

Newsletter

February 2020



NORTHERN REGION

CENTRAL REGION

SOUTHERN REGION

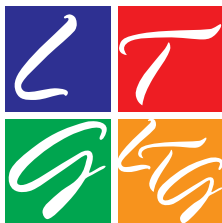
In This Issue

- Chairman's Final Letter P3
- Jottings from Michael Shipley P4
- Nothing Quite Like a Dame P8
- LTG National Conference P11

Vol.34 No.1 February 2020

Vol. 34 No. 1 Feb 2020

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

Articles for the LTG Newsletters 2020 deadlines for copy: May 10th, Aug 12th & Nov 6th

LTG Diary of Events

National Conference
Questors, Ealing April 17- 19th

Northern Conference
Chads 2020 Date tbc

Central Conference
Norbury Theatre, Droitwich February 22nd

New LTG Rep

Station Theatre, Hayling Island - Laura Duncan
hiya@hiads.org.uk

A Word from The Chairman of Carlisle Green Room

I attended the LTG Conference in Nantwich at the end of October and high on the list of 'must attend' workshops was one entitled **Adjudicators - What do they Know?**

I was there like a shot, as I knew this area is a hot topic at the moment. What I found

was interesting. It appears that there is a mixed feeling for the competitive kind of adjudication such as when entering a festival and an adjudication which is just an assessment of a particular play. Maybe we should adopt the latter at the Green Room.

Within this there is scope to have either a written adjudication sent to the company or to have a verbal adjudication delivered on the night of the performance after the show. Similar to the system used in a one act

festival. It was good to learn of the different possibilities.

Well I'm sure we can fill a whole edition of tales of adjudicators destroying the self confidence of many a budding newcomer, or sending an experienced actor off in a monumental sulk sometimes for the kindest of advice! Some cast can be affronted on account of others if they feel a comment is unfounded and sadly this can now easily explode onto social media. Not an easy job being an adjudicator!

A CONCORD THEATRICALS COMPANY || SAMUEL FRENCH ||

Well by now some of you will know that Samuel French has been taken over by Concord Theatricals Company. Fortunately the name lives on at Samuel French's Bookshop at The Royal Court Theatre.

When I was commiserating with the staff over

the death of a name that IS Amateur Theatre, I was reassured that Samuel French would survive **as an imprint of Concord Theatricals.**

Not being familiar with the expression *I don't know how to feel about that!*

Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain

www.littletheatreguild.org

National Secretary:
Caroline Chapman
Friar's Oak
24 Mill Farm Road
Hamsterley Mill
Tyne & Wear
NE39 1NW
Tel: 01207 545280
Email: caroline.chapman1816@gmail.com



Temporary Newsletter Editor:
Sandra Simpson
104 Albert Road West
Bolton
Lancs BL1 5ED

Tel: 01204 843631
Email: bls12@uwclub.net

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



A Final Letter from the Chairman

"It's one of the tragic ironies of the theatre that only one man in it can count on steady work – The Night Watchman". So said Tallulah Bankhead the American actress of the 1920s and 1930s.



The same might be said of LTG Chairmen who are now rotated every three years. That is a policy of which I very much approve. As this will be my last Chairman's Letter, I hope you will forgive a bit of reflection.

The first thing to say is being LTG Chairman has been a very enjoyable and rewarding experience. During my term I have attended approximately 12 national and regional conferences. I can honestly say I never get bored of them. I suppose I have become a conference junkie. They have three great attractions, the people you meet, the stage productions and the opportunity to visit places you would probably never have visited. The welcome at all these conferences has always been very warm and friendly and the productions of a uniformly high standard which does great credit to LTG. I now feel I qualify to become an Ambassador for Trip Advisor.

The position is of course much more than being a conference junkie. It is being part of the national committee team who are constantly trying to make positive changes in the way we operate and the benefits we can bring to our theatres. In the spirit of reflection, I thought it might be interesting to detail some of our more important initiatives.

At the start of my term, with the support and active involvement of the national committee, I was anxious we developed a Business Plan to act as a "route map" for the next three years. This covered most of the areas we are involved in from member benefits to communications and from Grey papers to finance. For each area we established a projected outcome, target and review date with the plan as a whole being reviewed on an annual basis. It is, therefore, very much a living document.

We have also taken the opportunity to review our Rules and make changes as appropriate. Changes were recommended and these were approved at our 2018 AGM at the People's Theatre in Newcastle. The most significant change was extending the term of office of the Chairman and Vice Chairman from two to three years. This has enabled longer term planning to become embedded and the job holders to become more familiar and confident in their positions.

Enhancing the benefits of LTG membership has always been a priority for the national committee. To

this end we have negotiated valuable discounts on play scripts from Samuel French, Nick Hern Books and Weinbergers. Depending on how many productions your theatre puts on in a season it can contribute or even meet the cost of the LTG subscription. The process of negotiating other benefits is ongoing.



A subject always under review is member communications. It is something very difficult to get right and like many other organisations we do sometimes get the criticism we don't know what is going on. Sometimes it is justified but not always. LTG has three main channels of communication, website, newsletter and yearbook. Certainly, when we held relationship meetings round the country the yearbook and newsletter were regarded as valuable and useful. It is fair to say our social media presence needs to be developed and this is something that will be looked at.

Many services we provide have been an LTG feature for years and none more so than our Grey papers. They provide summary details and early warning on legislation that will affect our theatres and also other related issues such as tax. These are very well received and often given as a reason for joining by new members. They are constantly being added to and are reviewed on an annual basis for accuracy and relevance.

I have been very fortunate in being supported by a dedicated and experienced national committee. Their great strength is that they all remain actively involved in their own theatres. This keeps us all well grounded and very aware of what it is like at the "coal face". I would like to thank each and every one of them for the support they have given me and the work they have undertaken which has made being chairman such an enjoyable experience.

I have been very fortunate to have as my Vice Chairman Jo Matthews from Questors Theatre. Many of you will know her and be aware of her undoubted abilities and knowledge of the theatre. I could not have asked for a more supportive and dedicated vice chairman. As under the LTG Rules she will automatically become chairman at this year's AGM, I have no hesitation in saying she will become a very worthy chairman.

Finally, could I thank you all for making the last three years such an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Mike Smith

More Jottings from Michael Shipley

A short piece from the photographer Dafydd Jones in a recent book, quoted in *The Oldie* recently: "I noticed how many of my pictures featured **people glued to their phones**. Old people, young people, mothers with children, workmen, cops, cyclists, everyone - in shops, in the streets, on the train, in galleries, in bars and restaurants, **everywhere**. I've even seen a man standing at a urinal, a phone cradled in his free hand."

A blast from the past!

It's time to look at the archives again, this time for **November 1989**, thirty years ago! There, on the first page, comes this pithy quote from the Newsletter from **Ilkley Playhouse**:

"Theatre is about taking risks and this is exciting. We climb mountains, dive under coral reefs, drive too fast - and put on plays - all for the risks, the sharp intake of breath, the racing pulse. Frankly I'm not a mountain climber; swimming for me is a highly overrated pastime and driving too fast is self-indulgent and anti-social - but putting on plays - that's the life and, boy, is it risky?"

Right from choosing the play, finding a director with a decent measure of imagination, creativity and flair, and selecting the cast (will they live up to it?); designing the set (will it work?); sending out publicity (will the audiences see it and be tempted?); - through all of this, we're risking everything."

And then on the very next paragraph the following caught my eye: "LTG REPS: so we no longer want to be correspondents or communicators! **We want to be Representatives!** This was the view of those meeting at Nottingham last November.

There can be a lot in a name. If the LTGs are keen to sell the benefits of the Guild to their Theatres, great! If they are ambassadors of their theatres to the Guild, even better. The process is two-way for mutual benefit."

Moving to page 2, the popularity parade (or **Top of the Pops**) of the plays chosen in the Guild was announced. The five most frequently performed authors in 1988/9 were Alan Ayckbourn, William Shakespeare, Noel Coward, Tom Stoppard, and Michael Frayn. The most frequently performed plays were *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *Noises Off*, *Chorus of Disapproval*, *84 Charing Cross Road*, and *On Golden Pond*.

Plans for the following year in 1990 included a spring conference in **Bolton Little Theatre**, featuring the work of Strindberg, and the then newly opened Forge Studio Theatre; and a full weekend training session at **Loughborough College** for 'acting, physical movement and dance' in September. Meanwhile in November 1989 **Grove Park Little Theatre** had offered a weekend seminar for directors from Geoff Bennett, attended by some 10 delegates from the North West. While **Questors Theatre** hosted an English Amateur Theatre Week, attended by members of **Lewes Little Theatre**, **Leicester Little Theatre** and **Bradford Playhouse**. "Those who enjoyed the free accommodation, sampled the mountains of scrumptious food, received non-stop help with all aspects of the production and generally wallowed in the superb camaraderie, will know what I mean", reported Brian Cooter.



Booker Prize Winner

Bernadine Evaristo wrote feelingly in *The Guardian* about **youth theatre** work on 24th October: "(From the age of 12) the youth theatre soon became the focus of my social life. I made friends quickly and looked forward to entering its creatively stimulating environment, where I took not only drama workshops but also dabbled in photography and design. It was affordable to attend, costing literally pennies... At the youth theatre, we learned to think independently and imaginatively while participating collaboratively in drama activities that developed our confidence and honed our performance skills... I came to love acting so much I couldn't imagine doing anything else... After school I learned to stand for something larger than myself, to be the change I wanted to see in the world. It was the incubator of my early creativity, a safe place to spend my childhood". There must be many people who share these words after experiencing working in stimulating Youth Theatre workshops, and good to receive such an important endorsement!

Requiem to Estrela Hall - The End of a Theatre Building

Lisbon Players Theatre, 1947-2019

It is always sad to see a theatre close, but especially so in the case of this one with its strong links to the foreign communities in Lisbon and to the city's cultural scene. For 72 years Estrela Hall has been the home of the Lisbon Players and since 1947 has presented an uninterrupted theatre programme. Its participants have come from incredibly diverse national, ethnic, social and professional backgrounds but have been brought together by a single objective: of doing theatre in English for Lisbon audiences. That not all of these 72 years have been glorious is true – there have been very troubled times and many threats to the theatre's continued existence but, on balance, the life of the Lisbon Players' theatre and its contribution to the life of its home city and to theatre in general has been extremely significant.

The closure and destruction of the theatre has multiple causes. One of these has to be the rapacious demands of the property business in the second decade of this century which is laying waste to so much of this and other cities. But, if there is blame in other quarters, it can surely be laid at the door of the British authorities who were trustees for this once "British" quarter of Lisbon, for the neglect, poor governance and greed which have seen the inglorious end of the century-old British Hospital, the demise of the Royal British Club, the neglect of the Jewish cemetery and the sad dilapidation of the other historic buildings, such as the Parsonage, under its care. The Lisbon Players Committee over many years may also have to bear part of the blame for not properly protecting the theatre's best interests, but in its mitigation it must be remembered that it was representing an unfunded amateur organization and its adversaries were well-funded government and property interests.

So how did this come about?

THE HISTORY OF ESTRELA HALL

Estrela Hall was built in 1906 on land that had been granted to the foreign communities in Lisbon, primarily for the burial of its non-Catholic dead at the end of the 18th century by the Portuguese queen, Dona Maria I. Evidence of this original intention still exists in the extensive British cemetery and the much smaller Jewish cemetery that exist alongside the theatre. The building was initially intended to be some kind of church hall, school and community centre under the auspices of the adjoining St. George's Anglican Church. Evidently this plan was never successful and, after passing through a number of uses – including that of a roller-skating rink and a cinema showing Allied propaganda films to the supposedly neutral Portuguese during the Second World War – in 1947 it was handed over to the recently-formed Lisbon Players with a rental agreement. Actual ownership of the building has always been unclear, but the landlords to whom the Lisbon Players paid rent were a London-registered charity called the British Protestant School Fund whose trustees included the British ambassador and representatives of St. George's Church.

In 2009 the Lisbon Players, faced with eviction, and in the absence of any clear proof of ownership of the building, took legal advice and, at their own considerable expense, went to court in order to try and claim 'usucapião'. (a kind of squatters' rights) The case for 'usucapião' was unsuccessful as the British government had already managed to obtain 'usucapião' for themselves, unbeknownst to the theatre's lawyers. However eviction was avoided as the Lisbon Players were deemed legal occupiers though not owners of the building. On the very day of the opening of the court case the trustees had also closed down the charity in

London that was the ostensible owner of Estrela Hall, the British Protestant School Fund.

The financial crash of 2008/9 gave the theatre a brief respite but a relentless search for a buyer led to the entire site being sold for a paltry three and a half million euros instead of the more than ten million initially predicted. The eventual buyer was a Portuguese real estate company called Arquimelo.

They plan to redevelop the site and their plans involve the demolition of Estrela Hall.

The Lisbon Players immediately went into urgent negotiations with Arquimelo to see what could be salvaged from this for the theatre. A proposal to build a new theatre for the Lisbon Players inside the new building to be constructed on Rua da Estrela was put forward by the representatives of Arquimelo and eagerly accepted by the Lisbon Players but in the end this proposal came to nothing.

The passing of Lisbon Players at Estrela Hall will be mourned by hundreds of people who have passed through its doors as actors, directors, stage managers, designers, musicians, composers, playwrights, bar staff, box office staff, costume makers, audience members and countless others who, in thousands of little ways, kept this wonderful theatre going with no financial reward. It has been an extraordinary breeding-ground for talent, and there are many people working in various branches of the theatre arts in Britain, Portugal and other places who will remember their time working at Estrela Hall as a crucial learning experience and a launch pad for their professional lives. For many others from other professional fields it has provided a unique contact with the world of theatre and performance.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM ALL THIS

The first lesson to be learned is that when you are the poor and powerless party you need to be properly armed. However much you may feel that history, circumstance, morality, public opinion, and even politicians and institutions may be on your side, you must always remember that property and finance, backed up by expensive legal experts, are an absolutely formidable enemy.

The second is that nothing can be taken for granted. However strong your moral and historical case might seem, it needs to be armed with weapons at least as powerful as those on the other side.

Money and property are extremely potent and, unless you are very canny and highly organized, they will always win.

THE FUTURE OF THE LISBON PLAYERS

It is earnestly to be hoped that the sad loss of the Lisbon Players' home for the past 72 years will not mean the end of the long tradition of English-language theatre in Lisbon, and that somehow the ongoing negotiations with various entities will result in a new home being found in order to give continuity for this great asset to the cultural life of the city of Lisbon.

Jonathan Weightman, December 2019

Please note that Jonathan Weightman has no official capacity at the Lisbon Players and any opinions expressed are his only. Having followed the Lisbon Players story for many years he hopes that the basic facts are pretty much correct.

The LTG send best wishes to the Lisbon Players and look forward to an early resolution.



Brave Experiment at The Cotswold Players Julius Caesar October 2019

Our greatest playwright didn't write many parts for women. In response to this unfairness, some companies have been experimenting in recent years with women playing traditionally male Shakespeare roles. But this Autumn, the Cotswold players went one step further. We decided to audition all parts in a production of Julius Caesar on a 'gender-blind' basis. In other words we did not take into account the actor's gender as a criterion for deciding what role they might play. Then, having cast the play, we made textual adjustments, to change the gender of the characters in the play to fit the gender of the actor chosen to play them.

The results were surprising, challenging and exciting. In a cast that was broadly balanced between men and women, we had a female Julius Caesar, with a young male husband; and a female Brutus, with a wife of the same sex. This threw new light on the dynamics of the key relationships, and freed us from the shackles of traditional approaches to the story. It also required more changes to the text than we might have expected.

Many a 'he' and 'him' of course had to become 'she' and 'her'. But many familiar lines such as 'friends, Romans, countrymen', and 'there is a tide in the affairs of men', also displayed a kind of sexism, which we decided to eradicate.

This was not just a gimmick, nor was it simply a pragmatic response to the fact that there were at least

as many female as male actors in the theatre. We wanted to find out whether gender could be as unimportant as, say, nationality or skin colour in playing a role; and we wanted to encourage our audiences to set aside gender prejudices, and to enjoy the play for its commentary on humanity.

To be sure, we had to make other changes too. It would not have been believable for women to be generals, dictators and senators in Republican Rome, so we brought the setting into the 21st century, complete with mobile phones, video conferences, webcams and live drone footage of battle. It was the use of technology, together with the play's remarkable political relevance, that generated the most audience comment. Of the dozens, possibly hundreds of items of feedback we received. Not one commented on the issue of gender. We think this proves our point.

It is around twenty years since the RSC first cast a black actor as one of Shakespeare's English Kings. Today, colour-blind casting is common place in the professional theatre. We should like to think that we have started a ball rolling that will eliminate or at least dilute gender as a determining issue in casting too.

Ps. We look forward to comments on the above. Speaking for myself, I never believed there was anything sexist about the two quotes friends, Romans, countrymen and a tide in the affairs of men, assuming 'men' was being used as a generic term - neater than 'human beings'.

Have the Cotswold Players tempted others to follow suit? Let us know. - The Editor.

For more information contact Jonathan Vickers on vickers.jonathan@gmail.com

How well did your Play Selection Team do?

TOP TEN PLAYS

1. Blue Stockings - Jessica Swale
2. Ladies Day - Amanda Whittington

3. The Thrill of Love - Amanda Whittington
4. Bull - Mike Bartlett
5. The Railway Children - E. Nesbit
6. Nell Gwynn - Jessica Swale
7. Di & Viv & Rose - Amelia Bullmore
8. Hound of the Baskervilles - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
9. Around the World in 80 Days - Jules Verne
10. The Children - Lucy Kirkwood

Did You Know This?...

Ilkley Players – like many theatres, are just putting finishing touches to their 20/21 season. Their reading committee have read an average of forty plays each and are now juggling with the short list.

A big issue for us in the last couple of years has been obtaining permission to perform – or royalties.

Royalties are defined as the sum paid to a book sold or an author or composer for each copy of a book sold or for each public performance of a work. It used to be generally assumed that once a playwright had been dead for seventy years then a piece could be performed without any payment, but this is now often not the case. Estates and families of writers extend the royalties period,

new playwrights adapt classics plays or translate them afresh, new editions are published. Apart from Shakespeare one should never assume that a play can be performed royalty free.

In most cases we must, quite rightly, pay to perform someone's writing but also get permission to perform it as well as paying for it.

We have had issues with royalties for a number of reasons. Many plays sit on hold for several years pending the announcement of a long professional tour.

This can be frustrating for community groups such as us because sometimes the professional tour never comes off. Or if the production happens it may only be in London or other parts of the provinces.

A ten day run at the Ilkley Playhouse is hardly likely to affect sales for the

pros. Most of our plays are licensed by Samuel French or Nick Hern, but sometimes they are only the agent and they still have to work with the author or the publisher to get the permission to perform. This causes delays which we can ill afford - we need to get our season on the road! Also recently the window for permission has moved to eighteen months. So, when we approach directors for a new season (mid-December) we have not yet had our June/July 2021 productions cleared. It's all a bit of a minefield.

In spite of this behind the scenes frantic work, most theatres look forward to Launch Night, Directors eagerly scanning the faces for likely candidates, the aspiring actors listening intently for the play that is 'just for them' Only the auditions between them and public acclaim!

The Kevin Spence Column

THE UNNAMEABLE AND THE UNKNOWNABLE: THE CASE FOR MUSICAL THEATRE



Suddenly, and a trifle unexpectedly, musical theatre has done a 'smash and grab' job on my life! I am very close to the first night of my new production of TWELFTH NIGHT and am constantly reminded in rehearsal of how music is integral to this show. For me, this is as near as Shakespeare ever got to writing a piece of musical theatre. I guess the opening line - 'If music be the food of love, etc' - clearly sets the tone.

These days I seem to be able to go for months without musical theatre featuring heavily in my day-to-day theatrical life, and then suddenly out of the blue, circumstances conspire to remind me of its visceral power and importance.

Around Christmas time my theatre-going tends to centre on finding an escape route to see a musical when a few theatres (thank goodness) throw out a lifeline to those of us who want to celebrate the festive season with something other than a pantomime. And yes, I know panto is important for a hundred different reasons - all valid - and I do not disagree with any of them. But nowadays, I think I have possibly outgrown them - so hence the search for something different. This year has been no exception. It started with DEAR EVAN HANSEN in the West End - technically stunning, extremely well-acted and sung, with a searingly contemporary message about mental health and social media. It was refreshing to see lots of young, eager faces in the audience, too. Then GYPSY in Manchester - a salutary reminder of the ingredients that make a great musical - but also a brilliant showcase for women in leading roles. The Royal Exchange continues to astound with its creative spirit and ingenuity. It is never daunted by transforming shows written for conventional theatres into the 'in the round' format. And finally, the masterpiece that is WEST SIDE STORY - Nikolai Foster's stupendous production at Curve in Leicester. This show above all - one which I have seen a dozen or more times - even rather sombrely on the day that Leonard Bernstein died in 1990 - never fails to remind me that a great musical reaches the parts that other types of theatre do not reach! I leave the auditorium an emotional wreck, but energised by discovering that once again live theatre has given me a unique experience which no other art form can replicate.

However, there are other factors relating to musical theatre which are worth remembering as we celebrate the start of the new decade. Firstly, the sheer number of young UK actors who are brilliant exponents of musical theatre - acting, singing, dancing, playing instruments (often all in one show!) - is just dazzling. We should constantly remind ourselves how wonderful we are in this country at finding and training so many talented people - and this applies just as much in amateur theatre, too! Secondly, the popularity of musicals for audiences is evident and shows no sign of waning. Thirdly, our musical productions are a worldwide export success - something we might begin to value even more in a post-Brexit Britain.

So, although I am well aware that musicals are totally exhausting to stage as part of a season and tend suck

a lot of creative energy out of a theatre, they also provide a great financial and artistic stimulus to an amateur theatre, and I offer my warmest congratulations to those LTG theatres who continue to stage them so brilliantly and successfully!

Scaled back Productions But is it possible for more of our theatres to wade into these musical waters? There are lots of reasons, which we all know well, why some LTG theatres just cannot contemplate staging musicals, and we have to respect and understand those reasons. Some theatres are not interested. Others feel they do not have the time, space or talent to stage such productions. However, the success of a number of London 'fringe' theatres - like the Menier Chocolate Factory and Southwark Playhouse - in staging 'scaled back' productions of musicals - and my own current favourite - the Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester - should give us pause for thought. They prove, for example, that the theatre can be small and still stage topnotch musicals which sell out. You just need imagination and the right talent. Many of the 'fringe' venues are no bigger than LTG theatres, so size is not necessarily a factor. The recent successful production of MAME at Hope Mill was a prime example of this. There are also a number of wonderful musical shows which have reasonable-sized casts, are easy to stage, and which provide backing tracks as part of their performance licence agreements. Some audiences will be intrigued to see that these are being presented as they are not the large-scale musicals that they tend to know. Again, the professional theatres have proved that within the catalogue of smaller musicals there are some real, hidden gems! There are also examples of amateur theatres across the UK who have found a way of amicably sharing resources - both human and technical - with local musical theatre groups, to promote the success and viability of both parties. I am aware that much is learned by such symbiotic arrangements. For instance, to find yourself suddenly working with an experienced musical director and/or choreographer can be a real eye-opener and pave the way to exploiting their talents when movement and musical expertise are required in producing other standard plays in a season. I know of one LTG theatre, for example, - I will not embarrass them by naming them! - who mount a musical at the end of their season in the summer - a time when audiences can be more difficult to attract - and make a great success of them. I have personally enjoyed a number of them.

All of this underlines a key point for us all going forward into the 2020s.

I suspect as tastes and audiences evolve, we would do well to remain open-minded and not discount any initiative for our theatres - whether it is producing musicals or anything else - just on the basis that it is not 'what we do' or that 'we have never done it before'!

It is perhaps worth remembering the words of Leonard Bernstein - 'Music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable.'

I am hoping that the musicals I have the good fortune to see this year - whether amateur or professional - have both of these qualities and I wish you all a happy and theatrically productive New Year!



KEVIN SPENCE

There Is Nothing Like A Dame



There is nothing like a Dame. But then, having played Dames in 27 pantomimes over the last 35 years, I suppose I would say that, wouldn't I? There is no doubt every year that it is my favourite role and, thankfully, enough people think I make a good Dame that they continue asking me to play the role. Now at the age of 75 I am getting close – but not too close, I hope – to hanging up my dresses, wigs and make-up for the last time. At the audition each year I think, "Is this the year someone will step in and take over?" So far so good, and I shall be auditioning for the role once again this year in the Thame Players' production of *Babes in the Wood*. I remain hopeful that I will be chosen once again...

I am often asked, 'What makes a good Dame'? Well, this is inevitably a matter of opinion but, as far as I am concerned, the Dame should definitely be a man, the audience should know that she's a man, and the kids in the audience should know she's a man. A Dame must appeal to all age groups and every section of the audience. The Dame must appeal to men as much as to women. If men in the audience are made to feel uncomfortable, then the Dame has failed. The audience must accept the Dame as a woman, whilst knowing perfectly well that 'she' is a man. The Dame does not send women up, she fights for women's causes, and everything she says is as a woman. The Dame is most definitely not a female impersonator. The Dame is allowed to get away with absolutely anything. As a woman, she is motherly, kind, foolish, fallible, flirtatious, disciplined, silly and strong. A Dame is outrageous, never really offends anybody, and should be vulgar, beautifully vulgar. The Dame goes to the heart of what pantomime is. She has a special relationship with the audience. She is ridiculous, absurd, vain, subversive and rude, but she's always game and she's always warm, and she's always uniquely British. And, without

doubt, our world would be so much poorer without her. But the greatest quality anyone playing the Dame can have, in my view, is the ability to connect with the audience. The Dame must be able to get the audience eating out of her hands. She must be able to rouse them up, calm them down, get them to respond to her every command and make them leave the theatre thinking what a wonderful character she is.

The history of the Pantomime Dame goes back centuries, but the role of the Dame, as we think of her today, was undoubtedly created by the great music hall star, Dan Leno, towards the end of the Victorian era. He danced, he sang, he told jokes. He had the most remarkable eyes – looking as though the world had beaten him down but he was still there, indomitable. Leno would come on stage – small, dainty, diminutive – doing it all with his eyes and little movements. He was the 'put upon' woman. He would come on stage, playing any one of several great Dame characters he portrayed, and suddenly he became a housewife, a mother, a cook or a nanny, perhaps wearing a long frock, apron and wig - all highly exaggerated. For anyone playing a Dame in pantomime today, without doubt Dan Leno made them what they are. Dan Leno is the Dame's Dame and should be revered by all who followed in his footsteps.

Pantomime is a peculiarly British phenomenon. It is hardly seen anywhere else in the world, other than by expat audiences. And the Dame is the lynchpin that holds the whole show together - long may it be so. There is, indeed, nothing like a Dame. But then, I would say that, wouldn't I?

Written by Tony Long, Thame Players Theatre Company, the Players Theatre, Thame



And Did We Enjoy the Panto Season?...Oh Yes We Did!!!

"I guess Panto is for life and not just for Christmas"

A quote from Adam Schumacher who played the Dame in *Babes in the Wood* in 2019 at Priory Theatre, 25 years since he was first 'bamboozled' into playing the dame in a pantomime by Anita Dalton, who I notice is still busy - directing **Mr Bennet's Bride** in the spring.



Archway Theatre - *Alice in Wonderland*

Yes I know the purists will consider *Alice in Wonderland* a dark drama and not a pantomime but it's a lovely piece of magical theatre for Christmas.

Good News for Some

Plaza Theatre, Romsey

Romsey Amateur Operatic & Dramatic Society own and operates the PLAZA THEATRE (RAODS). They are sharing their good news.

Application for a grant through the Community Infrastructures Levy to help with our stage/house improvements has been approved. We are looking forward to receiving £200,000 from the CI.

The money will be spent raising the roof above the stage to bring it level with the rest of the roofline; installing a new rewire.

Chorley Little Theatre

Who have received a grant from The Theatres Trust towards converting an adjacent disused restaurant into a new acting space.

More from Michael...

Remember the Election?

"This was **pure theatre: am-dram at its worst, with fluffed lines, missed cues, method stupidity**" were the words of columnist in the *Guardian*, John Crace, covering the debate and arguments in the House of Commons to fix a date for a new General Election on 29th October. And the Pantomime season had not yet even started!

Michael Billington retires!

"**Billington bows out after 48 years in 'dream job' as Guardian theatre critic**". After almost 50 years and some 10,000 reviews, Michael Billington is to step down (at the end of the year) as the *Guardian's* chief theatre critic. He has been virtually a daily presence in the paper. His incisive reviews, with their historical sweep, keen eye for detail and socio-political context, plus the odd judiciously deployed pun, have made him one of the world's most respected arts critics' is the headline column. Easy to agree, especially after a lifetime of reading the *Guardian*! In 2007 'Faber published his book *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* which won the Theatre Book prize, and is essential reading for any theatre buff seeking a wise over-view of the best period in British theatre for generations'.

Some weeks later, Billington noted that the five things he won't miss on his retirement would be: **1.** The ritual standing ovation – a filthy habit imported from the US – for even the most modest piece of theatre. **2.** The sense of being pushed and shoved in cramped West End foyers by air-kissing B-list celebrities on fashionable West End first nights. **3.** The sound of plastic glasses and bottles being crushed under foot at the most crucial moments of a play by spectators who will apparently expire if they are not allowed to drink. **4.** The growing use of mics, even in medium-sized

theatres, to compensate for the failure of actors to learn how to project. **5.** The delay in turning off mobile phones until the first words of a play have been spoken or the first bars of a musical score have been played." But when asked his best nights at the theatre had been, he answered: **Ken Dodd's** marathon celebration of comedy, Ha-Ha, at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1973 – 'one of many happy nights, sometimes stretching into the following day, watching a master at work'.

The Evening Standard Awards

The papers made a big fuss about **Maggie Smith's** award as best actress for her performance in *A German Life* last May. Yes, indeed, she first won the award 57 years ago, with her role in *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye*. Has this play by Peter Shaffer been revived recently? The award for best actor was won by **Andrew Scott** for his performance in *Present Laughter*, which many of us had the chance to follow on screen with a live showing in late November. The play of the year was **Sweat** by Lynn Nottage, and the best director was **Robert Icke**. However, **Sir Ian's McKellen's** one man show over 80 theatres for his 80th birthday from May to Christmas received a special award, as did also **Peter Brook**. Last but not least, a special award was also made to the behind the scenes heroes, the **stage door keepers**, invited to the stage to take a bow!

Obituary Time

Particularly sad has been the news on the same day on 28th November 2019 of the deaths of **Clive James** and **Sir Jonathan Miller**.

Anyone remotely interested in the Arts, Literature and Theatre will surely have heard the news, and will have some or many memories of programmes on TV or performances they experienced after reading any obituary. Highlights for me



were productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Rigoletto* and *The Mikado*. A letter in the *Guardian* sums up the situation perfectly: "**Clive James and Jonathan Miller dead: just when we're most in need of an increase in the national IQ, we get a drastic reduction.**"

What has happened to conversation?

"In **2005** I sat opposite someone at a dinner party who spent much of the evening looking at her phone under the table, sending messages and smiling to herself. **I was amazed by her rudeness.** A month later I sat near a politician in a restaurant, with a glamorous woman, but they were not speaking; instead they spent the whole evening looking at their own phones. I found their behaviour fascinating and peculiar. **Fifteen years later**, the preference for phones over humans no longer seems in the least remarkable. At cafes, restaurants, and family dinner tables, rather than talking to one another, people look at their phones. Or if they are talking to one another, the phone is on the table, as if a part of the place setting, taken up at intervals as casually as a knife or fork, implicitly signalling that the present company is not sufficiently engaging. There was a time when, during idle or anxious moments, people reached for a cigarette. But now people just as reflexively reach for their phones. **Like smokers and cigarettes, people get jittery without their phones.**" (Amelia Gentleman, in a book review)

A Letter from Ian Wainwright which has already gone out to all Reps:

Dear fellow theatre maker,

Hope you have had a great Christmas and new year.

Here is information on the RSC's **HOW TO MAKE AND PERFORM IN A MUSICAL** weekends in Feb/March <https://www.rsc.org.uk/events/how-to-make-and-perform-in-a-musical> aimed at anyone interested in performing in or making musical theatre. Join us for a weekend of workshops at the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Work with RSC directors, choreographers and musical directors in the RSC rehearsal rooms and on stage to learn the skills and techniques of professional musical theatre and discover how the RSC brings its hugely successful musicals such as *Matilda*, *Les Misérables*, and now *Boy in The Dress*, to the Stage.

Please do share with the appropriate members of your team/members/participants. Thank you.

Warm Regards

Ian Wainwright

Participation Producer

Royal Shakespeare Company

How to Make and Perform in a Musical

Two new weekends of theatre training for amateur, community and non-professional theatre makers.

From *Les Misérables* to *Matilda The Musical*, and now *The Boy in the Dress*, we have a track record of creating hit musicals. For the first time we will take you behind the scenes to learn from our creative and technical teams.

How to Make a Musical

Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 February 2020

This weekend of practical workshops will look at the making process, skills and techniques of musical theatre. The weekend focuses on those making and leading a musical, looking at directing, musical direction, choreography, sound, design and writing musical theatre.

Weekend Two: How to Perform in a Musical Saturday 29 Feb and Sunday 1 March 2020

This weekend of practical workshops takes you inside the rehearsal process to learn some of the skills, techniques and processes of professional musical theatre. The weekend focuses on performers, working with choreographers, directors, voice coaches and musical directors.

Each weekend ticket price also includes:

- Lunch on both days
- Ticket to The Play's the Thing, our interactive exhibition
- Backstage tour of our theatres
- An opportunity to purchase a discounted ticket to see our acclaimed new musical *The Boy in the Dress* on the Saturday night. Registration is from 9.30am at the Other Place.

The weekend will finish at 5.30pm on Sunday.

All workshops take place in our rehearsal rooms as well as the Clore Learning Centre, The Other Place and onstage in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

Price £205 per weekend (does not include accommodation)

Participants must be aged 18+

Booking

Tickets are available by calling the RSC Ticket Hotline on 01789 33111 or in person at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Box Office. Early booking is recommended as places are limited.

Tickets are not currently available online.

All sessions are suitable for both those starting out and those with more experience. To help us tailor the sessions an enrollment form will be sent so you can tell us your previous experience and any areas you would like covered.



Summary of Michael Coveney's book by Questors About Questors, Jesters and Renegades

This is the vital story of the amateur theatre as it developed from the medieval guilds to the modern theatre of Ayckbourn and Pinter, with a few mishaps and missed cues along the way. Michael Coveney – a former member of Ilford's Renegades - tells this tale with a charm and wit that will have you shouting out for an encore.

Between the two world wars, amateur theatre thrived across the UK, from Newcastle to Norwich, from Bolton to Birmingham and Bangor, championed by the likes of George Bernard Shaw, Sybil Thorndike, and J B Priestley. Often born out of a particular political cause or predicament, many of these theatres and companies continue to evolve, survive and even prosper today.

This is the first account of its kind, packed with anecdote and previously unheard stories, and it shows how amateur theatre is more than a popular pastime: it has been endemic to the birth

of the National Theatre, as well as a seedbed of talent and a fascinating barometer and product of the times in which we live.

Some of the companies Coveney delves into – all taking centre stage in this entertaining and lively book - include the Questors and Tower Theatre in London; Birmingham's Crescent Theatre; The Little Theatre in Bolton, where Ian McKellen was a schoolboy participant; the Halifax Thespians; Lincolnshire's Broadbent Theatre, co-founded by Jim Broadbent's father and other conscientious objectors at the end of World War II; Crayford's Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre, where the careers of Michael Gambon and Diana Quick were launched; Anglesey's Theatr Fach, a crucible of Welsh language theatre; and Cornwall's stunning cliff-top Minack.

Foreword by Kenneth Branagh

The publishers are the Bloomsbury Group who will provide promotional flyers to anyone with space to display them. In return you can purchase the book at a 35% discount on a RRP price of £25. Contact:

www.bloomsbury.com/uk/questors-jesters-and-renegades
9781350128378

International Practical Training Course on the Method of Konstantin Stanislavsky

The Russian Centre of AITA/IATA – International Amateur Theatre Association – will hold the biennial Course on the working methods of Stanislavsky. The course is described as practical training for actors and directors.

To make travel easier it is to be held in Papinniemen Leirik in Finland. Participants need to travel to Jyväskylä, Finland, where they will be taken to the venue. The cost is Euro 68 per day for accommodation and three meals. Payment is made on arrival at the venue.

The course will run 7 – 13 August 2020 and deadline for receipt of applications in 10 March 2020. The working language will be Russian and English. More information can be found in the list of events on the AITA/IATA website www.aita/iata.net/events/html where you will also find the application form.

Further information from Allo Zorina at the Russian National Centre - alla_zorina@mail.ru

This is a highly respected course and participants are usually expected to work hard for quite long hours.

ps I remember applying for this course which was aborted at the eleventh hour because of the ash cloud from Iceland. Fortunately because British Airways wanted to buy up tickets to get people back to where they needed to be – I also got my £300 air fare back and only lost the cost of the visa!

Funding Award for a New Digital Sound System at Priory Theatre Company

From Chris Biddle: I am delighted to report that at the Rotary Club of Kenilworth "BID 4" awards in mid November we were granted £2,000 towards a new digital sound desk and associated equipment. This represented 40% of the available funding on the night and was thus the largest single award made. This money will

need a small supplement of a few hundred pounds in order to buy all the kit and cabling we need but it is a significant boost to this much needed technical project. The event consisted of a "Dragon's Den" style pitch with questions and answers at the end. Specific thanks go to Neil Thomas and his team for the preparation and excellent presentation. We were also able to promote our Charity Nights to a number of fellow finalists. Perhaps a double whammy!

Rotary Clubs are always seeking worthwhile local small projects to support.

Tips for Aspiring Writers from Mark Twain

The author pseudonymously known as Mark Twain is reputed to have told wannabee writers to **"Write what you know"**. He perhaps intended to be more helpful than American poet Howard Nemerov who also advised **"Write what you know"** but rather cuttingly added **"That should leave you with a lot of free time"**.

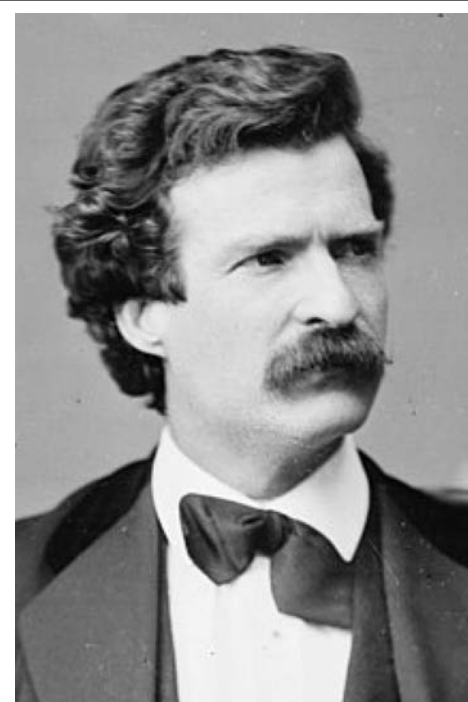
While a huge number of young (and not-so-young) readers are more than happy that the likes of J K Rowling paid no attention to Twain's admonishment, there is no doubt that some of the most powerful, moving and unforgettable writing ever put down on paper comes from authors who have lived the experiences they so hauntingly recall. And so it is with Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, who repeatedly used the experiences of his life and family to inform his writing.

The outstanding quality of O'Neill's writing won him a remarkable total of four Pulitzer prizes and the Nobel Prize in Literature. In a chance, but somehow satisfying, symmetry he won Pullitzers for both the

first of his full length plays to be produced (*Beyond the Horizon*) and the last – the wonderful *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Written, as he himself said, **"in blood and tears"** O'Neill never intended the play to be produced and did not even want it published in his lifetime, leaving the manuscript with his publishers with instructions that it was not to be published until 25 years after his death. It was his widow, Carlotta Monterey, who overrode his wishes & had the play published. Its first production was in 1956 in Sweden, where his plays had always enjoyed enormous popularity, and it premiered on Broadway later the same year. The Broadway production won the Tony Award for Best Play and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the season. The first UK production was in 1958.

The play is widely considered to be O'Neill's magnum opus and one of the finest American plays of the 20th century. It has been revived countless times.

And no doubt the widow was happy with her cheques too! Says the cynical editor!





LTG National Conference at The Questors Theatre, Ealing, London 17-19 April 2020

The 2020 LTG National Conference will be held at The Questors Theatre, Ealing, London, the venue for the first ever LTG Conference on 19 May 1948, although this is disputed by some...

Ealing and The Questors – Ealing, in West London lies within easy reach of Central London, well served by public transport. We have a Playhouse and Studio and stage around 19 productions each year and host over 15 productions by visiting companies. The Questors Youth Theatre (QYT) is attended by over 500 young people each week.

The conference theme – In 1943, The Questors' artistic direction was summed up in a statement of aims – known as "The Quest" – which has remained, with minor amendments, our guiding principle to the present day. One of the five Quests is "To be an outward looking theatre" and to support this aim the overall theme of the weekend will be "looking outward / connecting with, and involving, the community". We will come up with a catchier title!

Theatre Dramatic Society

The production We are working on a feast of delights for delegates in April, with some already in place. The Saturday

evening performance will be Martin McDonagh's *Hangmen*. A satire on the justice system which fuses a dark tale with the mundanity of northern pub life, undercut with McDonagh's idiosyncratic humour. Set in 60s Lancashire, this is a gripping, fast-paced dark comedy.

Archive – The Questors holds the LTG Archive and The Questors Archivist John Dobson will hold a related session. We know that some LTG Members have an archive or would like to know more about housing and looking after one, and John is keen to hear from LTG Members about what the session should include. Contact Anne Gilmour if you have any requests or ideas.

Play in a day – an opportunity for those aged 18 – 25 from both LTG Member theatres and former QYT students who continue to be active at The Questors, to come together and create a play over the weekend. They will choose the theme Friday evening, write it that evening/overnight, rehearse Saturday and perform the 12 – 15 min play on Sunday morning to delegates. To be followed by a short Q & A.

Workshops – we plan a session on co-ordinating social media platform, photography and videography to market your shows; a 'serious' session on the more challenging aspects of running a theatre building, presented by the National Committee; we hope to also include sessions on the Customer Experience; inclusion and diversity and outreach; and of course a session for our actor-delegates to strut their stuff.

Programme – to follow the 'usual' shape: Friday – arrive for some congenial fun; Saturday – workshops, AGM, Open Forum and the play *Hangmen* in the evening; Sunday – workshops play in a day and possibly a keynote speaker.

Early Bird Booking – the fee will be similar to recent conferences, but we will introduce Early Bird Booking. Book between 3 Feb and 9 March and you will pay less. Book late and it will cost you more. Watch out for the email coming your way in early February.

Accommodation – there is plenty of competitively priced hotel accommodation within walking distance of The Questors – Premier Inn, Travelodge, etc. There is no free parking around the theatre and we strongly recommend arrival by public transport. We are a 12 min walk from Ealing Broadway – District and Central tubes and Paddington Mainline trains – and a 17 min (and bus) from South Ealing Tube – Piccadilly tube to Heathrow. Why not fly?

If you need any further information, do not hesitate to email me.

Anne Gilmour

Questors Theatre, Ealing
Secretary, Southern Region, LTG
anne.gilmour@questors.org.uk

Sounds great. I like the Early Bird opportunity. I'm in!
The temporary Editor

Ps I'll be seeking a permanent editor for the Newsletter while I'm enjoying the conference.

Theatres Trust | Theatre Photograph of the Year



A new national competition with an exhibition at the National Theatre, looking to find images that reflect everything we love about theatre buildings in the UK.

Judging the Competition

The judging panel includes four of the Theatres Trust Ambassadors, Samira Ahmed, Matthew Bourne, Miranda Hart and Jude Law, alongside Theatres Trust Director Jon Morgan and long-term volunteer photographer Ian Grundy.

National Theatre Director Rufus Norris will also be on the judging panel.

Categories

There are various categories – you can enter one photo in each:

- Beautiful buildings – photographs highlighting the wonderful architecture of theatre buildings, old or modern, small or grand. This could be the exterior of a building, an inside space or a particular design detail.
- Connecting communities – photographs

celebrating how theatres are central to their communities.

- Joy of going to the theatre. This could be the excitement of the communities. This part of its local area or how the theatre brings people together.

The Story Behind the Photo

We want to know the story behind each photograph you submit. This could be your connection with the theatre, why it matters to you or what the scene pictured says to you.

INTERESTED? Closing date:

March 30th

Go to Theatres Trust website for all details or tel: 020 7836 8591

Some Recent Production Photos

Crescent Theatre - *Pressure*



Farnworth Little Theatre - *Bronte*



Durham Dramatic Society - *The Nightingales*

Southport Little Theatre - *Perfect Nonsense*



Questors - *Fault Lines*



Southport Little Theatre - *Corpse*

Questors - *1984*



Progress Theatre - *The Children*



TOADS Theatre Company - *Babe the Sheep-Pig*



The Oast Theatre - *Pressure*



Southport Little Theatre - *Caring Cross Road*