

Oxfordshire Drama Network



Newsletter

AUGUST 2026

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

I hope you're all enjoying the summer sunshine. It's very much the quiet season at the moment, but still a few shows to look forward to.

The One Act Play Festival was a great success (details of the Awards are on page 2).

Our 40th Anniversary Festival is well under way, and it's not too late if you wish to enter a September production, see page 2 for entry details.

Some of the reviews from the 40th Festival are shown at the end of the newsletter; there will be more to come in the October edition.

Mike Davies (Next issue Oct, deadline 20th Sept)



CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

We still seem to be enjoying the sunshine! Although fantastic for all our outdoor events it does bring new challenges for us!

The ODN one act festival was a great success, with so many talented actors, writers and directors. For details of the awards see page 2

We are excited for Banbury Cross Payers and Compton Players who are both in the National Drama Festival and wish them luck and congratulations for getting to such a high level!

The ODN committee worked hard to pull this festival off due to its short notice and like the gliding swan (paddling frantically under the water) everything went to plan. Our adjudicator was wonderful and enjoyed the festival; he told us he was impressed with all the plays. We hope our growing audience enjoyed them as well.

The 40th anniversary summer drama festival is coming along nicely with more information coming soon about our party and awards night.

In the next couple of weeks we will be setting up a facebook page for all ODN members, covering Oxfordshire for selling costumes, set and props. I'm hoping this will help us all with those items that we no longer need but are valuable to other groups. So if you have anything you wish to sell or give away please get it ready! Details will be published.

The trophy for the new "William Gofton Acting Achievement Award for under 21s" was collected and shown to BODs and William's family before we hand it over to ODN. It's a beautiful trophy and it will be awarded to someone from the winter festival for their achievement or something special. The name will be engraved on it and each time it's awarded, a scroll will be in the cup with their name and what it's awarded for which they will take home to keep after having photos taken with the trophy. On the scroll will also be the QR code for 'mind' under William's name but goes directly to the charity. It is the family's wish that even a few pence could help save someone from going through what they have experienced. We are so excited to see who wins this trophy over the coming years and to see their talent on stage.

Enjoy the rest of the summer, but maybe we could all work on a rain dance !

Mandyrae ODN chair.



WHAT'S ON DIARY (details inside)

AUGUST

7-8 KADs (Kennington) **Lexi's Midwife Runners**
14,15 YOBOS (Banbury) **Hadestown: Teen Edition**

SEPTEMBER

8-12 Thame Players **Design for Living**
10-12 Buttercross (Witney) **Cluedo**

OCTOBER

16,17 The New Nortonians **Larkrise (Staged Reading)**
17 BCOS (Bicester) **Divas & Crooners**
18 Buttercross (Witney) **Comedy Showcase**

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ODN 40th Anniversary Festival

A Fantastic Response!

The ODN 40th Anniversary Festival is well underway, and what a wonderful response we have had from groups across the county. We are delighted to have received 14 festival entries, showcasing the incredible breadth and quality of amateur theatre in Oxfordshire.

So far, the following productions have been entered:-

- Kingston Bagpuize – *The Unfriend* by Steven Moffat
 - Branching Out Drama Society – *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare
 - Bartholomew Players – *A Murder Is Announced* by Agatha Christie
 - Banbury Cross Players – *Underdog: The Other, Other Brontë* by Sarah Gordon
 - Jigsaw Productions – *Wind in the Willows* (The Musical)
 - Dorchester Amateur Dramatic Society – *Calendar Girls* by Tim Firth
 - Didcot Phoenix Drama Group – *Wyrd Sisters* by Terry Pratchett, adapted by Stephen Briggs
 - Sinodun Players – *Underdog: The Other, Other Brontë* by Sarah Gordon
 - Encore Youth Theatre – *Around the Stage in 5 Plays*
 - Abingdon Drama Club – *Things I Know to Be True* by Andrew Bovell
 - Launton Village Players – *Frozen: The Musical*
 - Buttercross Theatre – *Hadestown: Teen Edition*
- Still to come:-
- Kennington Amateur Dramatics Society – *Lexi's Midwife Runners* by Jamie McLeish & Andrew Kirkwood
 - Banbury Cross Players – *A Handbag* by Anthony Horowitz

Our sincere thanks go to every society that has entered. The standard of productions has been exceptionally high, making this a fitting celebration of ODN's 40th anniversary. There is still time to enter if your group has a production taking place in September. Simply complete the online entry form here:- <https://forms.gle/5bXodv135YkUM2Gp8>
The entry form will remain open until 28 August, so don't miss the opportunity to be part of this landmark festival.

A huge thank you also goes to our team of volunteer reviewers, who have been outstanding in their support of the festival. Their enthusiasm, commitment and thoughtful feedback have been invaluable.

The festival will culminate in our 40th Anniversary Gala Awards Evening, to be held at Southmoor Village Hall, Draycott Rd, Southmoor, OX13 5BY on Saturday 10 October at 7.30 pm. Everyone will be

welcome, but we especially hope that representatives from every participating group will join us to celebrate the festival—and perhaps collect an award! Further details about the evening, including booking information, will be circulated over the coming weeks.

We look forward to celebrating with you all in October!

ODN One Act Drama Festival

Was held on Mon 1st to Wed 3rd June at

The Unicorn Theatre, Abingdon

Our adjudicator was Chris Baglin GODA

AWARDS

The Punters Prize went to:-

Banbury Cross Players for “*A Handbag*”

The best Original Play award went to:

Compton Players for:

“*The House with the Lights still on*”

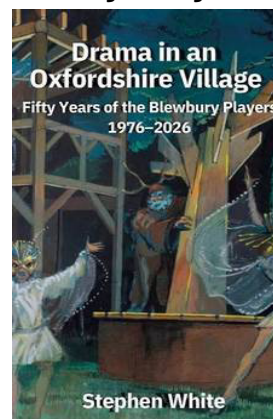
The Colin Dexter Rose Bowl for Magic Moment went to:-

Wychwood BODs for “*Don't Panic*”

Drama in an Oxfordshire Village Fifty Years of the Blewbury Players

A book by Stephen Wright

Steve White's book directs the reader behind the scenes, from post-war Blewbury to the birth of the Players in 1976, covering the impact of the Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell (UKAEA) and the growth of neighbouring Didcot and the village, which has played a significant part in the Players' success.



With 300 pages, 270 images and in reviews of 62 major productions, it documents every production throughout the year and features 270 photographs. It catalogues the ups and downs of staging plays come rain or shine, sometimes with animals and children, with no understudies or prompting, while navigating the chaos, politics and egos of a small community.

Available to buy at Savages, London Road, Blewbury, OX11 9HB. Price: £25

Online orders for postal delivery only available via “Drama in an Oxfordshire Village - Fifty Years of the Blewbury Players Book Preview The Blewbury Players”

See: www.blewburyplayers.co.uk/whatson

Wychwood Players

Summer Workshop

Saturday 8th August 10.30-12.30

Acting Masterclass Morning Workshop

Hosted by Wychwood Players who are offering an acting masterclass on the morning of Saturday 8th August at New Beaconsfield Hall from 10.30am-12.30pm

This will be with professional acting and voice coach, Sarah Methuen.

The half day workshop will be £20 per person and will have to be on a first-come first-served basis as we have 10 spaces only.

To reserve your place or for more information please email wychwoodplayers@gmail.com and we will offer the spaces once payment has been received.

Sarah's workshop is entitled 'Page to Stage' and, using contemporary duologues, will introduce engaging with script analysis, finding objectives and making informed performance decisions based in bold, fun, imaginative storytelling.

Sarah Methuen (MA, BA, PC Cert. Ed.) is a multidisciplinary arts practitioner, acting tutor, and voice coach with over 25 years of experience in the creative industries.

She trained at Rose Bruford College. Currently, Sarah serves as an acting teacher and audition coach at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Her practice integrates theatre techniques with research in psychology and behavioural science to support performers and corporate clients in transformation, communication, and confidence.

We look forward to welcoming you!

Wychwood Players



Theatre Costumes & Jewellery Guide

by Peter Morrell

Theatre costumes do far more than dress an actor; they breathe life into the story being told on stage. From defining a character's background to capturing the period of a scene, costumes are essential for building believable, immersive worlds in any performance. When thoughtfully designed, costumes support the emotional arc of the show, enhance its visual appeal, and help actors fully embody their roles.

Why Costumes Matter in Theatre

Costumes are an essential storytelling tool. They go beyond clothing to convey character, tone, and setting. Effective costume design:

Defines Characters: Costumes provide instant clues about a character's personality, profession, status, and emotional state, often before they say a word.

Sets the Scene: In historical or culturally specific plays, accurate costumes transport audiences to the right time and place. They make the world of the story feel real and grounded.

Conveys Mood: The style, fabric, and colour of a costume can support the tone of a scene. Vibrant outfits work well in comedies or musicals, while darker palettes suit serious or suspenseful plays.

Creates Visual Cohesion: Costumes work with set design, lighting, and makeup to ensure that all elements of a production feel cohesive. A shared colour scheme or design style across departments can help tie everything together.

What to Consider When Designing Costumes

Designing stage costumes means thinking about much more than how they look. Functionality, historical accuracy, and character relevance all play key roles.

The Characters

Every costume should reflect who the character is and how they change. Before sketching designs, ask:

What is the character's background and status?

What is their emotional arc?

Do their costumes evolve with the story?

Can any symbols or themes be expressed through their clothing?

Work with the director and actors so that your designs match the overall vision of the production.

The Time and Setting

When a play is set in a specific time period or cultural context, details matter. Research silhouettes, fabrics, and styles that fit the setting.

Historical Plays: Stick to authentic details like accurate cuts, materials, and accessories for the time. Even small inaccuracies can feel out of place.

Modern Settings: Use up-to-date clothing styles or capture a specific subculture through fashion.

Fantasy Worlds: Get creative, but make sure that all design choices still feel true to the world of the play.



Colours and Fabrics

Colours and materials affect how a costume looks and feels on stage.

Colour Choices: Pick costume colors that help express the character's personality or emotional state. Warm tones like red and gold can suggest confidence or anger; cooler hues like blue and grey might reflect sadness or distance.

Fabric Function: Choose materials that move well, breathe easily, and hold up to repeat performances. Heavier fabrics like velvet add richness, while lightweight ones like cotton keep actors comfortable.

Stage Lighting: Be aware that stage lights can change how colours look. Test costume pieces under the actual stage lights before finalizing them.

Comfort and Practicality

Costumes need to both look great and work well during a performance.

Mobility: Actors need to dance, run, or fight in their costumes. Design with flexibility and comfort in mind.

Fast Changes: Use zippers, snaps, or Velcro for costumes that need to come off quickly backstage.

Durability: Performers often sweat under stage lights, so breathable, easy-to-wash fabrics are a must.

Creating DIY Theatre Costumes and Jewellery

Not every production has the budget for professional costumes, but that doesn't mean you can't make something great. With a little creativity, DIY costume-making can deliver impressive results, including unique accessories like handmade jewellery.

Thrift Store Finds

Second-hand stores are goldmines for affordable costume pieces. Look for vintage styles that match the era of the play. Basics like blazers, skirts, jeans, and blouses can also be altered or embellished to fit a character's look.

Handmade Jewellery and Accessories

Accessories finish off a costume and can often be made in-house.

DIY Jewellery: Use beads, wire, or found materials to create earrings, bracelets, or necklaces that suit the character's personality or the play's time period.

Hats and Headpieces: Foam, cardboard, and fabric can be combined to make dramatic or historical headwear.

Custom Touches: Use paint, glitter, or faux gems to decorate belts, gloves, or shoes for added flair.

Sewing and Customization

Even basic sewing skills go a long way in DIY costume design. You'll be able to adjust thrifted clothing to better fit actors or match specific styles, and you can also add detail to customize a piece with embroidery, patches, buttons, or trim. If you have more advanced sewing skills, you can build your own original garments using simple patterns or fabric draped over a dress form.

Renting for Specific Needs

If DIY doesn't cut it for specialty pieces, look into rental options. Costume houses and local theatre companies

often rent out high-quality items. Rentals are especially useful for historically accurate or ornate costumes that would be expensive to make from scratch.

Working With Hair, Makeup, and Props Teams

A costume is just one part of the visual story. Coordination with other departments ensures a consistent, polished look.

Hair and Wigs: Hairstyle choices should reflect the time period and character traits. Period-accurate wigs or facial hair may be required.

Makeup: Stage makeup, including products like coloured contact lenses or face paint, should complement costume colour schemes and bring out key facial features.

Props: Collaborate with the props team to make sure that items like canes, bags, or weapons look appropriate with the costumes and are easy to handle during scenes.

Costume Maintenance and Upkeep

Costumes must be cared for to last through rehearsals and performances.

Cleaning: Regularly wash or spot-clean items depending on their material. Build in time for repairs between shows.

Storage: Keep costumes in labelled garment bags or hung neatly backstage to prevent wrinkles and confusion during quick changes.

Emergency Supplies: Have a backstage kit with safety pins, thread, glue, and extra accessories for last-minute fixes.

Peter Morrell

kylarmack.com/pages/peter-morrell

Witney Dramatic Society

Costume Request

In October, Witney Dramatic Society are putting on *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*

We are struggling to find a suitable costume for **Sherlock Holmes**.

Is there anyone out there who could lend or hire us a costume please.

Most appreciated .
Thanks,

Margaret Hamm,

Email: madmaggie52@yahoo.co.uk



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

KADs (Kennington)

Lexi's Midwife Runners.

by Jamie McLeish and Andrew Kirkwood

A comedy that looks at the faces behind the masks.

Follow our squad of midwives as they attempt to transform from unfit colleagues into half-marathon heroes to fund their beloved neonatal unit.



But the road to the finish line is paved with more than just blisters. Between an "errant" Grandad's questionable training methods and a devastating betrayal within the group, the team is pushed to the breaking point.

Laugh-out-loud funny and deeply moving, this is a story about doing the impossible, one step at a time.

Viewer advisory age 12+

When: Friday Fri 7th & Sat 8th August at 7:30pm
+ Saturday 8th August 2pm

Where: Kennington village Hall, OX1 5PG

Tickets:

www.ticketsource.com/kennington-amateur-dramatics/e-mjpmoj

Box Office - 0333 666 3366

YOBOS

(Youth of Banbury Operatic Society)

Hadestown:

Teen Edition

by Anais Mitchell

A journey to the under-world, weaving together two mythic tales of young dreamers Orpheus and Eurydice, and King Hades and his wife Persephone. Guided by Hermes, the storyteller, we see a world where love is tested against fear, hope battles despair, and music has the power to change fate. Full of incredible songs, heart, and energy, Hadestown is a modern musical like no other.

There is alternating cast, if you need to check who is performing, go to:

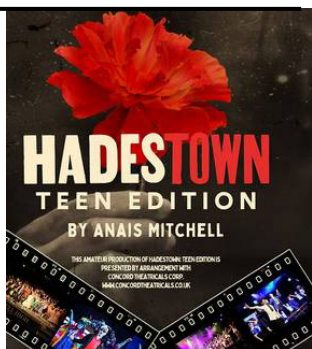
<https://www.yobos.co.uk/hadestown>

When: Fri 14th & Sat 15th August at 2pm & 7.30pm

Where: Wykham Theatre at Wykham Park Academy, Ruskin Rd, Banbury, OX16 9HY
Banbury

Tickets: Adult £17.25, '18 & Under' £15.09 (inc booking fee)

from <https://www.yobos.co.uk/hadestown>



Thame Players Design for Living

by Noël Coward

Written in 1932. Banned in the UK for its daring depiction of a ménage à trios.

The play proclaims Coward's playful and daring genius while the themes it touches on (personal freedom, sexual identity, the costs of a hedonistic lifestyle outside of societies norms) remain as relevant now in the age of internet relationships as ever.

Witty and erudite, Coward's dialogue drips with humour and irony but as ever contains huge darker truths about the human condition.

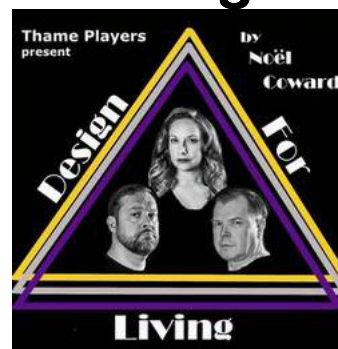
When: Tue 8th - Sat 12th Sept at 7.45pm
+ matinee Sat 12th Sept at 2.30pm

Where: The Players Theatre, Nelson Street, Thame, OX9 2DP

Tickets: £12 (£10 conc) from The Information Centre, Thame Town Hall, High St, Thame OX9 3DP, or Tel: 01844 212833

OR online £12.94 (£10.78 conc) from

Website <https://www.thameplayers.co.uk>



Buttercross Cluedo

Inspired by the iconic board game, Cluedo brings the world's most infamous dinner party to life in a brilliantly chaotic, fast-talking, mystery-filled comedy romp.

When a group of suspiciously secretive strangers gather at a remote country house, the night quickly spirals into confusion, conspiracy... and corpses. Everyone has something to hide—and no one is quite telling the truth. Was it Miss Scarlet in the library with the candlestick? Colonel Mustard in the study with the revolver? Mrs White in the kitchen with the knife? Or did something even more outrageous unfold?

Expect quick-fire comedy, ridiculous twists, questionable alibis, and a race against time to piece together the clues before everything (and everyone) unravels.

This high-energy whodunit will keep you guessing—and laughing—right to the final reveal.

When: Thu 10th - Sat 12th September at 7.30pm

Where: Corn Exchange, Market Square, Witney, OX28 6AB.

Tickets: Adults £15 (Child £10) from

<https://www.buttercrosstheatreproductions.co.uk>



The New Nortonsians

Larkrise by Flora Thompson

A Staged Reading

The story of Lark Rise is a semi-autobiographical account written by Flora Thompson, depicting late 19th-century rural English life in a small Oxfordshire hamlet based on her childhood home of Juniper Hill.

Where: The Glyme Hall Chipping Norton

When: Friday 16th and Saturday 17th October 2026 .

Tickets: available from September

Email: williamsbill614@gmail.com

BCOS

(Bicester Choral & Operatic Society)

Divas & Crooners

A concert of amazing music featuring hits from artists as diverse as Shirley Bassey to Whitney Houston, Frank Sinatra to Freddie Mercury, Shirley Bassey, Adele, Michael Bublé, & Harry Connick Junior.



When: Saturday, 17 October at 7:30 PM

Where: St Edburg's Church, Bicester

Tickets: from Coles Books, Bicester or www.ticketsource.co.uk/bcos (+ booking Fees)

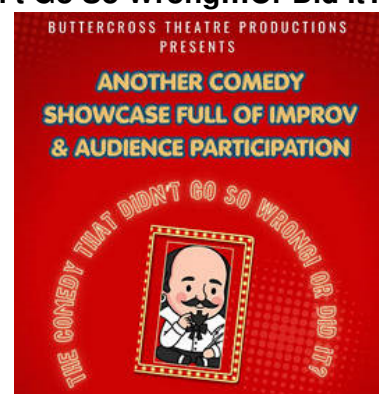
Buttercross Theatre

Productions

Comedy Showcase

The Comedy That Didn't Go So Wrong...Or Did It?

Get ready for an evening of laughter, surprises and pure theatrical fun! A Comedy Showcase brings together a lively mix of performance styles, featuring a fast-paced modern Shakespearean comedy complete with audience participation, alongside improvised and devised pieces created and performed by a talented ensemble of actors.



Expect sharp wit, playful chaos, and a joyful celebration of all things comedic—perfect for audiences of all ages who love imaginative, spirited theatre.

When: Sunday 18th October at 6pm

Where: Langdale Hall, Witney, OX28 6AB

Tickets: Adults £7.50 from

www.buttercrosstheatreproductions.co.uk

Your ODN Committee

Officers:

Chair	Mandyræe Jessey	(BODS - Wychwood)
Secretary	Karen Carey	(Didcot Phoenix Drama Group)
Newsletter/Website	Mike Davies	(Drayton Players & Jigsaw Stage Productions)
Membership Secretary	Jess Ebberson	(Kennington Amateur Dramatic Society)
Treasurer	Richard Winslet	(Dorchester Amateur Dramatic Society)
		Treasurer@OxfordshireDramaNetwork.org

General members

Mike Lacey	(Kingston Bagpuize)
Sue Hadley	(Drayton Players, Jigsaw Stage Productions & Buttercross T.P.)
Mareve Kilbride-Newman	(Witney Dramatic Society)
Adrian McGlynn	(Banbury Cross Players)
Debbie Ruth	(Buttercross - Witney)
Susi Dalton	(Abingdon Drama Club)

Email: info@OxfordshireDramaNetwork.org

Facebook www.facebook.com/groups/1324585987569767

Instagram: www.instagram.com/oxfordshiredramanetwork

N.B. For your group to add events to our website, email us for a group Username & Password.

Email: info@OxfordshireDramaNetwork.org

REVIEW

Wychwood Players' The Unfriend

by Stephen Moffat

It is a truth universally accepted that the job of any dramatic performance is to convince an audience that what they are watching is real, and full of real people doing real things. With that in mind, Wychwood Players' performance of Stephen Moffat's *The Unfriend* can only be described as a complete success. The mundanity, normalcy and sometimes chaotic, nature of family life was brilliantly brought to the fore on stage by all involved. In what is clearly a very technically difficult and challenging production to put together, the creative team at Wychwood made it look pretty effortless and easy. Director Alice Spiers managed to nail down the tone of suburban life brilliantly whilst mixing it together with the unsettling and foreboding undertones of a Netflix murder documentary. Was the house guest this unsuspecting family had invited round actually a mass killer? Kudos must also be given to the technical team behind the show with well lit scenes and really clever use of a digital background giving the audience access to a laptop screen that would otherwise have been tricky to get across. Scene changes and transitions were a little clunky, sometimes taking longer than felt necessary, stifling the flow of laughs from an eager audience, but that was a minor blip in what was otherwise a slick performance.

The casting was completely spot on with each component expertly bringing a believable energy to their roles, whether that was a sense of anarchy, anxiety, apathy, anger or just sheer annoyance with the busy-body neighbour, every member of cast did a fantastic job of telling their own story. Both Richard Hartley and Vikki Days were wonderfully placed together as the poor unsuspecting couple who are just busy people trying to get by and eventually giving in to the occasional well acted and well judged meltdown. Matthew Colledge and Sarah Gilbey equally gave acutely accurate depictions of angsty teens, from fart jokes to staircase stomping - so bang on were their portrayals, that this reviewer got distracted and spent a solid 5mins trying to gauge Matthew's actual age! Supporting turns from Simon Johnson and Ralph Wears, although

given less time on stage by Moffat's script, gave perfect balance, pacing and comedic turns to the show at just the right times and further examples of the great casting. However, it is with Samantha Broadhurst's deliciously evil, yet strangely likeable, Elsa Jean Krakowski that huge praise must go. Sam's confident performance, and smooth Southern drawl (despite Denver not being in the South) struck the perfect balance between brash, loud American and gentle family-bonding agony aunt. So likeable was she that ultimately nobody cared whether she was a mass murderer or not! The audience, much like the play itself, hung off of her every word.

A huge well done to all involved, from front of house to backstage. Wychwood Players should feel very proud of their latest production.

40th FESTIVAL REVIEWS

Jigsaw Stage Productions

Wind in the Willows

The Musical May 2026

This highly creative adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's timeless tale, engaged and delighted its audience from beginning to end. The venue was well suited to the event and the front of house team were courteous and efficient.

The simple but cleverly designed set took the audience through the story with ease. Home-made flats were used to great effect in spotlighting specific areas when needed, such as Mole's and Badger's homes and Toad Hall. These areas, along with the contrasting wide expanse of rolling countryside in the backdrop demonstrated a deep understanding of the atmosphere of the original story.



Throughout, the clever design and use of special effects such as the boat, making the car and barge, enhanced rather than interfered with the atmosphere. Costume and makeup immediately identified the characters. The chief weasel and her band were

particularly well done. Lighting and sound were well used and precise, particularly in the barge scene.

The director's excellent understanding of the interaction of design skills was much in evidence in the special effects of the car crash, Ratty and Mole's boat trip and the barge scene.

The acting overall was excellent. Cast were well rehearsed, demonstrated an excellent understanding of theatrical skills and ensemble work, for example, in the battle for Toad Hall.



Lewis Holfield, who adapted the original story for this production, gave an outstanding performance as Toad. He made an immediate impact with his larger-than-life personality and excellent voice control. He engaged the audience skilfully with his pausing – particularly in his 'crying' scene and again with his impromptu comments as to why the car was missing a wheel.

Eva Dring totally captured Mole's personality and did not waiver throughout. That undercurrent of quiet strength, coming to a climax when she mustered the troops to fight for Toad Hall.

Thea Flynn was perfect as Ratty. She did not rush at it, she made every line, every pause count. Her singing was excellent and again, not rushed so the sentiment could be caught.

Kevin Potter gave a solid performance and excellent interpretation as Badger. His characterisation fitted in so well with my conception of the character when I first read the story. He used his voice and the stage space very well.



Maggie Weston-Hearne was the quintessential 'baddie' as Chief Weasel. Her voice control was excellent and used well to change the mood, for example, when she was the sales rep. Her pausing

was used to great effect and her song very well delivered – excellent control.

Debbie Watson and Hanna-Beth Demain as the Chief's rather reluctant sidekicks were completely convincing. Their characterisation of weasels and their movement was obviously well rehearsed. They stayed beautifully in mode throughout the production. Their lines were delivered with confidence and to good effect. They supported each other very well and enhanced each other's performance. Well done!

Rachael Gardener as the Jailor's Daughter convinced us of her kind heart and possibly, misplaced trust in Toad. Her voice was a joy.

Sue Hadley played several parts – all extremely well. Her Washer Woman, although a small part was carried off with confidence. Her portrayal of the Bargee was excellent. She took her time; the stage was hers and her unhurried use of voice and movement was perfect. Her chorus work showed a good understanding of ensemble work.

Terry Gashe's performance as the Train Driver, Constable and Mr. Rabbit showed amazing versatility. His constable was very funny.

Mike Davies played a very convincing judge, and his chorus work was good.

Chris Jones and Lisa Dew as Mrs. McCafferty and Mrs. Rabbit respectively were totally in character.

The chorus work was very well rehearsed and wonderful. Obviously, a lot of hard work had gone into every scene and it paid off. Their movement was smooth, fluid and supported the atmosphere of the play completely.

Emily Colborne, Jocelyn Gardener, Esmay Dew, Betsy Roberts and Mark Flynn had obviously worked very hard. Their commitment was obvious in their flawless ensemble work. They supported each other very well.

Agnes Och, William Dew, Leah Stevens and Sam Wood were charming as the woodland animals.

Mark Flynn gave an excellent performance as the Jailor.

The music, written by James Carter, for this performance was what brought the whole production together and established it as a true representation of this beautiful story. We were laughing with Toad, we were crying with Mole, and we were cheering with Ratty. From Toad's rendering of 'What was that' through the magical motif of the Wild Woods to the Razzmatazz of the weasels in Toad Hall, the music guided us through every mood and delighted us. The chorus work was well rehearsed and supported the story well. The simple but effective harmonies added texture. The individual songs were well suited to the characters and the chorus numbers guided us through the mood change from 'It looks like toad's in trouble' in the court scene to the final number. The Wind in the Willows was beautiful.

Rhiannon Demain, as Musical Director, did an excellent job of bringing the music together. And making it work on stage. Rhiannon and the

choreographer, Debbie Watson, brought a wonderful sense of cohesion and liveliness to the play. This was particularly evident in Razzmatazz where the singing and ensemble work was tight and stylish, and the fight between Badger and Chief Weasel. Rhiannon also excelled as the pianist throughout.

This is not an original story, but Holifield's staging was extremely original and creative. He demonstrated a highly developed understanding of theatrical communication. The dramatic impact was repeated time and time again as we engaged more and more with the characters. Sensitivity and huge imaginative realisation were obvious in bringing this well-loved story to the stage and endearing the characters to us all over again. The chorus and ensemble work demonstrated a high degree of theatrical artistry through which the cast were enthused and motivated right up to the final tableau.

Mareve Kilbride-Newman ODN

Dorchester A.D.S. Calendar Girls

by Tim Firth

Based on a remarkable true story, Tim Firth's *Calendar Girls* follows a group of Women's Institute members from a Yorkshire village who decide to create a nude calendar to raise money for leukaemia research. What begins as a light-hearted fundraising idea develops into a touching story about friendship, loss, courage and the strength of community. Packed with humour and memorable characters, the play also invites audiences to reflect on grief and the importance of supporting one another through life's most difficult moments.

Before a single line was spoken, DADS' set established a convincing Yorkshire village hall, complete with upright piano, simple furniture and an impressive picture window overlooking a beautifully painted Yorkshire Dales landscape. The grasses, stonework and rustic fencing at the front of the stage extended the world beyond the hall itself, creating a strong sense of place. Particularly impressive was the versatility of the design. Within a limited performance space, it successfully represented a variety of locations, including the village hall, the Yorkshire Dales, a village fete, the WI conference and even a film studio. The open staging allowed scenes to flow smoothly, while the appearance of sunflowers at the end provided a simple yet moving visual representation of John's seeds coming into bloom. Considering DADS must first construct its own stage before creating the set, the result was both imaginative and highly effective.

Lighting and technical effects were handled confidently throughout. A particular highlight was the deliberately uninspiring vegetable presentation, where coloured projections over the audience cleverly reflected the vegetables being discussed, adding an extra layer of humour. The power cut

sequence was also effective, although the stage lighting faded fractionally before the projector image disappeared, making the effect momentarily less seamless. The sound team also deserve praise. Sound effects were well judged throughout, with the perfectly timed car crash coinciding brilliantly with Chris removing her top. The use of the PA system during the WI conference scenes, complete with echo and occasional feedback, convincingly recreated the atmosphere of a large council meeting. Transition music generally maintained the production's pace, particularly during longer scene changes. On a handful of occasions the music ended before the transitions were complete, or no music was used at all, leaving the blackouts feeling slightly longer than necessary. However, this was a minor observation within an otherwise technically polished production.

Costumes immediately established character. Cora's Led Zeppelin T-shirt perfectly reflected her rebellious nature, while Celia's bright, colourful wardrobe captured her confidence and flair. Marie was suitably smart, although an even more formal opening outfit might have reinforced her pride in protocol and standards. Comic costume moments were particularly successful, especially the escalating Christmas outfit rivalry between Chris and Celia and Ruth's wonderfully eccentric "mouse, gerbil, ferret, bunny" ensemble, both of which delighted the audience.

At the heart of *Calendar Girls* are its relationships, and Hayley Poole's direction ensured these remained the focus throughout. The opening Tai Chi sequence quickly established each character's personality through natural interaction and banter, providing a strong foundation for the story. The cast worked confidently as an ensemble, maintaining an engaging pace while allowing both the comedy and emotional moments to land. Among the most touching moments was the transition from John's speech to the image of his empty wheelchair before Annie and Chris continued his words. It beautifully conveyed the impact of his loss, although allowing the silence to linger just a little longer could have made the moment even more powerful. The calendar photography sequence was another standout, requiring complete trust between the performers. It was handled with great sensitivity and confidence, becoming one of the evening's strongest ensemble scenes and deservedly earning applause after each photograph.

DADS assembled a cast who clearly enjoyed working together, bringing warmth and authenticity to every role. Lucinda Kenrick gave an excellent performance as Cora, delivering the character's blunt observations with gusto while opening the show with a strong singing voice. Louise Aukland brought infectious energy to Chris, combining excellent vocal delivery with genuine passion for the cause, particularly during her memorable address to the WI Council. While her energy drove much of the comedy, occasional moments of greater stillness in the emotional scenes could have heightened their impact

even further. Christine Jones delivered a heartfelt and believable Annie, convincingly portraying both her love for John and the devastation of losing him. Ian Brace complemented her beautifully as John, giving a sensitive and moving performance filled with warmth, dignity and quiet acceptance. Carol-Anne Tilley was delightfully spritely as retired teacher Jessie, with her revelation to Laurence that she had once taught him earning one of the evening's biggest laughs. Liz Ramage brought confidence, glamour and plenty of sass to Celia, creating an entertaining rivalry with Chris throughout. Rachel Winslet-Morris offered a refreshing interpretation of Ruth, portraying her less as downtrodden than simply naïve and eager to please. This made her transformation into a stronger, more confident woman particularly rewarding, with her confrontation of her husband's mistress receiving enthusiastic audience support. Ann Winslet was perfectly cast as the prim and organised Marie, capturing both her devotion to standards and her horror at the calendar project while gradually revealing the vulnerabilities beneath. Her eventual acceptance of the group's success culminated in a wonderfully exuberant delivery of "1-0, bloody brilliant!" Among the supporting roles, Mark Williams provided solid support as Chris's patient husband Rod, while Russell Bailey was excellent as the nervous photographer Laurence, visibly overwhelmed by such a formidable group of women. Sally Bell was suitably snooty as Lady Cravenshire, and Catherine Fitzgerald made the most of the challenging role of Elaine, the make-up artist revealed to be having an affair with Ruth's husband. Although I would have preferred her make-up brushes to be used a little more convincingly, her confrontation scene with Ruth was particularly well played and marked an important turning point for Ruth's character. Bryn Bennett also made a confident DADS debut as the director of the ill-fated washing powder advert. Special mention must go to Geoff Russell for his scene-stealing cameo as Brenda Hulse, the relentlessly uninspiring vegetable speaker. What could easily have been a throwaway role became one of the evening's comic highlights thanks to his wonderfully earnest delivery, proving that even a lecture on vegetables can be thoroughly entertaining in the right hands.

Calendar Girls demands humour, heart and honesty in equal measure, and DADS delivered all three. Supported by imaginative staging, thoughtful direction and a cast of well-drawn, believable characters, the production balanced laugh-out-loud comedy with genuine emotional depth. The calendar scenes, in particular, were handled with sensitivity and confidence, allowing the audience to appreciate both their humour and their significance. This was an entertaining and moving evening of theatre that captured the spirit of Tim Firth's much-loved play.

Congratulations to DADS on a thoroughly successful production.

Phoenix Drama Group

Wyrd Sisters

by Terry Pratchett

This was my first experience of a Terry Pratchett play and had wanted to see one for ages, so I was so pleased the Director, herself, was able to achieve her wish at the same time as mine.

Wyrd sisters is part of the Discworld novel series and has been performed over many years on amateur and professional circuits. The similarity of the play to Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet gives way to the world of fantasy which Terry Pratchett writes in his own inimitable way.

There was a friendly atmosphere in the foyer of the Hall and all FOH helpers were efficient and welcoming. It was a nice touch to have "character" truffles on sale!

Due to the group having to perform in 2 different venues, it was sensible to have a set which was functional and transportable. The set gave the audience enough visible hints to support the script. The staging was quite noisy when set was moved and the Duchess's heels! Good idea to put furniture pads on the bottom of the chairs and tables and the heels were not quite in keeping with the costume (white tights and soft slipper type footwear would have been more appropriate)

The sound and lighting were effective but sometimes did not quite happen on cue.

Costumes really made up for the minimal set and we were never in doubt as to who was who. Just a little picky thing, when you buy new item it is better to iron out the packing creases. Would witches have wedding rings...maybe they are married to the "Cause" so I am happy to be corrected.

Backstage crew were really slick and were always ready to change the scene. A small suggestion would be to cut out half the black outs and incorporate scene changes into the action by the cast. This would save time, keep the audience interested and keep the action continuous. No reason why cast cannot change scenes. Props were sufficient and I loved the detail on the map, with the Lancre wording visible.

It was nice to see the Director included young people in the cast. We need to encourage the next generation as much as we can. All the young actors played their parts well and as they keep learning the art I am sure they will be in leading roles in the future.

There were some lovely moments throughout the play especially the witches. They worked well together and had some lovely comedic lines, especially Nanny Hogg (Jayne Henderson) which were appreciated by the audience. Magrat (Casey Rouse) did speak quite quickly sometimes but that can be easily put down to nerves. Her facial expressions and interaction skills show great potential. The Duke (Chris Hedges) had a great speaking voice and stage presence. (loved the scratching with the knitting needle!)

Nice and simple effect with Demon (Greg Greetham) popping out of big pot he had nice diction and controlled the stage. Hwel (Thomas Baldock) has a lovely speaking voice and has great potential too. Nice enthusiasm from Tomjohn (Lola Gardiner) but watch out for taller people masking what is happening behind them. We could not see her at all when she was sitting at the table.

A couple of points which I hope will help in the future are, firstly, stay in character until you are completely off the stage. Many actors stopped acting whilst still in view of the audience. Secondly if you forget your lines don't let the audience know by whispering or looking completely lost or unsure.....try and stay positive and in character.

The Fool stole the show for me. Her comic timing and complete immersion into the character were great. Her delivery of dry humour was priceless and helped lighten the whole piece.

The group had a really appreciative audience and despite the warm weather they laughed and applauded throughout this fun production. I am looking forward to the Panto and many thanks to Didcot Phoenix for an enjoyable evening.

Susi Dalton

Abingdon Drama Group

Things I know to be True

by Andrew Bovell

Andrew Bovell's Things I Know to Be True is one of those plays that feels incredibly real. It follows the Price family over the course of a year as each member deals with life's twists and turns, exploring themes of love, family, identity and the sometimes difficult balance between supporting the people you love and letting them find their own way. It's a beautifully written piece, but it's also a brave choice for an amateur dramatic society. It's incredibly emotional (in fact they were offering tissues on Front of House!) – everything depends on believable relationships, honest performances and a cast that can handle the play's emotional highs and lows.

Visually, the production had much to admire. The simple kitchen unit formed the heart of the family home and became a natural focal point for many of the play's most important moments, while the small rose garden at the front of the stage was a lovely touch. My only reservation was that, at times, the stage felt just a little busier than it needed to be. The suspended illustrations of the shed, tree and kitchen items, I personally felt a little distracting, drawing the eye upwards when the real focus should always have been on the actors and their relationships. With so much of the drama resting on the relationships between the family members, I found myself wanting the playing space to be a little more open, allowing the cast greater freedom of movement and ensuring the audience's focus remained firmly on the performances. The two-seater garden bench

occasionally restricted the action, but these are relatively minor points. The lighting was excellent throughout, subtly shifting with the changing moods, and the carefully chosen music complemented the action beautifully.

The casting was excellent, with every member of the ensemble contributing to a family dynamic that felt utterly believable. The opening scene, as Rosie returns home, immediately drew the audience into the rhythms of family life, with the warmth, humour and easy interactions making it feel as though we were simply watching a real family going about their everyday lives.

Cecil Alexander gave a wonderfully assured performance as Rosie, the youngest daughter whose return from Europe after a failed relationship sets the story in motion. Her opening monologue was delivered with honesty and warmth, and throughout the evening she charted Rosie's emotional journey with great sensitivity. From heartbroken traveller to cherished baby sister, from the naïve belief that her family was happy and secure to the bewilderment of seeing everything she thought she knew begin to unravel, before finally reaching a quiet acceptance of change, every stage of that journey felt authentic and believable.

Dave Fardon was equally convincing as Ben, the youngest son and unmistakably his mother's favourite. His expressive facial reactions often spoke louder than words, perfectly capturing Ben's initial focus on money and success while hinting at the insecurities beneath the surface. It was a performance full of small touches that made the character feel genuine rather than stereotypical.

Chris Bedford faced perhaps one of the play's greatest challenges as Mark, whose lifelong struggle with identity ultimately leads to his transition to Mia. It is a role that demands enormous emotional honesty and sensitivity, and Chris handled it with real nuance and dignity. He never overplayed the character's pain or vulnerability, allowing the audience to understand both the courage it took to embrace his true self and the shock and confusion experienced by the family around him. It was a thoughtful and deeply affecting performance.

Rebecca Peberdy was superb as Pip, portraying the outwardly successful high achiever whose seemingly perfect life masks a deep sense of dissatisfaction. Her portrayal of Pip's strained relationship with her mother was beautifully judged, with every confrontation simmering with years of unresolved frustration. Her monologue and the reading of the letter were particularly affecting, delivered with quiet honesty rather than melodrama. It was an understated performance, but one that packed a real emotional punch.

Maria Crocker was perfectly cast as Fran, the formidable matriarch around whom the family revolves. Sharp-tongued, fiercely practical and utterly devoted to her family, Fran's flaws were as evident as her strengths. Her tendency to favour and protect

her younger children while struggling to understand her older ones created much of the play's conflict, yet Maria ensured she never became unlikeable. Instead, she presented Fran as a woman doing her best, often getting it wrong, but always acting out of love. It was a commanding performance that drove the narrative from beginning to end, making the void she leaves behind all the more profound.

Jon Crowley provided the perfect counterbalance as Bob, the quiet, dependable patriarch whose steady presence holds the family together far more than anyone realises. Where Fran dominates, Bob observes; where she confronts, he quietly absorbs. Jon's restrained performance was exactly right, proving that stillness can be every bit as powerful as the most dramatic outburst. The final scene, as the family prepare him for Fran's funeral and he silently reveals the depth of his grief, was heartbreakingly moving. Without saying very much at all, Crowley conveyed the devastation of a man who had lost not only his wife, but the person around whom his entire life had revolved.

Director Lin Crowley deserves enormous credit for keeping the focus exactly where it needed to be – on the relationships at the heart of the Price family. In a play that relies almost entirely on emotional truth, it would have been easy to overcomplicate matters, but Crowley trusted both the script and her cast, allowing the characters and their interactions to drive the story. The result was a production full of believable family dynamics, where every conversation, argument and embrace felt genuine.

It takes courage to choose a play like this, but it also takes an enormous amount of trust – the cast trusting their director's vision, and the director trusting the cast to dig deep and deliver performances of real honesty and vulnerability. By the end, it was clear just how much they had given. The cast looked physically and emotionally drained, and, if the silence in the auditorium was anything to go by, so were we. Theatre doesn't always have to leave you smiling as you walk out; sometimes its greatest achievement is to leave you feeling something. This production certainly did that.

Well done Abingdon Drama Club!

Banbury Cross Players

Underdog: The Other Bronte

Front of House was welcoming and efficient. There was a real buzz in the foyer.

The setting was creatively done, establishing 'place' with great immediacy. The Bronte's home was particularly well done with minimal furnishings. A large area of stage left was used for specific locales indicated by the use of projections, particularly in the carriage ride to London. While this was creatively done, this half of the stage remained unused for large passages of time. The projection of passages from the Bronte's work added a highly creative touch.

Costumes were perfect and identified characters and personalities immediately. The use of men's coats while the sisters took on their male pseudo names was clever. Make up added to the overall atmosphere of the production. Sound and lighting were executed with great precision. Incidental plain song was used effectively to create atmosphere. Having the stage crew dress the set just before the play began, drew the audience's attention and gave Charlotte's entrance immediate dramatic effect.

All actors gave confident performance and were well rehearsed. The ensemble work was flawless and gave an excellent portrayal of the stereotypical Victorian male. The 'sisters' created an authentic mood in the Bronte's home and were convincing in portraying the degree of intimacy and mutual understanding that comes from being brought up in a family home. There was a high level of support between all the actors – particularly the sisters. Each portrayed their distinct personalities with sensitivity and flair.

Sophie Raval gave an outstanding performance as Anne Bronte. She struck just the right balance between temerity and a quiet inner strength.

Hannah Ramsden was convincing as Emily Bronte – the practical, calm mediator. Her voice control and use of space were particularly good and executed with flair.

Vivienne Garret gave a confident performance as Charlotte Bronte. Her characterisation was secure. Her voice control and movement were good.

Kate Groves gave 3 distinct and excellent performance in her three roles.

Fraser McMinn was sound as Branwell and confident in the ensemble work.

Richard Oliver gave three confident performances in his various roles and ensemble work. He demonstrated an excellent flair for comic timing.

Jem Turner gave a convincing performance in his supporting role as Tammy.

The director demonstrated insight in her interpretation of the text in bringing out the distinct personalities of the three individual sisters. She showed a good command of stage movements and grouping of actors, particularly in the ensemble work and in Emily's and Anne's death scenes. Although, we felt that the 'pacing' could have been shorter. The carriage ride to London was particularly well done and completely convincing. The ensemble dance with sunglasses was hilarious. Anne Bronte's poem was used to great effect to create atmosphere.

Congratulations to all involved for a most enjoyable and thoughtful production.

Ashley Parker & Mareve Kilbride-Newman

**More 40th Anniversary Festival reviews
to come in the October edition.**