



Fisher Spotlight

The newsletter of The Bungay Arts and Theatre Society

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Christmas at the Fisher Theatre

Christmas is a very important time for us. It brings in new, younger audiences and also generates vital extra income. In December 2025 we welcomed exhibitors at the Makers' Market, the FYTG original production of *The Snow Queen* and our panto - a new version of *Robin Hood*.

Hayley Evenett, producer, writer, and director of *Robin Hood*, writes:

This year's pantomime from REDuck ProDUCKtions was none other than *Robin Hood*, a classic tale elevated with references, acrobatics, unexpected plot twists and added fairy sparkle. Running from December 19th to 31st, *Robin Hood* saw a record number of audience members and received several terrific reviews from critics and audience members alike, with feedback such as "brilliantly funny", "dynamic and inventive" and "a wonderful night at the theatre".

The show featured all the classic tropes including plenty of audience participation, slapstick, double-entendre, good vs. evil and a fairy speaking solely in rhyming couplets. Back by popular demand was the inclusion of the audience favourite: the 12 days of Christmas, which went down a storm!

Writing the pantomime is always fun, but challenging. I was particularly proud of the 'Snacky McGee' segment this year, with plenty of confectionery-based name interjections throughout Robin's monologue.

I was very spoilt with this year's cast featuring five returning cast members: Ellis

Rose Rother (*Jack & the Beanstalk*), Ivan Wilkinson (*Peter Pan*, *Raiders of the Lost Panto*, *Cinderella*), Eloise Cubbin (*Beauty & the Beast*), Leighton Melville and Gillian Dean (from the last three pantomimes).



Ellis Rose Rother as Alan A Dale, Eloise Cubbin as Maid Marion and Dan Crowley as Will Scarlett

They are all incredibly skilled, local professional actors who are wonderful to work with and all of them brought additional talents to the production such as lyric writing, music editing and choreography.

Gillian Dean was back for the fourth year and it's easy to see why I like working with her as she is a superb character actor and a pleasure to work with. It may come as a surprise to learn (though it is no secret) that Gill is severely sight impaired and technically blind, but you certainly wouldn't know it from her performance. This could, of course, be a challenge for her when it comes to reduced on-stage lighting during scene changes, blocking and special effects,



Gillian Dean as Sarah and Ivan Wilkinson as the Sheriff

but with open discussion, check-ins and problem solving, there is always a solution to ensure that she feels as confident and safe on that stage as possible. Working with creatives, there are often several cast or crew members with neurodivergencies that need to be considered, especially as the rehearsal room can be a very raw and delicate environment where people can often feel particularly vulnerable. I encourage my cast to talk to me about anything that is a concern from day one and I always start the process with a talk about expectations, parameters and how I have an open-door policy so that everyone hopefully feels comfortable and supported. This makes the rehearsal process a smooth and enjoyable place for everyone involved and it needs to be if you're giving up all your time over Christmas! This year I was also joined by newcomers Quinn Richards and Dan Crowley, who were brilliant additions to an already strong, incredibly skilled group of local professional actors. Casting for the pantomime is always difficult as you not only want the best performer on that stage, but also people who can 'hit the ground running' as we only have a week to rehearse. They also need to work well with one another in such an intense and close environment. This year's cast gelled from day one and their chemistry with one another could certainly be felt on-stage.

My creative team was just as strong with the return of Sam Webber on lighting & sound design and operation. Sam brought plenty of fantastic ideas and lifted each scene with dynamic colour changes, sound effects, and focused lighting. His work on the archery competition was particularly superb. Ellis Rose Rother (as well as playing Alan A Dale) returned as my choreographer and once again elevated the musical numbers masterfully. The Fisher's very own Alex Butler provided the projections during the production, which were lovely additions.



Quinn Richards as Robin Hood

I am always incredibly honoured to produce the Fisher Theatre's pantomime, and this year was a particular highlight for me. The pantomime was a tremendous success, and it was all thanks to the skill of my cast and crew, and the support I received from all at the Fisher Theatre. I am already making plans for 2026's pantomime *Sleeping Beauty* and I cannot wait to see you there.

Christmas Makers' Market

On December 7th we had a wonderful, busy day in the theatre, with our magical Christmas Makers' Market, held in our auditorium. This was a huge success and drew large numbers of people – an extra bonus for people coming to the Bungay Street Market. We had an exciting variety of stalls, including handmade jewellery, ornaments, jams and chutneys, quilted items,



books and delicious Italian food. At the same time Alex and Molly had worked their magic to create Santa's Grotto for the children,

and this comes with huge thanks to our genial Santa(s!) and mischievous Elf who made this a properly magical experience for the children. This is definitely an event that we would like to become a tradition – possibly with two or three more stalls in the auditorium, and the Grotto in the Gallery or Cellar – both are thoroughly enjoyable additions to the Christmas festivities. **Cathy Edwards-Gill**

Julie Dunning and Joe Edwards-Gill offer a warm welcome in Santa's grotto.



The Makers' Market in the auditorium with the grotto on stage

A Snow Queen extravaganza

This Christmas FYTG ventured into new territories. Instead of hiring a bespoke musical from the shelves of the theatrical licensing giants, I wrote our own version of *The Snow Queen* with original song lyrics.



The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Andersen isn't a Christmas story, but it heavily features snow, as the title suggests, and magical encounters, so we thought it passed muster for a Christmas offering.

The story is about meaningful friendship between a little boy called Kai and a little girl called Gerda, drawn together across their humble adjoining rooftops in Copenhagen. The simplicity and joy that they share in nurturing a garden together, reading stories and hearing Gerda's grandmother's old folk tales creates a bond of great loyalty between them. Gerda risks everything to find her dear friend Kai, travelling to the farthest north to rescue him from being eternally frozen.



FYTG cast photos by Darren France

Written with the large number of our Fledgling group (9-13 year olds) in mind, it meant there had to be lots of characters, which admittedly there were already in the story, but we created even more speaking characters which showed in probably the longest cast list we've ever had, and many ensemble scenes. We made sure there was

short dialogue a-plenty to keep the whole group of 42 children busy.

On top of this, we worked for the first time with a very talented composer and musician who we are lucky enough to have in Bungay, Will Fergusson. We commissioned him to write a score and



songs. He also played live for the performances which was a great experience for the children having such a talented musician adding such richness and flexibility to their show, and who blew away audiences with the extraordinary music he composed.

This made the whole process of putting a show together quite different for us and the children. At times it was a little more heart in mouth, but it was worth it. Working with a new piece of writing meant that, as we worked on scenes in the rehearsal room, we might discover that something needed adjusting. This certainly happened with the songs, meaning that the original lyrics printed in the script completely changed by the time of performance. Similarly, with the movement sequences when we found something wasn't working, we had the wonderful Mr Fergusson on hand who, in no time at all, adjusted his composition with his improvisation skills to accommodate the young cast.

Other local talent, Kerry Timewell and Bee Eno, worked tirelessly to paint and sew set pieces. It was a great pleasure for us all to get away from the formulaic backing-track musical and create something unique, poetic and unusual. We hope you enjoyed it.

Laila Choat-France

A preview of our 20th anniversary celebrations and so much more

It seems amazing, but this September will mark 20 years since the grand re-opening of the Fisher Theatre in 2006. We have come so far since those early days, when loyal supporters turned out with blankets and hot water bottles to watch fundraiser shows, picking their way through piles of rubble! We are all so proud of the theatre, and what we offer to the community – a rich and varied programme of performances and exhibitions, and an increasing offering of meals, workshops, talks and creative groups.

Around the time of our **20th birthday** there will be some special events, and the flagship

will be our production of ***Kinky Boots***. This is edging ever closer to production – several of the parts are already cast, with the all-important role of Lola to be decided later this month, after a far-reaching search. The production is the long-held dream of Alex Butler, whom you will know as a very familiar face around the theatre. With Alex keeping an eye on everything as producer and designer, and with Darren France directing and Alisha Gouldhart as musical director, we are in capable hands. It will be a fantastic show, and it all kicks off in February with the first thrilling read-through by the cast.

An exciting programme

But I am jumping ahead. We have some wonderful events for your diaries between now and the end of April. We have introduced **Meet-Up Matinees** – afternoon screenings of much-loved films for those who prefer

not to go out in the evening. There are several **new bands** coming to us, the wonderful Hedera, Sound of the Sirens and local musician Entison, aka Nathan Thomas. Not The Rolling Stones look amazing – with a dead ringer of a young Mick Jagger on lead vocals. Many **old favourites** return – ELO Encounter are doing two shows due to popular demand, and we always love to

welcome back Cobbler Bob, Stephen Amer, Totally Blondie, Alchemy Live and the Guitar Legends.

There is great drama too – we offer you ghost stories, *Suffolk Spectres* and *Tales of Trouble*

or come and see RoughCast's *The Real Inspector Hound*. Meet Audrey Hepburn, and King Henry VIII. Be baffled and amazed by Daniel Sinclair's acclaimed Comedy Hypnosis and Mind-reading show, or enjoy afternoon tea prior to *Downton Abbey*. Our popular **pre-film meals** continue too, thanks to our wonderful chef Julie Dunning, and do come to a wartime **musical**

fundraiser by the engaging Daisy and the Continentals and Station 366. There are two more **oil painting workshops** too, and plenty of **creative writing opportunities**.

This is only the tip of the iceberg! Please have a look at our printed programme and website, and thank you all so very much for your continuing, invaluable support.

Cathy Edwards-Gill,
General Manager



Images from future shows. Montage: Alex Butler

Rooted in the landscape: bringing artists together at the Fisher

The Fisher Gallery is a vital part of the theatre as the cultural centre for Bungay. We invited Helen Derbyshire to reflect on her experience as an exhibiting artist in the autumn of 2025.

From 29th September to 8th November 2025, four of us – Sarah Cannell, Helen Derbyshire, Louise Dougherty and Caroline Mackintosh – exhibited our art together for the first time in “Rooted in the Landscape” at the Fisher Gallery.

Two serendipitous events brought this about. In late 2024, Helen and Louise had met up for the first time in a long time as part of a newly forming artist support group. They had always admired each other’s work and recognised the close compatibility of their local landscape subject matter and approaches.

In January 2025, Helen attended her first volunteer meeting at the Fisher Theatre. She had heard on the grapevine that the volunteer curator was stepping back, but was pleased to hear that the staff and Board wished to continue to hold high quality art exhibitions and were looking for potential exhibitors. Helen expressed her interest, phoned Louise and arranged to meet her at the gallery.

Where, how, when and with whom to exhibit are questions that artists live with constantly. Issues of cost, likely footfall, prestige, practicality and potential for sales are all factors taken into consideration. We saw lots of positives in exhibiting at the Fisher. The gallery is a large light space with the ability to exhibit both large and small works. Entry is free; exhibition slots are six weeks long; there is no requirement to invigilate; it has good day and evening opening hours; and 30 percent commission on sales is very reasonable.

On the down side for us, the gallery is sometimes used for meetings and classes, and is occasionally closed to the public. We had heard about this from previous exhibitors – with some having visitors who had travelled from a distance but been unable to see the exhibition. Meetings also

bring captive audiences, however, and the potential for art to be seen by people who might not usually come to exhibitions.

We decided to go for it - and to invite two additional artists with a distinctive focus on the local landscape to join us. Caroline and Sarah both immediately said yes. We all recognised the compatibility in our work and the potential of exhibiting together.

Months of team work on planning and practicalities led up to our private view opening event – an extremely well-attended,

bustling evening. We were thrilled. A few weeks later, an informal Meet the Artists evening, with Helen and Louise talking to each other about their art and answering questions, was an equally validating, uplifting event.

When the exhibition came down, we all reflected on its success: lots of visitors,

lovely comments and conversations, great local exposure as well as sales of original artworks, prints, cards and jewellery. “Love it. Stunning exhibition. Took my breath away.” “Grounding and deeply beautiful.”

Above all, we really appreciated the opportunity given to us by the Fisher Theatre to exhibit together for the first time. We were thrilled with how our work looked collectively as well as with the experience of working together. In 2026, we’re planning more collective adventures!

Helen Derbyshire



Artwork by each of the four artists

Our next exhibition - February 9th - 28th



Textile Tales by the Mary Walker Foundation showcases the personal, varied styles and techniques used by the artists to create their own view of the world.

We encourage everyone wanting to view an exhibition to check that the Fisher Gallery is open before travelling to Bungay. Please contact us on Tel:01986 897130 or Email info@fishertheatre.org

Know your Fisher Theatre

Our live quizzes, with quiz-master Joe Edwards-Gill, are very popular. To keep you going until the next one on 25th March, Paul Baker poses ten questions about the Fisher Theatre and our programme of events.



Paul Baker

- 1) The original Bungay Fisher opened in 1828. What was the date of the first performance? 2) What was the play? 3) Who was the author?
- 4) In the Jan-April 2026 programme which of these shows is the odd one out and why? February 21st & 28th, March 12th & 28th, April 9th?
- 5) Looking at the original header on the back wall of the auditorium, what is so special about it?
- 6) How many faces are on the header?
- 7) How many full height doors and external window panes are in the Fisher Gallery?
- 8) To celebrate 20 years of the Fisher re-opening in September, what show are we staging? 9) In the bar how much is needed to hear from David Fisher? 10) How does he describe Bungay?

Do come into the theatre to find the answers. Leave your answers, name and phone number at the box office for a chance to win a small prize. The winner will be announced at the quiz on 25th March.

Prompt Corner

In this section we report on aspects of running the Fisher Theatre. We start with a profile of our new Trustee, Frances Betts.



Frances Betts

My background has always been connected to the theatre as all my working life I have been a costume maker for theatre, film and television. When we moved to Suffolk to run a B&B, I continued costume making.

After nine enjoyable years in Ilketshall St. Lawrence, we gave up the B&B and moved to Bungay in 2016. A friend recommended that I visit the Fisher Theatre as they were looking for volunteers and so started my association with this jewel of Bungay.

I became involved with Bungay Town Council during the pandemic through coordinating mask making for the town's residents. I subsequently found out more about the role the council has within the town and it became clear to me that this was something I could help with. When a vacancy arose, I applied and was co-opted to the Town Council in September 2020. Even with my volunteer roles at the Fisher and the Council, I still found time to help with Bungay in Bloom, be a feoffee on the Town Trust and a member of the Friends of

St Mary's Church.

I was fortunate to be elected Mayor in 2023-2024 and had a great year representing and promoting Bungay.

Over the last few years I have seen how the Fisher has weathered the pandemic and its constant effort to keep operating. So I wondered if there was more I could do to help apart from my volunteering.

I had decided to leave the council after five years and thought that maybe it was time to step up and apply to be a BATS Trustee at the Fisher. It is quite a commitment to do this but was delighted to be elected at the 2025 AGM.

I look forward to a long and mutually rewarding association with this special theatre.



A design for Matthew Bourne's ballet *Cinderella* and a jacket made by Frances based on the design.

Trustees look ahead



Roger Yaxley, chair of the Board of Trustees, writes:

The Board meets on the second Tuesday of each month with a very full agenda, covering a whole range of aspects of the work of the theatre, from the Business Plan and the

building itself to staffing and volunteers and many more in between. Before business got underway at the last meeting it was a pleasure to welcome Frances Betts to the Board who brings much experience, enthusiasm and ideas 'to the table' for fund raising in particular, an area which the Trustees felt needed to strengthen us for the future. Two vacancies still exist and the Trustees are looking to fill these as soon as possible.

Between each monthly meeting, Trustees take part in working groups which make recommendations to be discussed by the Board and acted upon. My job is to try and keep order and to keep such discussions 'on task,' within a reasonable time frame. This is helped by the provision of light refreshments by one of our volunteers.

Occasionally, the Board holds an 'Away Day' which was held at 'home' in early January. The focus was on finance, in particular on grants, fund raising and how to generate more income from our building.

And so the work of the Board continues into a new year and the 20th anniversary of the re-opening of the Fisher this autumn.

A strong year for the Fisher

Reports given at the 2025 AGM, held on November 16th, showed 2024-25 was an excellent year for the Fisher Theatre, thanks to the generosity and commitment of many people in our community. Jeremy Davies, our Treasurer, reported a significant increase in income, with total funds rising to £340,000 (£240,000 in 2023/24). This meant the theatre moved from a £30,000 loss to a £17,000 surplus.

A major contribution came from a £50,000 legacy left by the late Peter Hinsley. The

Fisher also benefited from a remarkable fundraising effort by Terry Reeve, who chose the theatre as his charity while serving as Town Reeve. His Harry Potter Readathon raised over £13,000, supported by many readers, invigilators and donors. Increased donations through STARS, the Fisher Lottery and higher ticket sales also played an important role. Funds raised by both the Readathon and Art Auction will be augmented by Gift Aid tax relief for donations that were made by tax payers.

The positive momentum has continued into 2025-26. An art auction, co-organised with the Waveney Arts Society, featured a work donated by Maggi Hambling, and raised £11,000 after costs. Savings have also been made on insurance and energy, while ongoing support from donors and Fisher lottery players remains vital.

'.. the theatre's success is built on its people.'

However, it is clear that running a theatre remains challenging. As we approach our 20th anniversary of re-opening, maintenance costs are expected to rise as equipment and furnishings age. The building itself requires attention and a major renovation of the facade was undertaken during 2025, financed by a grant from East Suffolk District Council and the Hinsley bequest. Staff costs are also increasing, particularly as the theatre remains committed to paying the Living Wage. To ensure long-term sustainability, ticket price increases are expected next year, balancing affordability with the need to cover essential costs.

Roger Yaxley emphasised that the theatre's success is built on its people. He thanked the staff for their dedication and flexibility, the Trustees for their voluntary work guiding the theatre, and the BATS secretariat for vital administrative support. Special thanks were given to the 90 volunteers who welcome audiences and support performances and events.

Members were asked to continue their support, through attendance at shows, donations, volunteering and spreading the word. Looking ahead, there is a need for additional Trustees and enhanced fundraising. The meeting ended with a moving talk by Terry Reeve on a local love-story, based on his book *Only the Springtime - the story of Charlotte and Chateaubriand*.

Celebrating the Lives of Two of our Members

Peter Sowerbutts (1949-2025)



Peter Sowerbutts

Peter was a well known actor and director. He appeared in several TV series - Super Gran, Monarch, The Haunted Hotel, Dr Who and Sarah Jane Smith. He performed on stage nationally and locally, notably with the Open Space Theatre Company and as the Dame in Fisher pantomimes. David Green described Peter as 'a fine actor, who featured in a host of productions for Open Space after a professional career which saw him work alongside Judi Dench and other stars of the theatre world.'



Peter as a pantomime dame at the Fisher

Hayley Evenett wrote 'He was often incredibly cheeky and would find any opportunity to make you corpse on stage.' For Hayley, Peter will be always be remembered as her panto Mum and the Hook to her Pan. Luci Bedwell-Lee wrote 'Spent many quick moments zipping up those dame outfits, for his numerous quick changes - what

a legend. He will be very much missed.' Cathy Edwards-Gill wrote 'Peter will be hugely missed, not only for his wide-ranging acting skills, his wicked sense of humour and camaraderie, but as a friend.'

Margaret 'Maggie' Laird (- 2026)

Often working quietly in the background, Maggie played an important part at the Fisher Theatre in her role as BATS Company Secretary from 2017 to 2024.

BATS Trustee *Sandra Cox* writes: 'Maggie will be so much missed. She was always ready to volunteer any of her many skills, which included minute-taking which she used for years to take the minutes of our Board meeting, held every second Tuesday of the month. She was always there when you needed her. Without her, Fisher life would have been very much more difficult. We all owe her a great deal.'

Jeremy Davies, our Hon. Treasurer, adds: 'When Jenny Birch retired from helping me with the account administration, Maggie very kindly took over and quickly brought order to all the paperwork with a filing system *sans pareil*. As well as helping with the posting of invoices into the Sage system, she ensured that there was a place for everything and everything was in its place. She was a great help to me personally and then to the Board in general when she volunteered as Secretary.'



Maggie Laird (second from right) in 2018 at a cheque presentation to the Fisher Theatre

We welcome contributions to *Fisher Spotlight* from BATS Members, our volunteers, supporters, performers and members of our audiences.

The copy deadline for the next issue is Wednesday April 8th 2026.