

# Milestone birthday for An Lanntair in 2010

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AS the final days of 2009 draw to a close, the An Lanntair Arts Centre, Stornoway, turns to the New Year with one thing in mind – the fact that 2010 will see the iconic centre celebrate its 25th anniversary.

And for island residents, the birthday treats kick off in March with live music being performed by a host of excellent musicians every Friday night.

An Lanntair Programmer Alex Macdonald expands: “We will have Fred Morrison, Dick Gaughan, The Open Day Rotation and Southern Tennant Folk Union in March. Each have a particular tie with An Lanntair, and none of them needed any persuasion to be part of our anniversary.”

Alex continues, detailing others lined up to play include favourites from the HebCelt festival '09 The Wilders, and the less well-known but equally talented brother of Christie Moore, Luka Bloom.

And, making a rare visit to the UK from America Luka, as with The Wilders, made the Lewis arts centre a requested venue on his tour.

“People seem to play here and then recommend us to others which is great,” says Alex, “and of course, if any of them get a chance to see the Island, they love the place.”

Fulfilling An Lanntair's all-round artistic remit, theatre is also set to be well represented during the anniversary year with a week's residency for Theatre Hebrides and visiting productions by both Mull Theatre and Dogstar Theatre companies.

The Scottish Opera are to return again in the autumn of 2010 and both Faclan, the Hebridean Book Festival, and Mach 10, the Gaelic drama festival will be repeated.

And the Scottish Arts Council's 'Tune Up' musical scheme will once again be providing a number of events over the next 12 months, as Alex explains: “Last January we had over sixty enquiries about 'Tune Up' alone – and it seemed that everyone applying wanted An Lanntair to be part of their tour.

“The ones selected for 2010 are Daimh, Saltfishforty and Aidan O'Rourke's specially commissioned piece 'An Tobar'. There will be a couple of others, but I'm trying to find space at the moment.

“I also expect this January will produce another pile of proposals for me to read through for the following year as professional tours have to be planned well in advance because of funding deadlines.”

It looks like 2010 is set to be another busy year in the planning, but although Alex is pleased to report that enquiries to the Arts Centre continue to rise, there is also a downside.

“The plus side is that we are never short of events to promote,” she says, “but of course the negative side is that it is impossible to accommodate everything.

“If you consider we have three days of film also to programme each week, it can be a stretch, and particularly as we are also a business, there are always other considerations.”

It maybe tough at times, but Alex and the An Lanntair staff continue to strive to entertain islanders and looking back at 2009 its clear to see how successful they are at doing just that.

“It's hard to believe that 2009 is coming to an end, and if I think of it in terms of events and films it just feels like a few weeks ago since we were screening 'Quantum of Solace' and 'Madagascar 2', but that was last January!” says Alex.

“Highlights are always difficult to choose, but the first thing that comes to mind is the weekend in October when we had Edwyn Collins and the following night Benny Gallagher.

“But then, I remember The Wilders dancing with the audience during the Festival [HebCelt] week, or Lau, who were outstanding.

“A couple of weeks back we had Michael Marra and Frank McConnell's show 'A Wee Home from Home', and I realise it's a harder choice than I first thought,” she chuckles.



Benny Gallagher - of Gallagher and Lyle fame - appeared at An Lanntair in October.

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As An Lanntair has an agreement with funders as to the range of activities offered to the eager public, Alex continues, explaining that this is the starting point for the Centre's programming every year: "For every person that wants to see a film there is someone who wants to go to the theatre, and for each of them someone who wants to hear live music.

"We have to find a balance and offer a bit of everything and that's always the challenge. We also hire the premises out when it's not in use for our own programme, so that means we're always busy."

2009 proved no exception on this front also, being the Year of Homecoming seeing an increased number of local events which took place in venue, including First Minister Alex Salmond's reception.

And of course there was the Harris Tweed Fashion show – an event which saw An Lanntair being nominated for a prestigious Scottish Style award in the 'Most Stylish Entertainment Venue' category.

Other notable events of the last year included Dogstar Theatre's 'The Tailor of Inverness' and the highly anticipated annual visit by musical duo Phil Cunningham and Aly Bain.

Alex continues: "The Dogstar piece was written by their director and main actor Matthew Zajac, and was a personal account of his father's experience of arriving in Scotland after the Second World War.

"There were quite a few people leaving the place with tears in their eyes that night; but equally we can have a couple of hundred people crying with laughter at Phil and Aly's stories.

"In fact, we should have started handing out tissues to people after watching films like 'My Sisters Keeper' or 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' as well."

On the cinema side of An Lanntair, the Centre bucked the general UK trend of falling numbers in 2009 with film attendances rising slightly over the past 12 months.

As Alex comments: "Entertainment ticket sales are down generally by 20% throughout the country, so maintaining sales is in itself an achievement in this climate.

"Of course it depends on what's on offer, but this year there have been some really great titles – 'Slumdog Millionaire', 'Twilight', 'Bolt', 'Star Trek', and of course 'Ice Age 3' being just a few of them."

And 2009 also saw performers from all over the world continue to visit the Lewis venue, including the well received 'Voyage De Nuit', The Stairwell Sisters and the 'Going Across the Sea' projects.

"In the past year there have been visits from musicians from Bolivia, the Appalachian mountains, Brazil, Kansas, Spain, and all over the world literally," Alex goes on, "but equally local musicians have performed here too.

"We had sell-outs for both Na h-Oganaich and the Fiona Mackenzie concert. Face the West have just done our Christmas Ceilidh, and next year one of our events will showcase people from the Island who are studying at the RSAMD [Royal Scottish Academy of Music



**Fiona 'Bosie' MacKenzie - part of the 'Would The Real Fiona Mackenzie Please Stand Up' show.**

*Picture: Rita Macleod*

and Drama] in Glasgow."

A lot of great entertainment memories have been taken from 2009 and there's a lot more set to come in their 25th anniversary year, as Alex rounds up: "Apart from the events I've already mentioned, there's a new Disney film due at Easter, and new Shrek, Twilight and Harry Potter films throughout the year.

"Fred Macaulay is back with his stand up show in May, and of course Phil and Aly will be here later in the year; but personally I'm looking forward to seeing Tim O'Brien

from the BBCTV series 'The Transatlantic Sessions'.

"I've seen him live a number of times, so I know that's one not to be missed!"

To make sure you don't miss any of the An Lanntair action in 2010, you can tune into Alex on Isles FM each Thursday at 5pm giving full details of the week's coming events, and of course the Gazette's Hebridean Entertainments will bring readers features and stories as the year unfolds.