

## FRIENDS OF CHESTER LITERATURE FESTIVAL NEWSLETTER



NOVEMBER 2015

Dear Litfest Friend,

Welcome to the Winter edition of our newsletter with the usual roundup of Friends' events past and future. We do hope that you enjoyed this year's Literature Festival, and in case you would like to read about some of the events that you may have missed we have included a selection of reviews. We certainly helped to get the Festival off to a good start by holding our first Fringe event with 45 people taking afternoon tea on the canal in the excellent company of Jo Bell, one of our favourite poets. Then we had a great reception at the Town Hall for a roomful of Friends, before our sponsored event for this year, *Austentatious*.

Since the Festival ended a group of us went off to Manchester's splendid new HOME Theatre to see a radical re-working of *The Oresteia* based on the words of Ted Hughes, which inspired almost as much debate as the previous theatre trip to see a very different version of Rebecca at the Lowry. Hopefully you will agree that our theatre choices continue to provoke as well as entertain you!



Meanwhile the Friends' support of Cheshire Young Carers continues apace. We sponsored a lively theatre workshop that was held in Ellesmere Port's Whitby Hall at the end of October and also took an enthusiastic group of young carers to see a performance of *The Wind in the Willows* at Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre over the Summer, much enjoyed as you see from the photo!

Our plans for the coming year include another evening **writing workshop lined up for February 25th held at Chester's Little Theatre studio, led by popular local author Claire Dudman**, and an open bar to facilitate inspiration. We are also planning a day out to the Oxford Literary Festival in April, as well as the usual Spring theatre trip – further details of which will be announced nearer the time. As ever you are urged to get your bookings in early to avoid disappointment.

At the time of writing tickets are already selling fast for **the annual coffee morning at Bishop Lloyd's Palace, on Thursday 26th November at 10pm..** This year our speaker will be **Alex Clifton, Artistic Director of Chester's new theatre.** We look forward to seeing you there!

All the best, Elizabeth Lambrakis/Gill King/Carol Archer/Marie Hughes/Helen Hill/Jennie Roberts/Jan Bengree/Marigold Roy

Contact Elizabeth on 01244 323032 or email her at [elam@talktalk.net](mailto:elam@talktalk.net).

Remember our website: [www.friendsofchesterliteraturefestival.org.uk](http://www.friendsofchesterliteraturefestival.org.uk)

Some of your reviews, at longer length, will appear on it from time to time!



## Wasn't It a Lovely Day, the Day We Went to Buxton!

Buxton is England's leading spa town, according to the official town guide. But LitFest

members were there not to take the waters but to participate in the annual Buxton Festival of Opera, Music and Literature. For two weeks in July, and with the Fringe Festival playing in tandem, the town buzzes with a variety of cultural activities.

Programme offerings on the day we visited included the irrepressible Miriam Margolyes discussing Charles Dickens, particularly his female characters including Mrs Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and one of her favourites. This event took place in the famous Buxton Opera House, designed by Frank Matcham and opened in 1903. Also, a fascinating insight into the Sackville-West dynasty was revealed by Robert Sackville-West, the current Lord Sackville, discussing his biography, *The Disinherited*. Musical offerings at the Pavilion Arts Centre included *Debussy and His Muse*, the composer's infatuation with Marie-Blanche Vasnier, and a stunning recital by the Frith Piano Quartet playing Schumann and Dvorak. And for those needing a break from festival hustle and bustle, the Pavilion Gardens offered peace, tranquillity and park benches and for the adventurous, a tour by miniature railway. (Sue West)

**POETRY AFLOAT!** Poetry and cream cakes! What could be better, especially in the company of Canal Poet Laureate, Jo Bell. This was a wonderful afternoon of inspired poetry as we sailed down the canal. Jo was generous in responding to questions and gave us an insight into the process of writing and the joys of narrow-boating. A truly magical afternoon! (Marigold Roy)

See [www.waterlines.org.uk/poems](http://www.waterlines.org.uk/poems)



Mike and Chrissie enjoy afternoon tea.

## LITFEST 2015!

**Austentatious!** Our sponsored event this year, not forgetting the Prosecco beforehand, was a great success. We were delighted to see that one of the Friends, Christine Robinson, had donned regency gear, self-made, specially for the evening! The title of the improvised play, *Ascent of a Balloon*, was picked out of a hat from the audience's (very odd) suggestions and we were treated to a veritable tour de force. Perhaps nearer to a French farce than a witty Jane Austen novel, it incorporated the Napoleonic Wars, French espionage, motherless daughters, wicked future stepmother, a balloon powered by sparrows and a double marriage to conclude! All acted with aplomb by very young and enthusiastic actors.



## Michael Billington with Alex Clifton: The 101 Greatest Plays

I enjoyed this event and I learnt a lot, but I didn't learn a great deal about Billington's choice of 101 Greatest Plays. I certainly have a renewed respect for the role of the theatre critic who has to distil every aspect of a production and provide an opinion, backed by evidence, all in about 400 words. Alex Clifton began the conversation by asking about Billington's early experiences of the theatre. He remembers being entranced by a production of *Troilus and Cressida* at the age of eight and as a teenager spending all his pocket money on visiting the theatre. He told us that he would have liked to have been an actor but realised at university that he hadn't the talent. He has also tried directing various plays but he's most comfortable writing about the theatre than taking an active part in it. His life as a critic is both solitary and sociable; he writes alone in his study during the day and visits the theatre five evenings a week.

The conversation did cover some aspects of his book; his decision to include six Shakespeare plays and, controversially, to omit *King Lear*. He believes that *Henry 1V* parts 1 and 2 are Shakespeare's greatest plays. I wanted to know more about his criteria for his choices and why he's chosen certain plays above others for example ; why Beckett's 'All that Fall' rather than 'Waiting for Godot'? I left with more questions than answers - obviously, I'll have to buy the book! (Carol Archer)

**Tracey Thorn with Dave Haslam** Tracey Thorn came to speak about her latest book "Naked at the Albert Hall" on the night when the Man Booker winner was to be announced. She immediately revealed that she is a judge for the Baileys Women's Prize for fiction, despite never having written a novel and having no plans to do so. Nevertheless, as she pointed out, she has been writing since the 1970s, but her output is all songs and memoirs – and songs are fiction! *Naked at the Albert Hall* is essentially about singing and singers and in any musical group, she suggested, the singers have all the neuroses.

One of her own hang-ups is stage fright and she has not performed live for at least 15 years; indeed she also had a break from recording for quite a few years in the early noughties. Now however she has a solo collection due to be released on 23<sup>rd</sup> October entitled *SOLO: Songs and Collaborations 1982-2015*. Dave Haslam pressed her repeatedly on whether there are any circumstances in which she might perform again. She insisted that this was very unlikely but refused to rule it out. One of the most interesting revelations was Tracey's influences and heroes. She spoke passionately about Kate Bush, Patti Smith, Siouxsie Sioux and – especially – Dusty Springfield. A really engaging and humorous speaker! (Peter Goodhew)

(See our website for Peter's full review.)

**Poetry at the Fest** A poetry feast this year, including well-known poets such as Simon Armitage, Tony Harrison, Glyn Maxwell and Don Paterson, a poetry pub crawl, resident poet Glyn Edwards and an afternoon of spoken word. I enjoyed the performance poets Chanje Kunda and Mark Grist. Chanje's soft rap was easy on the ear and enthusiastically read with the help of props such as a loudspeaker, a roll of tape marked *fragile* wound round herself whilst reading her love poem *Amsterdam* and finally, a Little Pony worn as a hat! Mark Grist was louder and laddish, an ex-"rogue" teacher with a certain boyish charm. I would have preferred more of his poems and less of his teacher tales, but the audience seemed to like him. (Plea to organisers, more women poets next year!)



Simon Armitage's solo reading featured his new book, *Walking Away*, set in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. As always, an accomplished poet who combines breadth of knowledge and skill with a quiet humour, he gave beautiful descriptions of the landscape (the sand is described as *cream, corn, gold, umber, amber...*) and then related a comic account of a reading in a Cornish roundhouse on a four-poster bed! Later, Simon read and chatted with poet and playwright Glyn Maxwell. Topics ranged from childhood influences, dialects, identity shaped by language, the purpose and successfulness of creative writing courses and their travels in Iceland. I'll certainly never look at Welwyn Garden City in the same way after Glyn described it as "living in someone else's dream!" (Helen Hill)

**BRING YOUR FEEDBACK AND QUESTIONS ON THE FESTIVAL TO PAUL AT THE COFFEE MORNING!**

**Oresteia** The female chorus dressed as cleaning ladies was a puzzle. The gods wearing jodhpurs was another talking point. And we wondered why a dress on a hanger floated down to the stage, to be then donned by a man? But then Blanche McIntyre, director of this Greek drama, *The Oresteia*, was clearly aiming at innovation with an ensemble of actors playing multiple roles that crossed generations and gender.

The production was at HOME, Manchester's new cultural centre and the Friends enjoyed the buzz to this lively modern building packed with young people, many of them A Level students. But there was disappointment that a promised pre-talk by the director turned out to be an academic lecture aimed at said students. Woosh! Over my head and I don't think I was alone!

Anyway, into the new-smelling modern functional theatre we went (with a nostalgic pang for the gorgeous old Library Theatre), for this stripped back version of a bloody tale of murder and revenge, matricide and revolt, civic power, terrible justice and primeval forces, a remarkable masterpiece written over two thousand years ago..! Strange, though they hid the blood, we were shown – with the house lights up – the mechanics of the minimal staging. Oddities to ponder, along with such irritations as the male chorus, local blokes enthusiastically shouting! With Manchester people recruited to be the voice of the citizens, the production had a strong community element. But hey, the translation by Ted Hughes gave power to the language and individual performances were good, so there was much to enjoy. And there was much debate on the homeward journey, always the sign of a successful trip. (Peggy Woodcock)