

A  
Registered Charity  
Number 1071518

News & Review

July 2013  
Issue 2  
Number 26

# ALL-ENGLAND THEATRE FESTIVAL

Reaching out to drama groups throughout England



## England

Having spent the last 6 months organising and running a first round, a week-long festival in Tamworth, a Quarter Final in Burton on Trent and a Semi Final in Stoke on Trent and acting and directing productions at all three levels, as well as entering and supporting other first round festivals, chairing Divisional meetings and attending Area meetings, I have to admit I was feeling a little worn. However I have just returned from an excellent weekend in Christchurch at the English Final.

The Venue, The Regent Centre, was an excellent choice and its position right in the centre of Christchurch gave easy access to this delightful town and all its amenities. Even the weather obliged, "The sun always shines on the righteous" as they say. So I spent a lovely day on Friday enjoying Christchurch.

Saturday morning I arrived at the theatre to be greeted by 22 excited teenagers, though some looked bleary eyed, and their exhausted parents. The day went well and the standard of all the plays was very good. Despite the fact that my Youth Theatre IMPACT did not win, I was very proud of them and they enjoyed their day.

The following week I went to Stratford to meet up with Ian Wainwright from the RSC to talk about Open Stages 2013-2014 (see the report from Ian for more details) The RSC would not be directly involved with the AETF 2014. However, it was suggested that as part of our English Final the RSC might help each of the area winners to do a warm up prior to their performance, but of course this would be up to the individual teams. I was very impressed with the changes that had been made in the Main House of the RSC which Ian was kind enough to show to Roger, Jean, Dave and myself. I did explain to Ian that although the workshops had gone down well in Worcester, it had been people not directly involved with the performances and adjudicators that had taken part, rather than the actors performing in the final, who were far too busy on the day and yet would have liked to have been involved. Ian said that this was something

he hadn't realised, but he could see the problem. Although Ian and the RSC representatives found some of the adjudications of the plays difficult to understand, they thought the standards reached by some of the groups was very high.

My next trip, which I am really looking forward to, will be to the British Finals in Derry Northern Ireland, where I look forward to seeing the excellent production of 'A Day in the Death of Joe Egg' by Troupers once again, as well as watching the winning plays from Scotland, Ireland and Wales and meeting old friends.

Then off to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to perform *The Tempest* with TACT. If any of you are going up to Scotland, between 18th and 26th August, come to C venues and see us.

Then it will be time to start organising next year's festival. Well, I'd best keep busy, "The devil makes work for idle hands."

Sue Fortune  
English Chairman



On it's way to Edinburgh



*The only nation-wide  
eliminating contest  
for one-act plays  
in performance*

Chairman  
The Elms, Lichfield Road,  
Hopwas, Tamworth  
B78 3AF

### National Contacts:

Chairman - Sue Fortune  
Sue.fortune@hotmail.co.uk  
Vice-Chairman - Ian Clarke  
Ian.clarke33@btinternet.com  
Treasurer - Roger Cunnington  
cunnington@talk21.com  
Secretary - Ann Aplin  
aplironacton@gmail.com

### Area Contacts:

Northern  
Ian Clarke 01423 712240  
Western  
Ann Aplin 01454 228 243  
Eastern  
Margaret Watford 01932 228 525  
Central  
Jean Cunnington 0121 707 6684

[www.aetf.org.uk](http://www.aetf.org.uk)

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## Northern Area

This year's festival in the North was high in quality in both dramatic execution and in original writing. Firstly, hearty congratulations to two of our festival playwrights - James Phillip, whose 'Silencing the Lambs' from the Leverhulme Festival won the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy, and Keith Burton, whose trenchant and moving little play 'The Journey', performed at the Nidderdale Festival, won a joint runner-up accolade in the same competition.

Although our friends from the Isle of Man were unable to send their winner to the North West Quarter Final, a splendid, two-play evening at Grange in May saw the Cumbria festival winners, Cumbria Amateur Theatre Society (CATS), triumph and advance for the first time to the semi final stage.



Centre Stage

Across the Pennines, our decision to amalgamate the North Central and North East quarter finals was thoroughly vindicated. Packed houses at both matinee and evening sessions at the Frazer, Knaresborough,

witnessed splendid performances by Richmond Amateur Dramatic Society, Saltburn '53 Drama Group (Youth), Harrogate Dramatic Society (HDS) and the ebullient, mega-talented youngsters of Centre Stage Drama Group of North Ferriby. Two superb acting performances in the principal roles of Pinter's 'The Lover' by Rachel Conyers and Stuart Newsome of HDS just won the day and HDS and Centre Stage (runners-up under Jane Godber's imaginative direction of Christopher William Hill's 'Ittullkyllyooiffyoodoo') went on to contest the Northern semi final with CATS.



Rachel Conyers & Stuart Newsome  
Harrogate Dramatic Society

The semi-final itself was held for the first time at the historic little Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond. The venue inspired all three groups to 'up their game' even more. Once more HDS, with Rachel Conyers and Stuart Newsome again inspired, just pipped Centre Stage at the post and, under Stuart Kellett's excellent direction, went on to perform at Christchurch. They were the North's most competitive AETF finalists for some years and did us proud.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to all who contributed, in whatever capacity, to this year's festival events north of the Dee and Humber.

Ian Clarke – AETF Vice Chairman and Northern Area Secretary.



## Western Area

This has been a very busy "summer" for Western Area with the various Quarter Finals, the Semi Finals and then the English Final. The Semi Final was held at the Atheneum Centre in Warminster which was run by Martin Clifton on behalf of the Committee. It was a highly successful day and the quality of the four plays performed was of a very high standard. The winners were Troupers, a team from Frome in Somerset, who performed, "A Day in the Death of Joe Egg" Act I by Peter Nichols, "a very challenging piece of theatre," commented the Adjudicator Robert Meadows GoDA. The Adjudicator said that all the plays he'd seen deserved to be there and wished Troupers well in the English Final.



It was the turn of the Area to host the English Final and this was held at the Regent Centre in Christchurch, a delightful seaside town on the South Coast.

The teams were exceedingly pleased with both the venue and the technical staff for their help on the day. The day turned out to be a gloriously sunny one and the teams turned up to do battle for the privilege of representing

England at the British Final in Derry, Northern Ireland. Again the plays performed were very diverse and the Adjudicator, Jan Palmer Sayer, GoDA said that there was only one mark between the winner and the runner-up. The Irene Gartside Award for décor and Paul Dyson Trophy, presented at the adjudicator's discretion, were both won by Stretch Theatre Company for their performance of 'Housebound' by Simon Mawdsley. The winning team was Troupers with "Joe Egg" and the director Philip de Glanville received the John Maude Trophy on behalf of the team. Richard Thomas and Tina Walker were jointly awarded the Rex Walford Trophy for their performances as the mother and father in "Joe Egg" by the Adjudicator who said she was sure that Rex would have appreciated the sincerity and truth that these two actors brought to the play. Holly McPhee-Clarke also received praise for her performance as "Jo". Troupers will go to Northern Ireland to represent England at the British Final.

Dennis Dunford  
W A Chairman



Troupers

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## Central Area

Well it is finally here the reshaped Central Area, three Divisions consisting of three Preliminary Round Festivals each sending two representatives through to their respective Quarter-Finals.

**Birmingham** - This was a good festival not as well supported as has been the case in the past but as Scott Marshall GoDA said "Birmingham will be well represented at the next round".

**Nottinghamshire** - Unfortunately this festival had to be cancelled, however the AETF entry did perform at the Leicestershire Festival and received an adjudication before being accepted as Nottinghamshire's entry, inexplicably they then pulled out!

**Warwickshire** - We only attended the Abbey Theatre at Nuneaton on the Saturday evening and although neither of performances we saw was the AETF winner, the adjudicator, Cherry Stephenson GoDA Ass stated that we had seen a worthy runner-up.

**South Staffordshire** -When we attended the Hastilow Festival at the Tamworth Assembly Rooms, in the words of the adjudicator Ben Humphrey GoDA we had seen three performances, one which was meant to shock and two which were both entertaining and enjoyable.

**Herefordshire** - At the Herefordshire festival at the Courtyard we saw three performances which were enjoyable each in their own way; two going forward with high recommendation from the adjudicator Chris Jaeger GoDA.

**Leicestershire** - We were unable to attend due to inclement weather i.e. snow.

**Shropshire** - Again we were unable to attend due to the snow.

**North Staffordshire** - At the Stoke festival at Trentham High School we saw three very worthy entries, the adjudicator, Arthur Aldrich GoDA Ass, said that it had been a very good and thought provoking evening's entertainment.

**Worcestershire** - We only attended the final evening of this marathon two day twelve play festival. The adjudicator Paul Fowler GoDA summed it up as "a two day four session theatrical Odyssey, that was full of surprises". David Tristram, who presented the prizes, suggested that if you pick a good play and cast it well then you are likely to win.

**Eastern Division Quarter Final** - The FIRST Quarter Final took place this year and was a success. The adjudicator Chris Jaeger GoDA stated, as he started his first adjudication of the day, "Normally a comedy can not win, we have four comedies today, we will see how it works". In his final summing up he said, "We had four different genres of comedy today all good in their own distinctive ways, and a comedy has won".

**Central Division Quarter Final** - Took place at Burton-on-Trent and proved to be a very varied and thought provoking day's theatre. The adjudicator Chris Jaeger GoDA stated that he was very pleased that two productions would be going forward as when he had initially added up the marks two teams were identical.

**Western Division Quarter Final** - At the Swan Theatre, Worcester had a very varied line-up of plays, but the adjudicator Mike Kaiser GoDA went on to send two youth groups through to the Area Final.

**The Area Semi-Final** - Took place in the Mitchell Memorial Theatre, Stoke and a grand event it was too. Our adjudicator Russell Whitley GoDA was certainly impressed with the standard and Impact Youth Theatre took the honours to represent the Area at the English Final.

I would like to thank everybody involved in all of the AETF festivals, for the success that they were. I would also thank all of the preliminary rounds for making Jean and I welcome when we have been able to attend. Could I say that if you are interested in becoming more actively involved, the Area holds it's AGM on the 23rd September in Solihull, please get in touch with Jean Cunnington (0121 707 6684) for more details.

Roger Cunnington.  
C A Chairman.



Impact Youth Theatre

After serving several years as the National Secretary, due to failing health, Martin Patrick has reluctantly decided that the time has come to relinquish the position.

Since taking up the post, Martin has done a sterling job and performed his duty diligently - AETF owe him a great debt of gratitude, we all send him our best wishes for the future.

With a little arm twisting, Ann Aplin has agreed to take on the position.

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## Eastern Area

A good season overall for the Eastern Area, with a recurrent theme of new material and emerging youth talent in many of the first round festivals.

When I reflect on my early involvement in the AETF some 30 years ago my recollection is of a small number of playwrights and, indeed plays, featuring repetitively. Youth groups were a rarity and were generally noticeably below the standard of the adult groups, both in terms of staging and performance level.

Contrast that with the current AETF scene and there is a marked increase in the number of new plays, many of which are of a high standard and winning awards. Indeed, the Eastern Area Final was competed for by two groups (perennials Runnymede Drama Group and festival newcomers Stretch Theatre Company) who staged new works, both of which were justifiably highly praised by the Adjudicator for the quality of writing.



Runnymede Drama Group

Stretch Theatre Company subsequently came second in the English Final by the narrowest of margins – albeit to “A Day in the Life of Joe Egg” which certainly isn’t an original piece (but was nonetheless worthy of winning) !

Similarly, the resurgence in youth participation in the festival scene seems to be gathering pace, with youth entries making up 50% of entries in some first round festivals. Just as importantly, the quality of youth productions and performance is now markedly higher and in many cases at least on a par with adult groups, which bodes well for the future.

The challenge is in nurturing that level of interest and encouraging the youngsters to maintain their interest in acting and production.

Sadly, 2013 saw the demise of the long-standing Southend Festival which has suffered financial losses for several years and is no longer able to continue. This was despite a healthy entry level, with 12 productions this year, but only one of these was local to Southend and several of the entries were ad-hoc groups formed solely to tour the festival circuit, and bringing no support, a disappointing approach that seems to be more prevalent. Frank McGrath OBE and his committed team will be a significant loss to the Eastern Area.

Attention is now turning to the 2014 season and the opportunities and challenges that will doubtless throw up !

## 2015 British Final

Planning the British Final is similar to arranging a wedding, although a marriage usually lasts longer than a weekend..... The church and wedding breakfast venues are replaced by theatre and reception venues and the local Mayor (for a Civic Reception) replaces the Vicar – in each case all these have to be planned well in advance, after which there is some breathing space before attention focuses on other arrangements to be put in place.

The early ‘long-lead’ arrangements for the 2015 British Final are well advanced, with bookings confirmed and deposits paid for the 300 seat Wilde Theatre and 100 rooms in the nearby Hilton Hotel in Bracknell, Berks. The theatre was built in the 1980s and is part of a larger arts centre in an attractive listed former manor house in a landscaped parkland setting. The hotel is just a 6-7 minute walk from the theatre, offers very competitive room rates and is due to be fully refurbished in 2013-14.

Bracknell is no tourist attraction in it’s own right, but is only 15-20 minutes drive from Windsor which offers the magnificent Castle, delightful riverside walks, great shopping and more restaurants and coffee bars than is decent !

The formalities for the weekend are also well advanced with not one, but two mayors (for the town and borough councils) lined up to attend the Saturday morning ‘welcome’ reception for the host (English) and visiting teams and their drama association representatives and both mayors hopefully attending the Saturday evening performances and awards. The Friday night reception will be held in the theatre gallery, bar and external terrace (weather permitting) whilst the formal after-show reception on the Saturday night will be held in the 120 seat hotel function room.

I had the pleasure of participating in the 2002 Final in Inverness, which gave me a good insight into the modus operandii but will be attending the 2013 British Final in Derry and 2014 Final in Stirling, to pick up a few organisational tips.....

Watch this space for more news.....

Ian Thomas  
E Area Chair



Caroline Petherbridge & Martin Bedwell from Stretch Theatre Company

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF

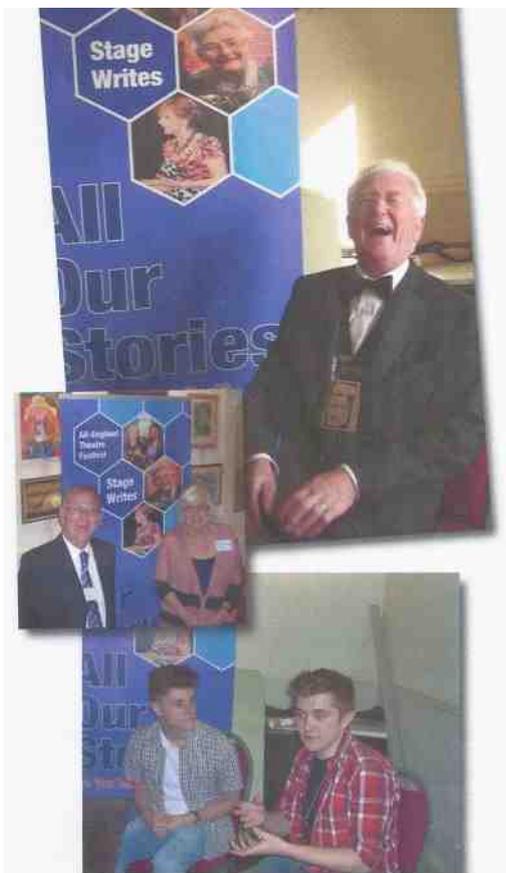


## The Treasurer's Ramblings

Just as a reminder, and after all it does concern money, I would take the opportunity to mention the AETF membership scheme. As happened last year we have enclosed with this issue of the Newsletter an application form, and hope that you will give consideration to becoming a member if you are not one already. There are several categories to choose from, so even if you are a member yourself perhaps you could persuade a friend to become one as well. The scheme, although not bringing in mega bucks is proving quite popular, and does enable anyone to keep in touch with the AETF without having to wait until the festival season is actually underway.

On a different tack, it is doubtful if it will bring forth any dialogue, but having being involved with the Stage Writes Project it made me wonder how many of us actually support Quarter Finals and Semi-Finals outside of our immediate catchments area, for that matter how many of us support our county winners unless we are personally involved? We were only able to get to the English and Welsh Finals this year, a one and two day event. The Scottish Final was over three days and the Northern Ireland Final a one day event in January. Having blown my own trumpet it is interesting to note the support from none members of the competing groups at the British Final each year. Perhaps the trustees could be persuaded to organise some form of discount scheme, so that their semi-finalist audiences could attend the other three Semi-Finals. An impossibility, probably, but it could increase the number of bums on seats which is always better for the teams taking part!

Roger Cunnington



## STAGE WRITES

Last October I appeared at the English National Executive meeting more than usually excited and saying 'We've got it!' In other words our application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant for our project STAGE WRITES to establish a digital record of amateur theatre memories, stories and memorabilia had been successful and I had received notification of it the day before. Robert Meadows, GoDA, had been (and still is) the inspiration behind the project and AETF was the body well placed to take it forward.

All Festival Organisers were contacted and bundles of leaflets were sent out to be distributed amongst clubs and at festivals. In January a training day was held in Bristol where we were led gently along the way of interviewing and shown how to use our digital recording wonder. At this meeting we also met up with Daniel Penfold who was to set up the web side and work on the recordings for us.

Subsequently a team headed by Robert and myself appeared at various festivals and set up recording sessions. These recordings were made by a variety of people, adjudicators, audience members, company members old and young current and past. One sad reflection on how important such memories are is that an elderly man with a very full past as an actor was recorded at a festival in February and has recently died. I remember seeing and admiring him on stage and it was great to be able to go back and listen to Ted and his wife in 'Water and electricity don't mix', against the babble of a theatre audience.

I did this by going to our website [stagewrites.org.uk](http://stagewrites.org.uk) which is up and going with 24 recordings available to listen to. If you have been 'caught' by any of us and made a recording and yours isn't there yet - be patient! it takes time and the 24 recordings there are only a portion of those made. But do please add to it by logging on and making a comment.

There are also some written memories and memorabilia; please add to these by emailing to [aplinironacton@org.uk](mailto:aplinironacton@org.uk) or [rgmeadows@talktalk.net](mailto:rgmeadows@talktalk.net). We don't want your actual photos, set and costume designs, - just jpgs of them!

I am sure that some of you may be feeling that you have missed the boat, and other festivals would have welcomed us. However the number of festivals we could attend was constrained by the logistics of getting our black recorder from place to place - and of course many were on the same dates.

However AETF is going to continue to collect the stories and add them to the web site. This will provide a rich and entertaining collection for people to read and add to in years to come.

Ann Aplin



We are looking for a new editor for the AETF newsletter, There are two newsletters a year - if you are interested please contact Jean email: [cunnington.t21@btinternet.com](mailto:cunnington.t21@btinternet.com)

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## British Final:

There is always a buzz of excitement at the British Finals, it's great to meet up with old friends and to make new acquaintances with a likeminded enthusiasm for theatre. This year's festival, organised by the AUDF, was at the magnificent Millennium Forum in the beautiful City of Derry, voted the first UK City of Culture.

First on from Northern Ireland were Lurig Drama Group with 'Duck Variations' by David Mamet. The group was established in 1972 to revive the traditional love of drama performance in the Glens of Antrim. Over the years they have had many successes at festivals throughout Northern Ireland and in 2011 won the premier trophy at the British One-Act Finals.

The Scottish entry was next with Atholl Players offering of - Act 2 'Visitors From London' from the California Suite by Neil Simon. Atholl Players are a comparatively new club having been formed only in September 1995 when Gallery Players and Pitlochry Amateur Dramatic Society (PADS) came together to form a combined club. Both of these clubs had distinguished histories with a high level of success in SCDA Festivals. They have just won their 5th Scottish Final since their re-formation.

Following a very brief adjudication from Tom Doherty we adjourned to the Piazza area of the Millennium Forum to enjoy an Irish stew supper whilst being entertained by some skilful Irish dancing.

Saturday morning saw us off to the splendid Guildhall for a reception, hosted by the Mayor of Derry, Cllr Martin Reilly. During the afternoon there was the option to hear a rehearsed reading of the winning play in the Geoffrey Whitworth Competition. Twenty four scripts were submitted this year, and the winning script was 'Silencing the Lambs' by James Phillips from Wallasey in Cheshire – first performed in the Leverhulme Drama Festival.



A quick walk around the walls of the City and over the Peace Bridge and it was time to get ready for the theatre again.

The evening was opened by the English entry Act 1 of 'A Day in the Death of Joe Egg' by Peter Nichols, performed by Troupers from Frome in Somerset. Troupers is a small group, set up 25 years ago for the fun of performing in one act festivals and, occasionally touring full length plays. They last reached the English Final in 1994 and this was their first appearance at a British Final.



Philip de Glanville receiving the Howard de Walden Trophy

The final entry from Wales was from Solva Amateur Dramatic Society with 'A Little Box of Oblivion' by Stephen Bean. Solva began in March 2009 with five members and now have a healthy membership of all ages. Their aim is to bring the magic of theatre to their local community for enjoyable entertainment and as a fun-filled hobby.

Following another brief (maybe, ever so slightly longer) adjudication, we all awaited the results and were ecstatic when Troupers from England were announced the winners of the Howard de Walden Cup.

Looking resplendent in her green jacket, Dame Mary Peters, President of the AUDF, presented the awards.

Murray Walker, Chairman of the Scottish Community Drama Association, was presented with the 'Friendship Cup' in preparation for the 2014 British Finals which will be held at the Macrobert Theatre, Stirling on 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> June.

Following another luscious supper, this time salmon, and some excellent entertainment from a gentleman singer we made our weary way to bed. The following morning making our way back to the mainland, we took home warm memories of a super weekend of theatre. Many thanks to the Association of Ulster Drama Festivals.



From left to right Gordon Hibbert - Chair SCDA, Sue Fortune - Chair AETF, Dame Mary Peters - AUDF President, Teri McCarthy - Chair DAW, Maureen Dunn - Secretary AUDF, Alan Marshall - Chair AUDF. Left: James Phillips receiving the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy

Photographs taken by Mac Pollock, Vice Chairman, AUDF

# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## The Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Project is back

The RSC's hugely successful Open Stages project engaging with amateur theatre makers is back.

The RSC and its professional partner theatres are looking for 100 amateur companies across the UK to produce a Shakespeare or Shakespeare-themed production in their own venue, hired hall or outdoor site.

This new phase of the project will focus on learning, with each RSC Open Stages amateur company receiving, training, director mentoring, feedback and support from the RSC and its professional partner theatres.

The RSC believes that Shakespeare, and the art of theatre making belongs to everyone, not just to watch but to perform - that Shakespeare is not simply the province of the Oxbridge director, the University Academic, the GCSE/A level student, or the trained professional actor.

Open Stages demonstrates and develops the idea that Shakespeare is, and has always been, the people's playwright, by engaging with, supporting, developing and celebrating the work of amateur theatre makers.

Open Stages shares the RSC's rich resources of expertise, ideas and experience beyond its audience to those millions of ordinary people striving to make theatre in church halls, community centres and pubs, grass roots theatre makers outside the subsidised or commercial theatre world.

Ian Wainwright  
Producer RSC Open Stages

### So What happens?

Amateur companies from across the UK submit their application to be an RSC Open Stages Company by pitching us their production and explaining why they want to take part and what they want to learn. This takes the form of an application form plus any additional useful information. As the project will require the director of the production to be committed to the project and the production we would strongly recommend where possible applications be made by the director of the production.

The RSC selects 100 companies from across the UK to take part. Each company is assigned an Open Stages Regional Partner Theatre to work with.

The directors of all 100 Open Stages productions gather for a weekend of workshops at the RSC in Stratford-upon Avon to introduce the project and build skills. All directors must attend the initial director workshop weekend.

Each of the 7 professional partner theatres will run a Skills Exchange event for performers and non performers from each Open Stages company in their region. At the Skills Exchanges the RSC and the partner theatres' practitioners will run a series of theatre skills workshops aimed at developing the skills and techniques of the participating amateur theatre makers (a minimum of 10 places will be available to each company). The directors will gather for regular forums, workshops and training opportunities at their regional partner theatre led by the

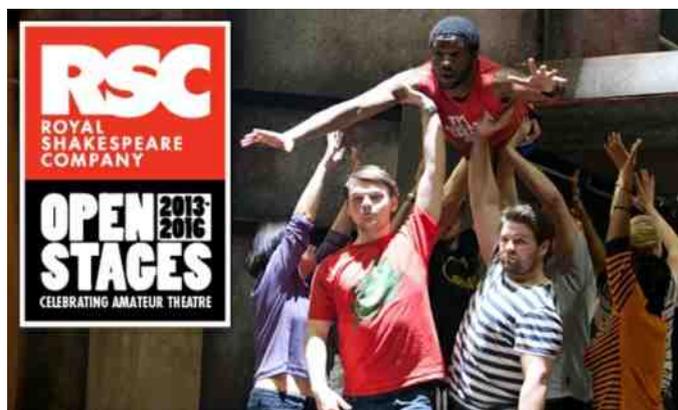
partner theatres professional practitioners with input from the RSC (from 5 to 10 sessions). The aim of these sessions are to support the directors as they prepare for and rehearse their productions offering skills techniques and ideas they can feed into the rehearsal room. It also offers directors the opportunity to share good practice and their own experience.

The most important and exciting element of the project will see each Open Stages production staged in its own venue, hired space or site specific to the production. The productions will need to take place between April 2014 and the end of April 2015. Each production will carry RSC Open Stages branding. A professional theatre practitioner from the regional partner theatre will visit the production and give feedback to the director, the group, the partner theatre and the RSC. The aim of the feedback will be to further develop the work of the director, the performers and the company rather than to 'adjudicate' or review.

From May 2015 to the end of June 2015 each partner theatre will run a showcase event where short extracts of each production will be performed. Please remember this is not a festival or competition. The purpose of this event will be to celebrate and share the work that has been done in that region.

In July 2015 RSC will run a showcase in Stratford-upon-Avon where some of the Open Stages companies from across the UK will be invited to perform. These companies will be selected to demonstrate a cross section of the work e.g. a small village group, a large urban company, a piece of new writing, a young group etc. Again we do not see this as a festival or a competition with a cross section of work being programmed in Stratford to demonstrate a wide variety of groups and their work. The aim will be to celebrate and share at a national level the work achieved across the UK and raise the profile of amateur work. All Open Stages companies will be welcome to attend see the cross section of work and take part in a day time programme of workshops and master classes.

To find out more and/or get an application form go to <http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/projects/open-stages/> or simply go to the RSC's website



# All-England Theatre Festival

The Elms, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, Tamworth, B78 3AF



## A Festival Experience:

Our Company TOADS\* was very much the “The new kid on the block” in this year’s AETF theatre festival and it was pure serendipity that propelled us into entering the AETF for the first time, I had only the vaguest knowledge about festivals and, to my shame, had never attended one.

Our company had never entered a one act play festival, surprising given that it has been producing plays since 1944. Since 1988 TOADS has owned and operated Torquay’s 250 seat Little Theatre. But like many similar companies it receives no grants or subsidies and the enormous cost of running the theatre has to be found from ticket sales from ten three act plays a year, a total of nearly eighty days on stage. Our 170 members are fully taken up with the season plays and maintaining the theatre. Entering festivals has not really been on the radar and indeed the lack of members with free time to help and support us was very nearly our undoing. However after reading my script our Theatre’s managing committee agreed to us entering my two hander *Dress Down Friday* at Teignmouth for TOADS.

Our team embarked up a steep learning curve and we were far from optimistic after learning about rival companies dedicated to almost nothing but one act festivals and with long track records of success in the genre.

Our first challenge was to design a set which would adequately convey the audience into Sharon’s flat with set pieces and props sufficiently portable and suitable to be set and struck within the times allowed. Then the challenge of arranging transport after it became apparent that the set would not fit in a normal hatch back.

Our good fortune was to have the willing involvement of a fellow TOAD, accomplished director Anna Reynolds, who auditioned and chose two equally keen and committed actors.

At our first outing at Teignmouth Hannah Samuel playing Sharon achieved best female role, Stuart Sutherland playing Alan was runner up best actor and DDF was runner up with quite high marks. We were invited to also enter the first round at Exmouth Drama Festival but had elected for our Teignmouth performance to be listed for the AETF which turned out to be quite fortuitous.



Austin Hawkins Author, Jolyon Tuck ASM, Anna Reynolds Director, Paul Driffell SM  
Hannah Samuel & Stuart Sutherland, Margaret Hawkins Set dresser.

At Exmouth Hannah achieved best female role again and the play received a nomination for best original script and a similar nomination from the audience. Then the big surprise - we could go through to the quarter finals as highest marked runner up at Teignmouth.



Hannah Samuel, Anna Reynolds and Stuart Sutherland

A good maxim is “write about something you know” however I have no experience of the world of prostitution - I hasten to add. I normally research what I write, but the characters of Sharon and Alan her client they were pure fiction so, for me, finding that adjudicators and audiences found them to be credible and engaging was very encouraging.

Contemplating the quarter final - also at Exmouth - we took stock of the situation and decided that, performing against three winning plays, we were the outsiders but were determined to give a good account of ourselves and crucially, and to their credit, Anna and the cast learned from experience, listened to the advice of adjudicators, and took time to re-rehearse between each performance and at each stage we fine tuned our set.

At Exmouth our cast had to manage without Anna - who was on stage in Torquay, and myself away at an event in Somerset, and our sound and lighting engineer Steven was also engaged in a play in Torquay. But by all accounts Hannah and Stuart put in a stonking performance and during a dinner dance I got the text - we were going through to the semi final!

Then - a spanner in the works. Hannah works in retail and could not get time off for our scheduled afternoon appearance 100 miles away in Warminster. But we had underestimated the camaraderie of the AETF and a call to Ann Aplin resulted in us being re-scheduled to the evening so Hannah was able to make the 100 mile dash to the Atheneum with 30 minutes to spare. Meanwhile Anna and I watched the other three plays and realised what a very high standard of theatre applies at the semi finals. Somehow we could not really believe that, at our first attempt, we would reach the English Finals and indeed it was not to be. Troupers with a fine performance of the first act from *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* went on to represent the West of England at Christchurch and we wish them every success. We did have the consolation of taking back to our theatre the Stanley and Madge Williams Shield at the adjudicator’s discretion.

Representing a Company heavily committed to plays at our own venue we felt we were on the back foot compared with smaller more experienced teams but have really enjoyed the competition and have raised the profile for one act plays in our own theatre. I particularly enjoyed the sense of shared endeavour with the other participants.

Austin Hawkins

\*TOADS Torquay Operatic and Dramatic Society. Youth section is The Tadpoles who compete in the AETF.