

Speen Festival

Our publicity for September's Festival boldly announced '11 glorious days'. And though the weather didn't quite live up to this promise, audience reactions to an amazing 17 events – a bigger, more varied programme than ever – suggest that once again the Festival found the all-important 'wow' factor.

Ticket sales were up on the previous (2009) Festival and several events were a sell-out. Our opening show *The Dreaming* set the tone, playing to packed houses. Despite my belief that we had bitten off considerably more than we could chew in staging this ambitious musical, it proved a resounding success, due to fantastic acting and singing, particularly from the younger members of the cast; very high production standards including professional quality lighting, sound and scenery; and the painstaking work of the production team and artistic directors. I recall a handful of people who turned up to auditions claiming they could neither act nor sing, then acting and singing with great confidence. The luvvies and prima donnas turned up as usual (no names in this context Eamonn and Tony).

Thanks to the ingenuity of our event organisers, the Festival included several new treats alongside traditional favourites. Among the returning highlights were the Jazz Concert, Food Festival, Science Matters debate, Teatro Unfortunato and the Cabaret Supper. The local environment and local history featured prominently with wildlife events for children and adults alike, a talk by Stuart King on Bucks crafts and customs, and an

evening at the chapel, with evocative song by the Elysian Singers and accompanying readings from the Chilterns' oral history. The organisers of the popular Bike Park Challenge created yet more fiendishly demanding circuits to test the skills of the riders, who turned up in record numbers.

First-time events for 2011 included a day of fun activities to entice younger and older participants to try their hands at some new creative task. Children sat with rapt attention as they figured out how to knit, make pompoms and paper flowers or turn buttons into bracelets, under the expert guidance of WI members. Families wandered into the pub to smile nicely, look gorgeous and sometimes clown around for a DIY Photo Shoot, with fantastic results, while others took to Ridgley's field to craft a bodger's shelter, and cook spuds and toast bacon and marshmallows over a fire. The outcome was sumptuous, particularly if you like your bacon on the rare side with grass garnish and your spuds like charcoal hand grenades. I have never tasted better, and the nettle tea was interesting...

'Youth Takeover' was another 'first' for Speen, designed to plug a gap in the programme by offering a night's entertainment that the younger members of the community wouldn't mind admitting to attending. In the lead-up to the Festival, workshops on graffiti art and dance blazed the trail. On the big night, youngsters from pre-10s to late teens did jaw-dropping wheelies, hennaed their arms, cooked burgers under KWIV instruction, put their hair up, strummed, sang and let their hair down on the dance floor. Audience feedback tells us that this event is just what the young people of the village needed, so mustn't be a 'one-off'.

For the very young, SpeenSchoolFest! was an imaginative *tour de force* which saw five schools – including Speen School, Speen Pre-School and St.

John's Combined School, Lacey Green – collaborating in a three-day art, dance and music workshop in June, culminating in a newly choreographed performance entitled 'Arabian Midsummer Nights'. This was cleverly timed to allow the children to decorate the marquee and craft feathery headbands, adding sparkle to the Speen PTA Ball. SpeenSchoolFest! also brought bandanas, tie-dye t-shirts and African drummers to the Speen Fête, and in September, local sculptor and artist Jeni Fairey led an autumnal art and animal yoga workshop for the pre-school children. One of their activities was to make those rather individual tree sculptures which you may have seen adorning the oak on Ridgley's Field.

The Festival 'finale' – 'Prom in the Playing Field' - was another new invention for 2011. I confess to some trepidation about this event: untried, enormous and logistically very complex, involving not only solo performers but also the creation of an 80-piece band with players drawn from no less than seven local orchestras. But as Sam Laughton led the musicians through a wonderful selection of classical and film favourites, apprehension rapidly gave way to elation – a feeling surely experienced by everyone on the field as they picnicked, chatted, waved their flags, sang along or sat awe-struck that Speen could pull off such a coup. The cold weather was kept at bay through rousing audience participation in 'Land of Hope and Glory', ending with a roof-raising 'Jerusalem'. And so it was that the sun set on England's green and pleasant land and on Speen's 2011 Festival.

We welcome your feedback on the Festival as a whole and on individual events; armed with this information, future committees can build on past experience and develop new ideas. Do give us your views via the website

www.speenfestival.org by clicking on the feedback tab, or email secretary@speenfestival.org.

This year's committee has greatly enjoyed its tenure. But now it's time to hand on the baton to new members with new ideas. Sam and Kate Laughton will stand down as Artistic Directors (but are still keen to take part...) and I shall vacate my role as Chairman. If you are interested in filling these positions or wish to join the committee in any other capacity, please get in touch with a member of the current committee or email secretary@speenfestival.org.

Lastly, thank you for supporting Speen Festival 2011, whether by attending events, by being an organiser or helper, or being one of our generous local sponsors. Once again it's been a superb manifestation of the strong community spirit in this and our neighbouring villages. I guess that over 100 local people assisted in making the 2011 Festival such an enjoyable and inclusive celebration of local talent.

And finally, in the words of dear delightful darling Doris Day:

*Now you must wake up, all dreams must end
Take off your make-up, the party's over
It's all over, my friend.*

Jeremy Symondson
Festival Chairman