



# Stars of Bethlehem

From a contrary Mary to wise men wrapped in curtains, to bit parts as sheep and crustaceans (but no angels), some of our best-loved celebrities have made their stage debuts in school Nativity plays. And so it came to pass that they shared their memories with us

As told to **Caroline Hutton, Daphne Lockyer** and **Danny Scott** Illustrations **Neil Davies**

## Kirstie Allsopp

TV presenter

**‘I was a dark-haired, serious child, so was perfectly cast as Mary in my first Nativity.** There was a small problem, however. I was very attached to my Tiny Tears doll – it wore nappies and cried ‘real’ tears – but for some reason it was considered unsuitable for the role of Jesus. Instead, I was given a doll I didn’t like at all and, with no rehearsal I can recall, found myself in our local church in Wiltshire with the manger in front of me and this unwanted toy on my lap.

‘I was outraged and in my eagerness to be rid of it, turned to the audience and said crossly, “What am I supposed to do with this now? Where does it go?” People just laughed and I had to sit there getting increasingly indignant for the whole performance. I’ve always been quite a literal person and have to believe 100% in what I’m doing or I can’t get into it. So even at an early age, I was a poor actor.

‘When we were filming my *Handmade Christmas* shows this year, we met a lady who made an entire Nativity scene with twisted balloons. She saw no conflict whatsoever between her Christian faith and representing Mary, Joseph and Jesus with inflatable rubber items. But what she had created was wonderful. People do so enjoy the traditions of Christmas, such as the Nativity. It brings them together.’ **CH** Kirstie’s *Handmade Christmas* is on Channel 4 this month

Ben Fogle’s new book, *Labrador: The Story of the World’s Favourite Dog*, is out now (William Collins, £20)



## Ainsley Harriott

TV chef

**‘An old curtain and a painted cardboard crown. I believe those formed the basis of the costume** my mum, Peppy, made me to play one of the three kings in my Wandsworth primary school’s production. I carried a box, supposedly with gold, frankincense or myrrh inside, though I think, as it was me, it contained some kind of vegetable – a large, glossy pepper or a vine-ripened tomato, perhaps. Mum always equated cooking with love in our house. My love of performing, meanwhile – which got me my leading role – came from my dad, Chester, a jazz pianist.

‘I still live near that school and get together regularly with my old chums Mike, John and Charles – who would have been in the Nativity too – for games of backgammon. We play for money, though the same £100 pot has been doing the rounds for 40 years. It’s lovely to think that the pure, uncomplicated friendship we had as little boys in that play remains to this day.’ **DL** Visit [ainsley-harriott.com](http://ainsley-harriott.com) for recipes and information about Ainsley’s range of supermarket products

## Ben Fogle

Adventurer, writer and TV presenter

**‘My first Nativity play is also one of my earliest memories. Perhaps it stuck in my mind because I was cast as a crab.**

A little unusual, perhaps, but it was just one of God’s many creatures paying their respects to the baby Jesus. Anyway, I really looked the part. My mother spent hours stretching coathangers out to make an amazing big shell that she covered in orange fabric and I was super-excited to be such a magnificent creation. I took my role very seriously, scuttling around sideways on stage on all fours – with my family watching – trying to avoid crashing into the play’s protagonists. I like the fact that the ingredients in that strong childhood memory, animals and performing, subsequently came together in my career. I’m, in part, a natural historian filming the world in all its variety. I must admit, however, that I’m now quite partial to a crab salad...’ **CH**



**'I like to think I gave such a genuine impression of something that rose in the East that no king could help but follow me'**

## Alfred Molina

Actor

**'Along with many of the boys at my Kensal Rise primary school, I had a huge crush on one of our teachers, Sister Mary de Pazzi. She wore John Lennon glasses, had flawless skin and looked like an angel. So when I appeared as one of three shepherds in our Nativity, aged seven, I wanted to impress her with my nascent acting ability.**

'Dressed in old sheets and sporting an orange crepe-paper beard, I really threw myself into the role. When the Angel Gabriel – a vision of cardboard and feathers – appeared on the stage, our direction was to "look awestruck". So I hurled myself to the ground, making a noise like a coronary victim.

'Pleased with my performance and still making gasping noises, I looked up and caught not Sister de Pazzi's eye in the audience, but that of play director Sister Mary Kenneth. She was lifting her finger to her lips and making a "Shush now, Fred" gesture.

'I now teach classes to young drama students in California where I live, and when I watch them I always remember that acting is at least 80% passion and just 20% the craft that's drummed into you along the way. Maybe I always knew that. Even at the age of seven!' **DL**  
*Alfred Molina stars in the major new BBC Two drama Close to The Enemy early next year*

## Sandi Toksvig

Author, comedian and the new host of BBC Two's QI

**'As soon as I was told, aged four, that there was to be a re-enactment of the Christmas story at my Copenhagen convent school, I was certain that a role as either Mary or Jesus himself would be mine.** So when I discovered that Mary was to be played by another little girl, and Jesus by a doll, I was appalled. I went home tearful but my dear father, as usual, made it all right. "Is anyone playing the star?" he asked. "That is surely a critical part."

'I don't think it had occurred to Mother Bernadette, who was fierce and in charge, that the star needed playing, so when I asked about the role, I was given it by default. My father got me a sparkly headband as a costume, and though mine was a silent part, I like to think I gave a genuine impression of something that rose in the East with such vivacity that no shepherd or king could help but follow me.

'Years later, my oldest daughter, Jesse, was about the same age when she came home and announced with delight that she had a part in her school's Nativity.

"How marvellous!" I declared. "Who are you going to be?"

"The penguin," she replied.

'I thought how my father would have reacted.

"The penguin," I repeated solemnly. "Without whom, the story might never have happened." **CH**

*Sandi's new children's novel, A Slice of the Moon, is out now (Random House, £9.99)*



## Brian Blessed

Actor

**Despite being Yorkshire miners, my father and many of his colleagues were well versed in the arts, spouting Shakespeare and putting on operettas.** So I was in a lot of plays growing up, although I wasn't in a Nativity until I was about 11.

'I played Joseph and found myself surrounded by this vast menagerie; we had a real donkey, sheep, hens and even a couple of pigs. Very realistic! I was a rather naughty Joseph, though, and kept slipping the donkey a lump of sugar, which started this

thing braying like mad... eee-haw, eee-haw! Then it went for poor Baby Jesus, who would have had to leap out of the crib had he been real.

'What I really remember about that play, though, is the music, the lights, the wonderful hymns and magic in the air. The Nativity was important to Britain then and I think it's even more important today, when the world is in such a dark state. Sadly, in this modern, politically correct age we are in danger of losing the Christian spirit at Christmas. We can't let that happen: we need our faith.' **DS** ▷



**'I was a rather naughty Joseph and kept slipping the donkey a lump of sugar, which started this thing braying like mad... eee-haw, eee-haw!'**

Absolute Pandemonium: The Autobiography by Brian Blessed is out now (Sidgwick & Jackson, £20)



## Sanjeev Bhaskar

Comedian and actor

**‘Even at the age of five or six, I knew that I enjoyed acting** and I think my teachers at school in Hounslow in the late Sixties had picked up on this. I’m happy to say that I regularly landed a part in the Nativity, but... I was always one of the three bloody wise men! There was me, the other Asian kid in my year and the black kid. And how come I never got to hand over the gold? They always gave me myrrh... I didn’t even know what it was.

‘One year, I started to kick up a bit of fuss about this, so they decided to give

me the side role of Jesus’s understudy. I was loads better than the number-one Jesus; I had to tell him how to act! Did I get the call up? Not a chance.

‘Anyway, the next Christmas came around and enough was enough. “Look, this isn’t fair,” I told the teacher. “I’ve been playing the same wise man since I came to this school. It really is time for a change.”

‘Y’know what they did? Made me head sheep! Head bloody sheep!’ **DS**  
*Sanjeev stars in BBC One’s crime drama Unforgiven. Series 1 is out on DVD, £16.99*

## Eric Idle

Monty Python legend

**‘I think Joseph’s reaction to the Nativity story has clouded my impression of the whole business of religion ever since’**

**‘I was at boarding school in Wolverhampton for my first Nativity, and must have been about eight or nine.** It was my debut stage role and I was one of the shepherds abiding in the fields. The hall was packed with proud parents, but what made my first experience of show business so memorable was the unexpected sight of Joseph suddenly throwing up all over the Virgin Mary. It was just so great, out of the blue, and nobody knew what to do. We found many versions of this primal Nativity scene, and virgin births, when we were researching religions prior to writing *The Life of Brian*. But we never found anything where the stepfather of God threw up over His mother.

‘I think Joseph’s reaction to the Nativity story has clouded my impression of the whole business of religion ever since.’  
*Eric’s new novel, The Writer’s Cut, is out now (Canelo, ebook £3.47)*



## Beatie Edney

Actress

**‘My mother, the actress Sylvia Syms, took a very active part in my education** and was delighted when she found out I was going to have a special singing solo in our school Nativity play. I was obsessed with Shirley Temple, so, aged four, practised like mad to perfect *On the Good Ship Lollipop*. It was a liberal Sixties London school and somehow a song by a Thirties Hollywood child star – combined with the fact that I was dressed as a sheep – wasn’t out of place in Mary and Joseph’s story.

‘The big day came and excitement was growing backstage as the audience took their seats. I started to sing bravely and then, horror of horrors, completely forgot

the words. I was so traumatised that I peed on stage! But my fantastically glamorous mother, ever the consummate professional, stood in the aisle and finished off the song – to the delight of the entire school hall.

‘That Nativity experience stayed with me for many years and when I first acted professionally I used to have terrible stage fright – sometimes even being sick before going on. But in the late Eighties, when I was appearing every night in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in New York, Alan Rickman said to me, “Nerves are ego”. From that day I pulled myself together and was never frightened on stage again.’ **CH**  
*Beatie stars as Prudie in the new series of Poldark, starting on BBC One next year* ♦

