



# Wildsong

This winter, Oxford's North Wall Arts Centre houses cold and wintry scenes, as paintings by Oxfordshire Artweeks' Jane Duff hang on the crisp white walls. Creation Theatre company present *The Snow Queen* in the auditorium in their magical and ever-inventive style.

**W**ith live music on stage, a small and versatile cast tell the traditional tale of two children, Gerda and her best friend Kai who has gone missing. With a knapsack and song, Gerda travels through shards of mirror into Lapland's frozen landscape, on her quest to rescue Kai from the Snow Queen taking her past wild roses and over rivers. It's a dangerous snow-rich journey that artist Jane can imagine more than most of us.

Jane spent her childhood on the edge of Snowdonia, describing an idyllic existence in which she was largely left to her own devices, riding her bike or climbing hills with a dog as her faithful companion. "I had an intense love for mountains since I was very young and got to know Snowdonia like the back of my hand," she laughs. "We lived near a fantastic mountain and so we were also manic sledgers: if it snowed, we'd be up at dawn and out all day!"

Family holidays were spent in a small caravan by local beaches on the Llyn peninsula or on the moors, but when

Jane reached university her horizons shifted: hearing the adventures of a fellow student who'd spent the summer driving from London to Kathmandu in an old van, she was fascinated by the idea of walking in Nepal.

As a result, she spent much of her early twenties high in the Himalayas. First trekking and camping alone, walking in eastern Nepal then to the Annapurna sanctuary and the Annapurna Circuit – a 230 km route which rings a mountain range in central Nepal. Until becoming a guide herself, taking groups for 3-4 weeks at a time through magnificent peaks, forests and paddy fields, leading yaks up and down the mountains, and cooking on kerosene stoves rather than wood to avoid contributing to the Nepalese problem of Himalayan deforestation. On her return to the UK a few years later, she moved to South Oxfordshire, taking a job as an art editor at OUP, then working as a freelance photo editor in the UK and then at Times Editions in Singapore.

"At that time," she smiles, "my passion was photography and although I developed a good eye for composition: it



TOP LEFT  
Landscape Painting



ABOVE  
Scottish Seascape

TOP RIGHT  
Seascape Painting



wasn't for many years that I turned my hand to drawing and painting. I wasn't really an art enthusiast or even a regular visitor to art galleries. Then had a life-changing moment at an exhibition in Beard Mill in Stanton Harcourt during Oxfordshire Artweeks fifteen years ago when I suddenly became interested. I was very taken by a large pencil drawing of crack Willows on the Thames by Steve Empson. It was his striking composition and clear appreciation and observation of the natural world which struck me. He was offering art classes in Marsh Baldon and so I signed up. I also then learnt to paint."

Originally a linguist, Jane's love of the world around her and an interest in geography had led her to study environmental conservation: she teamed this passion for the natural world with her newfound artistic talent. Her painting style is relaxed, intuitive and expressive. The results speak volumes about the wildness she finds in the places she visits, whether far flung or at our feet, the ecological value of these special places and the emotions that visiting them ▶

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evoke. Jane is a keen walker and canoeist. “I immerse myself in a landscape for hours, absorbing the atmosphere, the play of light and shadows, the textures and colours of the vegetation before finding the place that moves me enough to want to put up my easel and paint there,” she explains. “I prefer to paint in-situ so I can react instinctively to the landscape bringing the emotions, weather and light of the place into my paintings.”

This month’s Wildsong exhibition includes several large seascapes, the abandon of the waves below the rugged cliffs of Devon, Cornwall and Pembrokeshire, and a series showing the Welsh moors and the Rhinog ranges, one of the ‘wildest’ areas in Britain.

“There is no true wilderness left in the British countryside, not in comparison to the vast areas found in places like Alaska and Canada. There are a few areas within the highlands of Scotland and the mountains of England and Wales however, that are very inhospitable and although not ecologically ‘wild’, as even these have been altered over the centuries, they are remote, dramatic and elemental so they offer a perceived sense of wildness.

You can also discover a sense of wildness in Oxfordshire,” she continues. “Oxfordshire has a gentle yet complex landscape with a big variety of habitats, from the Chilterns beech woods to heathlands, chalk downlands, fens and wildflower meadows abutting our rivers; the Cherwell, Thames, Evenlode and others. It’s a fantastic county to live in, as we have great well-protected nature reserves and Sites of Scientific Interest with good biodiversity and that wonderful a sense of wildness.” Jane has painted many of these for this exhibition.

Jane is also a volunteer for The Earth Trust in Little Wittenham and is a supporter of a local conservation charity The Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). “In the U.K. We have lost 90% of our wetlands. Reedbeds were once common in the low-lying areas of Oxfordshire but there are no large remnants now of

this important habitat for birds and insects. The numbers of birds like curlew, lapwing and snipe have dropped dramatically across the county which is why I’m so excited by The Earth Trust’s River of Life wetlands creation project on the Thames floodplain between Shillingford and Clifton Hampden. As more wetlands are created, I look forward to hearing the bubbling song of the curlew and the cries of ‘pee-wit pee-wit’ from flocks of lapwing across the Thames. I have often painted these reedbeds in the winter snows with the bull rushes silhouetted against the low winter sun.

The exhibition is called Wildsong to reflect the cry of nature. Art has a part to play, not only in reminding people of the beauty of the landscape but highlighting the importance of protecting our habitats and their biodiversity. With developmental pressures, even our most iconic reserves such as the RSPB reserve at Otmoor and BBOWT’s Sydlings Copse are under threat. I feel it is an honour to have them within our county boundaries so we must do everything we can to take care of them.

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You can see more about Jane at [janeduff.co.uk](http://janeduff.co.uk)

Wildsong runs from 29 November until 7 January at North Wall Arts Centre.

The Snow Queen runs from 30 November until 5 January. Order your tickets at [creationtheatre.co.uk](http://creationtheatre.co.uk).