

Youngsters get chance in spotlight

THESE are the youngsters who will be joining the professionals on stage for a West End-style musical.

The teenagers will take part in *Luv Esther* at the Kings Theatre in Southsea on February 9. The Biblical musical, which combines catchy songs, modern technology and exciting dance routines, is being staged in the city for a second time.

The 12 to 17-year-olds, from churches of all denominations around Portsmouth, have spent a day alongside professionals in Bristol learning the lyrics, the tune and the dance moves for the show's finale.

Beth Downey, 15, from St Nicholas' Church in Bedhampton, said: "I love acting and expressive arts, so when I heard about *Luv Esther* I really wanted to be involved. It will be great to invite my friends to something that tells a Bible story in a cool way."

And Alice Kennard, 13, from St Simon's Church in Southsea, said: "The Kings Theatre is just around the corner from where I live, so to perform there is great. I'm looking forward to being on stage and performing in front of all my friends."

More than 700 tickets have already been sold for the one-night



only performance at the Kings. Churches of all denominations have worked together to publicise the show.

It tells the Biblical story of Esther, a Jewish refugee who was chosen to be queen of a foreign country. It emphasises that she made a choice that helped to save her entire race – and challenges audiences to make a difference in their own communities.

It was originally written by Murray Watts, who was the screenwriter for the film *The*

Miracle Maker, and the songwriters, set designer and producer have experience in the West End.

Since its premiere in Bristol two years ago, it has played to sell-out crowds in more than 50 venues around the country. The previous Portsmouth performance was at the city's Mountbatten Centre in March 2006, but this version features a new cast.

The show raises money for HIV/Aids projects in Africa, and ends with a film telling the story of an African victim of the virus. After this tour, the cast will head to South Africa to offer hands-on support for such projects.



(Above): George Mhondera as Hegai in *Luv Esther*; (left): the youngsters appearing include (back, l to r): Becca Stary, 12, Abi Shore, 13, Beth Downey, 15, Katherine Message, 16, Theresa Ellis, 15, Amanda Ellis, 15, Charlotte Quick, 15, and Rachel Hall, 17; (front): Emma Forde, 13, Emily Mortimer, 12, Laura Philpot, 13, Bea Waters, 13, Megan Comlay, 14, Elspeth Barron, 13, and Alice Kennard, 13

Local organiser Julian Ellis, from St Nicholas' Church, Bedhampton, said: "The young people are very excited about being involved. The experience gives them the chance to go on stage, but also to understand some of the issues that inspired the show, and to invite their friends to experience a Bible story unlike anything they will have seen before."

For more information, see www.luvesther.com or www.myspace.com/luvesther. To book tickets for the show, priced at £10 each, contact the box office on 023-9282 8282.

MPs hear stories of poverty

TWO MPs will hear stories of poverty and homelessness in Portsmouth at an event organised by churches.

Havant MP David Willetts and Portsmouth South MP Mike Hancock will join key-decision-makers at the 'Opening Doors, Opening Hearts' event. It will be held between 3.30pm and 5.30pm on February 1, at the Discovery Centre in St John's RC Cathedral.

The event has been organised by city churches of all denominations as part of National Poverty and Homelessness Action Week, from January 26 until February 3.

Shadow Cabinet member David Willetts will give the keynote speech, after which there will be discussion groups about the issues of poverty and homelessness in the Portsmouth area. Local agencies that deal with asylum seekers and the homeless will share the experiences of such individuals.

The event will end with questions to a panel of decision-makers, which will help to identify how to raise awareness and tackle these issues.

Mr Willetts said: "Poverty is one of the most important issues facing Britain today. We see it blighting the lives of people in Havant and Portsmouth. It is a very valuable initiative to bring people together to confront this difficult and urgent question."

Anyone can come. The event is free, and there is no need to book in advance. For more information, contact Bruce Finch on 07751-351903.

Brunches on again

WORSHIPPERS from 11 churches of all denominations will host brunches each Saturday during Lent again.

They happen from February 9 until March 22 in Freshwater Memorial Hall, between 10.30am and 1.30pm. Anything from light snacks to full three-course meals are available, and there are Traidcraft and home-made goods to buy.

These brunches have raised almost £70,000 over the past 20 years for a range of charities. This year, Christian Aid, Tearfund, the island's Christian bus and the West Wight ecumenical holiday club will be supported.

Changes herald new church secondary school

A NEW joint Church of England and Roman Catholic secondary school is likely to be created as part of a reorganisation on the Isle of Wight.

Christ the King College was due to be created in September 2008 anyway in a merger of Trinity Middle C of E Primary and Archbishop King RC Primary Schools in Newport. Reorganisation plans outlined by the Isle of Wight Council have indicated that it is likely

to educate older pupils too.

The council unveiled three possible options for school reorganisation last month in a bid to improve standards across the island. Two of the three options involve moving to the primary and secondary school model seen on the mainland. All three involve Christ the King College teaching children up to the age of 19.

Each of the options would involve a significant number of

school closures and mergers. Some of the 19 C of E primary schools on the island would be closed and some merged with RC schools. The council will consult the C of E and RC dioceses, parents, staff, governors and island residents before asking councillors to make the final decision.

Our diocese's director of education, Tony Blackshaw, said: "I welcome any proposal that seeks to improve the quali-

ty and provision of education for children and young people on the Isle of Wight.

"Our diocese welcomes this chance to debate the future of education on the island, and would encourage pupils, parents, teachers, governors, worshippers and others to have their say during this consultation period. Our own Diocesan Board of Education will also be considering its response to these proposals before March."