

# **Salisbury Playhouse**

## **Written by Arthur Millie and Jane Ware**

### **In the beginning there was a chapel.**

This was built in Fisherton Street by the Primitive Methodists in 1869. They continued to worship there until in 1915, the trustees were informed that the building was unsafe due to damage caused by constant flooding.

The premises were then sold to Mr. Albany Ward who reported that he wanted to convert the building into a garage. Considering that he was a great pioneer of motion pictures in Salisbury and the Methodists were not very enamoured with this new form of entertainment, it was rather naive of the trustees to believe him and it wasn't very long before he had spent the vast sum of £700 converting the building into "The Picture House."

This cinema duly opened in December 1916 and it became very popular particularly after the Rank Organisation took it over. However, as many other larger cinemas opened up in the city a decline slowly set in and "The Picture House" closed its doors in September 1937 as "The New Picture House" opened next door!

The Rank Organisation put the building up for sale but nobody wanted to buy it. However, as war was spreading throughout Europe, the military authorities were on the lookout for useful buildings to requisition and for a while the building was used as a Drill Hall for the Territorials and then as an Army Recruitment Centre.

The old building needed rescuing and a saviour appeared in the form of Basil Dean who was in charge of ENSA (Entertainment and National Service Association). The association took over the building and the Royal Engineers transformed the old picture house into the Garrison Theatre, Southern Command.

### **The Garrison Theatre**

This duly opened on 11th October 1943 with the gala show "You Asked For It." The first play produced at this theatre was "Night Must Fall" which was directed by the author Emyln Williams who also took one of the leading parts. This was closely followed by "Blithe Spirit" and Noel Coward himself came down from London to produce it.

Price of admission was kept low, 6d for officers and 3d for other ranks and occasionally one civilian friend per man was allowed in.

This was a wonderful training ground for actors and entertainers and many who performed there were just starting out in their professional career but soon became household names such as Peter Ustinov, Edith Evans, Flora Robson, James Mason, Glynis Johns, Eric Portman and Bryan Forbes. Even Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh made personal appearances in two Anglo-American troop shows.

The local servicemen now had something to counteract the fear of war and the monotony of training and they went to see plays, ballets and concerts perhaps for the first time and discovered that they actually enjoyed what they were seeing - even though they often referred to ENSA as Every Night Something Awful!"

### **The Arts Theatre**

When the War ended, ENSA relinquished the lease on the building and the Arts Council took over the running of the theatre. It was named the Arts Theatre and was officially opened in 1945 by Beatrix Lehman.

The theatre had a bumpy ride during those early years trying to survive many a financial

crisis as well as a punishing schedule touring to many local towns. Eventually two companies were formed to take it in turns to perform in Salisbury and to perform on tour. Unfortunately, the touring policy proved too costly and in 1951 the Arts Council withdrew from the management of the theatre. Fortunately, a group of local enthusiasts under the theatre's chairman, Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox, formed a non-distributing company and the theatre was saved.

During this time several actors, who were later to become household names, joined the company including Prunella Scales who joined in 1952 earning the princely sum of £8 a week.

She was in several plays with George Baker who was also involved in a short season when the company performed in Carlisle where Leslie Phillips directed some of the plays.

The theatre remained the Arts Theatre until 1953 when, under mounting criticism that the word "Arts" could be putting off a lot of local people and servicemen it was decided to change the theatre's name. There were many suggestions including one from the Home Office who suggested it could be called "The Salisbury Coronation Theatre", as it was coronation year.

A member of the Board, Mr. Vizard said that the name "Playhouse" told everyone what to expect so the theatre was re-opened as "The Salisbury Playhouse" in July 1953 with a performance of "Lilac Time".

## **Enter Reggie Salberg**

In 1955 the General Manager, Michael Wide felt it was time to move on and he mentioned this to an old friend of his called Reggie Salberg. Reggie invited himself down to see if Salisbury was appropriate to add to his collection of theatres having already managed several companies including Preston, Penzance and Hull.

At his interview there were two remaining candidates. Reggie got the job by one vote. But it was a fluke as one of the directors thought he was voting for the other candidate when he cast his vote for Reggie!

At the age of 39 Reggie knew he was about to face his greatest challenge but he quickly saw the potential in Salisbury.

Reggie had inherited a very popular theatre but it was housed in a building that had already been condemned years ago when it was a Primitive Methodist Chapel!

Roger Leach, the actor recalled: "Backstage at the old Salisbury rep was dreadful. It was like the wartime spirit. Coal was kept in the corridor on the left hand side of the stage, so we had to be careful of our costumes when we made an entrance.... We used to get in and out of the wardrobe through a window and the wardrobe was always full of pigeon droppings because the roof needed fixing."

Rain was always a problem and one of Reggie's first tasks was to ask a lady sitting in the auditorium to take down her umbrella! It was then that he first dreamt of a new Playhouse.

Fortunately Reggie decided to stay and he transformed the Playhouse into a theatre with a national reputation. Reggie couldn't do much about the building but he could certainly improve the standard and the quality of the performances. When he started, plays were still being performed weekly with one inadequate week's rehearsal. However, by the time the new Playhouse was ready to open, Reggie's ambition to have three weeks' rehearsal periods and three week runs had come into fruition.

In 1961 the lease of the building which was still owned by the Rank Organisation was due to run out. Somehow the people of Salisbury rallied round and managed to find the

£6,000 to purchase the freehold of the theatre and a plaque was put up outside the building which states that "this building has been purchased by the theatregoers of Salisbury."

In 1966 the Playhouse celebrated its 21st anniversary with a performance of "Lock Up Your Daughters". But more importantly it marked the arrival of a young Alan Corkill to the staff as a Trainee Manager!

This was a truly golden age for the Playhouse as Reggie had a wonderful talent for keeping the accounts in the right colour as well as appointing excellent actors for his companies including Leonard Rossiter, Stephanie Cole, Jonathan Cecil, Christopher Biggins and Timothy West.

The people of Salisbury loved their theatre and actors were always happy to work there but the theatre was suffering from a long list of ailments with primitive conditions both for the theatregoers and for those trying to work backstage. A new building needed to be considered before the old Playhouse was no longer in a fit state to produce plays or simply to be occupied.

## **The New Playhouse**

After many discussions and much soul searching, in April 1974 at the Theatregoers' Ball, the Appeal for a new building was launched. Reggie wanted the new playhouse "to be built by a thousand people" and he was concerned that "the small men" would be able to play their part. So as well as donations and grants from the high and mighty, the people of Salisbury once again rallied round and the money came flooding in through a whole variety of activities including coffee mornings, fetes, covenants and raffles.

The building began to rise and in 1974 Derek Nimmo "turned the first sod" with the words: "I have never turned a sod before. I declare this sod well and truly turned." This was followed in 1976 by the laying of the Foundation Stone by Peter Hall.

It was an enormous struggle but the 3/4 million was somehow raised and the new building was ready to be opened on Tuesday 30th November by Alec Guinness.

The architect of the new Playhouse was Norman Downie and the design was based on the Mercury Theatre Colchester.

Many people did not want to see the old building demolished but because it was classed as a "building of great interest" whoever replaced it was instructed to keep the design of the front similar to that of the original building. Older theatregoers can now look at the present building and imagine they are looking at the old Playhouse.

Reggie Salberg decided to retire with the transfer to the new building as his dream had turned into a reality. The task of running the new Playhouse was given to Roger Clissold who had arrived some years earlier as a Trainee Director to work alongside Reggie.

Roger oversaw the opening of the Salberg Studio and he helped to establish Stage 65 with the Wiltshire Drama Adviser, Michael Pugh. They also established Theatroscope and T.I.E (Theatre In Education) which continued Reggie's vision of taking plays out to the provinces and into schools.

In 1981 Roger Clissold decided to move to Leatherhead and he directed his final

play: "Cider With Rosie".

On seeing a bonfire burning on the stage of the old theatre as it was being demolished, he remembered past productions and commented: "Perhaps that is the answer, to let the past go up in smoke and sparks - and to admit that we cannot tell what the future holds."

The future for the Playhouse however, came in the large shape and personality of David Horlock who arrived from Farnham.

Many theatregoers will remember with affection the large sprawling landscapes of such epics as "Far From The Madding Crowd." and "A Tale of Two Cities" and his collaboration on many a pantomime with Jack Chissick.

On Mother's Day in March 1990, David visited his mother in Pagham. Tragically on his journey home he was killed in a car crash.

His sudden death cut short a brilliant career and he was mourned not only by the Playhouse, but by the community of Salisbury, as he was involved in so many activities around the city.

Bishop John Baker in a service of thanksgiving for his life said that: "he crammed the suitcase of each day to bulging."

However, as they say, the show must go on and the task of repairing the Playhouse after this tragic event fell upon Deborah Paige. Unfortunately for many reasons the mantle proved to be too heavy a burden and after four years she resigned and the theatre went "dark".

Nevertheless there were several successes during her reign including taking "Twelfth Night" to China and introducing theatregoers to a young Ewan McGregor.

## **The Playhouse Re-opens and looks to the future**

After much frantic work behind the scenes which included the establishment of a new Board and grants for re-furbishment, the Playhouse was able to re-open in October 1995. Jonathan Church was appointed Artistic Director and Rebecca Morland was appointed Executive Director. The first time that the two roles were not covered by one person.

To revive a theatre's fortunes after a period of closure was a Herculean task. The Salisbury theatregoers were going to expect a great deal from these new appointments. They not only wanted security for their beloved theatre but also a new direction and a new vision. Both people in their quiet, determined ways they gave them that and more and put the smile back on the face of the Playhouse.

The Playhouse's reputation continued to rise in the millennium after the appointment of Joanna Read and then Philip Wilson.

In 2007 we saw the opening of the extension by Prunella Scales. This houses a rehearsal room and community space and is in constant use.

Then in 2011 Gareth Machin was appointed Artistic Director and the success continues. Those who saw his recent productions of "The Spire" and "Little Shop Of Horrors" will agree that the Playhouse is in safe and talented hands.

And now we move into an unknown but exciting future with the recent merger of the Playhouse, the Arts Centre and the Festival.

The old Playhouse used to be known as "the little theatre with the big reputation." The present Playhouse should be known as "the big theatre with the enormous reputation."

So many incredible memories it deserves an incredible future.