

Chesil Street, Winchester SO23 0HU

NEWS RELEASE

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**CHESIL THEATRE’S *TAKETEN* NEW WRITING FESTIVAL**

**A RESOUNDING SUCCEESS**

*TakeTen*, Chesil Theatre Winchester’s new writing festival came to the stage with four performances of the ten winning ten-minute plays over the weekend of 24th and 25th February 2024. Writers, directors, judges and cast members were all able to meet and share their thoughts and ideas over the sell-out run.

This biennial event started in 2008 with just ten plays and has grown into a national competition attracting hundreds of entries. This year’s winners came from Edinburgh, Carmarthenshire and Wadebridge as well as nearer home.

With a programme covering a range of theatre genres, each play had to involve a treatment of the theme ‘Snakes and Ladders’ – the roll of the dice, the ups and downs of life, with its twists and turns. Topics ranged from artificial intelligence to dementia.

Local writer Dom Brennan was in the audience and writes:

“In this captivating blend of creativity, Chesil Theatre continues to celebrate fresh voices and unexpected narratives. The stage remains a canvas where gender, like the twists in these plays, can surprise us all.

“The Company hosted this eighth edition of its festival, featuring ten previously unperformed ten-minute plays. As always, the festival attracted entries from writers across the UK - some emerging talents and others with established credits in theatre, television and film.

“One notable aspect of this year’s festival was the prominence of female voices. Eight of the finalists were women; a departure from previous years where gender representation among winners had been more evenly balanced. The judging process is strictly anonymous, leaving us to ponder: Can we subliminally discern the writer’s gender from the content of each piece? Do certain preferences - like favouring Barbie pink over navy blue, cuddly toys over ray guns, or excelling in social skills rather than map-reading - reveal themselves within these succinct ten-minute performances? Enough preamble – on with the evidence!

“In *Firing Blanks*, we have a sparky, gag-driven comedy which unfolds during an accidental restaurant first date and ends with a neat twist... obviously, a man’s play? Perhaps writer Kathryn West would have something to say about that. Then *Unlived Experience*, a wryly humorous yet sensitive piece that revolves around a neglected, elderly woman enduring visits from variously unhelpful male jobsworths. From a female pen surely? Kudos to Barry Hood for providing the platform for a remarkable performance by Mary Mitchell. Her ability confidently to command the stage, despite her largely recumbent position, was a stand-out if not a stand-up, performance. The poignant finale, where her supposed welfare support discovers her decomposing corpse, lingers in the mind. *Cake,* a play following a tentative liaison between the parent of a learning-disabled son and potential romantic interest, centring on the sharing of the titular sweet had to come via a feminine pen, surely? Well, in fact, it did, but the fraught parent was the father, subverting any expectations of caring, almost despairing, motherhood. The performance of the son, played with confident cheekiness by Ben Tyler, a young actor with Down's Syndrome, gave the piece extra resonance.

“*Moksha Patam* is a tale of the avenging murder of an amoral, British 19th-century officer now retired from India to a genteel English boarding house. That the murderer's hand was female and the conveyance of deadly poison was via cucumber sandwiches might have suggested Agatha Christie for its inspiration but in fact, it was the second by a male writer. Mark Shephard would doubtless have been impressed by the horrific realism of the death rattle of the victim (played by Geoff Dodsworth). So realistic, indeed, that it prompted an audible rustling among the audience, as several first aiders switched to red alert. *Alan Has* *Left The Chat* was a fast-paced comedy delving into the dangers inherent in AI. No overt gender signature here, but the physicality and verbal dexterity of Nicky Denovan’s piece was beautifully realised by the director Duncan Ley and the actors, one of whom was a seamless late-stage replacement.

“The remaining five plays entertain and provoke thought, maintaining the overall feel of amateur work executed with professional finesse. Occasionally, overt serpentine allegory could have been left for the audience to uncover, but any minor jarring notes quickly dissolve in the overall sweep of a harmonious production.

“While the jury is still out on the prospects for Navy Blue’s comeback, the final verdict on this year’s *Take Ten* is a decided thumbs up for the playwrights, actors, and Chesil Theatre for another memorable festival!”

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Editor’s Notes: The attached images are supplied repro-free for editorial use.

About the TakeTen winning writers

Lucy Aley-Parker (London) Powerplay

Victoria Buse (Oxford) Cake

Nicky Denovan (Reading) Alan Has Left The Chat

Sarah Hawkins (Hampshire) New Master

Barry Hood (Carmarthenshire) Unlived Experience

Sarah Nash (Haslemere) Time To Let Go

Kate Price (Winchester) A Portrait of Isabella

Hayley Scott (Edinburgh) Revisiting

Mike Shephard (London) Moksha Patam

Kathryn West (Wadebridge) Firing Blanks

About the judges for TakeTen

Rosanne Collinson Head of Drama and Theatre, Peter Symonds College, Winchester

Cecily O’Neill Writer, lecturer, dramaturg, Artistic Director 2Time Theatre

Danica Pickett Casting director, actor, director

Simon Plumridge Designer, director, core member Platform4 theatre company

Mark Ponsford Writer, actor, musician, critic

About Chesil Theatre

Chesil Theatre (Winchester Dramatic Society) is based in the heart of Winchester, presenting up to eight productions a year, ranging from traditional classics to contemporary works. Chesil Theatre also encourages new writing through its biennial festival *TakeTen*, runs drama workshops, outreach community projects, play readings, two lively youth theatre groups and offers stagecraft and technical training. The Company has been performing for over 150 years.  
  
Since 1966 Chesil Theatre has been the Society’s permanent home - a former 12th-century church in Chesil Street, Winchester. This heritage building provides an intimate 75-seat studio-style theatre and versatile performance space.