

# Newsletter

## March 2017



NORTHERN REGION

CENTRAL REGION

SOUTHERN REGION

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The Little Theatre Guild represents 114 member theatres that control and manage their amateur theatre companies with an annual audience of over 650,000 patrons, and a turnover

of approximately £4 million. Visit us at [www.littletheatreguild.org](http://www.littletheatreguild.org)

LTG Diary of Events

**National Conference 2018**  
The People's Theatre Newcastle  
20 – 22 April

**Northern Conference**  
Stockport Garrick  
26 – 28 October

**Southern Conference**  
Corn Exchange Wallingford  
(Sinodun Players)  
19 – 21 October

## Encouraging Safe & Supportive Working Practices in Theatre

On 8th February the Health and Safety Officer for Bolton Little Theatre attended a meeting with the above title at Home in Manchester. Health & Safety OfficerThe forum was organised by the **Society of London Theatres (SOLT) and UK Theatre (UKT)**. It was presented by a representative from Challenge Consultancy who has been working with BAFTA and BFI to develop working practices that will confront and challenge issues of bullying and harassment.

It was reported that in an anonymous survey of organisations that had an established reporting system in place , 67% of respondents claimed that they chose not to report an incident and of those who did report 75% had no action taken on their complaint. This suggests that only 8 in every 100 incidents get to be investigated.We were asked to consider and discuss Bullying and Sexual Harassment:

What experiences we have as individuals and conversely as an organisation – how were they handled?

How would we deal with complaints and reported observations of inappropriate behaviour?

What can be done to minimise or eliminate any cases? How do we progress?

On many of these points I found that I had less experience than the majority in the room representing professional theatre where paid employment is involved. As a voluntary organisation, if any of these problems arise then we lose a member and may never know there was a problem.

Freelance workers in the industry were mentioned in a similar vein as they will come into an organisation with no knowledge of procedures and move on at the end of the project. It was suggested that an industry standard training certificate could be developed to demonstrate awareness of positive Working Practices for freelancers to be recognised at all venues.

This meeting was a forum discussion to encourage planning towards a satisfactory solution for individual organisations and industry wide guide lines.

**So for BLT, what will be our first steps towards:**  
**Establishing a Standard Code of Expected Behaviour**  
**An effective reporting and recording system**  
**An effective investigative procedure**

**Nigel Miller**  
HEALTH & SAFETY OFFICER

## LTG Grey Papers

You will have received your Grey Paper on Data Protection. We would appreciate feedback, both positive and negative, from member theatres.

## All Change

Contact details for newly appointed LTG Reps. We hope to see some of you in Newcastle in April.

**Seaford Little Theatre** - Sue Shepard

**Louth Playgoers Society** - Pamela Whalley, 2 Kiln Lane, Louth LN11 0LG

**Hayling Island Dramatic Society** - Anthonh Hazan, 9 Aubrey Close, Hayling Island PO11 0SU

**Wokingham Theatre** - Richard Coleman, 28 Way, Lower Earley, Reading RG6 4AD

## OOPS!

Apologies to **Seaford Little Theatre** - incorrectly named as Seaham due to an oversight in the last Newsletter. If it happens again heads might just have to roll!

## Last Minute Reminder



# Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain

[www.littletheatreguild.org](http://www.littletheatreguild.org)

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The contents of this newsletter are not necessarily the official views of the Little Theatre Guild.

# Letter from the Chairman



"It's behind you" with the refrain "Oh yes they are" can now be put to bed for another year. Pantomime or a Christmas show has been a staple feature of many of our theatres for years. Actors often have mixed views of pantomime but its enduring appeals still remain very strong.

A quick trawl through the 2017-2018 LTG Yearbook revealed that for Christmas 2016 some 35-40% of our Theatres put on a Christmas Show or pantomime. Aladdin and Cinderella continued to have enduring appeal. It will not come as much surprise to report that this show usually attracted the best audience of the season and often had extended runs. The contribution to the cost of running our theatres can be immense. You will not find many Treasurers arguing against having a Christmas show.

It is easy to be cynical about pantomime but I read an interesting quotation from John Barrowman "I am really passionate about a pantomime, because it is often the first introduction for a child to theatre, and if that child has a great experience at a pantomime they will continue to come year after year". It certainly made me sit up and take note.

Before Christmas along with Kevin Spence we had a very productive meeting with the senior management team at Samuel French. They agreed that LTG members, both individual and corporate, will automatically be given a 10% discount on all book orders with immediate effect. A code is not required to obtain the discount but Theatres should confirm they are LTG members when placing their orders. Their retail sales team automatically receive a copy of the LTG Year Book so verification should not be a problem.

We also discussed the fraught subject of licensing requests being turned down. This has become a particular problem for theatres close to London and we recognise it is infuriating when some theatres see applications for over 50% of their proposed seasons plays rejected.

Samuel French understand the problem and will try to encourage agents not to retain rights for excessive periods of time. The bottom line though is that they do have to remain on good terms with agents for sound

commercial reasons. There is therefore a limit to the pressure they can exert. We will continue to monitor the situation and do what we can to keep the issue in the spotlight. As has been quite reasonably put to me it is difficult to believe a theatre 25 miles from the centre of London with less than 100 seats is going to destroy the viability of a professional production. LTG do recommend to mitigate this problem that licences are applied and paid for up to 18 months in advance. This virtually guarantees the right to perform the play. There have been suggestions from at least two of our theatres that licences had been rescinded when paid for but this on further investigation turned out not to be the case.

One of the most enjoyable parts of being Chairman is to visit our Theatres. I recently visited The Apollo theatre at Newport on the Isle of Wight for a Gala Night. This was for the unveiling of a casting of "Faces of Olivier". This second casting had laid in storage until it was donated to the Apollo Theatre Players by Lawrence and Julia Holofcencer in recognition of their connection with The Players. It was an impressive gift and a tremendous evening.

To break the journey back to Durham I stopped off at the Barn Theatre, Welwyn Garden City to see an excellent production of Glorious played to an almost capacity audience.

It is very pleasing to report that our Theatres continue to make good progress. I am indebted to Robert Gill for analysing the audience figures in our Year Book. This revealed that total attendances are up from last year by around 14,000 to 610,600 (excluding Studio productions). The total number of productions was 832 with 5832 performances. I think we can reasonably congratulate ourselves in making a considerable contribution to the cultural life of the country. This is gratifying in the current difficult economic climate.

Finally, could I encourage you to come to our 2018 National Conference which is being held at the People's Theatre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, over the weekend of 20-22nd April. They have arranged an excellent programme of workshops and a performance of Trainspotting. I look forward to seeing you there.

**Mike Smith**

## Our Editor Emeritus Column

### Random Jottings on the LTG and other topics

The news from **Max Stafford Clark** that his behavior of a sexual nature has left many people, especially women, in the theatre community has been disappointed (to say the least). Sorrow and disappointment is rarely forgotten about. A memory of a brilliant production can so easily be stained, as I particularly felt; in the early 1960s as Max Stafford Clark was at the start of his career, he was appointed director of the Chester Mystery Plays production for the cathedral close, the majority of the participants being drawn from the ranks of amateur theatre groups, including Chester Theatre Group. The experience was breath-taking, every scene seeming to be ever more imaginative than the previous one. Stale tradition from the past century had been jettisoned in favour of a brand new concept (for me at least) of the circus ring, "Theatre in the Round"! For the next 50 years I looked forward to enjoying this director's work when I could – but the pleasures have now been somewhat tarnished.

The appetite for amateur Shakespeare does not diminish. The reputation of **Richmond Shakespeare Society** for presenting the Bard, with popular and obscure choices, shows no sign of diminishing. Three productions are scheduled for the period October 2017 to April 2018 at the Mary Wallace Theatre in Twickenham. *Richard II* started the season, followed by *Romeo and Juliet* for the RSS Youth Theatre, and *Macbeth* is scheduled for March. And there will be as usual an open-air production in the summer!

Did you catch the recent obituary for **Walter Lassally**, the famous cinematographer who died at the age of 90? His work brought to me so many memories from the past - just thinking of *Zorba the Greek*, *Tom Jones*, *Heat and Dust*, *Taste of Honey*, *The Long Distance Runner*, *The Bostonians*, and many more classics has revived so many great memories. Of course, cinema directors after the war achieved a legendary reputation and their films were awaited as major events; but it was quite rare for the cinematographer to be awaited as eagerly. One always waited for Walter Lassally, in black and white and then colour, to provide beauty and excitement in the visual images. Are people these days too busy, bored or contented to display any interested nowadays in this fascinating art? Thank goodness that Film Clubs still provide devotees with the chances to revive great film classics like these.

The power of good theatre is well known with the constant repetition of **good revivals**; at the end of October in 2017 the West End was flourishing with *A Woman of No Importance*, N C Hunter's *A Day by the Sea*, and that old warhorse *Witness for the Prosecution*, this last revival being

distinguished by being set actually in the council chambers of the former London County Hall. Apparently booking for this show is good for at least the next twelve months. But then the power of using revivals to refresh the flagging financial fortunes of old successes is nothing new. Shakespeare had no problem in reviving a hit from yesteryear! But within the LT Guild it is increasingly a case of the tail wagging the dog, as the excitements of watching relatively new work becomes ever rarer and old revivals are dominating the schedules. Most amateur seasons seem to prefer to present an old revival than to offer something new or at least a little different. "Oh, dear" I find myself checking out the latest pieces of Guild news about the choice of next month's offering, "This play again? This one is so old fashioned! Hasn't this play been done to death by now? With so much material on offer every season, who is selecting this restricting, and increasingly boring old repertoire?" Is there any sense that at last perhaps something new and different, the arrival of some exciting "live theatre" might be replacing "tired old revivals". Well, sadly, not that I can tell!

But good Box-Office does matter, of course, even when people like me gripe about the disappointing quality of play-choice currently on offer. **Southport Little Theatre** with a capacity of 409 seats and 11 productions with 8 performances each season to present, maintains an astonishing record of success over the years. The figures for the last complete season in 2016/17 reported that Subscriber Season Tickets stood at 47.2% of total capacity, an increase from 46.6% on the previous season. On top of this, more money was being banked, as more expensive tickets had to be booked because of the increased popular demand! Subscribers actually provided nearly two-thirds of the audiences – can this be the healthiest situation in the Guild? The Treasurer also reports: "As usual we lost a lot of our long-standing previous subscribers due to ill health, old age etc. and quite a lot who, despite postal and telephone reminders, just don't let us know". It seems that Southport's increasing population of retirees just cannot get enough of the theatre! They certainly love their theatrical revivals!

At **The Miller Centre Theatre, Crayford**, as "all eight shows last season made a profit, notably *Nell Gwyn*, which not only sold 100 percent capacity at the Miller Centre, but also earned us £29,907 at Minack. Our finances are in a very healthy state ... we are supporting two students with money from our bursary fund ... new sound equipment has been installed in the control box ... and new security cameras have been fitted on the outside of the building."

Shakespeare's production of *King Lear* at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester starring **Sir Ian McKellen** has drawn superlative reviews from the critics. "By the end, says Dominic Cavendish in *The Daily Telegraph*, we see Lear on a hospital drip, then tottering around in pyjamas, far gone. There are hugely poignant moments when it is hard to avoid thoughts of the actor's

own mortality. One hopes, of course, that this isn't the last time we shall see McKellen in Shakespeare or on stage. But if this is his swansong, what a triumph!"

"When I was leader of \*\*\*\*\* District Council I used to come down to the theatre and help with the lighting. I relaxed, forgot my problems and went home with a clear head. It was a great way to relax, and because I was being bossed around by the younger membership, it stopped me becoming too pompous."

Lovely to hear again from **Mark Rylance** and **Derek Jacobi** that the controversy about the authorship of Shakespeare's plays was being stoked again on Sunday 29th October. Apparently the claims of writer Alexander Waugh (grandson of Evelyn) will be revealed once and for all publically at the Globe Theatre and that the true author was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, posthumously, and that his remains will be found in Westminster Abbey, and not in Stratford Church after all. A pity that we didn't get this all sorted out last year when we all had the chance during the official commemorations. However, I do not expect similar controversies around President Kennedy's assassination, or even former Treasury Chancellor Nigel Lawson's belief in the absence of evidence of global warming, will be likely to run for the following 400 years. You cannot keep such a good story down!

For 11 minutes on 1st November "@realDonaldTrump does not exist", not even as fake news. The Twitterer was for the moment silent! Presumably this will not be allowed again! More's the pity! But how frightening to learn that Twitters were now going to be increased to 280 characters – double the length the time in which to be free to waste precious useful time!

And in the same page of this, my favourite drama critic, Michael Billington thrilled readers with his praises on the recent 90th birthday of **Ken Dodd**. The reminder that Peter Brook and Peter Nichols (both still alive) in their special ways at the same age have been able to hold audiences spellbound, but for **a performer who had been 'kissed with genius' in his lifetime**, Billington always praises two special performers - Sir Laurence Olivier, and Ken Dodd. Those who have been spell-bound for hours in the presence of Dobby's performances have never been in any doubt!

At **Bolton Little Theatre**, after longer years than the organizers expected, the moment came at the end of 2017 for the theatre to announce the completion of its fundraising campaign to purchase the "freehold" at Hanover Street, Bolton. Since 1931 the theatre firstly left its benefactor to its own devices, and it was only in 1961 that a legal status was created, to give charitable status some degree of permanence. But as the years went on, as with short term leaseholds, Bolton Little Theatre decided that full and final control had to be created. The negotiated cost of gaining the "freehold" was £90,000, with additional legal costs. The path was extremely legally tortuous, but hopefully

now every party involved has come out with a satisfactory conclusion.

**Why TV producers are immune to mumbling.** This is a regular complaint, especially when a new serial gets audiences keen in anticipation, only to hear them dashed by TV producers and directors guilty of mumbling. There is a simple answer: once you know the script you should hand over responsibility for the audibility. The only judge who can deal with audibility is the first-time listener, like the first time viewer. "Once you know the script, you are no longer qualified to decide if the speech is understandable." This problem is particularly acute with amateur actors when dealing with strange accents; once you know the accent and are familiarized with it, you will have forgotten how to deal with the sounds for the new audience. A late rehearsal should be allocated for this purpose, to improved audibility. (The same perhaps should be applied to over-familiarity with emotional responses, like when shouting excessively loudly is usually the answer for a lazy actor.)

Did you catch the **London Evening**

**Standard** theatre awards in early December? The most remarkable award came for W Moractress for *King Lear* to **Glenda Jackson** at the age of 80, more than 40 years after her two Oscar triumphs. For best actor the award was won by **Andrew Garfield** in *Angels in America*, while the most feted recipient was the new play *The Ferryman* by Jez Butterworth, with three awards which included best director for **Sam Mendes**. How long will it take for Guild selection panels to catch up with this play?

The gap between Christmas and New Year provided some interesting comments from **David Hare** in the columns of *The Guardian*. The old warhorse about the lack of support for provincial touring usually can be relied on to make some lively comment, as in this little piece: "Hare's demand for touring theatre should hit a nerve. I remember the question asked many years ago: "Did someone say, 'Let's have a National Theatre. Where shall we put it?' Or did they say, 'What London needs is another theatre. What shall we call it?'"

And just before Christmas came the

annual selection from **Alan Bennett's** Diary in London Review of Books. On 28th March he talked about the recent death of writer **David Storey**: "It was always cheering, even if these days he was often shuffling as much from the medication he was taking as from old age. But he would call me 'darling', this ex-rugger player, and put his arms around me, unashamedly affectionate. I haven't always felt so kindly, as when he wrote plays in the 1970s I was very jealous of him (as, I believe, was Pinter). He could run up a play in a week or two, generally when he wasn't getting anywhere with a novel. And the plays were terrific, particularly *The Contractor*, *The Changing Room* and *Home*; effortless they seemed to be, particularly under Lindsay Anderson's direction. I met Gielgud when he was rehearsing *Home*, in which he starred with Ralph Richardson, and he sang David's praises. 'He's the ideal playwright. Never says a word.'

Surely the time has now arrived for us to enjoy some of Storey's emotional plays anew for today's generation.

**Michael Shipley**

## NEW THEATRES

### Shakespeare Fans Head For York

The Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth and Richard Third will play out in a pop-up theatre modelled on Shakespeare's Rose built from scaffolding, timber and corrugated iron, erected beside Clifford's Tower in York's historic city. 600 seats available if you don't want to stand. Top prices £59.95.

For three months from June, this visiting theatre, the first of its kind in Europe will be erected on the car park beside Clifford's Tower, upsetting those loathe to lose scarce car-parking spaces. It will stand in a mock Tudor fairground with themed food and entertainment including free performances from the back of carts.



### And Another Interesting Acting Space

Did you manage to catch up with **The Playground**? This is a former bus depot off Ladbroke Grove in West London, which has been turned into a handsome theatre at a cost of £270,000, seating 200, also hosting a café and a counselling centre near to Grenfell Tower. Amazing that all these financial projects continue to be funded in the professional arts; if only it were as easy to promote worthy amateur projects.

"I was going to comment on the type of plays they were anticipating scheduling at *The Playground* that would necessitate on-site counselling - until I read of its proximity to Grenfell Tower", writes **Sandra Simpson**

Now back to London: South Bank's new theatre, **The Bridge** dedicated to new writing (with an occasional musical and an occasional classic), is the home of the **London Theatre Company**, offspring of Nick Hytner and Starr who were together at The National for twelve years, an intimate space which wraps around the audience (900 seats). Susannah Clapp describes it as a mighty space with, according to Tomkins, architect, 'an electrical connection' between audience and actors.

Constructed from steel on a sprung concrete slab, it has no pillars and galleries are able to be stacked on top of each other so no-one is stranded away from the stage. The stall seats are removable so that actors can move on platforms among the audience.

**Sandra Simpson** says: You may have seen the new space at a live streaming of *Young Marx* in December but although I enjoyed the play very much it was very dark, so very little to see of the new space. Worth a visit though.



## AND A NEW THEATRE COMPANY

So, Playwright **Jim Cartwright** whose work includes *Road* and *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, has just launched his own theatre company at Salford University's new £55 million Arts centre inside their New Adelphi building. The Jim Cartwright Theatre Company has a mission statement to showcase the best of North West acting and writing talent. Speaking at the press launch Cartwright said: "*When I was starting out in theatre, there was a feeling that it was available to all, if you had the talent and the raw gumption. In these trying times, it's important that we continue to champion that opportunity - making sure theatre is opened up to as wide a group of people as possible. I want our new company to fizz and sing and ring with the excitement of that prospect.*"

In the spring there will be a new Jim Cartwright play, **Shakespeare's Mine**, about a Lancashire miner discovering theatre. (shades of *Pitmen Painters* nearly a century ago?)

"Thanks to Burberry, Jim Cartwright's play *Road*, gets a make-over for this new production" says **Michael Shipley** who has been at those fashion pages again!



# More Happy Anniversaries

Fifty years for the **Company of Ten** at **Abbey Theatre, St Albans**. Another achievement - fifty years in the same building! They'll be celebrating with a production of **ON GOLDEN POND** on May 19th and a party on Sunday May 20th.

And another 50th! for **Summerseat Players**. This time definitely not in the same building.

**Sandra Simpson** remembers that in the late seventies she used to be dragged from Preston by Harry Trickett along with his other students to the Building with the Tin Roof. It was always raining - impossible

to disguise. Cups of tea were passed precariously along the rows. No point moving at the interval - there was nowhere to move to!



Summerseat are hosting a special anniversary dinner on Friday May 25th with an impressive list of guests who are asked to 'dress to impress'. There will be entertainment through the evening at The Stables Country Club in Bury.

## Top of The Pops

The annual Top of the Pops has been running for over 30 years in the LTG Newsletter. In the early days the information was collated by hand. The most chosen playwright was invariably Shakespeare; only on a handful of occasions did Ayckbourn usurp the top position and for a generation or longer Ayckbourn was cast as the runner-up. Not any more!

113 theatres presented 970 productions and sold 622,468 seats.

AND OUR FAVOURITE PLAYS?... One Man Two Guvnors, The Ladykillers, Ladies in Lavender,

Dial M for Murder, Jerusalem, Communicating Doors, Snake in the Grass, Nell Gwyn, Flint Street Nativity, Macbeth, God of Carnage.

## Tear Up Your Gym Schedule

It's Official! Wait long enough for the stats and people will come up with something scientific you'll be grateful for...

A trip to the theatre is not just an enjoyable night out. It's good for your fitness too. Research suggests that seeing a show has the same effect on the heart as

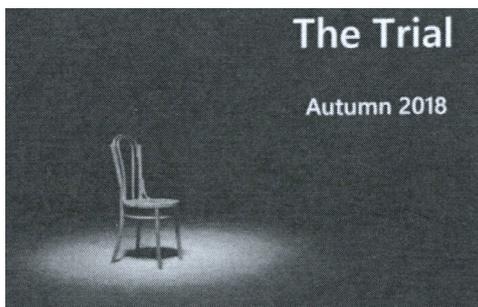
thirty minutes of cardio exercise! Heart monitors showed that people watching the musical Dreamgirls reached upto 79% of their maximum heart rate, particularly before the interval and close to the end. It is thought this was caused by the drama on stage and the emotion it triggered.



**Trainers off - get down to the Box Office!**

## From your Newsletters

Always keen to see what the YAT are upto, I noticed that the autumn will see Steven Berkoff's adaptation of Franz Kafka's classic novel, mixing mime, clowning and physical theatre on stage at Teddington. The physicality of the actors creates the nightmarish world of the play. Using barely any props or set (how brave! And how liberating), this ensemble piece will be a very exciting challenge for YAT. Every one is welcome, regardless of experience or physical ability, providing they bring commitment and passion with them.



This will be a great learning experience too as there will be

a lot of physical workshops and opportunity to study clowning techniques in preparation.

The Trial, is surreal, frightening, funny and moving. So our mild mannered bank clerk Joseph K is drawn into a labyrinthine world of bureaucracy, manipulation, fear and paranoia. As his life unravels and his trial draws near, can he find something indestructible within to help him defend himself.

## Thanks to Whitwords for this little gem:

"A comedy is just a tragedy interrupted. I once said, do you finish with the kiss or when she opens her eyes and sees the blonde hairs on his collar?" Alan Ayckbourn Output currently at 82 plays in his 78 years!



## LTG National Conference, 2018

It is my pleasure to invite members of your theatre to the 2018 National Conference and AGM of The Little Theatre Guild to be held at The People's Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne over the weekend 20 - 22 April, 2018.

We have chosen as our theme "Keeping ahead of the Game" to reflect the workshops we will be offering. The working titles of these are "Running a Youth Theatre", "The implications of new Data Protection legislation", "Fundraising in a time of Austerity" and "Hair & Wigs, Transforming Characters".

On the Saturday evening there will be a performance of "Trainspotting",

adapted by Harry Gibson from the Irvine Welsh novel. Looking forward to welcoming you to the People's and to sharing our newly refurbished foyer and theatre exterior with you all.

Yours sincerely,

**Karen Elliott,**  
Chair, People's Theatre

Hoping for a good weekend at **People's Theatre** in April. Your details and booking forms are with your LTG Reps. Tag on a few days in the beautiful North East. After the audience reaction at Bolton Little Theatre to Pitmen Painters last week I am programming in a visit to The Woodhorn Museum. A must if The Pitmen Painters is part of your next season.

## An Actor Remembers His Roots

Halifax Thespians is remembered with affection by **CHRIS WILD**. He devotes a couple of chapters in a book he is writing to his experience in Halifax. He recently visited the Playhouse and had a look round to refresh old memories.

"I was a member for a few years. It was a big part of my life and changed my direction to pave the way to where I am today".

Having been cast as Joseph Surface in School for Scandal, Mathew Wolfendon secured a part in a West End Show, Chris was cast at short notice to take over the part.

"The show was a huge success for both the Thespians and myself, physically and

mentally. I had to learn 38 pages of non stop dialogue in four weeks. Thanks to the director, John Eastwood, I managed to pull it off!"



His Thespians activity helped him move from the care system and he went on to build an acting career in London and the USA.

## Book Review

Thanks to **Market Harborough** for this book review.

### Get Me the Urgent Biscuits by Sweet Pea Slight

An assistant's adventures in Theatreland.

If you would like to have a good laugh about the highs and lows of theatrical production in the West End and realise that professionals have as many crises and anxieties as Little Theatre companies, try this book.

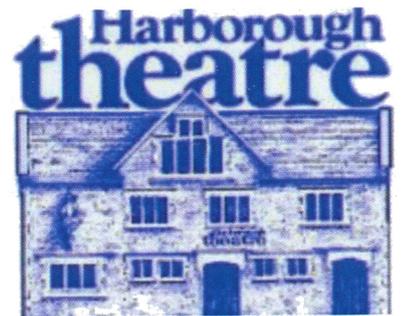
At eighteen, after moving to London with dreams of becoming an actress, an impressionable girl who paints freckles on her face, begins work experience in a West End theatre company.

In between mail-outs and making cups of coffee she meets the formidable producer Thelma Holt. Within a fortnight Thelma has stolen

her, cancelled her audition for RADFA, sent her to evening classes to learn to type, organised a miniscule salary and renamed her.

"It was during one of my morning envelope opening sessions that Thelma first put her head round the door of the boardroom and said, 'Hello, darling - which raffle did we win you in?'"

"Glorious... I laughed loud and long, sweeping away tears so I could carry on reading". **Anna Chancellor**  
"An extraordinary adventure in theatrical wonderland". **Zoe Wanamaker**  
"The dazzling debut of a born storyteller... Crackles with wit while knocking you sideways with its poignancy". **Anne Robinson**



## Questors in the News

### Guardian's Three Stars for Enterprising West London Amateur Theatre

This play by the much admired Peter Whelan, written in 2009 but only now getting its premiere could hardly come at a better time. As idealised versions of our wartime past dominate cinema screens Whelan comes up with an honest truthful account of the mixed reactions of British people to global conflict and scotches the myth that everyone in world war two behaved with impeccable heroism.

Whelan's focus is on a Midlands family in 1941 and in particular on daughter Marion. She joins the womens' army, becomes a skilled member of an anti-aircraft unit but is furious that she is confined to identifying enemy planes rather than shooting them down. Marion's life becomes even more complicated when she falls in love with an introverted captain tormented by the idea that civilians are being wantonly sacrificed to the Luftwaffe.

That however is only one example of the way Whelan's people defy expectations. Marion's dad despises Churchill and

constantly rakes up his peacetime record; her antisemitic mum treats a Czech refugee with calculated coldness and a profiteering neighbour makes a tidy sum out of the scrap metal trade.

The story takes time to get going and Whelan never makes enough of the point that the British themselves, through appeasement, helped to create the fascist monster they are fighting.

But, Whelan writes with wit, as when a character remarks of Marion's absentee lover, "other ranks desert, officers are overdue"; as in his study of a group of Lancashire lads who enlisted in world war one, the Accrington Pals. Whelan also has the capacity to write about working-class people without either sentimentalising or patronising them.

John Davey's production for **Questors**, where Whelan was involved for over half a century, is alive to every nuance of this deliberately unromantic drama and is exceptionally well acted by Claudia Carroll as the strong minded Marion, Felix Grainger as her tormented lover and Robin Ingram as a sadly silent bounced Czech.

## Safeguarding Back Under the Spotlight

Distressing allegations of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour that shamed Hollywood and the film industry have surfaced now in respected British Charity Organisations trusted by the world.

When **Bromley Little Theatre** read the results of a survey of sexual harassment and bullying in the professional theatre, published in Stage magazine, they looked again at their own safeguarding procedures which resulted in a new Code of Conduct. It might be worthwhile to look at these on their website.

- A new Code of Conduct which sets out both the standard of behaviour we expect from members and volunteers at BLT and behaviour which is not acceptable.
- A Grievance policy which explains how members/volunteers should raise any serious problems or difficulties they experience at BLT.
- A Disciplinary policy which sets out the process we will follow in the event of an allegation of misconduct or other inappropriate behaviour in respect of a BLT member or volunteer.

A great Recruitment Idea from **Market Harborough** and an evening of Unusual Entertainment!

# A Set Builder's Tale

Our sets have ranged from **Ancient Greece**, through an oak-panelled **stately home**, to a **Derwentwater island** ... from the **Afghan desert**, to a **hospital ward**, to a **Northern nightclub** ... from an **artist's patio** to the roof of a **speeding train** ... and many, many more.



How do we do it? Blood, Sweat & Tears? Strings & Mirrors? Set Builder's Magic? **Come and find out at the February MHDS Club Night.**



*Using a combination of light-hearted sketches, practical demonstrations and audio-visual aids, our set builders aim to enlighten you, showing how they achieve them in, typically, twelve half-days of construction, or less!*



For members and their guests, in the Theatre Lounge, bar open, and tea, coffee and light refreshments will be available.



Every Tuesday morning at about 10.15, one lady and a group of men suddenly appear in the Theatre Lounge. They commandeer a table, drink most of the coffee, and if you're not sitting on it, you may lose your chair! They are the Set Builders and one night in February they revealed their secrets – or as they put it, their 'magic'.

had come from a Hallowe'en party showed the audience some basic skills with wood and tools. This was followed by a speeded up film of the team building a set for one of the season's plays, followed by another film of them taking it apart. A miracle in itself, considering how little space they had to work in.

The evening began with what might have been a scene from a low budget Harry Potter film. Two strangely garbed gentlemen, looking as if they

The Evening ended with refreshments – and what sounds like a new respect for the contribution of set builders to productions.

# Directing... What Matters?

Michael Saunders, writing in *Sardines* suggests that the director of an amateur show has a much more widespread and demanding role than a professional director. He mentions: multi-tasking on set design, publicity, choosing props, in addition to dealing with difficult actors. (*presumably if you are working for a wage you may be more compliant!*)

It's hard and yet can be very enjoyable. It can also be a nightmare!

He talks about problems professionals never face – having to make do with people that do not gel, and are prone to not taking direction. This is a recurring problem and you need to be tough to deal with it. If cast are not off the books early enough this can lead to rows and confrontations. If you get a team that comes together the job of the director - shaping the play - is much easier.

But you have to be prepared for actors who do not learn their lines when they should along with a lack of commitment.

Saunders recommends being tough. Show authority from the start and if an actor needs replacing, do it!  
You are expecting audiences to pay, so standards must be high.

For your part you must have a clear vision of what the play is about and convey this to the



actors. This should be dealt with at the reading stage before anyone sets foot on the stage. Don't leave liaison with backstage, stage manager, lighting, sound props, costumes, publicity etc to the last minute. Liaison with all these departments is essential to produce a successful production.

Still want to direct? A successful run makes up for all the irate phone calls and smoothing of ruffled feathers. Your reward when all goes well is a great feeling of achievement for everyone involved.

## Water Carriers and Two British Intruders in Marrakesh

Is this how the LTG spends our money – funding delegates to conferences in far-flung places?!!

Or is this the new way to meet with other thespians? A Saga holiday to Marrakesh brought together **Bolton Little Theatre's** Sandra Simpson and Paul Asher from **Nomads**.

Hopefully we didn't bore our fellow travellers rigid.



# The Kevin Spence Column

## 2018 – Taking Stock

In my town we are lucky enough to not just have the Little Theatre, and a brand new 'state of the art' large regional theatre, but we also have a thriving little Arts Centre called 'The Point'. Needless to say, all the local waggish cynics were quick to quip "What's the point?" when it first opened. This thought popped into my head as the New Year was suddenly upon us. I know many of you will have somehow survived a Christmas show or a pantomime and will have no doubt been feeling that all your members, backstage and onstage, and all your various departments will have been tested to the limit – especially those of you who have to ask members to volunteer in the festive season. Usually, the only person with a smile on his/her face after Christmas is the Treasurer after banking the takings from the biggest show of the year. So as you finally sit down on a dank and dreary day in January, totally shattered from all the demands of not just your December show but the others you have tried to support since the season opened in September, you could well be heard to echo in your gloomier moments – "What's the point?" I hear constantly at both regional and national LTG conferences and at 'relationship' meetings the same old refrain about poor support from members, sudden unexpected demands on your hard-won cash – leaking roof, new boiler, new lighting desk etc – the usual endless list! And if it's not these problems, it is issues around your pesky local authority, safeguarding, insurance, unsuccessful funding bids, licensing, employment law – yes, this list seems endless too! Then as you peer through the window at the grey world outside, you think back to your original reason for joining the local Little Theatre in the first place. These motives can be many and varied – not just a love of theatre or some aspect of play Season in a Nutshell-making, but to find new friends, improve your social life, make a fresh start, fulfil a long-held ambition – or look for and hope to find love! Whatever it was, it has probably been buried under the avalanche of the demands of trying to support your colleagues in keeping your particular theatre afloat.

And just as you feel as if you might finally throw the towel in and revert to something like sanity, that special something will suddenly happen that reminds you that despite all the difficulties, people working creatively together can produce heart-stopping magic. Last week, I went rather reluctantly to see a local fundraising concert and it wiped clean all the pessimism and exhaustion I might have been feeling before I took my seat in the theatre. The standard of musicianship, dancing, singing etc was uniformly high, and just served to underline what talent exists in every town in the UK. But it was not just the talent that filled me with optimism – it was the mindboggling range of ages and abilities, but most of all, the sheer joy in performing together that leapt off the stage.

That same day, I had also paid an exploratory visit to a theatre group in my county who are considering

joining the LTG. On the evidence I saw, I do hope they join us! They own their own lovely converted Methodist church and put on an annual programme of plays – so on these two counts alone they



are more than qualified for LTG membership. For the group, it was just another normal Saturday morning, but for me as a visitor, it was totally inspirational and reminded me why LTG theatres should be proud of who they are and what they do. I arrived in pouring rain at 10am to find the usual group of men – yes, the gender stereotypes still persist, don't they? – already busy on the stage building the set for the next show. Already several ladies were running around making tea, opening up the rest of the theatre, and welcoming in older members of the community to their regular Photographs for Back agethe impression that they were putting on a front for my benefit. As if this was not encouraging enough, two cheery – looking young men – in their early 30s I would guess – suddenly wandered in asking to join the group as they had just moved into the locality. So to summarise, in a very short period of time I had been given a timely reminder of that special something that makes us all keep going. It boils down to Peter Brook's famous line in his landmark analysis of theatre, 'The Empty Space' – 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.' When you boil it all down it is as simple and powerful as that – and despite all the failures, friction, frantic effort and falling out that theatre can generate, this is how the magic happens.

So this year, I have resolved to try to regain my sense of perspective. I love being around LTG theatres and their lovely members because they share my belief that it is important to remove ourselves from our working lives, the emails, mobile phones, computers and social media and buy into the notion that a group of people all sharing the same space, breathing the same air, and trying to create something that everyone will remember, continues to be a bit special.

Can I encourage all of you to think about joining me on this mission? 2018 is not going to be any easier for theatremakers – a cursory glance through 'The Stage' each week reminds you of that – but if we all lose sight of the compelling reasons we all continue to bother, that would be a tragedy for ourselves, our theatres and communities.

So can I wish you all the best in your theatrical endeavours in 2018 – and I look forward to seeing many of you at LTG events this year!

**Kevin Spence**

# Season in a Nutshell

In a previous edition there was very impressive quiz for including all the season's play titles so Bolton Little Theatre promptly picked up the challenge. Here's the pretty creative winner.

Alice had very fond memories of Wonderland. Falling down that **RABBIT HOLE** had been the best time of her life. Everyone she met there had been some sort of **ABSURD PERSON. SINGULAR** things happened all the time. It had been very queer, very **FUNNY. MONEY** couldn't buy experiences like that! Now though, things were different. The second time she fell down **THE PITMEN PAINTERS** changed all the colours around her. Before,

there had been the Mad Hatter's tea party; now there was only a **sALAD DINner**. Even the Queen of Hearts looked **DEAD GUILTY**. It was bad enough when, on the croquet lawn, she'd used flamingoes as mallets; but now, in **THE CEMETERY CLUBS** were used instead. This was all too much, and the poor girl was compelled to change her name from Alice in Wonderland to **AGNES OF GOD** knows where!

Talking of Seasons, many of you will be publishing brochures for 2018/19 soon. Then it will be back to hunting for what's to follow, hoping to spot a box office winner or a play to captivate new and old audiences.

Michael Billington's review of James Graham's **QUIZ (Minerva Theatre Chichester, November)** for the Guardian

suggests this might be something to tempt our playgoers.

"Theatre has often dramatized famous trials, but James Graham goes a lot further in this highly entertaining play by resurrecting the famous case of a trio convicted of attempting to defraud the makers of '**Who Wants to be a Millionaire**' through audience-based coughing. Graham uses the courtroom drama to explore popular culture and the speculative nature of justice. The bulk of the play rehearses the prosecution and defence of the cases in the matter of Charles and Diana Ingram and their alleged accomplice Tecwen Whittock (which exploits courtroom drama and show business.)"

The tabloids were gripped by this scandalous event several years ago. A courtroom drama with intrigue based on reality!

## Directors' Course

You can see what The Globe does with their production of Othello with Mark Rylance as Iago – who else – on August 3rd if you join the Directors' Course which the LTG is organising for that weekend (Fri – Sun). We have 30 places booked, If you are interested in hearing more please email **Sandra Simpson** on **bls12@uwclub.net** Accommodation can be organised or you can do your own thing. Should be fun and we might learn a thing or two! A great opportunity for young inexperienced directors but also a useful refresher for those of us who have been directing for decades – and don't want it to show!

## John Barton

Charles Moore, writing in The Spectator mentions John Barton, a name I always couple with Cicely Berry.

John Barton, who has just died, was a brilliant interpreter of Shakespeare. He propagated his idea of how the plays should be spoken in the early glorious years of the RSC. It dominated my generation, and probably still dominates the rising one. The idea was to be more 'natural' and accord less reverence to the verse. It worked, but in a way it was just as 'mannered' as the Victorian/Edwardian approach which it displaced.

Modernising innovations, though often necessary improvements, inevitably become dated themselves, like once groovy haircuts. It would be fascinating if a modern director were to try seriously to realise a new production in the manner of someone like Henry Irving or Beerholm Tree.

The interpretation of Shakespeare does not progressively improve over time in the way that, say, brain surgery does. It reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the age in which it appears.

# Some Recent Production Photos

*Perfect Partners* - Summerseat Players



*Happiest Days of Our Lives* - Leicester



*Colder Than Here* - Nantwich Players



*The Diary of Anne Frank* - Market Harborough



*Sleepers* - Questors



Foto. Ania Pankiewicz

*The Pitmen Painters* - Bolton Little Theatre