

Playhouse Company - Secretary's Report, 2019/2020

Secretary: Harriet Tarpy

Hello everyone,

I hope that you are all well and looking after yourselves and each other in these strange times. COVID-19 is affecting us all, in many different ways, and I hope that you are finding ways to stay in touch with those you love and keeping yourselves sane. As you're probably aware, the theatre world is one area that has been particularly shaken by our current safety measures. I'll go through the shows we've been lucky enough to produce over the last year, where we are as a company, and then will touch on how we as a committee intend to take the company forward through these uncertain times.

We started off 2019 with a double-bill of Bouncers and Shakers - technically Shakers and Bouncers, as Shakers was always on first! These shows were well received and both required complex and impressive technical input, a real challenge for us that paid off. We learned a lot from this production and really stretched ourselves with regards to what can be achieved on our stage. We also employed the same innovative publicity as used by The Ladykillers in that we had short video segments with the cast members in the run-up to the show. These were very effective and looked very slick.

In the summer, we had intended to run A Few Good Men. Unfortunately, we were not able to get a full cast together, and in the time that we had available, it was simply not feasible to put on another show in the summer slot. There were a number of issues at play here. As is the case with many amateur theatre groups, we struggle to find/attract male actors. We are not the only company with this problem, but it is one we should address. We also put ourselves in a precarious position by not giving ourselves enough wiggle-room, time-wise. Our spring and summer shows are very close together, and often involve the same people. I'll address these in more detail below.

As an alternative to the summer show, we instead put on a 'summer showcase'. We ran evening workshops, a member's social event, and a quick-turnaround show, Curses! Foiled Again!. As a committee, we've talked a lot about running more drama and theatre workshops, and we'd love to hear from the membership if you'd be interested in these running more regularly, and what you would like them to cover. Our thanks to Sally Lewis for directing Curses!, which was very well received, and attracted a number of new members.

Our final show of 2019 was The Flint Street Nativity. A large cast and challenging technical requirements meant that this show really pushed what we were capable of, and having a mix of spoken dialogue and music added extra pressure. The cast and crew were extremely dedicated, however this did not translate into audience numbers, which were sadly rather poor. As above, this was likely for a number of reasons - the show being stretched over two weeks, an un-festive mid-November slot for a Christmas show. Having been in the cast, I can promise that a huge

amount of effort went into Flint Street, and it really is a terrible shame that more people didn't see it. The reviews were genuinely glowing, so at least we know we put on a good show!

And just sliding into the start of 2020, we had Bombshells, which I directed, so probably can't talk about objectively. What I can say is that we attracted a number of actors who had either never acted with us before or not for many years, which was really lovely to see. It was a fairly unusual show, consisting of six separate monologues, containing huge amounts of physicality, music, and dancing, so it was a bit of a gamble to stage. I'd like to extend a personal thanks to the fabulous cast and crew who all demonstrated passion and commitment throughout, and were wonderful to work with. We finished up our week's performance just as COVID-19 was starting to take hold, so we were incredibly fortunate to be able to put it on at all.

So, where are we now? At home, like everyone else. But as a company, we are also in a position to address a number of challenges that have been bubbling for a while. Below are what we consider some of our most pressing issues, and what we plan to do about them:

1. Our membership. Grappling with our membership process seems to be a perennial problem, both in terms of understanding what our current membership looks like, and establishing a sustainable process going forward. We have proposals for what the future of our membership could look like and welcome your feedback. Our intention is to create something that is inclusive, viable, and reasonable in terms of its administrative demands.
2. Our outreach and identity. To both our members and the wider community. We need to do a complete overhaul of our database and comms systems, which should hopefully be an integral part of solving issue one, above. In terms of our publicity and community outreach, we need to step up our game, and we have plans for how we intend to do this. We have the opportunity while things are necessarily quieter to really think about our identity as a company, and use that to shape all of our publicity in the future.
3. Our strategy. As we have found at a number of junctures throughout the year, we have been left on the back-foot because we were always having to respond reactively to events, rather than proactively. As a committee, we are creating a plan of action to try and more thoughtfully distribute our efforts and talent across the year, whilst looking ahead into the future to ensure our approach is sustainable. And we recognise that the existing membership is the life-blood of the company, so we want to make sure that there's plenty for you to engage with across the year as well.
4. Our tech and backstage expertise. We found ourselves on multiple occasions this year having to beg, borrow, and steal the same people that every company across Gloucestershire are using. While this is of course not without good reason (they're very good at what they do), we can't rely on this in the long run. We need to build up some home-grown talent and skills if we're to be able to continue to put on the high-calibre shows that we love. We started doing this with some of the shows, but we need to do more.

On a personal note: I really love this company. I moved to Cheltenham about seven years ago, but only plucked up the courage to join The Playhouse Company two years ago, and I'm so glad

I did. I feel that we are at an important turning-point, particularly in our current global context, that will decide the fate of our company. I really hope that we find our way through this together and come out the other side stronger, more connected, and ready for our cue.