

Newsletter

February 2019



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

LTG Diary of Events

National Conference 2019 -
Highbury, Sutton Coalfield
29-31 March
Performance of 'Rules for Living'

Northern Conference
Nantwich
25-27 October

Central Conference
To be confirmed

Southern Conference
Hastings
19-21 October

National Conference in 2020
Questors
Date to be confirmed

Here's a copy of a request for information by Steve Pratt, our Northern Regional Secretary. This was sent to all Northern Reps. and Chairmen. No apologies for reminding you to please follow up Steve's request - it's easy for emails to go astray - or find their way into spam or trash!

I am following up on my statement in the annual report and as mentioned at the Northern AGM at Stockport of my interest in analysing how our Northern Theatres are organised.

I would appreciate it greatly if you would take a few minutes to send me copies of any documents describing your constitution / organisation and the rules of your organisation.

I know the Panto Season is behind us, (Aladdin in particular) but Formby Little Theatre is still trying to flog old lamps!

All in good condition! Contact Ian Beyden, Treasurer, Formby Little Theatre if these are just what you need!
 6 x Spotlight RE1 2055w floods • 2 x Acclaim Axial Profilers 600w 240 to 440 • 6 x Acclaim Fresnels 650w
 Formby Little Theatre @gmail.com

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WELCOME TO OUR 2018 COHORT OF NEW MEMBERS

In late 2017 we welcomed **The Warehouse Theatre**, Ilminster a 150 seater theatre producing 6-7 plays a year. The theatre which was previously a fruit warehouse was converted in 1987. The Ilminster Entertainment Society have been in existence since 1947. Their next production will be "Dangerous Corner" by JB Priestley.

2018 was a busy year as some of you reading the LTG Year Book would see as we had five new members join the organisation. These were Ecclesfield Priory Players in Sheffield; East Lane Theatre in Sudbury and the Corn Exchange Theatre Company in Stamford; Seaford Musical Theatre in Seaford and The Playhouse Theatre in Northampton.

Ecclesfield Priory Players are housed in a former Methodist Chapel with 98 seat auditorium and they produce three plays annually. The next play in February is the comedy "There goes the Bride" by Ray Cooney and John Chapman. They open the theatre every Saturday for coffee and tours of the theatre, so if you are in Sheffield on a weekend you will know where to get a coffee and toasted teacake.

East Lane Theatre with a seating capacity of 75, produces 4 plays a year. It was previously used a tennis

pavilion and they have made several improvements to enlarge the backstage area. Their February production is JB Priestley's "Laburnum Grove."

Corn Exchange Theatre Company, Stamford established in 2000 have redeveloped the existing Corn Exchange into a theatre with a seating capacity of 399. They offer a diverse programme from musicals, drama to comedy nights.

Seaford Musical Theatre, Seaford was originally founded as a Gilbert & Sullivan society and now stages a wide variety of musical shows with forthcoming "Sister Act" and variety Shows. The theatre seats 128.

The Playhouse, Northampton. This small theatre seats 85 people and up until its conversion in 1961 it was a former coffin store/shoe factory They produce 6 plays a year, their next production is "Deathtrap" by Ira Levin February 19-23rd.

We hope to see you at our next conferences where you can take the opportunity of networking with other theatres in your area and of similar size.



I am trying to see if there is any consistency in the way we are organised and make comparisons on such things as the roles in each theatre, the size of the committees, the structure of the management board and sub-committees. If you feel your theatre has some unusual or unique aspects to the way you are organised please highlight this in your email.

I will publish my findings to all who send me info, suitably anonymised. As the ethos of the LTG is we can all learn from each other I do hope you help me undertake this analysis. Who knows what it may reveal,

best regards
 Steve
 Northern Regional Secretary

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

The deadline for content to be included in the next newsletter is 10th May.



SAVE STAGE LIGHTING CAMPAIGN LIGHT AWARE

Please note this support for the 'status quo' in respect of stage lighting.

"The charity LightAware wholeheartedly support the Save Stage Lighting campaign. We would also like to alert readers to the fact that this "mistaken legislation" goes far beyond theatre, and constitutes a crisis not just in the arts but also in health and social justice.

Legislation banning incandescent lighting has created a severe situation of social exclusion for those who cannot tolerate new forms of lighting, including LED and fluorescent lighting – and this tightening of the legislation means even fewer alternatives. We hear from light-sensitive people throughout the UK and around the world, who are struggling to work, participate in leisure activities, travel, study or even access the streets at night because of the recent changes in lighting.

We believe that it is immoral to ban a form of lighting with no provision for those who cannot tolerate the alternatives to light their homes and live their lives."

Letter from the Chairman

Consultation, these days everybody does it whether it is the Government, your local council or even on occasions LTG. It seems part of a process large organisations have to go through and is often treated by the recipients with a fair degree of cynicism.

According to the Oxford Dictionary consult means to take into account and consider people's feelings or seek permission or approval for a proposed action. In my experience that latter definition rarely applies when it relates to a large organisation. A case in point is Arts Council England's consultation on shaping a new strategy for the next 10 years (2020 – 2030). I went to there well attended consultation meeting at the Barbican in London. It was one of a series of meetings that they held throughout England.

The problem with the meeting was that you were presented with a consultation document that largely defined the subjects you were allowed to discuss. You were then divided into small groups of seven or eight to "brain storm" their consultation document. There was of course a short reporting back session but by that time ideas had been diluted to a few headline comments. Radical suggestions for a change of approach were effectively ruled out.

Although I may sound critical of the approach, I have attended a few other consultations and their approach was fairly standard. I also recognise they do much good work in supporting cultural life in England. It is a very effective way of managing the discussion and preventing a united opposition to the proposal being made. In general, such consultations will accept comments on points of detail but not the central proposal.

For the Arts Council the consultation has now been completed and we expect to hear what they have heard in the spring. In a written submission to the Arts Council I argued for three initiatives. They should become less London centric, greater support should be given to the amateur sector and diversity should be approached with a sense of proportion.

My reasoning is along the following lines. By far the largest slice of Arts Council funding goes to the 829 National Portfolio Organisations (NPO). This currently amounts to £408m per year with 36% of NPO's based in London and they account for 24% of all NPO funding. To put this in context London only has approximately 16% of England's population.

When it comes to the amateur sector, they receive very little. I have been unable to find an exact figure, but as they do not mention the amount, I think it is fair to assume it is small. Yet this sector makes a major contribution to the cultural life of the country. In the case of LTG, Robert Gill who has conducted an analysis of the figures in our Yearbook has estimated that in 2017 (latest figures available) our theatres put on approximately 6,800 performances. In many smaller communities the LTG theatre is the cultural hub.

Finally, greater diversity is something to be welcomed. We probably all recognise that our theatres only reach a very small

percentage of the population and they tend to be the more affluent. That is, of course, no different to the professional theatre. A sense of proportion is required when it comes to ethnicity and it is well to remember according to the 2011 Census 86.6% of the population of England and Wales was white. That is not to say we should not encourage greater diversity in our theatres but proportionality is important.

Each year LTG holds a National Conference which as well as being a great social occasion also provides an excellent opportunity to network and discuss matters of mutual interest. This year our conference is being held from 29 – 31 March at the Highbury Theatre Centre, Sutton Coldfield, which is close to Birmingham. They have arranged an excellent programme of Workshops and entertainment. The workshops include a "Celebration of Amateur Dramatics" and a keynote address by Natalie Haynes who is the star of the BBS Radio 4 Series stand up for the classics. On Saturday night there is the opportunity to see Rules for Living by Sam Holcraft which is a dark comedy about family dysfunction and societal norms.

The total cost for everything for the weekend, including meals but not accommodation, is only £52 which represents excellent value for money.

At first sight defibrillators and our theatres do not have much in common. Yet 5.9m people in England are living with a cardiovascular disease. It is quite likely some of your members and audience will suffer from this condition and could suffer a heart attack in your theatre. In this situation a defibrillator could literally be a life saver.

The encouraging news is that defibrillators are now designed to be used by lay persons. The machine guides the operator through the process by verbal instructions and visual prompts. They are also safe and will not allow a shock to be given unless the heart's rhythm requires it. They are designed to be inactive for long periods of time and require very little routine maintenance. I'm grateful to the British Heart Foundation for providing this information on their website.

While not wishing to endorse Amazon, I did google them to see what a defibrillator would cost. The cheapest one they have is for £940. This is certainly not a recommendation and every theatre would wish to undertake its own evaluation but at least it gives an indication of cost.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to wish every one of you a successful and rewarding season.

Mike Smith



Cecily Berry

Many of your newsletters contained tributes to Cecily Berry. Thanks to Market Harborough for this obituary.

A world famous voice director, who worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company for 45 years, Cecily transformed the way actors work. She swept aside traditional ideas of elocution in favour of a deeply physical approach to speaking lines. Olivier, Judi Dench, Ian McKellen and Samuel L. Jackson were among those who sought her help; so did several leading politicians. She believed that great writers—Shakespeare above all—conveyed meaning not just in words but in rhythms, and that actors should act as much from the gut as the head. They needed to feel the rhythm of the script in their bodies. So actors were given very physical things to do while they were rehearsing speeches.

One of her favourite quotes was from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*: "Where words prevail not, violence prevails." "There is no right way," as the director Peter Brook put in his introduction to her first book, *Voice and Actor* (1973). "There are only a million wrong ways, which are wrong because they deny what would otherwise be affirmed."

Berry's *Text In Action* (2001) explores the fascinating topic of the ways in which speech is subject to changing fashions and how this can influence the actor's performance. Her exercises became the stuff of legend, although to some they must have seemed bizarre. Her plays included making actors kick chairs, assemble piles of books, sketch houses and stutter as they uttered some of the most famous lines in the English language. The objective was to eradicate self-consciousness and make the speaking of verse as natural and spontaneous as a physical movement.

From the age of eight—when she read reports about the Spanish Civil War and declared herself a communist—Berry was committed to left-wing causes. Theatre, she argued, was a place not just for entertainment, but for social change; and having a confident voice was essential to success in life. She taught in schools and prisons, and travelled to Rio de Janeiro in her 70's, where she worked with a youth group in a Favela, even as gunshots echoed outside.

She continued to work until a few years before her death. Her husband, the actor Harry Moore, died in 1978. She is survived by her two sons.

Sources: *The Guardian* and *The Week* newspapers.

Three years ago I had the good fortune to attend one of her seminars at the RSC and was fascinated by the personality and energy oozing out of this small person. (Editor)



The Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre hosts Martin McDonagh (right) at the amateur premiere of *Hangmen* with Marston York who plays Harry.

Director Andy Briggs writes:

On 19 January 2018 I was informed that the rights to *Hangmen* by the great Martin McDonagh had been released. One year later, on 19 January 2019, my amateur première production at The Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre had its final performance. Synchronicity.

We at the Whitworth are incredibly lucky to have our own well-appointed theatre. We present nine main productions a year and one youth group production. Generally our rehearsal period is six weeks. Three weeks in our studio then three weeks on stage. However, the challenges of this particular production presented themselves way before rehearsals started.

First, the setting. To design and create three full sets in three weeks on stage over Christmas was daunting, but it was a challenge our technical team rose to admirably. Opening in a grim execution cell, transforming into a large, tired old pub in Oldham complete with working beer pumps, and then to a greasy-spoon café, the sets had to be transformed three times a night as quickly and silently as humanly possible. Quite rightly I was so pleased for my cast, who were also my crew that the transitions received a nightly round of applause.

The final weeks of rehearsals were technically the most challenging, particularly the safety perspective of hanging two actors nightly. The idea of having sixteen actors for a run of eight performances and just killing them each night was mooted, but was reasonably quickly discarded.

The first hanging, an execution with noose and trap door, presented many problems: working at a height of eight feet to create the drop; creating a trap that could be walked on then opened mid-action for the actor to fall through; and ensuring a safe landing. This was achieved by creating an authentic looking executioner's noose with 'break away' element to ensure there was no chance it would tighten and end up doing the job for which it was intended.

The second hanging, a reveal from behind a curtain, had its own problems. In the action, the actor is placed on a chair and a noose put around his neck. He is then obscured by a curtain, which is later pulled back to reveal him dangling by his neck. To create this effect we employed the professional theatrical flying team, Flying By Foy who installed the equipment and trained everyone involved.

Once both hanging effects were created it was then absolutely vital to ensure stringent risk assessments were undertaken and our theatre insurers were made aware of the stunts being performed. I have nothing but admiration for the two young actors concerned, along with my stage manager and crew. The trust they shared; an incredible job.

This play is going to be very popular and I have no hesitation in recommending Foy's services. However, I would advise any company considering *Hangmen* to think long and hard about it. These effects cannot be taken lightly and the team had some sleepless nights during the process.

The week of performances was extremely gratifying with much fantastic positive feedback. Then all too quickly it was our closing night. To have Matthew Dunster, the original director from *The Royal Court* production, and his wife attend was incredibly special. Then to turn around and be face to face with the great man himself, Martin McDonagh, was extraordinary. Being confronted by someone I greatly admire, I was very cool and composed and I think I styled it out brilliantly; what came out of my mouth next was 'Oh FLIP me!!!' But 'FLIP' wasn't the word used!!

I have never been more nervous about audience members watching a production of mine. However, I needn't have worried at all. They were so incredibly kind and generous. They stayed and chatted to cast and technical team afterwards and the fact that these two talented, busy men took the time and trouble to come and see our show was very humbling.

Later that evening my team presented me with a script signed by Matthew Dunster. Then there was an inscription, which read "To Andy, That was honestly brilliant! Congrats mate! Martin McDonagh".

Andy's response? "Martin McDonagh called ME mate! What a pay-off for all the hard work over the previous six weeks."

SPOTLIGHT ON...



Carlisle Green Room have every reason to be feeling pleased.

John Metcalfe writes: Jack McNeill was one of our Pinnochios when we did this pantomime years ago. Jack is at present appearing in one of the No.1 Pantos in the Theatre Royal, Nottingham, one of the country's best touring theatres; and, where, incidentally I first became an avid theatregoer while spending holidays

with an aunt and uncle who lived there. Not only is Jack appearing IN Peter Pan, he IS Peter Pan! And he's been getting very good reviews.... so well done and congratulations to Jack.

Transfer from The Fringe to London

Congratulations to members Michael Spencer (author) and Lexie Ward (director) on the transfer of **The Highly Suspect Theatre Company** production of *We Know Now Snowmen Exist* to London. It had its début at the Carlisle Fringe last year, where it won the Creative Spark Commission for New Drama. The production, complete with the original cast, will be appearing at The Space in London from March 19th to 23rd. Tickets are

£14/£10. Details can be obtained from The Space website - <https://space.org.uk/event/we-know-now-snowmen-exist>

AND THAT'S NOT ALL

Presidential Visit (no! Not Trump!)

2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the visit of United States President Woodrow Wilson to Carlisle to visit his mother's birth place. On December 29th (the anniversary of the visit), Club members Eva Cook and Simon Brown helped The Woodrow Wilson Society recreate this event by playing the parts of the President and his First Lady and visiting various places in Carlisle.

Top 10 Most-Performed Plays of 2018

2018 saw the thirtieth anniversary of Nick Hern Books – and it was certainly a year to remember, with more plays published than in any previous year in the company's history, a shelf-load of awards, and the inaugural Amateur Theatre Fest in September. Plus, we licensed many brilliant productions of Nick Hern Books' plays to amateur companies up and down the country, and further afield. We've done some number-crunching, and can now announce our official Top 10 Most-Performed Plays of 2018, together with some of our favourite posters from the productions we've licensed over the year..

1. **Nell Gwynn** Jessica Swale
2. **Blue Stockings** Jessica Swale
3. **Ladies Day** Amanda Whittington
4. **Hound of the Baskervilles** Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
5. **Thrill of Love** Amanda Whittington
6. **Jerusalem** Jez Butterworth
7. **Arabian Nights** Dominic Cooke
8. **Handbagged** Moira Buffini
9. **Be My Baby** Amanda Whittington
10. **Railway Children** E Nesbitt



Congratulations go to the following LTG Theatres for best posters:

Chorley Little Theatre - Be My Baby

Nantwich Players - Thrill of Love

Doncaster Little Theatre - The Railway Children

Chads - Handbagged

THEATRE HELPLINE

Please make your members aware of the launch of the Theatre Helpline, a significant part of UK Theatre and SOLT's work to encourage safe and supportive working practices in theatre.

This is a free and confidential support available 24/7 to ANYONE working in theatre and the performing arts in the UK.

Theatre Helpline provides advice and support on your challenges inc.

- Bullying or harassment
- Health issues including mental health
- Injury and mobility issues
- Issues with employment or unemployment
- Career issues
- Retirement
- Debt and financial issues

This initiative is being funded for one year – as a pilot. During this year usage will be monitored and then a decision made about whether further support is necessary.

Theatre Helpline
0800 915 4617 or email advice@theatrehelpline.org

CHADS THEATRE CENTENARY PROJECT

The Cheadle Hulme Amateur Dramatic Society (as CHADS was originally known) evolved from an informal dramatic group run by members of the Cheadle Hulme Cricket, Bowling and Tennis Club just after the first world war. Productions were mounted in the Parish Hall and later in the local cinema.

In the early 1950's it was decided to build a theatre and in preparation for this, a long-term lease was taken out on plot of land. The theatre building was completed in 1959. A number of improvements have taken place since then, notably a raked auditorium floor and the addition of an extension which incorporated a rehearsal room. In 2012 we installed a lighting rig to enable the rehearsal room to be used as a studio theatre.

The 1959 building incorporated an asbestos roof and over the years this roof had deteriorated to such an extent that we were becoming increasingly concerned about its ability to last.

About eight years ago we started to talk seriously about replacing the roof and consider how we could treat the replacement as an opportunity to enhance the theatre. Since the stage lighting installation was integrated into the existing roof structure, a new lighting rig would be an integral part the replacement project. We also considered the option of building fly tower. Initial cost estimates were carried out and it became clear that we did not have sufficient internal funds to cover the projected costs.

We approached several organisations who were known for funding projects such as ours and were successful with two- the Garfield Weston Foundation and the Foyle Foundation. Even with their support we were still looking at taking out a loan. By 2017 we had a good idea of what the scheme would look like (the idea of a fly tower was abandoned owing to significant cost and limited potential use). We therefore arrived at a project budget of circa £300,000, two thirds of which would be funded by internally generated funds. As well as a commercial loan from NatWest Bank we asked our members to support the project by loaning what they could spare to CHADS for 3 years. This was well supported and raised £23,000 to help with cashflow over the project timescale.

The project commenced in April 2018. In order to accommodate realistic timescales for the project two production slots normally used for main stage productions were switched to the studio.

A project team of five members was established to oversee the project comprising the chairman of the executive, a project manager (who is professionally involved in the building trade,) a qualified architect, Chads treasurer and the head of lighting. The chairman of the executive committee was the official customer for the project for purposes of the contract and guided by the architect, the legal requirements of the Health and Safety executive Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015 (CDM 2015). Finances were tightly managed with expenditure monitored against the project budget and weekly cash flow forecasts produced. Formal purchase orders were placed for all significant items. The team used a WhatsApp group to enable rapid communication. The regular meetings of the project team were lively affairs with the chairman frequently questioning various aspects of the project (for example the need for joint insurance with the contractor and progress on the bank loan).

Successful completion of the project was heavily reliant on members carrying out multiple tasks both skilled and unskilled. For example, one new member (84 years old!) carried out a lot of the electrical work.

The new roof line is significantly higher which gives us more height above the stage with more scope for multi-level sets. We have also dispensed with the ceiling in the auditorium which again gives us more height and better front of house lighting positions.

The opportunity was taken to install an air conditioning system and dispense with our old and inefficient storage heaters.

The new lighting rig incorporates a grid above the stage with the potential to be lowered to stage level- it is equipped with 96 dimmer channels and enables use of LED fixtures (when funds permit!). We were fortunate to receive a grant from the Manchester Airport Community Fund for a new lighting console.

A significant challenge was protecting the auditorium seating, carpet and walls from water damage since the building would be open to the elements for several weeks. Covering with plastic sheeting was a laborious process. For the first few weeks the weather was scorching but inevitably it changed and we spent many hours pumping water out of the auditorium (not a very pleasant task). In spite of all this effort, the carpet was in a poor state and had to be replaced which has improved the appearance of the auditorium immensely.

As is almost inevitable with building projects, things ran late and it was a rush to get the theatre ready for the first main stage production (the heating and ventilation system was still being installed on the day of the first night!).

We are scheduled to hold the Northern Conference in 2020 (our centenary year)-we hope many of you will visit us to see for yourselves what we have achieved.

Further images can be seen in the videos which were used to keep the membership informed of progress and encourage fundraising.



These photos show how the 1950s roof has deteriorated and is in need of replacement.

THEATRES TRUST NEWS...

Protecting
theatres for
everyone

Theatres
Trust



Last year we announced 25 influential Ambassadors who would work with us to ensure the UK's theatres are protected and secured for future generations to enjoy.



*Theatre Trust Trustees and Ambassadors
L to R Gary Kemp, Samira Ahmed, Jo Brand,
Beverley Knight and Dara O'Brian*

One of the questions we asked Alan Ayckbourn another of our Ambassadors was ... Has the role theatres play in society changed and how do you see them now?

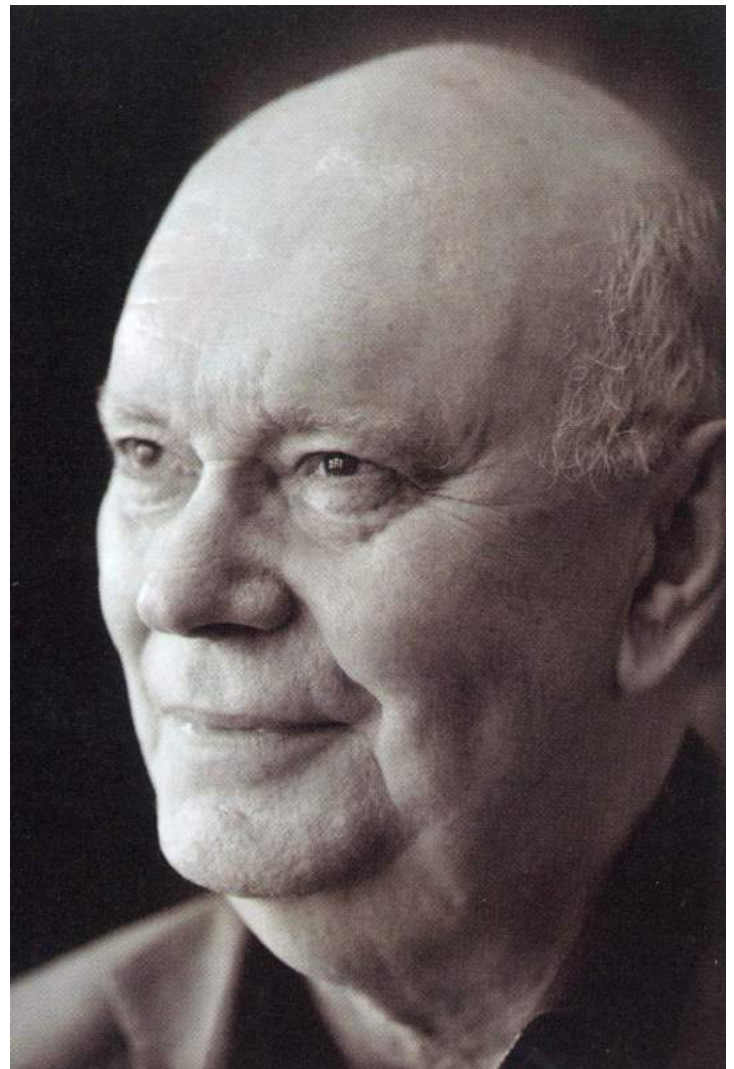
Very much, and in my view for the better. A preponderance of weekly rep dominated the theatre scene in my early days with many provincial centres being offered a stream of hastily-produced, under-rehearsed productions offering a pre-television audience a weekly diet of rotating comedies, dramas or light classics forty-eight weeks of the year with the much needed relief of a four week panto at Christmas. (I recall my first bitter experience of the latter was when I found my meagre salary had suffered a reduction during to our not working on Christmas Day!) Considering the unremitting schedule and heavy demands made of both performers and stage management it was, in hindsight, remarkable that the standard was as high as it was.

But, with the mass spread of TV, theatre regionally was forced to examine its role in the community and reinvent itself, reverting to its original role becoming more than a mere purveyor of entertainment, but also to inform, educate and provide a forum for discussion

– whilst still entertaining of course! Quite a brief. Whilst the West End's commercial wing retreated, in the main, to large scale musical spectaculars with commensurately increased ticket prices!

We also asked him to choose his favourite theatre:

Is there any doubt where my heart lies? The Stephen Joseph is for me the perfect round space which we, the company, virtually had built to order for us utilizing the best of all we'd learned from our previous buildings: not too big, not too small, and with the audience sitting all around in the same room, sharing the performance with performers and each other. A truly magic space.



I was in the theatre for a sold out matinee of Arrivals and Departures. A wonderful experience. I had taken along a friend who was new to theatre-going. She was hooked after that! Still trying to persuade my own theatre to put this play into our season. (Editor)

NEWS FROM MICHAEL SHIPLEY

Emeritus Editor



Here are my jottings for the end of 2018. I don't get much LTG news these days, so enjoy tagging on to national theatre news which I think can, and should, be of interest to readers.

"Brexit is like a Premier League side wanting to be relegated". (William Keegan, *The Observer*)

"Here the smell of blood still. Not all the sweet perfumes of Arabia will sweeten this hand", bewails Lady Macbeth as she confronts her guilt." (A comment on the crisis in Saudi Arabia, following the murder of Khashoggi)

Patience is a Virtue

Members of **Chesil Theatre, Winchester** must really feel that as the years roll along, they might never see their promised theatre extension, so prolonged are the negotiations to achieve it. There is still an agreement to sell the land for the planned extension with neighbouring St John's Winchester Charity, but difficulties with the City Planners over the wider scope of the plans are still holding things up. "We now have outline agreement from St John's, in principle for approximate dimensions of our annexe", wrote Chairman Martin Humphrey at the recent AGM. "Our more detailed need to be agreed with St John's before we can submit those for planning permission to the city planners. I am confident that when the permission is achieved for both parties St John's will honour their agreement to sell us our annexe. We thank the team for all the many hours and days that they have poured into the project so far. Many more hours are still required before we achieve our objective".

More Ambitious Plans

According to the Theatres Trust, **Chester Little Theatre** is supported by the Trust with the new plans to provide an extension to the theatre to enhance wheelchair accessibility and improve access to the theatre's first floor. News of details of these ambitious plans are awaited!

Are you up to the date with the latest?

Theatre reviewer and critic Michael Billington at *The Guardian* works hard to make sure that theatre buffs are kept up to date with the latest news, even if most of this news comes out of the metropolis rather than the provinces. It was, therefore, a little bit of a surprise to learn of the latest new play to arrive from the new theatre, the Bridge Theatre near to Tower Bridge in London, without the usual advance gossip and puffing, typical of the fuss this week's premiere for the new Mike Leigh *Peterloo* film. So it was gratifying to read of the excellent review of **Martin McDonagh's** new play **A Very Very Very Dark Matter**. Surprise, surprise? This play is calculated to offend! "I found this gothic fantasy macabre, funny and ultimately serious. The link between literary plagiarism (the main character is Hans Christian Andersen) and genocidal oppression in the Congo (the other main character is Marjorie, a minute Congolese woman) is a risky one, but you see what McDonagh is driving at: that throughout history certain voices have gone unheard and the past has been forgotten. But McDonagh camouflages his argument with a wild inventiveness realised in his previous play, *Hangmen*. It's a play you will either like or loathe. For me it confirms that McDonagh is a genuine original with a talent to disturb".

Another new play that caught my eye was **I and You** by **Lauren Gunderson**, at Hampstead Theatre. "Scarcely known in Britain, she was the most produced living playwright in the USA last year". So I presume we will be learning quite a bit more from her, though this show was not exactly earth shattering according to the review!

But more popular than new plays are **classy revivals** – indeed, LTG Annual Reviews tell us that revivals are almost the only reason of our existence! Take this recent review of **The Madness of George III** in the Nottingham Playhouse by Kate Maltby: "Why revive this play now? It is clearly a perfect star vehicle for Mark Gatiss. But lines that might provide resonances to 2018 – a government consumed by constitutional stalemate or the leader of the western world an imbecile – are thrown away or undeveloped. Nevertheless, this is a technically excellent production of a modern classic".

Cicely Berry

The news has just come in about the death of Cicely Berry at the age of 92. She was "the best-known voice coach of her generation, although the term vastly underrates what she did. Speaking, for

Berry, was 'part of a whole: an expression of inner life'. One of her favourite quotes was: 'Where words prevail not, violence prevails'. Technique to her was a myth because there is no such thing as a correct voice. There is no right way." Working at the RSC in Stratford since 1969, there can be very few actors who failed to benefit from her tuition and experience, and indeed if there is a 'house style' for the RSC, then it was created by Cicely Berry. Her fame and influence extended world-wide, and especially in the USA, where the American theatrical techniques using the body and emotions were so different from those used in British classical styles. She is quoted: "I see my job as intrinsically to do the following – through exercises to open out the voice itself so that the actor finds his/her true potential – after all, do not singers train?" Those of us who met Cicely Berry, and many of her disciples, on attending sessions promoted by the LTG, have great reason to be grateful.

Cross Gender Casting

Going to the RSC LIVE production of *Troilus and Cressida* at Stratford on 12th November, we were told that this would be an important show because the casting was going to be 50/50 casting across the board. So, important characters like Agamemnon and Ulysses as well as many lesser characters were to be cast by women, as well as Cassandra playing the role as the first actor at the RSC to be totally deaf and without speech. There have been similar experiments in the past of course, but this was meant to be special. Did the performances contribute something special that was epoch making? Very hard to say. As the Trojans and Greeks were largely muscle-bound beefy male actors, the power of Ulysses and Agamemnon as women did not seem to match them at all, except perhaps for the arguments about the politics! Most successful was Sheila Reid as a diminutive Thersites, a difficult role very hard to pull off. So these experiments are always interesting, and usually enjoy some degree of success, but hopefully they only surface every decade or so. And when they fail they leave a very sad taste in the memory. So let us remember some of the better examples, like the all-male *As You Like It* in the 1960s, and the recent all female *Julius Caesar*. For me, the 1960 traditional Stratford production of *Troilus and Cressida* in the sun-baked sand-pit of ancient Troy is the memory for me to treasure. On the next question of equality colour casting, for some the argument also has still to be won. Perhaps another article?

Ian McKellen's 80th birthday tour is truly national theatre

This is from the editorial in *The Guardian* on 17th November: "Many people seek unusual ways to celebrate a big birthday, but it's unlikely that anyone has beaten Sir Ian McKellen to the idea of marking 80 years on this earth with an 80-stop theatre tour of the country of their birth. He found something personal to say about each venue; if any proof were needed that his affection is returned, well over half the dates have sold out, within a week of him announcing them". The tour begins in January at his local theatre in the East End, and ends at the Olivier at the National. On 25th May, at 8:30pm 80 years to the minute after he arrived into the world he will be on stage at **Bolton's** Albert Halls Theatre, with additional visits to Burnley's Empire Theatre and Wigan's Little Theatre to consolidate his personal connections with the three towns. "Sir Ian's tour is a testament to the enduring vigour of the acting community that once filled them, and the way it sustains itself through generations. He has said that growing up in Lancashire, he was grateful to companies who toured beyond London and has always enjoyed repaying that debt". This is a comment that is fully endorsed by so many LTG companies who had the chance to meet Sir Ian on his many visits to their theatres while he served as Patron of the LTG for 10 years!

No surprise that a week later, almost all tickets had been sold out! "I can think of no better celebration of national treasures than Ian McKellen's 80th birthday tour, taking 'a lifetime of accumulating skill back to the people, wherever they may be'. Both he and our theatres deserve the accolade but here in the wilds of Essex both dates, in Hornchurch and Colchester, sold out in minutes. **Since there's nothing like a comeback, can I make a plea now for his encore tour to take in our local theatre?**", wrote a disappointed reader in *The Guardian*. Another reader commented: "Ian McKellen is taking no fees for his tour of 80 theatres. Each theatre sets their own ticket prices so that they can use the funds generated to improve the facilities for their audiences. The suggestion that, at the age of 80, Sir Ian do an encore tour of any length would involve him working even further past the age by which most people would have retired. Some by sometimes like 20 years".

Evening Standard Awards

The popular awards were held at Drury Lane Theatre on 18th November. No surprise winners perhaps. **Best actor** and **actress** were Ralph Fiennes and Sophie Okonedo for their roles in *Antony and Cleopatra* at the National Theatre. **Best play** was *The Inheritance* by Matthew Lopez, also at the National, while **Best Musical** was won by *Hamilton*, at the Victoria Palace, with Rosalie Craig winning the award for **Best Musical Performance** for *Company* at the Gielgud Theatre. **Best Director** award went to Marianne Elliott



for *Company*, and **most promising playwright** went to Natasha Gordon for her play *Nine Night* also at the National. Sir Cameron Mackintosh received a special award for his contribution to musical theatre, while a new award was made, as a tribute to the theatre's 'behind the scenes' heroes, this year for the job of **the dresser!**

"Premium ticket prices for West End shows rise 19% on average"

The news from the latest survey from *The Stage* is worrying, particularly for those of us who like to take in a show every so often in the West End. For top-end shows, the average is now £117.52 per person. On the other hand, the average for the cheapest tickets has fallen by 9.7% to £19.31. Top prices in the subsidised sector are also increasing. The average top end ticket price is £76.94 an increase of 30%. And we are told, moves to cut the secondary ticket market are also having an effect. "Money is staying in the theatre and going back to the people who are creating the shows and casts and creatives in a way it didn't used to". Whichever and whatever, **your local LTG theatre obviously continues to offer you good value for money!**

Those lists – do you care?

It is Christmas time soon, and once again the critics pontificate on the best shows they have seen over the last 12 months. Michael Billington this year has limited his choices and only 7 of his choices came from the West End! He found room for a visit to Chichester, Stratford and Manchester! So, for what they are worth, here are his choices:

The Height of the Storm, Florian Zeller
The Watsons, Laura Wade

Young Ambassador's Scheme

A report from Kevin Spence who continues to work for opportunities for young people in theatre.

Sat November 3rd 2018 Crescent Theatre, Birmingham 12 noon – 5pm.

This successful inaugural meeting took place as a first step in an ongoing initiative to engage more constructively with LTG members around the country between the ages of 16 and 25.

Young people from Birmingham Crescent, Stockport Garrick, Nottingham Lacemarket, Grove Park, Wrexham, Rugby and Chester took part. The first thing to note is that if these young people are a typical example of the ones involved in our theatres, not only are they clearly highly intelligent and talented, but also individuals of whom we

should all be very proud. The future of our theatres and the LTG should be safe in their hands.

With the kind help and support of Jackie Blackwood, Andre Lowrie and all colleagues at Birmingham Crescent, the young people were provided with a structured list of issues to discuss, and they were invited to think 'outside the box' and to come forward with lots of useful ideas about their roles in their theatres and the LTG, now and in the future. They did not disappoint!

Key points to consider:

1. We all need to be concerned that most of the delegates had not (until recently) heard of the LTG and what it does! LTG Reps, please note!
2. In our theatres they would like to see:
 - a) more mature shows for older students to be involved in.
 - b) more opportunities to 'shadow' adults with key responsibilities with a view to being allowed to have more responsibility themselves.

c) more collaboration between theatres, especially in respect of young people. They suggested a competitive showcase between LTG theatres of young people's work, for example.

3. Our young people are also looking to us for help and support in the following areas:

- a) 'greater exposure to plays'.
- b) attending workshops given by respected industry practitioners
- c) support for getting places at drama school, especially help with auditions
- d) help to locate cheap/free seats at regional/national producing houses.

....and much, much more!

The LTG National Committee are now planning our next steps in this consultative process. We will be providing more detail at our forthcoming National Conference at Highbury Theatre at the end of March.

Kevin Spence

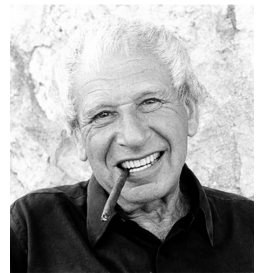
The Lehman Trilogy, S Massini/Ben Power
The Inheritance, Matthew Lopez
Company, Stephen Sondheim

and the best of the rest were *John*, *Nine Night*, *Tamburlaine*, *The Producers*, and *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*.

Ralph Koltai

The renowned designer has died at 94. Those of us who lived through the glory days of the RSC, Covent Garden, ENO, and the NT found his work inspirational, and truly memorable. He invariably found visual images on the stage that stimulated audiences, perhaps way beyond the worth of the piece of theatre itself! Going to the theatre in the 60s, 70s and 80s was a stimulating artistic experience, and often the memory of a great production is bound up with the visual imagery created by Koltai. I particularly remember the designs for Wagner's *Ring* in the '70s for ENO which have not been excelled in any subsequent productions of Wagner that I have seen.

Then just after Christmas came the news of the death of the now forgotten composer **Galt MacDermot**, a man immortalised by just one great show, the musical **Hair** of 1967. *The Age of Aquarius* carried a whole generation into new worlds of unparalleled excitement! No wonder that those of us who shared the experiences of the first production never forget it!



Priory People: Pete Horton

As part of the recent discussions on membership one area that came up time and again was the issue of communications. Who does what and where is it done and how can we help? So in forthcoming Priory Newsletters we are going to profile some of our members and what they do to help within the theatre. Following on from our last production - *QUARTET* - there was universal praise for the detailed painting of the set. The view into the garden and the portraits of all the worthy composers were all done by "Pete the Painter" and so it seems fitting that he is the first under the microscope.

Pete Horton

Pete has been a member for about four years and during this time has contributed to set building and more particularly to the detailed painting of backdrop scenes, specific pieces of furniture, portraits and those unique items that "props team" ask for. Here you can see Pete on the set of *Quartet* and his amazing landscape through french windows.

He retired as a Voice and Data Engineer with Virgin in 2009 and has painted for the Criterion and the Loft. He started painting as a nine year old and just does it for fun but he does like to have a reason for painting. His talent is obvious and I am sure you will agree he

has a really special gift. As well as his painting hobby Pete is a keen pilot and likes nothing better than to take to the skies and if anyone would like then just contact Pete.

His favourite plays at the Priory are the Pantomimes and no doubt if you look somewhere on the set of *Puss in Boots* you will be able to see some of his work.

Watch this space for the next Priory Persons Profile!

Nigel Macbeth



J. B. Priestley and Amateur Theatre

Tony Rushworth is a long standing member of The Questors, a published playwright and for many years a GODA Adjudicator. He is now an Honorary Member of this august body.

Quite by accident I came across 'English Journey' by J. B. Priestley - it was published in 1934 and records his journey across England in 1933. The section that especially interested me was called 'To the West Riding' and specifically his observations on Bradford and the growth of the amateur theatre movement. Priestley became the president of the Bradford Civic Theatre which was one of the early members of The Little Theatre Guild: it was much later called the Bradford Playhouse but sadly closed some years ago. As a young man I acted and directed there and saw many of its productions. For me it was an inspirational venue which introduced me to new and often non-commercial plays as well as adventurous productions. The weekly Rep Company at the Princes Theatre played the commercial repertoire.

Priestley writes:

'I do not think that my own personal interest in the theatre is deluding me when I declare that this amateur dramatic movement is of immense social importance.

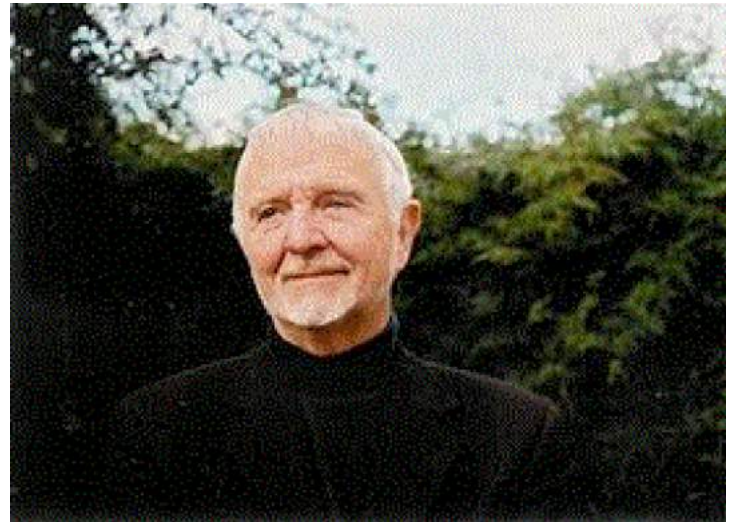
The people who work for these theatres are not by any means people who want to kill time, they are generally

hard-working men and women whose evenings are precious to them... and they are tremendously enthusiastic. These theatres are very small and have to fight for their very existence but the more I have seen of industrial England the more I am convinced that it would be easier to under-estimate than over-estimate their significance. I see them as little camp fires twinkling in a great darkness....theatres that have opened little windows into a world of ideas, colour, fine movement, exquisite drama, have kept going a stir of thought and imagination for actors, helpers and audiences.'

These are inspirational words which some eighty-six years later are worth reflecting on.

Tony Rushforth

The Questors Theatre



BIG AMATEUR WEEKEND

On December 21st we had an email from Ian Wainwright, Producer RSC Shakespeare Nation, inviting us to apply for an unforgettable theatre experience at The Other Place, Stratford on Saturday and Sunday February 16th and 17th. We hope that some of you received details in time for you to consider attending. Going along will be Kevin Spence so look out for him there.



THE KEVIN SPENCE COLUMN

BRITAIN'S GOT (CREATIVE) TALENT!



Doncaster Little Theatre has recently completed a short-run production of Steven Berkoff's **EAST** – and all credit to them for reviving a play which although unbelievably over 40 years old still comes up as fresh as paint in its ability to confront and challenge the audience. The

cast included three young actors, two men and one woman, who attacked their parts with all the energy and verve that a Berkoff play requires, though how they could relate to the life of working-class Jews in the East End of the generation of Berkoff and Pinter is hard to fathom. What was refreshing to see however, was that they had found a unique theatre practitioner whose work they clearly enjoyed. It was lovely to chat to them after the show. I have got to know them as they have been around the local theatre scene for a while. Recent events both locally and nationally have got me thinking about the direction in which these young people might go in pursuance of their creative dreams. I wonder how many of you reading this can identify young people in and around your own theatre who share many of the characteristics I am about to describe. I come across lots of them.

They tend to have done well at school, but not exceptionally so. They have always identified as creative, and will often want to write, act and direct. They have often performed well at A Level or BTEC, but have only managed to get places on the kind of Performing Arts courses/degrees recently criticised by the Head of OFSTED, Amanda Spielman, and even supported in this view by such theatre luminaries as Lyn Gardner. They are usually from low to medium income families and tend to be almost exclusively white. They often do not have friends from other ethnic backgrounds because they do not meet them where they live. They are largely socially liberal, but not necessarily heavily politically engaged. Their drama influences are drawn largely from film and TV, particularly Netflix and other streaming platforms – and it shows in their ideas about acting. They are very Facebook and Twitter savvy, will make short film, vlogs etc but not have much knowledge of theatre because they were not taken by their schools or parents and nor did their schools perform anything but a yearly musical to exploit the talents off those who could dance and sing. Whatever FE or HE course they have done, they have alarming gaps in their knowledge, particularly if they have done a performance-based course. For example, they can easily get through a three –year course and not encounter Berkoff or other post-war practitioners, let alone Shakespeare. I even mentored a recent actor from this background on Brecht, as he had secured a professional role in what turned out to be a highly acclaimed production of one of Brecht's greatest plays.

Such young people will often tell you without blushing that they do not like theatre, even when you tell them there are ways by which they can make tickets financially affordable if they are under 25. They will often tell you that their experience of non-musical theatre has been boring and difficult to relate to. If they are lucky enough to live close to an LTG theatre, they often find it difficult to relate to the kind of play selections which our theatres go for, but overcome these doubts because of their great desire to perform – even more so because they are now too old to be in the

youth theatre. Occasionally this pays dividends, because they will discover a new play, writer or style they never knew existed and that they thoroughly enjoy. Nevertheless, they will often remain directionless and frustrated because they cannot express themselves creatively in a way that they wish to – and do not have the means or the expertise to know how to fix their problem.



They will tend to drift into meaningless work in their home town, because they cannot afford to move away from parents and branch out on their own. On the plus side, if they are graduates, they are unlikely to ever have to repay their student loans because they will not have the income to require them to do so. They are often terrifyingly talented but often they do not want the advice of older LTG members or other mentors, because they do not like what they hear. Sometimes they discover others like themselves on Facebook or other social media, and coalesce into a little creative group. They will hang out together, have fun and sometimes even discuss the viability of setting up their own theatre group. They will even talk about developing their own work, philosophy and playing style and even think of taking something to the Edinburgh Festival – but are often floored by lack of finance, the constrictions of their employment, and their almost certain inability to get funding from anywhere. They certainly do not match easily with any of the Arts Council's current funding criteria. And in any case, when they do get fired up with a creative project, it can often turn out to be something which has great difficulty in finding an audience.

Is it too extreme to refer to these young people as a potentially 'lost generation'?

Am I in danger of stereotyping or do you recognise them in and around your own theatre and locality? Do you manage to draw them in, inspire and challenge them – and if not, why not? I think this is really tricky for many LTG theatres whose audiences are predominantly over 50 and who consequently select plays to appeal to an older age group – and yet we all know that having younger, talented people in our membership is like gold dust! But even if they become a wonderful new asset to your theatre, the potential future lifeblood of your organisation, are they capable of more, a loss to the creative energy of the UK, a voice in our national creative future which will not be heard?

How many Albert Finneys, Tom Courtenays, Maxine Peakes and Julie Walters will remain undiscovered – and that is just in the field of acting alone.

If you think that what you have just read is an overstatement of a problem that does not exist around your theatre, that's fine! But if you recognise even some grain of truth in this article, then our wonderful theatres have another vital role in our communities to identify, motivate and help to fulfil the creative aspirations of these people. Maybe it is something to consider in your theatre business plan for 2019 and beyond.

Oh, and by the way, if you are worried that the young people in question will get their hands on an LTG newsletter and read this stuff about them, I doubt you need to be concerned. In my experience, LTG material tends not to be their reading matter of choice!

Kevin Spence

Some Recent Production Photos

Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre - *Hangmen*



Halifax Players - 2018 Panto



Studio Theatre Salisbury - *God of Carnage*



Southport Dramatic Club - *Godspell*



Southport Dramatic Club - *Handbagged*



Farnworth Little Theatre - *Mom's Gift*