

FROM DEAD RINGERS TO RISING STARS

Bath Comedy Festival proves why it's a right laugh!

By John Mather

Now firmly established as one of Bath's liveliest cultural fixtures, Bath Comedy Festival is back with more than 100 shows and well over 300 performances, promising four weeks of stand-up, sketch, improv and gloriously daft goings-on in venues across the city.

Running 21 March – 19 April, it's a heavyweight line-up that underlines Bath Comedy's ambition and pulling power. At the top of the bill are some major names at Bath Forum, the city's biggest venue. Here, audiences can expect razor-sharp impressions from *Dead Ringers*, quick-fire wit from Paul Merton & Suki Webster, classic characters and new material from comedy legend Harry Enfield, and the deliciously eccentric stylings of Troy Hawke.

"This year's festival line-up is an impressive mixture of well-known comedy stalwarts and rising stars," says festival director Nick Steel, who shares his Bath Lives over on page 114.

But big rooms are only half the story. One of the festival's great strengths is the way it champions more intimate spaces, giving audiences a chance to get up close and personal with the performers. Chief among these is the much-loved upstairs room at the Ring O' Bells in Widcombe, a long-time festival favourite. Here, the programme spans the full comedy spectrum: relative newcomers and award-winning rising stars like Madeleine Brettingham and Kev Mud share billing with seasoned circuit heroes Phil Nichol, Alistair Barrie, Rosie Holt and Alan Francis.

The Ring O' Bells schedule kicks off in style on 1 April with the fabulous Terry Alderton & Friends, which forms part of the newly formed Live Comedy Day, set up by the Live Comedy Association and supported by BBC Radio 4. It's a fitting launch for what promises to be one of the festival's

buzziest venues.

Spotlighting emerging talent has always been central to Bath Comedy's ethos, and the festival's New Act Competition is now an established proving ground for the next generation of stand-ups. Throughout the festival, heats of this esteemed competition run at The Nowhere Tavern, with hopefuls from around the country battling it out for a place in the Grand Final at The Old Theatre Royal.

For audiences, it's a chance to say they saw tomorrow's stars first.

Across the city, a cluster of regular and new venue partners help create a festival feel that stretches far beyond the main stages. Long-time collaborator the Rondo Theatre hosts a carefully curated selection of shows, while The Fez Comedy Club presents a range of solo performances at The Old Theatre Royal, giving comics space to stretch out and experiment. New on the Bath scene,

The Jesters Comedy Club offers what Nick Steel describes as a "constant underground comedy club backdrop", adding late-night energy and an authentic club atmosphere to the programme.

Ensuring that comedy in Bath remains accessible is another key priority. As Nick puts it, "We encourage new partnerships and collaborations, both between arts organisations and with businesses. To this end we

continue to devise more ways to work together on mutually beneficial ideas, to ensure Bath Comedy Festival's future and to keep bringing laughter to Bath." That spirit of openness filters through the programming too, with a range of affordable 'pay what you feel' gigs and open mic nights designed to welcome both hardcore comedy fans and curious first-timers.

Of course, Bath Comedy Festival wouldn't be quite the same without its most gloriously bonkers tradition: The Wine Arts Trail (T.W.A.T.). This flagship bus tour is part sightseeing trip, part performance art and part moving party. "Each year we reveal more secret Bath through the auspices of The Wine Arts Trail," explains Nick. "Myself and co-producer Ralph have a talent for spotting unknown 'secret corners' and animating them with the help of humour and lashings of vino. A cheeky red in a cheese factory? A gurning competition in an ancient village hall? The ghost of Tommy Cooper at a University theatre? 16 years of "I never knew this existed!"...and this year's route is particularly intriguing."

Nick is also keen to stress that the spring festival is just one part of a much bigger picture.

"Individuals can join the Friends of the Festival scheme to be a part of our exciting journey, gain tangible benefits and help sustain the Festival's continuing evolution and development." ■

For more: www.bathcomedy.com

"The programme spans the full comedy spectrum"



Nick Steel is the festival organiser



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Russell Hicks performs at the Rondo on 17 April; Harry Enfield celebrates 40 years of comedy at The Forum on 30 March; The Forum hosts Paul Merton and Suki Webster improv show on 28 March; *The Dead Ringers* team Jon Culshaw, Jan Ravens, Lewis MacLeod and Duncan Wisbey take their 25th anniversary tour to The Forum on 31 March; The Rondo plays host to Hal Cruttenden on 11 April; Jessica Fostekew is bringing her new comedy show to the Rondo 9 April; *The Britpop Hour* featuring Marc Burrows performs at the Rondo on 3 April; See Rosie Holt 8 April at Widcombe's Ring O'Bells; Troy Hawke's *Never Stop, Never Change!* show is at The Forum 11 April; on 2 April Stevie Martin brings her critically acclaimed live show, *Clout* to the Rondo





“I used to be called ‘Mr Widcombe’. Surely that should be ‘Lord’ now?”

Being a musician I started promoting bands but after meeting an Edinburgh-based comedy producer and helping out at the Fringe for several years in the early noughties, I’d made friends with dozens of burgeoning comedians (many of whom have now gone on to be household names), so I started bringing them here to headline cabaret shows I was presenting at the old Widcombe Social Club.

NICK STEEL

Bath Comedy Festival’s impresario on school bullies, the world of websites, and the joy of Widcombe

Nick Steel, originally from Yorkshire and now a long-time resident of Widcombe, is a promoter and producer of music and live comedy. This includes the Bath Comedy Festival, which returns from 21 March to 19 April for an impressive 18th year (see page 20 for more). He has also worked in IT covering web design and networks, and as a bar manager at Widcombe Social Club and The Ram.

I grew up at the foot of Ilkley Moor in Yorkshire, moving to Bath in 1997 to help one of my brothers set up his new business. I fell in love with Bath, and it became my home almost immediately – within two weeks of arriving, I was playing in a band at the Hat & Feather.

I am the youngest of four brothers, and am lucky to have been given a great head start by my inspirational mother (don’t

tell her that, she’s probably reading this!). My mother was the longest standing bookseller in the UK, retiring at the age of 90. At 95 now, she joins a weekly Zoom call with us four brothers, and the occasional offspring thereof.

My scout troop were top of their field, and I learned a lot from camping trips, staying on later in life to be Quartermaster at the big annual summer camps.

I was bullied terribly for seemingly being ‘posh’, which in Ilkley was simply not having a thick Yorkshire accent. At grammar school in Skipton I made sure to somehow every year wriggle out of games so that I didn’t exist on those days, but remained one year ahead of my age until I left after A-levels. Bullies made sure I never had many books or glasses, so the physics lab assistant let me rummage through the laboratory back room for lenses of the right dioptries so I could see the blackboard.

I took a year of microelectronics and software engineering at Newcastle University then swapped to computer science in the second year, but found neither were as glamorous as I’d been led to believe from watching Jon Pertwee as *Doctor Who* fiddling with his dematerialisation circuit in a laboratory at UNIT HQ!

I left Newcastle after a year and did a year at Leeds College of Music. Strangely, my life ended up involving a mixture of computers and music, so I guess that kind of worked out.

I really enjoyed making websites for a while – escaping into a world overnight where code obeyed its own rules, and no one was around to disturb one’s happiness, fulfilled a bit of my old scientific yearning.

The Bath Comedy Festival was founded in 2008 by Alex Timms, and I helped programme the professional comedy end for the first two festivals. In 2010 I took over the whole thing and have grown it from a weekend to a fully-fledged, month-long festival over the last 16 years.

For a while I was a frequent recipe winner in *‘Take A Break: My Favourite Recipes’* magazine, including the £500 star recipe of the month prize.

I can be a bit of a hoarder. I used to have 35 keyboards at the height of my collection, a sight some wag once likened to “Rick Wakeman’s car boot sale”, and though I’ve relinquished myself of most, I still hang on to some of my babies, including my first ever Hammond Organ and Leslie speaker.

I’m very proud of Widcombe Rising, the series of street parties I organised between 2005-2012 with Ralph Oswick (then of Natural Theatre fame) – we helped reclaim Widcombe’s village street by putting on a veritable mini Glastonbury all in one day, for thousands of people.

I’ve been in the heart of Widcombe for 28 years now, and have been privileged to be part and parcel of most of the interesting goings on here – the *Chronicle* used to call me ‘Mr Widcombe’. Surely that should be ‘Lord’ now? ■

For more: www.bathcomedy.com