

Circular June 2020

Welcome

Hello and welcome to the June 2020 issue of the Circular, the newsletter just for our Circle members. In this month's issue, we bring you up to speed on Alan Ayckbourn's exclusive audio play, *Anno Domino*; tell you about some online activities; introduce you to our Associate Director, Chelsey; and finally, our Archivist Simon Murgatroyd brings you a not-so-spooky-after-all tale of ghostly goings on in the McCarthy auditorium.

Anno Domino

At time of writing, nearly 13,000 people had listened to Alan Ayckbourn's latest play, *Anno Domino*. His 84th play, he was inspired by lockdown to team up with his wife, Heather Stoney, to record an audio-only version for our website.

It's attracted a lot of attention in the UK, with features on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme and in *The Telegraph*, and reviews in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sunday Express*.



Alan and Heather, Photo by Tony Bartholomew

It's also picked up a lot of interest in the States, with glowing reviews in *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/theater/anno-domino-review.html>) and the *Wall Street Journal* (here's the link https://www.wsj.com/articles/anno-domino-review-no-stage-no-problem-11591300960?mod=opinion_major_pos13 but it's behind a paywall – if you'd like to see a copy without subscribing, do drop us a line at marketing@sjt.uk.com, and we'll send you one).

And it was featured on *Morning Edition*, the flagship show of National Public Radio in the US, which took it right across the country – you can hear that here: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/865061847/theaters-return-to-an-old-art-form-the-radio-drama-with-a-twist>

More recently, and back in the UK, Alan recorded a fascinating interview for *The Stage's* Seven Stages podcast series: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/the-stage-podcast/the-stage-podcast/seven-stages-podcast-episode-6-alan-ayckbourn>

And he was a guest on BBC Radio 4's popular weekend magazine programme, *Saturday Live*, talking about his Inheritance Tracks: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08gwwxh>

So much to read, and listen to – but don't forget to listen to the actual play itself – you don't have long now! You can hear *Anno Domino* here until 25 June: https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1036/anno_domino

There are also captioned versions of Act I here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XKLG3yT694> and Act II here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi4Fmijc22Q>

Classes online

We're not yet sure when we're going to be able to re-open our beautiful building for you to visit (we promise to be in touch just as soon as we know!), so in the meantime, we've been moving some of our most popular OutReach classes online.

So far, these include:



Nick Lane, Photo by Tony Bartholomew

Beginner's playwriting course:

Tuesdays at 11.30am. Led by playwright Nick Lane, who has written the SJT's Christmas show for the past four years as well as the hugely popular adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes story *The Sign of Four*, which visited the theatre last spring. This course is sold out, but watch this space for further opportunities.

Rounders – the SJT youth theatre: until Thursday 9 July, the SJT's Associate Director for Children and Young People, Cheryl Govan, and Associate Director Chelsey Gillard are delivering three free sessions per week online.

Script reading classes: these hugely popular fun and friendly sessions take place on Wednesday from 11.30am up to 8 July. Led by our Associate Director, Chelsey Gillard, participants will explore the work of playwrights from the restoration period, reading aloud texts and looking at their themes, stories, writing styles and the historical context. Digital copies of plays including *Venice Preserved* by Thomas Otway and *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar will be provided and participants will be given a link to join each weekly session.

Script surgeries: These special script surgeries provide individual feedback on scripts in development. Scripts will be read by professional literary consultant Suzy Graham-Adriani, best known for creating the National Theatre's Connections Programme and responsible for commissioning and developing the first hundred plays and musicals for it from writers such as Alan Ayckbourn, Bryony Lavery, Mark Ravenhill, Dennis Kelly, and Simon Armitage. Suzy will give detailed feedback and a one-to-one Zoom session to explore ways to take the script to the next draft and, if appropriate, ways to take it forward.

Cheryl says: "We are, of course, really looking forward to re-opening the theatre and welcoming our community back to our popular classes.

"But until that's possible, we hope that as many people as possible will join us online! We'll be adding more soon."

For more information on the online classes: www.sjt.uk.com/getinvolved#classes

National Literacy Trust project

We recently teamed up with the National Literacy Trust to present a new project for young writers locally.

Your Stories is an online story creation adventure for five-to-12-year-olds.

For six weeks leading up to Monday 6 July, daily content is being released via the NLT's local Facebook page.



The original creation by Bronwen and the reworked illustration by Simon Whittaker

This will include exercises on how to create characters and settings, such as storytelling bingo, role-playing, drawing comic strips and sound recording, and using all kinds of everyday things to create the adventure.

There will be short vlogs from author Saviour Pirotta, writer of best-selling children's novels including *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*, the *Ancient Greek Mysteries Series* and *The Unicorn Prince*, and author of our hit 2019 show *Granny's Exploding Toilet*, and from actor and poet Nadia Emam, who has worked extensively at both the SJT and with Slung Low Theatre Company. The pair will also give dramatic readings of some of the submitted stories, and recommend books in the form of accessible e-books and audiobooks.

At the end of each week, illustrator Simon Whittaker from House of Deadleg will create drawings based on some of the stories submitted. He will also give video tutorials on creating illustrations.

The SJT's Associate Director, Chelsey Gillard, says: "Participants can choose to engage every day, or just dip in and out as they like. By the end of the six weeks they will have all they need to create an exciting adventure set in their hometown.

"Our artist, Simon, will create illustrations of the characters and settings of the stories as well as drawing elements from them to create one brilliant mega story curated by Saviour Pirotta!"

To take part in *Your Stories*, simply visit <https://literacytrust.org.uk/communities/north-yorkshire-coast/>

Staff profile – Chelsey Gillard



Chelsey in rehearsal, Photo by Dan Green

You might have spotted Chelsey's name cropping up in the last couple of stories – here's your chance to get to know our Associate Director better...

I grew up in Bridgend in South Wales, a town without a theatre, and somehow I've ended up being a theatre director in Scarborough – I couldn't be happier!

It's been a very wiggly path to get to where I am. Despite the fact I gave up all my free time as a teenager to be in a youth theatre I never thought seriously about it being a career I could follow. For a long time I harboured a dream of being a doctor, I thought that was the best way to help people who may be struggling with what life throws at them. After a year spent at medical school in Cardiff I realised I was far more concerned about

the time I was spending on the stage with the drama society than I was about the time I was spending in surgical theatre!

I left medical school unsure about what I wanted to do and was lucky to see a newspaper advert calling out for young theatre critics. With a little bit of training and a lot of opinions I was let loose on the theatre scene of South Wales, devouring as much theatre as I possibly could.

I saw my first piece of 'new writing' which I was initially very angry about because it was a site-specific piece that had taken over my much loved local rock nightclub – how dare theatre get in the way of my music! But I quickly fell in love and knew I wanted to pursue theatre further.

I ended up completing a degree in English and Drama. It was during this time that I learnt being a theatre director was a real job and I have spent every moment pursuing that dream since.

As I graduated from university I learnt about a small group of people who were looking to set up a pub theatre in Cardiff. I instantly got in touch and began working for the team doing research and marketing using the skills I had learnt as a critic.

A few months later I plucked up the courage to finally admit I really wanted to be a director. As the theatre, The Other Room, was born I was invited to be the Assistant Director on the debut show. We put literal blood, sweat and tears into that grand opening and it's still one of my proudest moments.

A year later I was directing my professional debut in that same small 40-seat theatre, but always looking for ways to change the audience experience we turned it into three separate rooms to create a promenade performance in the most unlikely setting. Since then I've directed shows all over and been an Assistant Director to some of the UK's leading artists.

Working as the Associate Director at the SJT is such a privilege. I am learning new things every day and I don't think there's a more supportive team in any other theatre in the world. Day to day my work is really varied, I'm often borrowed by various departments at

different times – I work with Fleur Hebditch in the Literary Department reading scripts, assist on the produced shows at theatre, research potential projects, run occasional workshops and I've even directed a rehearsed reading with the students on the Acting course at Coventry University.

You can also often see my putting in a shift on box office which I love as it allows me to meet the people who make our theatre so special – you, our brilliant community.

Now I know that theatre helps us make sense of the world around us, it can help us have a 'practice run' at the tricky moments in life to develop empathy, resilience and shared stories. So one day I want to run a theatre that cares about the people and community it is part of, just like the SJT (watch out Paul Robinson!).

Who You Gonna Call?

by Simon Murgatroyd

During our imposed lockdown, I've had the pleasure of reading a book I'd been kindly gifted, *Theatre Ghosts* by Roy Harley Lewis.



Our 2015 production of The Woman in Black – the only ghost you're ever likely to see in the McCarthy...

This sober and well-researched investigation into credible theatre hauntings (whose author has a link to the SJT, can you guess it?) reminded me of an incident several years ago when the author Mark Riley contacted me about his book *Haunted Scarborough*.

Always glad to help, I agreed to meet him at the SJT, and the inevitable, if awkward, question came up.

"Tell me about Mabel, the ghost of the cinema usher," said Mark.

Biting my tongue, I replied, "There is no ghost."

"But I've heard about it," replied Mark. "From the ushers and the cleaning staff. It's a local legend."

I find deep breathing exercises help at times like this.

"It's not a local legend. It's not even remotely true."

That's the polite answer. You see it's bunkum, nonsense, hogwash, stuff and nonsense. It is nothing more than an urban myth which has spiralled out of control.

And before you starting Scully-ing me, let me make it clear. I'm not saying there are no such things as ghosts, the paranormal or supernatural phenomenon. Nothing of the sort. I'm saying that, very specifically, Mabel the ghost doesn't exist. She is a figment of the imagination.

Now, I know I'm fighting the weight of opinion here as practically every usher, cleaner and assorted staff member at the SJT have claimed to have seen 'something', sensed 'something' or had a disturbing encounter.

Which is fine. Perhaps they did. Perhaps they experienced something inexplicable. They just didn't experience Mabel. Because Mabel is completely and utterly explicable. The most mundane ghost as she is nought but words and tales.

Mabel is the creation of a former employee at the SJT who worked in the Education Department and who used to conduct tours of the building – and was also something of an accomplished story-teller. Unfortunately, they got a bit restless the telling the same old dry facts and figures and so decided to take a few liberties and to spice things up a bit.

The SJT is a relatively old building – it's built in the shell of a former Odeon cinema completed in 1936 – so, what do all old buildings and theatres need? That would be a resident ghost.

Thus was Mabel the Spectral Cinema Usher invented; a young women who haunted the theatre – although, curiously, never the cinema. After the person who invented her left, other people picked up the story and it became a regular part of the SJT tours but – as is the wont in theatre – the plot-line continued to expand and develop.

Mabel is purportedly the ghost of an usher who worked at the Odeon cinema on the site of which the Stephen Joseph Theatre now stands. She's been referred to by other names too, but Mabel is the one which has stuck. The stories differ slightly but the most common is that one night after work during the early years of the cinema's existence (presumably the late 1930s), she left the building alone and was attacked and murdered in Hanover Road, behind the theatre. Her killer never found and her ghost subsequently haunting the building. As the story gained traction, it developed from hazy 'facts' to an increasingly gory and detailed story.

Now the problem with a story like that is it catches people's imaginations – hence why Mabel has persisted for the past couple of decades. Somewhat predictably, it caught one member of the public's imagination, who upon hearing this tale of horror on the tour decided to investigate and add some meat to the bone. Except there was no meat. There was no bone. Just a tall tale.

The member of the public returned to the SJT and reported what she had found.

Precisely nothing.

There was no usher called Mabel and no cinema usher was ever murdered on Hanover Road. There wasn't even a record of any usher dying whilst working at the Odeon cinema. In fact, it's difficult to find evidence that anyone ever died within the Odeon cinema between 1936 and 1988 when it closed. Ironically, there is also no oral or written record of a ghost haunting the Odeon when it was actually a working cinema – it took more than six decades for Mabel to make her first 'appearance'!

Mabel was the ghost of a ghost.

I have often pictured the scene when the Theatre Manager had to listen to this and then sheepishly admit that it was all a fallacy and nothing but flim-flam to liven up the theatre tour.

I frequently tell people this story and I hope Mabel is never mentioned on the tours. But I know she is. I know people still enjoy the story and believe it. She keeps returning from the grave, no matter how many times the story is debunked.

She may not exist, but I suspect she'll live on at the SJT long after I'm forgotten.

When *Haunted Scarborough* was published, I was curious to see what Mark had written. He actually did the unexpected and turned it into a chapter on fictional ghosts and how these stories gain a 'life' of their own.

I also told him the story of another 'legendary' ghost, which I heard back in the early '90s whilst working as a journalist covering the conversion of the building to the SJT. Apparently the projection room was haunted by the original projectionist.

Whilst researching the project, I interviewed an elderly projectionist from the Odeon. I put to him the story and asked, had he ever seen the ghost of the first projectionist?

"I should bloody well hope not," he said. "As far as I'm aware, I'm still alive..."

And if you're wondering what the link is to the SJT, Roy Harley Lewis was the father-in-law of our lovely Jaye Lewis, Executive Assistant at the theatre.

Membership renewal

Thank you to all of our members who have continued to renew their memberships. Please be assured that your membership renewal has gone through on our system, but there will be a delay in getting your physical packs out to you. Once we are able to open up again we will be posting all packs out to members who have renewed during this period as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience at this time.

Keeping in touch

We're doing everything we can to keep in regular contact with all of our customers, especially Circle members and those who may not have access to the internet.

You should be receiving regular emails or mail-outs from us, keeping you up to date with all our news – if for any reason you're not, please do tell us!

And if you know anyone else who you think would like to hear from us, now's the ideal time for them to sign up to our mailing list here: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/maillinglist-signup>