

"OUR COUNTRY'S  
GOOD" SPECIAL

# NOISES OFF

## OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD



APS has a policy of presenting a balanced, varied and stimulating programme over the year. This play was picked for its strong themes, unique setting and dramatic impact. As the excellent programme informed us, in 1787 the First

Fleet transported 751 prisoners convicted of crimes we now regard as petty, with 252 marines to guard them, from Portsmouth to Sydney Cove in New South Wales. The landing of this group in January 1788 after an 8

month voyage was the very beginning of the English colonisation of Australia. The remoteness of the situation in an alien land only sparsely populated by indigenous tribes highlighted and questioned the English societal values, attitudes and norms of the incomers, particularly compliance with the law, the value of harsh punishment as retribution or an example to others, and whether criminal tendencies are innate or prompted by circumstances. The play has several layers: part history, based on facts and real people; part philosophical debate on issues of crime and punishment (still relevant today); part an uplifting tale of redemption, recovery and self-improvement; part reflection on the vital role of theatre in a civilised society and what 'civilisation' actually means.

The occasional disembodied (but authentic) voice of a puzzled tribesman musing on the meaning of this 'dream' of a 'giant canoe' and the antics of its occupants underlines their geographical isolation and the arbitrariness of their ethical system. All this was clearly expounded, giving us plenty to think about.

The impact of the production was immediate on entering the theatre: on the stage, a huge, faded, salt-stained Union Flag of the period; beneath it, a huddle of convicts, grubby, ragged and downtrodden; to one side a mound of antipodean vegetation, complete with venomous-looking wildlife; to the other side part of a ship and its rigging. Then you see that the auditorium walls have been covered to create an 18<sup>th</sup> century ambience. When the flag is removed we have a realistic vista of an empty beach and rocky cove.



The play begins with the convicts bemoaning their desperate physical, sexual and emotional plight through speech and song. Then one is flogged – this was ingeniously presented in a spotlit freeze-frame after the first lash to spare us some of the savagery. The marines discuss the criminals' humanity, or lack of it, as their individual characters perceive it. At the instigation of a young, idealistic officer, and in the face of hostility from several of the officers, the Governor agrees to the convicts putting on a play to give them a chance to improve themselves through the

civilizing power of theatre. Many of them seize the opportunity, and we see that their demeanour and sense of self-worth and community do indeed grow as a result. Most actors played two parts as intended by the writer: one a marine, the other a convict, which served to underline the crucial impact of circumstances on outcomes in life. Boundaries between Government and



convicts gradually become blurred; they are all in this inhospitable environment together.

The cast relished their lines, with some startling larger-than-life characterisation. The period music blended the whole together, with solo folk songs especially poignant. The multitude of scene and costume changes, an epic project in itself, was achieved smoothly and efficiently. The props and costumes, with a small red and white army of dazzling military uniforms made by Jane McKenna and convicts' tatters made with the help of Annie Price, were simply phenomenal.

It is invidious to pick out individual cast members for



praise in such a strong and committed ensemble, but the following should be mentioned:

Patrick Knox's Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip, was genial, wise, learned and compassionate, with the crucial belief in the possibility of human betterment.

Sam Frost was the idealist Lt Ralph Clark, whose belief in turn of the intrinsic worth of the convicts was clear, kindly and unwavering.

Charlotte Berry's Mary Brenham evolved from meekness to confidence.

Maureen Nethercott's Liz Morden was coarse and combative.

Andrew Holt portrayed the hard-nosed Major Ross with an impeccable Scots accent, then bafflingly reappeared in a trice as the convict hangman Ketch, a totally different persona - with a convincing Irish accent!



(Credit to the voice coaching of Jilly Hudson.)

The play was not an easy evening's light entertainment: it confronted moral, political and historical issues head on. Passion, despair, deprivation, injustice, brutality, philosophical argument – they were all there. But as one character says: *“People who can't pay attention should not go to the theatre”* – and our audience was engrossed. Another character: *“A play should make you understand something new. If it tells you what you already know, you leave it as ignorant as you went in.”* Impossible not to have some of our fundamental attitudes re-examined while watching this play – one of the functions of theatre.

The magnitude of the themes and the complexities of the staging made this a real challenge to put on, especially in such a small space. APS is fortunate to have in Jane someone with the willingness to tackle such a project and the expertise and application to see it through to success. It was an exceptional achievement. The whole cast and crew under her leadership deserve the highest praise.

Our tiny Studio Theatre has the advantage of intimate interaction between cast and audience but the increasing difficulty of accommodating all those who would like to



attend. This show was almost sold out on the first day of ticket sales, such is the reputation and popularity of our productions, and the theatre was packed for every performance. Book early to avoid disappointment!

**Graham Smith**

Footnote: Local theatre critic Gay Pirrie-Weir (who is not always easy to please), stated in her review:

*Much as I hate the cliché “next level”, there is no doubt that this production has taken the already-excellent APS to a new tier.*

Read the full review at [www.theftr.co.uk/our-countrys-good-sherborne-studio-theatre/](http://www.theftr.co.uk/our-countrys-good-sherborne-studio-theatre/)



## NEW MEMBERS

The following new members have joined APS since the last edition of *Noises Off*. We are delighted to welcome you, and hope that you will have a long and productive association with the Players.

**Kim Macdonald  
Carolyn Corlett  
Lindsey Hunt  
Rachel Butcher  
Sarah Probert  
Alex Scrivenor  
Richard Gaunt**

**NEARLY 100!** The total membership now stands at 99, higher than it has been for a considerable time. How good it would be to reach 100! What about persuading some of your friends or loved ones to join? Or if you are a patron but not a member - isn't it time you joined us? Just go to [aps-sherborne.co.uk/join-us.html](http://aps-sherborne.co.uk/join-us.html) Most of our members are not actors, but folk who want to support the APS and keep in touch with our activities.

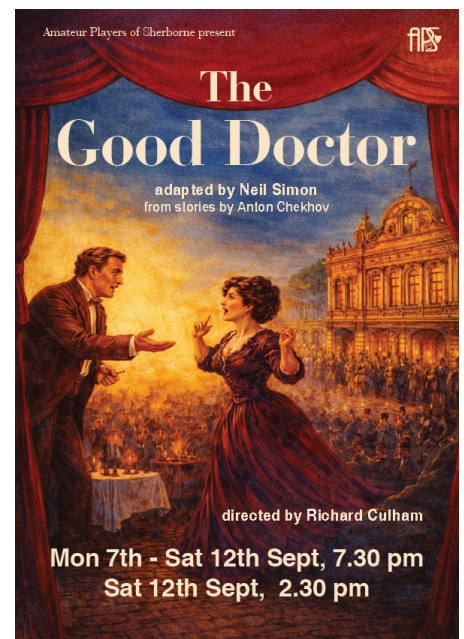
## 100 CLUB

As we regularly report, the 100 Club exists to give vital support to our fund-raising efforts on behalf of the Theatre, and in its short existence we have already raised over £9000. This has enabled us to complete various projects - new auditorium seating, new floor and insulation, improvements to the bar area, new doors, installation of a hearing loop and wifi - and plenty more too. Our thoughts are now turning towards improving and updating our stage lighting - and we hope to realise this dream in the not too distant future, thanks largely to the 100 Club. But there is plenty of room for new members, and more than a half of the total of APS members have not yet joined up - please do so as soon as you can. However, you do not have to be an APS member to join the 100 Club. Please see "Support Us" on the APS website, or email [sst100club@gmail.com](mailto:sst100club@gmail.com) in order to join.

The most recent draw took place on June 13th, and the lucky winner took home £49.20. Next time this could be you!

The next draw will take place on August 8th 2026.

## NEXT PRODUCTION



This autumn APS invites you into the wonderfully human world of **The Good Doctor** by Neil Simon, inspired by the short stories of Anton Chekhov. Set against the backdrop of an atmospheric Russian salon, our production celebrates the absurdities, frustrations and joys of everyday life with warmth, wit and humanity. Each scene offers a fresh glimpse into Chekhov's world, where the smallest mishap can become a major catastrophe and the simplest encounter can reveal unexpected depths. Part narrator, part observer and part doctor of the human condition, The Writer introduces us

to a gallery of unforgettable characters: a civil servant undone by a sneeze, a governess whose honesty is tested, an over-confident amateur surgeon, an ambitious young actress desperate to impress her hero, two elderly men locked in a lifetime of pride, and an older couple haunted by regret and opportunities missed.

Funny, touching and quietly profound, the play reminds us that behind every awkward silence, every foolish decision and every grand declaration lies something instantly recognisable – ourselves.

Directed by Richard Culham, this ensemble production celebrates the warmth, wit and compassion that link Chekhov and Neil Simon across a century. With a talented cast bringing ten beautifully observed scenes to life, audiences can expect laughter, moments of tenderness and more than a few opportunities to recognise their own foibles.

The initial read-through and subsequent audition processes were exceptionally well attended - a result, we feel sure, of our ever-growing

popularity and reputation for outstanding shows. The cast has been finalised, rehearsals are under way, and we are especially pleased to welcome no fewer than four APS first-timers, and two “returners”. Each cast member will play more than one role, in more than one story. The cast comprises:

Rachel Butcher  
 Samatha Elgar  
 Richard Gaunt  
 Adrian Harding  
 Richard Jones  
 George Lipop  
 Sally Matthews  
 Sarah Probert  
 Alex Scrivenor  
 Cameron Thrower  
 Martin Williams

Join us for an evening of humanity, humour and heart. Performances are, as always, at the Sherborne Studio Theatre at 7.30pm, Monday September 7th - Saturday September 12th, plus 2.30pm on the Saturday. Tickets will go on sale on July 27th, and APS members will be sent ticketing details in advance. *(Please note, with apologies, that box office telephone support will not be available on July 27th between approx 11.00am and 5.30pm.)*

The Good Doctor will see you now...

## A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

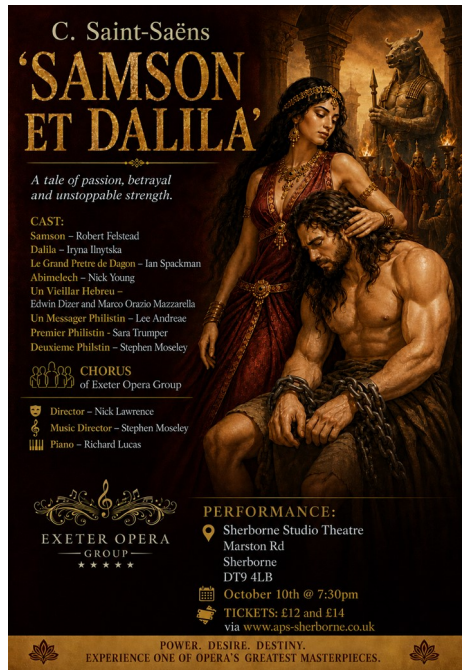
We welcome, for one performance only, Exeter Opera Group, performing Camille Saint-Saëns's opera *Samson et Dalila*. Please note this is a change from the previously-advertised *Così Fan Tutte*.

The opera tells the biblical tale of Samson, the leader of the oppressed Hebrews, who falls in (forbidden) love with Dalila (known in English as Delilah), a Philistine woman. Samson possesses superhuman strength, but his passion for Delilah leads to his downfall. Shorn of his hair and his power, he prays to God in despair. His powers are restored and he brings destruction down upon the hedonistic Philistines.

Although originally composed as an oratorio, its dramatic story, with its themes of love versus duty and hedonism versus spirituality, not to mention its stunning music, destined it for the operatic stage. The opera is

especially noted for Dalila's famous aria, 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix'.

Exeter Opera Group will perform the opera adapted for the small stage in the original French, with linking narration in English. The cast features Robert Felstead (tenor), and the noted Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Irina Ilnytska.



As this is a single performance, tickets are certain to be in huge demand. Priority will be given to APS members, and details of ticketing arrangements will be published in due course. The price of tickets will be the same as for APS shows.

The performance will take place at the Sherborne Studio Theatre at 7.30pm on Saturday October 10th.

## FUTURE PLANS

Following *The Good Doctor* in September, the following productions are in the pipeline:

December 2026  
*God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza. Directed by Bev Taylor-Wade

March 2027  
*The Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni. Directed by Martin Williams

June 2027  
*The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Graham Smith

Details of the usual processes of read-through, auditions and rehearsals will be published in due course.

## MONTHLY SOCIALS

As (we hope) you know, the theatre is open on the last Friday of every month (unless very close to a production week), and all APS members are invited to come along, to mingle and chat, and take advantage of

the best-value bar in Sherborne!

Non-members are also welcome, and indeed we have been joined by several people recently who then signed up, and even played crucial supporting roles in the latest show.

If you are one of our (nearly) 100 members who only comes along to performances, why not turn up and meet some more of us? The next date is June 26th, then July 31st. Doors open at 7.00pm.

See you there!