

Issue No 8 – Spring 2000

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

This is our 8th Newsletter, the first being published in November 1996, and, looking back at the past editions, they serve as reminders of the excellent seasons we have experienced during the past three years.

Now we look forward to those plays which Jill has in store for us this year, 2000. Indeed we are more than fortunate to have such a rewarding season ahead this summer. Writing now in January, at a time when one does look ahead, it is good for me to be able to invite you to get out your diaries and make notes. The first Friends' Social Evening will be on Friday 28 April at 7.30pm at Walberswick Village Hall. The second date to book is in June: the Friends Summer Evening at 'Westons' on Thursday 29 June at 6.30pm.

During the past season our membership has been, on average, nearly 500 paid-up Friends. So your practical financial support, given by your subscriptions and donations, will enable the Friends to cover the costs incurred by the Company in the creation of a new and much needed Wardrobe Store, from the conversion of an old smokehouse.

My own personal thanks go to the Treasurer, John Veitch, and to the Editor of the Newsletter, Jack Clayton, for their continued loyal support, as well as to all Friends.

I look forward to seeing you again this year at our two Social Events.

Margaret Chadd

JILL WRITES

Dear Friends,

We are well into planning the millennium season and particularly excited about our opening show, "**Mr Cinders**". This very happy English musical with lovely songs – "Spread A Little Happiness" is one of them – will, like any musical, painfully stretch our budget but will start the summer on a sky high note and we'll pay the bills somehow.

Speaking of money, I hope you all know how grateful the Company is for the financial support from the *Friends*. The membership has grown considerably since Jack Clayton started the newsletter and we benefit as a result.

By the time you read this, the conversion of a smokehouse to our new wardrobe store should be nearly completed. This has been almost entirely sponsored by the *Friends*.

I hope to thank Margaret Chadd, John Veitch and all of you personally at our get-together on 28 April.

See you there.

Jill

*The autumn newsletter featured the first part of **Gerry Hinks'** life story which he wrote especially for the Friends of the Suffolk Summer Theatres. It stopped at the moment when he decided that he would no longer be a dedicated amateur actor. This concluding part brings us up to the present day.*

GERRY HINKS - THE PROFESSIONAL ACTOR

In 1983 I was made redundant, so I began to look for another job. One enquiry led to a visit to London for an interview with an airline. On my arrival I was thanked for attending, and then told I was a little too old for what they had in mind. That weekend I kept looking into mirrors at the 48-year-old man who was too old to be employed. On Sunday the family was all assembled when I announced that I would not be getting another job; I was too old. There was a silence for a few moments and then Teresa, my wife, said "There's only one thing you can do: become a professional actor."

"But 90% of actors are out of work at any one time" I replied.

Her response was simple, to the point, and extremely logical. "You may as well be an out of work actor as an out of work airline sales manager". Was I ready for such a demanding profession? There was no doubting the answer. I had served a 40-year apprenticeship!

Now there much to do: letters to write, telephone calls to make and - during that first week - I formed my own *Opus Theatre Company* and selected the first play: "Rattle of a Simple Man".

In those first 3 years *Opus* presented three more plays; "The Importance of Being Earnest"; "The Caretaker"; and "Educating Rita". I was also writing hundreds of letters trying to get into mainstream theatre and thereby get my Equity card. I received many "thank you, but no thank you" replies, but I was not to be defeated. Such replies meant that I could write to them again - and I did.

I had just one reply inviting me to audition and that was from Dundee Repertory Theatre. The auditions were held in London where I met Robert Robertson, the Artistic Director. Shortly afterwards the postman delivered an envelope bearing the Dundee Repertory Theatre stamp. It was not an offer but certainly the next best thing: a personal letter from Robert Robertson saying how much he had enjoyed my audition but regretting he could not offer me anything in the forthcoming season. He would certainly invite me to audition the following year and I was to keep persevering.

It was when I was in rehearsal for "Educating Rita" that the break that I needed was presented to me. One evening I was sitting at home enjoying a cup of coffee before keeping an appointment at a local studio to have some publicity photographs taken. The television showed a trailer for the Scottish police series "Taggart". There on the screen was Robert Robertson playing the role of the pathologist. I went upstairs to prepare for the photographic session when I heard the telephone ring and Teresa answering it. She called me, saying that it was Robert Robertson to speak to me. It was no practical joke, just a coincidence!

I had a conversation with him for a few moments and replaced the receiver. I could hardly believe what I had heard as I told Teresa that he had offered me a part in a play called "Man at Yir Back" for a run of 9 weeks and he would give me my Equity card. I was to think about it overnight and call him back with my answer the following day. I'm not quite sure what happened next but I think Teresa went to pack my case!

One evening whilst sitting in my dressing room at Dundee Theatre, I decided to write a list of what I would like to do as an actor. As an amateur there had only been the stage, but a professional has the opportunity of doing so many different things that were new to me. I would consider it as a list of challenges. Challenge number one

was regional repertory theatre which was promptly crossed off - thanks to Dundee Rep. Next came radio drama, followed by "The Archers" - well, that was radio, so why not? Television, and why not include "Coronation Street"? Seaside Repertory - I had not heard of Southwold at that time so my idea of this was Central Pier at Blackpool. Finally, a dream: The West End.

I had kept in touch with my old English teacher Donald Nutter until he tragically died a few years ago. Some years ago, whilst employed as deputy headmaster, he had been seconded to BBC Radio Derby to produce weekly educational programmes. He frequently called me to play a poacher or rat catcher or the like in these programmes which were recorded on Sundays. On my very first visit I met Arthur Wood who was to direct the programmes. He later told me I should be in radio drama, as the microphone liked my tonsils!

I decided to telephone Arthur from Dundee and ask him how I should go about it. This resulted in a letter from Arthur's boss who suggested I contact him when I finish at Dundee. This I did, and a few weeks later I had an invitation to audition from BBC Pebble Mill at Birmingham. Only a couple of weeks later I was offered my first radio play.

When I recorded my first radio play, there was a young actor who some of you may remember, Richard Pearce. He had been to Southwold Summer Theatre for a season and was waxing lyrical. He suggested I write to Jill, which I did. But it was to be another 2 years before I was invited to audition for her in Wimpole Street.

Twelve more months were to pass before I was invited to come to Southwold to appear in the play "Building Blocks". My first season also included "Happiest Days of Your Life" and "Habeas Corpus and, if that wasn't enough, a three-week tour of Pakistan. The rest you know. Seven glorious years of the Rolls Royce of seaside rep!

But alas the days of juvenile leads are well and truly behind me. I recently came face to face with this reality when I was successful in getting a commercial - for Age Concern!

Remember the list I made in Dundee of what I would like to do as an actor? Well I did "The Archers" and included in my television credits "Coronation Street". Two years ago I crossed off the last item when I made my West End debut at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan". Earlier this year I completed a feature film called "The Ring and The Seal" which has been bought by an American distributor - but I shall restrain myself from adding Hollywood and Broadway to the list. I think I may be pushing fate instead of fate pushing me!

In the 12 years since 1987 when I announced that I was a professional actor, my feet have hardly touched the ground. I realise how very fortunate I have been, and how very lucky I am to have spent more than half of that time here in Suffolk. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity of sharing my acting life with you.

Gerry Hinks

WELCOME TO THE 21ST CENTURY

And what an exciting season we have lined up for you. Beginning with Vivian Ellis's most popular show "MR CINDERS". Renowned as the 'Spread a Little Happiness' musical, it opened on 25th September 1928 at the Opera House in Blackpool starring Bobby Howes and Binny Hale before transferring to the Adelphi in London. There was a film version made in 1934 featuring the Western Brothers, and a successful revival in 1983 at the Fortune Theatre with Dennis Lawson as Jim. We are pleased

to welcome back *Sidi and Derek Scott* as Choreographer and Musical Director who were the team who brought you “Salad Days” six years ago. With many hummable tunes, including ‘She’s My Lovely’, ‘One Man Girl’, and the title song which was specially written for the 1983 revival by Vivian Ellis, it will have you skipping along Cumberland Road en route for the Swan. If you enjoyed “The Boyfriend”, you’ll love this.

“NIGHT MUST FALL” is, perhaps, Emyln Williams’ best-loved play, a taut psychological thriller, it was first produced in 1935, starring the author and Dame May Witty. It has been filmed twice, once in 1937 with the central role of Danny played by Robert Montgomery for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, and once in 1963 starring Albert Finney. I remember seeing it on tour in 1968 with the unique pairing of Dame Sybil Thorndyke and Adam Faith. For those of you who regretted not having a classic thriller in last season’s programme, this is a must.

What better way to celebrate those barmy August evenings than the hilarious comedy “OUT OF ORDER”, which teams playwright Ray Cooney – writer of such classics as “One for the Pot”, “Move Over Mrs Markham” and “Not Now Darling” – with director *Richard Frost* who joins us for a fifth season, having previously directed “Corpse”, “Joking Apart”, “Taking Steps” and “Hindle Wakes”. Seen at the Shaftesbury Theatre in 1990, starring Donald Sinden, Michael Williams and Sandra Dickinson, this evening of shenanigans at the ‘Westminster Hotel’ is an uproarious addition to our season.

Charlotte Bronte’s “JANE EYRE” has been filmed no fewer than four times: in 1934, 1944, 1971 and 1996, most famously starring Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles. But this tale of the young governess sent to work in the house of the mysterious but romantic tyrant, Rochester, never loses any of its grip. We hope you will be enthralled by this compelling and imaginative adaptation.

Finally, take a conservatory, a garden pond with a battered concrete gnome and the edge of the local recreation ground and – yes, you’ve guessed – another success by Alan Ayckbourn, and a further challenge for resident designer Maurice Rubens. “TIME AND TIME AGAIN”, a very funny play of family feuds and sporting non-achievement, was premiered at the Comedy Theatre in 1972 starring Tom Courtney. It was directed by Eric Thompson, Emma and Sophie’s dad, and had in it a very young Cheryl Kennedy, who regulars will remember from our production of “How the Other Half Lives” in 1994. It was Mr Ayckbourn’s fourth West End hit, what a long way he’s come since then.

Enjoy the season.

Anthony Falkingham, Associate Director

THE 39 STEPS

Speak to anyone who saw last season’s plays and **The 39 Steps** will dominate the conversation. Why? Mainly, I believe, because it was so unexpectedly entertaining. We all thought we knew the plot. But none of us was prepared for this adaptation by *Simon Corble* and *Nobby Dimon*. The company of four, directed by *Richard Howard*, took us on a breathtaking adventure across the country which was spiced by dashes of humour, visual inventiveness of a rare order, impressively well-rehearsed acting and a never-ending series of plot twists.

It was a superb example of the magic of the theatre.

Alison Dove, who reports the Arts Scene for the *Lowestoft Journal*, devoted her Christmas Eve article to her highlights of the year. She chose **The 39 Steps** as the best professional play of the year in the area, calling it “. . . Wonderfully inventive ‘spoof’ version of the classic thriller”.

Congratulations to all concerned, and many thanks for the treat!

Jack Clayton