



Children treasure the memories of their school nativities later in life



AWAY IN A MANGER

Why the traditional nativity play is still going strong this Christmas

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Most of us have fond memories of our first performances on the stage in the nativity play. Full of ad libs and charming mishaps after what seemed like never-ending hours of rehearsals, it was all part of the magic and sparkle of Christmas. Whether you were lucky enough to play Mary or Joseph, or settled for merely a star – or even a tree, like me – it's likely to be with a sense of nostalgia that you watch your own children or younger family members parade their costumes and practise their songs on repeat at home.

For Lydia Loxton of The Roche School in SW London, it's a rite of passage for the children, who are 'beside

themselves' with excitement, and get plenty out of the custom aside from the sheer joy of it. 'Some of the children start the year so shy they don't dare say boo to a goose,' she tells me. 'By Christmas, they have so much pride in the fact that they can stand up and speak in front of a large audience, even if it's just to introduce themselves. It's important that they all get their moment. I encourage them to really make the role their own, so there's a lot of child input and they become really confident.' For Loxton, the smaller the cast, the better.

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Teamwork and encouraging their peers is also a key part of the process. 'A lot of kids are natural leaders, but they have to learn to be kind and encourage others, rather than being bossy,' she says. 'It's about steering their bossiness. Getting them to project their voices can also be a challenge!'

While schools such as The Roche opt for a traditional retelling of the story of baby Jesus – as do west London schools St James Junior and St Augustine's Priory – many schools now opt for a more modern Christmas-themed play. For Grace Mccahery of the White House school, experimenting with drama is no bad thing – but ultimately, 'the old way is the best way, and the nativity is about creating memories. Parents are always transported back to their own nativity. We'd rather be creative with our summer play, which is always a huge production'.

Wherever you stand, both can have their place in reaffirming the true spiritual meaning of Christmas in a world where children are bombarded with commercial messages come December. Loxton opts for a balanced approach. 'We teach the children the Christmas story, and we say to them that people who are Christian believe Jesus

was born on Christmas Day. Ultimately, I like to emphasise that Christmas is about family and being grateful.'

It certainly seems that as much as the children get out of it, this is a tradition that's for parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents as well – and one that doesn't look like it's going anywhere anytime soon.