

Cumnor Players Celebrate Their 10th Anniversary

Ten Years of the Cumnor Players

Thank you to everyone who has supported the Cumnor Players over the last 10 years. The idea for an amateur dramatic society in the parish of Cumnor was first pitched in 2006, and every year since December 2007 we have had the opportunity to celebrate the wonderful tradition of panto as well as other theatrical projects. This would not have been possible without help from parents, the Cumnor Village Hall committee, Cumnor Primary School, local businesses, the Sewing Bees, *Cumnor Parish News*, and all the people who over the years have got involved directly in acting, writing, dancing, playing instruments, building sets, or helping front of house. And we want to thank the most important group of all – the audience! This special anniversary feature is about some of our highlights over the years.

STOP PRESS: Tickets for our next pantomime, “*Robin and the Hoods*”, will be available in early November from Cumnor Newsagents and our website, www.cumnorplayers.org.uk. Performances will be on *Wednesday 7th, Thursday 8th, Friday 9th and Saturday 10th December* at Cumnor Village Hall in Leys Road.

How It All Started

“Can I eat this?” That is what the son of one of the panto committee says before Christmas as he picks up something that looks edible but could be a prop. Even before he was one, Thomas Lewis (who is now 10) has known nothing other in December than a festive tide of drying papier-mâché offerings and painted canvas sweeping into the kitchen. His mum Jacqui is involved in set design and acting every year: indeed, she was the one who roped everyone in, fired up with thoughts of playing Dames and plucky heroes.

She was putting up Christmas decorations in a hotel when the idea popped into her head. On returning home, she asked friend Amanda Gaydon, who was babysitting, and then one by one other parents were recruited for panto – in the Glebe park while the children played... or by word of mouth.

They advertised a ‘do’ in the pub to widen the net further and draw people in. “That night you pretty much got a part if you put your hand up,” says Amanda Gaydon. “People who had never done anything like it before came forward. We agreed that *Cinderella* should be the first pantomime. We had little in the way of funding so paid for the things we needed for the show out of our own money.”

Cumnor Village Hall committee backed the idea, generously allowing the Cumnor Players the use of the hall

for the performances. All practice took place at people’s houses, with only the nail-biting dress rehearsal choreographed in Cumnor Primary School hall in the final days. “We rehearsed the first scene a million times,” says Amanda. “A week before the show there was a lot of nervous giggling. Everyone was told to buckle down or the show would be horribly humiliating!”

As well as actors, musicians were recruited. The musical director for *Cinderella*, Dave Gaydon, plus Rachael Claridge, drummer Jon Buxton and saxophonist Jon Heffernan made up the original panto band, the Pantones.

The creative spark was lit for Ally Baker, and she volunteered to write the first script AND design and craft all the

costumes. Publisher Ian Bannerman was asked if he would edit *Cinderella*, which had taken her two months to write, and ‘add funnier jokes’. Local author Philip Pullman also contributed, writing verse for the Fairy Godmother, played by food writer Sophie Grigson, then living in Cumnor. She made marvellous meringues to sustain the cast, boosting morale and energy levels.

The performances were a sell-out and the audience showed their appreciation. It was uplifting for those involved and the momentum just carried on... The second panto, *Peter Pan*, had a magnificent response, with a long queue of hopefuls lined up for casting.

Since then, highlights have included *Jack and the Beanstalk* (2014) receiving a runner-up prize in national finals from NODA (National Operatic and Dramatic Association); the Cumnor Players performed two years running in front of audiences of several thousand at Camp Bestival in Dorset; and also taking an extract from *The Darke Years*, first shown in Cumnor, to the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford upon Avon in 2014 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s ‘Open Stages’ project. Rehearsals are now underway for *Robin and the Hoods*, with five rather than the usual four performances planned to mark this special year.

Costume Dramas

Ally Baker studied textiles and pattern-cutting in London and has worked for a top dress and bridal-wear designer in Oxford. She runs her own business, as



The first Cumnor Players pantomime: *Cinderella* in 2007.

Cumnor Players 10th Anniversary



Sophie Grigson as Smee with Paul Bobby as Captain Hook (with inappropriate see-through shirt!) in *Peter Pan*.

well as designing and making costumes for Cumnor Players' pantomimes.

What's the first piece of costume you made for a Cumnor Players' production?

The first piece I made was for *Cinderella*. I cut up horrible duvet covers to make 1920s dressing gowns for the Ugly Sisters. I thought, well, nothing lost if it doesn't work out. It's only an old duvet.

What is the largest number of costumes you have made for one pantomime?

The largest number was for *Peter Pan* when we had a cast of 50! Sarah

Bannerman, a Cumnor friend, has been a faithful collaborator plus we sometimes convene a Sewing Bee to get large volumes of stitching done in time for the show.

Where do you get your ideas?

I collaborate closely with Jacqui Lewis, who does the sets. We get our ideas from films, books, or paintings, and choose a period or era. The starting position is to be historically accurate and then make it funnier for panto. The inspiration for *Beauty and the Beast of Boars Hill* was based on medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Which costume are you most proud of?

The Squire's costume in *Treasure Island*. It was based on an historically accurate picture of 18th century clothes. Jan Kowal, who played the Squire, was spectacularly brilliant in it. How a person wears a costume is a big part of the fun: particularly the Dames, who have been known to bump into one another in the bra department of Marks & Spencer!

Which took the longest to make?

The cow in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, as it was a costume for two people and the costume had to fit both of them as they swapped places on different nights!

How much does it cost, on average, to make all the costumes for one show?

We have a budget of around £300 to make all the costumes for each panto.



In *Jack and the Beanstalk* the Beans wore tendril hats, which got tangled together during one performance.

We recycle material so a sparkly cape for a fairy godmother in one show was magically turned into Jasmine's trousers in *Aladdin* and then mermaids' shimmery tails in *Treasure Island*.

Have there been wardrobe malfunctions?

Captain Hook's see-through shirt in *Peter Pan* and see-through harem pants in *Aladdin*... not really suitable for matinee performances. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the Beans had wire tendrils twirling out of their hats and in the middle of their song couldn't move because their wires tangled up and their heads were stuck together.

Most magical moment for you?

Every year there is a beautiful moment when everything comes together. We want to create something moving as well as make audiences laugh; we want heart to be at the centre of it all.

It's behind you! Set design

Jacqui Lewis is a Fine Arts graduate. She works with a team including Kim Heffernan on painting, stage manager Tim Claridge, and Chris Warne, whose carpentry has been invaluable over 10 years.

What was the first bit of set you produced?

A concertina backdrop for *Cinderella*, with wall-papered interior of Baron Hardup's castle on one side and a royal ballroom on the back. There were six panels, each three metres tall and a metre and a half wide. They were wallpapered on Kim's dining-room table and took up that room and her sitting room too.



The Squire (left) in *Treasure Island* wears the costume Ally is most proud of creating.

Cumnor Players 10th Anniversary

How do you plan it out?

Spread the canvas and sketch it out in charcoal. I do it by eye rather than calculate and plot. I make people lie down on the fabric for scale to see where windows need to come. I think about where actors will be standing on stage. You work out the gaps between the actors as that is where you paint the interesting details.

Have there been any set disasters?

We painted backdrops on different types of canvas to save money and found that as the paint dried, the canvas shrank at different rates. One of the most frustrating disasters was during *Peter Pan*. We had to fold up the set wet and it stayed folded for a few days. When we unfolded it, it was totally mouldy. Right up to opening night, we had to keep painting over the mould because it kept coming back.

Do you work right to the wire in getting the sets ready?

We don't finish until 3.00 am on the day of the technical rehearsal as some of the work can't start until we can use the stage fully in the hall. We have it ready for the tech rehearsal, as the lights have to have something to point at. Even just before the show starts, I am still touching stuff up.

What are the other challenges?

It is a minor miracle that the backdrop fits on the floor of our house and



The set of *Snow White* (Jacqui's favourite).

because we have underfloor heating it is often left to dry there. The family lives around the backdrop. The children had to step through a *Peter Pan* window to get into our kitchen at one stage.

Which is your favourite set?

I think of all of them it has to be *Snow White*. It went from a stark white set to the full colour of the dwarves' homes. The scenery even got a round of applause from the audience. We had falling snowflakes thanks to lights person Stuart Newton. It actually made me cry, seeing snowflakes, the lights, the dance and the music all coming together.

Set for Laughs!

Stage Manager Tim Claridge translates ideas into reality and leads the team that designs and builds the panto sets. He recalls one memorable mishap: the case of the falling sun during *Treasure Island* and the bold attempt by a stage crew member to sneak unnoticed behind the sea-side backdrop to prevent the huge sunny disc collapsing onto the cast. He went unnoticed, save for the appearance of two huge black boots protruding from under the backdrop... the stage crew were in tears... priceless!

One of the joys of being part of the backstage crew is when they share their



The Witch in *Beauty and the Beast*.



The set of *A Cumnor Christmas Carol* was quite challenging.

Cumnor Players 10th Anniversary



The backstage crew enjoying tea in the interval.

traditional tea and biscuits during the performance intervals. Nothing like camaraderie over a cup of tea... and occasionally something stronger!

High Notes for the Pantones

Five-times Musical Director Rachael Claridge joined the Cumnor Players in 2007 in response to a call out for local musicians. She studied music at the University of Oxford.

So who are the Pantones?

I play keyboard and Jon Heffernan plays sax and clarinet. I've continued to play in each production since joining, and Jon and Dave Gaydon, our first Musical Director, have played in most. Our drummer, Jon Buxton, has also performed in the panto band in every Cumnor Players production. Of course, we have been lucky to have other talent join us over the years as well.

How many songs have you learned over last 10 years?

We have performed approximately 150 songs/excerpts of incidental music, some of which may now cause us to shudder when we hear them again.

So what does the Musical Director do?

The job entails working with the Director to ensure the music fits with the script. I help select songs, which are then allocated to singers. At rehearsals, we then work out the musical arrangements and then it's band practice, with and without the actors.

Any particular highlights?

Thinking of songs suitable for a singing camel and auditioning people who think they can't sing, but find out they can.

Some Quotable Quotes

"The build-up from rehearsals was strange to say the least... especially

going shopping for ladies' undergarments that I could squeeze into and finding some very strange websites where size 11 heels seemed commonplace."

(Paul Bobby, Ugly Sister in *Cinderella*, Dame in *Beauty and the Beast*)

"The best thing about being a Dame includes the outrageous costumes. My wife tells people truthfully that I've had more dresses made for me than she has!"

(Andrew Down, Queen of Hearts in *Alice*)

"They booed us on and laughed us off. Swaggering about the stage like you owned it was so enjoyable."

(Jan Kowal on playing Ronnie Rumble in *Jack and the Beanstalk*)

*"One of the most rewarding characters to write is the baddie. We realised just how pivotal the boo factor is to the success of a pantomime when we performed *Beauty and the Beast of Boars Hill*. The witch went down a storm with the audience, particularly with the under-10s, and we realised that children like to be scared so we try to write stuff that makes young hearts thump harder with excitement... as well as making them laugh."*

(Writers Maria Jeffery & Mike Meldrum)

Cumnor Players in Numbers

- 110 people have acted in our shows
- 140 people have helped offstage
- 100 litres of paint have been used
- 2,000 ice-creams have been sold

Charitable Donations

Since 2007, the Cumnor Players have raised thousands of pounds for charities and voluntary groups through ticket sales and raffles. Well over £10,000 has gone to Cumnor Primary School and paid for arts and drama projects. Money has also been donated to Cumnor Pre-school Nursery, Botley Alzheimers Home, Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity, Helen and Douglas House, Viva (for vulnerable children), Lily Gulshat, the Parasol Project, See Saw (support for bereaved children), Bikesafe for B4044 Community Path, and the 4th Oxford Scout Group.

Maria Jeffery



The Pantones have provided live music for every pantomime production.