

Debbie Isitt, Hon DLitt (*Tuesday, 17 January 2023, am*)

Chancellor

I am delighted to introduce our honorary graduand, Coventry-based writer, performer and film director, DEBBIE ISITT.

Debbie was born and educated in Birmingham. She left school at 16, and, on her mother's suggestion, went off to study drama. After graduating in 1985 from Coventry Performing Arts, she toured Europe performing with the Cambridge Experimental Theatre Company. Later auditions revealed, however, that there were few great parts for women so Debbie reacted by forming her own touring company, Snarling Beasts, and writing plays in which she could act. She spent the next 15 years writing, directing and performing in plays that her company took around the world: one of her best known works from this time was *The Woman Who Cooked Her Husband*, a spiky, sinister, and funny play, full of witty, feminist panache. Moving into film and television, Debbie wrote and directed the feature films *Nasty Neighbours* (1999) and *Confetti* (2006); she adapted Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* for Channel 4 in 2003, winning a BAFTA and an Emmy, and in 2013 directed the acclaimed ITV series, *Love and Marriage*. By then she had completed two of her much loved films, *Nativity!* (2009, starring Martin Freeman, rated as the most successful independent movie of the year), and *Nativity 2* (2012, an instant box office success, starring David Tennant); she directed a third *Nativity* film, starring Martin Clunes, in 2014 and a fourth film, *Nativity Rocks!* (starring Warwick alumna Ruth Jones) was released in 2018. Debbie has recently made *Nativity 3* into a highly successful musical, co-

writing the songs with her partner, Nicky Age, who is also her film editor. Central to the *Nativity* series is the city of Coventry: the fictional primary school at the heart of the story is based in the city and the films were shot mainly on location in Coventry and Warwickshire.

Debbie's inspiration for the *Nativity* series came from watching the annual nativity play at her daughter's primary school. She often finds her material in events that spring from her own real life experience – her mockumentary, *Confetti*, was prompted by her sister's wedding, for example. She sees the comedic possibilities in familiar situations – disagreements between neighbours; the trials and tribulations of wedding planning; retirement plans that don't work out as envisaged – and uses comedy to explore themes such as the breakdown of communications in relationships or the human desire for revenge. New situations suggest new themes: in the *Nativity* series she explores how men cope in a predominately female environment of the primary school. She puts her actors at the front and centre of her work: her celebrated use of improvisation gives them ownership of their lines, bringing a freshness and integrity to their delivery and enhancing the connection with the audience. She has worked with big names – David Tennant, Alison Steadman – yet still includes her daughter and sometimes her parents in her films; in her *Nativity* works, she cast groups of schoolchildren from Coventry and Birmingham – not trained child actors but 'ordinary' children from local primary schools. This reflects Debbie's determination to put the West Midlands' region and its working-class folk at the heart of her work. One of a relatively small group of female film directors, she has had approaches from Hollywood, but (much to our relief!) has rejected them in favour of her home territory.

When I spoke to one of Debbie's long term collaborators, the actor Marc Wooton, about what distinguishes her as a director, Marc spoke of her creativity and her playfulness, and her ability to liberate everyone she

works with, from her lead actors, to the runners on set, to her executive producers. Being committed to improvisation means having belief in the people around you and Marc, who you may know better as Mr Poppy in the Nativity films, talked about Debbie's 'punk' ethic, describing her as passionate, enabling and exciting to work with.

Debbie Isitt – writer, performer and film director – has made an enormous contribution to the arts and culture of our city and region, and to British film culture more widely. As Coventry reflects on the legacy of its stint as UK City of Culture, it is particularly fitting that we should celebrate her achievements today.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, DEBBIE ISITT.