

A
Registered Charity
Number 1071518

News & Review

August 2017
Issue 2
Number 34

ALL-ENGLAND THEATRE FESTIVAL

Reaching out to drama groups throughout England



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

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England

At the start of this report I make no apology for looking back at the two events that formed the twin pinnacles of the 2017 season – our Grand Final, held at the excellently appointed Macmillan Theatre in Bridgwater, and the British Final, held at the Metropolitan Arts Centre in Belfast.

The Grand Final was superbly hosted by our colleagues in Western Area. Ron Roberts and his hard-working team had planned the event meticulously. Their foyer hospitality was particularly impressive, as was the excellent buffet they laid on. The four finalists, BAWDS of Cambridge, St Albans Players of Bristol, Total Arts Community Theatre (TACT) of Tamworth and Saltburn '53 Drama Group, performed challenging and varied repertoire to the anticipated high standard. It was particularly gratifying to witness the performance of two brand new works – Sean Baker's funny and touching two-hander *Anyone Can Dance* and Sue Pierce's multi-cast and moving *Moles and the Habits of Birds* which would go on to win her the 2017 Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy. Our congratulations to TACT, who brought a difficult play, *Lear's Daughters*, memorably to life and went home (as they so often do) clutching the John Maude Trophy as worthy AETF Champions under the talented direction of Rebekah Fortune.



Siena Jackson-Wolfe receives the Paul Dyson Trophy at the AETF Grand Final.

The organisation of the British Final Festival of One-Act Plays involves a quantum leap of commitment and forward planning. This year's 84th such event was entrusted to our colleagues in Northern Ireland – the Association of Ulster Drama Festivals (AUDF). Mac Pollock and his team rose superbly to the challenge of making this a memorable event for everyone who attended, aided by four high quality finalists - TACT, Bangor Drama Group, Aberfeldy Drama Club and The Unknown OUTCasts (last year's winners) from Cardiff. Walker Ewart's clear, concise and astute adjudications were a breath of fresh air and his decision to award the Howard de Walden Trophy to our AETF Champions, TACT, thoroughly justified. It was a privilege to share the stage for the prize-giving with my fellow Chairmen from Wales, Scotland and Ulster and Dame Mary Peters, the AUDF President and to announce Sue Pierce as the winner of the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy. The Civic reception, held in the mayor's parlour at the magnificent Belfast City Hall, was another plus point of a memorable weekend. So, congratulations to our Ulster friends. They will be a hard act to follow for our colleagues in Scotland at Stirling next year and for AETF Northern Area at Port Sunlight in 2019.



Rebekah Fortune (TACT) receives the Howard de Walden Trophy from Dame Mary Peters

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There is no escaping the fact that all organisations involved in festival drama, the AETF in particular, face a difficult future. Our immediate priority is to halt the declining levels of participation and reach out to a previously untapped hinterland. Through Rebekah Fortune we are developing our social media capability and raising our profile. Her work has already elicited promising levels of new interest. The search for celebrity patrons and new sources of income is ongoing and we recently had a meeting in Barnsley with the National Drama Festivals Association (NDFA) to discuss common issues of concern and possible future collaboration. Let us hope that the recent return to the AETF fold of the Cambridge Festival and the unveiling next year of the new Sunderland and Durham Festival (see Northern Area report) are positive auguries.

Before closing, I offer congratulations to Paula Clifford and her Swindon and District Theatre Guild colleagues on this year's 70th birthday of the Guild (see *Paula's anniversary article on Page 7*).

Thank you, one and all, for keeping the flame of one-act festival drama burning.

Ian Clarke - AETF National Chairman



Sue Pierce receives the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy at the British Final in Belfast



Northern Area

The attractive seaside town of Saltburn proved a delightful setting for this year's Area semi final held over the weekend of 6 and 7 May. Although a Siberian wind blew in from the North Sea, the near capacity audiences on both nights at Saltburn Community Theatre were warmed by the hospitality of the home group, Saltburn '53, the eclectic repertoire on offer and some splendid performances by the winners of six of our seven preliminary round festivals (sadly, the Isle of

Man winners were unable to make the trip). The participants were Cumbria Amateur Theatre Society, Sedgefield Players, Carlton Players (from Birkenhead), Dewsbury Arts Group, Blackburn Drama Club and Saltburn '53 Drama Group. In March, Blackburn had made the long and arduous journey across the Pennines to make their AETF debut at the Nidderdale Festival and had wowed the audience at the Frazer Theatre with a spellbinding performance of *Address Unknown* by Kathrine Kressman Taylor. Although they were in comparable form at Saltburn, they were pipped at the post by the home group, Saltburn '53, whose cast of thousands performed Sue Pierce's moving and heart-warming new play *Moles and the Habits of Birds* about the Aberfan Disaster and its aftermath. This was community drama at its finest and deservedly went through to the Grand Final at Bridgwater where it won the Special Creativity Award. Sue Pierce's festival season didn't end there. As you will read elsewhere in the Newsletter she was also declared the winner of this year's Geoffrey Whitworth Competition for her new play. Well done, Sue! Well done Saltburn '53!

Although this article is supposed to be a retrospective, I can't possibly end without announcing that a brand new festival will be unveiled in Northern Area in 2018. Thanks entirely to the initiative of Alan Godfrey MBE, the Durham and Sunderland One-Act festival will open its doors at the impressively appointed Washington Arts Centre from 8-10 March. It will become the AETF's most northerly stronghold and tap into a new hinterland for competitive, one-act drama. On 3 August I was privileged to attend a promotional evening for the new festival at which Holmside Productions revived *The Dear Departed* by Stanley Houghton. It attracted a near capacity



Steven Derbyshire (Blackburn Drama Club) receives the Best Actor Trophy at this year's AETF North semi final

audience which bodes well for the success of Alan's bold new venture.

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It remains for me to warmly thank everybody involved in the events of this year's festival in the North. Bless you for your commitment to nurturing and sustaining one-act drama north of the Dee and Humber.

Ian Clarke - Secretary, Northern Area



Central Area

Following the unanimous decision by all four committees making up Central Area that we should retain our format of three Divisions each taking two entries from their preliminary round festivals and each feeding two entries into the semi-final, we moved forward with determination to succeed. I send my congratulations to those committees and to the preliminary round festivals who support them, because succeed we did!

Birmingham – The festival was once more held over a weekend, an arrangement that again proved very popular. The One-Act play section went extremely well and was enhanced by Chris Jaeger's presence as adjudicator.

Worcestershire – This was another weekend event. It attracted 12 entries, a mammoth commitment in the words of the adjudicator, Jennifer Scott-Reid. However, she and the capacity audiences were rewarded with high artistic standards. She found it a wonderful experience.

Warwickshire - We attended the opening night where a good sized audience was entertained by (in the words of the adjudicator Mike Kaiser) 'three diverse performances which boded very well for the remainder of the festival'.

Herefordshire - Our visit to Hereford's final night gave us the opportunity to see Paul Murray, a non-GoDA adjudicator, at work. There was common consent in the bar afterwards that he had chosen the right winner, but personally I felt that there was too little structure to his feedback. However, he did say that the companies had given us a good night out.

South Staffordshire - We attended the Hastilow Festival in Tamworth on the final night where we met a promising new GODA Associate, Nick Wilkes. In his summary of the festival he said that the wide range of community drama on offer had provided him with a great experience. From what we saw we would agree.

Leicestershire - We attended the opening night at the Little Theatre, Leicester. This again proved to be a superb venue. With twelve entries this year, the event continues to be extremely popular and, as Robert Clarke, the adjudicator, stated: 'If the three performances we saw tonight are anything to go by we are in for a super festival'.

North Staffordshire - Unfortunately Jean and I were unable to attend this year due to clashing dates. However the grapevine suggests that it was a great festival, with some nineteen entries.

Shropshire - We attended the Friday evening and saw two plays which, as the adjudicator Bev Jenkins remarked, gave a young company a lot to think about both in terms of content and presentation.

Western Division Quarter Final - We were at Highbury Theatre Centre for this event. Richard Woodward congratulated all six groups and said that the sheer variety of theatre on offer (which included some challenging repertoire) was a delight.

Eastern Division Quarter Final - We were at the Little Theatre, Leicester, again, for this event. In the words of Jan Palmer-Sayer: 'What a potpourri of drama we have seen today!'. She was right, it was, indeed, a wonderfully entertaining day of theatre.



Abbey Players - Eastern Division runners-up

Central Division Quarter Final - We were at the Brewhouse Theatre for this last quarter final. Chris Jaeger adjudicated six more very different plays performed to very good houses.



Ledbury Amateur Dramatic Society - Central Division runners-up

Area Semi Final - This year we were at the Abbey Theatre, Nuneaton for a two-session, six-play semi-final. In his summing up, Robert Meadows said that it had been a good, well attended festival with some strong performances.

I would like to thank everyone involved at all levels of the festival scene (organisers, supporters, audiences, performers et al) for what has been a highly successful Central Area season. Our festival events have been financially viable and artistically impressive.

Finally, could I thank everyone for the generous welcome Jean and I received at all the events we visited. I invite you to our Area AGM which takes place on the 16th September (for full details go the web page. www.aetf.org.uk). One of the agenda items will be our hosting of the 2018 Grand Final at the Mitchell Memorial Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent (birthplace of Arnold Bennett) on the 2nd June. This is a challenge we are relishing.

Roger Cunnington - Chairman, Central Area

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Western Area

Preliminary Rounds

Our first-round events hosted a total of 31 productions. Some of the performing groups did not opt to go forward and this is 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.

Area Semi Final 2017

This was held, not for the first time, at the splendid Athenaeum Theatre in Warminster where we again placed the judging in the safe hands of the popular Chris Jaeger. In our advance publicity we told the public that one-act plays are similar to short stories in that they have a 'twist in the tail' and, like all good theatre, often have a good versus evil theme. So it turned out to be at Warminster.

Roundabout Theatre Company of Ferndown, Dorset performed *In by the Half* by Jimmie Chinn. This is an acerbic comedy that gives way to poignant drama. Chris Jaeger observed that Chinn had created an opportunity for strong characterisation from the main players and some interesting cameos. He praised the set and the choice of costumes. Although the music and sound cues were of variable quality the production as a whole was good. The central role was well played, as were the cameos.

Salterton Drama Club performed *Brenton vs Brenton* by David Tristram. This is an outrageous spoof of American soaps and block-buster mini-series set in the manic world of a Chicago advertising agency. Chris praised the set (particularly the door on wheels), supporting music and the immaculately timed lighting cues. Although some moments of physical and verbal comedy needed attention, the high quality cast, performing at fantastic pace, made a difficult play look easy.

St Albans Players, Bristol performed *Tomcat* by James Rushbrooke. This play is set in a secret unit somewhere in the UK in the not-too-distant future where 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. Although he had some reservations about the lighting of those actors not involved in the action, Chris praised the direction, movement, pace and consistently high quality of the acting, particularly that of the young lead (actual age 14) who played Jessie with perfect diction and impressive projection.



St Albans Players, Western Area champions 2017

Weymouth Drama Club performed *Questions on the Margin*, a black comedy by Scott Marshall. Chris asserted that the play needs great concentration from the players. The action was brought sensibly downstage and the two main characters had strong voices (though sometimes a greater lift in delivery was needed). The cameo role of the Woman was well done. Despite some memory lapses, the actors worked commendably hard and the director used the space well (which hinted at a more polished level of performance in earlier rounds).

Summing up, Chris praised the efficiency of the arrangements made on behalf of both competitors and audience and lauded the endeavour of the four semi finalists. The Stanley and Madge Williams Shield went to the talented Siena Jackson-Wolfe for her portrayal of Jessie in *Tomcat*. St Albans Players were announced as overall winners and they were presented with the Broughton Chatwin Memorial Trophy. They went on to the Grand Final at Bridgwater.

AETF Grand Final

In our pre-publicity we told the public that 'the Grand Final... is a wonderful opportunity to see directing, acting and stage presentation at its most polished level.... 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 across the land.' Paul Fowler proved an excellent adjudicator. Our choice of the Macmillan Theatre, Bridgwater was entirely vindicated and I was extremely proud of the Western Area team for its meticulous planning of the event and pro-active engagement with performers and the audience on the day.

The four finalists have already been named in this Newsletter. It was a matter of some pride that our Western Area winners rose to the challenge of performing *Tomcat* with distinction and that Siena Jackson Wolfe won the Paul Dyson Trophy (the adjudicator's discretionary award). Saltburn '53 Drama Group deservedly won the Rex Walford Trophy for exceptional creativity for its performance of *Moles and the Habits of Birds*, a vital and moving piece of true community theatre about the Aberfan disaster. However, the day ultimately belonged to the magnificent Total Arts Community Theatre who not only won the Irene Gartside Trophy for best stage décor, but were also crowned Grand Final champions and thus journeyed home to Tamworth with the John Maude Trophy for their performance of *Lear's Daughters* by Elaine Feinstein.

In his summing-up Paul complimented all four performances on their high standard (we must not forget to mention the hugely enjoyable performance by Bawds of Sean Baker's new play *Anyone Can Dance*) and praised the organisation of the event at the splendid Macmillan Theatre.

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



Eastern Area

Eastern Area was delighted to welcome the Cambridge Festival back after an absence of three years. Reports from the now five preliminary round festivals were generally positive, although the Maidenhead and Waltham Forest events both experienced a significant reduction in the number of entries.

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Cambridge Drama Festival

The 49th Cambridge Drama Festival was a resounding success artistically (if not financially), a view echoed by the adjudicator, Jennifer Scott-Reid, in her summary of the week. Eleven groups participated including four youth groups. There were five original plays, one adapted Shakespeare and festival favourites such as *The Dumb Waiter*. The winning youth group, Samuel Ward Academy, making their festival debut, showed immense maturity and ensemble discipline with a performance of *Graham - The World's Fastest Blind Runner* by Mark Wheeler. The overall winners, also making their debut, were Big Squirrel with an original piece *Uke Belong To Me* by Kattreya Scheurer-Smith. Unfortunately they were unable to progress due to a work commitment. BAWDS, therefore, progressed to the Area semi final with their production of *Anyone Can Dance*, an original work by award winning amateur playwright Sean Baker. The Cambridge festival is looking forward to celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2018.



Bawds - AETF Eastern Area semi final winners

Elmbridge Drama Festival

The 2017 Elmbridge Festival closed in the Cecil Hepworth Playhouse, Walton-on-Thames, with the presentation of awards by the adjudicator Jill Colby. Jill praised the variety and high standard of performance in a competition that featured performances by five groups over two evenings, two of whom, Drama Queens and Chameleons, made their festival debuts.

Runnymede Drama Group (RDG) were the festival winners with their production of *Pvt. Wars* by the American playwright James McLure, a sensitive and humorous portrayal of the strained relationship between three Vietnam veterans in a US army hospital. RDG narrowly beat the inventive Woking College Theatre Company's production of *Bed* by Jim Cartwright which won the Runners-Up trophy in addition to a host of other awards. The award for best original work was deservedly won by Drama Queens with their performance of *Untucked* by Teresa Hennessey, a work featuring two colourful

and larger than life drag artists. This well-written piece subsequently earned Teresa a 'Commendation' in the 2017 Geoffrey Whitworth play-writing competition. RDG represented the Elmbridge Drama Festival in the Area Final.

Maidenhead Drama Festival

The Maidenhead had only eight entries this year (half that of last year's total) with almost no school groups due to a late Easter and changes to the curriculum. However, the standard was still very good.

The organisers took a gamble on a new GoDA Associate in only his third festival. The presence of GoDA assessor Colin Dolley gave the adjudicator a stiff first night challenge, but he gained confidence as the week went on and his youthful style and attitude was well received by performers and audiences alike. The festival winners, Woking College Theatre Company with *Bed* by Jim Cartwright, went through to the Area Final.

Southern Counties Drama Festival (SCDF)

The SCDF enjoyed another good year, despite a slight reduction in entrants. Audiences were generally good and they were entertained by high quality drama, topped by Glow Theatre Company's production of *Everyman*.

Waltham Forest Drama Festival

This was held in a new and much smaller venue due to the previous long-standing venue increasing its hire charges by 400%. The new venue had very limited wing space and only one (rear of stage) dressing room which is also used for entrances and exits. Scenery had to be stored in a room off the auditorium and set in front of the audience. There were fewer entries than usual, possibly because of the limitations of the hall, but the feedback from entrants was that the event had been a friendlier occasion than usual. Teams had to sit in the hall and watch the other plays (there was nowhere else to go!) and the audience seemed to enjoy watching the stage being set.

Eastern Area Final

This event was stylishly hosted over two sessions by the Southern Counties Drama Festival in the delightful Barn Theatre, Oxted. The enthusiastic audience was treated to drama of the highest order (most of the productions would have graced the Grand Final). An SCDF review of the plays performed is available at http://www.barntheatreoxted.co.uk/scdf_aetf_eaf2017report.html. Arthur Rochester, the adjudicator, awarded the winners trophy to BAWDS (Cambridge Festival winners) who progressed to the Grand Final in Bridgwater. The Area Final brought an end to the 2017 season and festival organisers will doubtless already be focusing attention on arrangements for 2018.

I wish all involved in organising, participating in and watching one-act drama, a rewarding and enriching year of dramatic entertainment in 2018. Do please follow us on our new Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/AETF.EasternArea/>

Ian Thomas – Chairman, Eastern Area



Treasurer's ramblings

I would like to start by drawing your attention to a couple of points from our attendance at the Drama Festival Consortium (DFC) meeting earlier this year: -

- o GoDA is expanding its work into Speech and Drama Festivals and its Council is producing guidelines to cover this very different type of event from our own.
- o There will be a Drama Festival Conference in September 2018 and Jennifer Scott-Reid will be overseeing this. The AETF has been asked to supply comments on the format and general requirements for the event.



"When did I first start rambling?
Well, it's a long story..."

The AETF is sometimes accused of being a little insular. In my opinion that is a questionable assertion as we enjoy associations with a number of like-minded organisations. We have recently become a member of NODA in the hope that this will extend our influence further. In April Jean and I attended a most

interesting national meeting of NODA where the decision was made to change its status to that of an Incorporated Charitable Organisation.

This year Jean and I were able to attend all three nights of the Scottish Final of One-Act plays which took place at Scotland's 'Theatre in the Hills', namely Pitlochry Festival Theatre. This is a wonderful venue and we saw eight plays. The event is something everyone should experience. The SCDA made everyone feel welcome and the performances and social events were hugely enjoyable.

We also attended a professional production with the title 'A Double Bill of New Work' presented by Worcester Repertory Company. It comprised two new 30 minute one-act plays - *Number 42*, a three-hander by Ben Humphrey and *Conclusions*, a two-hander by Chris Jaeger. Both plays were performed on a bare stage and required only a park bench as set.

In *Number 42*, Victoria Lucie and Jonathan Darby played their roles of up-coming assassin and end-of-line assassin with style and the conclusion has a most unexpected twist. We just have to hope that these characters do not exist in real life

In *Conclusions* Victoria Lucie as the modern teenager and Liz Grand as a newly grieving wife, both provided very believable insights into the modern world.

This double bill proved to be a great evening out. It was thought-provoking and entertaining and I suggest that both plays are well worth exploring as festival repertoire.

Finally, a little bit about the UK Community Drama Festivals Federation (UKCDDF). This is the organisation that oversees the development and running of the British Final of One-Act Plays and is on the lookout for anyone who can provide guidance and commitment to grow and develop this wonderful festival event. For further details, please contact me at cunnington@talk21.com.

Roger Cunningham, National Treasurer

THE AUSTIN HAWKINS COLUMN



It's opening night and backstage there's that familiar mixture of excitement and anticipation as the audience gathers in the auditorium. Front of house staff are busy sorting out a possible double-booking. Have we overlooked anything? In fact the most vital aspect of preparedness for an evening in the theatre is not likely to be in our minds at this point and very unlikely to feature on this or any other night. But if it does arise,

everything we do must be right and could be the subject of extreme critical scrutiny - I mean, of course, an emergency evacuation, especially if there is a fire.

The simple fact that your theatre or hall may never have had an emergency evacuation is no excuse for lack of vigilance. It is vital that all safety equipment and procedures are in place and working and that everyone knows what their role will be in reacting to an emergency.

In the 1960s I worked for Rank Theatre Division. The Company had responsibility for 400 buildings, including cinemas, theatres, Top Rank ballrooms and bingo halls. The protocol for dealing with an emergency evacuation was laid out in great detail and was uniform throughout the circuit, and we undertook drills to practice our roles for an emergency. It was all aimed at avoiding, perhaps, the most dangerous possibility - panic. It might seem rather quaint but, once we had requested the audience to leave the building, technical staff would put on a vinyl disk of a march to the tune of 'Three Blind Mice' - amusing and calming.

I recall covering for a manager in a Cornish cinema. During the first afternoon's screening I walked all the passageways and found that the emergency doors were chained and padlocked. I discovered that the doorman had wanted to discourage a boy from buying a ticket and nipping to the exit door to let in his mates for free. I told the doorman to end his quiet smoke in the rest room, remove the chains immediately and patrol the passageways. I still recall his expletives as he went to get the keys.

I was on duty on three occasions when we evacuated a building; one of these evacuations was caused by smoke pouring into the auditorium due to a faulty ventilation motor; another was the result of popcorn boxes catching fire and the third was a bomb scare. The Company's evacuation procedures were applied rigorously and there was no panic, injury or loss of life during these incidents.

A key area of theatre safety is to have fully functioning exit doors and unobstructed passageways. There have been a number of serious fires in theatres, night clubs and entertainment centres (at home and abroad) where loss of life was directly attributable to locked or obstructed doors (the Summerlands disaster on the Isle of Man in 1973 being a case in point)

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case in point).

Many legal requirements for fire safety in theatres were put in place after an infamous fire at the New Theatre Royal in Exeter in 1887. At that time Exeter already had a poor history of theatre safety (two other buildings in the city had previously been destroyed by fire). The New Theatre burned down in 1811 when a gas-lit chandelier set fire to the rafters. The first-named Theatre Royal in the city was destroyed by fire in 1885 at a time when oxygen/hydrogen-fuelled limelights presented a very dangerous hazard. Fortunately the only casualty was a pig which belonged to one of the performers. In 1886 that building was replaced by a second Theatre Royal. On 5th September the following year, while Exeter Theatre Company was performing *Romany Rye* in front of an audience of 900, a naked gas light ignited some drapes in the flies. Panic broke out as the flames quickly spread. 186 people died, many in the upper gallery where the exits were poorly designed. According to a contemporary account: *'It is almost needless to say that the utmost panic prevailed throughout the theatre, and the terror and bewilderment was intensified a hundredfold at those points where egress seemed impossible.'* Many victims would have suffocated in the crush.



That third theatre fire in Exeter was the worst ever in Britain and the loss of life shocked the nation. A raft of new safety precautions were introduced as a result. They included the fire-proof safety curtain, still a feature of larger theatres and usually lowered during the interval to reassure the audience.

With the introduction of electric lighting, fail-safe heating systems, fire-resistant materials and modern fire-fighting precautions it is unlikely these days that anyone in a theatre audience will be injured in a fire. However, there is always the danger of being crushed in the panic which quickly develops when people feel threatened by smoke and fire.



When we attend any performance in a small theatre or village hall we subconsciously assume that the company in charge is aware of all the potential fire hazards and has ensured that the fire-fighting equipment is up-to-date and working.

That in itself is no guarantee that the unthinkable will never occur. Are we certain that all the exits are unlocked and free to open fully and all the escape routes are unobstructed? And are we set up to manage an evacuation without panic arising? Do we ever include a fire drill in our rehearsal schedule?

Footnote: This item was written prior to the appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

Austin Hawkins - 2017

Austin is a former journalist and biographer who, 'in later life', has turned his creative writing talents to fiction and the theatre. He is a regular contributor to the AETF Newsletter. Austin's three-act play 'FRIDAY'S CHILD' will be performed at the Ice Factory Theatre, Teignmouth from 13-18 November. SQUADDIES, a 30 minute piece for the screen, is in pre-production.



THE SWINDON AND DISTRICT THEATRE GUILD at 70

by Paula Clifford - Chair, Swindon and District Theatre Guild

This year the Swindon and District Theatre Guild celebrates its 70th Anniversary. The Guild, founded in 1945, held its first festival in 1947. At that time it was affiliated to the British Drama League (later the British Drama Association and then the AETF). In 1961 the Guild changed its name to the Swindon and District Amateur Theatre Guild (the word 'amateur' was later dropped). At this time it had 24 affiliated drama groups.

These days the Guild organises the Harold Jolliffe One-Act Festival. The festival's dedicatee was the 'father of cultural life in Swindon'. In 1966 the Guild and Harold Jolliffe, then the borough's Chief Librarian, led discussions with the town council for a permanent arts centre. The Council already owned the lease on the Bradford Hall, a dance venue of declining popularity in the Old Town area. In November 1967 dances stopped and the Arts Centre, the first dedicated municipal facility of its type, moved in. Harold Jolliffe presided over its opening at which the Guild presented a performance of Yves Cabrol's *The Fish*, a lighthearted tale of how a miserable greengrocer and an extremely cheerful undertaker exchange businesses.

A founding member of the Guild was Joan Cheshire. Joan's dedication to amateur theatre and to the Guild was steadfast. Her love of theatre and admiration for its practitioners (irrespective of age or ability) was evident. Sadly, Joan passed away on 12th November 2013. She was 93. The following message, written by her, still sits on our website.

"When I'm asked why I love the Festival, I have so many answers to hand! Most of all, I suppose, it's because to me the Festival allows our young talent to flourish in a supportive environment. These young actors, actresses, directors and stage crew are, after all, the future of drama! The Festival also gives so many youngsters the chance to perform on a stage under Festival conditions – it's a wonderful opportunity to grow. For me, it's this environment which also fosters another special quality: comradeship. Coming together, as we do every year in this way, we do all we can to help one another. Props, costumes and advice are all aspects of our performance about which we can ask for help – in fact that's a primary reason for the existence of the Guild anyway.

Over the years, I've noticed many changes. Most of all, I suppose, when I remember one-act plays entered back in the 40s and 50s, it's the freedom of speech we enjoy now. I don't mean the political meaning of the phrase at all; more the freedom to express thoughts and emotions, in ways and words which all those years ago would have been frowned upon at best – or perhaps not allowed at all! The Harold Jolliffe One-Act Play Festival is a wonderful thing; we deserve it, and it deserves our support"

Joan's words are still relevant today. Our young h1act team is knowledgeable, experienced, and supportive. It is always looking for ways to improve the event. We are particularly proud of our social media expertise (dedicated website plus blog, Facebook and Twitter page).

Our team includes a festival director who acts as host on performance nights. The host outlines the festival season,

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explains the format of each evening, introduces the adjudicator and spells out the 'housekeeping' rules. A photographer captures every performance and the awards ceremony. All companies, therefore, have a visual record of their participation.

One of our festival directors describes HJ as being 'like the FA cup for actors'. Thirteen awards are presented covering every aspect of production from directing and technical achievement to acting. The awards have been donated by, or dedicated to, people such as Joan Cheshire who have supported the event over the years. The BBC audience award allows audience members to vote for their favourite play. The festival always ends with a glittering prize-giving. A presenter from our local BBC radio station presents the audience award and local dignitaries present awards to those selected by the adjudicator.

In this anniversary year we departed from tradition and took HJ 'on the road' to the Memorial Hall in Royal Wootton Bassett. The event led Nick Wilkes to comment: *'This is by far the nicest, most well thought out, planned and.....welcoming festival that I have been lucky enough to adjudicate; superb communication at all stages; a pleasure from beginning to end.'*

We received similar plaudits from many of the participants.



Our vibrant festival (now affiliated to NDFA as well as the AETF) continues both to grow and attract more original writing. Many plays produced for the first time at HJ have since been published. Joan (**pictured**) and Harold would, I feel sure, be proud.



National Statistics - 2017 season

As far as the season's stats are concerned this is a very brief report as I am still awaiting returns from ten of the thirty eight festivals making up the AETF family. If you have not made this year's return, I will be contacting you shortly. We are hoping to get a full return this year. Could I please ask all preliminary round programme compilers to:

- Acknowledge that their festival is a member of the AETF.
- Flag all the original plays to be performed (and which are eligible for consideration by the Geoffrey Whitworth adjudicators).
- Flag all the productions eligible to go forward to the AETF National festival proper.

My thanks for your co-operation

Roger Cunningham – National Statistics Co-Coordinator

'MOLES AND THE HABITS OF BIRDS'

THE 2017 GEOFFREY WHITWORTH WINNER ON THE GENESIS OF HER PLAY

Although I have lived happily in my little corner of North Yorkshire for some considerable time, I am, nevertheless, a Welsh woman in exile and my Welsh family love to tell stories! And for someone who is passionate about community drama, what better way is there to tell a story than through the medium of the theatre, with a group of people who will listen to my ideas and are mad enough to believe in their realization....and when I say we need a slag heap on stage, no one turns a hair or shakes a head!

And so to Aberfan and a story I have lived with all my life; like many of my age, it was the first disaster I encountered and I vividly recollect the harrowing black and white television footage. But it lay buried until the recent focus on the Hillsborough inquiry - another avoidable disaster - suddenly made it important for me to recall the events of 1966 and focus on how the community survived both the tragedy itself and the



injustices that followed. I read whatever I could – trial transcripts, newspaper articles, survivor accounts – and used three (fictional) families and the way the disaster affected them, as the starting point and structure. The play was always intended to be underpinned by music and thus hymn tunes and a thousand year-old Welsh lullaby were used to tell the story where words alone could not. The All-England Theatre Festival provided the performance opportunity and it was an absolute privilege to

accompany *Moles and the Habits of Birds* with the cast (ages 11 to 85 years) on its journey through the Festival. Lastly, a huge thank you (from an extremely new writer) to the Geoffrey Whitworth competition for encouraging new work.

Susan Pierce – 2017

(Sue is pictured above collecting the winner's trophy at this year's AETF North semi final)



YOUR COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE CONTENT AND PRESENTATION OF THIS 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. HAVE A GREAT SUMMER

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