

A Few Memories of the Theatre Royal Windsor in the 1940s

In August 2017, the actress Elizabeth Counsell appeared at the Theatre Royal Windsor for a special evening devoted to her father

"JOHN COUNSELL, THE FIRST IMPRESARIO OF THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR".

John Counsell ran the Theatre Royal from the 1930s to the 1980s. My own memories are from the 1940s when I was actively involved in a small way, as well as being a regular 'theatre-goer'.



John Counsell

By the start of WW1 in 1939, John Counsell, with his actress wife Mary Kerridge, had just about got the Theatre re-established as a weekly repertory theatre. John soon joined the Army. And Mary Kerridge was soon otherwise occupied with her twin daughters, born in 1942. So the staging of plays was largely in the hands of the 'permanent' staff led by Oliver Gordon. Oliver Gordon was actually O.G. Battcock who had been a quite well-known all-round cricketer. The war-time weekly productions were 'light-weight', with Oliver Gordon himself often playing humorous roles - especially in the pantomime season; the Theatre and Oliver Gordon were hugely popular.

John Counsell returned when the war ended, and Oliver Gordon left.

The theatre gave a lot of practical assistance to the Windsor County Boys' School, where school-plays were ambitious productions in which some parts were taken by girls from the Girls' Grammar School. I took part from 1944 to 1948. And that established a connection with the Theatre Royal from about 1946. In fact that was the year when Geraldine McEwan (at the County Girls' School, and exactly my age started her distinguished acting career with a small part at the Theatre Royal. Hugh Cruttwell was an Assistant Stage Manager there at the time. They married 7 years later, and Hugh Cruttwell went on to become Principal of RADA.



Geraldine McEwan
- a Windsor girl



David Willmott
- as Tobias

The 1946 School Play was "Tobias and the Angel". David Willmott played "Tobias" and I was "Tobit". A few months later the Theatre Royal staged "Captain Brassbound's Conversion. (Theatre programmes were fourpence!) The production was a coup for John Counsell, who had secured Flora Robson to play Lady Cecily. Packed houses resulted in an extension for a further week. David Willmott had a minor role as 'Muley' and I and some other boys were Arabs. David Willmott went on to become a quite well-known BBC radio announcer.



Flora Robson



Cyril Douglas

My own association with the Theatre continued in the pantomime season for several years up to 1951, operating stage lighting under Cyril Douglas, the Chief Electrician. I operated the 'lime-light' in several pantomime seasons - rushing up the stairs to the projection room behind the Gods just in time to fit new carbon rods and strike the arc as the curtain rose. Better paid than the 'perch' job. I think I got 6/6 or 7/6 per show (30 or 40 pence.)

There was also a season when I operated a 'perch' spotlight. I think that Polly Elwes was an Assistant Stage Manager at the time. Polly went on to a glittering career and married Peter Dimmock. Juliet Byam-Shaw, daughter of Glen Byam-Shaw and Angela Baddeley, was also working back-stage. And on one occasion she climbed up the ladder to join me on the tiny platform - obviously very distracting for a young man! I failed to slot in the colourwheel correctly and shortly afterwards it crashed down onto the stage causing minor mayhem. Was John Counsell watching from his spy-hole behind the gods? Would there be retribution? We heard no more.



Polly Elwes

I clearly remember all the actors in the permanent Company - but of course I hardly knew them personally. A few such as Patrick Cargill went on to fame