

Stars of the seas

Onboard entertainment has entered a new era, writes cruise expert **Jane Archer**

I can't quite believe this but here I am gulping down a quick snack in the buffet on Royal Caribbean International's *Icon of the Seas*, so that I can get to the theatre early to bag my favourite seat for tonight's performance of *The Wizard of Oz*.

I've never been a fan of production shows on cruise ships. But I'm not up there with the critics who equate cruise ship

entertainment with second-rate singers and shows, either – a view that I think is unfair, and very much out of date.

These days, most singers and dancers on ships are a talented performers, while the shows themselves cost the cruise lines hundreds of thousands of pounds to stage and are often choreographed by leading names in the world of showbiz. And lines have been ramping



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MSC Rock Circus; Holland America Line's Rolling Stone Rock Room; MSC Rock Circus
FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: *The Wizard of Oz*, *Icon of the Seas*; Disney Cruise Line deck party

PICTURES: Christian Ekren; Michel Verdure; Roy Riley, sbw-photo



SELLING TIPS

🌀 Use the shows to add an extra dimension to your sales pitch. Non-cruisers might not be aware of the quality and variety of entertainment offered.

🌀 Good seats to watch a West End or Broadway musical cost at least £100. On cruise ships, there's nothing extra to pay.

🌀 Shows on the ships do change. Always check with the cruise line before booking if there is one your client is desperate to see.

things up in the past few years, securing the rights to stage Broadway and West End shows, while deploying expensive new technology to ensure the shows are even better than you'd see in London theatres.

Norwegian Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean have staged great productions of musicals such as *Grease*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Jersey Boys* and *Kinky Boots*, while *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical* is currently playing on *Norwegian Prima*.

The likes of Celebrity Cruises and Holland America Line, meanwhile, have installed banks of high-resolution LED screens in their theatres to provide spectacular backdrops to the action on the stage.

In Carnival Cruise Line's *Rock Revolution* – currently playing on *Mardi Gras*, *Carnival Radiance* and *Carnival Panorama* – a swarm of drones 'dances' around the singers. MSC Cruises lays on shows filled with aerialists and high-flying stunts in specially designed Carousel lounges that seat the audience around the stage. Cunard has teamed up with West End theatre producer David Pugh to stage an adaptation of Noel Coward's *Brief Encounter* on *Queen Anne* when it launches in May.

BEYOND THE THEATRE

But today's entertainment at sea goes way beyond song-and-dance routines in theatres, with high divers, ice skaters, deck parties and guest entertainers who often do the rounds on many different cruise lines.

The divers and ice skaters can be found on Royal Caribbean ships. The former thrill audiences with their daredevil antics in the aqua-theatres on the line's largest vessels, with the latter wowing passengers as they whirl and twirl around on ice rinks. Shows vary but don't be surprised to see stunning light effects and quick-change artists who skate into a tent in one costume and exit the other side in a different one.

Holland America Line has a Music Walk onboard *Koningsdam*, *Nieuw Statendam* and *Rotterdam* created in partnership with BB King Productions, *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard*. Passengers can dip in and out of specially designed venues playing live blues, rock (the bands come complete with shades and ripped jeans) and chart favourites.

Disney Cruise Line is the king of deck parties, with Mickey, Minnie and the gang out in force on the day

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one sailaway and Marvel at Sea-themed bashes under the stars.

In terms of guest entertainers, think singers, pianists, comedians and magicians. I've seen them all – and even a group of actors stage a Whitehall farce. Usually these acts are flown in to perform for a few days, then head off to be

replaced by new talent, keeping the entertainment different and fresh.

In March, on board Princess Cruises' new *Sun Princess*, it was standing room only for comedian Robbie Printz and comedy juggler Goronwy Thom, who had audiences in fits with his madcap anything-can-go-wrong (and usually does) act. He was replaced by a ventriloquist, whom I wasn't looking forward to, as a result of too many memories of Rod Hull and Emu. But Gareth Oliver aced it, picking passengers at random to be his 'dummy'.

OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD

Back on *Icon of the Seas*, I've managed to nab the seat I wanted and it's not at the back of the theatre, so I can sneak off, like I might've done in the past. I'd ➤

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SHOWS AT SEA

MISS BEHAVE

This interactive game show epitomises **Virgin Voyages'** aim to set itself apart from other cruise lines. The theatre is divided into two by Miss Behave – a fast-talking lady (or gent) with a penchant for swearing – and then it's a case of anything goes, with points to be won and lost and no one having a clue what's happening. Huge fun but stay away if you are easily offended. The show is on *Valiant* and *Resilient Lady*.

CHOIR OF MAN

Imagine a pub and a few blokes turning up for a pint or two and bingo, and you have **Norwegian Cruise Line's** Choir of Man show, which is currently playing on *Norwegian Encore* and *Escape*. There's nothing too showy or extravagant – just a handful of guys having a good evening out with music, songs and stories.

AN EVENING WITH TIM RICE

This is essentially songs from the shows, but with a **Seabourn** twist. Namely that they are all from the pen of Tim Rice, who appears as if by magic with anecdotes about the songs and the inspiration for them, before a live rendition by the ships' singers (often with some dancing thrown in). Expect a bit of *Evita*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Lion King*, *Chess*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and more. Playing on *Seabourn Encore*, *Ovation*, *Sojourn* and *Quest*.

BRIDGES

A new show playing on **Celebrity Cruises'** *Celebrity Ascent*, this makes spectacular use of the LED screens across the back of the stage as well-known cityscapes in London, New York, Venice and Australia fade in and out in super high resolution. Even if you aren't a fan of song and dance, go along to marvel at the technology.

SPELLBOUND

See that non-descript door off the atrium of **Princess Cruises'** new *Sun Princess*? That's your starting point for a fun evening of close-up magic, first at a bar serving colourful cocktails and then in a theatre that holds just 30 people. And that's all we're saying – except to add that the venue screams Victoriana. The show has been created in partnership with Los Angeles-based Magic Castle and the \$149 price includes a four-course dinner in a separate part of the main dining room and drinks.

AQUA ACTION!

Royal Caribbean has spectacular high-dive shows on all Oasis-class ships, but this one, onboard *Icon of the Seas*, is the biggest and best. The action takes place in the AquaTheatre, with daring divers plunging from 18m platforms into a tiny pool of water, a splashier version of synchronised swimming and even an aerial pas de deux.

ROCK CIRCUS

MSC Cruises built the Carousel lounges on *MSC Bellissima*, *Grandiosa*, *Virtuosa* and *Meraviglia* for Cirque du Soleil and when the theatre company went bust, developed its own high-flying shows. This one, onboard *Meraviglia*, pairs rock music with acrobatics and circus acts. There's probably a story somewhere, but forget that and just sit back and enjoy. The show is 40 minutes and you need to book seats. The cost is €10 in advance or €15 onboard, including one cocktail.



ABOVE: Norwegian Cruise Line's *Choir Of Man*

BELOW: Sun Princess's *Spellbound*

PICTURE: Steve Gregson



“I forgot that Dorothy's dog was a puppet being 'worked' by a man running behind. It's a tough gig if he has to do all the yapping

caught 30 minutes of *The Wizard of Oz* the previous day and was blown away, so I've chosen a spot at a high table in the centre of the auditorium, giving me a perfect view of the stage.

The show is 90 minutes long – bucking the trend of paring running times back to half an hour or so – but it was worth every minute.

The stage sets are excellent, as are the performers – the actors auditioned for the various roles they play (23-year-old British actor, Ruby Dollner, who played Dorothy, is in her first job after studying at the Brighton Academy) and are on board only to play those parts.

There's plenty of comedy and I love the scene where Dorothy's house is carried off by the tornado (I'm not giving anything away but it was aerialist technology that, for once, made sense). The way in which the yellow brick road was created on stage was also clever.

I even forgot that Toto, Dorothy's dog, was not a real dog, but a puppet being 'worked' by a man running along behind. It's a tough gig for him if he has to do all the yapping. Or maybe that was the dog after all? I never did find out. **TW**