**LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU: THE GLASGOW ARTS COMMUNITY PANTO IS 10 YEARS OLD**

The Glasgow Arts Community Touring Pantomime is 10 years old. Oh yes it is! Since 2009, the touring Christmas show has been staged in community venues throughout Glasgow, bringing Yuletide cheer and high-quality theatre to the places where people live at prices they can afford.

And when the curtain rises next month (December 3) in Shettleston, Castlemilk and a dozen more community venues, local audiences will be continuing in a decade-long tradition as they laugh, hiss and sing along with the professional cast of goodies, baddies and pantomime dames.

This year’s Glasgow Arts Community panto is Beauty And The Beast. Written by Alan McHugh, directed by Julie Brown with Karen MacIver as musical director, it features a stellar cast including Storm-Skyler McClure as Belle along with Kevin Lennon and Andrew Marley as her good pals, Betty’n’Boaby. They are determined to break the curse cast on unfortunate Prince Sebastian (Trevor O’Connell) and his faithful housekeeper Agnes (Elaine M Ellis) by nasty witch, Deadly Nightshade (Neshla Caplan).

The show is currently rehearsing in the Barmulloch Community Centre. But Beauty And The Beast is far from a one-off. Sleeping Beauty and Mother Goose are right behind her. Oh no they’re not? Indeed they are – along with Cinderella, Aladdin and other well-loved panto classics, some of them specially adapted for Glasgow audiences with titles such as Weans In The Wid and Ricky McWhittington.

Every year since 2009, the fully professional but affordably-ticketed production has been staged as part of the year-round Glasgow Arts community touring network. Aimed at a wide demographic including families, primary schoolchildren, youth groups and vulnerable adults, it tours throughout December to 14 community venues including Lodging House Mission – a Glasgow-based charity dedicated to providing care and support to homeless, vulnerable and socially excluded people. With 21 performances scheduled, some 4,000 people are expected to see the show.

“The value of this professional Christmas touring pantomime is huge,” says Mari Binnie who, along with fellow Glasgow Arts producer Jon Pope, has been producing those community pantomimes for the past decade. “The fact that audiences are always at or near capacity speaks for itself. In past years, I’ve stood at the door saying goodbye to audiences at community centres and heard from adults and children alike about how good it is to have such fun-filled, joyful performances on their doorsteps – and at an affordable price that means they can bring a whole family or group along.

“Theatre has the power to make us view the world differently, switch off from everyday stresses or simply make us experience laughter or empathy. Everyone should have access to high-quality arts and theatre, and the community pantomime is a really successful model for achieving this.”

Glasgow Life’s director of cultural services, Jill Miller, said: “Ten years of the Glasgow Arts Community Touring pantomime is a milestone well worth celebrating. Bringing high-quality entertainment right into the heart of communities, it gives people the chance to get into the festive spirit and enjoy a first-class production, within their own neighbourhood.

“There’s nothing like a good old-fashioned pantomime for giving audiences the chance to really get in the production. It gives people the opportunity to experience good quality live theatre, in some cases, inspiring them to get involved in the drama, creative writing or other related activity.

“Most importantly, it’s always a hugely enjoyable highlight of the year – and I can’t wait to see this year’s show, which promises to be yet another Christmas cracker.”

**A SHORT HISTORY OF**

**THE GLASGOW ARTS COMMUNITY TOURING PANTOMIME**

**2009: Cinderella**

The very first Glasgow Arts Community Pantomime was staged 10 years ago, with the 2009 production of Cinderella. It was written by Johnny McKnight, who’s famous for his role in TV soap River City and as a pantomime writer, actor and director. Adapted from a longer version of Cinderella for Stirling’s Macrobert Arts Centre, the panto, produced in association with Platform in Easterhouse, visited eight venues.

“Watching the show in Easterhouse was joyous,” recalls Johnny McKnight. “People dancing in the aisles, the quality and hysterical heckling of a Glasgow crowd, the deafening sound of ‘He’s behind you!’… It’s the reason we all work on panto. It’s a pleasure and privilege to bring Christmas (and the Christmas night out) to the communities of Glasgow.”

**2010: The Selfish Giant**

The Selfish Giant (directed by Andy Cannon) was produced in association with Glasgow East Arts Company and Wee Stories. The plot revolved around a mean-spirited giant living in a Scottish Highland castle, who builds a formidable, keep-out wall around his beautiful garden and needs to mend his selfish ways in time for Christmas

“It was a year when we had a lot of snow,” recalls producer Jon Pope. “In fact, it was the only time we’ve ever had to cancel some performances, because community venues were closed.”

**2011: Mother Goose**

This year’s show was produced in association with Hopscotch and for the first time, it was performed at the Lodging House Mission (LHM). That’s now a regular Glasgow Arts Community Touring Pantomime venue and current LHM manager, Stephen Mitchell, is enthusiastic about the benefits for the marginalised, homeless and often socially isolated people who use the service. “I applaud greatly the fantastic spirit and energy of the people on the ground, so to speak, who continuously strive to provide these opportunities for inclusion and participation. There is such a wholesome spirit here behind this community outreach which is both enabling and empowering and which helps to mitigate against the social exclusion that impacts severely on so many in our society.”

Kate Keating, a vocational guidance worker with NHS Restart, Bridgeton, works with people with severe mental health issues and regularly takes a group to the Lodging House Mission’s pantomime performance. “The feedback from the shows is fantastic,” she says. “A lot of the people we work with are quite isolated, and coming as a group gives them an opportunity to socialise with different people. They come away from it buzzing.”

One woman, who had severe depression and alcohol issues, was inspired to join a drama group; some others became involved in creative writing. “The panto is a highlight of the year for them,” adds Kate Keating. “They look forward to it and talk about it for ages afterwards. They are already talking about Beauty And The Beast.”

**2012: Dick Whittington And His Amazing Cat**

This show was presented in conjunction with Hopscotch and was one panto that explored a journey from Glasgow to London, rather than focusing on the home city we all love.

**2013: Little Ulla**

This year, rather than staging a traditional panto, Glasgow Arts presented a children’s show called Little Ulla. Written by Clare McGarry and Bill Wright, of Grinagog Theatre, it was extremely successful with the young children it was aimed at.

**2014: Weans In The Wid**

In response to audience feedback, this year’s show reverted to the traditional family panto model with Weans In The Wid, a Clydeside creation based loosely on Babes In The Wood and Hansel And Gretel. Written by John Binnie and directed by Andy Cannon (creative director of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony), it was billed as “a traditional Glasgow panto for all the family that’s packed with gallus humour and slapstick along with song, dance, adventure and romance”. The plot centred around wicked step-mum Mince, her bingo buddy Tatties and poor, picked-upon Greetel, who inherits a fortune, only to be transported to the dark forest by Mince and Tatties …

It was produced in association with Ignite Theatre, which engages with a diverse range of young people offering drama workshops and creating innovative new work. Ignite director Aileen Ritchie recalls “the sheer excitement of seeing so many young people get their professional debut. Two of them went on to study acting and make it their profession. As artistic director of Ignite, it was fantastic to work with an ethnically diverse cast and see that reflected back in the make-up of the audiences. It brought so much fresh life to age-old stories and the children really invested and identified with the characters.”

**2015: Cinderella**

Scripted by Johnny McKnight, this version of the well-loved tale was directed by Bill Wright, with musical direction from Clare McGarry and Brian Hartley as designer. Bill Wright (who would later direct Aladdin and Ricky McWhittington for Glasgow Arts), has fond memories of this production: “It’s always great to see a queue snaking its way outside the door and the audience were extremely positive. I remember a standing ovation when we pulled off the Dirty Dancing-style lift in Cinderella, the sustained booing of the villains, the moment when a little girl said, ‘How did they do that!’ when Cinderella transformed her dress and her mother replied, ‘Magic, hen.’

“There were always a few moments of panic on-stage and off,” he adds. “A highlight for me was stepping in to play Buttons in Toryglen after Gavin Wright fell ill.  With no rehearsal and a slightly improvised costume, I had to open the show, sing a song and then keep everything going for the next hour.  I thoroughly enjoyed it, but was glad when Gavin came back the next day!”

**2016: Aladdin**

Scripted by John Binnie, this production was directed by Bill Wright and starred Andrew Fraser as Aladdin. George Docherty was Widow Twanky, Storm Skyler McClure played Princess Jasmine, Maureen Carr (from Still Game) also starred and Alan Penman arranged music and choreography. For the first time, rehearsals took place within Barmulloch Community Centre.

“Getting out of the usual artist-based buildings during rehearsals had a positive effect on everyone,” enthuses musical director Clare McGarry. “It was also refreshing to be in among the bowling, tea dances, dance clubs and other groups that used the centre each week! It definitely kept our feet on the ground to see how many great things happen in these community centres and what a vital service they are for the local community. What a brilliant way to demonstrate the ethos that these communities matter; so why not rehearse where the show is also going to tour to?”

From then on, all Glasgow Arts pantomimes have been rehearsed in community centres.

**2017: Ricky McWhittington**

This version of the old tale was written by actor, writer and comedian, Alan McHugh, who’s well known for TV roles in Taggart, Take The High Road, Limmy’s Show and Rab C Nesbitt. The action took place in Senga McWhittington’s sweetie shop, which was overrun by a plague of rats until Ricky McWhittington stepped in to save the day, with the helping wand of Fairy Gallus Alice. Alan McHugh, who also wrote this year’s pantomime, Beauty And The Beast, recalls: “Both scripts were commissioned by other producers, and were therefore pre-existing scripts, which were then adapted to suit the needs of the Glasgow Life panto remit.

“With Ricky McWhittington, I worked closely with Bill Wright over many months to make the script as local as possible, aiming it at a family/kids audience.”

**2018: Sleeping Beauty**

Written by John Binnie, directed by Aileen Ritchie, designed by Brian Hartley, this panto was rehearsed in Knightswood Community Centre where Ignite theatre is based. Audiences were invited to “join Sleeping Beauty, her sister Poppy and their nurse Nella Nae Dosh as they tried to save their home and let true love flourish”.

There were plenty of sing-along moments, as musical director Karen McIver recalls: “We sang Harold Arlen's *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* in Judy's Garland’s key and I asked everyone to randomly sing a note in harmony at the end, Once in a lullaby … The sound was exquisite and the harmony totally sublime. I used it as my ringtone for the rest of the year!”

Actor Simon Weir, who played Nellie Nae Dosh, has happy memories of those musical moments: “We usually have three songs and dances to learn, from current pop hits to classics and have a short time to get the show together and up to the standard required. Sets, costume and props all come together during this time and a great esprit de corps develops as we dance, sweat, sing and drill the scenes from an excellent script by John Binnie.

“Suddenly we are on and touring our first venues and the magic begins. Touring with the likes of actor George Docherty has given me memories that I still to this day burst out laughing about. The casts I have worked with have become friends for life and all of the hard work is so worth it. It is a tough tour. Lots of venues, lots of shows and a high, high standard to maintain but the most rewarding job of the year.”

**2019: Beauty And The Beast.**

Beauty And The Beast, Glasgow Arts Community pantomime for 2019, written by Alan McHugh and adapted by Julie Brown, begins rehearsals in the Barmulloch Community Centre on November 18.

Handsome Prince Sebastian has been cursed by Witch, Deadly Nightshade and left isolated in his crumbling castle as an ugly Beast! See if feisty Belle (and her good friends Betty‘n’ Boaby) can break the spell and bring back joy, love and loads of laughter.

The curtain rises in Barmulloch Community Centre on December 3. Let the panto season begin …

**Let’s hear it for Glasgow Arts Community Panto**

***A round-up of quotes from cast and production crews over the past 10 years.***

**Johnny McKnight, actor, writer and director**

*“*I think the ethos behind the touring pantomime is absolutely essential, especially when we’re amid high-end, extremely high-priced commercial pantos. The cost is, for many, far too high for a family to attend. Add to that issues of childcare, transportation, cost of food and drink in the venue. Many venues have lost sight of the spirit of the pantomime. It should be available and easily accessed to all. The joy of the community panto not only brings the product directly to people’s door, it also provides a much-needed entry point to theatre. Long may it last!”

**Alan McHugh, writer*,* Ricky McWhittington (2017) and Beauty And The Beast (2019)**

“Quite often, people from the community can’t ‘go to’ panto or theatre, so it’s only right that ‘Glasgow’ should take the theatre/panto to them. That’s what they pay their Council Tax for!

“The community pantomime in Glasgow is essential. Many of the main house pantos in Glasgow are outwith the budgets of much of the city’s population. These pantos too have a role to play, but are often written around big effects and celebrity names, with the focus being on spectacle, as opposed to story. The beauty of the community panto is that by the very nature of its budgetary restrictions and size, it relies on the story, and the integrity of the performances to carry it off … whilst being both in and about the community it serves and entertains.

“This will often be a child’s first visit to the theatre, and we have a responsibility to our art and profession to communicate with them and speak to them at their level, whilst entertaining them and giving them their money’s worth, to hopefully attract them not only to panto, but to theatre and the performing arts for the rest of their lives.”

**Brian Hartley, designer, 2014-2018**

“It feels very important, taking well-made professional theatre to the communities which don’t get so much access to arts provision through the year. It is an affordable and local family-friendly night out, in comparison to an expensive night out to the bigger theatres which is beyond many people’s financial means. The show feels accessible and inclusive, and comes to local venues.”

**John Binnie, writer, Weans In The Wid, Aladdin And Sleeping Beauty**

“I had such a great time writing these three touring pantos. I have memories of families, of all generations, experiencing the panto together in their own environment: toddlers sitting on mats at the front, parents and grandparents further back, all enjoying a show that was being performed in their community.

“Panto is so direct and pure, and there is something special about it being performed close to the audience. The set was bright and colourful as were the costumes. Actors perform in the audiences' lap. Audiences love the intimacy and directness. It is also essential, providing high-quality, heart-warming entertainment at a low cost. Long may it continue.”

**Aileen Ritchie, director, Ignite Theatre, sourced actors from among local communities**

“Glasgow is proud of the panto tradition and we really celebrate so much of the fun and joy which the show brings. Songs old and new bring people together, letting them enjoy a good laugh. It gives people from all walks of life and of all ages a chance to be together. I think a memory from last year’s pantomime, Sleeping Beauty, sums it up.

“A mum and her five children had arrived from another part of Glasgow for the evening show at Knightswood. She felt new to the city ­- didn't speak much English and the community centre was about to shut between the matinee and the evening show. It was already dark outside and she had been dropped off in an unfamiliar place. The cast suggested we ask her in to share the office with the children, saying they would stay in their dressing room so they didn't spoil the magic for the children, of seeing the actors on stage. We had a small party for the children and mum in the company office: sharing snacks, songs and stories. The family later went to the evening show and had a wonderful time. It felt like the spirit of Christmas.”

**Clare McGarry**, **musical director of Cinderella (2015), Aladdin (2016) and Ricky McWhittington (2017)**

“The Glasgow Life pantos are special.  The atmosphere, and the ethos behind them, makes them unique.  I think this comes down to the value that Glasgow Arts put on communities across Glasgow getting a high quality production in their local centres, and at great value.  The commitment they have to these communities is authentic, and it is brilliant that this will be the 10th year.  The fact that the majority of shows are in areas of multiple deprivation where a lot of families would find the cost of panto tickets elsewhere prohibitive makes the whole experience incredibly meaningful.

“I loved being part of the creative team and helping to deliver something of great quality. The highlight for me was always to get the show out in front of the audience where it belongs and seeing people sing, clap or dance along at the end.  I loved seeing kids come down to the front of the stage to get a better look.  During every single show I would be bursting with pride to be a part of this production and found the audience’s reactions very moving.

“Well done Glasgow Life.  Keep up the good work.  Here’s to the next 10 years!

**Simon Weir, actor, played Abanazer in Aladdin (2016) and Dame Nellie Nae Dosh in Sleeping Beauty (2018)**

“Rehearsing and performing the Glasgow Arts Community Touring Pantomime is the toughest five weeks of the year. It feels more like a mini circus rolling into town and the audiences absolutely love it. Every show is hair-raising; many of the kids have never seen a panto and their reactions are amazing, especially when they amble onto the stage mid-scene or are questioning you outside the venues, 'Mate...MATE...You in this?' being a popular refrain. Chase scenes through the audience wearing knee-high high-heeled boots and enormous Christmas tree costume can be fraught with danger! But I have honestly *loved* every single second of these shows.

“Because of the high prices charged by town theatres, many kids and parents cannot afford it so to bring the magic of panto to their own community halls and give them that same high standard of show is the most rewarding part of the job. The kids really engage with it as do the adults, since there is always a nod to the parents with the dialogue and a great message contained throughout. Every show was full and we had lots of feedback from families who had never seen panto and were blown away by it.

“It is the most rewarding job I have ever done in theatre and for us there is no difference in playing the Hackney Empire or Ruchill Community Centre. The standard and the job is exactly the same but the audience are close (sometimes literally) up and personal and the banter with these audiences is second to none. Glasgow *needs* this tour every year. It is the future of touring theatre. Bring top quality drama to these community centres, charge truly affordable prices, re-energise the venues, pack the halls and cafes and local people will come along and experience the magic that only a live performance can provide. Ultimately, for audiences, crew, producers, venues and actors the Glasgow Life Community Tour is food for the soul. I love it.”

**Maureen Carr, actor (Madam De’Mon, Cinderella (2015); The Genie and The Queen, Aladdin (2016)**

I loved having that connection with the community and think Glasgow Life do a fantastic job. This connection must be maintained; it’s vital that people have access to live theatre. A lot of people think that theatre is not for them. It really annoys me when I hear people say that it’s a luxury.  It’s not.”

**Sarah McCardie, actor (The Genie & The Mayor, Aladdin, 2016; Gallus Alice (the fairy), Ricky McWhittington, 2017)**

“I enjoyed meeting some of the children and young people after the shows. I stayed in costume and would go out the front to meet them. This was a fantastic experience. I remember from my own childhood, the magic that only theatre, Christmas and panto can bring - so it feels special to meet them off-stage too. I remember one wee girl asking if I could really fly. I looked her in the eye and with absolute conviction said: ‘Yes.’ She said: ‘Wow.’

“I believe Glasgow Life pantomime is *hugely* important and is often the first time children and adults will have seen such a professional production in their communities. Many people return year after year. The high standard created from script, set, costume, performers and overall production is immense. I firmly believe that this sort of experience should be accessible to all, not only those who can afford to go to commercial venues where ticket prices can be extortionate for a family, and many simply cannot afford it. I think Glasgow Life provides a brilliant, professional production in a community setting where the joy and experience at Christmas can make such a difference to so many. It really is magical. Producers Mari Binnie and Jon Pope work so hard to create a supportive environment for all - I recommend every actor who can get involved to experience this community marvel. It's special.”

**THE GLASGOW ARTS COMMUNITY PANTO 2019**

**BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**

**Cast and creative team**

Betty Blumenthal             Kevin Lennon

Beauty                               Storm Skyler McClure

Sebastian / Beast             Trevor O’Connell

Agnes (housekeeper)    Elaine M Ellis

Deadly Nightshade          Neshla Caplan

Boaby (Betty’s son)        Andrew Marley

Writer                                   Alan McHugh

Director                                Julie Brown

Musical director                Karen MacIver

Set & costume designer     Claire Halleran

Costume maker                 Kirsteen Naismith

Choreographer                 Susan Elena

Production manager       Sian McGregor

Stage Managers                 John Wilkie and Dougal Gudim

**DATES AND VENUES:** The curtain rises on December 3 at Barmulloch Community Centre with a preview (all tickets £2). The show will then visit Darnley Community Centre, St Francis Centre, Penilee Community Centre, Knightswood Community Centre, Ruchazie Community Centre, Lodging House Mission, Shettleston Community Centre, Possilpoint Community Centre, Barmulloch Community Centre (return), Milton Community Campus, Barlanark Community Centre, Drumchapel Community Centre, Pollok Community Centre and Castlemilk Community Centre.

Tickets are £5/£2.50 concession.

For more information on venues and tickets visit

<https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/event/1/beauty-and-the-beast>

glasgowlife.org.uk/arts
#glasgowartspanto