

Norfolk

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magazine

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Norwich's
CHOCOLATE
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Photo: ©BBC/Sam Barker

The whole Hostry

As the Hostry Festival celebrates its 10th anniversary, Anna Mudeka and Stash Kirkbride reveal how Harry and Meghan inspired their latest joyous project

“**Y**ou hear people talking about Norfolk and saying, ‘What are you doing there?’ I’m actually doing quite a lot!” said Anna Mudeka – musician, dancer, entrepreneur and artist and now leader of the new African Choir for Norfolk.

It was a hug and a case of mistaken identity which first launched the new choir. She was in Holt when she mistook Stash Kirkbride, artistic director and co-founder of Norfolk’s Hostry Festival, for a friend.

“Anna came up to me and gave me a big hug and said, ‘How wonderful to see you!’ I said, ‘Wonderful to see you too, but who are you?!’” said Stash.

Then he watched Harry and Meghan’s wedding. “I saw the

choir and thought, ‘Oooh, maybe we could create one of those in Norfolk,’ said Stash. And he suddenly knew exactly who to ask. “The ethos behind the festival is that it is produced with Norfolk talent. I thought there is no way I could do this, but I know someone who might,” he said.

This month the new African Choir of Norfolk, led by Anna Mudeka, performs its first full concert at the 10th anniversary Hostry Festival. It is made up of Norfolk people with links to countries including Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and the Caribbean.

Most are new to choirs and performing and for months only met via Zoom. Anna recorded all four parts of each song in the choir’s repertoire (even bass) and

sent them out to the singers. This summer they were finally able to meet and rehearse together – and Anna was overwhelmed by the beautiful sound they created.

Dressed in costumes designed by a choir member, they hope to perform songs from every one of the 54 countries of Africa over the next five years, and release a series of albums too.

When she met people from Ghana and Morocco recently Anna asked them for songs. “We have someone from Libya who

‘This is what I love about this county. I have been able to pretty much live my dream’

was teaching my daughter maths and I was, ‘Oh, I need a Libyan song!’” she laughed.

There are also plans to take African Choir of Norfolk workshops to schools, businesses and other organisations, to join Norwich’s Lord Mayor’s Procession celebrations, perhaps to appear at the Royal Norfolk Show. And might they sing at weddings too, like the choir which inspired Stash? “Yes!” said Anna. “We are available and nothing is too big or too small.”

Anna, of Southburgh, near Dereham, was born and brought up in Zimbabwe. At six, she began playing traditional musical instruments and by her teens she was a professional musician and dancer. Her manager was from Norfolk and she said: “We watched every single Norwich



Picture: Richard Howes



Pictures supplied by agent



ABOVE:
The African Choir of Norfolk: choir leader Anna Mudeka with Jacq Sempre, Genesi and Eunice Amon

LEFT:
Stephanie Beacham is appearing at the Hostry Festival on October 30

City match.” She arrived in the county at 18. “It was February. It was grey. It was cold. I couldn’t find African food. But I was welcomed. I have always been welcomed in Norfolk.

“This is what I love about this county. I have been able to pretty much live my dream. Everything I think of doing or get involved in, I have been supported. I’m like an adopted daughter of Norfolk. If you have got a vision it allows you space to create.”

In normal times she performs around the world as well as running drumming, song and dance workshops and an annual world music festival at Southburgh to raise funds for disadvantaged and orphaned

children in Zimbabwe. She set up the Mudeka Foundation, providing classrooms, safe water, toilets, and free school meals, after returning to Zimbabwe for her mother’s funeral and finding that a third of the children at her old school were orphans.

She lives with her husband, a farmer, and their daughters, aged 11 and 14, and this year there are two more new projects for indefatigable Anna – running a summer campsite at Waxham and an apple juice business.

The campsite came as part of a chicken farm her husband took over and the apple juice came when the farmer who used to juice their apples retired.

The African Choir of

Norfolk has become another passion-project for Anna and the fifth main strand of the Hostry Festival. It joins the annual Norfolk Arts Awards which honours those making a particular contribution to Norfolk arts, Total Ensemble inclusive theatre company founded by Rebecca Chapman and also celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, outside art movement Paint Out, and the central play, which this year is *Beethoven’s Tenth* by Peter Ustinov.

“In life you have to say yes to things you are passionate about,” said Anna.

The African Choir of Norfolk launch concert is in the Hostry on Friday October 22.



SECRET STASH

Who is Stash Kirkbride? And how did he persuade Olivia Newton-John, Hayley Mills and Susan Hampshire to become patrons of the Norfolk festival he helped launch?

Everyone knows him as Stash, but he's actually Stanislas. "I was named after a Russian submarine captain who came and docked his submarine at my parents' oyster

restaurant in Perth, Australia, in 1966," he explained.

Soon afterwards his parents, two sisters, one brother and six-month old Stanislas, or Stash, moved to Norfolk. The anecdote is typically unconventional. And once settled in Norfolk family life was far from ordinary.

"I only went to school for six days," he said. "We were all home educated. I learned by example, by doing projects around the house."

The children staged their own plays, were taken to the theatre

and read to a lot – but Stash didn't learn to read or write himself until he was 15. From the age of 10 he was also a carer for his much loved and missed father.

"He died in my arms when I was 15," said Stash. "He died a broken man, unfulfilled. Caring for him for four years, I loved every day of it and it taught me a lot. I think I learned absolutely everything I needed to know from the age of 10 to 15."

His father was a television producer and director (as well as running that restaurant) and

ABOVE: Stash Kirkbride, Hostry Festival artistic director and co-founder, outside the Hostry, Norwich Cathedral

Picture: Mark Ivan Benfield

one of the contestants on his Australian talent show was a young Olivia Newton-John. “She sat on a stool and did a song with a guitar,” said Stash. Olivia went on to star in *Grease* and the Kirkbride family moved back to Norfolk. But when Stash started the Hostry Festival he contacted her, mentioned his father, and she agreed to become a patron.

His mother worked for Norwich entrepreneur Hy Kurzner when his iconic Norwich business Pizza One, Pancakes Too, was just a pizza restaurant. “We were very, very penniless, my father was dying, so she got a job as a waitress,” said Stash.

“She ended up as managing director.” It was Melinda Kirkbride who suggested the Pancakes Too aspect of the restaurant and Hy’s nightclub above.

Determined to become an actor, Stash joined as many local amateur dramatic groups as he could, performing with the Sewell Barn Theatre, the Maddermarket Players, the Great Hall Players. He went to drama school at 22 and then worked as an actor and producer.

Along the way he made some good and influential friends. “I have never just been an actor. I have never just been able to do one thing. It seems to be my destiny to bring good people together to make good work happen in a safe and nurturing way,” he said.

When he returned to his home city, his friends Rebecca Chapman and Peter Barrow came too. Soon he was looking



Picture: Kay Jon Went

Paint Out is part of the Hostry Festival and sees dozens of artists working in the open air across Norfolk

for a venue to put on a play – and fell in love with the new Hostry building at the Cathedral.

With Peter Barrow, Rebecca Chapman and Peter Beck, he secured permission to produce a play and a concert. A year later there was another play, a few more events – and the addition of not only the word ‘festival’ but the word ‘annual’ too.

“As soon as the first year was a success it was inevitable that I came up with a festival!” he said. “I have a habit of making things seem more established than they are!”

His faith was rewarded. Today the Hostry Festival, officially a not-for-profit community interest project, runs projects across the county and has attracted some very famous names as participants and patrons. It has also provided experience and training for hundreds of volunteers.

“To our credit we have

commissioned over 100 projects, worked with nearly 1,000 volunteers and hosted over 200 events,” said Stash. “Getting everyone together to see how far we can all go up the creative ladder has always interested me. We have people who have recently worked at the National Theatre to people in am dram to people who have never acted before.

“But there would be none of it without Peter Barrow’s philanthropy.” An inheritance meant he could support the Hostry Festival and Stash said: “We don’t have to be commercial. It loses money every year. I’m always saying to our business supporters, if you are looking to make money from it, run for the hills!”

However, the festival does attract national and international stars to Norfolk, and has patrons including Melvyn Bragg, Hayley Mills, Susan Hampshire and Olivia Newton-John. Hayley will be appearing at the festival this year and Stash explained he first met her when asked to sing a comic song at a big event.

“Hayley Mills came bounding up to me and said, ‘Where have you been all our lives?’ Twenty years later he asked her to be a patron.

Three years ago he was asked to guest direct the Holt Festival. “It was the first time a job was offered to me without me having to persevere, badger, pursue!” he said. “I push at doors – and then I hope I leave the door open for people to follow.”

Festival patron and Sheriff of ▶



Picture: Andrew Florides

RIGHT:
The cast of *Beethoven’s Tenth*, the central play at this year’s festival



Picture: Stash Kirkbride

ABOVE: Rebecca Chapman's Total Ensemble Theatre Company also celebrates its 10th anniversary this year and will perform a piece called *Egmont* to open the Festival's central production, *Beethoven's Tenth*

RIGHT: Hayley Mills is appearing on October 31

Norwich Caroline Jarrold said: "The way Peter Barrow and Stash Kirkbride have worked together to develop this extraordinary programme is very exciting and very special for Norfolk. It's independent. They do what they want. They do what they believe in, and they bring together some tremendous artists, both well know professional world class names as well as many local people, so it's very special that this happens in Norwich."

"I've worked with some of the best actors. These are kind, wonderful people. That's the only requirement we have, for people to be nice to each other and kind to each other."

STASH'S HIGHLIGHTS

This year Stash is particularly looking forward to the Norfolk premiere of the comedy drama *Beethoven's Tenth* by Peter Ustinov. "It's only been done a handful of times. It was my favourite play I have been in as an actor," he said.

Total Ensemble Theatre Company has created a prelude of drama, music and dance, called *Egmont: A Valiant Stand*, for each performance. "We are doing what I love doing which is folding in projects," said Stash. "Total Ensemble will produce something very moving and uplifting."

His many highlights of the first



Picture: Bee Gilbert

10 years of the Festival include *Boy in the Lighthouse* with Total Ensemble. "I think we were probably the first mainstream festival to have a boy with Down's Syndrome playing the central role," said Stash. He was also thrilled to welcome Melvyn Bragg and his play *King Lear in New York* in 2016, rewritten specially for the festival.

DIARY DATES

The Hostry Festival brings a fortnight of drama, music, conversation and celebrities to Norwich through October into November. Dates for your diary should include:

BEETHOVEN'S TENTH

The central production is *Beethoven's Tenth* with a prologue by Total Ensemble Theatre

Company from October 25-30. Other events on the Beethoven theme include a specially commissioned piece of music, piano improvisations and a sculpture by Rachel Long (of the Wells-next-the-Sea horse.)

THE AFRICAN CHOIR OF NORFOLK

The choir's launch concert is in the Hostry on October 22 and a week later, on October 29, there is a chance to join a free African singing workshop led by Anna Mudeka and featuring members of the choir.

THE 2021 NORFOLK ARTS AWARDS

The awards, hosted by festival patrons Susie Fowler-Watt and Becky Jago, celebrate the very best of the county's arts at the Hostry on October 23.

STEPHANIE BEACHAM

Stephanie, of *Dynasty* and *The Real Marigold Hotel* fame, will be in conversation with former Norwich Theatre Royal chief executive and festival patron, Peter Wilson on October 30.

HAYLEY MILLS

Oscar winner and festival patron Hayley Mills will be in conversation with Stash Kirkbride at the Hostry on October 31. They will talk about her new autobiography, *Forever Young*. ♦ **Box office 01603 598676. Full details at hostryfestival.org**