

SINODUN PLAYERS' CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2026

I would like to take a moment to remember those who have sadly passed away this year.

We recently lost John Critchley, who was for many years one of our volunteer cinema projectionists. Back in April we lost Jose Wood, a much-loved and long-standing SP member whom many of us had the privilege of knowing and working with. We were also saddened to hear of the passing of Pete Heppelthwaite in June. Pete was one of our original youth members back in the early 1980s and went on to carve out a successful career in the professional theatrical world.

SP Productions

We have had another fantastic, and particularly busy, year meeting our charitable objectives by offering a wide variety of drama and entertainment.

Recapping on our SP productions since our last AGM, we completed a successful 2025 season with *The Father* by Florian Zeller, directed by Gloria Wright. This powerful production tackled the harrowing and heartbreaking challenges of dementia. Rebecca Cleverley received the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA) Sybil Conway District Award for Best Female Character, while Chris Bertrand was awarded the NODA Charles Sumner Regional Award for Best Male Character. Gloria also had the excellent idea of ending each evening with a Q&A session, inviting dementia care professionals to join us. This gave audience members an opportunity to share their own experiences, as well as access to professional advice.

Sinodun Players were also awarded the NODA London Flame Award in recognition of a “brave and varied programming” and “inspirational contribution to the pursuit of excellence in theatre”. This award recognised all the productions staged throughout 2025/26 but with particular mention for two of our productions namely *The Father*, for the outstanding performances by Chris and Rebecca and for bringing the subject of dementia out into the open and for our September 2025 studio production, *The Inheritance* by Miguel Falabella, directed and adapted by Len Pannett, for its suitability to our intimate John Warburton Studio space and the notable quality of the ensemble acting.

Our pantomime this year was *Hansel & Gretel*, written by our very own Marilyn Johnstone and directed by yours truly. The Oxford Drama Network (ODN) Winter Festival awarded us runner-up in the Best Overall Pantomime category, while Peter Smithson and Abi Thornton were awarded Best Comedy Act. We also received the NODA “It’s Behind You” District Award for Best Production of a Traditional Pantomime.

Our 2026 season of drama kicked off with our early spring production, *The Unfriend*, a comedy by Steven Moffat, directed by Ric Harley. Audiences were delighted and thoroughly entertained by the razor-sharp dialogue and rapid-fire wit. This production also provided an acting opportunity for one of our young Encore students Ellie Gerrard.

Late spring brought us *Murder, Margaret and Me* by Phillip Meeks, directed by Simon Tavener. This production was staged in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the death of Agatha Christie and gave us a wonderful insight into the developing and lasting friendship between Agatha Christie and Margaret Rutherford, as Margaret took on the role of Agatha's beloved Miss Marple.

This year, Encore delighted us with *Around the Stage in Five Plays*, another devised piece directed by Encore Principal Diana Christie and written by Diana and Encore student Abie Walton. This was a fantastic collaborative achievement by our youth drama group, particularly under the very difficult conditions we experienced during this year's heatwave. I would like to thank and applaud Diana for all the encouragement and support she gives to these young adults. Not only does she run regular weekly classes, but she also organises holiday workshops throughout the year. Diana and these young students are truly an asset to our membership.

Our summer production, *Underdog: The Other, Other Brontë* by Sarah Gordon and directed by Dorothy Hirsch, explored the sibling rivalries, jealousies and power dynamics behind the famous Brontë literary family. Despite this production also being hindered by the extreme heat, audiences were thoroughly entertained by this modern mash-up style, its laugh-out-loud moments and its fourth-wall breaks.

To finish off our 2026 season, we have our two autumn productions to look forward to: *The Sewing Group* by E. V. Crowe, directed by Sue Forward, a superbly dark and surreal contemporary drama and *Immaculate* by Oliver Lansley, directed by Julie Utley an irreverently funny, laugh-out-loud black comedy.

Death Knock, an original play written by Mike Rowbottom, represented the SPs in this year's Drama Festival, performing at Henley, Abingdon and Wallingford. I would like to thank all of the cast, crew and production team who were involved with the play, as well as all the volunteer members who helped to host our own festival, which is always a favourite amongst the other local amateur dramatic societies.

Not only do we have a pool of skilled and talented directors and cast members, but we are also fortunate to have a huge and supportive network of members and volunteers who make up the various other essential departments — wardrobe, workshop, technical, backstage and marketing. Thank you to everyone who has contributed their time, energy and commitment to all of the past year's productions.

Touring Shows and Community Events

The Corn Exchange is also a very popular venue for touring live shows and tribute bands. This past year we have welcomed *Bootleg Shadows*, *Pulse Pink Floyd Tribute*, *Jazz Diva Duo*, *Wallingford Acoustic Ballroom*, *Posting Letters to the Moon*, *The Cavern Beatles* and *Alter Eagles*. Thank you to my fellow incoming Show Committee members, Mike Baker, Abi Thornton, Bruce Williams and John Pinniger for helping to organise and schedule these additional events in our calendar.

We continue to involve ourselves in and support local community music events such as *Wallingford Winter Blues and Jazz* and *Bunkfest*. All of these events require a tremendous amount of planning and preparation, so I would particularly like to thank Mike Baker and the small teams of technical wizards and stage managers who support and welcome these touring groups.

Fundraising, Workshop and Social Events

Thank you to Jean Simmons, who has worked hard behind the scenes raising funds for wardrobe by hiring out costumes to other theatre groups and individuals. Greg Ryder has also been beaver away in the workshop, creating props for community events such as Wallingford Carnival and Wallingford Fireworks.

Julie Utley continues to organise workshops, social events and fundraising activities. We put on our usual Christmas *Punchbowl* evening, full of festive fun and seasonal joy, with all proceeds donated to Crisis and the Wallingford Food Bank.

We ran a very popular vocal workshop, where participants learned about projection and articulation and explored Shakespearean text. Abi Thornton organised a fun and active combat workshop, and Julie's recent wine-tasting fundraising evening held in the John Warburton Room was very well attended and a lot of fun.

The SP Members and Volunteers

Thank you to the CEWLtd Board of Directors and the Health and Safety Committee for taking care of the day-to-day running and maintenance of the theatre so efficiently. The upkeep of our wonderful theatre takes a huge amount of work and commitment. The impending stonework repairs and external lighting project are no exception, so I thank everyone involved for their time and commitment.

I would like to thank the Trustees for their guidance and efficiency in making sure that we operate in line with our constitution and fulfil our charitable objectives. I would particularly like to thank Minaz Beddall, our Financial Trustee, for all the support she has given to Anne Stammers and myself as we settle into our new accounting procedures.

I would like to extend my thanks to all our members and volunteers who give up their time to house-manage, run and maintain the bar and box office, usher, serve coffee, bake cakes, operate the cinema, organise monthly rotas and deliver and distribute posters. Thank you to Gerry Bolton for her continuing work sorting, organising and digitising our archives, and together with Barbara Wood, for keeping on top of the smooth running of the box office. Thank you also to Heather Trevis for her sterling work as our CX Times editor.

I acknowledge my fellow SPC members — Anne Stammers, Dorothy Hirsch, Len Pannett, Sarah Enticknap, Poppy Jackson, Julie Utley, Sam Rhodes, Abi Thornton, Val Kent and Sandy Milton — and thank them all for their valuable input and continued support.

Looking Ahead

I would like to conclude by saying how proud I am to be part of this long-established, fully voluntary organisation that serves its community so successfully. Since the birth of the SPs back in 1948 things have naturally evolved and we have all had to embrace many changes: different ways of working, the implementation of new policies and considerations about how we should all strive to work together harmoniously. This is not always easy in an environment such as ours where everyone is working to stressful deadlines while balancing family life and outside occupations.

We all need to continue to be mindful of how we treat one another and how we speak to one another. We need to listen to and support each other with kindness, fairness and respect. Every one of us should feel that our efforts and contributions are valued and relevant. So, let us collectively continue to embrace, nurture and respect the wealth of talent that we are so lucky to have within our membership.

Thank you.

Caroline Malnick
SP Chair