

### ***Preliminary Rounds***

Across the face of the Area, a total of 31 productions were in first round competition, all of them adjudicated by GODA-qualified Members or Associate Members but a few of them not opting to go forward, something that we may address in the future. What may be fairly claimed, though, is that those who appeared at the Quarter Finals certainly deserved to be there.

### ***A review of the Area Semi Final 2017***

There was much that was familiar about our Festival at The Athenaeum Theatre, Warminster where we gathered on Saturday, 6 May. Not only have we used this splendid theatre before but we had again placed the judging in the safe hands of the popular Chris Jaeger, MBE, GoDA. In our advance publicity, we told the general public that One Act plays are similar to short stories in that they have a 'twist in the tail' and, like all good theatre, have an element of good versus evil. So it turned out to be at Warminster.

***'In by the Half'***, by Jimmie Chinn, Roundabout Theatre Company, Ferndown, Dorset. Winner Southern/Mercia Divisions. Madam, once a distinguished actress, lives in seclusion with her ex-dresser who looks after her. Their peaceful routine includes visits from the doctor and the insipid Sylvia, who takes acting lessons from Madam. The initial acerbic comedy of the play gives way to poignant drama with the arrival of Madam's estranged daughter who nurses a bitter secret. ***Chris Jaeger's observations summarised:*** *Jimmy Chinn has created here an opportunity for strong characterisation by the leading players supported by interesting cameos. The relationship between mother and daughter is vital to the success of the drama. The set was very good indeed and the spaces aided the telling of the story. The choice of costumes helped the characterisations. The quality of the sound cues varied, the grandfather clock being very good but the doorbell too loud and, whereas the choice of music was generally good, 'Send in the Clowns' as the letter was being read was a bit hammy. This production as a whole had a very good feel for the period. The central role of Madam was well drawn with a strong voice and her teaching conversations with Sylvia were good but could have risked playing the character a bit higher when pretending to be an OTT actress. The cameos were well drawn: Sylvia's gauche gawkinsness was good, Doris of the strong Cockney voice and the Doctor spot-on. Daughter Ursula established the awkward relationship very early after her entrance with very good body language and well controlled anger. She achieved that difficult balance between her own illness and a passionate reaction to her mother's archness. A good interpretation.*

***'Brenton vs Brenton'***, by David Tristram, Salterton Drama Club. Winner Western Division. What is the dark secret which enflames the Brenton family? Who is the mysterious Eddie? Why are Lana's shoulder pads wider than the door and just what was Deke Brenton doing down at the farm? All this and more is revealed in this outrageous spoof of American soaps and block-buster, mini-series in the manic world of Chicago's biggest advertising agency. ***Chris Jaeger's observations :*** *Tristram is a clever playwright and very funny but you have to play him at the right level: farce must be sustained, pace is vital, must be very fast, one cannot play it too high. Set was great, the door on wheels very inventive but as a high-powered office a carpet should really have*

been down. The supporting music was well chosen. Timing of the lighting cues was immaculate. Deke set the right tone with a great opening speech, overacting at a perfectly judged level and creating a picture of a down-and-out executive with a lot of energy but camp with it. Brett, as the long-suffering butt of Deke's jokes was consistently good with excellent facial expressions. Foxy, as the spoilt-American-child was 'equity material' with carefully calculated squeaky voice and good use of the eyes, particularly in the flirty bits. The dragging foot gag was a joy but would have been even funnier if the 'drag' had grown in length as the piece went on. Lana had super diction but was pitched a tad high. Matt could have 'pointed' the jokes a bit more. Blanche, quite rightly, provided a layer of melodramatic action. A difficult play made to look easy by the fantastic pace with which it was delivered. Very well done.

**'Tomcat'**, by James Rushbrooke, St Albans Players, Bristol. Wessex Division Winner. Set in a secure and secret unit somewhere in the UK in the not too distant future. The world 'is a better place' because all diseases and disorders have been eradicated. 12-year-old Jessie, however, has slipped the net. There is something dangerous in her DNA, something that needs to be dealt with. **Chris Jaeger's observations** : An interesting and challenging play reflecting the horrors of absolute state control. Needs strong, high-level playing particularly from Jessie and Tom, her jailer-cum-carer, their relationship is the core of the piece. The 'institutional' smell of Dettol at start was very effective – definitely a Festival 'first'! Set was very good, particularly the concept of everyone playing through the fourth wall even if notionally watching the action elsewhere. Movement of the actors not immediately involved was often still lit: it would have been less distracting if they were unlit until next involved. Having said the which, the general grouping was consistently good. The direction was at a high level, particularly of Jessie and the pace excellent with correct variations. A very good performance from Tom who caught the right tone of firmness coloured by a gentle kindness. He conveyed a total understanding of how to handle a teenager in these strange circumstances. His defensive observations to both psychiatric doctors in the early scene was very strong. Jessie (actual age 14) played a terrific performance with perfect diction and impressive projection. She cleverly played it down at times : she had to make us like her despite her tantrums – and she was lovable! A big range of emotions, believable tensions and terrific cuebite. The two doctors: Caroline, who had 'seen it all before' showed a believable conviction that 'the problem was not psychotic' and Charlie, who did not handle Jessie well, had a zeal to treat her and try experimental solutions. We were not meant to like him, and he succeeded! Good acting from both. Great direction and coordinatipon: a difficult play bravely conquered.

**'Questions on the Margin'**, by Scott Marshall, Weymouth Drama Club. (Runner-up Mercia/Southern Division. Scene: a terrace. Duffy, an actor, is being questioned by the persistent Johnson. With echoes of Pinter, an atmosphere of mystery and menace hangs over this black comedy as Duffy displays his professional dexterity. But who are these two men? Where are they and, more importantly, where is Duffy's wife? **Chris Jaeger's observations** : An intriguing choice of play which needs great concentration from both main players in that the fantasy scenes must contrast with the reality mirrored in-between them. Bringing the blacks in was good direction, it brought the action downstage and nearer to the audience. The choice of 'In a Country Garden' as intro music was not entirely suitable - and neither was the hiatus which followed before the

*action started. Johnson had a good, strong voice and was a good listener when off-cue but needed to lift delivery when involved in the script's iconic football match discussions. Duffy also had a good voice and, though both came alive during the sports pieces, he could have seemed more of a player as opposed to just reminiscing. The cameo role of the Woman was well done: despite appearing late in the play, she looked as if she belonged. The production suffered from words difficulties from early on and the fact that some of the passages became jumbled. Both main characters worked very hard to overcome the problem but were affected as a result. The word games were thus too slow and there was no snap to the pace or the playing. The director used the space well which hinted at a more polished, prior performance.*

Chris Jaeger summed up the Warminster Final by praising the efficiency of the arrangements made on behalf of competitors and audience and praised the endeavour that had produced the four plays presented for our entertainment. The Stanley and Madge Williams Shield is presented each year at the Adjudicator's discretion and Chris awarded it to **Siena Jackson-Wolfe** for her portrayal of Jessie in St Albans' "Tomcat". The Broughton Chatwin Memorial Trophy goes to the overall winners and was won by St Albans Players for their production of 'Tomcat'. The winning play will represent the Western Area at the English Grand Final at Bridgwater, Somerset on Saturday, 3 June.

### ***A review of the English Final.***

In our pre-publicity, we told the general public that 'the Grand Final of the prestigious All England Theatre Festival is a wonderful opportunity to see directing, acting and stage presentation at its most polished level. The AETF brings competitive drama to The McMillan Theatre, Bridgwater. Audiences are guaranteed high-quality entertainment since all four of the one-act plays to be presented have already triumphed at previous, knock-out stages in the four corners of the land.' Paul Fowler, ex-actor, director, stage manager and festival organiser will be known to many readers and, naturally, was an excellent adjudicator.

The Festival was opened by the **AETF Western Area Winner St Albans Players, Bristol presenting 'Tomcat', by James Rushbrooke.** This gripping piece of theatre is set in a secure and secret unit, 'somewhere in the UK and in the not too distant future'. The world is 'a better place' because all diseases and disorders have been eradicated. 12-year-old Jessie, a feisty lass has, however, slipped the net. There is something dangerous in her DNA, something that needs to be dealt with. ***Paul Fowler's observations summarised:*** *The central situation of this play deals with the vexed, ethical questions surrounding genetic screening but centres on the effects on the people involved. Tight control of the mood was the essence required of the director. The presentation of representing the cell boundaries by a lighted strip was a clever solution. The institutional, strange place of confinement was excellently created and a world of oppression well maintained throughout. The birdsong heard at the beginning was an effective reference to the world outside. The costuming was very good, all carefully considered. This was directed with terrific discipline, loved the assured way that the scenes changed. Relationships were excellently drawn and the key 'battle' between Jessie and carer Tom believably established from the start. The girl cleverly showed that some of the anger was not genuine, showing that she was playing games with those meant to be in control. The sequences of near-violence were particularly well done. The whole added up to the black nature of the final questions as to Jessie's fate being totally*

achieved. Jessie produced a terrific, mercurial character with a huge range of vocal variations and an angular physicality. A considerable acting achievement. Tom gave a thoroughly professional performance, creating a warm, honest, down-to-earth man in a portrayal that was very powerful. The doctor Caroline was the perfect, cool professional at start and grew increasingly more uncertain as the play progressed. A good performance of the neutral factor in the medical power balance. The young doctor Charlie was the face of the state: somewhat ruthless and uncaring about the fate of subjects. They amounted to a terrific team tackling a tight piece of theatre. It was very well done requiring great concentration from all of them.

**“Anyone Can Dance” by Sean Baker, presented by BAWDS, Cambridge, the Winner Eastern Area.** Joe and Samantha have been in a relationship for nearly six months or, as Joe points out, “five months, three weeks and two days”! He wishes that they had met years ago but Samantha is not so sure. During a series of imagined past meetings, perspectives begin to change. As one of them says, “Life is not a series of ‘what ifs’, it’s a series of ‘what is’”. What’s the resolution? **Paul Fowler’s observations:** *This is a vibrant if quirky look at the history of a relationship between the two characters. It is composed of a series of scenarios introduced by a flick of the fingers by either one and introducing different locales and moods and stages of ‘their journey’. The script is not overburdened with stage directions and thus constitutes considerable challenges for the director and much scope for characterisation. The positioning of the bed at centre stage was absolutely right and the strewn clothes around the bedroom indicative of a chaotic life that, eventually, straightens. The technical aspects worked very well. The costume changes demanded by the myriad scenes were terrifically well done and made utterly unselfconsciously. There was a ring of truth about all of the progressive stages of the relationship. As already indicated, direction was of necessity somewhat objective but there were some wise decisions shown here, achieving a great relationship between the two actors. Pace was varied, fast or slow available as needed. The railway station scene was terrifically honest, indeed there was a real difference in each vignette. We saw versatile performances of terrific vitality in a poignant and charming journey of discovery with honest and effortless timing, atmosphere and mood.*

**Saltburn ’53 Drama Group, with ‘Moles and the Habits of Birds’ by Evan Roberts. Winner Northern Area.** Drawn from events at Aberfan, a mining village in South Wales where, 50 years ago, a colliery tip slipped and buried the school and nearby houses. The play tells of the effects of the disaster on individuals and the community in life-affirming ways. **Paul Fowler’s observations:** *The horror of events on 21 October, 1966 when 116 children and 28 adults were buried is recalled. The play deals with the event in a broad sweep whilst also reflecting individual feelings. The director’s task is to hone in on the drama whilst avoiding the sensational and to impose on the cast a confident playing style. This was a bold and ambitious choice presenting huge challenges. The costuming was right for period and class. The live music lifted the drama very well and the singing an unexpected delight. The presentation was valid, different areas of the stage given to a profusion of differing scenarios without ever getting in the way of each other. The playwright has structured well, Mrs Jenkins was a kind of Greek Chorus, the conscience of the piece. The ordinary world was established first, then came calamity. Loved the beginning with those innocent children and then the portrayal of the landslip was truly horrible, heart-wrenching stuff followed by that eerie silence – a very, very good theatrical moment. Lovely direction in the bodies being*

*passed one to another. The play then moves on to other issues such as survivor guilt and the dry, impersonal, formal court hearing. The fight for justice was rushed writing but was well done in this production. Nice scene in The Club - lovely singing, indeed they could have been Welsh. Congratulations to Saltburn who can be proud of their remarkable achievement: the pace was very good throughout, the accents were consistently good and the children terrific. A triumphant example of what community theatre can achieve and very moving in a way that only live theatre can be.*

**TACT, Tamworth. “Lear’s Daughters” by Elaine Feinstein & The Women’s Theatre Workshop, Winner Central Area.**

A prequel to Shakespeare’s ‘King Lear’. This intriguing play deals with the relationships between Goneril, Reagan and Cordelia and their powerful father and seeks to tell us why each did what they did. It may bridge 411 years but the themes are strangely contemporary, with shades of a current state leader with a particular, almost peculiar ‘take’ on absolute power and a further hint of a resurgent feminist movement. **Paul Fowler’s observations:** *The play deals with the upbringing of the three, a Brechtian approach in which the position of women in Society is the theme. It has created terrific roles which challenge any actress whereas the director has other tasks, the main one being to make this difficult piece of theatre understandable! The director’s approach started with that very imaginative setting of the three podiums from which the daughters stepped down in their turn. The importance of visual impact was clearly understood. The daughters’ costumes were stunning and the Nurse by contrast very neutral. In this kind of theatre, underscore music is used at one’s peril but here it was ‘spot on’ throughout. The direction had imaginative courage and the vision to use different modes of movement, dance, impressionism and expression. In consequence, the stage pictures were gorgeous which helped to interpret the difficult and obscure dialogue. Given that there was almost too much to take in, the production made a huge impression. The Fool was male as opposed to the androgynous figure envisaged in the script: it worked perfectly, making him into a puppet-master. We were treated to five accomplished actors: Goneril of the icy-edged ambition; Regan’s contrasting vocal perfection; Cordelia’s eager, childlike start and an arc of characterisation as the play progressed; the Fool’s excellent physicality and the Nurse as a hub of the play, a compelling actress in a measured performance. This was terrific theatre, directed with intelligence, a production that was complex and subtle by turns.* In his summing-up of the Festival, Paul complimented all the performances on their high standard and praised the organisation of the Festival in this splendid theatre.

The Irene Gartside Trophy for the best stage décor went to **TACT for “Lear’s Daughters”**. The Paul Dyson Trophy, awarded at the Adjudicator’s discretion went to **Siena Jackson-Wolfe** for her portrayal of Jessie in St Albans’ “Tomcat”.

The Rex Walford Award for exceptional creativity went to **Saltburn ’53’s “Moles and the Habits of Birds”** and

The John Maude Trophy for the Grand Final Champions went to **TACT**.

A good year and a truly Grand Final.

*Dennis Dunford, Chair Western Area,  
Assisted by Ron Roberts, PRO.*