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13 December 2020

Dearest friends

When, on 14 December 2019, we sat down to compile the equivalent letter, we started “It's been quite a year. For everyone. No comment here about matters global or political: there are millions of words out there from others. We'll stick to our own small efforts and keep beavering away.” Well, we didn't imagine things would take the turns they did. However, the statement remains the same.

The first three months or so of 2020 ran true to form. Church, theatre, work, family and friends all moved in their usual mad and lovely circles of activity. The first show of the year at the [Sewell Barn](#) was The Innocents - a splendid version of Henry James' The Turn of the Screw – with magnificent performances from adults and children alike. This was followed in February by the Barn's 300th production: The Female of the Species, a fabulous farcical romp inspired by Germaine Greer. Colourful set, costumes and language, and another very proud achievement. Later that month we were tremendously excited to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Sewell Barn Theatre, with an excellent party including directors, performers, artistic directors, audience, crew and supporters of all kinds.

At church we were well underway with ongoing fundraising and socialising projects. Best buddies Dorothy & Milton came up trumps as always with a magnificent quiz, and the church hall was packed with highly competitive teams. In March, we reassembled some of the cast of **Hats Off!** – the works of Flanders & Swann, with the occasional comment from Mr George Grossmith, which we've performed several times before – and were delighted with the hugely positive response. New visitors to the church looked forward to future concerts in our beautiful building, a good amount of money was raised, and a fine time was had by all.



And then... we all know what happened next. We've cried in the past “stop the world, I want to get off” when things seemed too pressurised and busy. This wasn't what we had in mind.

There's little point in saying anything further here about the virus, coupled with well-known political disasters across the globe. All we can do is to say that we have been beyond fortunate to remain safe, well, and comfortable; that there has, at least, been some positive output (“making a virtue of necessity”) from this bizarre, frightening and controversial time; and to chat about what we did manage, and learn, and experience, and enjoy.

On Tuesday 23 March – officially the first day of the first lockdown – we reflected on a song that Selwyn had sung at some long-forgotten concert, called Laughing Matters. The final lines are “Keep your humour – please / For don't you know it's times like these / That laughing matters most of all.” He decided to perform it and publish the results on Facebook that evening. We then decided that one contribution we could make was to use some of our newly free time to provide a ‘**song of the day**’. Which we did. (Day #2 was The Tale of a Guinea-Pig, which will be known to plenty of our friends. It rather set the tone. That song was featured a few days later in an article on BBC Radio Norfolk.)



Selwyn continued to play and sing; after about ten days, Cassie started performing too; and we persuaded a few friends to provide us with contributions (usually by sending them recordings of Selwyn's accompaniment,

which they then returned with their performances added). These included solos, duets, instrumental, the spoken word, music hall, musical theatre, and much more, and the daily challenge was a great delight.



We found that Day #99 fell on Tuesday 30 June. We were scheduled to leave Lockdown #1 on Saturday 4 July, so on the 1, 2 & 3 July, we shared again the three most popular items, based on 'likes' and views; and on Saturday 4, we presented our 100th performance: Coward's **I Have Been a Marvellous Party**. Eight singers (all of whom had performed at some time in the previous 100 days), plus our friend Bob Osborne on clarinet and Selwyn on piano, merged with superb technical wizardry by Martin Taylor.

When Lockdown #2 kicked in, we decided to continue. Although it only (!) lasted a month, the limitations on our theatrical life continued in Tier 2, so we thought we'd keep singing until Christmas Eve – making 50 items in this present phase. (If anyone would like to see any of this nonsense but isn't a Facebook user, you can at least see the second set – as they have a 'public' setting and they're all in one album now, unlike #1– by following the link <https://bit.ly/2URS2M8>.)

In church, the impact was keenly felt. We lost, of course, a great deal of income – from fundraising activities and from hall hire – although we have been very lucky to be able to continue to pay our Parish Share due to the generosity of our regular givers. More importantly, we lost our face-to-face contact and sharing of worship with friends. For a couple of weeks we had socially distanced and sanitised as advised, but then it became clear that even that was not permissible. So we moved to Zoom. Palm Sunday 2020 was our first experiment with this medium, and with some learning over the following weeks and months, it works remarkably well. Understandably there are some people who can't or don't like to use this method of worship, but others who prefer it to our now-permitted masked-and-distanced services. We now alternate between the two versions (when not in lockdown), and the SMM family maintains its sense of community and support. It does have the advantage of people being able to join in with services from a distance – our good friend Bob (clarinettist, mentioned above, lives in Wales) joined us for Easter Dawn online at 5.30am!

One lovely happening in the church world was that Selwyn has been re-licensed by the Bishop of Norwich (+Graham the second!) to spend a further three years here at St Mary Magdalene, about which we are very happy. (It's highly likely that he will take his retirement at that time, at the age of 69, in autumn 2023.) In June 2021, he celebrates forty years since ordination - hard to believe.

Another significant marker for Selwyn was his award (only two years late!) of the **Alan Nabarro medal for 50 years of insulin use**. His health continues good and well-monitored (with Cassie as his rottweiler when he occasionally lapses in concentration...).

The enforced extra time in the house has brought some unusual projects – some unlooked-for, some that were sitting in a permanent pending tray. While Cassie will never be a female Titchmarsh, the Vicarage garden has brought great pleasure, and with help from Andy-the-gardener, Richard-the-builder (for a tiny corner patio) and advice from several parishioners, is starting to take shape. At the same time, Selwyn has recommenced work on revising his book on Robert Hay (early 19th century Egyptologist), originally written as part of his work towards a PhD (which didn't happen, but the book did); we successfully completed (only three years after her passing) the publication of the writings of our dear friend Beryl Board about her village of Stow Maries in Essex; and likewise, only twenty-five years after his passing, the compilation of a book of the poetry of Selwyn's father Ben – which has been sold in small quantities to friends and parishioners, raising a little money for church funds along the way!



In the theatre world, of course, the effects of the virus have been disastrous, across the professional and amateur spectrum alike. The remainder of our 2019/20 season was of course cancelled, and the plans that we had already made for 2020/21 were suspended. However, we found delights in unexpected places. During the summer, Clare & I (as Artistic Directors) were contacted by a local lady who was running a creative writing course online, and whose students had been tasked with writing short ten-minute plays; she wanted to 'borrow' some of our actors to bring them to life. We were delighted to oblige. The resulting evening was huge fun, and the idea of the 'Sewell Barn Shorts' was born. We asked for performers and authors alike to contact us with similar proposals, and three evenings were held, showcasing a total of 23 pieces. We were so impressed with them that we decided we'd like to present ten of them for real. The authors were all thrilled and gave their permission for royalty-free presentation, as well as video capture.



During the autumn, when Norwich remained in Tier 1 and the Rule of 6 still applied indoors as well as out, we worked out that we could host a socially-distanced audience of 25 in our 100 seater theatre; and that we could present two separate halves of the show, keeping the actors in two dressing rooms, with four performers, one director and one stage manager per half, each half performing five short plays. **'Put Your Shorts On'** was cast with a splendidly talented bunch, the stage was prepared, the costumes and props gathered, the technicians and photographer recruited, the first tickets sold, the first rehearsals held... and then Lockdown #2 came along, followed by our move to Tier 2. So

the show is now on hold – again. However, we held a fabulous full-cast Zoom just the other night, and the whole team is eager and ready to stage the show as soon as circumstances permit.

The other two main Norwich community theatres have been missed just as much. We got in under the wire, just days before lockdown #1, seeing Ben Turner's magnificent one-man performance of *One Fine Day* at the Great Hall; all their subsequent performances have been put on hold until times are different. Our good friends at the Maddermarket have had a painful journey, as theirs is a larger venue with paid staff and which often hosts professional touring theatre and music; they have now been forced to 'go dark' until next summer. They did create a really excellent 'remote' show, which was screened for a limited time on YouTube: Caryl Churchill's appropriate, dystopian *Escaped Alone*, with four first-rate actresses. In the brief period in late summer / early autumn when such things were possible, we did catch some lovely live theatre. Our friend Sabrina gathered local talent to present a magical little Shakespearean entertainment in the garden of a local church, and later an evening of Norfolk ghostly tales for Hallowe'en (inside!). Finally, it was great to see a fabulous two-hander, *'Blink'*, at Sheringham Little Theatre.

When you've spent decades immersed in the theatre – watching, performing and directing – virtually without a pause, it's painful to find yourself without that particular family. However, We Will Return!!

We have all suffered covid-19 casualties when it comes to celebrations, of course. Ours was our silver wedding anniversary at Easter, which was planned to involve parties, a visit to Brussels, church services and more. However, we hosted three superb and hilarious Zoom calls – **one for family**, one for the theatre family and one for people who had attended our wedding or been part of our musical world in London – which included folks who probably wouldn't have been able to make a 'real' party. The holidays will happen some other time. We remain deeply happy and blessed in our lives together, and so grateful for the friends, family and colleagues that have been, and continue to be, part of our fabulous journey.



We have managed two short holidays in 2020. In January – well BC (Before Covid) – we spent an agreeable, albeit chilly, week in Wales, gathering photographs of Dylan Thomas country ready for our planned production of *Under Milk Wood* (which, of course, will also now have to wait for another day). In September, we were able

to enjoy a beautiful week in Yorkshire, with visits to friends, hikes in the countryside, wanders in lovely towns, and staying in a beautiful selfcatering AirBNB. We also took the chance to be tourists in Norfolk, including a great outing to the western end of the county, visiting Cassie's aunt and uncle, and spending a magical day at Houghton Hall viewing the stunning **Anish Kapoor exhibition**. Photographic heaven.



There have been fewer hikes this year. However, Cassie did manage nearly-another-marathon, several walks of increasing distance with good friend James, the longest being over 24 miles. More will follow in 2021.

It's always sad to record farewells, but this year our goodbyes have been limited to online viewing of crematoria around the country. We remember with love some special people, including: Stella Jay, a loyal supporter of and worker for the Sewell Barn for 40 years; Linda Jones, much-loved pillar of St Mary Magdalene; Dick le Grice, church organist and dear friend from our ten happy years in Weston Longville; and the amazing Malcolm Ball, father of our great friend Kim, who meant so much to so many, in particular the local running fraternity that he inspired, mentored and supported. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

One huge relief was that, when all this started, Cassie's mother was already safely settled in the care home in Norwich. The staffing and administration of Cromwell House has been matchless; they have had very few cases of the virus over the last nine months, have managed communications extremely well, and mum remains safe and well cared for. She's become accustomed to the use of Skype in place of 'real' visits: as her hearing is poor, and visits would (when they can happen, which isn't often) have to be behind a screen, behind a mask, with nil contact, and would be more troubling than consoling. On Skype she can see and hear us properly – I can even share photographs using 'screen sharing' – and we know that there is no risk involved at all. She's frail, but her mood ranges from a sort of neutral resignation to positively cheerful; she eats and sleeps well; her short-term memory is bad but she still knows who the main members of the family are, and close friends. Come late spring, the bungalow will have to be sold to continue to pay for her care, but for the last 18 months we've been blessed to have splendid tenants in there.



Happily, we had a **visit from several relatives** in March, including little sister Jenny and nephew Jack, just a couple of weeks before the world stopped; there was a visit to Mum in the home, and a riotous dinner together. However, in recent weeks we've acquired a new member of the household: niece Samantha decided she wanted to try out life in the UK (she has a British passport and dual nationality), and has been living in the Vicarage. She's been working at a 'pop-up' bar in Norwich and is much enjoying both the atmosphere and the earning potential! It will be lovely to have her here with us for Christmas, although we'll miss Jenny, Jack and Carl (still safe over in Spain) very much.

We continue safe, happy and deeply grateful for all we have and share, for our friends and family, for the love and support that we experience. We send our love to all who are part of our crazy life-jigsaw, and our virtual hugs and blessings.



Cassie Solway