



Forthcoming read-throughs, auditions & other production stuff

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Remember: a read-through is not an audition!

DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEXT ISSUE:

Whenever the muse strikes you!

Other diary dates (more info on the website)

Virtual coffee mornings	Every Saturday, 10.00-12.00
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**Peter Boffin
1932-2021
RIP
Obituary and appreciation, pp 5-8**

apollonius

The in-house magazine of the Apollo Theatre Players, Newport, Isle of Wight

Issue no. 282

January 2021

From the interim Arts Manager

'You'll see from the report on the Players' committee meeting that I've been approved as interim Arts Manager.

It is my delight to return to the Apollo scene after many years away in Yorkshire, the Canaries and France. Everywhere I've lived, I've had different experiences of amateur theatre and all who listened to my tales of the Apollo were green-eyed and amazed. You do not truly appreciate what is on offer until you have to operate in a scenario without the back-up that goes into an Apollo production.

The first play I saw at the Apollo was 'The Glass Menagerie' (in the days when Marylyn Ford had long flowing locks!). I knew then that I had found a theatrical anchor. Up to that point, I was perturbed by amateurish approaches I'd encountered. I am very grateful for the opportunities the Apollo has given me over the years and it has been a springboard from which I have launched other initiatives.

The existing structure for mounting plays works very well, tried and tested over time. There have been subtle shifts of emphasis over the years, and while I appreciate the necessity for crews to work in teams, I'm nostalgic for the days when every aspect of the production had a dedicated person allocated. Oh for the days when work pressures were more reasonable and one could indulge! And how about last-night parties! Every member seemed to come out of hibernation and we partied until the early hours. It was a great unifying event!

Survival, of necessity, calls for adaptation and that is now very much the name of

the game. In this Covid scenario we need to think outside the box. I applaud initiatives already underway: for example, Michael's workshops, radio plays, Tell Tales and the online Christmas revue. I hope that this type of venture continues and expands; but with restrictions on script sharing, normal auditions, rehearsal and set building, what do we have left? Well, for some people, it is time in isolation. This would seem a wonderful opportunity to create our own material and promote the writing talent in our midst and get ahead with planning productions and learning lines. If actors come to rehearsal with lines in their heads, rehearsal time would be reduced. So how might this work?

We could go forward on several fronts. We could be preparing our own revue, including for example acts from Victorian and Edwardian plays and individual monologues. I know you've done things like this in the past, and it could also be an opportunity for new and established directors to undertake responsibility for smaller units.

I'm particularly interested in the prospect of individuals rehearsing two- and three-hander scripts in their own homes, under the guidance of a director on line. There are some households among our membership where two people could rehearse together, and a third could join them in a bubble to work on a three-hander. Individuals who would not be in a position to work in this way could explore the world of monologues. There could also be a system of auditioning, using a submission on line.

Sets might have to become more abstract with just suggestions of period settings.

This leads me on to another initiative I would like to see. Under normal conditions, the main focus is on productions. There are many older members who can no longer undertake major parts and younger members whose commitments exclude them from longer-term undertakings—masses of untapped talent without a creative outlet! It would be possible to set up a type of themed 'open mic' which would give them a platform. These initiatives could possibly feed into revue scenarios and could also serve as a launching pad for would-be writers. Should this be an acceptable model, one could get started straight away at home. The Apollo is a lifeline for many people and this would be a venture that would also contribute to well-being and mental health.

As for the main season, with so many unknowns, it is best to plan within the framework of restrictions; we may find ourselves working within the 'Rule of Six', for example. I've got a variety of ideas for small-cast plays and so on, but these ideas would require a commitment from the membership so I would welcome feedback and suggestions. Please let me know if you are able to work from home using electronic communication. I would love to hear from anyone interested in directing and/or being involved in any initiatives I've mentioned, or to put forward any other enterprise that you feel might be worthwhile, so do please get in touch—including directors of the current season.'

Evelyn Hicks

Editorial: the view from the Editor's chair

How great to see an obituary in the Guardian of a renowned theatre costume designer, Anne Curry. Her costume designs were re-



markable and it's clear why she was considered so inspired and inspirational in her career, both as set and costume designer for major theatres including the Birmingham Rep and the Bush in London and later as lecturer and examiner on various costume design courses in prestigious institutions including

the London Institute for Performing Arts. I say 'great'—obviously it's sad to see so creative a life cut short (at 66) but it's essential that the world at large is reminded that there's more to a stage production than Big Name Artistes. Where would our shows be without Peggy and Liz and their team? Looking at the photographs of our productions, I am often reminded how brilliantly the wardrobe department realise the director's dream. Our costumes are rarely (except in a crisis!) thrown together—they're beautifully made pieces of craftsmanship. In the same way, our backstage staff create our theatrical worlds with skill and experience which can often go largely unrecognised—except by those of us who find that a tap

when turned gives out water, a switch when pressed lights a lamp, a proscenium stage is turned into a theatre in the round which would do justice to the recreation of the Old Vic for the Norman Conquests.

I didn't mean to wax quite so lyrical in this editorial. My plan was to recognise that despite the current difficulties work is still going on to plan for our future when the lights are allowed to go back on. As the Guardian so rightly says, *'It is going to be hard. But there are grounds for hope. People long for a world beyond the vaccination programme when they can gather together once more to share stories and witness wonders. The arts, it has been abundantly demonstrated, have immense power to heal. Which is what the nation so desperately needs.'*

News from the Apollo Theatre Trust



All work to complete the rationalisation of the unit and the progressing of Roger's list of jobs at the Theatre has ground to a halt. One job in particular which anyone venturing into the theatre should be aware of is the improvement to the sound-proofing at the rear of the auditorium. This involves moving the rear row of seats and this job was under way when the last lockdown occurred so the whole of that row is partially unscrewed from the floor and not in a very safe state. So please stay clear and don't try and sit on them!

The surveyor has completed the drawing of the theatre which has allowed the architects to start work on the development plans including preparing them for submission to building control. We are now in possession of a complete and accurate set

of drawings of the Theatre and Hancock House, which are fascinating, and it may be possible to publish them on the website for members to have a look at.

In readiness for re-opening the theatre to members and the public a number of Covid precautions have been implemented including hand gel dispensers with signage, Perspex screens around the box office and touch-free taps in all toilet areas. The reinstatement of some of the seats removed from the auditorium some years ago at the request of the fire officer is currently the subject of our own risk assessment. Replacing 5 of 6 seats will enable us to maximise audience numbers even with the social distancing (every other row empty and one seat between each party) likely to be necessary, if only initially, when

we re-open.

The plan to merge the Trust and Players into a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) was given approval to proceed to the next stage at the Players Committee. Meanwhile the working party have finalised the constitution and the structure of the operational management team was agreed at the meeting of the Players Committee.

Once the Constitution of the CIO has been drafted and the structure of the operational management team agreed the merger will be the subject of a EGM of the Players and it is hoped that as many members as possible will attend.

Paul Jennings

Chair, Apollo Theatre Trust

News from your Committee

Notes from the Committee meeting 25 January 2021

At the Zoom meeting on 25 January it was proposed and the Committee agreed that 'When We Are Married', which those of you with long memories may remember was to have been the fifth play last season then potentially the fifth in this 'season', sadly will not now be put on. We're all sad about that: WWAM is an absolutely fabulous play, right up our street; everyone worked really hard on it and if things had been different it would have been a worthy part of that season, as well as probably bringing in some much-needed income. But as it stands, realistically there's no prospect of our putting on a 'live' large-cast production for some time. When that becomes possible, well, we can think about it again. However, members will all, I'm sure, appreciate that the safety of casts, audiences and everyone involved must be our first priority. While we are prevented from making much happen at present, be assured that as soon as things can start happening, they will!

On that note, you may remember that in the last issue, the Players' committee agreed that in the light of Di Evans' unavoidable absence, an interim Arts Manager would be appointed

to take us forward and oversee what our artistic offering can look like in the current situation. An application was received from Evelyn Hicks, and at the meeting it was agreed that she would be co-opted to take over for at least the remainder of this 'season' plus the 21-22 season as Interim Arts Manager. On the front page you will have seen some of her thoughts on the way forward.

Evelyn has had some interesting ideas about plays with small casts which could potentially be put on, either remotely or (when the restrictions are eased) on the stage with socially-distanced casts, crews and audiences. Some of her suggestions include:

April in Paris (John Godeber)

Stones in his Pockets (Marie Jones) Act 1 online (search 'Red Barn Theatre, Stones in his Pockets')

Five Little Plays (Alfred Sutro) available online Gutenberg Project

Lunch Hour, Knights-bridge, Marble Arch, Bermondsey (John Mortimer) one-acters (half hour each)

Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures (Douglas William Jerrold) available online Gutenberg Project

Dangerous Obsession (NJ Crisp)

Zoo Story (Edward Albee)

Number (Caryl Churchill)

There are probably lots more out there, and Evelyn will welcome any suggestions from members with ideas.

In other news, the Players' annual accounts are complete and have been ratified by the Committee, so they will be available for you to look at via the website shortly. Our current financial situation, while not quite perilous yet, nevertheless is giving cause for concern as our entire income stream has died and the theatre still has a certain amount of unavoidable outgoings. We were very fortunate that the first plays in the 19-20 season were good income-generators so we have a little (a very little) money in hand and are working with the Trust to keep our heads above water. Any fundraising ideas from members would be very gratefully received.

As you will have seen from the Trust Chair's remarks on page 2, the Committee agreed the structure of the operational management team of the new Charitable Incorporated Organisation, which will merge the Trust and the Players. Watch this space for more updates.

YOUR COMMITTEE

Theatre Director & Chair of management committee (elected 3-yearly): **Amy Burns** (2019-22) amy@masexodus.co.uk

Arts Manager (elected annually in Nov for season beginning following Sept)	Evelyn Hicks (2021-22) francishicks@gmail.com	2 Members' Representatives (elected annually)	Kate Fysh (2019-21) katefysh@gmail.com
Business Manager (elected biannually)	Ginnie Orrey (2020-22) gginnie@googlemail.com or info@apollo-theatre.org.uk	House Manager (elected biannually)	Steve Reading (2019-21) steverreading104@btinternet.com
Marketing Manager (elected biannually)	Maureen Sullivan (2020-22) msullivan58@me.com	Technical Manager (elected biannually)	Dan Burns (2019-21) dan@masexodus.co.uk
Players' Secretary (elected biannually)	Mike Whitehead (2020-22) michaelwhitehead@yahoo.com	LTG rep	Cynara Crump cynara.crump@virgin.net
Membership Secretary (elected biannually)	Carole Crow (2019-21) carolecrow9@gmail.com	Apollo Trust Buildings Manager (co-opted)	Roger Simpson roger.dodger45@yahoo.co.uk

Steve
Reading
takes a look
at another of
our namesake
theatres



In this edition we take a look at another of our namesakes, The Apollo Victoria, situated opposite Victoria station in London.

By comparison to our own Apollo, it is very young! As we know it now, it began life as a cinema and variety venue. It was built by architects Lewis and William Edward Trent in 1929 for Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, a part of the Gaumont British chain, and opened in 1930. It has the unusual feature of two identical facades on Wilton and Vauxhall Bridge Roads and an interior in Art Deco style with a nautical theme. It seats 2,328 patrons.

Opening as the New Victoria Cinema in October 1930 it boasted a 'Compton 3 manual 15 rank theatre organ' ('oh where is it now?' asks Roger Simpson). In June 1939 it was chosen as

one of the 3 London sites to present a live relay of Epsom Derby as part of the BBC's pre-war experimental broadcasts. From 1940 to 1941 it remained closed but was quick to open as it sustained no damage.

Plans were made for its demolition in the 1950s but it was saved and went on to present a mixture of ballet, live shows and films. The last films were shown in November 1975. The doors were then closed and opened only for the occasional rock concert with acts such as ELO, Cliff Richard, Peter Gabriel etc. Led Zepplin rehearsed there in May 1980. In 1981 it opened as the Apollo Victoria Theatre as a musical venue with a Shirley Bassey concert. During the early 1980s it hosted successful shows such as *The Sound of Music*, *Camelot* and *Fiddler on the Roof*

and in 1984 the interior was refurbished to provide a 'race track' through the audience for the musical *Starlight Express*, in which the cast wore roller skates. The show premiered in March 1984 and ran for over 18 years.

After another refit where the 'race track' was removed and the old auditorium lighting (3,500 incandescent lamps) was replaced with 88,000 LEDs specially designed for theatre, it became the first theatre to be lit in this way. Shows that followed included 'Bombay Dreams', 'Saturday Night Fever' and 'Movin' Out'; the Broadway musical 'Wicked' had its London premiere there in September 2006 and remains there to this day.

The theatre is owned and operated by the Ambassador Theatre Group.

Once again
Louis
Lawrence
shares with us
some musings
on life—this
time entitled
'PREMONITION'

I was just reading the morning paper, as I do every day, and in the corner of my eye catching the news on TV where as usual nowadays the on-screen person sits in front of their shelves of books. An awful thought hit me. What if someone saw the kind of books I have on my bookshelf if I used Zoom? Would they be impressed by the erudition shown by my collection of classics, eg Readers Digest condensations, my wife's gardening and cookery books, the Quran, the Bible, the Torah, Beano and Dandy annuals, the Argos catalogue ... Patterson, Ludlum, Harris ... Nah! Best conceal the lot and put the camera in the spare room with nothing on the walls. Not that I will be zooming anything as I don't really understand the technology, up to and including the mute button. Another thought ... where is my Thesaurus? I used to have one sitting there since the early days of my life in advertising and promotion.

No, it is not a stuffed prehistoric bird trophy, it is the

equivalent of the Bible for advertising copywriter people, a book which contains all the possible meanings and definitions of words. When I logged on to find the latest instructions re our local U3A writers' group I found that one of the subjects was PREMONITION. I realise something had set me off on the trail to discovering the absence of my Thesaurus and it figuratively set the hairs rising on the back of my neck. Coincidence (accident, eventuality, stroke of luck, fortuity)? Heck, that was premonition (intuition, suspicion, hunch, apprehension, foreboding, funny feeling, presentiment) all right!

Where could I start my search for the missing Thesaurus, ancient (old, aged, primordial, obsolete, former, bygone, past, antiquated) and tattered as it might now be? I trawled through my memory of places of residence and movings-on since my early days: Hackney, East Ham, Wembley, Hendon, Milton Keynes, Isle of Wight. As my career prospered

(advanced, progressed, thrived, got on, done well, flourished, bloomed, made good, grown rich (hah)) and changed so had my faithful (loyal, true, committed, constant, attached, dedicated, reliable, staunch, truthful, dependable, unwavering etc. etc.) Thesaurus followed me through thick and thin. Oh, where, oh where could it be? A search through boxes in the attic, under beds, in cupboards. Forensic questioning of family (relations, people, children, issue, relatives, household, offspring, descendants, brood, menage etc. etc.) some as far away as Australia revealed nothing except it was last seen propping up a bed in Gills Cliff Rd, Ventnor. Since then ... zilch.

I had to acknowledge (own up, accept, declare, recognise, yield, concede, acquiesce, disclose etc. etc.) that poor old Thessie had gone from my ken. There was only one thing to do now and, with a sigh of regret, I logged on to Amazon for a replacement (substitute, stand-in, proxy, surrogate, understudy).

What a year it's been! One of the highlights for me was the Summer BBQ hosted by Sue and Paul Jennings - the absolute joy of meeting up with friends! Then we had the re-opening of the Coffee Mornings, sadly a short-lived reprieve but the Zoom drop-ins continue at 11am every Saturday. We ended the year on a high with the Big Fat Quiz of the Year expertly presented by Steve and Helen Reading, which was a fun night and brought some much needed levity to the current situation!

Have you seen—or rather listened to—the recordings on our YouTube channel, 'Apollo Theatre Isle of Wight'? Under the present circumstances this is the only choice we have to do what we do best: 'entertain'. I hope you enjoyed the recently zoomed play reading. It was great fun to do. We had three virtual get-togethers and read through each act separately to get the feel of the play. Everyone entered into the spirit of the thing with lots of ideas coming forward and lots of laughter—it was ALMOST as good as running actual rehearsals! So good in fact that everyone is keen to do more! Would you like to be involved either with running something similar, taking part or have an idea of your own? Just let me know.

Don't forget the Saturday 'Drop In' at 11am—we would welcome your company, and it's good to talk! Join the Zoom meeting with ID 802 953 5855 Password Apollo.

Here we are at the start of a new year and it's membership renewal time. Your continued support with the subscription of £20 for a full member, £30 for a couple and £10 for a student will go a long way to help us weather this storm and ensure the Apollo can once again bring the very best of live theatre to the Island. For all of you who pay by standing order, the annual subscription will shortly be disappearing from your bank account if it hasn't already. If you wish to make a bank transfer—don't forget to give your name as reference—our details are:

Apollo Theatre Players HSBC Bank	Sort code: 40-34-26 A/c no: 01715186	If you have any queries please contact me on 07905 220934.
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It just remains for me to wish you a very happy and healthy New Year!

Carole Crow, Membership Secretary

PETER BOFFIN, EXIT STAGE LEFT ... OR RIGHT???

As most of you know, dear Peter died at home on Thursday 7th January. His daughter Samantha phoned me on Friday morning with the sad news. Apparently he was sitting comfortably in his armchair, enjoying a mid-morning biscuit and glass of 'red' non-alcoholic wine, when he suddenly complained about a pain in his chest. Before Rita had finished calling 999 he was dead. It was an absolute shock, sudden and totally unexpected. A neighbour gave him CPR until the medics arrived but even they could not resuscitate him.

Our thoughts and love must now go to darling Rita who has supported, loved and protected Peter through the past five years of increasingly debilitating vascular dementia. She is presently being supported by her two daughters. Peter was born in 1932 in the Home Counties. He met and married Rita and they brought up their daughters in Rickmansworth. He originally worked for the BBC but moved over to ITV in the 60s as an entertainments producer. He met all the Light Entertainment stars of the day, e.g. Morecambe & Wise, Tommy Steele, Tommy

Cooper, Shirley Bassey, etc. Sam said she had wonderful memories of 'going with her sister to visit Dad at work' and meeting the stars they watched regularly on TV.

Peter and Rita were active members of several amateur theatre groups in Rickmansworth and Ruislip. When they retired to the Island in 1994, they quickly became involved with the local am-dram scene which, luckily for us, included joining the Apollo Players. When I took new-member Peter around the theatre he was amazed at our facilities, both FOH, on stage and backstage, saying they were more professional than any of the amateur and many of the professional venues he'd worked in.

In all the years I knew Peter, he never displayed anything other than gentle good-natured affability and was impossible to fluster or hurry. This could sometimes prove a little irksome when encouraging him to not miss his cue after being called from the dressing-room! I'm sure many members have wonderful anecdotes they could share that involved the one and only 'Boffin'. My first on-stage meeting was as part of the 'Guys and Dolls' team when this Overner, with very

round vowels, became the personification of a Noo Yoik hoodlum as Big Julie. Our next was a far better fit for Peter when he played the rather vague headmaster Godfrey Pond, in the classic comedy, 'The Happiest Days of Your Life'.

The next three occasions we shared the stage demonstrated Peter's enviable versatility when he played the conflicted but loyal Duke of Norfolk in 'A Man For All Seasons', then three months later Hasler, the devious factory owner in the comic musical 'Pyjama Game' and then four months a wonderful, gruff but endearing Mr. Badger in 'Toad of Toad Hall'. Three productions in the same year ... the man had stamina!

Over the years, Peter appeared in or directed numerous successful productions at the Apollo and with Niton's Peppercorn Players. He and Rita were also very active off-stage with countless FOH duties in the foyer or behind the bar.

As soon as Samantha lets me know the funeral details, I'll pass on them on. It will be a cremation but numbers will probably be very restricted.

Michael Arnell

Access details to the members' area of the theatre website

- Go on to the website and hover over 'membership' and the 'members' area' tab should drop down;
- click on that and you'll get the message 'We're sorry, the content you are trying to reach is restricted to members only';
- click on 'member login' and a drop-down box will appear containing the two areas 'username' and 'password';
- In the top area enter your 'username', which is first-name.secondname' (remember the dot between the words), and in the bottom box enter your password, which is your membership number.

Once you've done this you should get straight into the members' area. If not, there's a problem and you need to let Ginie Orrey (webmistress) know, but try these steps first.



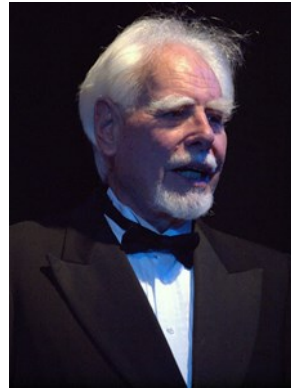
Your letters

MEMORIES OF PETER BOFFIN

Breaking with not only tradition but my personal preference, here are some 'letters' from our facebook page.

I was in one of my first shows with Peter. He taught me so much! Absolutely incredible man, full of spirit and an amazing talent. Sending love and thinking of his family at this difficult time
Lewis Grant

So sad to hear this and thinking of Rita and family. He was a talented and intelligent man; however in the latter years my memory will always be of us in the wings



and him saying "What comes next?". He was so funny though and a bit naughty at times with a wicked sense of humour. He will be greatly missed by all theatres on the Island.
Gwen Stevens

Very sad. Was in a few shows with Peter. Legend. Will never forget him phoning me to ask if I'd play Renfield in Dracula. "We're looking for a madman and thought of you!"
Graham Brown

An absolute legend and my favourite naughty old man! And what an actor. So many happy memories.
Helen Reading

Condolences to his family. Peter—a fantastic actor, with such a mellifluous voice. Will be greatly missed.
Fiona Gwinnett

Rambling Rose



Sometimes I find it incredibly hard to find inspiration and then you watch something and suddenly you feel revitalised through total immersion and escapism. Such was the case for me recently when I saw a 2004 adaptation of *Oliver Twist* on the TV a few days ago. I must have missed it first time to air, or more likely I couldn't face another sanitised version of Dicken's classic novel, with pretty boy Oliver and clichéd characters bearing no resemblance to the original gritty and ugly reconstruction of 19th London and its precarious life. It was shown in two 90-minute episodes which allowed the scenes to progress with more detail than if it had been a film, but not a serial length which risked over-stuffing with irrelevant minutiae. But the joy for me was the stellar cast, who played true to character and not one of them overblown with their own importance. Interestingly Fagin was brought to

life by Timothy Spall, not an actor I would have considered suitable either in appearance or speech which shows how wrong I can be. He brought something unique to the part, a fresh approach out of usual mould and a revelation to those of us who can imagine only the 'Ron Moody' type. 'Which is a long way of saying that casting directors sometimes need to 'think outside the box'. What a horrible term but you get my drift.

Which puts me in mind of a great disappointment early in my amateur career. I started out in Freshwater with the Strolling Players and Vagabonds and was a regular in their annual pantomime. One year to my excitement and joy I was asked to play Snow White in the panto of that name. Oh joy, the lead part. This was a great step up for me; being one of the newest and youngest of that great company I had hitherto been used mainly as background decoration. Could this be

the break I had waited for? A week after the casting, I took a call from the Director, a certain Bernard Turner (son of our own Barbara Turner MBE, both sadly no longer with us) who admitted after much prevarication that he reluctantly had to recast as it was felt that I was too small in stature. They couldn't find any other adults smaller than me to play the dwarves. I pleaded and cajoled, could they not play the part on their knees etc? All to no avail. He offered me a dwarf character and Snow White was recast with one of the rather tall statuesque ladies of the company. Heartbroken! What part was I offered? No, not Grumpy! I was to play Bashful, I had two lines but I made every one of them count and be heard. But boy, did I make a convincing dwarf!! After all, who once remarked 'there are no small parts, only small actors'!!? I rest my case m'lord.

PETER BOFFIN 1932- 2021

Many members will already have heard of the sad loss of one of our long-serving, 'stalwart' members, Peter Boffin. You will find his obituary on page 5, but here is a more personal tribute from his wife, Rita.

'Michael Arnell has very kindly written a tribute to my beloved Peter's enormous contribution to Island theatre, both as skilful actor and innovative director, so I thought maybe a more intimate approach from me might help complete the picture and be of additional interest.

We met at St Paul's Youth Club, Ruislip Manor. Peter had come to give a talk about the BBC where he had just started working. I was among the youth members attending and took an immediate fancy to him. I therefore thought up a question to ask, in the hope he might notice me. He did and a day or so later he phoned to see if I'd be interested in being one of the voices in his puppet show at the church fete. From then on we were inseparable. I was due to go to teaching college but put it on hold while we saved up enough money to get married and rent a flat in Shepherd's Bush. Two years later, thanks to Peter's father, we were able to put down a deposit on a new house in Rickmansworth and I started a language course, finally graduating to become a teacher. Peter in the meantime had left the BBC for a more lucrative position at ITV. He was so successful that he soon became the senior vision mixer working alongside the producers and thus meeting many famous personalities: Morecambe and Wise, Brian Murphy and Yootha Joyce, Barbara Windsor, Tommy Steele and Ian Ogilvy, to name but a few.

He was a skilful DIY enthusiast and single-handed twice put full central heating systems in the big old houses we bought, adding extensions and patios for good measure. However, Peter's much pre-

ferred spare time activity was taken up with—yes, you've guessed it—amateur dramatics.

We both belonged to at least three local groups and whereas he would act and direct plays, I was only interested in musicals. He produced and performed in many plays for The Pinner Players, a small local group. Then there was The Argosy Players, of which he had been a member since boyhood and which often per-



formed at the Beck Theatre, Hayes, while The Watford Palace Theatre was the chief venue of our local group, The Rickmansworth Players, when putting on one of their lavish musicals. We both 'starred' in several shows, one of which was *Oliver*, with Peter as a wonderfully sinister Fagin and me as Nancy. Others included 'Lock Up Your Daughters', 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum' and 'Fiddler on the Roof' (this he directed some years ago at Shanklin Theatre, where he has also appeared on stage many times).

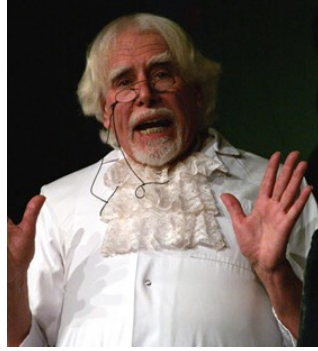
During all those years we managed to find time to produce our two lovely daughters, Fiona and Samantha, whom, when they were tiny, we would take to all the rehearsals in their carry-cots and leave them somewhere safe until it was time to leave. They too, of course, have been bitten by the acting bug, with Samantha formerly at the BBC, now freelance and an active member of the Questors of Ealing, and

Fiona devoting most of her spare time to directing and acting in local shows in Hinckley.

Somewhat surprisingly, Peter did not come from an acting family. Where did he get his innate talent? Neither his sister nor brother seems particularly interested in theatre. Latterly, though, his whole life having been being centred round the media did not help him cope with the restrictions of dementia, the onset of which in 2015 left him unable to find anything to occupy his waking hours. He had never read a book in his life other than plays, so, with dramatics being his sole former interest, he could find nothing to do, other than watch television—preferably old sit-coms which often flagged up his name—and be taken out in the car. So sad.

He would be amazed and flattered by all the attention he is now receiving—cards, letters of fond memories and past stage successes, even photos. But as a personal tribute to Peter, I really must share with you the fact that I have never ever heard him say one single, detrimental word about anyone, nor has he ever raised his voice. He was not demonstrative but always calm and ready to listen and help. He really was a wonderful person and I just cannot manage life without him. The prospect is bleak. Thank goodness for our two daughters who have been so supportive and who are staying with me for an indefinite period. Peter would have been hugely proud of them.'

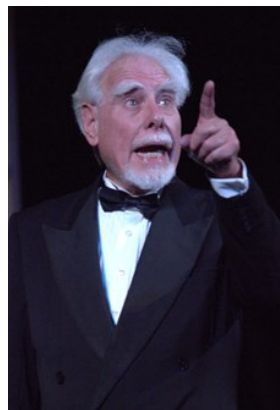
Rita Boffin



**PETER BOFFIN;
A PHOTO GALLERY**



It would be unthinkable not to mark the passing of one of our 'stalwarts' without a selection of photographs of Peter Boffin in some of his trademark roles



When I had the idea for these articles, I initially thought that enough material would be available for only one. However, as time has gone on I keep finding new—or at least new to me—novels with a theatrical setting, with the effect that I'm now on no. 3 in this series. I don't set out to find them; they tend, if anything, to find me. All the books are relatively good ones—that's to say, not tosh—and all have not only benefited from being set in the theatre but also always speak to us in different ways, sometimes unexpected. So here are my latest discoveries, for your entertainment. If you, dear reader, should enjoy them (or indeed hate them, as a friend told me after one of these articles!) or find others, do please feel free to write your own piece—newly discovered novels are always a joy.

My first, entirely fortuitous, find was a series of crime novels by the writer Elly Griffiths (I confess to a weakness for thrillers). I came to her writing via her books set in the wilds of the Norfolk coast (very much worth a look, if you're inclined), but then found that she had written another series, set in Brighton of the 1950s, known as the '**Brighton Mysteries**'. The protagonists are a young detective and his friend, a music-hall magician, and all the plots have a theatrical setting, which, given the location and the period, are satisfyingly seedy and the detail feels authentic. At one point a visitor is announced—'Gentleman to see you'—and the recipient thinks, 'Gentleman must mean he wasn't a theatrical.' They are an excellent read and I return to them when I want something enjoyable but not too taxing.

Another find, which mea culpa was until very recently unknown to me, was Margaret Atwood's '**Hag-Seed**'. As you would expect from a writer of her brilliance it is quite wonderful, and had particular relevance for me as I had played Ariel in our production of 'The Tempest' in 2015 and it was still very clear in my mind. The book revolves around a drama lecturer who plans to stage his own interpretation of 'The Tempest' at a renowned drama festival; toppled from his post by underhand plotting in the drama department (surely not!!) he ends up teaching the play in a local prison and finding his revenge in various subtle, indeed Shakespearian, ways. The book is filled with quotable lines, but here's one to give you a flavour: 'When in doubt, he told himself, just keep talking. It was an old trick for when you froze onstage: throw out a line, anything that sounded good, to give the prompter time to toss you the real one.' There's someone who's been there and done that ...

A book which could almost fall into the category of 'tosh'—that's to say, one which would while away a long train journey but could be left behind on the seat without a pang—but is sufficiently well written not to be deleted from your Kindle library is one of Donna Leon's Venice-based thrillers (sorry), '**Death at La Fenice**'. It's not too demanding plot-wise—a murder, an investigation, a satisfyingly complicated denouement—but it conjures up the atmosphere of both Venice and the tawdriness of the backstage environment in even so glorious a setting as La Fenice.

I have just recently discovered a novel called '**The Understudy**', which also

narrowly escapes the definition of 'tosh'—mainly by virtue of absolutely nailing the less admirable elements of an actor's psyche as well as the desperation to succeed. The book's author also has the endearing quality of having grown up in Eastleigh and obviously having spent some time on the Island, as every now and again you stumble upon a small gem such as 'He was, however, still on the Isle of Wight; a nice enough place to grow up but from a show business point of view he might as well have been on Alcatraz,' as well as 'The Isle of Wight doesn't really have a West End. Well, it does, but it's called Ventnor.' Worth a read if only for those *bons mots* but also because it conjures up so well the desperation, the backstabbing, the cruelty of the understudy's lot.

And finally, leaving the best for the end, I had the good fortune to be given a copy of Margaret O'Farrell's wonderful novel '**Hamnet**' for Christmas. While it is not on the surface 'about' the theatre and is seen from the point of view of Agnes, Shakespeare's wife/Hamnet's mother, the figure of Hamnet's absent father hovers over the whole book and we hear the author's absolutely authentic voice giving us the backstory (including the legendary 'second-best bed'). The playhouses are all shut because of the plague (my goodness, doesn't history repeat itself?), giving rise to another apt quotation: 'It is so tenuous, so fragile, the life of the playhouses.' Don't we all know it? And in the final pages of the book Agnes finally sees the play that takes the name of her son, dead of the plague but somehow miraculously alive in his father's writing. A wonderful read.

NOVELS SET IN THE THEATRE

No. 3 in an
occasional
series by
Ginnie Orrey

In a major break with tradition, this is episode 1 of a three-part article by

Mike Crowe

entitled

'JUST A WHITSUN WEEK-END LEAVE'

[The words 'shaggy' and 'dog' come to mind ... *Ed.*]

I would imagine that the reader will say 'Oh yes?' when I explain that an ordinary Whitsun weekend leave from my ship HMS Gambia in Rosyth, to my home in Leicester, brings in a fast army lorry ride, being given wrong train times by British Rail, a fog-bound train, the filming of the film 'Sink the Bismark' and much much more. Don't believe me?

Well, sit back, pour yourself a tot and read a story which I can hardly believe happened, but it did!!

I had been deferred until I was twenty-one to serve my two years National Service as I was completing a five-year apprenticeship as a Marine Electrical Engineer. Come the age of twenty-one and a bit, I was called up to do my stint in the Royal Navy. Almost all of the first year was served at HMS Collingwood, the Royal Navy's Radio, Radar and Electrical School Gosport and Fareham. Now a National Serviceman's pay was not all that good so many of my off duty weekends were spent in Leicester thanks to my thumb; I hitch-hiked. This was easy as the 'sailor suit' helped: 'Hop in, Jack. Where're you going?'

I very soon developed the art of hitch-hiking. For example, knowing where to stand so the drivers could see me and have time to pull in. Fortunately the roads were nowhere near as busy as they are now and also, no motorways, so no restrictions on where I could stand and for the motorist to stop without having a dozen vehicles pile into the back of him.

I finished my course at Collingwood and was drafted to HMS Gambia, a Second World War cruiser based at Rosyth in Scotland.

So, Whitsun weekend 1959, non-duty watch had leave from 1600 on Friday to 0800 on the Tuesday. I was non-duty. Did I want to spend three days on board in

Rosyth Dockyard? No. Now as a National Serviceman I could not afford the fare from Rosyth to Leicester return. Couldn't really afford it single, but using my experience in hitch-hiking, I would look into hitching down on the Friday, but get the train back. Hitch-hike from Rosyth to Leicester? Yes, well think about it! A very handy book to the hitch-hiker was the A5 book of maps supplied to members of the AA, and I had one! Work out the route. Calculate the mileage. Calculate the time it would take going on the average I had been making in the past of HMS Collingwood to Leicester and return. Yes, I used to hitch both ways. Average over many journeys: 25 mph. Leave Rosyth at 16.00. MFV to Queensferry which is south of the Forth and make for the road. I calculated I would reach home in a little over 12 hours at 04.30 on Saturday morning.

When I started to get serious about this with the AA book of maps, pen and paper and calculations and I told my messmates, they thought I was mad. 'You'll get there in time to turn round and come back' was the most common. Well, I was going to have a go. And have a go I did, not knowing just what an adventure it was going to be.

As planned I left the ship with the first Liberty Men, got the MFV from Rosyth Dockyards across to Queensferry and headed for a road south. The first lift came along quite quickly which took me into and out of Edinburgh and the A1. Now I don't know where it was, somewhere up near Berwick-upon-Tweed and not very far into the journey, that I was standing, thumb poised, when an Army lorry came into view. Army lorries are not exactly E-type Jags, so, sorry Pongoes, I turned my back and started to stroll along. Heart sank, it pulled up

alongside me: 'Where you going Jack?' Now I knew the journey and I always asked for the next town. 'Oh well it will help get me South' I thought. 'OK Jack, hop up in the back, there's some more in there'. Canvas backed lorry. Hardly a limo!! 'Come on Jack, let's have your case' Me and the brown case were hoisted into the back. 'Where are you going?' I was asked, again, told them the next town. I hardly had time to get comfortable on 'something' when we were off. You know how a greyhound comes out of a trap? We beat all the rest of the traps. We were moving. Bat out of Hell - we were on a mission. 'We're on weekend leave and heading for Nottingham. How far are you going?' All of a sudden this was ideal. I was heading into and out of Nottingham on my way to Leicester, so when the driver stopped at wherever it was I told him, I explained where I was going and settled down.

Nottingham arrived, or we arrived in Nottingham, not sure which because the journey seemed very quick. Out onto the Leicester road and I soon picked up a lift, going right into Leicester (a market man if I remember correctly). Superb. I lived on the outskirts of Leicester, on the city boundary on the road out to Lincolnshire. From the centre of Leicester to within 200 yards of home, another market man and I was there. My calculations as to what time I would get home were not too bad. I put the key in the front door at 4.28 am. Yes, Saturday! TWO MINUTES OUT!!!

Now we must get the journey home organised and I wasn't trusting to my thumb. Let the train take the strain.

To be continued ...

Once again our poet-in-residence, Steve Taverner, has come up with a couple of his pithy comments on the strange universe we find ourselves in

'One of the most frustrating things about the democratic process to me is that most people seem unable or unwilling to deal with analysing complex issues and reaching reasoned decisions. They prefer ideas which can be reduced to a single slogan which affects them at an emotional level. This poem deals with one such slogan often used by politicians in preference to reasoned argument.

GREAT

"Let's make Britain great again,"
You'll often hear our leaders cry.
Explaining what they mean by great
They rarely try.

Do they refer to Empire days
When Britain conquered half the Earth,
And plundered from the native folk
All things of worth?

Perhaps they're thinking of the years
We carried out the slave trade, which
By the misery of millions
Made Britain rich.

Industrial revolution?
We led the world back in those times.
Poor workers in polluted slums
And kids down mines.

Were we not great in World War Two
When, standing firm in freedom's fight,
Alone against an evil foe
We shone the light?

But even then the man who did
The most to keep the threat at bay
Was forced to take his own sad life
For being gay.

For greatness should we not demand
Tolerance, equality,
Good education, jobs for all
And liberty?

Care for our environment
Fair sharing of the nation's wealth,
Constructive help around the world,
Good care of health?

It could be done, we could be great
For in our land you'll find the seeds,
If we could only find a way
To kill the weeds.'

On holiday in Scotland I visited the Royal Lochnagar distillery, next to Balmoral Castle, and on leaving found my route blocked by a lot of kilted soldiers practising for the arrival of the queen. The diversion added 20 miles to my route, and resulted in the following verse.

DIVERSION ON THE B976

Close to where Her Majesty Spends the summer by the Dee
There is a fine distillery
Which you can visit for a fee
And taste a dram of fine whisky.

Leaving with a face that glowed,
A whisky bottle safely stowed,
Driving home the precious load,
Bugger me! Well I'm blowed,
The Queen had closed the bloody road!

Her troops she needed to inspect
To see that they were all bedecked
In kilts of tartan all correct
And make sure she could not detect
A sporran which was old

and wrecked.
You would have thought she could have found
Some space within the castle ground
To look these fellows up and down,
But not at all, though homeward bound
I had to take the long way round!

Although I wish our Liz no ill
My petrol tank I have to fill.
They don't give you the fuel for nil,
Four pounds went to a garage till.
I think I'll send Her Maj the bill.

Once again a trawl through one of Dave Talbot's books of poetry (his 'thoughts on life', as he puts it) comes up with a nugget of joy. This time it's a particularly apposite piece from his fourth slim volume, 'Such is Life—Another Thought'. He sums things up, I think!

Change

I've never liked change, you see
But I can take it better, if people tell me
Some we like, some we won't
Some we adapt to, others we don't

The world is evolving every day
Even in the places where people work, just to say
So let's all try to take it in our stride
Don't worry about it much and try to enjoy life's interesting ride.

**DAVE'S
POETRY
CORNER**



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The Apollo Players' next production

... will happen as soon as the Government deems it safe. Our playhouse is currently dark and silent but we're working hard to make it ready, so that when we can make theatre happen again, rest assured that we shall.