

A brief history of Leeds Children's Theatre

by Life Member, Mrs Elsie Brown (copy as sent to us in 1995 for our 60th anniversary archive.)



We had a special visitor, Founder Member, Mrs E Brown during the show The Gingerbread Man, March 2006 (The Carriageworks theatre)

To trace the beginnings of the Leeds Children's Theatre, we have to go back to the 1920s, and that's even before I started teaching.

One or two Leeds teachers began producing plays the performance at their own and other schools in the city.

So it was decided in 1931 to centralise these sporadic efforts by performing at the YWCA headquarters in Cookridge Street, and in initiating children in visits to the theatre rather than bring plays to the schools.

This was a great success and the demand for seats so far exceeded expectations that repeat performances had to be given. For the next four years an annual show was given, consisting mainly of short plays mimed ballads and acted songs using a minimum of scenery.

The years 1936 and 1937 saw the production of two plays by the Yorkshire playwright and artist the late Albert Wainwright. They were the Key of the Kingdom, and Peter Starlight. Acted by mixed cast of children and adults, a policy which has always been adhered to by the Leeds children's theatre, they were notable for the beautiful craftsmanship of the scenery, costumes and properties.

At this point it was felt that the organisation was now sufficiently well-established to be put on a more orthodox and permanent footing and a constitution was drawn up. The theatre went from strength to strength, with two fairytales dramatised by Arthur Ridley. He later wrote an exciting adventure play for older children, which was produced at least three times on the third occasion in his 82nd year when he was still LCT's very active President.

These were the halcyon days before the war. We met at a school in the YWCA canteen for a cup of tea and then got on with the business of rehearsing costume making and scenery painting. A warden there, Miss Kingston was a very good friend to us. The hall held 200, and we charged 3d for children and 6d for adults. The performances start at 5:15 p.m., and the audiences came exclusively from the Leeds Schools.

Then came the war: teachers and children were evacuated, schools closed. The properties, costumes and scenery of the children's theatre had to be left behind in the city, and for seven years, nothing could be done. But in 1947 when the educational life of the city had reverted to something like normal in the enthusiastic few began to pick up the threads.

Miss Kingston, alas, had died: the new people had never heard of the Leeds children's theatre or its belongings, and the charges for the hall had increased tremendously. We had 50 precious pounds in our bank account, and our future was an unknown quantity.

We looked around to some other place where we could perform more economically, and the Rev Don Robins, the vicar of St George's Church and the crypt listened to us sympathetically, allowing as the use of the school hall for our first post-war production.

Just before it took place this wonderfully kind and dynamic man died suddenly. We were able to show our gratitude by donating one of our performances to the fund for his family. We found it quite impossible to fit in all the children who wanted to come. And he finally decided to hire the Albert Hall, as the Civic Theatre then was, for one night, and take all those who were still wanting seats. In those days, the seating at the Albert Hall was truly Victorian, and in the balcony we had padded forms. This meant that we were able to squeeze into far more children and had been squeezed into since - we played to more than 700 in our first performance in what was to prove our home to many years.

We were still without rooms for rehearsal, and for the making of scenery, and when one of our members suggested an amalgamation with the Leeds arts Centre, a composite organisation, with many separate groups, and which had premises in the centre of the city, we felt that this may indeed be the answer.

The arrangement worked very well for some years, but we realised that we were not attracting the teachers into our midst, and we broke away to become an independent organisation once more in 1955.

From that time, we produced two plays each year generally running a fortnight each at the Leeds Civic Theatre. One in late November and early December, catering for the younger children from five to nine, and one in March, usually an adventure play for the slightly older schoolchildren aged from seven to 14. We have never attempted to interest the over fourteens, as we feel that at this age children should be encouraged to visit suitable productions by adult societies.

We are very much a do it yourself theatre. I think it is true to say that we have never hired scenery, we have an excellent group of scenic workers who built and paint scenery in the workshop belonging to the Leeds Civic arts Guild, a building opposite Civic Theatre, which is owned by the corporation, and used by most of the amateur societies in the city for rehearsals and meetings.

Other costumes are in the hands of similarly devoted group of members who spend hour after hour, stitching away - and unpicking so that costumes can be adapted for a second wearing. Certain costumes, we do have to hire - men's costumes for example and animal costumes. The almost invariably hire animal costumes, although we did make our own Toto for the Wizard of Oz.

In recent years - and this is one of the biggest thrills - we have gathered together a small children's Orchestra, usually under the guidance of a Leeds teacher, but it has been known to function without any adult help at all. We lay no claim to its perfection, but we think it is a wonderful and stimulating thing for the children concerned.

Prior to the performance, circular sent out to the schools and to about 120 families on the mailing list, just over a month before the date of production. The Leeds schools always receive their circulars - by the kind assistance of the education office, where they are enclosed with the school correspondence - on Fridays. A special effort is made to see that the West Riding schools have theirs at the same time - and almost impossible task.

There can be postal delays, schools that are at on holiday when others are not, head teachers who perhaps are not interested themselves and forget to pass on the circular immediately.

I have to specify that the first few days bookings must be by post. So that I can deal fairly with the requests in rotation. Some years ago, before we made this stipulation, my telephone was completely jammed for the whole of Friday afternoon. By the Saturday morning's post I'm usually inundated, because the schools in the know send of their bookings by the first possible post with a provisional number. School parties fill the week nights almost exclusively, and the family parties choose the Saturday performances.

The night comes; the show is due to start at half past six. Sometimes as early as six o'clock, the coach will draw up outside the theatre, and out will pour hordes of excited children - even in this day and age, when they have so much entertainment, they are excited.

If it is their first visit, they are first enthralled by the theatre. It is a real theatre and looks it. Not just a school hall. And it is a very pleasant and comfortable little theatre. The theatre manager Mr Holmes is one of our greatest fans - he loves having the children in (one sometimes wonders why!) And all his helpers seem to derive the same enjoyment. There is twice as much work to them when we are in the theatre than with any other society, but that doesn't seem to matter - they enjoy it so much the more.

When audience is assembled - and on occasions, we have to wait when we realise that a whole school party is missing (perhaps a hold-up because Leeds United is playing a cup tie on a Saturday afternoon for example) our auditorium manager mounts the stage and welcomes the children to the theatre. He asks them to look at their programme, which is provided free of charge, as we feel every child should be educated to use a program when visiting a theatre. He explains that when the ice cream will be on sale - great sighs of joy - and asks them to stand to sing the national anthem. Year after year, I stand at the back of the hall to help to lend volume to the singing, and make a vow that before the next time I must send a note round to the teachers and asked them to teach them the words of the first two lines. They were seeing God save our Gracious Queen, God save our Gracious Queen. And every year, I forget until the first night again!

Then the audience rustle to their seats, the lights go out, the orchestra plays the overture and the magic begins.

And it is magic - they feel intensely, the good of the hero and the wickedness of the villain, and there is no greater tribute to the baddie at the end of the show than aloud hiss when he comes to take his bow.

There is much talk in these modern times about audience participation. Our audiences participate without being asked to. They comment a wonderful to hear; and when good triumphs, wow! the cheering almost raises the roof.

Our audiences these days are, as you will have gathered, not confined to Leeds schools, and include visitors from many of the schools in the Wakefield area from Horsforth, Pudsey, Ilkley, Rawdon, Yeadon, South Milford, Calverley and several more. Sometimes I think that these outlying schools need us more, in that they have not as many opportunities as the ones in the city to see plays performed for children.

Profit-making is not our prime aim, which is - and I quote from our constitution "to inculcate in children a love of the theatre, and to provide suitable entertainment for them, using players who are either children or adults, or both as may be necessary to the production. But we have been able to donate several hundreds of pounds to children's organisations - notably, the NSPCC and the save the children fund - and to other special appeals, as they've been launched.

The end.