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MAGAZINE

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WHAT YOU READ WHEN YOU GROW UP



The animal handler

HENRIETTA FIDDIAN-GREEN

Businesswoman Henrietta, 50, provides the horses and helps with the donkeys and sheep in the Wintershall Nativity Play, a huge production set on a private estate in Surrey, involving 50 actors, a choir, musicians – and live animals.

'I've appeared in the Nativity ever since my father Peter started it in 1989. In the past, I've played Mary, but now lead the horses, dressed as a shepherd, a king's attendant or Roman guard – whatever costume's available.

'Having live animals in the Nativity makes it very special. They come with the story. The horses are dirty old things from the paddock, but when you get them a little bit shiny and put outfits on them, they look impressive – everyone gasps when they come in. Children in the audience really connect with the horses and can meet them after the performance. As for the sheep, people just melt when they enter with the shepherds. But the donkey is the real hero. Everyone wants to stroke him.

'Very often, my husband Nic's horse George will do an enormous poo just as he's brought Herod in. All the children's fear of this evil king dissipates somehow. Then I go scrubbing around and my father goes mad because he sees me picking up horse mess with my hands and shovelling it into my costume so that no one will step in it!

'Rehearsals start in November. This year we're doing ten performances over five days. There are moments when half of me is sitting there thinking, "Oh my goodness, why am I doing this?" We've got four children, there's so much else going on around Christmas and things do get stressful.

'But it doesn't matter how many years I've been involved in the Nativity, it always touches me deeply at some point. I might be in the horsebox in the rain, but at that moment I will know it's good – and it's for God. That's what keeps me doing it.'

*Wintershall Nativity, Dec 16-20
(wintershall-estate.com, 01483 892167) ▷*

LET US ENTERTAIN YOU

From a Nativity animal handler to a saxophone-playing judge, a choir mistress to an amateur actor, meet the volunteers who devote their festive break to making us merry

Words **Susannah Hickling**

Photographs **Andrew Hayes-Watkins**

For most of us, this time of year means lots of family get-togethers, numerous parties and slumping in front of the TV after too much sherry.

But across the country, thousands of amateur entertainers give up their time – and even Christmas Day – to perform for everyone from pub customers to charities and churchgoers. The homelessness organisation Crisis alone mobilises more than 400 entertainers to help to make the festive season special for the vulnerable people who come to its centres.

So, who are the musicians, actors magicians, carollers and acrobats who are working, while the rest of us are putting our feet up? And why do they do it?



'Having live animals in the Nativity makes it very special. The donkey is the real hero. Everyone wants to stroke him'

△ The choir mistress

JANICE DEVINE

Music teacher Janice, 51, is choir mistress at St James's Church, Finchampstead in Berkshire.

'The choir's Christmas programme is so full and takes so much preparation that I have to start planning it in July. As well as singing at Midnight Mass and the Christmas morning service in our lovely 12th-century church, in the weeks before, we go to local pubs singing carols and collecting for charity, and perform at social clubs. We also take a leading role in the Nine Lessons and Carols festival in the chapel of nearby Wellington College public school.

'There's quite a lot of pressure when you stand up to conduct an amateur choir with 35 members – aged seven to 70-plus. I worry that

one of them might miss an entry somewhere – not that they ever do. But when I first led them at the Nine Lessons performance a couple of years ago, which is our most important annual event, with a big audience, at the point where I was supposed to indicate to them to stand and sing, I froze and everyone just sat there waiting. In the end, someone had to whisper to me, "We need to get up!"

'Still, the choir is very enthusiastic, always strives to perform to the highest standards and the ten child members get totally excited in the run-up to Christmas. There is a fantastic atmosphere at events and

when our soloist starts singing *Once in Royal David's City*, it invariably sends shivers down my spine. I've always been a churchgoer and choral music, with its composers from the baroque period onwards, evokes such a sense of the Church of England's history. It's also joyful and makes everyone happy.

'On Christmas Day itself, my husband Colum and three children all come to church. Indeed, my 18-year-old daughter Emily sings in the choir too. After the service, Colum cooks Christmas lunch and as we finally sit down to eat, I do think, "Phew, thank goodness that's all over... for another year!"'

'I was supposed to indicate to them to stand and sing, but I froze – and everyone sat there waiting'



HAIR AND MAKE-UP SAFFRON POWELL, WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO WINTERSHALL ESTATE

‘We’re keeping a centuries-old tradition alive and when the audience are rolling about laughing, there’s a real feel-good factor’



The Hoodener

DAVID GRAY

Monumental mason David, 68, has spent almost every Christmas since 1967 performing in a Hoodening play – a folk celebration of rural life that goes back to at least the 18th century – in and around the village of St Nicholas-at-Wade, Kent.

‘I was very shy when I was young and didn’t do very much at all, let

alone get up and act. But I had a friend who was one of the Hoodeners and one day he knocked on my door, told me that they were short of players and asked if I would join them as a favour. I couldn’t have stood in front of people and talked as myself, but I somehow agreed to take part and, when I started performing, I felt this sudden confidence. It was just

brilliant and, though that was 50 years ago, I’ve been a Hoodener ever since.

‘There are six of us in the play – which has a loose traditional plot that changes every year to incorporate topical jokes and local references – taking roles with names such as the Waggoner and Sam the farm labourer. I play Mollie, a man in women’s clothes, who’s the first to come in, shouting, “The Hoodeners are here!” before brushing the floor with a broom to sweep away the evil spirits and clear a space for the performance.

‘We tour local pubs, private houses, community centres and care homes in the run-up to Christmas, and what with rehearsing and one of us writing a script (which we all then change), the play takes time. It’s brilliant to know, though, that we’re keeping a centuries-old tradition alive and when the audience are rolling about laughing, there’s a real feel-good factor. We’re not very professional and get as many laughs from being prompted as we do from the play itself. It’s so terrible, it’s funny.

‘Since 1967, the only time I haven’t played Mollie was when my son Simon was born – but even then I didn’t miss the show. My wife Susan had a few problems during the birth, so the nurses would only let me see her for ten minutes and my family were telling me I might as well go Hoodening. So I did! When I got there, my nephew, who’d stood in for me, was doing such a good job that I let him carry on and watched.

‘My wife tells this story differently. She says I came in to the ward, said, “Gotta go – I’m off Hoodening!” and left. But she was heavily sedated, which obviously affected her memory. Anyway, Hoodening hasn’t done our family any harm – Simon is now 26 and takes the role of the Boy in the play, while my wife does all the driving. We do have to drink!’

Find out more at hoodening.org.uk ▶



‘It feels like a good way to express what Christmas is all about – giving people something, alleviating their suffering’

entertainment programme and applied on behalf of my group.

‘5 4 Sax has been performing for Crisis for three years and, while we all spend time with our families over the festive season, our involvement feels like a good way to express what Christmas is all about – giving people something, alleviating their suffering.

‘We go to about three different centres in London over two or three days at Christmas, performing a variety of arrangements, from light classical works to jazz numbers and rock, such as Van Morrison’s *Moondance*. The old pop tunes seem to go down best. People are often eating or playing games while we’re on, but we’ve had them singing along to *Bohemian Rhapsody* and we get lots of requests. One rather over-enthusiastic man sang along for most of our performance, all the while hanging on to the arm of one of our band members while she was trying to play.

‘One of our performances was in a secret shelter for victims of domestic violence. I thought the women might be fearful of seeing men in such a place – even though there are only two of us in the quintet. In fact, it was the opposite. It may have been just for themselves or for each other, but they had really dressed up and put on make-up. They danced too; one just didn’t stop. The joy we saw in her is a very special Christmas memory.

‘Whenever you play music, it’s a buzz, and when someone says, “That was really nice”, then you know you’ve made at least one person’s day somewhat better. At Crisis, no one’s made to watch our performance – if they don’t like it, they can go off to another part of the building – so if people are there, sitting, listening and enjoying it, that’s very rewarding.’ ♦

To volunteer or make a donation, visit crisis.org.uk or call 0300 636 1967

◁ The saxophonist

IAN BAKER

District judge Ian, 68, is a member of the saxophone quintet 5 4 Sax, which entertains homeless people at centres in London run by the charity Crisis.

‘It’s more than four decades since I became part of the criminal justice system – before being on the bench I was a criminal defence solicitor – so I’ve seen a lot of the sad side of life. Homelessness is a significant element

of that. You haven’t got anywhere to lay your head at night, so you can’t get a job, you can’t get benefits... you can’t get a whole lot of things. It makes you very vulnerable, especially in winter.

‘I first worked as a volunteer for Crisis when it began offering Christmas dinner to homeless people in the early Seventies. Then, after a 40-year gap, I saw an advertisement asking for performers to be part of its