

FRIENDS OF CHESTER LITERATURE FESTIVAL

NEWSLETTER June 2017



Welcome to Storyhouse! At last Chester has a new theatre. Here are the committee on their pre-opening tour with Paul, Festivals Manager, and Liz O'Rourke, representing her husband Simon who designed the wonderful storytelling chair for us. More details below.



Dear Litfest Friends

Summer is here and it's an exciting time for Chester with the recent opening of the wonderful Storyhouse Theatre. Not just a theatre but a vibrant cultural hub for the local community offering 2 theatre spaces, a cinema, library and children's library, restaurant/cafe and bar, as well as a place to meet up with friends or get down to some work. It's been a long wait since the Gateway Theatre closed down in 2007, and now at last we can look forward to a new chapter for the arts in Chester and the wider area.

As a special gift to Storyhouse from the Litfest Friends we commissioned an award-winning local craftsman called Simon O'Rourke to create a unique storytelling chair for the children's library. It was delivered just before the opening of the building on 11th May and now takes pride of place in the storytelling room where the younger children come together for regular sessions. Carved from a variety of different sorts of wood, it is decorated with birds and animals including the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland, which is of course one of the opening theatre

productions. We hope the chair will be used and enjoyed by children and their families for years to come.

Taking a look back at Friends' events over the last 6 months, you will find a number of reviews in this newsletter. Our 2016 end of year coffee morning was well attended as usual, with the highlight being a talk from Tamara Harvey about her work in regenerating Theatr Clwyd which goes from strength to strength under her able direction. Since then we've been busy with a stimulating Flash Fiction workshop at the Little Theatre in February, followed by a really enjoyable day out to



Yorkshire in April visiting the Bronte Parsonage Museum in Haworth. Then in June we were off again on another trip, this time to Stratford-upon-Avon to see Oscar Wilde's Salome at the RSC.

So looking ahead we have another theatre trip organised for **Saturday 9th September**, to see a new musical at Manchester's award-winning **Hope Mill Theatre**. Bookings for that are already coming in fast so if you would like to come along don't delay. And this year's **end of year coffee morning will take place on Thursday 30th November in a new venue - the Garret Bar at Storyhouse**, with a guest speaker to be announced nearer the time. We are also hoping to arrange one further event in October, possibly going to the Ilkley Literature Festival, but we will let you know more about that in due course. At the time of publication we are still waiting for some advance details of this year's **Literature Festival**, however we do know the dates which are later than usual, **12th to 19th November**. We shall be putting on a special Friends' event during the Festival.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to remember one of our Friends, Muriel Maufroy, a remarkable and very gifted woman who sadly died recently in France. We will miss her.

With very best wishes from Elizabeth Lambrakis, Jan Bengree, Carol, Archer, Sue Buckley, Marigold Roy, Kath Pilsbury and Helen Hill.

(Contact Elizabeth on 01244 323032, elam@talktalk.net)

FLASH FICTION! Our workshop in February with Ashley Chantler and Peter Blair from Chester Uni, was much enjoyed. Here are two examples!

Remembering Margot

The family came up trumps.

Donald, the widower at the wake, was proud. Eliza brought orchids. John brought brandy. And Lucy (hippy colourful Lucy) brought smiles, warmth, and her customary winsomeness.

“Margot was a dignified lady,” intoned the vicar “We loved her tranquillity, her gentleness”

His voice was a deep bassoon. Donald likened it to that of a schoolmaster he had once feared. It emanated with The Authority of God and The Importance of Goodness.

Donald shuddered. He wasn't sure anymore about Goodness and nowadays, those in Authority usually left him cold.

“Margot was sweetness itself,” intoned Margot's sister, Debra. “She was reliable, staunch. We loved her” Her voice was a strident piccolo: staccato, emphatic. Donald likened it to that of her mother, a woman he'd always avoided.

So the congregation pictured Margot in woollen dress with cameo pinned primly at neck. And some recalled Margot's lipstick (a tidy tasteful shade of Coty Rose) as well as recalling her kindness. And John, Eliza and Lucy (in oaken pew) remembered Margot's devotion, as they stood together in scented, flower-filled, overflowing, stone-walled church.

Later, everyone sipped brandy in Donald's dining room and nibbled Debra's delicate sandwiches. And everyone chattered in high shiny voices to John and Eliza and Lucy, paying fulsome compliments about Margot:

“Always immaculate”

“Always gentle”

And “Always Did The Right Thing” said another.

But later still, Donald reached into the back of a bedroom drawer and an envelope yielded itself. And Donald perched on his bed and opened it. And Donald wept (although eventually he laughed.)

And then Donald lay, grey head on white pillow, with a tiny wrinkled photograph clutched in his fingers... It was his Margot (Donald's Margot, as he alone remembered): tousle-haired, twenty-something, in fluttery petticoat.... and certainly not much else.

So Donald (the widower) slept soundly, very soundly.

Jan Bengree

Stranger than Fiction

It's strange how first appearances fade once you know someone. When I first met her, I thought her ugly, inconsequential. Several weeks later, I found myself admiring her elegant neck, long pianist's fingers and ballerina's walk. Despite our age and cultural differences, I made sure we had fun together. Despite wealth, she'd been lonely and unloved in her cocoon of fame. We married despite considerable disapproval. I like to think I made her happy –cared for her - even for a short time. Her sudden death shocked everyone. Who would have thought mushrooms could kill?

Anon.

Friends' Visit to Haworth April 27th

Did you know that the Bronte family name was originally Brunty? Neither did I. Somehow "Charlotte Brunty" doesn't have the same romantic ring to it! That's just one of the fascinating facts I discovered during the Friends visit to the Bronte Parsonage in Haworth, West Yorkshire. A member of the Bronte Society gave us an illuminating talk about the famous sisters'



childhood in Haworth. She told us that it was their father, Patrick, who was from a barely literate Irish family, who fixed the spelling of the name from Brunty to Bronte – to hide his humble origins perhaps? After the talk, another member of the society led a walk around Howarth showing us the places associated with the family: Haworth church, the Apothecary and the Black Bull pub. Branwell Bronte was a frequent visitor to the Black Bull and his chair is still there to this day.

After lunch, we spent a happy few hours in the Parsonage Museum. I think we were all struck by the tiny books, covered in minute, barely legible, writing, which the sisters filled with stories about their fictional worlds. The Brontes wrote more words as children than in all their published adult works. I was amazed to discover that one of Charlotte's miniature books is more than 60,000 words long. There was added interest in the museum; a display of costumes used in the recent B.B.C. play, "To Walk Invisible" and a collection of poetry, written by Simon Armitage, commemorating the bicentenary of Branwell's birth.

The visit gave us much to think about, especially; how many more jewels of literature would we be reading today had the sisters lived and continued writing into old age?

Carol Archer

And so we leave you with another picture of Storyhouse, in the library – another of many quirky touches by the designer, Hannah Wehbeh.

We hope you enjoyed this newsletter. Any suggestions welcome and we'd love offers of help to write some future reviews!

(Our thanks to Sue Buckley for the photos in this newsletter.)

