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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

I make no apologies for devoting most of this article to our Grand Final, capably planned and organised by our colleagues in Central Area at the Mitchell Arts Centre, Hanley and the British Final, warmly hosted by our SCDA friends North of the Border.

It was heartening to see so much impressive young talent on display at this year's 'English', not only in the youth teams of Woking College (performing *Cider with Rosie*) and Sodbury Players (performing Lorca's *Blood Wedding*) but also in Saltburn '53's production of Sue Pierce's *A Tiding of Magpies* whose huge cast employed youngsters in their early teens as well as a cast member in her 80s. Joining them, Total Arts Community Theatre (TACT) brought their usual imaginative flair and impressive production values to the Ruth Ellis story dramatised by Amanda Whittington in *The Thrill of Love*.



2018 AETF Champions TACT performing
The Thrill of Love

With so much creative talent on display it seems churlish to focus on a major personal disappointment. Three out of the four productions suffered from long stretches of inaudibility. Although the dead acoustic of the auditorium was clearly a contributing factor, it was a shame not to be able to reap the full benefit of all the skill and hard work that had clearly been lavished on the productions. In my experience, GODA practitioners are far too complacent about

matters of projection, so it was instructive to hear Ben Humphrey, the perceptive and entertaining adjudicator, confirm that there had, indeed, been an intelligibility shortfall.

Our congratulations to TACT for, once again, being crowned English Champions. They really have set the gold standard to which others in England must now aspire.

A large contingent of Sassenachs made the trip north for this year's British, hosted with verve and enthusiasm by our friends at the Scottish Community Development Association. The location was the magnificent Macrobert Theatre at Stirling University whose picturesque campus occupies 360 glorious acres between the Wallace Monument and the Ochills. It goes without saying that all four finalists were of the highest quality although there were, again, some audibility issues. In addition to TACT, the final featured Aberdour Players (from Fife) who performed *Red Cross*, an enigmatic early work by Sam Shepard, Rosemary Drama Group (from Belfast), who performed Anton Krueger's anarchic *Mediocrity* with comic abandon and Players' Theatre (from South Wales) who performed *The Bridge* by Gabe Torrens.



Players' Theatre (Wales) performing *The Bridge* by Gabe Torrens
(photo by Walter Hampson)

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The setting for the latter is a ravine at night where the leading character contemplates suicide and a mysterious figure from his past attempts to talk him down. The play had great atmosphere and revealed unexpected twists of plot. Jennifer Scott-Reid, the assured adjudicator, awarded Players Theatre the coveted Howard de Walden trophy. Well done, Wales!

England didn't walk away from Stirling without a gong. For the second year running, Sue Pierce won the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy, this time with *A Tiding of Magpies*, the second play of a proposed Welsh trilogy. Sue also earned herself a contract with Cressrelles Publishing Company Ltd, whose commitment to publish *Tidings..* and future GW winning plays is hugely appreciated by all four home nation festivals. We hope it will greatly encourage new writing talent across the land. Three cheers for Cressrelles!



Sue Pierce receives the 2018 Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy from Keith Robinson, Chairman of the United Kingdom Community Drama Festivals Federation at this year's British Final
(Photo by Walter Hampson)

The SCDA has now passed the British Final baton to AETF North. We shall be hosting this amidst the late Victorian splendour of Harrogate Theatre on 5 and 6 July 2019. You will shortly find a brochure about the event on our web pages. Do, please, support it. Harrogate is a splendid place to visit in its own right and is a gateway to the Yorkshire Dales and other major tourist attractions.

Inside this Newsletter (in addition to the usual features) you will see some embryonic thoughts about the future direction of our membership scheme, find out about our new policy with regard to the dissemination of adjudicator marks and read an appreciation of David Highnam, a great servant of the festival movement who sadly passed away earlier this year. We wish you a wonderful summer. Thank you for your vital support of

the festival movement in 2018. We hope you come back ever more enthusiastic in 2019.

Ian Clarke - National Chairman



Harrogate Theatre - venue for the 2019 British Final



Northern Area

The Area semi final, the culmination of our season, took place over the early May Bank Holiday in sweltering Saltburn. Sheenah Taylor, Sue Pierce and their ever hospitable and hard-working team from Saltburn '53 Drama Group laid the foundations for a splendid event which featured six of our seven first round winners. Hog the Limelight from the Isle of Man, Pateley Bridge Dramatic Society, Sedgefield Players, Weighton Young Players and the Royalty Theatre (Sunderland), joined the home group, Saltburn '53, for two days of varied theatre featuring work by Bertolt Brecht and Alan Haehnel and brand new writing by Keith Burton, Sue Pierce, Lee Stewart and Sharon Mitchell. The event attracted nearly full houses, made a substantial profit and was graced by an adjudicator, Robert Meadows, at the top of his game.

For the second year running, Saltburn '53 emerged as winners with *A Tiding of Magpies*, another trademark, multi-cast piece of true community theatre by Sue Pierce. The '53 went on to win the Rex Walford trophy at the Grand Final whilst Sue earned herself the coveted Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy for the second year in succession and a publishing contract with Cressrelles. Congratulations also to Keith Burton for earning the Geoffrey Whitworth runner-up accolade once again, this time with *On False Premises*, a vibrant and witty farce set in New York. Original drama is decidedly alive and well north of the Dee and Humber.

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West of the Pennines the Manx Festival successfully moved to its new base at King William's College and attracted a healthy 10 entries. The Leverhulme, our biggest preliminary round event, began a new era without its guiding light and motive force, the redoubtable Phyllis Driscoll, who has retired as organiser for reasons of ill-health. Phyllis remains a living legend on the Wirral and has left a magnificent legacy across Merseyside and beyond as a nurturer of community drama. Bless you for all your many years of outstanding service, Phyllis.

Olivia Bower (Sunderland Royalty) receives the Best Actress Trophy from Dennis Bloor, (AETF North Chair) at this year's Area semi final.

East of the Pennines, the new Durham and Sunderland Festival got off to an auspicious start with seven teams performing mostly original work. Sunderland Royalty were its first winners. Elsewhere the Hull, Richmond and Saltburn events marked time in terms of the number of entries they were able to attract. Only the Nidderdale boosted its intake in comparison with the previous year.

The highs certainly outweighed the lows over the season as a whole, particularly in the field of original writing. We really do seem to be fertile soil for talented and inventive new playwrights.

My heartfelt thanks to all of you involved in the Area festival scene in 2018 – audiences, volunteers, organisers, casts and crew.

Ian Clarke - Secretary, AETF North.



Central Area

2018 has been a very good year for the Area. We again had three, six-play quarter finals and a six-play semi final, the winner of which went on to represent the Area at the Grand Final which we were honoured to host at the Mitchell Arts Centre in Stoke-on-Trent. The format proved to be both an artistic and a financial success for the AETF.

Birmingham - This compact festival retained its popularity and played to almost full houses. In her summing up of the festival Jennifer Scott-Reid paid tribute to all of the teams taking part and the festival organisers.

Warwickshire - Unfortunately Jean and I were unable to attend this year due to clashing dates. However, the ever helpful grapevine reports that the festival went well and Nick

Wilkes, the adjudicator, was popular with both the audience and the teams.

Herefordshire - The move from the Courtyard in Hereford to the Market Theatre in Ledbury seems to have been a good one. In his summary from the stage, Chris Jaeger remarked that the increased participation (thirteen groups took part) and full-houses bode well for the future of the event.

Worcestershire – Snow forced a postponement of this festival. Fortunately, the theatre was able to offer alternative dates and a reduced festival went ahead a few weeks later. Congratulating all involved, Nick Wilkes remarked that, although the postponement had posed problems for all, the event had been a happy and successful one.

South Staffordshire - It was our privilege to attend the Hastilow Festival in Tamworth on the opening night. Having taken over from the original adjudicator at short notice, Sue Doherty was very well received by the audience and the three teams taking part that evening.

North Staffordshire - We attended the Friday evening and had a very good time. Richard Woodward complimented the three teams (junior, youth and adult) for providing impressive entertainment.

Shropshire - We attended the second night and witnessed youth theatre productions. The audience were in full agreement with Beverley Clark who complimented all the teams for taking on stiff challenges of interpretation and presentation.

Western Division Quarter-Final - This six-play event took place in Ledbury. Mike Kaiser, the adjudicator, sent two original plays through to the next round (one with a cast of thirty-one and the other with a cast of seven).



Raw Talent Youth Theatre, winners of the Western Division Quarter Final

Central Division Quarter Final - The Brewhouse, Burton was the venue for this event. All six productions played to very good houses. Nick Wilkes, whose first quarter final this was as an adjudicator, found it a stimulating experience.

Eastern Division Quarter Final - Unfortunately Jean and I were unable to be at the Abbey Theatre, Nuneaton this year, but reports suggests that Chris Jaeger and the audience were provided with a great day of competition from all six groups.

Area Semi-Final - This year we were at the Swan Theatre, Worcester. Six deserving teams played to good houses over two sessions. In his summing up Paul Fowler said that it had been a varied and memorable event which had showcased nearly every dramatic genre.

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I could not possibly complete this brief survey of Central Area's season without congratulating Sue Fortune, my Vice-Chairman, for organising this year's Grand Final at the Mitchell Memorial Theatre. This was a splendid event which went off well. The fact that her group, TACT, were crowned AETF Champions with *The Thrill of Love* by Amanda Whittington and went on to perform it at the British Final in Stirling proved a delightful bonus.

I would like to thank everyone involved at all levels of the festival scene in Central Area for their contribution to a successful season. Sadly the weather this year did have an adverse effect on some festivals. However, overall audience support has again ensured that our festival events remain viable. I would also like to thank those individual members of the AETF who reside within the Central Area for their continued support together with their financial donations. These are very much appreciated and will not be forgotten. My thanks, also, to everyone who made Jean and I so welcome when we put in an appearance at their events.

I invite you to attend our Central Area AGM which will take place on 23rd September. Full details will be available on www.aetf.org.uk once the venue is confirmed.

Roger Cunnington - Chairman, Central Area



Rebekah Fortune and Stephen Smith in TACT's winning production of *The Thrill of Love*



Western Area

We are glad to report a successful season. Preliminary rounds were held at Avon, Bristol, Dawlish, Exmouth, Ilminster, Pewsey and Totton. A total of sixty one teams took part, of which eight were youth entries. All the events were well supported. Circumstances forced us to reduce to only two quarter finals this year. Although this will probably be repeated in 2019, we are working hard towards restoring the other two. The surviving ones this year were held at Bristol and Weymouth and both were very well supported.

Our Area Final was held at the Shaftesbury Theatre in the pleasant seaside town of Dawlish. The local Repertory Company did a fine job of hosting us. The adjudicator, Jan Palmer-Sayer was, as usual, excellent. Some of Jan's comments about the four productions are provided below:



The Thousand and One Nights by Paul King performed by Mezzalchemistry, the Drama School, Exeter.

This play is based on a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales often known as 'The Arabian Nights.' *Jan remarked that this play poses a considerable challenge for any company, particularly a youth group. Given the Middle Eastern source material the setting needs to be colourful. The costumes were terrific. The set was interesting and perfectly adequate. The use of smoke and the design of the lighting were good but there were some 'dead' areas on stage which might have been corrected during the tech rehearsal. The selection and timing of the stirring music was good. Jan loved the opening as the cast entered through the auditorium and acknowledged the audience from the stage. The entire cast was onstage throughout and the pictures the performers created were very effective. The story's structure was thus well illustrated. The production was enhanced by excellent choreography and inventive direction.*

Bully Beef and Whizzbangs by Chris Hawley, performed by SUP Theatre Company, Southampton.

In this darkly comic play, full of trench humour, we visit the sharp end of WW1 in the company of newly-arrived Smudger and old hand Harry. This is a wry look at two reluctant heroes. *Jan commented that this is an extremely well-written play. We were taken into the trenches by a set that was a pure work of art. Costumes were spot-on and all on stage had authentic, 'short-back-and-sides' haircuts. The lighting was warm and the sound effects exquisite. The opening was noteworthy for its timing but the entry of the second character straight to position and looking upstage was strange. Throughout there was a consistently sharp take-up of cues and a well-executed use of pauses. The comedy was firmly pointed. All the characters were well portrayed. This was a polished performance of a broad, complicated and brilliantly written piece.*

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Last Tango in Little Grimley by David Tristram, performed by Exton Drama Club.

The play portrays a small amateur drama group in crisis - funds are dwindling, the rent is overdue and the company needs a miracle to survive. *Jan commented that this is a popular festival choice with a plot that is pure 'Carry On Comedy'. It is also a minefield for any group that lacks the brio to 'go for it'. If it's going to work in all its glory, it needs zip and pace. The set was minimal but adequate. Costumes were fine except that the cast wore glasses, thereby diminishing their expressions. The performance needed more busyness and comic timing to make the most of the gags. High points in the plot could have been pointed more than they were. Speeches were delivered in profile and thus carried less expressive impact than they might otherwise have achieved. However, there were some lovely moments from this competent cast.*



Frederico Garcia Lorca

Bodas de Sangre by Frederico Garcia Lorca, performed by Sodbury Players Youth, Chipping Sodbury.

Translated into English as 'Blood Wedding,' Lorca's classic is a high-octane depiction of an all-too-familiar situation in a closed and tight community. *Jan remarked that Lorca's play is relentlessly dramatic. The characters are stark and passionate - none more so than the central pair of doomed lovers. The potential for expressionistic treatment is clear - there is an open invitation to embody death and the moon on stage and an irresistible opportunity to accompany them with music, movement and dance. The set was visually stunning and created ample space for the action. The costumes were spot-on, though the hair of the 'older' women should have been put up. The lighting was a great success; it was properly varied for each scene and the flashlight work in the blackout was very well done. The sound cues were excellent. Choral speech was a strong feature of the performance though it can lead to monotony of cadence and force. Using the flashlights to illustrate the moon might have worked better as a tight circle or crescent. The use of the stick as an exchange of power and dominance showed much invention. The dance choreography and foot-stamping were excellently done. Indeed, it might have been extended to some kind of ritual following the two deaths. Characterisation was sound throughout. There were stark contrasts where necessary from the leads and thoughtful and determined support playing from the others. To sum up, we*

witnessed great ensemble playing, some excellent individual performances and brave and inventive direction.

Artistic standards were high throughout the event. The Countess of Devon was the guest of honour and presented the awards.

In conclusion I'm delighted to report that none of our festivals lost money. Indeed, most showed a modest profit and I and my Area colleagues extend our warm thanks to everyone involved in our festival scene in 2018.



Ron Roberts - Chairman, Western Area



Eastern Area

The 2018 round of preliminary festivals now seems a distant memory as we enjoy a golden summer.

The 2018 Eastern Area programme was led out by the Southern Counties festival in the delightful Barn Theatre, Oxted in February. This festival has been one of the strongest in the area for many years but this year was an exception with only eight entries, significantly down on recent years. Three of these entries were from Glow Youth Theatre who have enjoyed much success in recent years, but on this occasion they lost out to Oxted Players who progressed to the Area Final. The adjudicator was Jennifer Scott-Reid who was well received by teams and audiences alike.

The Elmbridge Drama festival was held in early March with four entries (one down from 2016 & 2017), including two from Bishopstoke Players in Eastleigh, some 50 miles away. The winners were The Thursday Night Project, a recently formed local group who performed a technically impressive and well-acted production of the Howard Brenton's *Heads*. Regrettably, having opted to go forward in the AETF competition, they had to withdraw due to the work commitments of one cast member. Since the only other production by a team opting to go forward did not meet the required standard, Elmbridge wasn't represented at the Area final. Elmbridge has a good track record of offering GoDA Associate adjudicators the opportunity to gain much needed experience (they must adjudicate six festivals before they are eligible for assessment for full GODA accreditation). In this instance the festival was expertly adjudicated by one such aspirant, Keith Phillips, who is well known in the Area as Chairman of the Cambridge Festival. Despite a £850 grant aid from two local Arts funds, the festival lost around £400, principally due to poor audiences. This has

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been a long-term trend and 2019 may, alas, see the 58th and final staging of this festival.

Next up was the Waltham Forest Drama festival which had eight entrants and reasonable audiences. The adjudicator, the excellent Jan Palmer-Sayer (who took over as GoDA Chair earlier this year) decided that Woodham Players would represent Waltham at the Area Final.

In April, the Cambridge Drama Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary with a six night run and sixteen entries. There were six new plays, five youth teams and five teams new to the event. There was a wonderful mix of thought-provoking repertoire embracing comedy, drama and tragedy. The awards night ceremony was a glittering event and I was delighted to be asked by Chairman Keith Phillips to present the trophies – albeit only at the last minute when the anticipated local celebrity dropped out! BAWDS, with Nick Warburton's production of his own *The Last Bread Pudding*, were the eventual winners. Jan Palmer-Sayer, whose concise and constructive adjudications were well-received, declared it to be the best production of the play she had seen. BAWDS were regrettably unavailable for the Area Final and their place was taken by the runners-up, Big Squirrel Productions with *Flat 2B*. Audience numbers were reasonably healthy and the organising committee is optimistic that there will be sufficient funds in place for the 51st Festival in 2019.



Ian Thomas presents the awards at this year's Cambridge Festival

The Maidenhead Drama Festival took place in late May with ten entries, two down on 2017 and six down on 2016. Jan Palmer Sayer (she has been busy!) praised the quality of drama on show. Audiences were lower than usual, presumably reflecting the reduced number of entries. The festival winners, Woking College, progressed to the Area Final.

The Area Final was hosted by the Maidenhead festival at the delightful Norden Farm Arts Centre. It featured four diverse and enjoyable productions by

- Big Squirrel Productions with their own play, *Flat 2B*, a humorous take on a modern relationship, by Kattreya Scheurer-Smith.
- Woodhouse Players with *Glass Hollow*, a hard-hitting police-themed drama by Simon Mawdsley.
- Oxted Players with *Nine*, a dark and disturbing female counterpart to *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. *Nine* was authored by Jane Shepherd.

- Woking College with an adaptation by James Roose-Evans of Laurie Lee's *Cider With Rosie*, a charming recollection of childhood.

It was a close-fought contest at the end of which the adjudicator, Jill Colby, awarded the winner's trophy to Woking College. They progressed to the Grand Final in Stoke – but that's another story.....

Sadly, three of the four groups brought minimal support. Consequently the event made a large financial loss. I cannot over-stress how important it is for competing groups to encourage their non-performing group members, family and friends to attend events at all tiers of competition. Without the financial viability that such support guarantees, opportunities for one-act festival drama in Eastern Area will continue to shrink.

It remains for me to wish all readers an enjoyable summer and autumn and thank all festival and organisers and their helpers for their (often) unsung efforts.

Ian Thomas - Chairman, Eastern Area



THE TREASURER'S RAMBLINGS



The principal topic of my ramblings is the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) which came into force on 28 May. As a membership society the AETF is subject to these regulations. We have already addressed the main requirement concerning the holding of information relating to our membership

(see the membership application form on our web site). We are also looking to see what the implications are for our festival organisers. Independent Preliminary Round Festivals affiliated to the AETF will have their own procedures in place, as will all of the teams who enter.

The new regulations have also prompted us to think about, and tackle with urgency, our privacy and child protection policies. We want to ensure that our policies in both regards are fit for purpose before our AGM on 27 October and put them in place for everyone to see on our web site shortly after. As ever, if you want to give me the benefit of your thoughts please do so to via:

aetftreasurer@btintenet.com

Jean and I were not able to make as many visits to festivals outside our own Area this year due to other commitments. However, we did represent the AETF at a couple of NODA events which proved interesting and where we were made most welcome. Attendance at their regional AGM certainly

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gave us food for thought with regard to the new GDPR regulations. NODA's National AGM & President's Gala will take place on 22 & 23 September at St Ann's Manor, Wokingham.

Jean and I were fortunate again this year to be invited to the Bristol Festival's last night. It was a grand occasion enjoyed by all. Colin Dolly, the adjudicator, gave valuable advice to the two teams taking part that evening and clearly enjoyed himself as well. We met up with the organisers and their guests and sponsors for drinks and after-show nibbles before contentedly wending our way home, having renewed friendships.

We were also invited to a black tie, gala performance by 'The Young Rep' of *Macbeth* at the Swan Theatre. Directed by Ben Humphrey and provided with a modern day setting, this was a stunning production. George Romero as Macbeth, Charlotte Mason as Lady Macbeth and a strong supporting cast gave splendid performances. Congratulations to all!

Roger Cunnington – National Treasurer



STATISTICS - 2018 SEASON

There is not a lot to report at this juncture. We provided a breakdown of last year's figures in January. Although the 2018 season is now over data is still sparse. At the time of writing I await returns from twelve of the thirty eight festivals making up the AETF.



If you have not made this year's return yet, I and the Area Chairs will be contacting you. It remains the National Committee's hope that we get a full return this year.

I'm sorry to flog this to death, but it remains a source of surprise to me that many festivals fail to flag new, original work in their programmes. Many will be eligible for entry in the Geoffrey Whitworth Play-writing competition. Winning this is not only beneficial to the playwright but it also brings kudos to the group performing it and the festival in which it is entered.

These days we constantly fret about declining participation at our festivals. However, it could be worse. The rate of decline is even more acute north of the Border where, in 1950, there were over 500 entries during the season. This had slipped to 110 in 2018. Our records (which, admittedly, began only in 2008) show that declining participation in AETF events is half that of the Scottish figure. This is nothing to be complacent about but it might suggest that we are more robust in retaining support in the face of a national trend than we thought.

Roger Cunnington

DAVID HIGHMORE



It is with great sadness that we report the death in April of David Highmore, aged 86. David served for some time on the AETF National Committee and was also a stalwart committee member and supporter of Maidenhead Drama Festival for many years. In his heyday David was a fine actor, playing everything from pantomime to Shakespeare with great panache – it is obvious where his son and famous grandson, Freddie, got

their talent from.

David was a true gentleman, with a gentle smile and kind words to all; he will be sorely missed.

Carol Hennessy - AETF Eastern Area

DISSEMINATION OF ADJUDICATOR MARKS



Following a query from a long-standing festival supporter and participant about AETF policy with regard to the passing on marks awarded by adjudicators to teams at festival events, the

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Executive Committee reviewed current practice at its June meeting.

Our discussions revealed that, in the absence of any covering AETF rule, practice varies widely across the country. Some festivals never pass marks on to their performers. Others send groups their individual marks only (with or without their ranking position). Some may provide an upper and a lower range of marks. A few festivals pass on a complete inventory of marks to all participants.

After our discussions there was unanimity that, at AETF events proper, we should regularise practice. From the start of next season, therefore, the organisers of all such AETF events should, in a spirit of total transparency, pass on a complete set of adjudicator marks to ALL participants.

This practice will be enshrined in section C4 of the next re-issue of our Festival Rules, including the caveat that teams should address any concerns about marking to festival organisers and NOT to either GODA or the adjudicator.

Although independent preliminary round festivals are free to continue with their current practices, we encourage them to enshrine this new transparency in their own rules.

Ian Clarke

expensive journey towards the Grand Final.

We realise that such a scheme, whereby the many support the few, may be contentious. Your comments – for or against – would be most welcome before the matter is presented to the National Executive Committee in Birmingham in October.

Ian Clarke



AETF MEMBERSHIP AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR WINNING TEAMS



In pursuit of our 5 year plan objective to develop a fund-raising strategy for the AETF we have recently set up a sub-committee to identify potential sources of income we might generate both internally and externally (the latter through grant aid and sponsorship). We are particularly keen to provide sustained, year-by-year financial support for winning teams at quarter final level and above (or enhance this support where it is currently provided).

Given the capricious and uncertain availability of external sources of income, one possibility the sub-committee is exploring is to make AETF Group Membership (currently £20 per annum) mandatory for all companies opting to go forward, if selected, from any preliminary round to the next tier of competition. The sub-committee believes that we could, by this method, generate significant funds to help winning groups of non-independent first round festivals, quarter finals and semi finals negotiate the

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. THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.

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