



## ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

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“Christmas is a terrible time of the year if you’re a programmer and you like good contemporary music,” says Laura Ducceschi, the Concept, Artistic and Musical Director of ANOTHER CHRISTMAS. So she set out to do something about it and initially came up with an idea called Dark Christmas. “We wanted to create a respite from what was going on at Christmas,” she says. “Both musically and also that singular marketing message of: my family is so great, we’ve got so much money, let’s buy all these gifts. The desire was to represent another story.”

Christmas is a complicated time of year. The warm, fuzzy, greeting card version of it does not necessarily align with people’s real life experiences and emotions. Regardless of background, upbringing, or socio-economic status, the festive period is somewhat inescapable and means something different to everyone. In the media, it’s marketed as a time of plenty and excess with a pressure to consume and conform to societal expectations. Being bombarded with this one-way narrative leaves droves of people feeling isolated and excluded.

So Ducceschi sought out some singular talents in the music world to create a stage show and “to shine a light on those who don’t fit into traditional boxes.” Those who came on board are the Mercury-nominated vocalist, multi-instrumentalist and producer ESKA; the singer-songwriter and composer Douglas Dare; multi-instrumentalist songwriter Duke Garwood; Irish musician, singer and actor Camille O’Sullivan, as well as further musical input from Feargal Murray and Oliver Coates. “The artists are all polymaths,” says Ducceschi. “So my attraction to them was that they’re great storytellers but also fantastic performers who have an incredible ability to connect.”

Mere days into production for the stage show lockdown struck. However, the new environment everyone found themselves in provided an opportunity for a re-think about the project and what could be done with it. “I started to reflect on the pandemic and suddenly it was like, hang on a minute,” says Ducceschi. “I realised the thematics that we’re exploring of things like isolation were perhaps more relevant than ever. So we then started to think about if we could make something that captured the essence of a live performance: a certain energy, intimacy, and sense of connection. To actually create something more film-like that could hold a story within it - not about a camera just capturing a gig but moving into new territory and raising the bar on bringing new music performance into people’s homes beyond a stream. “

Director Samona Olanipekun immediately understood the essence of the concept. “He said: ‘it’s like an anti-John Lewis advert,’” recalls Ducceschi. “And I was like: yes. That’s it.” Collectively - also with Dramaturg and Co-Creator Patrick Eakin-Young - they exchanged ideas, images, moods and tones to get a sense of people’s varying experiences of Christmas in order to better represent what it looks and feels like. “I was curious about interrogating the breadth of Christmas festive expressions,” says ESKA. “Because there’s not just one narrative for Christmas. Presenting something that gives a broader account of how people interact with this festival is long overdue.”

Olanipekun, from Coventry, went there to also cast a variety of people in order to work in their narrative to the musical world being explored, so the backdrop of, say, a cabbie working his usual Christmas day routine is interspersed with the deeply cinematic performance of ESKA performing inside an empty Brighton Dome or O'Sullivan playing at home. "It removes a hierarchy," says Ducceschi. "And explores everyone's experiences as equal and on the same level." Olanipekun says "we tried to make it fly on the wall," of approaching the filming of the people of Coventry. "So there's not too much of a literal: this is who they are and this is what they're doing." For O'Sullivan, the deeply collaborative process resulted in "the merging of ideas, where the dialogue is told through music." Ducceschi describes this as: "using a kaleidoscopic approach, as we visit different families, individuals and friends, spending the festive period in different ways, intertwining their stories with our stage performances, highlighting the collective isolation we are all familiar with."

Christmas classics are performed and completely reinterpreted, along with new and original material resulting in something that is simultaneously familiar but also fresh and contemporary. "I love the challenge of being able to take a classic carol and develop that into something that feels modern," says ESKA of her and Garwood's distinct take on Silent Night. "But also develop it into something that still feels like it connects with the season. It's been a reawakening. It's really made me re-engage with the song and it's made me re-engage with the season, so for me if it ticks those boxes then job done."

Despite the initial idea being rooted in a Dark Christmas, ultimately this project is one driven and united by love, compassion, thoughtfulness and peace - just not wrapped up in mawkish sentimentality to flog chocolate. "This is sort of billed as a non-Christmassy Christmas but actually it's even more Christmassy as a result by trying to focus on the reality of it," says ESKA. "Not everyone's sleeping in heavenly peace right now but we wish everyone a Merry Christmas and we wish heavenly peace on people whatever they're going through." Ducceschi echoes this. "This is about connection," she says. We always wanted to finish it with a sense of a hug. This is about 'the other' but we are all the other."

Dan Dylan Wray

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS is a Music Beyond Mainstream commission, with co-commissioners Coventry City of Culture Trust and Barbican Centre.