

KIRKINTILLOCH PLAYERS HISTORY

A personal view by David Warden

From the vantage point of the club's current thriving position, it is salutary to look back on the trials, tribulations and pleasures of the last 25 years, and indeed on those of the previous fifty years. Our accommodation, which in the past has been a permanent source of uncertainty for the Players, is now the envy of amateur drama clubs throughout the country. Our membership is thriving, with a vigorous Youths and Juniors section. And the standard of our performances is as high as ever, most recently reflected in 1997 when we won the British One Act Festival for the first time ever. But let's go back a bit. In 1974, the club moved to the Liberal Rooms in Eastside, with a 15 year lease. These were in a poor state of repair, and considerable renovation was required, including rewiring, new seating for the theatre and lounge, and the creation of a small lighting box above the entrance door (for very small lighting technicians). This allowed us to use the rooms as club rooms/rehearsal space, and to give occasional performances. In the main, however, our performances were given elsewhere, often in the Town Hall, where we played to very small, and therefore unprofitable audiences. By the late 1970s, the drain on our resources became too serious, and could not continue. There was no choice but to convert the Liberal Rooms into a small performance area where we could put on our plays on a regular basis. The last plays we performed in the Town Hall, at Easter in 1979, were three one acts, produced by Nessie Wilson, Norman Gilzean and Maisie Weir.

During the summer of 1979, the Liberal Rooms were converted to The Studio, at a cost of £800 (which was not then the trifle it may seem now). The seating, obtained second-hand, was raked in its present position, but other facilities were somewhat basic. There was no proper heating, and rehearsals were conducted in very warm clothing, and in the company, in winter, of a battery of calor gas heaters. There was no dressing room as such, but a changing area evolved in the space where we now have toilets. The then toilets were located in the passage behind the stage; as the only access to them was across the stage, they could not be used during a performance. Who knows how many members of our audiences suffered in silence? The Studio was opened in October, 1979, with great enthusiasm and a very funny production by Elsa Currie, of Alan Ayckbourn's *Table Manners*, starring young Keith Robinson, Ian Atherton, David Henderson, Kay Warden, Marjorie Murray and Reba Copper. It ran for three successful nights, and initiated our present tradition of an autumn 3-act play. At this point, we also instituted a new practice of hiring a producer for our annual pantomime, a practice which lasted three years, and had a positive effect on the sanity of our home-grown producers, if a more negative effect on our funds. The pantomime, which continued to be our only production in the Town Hall, has always been a major event in our calendar, demanding a major commitment from the production and stage management team, over a large part of the year, which commitment seems to increase annually.

It soon became obvious that, for our other productions in the Studio, these premises were inadequate for their purpose, and, during the summer of 1981, the present dressing room and toilets were built at a substantial cost of £4500. In 1982, the lighting box and theatre lighting were completely renovated by Ian Atherton and Iain Carmichael. However, the Studio was still not a theatre, and, without a theatre licence, we could only function as a private club. This meant that we could not advertise our productions; but we could at least perform our plays without losing money.

During the early 80s, some of our most successful productions included *Come Blow Your Horn* by Neil Simon, produced by Elsa Currie, *Bell, Book and Candle* by John van Druten, produced by Keith Robinson, *Gaslight* by Patrick Hamilton, produced by Maisie Weir, and *Separate Tables* by Terence Rattigan, produced by David Henderson. We were now into an established annual routine of producing an autumn and a spring three act play in the Studio, a pantomime in the Town Hall, and a variable number of one act plays, sometimes for festival presentation. The SCDA One Act Festival has been the recipient of differing opinions within the club over the years. There have been those, including this writer, who have found the competitive element to be stimulating and enjoyable; trying to improve one's own standards and being judged against, and learning from other clubs throughout Scotland is part of the fun. But others argue that such competitions are stressful, and can encourage us to take the drama too seriously, which detracts from the fun. There is room for both views, and part of the committee's continuing aim is to cater for both ambitions within a busy year.

The annual pantomime continued to develop, increasing from a mere three performance nights (a doddle) to the hair-raising and exhausting full week plus Saturday matinee as we know it now. Our abiding admiration and gratitude goes each year to the brave club members who submit to the ordeal of producing and staging this show, and Ian Atherton, Keith Robinson, Iain Carmichael, Elsa Currie, and Rosina Wyvar (Robinson) have been among the braves. Much of the enthusiasm for the pantomime comes, of course, from the Youths and Juniors section of the club, which really blossomed during the 80s. As well as their participation in the pantomime, the Youths and Juniors have been putting on their own shows annually since the early 80s. (Indeed, in 1987-88, they put on no less than four shows.) To begin with, these shows were usually one acts, but the custom now is for one full length production, often a musical, at the end of the season. In 1984, disaster struck. The Studio had to be closed because of wet and dry rot in the floor and lower walls, which made it unfit for use. Making a virtue of necessity, the decision was made to convert the Studio into a proper theatre, with a theatre licence, and a variety of fund-raising activities ensued, including a well-publicised 48-hour read-in of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. The work, which consisted of putting in new floors, wall panelling and a fire door, having windows blocked up and fitting a new seating arrangement in the lounge, was carried out by Community Industry, a company who trained young people and did the work for the cost of materials only. At this time, we also installed central heating - bidding a fond (?) farewell to our calor gas heaters. Throughout this period, rehearsals continued amidst the scaffolding and the dust, but we were warmer. Plays were meanwhile performed in various local venues, including Lenzie Academy (*Absent Friends* by Ayckbourn) and Kirkintilloch High School (*Separate Tables* by Rattigan).

By the spring of 1986, we were ready to move back into our newly refurbished theatre. It was small, with a seating capacity of only 60 seats, and only a limited space on stage and in the wings, but it was ours. The total cost of the work had been £7500. We wanted to mark the occasion with a new name for the theatre, and suggestions were many and varied, including The Bus Stop, The Tenement, The Kirkintilloch Theatre, but we were finally persuaded by the architecture of the building, and agreed to call the theatre The Turret. Our theatre licence was at last granted on 24th April, 1986, and we christened The Turret in fine style with another first class Elsa Curie production of *How The Other Half Loves* by Alan Ayckhourn. Thereafter followed a very happy period, in which membership grew and our drama prospered. We welcomed the return of David and Bess Cumming after their long absence in England, and the arrival of such stalwarts as Gavin Paterson, George Kirkpatrick, Myra Scott, Rod and Pat MacCowan, Bette McKenzie, Anne Mack and David Warden. There were many memorable productions, including *Night Must Fall*, *Blythe Spirit*, and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, produced by Maisie Weir and Elsa Curie respectively. The decade finished with two major events: a rousing production of *Tartuffe*, guest produced by Phillipa Stevenson from the Fort Theatre, which we were invited to perform at an international Drama Festival in Glasgow; and the first of many of our performances of a Mike Tibbetts play, David Cumming's production of *Funny You Don't Laugh Jewish*, which took us as far as the Scottish Final of the SCDA One-Act Festival.

Into the nineties, and we enjoyed three more peaceful years before renovations struck again. During these "quiet" (!) years, our calendar of events was overflowing, and rehearsal space was at a premium. As usual, members' houses continued to provide back-up rehearsal space, but the committee instituted the post of Theatre Manager, to try to alleviate the situation. The successes of these early nineties were many, but one which stands out was Elsa Curie's hilarious production of Tony Roper's *The Steamie*. Also notable in terms of new ventures was Keith Robinson's production of Ayckbourn's (again) *A Chorus of Disapproval*, the club's first attempt to stage a musical show (or at least a show with music) for a long time. However, the adults' musical talents were put in the shade in the same year (1992/93) by the Youths and Juniors, who gave a very funny performance of *Bugsy Malone*, produced by Anne Mack.

In 1994, the local council informed us that our building was structurally unsafe, and that the front of the tenement block would have to be brought down and rebuilt. What was that about virtue and necessity? Well, our previous renovations had been trivial in comparison, being confined to the inside of the theatre space, but now we had the opportunity to make changes to the building itself, and we did. Thanks to the very hard work of Keith Robinson, Elaine Todd and Bill Todd particularly, plans were laid to make major improvements to both the outer shell and the internal fabric of the building. We moved out in Spring 1994, putting flats, costumes etc. into store, and were given back the premises in December, 1994. In the interim, the front door was moved away from the theatre area, to make for a less disruptive entrance. No sooner had we moved back into the building than the River Luggie burst its banks, and Eastside, including The Turret, was flooded. After clearing up that mess, we continued with internal work, and had installed, by professional contractors, a much better lighting box, new toilets, new kitchen, new theatre seating, carpets, and proper decoration throughout for the first time. At a total cost of £50,000! The considerable costs were raised by the club and through various grants, tenaciously sought and obtained by the club's officers. During this difficult period, and thanks to the hospitality of our neighbours in Bishopbriggs, our productions were performed in the Fort Theatre; these included the one-act plays *The Bespoke Overcoat*, *A Kind of Alaska*, and *Curses, Foiled Again!* The Fort is a very different theatre space, and it was an interesting experience playing to an audience on two sides. Spring 1995, and another successful opening - Jeffrey Archer's *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, produced, yet again, by Elsa Curie. Indeed, the play was so successful that, by public demand, it was performed again in the autumn, in addition to our normal autumn production (*You can imagine the polite conversations over rehearsal space that year*). The only disappointment of the opening evening in the spring was the new theatre seats, which had been installed only the previous week, too late to recognise that the angle of rake was insufficient to provide good visibility. However, this deficiency has since been rectified.

1995 also saw the arrival of two talented new members, Mike Tibbetts, as playwright and actor, and his wife Pam Tibbetts (née Cumming), as producer and actress. The following year saw Mike take the lead in one of more testing and serious productions, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (produced by one E. Curie), and follow that by providing us with the script for our entry in the 1997 One Act Festival - *The Dancing Fusilier*, which Pam produced. There was always something about that play. The theme was extremely moving, and somehow involved all the club members. Also, various members of the cast reported odd coincidences, linking themselves to the story, throughout the rehearsal period. When we won the Scottish Final in Kirkcaldy, we were speechless. When the whole club went on holiday together to Northern Ireland wearing kilts for the British Final, and we won that... well, just don't expect words.

We are now into our 75th Anniversary year. Already we have broken all our records by performing Agatha Christie's *A Murder is Announced* to packed houses for three nights in the Town Hall. As I write this, we are rehearsing our autumn production, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, produced by Pam Tibbetts. Looking back over the past twenty five years, the club seems to have continued to develop its very own couthy, friendly character. There are those who are wary of amateur drama clubs because of their reputation for posers and for cliqueishness. To this insider at least, the Kirkintilloch Players seems the very antithesis of such perceptions. Our facilities are now of a high standard, and we can and have put on some thoroughly good productions, which have created great pleasure for audiences and performers alike. We also have the priceless asset of an excellent stage crew membership. Ticket sales in the local community are certainly improving, as evidenced by our recent Town Hall sell out. However, amateur actors, despite the stereotype, can be shy and hesitant about asking folk to pay to watch them perform, and our Patron membership continues to form the backbone of our ticket sales for most productions in The Turret. These members are much appreciated, and new Patrons will be warmly welcomed. It being in the nature of things, we have, sadly, lost some of our old familiars in recent years. Most notably, we regret the loss of Norman Gilzean and Maisie Weir. Both were actors and producers of great talent, and their contribution to the club at every level will long be remembered. Norman has been memorialised by the establishment of the Norman Gilzean Trust Fund, which is used to encourage young members to develop their skills, in acting, production or stagecraft. I look forward to our centenary.