

CHARING GUILD OF PLAYERS

Memories of Early Days

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There had been Amateur Drama in Charing long before I came to live here. To find out about those very early days we have to enquire of Margaret Ruglys, Martin Pym, Bill Rudge and Michael Preisig, all of whom figured in some of the earliest productions. The Rev Peter Birkett is known as the founder of the Guild and I am most grateful to Martin Pym who knew his telephone number and who phoned him to gather that he remembers taking a three hour service (surely on Good Friday) and then taking part in "Everyman", a morality play. He remembers the production of "Alice In Wonderland" with Margaret Ruglys taking the part of Alice, and "Sweeney Todd" with Margaret again in the cast. There was also a production of "Zeal Of Thy House" with Little Chart. There must have been other productions but we have no record of them, our first documentation being for "Quiet Weekend" in 1952, strangely enough on the programme referred to as performed by the "Charing Amateur Players". All subsequent plays are quoted as being performed by "The Charing Guild of Players".

My first appearance for the Guild was in 1956 in "The Housemaster". It was not, however, my first appearance on the Charing stage as I had previously played the station master in "The Ghost Train" which had been produced by Ruby Bowles for the W.I. At that time there was a strong relationship between the Guild, the W.I. and the Scouts, all of us producing plays and borrowing actors, scenery and props from each other. Sometimes the W.I. invited Guild members to criticise one of their productions. I remember one hilarious evening when Philip Holland (whose recent death will sadden all who knew him and his work for the Guild) and I were asked to comment on a drama called "Ladies of Chastity" which had been written by one of Ruby Bowles' friends. It was not however a drama revolving around a nunnery, or a community devoted to good works; but to the escapades of the ladies locked into their chastity belts by husbands departing for the Crusades. It was even more entertaining as all the parts were played by women, one of whom was Jess. She was deeply embarrassed by our presence and even now refuses to speak in any great detail about this episode in her dramatic career.

At this time all plays took place in the Village Hall. A fee was charged every time the Hall was used, and since the stage was often used for other functions, erecting scenery was quite a problem. The usual procedure was for the scenery, consisting of flats covered with canvas or hessian, to be carried down from an outbuilding of the old Vicarage (Mr and Mrs Counter's present house) on top of the Rev Pat Lury's car. This would be on a Saturday morning or earlier if possible; it would then be erected, painted and dressed on the Sunday and Monday ready for a dress rehearsal on Wednesday; with performances on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Of course you will understand that it always had to be basically the same set; ideally with two entrances, one on either side of the stage. If three entrances were required it was possible, just, to squeeze one in down stage but an entrance at the back of the stage was practically impossible. Erecting the set was further complicated by the hall custodian's insistence that no nails or screws were to be knocked into the woodwork of the stage, everything was supposed to be tied up with rope or wire; a dictum that I'm afraid was more honoured in the breach than in the observance; but if you were going to use a hammer you had to make sure he was out of earshot.

The stage was lit by large bulbs in biscuit tins which served as reflectors. I think we also had a few footlights and I know we borrowed some lights from the Scouts. Peter Ryan, who worked with and for the Guild for many years, was responsible for making the lights and often for operating them. Frank Darby, the village policeman, was another who lit our plays. As I remember there was a switchboard consisting of a large number of domestic type switches down right of the stage. You could switch lighting on and off but I don't believe we had any facility for dimming lights or bringing them up slowly. This must have been difficult when we did "Gaslight" in the Village Hall but perhaps we borrowed something from the Scouts to achieve the fading and flickering of the lights that is needed. Anyway we did avoid the loud comment of "That's clever" which came very audibly from one member of the audience on a subsequent performance of "Gaslight" in the Barn when the wrong rheostat was lifted thus apparently lighting the gas opposite to the one to which the match was being applied.

Rehearsals usually took place in the Vicarage or in Burleigh House, the home of Arthur Baker. In those early days all the plays were produced by Pat Lury or Donald Bain, either separately or in conjunction. The producers decided what play we were to do, but the decision was not completely autocratic. "Gaslight" was produced rather than "White Sheep Of The Family" as we argued it was a better play, and you can still find in our bookcase in the gallery in the Barn a complete set of "The Young Elizabeth" which was discarded because Donald Bain argued that it was not a prestigious enough play to open the Barn, and that is why we did "The Lady's Not For Burning" - Donald's choice - and he was right!

I've mentioned the three people that I think had most to do with the survival and improvement of the Guild of Players; Arthur Baker, Donald Bain and Pat Lury. I'll try and tell you a little about them.

Pat Lury first, because he, more than anyone else, was responsible for the building of the Barn. Pat always had some scheme for the improvement of the village and his parishioners.

In those days we never locked doors and it was always with trepidation that one saw Pat stick his head round the door and say "I wonder if you could give us a hand etc. etc.". It was hardly possible to refuse because you knew that the one who would work longest and hardest on whatever project he had in mind would be Pat himself.

I know his next project, after building the Barn, was to be the construction of a swimming pool for the children of the village in the grounds of the then Vicarage. Without Pat's vision and ability to involve people and his own hard work the Barn would **never** have been built. There was always an air of excitement and expectancy about Pat - what's he going to do next? - and one of the exciting things that impinged upon Jess and me was a connection he must have had with the BBC. On two occasions parties of foreign students - mature people - came to Charing on BBC courses to learn how to interview people, and to produce a test programme about an English village and its people.

The students were hosted in the village through Pat and on both occasions we had a room to offer, once to a very quiet, serious Chinese gentleman called Kay-Pee and once to a Dyak whose grandfather had been a head hunter. Because our house is central it became a meeting place for students and it was fascinating to realise how these educated, intelligent people were bewildered by a culture very different from their own. Our Dyak, for example, was bewildered by the term "landlady" as applied to the tenant of a pub, the ownership of land being of great importance in his homeland, and he never did understand the ownership of - as he put it - "the jungle that grows at the side of the roads".

If Pat was the driving force behind building the Barn, Arthur Baker was the one man responsible for the Guild's happy financial start. For many years he was our treasurer and I'm sure he paid many of our bills out of his own pocket. He was a civil engineer who had made quite a lot of money in India. When he came back to England he settled in Charing, but tragically lost his wife. I think it was his determination to overcome his loss that drove him to acting, but once involved it became a consuming passion. He was an imposing, wise, kindly gentleman, and a great doer of good by stealth. As an actor he had a passion for accuracy: plays with Arthur were always fun because if the stage directions said "Anon pours himself a whisky" then on Dress Rehearsal night the bottle of whisky would appear to be used throughout the performance.

Rehearsals at his home, Burleigh House, were also great fun. Halfway through we would stop for refreshment. Male actors were offered whisky and soda, the ladies sherry. Coffee was available for those who didn't opt for the more enjoyable alternatives.

At Christmas Arthur presented most members of the committee with a present. Ladies received a box of Floris chocolates, men a box of cigars. As an actor Arthur was very skilful in comedy or as a lovable, distinguished, older man, but he found it impossible to play a villain; he was so good-hearted that he just could not portray the opposite.

What can one say of Donald Bain? He too had vision - I think he saw Charing as being a centre for Amateur Drama for other groups in the locality, and he felt very definitely that we should tackle plays that other groups, lacking our facilities, could not stage. He had a wide acquaintance with the professional stage and a very extensive knowledge of theatrical scripts. With Donald producing we had a series of plays that stretched us to the limit: "The Lady's Not For Burning", "The City Gallant", "Toad Of Toad Hall". "The Recruiting Officer" and his leadership and encouragement led other producers to follow his lead and this resulted in what I regard as the golden period in the Guild's history.

Donald brought actors from his wide interests - some from other groups, some from the cricket field, some from drinking friends. Furthermore, like Pat he was exciting and fun. Special rehearsals at Stone Hall to polish a difficult scene meant lunch with Jessie Evans, his wife and a West End actress - and a charming woman - and probably a champagne party in the conservatory afterwards, and it was Donald who took us and actors from other groups to perform "Murder In The Cathedral" at Little Chart and then to the Chapter House at Canterbury and then to the crypt in St Paul's and finally to Pat Lury's new parish of St Michael and All Saints in Maidstone. It was also Donald who persuaded Esme Church and Molly McArthur, producer and stage designer from the Old Vic to produce for the Guild - a great learning and enlightening experience for us. It was also Donald who invited Fred Boddy and me to perform in a nativity play at a Charity fund raising effort at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Fred and I had about two lines each, our main function being to lead the donkey but Jill Bennett was the Virgin Mary and Peter Howell was Joseph and there were many other famous theatrical personalities involved in the whole show. I don't think many of our present members would turn down a chance to be involved in something like that.

I could go on and on about Donald and Pat and Arthur Baker and about the actors and members who gave Jess and me such pleasure and friendship and knowledge in those early days. Many of them now alas are disabled or gone. If I were in another place I would like to raise a glass in a toast to all those **characters** alive or dead who made the Guild such a lively place for people like us to be: - to Arthur Baker, Pat Lury, Donald Bain, Jessie Evans, Philip Holland, Gordon Payne, Esme Church, Fred Boddy, Frank Darby, Peter Ryan, Marjory Machin, Stanley Bagshaw, Irene Preisig, Martin Pym - oh the names and memories are endless, but I have to stop and leave their stories to another time.