

Greetings. I hope you are all keeping well amid the current global crisis. This is a unique annual report in that I cannot deliver it to you in person, however, should any questions arise please submit them to us via the website or email and I will do my best to respond.

2019 was a year of tough challenges, some of which we overcame and others which hit us harder than anticipated. There are some clear areas where we need to focus on improvement, but first a summary of the performances and events we hosted over the year:

Bouncers and Shakers

I may be incredibly biased, but 2019 got off to a strong start with our March double bill of "Bouncers" and "Shakers", which were directed by myself and Gwen Roskilly respectively.

Despite narrowly failing to break even, both plays were met with overwhelmingly positive feedback, we had some modestly sized but highly appreciative audiences and there were hot debates among those that watched, as to which was their favourite piece.

The fast pace and rapid character changes meant that there were not just performance challenges, but technical ones as well. Some pages were so heavy with cues that barely three words of dialogue had been spoken before there was another one to consider. The reward was well worth it though. Despite one or two teething problems, the productions highlighted the impressive capabilities of the theatre's new lighting board: Dylan's lighting design help transformed Mark's simple but effective set into a visually striking bar/nightclub, whilst Rob's stirring and nostalgic soundscapes transported straight back to the 80s.

I had the pleasure of being able to sit back in the audience on the final night and the energy and atmosphere were electric.

I can honestly say that directing "Bouncers" was one of my most fun (if stressful) productions I have ever worked on. Watching everyone in both productions elevate their game on that final performance, means that it will no doubt remain one of my favourite memories of this venue for some time. The boys will know from the rehearsal room that I'm not exactly one to pile on the praise, but the fact that both plays got to such a high standard in eight short weeks is a real credit to what this company can achieve and those involved should be incredibly proud.

A Few Good Men

Next up should have been our big summer production, "A Few Good Men" was to be directed by Sally Lewis in June, unfortunately, work had to stop on this production early after we stumbled at one of the first hurdles. Requiring fourteen men and a single female cast member we already knew casting would be a challenge but had high hopes that such a well-known title such as this would attract people from further afield. A point that did, to an extent, hold true; oddly our inability to cast the production was not due to lack of new faces; we had a decidedly strong turnout from prospective new members, but rather there was lack of availability and/or limited interest from our existing male members that did not enable us to fill out the ranks this occasion. A shame too, in addition to missing out on those prospective new members, early box-office indications were looking favourable with several tickets sold months in advance of the rehearsal process even starting. We did make attempts to reschedule the production only to find that the rights had been revoked ready for a professional touring production, which forced us to put the project on the backbench for the foreseeable future. It was unfortunately too quick a turnaround to find another viable mainstage project. The remaining timeframe meant we simply had to forgo what we had hoped would be a summer hit.

Summer Showcase

With a gap in the programmed schedule, we decided to look to a few smaller events in the summer. These were hosted in the Green Room over three evenings in mid-July.

A Crash Course in Coarse Acting

I ran a free workshop which introduced the world of the coarse actor despite a small attendance, we had some fun practising exercises in one-upmanship, and excerpts from Michael Green's "Sleuth".

Social Night

Our second night saw a handful of members join us for a pleasant evening of drink, nibbles and sharing old stories of the theatre. It was a good opportunity to catch up with everyone without the pressure of trying to watch a production in between. Hopefully, we will be able to do more of these in the future once the lockdown has ended.

Curses, Foiled Again!

After the loss of our main auditorium project, Sally Lewis was thankfully still determined to direct. She chose a smaller project in the form of "Curses, Foiled Again!" casting newer and less

experienced members so that they could to perform in a less intimidating environment. The performance was pretty well attended and it was good to see some more new faces performing.

Whilst some events were better attended than others, it was particularly encouraging to note that all three events attracted different aspects of the membership. In that regard, it was a success and we hope to be able to refine this model so that we can appeal to more of you when we host similar events in the future.

The Flint Street Nativity

Our November production, "The Flint Street Nativity" was directed by Dave Wheeler, both readings were well attended and auditions were extremely competitive, bringing several new faces into the company.

Sadly, though no one's fault, it was a production plagued with multiple problems behind the scenes. Several unanticipated early drop-outs meant that we had to recast three roles just as rehearsals were getting underway, thankfully these were resolved relatively quickly but it had already set us off on the back foot. Scheduling conflicts were a constant battle throughout and were slowly eating away at the fifteen-week rehearsal period, a problem further compounded by having to replace one cast member two weeks before the show due to concerns for their health.

Technically it was also very taxing, the additional musical elements and the extensive amount of scaled-up props and scenery placed some high demands on our backstage team. Outside commitments also meant that we didn't have access to Rob's usual expertise in the sound department for the run, though thankfully we did manage to find a late replacement and Rob was kind enough to provide us with enough kit and supervise us through the tech. It is a point that brings me back to a comment made by Carol Meredith at last year's AGM, that we are currently too reliant on certain key individuals backstage. Training more people in these areas is going to be an absolute necessity if the company is going to ensure its survival in the future. That said we did manage to bring a few new backstage helpers on board, two of which, Bernie Waller and Mollie Irvin, have already returned to help us on our first production of 2020 and we hope that we will see more of them soon.

Despite all the setbacks, I am pleased to say that it did manage to reach the stage without any further complications, receiving some decent reviews even if it did not achieve the audience numbers we had hoped for. I put this mainly down to the tremendous amount of energy that was being employed to keep the show on track. Putting out each of these little fires as it arose meant that we could not dedicate as much attention to areas like publicity, as we ideally would have

done and that was certainly reflected in the numbers that we saw. Nonetheless, I would like to give a big thank you to Dave and everyone else involved in the project for fighting on and seeing it through to the end.

As was to be expected with the absence of main stage production in the summer, ticket sales were down from the previous year.

Malcolm Ball

As you are no doubt aware by now, the theatre sadly lost its chairman, Malcolm Ball, last September. I was fortunate enough to have performed with him twice, in "Death of a Salesman" and "A View from the Bridge" and then, most recently to be directed by him in "Season's Greetings" back in 2017. His vision of what the Playhouse could be in the future was truly inspiring and the insightful remarks he left at last year's AGM really resonated with us here on the committee; we have since been looking at how we can improve our outreach and establish a stronger company identity two things that will no doubt become even more crucial than before.

He will be sorely missed by a great many people.

Membership

This has been an admin issue surrounding membership for many years, some small improvements had been made but the real progress can begin now that the theatre has revised its membership scheme.

The previous combined membership form has been officially done away with: In principle, this was originally conceived to cut down on the amount of paperwork and constant explanations to confused new members that their subs were still due, because despite being similarly named and operating under the same roof Playhouse Theatre and Playhouse Company were two separate entities. In reality, though, it only served to create the admin equivalent of the Bermuda triangle, as forms were being handed in at multiple locations and weren't always reaching the other party. Now that our membership is separate again we can start to detangle ourselves. We will have much more direct control over the system and we should be able to track things far more easily than before.

Outgoing Committee and the Future of the Company

This year the committee say goodbye to Kishi and Maria Allebone, I would like to personally thank them for all the hard work they have put into our publicity efforts over the years. There was a significant boost the quality of our publicity under them and I still have people coming up

to me commenting on the quality of the video segments that were produced over "Ladykillers", "Bouncers" and "Shakers"

Hannah Galliers is also stepping down from her role as Treasurer, though she plans to stay on the committee in other capacities, we would like to thank her for her hard work over the last two years.

Contrary to my announcement last year, I have decided to remain on the committee for another year, I would not feel comfortable leaving it at present, especially given the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 virus. It looks like the challenges are only going to get tougher throughout the remainder of 2020 and it will possibly even the next few years before we form some semblance of normality. It will be a challenge not just for our company, or even the Playhouse, but the global theatre community as a whole. Though the months ahead will no doubt will be a difficult time, now, more than ever, it is important to retain our passion for the theatre, so that we can eventually savour it once more.

Stay safe.

Lloyd Spencer

Chairman, Playhouse Theatre Company