

# Entertainment & Leisure

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**Starter's orders:** *The Hollow* at the Mill at Sonning is the first play Brian Blessed — pictured, centre, with the cast — has directed in more than half a century



**Bold rhythms:** the Deco Ensemble are playing Norden Farm

## Musical worlds will collide live on stage

ECLECTIC music group the Deco Ensemble are bringing a rich blend of influences to Norden Farm in Maidenhead next weekend.

The band, who have been hailed as one of Britain's finest tango quintets, play the Altwood Road venue on Saturday, August 6.

Formed in 2013, the group mix classical, jazz and world music elements to create a modern tango sound.

They combine classical masterpieces and little-known gems featuring rich harmonies and bold rhythms, with works by Prokofiev, Ravel, modern classical composers and tango masters among their repertoire.

The band are particularly inspired by Astor Piazzolla's music. Back in the Sixties, Piazzolla laid down the foundations of tango nuevo writing and Deco Ensemble reimagine those sounds.

Since forming they have toured across Europe, playing sold-out shows in Glasgow, Brussels and Rome — as well as performing at London's Wigmore Hall and the Royal Albert Hall.

The band's line-up features Sabina Rakcheyeva (violin), Bartosz Glowacki (accordion/accordina), Ricardo Gosalbo (piano), Robert Luft (electric guitar) and Elena Marigómez (double bass).

Starting at 8pm, their Maidenhead show will see them performing a programme of works by Astor Piazzolla, Gustavo Beytelmann and Ramiro Gallo.

Tickets are £14, available by calling the box office on 01628 788997 or online at [www.nordenfarm.org](http://www.nordenfarm.org)

For more on the Deco Ensemble, visit their website [www.decoensemble.com](http://www.decoensemble.com)

# Mars beckons, but first there's a play to direct!

JORDAN, Sharon Osbourne, Geri Halliwell. Good, bad or indifferent, you know someone's made their mark when they start to rack up multiple autobiographies.

To be fair to Brian Blessed, he is still only on his second — having published *Absolute Pandemonium: My Louder Than Life Story* last October to rapturous critical acclaim and five-star reviews on Amazon.

His first autobiography, *The Dynamite Kid*, appeared in 1992 — nearly a quarter of a century ago — by which time Blessed had already been famous for 30 years, having gotten his big break in 1962 playing PC "Fancy" Smith in *Z-Cars*.

He was 25, so not quite a spring chicken. Even less so now — he will turn 80 on October 9.

Asked by a BBC interviewer how he was planning to spend his birthday, he said: "A bloody good long walk — I might do some of the summits in Wales. I shall never retire — I'm going to return to Everest."

Everest, of course, being one of his many passions, along with space travel and the planet Mars. Unlike Mars, though, he has visited Everest three times, climbing without oxygen

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in the style of his childhood hero, George Mallory. So far he has narrowly failed to reach the summit — but you would never write him off.

A deadly serious mountaineer who has written books about his Everest experiences, he has reached the tops of Mount Aconcagua in Argentina and Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

He is the oldest man to go to the North Magnetic Pole on foot and has undertaken an expedition into the jungles of Venezuela, during which he survived a plane crash.

Fired by a passion for the outer limits, Blessed has also completed 800 hours of space training at Star City in Russia — something he is more than happy to discuss.

"We need to get out there!" he roars. "The Earth has got to rest! We are the children of stardust, yearning for the stars — we don't just belong here. We need to get out there, get into space!"

"When I was six I heard about Mars. Oh, I wanted to go! Oh! And I

was almost brokenhearted I couldn't go to Mars.

"[Recently] I met thousands of kids at Leicester space centre — they wanna go to Mars! They want to go into the solar system!"

Ask a silly question, but is Blessed booked on Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, by any chance?

"Oh, that's Mickey Mouse!" he pooh-poohs. "No, no, no, no! I've been working with the Russians and Britain and America. The greatest scientists in the world are getting their ships ready for Mars. And I've made a film about it with them."

Blessed says that while the documentary in question isn't finalised yet, the title will be something along the lines of *Mission to Mars*.

In the meantime, though, he has another project to occupy him — at least until Saturday, September 3, when Agatha Christie's *The Hollow* concludes an eight-week run at the Mill at Sonning theatre.

The play is almost Blessed's stage directorial debut — he confesses that he put on a small production of Harold Pinter's 1957 play *The Room*

during his time in Stratford-upon-Avon. But after an interval of that length, *The Hollow* might as well be his debut.

"I thought I'd start with a simple play and then I'll go on to Tennessee Williams — *Camino Real* — which has about 150 people in it. In that is Casanova, and in that Lord Byron, and Kilroy and all kinds of things — and a spaceship!"

"Directors feel they can't direct it, but I know exactly how to direct that. That will be my second play, but *The Hollow*'s a lovely start for me — I'm enjoying it enormously!"

All of the above is by turns exclaimed and intoned in Blessed's characteristically emphatic actorly baritone. Exactly as seen on TV.

Mill at Sonning theatregoers will soon have the chance to experience this for themselves, as he has offered to perform his one-man show, *An Evening With Brian Blessed*, once *The Hollow*'s run finishes.

The date has yet to be confirmed, so watch this space. In the meantime, tickets for *The Hollow*, which start at £53, can be booked by calling the box office on 0118 969 8000 or visiting [www.millatsonning.com](http://www.millatsonning.com)

## Creative summer holiday fun's on offer at theatre

PARENTS are being invited to fill their children's long summer holidays with creative fun and the chance to make new friends at the Watermill Theatre in Bagnor this August.

Based on Oscar Wilde's famous children's tales, such as *The Selfish Giant*, they can spend a week creating a play in the beautiful gardens during the Act Wilde in the Garden course running from Monday to Friday next week (August 1 to 5).

There are two sessions each day: 9am to noon for ages four to seven and 1pm to 4pm for ages eight to 11. The course costs £95.

A spokesman for the Watermill said: "Whether drama is your child's thing or

maybe they love musicals, the theatre has courses for all tastes. Children can create their own show from scratch, rehearse it and perform it in front of families and friends.

"Play in a Week is from August 8 to 12 and there are still spaces for 12- to 16-year-olds in the afternoon session that runs from 1pm to 4pm, priced £95. Musical in a Week from August 15 to 19 runs from 10am to 4pm each day and is for ages 12 to 16 years, priced £155.

"All our courses are autism-friendly, but the Autism Friendly Holiday Course from August 22 to 26 is specifically for young people on the autistic spectrum aged nine to 16. They can learn drama skills

during this fun-filled week.

"The course runs from 9am to noon each day and is priced £95. All Watermill Theatre courses are delivered by professional theatre practitioners."

For more details of the Watermill's holiday courses, visit [www.watermill.org.uk](http://www.watermill.org.uk) and search under "holiday courses". Or call the outreach team on 01635 570934.

■ **THE stage adaptation of *Peter Pan in Scarlet* — the official sequel to JM Barrie's *Peter Pan* — has its world premiere at the Oxford Playhouse on Friday, August 12. The show runs until Sunday, September 4. To book, call 01865 305305 or go to [www.oxfordplayhouse.com](http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com)**



**In on the act:** the Watermill Theatre puts on holiday courses



**Friends of Dorothy...** the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man all feature in *The Wizard of Oz* at Mapledurham

## Yellow bricks lead to Mapledurham

A STELLAR cast of actors is coming to Mapledurham House next week to stage an all-new open-air adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*.

You are invited to click your heels and head on down the Yellow Brick Road to the show being staged by Immersion Theatre on Thursday (August 4).

Gates open at noon for picnics and the performance starts at 1pm.

Rachel Stratton will play Dorothy, having previously starred in international tours of *Shrek the Musical* as well as the West End production of *Rainbow Magic Live*.

Matthew Forbes plays the brainless Scarecrow, straight from his role as associate director of puppetry and movement on the National Theatre's worldwide smash hit production of *War Horse*.

Other notable credits include the lead in Dundee Rep's *The Witches* and voicing the title role in Disney's *Boyster*.

Rachel and Matthew are

joined by Rob Gathercole as the Tin Man, James Clifford as the Lion and Rochelle Parry as the Wicked Witch of the West, all of whom have extensive experience across the West End, UK touring productions and pantomime.

Tickets are £9 for adults and £7 for children and seniors, with family tickets £28. To book, call 0118 972 3350 or visit the website [www.mapledurham.co.uk](http://www.mapledurham.co.uk)

■ AN "experimental" arts and music festival is coming to Braziers Park at Ipsden next weekend.

Supernormal runs from Friday, August 5, to Sunday, August 7. Around 1,500 people are expected on site.

A spokesman for the organisers said: "It offers a platform for artists, performers and musicians to work collaboratively and creatively for a new kind of audience seeking experiences out of the mainstream."

For full details, visit [www.supernormalfestival.co.uk](http://www.supernormalfestival.co.uk)