

Panto Season

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As December arrives and the tinsel comes out our thoughts turn to our seasonal traditions as Christmas cheer fills the air, in almost every theatre across the country a that seasonal tradition sparkles with uniquely British institution and tradition of Pantomime.

Accessibility ranks high when it comes to panto with the majority of these glossy festive shows coming with audio descriptions and touch tours. I decided to choose a few of these to sample in theatres around the country and I found myself during December and January in Stoke on Trent indulging in the magic of Aladdin, down south in Crawley soaking up Snow White and the seven dwarfs, in Wolverhampton for Jack and the Beanstalk and taking a break in Southampton for a different interpretation of Snow White and finally experiencing a family festive production of a cult classic- 101 Dalmatians at the Birmingham Rep which was offering a pre-recorded audio description on every performance for the first time.

Below are the reviews of these productions and their access services.

Aladdin at the Regent Theatre Stoke On Trent – Audio described performance – Friday 22nd of December 7pm /touch tour 6pm

Starring Jonathon Wilkes as Aladdin and Christian Patterson as Widow Twankey. The production ran from the 15th of December till 7th January 2018 We jumped on the magic carpet for a polished panto from QDOS that was, very funny and full of some really entertaining performances.

Starting with a touch tour, a slick effective affair led by Describer Anne Hornsby and Technical Manager Kate, tour of 9 patrons explored the sets and scenery after an overview of the production which included some of the many lavish costumes, an array of shiny lamps and a few technical aspects of the production. The touch tour offered an invaluable insight into all the visual aspects of the panto and painted striking images into the minds of all involved, preparing us for what was to unfold on stage.

The description was a fun affair as Anne got into the spirit of panto land and joined in with the banter and even sung along. It was clear and well scripted delivery throughout in an upbeat entertaining manner.

The Regent is a large 1600 capacity modern theatre that is very accessible and as part of the ATG group excels in a warm welcome to all its patrons.

If you want to book your seats and touch tour place for Robin Hood call ATG's dedicated Access booking line: 0800 912 6971

Snow White and the seven dwarfs- The Hawth Theatre Crawley Audio described performance – Thursday 28th of December 2pm

Starring well known TV Personality Stephen Mulhern – Ran from Friday the 8th December to Sunday 7th January 2018.

The Hawth (Part of Parkwood Theatres) offers a lovely theatre experience, the theatre is situated not far from the town centre in its own self-contained site with car parking and a venue that never feels overly commercial. Featuring a team of volunteer describers who cover a wide range of productions throughout the year. The Hawth is another example of a theatre committed to access in every way and their panto was fresh and exciting with a good mix of all the elements that make a panto great, with a laugh out loud dame with an outstanding performance from Michael J Batchelor and 7 witty dwarfs. The passion that went into this was evident all the way through resulting in this being one of my favourite pantos this season.

There was no touch tour but there was a detailed introduction to the show at 1.45 pm from dedicated describers Susan and Caroline. The introduction gave a overview of every visual aspect yet to unfold, created so the listener knows exactly what to expect, explaining the sets, costumes, characters and actors playing them. Caroline narrated act 1 with Susan taking over the describing reins for act 2.

They both delivered a thoughtful informative description that was totally effective and entertaining. The panto was a laugh a minute experience with great songs and a feel good factor and the fact that almost every

performance was sold out was testament to that and speaking to some of the attendees afterwards their joy echoed that.

The Next audio described pantomime performance is Aladdin. If you cannot wait their next performance is – The Case of the Frightened Lady by Edgar Wallace on Saturday the 17th of February at 2.30pm and next up the highly acclaimed Kite Runner on Saturday the 24th of February at 2.30PM.

The Hawth Theatre has a really good access guide and newsletter available which you can find on their website

You can book tickets by calling the Box Office on 01293 553636

The Grand Theatre – Wolverhampton – Jack And The Beanstalk. From December 9th to Sunday 14th January 2018

Starring – Gareth Gates, Lisa Riley and Graham Cole

Wolverhampton loves a good pantomime and QDOS pride themselves on producing high quality ones...

In Jack and the Beanstalk was a great balance of characters this year with Mother Nature played by the ever reliable Lisa Riley, Gareth Gates as Jack who excelled whenever a song was called for, local comedienne Doreen Tipton in her 2nd year, ~~whose dry humour was a breath of fresh air and~~ by far the best Ian Adam's as Dame Trot who was quick witted and had some of the best dame costumes I've ever seen including a cake, a chicken and a genius bagpuss outfit.

The description led by Anne Hornsby of Mind's Eye Descriptions together with Access Officer for the Grand – Sue Howell – On the day a group of 10 went to the stage for the touch tour. Anne gave a breakdown of a lot of the sets, props and costumes used in the show and the group touched and felt everything on offer and asked questions along the way. This all gave extra meaning and understanding to the production for all attending and was an invaluable experience for all.

There were many visual and colourful elements in this panto including lavish costumes that comprised of a whole host of farm animals with excellent details – pigs, sheep and a cow called Daisy, bright sets and props and a towering giant and the audio description by Anne was a good way to illustrate all this as her well-crafted script told you only what was needed and delivered it in a soothing easy to listen to manner.

Everyone who attended loved the show, touch and description and it was well appreciated. The Grand Theatre in Wolverhampton is another venue that goes out of its way to provide the best access it possibly can and their friendly team always give a warm welcome.

Their next pantomime is Sleeping Beauty, audio described on Thursday 3rd January at 2.30pm and Sunday 6th January at 2pm

If you can't wait their next AD performance is– Blood Brothers on Saturday the 21st of April 2018 at 2.30pm

Touch Tour times are still to be confirmed. Please check the website for further details which is at the top of its game when it comes to access

<https://www.grandtheatre.co.uk/access/> and for any questions on access or help with booking tickets email the access Manager Sue Sueh@grandtheatre.co.uk or text on 07973 83 81 89.

101 Dalmatians – from 30th November - January 13th 2018
Pre-recorded audio description available on every performance

Pre-recorded Audio description provided by Thomas Moran

101 Dalmatians at the Birmingham Rep, which for the first time offered pre-recorded audio description at every performance.

The Rep, go out of the way to make all of their productions accessible for all and the theatre itself is a great open area that is suitable for those with disabilities also with such a diverse programme of plays and shows throughout the year there is always something to cater for all tastes

The venue has great catering including bars, café, great restaurant and a shop, it is attached to the new library. Anyone can pick up a copy of their brochure in accessible formats.

101 Dalmatians is such a treasured story loved by millions so it was wonderful to see it brought to life on the REP stage, in interesting and creative ways with an array of fabulous performances, comedy, songs and action sequences.

Their innovative idea to produce a pre-recorded audio description to be available for every performance was inspired and I was pleasantly surprised at how good the quality of description was and how it stayed in sync mostly throughout.

Audio Describer, Thomas Moran was a perfect fit, his style and delivery came in at all the right moments, never sounding intrusive and blending in with the soundtrack of the show. It was an invaluable accompaniment for anyone visually impaired, with the very physical and amazing visual aspects which unfolded on stage.

You collect your headset from the cloakroom or ask a member of staff to do it for you, alternatively, you can access the audio description via a smart phone and headphones by downloading the MobileConnect app and logging on to the MobileConnect wi-fi network.

The Birmingham Reps next seasonal production is The Wizard of Oz, 24th November 2018 to 13th January 2019. Description information contact the Rep directly.

With the next audio described performances being The Winslow Boy on Friday the 2nd of March at 730 pm there is a touch tour beforehand please contact the theatre for times Or visit the website <https://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/>

**Snow White and the seven dwarfs at the Mayflower Theatre
Southampton – From 15th December 2017 till January the 7th 2018**

The Mayflower theatre is a fabulous venue in the heart of the city that has been given a makeover in recent years and has a lovely accessible foyer and auditorium. They pride themselves on making as many of their performances inclusive for all offering a wide range of Touch tours, audio described and signed and caption-performances, the website is easy to use and has details of everything on offer including their access membership scheme and an audio brochure.

Their panto Snow White and the seven dwarfs was a glitzy affair with Strictly star Craig Revel Horwood taking the lead as the wicked Queen supported by the chuckle brothers and dance troupe Flawless. This was tremendous fun for all the family full of song dance, laugh out loud comedy and spectacular special effects and set pieces.

The Touch tour took place at 12pm and it was wonderful to observe some visually impaired children taking part in the group that were led on stage by Will from the Mayflower and given a tour and overview of all the sets, props and costumes, This was an extremely engaging half hour and the party touched and felt the carriage, the queens laboratory, and various props and costumes used in the production giving an informative insight into all the visual aspects, The families involved all enjoyed the experience and it was wonderful to see what a difference it made.

The audio description which is provided by the Mayflower and describer Lesley Kirby began with an introduction at 2.15pm, everyone was issued with a headset which are easy to use and comfortable to wear, It covered all the relevant info needed for when the show starts like a list of characters and who is playing them and what they are wearing and what to expect in the opening sequence etc.

Lesley went on to describe the main panto in a clear light hearted manner and came in and out at all the right moments giving just the right amount of detail punctuating all the visual elements unfolding on stage.

Produced by QDOS this was yet another glossy impressive production with a bit of something for all the audience no matter their tastes and everybody appeared to love it

I was impressed with the effort The Mayflower Theatre go into making their performances accessible for those with disabilities.

Check out the website to find out more about what they offer
<https://www.mayflower.org.uk/your-visit/accessibility/>

The Mayflower's seasonal delights next year is Dick Whittingham AD is on Sat 5 January 2019 at 2pm.

The next audio described performance will be War Horse on Saturday the 9th of June at 2pm – please check with theatre for a touch tour.

Cinderella – The Birmingham Hippodrome – Audio described performance and touch tour Saturday the 20th of January at 2.30 pm with a touch tour that took place at 1pm.

The Hippodrome theatre in the Heart of Birmingham has always been hard to beat when it comes to not only their festive family panto but also accessibility and a warm welcome so when you put those two together you really are in for a treat and I certainly was.

This year headlined by Beverly Knight appearing in panto for the first time was witty and refreshing as the fairy godmother raising the level of musical entertainment to a very high standard, Joined by Danny Mac, Suzanne Shaw, local comedian Matt Slack and the Grumbleweeds

I can't say enough on how much the Hippodrome go out of their way to make theatre as enjoyable and as accessible as possible for those with disabilities and they excel when it comes to touch tours and audio described performances, with a whole team of volunteers well trained and always providing the care and attention needed at every performance. The most important thing though is how much the patrons who attend appreciate and love the performances as a result.

The touch tour began at 1pm led by describer Jonathon Nash as a large party made their way onto the main stage supported every step of the way.

We all got to gain an insight into all the major aspects of the production and got a great overview of what was about to come and a chance to ask questions. Some of the items available to touch and feel were a unicorn's outfit, a giant pumpkin and a horse head costume as well as an array of props and costumes. This was enjoyed by all involved and helped to form pictures in people's minds of what important production elements looked like.

Fellow describer Jo delivered a very detailed introduction 15 minutes before the performance of all the visual aspects of the panto plus gave a rundown of all the actors and actresses, what character they are playing and illustrating in vocal form what the set and stage is like.

The audio description for Cinderella was a shared affair and had Jo delivering it in the first half and Jonathon in the second half

I've seen quite a few of pantomimes at the Hippodrome and you're rarely disappointed and this was certainly the case with Cinderella as it was a fabulous star studded affair for the whole family filled full of music, dance, comedy and romance.

The description was clear, confident and entertaining covering every part of the production and delivering a well prepared script punctuating events as they unfold on stage and complimenting the soundtrack so it never feels intrusive more like a guide in your ear informing and enhancing the production. Headsets are issued by the team before performances.

The hippodrome offers a wide range of touch tours and descriptions throughout the year and makes theatre inclusive and accessible for all the next audio described performance and touch tour will be

Tosca on Thursday the 8th of March at 7.15 pm

Evita on Saturday the 24th of March at 2.30pm

The Play That Goes Wrong on Saturday the 31st of March at 2.30pm

And Wicked on Thursday the 12th of April at 2pm

There will be touch tours available before the performance

But if it is Pantomime you are after then you need to keep your diary clear for Peter Pan, AD on Wednesday 16th Jan 2019 at 2pm with the

touch tour at 12.30pm and Saturday 19th January at 2.30pm with the touch tour from 1pm.

For more information visit the website

<https://www.birminghamhippodrome.com/whats-on/access/>