



## **Break A Leg**

**Article by Jenny Landreth**

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### ***Introduction***

The December 2020 edition of the LTG Newsletter highlights Jenny Landreth's new book on amateur theatre and notes that the next edition will carry an interview with her. This article, penned by Jenny appeared, in a slightly edited form, in the Telegraph and they and Jenny have given their permission for it to be published by the LTG.

### ***The article***

'In the amateur theatre, love is all you need', actor Simon Callow said in a speech to the Amateur Theatre Fest in Sept 2018. And love is, of course, at the heart of the word 'amateur'. But COVID has stripped away any romantic notions and revealed a more complex picture. Now, and while everyone waits for a vaccine, love will only take some amateurs some of the way.

Love, the internet and a creative drive to 'find ways of being as responsive as we can to changing restrictions' has helped Putney Arts Theatre (PAT) run a busy programme of online events, including a live production of Yasmin Reza's *God of Carnage* on the 26<sup>th</sup> November. 'We have our adult amateurs and we have a young people's company, so what we can offer online has some diversity to it, for different audiences' PAT's Veronika Wilson said. Lockdown has given them the opportunity to try out some bold ambitious things 'but also', she added 'there might be some fairly ruinous consequences. We just don't know at this stage'. She is cautiously optimistic about vaccine news but 'obviously we understand that it will likely be a slow process.'

In a normal year, panto season would be almost upon us. Panto is important for amateurs and professionals alike partly because of what it means financially. 'Panto is literally the golden goose that pays the bills for the rest of the year' said Colin Hide from Leicester's Little Theatre. 'It's sell-out, every performance', making over a hundred thousand pounds in ticket sales. With that gone, how is the mood in the theatre? 'Pretty good' Colin said, in a qualified tone. 'The most amazing thing is the love people have for the place. People are phoning up, making donations, it's incredible.' When Colin asked members of their Youth Theatre why they liked it, their responses give a window into why amateur theatre is

important. 'It gives purpose to my life' one said. 'Because I feel part of a group where no one judges you and you can be who you want to' said another. 'Coming here doesn't just help me act, it helps me create entire worlds, become a new person. And be part of a show, a family.'

The theatre has its Centenary in 2022 and 'this is the first time we've shut' Colin said. 'Even in the war, they kept going. There was an incredible reluctance to shut, but we were instructed to shut. Terrible.'

The idea that amateurs doing it for love are free from financial concerns hides the reality. It's important, for the sake of the sector, that the curtain is raised. Because alongside unquantifiable losses to people's cultural and creative lives, going dark brings myriad economic consequences. Local communities benefit financially from an amateur theatre presence. 'It all ties back in' said Veronika Wilson. 'If you have a theatre on a local high street, the night-time economy on that high street benefits from those live audiences.' Some amateur companies, like in Leicester, run their own substantial buildings and have paid staff, now furloughed or out of work. Some hire in professional directors, choreographers, designers, and the loss of that employment hits a freelance workforce already excluded from financial support packages.

Tamsin Reinsch is one person very aware that amateur theatre is part of show *business*. She is the third generation to run Border Studios, who provide a full scenery service to amateurs. Started in 1961 by her grandfather Les, the company's books would normally be chock full of panto orders from across the country. 'We may not be providing for the highest echelons of the theatre world' Tamsin said 'but we are supporting grass roots theatre. We have been able to employ a team of people, support local suppliers, create work for freelancers and give back through work experience.' This normally-thriving professional company is just one of the hidden assets that contribute to the UK's theatre industry even, Tamsin said, 'if amateur theatre is often overlooked'.

Tina Swain of St Alban's Abbey Theatre is passionate about all theatre, hers just happens to be amateur. The chop/change of the last few months has required the Abbey to have a flexible, adaptable response and now they can 'turn on a sixpence', she said. The implications in the current government guidelines are that 'we can't let non-professional theatres open because they might not be responsible towards the people coming into the building' and 'that's nonsense' Tina said. 'If anything, we're *more* responsible. Those people are our life blood.' Tina is clearly, determinedly, on a crusade. 'We keep going. We are not going to give up this fight to be recognised for the value of what we offer for the local community.'

If you can't put a price on the love, joy and community of amateur theatre, maybe the very real money losses will make people sit up and take notice. A vaccine might help avoid some of those 'potentially ruinous consequences', but COVID has shown us that it's time amateur theatre had a public champion ready to shout about all of it.

Jenny Landreth