



Newsletter 13a

Spring 2016 (Supplement)

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Residents Resurrected - 'The Play That Nearly Went Wrong'

A Friends Newsletter Supplementary article by Ros Clow

In April I emailed everyone who had been involved in "In the beginning..." and "The Tragedy on Enborne Road" to tell them that we were going to do a new production at the end of October and were they interested. Everyone except Max that is; I couldn't face driving him home to Compton after every rehearsal and anyway he has never given me back my son's black boots!

My plan was to give everyone months to learn their words and to double cast each role, each actor performing twice i.e. four performances. Ever the optimist. Straight away Robert Spalton said he would be on holiday but the others expressed an

interest. Several replies saying 'yes' had the proviso 'as long as they didn't have to learn any lines'. Most pleasing was that Nick Canes our technician par excellence for the first performance of the Tragedy was going to help us again.

A friend of mine, Lydia, had just retired and was keen to be involved. I later discovered that she had always wanted to act but her father wouldn't let her go to drama school. Instead she had worked for BBC Drama before I met her. At this stage the script for Sarah Louisa Hopson was finished and as Lydia and Sarah were both born in Northumberland it seemed a match made in Heaven as indeed it was! She was terrific in every performance

It was suggested that we try to use the New Era theatre for the production and eventually I met with one of the committee and was given a guided tour of this converted church. It was perfect: intimate; back projection set up; an area to run our own bar; parking; even a prop and costume store in the attic. But they wouldn't let us use it so I was glad we had made pencil bookings at the Phoenix centre, even though it isn't the easiest place to use.



By June 10th the five scripts were out and the play was cast – or at least I thought it was. It wasn't double cast, that idea faded early on, but I did have someone for all six roles. No-one threw their arms up in horror after receiving the script so I began to feel relaxed. Later I began to realise that not everyone had read the script at this stage!



On July 9th I asked everyone to meet up in the Chapel so I could give an overview of what we were doing. By this time Garry Poulson had reluctantly dropped out for health reasons, but I had feelers out for another actor with New Era and through Michael Huxtable (MH), who by the end should have been credited as casting director. At this

first get together were Michael and Sue Huxtable, Barry Digby; Michael Ferris, Peter Cox, Thomas Buckingham, John Gardner and Dave Stubbs.

Paul Shave joined the cast as Ryott replacing Garry; he looked uncannily like Ryott's father! And then they began to fall like flies. Sue landed a role at the professional Watermill production of 'The Lady Killers'. Steve Counsell was away in Canada but asked to be excused as he wanted to go walking in Iceland with his daughter and the best time was the end of October. MH found me Derek Gale who was willing but didn't think he was able enough to play Finn. I met up with him at Cobbs at Hungerford (he lives near Faringdon) and by the time I came home he had done a deal with Paul that Paul would play Finn and Derek would be Ryott. I am not sure he knew that the Ryott script involved saying 'nigger', but Paul did!

Phew, I had a complete cast again and could go off on holiday having a venue, a brilliant technician and a cast and crew all set to go.

15th July was the last time I heard from technician Nick! He stopped replying to emails; as time went on Brian twice went round to his house and eventually was told he no longer lived there, he had moved to Basingstoke! We never heard from him again!

Luckily our technician Thomas, from the second production of the Tragedy, suddenly appeared out of the ether at this point saying he would like to help. He had been away and was on a Gap Year and would be back in Thatcham. Saved again!

Early September Michael Ferris was in contact, his daughter who lives in Vienna, was in the middle of a marriage break up. It turns out she has been married to a drug dealer for 10 years

and he now wants a divorce! She found a hand gun and two plastic boxes of white powder in their cellar; what really annoyed her was that he had used her Tupperware containers! Inevitably the court case was scheduled for the weekend of the play. Casting director MH to the rescue again. Mike Brook had been in the cast of *The Tale of Two Cities* at the Watermill and at this juncture stepped in to take on the role of Richard Goddard, the publican, not teacher as stated in the NWNNews review!



Late September Peter Cox, who was to play the role of Victor Corden, announced he needed a holiday and he was pulling out too. Over dinner in town I broke the news to husband David that he was to operate the epidiascope that we had not yet found. I waited till he had had half a glass of wine. "How many words do I have to learn?" "None". "I'll do it". The search for the epidiascope started in earnest. We found it, or at least the lens for it, on eBay located in Eastbourne. By chance we were going to Eastbourne to visit our son (bootless son) mid-October and were able to pick it up and save on postage.

I had always planned to use a narrator to provide links between pieces and in late September hit on the idea of using Dave Stubbs and Brian Sylvester as the Sexton and the Grim Reaper. Both had wanted involvement but felt unable to learn lines. This proved to be correct! When Wikipedia informed me that the term Grim Reaper was first attested in 1847 (the year the cemetery was founded) I was certain it was meant to be. Last minute revision of lines on Saturday night meant we were treated to the first ever Grim Reaper to appear wearing spectacles. "He looked like a panda!"



In the background beavering away were Julia Radbourne and Jan Budgen making costumes: the workhouse outfit, sexton's waistcoat, Hanington's cravat and collarless shirts; the Grim Reaper's habit. Jan made the blackface makeup properly from champagne corks – it worked perfectly - and emptied her house to provide the sets. David made the epidiascope from the lens and a cardboard box. It must have looked authentic as more than one person thought it was actually projecting the

image on to the screen. Jan and David used the Chapel to assemble the room divider screen and Isabel Carmona-Andreu used Town Hall illustrations provided by David Peacock to create the background for the Goddard monologue. We begged, borrowed, bought and hired from New Era, Hungerford Arcade, KATS, a church in Uxbridge, Oxford Charity Shops, the Rural Life Museum and unsuspecting members of the public.

Rehearsals were under way in October. It went fairly well on 7 October in the Chapel except for the Minstrel sketch, which didn't go well – this is an understatement! Derek, Thomas and I worked very hard over the next three weeks to make it work. I had written it and thought it was hilarious but not everyone agreed. Was it too different? Too shocking? Of course we did spend a lot of time discussing the use of the word 'nigger'. There is no doubt that this is the language that would have been used in this situation in 1867.

What do you think? Do I look authentic?

Authentic? Authentic what? You look like a nigger, one of those Christy Minstrels!

Hoorah! Exactly! I think this should be our next dramatic production

After long and good discussion the day before the Technical Rehearsal we decided that we would play it as written. But Derek, who after all had to say it, referred to the Watermill for more guidance, and replacing 'nigger' with 'blackface' was suggested. Was that a term that even existed in 1867? I emailed the two professors I had been in contact with as I developed the script. A Monday morning and they both came back within 10 minutes; their suggestion was 'blackface clown' so that was what Derek said in the performance. I am still not sure that this whitewashing of history was the right decision.



Newbury Choral Society had also had second thoughts when we asked them to record two Christy Minstrel songs to use as overture and at the end. 'Close the Shutters, Willie's Dead' was not controversial and we did use it three times in the performance, but 'Rosa Dear' offended sensibilities and a Bowdlerised version was recorded with lyrics such as "And de sun when he sets in de yaller west, A sighin for de darkies to go to dere rest" removed. We did not use this!



And so to the technical rehearsal. I still had hopes that Nick would turn up as promised but he didn't. The Phoenix Theatre is a fantastic resource for the community but having spent a huge amount of money on equipping it West Berkshire Council made the technician in charge redundant which means that when you use it you can't be sure that anything works. This time the curtains were all tangled up. I wasn't told about this till later. Old Age Pensioners climbing up ladders to pull down cables is not an ideal situation! There was no way to turn on the ceiling mounted projector without climbing up another ladder. There is only one main connecting cable which has to be moved to use the gallery equipment and then put back each time for the people who use the theatre the next day. And we had intended to add atmosphere by using the

smoke machine when the Grim Reaper appeared but the last time it was used it hadn't been cleaned properly so we didn't have enough time to learn to use it before the performance.

Thomas R did his best but it was hard work, the rehearsal took ages longer than expected because we were so late starting. John Gardner gave up taking his grandson to the Corn Exchange to be there to help us (this is called supererogatory professionalism) standing in for the Grim Reaper who was at his son's wedding. I played safe this time by operating the computerised visual presentations myself.

Thomas R didn't do his best at the Dress Rehearsal because he forgot to turn up! Luckily for us Paul Biddis had come from Reading to assist Thomas (he helped last year). Paul ended up doing the best he could which actually was very good. At this stage we still had no prompt. In the end the actors all helped each other. During the Dress rehearsal one of the very heavy screens fell over and destroyed one of Jan's Victorian chairs but other than that all went to plan.

All the actors in full costume and make-up had been down to the cemetery before the dress rehearsal to have their photos taken by a motley crew of photographers from Newbury Camera Club and the U3A Photography group. These photos turned out well and were on display in the Foyer for the Friday night performance. The other problem with using the Phoenix is that all users have to be out by 9.00pm, when Security comes to lock up. And we have to have someone in reception whenever we use the place. This doesn't seem to apply to other groups as was evident on the Friday where we shared the facility with a Swings and Smiles Halloween Party. As our audience arrived they were trampled by tiny skeletons and

witches, one or two having to be rescued by Maureen Hudd as they flew out on to the main road. Maureen had master-minded Front of House, car parking and ticketing.

There were so many times the play could have gone wrong but the Friday evening performance went really well, the Halloween revellers having gone home before the performance started. Rita Gardner and Church Vintners provided pre-performance refreshments and feedback has been good. One hiccup was the supportive but totally inaccurate review in the paper the following Thursday. Did he fall asleep?



The Saturday afternoon performance also went well and maybe the actors were all getting a bit too confident? The evening performance was the worst of the three. MH's William Corden The Younger, dosed up on cold remedies, missed out several paragraphs of his script causing me and Victor a dilemma as we had to pass over several slides scared stiff MH would realise and then go back on himself. He didn't and most members of the audience didn't notice the lightning changes. I don't think MH realised he had missed anything, the script was too long anyway! Thomas Buckingham as Hanington missed a couple of his lines and threw Derek momentarily. I was prompting and they were soon back on track.



And it was all over. John and Rita hosted a wonderful Cast Party, having also fed us between performances. Not everyone came which I think is always a shame but those of us who did were able to wind down.

Now the accounts have been drawn up it looks as if we broke even, which is what we had wanted. All of this is

about *'Bringing a Victorian Cemetery to Life'*. We plan to perform the monologues again in June 2016 in the cemetery.