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ALL-ENGLAND THEATRE FESTIVAL

Reaching out to drama groups throughout England



England

What a difference a year makes! I can't believe that this time last year I was struggling with my health and had just undergone major surgery. I now feel like a new woman.

I have spent a hectic past six months organising and running a first round, week-long festival in Tamworth and a quarter final in Burton on Trent. In that time I also helped to organise a semi final in Stoke on Trent and acted in, and directed, productions at all three tiers of competition. I supported other first round festivals, chaired divisional meetings and National Executive Committee meetings of the AETF trustees. Oh, yes, and I also attended Area meetings and took part in TACT's production of 'A Comedy of Errors' at the Grand Final in Maidenhead which was extremely well organised and run by our Eastern Area friends and colleagues at the splendidly appointed Norden Farm

I spent a lovely day on the Friday of the Final enjoying the local area before going to the theatre to watch the plays from Wales and Scotland. On Saturday morning I attended a civic reception in the beautiful council building where the groups exchanged gifts and were given a very warm welcome by the council leader. On the Saturday evening we enjoyed the plays from England and Scotland. The adjudicator, Jan Palmer Sayer, provided expert analyses of performance (she even found time to inform the audience that Wales had beaten Belgium in the European Championship game held on the same evening). All four productions were of a similar high standard and employed small casts (perhaps one day we'll enjoy a large cast final!). The overall winners (by just one mark) were Unknown OUTcasts, the team from Wales, who performed 'Contractions' by Mark Bartlett. Overall, this was an excellent weekend and I particularly enjoyed meeting old friends from all four countries.

Although the 2016 AETF is now over, preparations for the 2017 season are already underway across the country. I urge groups who have a love of acting, want to improve their work but have yet to take part in our great festival to get involved. Just contact us to find a festival near you. If you feel up for an even bigger challenge, why not start a new festival? You'll get plenty of helpful advice from our Area organisers.

I have hugely enjoyed my four years as AETF Chairman. I shall shortly be handing over the reins to a successor and I wish him or her well.

Sue Fortune - AETF National Chairman



Northern Area

I'll start with the negatives and then accentuate the positives. Two long established festivals, the Cumbria and the Nidderdale and District are now on 'life support'. The Cumbria is in a particularly parlous state having recorded minimal takings from its two-play event at Grange. John Larkham



*The only countrywide,
competitive festival
of one-act plays.*

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Unknown OUTcasts - this year's British Final winners.

My last engagement was to attend the British Final in Cardiff as AETF Chairman. The venue for this event, the Sherman Theatre, was an excellent choice and performers and audiences alike enjoyed its fine facilities. The position of the main hotel on Cardiff Bay ensured easy access to a whole range of amenities and although the venue was only a few minutes away the organisers had thoughtfully provided a coach, thus ensuring that transport was never a problem.

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and his colleagues have done wonders keeping this festival alive over the years. Amateur drama does thrive in this neck of the woods but it seems that the lure of competitive, one-act performance is weak amongst the lakes and mountains of this lovely part of England. I was particularly disappointed that my own event, the Nidderdale (normally a three evening engagement) was forced to shrink to a three-play, single evening affair this year. Thankfully, it benefited from a healthy attendance, a very generous donor and the participation of a group entirely new to AETF competition, Northern Grit, whose performance of 'Blackout' stole the show and very nearly earned them a Grand Final engagement when they repeated it at the Area Final in Port Sunlight.

Elsewhere, festival drama is thriving. Hull maintains its reputation as a vehicle for new writing and is now reaping the benefit of its move from North Ferriby to the splendidly appointed Bridlington Spa. The Leverhulme, although now just one week in length, continues, under the irrepressible Phyllis Driscoll, to nurture youth and original drama across Merseyside and remains a paradigm of best festival practice. The Manx Festival at Port Erin goes from strength to strength and arguably maintains the highest artist standards of any of our affiliated events (although sadly, this year's winners were unable to perform at the Area Final). The Richmond Festival, held at the exquisite Georgian Theatre Royal, continues to attract a healthy number of entries from all age groups and a wide catchment, whilst the Saltburn Festival remains a much loved and well-supported showcase for amateur drama across Cleveland and beyond and continues to provide winning productions of the highest quality.

Our Area Final this year was held over the weekend of the early May Bank Holiday at the magnificently appointed Gladstone Theatre in Port Sunlight, once the canteen for the Lever Brothers Factory across the road. It proved an excellent venue to showcase the talents of the winners of six of our seven preliminary round events. The somewhat sparse audience, scattered around the large auditorium, gave a warm welcome to all the finalists who came from Barrow-in-Furness, Dewsbury, Harrogate, Saltburn, Sedgfield and Wallasey and provided varied and adventurous repertoire. Sedgfield Players Youth Section (Richmond winners) performing Celeste Raspanti's moving play 'I Never Saw another Butterfly' set in Terezin, reminded us what a loss the Sedgfield Festival has been for the AETF. Saltburn '53 Drama Group and Hand in Hand Theatre employed a cast of thousands. The former presented Sue Pierce's first full-length play, a fascinating piece about the last days of the Spanish poet and playwright Lorca, the latter a brilliantly choreographed Shakespeare fusion by Bev Clark and Keith Hill on the theme of clowning. Interspersed with these were Cumbria Amateur Theatre's enjoyable take on the absurdist 'Alas Poor Fred' by James Saunders, Dewsbury Arts Group's beautifully presented 'The Bay at Nice' by David Hare and a vibrant, vividly choreographed, 'in yer face' rendition of Davey Anderson's 'Blackout' by the young cast of Northern Grit. Susan Doherty adjudicated with acuity and insight (and earned herself elevation to fully GODA membership as a result). In the end she had the onerous task of deciding whether Hand in Hand or Northern Grit should represent the North at the AETF Grand Final. By a single mark, Bev Clark's talented company from Wallasey won the day.

It remains for me to thank our colleagues in Eastern Area for their impeccable organisation of the Grand Final in Maiden-

head and salute all those of you who contributed, in any capacity, to this year's festival events in the North. See you next season.

Ian Clarke - AETF Vice Chairman and Northern Area Secretary



Hand in Hand Theatre Company crowned Northern Area Champions at the Gladstone Theatre, Port Sunlight (photo by Ian Lewis)

NORTHERN AREA POSTSCRIPT

PATELEY BRIDGE DRAMATIC SOCIETY PERFORMS ON BROADWAY

In 2013 Pateley Bridge Dramatic Society performed Keith Burton's play 'The Journey' at the Nidderdale and District Drama Festival's semi-centennial event held at the Frazer Theatre, Knaresborough. The production won the festival's 'runner-up' trophy and the author subsequently won a joint runner-up accolade from the 2013 Geoffrey Whitworth adjudicators for the same work. Now the play has been selected for performance at the Classic Stage Company Theatre, Broadway, New York City as part of the annual and prestigious Samuel French Short Play Festival. Thousands of playwrights from around the world submit their short plays for consideration but only 30 are chosen each year. By the time this Newsletter goes to print, the playwright and his original cast and crew will have travelled to 'the Big Apple' to deliver their performance. We offer our congratulations to this vibrant company on their stunning achievement. Details of fund-raising for their expensive venture may be found on the Pateley Playhouse web pages (www.pateleyplayhouse.co.uk)



Central Area

Unfortunately, Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Drama Association (NANDA) decided to call it a day with the AETF Festival, a lack of groups wishing to take part being the cause (although we are pleased that NANDA will be remaining as an associate member of the AETF). This meant that the three Divisional Committees as well as the Area Committee had to give thought to the layout and formation of the Area. The decision was unanimous - that we would retain the current format of three Divisions each taking two entries from their preliminary round festivals and feeding two entries each into the semi-final.

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Birmingham

There was a major change in the format of the festival this year. It was condensed into a single weekend whilst retaining its format of having eight entries, twenty-five individual youth entries and a presentation evening at which thirty-eight trophies were presented (these included fourteen trophies for the full-length, peripatetic festival). The one-act section went well and the adjudicator, Paul Fowler, added to the entertainment during the presentation ceremony.

Leicestershire

This year the festival took place at The Little Theatre Leicester, a superb venue. It was a successful event with twelve entries during the week and Paul Fowler was impressed by the varied nature of the repertoire.

Nottinghamshire

As mentioned above, the festival had to be cancelled again. This is a sad blow as amateur drama in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire is thriving.

Worcestershire

This was the second weekend festival we attended. It attracted good houses and positive feedback – as did holding the adjudications after each performance. As a prelude to the awards presentation we were given a photo montage of the weekend's activities. This was received with acclaim by the packed audience.

South Staffordshire

It was our good fortune to attend the Hastilow Festival in Tamworth on the opening night. The adjudicator, Bev Clark, commented in her summary that we had been presented with two very different takes on drama which provided us with a good opening night - a statement we totally agreed with.

Herefordshire

Our visit to Hereford did not give us the opportunity to see the winning performance which, we were assured, would be well received at the quarter final. However, we did witness a very young team's performance of 'Pantomania', which the audience thoroughly enjoyed and, in the view of the adjudicator, Mike Kaiser, boded well for the future of amateur drama in the county.

Warwickshire

This was an extremely well supported festival which attracted fourteen entries. The evening we attended provided three very diverse performances. Chris Jaeger, who had to brave a blizzard to get to the event, particularly praised the young performers of 'The Playground' for their enthusiasm and potential.

North Staffordshire

Unfortunately, Jean and I were unable to attend this year due to clashing dates. However, the Area vice-chairman, Sue Fortune, was there to present the trophies and reported on a large and enthusiastic audience who keenly supported all who took part.

Shropshire

We were able to attend on the Friday evening this year and were presented with two plays which certainly made you think. It was good to see Christopher Baglin, a GoDA Associate, being well appreciated by a young audience.

Eastern Division Quarter-Final

We moved back to The Abbey Theatre, Nuneaton this year for a six plays play event. In the words of adjudicator, Ben Humphrey: 'we had a fantastic day of theatre, we all learn from watching each other – you can take away something from everything you see'.

Western Division Quarter-Final

We were at The Swan Theatre, Worcester this year. The six works performed were varied and averaged four cast members per play. Alan Hayes, the adjudicator, was highly complimentary about the standard.

Central Division Quarter-Final

We were at The Brewhouse, Burton, for the last quarter-final. The six performances attracted good houses and the standard was highly praised by the adjudicator, Jennifer Scott Thomas.

Area Semi-Final

This year's six-play, two-session event was held at the Mitchell Memorial Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent. Houses were good and Chris Jaeger, in his summing up, commented that he had never officiated at such a high quality semi final during his 20 years plus as an adjudicator.

To sum up – although we have lost one festival and there has been a major re-design of another, I believe it has been a good year for Central Area. I would like to thank everyone involved at all levels of the festival scene for their hard work and commitment, the teams themselves and our faithful audiences for continuing to make us viable. Jean and I also express our appreciation of the warm welcome we received when we put in appearances at festival events. In conclusion, may I extend a warm invitation to you all to attend the Area AGM which takes place on 25 September in Solihull (for details see the relevant web page on www.aetf.org.uk).

Roger Cunnington - Chairman, Central Area



Western Area

This season nine preliminary rounds took place within the Area with a fair number of youth entries. This bodes well for the future. Most events were housed at regular venues but Teignmouth, having lost its lovely seafront venue due to a Council re-build, moved to the Shaftesbury Theatre in Dawlish which is run by the Dawlish Repertory Players. It was an excellent venue and the Players made the Festival very welcome: it will return there next year.

To our regret, we were forced to reduce to three quarter-finals: Wessex Division at the delightful, bijou Backwell Playhouse, Avon; Western Division at the Blackmore Theatre, Exmouth, Devon and a combined Festival for Southern and Mercia Divisions at the Bouverie Hall, Pewsey. As reported in previous Newsletters, Southern Division is effectively dormant at the moment through lack of finance. Although we still hope to revive the Division, the stark fact is that it has been running on a shoestring for nearly seven years. This is a subject we shall discuss again at our meeting in October. Incidentally, both the quarter finals at Exmouth and Pewsey lost money again this year.

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The Western Area Final was very successful. It was held at the excellent and helpful Merlin Theatre in Frome, Somerset and was adjudicated by the popular Jan Palmer Sayer. When Jan was previously with Western Area, at the Grand Final at Christchurch two years ago, her adjudications were a mix of insightful praise and invaluable advice to the groups taking part. We were thus delighted to welcome her back. This year's Area finalists were -

Lechlade Players, Gloucestershire with *The Proposal* by Anton Chekhov.

In this delightful vaudeville Chekhov pokes fun at the idea that economic security takes precedence over romance and love. In Nineteenth Century Russia, economic stability for the gentry rested on the idea of possession of land. 35-year-old Lomov has eyes on his neighbour's daughter Natalia. At age of 25 she is regarded as being 'on the shelf' and should therefore be grateful for any offer of marriage. Stuffy and inarticulate as he is, however, Lomov, cannot bring himself to speak of love but instead comically bumbles on about how his meadows border onto her birch woods.

Jan's observations: *Pace is everything in farce and we looked for it here where the demand is for three comedians to flirt with dark subjects. Both the Russian music introduction and the setting were fine though the latter sat too far downstage (the Merlin has a steep auditorium) causing movement to be above the furniture and thus lengthy. Costume was correctly in period, Lomov was flamboyant in the extreme. Natalia, in contrast, was rather maid-like. Chekhov makes all his three characters (who include the prospective bride's father) naturally argumentative and the director grasped well the comedy value of that. All three performers worked off each other very well and we, the audience, enjoyed the result.*

Colyton Theatre Group, East Devon with *The Ladybirds* by Tony Layton

Here we have an iconic am-dram group comprising five females, two of them at war, trying to decide which Noel Coward play should be inflicted on its audience. 'Where on earth are we to find ten men?' Into this volatile mix and out of nowhere comes an ex-professional director whose input brings to mind the phrase 'cat amongst the pigeons' as she proposes her own play about a lesbian relationship.

Jan's observations: *This play was written ten years ago when the concept of same-sex marriage was more shocking. Before 'the play within the play' begins, the group's complicated relationships have to be established. It is more problematic than it appears on the page. This was well done with the characters clearly defined early on, the rhythms and pace right and the moves properly worked out. There were lovely moments realised throughout with the various arguments well escalated. The ensemble work was impressive and this was a well-directed, warm and engaging production which avoided potential pitfalls.*

St Albans Players, Bristol with *Interior Designs* by Jimmy Chinn.

A study of the hearts and minds of three very different women, each of them single, each of them vulnerable in their own way. What they have in common, though, is a need to have odd jobs completed and they hire a seemingly perfect man for the

purpose. Individual hopes and notions of romance lead to an amusing, if poignant, ending.

Jan's observations: *A piece of escalating drama in which the only easy aspect is the dialogue. The one man plays all the male parts in speedy scenes and the biggest problem is how to move the play along whilst maintaining interest. The 'Jack-the-Lad' character who appears so objectionable on the page was nonetheless personable on stage and took the sexual innuendoes as comically far as was feasible. The separate pools of light to denote discreet locations worked well and the use of a single stepladder to denote any location was clever. The three women (all dressed in black) suggested aspects of Every(wo)man. The three actresses 'pointed' their characters by speaking the same words with emotional variations. There was a stylish and novel ending with all three women in the same spotlight in this very well-directed play.*

Quirky Bird Theatre, Royal Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire with *Tusk, Tusk* by Polly Stenman.

The play is an incredibly well-crafted piece combining humour and a trace of darkness. Elliot 15, Maggie 14 and Finn aged 7 are alone in the house. Mother is mysteriously absent. Elliot's girlfriend arrives and is soon aware of rivalries, affections and dark secrets. The tension steadily rises before the adults arrive home.

Jan's observations: *This tantalising piece is the first act of a play by a 19-year old playwright. Its middle-class background shows that behavioural problems are not merely the province of the poor. The play's relationships were established very well, particularly the underlying desperation of 'will Mum ring' and, more worryingly, 'will she be coming back?' All three actors managed to convey their individual vulnerability at times but the drama might have been heightened if tense moments had been more pointed and emphasised. Nevertheless, the production grasped the inherent challenges and met them.*

St Alban's Players were the winners of the Area Final. As some readers will know, they were subsequently crowned English Champions at the Grand Final in Maidenhead and thus went on to represent England in the British Final in Cardiff.

Dennis Dunford, Chairman, Western Area
assisted by Ron Roberts, PRO.



St Albans Players - 2016 Western Area and English Champions.

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Eastern Area

After a period of considerable change over the last few years following the closure of the Bedford and Southend Festivals, the Area is now stabilising.

The **Cambridge drama festival** will formally re-join the Area in 2017. The 2016 festival was well supported in terms of the numbers of teams participating and they derived considerable benefit from the comments of the perceptive and well informed adjudicator, Robert Meadows. Unfortunately the festival was not so well supported in terms of audience attendance and this was reflected in the final accounts with a significant loss recorded. The winners were Clavering Players with 'The Extraordinary Revelations of Orca the Goldfish' which progressed to the Area Final.

Elmbridge drama festival (14-15 April) was held at the Cecil Hepworth Playhouse in Walton on Thames with five entries this year. Three lengthy plays were performed on the second and final evening, resulting in a very late finish after the adjudications and presentation of awards by Tony Rushforth (to the evident displeasure of the Lady Mayoress who was on 'overtime' as she presented the trophies around midnight!).

Feedback was positive despite this logistical challenge and the festival welcomed a local youth group, Monkey Theatre, for their first competitive entry in the festival. Their director was very complimentary about the overall standard and felt the experience had been of considerable benefit to her young actors who also enjoyed a high quality, dynamic performance of 'Everyman' adapted by Carol Ann Duffy by festival winners Woking College on the same evening. This feedback emphasised one of the key attractions of competitive drama festivals in offering participants the opportunity to enjoy and learn from the performances of other competing groups and (equally importantly) from the constructive feedback provided by the adjudicator, Tony Rushforth. In the event we were honoured that Tony announced that this was to be his final adjudication in the UK, marking the end of a long and distinguished career for this most genial and thoughtful adjudicator. We wish him a long and enjoyable 'retirement'.

Maidenhead drama festival enjoyed a 'bumper' year, with sixteen entries (up from twelve in 2015). Half were in the youth category and one of them was performed by a cast of under elevens. Six of the plays were unpublished and over 170 people were involved on and off-stage. The Young Theatre, Beaconsfield won the event with a production of 'Home Free' by Lanford Wilson and received what must be one of the most impressive looking trophies on the festival circuit.

The **Southern Counties drama festival** was staged in its delightful long-term home at the Barn Theatre, Oxted and attracted fifteen entries of which six were in the youth category. The festival included an unusual performance by one group that effectively comprised a 'rehearsed reading' of an after-dinner speech. It over-ran the maximum time limit by fifteen minutes and was discounted from consideration by the adjudicator. As it was the third 'play' that evening it will long be

remembered by those who witnessed it (for all the wrong reasons)!

The overall winners were the youth cast of Glow Theatre with a slick and dramatically staged ensemble performance of 'The Edelweiss Pirates' by Ayub Khan Din. They also received the award for best stage presentation (and went on to receive the equivalent trophies at both the Area Final and the Grand Final). Audience numbers were slightly down but the festival covered its costs.

The informative and constructive adjudications from Arthur Rochester were very well received by performers and audiences alike.

The **Waltham Forest festival** had fewer entries than usual (ten compared to sixteen last year) but there was an interesting variety of plays. The winning play, 'The Long Christmas Dinner' by Thornton Wilder, performed by Woodhouse Players, went forward to the Area final. The adjudicator was the excellent Jill Colby whose assessments were interesting and helpful. The festival venue was Chingford Assembly Hall, which has a very large auditorium. Thankfully, audiences were reasonable and this contributed to a good atmosphere. As is traditional, the local Mayor presented the awards on the Saturday night and (as usual) remarked that he was unaware of the existence of the festival which has now been running for thirty years!

The festival organiser, Elaine Elliott, has reported a significant challenge to the festival in 2017. The local council has abandoned the significantly reduced rates normally offered to local amateur groups and the weekly hire charge will accordingly increase to almost £8,000. Needless to say the festival cannot afford this and is likely to decant to a significantly smaller and less costly venue next year. We wish them a successful transition as they move to their new home.



Glow Theatre - Eastern Area Champions

The **Eastern Area final** was hosted by the Elmbridge drama festival on 16 April, immediately after its own event. This arrangement avoided a separate week's hire charge and allowed technical costs to be shared, enabling both events to return a profit. The Final demonstrated the increasingly high quality of youth drama (three of the four plays were in this category). Jan Palmer Sayer was highly complementary about the quality of the four performances. Both afternoon and evening sessions



were well attended and the groups and their supporters all created a lively, competitive but above all friendly and enjoyable atmosphere. It was delightful to witness the enthusiastic and gracious congratulations offered by Woking College to the winners, Glow Theatre, who went on to perform with great distinction at the Grand Final which our Area (still fresh from the responsibility of hosting a British Final in 2015) had the pleasure of hosting at Norden Farm, Maidenhead on 4 June.

Ian Thomas, Chairman, Eastern Area



Treasurer's Ramblings

Following on from last year's ramblings I'd like to start with a couple of important issues raised at the DFC & UKCFFF meetings which I attended this year.

- We have been asked to hammer home the point that public adjudications are covered by copyright law and it is thus **illegal to make recordings or videos of them**. If you want a record of any adjudication, please pay for a written copy.
- It is not usual (or indeed policy) for an adjudicator to pass comment about a play itself or its author. However, it has been agreed that, in future, if an adjudicator is assessing the performance of an original play where the playwright is probably a member of the performing group, then the adjudicator may pass comment if the way the play has been written impacts on its production.

As many of you are aware, one of my duties is to monitor the content of festival programmes in an attempt to ensure that, amongst other things, the AETF festival as a whole receives the optimum level of publicity. As a result of my scrutiny of this year's programmes, may I make the following requests to the compilers of preliminary round programmes:

- Please indicate (as much out of courtesy to the playwright as to assist me in my 'stats' role) if a play is an original one.
- Please flag any production whose performers have opted, if selected, to go forward to the AETF proper.
- Please be aware of the fact that it is NOT permissible in the AETF rules for a team to elect to go forward to the AETF proper from more than one festival with the same play.

This time last year I raised the question of 'competitive parity' (prompted by the fact that some Areas have three and some just two tiers of competition). Since the topic elicited no feedback I assume that our readers are content with this situation. The AETF trustees have certainly discussed the issue and decided to continue with the policy of having quarter finals where there is team willingness for, and the money and organisational infrastructure in place to support, this level of competition.

Sadly, we lost another quarter final this year. With my Treasurer's hat on I lament the potential loss of income, but just as important (and irrespective of the financial side of things) is the loss of yet another outlet for competitive, one-act drama.

Jean & I represented the AETF at the Scottish Final of One-Act plays held in Edinburgh at the Church Hill Theatre (a far cry from the distance we travelled the previous year when we attended the same event in Kirkwall). Yet again the Scottish Final covered itself in glory and the SCDA membership gave the event superb support. Russell Whiteley commented in his summing up that it had been a fascinating three days of challenging, truly international repertoire. The atmosphere generated was superb. Incidentally, this year the SCDA celebrates its ninetieth birthday and as this Newsletter goes to print will have already celebrated the anniversary at Pitlochry Theatre.

We also represented the AETF at one evening of the Lighthorne Festival of One-Act Plays. This is an independent, four-evening festival which takes place each June at a village hall in the heart of Warwickshire. The audience sits at tables and is served food during each interval (a main course during the first and a pudding during the second). The menu varies each night. The festival winner is presented with a trophy and two cheques, one for themselves and the second for a registered charity of choice. We enjoyed three fine performances, some good food, pleasant conversation and a most enjoyable evening out.

Roger Cunnington, National Treasurer

RE-INTRODUCING OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTOR AUSTIN HAWKINS



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We are delighted that Austin Hawkins has given us his kind permission to print two more articles from his back catalogue. Austin is a former journalist and biographer who, 'in later life', has turned his creative writing talents to fiction and the theatre. His one-act play 'Dress Down Friday' represented Devon and Cornwall at the AETF Western Area Final in 2013. We hope to print more of Austin's pertinent insights into the world of amateur theatre in due course.

1. THE NEED FOR THE NEW

In an article for Somerset Fellowship's 'Spotlight' some months ago Sue Pomeroy, alluding to musical productions, sounded a note of caution about getting over-excited with the novelty of the new. She argued her case from a box office takings standpoint and in one sense she has to be on the right side of the debate. There is an obvious danger if companies do not measure their choice of production against the financial implications.

But it's worth sounding another note of caution, more related to plays. I was, for many years, a member of a well established drama company that does not mount musicals, pantomime or operatic productions (all of which, I am reliably informed, are more expensive to put on than most straight drama). The company produced ten plays a year, nine of which had seven evening runs and one of which (a summer production) ran over fourteen evenings (grand total - seventy seven evenings a year!). Since the theatre, which is owned by the company in question, is also hired out to other companies, there is a constant merry go round of plays in production and plays in rehearsal. The same theatre is run as a business and there is a constant fear that, unless very familiar and well loved titles are on the posters, audiences will drop off and threaten the flow of money needed to maintain the facility. This tension has resulted in a choice of repertoire that can only be described as 'commercial'.

It regrettable, you might think, that many theatre-goers, eschewing 'the shock of the new', will only go to plays they have seen before – plays they feel comfortable with and which fit them like a pair of slippers. In my own locality this has resulted in a revolving door of productions authored by the likes of Ray Cooney, Alan Ayckbourn and Agatha Christie. Excellent though these plays are (and in capable hands can result in first-class theatre) I have an uneasy feeling about what this 'safety first' mentality means for the future of amateur drama. In the ten years that I regularly did front of house duties the average age of the audience was noticeably and steadily rising. What, we ought to ask ourselves, are we doing to make theatre relevant for later generations? How do we draw them in to support theatre and the wealth of new writing that continues unabated.

A year or two back one of my colleagues posed the question: 'Are we running a theatre museum?' He was referring to the fact that we had produced almost an entire season of plays written at least fifty years ago. When we did produce more recent work it tended to be in the 'crowd pleaser' category like 'The Full Monty', or 'Calendar Girls' which, once released for amateur production, are immediately staged by any number of

companies in the area who have to share the available box office business.

Just before I stopped doing regular front of house duties I met a couple in their sixties who I used to see in the Theatre regularly. I remarked that we had not seen them for a while. They told me that they had already seen all the plays recently on offer, in some cases more than once, and remarked that local theatre is unlikely to be tempt younger people in their twenties to fifties.

You can see where I'm going with this. Are amateur companies stuck in a comfort zone playing safe with well known titles for the older generation but giving little thought for the future? Is it time to consider being more adventurous and support the box office by investing more time and resources in marketing and publicity to sell theatre as an evening out? Should we rely less on the title of a play and, for example, link a show with another activity – a meal at a local restaurant perhaps? Should we not be giving consideration to recent work by, for example, Simon Stevens or April de Angelis or by unknown writers? Such a change in emphasis represents a tough marketing challenge, but it is one that might be worth taking to broaden our appeal and find a new audience for the future.

I don't claim a monopoly of wisdom here, but am happy to instigate a debate.

Austin Hawkins

2. REVIVING THE ONE-ACT PLAY

There is a massive back catalogue of one-act plays languishing in publishers' lists. Many more such plays never make it to publication and gather dust on top of wardrobes, perhaps never to be performed again. Some plays will have had one or more outings on stage courtesy of the AETF and other festivals; others are destined never to be seen in performance.

Plays shorter than, say, fifty minutes do not have quite the cache of a full-length play. They neither provide a complete evening of entertainment, nor 'meat' enough for any company to get its teeth into and justify weeks of rehearsal and other preparations. Why bother with all that work for such little time on stage?

"One-act plays are best kept for festivals where organisers need to find time for multiple offerings from a variety of groups", I hear you say. But perhaps we're missing a trick here.

One thing is certain - the attention span of those watching drama has shortened over the generations. Go back far enough and people would happily sit through five acts of Greek drama lasting over three hours. But in more recent times, think of the influence of the 'telly'. If you ignore feature films most television drama is rarely over 45 minutes in length. Much of it comprises soap episodes of thirty minutes (topped and tailed for adverts). In the seventies, one-off drama in series like 'Play for Today', 'Armchair Theatre' and 'The Wednesday Play' made quite an impact (think of 'Cathy Come Home') and it is quite instructive now to view these on YouTube. Comedy sitcom episodes have traditionally occupied just half an hour (think of Galton and Simpson's 'Comedy Playhouse' which spawned such gems as 'Steptoe and Son').

All-England Theatre Festival

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



Add to this the effect of the Internet and you realise that there is a vast potential audience out there comprising those (especially in the under fifty age-range) who are quite comfortable fitting their attention span to thirty minutes. By extension there is surely a case for amateur companies to pay more attention to short forms of drama. Granted, you are unlikely to drag someone from hearth and home down a rain-swept street for an entertainment lasting a mere 40 minutes. But why not promote an 'Evening of One-Act Plays' with the strap line 'Three for the price of One!' (or four even?)? Such an evening provides scope for interspersing comedy, reflective drama and even tragedy. If it focuses on a single playwright it provides the opportunity for an audience to see multiple sides of the author. It also enables a company to provide a 'concept' or 'thematic' evening.

A newly formed drama group a few miles from where I live decided, as their first ever offering, to mount an evening of one-act plays. It asked other groups to contribute a play to the entertainment (one of which had recently been a successful festival entry). They threw in the novelty of a fish supper and, lo and behold (and perhaps to their own surprise), the evening was a sell-out. This surely demonstrates that there is no automatic audience resistance to a night of one-act entertainment.

A few months ago Teignmouth Players put on a run of two, one-act plays. 'Getting Dark' had a tragic theme whilst 'That Old Black Magic' was a comedy. Their initiative was rewarded with good houses on each night.

This shows that by mixing or matching titles it is possible to provide a distinct theme or set of contrasts through the medium of one-act drama. There is certainly no shortage of material out there. It also affords opportunity for an evening to be tailored to the acting skills and age-groups of available actors. A further advantage is that many one-act plays can be performed 'in the black' or with minimal set (as we see in many successful festival entries).

Worth considering for next season?
Austin Hawkins



ALL CHANGE AT GoDA

Festival organisers may wish to know that GoDA has recently announced the following personnel changes.

New full members

David Price and Sue Doherty

New associate members

Alison Haines (from Chard in Somerset)
Dave Bennet (from Lanarkshire)
Nick Wilkes (from Malvern in Worcestershire)

Change of status

Tony Rushforth (from practising to non-practising member)

THE WIT AND 'WISDOM' OF PLAYWRIGHTS (2)

Alan Bennett

When a society has to resort to the lavatory for its humour, the writing is on the wall.

If you think Squash is competitive, try flower arranging!

Oscar Wilde

Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go.

Work is the curse of the drinking classes.

Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to be more artistic.

Be yourself; everyone else is taken.

John Osborne

Asking a writer what he thinks about criticism is like asking a lamppost what it thinks about dogs.

Anton Chekhov

If you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry.

A good upbringing means not that you won't spill sauce on the tablecloth, but that you won't notice it when someone else does.

Sean O'Casey

A man should always be drunk when he talks politics - its the only way in which to make them important.

It's my rule never to lose me temper till it would be detrimental to keep it.

Leo Tolstoy

I prefer a good pair of boots to Shakespeare.

Leo Tolstoy to Anton Chekhov

You know, I hate your plays. Shakespeare is a bad writer and I consider your plays even worse than his.

FROM THE EDITOR

Your comments and suggestions about the content and presentation of the Newsletter are always welcome. If you would like to provide copy for future issues, do let me know and I shall do my best to oblige.

Happy reading and happy preparations for the 2017 festival season.

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