

Chairman's Report AGM 2021

Rather than try to report on the past year, this report focuses more on the future and some issues that need attention.

First, some brief facts for you

Two years ago, our adult volunteer membership, not including life members, was reported as 147 – this year it currently stands at 121. Obviously, COVID has played a large part in this but, as we were struggling to man the theatre, in all aspects, two years ago, the situation is now much more problematic. More on this later.

Auditions for this season have fallen foul of what has occurred over the last 18 months – postponed productions have tried to use their original casts as much as possible. Where original cast members were unable to take part, directors have been scrambling for replacements. This has been so troublesome that we seriously considered abandoning a production or two.

So, what of the future?

What I'm about to say may be construed as personal opinion and others may agree or disagree as they see fit, but I believe it needs to be said.

Two years ago, we decided that the number of season productions would be reduced from ten to nine, with one of the nine being a summer season production to ensure finances were not adversely affected. We remain committed to having **Allo Allo** as next summer's production as this has been postponed twice now and it seems only fair that it should, fingers crossed, go ahead. However, I am increasingly concerned as to how we can stage even nine productions per year. I am also concerned as to how we are going to man the theatre during any summer production, as cast requirements and volunteer holidays will effectively remove many volunteers from FOH, bar, café and all manner of backstage duties – we have struggled to man one-week winter productions, 25 summer performances seems daunting at best.

So, what options are there for improving things?

Removing some season productions and replacing them by diversifying the theatre into hosting many more professional shows, whether they be one-nighters or runs from incoming companies seems like one option.

Maybe we should employ a theatre manager? A professionally qualified, paid member of staff who could, hopefully, best advise us on how to maximise

our theatre's attributes whilst minimising costs incurred and increasing the effectiveness of our volunteers.

Should we consider splitting the theatre into two elements? The physical theatre itself could be run as a business going concern, with TOADS Theatre Company hiring the space as and when needed. Often the theatre building is mentioned as a "feather in our cap", which it certainly has been, but alchemy is at work – this feather is rapidly turning into a millstone and "in our cap" into "around our neck".

Should we hire an outside theatre consultant and pay for qualified professional advice on what to do and how to do it? This, in my opinion, is the very least we should do. None of us here, to the best of my knowledge, is a qualified theatre professional and we need to admit this and be willing to have a qualified outsider tell us some unpalatable truths about how to make the theatre a continuing success for years to come. In a way we are admitting our lack of expertise by asking you, our membership, for potential solutions because we aren't sure or simply don't know.

Societal changes over the last 20 to 30 years have resulted in fewer people being able to have drama as a hobby – jobs are no longer 9 to 5; the teaching profession, where many members historically came from, is increasingly stressful and demanding on staff time; and non-musical drama simply isn't "in vogue" at the moment.

I should add that I am convinced that COVID has exacerbated the situation. Some AWOL volunteers may well return in the next year or two but this is not something we can count on. For those still in work, jobs and careers are now more important than ever and attracting these people to our ranks will be ever more difficult. As an aside I add that a recent analysis of our adult membership revealed that, including life members, 113 are aged over 60 with only 27 under 60 – alarmingly under 30s = 0. Yes, COVID has made things worse but I can't help feeling that the last 18 months has simply accelerated what might well have happened in the next five to ten years.

Whatever happens TOADS needs to attract more volunteers to its ranks. Manning the theatre remains the main issue – you can put on as many performance nights as you like, diversify the theatre as much as you like, employ outside help if you wish, but if the volunteers don't exist then you simply can't open. We cannot implement any potential solution to our problems without depending on volunteers to man the theatre on a day-to-day basis. Gaining

additional volunteers may well take time and expenditure to achieve so what do we do in the meantime? Bluntly we need our current volunteer base to do more – the oft quoted membership requirement of four duties per annum is woefully inadequate. Rather than set a target for volunteers to achieve, we all need to do not only our bit, but lots more bits – why not make yourselves available for one or two duties per play. Just imagine how much stress that would relieve for those of us in a permanent state of mild panic, constantly chasing and nagging volunteers to come forward.

Any decisions that are made in the future will involve an element of risk and an evolutionary change to how we operate. People fear risk and they fear change, but remember the old cliché – if you change nothing, nothing changes.

Finally

So, why you might ask, am I stepping down as Chairman at such a crucial time? Because I'm knackered! I desperately need to take a step back, not only from committee, but simply from doing so much. I'm acutely aware that some previous incumbents have virtually overdosed on the role and then walked away, rarely to be seen again – I don't want to burn out. Recognising this and still wanting to be part of TOADS, I'll still be manning the bar, sorting IT issues and making a fool of myself on stage whenever I'm given the opportunity.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone on committee for all their hard work over the past 4 years, for putting up with me as Chairman and for all those ZOOM meetings which became part of normal life. This coming year the committee sees some changes in personnel which is quite refreshing in itself, although there's nothing terribly fresh about any of them. I urge everyone to support them, and the theatre, and to support Anna as Chairperson who takes on the role without learning any lines or attending any rehearsals.