

Christmas cringes

Recalcitrant ponies refusing to carry Mary up the aisle, stage fright and inopportune droppings are all part and parcel of a nativity show. *Charlotte Mackaness* finds out riders' most cringeworthy festive memories

COMPOSURE under pressure, the ability to react to events and putting on a performance. All are important aspects of not just the horse world, but also theatre. Christmas nativities are where most of us have our first taste of learning lines and donning strange outfits, but for many accomplished figures in the equestrian sphere, Christmas shows proved less ho ho ho and more no no no. Under-25 eventing champion Greta Mason confesses that she loved drama at school and was a particular fan of costumes.

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ANNA ROSS

"As children, we all had dressing-up bags with our names on," she recalls. "When we were still in Australia, so I must have been five or six, I had a particularly favourite outfit for Halloween. Unfortunately, I was wedded to it so much that when it came to our nativity play, I sulked throughout because I wasn't allowed to wear it. Apparently, Christmas stars don't sport pointed hats."

International dressage rider Anna Ross remembers mixed experiences of Christmas nativities at her London primary school.

"They tended to be unorthodox because it was such a big school; forget the Three Wise Men, we had 33. It won't surprise anyone who knows me that I've always loved to perform," she admits.

"Towards the end of primary school, I was the back end of a donkey. It was a real laugh and, boy, that donkey could move. However, an earlier school nativity was not so jolly," she says. "I remember being a very moody and sulky angel because not only had I not got the main part of Mary, but I hadn't even managed Gabriel."

Anna's mood was not helped by the fact her wings, constructed from net curtains and held together with a safety pin, fell apart during the show.

"Mum would have made them. She was normally very nifty with costumes, even making a papier-mâché head for me to 'lose' as Anne Boleyn in one school play.

"Years later, one of the horses refused to go around the arena at



Aachen after spooking at a camera. Mum put the same artistic skills to good use and made a papier-mâché camera that we used at home to desensitise the horses. Job done. Thank you, Mum."

Equestrian sculptor Holly Hickmore would, no doubt, approve. Unlike Anna Ross, she did find herself playing Mary in her school nativity.

"I was so pleased to be playing Mary and had a solo, but when the time came to sing, I absolutely froze," she remembers. "One of the

grown-ups had to escort me, inconsolable, to the side to sit out the rest of the play."

Earlier this year, she was married in the same church. "Beforehand, my father reminded me that the last time I'd had lines to say there, I'd fluffed them," laughs Holly, who did manage to get her words out to marry partner Andy, despite the fact her father had put him through a Yuletide baptism of fire on their first meeting.

"My dad has been dressing as Father Christmas for as long as I can remember," she explains. "A few years ago, we all went to Spain for Christmas, including Andy who had not yet met my parents. Dad made a video dressed up as Father Christmas and roped poor Andy in. Because he wanted to make a good impression, he felt he couldn't refuse. Trussed up in a festive suit, like an overgrown elf, Andy had to refer to my father as 'Daddy Clause'. Quite frankly, that could have been the end of the relationship there," giggles Holly.

SHOWJUMPER Dan Delsart knows that having a father with a taste for theatre can be no laughing matter.

"My dad, Didier, is a real character. He's done everything from stunt riding and carriage driving to equine dentistry, not to mention being a professional jockey for 15 years," says Dan. "When I was about 10, he dragged me around the village in France where we lived to

