

Newsletter

December 2020



NORTHERN REGION

CENTRAL REGION

SOUTHERN REGION

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Vol. 34 No. 4 December 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 2021 - deadlines for copy: 29 Jan; 10 May; 12 Aug; 6 Nov

New LTG Reps – we welcome the following new LTG Reps. If your LTG Rep is changing, please inform the LTG Secretary (details below).

Bournemouth Little Theatre Club – all correspondence to the temporary LTG Rep – bournemouthlittletheatre@gmail.com

Cotswold Playhouse – Geoff Butterworth, geoffdb@me.com replaces Patrick Howell

Hampton Hill Playhouse – Clare Henderson-Roe, clarehr@teddingtontheatreclub.org.uk replaces Barry Hill

Louth Riverhead Theatre – Holly Mapletoft, holly.mapletoft@louthplaygoers.co.uk replaces Pamela Whalley

Updated email address:

Apollo Theatre – Cynara Crump, cynaracrump@gmail.com

Swann Theatre – Robert Graydon, robertgraydon@btinternet.com

New editor of the LTG Newsletter

Anne Gilmour, Southern Region Secretary



I write as the new editor of the LTG Newsletter. My first task is to thank Sandra Simpson for her sterling work as the temporary editor, a role she stepped into at very short notice back in 2016 and has managed with great good humour, calmness and not a little skill at winking out articles and information from Members. She writes about her experiences and background elsewhere in the Newsletter.

Sandra followed on from the inestimable Michael Shipley, who also writes elsewhere in this Newsletter about his memories of the LTG and his time as editor. Also, Michael has written a cookbook ***Leaves from my Cumbrian Kitchen***: all funds raised from donations go to a good cause – one for your Christmas or New Year shopping list.

This is my first time as an editor of any Newsletter, so I hope that I will do the LTG proud. I look forward to being helped by new National Committee members Mel and Debbie. I hope to capture the diversity of our community, the range of productions we stage, the size and shape of our theatres,

the challenges we face and how we resolve them. As the S. Region Secretary, I have facilitated two S Region Zoom sessions for LTG Reps, who also invite their Chairmen and Artistic Directors. The chat is all very informal but as each theatre highlights the challenges they face, there are others who take some comfort from knowing they are not alone. As others talk about what they have managed in this time of COVID, others recognise an idea they have been mulling over and it gives them new energy and determination to push forward.

This, I feel, is the value of being part of a community of shared values: we learn from and understand more about each other and take comfort that we are not alone. I hope to try and reflect some of this in the future editions of the newsletter both through text and through pictures. So please bear with me while I get to grips with this new role. Your ideas and suggestions for new topics are most welcome. Should we include a *Letters to the Editor* column? If you think so, email me to get it started. How about a regular strip cartoon? Any budding artists/humourists out there, do send me a sample. We could perhaps hear more about what our Youth Groups are doing. All ideas most welcome, although I cannot promise to include them all.

LTG National Conference 2021

Southport Dramatic Club

14 – 16 May 2021 (to be confirmed by 28 Feb 2021)

We all have our fingers crossed that we can meet at a National Conference in Southport on Merseyside in May. LTG Rep Margaret Mann and the Southport Team are preparing

for the event on the basis that it will go ahead.

LTG Regional Conferences 2021

Current plans are for the Northern Conference to be at the Carlisle Green Room, but no firm plans as yet for the Central and Southern Regional conferences.

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The contents of this newsletter do not necessarily contain the official views of the LTG.

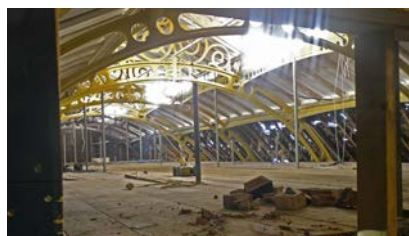


Letter from Vice-Chairman Nick Morley



Jo wanted you all to know that her mother sadly passed very recently so she is currently busy with her large extended family, probate and all the activities this brings. The committee are doing what we can to support her, which is why I am writing this piece in her stead. The editor also thought it would be good if I gave you an understanding of my interest in amateur theatre and the experience I bring to this role.

My first memory of amateur dramatics is from a pantomime when I was about 10; my father played the King, my sister was his page and I helped the lighting team. I can also remember getting involved in technical areas for school shows. When I was 18 I joined Abingdon Drama Club, who have a clubhouse and use the Unicorn Theatre in the Old Abbey Buildings to stage shows. Once again my main involvement was technical, mainly lighting, but I also acted in three shows when they were desperate for young men. In 1993 my family moved to Wallingford and I very soon found my second home in The Corn Exchange. In the 27 years since, I have worked on numerous shows with



The Sinodun Players, visiting amateur and professional productions and also become involved in the operational side of the building. Between shows we run a very successful cinema that mixes blockbusters with art house and foreign

language films. I stood down as a Trustee last September after six years, having previously been on the Ltd Co Board, and remain the DPS (Designated Premises Supervisor).

My involvement with the LTG started in 2016 when we were looking into our structure and considered becoming a CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation). My parents have involvement with Market Harborough Theatre who had just transitioned to a CIO, so on a visit I met with their Chairman and watched one of their shows. We were already an LTG member but hadn't been to any conferences, so at our next Trustee Meeting I reported on my findings and suggested we should start attending. I really enjoyed the events I have been to, so when various committee slots needed filling this year I let Jo know I was happy to be considered for any position; and somehow became Vice Chairman.



I am writing this article on the day the Oxford vaccine results are released. This news has made me very hopeful we'll be able to get together again in Southport next May, and be able to stage indoor shows with no restrictions before this. I am really hoping to encourage more LTG Reps to come to a conference next year. If you haven't been before, please do ask your group to consider funding your attendance. I know it is quite an investment, when travel and accommodation is needed, yet I believe the rewards of going far outweigh these costs. And as it should be December by the time you see this let me, on behalf of the committee, wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous 2021.

Nick Morley

Editor: for more information on a CIO see the government website www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-types-how-to-choose-a-structure

Sandra Simpson, Bolton Little Theatre Reflections of the former editor



Michael Shipley was the Editor of our National Newsletter for a quarter of a century! When he resigned in 2016 no-one stepped forward to pick up the reins. But Michael felt that after 25 years, the time was right for a rethink, a change of format perhaps, that new broom that just needs picking up if only we had the time. I was part of the committee then and I

volunteered to keep the Newsletter 'ticking over' until an Editor could be found. And so, four years have slipped by!! This is exactly how I have acquired most of the volunteering tasks I have taken on. I joined one organisation to get information for the final chapter of a master's degree thesis and stayed 20 years as Secretary.

Time now to concentrate on the successful relaunching of Bolton Little Theatre – once that green light is switched on. While the actors can't wait to be in rehearsal again, I am anticipating that we will have lost some of our precious volunteers, a large proportion of whom are over seventy and who perhaps have quite enjoyed not having to turn out on cold dark night. Let us hope I am wrong.

At present, the Play Production Team are finalising the

choice of a short comedy to perform on our main stage for three nights, as an opportunity to demonstrate to a reduced audience that they can safely watch live theatre again. The front of house staff will also be able to demonstrate their competence with the new safety systems.

Immediately before lockdown, I found myself in the position of directing two plays simultaneously – at different Little Theatres. Having retirees making up the cast of one play, I was able to rehearse during the day before going on to evening rehearsals for the other play. Note to self: never attempt this again! Like many directors I saw one play cancelled after the opening night.

Why have a Newsletter? A Newsletter is a wonderful vehicle for celebrating success certainly, but also for providing the stimulus and inspiration for developing new ideas. Theatre folk are extremely generous and willing to offer practical help and encouragement.

Now we can look forward to this Christmas Edition in the capable hands of Anne Gilmour and Jo Matthews.



The Ballad of Lady Bessy, The Loft Theatre, Leamington Spa in lockdown

David Fletcher, Chairman and Sue Moore, Artistic Director, Loft Theatre, Leamington

Loft theatre company

On 16 March the doors of The Loft Theatre were shut, along with so many. It was the opening night of *The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood in the Studio Theatre and two weeks away from opening *Anne Boleyn* by Howard Brenton in the Main House. The set was up, the tapestries

embroidered, the lighting design and rig were in place and we were heading into tech week.

In lockdown, we still wanted to present theatre but online. Looking back through the archive we had performed the world premiere of *The Ballad of Lady Bessy* by David Fletcher, an exceptional writer who happens to be the Loft Chairman. An audio recording had been produced by Jonathan Fletcher who had also written and performed the music live. This recording was the obvious candidate for high quality online theatre.

David gives some background on how this play came to be written and performed.

I have always been fascinated by the private meetings of historical characters that are only hinted at in the sources. The inspiration for my first play *Tongues of Fire* was the meeting at which Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate after the crucifixion to ask for the body of Jesus. This is only briefly mentioned in the gospels, but it became a crucial scene in my play. For the same reason, I was drawn to the character of Elizabeth of York who lived at the centre of political life through one of the most turbulent periods of English history – she was the daughter of Edward IV, the sister of Edward V, the niece of Richard III, the wife of Henry VII, and the mother of Henry VIII. She is usually seen as a quiet pawn in the dynastic struggles of the period, but there is one historical source that paints a very different picture. *The Ballad of Lady Bessy* is a long poem, possibly written soon after the events it describes. It includes some fascinating private meetings between a resourceful and intelligent Bessy and some major figures from history. I decided to use this version of Elizabeth of York as the starting point for my play.

Shakespeare's history plays captivated me from an early age. They are great plays, but they are littered with historical

inaccuracies and they include a portrayal of Richard III that is, in many ways, a distortion of history. So, these plays were both an inspiration and a warning to me. I am a historian, so I felt an underlying need to respect the historical sources, but I also needed to write a compelling play that gave free rein to my imagination. I hope I walked this tightrope successfully. I believe I wrote a play that does not contradict the historical sources, but I allowed myself to imagine some scenes that probably didn't happen – but they might have!

The play shows Bessy as an outstandingly intelligent and resourceful woman who keeps her cool whilst those around her are losing their heads – metaphorically and literally! As the play progresses, she begins to shape events, despite the unspeakable challenges that hurtle towards her. But this is not a play about just one woman battling alone in a man's world. There are two other ambitious women who feature in this story – Elizabeth Woodville (Bessy's mother) and Margaret Beaufort (Henry VII's mother). The conflicts between the women are as sharp as the struggles with the men in their lives. This is a play about power – between people as much as in politics – and about the way in which women could exercise power in a world where they were expected to remain silent. It is also a very human story full of excitement, tragedy, love, and reconciliation.



Photo Richard Smith Photography

Going the Extra Mile

The People's Theatre,
Newcastle upon Tyne

The People's Theatre Newcastle has announced that member Alan Potts has been chosen as one of MP Catherine McKinnell's Community Champions in recognition of his amazing fundraising challenge earlier this year.



Alan cycled 874 miles, the distance from Land's End to John O'Groats, around the theatre, raising over £6,000. He talks about what the People's means to him in a video of his last lap:
<https://fb.watch/1zJ7VVjiPK/>

Congratulations, Alan, and a huge thank you from all of us.

Obituary Column

A new column to mark the passing of just a few of the LTG Members who have held a long or specific role in our Member Theatres. It will not be comprehensive, but I hope it will reflect the long service and love that people have for amateur theatre.

David Wood MBE, Chairman, Dewsbury Arts Group. A founder member and "essentially the spiritual embodiment of our society".

Keith Sheepwash, President Rainham Theatrical Society (RaTS) He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the theatre and was always the voice of reason at committee meetings.

Rita Stringer, Secretary, Richmond Shakespeare Society. A member who over the decades gave unstinting service to us whether as Secretary, Stage Manager, Box Office... the list is endless.

Colin Lee-Warden, Committee Member, Lisbon Players. We were all devastated by the news and will miss him sorely.

Jennie Aron, Ilkely Playhouse. A significant and longstanding member of our theatre for a long time. Her roles included publicity, director, actor. She served on the LTG Committee and was the theatre's LTG Rep for many years.

Hazel Tolley, Highbury Little Theatre, Sutton Coldfield. Hazel was a former Arts Director at Highbury and regularly directed plays. She was also Highbury's LTG Rep for many years, supported by Reg. She championed the benefits of LTG membership and served on the National Committee.

Richmond Shakespeare Society (RSS) go outdoors

Since 1934 when it was founded, and apart from World War II, the Richmond Shakespeare Society has always performed an annual outdoor production – come rain or shine!

However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused their proposed outdoor production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to be cancelled this summer.

Not to be deterred, the RSS began rehearsing a programme of short scenes from Shakespeare for a possible 'one off' outdoor performance and in the hope that a venue for the same might materialise.

Such optimism was rewarded when the RSS was invited by English Heritage to perform *Shakespeare in the Park* in the grounds of Marble Hill House in Twickenham as part of English Heritage's *Art in the Park* programme.

And so on a gloriously warm and sunny afternoon in September (far warmer and sunnier than most of their usual summer performances!) the RSS maintained their open air record of an annual outdoor production with a very well received performance before a socially distanced audience of 450 plus.



Peter Parkinson considers how the Richmond Shakespeare Society has fared during lockdown

As a member of the Richmond Shakespeare Society I was recently interviewed, on Zoom, by Simon Bickerstaffe, on my writing "The History of the Richmond Shakespeare Society from 1934 to 2020" which I intend to publish next year. In the course of the interview I was asked how the Society was faring in the time of COVID-19.

Theatre, like all public activities, is under severe strain. Perhaps though, seen from the point of view of the RSS, amateur companies may be better able to cope with the situation than professional ones.

Mary Wallace Theatre

The RSS is fortunate in owning its own theatre, a restored Victorian Mission Hall which four decades ago had deteriorated so badly that its owners, Richmond Council, wanted to demolish it. They were prevented from doing so by the Secretary of State for the Environment who declared it was in a conservation area. At the time, the RSS was searching for a permanent home and put in a bid to take over the premises in order to restore it as a theatre. The bid was successful and in 1979 the members, helped by a local developer and his builder associates, began the arduous task which took two years to complete. The



Peter Parkinson (left) and Simon Bickerstaffe (right)

theatre was officially opened by HRH The Prince of Wales in 1981. The cost of the project was a little over £100,000 and the money accrued from generous donations plus some imaginative and lucrative fund-raising by the members. The largest single donation came from the bequest of Mary Wallace, an outstanding actress and general secretary, who had died in 1977, hence the naming of the theatre The Mary Wallace.

Coping with lockdown

It is a wonderful little theatre, in an idyllic setting by the Thames in Twickenham, much admired by all who visit. The problem is that it is currently closed in what we call – fittingly for a Shakespeare company - the Year of the Plague. It was this problem I was asked to address during the interview and I replied that I believed amateur theatre was perhaps better placed to deal with lockdowns than professional theatres. Citing the situation of the RSS, I said that we owned a building that was sound and well-maintained, that we weren't burdened with the overheads of professional theatres, that we were unlikely to be embarrassed by lack of funds, and most importantly that we were blessed with a membership whose stick-at-it attitude, imagination, and strong sense of corporate loyalty has kept their society alive.

Activities during lockdown

There have been Zoom-hosted play readings and other events to keep us all engaged and in contact with one another, and on Sunday the 20th of September, we did what we first did in 1935 and have done ever since – bar the war years – perform Shakespeare in the open air and on the greensward. The venue was the terrace at the back of Marble Hill House. The afternoon's entertainment

– it has to be in the afternoon because we could not light it – comprised several scenes from Shakespeare, with the parts learned and rehearsed and costumed; and carried out in accordance with current social distancing. The audience was safely spread over the lawn and anyone who wanted to watch did so free of charge. We had wonderful weather and attracted the attention of the Sunday afternoon strollers who throng the park. I must at this point express our gratitude to English Heritage for letting us perform.

Youth activity

But there are other activities underway or planned. The two Youth Theatre Companies have continued to meet in The Mary Wallace (duly socially distanced) and we are intending to proceed with a production of *Whisky Galore* in December with a reduced capacity, no bar, and a socially distanced audience. I must add that the aim of the Youth Theatre, which has been an integral part of the society for almost forty years, is not to replicate the grown-up version. The emphasis, starting under Penny Waterman in 1984 and continuing right through to the recent stewardship of Katie Abbott, has been on the experimental.

The Members

Of course none of this would have been possible without the Society's greatest asset, its members, who have continued to show the companionship and fellowship and determination on which all amateur theatre depends. What I said in the interview is that amateur companies thrive on the richness and variety of their memberships, drawn from all quarters of society, which means that, without any song-and-dance, we have achieved that much-in-vogue attribute of *diversity*.

Playwrights in Lockdown by Nick Marsh, Writers Group reader



Although lockdown has been a curse for many people, for the playwrights of Rugby Theatre it has been a boon! The Writers Group was started over ten years ago to support theatre members interested in the very start of the dramatic process. As well as producing a whole range of scripts (in a whole range of genres) the group also runs regular workshops to test its creations on willing volunteers. This not only provides feedback for the writers but gives many people the chance to act in an informal situation and without the commitment of a full stage production.

Each year, the group provides a script for Rugby Theatre's annual entry in the Lighthorne Festival of one-act plays. It has also provided short plays put on by the theatre in Rugby town's annual Festival of Culture.

Outside of these grand events, however, enthusiasm amongst the writers can often wane, especially in the winter months. Despite a good email circulation, the monthly meetings are often sparsely attended and new material can be thin on the ground. This was certainly the case up until March when, due to the lockdown, it was decided to move to online meetings.

Because of a good supply of scripts, the group moved to weekly meetings and the group has gone from strength to strength. There has been an enormous rise in productivity, with many new scripts being produced and many old ones dusted off for reworking.

As with most aspects of this pandemic, what started as a temporary measure has become the norm and, even after seven

months, there is no sign of the creative flow drying up. We usually have three scripts to hand, and each author will select his or her cast to read. Anyone can attend whether or not they are a writer. After each reading the group spends around ten minutes discussing it, with the chairman reigning in oft related anecdotes! The author may not agree with all the suggestions but is usually left with plenty of ammunition.



Youth Competition

In addition to the play readings, this summer Rugby launched a Young Person's Playwriting Competition for children from 11 to 19. The main prize was to have the play performed by Rugby Theatre. Unfortunately, despite wide advertising in local schools, only three entries were received, but each author was awarded a book token and offered the chance to improve their script through mentoring from a director. We are about to run auditions which will eventually lead to recorded performances of these plays.

Every stage of this process has been online, and we have sustained enthusiasm and encouraged new people to the theatre. For writers, at least, lockdowns can truly be a blessing.

Editor: The Lighthorne Drama Group established the Lighthorne Festival of One-Act Plays in June 2013 and has been held every year since, apart from 2020.

Maskers Theatre, Between the Lines writing competition

Between the Lines is a new writing project established by The Maskers Theatre, Southampton www.maskers.org.uk. It invited both Members and the public to write a short piece (a monologue, play, poem, essay) about life in the first six months of 2020 – a year like no other!

They asked writers to consider how they had been affected by the COVID-19 crisis – how they had felt in lockdown and what they noticed now everyone spends so much more time at home? Had they had enough of virus talk and would they like to write about something else – maybe something joyous that made them happy! Whatever the story, the Maskers wanted to hear it.

They asked for pieces of around 2000 words that would last approximately 10 minutes when read/performed. Maskers members were then invited to perform the pieces and a selection of the stories have been streamed on the Maskers Theatre YouTube channel. At the time of writing, the latest piece is *Lockdown Poem* by Samuel Ife.



TakeTen Play Writing Competition from Chesil Theatre: winners announced

Peter Liddiard, editor of the Chesil Newsletter, announced in November that the winners have been selected. The competition was launched on 1 May and, although entries came in slowly, by the closing date of 18 July over 400 had been received.

He thanks the Chesil Theatre reading group who spent many hours carrying out the initial evaluation so that the best 50 went forward to the judging panel. The five judges (whose details are on the Chesil Website and Facebook pages) are all professionals working in the world of theatre and drama. Our thanks go to them too for their energy and enthusiasm in carrying out a difficult task.

A Desert Place
A Grande Day Out
All Our Lives
Along Any Minute
Careful
Pufferfish Over The Carpathians
The Belgians
Tremble
Tunnel
Waiting For A Fare

Rosemary Evans (London)
Ian Fraser (Winchester)
Christina Pye (Winchester)
William Patterson (London)
Karla Ptacek (London)
Neil Walden (Gloucester)
Ross Bateson (London)
Rob Johnston (Manchester)
Cate Sweeney (Cardiff)
John-Paul Jones (Poole)



On 25 November the winning ten plays were announced. Now they are looking for directors, actors and stage management for the performances next year. An exciting event to look forward to!



A Coward Coupling by Brighton Little Theatre (BLT) by Steven Adams



When BLT began rehearsals in early August for two one-act Noël Coward plays – *Family Album* and *Hands Across the Sea* – we didn't know when, or even if, they would be performed. We tentatively set performance dates for mid-September which, in the end, we put back one week to 22– 26 September.

Many preparations were made before the start of rehearsals, including a deep clean of the theatre and purchasing two infra-red thermometers to check temperatures on entry. The cast and crew were all drilled on social distancing and regular hand sanitising.

Blocking nine actors on our fairly small stage with social distancing rules was a challenge. Handshakes were replaced with a slight nod, and drinks were served at a full arm's length! The set was six very separated chairs, and a Charleston dance routine was blocked with all actors more than a metre apart and doing their own freestyle thing.

Before the performances we conducted a full COVID-19 risk assessment and audience capacity was reduced from 75 to 30 with every other seat taped up – like a chess board. The

bar was table service only with clear plastic screens installed between tables. A gazebo was erected outside for extra seating and even part of our furniture storage garage was converted into more bar seating. Rules on mask-wearing, toilet capacity and movement around the theatre were introduced together with stringent regular cleaning.



All performances sold out more than two weeks before we opened and were very well received by the audiences. We deliberately chose to start with two funny and silly comedies as an antidote to all the recent bad news! The audiences really appreciated being back and the effort we had gone to making everyone feel safe. It has just been a joy to be back at the theatre rehearsing and putting on shows again.

Ed: - The BLT COVID risk assessment is on their website at www.brightonlittletheatre.com/covidra. At the time of going to press, BLT have announced that their double bill, *A Visit from Miss Prothero* and *Afterplay*, planned for November will now take place 8 - 12 December.

The Lisbon Players



Our overseas Member, The Lisbon Players, have a new website – www.lisbonplayers.com – and very informative it is too. Sadly, we have missed their first online movie, *We Came To Lisbon*, which premiered on 1 November. This is "An impressionistic documentary about visitors and exiles who have found themselves in the Portuguese capital over the past 500 years". The trailer for this movie is now on their Facebook LTG Discussion page.

They held their AGM online – like so many of us – in September and have also moved online artistically. One of their members devised the "Lisbon Players Première Zoom Show", which went live on 2 October with a fab poster.

They have found a possible new venue where the entire contents of the old theatre are stored. But the Lisbon courts (Tribunal) have requested use of the building in the coming months. Nor does this theatre have a performing license, which the Lisbon Players are trying to resolve. They have not, however, ruled out finding a different venue. We wish them well in their hunt for new premises.



Perhaps they should be in touch with the Tower Theatre in Stoke Newington who were without a permanent home for 15 years but always remained a vibrant and active group.

The Archway Theatre

The Archway Theatre is proud to present *Murder on the SS Archway*, an evening of whodunnit entertainment. This is in the classic murder-mystery style with a cast of nefarious ne'er do wells, almost anyone of whom could be the culprit. Can you spot the clues to who committed the murder aboard the luxury cruise ship the SS Archway?



The ship's commander, Captain Bilge, carries out his own investigation but will you be able to uncover the guilty party before he does? You can play the video to enjoy in the comfort of your own home as you watch a cast of Archway actors play out the story.

You can enjoy this by yourself or with any sized group of friends and family, subject to prevailing government guidelines. You do not need a fully assembled cast of characters.

The events of the mystery are retold in the video over the course of an evening meal and the action is paused at each course. You can just settle down and watch the video or alternatively, to get the full experience, you might want to

have your own dinner party and watch the scenes unfold between each course. To add some flamboyance, you could ask your guests to dress as one of the characters: but remember, you do not need all of the characters as guests as the Archway actors will provide all that you need.

Whichever way you choose to watch this, as a full-blown party or just a quiet evening with some cocoa, we are sure that you will have fun. To purchase this Archway event go to the Archway Box Office where you can buy it for your whole group for just £15.00. You will receive a link for the video and a host's pack of instructions with menu and recipe suggestions. You'll probably spend more on your Prosecco for the evening!

If you are inviting guests, you might encourage them to purchase the programme which will give them a list of characters and costume ideas. The programmes are £2.00.

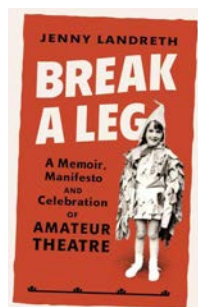
Finally, in the best tradition of Murder Mysteries, once you have solved the mystery of whodunnit, please KEEP THE SECRET!



Book Review Corner

Break a Leg: A Memoir, Manifesto and Celebration of Amateur Theatre by Jenny Landreth

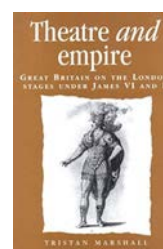
Waterstones notes that "This is the story of amateur dramatics in Britain. In a triumphant mix of memoir, social history, interviews and manifesto, Jenny Landreth opens our eyes to am-dram and shows us a vibrant world that is a crucial part of our culture".



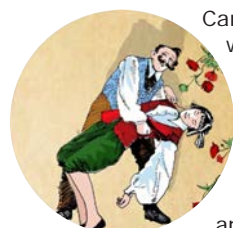
The next edition of the Newsletter will carry an interview with Jenny by Chairman Jo Matthews. It's a great book for the Xmas list for lovers of amateur theatre from your local bookshop.

Theatre and Empire by Tristan Marshall

Written by Questors member Tristan Marshall and published by Manchester University Press, Waterstones notes that "Theatre and empire" explores the genesis of British national identity in the reign of King James VI and I. While devolution is currently decentralising Britain, this book examines how the idea of a 'united kingdom' was created in the first place. It does this by studying two things: the political language of the King's project to replace England, Scotland and Wales with a single kingdom of Great Britain, and cultural representations of empire on the public and private stages. The book argues that between 1603 and 1625 a group of playwrights celebrated a new national consciousness in works as diverse as Middleton's *Hengist*, *King of Kent*, Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin* and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Specifically, Jacobean interdisciplinary studies are few compared with Elizabethan and Caroline works, but the book attempts to redress the balance by offering a fresh appraisal of James Stuart's reign.



The Broadbent Theatre, Wickenby Home of the Lindsey Rural Players



Can we rehearse, can't we rehearse? How are amateur groups affected? What news for professional groups? Questions, questions and more questions. The LTG and especially Eddie Redfern have been our saviours throughout this pandemic. We have received up-to-the-minute news covering every aspect of how the Theatres are affected during COVID-19. The Lindsey Rural Players at The Broadbent Theatre in Wickenby would like to give our heartfelt thanks to Eddie and all at the LTG for their

hard work in supplying us all with much needed information.

The Broadbent Theatre has not been able to put on its own amateur production but it has been able to provide much needed facilities for a local professional panto company, LADA, to rehearse and film a panto for schools across the country. Local professional theatre spaces were not available but we were. The company is returning to us in January to film a version for their Italian audience.

The Broadbent has always hosted professional and amateur companies as well as putting on our own productions.



Visiting companies have enjoyed our hospitality and very much appreciate our small theatre set-up with its excellent acoustics.

COVID-19 an LTG challenge that was not expected! From LTG National Liaison Officer, Eddie Redfern



I retired from the travel company TUI in December 2017, having spent the previous 25 years working with Government departments around the world on regulatory issues and challenging provisional law-making to make regulators understand our industry.

Following the news in January and February 2020, I was not nearly ready for what happened on 16 March when Boris Johnson

our PM announced that people should not be visiting the theatre! What? My own theatre was due to open with *The York Realist* the next day. The next day the news was that the West End had effectively closed. Our theatre Chairman also confirmed that we would close. Little did I know that I was, in effect, about to spend the rest of the year as if I was back in my old job!

I remember emailing DCMS about the plight of LTG theatres and received a request to join a conference call with other players in the sector. The lead was a person called Louise Smith who it transpired had links to The Questors, so understood our sector. During the call I was online with Companies like the RSC, ROH, Lloyd Webber's company and other professional organisations. I was able to get acceptance that LTG Theatres were in a similar position to professionals. That position unfortunately, never transposed to guidance and recognition.

UK Theatre and SOLT, have long recognised the value of LTG member theatres, predominately from leading actors declaring how their roots developed in the amateur sector: Sir Ian McKellen, Sir Kenneth Branagh, Oliver Ford Davies, Michael Gambon, Leonard

Rossiter. This means that we have been able to link in with what the professional theatres are doing, the main benefit being able to access the UK Theatre "See it Safely" campaign, plus their health and safety guidance.

The Theatres Trust was for me a latecomer to our interactions, but they have proven invaluable as responses from DCMS took longer and longer. Being a quasi-government organisation, they were able to reconfirm guidance for amateurs ahead of responses from DCMS.

Whilst I believe we have had a good relationship with DCMS, it became clear to me that the amateur sector was quite some way down their understanding and pecking order, with officials always considering local theatre groups hiring the local village or town hall. Trying to emphasise that we were running our own theatres was an uphill struggle that, even now, I'm not sure we have conquered!

I will continue to challenge them and push for greater understanding of the LTG position, and will do my best to continue to provide timely updates. But with the department taking over one or two weeks to update guidance after No 10 announcements, I feel the total frustration of member theatres.

I have no doubt that the National Committee will redouble its efforts to ensure that the LTG and its member theatres are fully recognised by DCMS as befits their position in our communities up and down the country.

Finally, can I thank all of those member theatres that have taken the time to both challenge my assumptions and thank me for the work I have done on your behalf.

ABTT Corner

LTG is a corporate member of ABTT - Association of British Theatre Technicians - and they have a useful website www.abtt.org.uk. They run online seminars and networking events many of which are free. For example, on 30 November they held a free seminar on COVID-safe working for Costume and

Wardrobe in Theatre and Live Events. They have a very useful back catalogue of the year's Zoom seminars covering matters such as: Sustainability; Diversity; Creating Theatre in a COVID-19 Landscape; UV-C Light at the end of the Tunnel.

They have a wide range of Guidance Notes on COVID-19 related matters. And, if your theatre hosts outside companies, have you

completed the ABTT Theatre Listings page? The aim is to create a comprehensive list of technical details for UK theatres which allows touring productions to find all the information they need in one place.

And finally, a date for the 2021 diary is the ABTT theatre show 9-10 June 2021.



What the Government's Rescue Fund Grant means

Seven LTG Members received funds from the Government's Rescue Fund. Ian Robinson, Operations Director at Chorley Theatre www.chorleytheatre.com, explains what this means for them.

Getting the grant does help with our survival. We have had exceptional costs in the past year with building repairs and adding a new performance/rehearsal room, which meant we did not have much in reserve. The 2020 schedule of popular shows should have covered everything, but, of course, most events were cancelled or postponed.

In our bid we had to explain to ACE (Arts Council England) that the building is 110 years old, and even closed it costs us money. We also

had to show that that any income from re-opening would only be minimal thanks to social distancing. We explained that what we offer is not just for Chorley but wider and being the only venue of our kind in this half of Lancashire certainly helped.



We also included our long history and strong hit-rate of former members that have gone on to work professionally in the industry. We got slightly less money than we asked for, but it is still a decent amount. Along with funding from the British Film Institute (we show films) this should see us through into Spring, when hopefully we will be able to open more regularly. The brief re-opening in October was very well-received by volunteers and audiences, re-affirming our belief that we are an important part of the community. We look forward to involving more people when it is safe to do so.

Culture Recovery Fund for Independent Cinemas

I was delighted to learn that Chorley Little Theatre, which also show films, has received some funds from the BFI (British Film Institute) to help it with its reopening. I asked for more information. Ian Robinson noted that the



BFI divide the country into regions to support independent cinemas. He has found them to be enormously helpful and they built on their good relationship, which was established when the theatre showed dementia-friendly films.

Chorley received £4,200 in May to help towards running costs and have now just received another £9,400 to fund film screenings up to the end of April. They are required to show a lot of films but as they are paid for, all profits come back to

the theatre to help them stay open. Ian noted that as films have no interval, fewer volunteers are required. Gloria Wright at the Corn Exchange, Wallingford confirmed that they too have been awarded money from the BFI and have made a recent grant application for funds to help make their theatre / cinema COVID-secure.

Ed: Applications to this Culture Fund are now closed but the BFI website has information about community cinemas www.bfi.org.uk

See It Safely

UK Theatre and SOLT have launched the See It Safely toolkit to support theatres as they reopen and to instil audience confidence.

By signing up to the toolkit, venues can show audiences that they are compliant with the latest government guidelines. DCMS are encouraging the roll out of this scheme across the wider live events sector, and the Federation of Scottish Theatre will be administering

and promoting the campaign once the Scottish Government gives the go-ahead that theatres can safely reopen.

Phill Brown (Head of Risk and Safety) is on hand to offer members ongoing support and advice on health and safety issues, and will share updated guidelines as necessary.

There is an online application form to complete before you can be granted use of the See it Safely toolkit. See www.solt.co.uk/



Voluntary Arts



Voluntary Arts is running two major surveys. One is the **Big Conversation** and the second is **Community COVID**. The deadline for **Big Conversation**

closed on 6 December. Did you or your board or trustees contribute? How did they find the questions?

Community COVID – this is part of a large-scale Community COVID research project, led by University College London and funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) which looks at how creativity and other community-based activities have helped individuals through the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Working with partners including

NHS England and Arts Council England, the project will publish a major report in 2021 to tell the story of how people used these activities to get through such challenging times, and what we can learn from this for the future. There are ten short questions, and you need to be over 18 to take part. Go to www.culturehealthresearch.wordpress.com/community-covid/ to read more about it and find the survey.

Big Conversation – follows on from similar surveys in 2017 and 2018: they want to see "what has changed for those involved in creative activities during these turbulent times".



**COMMUNITY
COVID
SURVEY**

LTG Memories from Michael Shipley

The mention in the last LTG Newsletter of changes to the Chairmanship brought me to my own memories from the late 70s and early 80s. The LTG rules were changed for 1979 when the chairmanship was changed to election by nomination from the membership. The first chairman elected under this new rule was **Geoff Bennett** (Criterion), followed by a new Vice-Chairman, in this case **Martin Bowley** (The Questors) who automatically became Chairman in 1981. I was elected as his Vice-Chairman, and so began my four years of activity in the Guild for the committee and membership.

LTG Committee

The committee was extremely active, especially with Martin constantly keeping us alert to new ideas. Secretary **Marjorie Havard** was ever active with reports and questionnaires, conference details and her own special interests in AITA/IATA (International Amateur Theatre Association). I was kept busy travelling all around the country, from Scotland, the north east, Lancashire and Yorkshire, north Wales, south Wales, the midlands, the south and west country, the home counties and London.

Growth of LTG

The LTG grew as the membership increased and the work of the committee became ever more time consuming, and many topics were delayed by the lack of time at conferences. When in 1985 I relinquished the role of chairman, I invited Marjorie and the new Chairman **Harold Mellor** to agree that I should take on the **new role** as **Newsletter Editor**. I hardly expected that I would be in this role until 2016! At one stage I also took on the role of North Region Secretary for a few years. With Marjorie's elevation as national chairman I was voted in as the Guild's **PRO** where I served for many years. So for some 30 years or more I was deeply involved with LTG in many different capacities. This came to a climax when for the 70th anniversary, I published my little history of the Guild.

Great Asby weekends

Perhaps the happiest idea I instigated was the summer weekend committee meeting at my house in Cumbria, which started in 1986. I had suitable accommodation in my own house and from kind neighbours, as well as a large garden. If the summer was kind, it was a great place for the whole committee, as well as various spouses, to gather from Friday evening through to Sunday afternoon. Ideas were mulled over, and decisions made on a whole host of important topics that were considered with care and without the pressures of a conference.

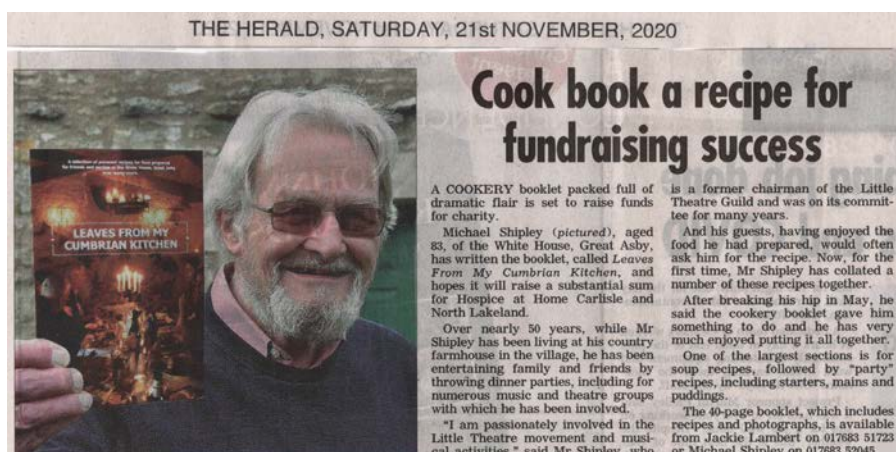
The addition of the adjoining field-barn created the perfect space for 'conference' work. I like to think that the freedom of these meetings was absolutely vital for the continuing success of the LTG in building the strength and co-operation of the team every year. But most important it was a great place for the meals that accompanied our meetings!

Great Asby cuisine

From the very beginning I loved making meals for all my guests, some basic, some quite adventurous. These suppers became increasingly popular; I had to provide menus and later recipe cards! And many of these, hand-written or in emails, have survived in the hands of many old LTG friends. I was often asked to provide a booklet of these recipes as a memento, but resisted largely, as I didn't feel that there was a sufficiently large interest to justify this. However, with time to kill now during COVID lockdown, I changed my mind, and began work. I do hope that you do enjoy the result.

Leaves from my Cumbrian Kitchen

The booklet is called **Leaves from my Cumbrian Kitchen**, a selection of personal recipes and food prepared for friends and parties at the White House, Great Asby over many years. It is available from me, and by courtesy of my favoured local charity, **Hospice at Home** of Carlisle and North Lakeland, Valley Court, Barras Lane, Dalston, Cumbria CA5 7NY. I have suggested a donation of **£10** for each copy, for which Gift Aid can also be claimed. Ask me for more full details including internet banking! Tel: **01768 352045**.



Music Hall and Variety Day

by Dean Caston, LTG Rep, Oasthouse Theatre, Rainham (RaTS)



Music Hall & Variety (MHV) Day on 16 May was a great success. It was organised by The British Music Hall Society, of which I am Vice-Chairman, and was introduced as a way to keep variety and music hall alive. The date was the birthday of our late President, Roy Hudd OBE and, while the day could have been linked with World Theatre Day on 27 March, the society wanted to focus on this particular genre of entertainment which, sadly, is fading away. The Society were also delighted to announce that Paul O'Grady will become their President from January 2021.



Events

This year, MHV Day events were online (due to COVID-19) with a couple of talks and posts via Facebook and Twitter. I co-ordinated activity with the press and radio and, throughout the day, interviews were given by Jan Hunt (Crackerjack fame and Paper Moon Theatre Company), Jimmy Cricket and Roy's widow, Debbie.

RaTS celebrations

The Rainham Theatrical Society www.oasthousetheatre.co.uk (RaTS) promoted the day and members performed monologues and songs via our Facebook page which were reported in the RaTS newsletter:



The British Music Hall Society held its inaugural Music Hall and Variety Day on Saturday 16th May, when they called on the world of theatre entertainment and our members to pay tribute to our beloved President, Roy Hudd on what would have been his 84th birthday.



Music Hall and Variety theatre supporters celebrated this day by sharing personal artefacts, collections and memories of the genre using the hashtag #MusicHallVarietyDay on social media.

Entertainment on the day (during lockdown) ranged from a message from RaTS Chairman, Helen Caston to launch the day (Helen also sang 'The Housemaids Song' later in the day; a Joyce Grenfell monologue from Jan Wyatt; Spike Milligan's 'The Ning Nang Nong' poem performed by Ryan Caston; and Michael Gentry performed a monologue whilst in the bath! A total of 10 posts were posted every hour from 10am. Dean was delighted with the responses and noted it was a way to keep the theatre alive during lockdown. The posts had over 3500 views!

Music Hall Day 2021

Planning for MHV Day in 2021 will begin in January which, it is hoped, will include a show in London (COVID permitting). Dean suggested that perhaps some LTG Members might like to mark the day.

LTG Members take part in Heritage Open Days 2020



Heritage Open Days is England's largest festival of history and culture, bringing together over 2,000 local people and organisations, and thousands of volunteers. Every year in September, places across the country throw open their doors to celebrate their heritage, community and history and it's all free. The website is www.heritageopendays.org.uk

Heritage Open Days is coordinated nationally by the National Trust with support from players of the People's Postcode Lottery. Over 2,000 organisations and some 40,000 volunteers program, fund and manage thousands of site openings and events, jointly attracting over 2 million visitors. They make Heritage Open Days England's biggest voluntary cultural event.

In 2020, two LTG Theatres took part – Southport Little Theatre and Stockport Garrick. Both theatres created a video to walk visitors through their buildings. Stockport Garrick launched their event from 11 – 20 September with a virtual tour. Southport too produced a walk-through the building video available on their Facebook page – useful background for when you visit them in May 2021 for the LTG National Conference (fingers crossed).

Another seven theatres took part this year. None of these are LTG Members but one or two have Membership potential which your committee will pursue.

Why not think about entering your theatre for 2021 Heritage Open Days which will be running 10-19 September?

heritage open days

On 11 - 20 September we celebrate

STOCKPORT'S HOD 2020

A Festival of History and Culture

Visit our What's On page

<https://www.stockportgarrick.co.uk/whats-on>

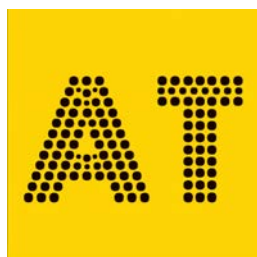
or find us on the HODs website

<https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/>



Live Streaming from the Abbey Theatre

By The Company of Ten, resident theatre company and owners of the Abbey Theatre, St Albans



The seed of the idea that we should live stream productions from the Abbey Theatre was planted early on during lockdown. In March our busy programme of productions had to be postponed or cancelled. By the beginning of June, it was clear that we would not be returning any time soon to the theatre, so we started to investigate alternatives. Live streaming seemed a viable option, but not having any experience of doing it, we hastily researched the technology required and soon concluded that this was something that we could achieve.

The introduction of 'The Rule of Six' brought additional challenges. Cast sizes would need to be limited to a maximum of six as would the size of the set construction crew, backstage crew and technical team (previously comprising lighting and sound but now including video director and camera operators) and none of these 'bubbles' should be allowed to mix. Our Production Executive has been working hard over the past few months to find small cast plays with minimal set for which we could obtain both performing rights and live-streaming rights and it has not been an easy task.

We gained experience of using the technology without a live audience with *Radio Fun*, a four-hander sketch show in the style of a radio play written by one of our members. Other tests followed and then in September we welcomed back a small socially distanced audience to see *Building The Wall* by Robert Schenkkan, which gave us the opportunity to test out our front of house COVID measures. This was followed by *Relatively Speaking* in November and *The Secret Garden* for Christmas.

The Company of Ten prides itself on the quality of its productions and we were determined that the live-stream should be of the highest possible quality within the constraints of the technology available to us and within a very limited budget. It soon became apparent that most cheap webcams do not have the necessary picture resolution.

After due consideration we decided to use Zoom Webinar to stream the event. We configured Webinar so that only our paying customers could access it from a single device. A few hours before the performance they are sent an email from Zoom containing a

link and all they have to do to join the live stream is click on that link. Incidentally, it is worth noting here that most live-streaming licences require you to charge the same ticket price as for a live audience – you cannot charge less or more.

There was much discussion about whether to use just one camera or to have additional cameras positioned nearer the stage to provide close up shots of the actors. We settled on a single camera in the centre of the back row to provide an overall view of the stage and two additional cameras, also in the back row, to provide the close up shots.

The theatre already owned a High Definition video camcorder and, after seeking professional advice we settled on using two other camcorders, borrowed from members.

From the outset, we were clear that this was a theatrical performance, hopefully in front of a live audience, that also happened to be streamed; it was not a film or TV programme. The most difficult aspect of the technology to get right has been the sound; we have settled on using three or four microphones positioned at the front of the stage.

So has it been worth it? The answer is a resounding yes! For *Building the Wall* we sold an equal number of live and streamed tickets and, bearing in mind that in many cases more than one person was watching on each device, we have reached many more people than we are able to accommodate in the theatre under current social-distancing regulations. Some of our viewers tuned in from as far afield as the USA and Australia! The feedback from both sets of audiences has been terrific with many of the live-streamers saying that it has given them the opportunity to be involved with theatre again even though they are self-isolating or nervous of attending the theatre in person.

This is a difficult time for the performing arts industry and we feel that in some small way we are supporting the industry by helping audiences continue to enjoy live theatre and build their confidence to return in person just as soon as they feel able. The alternative would have been to mothball the theatre and walk away but for The Company of Ten that was just not an option!

Ed: This is an edited piece; the full text is on the LTG Website.



Theatres Trust

Crowdfunder campaign



The Theatres Trust www.theatrestrust.org.uk continues to encourage theatres to take part in the Crowdfunder campaign with the hashtag #SaveOurTheatres which so far has raised over £1.4m from over 19,000 supporters. A link to the campaign is under latest news on their website and you can find the information in a post on 14 October.

A number of LTG theatres have signed up including: The Plaza Theatre, Romsey who list all the Crowdfunder supports on a supporters wall on their website and nearly reached their £20,000 target; CHADS theatre, Cheadle who raised £6,726 to help them complete their planned improvements; Stockport Garrick who raised over £7,000 to turn their basement into a usable and adaptable performance area for youth group, members and the community; and The Questors who raised just over £50,000 in 28 days.



£3m in two rounds. Needless to say, no LTG Member theatres were in the latter category. Members who received grants of between £50,000 and £113,000 were: The Crescent Theatre, Birmingham; Titchfield Festival Theatre; Blackfriars Arts Theatre; Stables Theatre, Hastings; Ilkley Playhouse; Chorley Little Theatre and Louth Playgoers Society.

The Theatres Trust was pleased to see just how many theatres had been successful in receiving a grant.

On the 27 October, the Theatres Trust announced the first 20 recipients of small grants (up to £5,000) from their Theatre Reopening Fund which total £81,000. These are intended to help theatres to alter their buildings to be COVID-compliant so they can open their doors to the public. Application for these grants can continue till the end of the year – so there is still time for theatres to apply. Two LTG theatres are in this first group of 20 recipients: Oldbury Rep and Hampton Hill Theatre (Teddington).



Shake a Virtual Bucket

With their Crowdfunder partner, the Theatres Trust invited theatres to take part in a Virtual Bucket Collection for the Xmas season as another way to raise money. And if the theatre will be open, to set up a QR code so that people can donate without the exchange of cash. See the Theatres Trust website www.theatrestrust.org.uk for more information.