

## **A Potted History of VADA**

Starting a pantomime was the brainchild of Heather and Richard Knowles. The former Lancashire residents had moved to Verbier after many years of staging productions in their home village and, despite an enormous workload managing luxury chalets, were keen to give it a go amongst the disparate expat community.

Word spread and, in the summer of 2010, over a sumptuous picnic supplied by Heather, with the Combins as our backdrop, a group of enthusiasts gathered to discuss. Some had experience, all had a great deal of excitement about the project. The name VADA (Verbier Amateur Dramatics Association) was born at that very first meeting as a play on the acronym RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, in London).

It didn't take long to decide that Snow White would be our debut and we set ourselves the very lofty goal of performing at the beginning of January 2011. With hindsight, we realised that writing, casting, producing, setting up a charity element, rehearsing and performing a brand-new endeavour in six months, culminating at the busiest time of the season was probably only manageable with the benefit of extreme naivety! Especially as the producer/Wicked Queen only gave birth at the end of June and everyone else was heavily involved with the ski season.

It was a total sell out, 800 people over two performances and the fire was well and truly lit. It was followed by Three Little Pigs in 2012, at a slightly later stage in the ski season to help us all keep our sanity. It was also a sell-out, even though it was (again hindsight being 20:20) a bit too long with a very complex plot!

In 2013, we were unable to use our preferred venue of the Verbier Cinema and moved to Salle de la Comba for the performances of Aladdin. A slightly less successful outing due only to reduced audience (La Comba was just too far to stumble from après ski!) but one of the funniest we have ever produced, with an extraordinary musical element.

2014 saw a return to the cinema and The Wizard of Oz as Dorothy et al skipped down the Yellow Brick Road to the Wizard's castle in the mythical Sembrancher, this time with involvement from the Verbier International School for the first time. It is worth noting at this point, that since day one our pantomime has both enthralled and appalled non-British audiences. The audience participation element being the most perplexing for those not brought up booing, hissing and screaming "he's behind you" in full voice. We have been delighted to welcome more and more non-Brits on to the stage and behind the scenes as well as training a whole generation of audience members in the art of panto.

We took a break in 2015 & 2016 from the main production, as Richard suffered a bout of ill health, however he and Heather did produce a children's bilingual version of Snow White in both Verbier and Le Chable, much to the delight of our French speaking audience.

In 2017 we came back with a bang with Cinderella, and Peter Pan in 2018 was to be Richard and Heather's final Verbier panto. They left Verbier to return to England as Richard's health started to decline. It is impossible to overstate what a driving force of creativity and

enthusiasm these two people were. Universally loved by cast and crew, their straight-talking Yorkshire chat, (bordering sometimes on brutally honest assessments of people's abilities – thick skins were necessary for survival of panto season) as well as their ready laughs and legendary generosity made their departure all the harder to bear. A powerhouse duo of directing and all things stage management made them the perfect pair for the panto and it was great sadness we learned in late 2018 that Richard had died.

For a moment, it felt like their departure would signal the end of VADA. The life force of the association was gone and we felt a little adrift. However, it seemed like the best way to honour Richard and their exceptional contribution to the "World's Only Alpine Pantomime" was to round up a new team and crack on.

This was the beginning of a new era of VADA. Becoming a formal not-for-profit Val de Bagnes association, with a proper committee and a new director, was key in breathing new life into the panto. To keep it relatively easy to reboot we redid Snow White, in the cinema, in 2019 and started to prepare for an alternative to the panto, Verbier's got Talent, in 2020.

As we know, the world had other ideas and so, once again VADA quietened down and we just left the ideas ticking over for when we would be free to perform again.

2022 saw the start of the third and current era of the association. A move to Le Chable saw us take residence in the delightful venue, La Concordia, with an established and committed team at the helm. Splitting the director's role into a team effort, we produced Jacques and the Beanstalk in early December. We also decided to put on the panto on a biennial basis at the beginning of the ski season and to try and expand our offering by providing youth and adult theatre workshops as well as supporting further, bilingual projects at other times of the year.

Our first kids' theatre workshop saw a total of 11 children rehearsing and learning every Sunday afternoon for ten weeks in late 2023, followed by a gorgeous final show in the tiny, intimate theatre in Sarreyer. This is probably our greatest nod to how Richard saw the future of the association right from the start, passionate as he was about involving the next generation

This brings us up to date. At the time of writing, production of The Sleeping Beauty is underway, scheduled for December 2024, with a slew of projects brewing, including an adult Physical Theatre workshop scheduled for Autumn 2024.

To expand briefly on the charity element, we are proud that to date we have raised around CHF20,000 for charity. We are enormously grateful that year after year, local businesses and individuals continue to believe in us and donate so generously. And also to our audiences who seem to love a good, old fashioned raffle draw and buy tickets in their droves!

Lastly, thank you to every single person who has been involved in some way with the association. By the nature of where we live, many people have moved on and away from the Val de Bagnes but every one of them is part of our history and our panto family. The association wouldn't be where it is without all their time, talent and enthusiasm.