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16th December 2012

Dear friends

If there's one thing guaranteed to annoy people, it's a smug Round Robin. Celebrations of glamorous holidays, business deals, family achievements and trumpet-blowing can often feel just too schmalzy, rose-tinted or (possibly) entirely imaginary. (As **my favourite t-shirt** purchase of the year put it, "May your life some day be as awesome as you pretend it is on Facebook"...)



We *really* hope that we manage to avoid this pitfall. Every year we've spent together (coming up 19 of 'em this year) has brought a pretty equal measure of joys and challenges, and 2012 was no different. But we have had some glorious moments, and generally think you're more likely to want to hear about those than the 'downs'. Cassie continues to publish her 'photo of the day' on Facebook, and as a friend so kindly put it on one occasion, 'You seem to find something beautiful in every day'. While one is tempted to mime vomiting at the Pollyanna-like sentiment, it's actually true: much as us cynical Brits don't do enthusiasm terribly well, there continues to be so much that we want to share and shout about – whether such stories bring a raised eyebrow, a hoot of laughter, a new thought or the chink of a virtual wineglass.

So, with that proviso, how has it been? Well, as always, we'll start with one of our favourite activities: pretending to be somebody else (or watching other people do so). We've counted twenty-seven shows or concerts, so we'll be here all day if they are all listed – but here are a few standout experiences.



Our two preferred local venues for 'amateur' (read: doing it for love, not money) performance continued to deliver high quality shows. At least ten visits to the Maddermarket, including a remarkably fine *The Alchemist* (Ben Jonson) – one became accustomed to the sixteenth-century-gangsta-language before too long; *We Happy Few* took us on a trip with an all-female performing troupe during WW2 (and Selwyn was involved as musical coach and consultant); *Five Kinds of Silence* was harrowing, powerful and superbly performed; *Time of my Life* (Ayckbourn) was superbly-paced and immaculate; *Daisy Pulls It Off* was exuberant, delightful and huge fun. There were also several excellent 'lunchtime theatre' shows: Judi Daykin presented my favourite of the Alan Bennett Talking Heads sequence, *Bed among the Lentils* (subject: an alcoholic Rector's wife) with tremendous integrity and aplomb; mother-and-daughter team Mel & Jo Sessions brought us the achingly painful *Effie's Burning* with their customary devastating skill, and Jo with the equally talented Gemma Morris took us through the beautifully crafted *Me and my Friend*. All reminders of just how powerful the genre of intimate theatre is.

Over at the Sewell Barn, an equally wonderful spread of experiences awaited. These included the emphatically non-musical *Les Misérables*, which captured the tough world of Victor Hugo superbly, with some masterful characterisations (Valjean and Javert in particular); *Brighton Beach Memoirs* was one of the finest shows we've seen there for many years, with some especially strong performances from younger members of the cast and a hugely imaginative set; and most recently *Flare Path* took us to the second world war, the enormous social and practical pressures, and the emotional traumas of the men who flew the aircraft – and the women who waited behind for them.

It's interesting to realise than only four of those outings were actually to the professional theatre this year, and three of those were at the delightful local Norwich Playhouse. We met Henry VIII's wedding planner: a one-woman portrayal of a historical but fictionally amplified lady-in-waiting who relates the familiar stories of the six wives in impeccable style. We met Mr Dickens, as portrayed by the inimitable Simon Callow; and Jessica Walker presented the world of the women who donned male clothing in the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras: a superb creation. Finally, a brief break with our friend Sarah-Lou in Cambridge enabled us to see an excellent *Twelfth Night* as part of the open-air Cambridge Shakespeare Festival... **Only the British would get this wet in the cause of Art.**



Finally, two rather special events. One was a last-minute discovery of a production of Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* at the University of East Anglia: no member of the cast was older than 21, but the overall standard of this very difficult musical was exceptionally high. This show has always meant a lot to us – Selwyn's first sighting of Cassie was in a 1991 production of it – and to see it performed by people who were not even born then was quite something! (It was especially humbling to see Henrik created by a young man who was not only a superb actor and singer, but being a grade 8 'cello student played the instrument live as well...) The other was a rare opportunity for Cassie to visit our previous theatrical home in South London – the Richmond Shakespeare Society – and to see a first-rate interpretation of *Great Expectations*, together with the chance to catch up with some long-neglected friends.

So what about our own performances? Well, one of these was cheating, really. Old friends may remember Cassie taking part in three of Siddons' Music Hall productions in the mid 1990s: 'adult' pantos and music halls (who could forget her performance as Zara, Queen of the Zonkers?). Since the death of Don Worts, the Dame and moving spirit behind it, the group was reinvented by the excellent David Hannigan, renamed Shenanigans, and continues to invoke merciless amounts of laughter around London and the home counties. A chance e-mail revealed that not only were several of Cassie's old colleagues performing with them this year, but that the Music Hall was playing in the old venue in Cheam; and to cut a long story short, your humble scribe was invited to reprise one of her favourite numbers from some 19 years earlier: The Pudding Song. ("They all want a piece of my pudding / It fills all the men with delight / They can't get enough of my rich fruity stuff / They're after it every night...") Business colleague Cherry and dear friend and fellow Siddons veteran Zoe came along too, and the resulting night was **a joyful (and saucy) trip down memory lane**.



As for other performances: these have been rather sparse in the last year. Just three items to report here. In March we were asked to create a workshop at the Sewell Barn on the use of music in theatre: this encouraged non-singers to realise that one doesn't have to be 'a singer' in the traditional sense to make good use of the medium. With the help of various musical friends, recordings of how (and how not) to do it, demonstrations and examples, we think the point was carried; and the evening concluded with a rather effective rendition, by all present, of Noel Coward's *I have been to a Marvellous Party*.



The Music Hall in Weston Longville that concluded 2011 having been such a huge success, we were asked to provide a **Jubilee Celebration** in June: talented friends Abi, Rachel and Martyn joined us to create an hour's programme of music that one might have heard on the radio in June 1952, which was a much appreciated success. It also was the occasion on which the Rector took 'the show must go on' to extraordinary limits: he managed to fall backwards off the piano stool at the end of the second number in the show, successfully got through the rest of the programme, and discovered on a visit to Casualty later that day that he had cracked three (or possibly four) ribs. The following month of pain and interrupted sleep can, we're sure, be imagined... happily no long-term damage was done.

Finally, Cassie took part in her first 'real' play in twelve months in July: J B Priestley's *When We Are Married* at the Maddermarket. As Maria Helliwell (one of the three wives dealing with the possibility that their twenty-five year marriage might not have been legal), she required a Yorkshire accent, an amazing costume (which made her look **like a Wedgwood vase**) and a superb wig. This was a truly joyful production, with an excellent director, cast and crew, and was a great artistic and commercial success.

That's probably quite enough of the theatre to be going on with! Our 'business' lives – his in the church, hers in the world of geek-queen and professional organiser – continue to challenge and please alternately. One major achievement on Selwyn's part was the finalisation of the sale of St Faith's – the long-closed Victorian chapel in Lenwade – safely into private hands for housing redevelopment (the exterior of the building will remain as it is). This is a huge weight off everybody's minds. Fund-raising events included visits from the Gresham's School and Cantilena Choirs to Great Witchingham, both much enjoyed; the eccentricity of rural Norfolk life was exemplified by the Tractor Parade through



the grounds of Morton Hall; and it's been a real delight to see the creation of the brand-new Weston Longville Village Hall, built with major lottery grant funding and opened this autumn with all its fabulous new facilities of kitchen, decent loos, staging and lights – and efficient heating!



Cassie's business life has had the customary ups-and-downs of feast-and-famine, but continues to bring her great satisfaction. Websites have been created and maintained, IT training given (including a particularly excellent lady who, at the age of 83, has started her journey into technology on an iPad); and many homes, desks, attics and cupboards decluttered and organised. Work continues to increase the reach of apdo-uk (the Association of Professional Declutterers & Organisers – yes, there really is such a thing: around 100 of us all over the UK) and much voluntary support is provided by generous members of the Association. **Our second Conference**, in March 2012, was a huge success, and plans are afoot for the next one in May 2013.

There have been, as always, some sadnesses this year. We have said farewell to several special people: Alan Doherty (one of the cast of our first production of *The Shakespeare Revue*, and long-term member of Imperial Opera) left us tragically early; Mac Newton, also from Imperial days, lost his fight with the big C. Stan Meares, wonderful character of Sullivan Society connection, is presumably now singing G&S to St Peter. And three dear friends from our days at St Mary's Beddington: Jackie Egerton (fine singer, superb teacher and the best poetry-reader ever); Allan Palmer (quiet, dry humour, highly intelligent, a privilege to know); and, as I sit here typing this letter in a cafe in Kent, I have just this moment received an e-mail telling us of the death of the redoubtable **Margaret Mansfield** (seen here as Madame Arcati in a play-reading of *Blithe Spirit* back in 1998): well into her 90s, a strong, generous, forthright, superb woman, who apparently was 'ready to die, and looking forward to seeing what the Promised Life would be like'. May they all rest in peace and rise in glory. The other real sadness is the continuing decline of Cassie's much loved father. His Alzheimer's is causing serious problems – not the forgetfulness as such (mother takes excellent care of him), but his deep depression about his inability to do stuff. Seeing him so distressed is very hard for us all. We can only take each day as it comes and support him and mum as best we can. He still recognises us all, communicates well, is able to do basic domestic tasks and so forth; but for a very proud man who was in charge of all areas of his life for so long, it's very difficult.



And so we reach the holidays – concluding with the greatest holiday of our lives so far. With this 'big trip' in mind, our other ventures during the year were kept economical (for which read: sponging off friends, but nobody seemed to mind too much!). We've had two wonderful visits to our dearest friends, Dot & Milton in Bolton, in January and in August. We spent our post-Easter break going via the adorable Jill & Dave Sealey in Worcestershire and thence to Devon, spending time with ex-Surrey friends Kay & Andy in their lovely new home, visiting ex-Chimes Becca and her gorgeous boys, Bob & Margie and **Ruth & Adrian** in Chepstow, and spending a couple of days in The Brake – a fabulous 'cabin in the woods' style self-catering home. A flying visit to Amanda & Jon in Richmond (Yorkshire, rather than Surrey) in August was fabulous – and involved picking up (from another source) a legacy of music and theatre books to absorb into our library...

And then we reached September, and The Holiday. It was 1999 when Selwyn last had a sabbatical (a long break from ministerial duties, as recommended by the church); it usually comprises holiday, study and religious retreat across a period of three months. In 1999, our holiday together was in the Languedoc area of France; in 2012, it was the trip of a lifetime to the USA.

As you may well imagine, this letter would be considerably longer if we attempted to recount the whole saga, so forgive us if such a spectacular opportunity is reduced to a few paragraphs. We stayed with generous friends throughout; we flew on twelve different aircraft. We spent a week in Minneapolis, a long weekend in Chicago, two weeks in Wilmington, North Carolina, from which we paid a brief visit to dear friends in Mount Dora, Florida; and we finished with two nights in Manhattan. Four weeks of extraordinary experiences: photography, worship with Presbyterians and Episcopalians; trying to teach Americans how to make a proper cup of tea; loving waffles with bacon and maple syrup, fabulous salads and toasted pecan nuts; wide open spaces, imposter robins (the size of a blackbird), Chicago skyscrapers, Central Park

and Battery Park, the fall colours in Minnesota, red cardinals (the birds, not the clerics), the staggering size of Lake Superior; theatrical performances that reflected each place (including Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park* in Chicago, followed of course by a visit to see the real picture, and *Forbidden Broadway* on – well, off - Broadway); temperatures ranging from 40 degrees to 90; excitement, laughter, delight and discovery. We are so, so grateful. (Those of you using the internet to read this will be able to follow a link to see all the **photos**, should you so wish.)

We returned to the UK on the Thursday morning, crashed out with friends Neville & Sarah (as we had done on the way out), got back to Norfolk on the Friday afternoon in time for Dot & Milton to arrive in time for the **Great Witchingham Quiz** in the new Weston Longville village

hall that evening (do keep up!); Dot was question mistress, Milton marked, Cassie added up, Kim collected answer papers – and Selwyn took his place on one of the teams and kept a low profile. On Saturday night we went to see *Daisy Pulls It Off*, and on Sunday morning Selwyn packed the car, drove down first to Canvey Island to put flowers on his parents' grave (for what would have been his mother's 100th birthday and his parents' 65th wedding anniversary a couple of weeks before), then down to our favourite Kent B&B for the night – and on Monday he went through the Channel Tunnel to spend six weeks in northern France.



This location was chosen because his 'writing project' this time was in fact the one that was unfinished from 1999: to make progress with writing the life-story of his honorary godfather Brother Bede (previously Arthur Lippett), who was gassed at Passchendaele in WW1, became a Benedictine monk, worked as a tour guide to British forces in the Holy Land in WW2, and hence came to know Norma and Ben. Selwyn therefore toured the war fields of northern France and Belgium, had space and quiet to write; we kept in touch via Skype (including the rather extraordinary experience of conducting the blessing of the Rectory nativity scene using the iPad), and Cassie was happily kept manically busy with business in his absence. Finally, he returned to Kent; spent five days in a retreat house with the Benedictine nuns at West Malling; and this letter is written the day after our reunion after the longest separation we've had in 18 years. We return to Norfolk on Sunday; he has a week to get his desk in order, and is officially back on duty on Sunday 23rd December.

This long separation was made rather easier for Cassie by the fact that our very dear friend Kim moved into the Rectory just after Selwyn had gone to France – taking over our downstairs spare room, various shelves and cupboards, and Cassie's parents' empty garage with her belongings – while she waits for the tiny new build house she's buying to be ready in April, after her rental tenancy came to an unexpected end. She's already given us far more than we're doing for her, in company, cooking, domestic improvements and general support, and it's all Worked Out Just Right.

So where does that bring us? When we get back to the Rectory, we not only dive into the Christmas festivities, but Cassie's sister and her family arrive on the 22nd to spend their first Christmastide with us in some 18 years or so. On the 29th, we welcome a host of family to celebrate Christmas – New Year – Jenny's visit – and, in advance, Cassie's 50th birthday. And the first thing to happen in the new year is a 'do' of some kind on the 5th January – Cassie having been instructed by Selwyn, Dot and Kim to provide the guest list and then to retire gracefully from the proceedings (they didn't put it as politely as that). Jenny and family return to Spain on 7th January. We'll then take a couple of days out to draw breath; and then it's back to the hurly-burly of normal life. As you can tell, 'normal' in this household is a somewhat variable definition.

And on that exhausting note: friends and family, near and far, we send you our greatest love and best wishes. May your 2013 bring you joy, peace, excitement and fun, and all that you would wish yourselves.

*Selwyn
Cassie*

