

Oxford Playhouse: 70th Birthday

Feature by Giles Woodforde for Oxford Times, October 17

Memories. When you reach 70, you've usually accumulated a fair few – be they funny, serious, or sad. Perhaps the same can be said about a 70-year-old building, especially if that building is a theatre. This month, the Oxford Playhouse celebrates 70 years in its Beaumont Street home, and the theatre staff has been digging memories out of the archives. One immediately appealed: "Susan Hampshire painted the ladies' loos in 1956". Susan, best known for her roles in *The Forsyte Saga*, and *Monarch of the Glen*, recently starred in a production of Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* at Milton Keynes Theatre, so I hastened backstage to find out more.

"I was a student assistant stage manager at the Playhouse when Frank Hauser was running the theatre," Susan confirmed. "When I first arrived, they didn't quite know what to do with me. So one of my first jobs was to clean out, scrape down, and paint the lavatories – I think I did both the ladies and the men's, but I'm not quite sure. I did quite a lot of painting actually, but I started off with the lavatories. I think there's even a photograph of me in dungarees, painting – not very dignified.

"I was very lucky at the Playhouse: at the end of my six-month stint I was allowed to be the heartless princess in the Christmas show. I had already done walk-ons, although I don't think I ever went on as an understudy – they did the most dreadful thing of asking me to be prompt instead, which wasn't good as I'm quite dyslexic. It was one of those excruciating

experiences: I was prompting, but I couldn't even tell where we were on the page.

Eventually Frank Hauser came up from the auditorium, and shouted the lines out. Please God, this will never happen to me again - although I had a very similar experience years later: I was in a play, needed a prompt, said to the other person on stage: 'Oh doctor, I'm feeling a bit faint, I'm just going to get a glass of water', and walked into the wings. The girl who was supposed to be prompting was reading *Hello* magazine. At least I tried to prompt – the fact that I couldn't find the place, or read out the words properly, is a lot better than someone reading *Hello* magazine!"

"I think I earned 25 shillings a week at the Playhouse, that's the equivalent of £2.50. I got digs nearby, but there was no central heating then, and the digs were so cold that about six of us had to sleep in a bed with all our clothes on – hats, gloves, everything. It was just freezing. But I was terribly happy in Oxford, I loved it, I was so excited to be working in the theatre."

My own first Playhouse memory is a Christmas visit in 1954. Never heard of again so far as I know, the show was *Listen to the Wind* by Angela Ainsley Jeans. The twee title song – by Vivian (*Bless the Bride*) Ellis – remains in my head to this day, but, alas, I remember nothing of "Ronald" Barker, doubling as Gypsy Man and Popple, or of "Margaret" Smith, (as their names were billed) playing West Wind. The director was one Peter Hall.

"In the early 1950's I was involved with the Elizabethan Theatre Company (which had developed from the Oxford and Cambridge Players) alongside John Barton and Toby

Robertson,” Sir Peter told me during a brief rehearsal break from one of his many current productions. “The Company’s patron was Thane Parker, who took a lease on the Oxford Playhouse, and in 1954 he asked me to be the theatre’s director. At the Playhouse I had an extraordinarily talented company including Billie Whitelaw, Ronnie Barker, Michael Bates, and Tony Church. There were also two assistant stage managers with acting ambitions. Their names were Maggie Smith and Eileen Atkins. Both now claim that I gave the best parts to the other; Eileen also maintains that I sacked her for having a continuous cold! I remember directing a Victorian Music Hall and playing the piano for Maggie Smith when she sang “The boy I love is up in the Gallery”, and thinking she was clearly going to be a star.”

But undoubtedly the most famous week the Playhouse has ever witnessed took place in 1966, when Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor joined an Oxford University Dramatic Society production of *Dr Faustus*. Playing Faustus’s servant was David Wood, who went on to become a professional actor, director, and producer of children’s shows.

“I was in a good position to observe,” David told me. “Also, my girlfriend at the time was Elizabeth Taylor’s understudy. What was lovely for them was that they didn’t have lots of paparazzi chasing them – which they were used to, they were at the height of their fame, or notoriety if you like. They were the No 1 couple of the world at the time. We rehearsed in the police station gym in St Aldates, which was thought to be the safest place. It was like being with royalty, because Burton never carried money. So when we went for a drink after

rehearsal, Gaston, who was the chauffeur-cum-bodyguard, had the money to buy the drinks.”

Talking of drinks, Richard Burton had a reputation for enjoying a drop.

“I don’t think it affected what he did,” David said, “But certainly there were drinks in the wings, and at certain points he would go off during the show – his valet would be there with a glass. The other thing that amused us was the huge entourage that came with them. I think there were about fifteen people. Elizabeth Taylor only appeared briefly in the show, but she came up through a trapdoor. Her entourage, four or five of them, would see her onto the trap, then rush up to the wings to meet her. But it was magical. She was very approachable - when we recorded the production, she came and made sandwiches for everybody. It just so happened that this was the day before my twenty-second birthday, and as midnight struck, she kissed me on the lips. I shall never forget that moment!”

Giles Woodforde

§ There are two birthday shows, *Many Happy Returners* and *Seventy – Not Out!* on Saturday 25 and Sunday 26 October respectively. Full details and tickets: 01865 305305 or www.oxfordplayhouse.com