

THE AMATEUR STAGE

A Book of Modern Play Production

by

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and

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with an appendix

by

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Preface

WE hope that this book will prove to be a handy manual to which all members of a dramatic society, whatever their capabilities and experience, can turn with profit when in need of information. There are many books on Amateur Dramatics but none, we think, so comprehensive and so representative of the trend of modern practice. Further, we have approached the subject from a different angle; so many books write down to the amateur and discuss makeshift apparatus, but our method has been to describe the ideal which may be attempted by a few established societies and at the same time to indicate how satisfactory results can be obtained by those with limited resources. Moreover, we feel that we have something of real value to say on the special problems that confront schools, for it is not always sufficiently realized how far school societies must necessarily differ from adult societies, and it has been our aim to help the dramatic society to take its rightful place in the corporate life of the school.

We offer our thanks to Mr. D. J. Elton and Mr. E. J. Chambers for their technical advice, to Mr. A. H. R. Ball for his help and guidance and to Mrs. Mary Eastwood of the Northern B.B.C. Dramatic Society for her unfailing interest in our work.

Burnage High School
Manchester
January 1938

F. F. BROTHERTON
A. R. HOBBS

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CHAPTER I

The Organization of a Society

(i) *Preliminaries and Constitution*

THE strong point of an Amateur Dramatic Society should be, but seldom is, its organization. Most societies begin with a group of enthusiasts for the drama who get together in the 'Let's do a play' spirit and in the first fine careless rapture they overlook the need for a sound businesslike constitution. Only when some crisis occurs do they realize the need for having a thoroughly clear arrangement from top to bottom of the society. Should you be in the fortunate position to be able to form a new society with no traditions, good or bad, to restrict you, we suggest this basis of procedure.

(a) *The Chairman*

Having decided that a society can be formed and that a suitable hall can be obtained, the first job is to look round for a suitable person to act as chairman. He should be a strong personality, benign and yet able to command respect from all members and not himself likely to want to take part in the productions. He should hold the reins and keep the balance between various factions so as to prevent petty jealousies which so often spoil the fun of amateur societies. Too often he is either a figurehead who presides at meetings but has no control, or a moving spirit of the society, probably the chief actor and producer. In either case the chairman's valuable position as an unbiased mediator will be vitiated.

All this talk of jealousy and rival factions may seem to strike an unduly pessimistic note, but we must realize that amateurs are artists in their own way and liable to fits of what is known as artistic temperament. When a crisis arises, feelings are wounded and irreparable damage may be done to a very promising enterprise. All of which could have been avoided by sensibly facing up to the fact that an amateur society is a business proposition and should be tackled as such.

(b) *The Constitution*

Assuming that you have been fortunate enough to secure the services of an interested and capable person as chairman, a general meeting should be called of all who are interested. The business of this preliminary meeting is small. It is to decide whether the proposed society shall actually come into being and to elect a small committee to draw up a constitution and to elect officials. The general meeting may then choose to make such suggestions for the guidance of the committee as the name of the society and the names of suitable people for executive posts.

The constitution should set forth the aims of the society and the rules by which it is to be run. These aims and rules cannot be too scrupulously drawn up, especially if the society should wish to devote its proceeds to charity, for in that case the Commissioners of Customs and Excise have a right to see a copy of the constitution and insist that certain clauses be included in the wording of the constitution. These clauses state in effect that the objects of the society shall be the performance of plays and operas and the raising of funds for charitable and philanthropic purposes; that the net proceeds of all entertainments shall be devoted to charity; that in the event of dissolution any balance of

cash after realization of assets and payment of debts shall be handed over to charity.

A certain official, usually the secretary, should be appointed as the society's delegate and empowered to act on the society's behalf. It should be stipulated that the secretary, treasurer and chairman be present to form a quorum at any meeting of the committee. In order to save time during the preparation of a play, the secretary and treasurer should be empowered to ratify occasional incidental expenditure. Both the technical and the acting side of the society should be represented on the committee either by the elected officials or by co-opted members. If the producer is to be an outside man hired for any one production, he should be co-opted on to the casting sub-committee.

Concerning the formation of sub-committees, it would be possible, of course, to form small sub-committees from the committee to deal with refreshments, tickets, etc.; but in the average society this is quite unnecessary. Each committee member takes it upon himself to do one job in connexion with the show, unless the secretary is exceedingly efficient and can manage on his own. A casting sub-committee is, however, a useful addition to the committee and, provided that the producer is allowed a good deal of latitude, it is the best way of choosing a cast from among the society's members without hurting anyone's feelings.

(c) *Policy*

At its first meeting the committee should attempt to decide the following important questions upon which the success of the society may depend. Firstly, is the society to have any set policy in the type of its productions? By this we mean concentration on one type of play, not necessarily indefinitely, but for a certain period. A society might well decide to do a series of

Shakespearian or Shavian plays, revive neglected classics or concentrate on modern comedy. The advantages of such a policy are manifold. Should there be other local societies, it will serve to distinguish the works of the new society from those of its rivals and provide an adequate position for all in the one locality. People other than friends of the actors may be attracted, knowing that they will see a performance of a certain type and standard. The tradition of acting and technical achievement which can be attained by following a set policy will make future shows more easy to produce. Naturally a change of policy is advisable from time to time to prevent staleness and boredom. Conspicuous examples of societies which have made a name for themselves partly because of their set policies are the Maddermarket Players, where audiences expect to see costume plays expertly done, and the Rochdale Curtain Theatre, which gives unity to its productions by the continuity of its method of mounting plays.

Secondly, it will be necessary to decide upon the number of shows which it is practicable to present in a season. This number will vary, but the shows should not be spasmodic. It is best to begin quietly with one or maybe two shows a season. None but the most established of societies should attempt regular two-monthly shows. Allied to this question of the number of shows per season is the number of nights which a play should run. It is rather a pity to play on only one night. The overhead charges are often little more for two or three nights. If the hall is to be hired, it is wise to hire it for a week and to perform on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, leaving Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to prepare the stage and to hold a dress rehearsal. A full week's performance is possible if the society owns its own hall, but it is a strain on the average amateur to play every night in the week. At all events it is undesir-

able to split the playing nights over the week-end. Monday comes cold and unappetizing after the Sunday break, despite all logical argument that there has been a refreshing day of rest. Once the show has started it should go on lest imagination grows chill and flags.

Thirdly, is the society to attempt to interest the non-playing members with play-reading circles and lectures? This is a question for each society to solve itself, although it should be kept in mind that a valuable training ground for new actors is provided by these play-reading circles. One extra activity which it is interesting to adopt is an annual dance, whist drive and general social evening.

(d) *Officials and their Duties*

The Secretary. His is an unenviable task, which demands a certain type of enthusiasm. Fortunately such a person is always forthcoming in every society. His immediate duty is to convene meetings, record the minutes and see that the spirit of the constitution is kept. If he has no business manager or assistant, he must also see to tickets, programmes, refreshments, seating, complimentary invitations, payment of author's fees, engaging of firemen for the actual nights of the performance and arranging the occasional licence for the performance. It is he who takes out 'personal accident' insurance policies covering the entire cast and the 'supers' for dress-rehearsal and performances. This is an inexpensive and advisable precaution. It is as well if he keeps a file containing a typewritten list of the duties he has to do for any one show, in the order in which they require to be done. This file should also contain the addresses of printers and people who are to receive complimentary tickets, and also licence forms for blank-shot pistols and halls of occasional entertainment. This file is all the more important if a change of secretary is

made. Then there can be a continuity of work and no disastrous omission will be made.

Business Manager. This list of duties is heavy. Hence the need for a business manager if one can be found. The business manager should undertake all the clerical work which is necessary for a single show, leaving the secretary free to think in terms of the whole year's programme and thus to provide a feeling of continuity in the society's activities. The business manager should make it his job to interview printers and to secure adequate advertisement, either in local papers, if this is thought necessary, or by outdoor posters. When deciding upon programmes it is false economy to go to the cheapest printer. A well set-out programme of pleasing format is a valuable advertisement and also provides a souvenir which can be kept. The actual drawing-up of the programme should be done by the secretary, on the lines which the producer may like to suggest.

The Treasurer. If a society is to be run on an economic basis, the treasurer must be a sound business man. He should know the society's financial condition at any given moment and be able to advise the committee about its course of action in any production. He can never be a very popular official, especially with producers, but an earnest treasurer is worth a lot to a society.

The Producer. The producer produces the play. That is all he does, but this demands so much that he should be really keen and, what is more, capable. Keeness without a 'flair' for dramatics is not of very much use. However, the producer cannot adequately be discussed in this summary of the officials. He demands a chapter to himself.

The Stage Manager. The stage manager is the producer's right-hand man. He must be handy and able to produce a hurricane lamp or musical box almost as soon

as asked. It is quite usual to find the stage electrician acting as stage manager. This arrangement works very well in a small society, for while the duties of neither are so onerous as to preclude one person from doing both jobs, it is an advantage to have one person with his thumb on the whole stage equipment. The stage manager should definitely be systematic, clear-headed and very sanguine. When the play is actually in progress on the stage, he is in complete control—lights, scenery, hand properties, even costumes—and should be able to check every point from the script which the producer has given him. A good stage manager can improve the best of performances and can most definitely pull through a performance that is tottering on the verge of collapse. Under him he should have a group of helpers, stage hands, effects men and the call boy. At convenient times during the rehearsal he should marshal his assistants on the stage for preliminary runs-through of their duties. This should not be left to the producer. Besides superintending the setting of the stage scenery, the stage manager should attend to the placing of keys, letters, guns and trays which may be needed during the play, at the correct stage entrance. The stage manager should be full of little dodges which may help the performance to go smoothly, such as a drop of paraffin on candle-wicks to help them to light. Anything which has to be unpacked on the stage should be arranged so as to unfold easily and allow the contents to be extracted quickly. Since he is in complete control in the ‘wings’ during the performance, he should see that only those players who are waiting their entry on to the stage are present in the wings and that everyone else is out of the way. Most especially should he prevent anyone from leaving the stage and going into the auditorium, either during or after the show. A stage manager’s job is a very satisfying one. He sees the results of his

labours and is usually in the happy position of being quite prepared for the opening night.

These officials by no means exhaust the total number it is possible to have or that it is desirable to have in a large society. Wardrobe mistresses, property men, stage carpenters, etc., may all be needed, and if the society has a good membership, some of the non-acting members may like to take over a job of work behind the scenes.

Effects Men. Of all the stage manager's assistants the effects men are perhaps the most in need of rehearsal before the play. The finding of adequate means of producing realistic 'noises off' and the rehearsing of these noises, can do a lot towards producing a smooth and creditable show. It is necessary to rehearse these effects, not only in order to time them properly, but also to help the actors in their work and to accustom them to the noises which are to be made. If the society possesses a gramophone or better still a radiogram, sets of records can be bought which give a variety of noises: motor horns, sirens, traffic noises, bird calls, etc. The whole of the complicated effects of *The Ghost Train* can be hired in the form of records. There are easily made mechanical methods for producing the sounds of wind, thunder and rain. A wind machine is a wooden barrel with widely spaced staves (supported in a frame and provided with a handle so that the barrel can be turned). Around the barrel is looped a length of rough, strong canvas. The canvas is pulled taut and fastened to the frame. As the barrel is turned, the staves rub the canvas and produce a whirring sound like wind. Thunder is provided by a large sheet of thin gauge metal which is held by one end and shaken. Alternatively if there is a piano behind stage, and one can take the front off, a rolling thunder can be produced by hitting the bass strings with soft padded hammers, although this is not

very good for the instrument. Rain is produced by rolling lead shot on a metal tray. Carbon rods taken from an arc lamp and connected to the two sides of a circuit will produce a lightning flash, but this is a very dangerous method for the ordinary fuse, so we prefer the rapid flashing of flood-lights with 'steel' gelatines in them, off stage. The marching of soldiers can be imitated by placing two stage-hands shoulder to shoulder and telling them to swing their right legs in unison and to scrape the ground, without stamping. Care should be taken over small points which are very noticeable to an audience, and which are always criticized, rightly or wrongly. A country telephone bell rings differently from a town telephone bell which is on an automatic exchange, and the sound of a horse's hoofs does not stop suddenly when its rider dismounts—unless the rider has been thrown—neither does the engine of a car start up immediately the driver has left the stage.

(e) *Tickets and Tax*

One final point before we leave the organization of the society. The sale of tickets and the booking of seats must, in fairness both to the society and to the audience, receive meticulous attention. It is as disastrous to sell too many tickets as it is to sell too few. Schools rarely sell too many tickets for their hall, because with so many ticket-sellers available, there is no need to issue more tickets for any one night than the hall can hold. But amateur societies habitually over-issue their tickets, and quite rightly too, because there is more chance of persuading members of the public to come if ticket sellers actually put tickets into the public's hands than if promises are made to send tickets on later. As tickets are definitely sold the numbers should be given to the secretary to book on his plan of the seating accommoda-