

Cassie & Selwyn Tillet

The Vicarage · 10 Crome Road · Norwich · NR3 4RQ

07802 475110 (Cassie) · 07432 684547 (Selwyn)

Please note: personal landline has been discontinued!

cassie@tillett.org.uk · selwyn@tillett.org.uk

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Dearest friends

Ups and downs, fears and joys, laughter and tears, starting and stopping, delights and frustrations, achievements and failures... We have, as the song has it, "got through all of last year, and we're here".

We shared **Christmas 2020** with our lovely 'House Elf' – as Sammy-Jo has become known, due to her domestic skills, delicious baking and generally being a delightful house guest since she came to live with us in October 2020. We communicated with the family by Zoom (didn't we come to hate that word, while being hugely grateful that the option was there?) and sent our loving wishes across the wifi waves.



Local theatre groups managed to provide imaginative entertainments online, too. At the Barn, we were so pleased with the success of 'Between You and Me' – a collection of extracts from published plays on Zoom, performed by a large group of our talented colleagues. (The Tilletts' main contribution was a snatch of Charles and Elvira from 'Blithe Spirit'...) Sabrina Poole directed the very talented Sarah Jenkins in a one-woman performance of 'Original Death Rabbit' – a reflection on social media that brought shock and hilarity in equal measure.

We continued our Facebook 'Song of the Day' project until February, providing our friends with a second batch of 100 songs, concluding with a multi-screen version of '**The Roses of Success**' on Shrove Tuesday ("from the ashes of disaster" – geddit?!) – twelve singers, with clarinet and piano, assembled with technical genius by our friend Martin. A real joy to share the virtual stage with so many talented people – twenty of them across the 200 performances.



In April, the restrictions started to ease, and some kind of normality returned – albeit still fraught with apprehension and concern. Church services continued to alternate between Zoom and reality until July, when we moved back to entirely ‘real’ services (albeit with major social distancing measures and other precautions in place).



We were able to return to our beloved Sewell Barn Theatre – again, with reduced audience sizes and other measures - and Cassie was involved in directing our first two post-COVID shows, with Selwyn as stage manager. In June, Cassie and Clare co-directed ‘Put Your Shorts On’ – a selection of ten short pieces written by local authors, originally presented as Zoom evenings, and now performed for real by two talented groups of four actors. This was a tremendously enjoyable and inspiring venture, giving the authors – in many cases – the first chance to see their writing brought to life. We then followed that with a production of Noel Coward’s ‘**Private Lives**’, which Cassie directed; this was a roaring success, with a truly magnificent cast of five, plus tech, stage management and stage design, all of whom rose to the challenges perfectly (just five weeks between casting and first performance) and who were deservedly praised highly for a fabulous show. We were so proud of them all!

Since then, Clare and Cassie have created the 2021/22 season of seven productions; we’ve successfully presented two shows without mishap, the third is in rehearsal and the fourth about to be cast. We can only work on the assumption that shows won’t be prevented by pandemic circumstances – and if the worst happens, we’ll do them another time!

We’ve even managed some performing live – as well as the Song of the Day project on-screen. Cassie was delighted to take part in July in a **Shakespeare anthology** with several of her talented local friends, as well as an extraordinarily mature young lady called Cleo who (at just eight years old) presented both Juliet and Rosalind with all the aplomb of an actress many times her age!

We were thrilled to provide part of the entertainment for the Maddermarket’s 100th birthday party in September, along with our friend Gill. Finally, a ‘real’ fundraising church event was a lovely poetry-prose-and-music evening for Remembrance, themed on the two world wars, where we were joined by Margaret, Michael & Janie.



As the theatre returned, both in the professional and the community worlds, we were very glad to enjoy many fine performances. We saw a couple of commercial shows: the talented and charming David Suchet at the Norwich Theatre Royal spoke about his amazing career; and the irrepressible ladies of **Fascinating Aida**, in Ipswich, left us helpless with laughter (and occasionally fighting back the tears). We enjoyed their show so much that we’re booked to catch it in March when (pandemic permitting) they will visit Norwich. We’ve even managed two visits to the cinema: Anthony Hopkins’ towering performance in *The Father* in the summer, and just the other day we were very impressed by the new Spielberg version of *West Side Story* – released in the UK exactly two weeks after the death of Sondheim.

As for the ‘amateur’ world of community theatre: this has provided many gems against great odds. The Maddermarket returned to the stage with a fabulous reworking of ‘*The Merry Wives of Windsor*’ Norwich’ – including the above-mentioned Gill Tichborne as a gender-blind, and brilliant, Falstaff. Hard-Nosed Cow

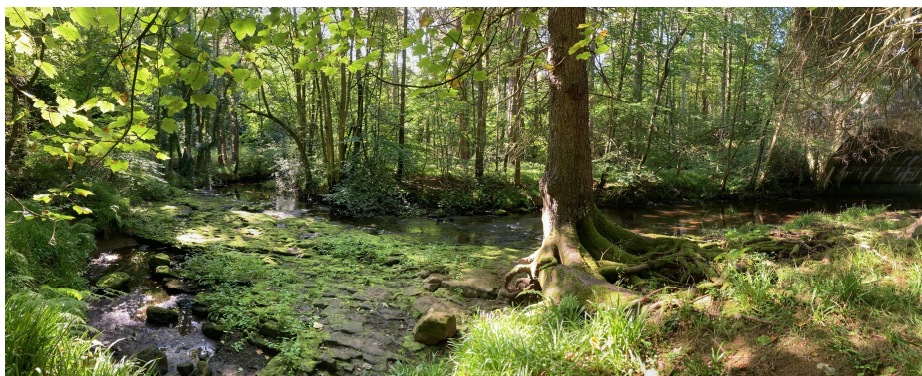
presented 'The Devil at Midnight' – a powerful and sinister piece – and latterly, their own created piece 'The Innocence That Time Stole', which was challenging and deeply absorbing. There was an open-air production of 'The Importance of Being Ernest' in the beautiful Plantation Gardens in Norwich, which we were lucky enough to see on the one night that it played (the two Saturday performances were sadly stopped by horrible weather conditions). The splendid Broadlands Theatre Group assembled their excellent children's summer-school production of 'The Enchanted Circus' in double-quick time. We were hugely impressed by the performance of Mandy Kiley, and the direction of Michelle Montague, in Moco's 'Who the Who, Who' – an emotional and vivid one-woman show about the challenges of age and parent-child relationships. The Great Hall Players gave us a lovely, accomplished performance of 'A Lady Mislaid' – in what is very sadly likely to be their final performance, due to short-sighted management ousting the group from the venue at which they have been resident for decades.

And at the Barn, we've successfully presented two shows this autumn: 'Love, Love, Love', which reflected on the battles of the generations from the 1960s to (almost) the present day, with hilarity and pain in abundance; and 'Three Russian Encounters': two reflections by Brian Friel ('The Yalta Game' and 'Afterplay') on Chekhovian characters, plus 'Swansong' – a duologue by Chekhov himself about an old actor looking back on his career. The six actors involved were, quite frankly, breathtakingly good. (Cassie took a deep breath and shared the role of technical operator for this show. Very nerve-wracking but in the end highly enjoyable.)

We've managed to sneak in some very fine holidays (in the UK, of course) when restrictions have permitted. These have ranged from a few days – visits to Cambridge, Oxford, Derbyshire, and to our dear friends Dot & Milton in Bolton – to a glorious week in Wiltshire in May, and a really fabulous two-week visit to **Northumberland** (pausing in Lincs on the way back) in September.



Cassie continues to much enjoy her hiking activities, and is proud that she's on track, at the time of writing, to complete a virtual Land's End to John O'Groats walk – in other words, her local walks are logged along an imaginary route of 1,083 miles, and she's today just 27 miles from the end, having started on January 1. In reality, there have been glorious hikes during our holidays (for example, 13 miles in Northumberland between **Blanchland and Hexham**, 14.5 miles round the Cranborne Loop in Wiltshire) and around the Norfolk countryside.



Selwyn has continued to work hard on recreating his book about Robert Hay – the Victorian Egyptologist – which was originally published at the end of his days in Cambridge, and which he now wants ready for publication online in time for an ASTENE* conference in 2022. With his ‘part-time’ (ha!) work here at St Mary Magdalene, his role as Secretary at the Sewell Barn, his indispensable work as stage manager to several shows and much more, he keeps very active... and we don’t think that retirement (planned for the autumn of 2023) is likely to make much difference!

**The Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East, if you were wondering...*

Cassie’s business activities in decluttering and organising, of course, were much curtailed by lockdowns – it’s not easy to help somebody to declutter by Zoom (although it did prove possible to provide some assistance and coaching in this way). Since the restrictions eased in April, life got busier and busier, and she presently has several clients who use her support – each one ranging from 2-3 sessions a week to once a month or so.



Cassie’s mother, **Peggy** (just turned 88) continues to be comfortable and settled in the splendid Cromwell House care home, in the south of Norwich, where the staff have coped magnificently during such difficult times. Although she remains quiet and somewhat diffident, she has adjusted well, and now even joins in with some of the activities – and definitely smiles a lot more. She still remembers family and friends when we talk about them, although some younger people tend to disappear off her radar. She fell ill with COVID in January and spent several days in hospital; but she came through it safely, and has absolutely no recollection of the experience. Her bungalow was sold during the year, and an annuity has been arranged that will ensure she is safely cared for no matter how long she is with us. We’re sure that her improved mood is helped by the weekly editions of the

Famileo gazette – a sort of personalised social media app, which is populated by family and friends and then presented to her in printed form once a week.

We managed to attend the beautiful **wedding** (after several postponements) of Domini Bucknell to her husband Jon: Cassie has been friends with the Bucknell family, and has taken family photographs, for many decades. A wonderful, sunny, happy day.



We have, as always, sadly said farewell to some dear friends and colleagues. These include Mick Evans, the wonderful and irrepressibly cheeky church warden of Alderford during our time in the Wensum Group; Stella Jay, long-term supporter and much loved member of the Sewell Barn Theatre team; Brenda Ranson, a dear friend from Cassie’s stagework with Wallington Operatic Society during our time in London; and Cassie’s aunt, Marga Nicholson, who passed away after some years of declining health. May they all rest in peace and rise in glory.

We hope that our dear friends, colleagues, relatives and all who make up our ‘life-map’ continue safe, loved and contented, despite the challenges that recent years have brought to us all. We send our best love and all wishes for happiness, and may 2022 bring kinder, healthier and happier times for us all.



Cassie
Selwyn