

# SOUTH MILL ARTS ANNUAL TOWN REPORT APRIL 2021 - MARCH 2022

## FOREWORD

If last year's report was all about making it through the pandemic, this one is definitely about how we have come back, doing what we do best, being there for our customers and community and proving that the show really can go on!

It hasn't all been plain sailing and there has been a lot of hard work and sacrifice along the way but unlike last year which was all about survival, this year has been about laying the foundations for our future.

Since emerging from the last lock-down our Front of House has seen the return of live shows, cinema and music. Our bar is once again bustling with community groups and visitors and we have been able to accommodate even more classes than before.

The work behind the scenes has been no less intense. We have revised and modernised our governance arrangements by converting to a *Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)*, updated our governance documents and recruited some new Trustees along the way. We are working on some exciting new plans for the future that will see major investments in our infrastructure which includes the refurbishment of the museum façade. These will help us reduce our carbon footprint and improve our environmental sustainability whilst enhancing our visitor experience and paving the way for our future security - good news for us and good news for the planet.

Once again, we thank the fabulous staff, volunteers and Trustees here at South Mill Arts for their incredible support and dedication, and express our gratitude to all our partner organisations, customers and supporters who have worked with us every step of the way, helping us to not just survive but to come back positive and looking forward to the future.

# South Mill Arts

At the heart of the local community

## A Year at South Mill Arts

### APRIL

Although our year began in lockdown by April we were already starting to call staff back in from furlough. We had welcomed our first customers for take away refreshments on the 29th March and were looking forward to the 12th April when we could open the bar for outdoor table service and welcome back our children's classes, including a new Hip Hop dance class for pre-school and school aged kids.

Our Marketing team started to promote our new programme ready for re-opening in late spring/early summer and our Covid risk management precautions were approved by the Society of London & UK Theatre's *See it safely* and Visit England's *We're good to go* schemes, confirming us as a Covid-safe venue.

Unfortunately, we were not able to run our Easter holiday activities as planned but, not to be deterred, streamed alternative craft activities to do at home through our website and donated the craft packs we had already prepared to the Bishop's Stortford food bank. By the end of April we had welcomed back our first school for a new session on Cecil Rhodes, building on our pre-pandemic work with secondary schools on colonialisation and imperialism.

### MAY

Early May was all about getting ready for the next step in reopening. The improvements to the museum 1st floor entrance, including the now popular *Museum Explorers* section for younger visitors, was completed and we adopted the new brand-layouts for our posters ready for the new season.

On the 17th May the Museum re-opened, adult classes re-commenced, the auditorium was allowed to re-open for cinema and the bar was opened for drink-in refreshments (with table service and lots of masks) and on the following day we re-started our cinema offer with *The Dig* directed by Simon Stone.

### JUNE

The first week of June saw our first live performance of 2021 with *Family Magic with Morgan & West*, staged as part of our half term events programme which also featured children's film screenings and museum crafts activities. The week was completed with a museum tour and our first live music gig when Que Pasa performed live in our gardens.

As touring theatre continued to cancel we compensated by screening 14 titles across the month.

Work continued on establishing our new brand identity with the installation of the new logo on the front of the main building.

## **JUNE cont.**

On the 28th June our new Trustees, who had been recruited in anticipation of the transfer to the new CIO later in the year, held a *getting to know you* session with staff and other Trustees.

## **JULY**

As part of a restructure of our Marketing Team, we welcomed two new Graphic Designers to South Mill Arts - first task, help consolidate and develop the new brand image!

July also saw the return of the ever popular Museum Lunchtime Lectures. Omid Djalili, honoured his auditorium booking even though he was playing to a reduced audience due to social distancing requirements (at this time a lot of performers were either delaying or cancelling their shows). Windhill, Richard Wittington and Northgate schools filmed their end of term shows in our auditorium for screening in their schools. Our Technical Manager visited Summercroft School to support their outside event.

After several months of discussion, the installation of acoustic panels in the Gilbey Room brought great improvements to the ambient sound quality and expanded the range of activities that we could consider hosting.

The month ended with another “quick change” as the eagerly awaited outdoor gig by Charlie Turner went indoors (due to the weather).

## **AUGUST**

On the first of August the Rhodes Birthplace Trust officially transferred its assets and operations to the *Bishop's Stortford Museum and Arts Charitable Incorporated Organisation (BSMACIO)*, thereby concluding a process that had been in development for over three years.

Momentous though this was, the transition did not affect the front of house operations and, with all staff returning from furlough, we completed four weeks of crafts, activities, shows and films, including the Bishop's Stortford Academy of Performing Arts staging of *High School Musical Jr.* and Chris Lord and her Blues Express live performance in the gardens. We were able to make the most of the good weather when we hosted our annual volunteers summer tea party – a great chance for friends and colleagues who had not seen each other for months to catch up; it was a really special moment.

August also saw us start the preparations for hosting Bishop's Stortford's first ever large scale Pride event at the end of the month, with the museum asking for information and recollections of *The Octopus Club* - the town's first Gay club. We would like to thank everyone who helped us with this and for the responses that helped to put this important part of the town's history on the map.

By the time we got to the Pride weekend the event had a great following and both days were a huge success. The fun kicked off on Friday evening with *Crayola's Summer Pride*, hosted by noted London Drag Queen Crayola and went on late into the night with an inclusive karaoke sing(ish) along. Saturday brought *Stort Valley Pride*, a whole day of community stalls, live music, advice and great entertainment.

We would like to thank Bishop's Wellbeing who worked with us on this fabulous and historic celebration (plans are now well underway for Pride 2022 so watch this space!).

## SEPTEMBER

We were delighted to host the 2021 Waterside Stortford photographic competition exhibition in the ArtSpace. This was a great example of community art and featured some amazing images of landscapes, wildlife and river traffic along the river Stort. Our creative activities did not end there as we hosted a series of auditions for our Christmas show Rapunzel.

September also brought with it the return of the ever popular Midweek Music and we continued to host an exciting range of auditorium events and live screenings.

Senior staff also represented South Mill Arts at the East Herts Cultural Strategy Group Meeting and we now have several of our public events featuring in the Cultural Strategy Action Plan.

## OCTOBER

Music was a strong theme in this month's programme; we were delighted to once again host the Herts Jazz festival. The Maltings Bar got in on the act with live performances from The Dave Jackson Trio and The Charlie Turner Trio. Comedy also made a welcome return to South Mill Arts when we hosted an evening of break through comedians performing a caberet style show in the auditorium.

Things took a darker turn for half term fun with spooky children's films and a Beowulf themed holiday craft activity while the ArtSpace hosted a new exhibition *Changing Stortford* by local photographer Mike Seaborne. This challenging and provocative 8 week photographic exhibition explored the town's sometimes troubled relationship with its heritage and culture in a rapidly changing street scene.

## NOVEMBER

Although by now we were in full swing getting ready for the Christmas season we still managed a packed programme of events for November.

To mention a few, we began with the Bishop's Stortford Academy of Performing Arts well received staging of *We will Rock You*. Next in line was a great acoustic set performed by The Kazans for November's Mid-week Music and on the 19th, we hosted the Bishop's Stortford Independent's Indie Community Award, which not only celebrated the fabulous achievements of members of our local community but did it with bags of glam and show-biz glitter.

To complete our season the fabulous Shakatak gave a special 40th anniversary performance of their entire 1982 Nightbirds album – what a way to end the month!

## DECEMBER

Our Christmas programme went ahead despite the anxiety in the industry. Our offer began with Rapunzel staged as a Christmas show, in replacement of the usual pantomime. 48 performances took place - 36 public shows/12 school performances. Five school performances were lost but all other performances went ahead and we managed to complete the run where a large number of other venues closed or cancelled performances.

Santa's Grotto was a huge success – 588 children visited Santa in the Victorian room of the museum. Social Media was awash with positive feedback and will repeat the event for 2022. Our Christmas offer was extended with additional performances of a Christmas Carol and Nutcracker screening.

## JANUARY

Performances moved from 2021 to 2022 gave us a very busy January as we saw increasing audience numbers return to live theatre. We began with an exciting new musical collaboration with Retune, a local charity who will become a regular feature in our programme calendar. Retune raises awareness of mental health issues in young people through music, live performance, open discussion and workshops. An all day event is planned for June 2022.

On the 25th of January the BSMACIO announced that they had made an application to Bishop's Stortford Town Council for a grant of £2.1 million to help finance the first stage of their redevelopment proposals which includes a new rehearsal studio, mezzanine area for art installations, refurbished toilets plus improvements to the building to enhance customer experience. Plans are currently on display in our reception area.

As usual in January we launched our seasonal Spring brochure. For the first time we presented the brochure to our customers in a digital format as opposed to a paper copy. A limited amount of printed brochures are in house.

## FEBRUARY - MARCH

As we head in to Spring, February has seen the return of Timeless Tuesdays; classic cinema particularly suited (although by no means exclusively so) for members of the community with dementia and their carers, in addition to another full month of live entertainment.

Our regular hirers have now all returned and we are experiencing an upsurge in new hirings which include Calmer Yoga, Body Works and Kung Fu. Our Studio continues to be fully booked at peak times.

We are delighted to welcome our amateur theatre groups *Waterlane*, *Bishop's Stortford Musical Theatre Seniors* and *Bishop's Stortford Academy of Performing Arts* who are using rehearsal space for their up and coming performances.

Half-Term will once again see crafts activities and trails, this time themed around Victorian toys and how they eventually led to the development of cinema while the ArtSpace is hosting an in-house exhibition *Startling Stortford*. Shamelessly following the style of *The Horrible Histories*, this exhibition presents quirky facts from the town's past in an accessible and engaging style.



## **FEBRUARY - MARCH cont.**

March will also see the successful completion of *A Space to Be*. This *National Heritage Lottery* funded project started in October 2020 and helps secondary school aged students address personal confidence and anxiety issues. Participants work with a professional artist to draw inspiration for creative activities inspired by museum collections and, as part of this process, are able to discuss and explore subjects of concern.

Due to the pandemic the whole of the first year had to be run virtually, however, in spite of the many challenges this presented, the project was a great success and from September 2021 we have been able to continue with weekly sessions run on site in the museum.


Although the project officially ends in March we will, with the support of *The Arts Society Bishop's Stortford*, be starting a *Young Curators* group later in the year with the aim of encouraging young people to participate in shaping the future arts and heritage landscape of the town.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

Looking back, it seems incredible that we have once again had to live through such tumultuous times and even more so that, in spite of all the challenges we have faced, we are going in to 2022 firing on all cylinders, with a clear eye on the future.

While none of us can predict the future and we certainly know that there will be many challenges ahead, I am confident that the commitment and passion of the staff, volunteers and Trustees coupled with the affection and support of our local community will carry us through whatever the world has got to throw at us.

I would like to end this year's annual report with a very simple message; thank you all, we couldn't have done it without you and look forward to taking the next exciting steps towards what I am sure will be a great future.



Paula Holland  
Operations Director