

ELLERSLIE THEATRICAL SOCIETY
PRESIDENT'S REPORT – 4 APRIL 2016

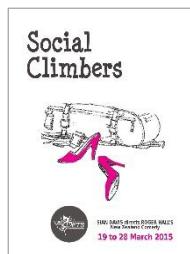
Introduction

In my report I will take you through a short review of the plays presented in 2015 followed by an overview of those being presented in 2016. I will then report on the governance of the society.

But first a quote.

"The theatre is the only institution in the world which has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive." John Steinbeck

Review of 2015



There's nothing like a Roger Hall play to pull in an audience. 2015 opened with Sian Davis directing Roger Hall's **SOCIAL CLIMBERS**. Sian had been in Wales and arrived back in New Zealand just in time for the auditions. Janet Williamson created a stage where the actors and the audience were immersed in the bush which still makes me think of the damp decaying leaves in the undergrowth. I can repeat my statement from my report last year, also about a Roger Hall play, in saying the play pulled in the largest audience of the year. 2015 started on a great note.

The committee made the decision not to go ahead with the Murder Mystery Dinners. The bookings were arriving very slowly and there were insufficient numbers to give to the catering company to make the event financially viable. There were many disappointed people and interestingly enough many of them were the ones who had not booked.



Main bill two was Katherine Di Savino's **THINGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME** which was directed by Barry Spring. We had a great turnout for the set builds although two members categorically refused to paint the set with the colours selected by set designer and dresser, Shirley Spring. The outcome was striking and set the stage for a single impressive piece of furniture – a large leopard print chair. This is sitting out in the green room and we are open to offers if anyone is interested in buying it.

Main bill three saw the return of the biennial **ELLERSLIE FESTIVAL OF ONE-ACT PLAYS**. Six plays were presented over two nights throughout the season with three plays performing for each show. With three locally-written premiere plays and a number of new directors and cast introduced to ETS, the festival was a financial and strategic success. Although it is seen as one production the festival is six plays each with their own set of rehearsals with director, cast, props, wardrobe and lighting. I congratulate the SMs and crew for making a technically challenging season look seamless. The Festival was dedicated to the memory of Kevin Murray, Bert Phillips and Yvonne Durling.





The main bill year closed with ***THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD***. Des Smith withdrew as Director, after the auditions, due to work commitments. Thankfully David Blakey had been working on the set design with Des and he was very familiar with and passionate about the work. David soon became an obvious replacement. With no time to prepare he was thrown in at the deep end and was tasked with casting the remaining characters before rehearsals could get into full swing. The dialogue in the play was full of the expressions and events happening around the location in Ireland at the time and there was a lot of research required to ensure the audience could follow this while the cast delivered the words in their natural Irish brogue. The bark floor added a great natural touch even though bits are still turning up.



The final event for the year was for the Ellerslie Business Association's Santa Parade and Street Party held on the first Sunday of December. The parade is an opportunity for ETS to connect with the local community and it always surprises me to hear people say they weren't aware there was a local theatre. This would indicate a need for stronger external branding on the building along with a number of other options. Congratulations to Renee Palmer and her large team of helpers who made the 1930s beach Christmas scene come to life complete with sandcastle, car backdrop, pohutukawa tree and not forgetting Renee's amazing costumes. The bonus of the day came with the award for Best Float and the society received a prize of \$200.

The current year – 2016

Some of the plays and some of the Directors for 2016 fell easily into place while others needed a little finesse. Sadly, this is the last play selection that Kevin Murray was involved with and we will miss his ability to smell out a great play.



Main bill one was a departure from Roger Hall but it still promoted a New Zealand playwright with Bruce Mason's ***THE END OF THE GOLDEN WEATHER***. Julian Harrison enamoured the Programming Committee with his vision for the play and the request to use Raymond Hawthorne's script adaption for an ensemble cast. Audience attendance was disappointing but the presentation, by an exceptionally talented cast, was not.

Before Main bill two we have two murder mystery dinner evenings called ***MURDER IN STAGES: A DAME'S DILEMMA*** developed and hosted by David Charteris. These are set for Friday the 22nd and Saturday the 23rd of April. Each evening will be catered for by The Spit Roast Catering Company and while dinners are entertained by our host, Dame Nivea Olay, we hope that nothing will go wrong – such as a series of totally unexpected murders.

Bruce Brown was originally looking at presenting Stephen Sinclair's *The Bach* as main bill two but was instantly attracted to Terry Johnson's ***THE GRADUATE*** when he saw the title written on a list of plays I had been researching. The Graduate has now been cast and the production crew are in place. The Bach will have to wait for its ETS outing.

Main bill three will see David Charteris directing **THE PIN-UP BOYS** a New Zealand comedy written by Mark Rayner. Mark wrote this for David to present as his 100th time directing a play. It is guaranteed feel good play and we hope to see the audience leaving with large smiles on their faces.

The last main bill of the year will be Noel Coward's **WAITING IN THE WINGS** which is to be directed by Rex Steele. Due to the large cast of 'retired actresses' Rex had put a notice in the recent newsletters requesting expressions of interest and has been pleasantly surprised by the number of enquiries.

GOVERNANCE

Budgets & Expenditure: Rona Colbert will shortly be presenting the accounts from 2015. There are many factors that contribute to a financially healthy society and the two key areas in 2015 came from the revenue from ticket sales and the extra-ordinary revenue from operational grants. Production and administration costs remained static across 2014 and 2015. There was a noticeable drop in bar sales. There can be a number of reasons for this – legal limits, selection or something as simple as having an eftpos machine available. This will be something for the incoming committee and bar manager to look into.

ETS received two grants in 2015. A grant of \$1849.46 from the Auckland Council Community Group Assistance Fund towards our publicity expenses and a grant of \$1964 from the Orakei Local Board towards our sound system upgrade for an Apple MacBook and QLab software. In addition to these grants we are also exceptionally fortunate to get discounts and support from Brian Mott, Harcourts, Lockhart Legal, Soar Print and Speedy Signs. ETS are exceptionally grateful to these people and organisations for their support.

We currently have 2 grant applications in progress, one for a new sound mixer and the other for a replacement lighting console.

Management: We have three members of the current ETS committee who will not be standing again this year. Sue Spurling has been an active committee member for many years and has been the Front of House Manager for most of this time. Paul Gapper, also a long standing committee member and previous President, has been instrumental in developing the annual budget which has given us better expenditure guidelines and resulted in reduced production and administration costs. Paul is also stepping down as Bar Manager. Roger Sawtell, another long term member of the committee, has been our technical manager and has been working with David Blakey to assess our technical equipment and identify items for repairs and replacement. On behalf of the society I thank you for selflessly providing much of your spare time and energy to the committee and the productions you have worked on.

It has always been a juggling act for a small team to work in and on the society at the same time. So the year ahead will involve growth and change for the committee in order to cope with the demands of production management and society management.

OPERATIONAL

Volunteers and Membership: The number of financial members remains static and the income received from subscriptions provides a small contribution towards the costs of sending out newsletters and publicity material. But ETS isn't just about the financials. It's about providing a connection between people and their community. Collecting a group of people who work together with a common goal is equally challenging and rewarding. It takes up precious time contacting new people, explaining how it all works and then training them, but more people being trained means more skilled volunteers for ETS, other theatres and performing arts events.

A number of local community theatres only send out newsletters and promotional material to paid-up financial members. They have found that with declining membership numbers they have a smaller pool to contact for volunteers. ETS maintains a mailing list which consists of both members and interested people. There are around 1000 people on this list and it is a great source for new volunteers.

Health & Safety: The committee has been approached by a Health & Safety consultant with an offer to review the society's practices and receive a full assessment following new legislation. While we are in discussions about this, compliance steps are being taken to ensure the safety of our volunteers. There are rules about volunteers working solo in the theatre and all set builds are treated like building sites with a written assessment of risk fully visible and safety equipment being provided.

Ticketing: For ticketing in 2015 we decided to remove the booking fees that our audience had to pay iTICKET and instead increased the cost of each ticket so that ETS could cover these costs instead. The result was pleasing with an increased number of people booking online and equally increased revenue from those who chose to book directly through the ETS box office (Rona and Heather). The committee decided to continue with this method for 2016.

The next ticketing challenge to address is the need to close off the online iTICKET bookings the day before each performance to allow time for them to print the tickets and courier them to the theatre on the day of performance. This means closing off the online ticketing on a Thursday evening for the weekend performances as well. We are just in the process of setting up a trial for **THE GRADUATE** to use a computer and ticket printer ourselves so we won't need to close off so early. We will see if this makes it more convenient for people wishing to book online and to reduce the stress on the box office when the courier doesn't arrive. This has happened on a number of occasions.

Publicity & Marketing: The range of plays the Programming Committee select is quite wide. Although there are a number of loyal audience members who attend all plays each year, the majority of the audience varies depending on the genre of play being presented, i.e. drama, comedy, local, classic, etc. This makes it especially important to create a marketing plan for each play. This plan should identify who the target audience is, how that audience finds out about events and then what methods will be used to connect to that audience. I will leave this initiative with the incoming committee.

We have been successfully pre-selling 'Playhouse Nights' where we sell a full night at a discounted rate to a group who can then on-sell the tickets. This has predominately been used by groups for fundraising.

Last year ETS offered an Annual Season Subscription for pre-purchase. This provided tickets to all four main bills for the year, priority bookings and a half price glass of wine for each show. The offer was made prior to the published 2016 calendar and there were no subscribers.

Programme & Directors: The ETS Programming Committee is appointed each year following the AGM. These committee members are required to read through all the plays submitted, research potential plays and open discussions with potential directors to see if they would be keen to submit a play for the following year. The outgoing Programming Committee has received a number of enquiries for 2017 to pass on.

It is recommended that the incoming committee strive to finalise the 2017 program early enough to hold a preview evening in September this year. The aim would be to present this to groups who may consider pre-purchasing a Playhouse Night and to those on the mailing list who are considering purchasing an Annual Season Subscription. This would also provide an opportunity to invite local businesses with a view to obtaining sponsorship for individual productions.

Venue: We often entertain thoughts about ETS owning its own purpose-built premises. It is a challenge sharing the space with other hirers, especially during the season. It also means our rehearsal schedules become inflexible if extra time is needed to complete sets or hold additional meetings etc. On the other hand, we are very aware of the benefits of hiring this venue from Auckland Council. Not only does the council provide the theatre at a heavily discounted rate it also pays for power, provides cleaners and maintains the building. These are expenses and manpower that other community theatres that own their own premises find quite onerous.

I would like to thank Rona Colbert and our Patron Desley Simpson for facilitating our relationship with the council as they both work exceptionally hard on keeping the frustrations of working in a shared venue to a minimum. Actually, they both work tirelessly on a number of things for the theatre but this seems the best place to say thank you.

Community Theatre Interaction: ETS is a member of Theatre NZ and as a result of an initiative a few years ago regular meetings were set up where committee and members of local community theatre groups could discuss common issues. These meetings have led to great interaction between the theatre's and it has opened the door to sharing each other's resources. Each theatre took a turn at hosting the meetings and although ETS didn't have a venue to provide we were fortunate that Dolphin Theatre allowed us to host a meeting in their foyer. I would like to thank our fellow theatre organisations with special thanks to Dolphin Theatre, Theatreworks Birkenhead (Mairangi Players) and Howick Little Theatre for allowing us easy access to their wardrobe, props and furniture stocks. This has enabled us to borrow rather than hire and we have been happy to reciprocate where possible. Unfortunately, these meetings fell off in 2015 so it would be nice to see them reactivated.

Assets and Maintenance: In our quest to see an improved system for setting up and dismantling the racked seating and the general comfort of seating we approached Auckland Council to see if there was the possibility of a feasibility study. We feel the best way forward would be to look at our options, obtain a few proposals and then open discussions with the council. This is a work in progress and I leave it in the hands of the incoming committee to continue pursuing.

Oh dear – I think I said that last year. This just reiterates the need to strive for a larger production team pool to allow the committee members more time to work on the society rather than in the theatre.

Summary

Ellerslie Theatrical Society Inc. is very healthy. In keeping with the John Steinbeck's quote at the beginning of my report there are some exceptionally tough and devoted people keeping theatre alive and well in Ellerslie. Thank you to everyone involved with the productions and management of the society in 2015. You are the nuts and bolts of ETS and it wouldn't be here without you.

Addendum

The Management Committee are recommending three members for Life Membership. This is not taken lightly by the committee and is in special recognition of the outstanding contribution from an individual and the impact of their membership of the society.

Rex Steele had been the longest serving committee member of the society. He has worked tirelessly on a number of roles within the committee including Treasurer and Membership Officer in addition to toiling at set builds, acting on the stage and at times directing. Rex will be directing Noel Coward's Waiting in the Wings later this year.

Rona Colbert has been a long-time member of the society and a stalwart member of the committee. She has held the position of Treasurer for some years. We have dominated the storage areas of her house for just as long not to mention using her house for meetings – even when she is not there. Rona's ongoing commitment to obtaining our bar licenses each year is admirable.

Jocelyn McQuaid has been an active member of the society and until recently was a committee member. Her attention to details for costuming and props would be hard to beat. She is a member of the programming committee and spends her personal time walking the streets of Auckland handing out flyers. She has also been presenting the annual plays to various retirement homes to encourage group bookings.