

# NOISES OFF

## Wow!



‘Costume, props, lighting, sound, special effects and stage design – this production is going to challenge APS in every one of those areas...’ Those were the words of our newest Director, Jane McKenna, when we asked her to produce and direct *The Thirty Nine Steps* for our summer show. She wasn’t kidding. APS had never attempted anything like *this* before.

- 300 sound and lighting cues
- 40 characters
- 70 costume changes
- A ‘mid-stage’ team of 8, drilled with military precision
- The London Palladium, the Forth Bridge, a marching band, a line of dancing girls, a flock of sheep and a manhunt with biplanes





We stepped through the door of the Studio Theatre and were instantly transported to Sherborne Station in 1935, with platform staff and passengers all in period costume. It was a full-on immersive experience: these characters were all happy to chat to us as we took our seats – even the shady-looking gangster with the bowler hat and the violin case. One of our many destinations was already up there on stage – the London Palladium, beautifully painted in faux-classical style. The Station Master pointed out the emergency exits, blew his whistle and our journey began with the flickering image of an old BBFC Film Certificate. This was going to be fun.

Many of the audience remembered Alfred Hitchcock's much-loved film adaptation of John Buchan's 1915 thriller *The Thirty Nine Steps*. The play, by Patrick Barlow, is based closely on Hitchcock's movie, using just four actors to embody dozens of characters as the story rattles along at breakneck pace. The great majority of the characters – 36 by my count - were played by Clown 1 (Freddie Wopat) and Clown 2 (Gary Brooks) – both gifted comic actors who morphed in the blink of an eye from a thug to a milkman to a lingerie salesman to a master spy and his black-jowled wife - and back again.

The lights came up on Richard Hannay, just back from Canada, jaded, rootless and alone in Portland Place, most of his pals having met terrible fates overseas – married to heiresses or eaten by crocodiles. Our hero was played by Jeremy Small, in his

debut performance for APS. From the first scene, Jeremy's vitality and brio gave the show its narrative spine. Not easy at all – a less charismatic actor might have seemed like the straight man to the madcap antics of the clowns – but Jeremy's energy provided consistent momentum without ever rushing.



He articulated every word like a pro, and was utterly convincing both in the set piece performative moments (like his off-the-cuff speech at the political rally to the strains of 'Jerusalem') and in the quieter scenes, like his tender interactions with Margaret and Pamela. His Hannay was a thoroughly engaging character, quick to tease, and even quicker to send himself up – as with his preening when the radio announcer tells the world about his 'dark, wavy hair, piercing blue eyes and very attractive pencil moustache.'





We were in equally safe hands with the female lead, Hazel Perrett - last seen at Sherborne as Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest* – who had enormous fun with the three female roles. First as Annabella, the doomed, vampish spy who flirts outrageously with Hannay before revealing a foreign spy ring about to steal a vital British defence secret, then dies dramatically across his knees, a knife in her back. Hannay is the prime suspect in her murder, and must keep ahead of the police while also tracking down the evil genius behind the spy ring.



Hazel returned in a blonde wig as the demure Pamela, who denounces Hannay to the police, then in pigtails as Margaret, the innocent child bride of the most curmudgeonly crofter in Scotland.



Her characterisation in each of these sharply contrasting roles was utterly convincing: Hazel is an actress of real range, capable of hamming it up with an

over the top German accent as Annabella, then delivering nuance and sincerity as the *ingenue* Margaret, and finally taking us with her on Pamela's journey from outrage, dislike and suspicion at Hannay, through the slow realisation of his integrity, and finally, shyly, to love. Hazel made a seamless transition from role to role, and delivered total commitment in each of them. *Brava!*

At least 2/3 of the lines were uttered by the Clowns, and no production of *The Thirty Nine Steps* can succeed without two comic actors of exceptional gifts. Lucky Jane,



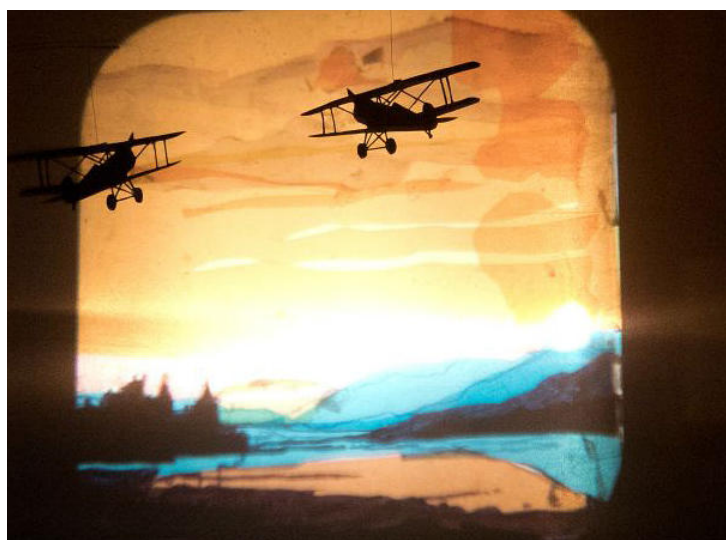
then, to have been able to recruit Freddie Wopat and Gary Brooks for this show. The sight of the two of them in fishnets, feathers and sequins doing the cancan at the London Palladium had the audience transfixed - hooting and clapping along. It is one of those visions that one simply cannot unsee: I fear I will take it to my grave. Both of them have mobile faces that can raise a laugh from the merest glance or from deadpan seriousness in the most absurd situation. Costume changes were completed in seconds, or even done onstage with a new hat or coat, as in the balletic sequence in the lobby of the McGarrigle hotel when Gary (as Thug 2) had a phone conversation with himself as Mrs Jordan, then returned as Mr McGarrigle and by taking Thug 1's hat and coat, turned Thug 1 (Freddie) into Mrs McGarrigle, and himself (Gary/Mr McGarrigle) into Thug 1. Or something like that. It was impressive choreography.



What can Freddie Wopat *not* do? Last seen as the humourless academic Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*, and before that as the gigantic schoolboy Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, his kaleidoscope of comic vignettes in *The Thirty Nine Steps* was wickedly, achingly funny. He and Gary had people literally (and I do mean *literally*, not figuratively) crying with laughter.



A brilliant cast, then. And a very large, well-drilled backstage (and mid-stage) team to keep all the moving parts humming along. The demands on the sound and lighting designers and technicians were also unprecedented at Sherborne. So many well-judged period pieces (and original work from Mike Stanley) accurately and promptly delivered were essential to maintain the momentum in such a fast-paced production.



But it was Jane McKenna's conviction of how this particular show could work in the intimate space of the Sherborne Studio Theatre that made it all happen. Only she knows the countless hours she personally spent creating life-sized puppets in the marching band, including the figure of Hitchcock himself in a diced glengarry. Or the projected silhouettes in Hannay's escape across the moors. Or the painting of the Palladium.



The simplicity of many of the effects – the visible wires on the silhouette biplanes, the motorised sheep, and the composite set, with four trunks serving as every form of furniture or vehicle, as each scene required – only enhanced the playfulness which animated the whole production, and invited the audience to suspend disbelief all the more willingly because of the joyful silliness of it all.

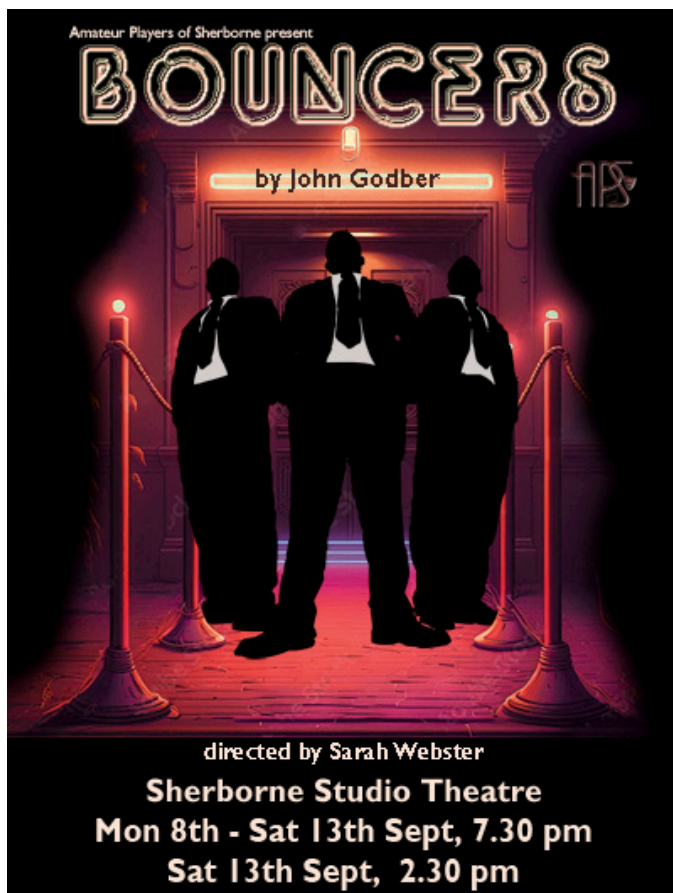
Well done, Jane. What are you going to do next?

Robert Brydges

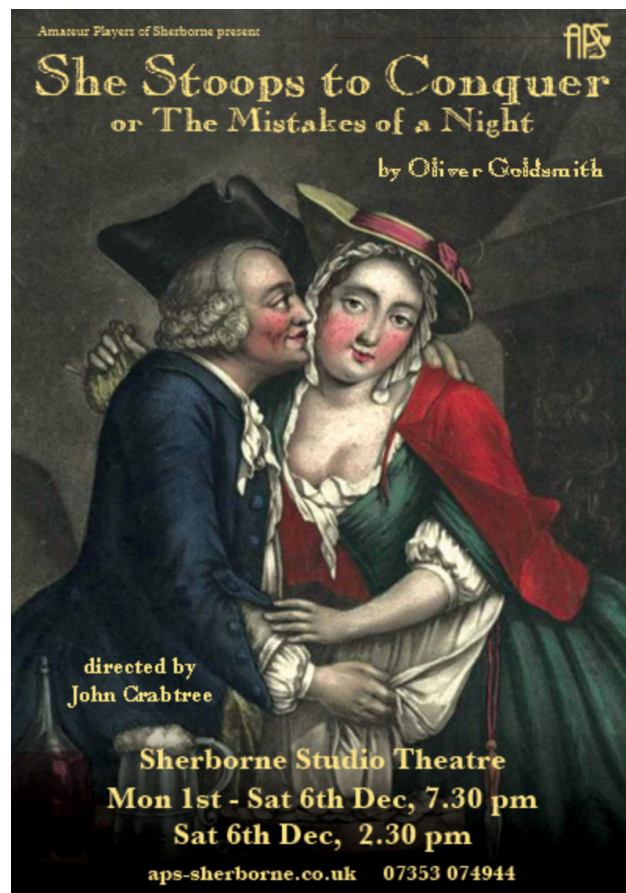


# WHAT'S ON

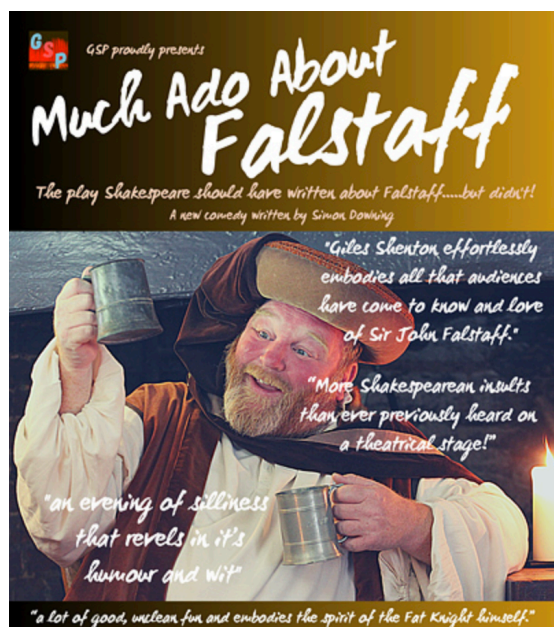
## SHERBORNE STUDIO THEATRE



John Godber's brilliant social commentary on the disco scene of the 1980's is listed among the National Theatre's top 100 plays of the 20th Century. This dissection of club culture is as funny and fresh today as it was in the days of Culture Club.



She Stoops to Conquer is a much-loved, much-revived classic - a brilliant romp of which Dr Johnson wrote: 'I know of no comedy that has answered so much the great end of comedy - making an audience merry.'



Falstaff is a role that Giles Shenton was born to play.

In this new comedy by Simon Downing, we find the fat knight in the Boar's Head tavern, nursed by the ever-hopeful Mistress Quickly. Will Falstaff marry her to pay off his debts? Will he turn teetotal? Will he mellow in old age? Join Sir John for an evening of jollity, frivolity and more Shakespearean insults than ever previously heard on any stage!

Fri 31 Oct, 7.30pm; Sat 1 Nov, 2.30pm and 7.30pm

Tickets on sale from September 15th

## BUILDING UPDATES

### SHERBORNE STUDIO THEATRE

The main door and doorframe to the Studio Theatre have seen better days, and now need to be replaced. Maurice Watts, who made such an excellent job of the new stairs in the bar area, will instal a new hardwood door and frame in August, rendering APS both weatherproof and secure!

We have also installed a quiet fan and exterior vent to mitigate rising heat during summer performances. The sound and lighting teams are particularly happy that they will no longer have to function in temperatures of up to 37°C in the gallery!

Sherborne Town Council have awarded APS a grant towards the installation of a hearing loop. We have chosen a supplier and expect to be able to provide this facility at all future productions.

## THE 100 CLUB

The 100 Club exists to give vital support to our fund-raising efforts on behalf of the Theatre, and has already raised nearly £7,000. It is largely due to the funds raised through the 100 Club that we were able to replace the old seating, and can now afford to renew the dilapidated main door and frame, as announced above. But more than half of the APS membership have not yet joined the 100 Club. Please consider joining, either by going to 'Support Us' on the APS website, or by emailing [sst100club@gmail.com](mailto:sst100club@gmail.com). You would have a chance of a cash prize in the bi-monthly draw, and would be helping APS maintain the fabric of the building.

The most recent lucky winner, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, won £46.20. The next draw will take place on August 9<sup>th</sup>.

## DIARY DATES

### SHERBORNE STUDIO THEATRE

#### Bouncers

Mon 8<sup>th</sup>-Sat 13<sup>th</sup> September 7.30pm  
Sat 13<sup>th</sup> September 2.30pm

#### Much Ado About Falstaff

Fri 31<sup>st</sup> October 7.30pm  
Sat 1<sup>st</sup> November 2.30pm & 7.30pm

#### She Stoops to Conquer

Mon 15<sup>th</sup>-Sat 20<sup>th</sup> December 7.30pm  
Sat 20<sup>th</sup> December 2.30pm

## SOCIAL EVENINGS

### SHERBORNE STUDIO THEATRE

Fri 27<sup>th</sup> June 7.00pm  
Fri 25<sup>th</sup> July 7.00pm  
Fri 29<sup>th</sup> August 7.00pm  
Fri 26<sup>th</sup> September 7.00pm

**Everyone welcome!**

## NEW MEMBERS

Since our last announcement in Noises Off, we are delighted to welcome the following new members to APS:

Alison Maynard-Griffin  
Trevor Walton  
Jeremy Small  
Clive Miller