

Entertainment & Leisure

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Star quality: Mary Stewart, right, will play the bad witch Maleficent in this year's Kenton panto, *Sleeping Beauty*. But five other roles remain up for grabs and an open audition is being held at the New Street venue on Wednesday, August 21

Blessed's back with his partner in crime

HE was a young actor in rep when he came face to face with the Queen of Crime — and ended up spending a fortnight in her company.

Now, more than 60 years on, Brian Blessed is returning to the Mill at Sonning to direct another of Agatha Christie's plays.

Towards Zero opens on Thursday (August 8) and runs until Saturday, September 28.

This will be Blessed's fourth time as director at the Sonning Eye venue, following the success of *The Hollow* in 2016, *Spider's Web* in 2017, and *The Unexpected Guest* in 2018.

A spokesman for the Mill at Sonning said: "Summer is the time when the inimitable Brian Blessed visits Sonning to direct one of Agatha Christie's classic thrillers.

"The combination of Christie and Blessed has proved a winning formula for our theatre, helped by the special relationship that Brian had with the queen of the thriller genre.

"He met and worked with her when he was a young actor at the Nottingham Repertory Theatre. Their friendly conversations informed Brian about how she would have liked to see her plays directed.

"She told Brian that *Towards Zero* was acclaimed by the novelist Rupert Graves as by far her best and most dramatic novel, and in 1956 Gerald Verner adapted it into a play."

When the plays opens, there has been a murder — a brutal murder — of an invalid matriarch as she lay in bed. There had



Formative influence: actor and director Brian Blessed and, below, Agatha Christie



apparently been no premeditation on the part of her family and friends, who had gathered at her home for their regular yearly visit.

No one seemed to have had any reason for killing her, nor did anyone gain by her death. What follows brings about the conclusion of the most amazing detective story of Agatha Christie's many mysteries.

Saturday matinées will take place each week, with Sunday matinées from September 1.

For tickets and times, call 0118 969 8000 or visit www.millatsonning.com

Panto's founder won't be sleeping on the job

By **MATTHEW WILSON**

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IT'S one of the firmest fixtures in the Henley calendar — so much so that it's hard to believe the annual Kenton Theatre panto is only in its eighth year.

Tickets for this year's fairytale show, *Sleeping Beauty*, have been on sale for a while.

But what fans may not realise is that the director of this year's production is the selfsame person who came up with the idea for a Kenton pantomime back in 2012.

Heather Simpkin now runs her own theatre company, Bear in the Air Productions, together with her husband Charlie and son Samuel.

But the Kenton remains the place where she cut her teeth as an actor, director and playwright.

"I've been on the Kenton board of trustees twice," she says. "I owe my whole career to the Kenton and HAODS — the Henley Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society."

Heather's family moved to Henley in the late Eighties and she has retained close links with the town ever since.

"My family home's on the Fair Mile and we're just building on it right now, so my husband and I have temporarily moved out into a flat in Reading," says Heather.

"We're a stone's throw from the Hexagon, so it's nice and central and really easy for me to come over here to Henley."

Now aged 25 and a professional actor, Heather's son Samuel Ranger made his first ever appearance on stage at the Kenton aged two.

But Heather's long association with the New Street venue has been no less formative.

"We moved to Henley, then I was at university, then I went to London and started a career in something completely different — I had my own recruitment consultancy on Oxford Street for 10 to 15 years.

"Then I divorced from my ex-husband and came back here in the mid-Nineties with my son, who was two, and immediately joined HAODS and started acting."

Heather took to treading the boards like the proverbial duck to water — and it wasn't long before she tried her hand at directing.

"I did *A Midsummer Night's*



Back at the helm: Heather Simpkin of Bear in the Air Productions directed the first Kenton Theatre panto — a production of *Cinderella* — in 2012

Dream down by the river — that was my first job as a director, for HAODS. And then in the theatre itself I've done *The Beaux' Stratagem*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and been involved in loads more shows. All amateur productions.

"I became a director and was quite good at it, or so I thought. Then I decided the time was right and I went professional.

"I went up to London and studied at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, which is one of the top five in the world, so you couldn't get better!

"I did an MA there — I'd already got a degree. Around the same time I was working at the King's Head Theatre Pub in Islington.

"They started this programme for trainee artistic directors and we basically worked for free — hello, it's the theatre. And I worked there for eight months on all their shows and did everything. So I really learnt my trade at the sharp end.

"I learnt about the professional theatre very quickly, but I had to do it for free. So I was in the meantime doing corporate coaching — going into big companies and teaching them how to present and all that sort of thing. That earns good money, and then in between I could do my theatre."

Meanwhile, back in Henley, opportunities were starting to open up for Heather.

"I was doing bits here and there where I could, and one of the first things I did was something at the Henley Festival with a group of

singers and comedians — we were one of the walking-around acts. And then a local chap had written a musical called *Make Believe*, and he put it on at the Kenton. So that was a professional production which I directed. And then I went up to London and did a couple of things there."

Having started to make her name in the theatre world, Heather came up with the idea for the Kenton pantomime.

"I was still living in Henley and I was on the board of the Kenton and I said to them, 'You guys want to find a way to keep this theatre going for ever. The way to do that is you need to have a guaranteed income.' And I suggested to them that they started an annual panto."

Playing to more than 6,000 people each year, the pantomime now accounts for a significant chunk of the theatre's yearly revenues, but its beginnings were rather more humble.

"The first one I did was *Cinderella*," recalls Heather. "We all kind of did it for nothing. No money at all and let's see if this works..."

"I wrote it, directed it. And then it just absolutely took off. People loved it — something local, something really of quality. When I'm writing my scripts I make sure they have integrity, truth and honesty, really good values."

With the pantomime aimed squarely at a family audience, Heather found that she was getting valuable feedback from audience members at the Kenton. "People

would come up to me and go that was so great — we went to the panto at wherever and it's just not appropriate sometimes. And you have to explain the jokes to the children. But we came here and it was wholesome, wonderful family fun."

Needless to say, Heather intends *Sleeping Beauty* — which opens on Friday, December 13 — to be very much cut from the same cloth.

The show will have a cast of six, of whom only one member has so far been cast.

"There's a woman called Mary Stewart, who was in *Cinderella*, who is perfect to play Maleficent, the bad witch. So she's in the bag. Fantastic actor. And then we're looking for five people to play the other roles, including Beauty."

With this in mind, Bear in the Air Productions will be holding open auditions at the Kenton on Wednesday, August 21.

Applications are welcomed from male and female performers aged 18 and over for all principal roles.

Those auditioning should be strong all-round performers with a good singing voice. An ability to play a musical instrument is a plus, but not essential.

Applicants must also be available for the entire contract, which is paid, includes rehearsals, and runs from Monday, November 25, to Saturday, December 28.

For full audition information and to register their interest, applicants are asked to send their CV to Adam Brahm Casting by email at sleepingbeautyauditions2019@gmail.com

As well as the formal auditions, there will also be opportunities for people contemplating a career in theatre to get involved in the production.

Heather said: "I've always been about encouraging talent, so I'm open to anyone in Henley who wants to understand the professional process. If they're keen, if they want to find out more, if they want to get involved somehow, I will find a way to include them. I'll do whatever I can."

Tickets for *Sleeping Beauty* range from £17 to £24 for adults, £10 to £18 for children, and £15 to £22 for concessions. There is also a relaxed performance, for which admission is £10 with free entry for carers.

For more information and to book, call (01491) 575698 or visit www.kentontheatre.co.uk

Comedian's talking about his recovery

COMEDIAN Russell Brand is appearing at the Christ Church Centre later this month to talk about his recovery from addiction.

The show on Wednesday, August 14, is titled "Recovery Live".

A spokesman for the organisers said: "Russell Brand is developing a new live project, building on work he has done with his book, *Recovery*, utilising techniques from the 12-step programme to help people in all aspects of their lives — work, relationships, sex and more.

"These events will be an exploration into how we can collectively help ourselves and each other using tried and tested methods.

"This is not a stand-up comedy show, but it will make you laugh."

The show has a running time of 90 minutes and is suitable for ages 16 and up.

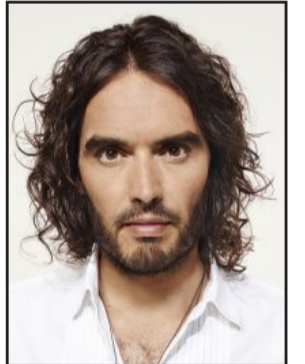
Film screening will spring a surprise

HENLEY'S Regal Picturehouse is hosting a screening of a "surprise film" tonight (Friday).

The screening, which starts at 8.30pm, is billed by the cinema as "a mystery preview of an upcoming new release."

A spokesman added: "Details will only be

Picture: Dean Chalkley



Techniques: Russell Brand

Doors open at 6pm for a 6.30pm start. Latecomers will not be admitted.

Tickets are £25 plus a £2.50 transaction fee and can be booked online at www.seetickets.com

A similar work-in-progress show at Norden Farm in Maidenhead on Thursday (August 8) has already sold out.

revealed as the opening credits roll."

What is known about the film is that it is rated 12A and has a running time of 117 minutes.

Tickets are £8 for general admission and £5 for Picturehouse members. To book, visit www.picturehouses.com