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ALL-ENGLAND THEATRE FESTIVAL

Reaching out to drama groups throughout England

NATIONAL AND AREA REPORTS



England

Firstly I would like to extend my gratitude to Preliminary Round Festival organisers, teams, venues and audiences and to Area and National committee members all of whom worked so hard to make the 2021 festival season happen. With dates and venues constantly moving it was a challenge, but one that was met with passion and a universal determination to keep everyone safe. It has become apparent from the very positive feedback we have received that people's appetite for, and need to be part of the Amateur Theatre community have in many cases grown stronger during these past difficult 18 months. Many lessons have been learned and positive changes have been highlighted, so we are looking forward to an even bigger and better festival season in 2022.

This year's AETF Grand Final saw the appearance of some groups new to the festival circuit and the highest mark ever was awarded by the adjudicator, Chris Jaeger, to the winning team. All the finalists had rehearsed in car parks, on Zoom or by any other means they could and still managed to produce a final of the highest calibre. The 'extra mural' events - a quiz and fish and chip supper - also helped make the occasion even more welcoming and enjoyable. My thanks go out to all the members of Northern Area, particularly Sara Dean and Chris Darling, for organising such a fabulous event in such difficult circumstances.



TACT tuck in at Bridlington

At this year's Grand Final we also introduced a new award in honour of our much-missed treasurer Roger Cunnington. The Cunnington award will be awarded yearly to any individual the AETF feels is an unsung hero of community theatre - for example a committee member, set builder, someone who makes the tea or washes costumes or runs a youth group - the list is endless. We will be sending details of how to submit nominations shortly. The inaugural winners of the Cunnington Award were, as many of you will have heard, Roger and Jean Cunnington themselves for their tireless and committed work over many years in support of the AETF at all levels of the festival hierarchy.



More post show conviviality at Bridlington

In 2022, to coincide with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Bank Holiday weekend, we will be hosting a new event - an English Final for Youth. This will be a pilot to explore how we might celebrate and involve our wonderful youth groups in the larger world of the AETF. They are, after all, our future. Each Area will be able to pass on more specific details to members and supporters, but in summary, a combined AETF and Youth Grand Final will take place at the Courtyard Theatre, Hereford on 3-4 June. The event will be hosted by Central Area. Please do let as many of your youth groups know about this wonderful opportunity.

I am incredibly excited for 2022 and hope that the spirit of community, mutual support, and inclusivity



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

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All-England Theatre Festival



fostered by the AETF in 2021 flourishes and grows as we move forward into a bright future.

Rebekah Fortune-Smith - National Chair



Rebekah Fortune-Smith receives the Rex Walford Trophy from AETF Grand Final sponsor Alan Godfrey.

carried forward to the semi final and the North was able to send Progressive Players' production of *The Signalman* (originally presented on Zoom) through to the AETF Grand Final.



Progressive Players of Gateshead, 2021 Northern Area champions, relax after the show at Bridlington.

We were pleased and proud to be the hosts of the Grand Final this year and our indefatigable team from Hull and East Riding with Sara Dean and Chris Darling at their head, stepped up magnificently to organize this event at the Bridlington Spa complex. It was a hugely enjoyable weekend of one-act drama, generously sponsored by SpecSavers and our very own Alan Godfrey. It thoroughly justified the optimism with which we had started the year.

Sue Pierce - Chair, Northern Area



Central Area

Festival year 2021 in the North began with our customary spirit of optimism, but as the pandemic grew and lockdowns were re-imposed, it became clear that we were still in a precarious situation as far as running festivals was concerned. Strict regulations effectively precluded dramatic activity for the first few months of the year and those festivals which would usually take place in the spring found themselves in the position of having to postpone until the summer, or cancel altogether for another year. Many of these decisions were imposed by venues not being able to open and this forced the cancellation of over half of the northern events. However, a notable development was the North's very first Zoom festival in March, hosted by Durham and Sunderland. This was problem-solving at its best and resulted in a model which was as similar to an 'in-person' festival as it was possible to effect, with recorded 'plays' but a live adjudication and summing up each night. Entrants were aware that, should they proceed to the semi-final, their production would have to be staged and all accepted this.

A different response was effected by the Nidderdale festival who found themselves without a venue and joined with Saltburn to present a 'two festivals, one theatre' model in June (several months later than both would normally have taken place). One adjudicator assessed entrants to each individual festival and the event produced two plays to go forward to the semi-final. Our audiences, socially-distanced and limited to 50% capacity, were delighted to be back in the theatre again as, of course, were the groups taking part. Winning plays from the 2020 cancelled festivals were also

In the difficult times of sickness, fear and lockdown, it would have been so easy to sit back and say: 'Let's not bother', but that is something that the Central Area Committee refused to do. At our first Zoom meeting in lockdown, every preliminary round festival (PRF) was represented, which was heart-warming. They were all open to ideas that would help the AETF to continue throughout 2021 and culminate in an English Final.

We felt that if we could move our first rounds back to later in the year, they would be more likely to take place. If any first rounds had difficulties with finding theatres, then other first rounds would host them. We also agreed to encourage teams to support other festivals by entering as many events as possible. This is exactly what happened. Teams rehearsed on Zoom and in car parks and gardens until the Government agreed that six people could meet indoors.

Once we were told that the English and British Finals had been moved to later dates in 2021, Central Area festivals were able to move forward. Worcester and Hereford festivals did not take place, but teams who still wished to enter were welcomed by other PRFs, all of which took place in late May and June.

The Birmingham and Leicester festivals were hosted by Warwickshire and the Shropshire and Stoke festivals were

All-England Theatre Festival



hosted by Tamworth. Determined not to cancel our quarter finals, we incorporated them into our first rounds.

Our semi final took place in July at Leicester and the standard was very high. Total Arts Community Theatre from Tamworth won the event and looked forward to performing at the Grand Final in Bridlington.

I have to say that the atmosphere and support from both teams and audiences at our PRFs and quarter finals were outstanding. People attended several sessions rather than just their own. The festivals were real celebrations of what can be achieved and shared between like-minded people. Adjudicators praised the standard of the entries and said it was a joy and an honour to officiate at the events. Audiences applauded the fact that at last they could share live theatre.

The Grand Final proved to be a lovely weekend, enhanced by a quiz on the Friday evening which created a friendly, relaxing atmosphere for the teams, organisers, and supporters. The four finalists provided excellent entertainment on the Saturday. The TACT team with their play 'Five Kinds of Silence', were naturally delighted to be announced as 2021 AETF Champions by the adjudicator, Chris Jaeger MBE. The evening continued with a convivial Bridlington Fish and Chip supper. Our thanks go to Sue Pierce and her Northern Area team for a most enjoyable Grand Final.

Sue Fortune – Chair, Central Area.



TACT celebrate with the John Maude Trophy at Bridlington.



Western Area

We ended our January Newsletter by joyfully supporting the AETF plan to hold festivals as late in the season as possible, thus avoiding lockdowns. Here in Western Area we managed to run three first round festivals - a successful merger, at Chipping Sodbury, of the Avon and Bristol events, another well-attended festival at Totton and a reduced competition in Somerset. The winners of all three events together with the Bristol/Avon runners-up competed at a restored Area Final at the Merlin Theatre in Frome presided over by Nancy Heath.

Gloom was lifted and smiles were back and the audience sat back to enjoy four varied productions by the following groups:

SUP Theatre Company, the Totton winners, performing *Stitched Up* by Robin Johnson, an amusing script based on the Frankenstein story;

Actonians Drama Group, the Bristol/Avon runners up, performing *Syrinx* by Kate Mosse, in which a retired headmistress, on the day of her retirement, tries to repair her relationship with two of her oldest friends;

St Albans Players, Avon and Bristol winners, performing *On Scarborough Front* by Stuart Fortey, which depicts the poet Wilfred Owen's time at the Yorkshire resort during the First World War;

Iminster Entertainments Society, the Somerset winners, performing *Tone Clusters* by Joyce Carol Oates, in which an 'ordinary', white, American suburban couple are placed under increasing strain by an unseen interrogator probing their son's arrest for murder.

Iminster proved worthy winners and went forward to the AETF Grand Final where they performed with distinction on the large stage of Bridlington Spa.

Ron Roberts - Chair, Western Area



Two shots of the Iminster Entertainments Society team (2021 Western Area champions)

All-England Theatre Festival



Eastern Area

The constantly shifting situation during spring coupled with scheduling difficulties unfortunately defeated both the Southern Counties and Waltham Forest Drama Festivals this year. However, thanks to a very supportive venue (Norden Farm Centre for the Arts), Maidenhead were able to move their dates several times and the festival eventually took place from 8 – 10 July. Southern Counties and Waltham Forest groups were invited to participate in the Maidenhead Festival to have an opportunity to participate in the AETF competition. In the event none took up the offer. With restrictions still in place, audiences socially distanced and masks worn at all times unless on stage, it wasn't the usual theatre experience, but everyone – performers and audiences alike – were just so happy to see live theatre taking place again. The audience and the adjudicator, Nancy Heath, enjoyed eight very different plays over three evenings across a range of genres. The standard was high, with only three marks between the top three plays, but the overall winner was Maidenhead Drama Guild with *Blood on Canvas* by local author Richard James.



Ilan Thomas presents Maidenhead Drama Guild with their AETF Grand Final certificate at Bridlington



Jean Cunnington receives the inaugural Cunnington Award from Rebekah Fortune-Smith

There being no Area Final, Maidenhead Drama Guild went straight to AETF Grand Final, successfully hosted by Northern Area at Bridlington on 7 August, where one of its actresses was nominated an award.

The Maidenhead, Southern Counties and Waltham Forest Drama Festivals are all planned to take place next year and previous entrants are already being approached for expressions of interest.

Our Eastern Area Final will be hosted by Maidenhead Drama Guild on 22 May, again at the delightful Norden Farm venue. Each of our participating festivals will put forward an adult and youth winner to compete in this event for the right to go forward to the national adult and youth final in Hereford on 3 and 4 June.

Ilan Thomas - Chair, Eastern Area



All-England Theatre Festival



RESTORATION OF THE OPTING FEE

The £10 opting fee levied on **all** groups participating in preliminary round festivals who wish to be considered for advancement to the AETF competition proper was suspended because of the special circumstances of the 2021 season. At a recent special meeting of the AETF National Committee there was a vote to re-instate it in 2022. The money should be collected by preliminary round festival organisers and then transferred to the National AETF account via our National Treasurer, Carol Hennessy.

Ian Clarke



Soundbites and slogans, strapline and headline: at every turn we meet hyperbole. The soaring inflation of the English Language is more urgently in need of control than the economic variety

Trevor Nunn

Whoever becomes head of the National Theatre finds himself in a position like that of Nelson's Column - pigeons dump on you because you're there.

Peter Hall

editor's NOTE.

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 WILL DO MY BEST TO OBLIGE.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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The Courtyard