



Forthcoming read-throughs, auditions & other production stuff

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* auditions, 16 November, 2.00pm in the auditorium

**Remember:
a read-through is
not an audition!**

DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEXT ISSUE:

Wednesday 3 December

Other diary dates

Coffee mornings Every Saturday,
10.30-12.30

Players AGM Saturday 22
(with social November
afterwards) 7.30

APOLLONIUS

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PHILIP FRYER
28.11.1944-20.10.2025

It is with a very heavy heart that we confirm the sad passing of our choirmaster and in-house play reviewer, Philip Fryer, on 20 October. He was a charming man who wore his significant learning very lightly, as well as transforming the Gateway Choir into a well-oiled machine during the sadly very short time we knew him.

The last review he was able to do for us before ill-health overtook him was for *My Fair Lady* in July; he had been struggling with his health for a some time but managed to write his usual elegant piece, ending with the words 'I left feeling uplifted, inspired and, above all, hopeful'. While there is now no hope for his continued presence at the Apollo, he has certainly left the choir inspired and uplifted, for which we can only be quietly grateful. The Musical Magic show on 7 & 8 November will be dedicated to him.

In Philip's absence I am grateful to Phillip Griffiths for contributing this review of The Mirror Crack'd.

'Oh, bugger!' may seem an unlikely line with which to open a new stage version of Agatha Christie's 1962 novel, *The Mirror Crack'd*. It may even have shocked some punters to hear it uttered by her much-loved septuagenarian sleuth, Miss Jane Marple. But Rachel Wagstaff's adaptation, first staged in 2019, offers us a modern take on Christie's fictional world, while maintaining both its period and setting. This, she signals, will not necessarily be the cosy sleuth to which some of us may be accustomed.

As the play opens, the village inhabitants are still adjusting to the emergence of a housing estate, pejoratively referred to as The Development, on the outskirts of the village. Meanwhile, at the other end of the social scale, Jane's friend and confidante,

Dolly Bantry (the splendid Maggie Cardew, relishing her role as the village gossip), has been forced to sell the manor house to an American film star, Marina Gregg, and her director husband. The two worlds collide when one of the residents from the Development, the garrulous Heather Leigh (delightfully played by Nicola Chastney), is murdered with a poisoned daiquiri at a party held at the manor. It would appear, that the deadly cocktail was intended for the fragile, middle-aged star, Marina Gregg, seeking a comeback in a new starring vehicle, which is being shot at a nearby film studio.

Cue the arrival of Inspector Dermot Craddock from Scotland Yard, known to Miss Marple since boyhood, who must negotiate the delicate egos of the Hollywood set as he attempts to solve the mystery. Fortunately for him, the woman he knows as Aunt Jane is on hand to unravel its tangled strands, as deftly as

if she were unpicking a piece of knitting.

Miss Marple remains on stage throughout, at times instigating the action, at other points observing and commenting. We see the events through her eyes, including several enactments of the murder, told from different perspectives. As she puts it herself: 'We all experience events differently'. This conceit allows Wagstaff to break free from some of the more stifling conventions of the murder mystery play. As past and present collide on stage, this adaptation offers the audience action which is more stylised and organic. On two occasions, as Marple and the Inspector discuss potential suspects, the actors enter the living room and line up, facing the auditorium. Dolly even removes herself, only to rejoin the lineup, when the Inspector refuses to rule her out as a suspect.

(contd. overleaf)

THE MIRROR CRACK'D REVIEW (CONTD.)

Such theatrical touches enhance Carol Death's production. I marvelled at the way in which this first-time director navigated not only the serpentine plot but dealt so confidently with the blocking, especially in the second act, where the entire cast of eleven were on stage at the same time. Meanwhile, the action unfolded, simultaneously, in both the narrative present and in flashback.

The clever and striking black and white set worked to great advantage; the neutral space had to serve as three different settings: Marple's home, the film studio and Gossington Hall. The lighting was a key element in distinguishing between the dual time frames. The colourful costumes also played an important part in differentiating the characters in terms of generation and class.

Stepping into Miss Marple's sensible brogues with ease, Ellen Weeks is a graceful and quietly commanding

presence. This Marple is a compassionate, broad-minded woman, aware of life's vicissitudes, as well as her own frailty. Her physical impairment acted as a metaphor for the way in which society sidelines both older people and women. In another time, she might have made a Chief Inspector.

Jason Harris is outstanding as the Inspector, bringing gentle humour and a slight stuffiness to his characterisation, as well as portraying an underlying sense of the uncertainty of a man orphaned in his youth.

All the Apollo newcomers are impressive. Alongside Nicola Chastney's chirpy victim are Rosanna Parker, who demonstrates a flawless American accent as the eager to please young star, and Chloe Haines who has a natural stage presence and conveys the 'help's perky nature with confidence and humour.

They are ably supported by Apollo stalwarts: Ian Moth brings a lofty presence to

the role of the director husband; Mark Duffus is amusingly over-the-top as the butler, complete with cod Italian accent; Di Marsh is all brisk efficiency as the star's personal assistant; Garry Smith is both funny and touching as the victim's hapless husband, and it was also good to see Tom Hilton emerge from the wings to take on two cameo roles.

As the movie star, Marina Gregg, Donna Thornal convincingly portrays the public face of the celebrity, as well as the vulnerability that lies concealed behind it.

Despite the uniformly strong characterisation and the imaginative direction, the play is overlong. It is a shame that Rachel Wagstaff's otherwise inventive adaptation could not have found a way to convey Christie's convoluted denouement with greater concision. But then I have felt the same way about nearly every Agatha Christie adaptation I have ever seen.

EDITORIAL: THE VIEW FROM THE EDITOR'S CHAIR

Compiling as I do the programmes for our shows, I often get to know more about particular productions than I did before. This time it's *The Mirror Crack'd*, which of course I'd read as the original Agatha Christie novel but am very interested in the new version by Rachel Wagstaff. However, as I was re-reading the text of Tennyson's poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, for the programme, it made me think about various links between the poem and the play which I can't imagine are accidental.

These days Christie is recognised as a far cleverer writer than she is usually considered. Often dismissed as a writer of pot-

boilers, she is in fact an exceptionally clever one, stylistically, structurally and intellectually, while hiding her skills behind apparently simple writing.

In this case, I thought about Sir Lancelot, who entirely by chance is the cause of the poor Lady's death from the curse simply by riding by and looking exceptionally buff. He has no idea that he has had that terrible effect on her; and when he sees her body lying in the boat all he can say is 'She has a lovely face,' which of course is true but not terribly helpful.

So what Christie is actually doing is foreshadowing the plot of her story, but also

turning the characters round: poor old Heather Leigh dies as the victim of something of which she has no knowledge, and she too has no idea of the effect what she says has on Marina Gregg. She blunders on regardless, not knowing that in the end she will cause the death of not only Marina but also herself.

The play is also set in the dislocated, socially disrupted world of postwar Britain. Life is changing, people have moved both geographically and socially, roles are more complicated than they used to be, all of which helps to set the scene for a deceptively simple story with darkness behind it.

NEWS FROM YOUR COMMITTEE

NOTES FROM THE COMMITTEE MEETING 27 OCTOBER 2025

THEATRE DIRECTOR

Since my last report, little has happened in the theatre other than the usual business of rehearsals, auditions and readings for upcoming plays. Coffee mornings continue to thrive.

Our marketing continues to have a very positive effect on our footfall. With *The Unfriend* showing a 90%+ take up and *The Mirror Crack'd* showing similar signs, it seems that the Apollo is becoming recognised as the place to go to see good theatre. NTLive numbers remain strong and a good money-spinner. Take-up of our opera screenings is still low but we need to give this time to develop—we are still unsure of our market and how to reach it. Folk Acoustic sessions in support of Age UK Isle of Wight continue to bring in a different clientele and my thanks to Steve Double for organising these events.

One of our showcases will be used in future to advertise forthcoming events whilst the other will remain as an external advert for our next play.

Building plans are still not agreed. Yet more information is being requested by Building Control and Fire Safety. It feels like a money pit for something that is likely to happen in the next decade at least. We need to ensure that costs do not run away while other areas of

the theatre need attention, like the theatre façade, which is beginning to look jaded despite being overhauled at great expense just 5 years ago. The firm that undertook the works has now ceased trading.

Thanks again to the hard-working volunteers who keep this magnificent theatre alive. Together we make great drama both on and off stage!

Steve Reading

ARTS MANAGER

At the time of writing *The Mirror Crack'd* is about to begin the first night of the run. Carol Death has made her debut as a director and has done a superb job. With her creative set design, expertly put together by the set-building team, clear vision and her ability to make new actors feel confident on stage as well as her resilience in the face of some difficulties that would make an experienced director want to cry, she has shown a real flair for directing. I shall definitely be asking her to do so again. Thank you, Carol.

Iron has been cast and we are making excellent progress in rehearsals. See page 7 for cast details. Thanks to Kate Fysh, my insightful assistant director for all your help so far.

Immaculate auditions are taking place this weekend, with Vicki Cook also making her directing debut with me as her assistant. One mem-

ber has made her feelings clear about the play, which is quite sweary; she feels that we should not be putting on plays that mock Christianity. Other religious people have expressed the view that it is actually quite clever in its arguments and have not been at all offended by the content. I am happy to justify and discuss any views of course, but I would ask that criticisms do not become personal. We should be able to disagree without character assassinations and insults being thrown.

Having said all that, the role of Arts Manager is up for election at the AGM and I urge anyone who would like to take it on to come forward as soon as possible. It is healthy to have a change every now and then, and I would be happy to help anyone new in the role to find their feet if they need me to.

A recent meeting with the publicity team, expertly led by Ginnie, was productive and positive. Thanks to you all for doing a fabulous job.

Some plays have been put forward for the 2026/7 season but it is not yet definite in terms of content or timings. Please let me know if you are interested in directing a particular play.

Helen Reading

(contd. overleaf)

YOUR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Theatre Director & Chair of Executive Committee (elected 3-yearly): **Steve Reading** (2024-27) director@apollo-theatre.org.uk

Arts Manager
(elected 3-yearly)

Helen Reading (2024-27)
artsmanager@apollo-theatre.org.uk

Members' Representative & Membership Secretary (elected 3-yearly)

Carole Crow (2024-27)
membersrep@apollo-theatre.org.uk

Business Manager
(elected 3-yearly)

Dan Burns (2022-25)
treasurer@apollo-theatre.org.uk or business-mgr@apollo-theatre.org.uk

Operations Manager
(elected 3-yearly)

Vicki Cook (2024-27)
operations@apollo-theatre.org.uk

OPERATIONS MANAGER

Since the last meeting there is not much to report from Operations.

The building application saga continues; thank you to Roger for his continued involvement in this.

It's been a busy couple of months, with lots of rosters to cover. My thanks to all who have stepped forward—your continued support is very much appreciated.

Moving forward I hope once the building plans are finally approved, we can start to draw up our phase one proposal of improvements to some of the public areas. Finally, following on from several reports to me, the passageway down to the stage door has been an issue with water ingress/rotten flooring/flooding etc. We hope to address this before we get too deep into the winter season. If you have any other concerns about operational matters please do email me.

Vicki Cook

BUSINESS MANAGER**90-day running costs**

After discussion at the last meeting, I have calculated the 3-month running costs for the theatre. This does not include any production or repair related costs, and is basically the cost of keeping the doors open. In calculating this, I have used an average from the past 12

months of utility bills—this does include higher periods of usage during performances, but I think it better gives a worst-case scenario. As a comparison, during the enforced COVID closures, there was very little in the way of power and utility usage at the start as the building was effectively locked down.

For a longer duration closure, we can look to reduce services such as the phone/box office booking line, and we would not be generating as much waste.

The line item for Biffa includes all refuse, recycling and glass collection and covers both collections and the bin rental. The line item for Telephone/Broadband covers the BT line including voice and broadband in addition to the box office answering system.

In short, the running costs work out at just under 1,400 a month. I have not included any inspection costs above—be that the electrical installation inspection, lifting/flying equipment or gas appliance servicing.

Theatre utilities	£ 1,318.78
Hancock Hse utilities	£ 526.01
Dodnor utilities	£ 311.61
Theatre water	£ 461.65
Hancock Hse water	£ 78.20
Dodnor water	£ 60.20
Insurance-all locations	£ 330.85
Telephone/broadband	£ 227.04
Biffa/waste	£ 265.66
Dodnor loan	£ 339.41
Total	£ 3,919.40

Financial Position

The balance across the 3 bank accounts is £21,130.87. This is in addition to approximately £9,000 due from Ticket-source covering ticket sales from both the current production and the recent NT live showing.

Building Fund

Since the start of the season, we have sold 1,431 full-price tickets for *The Unfriend* and *The Mirror Crack'd*. As discussed when we increased the seat prices by £2, this would be allocated towards future building/improvement projects. The building fund therefore stands at £2,862. This will be subject to change as bookings for the remainder of the run are made.

The replacement mixing desk discussed and approved at the previous meeting has been purchased and installed, and has been well received by all of the technical team.

It is pleasing to see that the current production has a sponsor—I think now is the time to look to develop our sponsors, but perhaps need to look at how this is advertised so there's information available that potential sponsors can have to hand.

Dan Burns

THE PLAY'S THE THING!

Having recently rejoined the U3A (University of the Third Age) on the Island, I noticed that their suggested groups included play-reading. Some of you may remember that Cynara ran such a group at the Apollo some years ago.

Further thought and discussion produced a broader-based concept covering other aspects of theatre: workshops, talks and discussions, as well as readings—looking at how we get the

page onto the stage, including direction, wardrobe, lighting & sound, set-building, props and so on.

The group will meet in the bar in the afternoon of the 4th Thursday of the month, starting on 22 January (time tbc).

Although the group will be under the auspices of U3A, this will be a collaborative venture and open to Apollo members. As usual, there will be a nominal charge to

cover heating and refreshments.

Any ideas, suggestions and offers of help are more than welcome, as is some indication of interest. Please contact me on katefysh@gmail.com, 01983 717618 or 07708 703677.

Oh, and what will the group be called? Why, 'The Play's The Thing!', of course.

Kate Fysh

The passing of Philip Fryer is a great loss to the Gateway Choir. It's almost three years since he was enticed to come and be our Choir-master and according to his daughter, he adored us! How lucky we were to have such a legend to take us in hand—and how patient he was! His family are hoping to arrange a thanksgiving in February on the Island and

we will be singing one of his favourite pieces.

Despite there being some criticism of the choice of more modern plays, we are attracting more keen volunteers: since the last meeting seven new members have joined and are already immersing themselves in Apollo life. A big welcome to Heather Kingsman, Daniel Pressey, Pat Suttman,

Adam Richardson, David O'Roarty, Henry Hamilton-Russell and Severine Moulton.

We are all very busy with other commitments around the Theatre but we really do need a new members night, I think!

Carole Crow

Membershipsecy@apollo-theatre.org.uk

MARKETING— A PLEA FOR HELP

As I'm sure you can imagine, our productions don't market themselves. An enormous amount of effort goes into our publicity activities: some physical, like posters and press articles, and some electronic, like social media and email-outs. It takes a lot of person-power, more than one person can do, which is why we have a marketing & publicity team, each with

their own responsibility. However, sometimes we need more than that, which is why I'm putting out a cry for help with our poster campaigns.

We have quite a lot of A4 posters printed for each show, and often they're not all used, which is a waste of our hard-earned money. I'm also concerned that there are parts of the Island that are 'poster deserts'. So can I ask you please to take some of the A4 posters you'll find under

the pigeonholes in the foyer and distribute them in your area? In particular, if you live in **Ryde** or **Ventnor** your help would be very welcome. Please speak to David Barnard, who is our poster co-ordinator, or email me on gginnie@gmail.com, to agree how many posters you can take. It doesn't matter whether it's two or twenty—it all helps to get us out there!

Ginnie Orrey

Marketing Manager



Once again I'm delighted to report back on another triumph for Anthea Weekes. Her 'Songs from the Shows' at Gurnard Church was a huge success, with the rafters positively shaking! She does them fairly regularly, so I do recommend going along to the next one—it's a real treat!

Wardrobe have put out a call: they have a need for empty 1- or 2-litre plastic ice-cream containers. If you can help, just contact any of the wardrobe team. Their worknight is Tuesday.

DIRECTORS' WORKSHOP

After nearly fifty years as an Apollo Player I realise that, for me, opportunities to actually be on stage are now very limited, but I honestly feel that I have learned many 'tricks of the trade' when it comes doing the 'page to stage' bit.

I am therefore willing to run a Workshop for any members who would like to direct or brush-up their directorial skills. We have published Directors Guidelines but they can only cover the admin rules etc. They do not teach the skills of developing the artistic vision a

director needs to transfer a playscript into a living piece of theatre.

I know 'artistic vision' sounds a bit precious, but once entrusted by the Arts Manager with a script, a director must not only read and know the plot and every character, but also the time and venue of the story. They then can cast appropriately and can explain in detail their requirements to set-builders/painters, wardrobe and props.

Then comes the rehearsal period which can be overwhelming for a director.

You not only have to have good human management skills but also staging tricks that are better learnt by doing rather than reading about.

I realise that the lead-up to Christmas is a busy time but the stage is available on Sunday 9 November at 2pm. Please ring me if you are interested and can make that date or would prefer one in the New Year. I am happy to do two workshops.

Michael Arnell

(01983) 296388

Carole Crow
membershipsecy@apollo-theatre.org.uk
Tel: 07905220934

GALA NIGHT—AND HOW WE DO IT!

BY

**STEVE
READING**

Our Gala Night celebrates the opening of a new season and is an opportunity to show off the theatre. It does take a lot of organising. Our Members' Rep, Carole Crow, was recently asked 'How do you decide who receives an invite to Gala Night?' Well, we do have a protocol for this and it runs something like this:

We aim to identify 60+ individuals who have made a significant contribution to the Apollo or to our local community. It's our way of saying 'thank you'. The list would include, but isn't limited to, the following:

- our Trustees
- members who give their time month after month in props, backstage, technical, marketing, costume and set building;
- members who are regular volunteers on rotas for plays and hirings (FoH, bar, box office etc);
- life members;
- the 'great and the good' – local community champions, including some politicians;
- the '+1s' of the cast of the play in session (and play director);
- sponsors;
- local press;
- customers who regularly book tickets for 3, 4 or more plays in a season;
- anyone else who is deemed to have helped the theatre move forward.

It's a long list—and for each invitee there will be a 'Plus 1'. We aim to fill at least the auditorium, leaving the circle for late responders.

On top of this a few hardy members (3-6) source and prepare the canapes and drinks while the play is in performance on the night. It is a challenging operation but worthwhile when you see the red carpet and posh suits and frocks on display. I'm a suit man myself!

So I hope this helps to explain how we organise the Gala Night.

Steve Reading

THE JERSEY OPERA HOUSE



**Alan Rodway tells us
about his travels**

In early October of this year Pat and I had a week's holiday in Jersey, an island I had never visited and Pat not for 60 years or so (!). Our stay happily coincided with the re-opening after five years of the Jersey Opera House, a building with a long and interesting history since its first opening in 1865.

The theatre was destroyed by fire in 1900 but re-opened after only five months; it caught fire again in 1921 and again was rebuilt within a short space of time, which says something for the resources of the Island. After the rise of Cinema in the '20s it was converted into a picture palace in 1931 and remained so all through the German occupation of 1940-45, after which live performances were gradually reintroduced and the building reverted fully to a theatre in 1958.

By the late 1990s the building was in urgent need of repair—£6 million was spent by the States (the Jersey government) and the theatre reopened in 2000 to celebrate the centenary of the first rebuilding in 1900. With the outbreak of the Covid epidemic it again closed in 2020 and a further £12.7 million was spent bringing the building up to date.

Pat and I attended a performance of the opening show 'Encore' on 5 October and the amount of talent on display from both adult and child performers was staggering—everything was fully 'miked up' and the 11-piece band was amazing. Jersey is about one-eighth the size of the IW and the population is just over 100,000 so to produce a show of this quality was extremely impressive. The Opera House seats around 600 which makes it larger than Shanklin Theatre and it has

Upper Circle (Balcony), Dress Circle and Stalls. It is now on 'the circuit' for West End touring shows and needless to say is on NT Live. Forthcoming shows include Jasper Carrott and Rory Bremner (already sold



out!) and their own Christmas Show which has also sold out. There is obviously a great local demand for productions and if there was a similar level of enthusiasm for theatre on the IW it would transform the fortunes of all our local dramatic groups!

Alan Rodway

PRODUCTION NEWS

More news on *Musical Magic*, the new singing group's inaugural concert on 7 & 8 November.

As you will remember, the first night, 7 November, is

open to the public, with tickets priced at £5. The second night, 8 November, is a members-only night and tickets are free.

However, do please remem-

ber that even though it's free, you must book your seat through the website to make sure we don't disappoint people who plan to come and find it sold out!

Following the auditions for the next production after *The Mirror Crack'd*, the cast for *Iron* has been confirmed as follows:

Fay: Fiona Gwinnett
Josie: Amy Burns

Guard 1: Paul Gwinnett
Guard 2: Holly Squires
Directed by Helen Reading
& Kate Fysh
Assisted by Dan Burns & Steve Reading

Production dates: 5-13 December

As always, volunteers for the rotas will be very welcome! Contact Vicki Cook on operations@apollo-theatre.org.uk to put your name down.

Written by Kander and Ebb (*Cabaret* and *Chicago*) in 1971, *70 Girls 70* has sadly been overlooked, probably because the original production did not last long, and partly because it was produced as a big Broadway show, when it needs a small intimate theatre like the Apollo. It was revived in June 1990 with the one and only Dora Bryan playing the lead-

ing role; the book was rewritten and some new songs added and it opened at Chichester's Minerva Studio and later transferred to The Vaudeville Theatre in London where it ran for 112 performances.

The show is set in The Sussex Arms in New York, a run down hotel for elderly residents. One of their number has been away for a while and returns to buy a group of them dinner.

Now, considering Ida never had two beans to rub together, how can she afford to treat everyone to dinner? How can she turn up dressed to the nines, looking a million dollars? And why does she look happier and years younger than when she left?

....

I'll explain next month!

John Abraham

For those of you who don't already know this play, you need to know that it's likely to offend some people. It's very 'swear-y' and makes derogatory references to Christianity. But it is ... *hilarious*.

Here's the story. You're young free and single and haven't had sex for the last eleven and a half months, then one morning you wake up pregnant, with the Angel Gabriel on your doorstep

claiming parentage. The situation quickly spirals into farcical confusion with no fewer than three more potential fathers claiming parentage: one of them an ex-boyfriend, one of them a nerdish contemporary from school that you wouldn't want to be seen dead with, and the third—Satan himself.

The auditions on 26 October were very well attended indeed and the director

was delighted to have to make some really difficult decisions between people all of whom could have done a part brilliantly. In the end the cast is as follows:

MIA	Imogen Evans
REBECCA	Hebe Gregory
MICHAEL	Dan Pressey
GABRIEL	Carl Burch
LUCIFER	Olly Fry
GARY	Mark Duffus
Director: Vicki Cook	
Assisted by: Helen Reading	

I'm sure many of you will remember our visit from the Mitre Theatre Players, from Croydon, during the summer. They have become regular visitors, bringing their energetic shows to the Island, and they always go down a storm. This year they included the following in their own monthly newsletter:

Great company, growing audiences, and big loud 80s rock—our Isle of Wight tour of Rock of Ages was everything a Mitre summer should be.
The Mitre Players once again took our summer tour to the

Isle of Wight, this year with the high-octane smash hit *Rock of Ages* at the Apollo Theatre. It was a great week in great company, filled with music, laughter, and that special Mitre sense of community that makes our tours so memorable. Audiences were strong from the start and continued to grow throughout the week. Off stage, the Island Riding accommodation proved once again to be the perfect set-up for the touring company, providing a wonderful base and a social hub that added so much to the

week.

Our promotional activities kicked off with a colourful entry into the Sandown Carnival, where we were delighted to take 1st place! Megan and Jerri also led the way in coordinating the promo weekend plans, including a very boozy and memorable 'Pub-licity crawl'.

We came, we rocked, and we blew the roof off in big, loud, 80s style. Huge thanks to everyone involved for making it possible!



THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THIS DAME

As the Apollo stages a play based on Agatha Christie's novel *The Mirror Crack'd*, Phillip Griffiths marks the centenary of the birth of **Dame Angela Lansbury**, who played Miss Marple in the 1980 film version



ANGELA LANSBURY, who died just a few days shy of her 97th birthday in 2022, gets my nomination as one of the most versatile star actors I have known. The longevity and diversity of her career were extraordinary. And yet many only know her from her twelve-year stint as the crime writing sleuth, Jessica Fletcher in the American series, *Murder, She Wrote*, or perhaps the singing teapot in Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast*. Yet this ignores her early Hollywood career, her three Oscar nominations and her years on Broadway, mostly in musicals, where she notched up a total of five Tony Awards.

My introduction to Dame Angela came early. I was four when I first saw Disney's *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, in which she played a well-meaning but prissy amateur witch in Second World War England; at first, reluctant to accept three cockney evacuees, she thaws as the story unfolds. And there you have one of her signature features, her ability not only to reveal a character's vulnerability, but her knack when playing unsympathetic characters of projecting, without ever sentimentalising them, an unquenchable personal warmth.

Angela was an evacuee herself. In 1940, she left London with her mother (Irish-born actress Moyna MacGill) and twin brothers for the United States. Her grandfather, George Lansbury, was a high-profile politician, a social reformer, pacifist and staunch supporter of Women's Suffrage. He was leader of the Labour party from 1931 to 1935.

Whilst Angela remained in

New York to study drama, her mother took the boys to Los Angeles. Angela joined her a couple of years later, and after a brief stint selling cosmetics at Bullock's department store, she secured an audition at MGM studios for a couple of films set in England. She was 17. Initially dismissed by director George Cukor as too young and inexperienced to play Ingrid Bergman's sinister housemaid in *Gaslight*, she was given a seven-year contract by studio boss, Louis B. Mayer. She got the role anyway – and earned an Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actress. She was nominated again the following year (1945) as the innocent music hall singer in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, singing 'Goodbye Little Yellow Bird' to a bird in a cage as a man threw paper snow over her.

An impressive beginning, then. But regrettably MGM didn't know how to use her. Early on, she was cast in a string of unsympathetic roles, often playing (to the hilt) characters older than her years. At 22, she played—brilliantly—Spencer Tracy's mistress in a fine film, Frank Capra's *State of the Union*, attempting to wrestle him away from his loyal wife (Katharine Hepburn). Hepburn had requested Angela for the role.

Angela appeared in four films a year but became frustrated with the limitations of the studio system. She begged Mr. Mayer, with whom she played gin rummy, for the female lead in *The Three Musketeers*, but had to be satisfied with the smaller role of the Queen. Finally, she bought out her contract.

With the decline of the stu-

dio system in the early fifties, she drifted into one-off television dramas, with the occasional film, of which the Danny Kaye vehicle, *The Court Jester*, was undoubtedly the best. Most of the television was shot in New York – and transmitted live! Still, she worked with good actors, and it helped her support her young family. She had three children from her fifty-year marriage to English born film executive, Peter Shaw. He also managed her career.

New York exposed her to the theatre, although her family home remained in Los Angeles. It wasn't until 1957, therefore, that she made her Broadway debut in the Feydeau farce, *Hotel Paradiso*, opposite Bert Lahr (the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*). She was also Joan Plowright's mother in the British play *A Taste of Honey*.

Although still in her thirties, playing mothers became a key feature of Angela's Hollywood career, often to actors of her own age. She played mothers to Warren Beatty, Carol Baker and Elvis Presley. Arguably her finest screen opportunity was as Laurence Harvey's malevolent mother in the brilliant Cold War thriller and satire, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Her evil yet darkly funny performance won her a Golden Globe and a third Oscar nomination. (If you have never seen the film, I urge you to seek it out.)

In 1964 she appeared on Broadway in a short-lived Stephen Sondheim musical, *Anyone Can Whistle*. Not only would this be the beginning of a long association with Sondheim, but the start of a new phase in her

career. Jerry Herman, who was preparing his new musical, *Mame*, caught one of the show's nine performances and felt she possessed all the qualities he was looking for in his leading lady.

The producers, however, took some persuasion. 'That's the woman who plays everybody's mother,' remarked one of them. Over the next year, between movies, Angela auditioned repeatedly. Her perseverance paid off. Beating off competition from bigger star names, she won the role of a lifetime, as America's favourite aunt – flamboyant, liberal, sophisticated. It required her to sing both upbeat numbers and a torch song, clown, dance up a storm and project glamour in a parade of twenty-four costumes. She also brought real pathos in her portrayal of the relationship with Mame's nephew.

Mame established Angela Lansbury as a star on Broadway – and more widely as a celebrity to the American public in general. She appeared in adverts as Mame, graced the cover of *Life* magazine, made guest appearances on television and her caricature was up in Sardi's restaurant. She also won the first of four Tony awards as Best Leading Actress in a Musical.

Her success also meant that she could command better roles in films – including Miss Marple and the drunken romantic novelist in *Death on the Nile*. But her heart now belonged to the theatre—and until the eighties, she worked mostly on stage. In London, she worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company and played the Queen to Albert Finney's *Hamlet* at the National Theatre. She also triumphed in the great American musical, *Gypsy*,

first in London and then America. Her performance as the dominating stage mother was later described by The Observer critic, Robert Cushman as, 'the greatest performance I have ever seen in a musical'.

In 1979 Angela originated the role of the merry pie-making Mrs Lovett in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* for a year on Broadway. Concerned that she might reject the idea of playing second-fiddle to Sweeney, Sondheim wrote the comic song 'By the Sea' to give her more to do in Act 2.

At an age when Hollywood typically rejects women, she enjoyed her greatest fame starring in *Murder, She Wrote*. In her seventies, she became one of the most powerful women on American television, establishing her own production company and acting as executive producer. It allowed her to initiate her own television movies and mini-series. Amongst others, she starred in *The Shell Seekers*, *A Green Journey* with Denholm Elliot and an original musical, *Mrs. Santa Claus*, written for her by *Mame* composer, Jerry Her-

Women (2017).

Following her husband's death, she channelled her grief, returning to the Broadway theatre at the age of 81. She was Tony nominated for both Terence McNally's new play, *Deuce*, a two-hander, and for her imperious Madame Armfeldt in Trevor Nunn's revival of Sondheim's musical *A Little Night Music* (2010), which she did for seven months. She won the Tony for her energetic turn as Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*, a role she would repeat in London in 2014. James Earl Jones even persuaded her to tour Australia with him in *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Blithe Spirit at London's Gielgud Theatre finally gave me the opportunity to see Angela Lansbury on stage. I saw it twice. She was hilarious as the enthusiastic, yet dedicated, medium. Her star quality and energy were awe inspiring. As she limbered up for the séance, she performed a flamboyant dance, like a demented Isadora Duncan.

I also spoke to her at the stage door. 'I can't begin to tell you what your work has



man. Until the end of her life, she continued to appear in films and lend her voice to animated features. Perhaps you recall her as the Balloon Lady in *Mary Poppins Returns* or Aunt Marsh in the BBC's version of *Little*

meant to me,' I said, 'I've loved you since I was four'. Turning to her dresser, Angela wrinkled her nose and broke into a smile, 'Oh, isn't that lovely!' she said.

Phillip Griffiths

'THE MIRROR CRACK'D' REHEARSAL PHOTOS





A REMINDER OF
HOW MUCH IS
GOING ON AT
THE THEATRE IN
THE COMING
MONTHS



On **7 & 8 November** our newly-formed Musical Magic Group are delighted to invite you to their inaugural concerts featuring a wide variety of classic 'Songs from the Shows' performed as solos, duets and by the chorus. The evening is sure to have something for everyone, from *Oliver*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Cabaret* to poignant ballads and sloppy police work from Gilbert & Sullivan.

7 November public performance; 8 November members only (free but seats must be booked online).

CURTAIN UP 7.30PM

We are delighted to announce the next productions in our 'Screenings at the Apollo' series. All screenings start at 7.00pm.



On **15 November** we shall be showing one of the world's greatest operas, Verdi's *La Traviata*, screened live at the Royal Opera House in 2019. It tells the story of a courtesan prepared to sacrifice everything for love, and contains some of Verdi's most beautiful arias and duets.



On **27 November** National Theatre Live presents Jack Lowden and Martin Freeman in the critically acclaimed, provocative and subversively funny new play by David Ireland, *The Fifth Step*. After years in the 12-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, James becomes a sponsor to newcomer Luka. The pair build a fragile friendship out of their shared experiences. But as Luka approaches step five—the moment of confession—dangerous truths emerge, threatening the trust on which their recoveries depend.



On **17 January 2026** we start the year with a showing of Puccini's most heartrending opera, *La Bohème*, recorded live at the ROH in 2020. The production evokes the vulnerability of youth within the harshness and glamour of the big city, and contrasts the poverty of the bohemians' attic home with the splendour of Paris.



On **22 January 2026** you can catch this fearless, contemporary take on Shakespeare's famous tragedy, with Olivier Award-winner Hiran Abeysekera as Hamlet. Trapped between duty and doubt, surrounded by power and privilege, young Prince Hamlet dares to ask the ultimate question—you know the one. National Theatre Deputy Artistic Director Robert Hastie directs this sharp, stylish and darkly funny reimaging.

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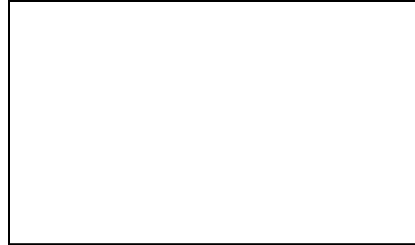
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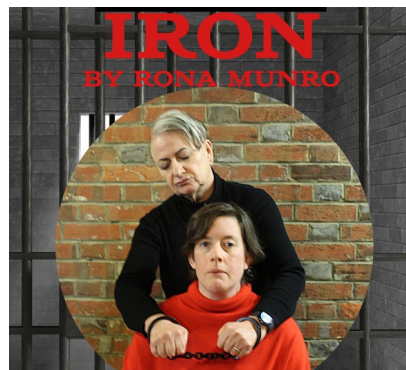
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The Apollo Players' next production



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An intense psychological drama in which a mother and daughter try to break through the barriers of time, memory and punishment which separate them.

Josie is seeing her mother Fay for the first time in a while—she's never walked into a prison before, and she's been putting it off for fifteen years. Fay is serving life for murdering her husband with a kitchen knife. Her daughter needs to find out why she can't remember anything that came before that terrible night, why her own mother would kill her father. Uncovering the memories they share is going to be more perilous than either of them can imagine...