

Riverside AGM March 2009

2008 and has been a very difficult year for Riverside Players and one which won't be forgotten easily.

The year started well with our Spring Play "Local Affairs" by Richard Harris. This play brought many "firsts"

Jill Dady realised a life long ambition and for the first time took the director's chair, one of our "chorus only" members took on a challenging main character part and successfully brought it to life and for the production crew, it was three fully furnished rooms, in three different houses but only one stage. Lighting Roger's words still echo in my ears " what do you mean you want straight lines and no shadows!" The play got great write ups and those people that came to see it were thoroughly entertained. It's a shame that dwindling audience numbers meant we only made a marginal profit, the hard work put in by all involved in that show deserved a better reward.

I am lucky that so many members of the committee can multi-task because whilst all of us were focussed on putting together a great Spring Play we were conscious that we had no Summer Musical to offer and so behind the scenes, we were also making pleas to our friends, families, colleagues, Joe Bloggs in the street, anyone whom we thought might be able to help us, to come forward and direct. We had our backs up against it and it came down to the line. I had already drafted the email to our membership announcing our disappointment at not being able to stage a summer musical when I got the call from Vicki to say " Don't hit the send button, I think we may have a show" . And indeed we had, not only did we have a musical director but in one fell swoop we had also found ourselves 2 directors and one assistant director it was a dream come true. "Little Shop of Horrors" was to be the Summer Musical and rehearsals could get under way.

The summer months are always difficult for the committee because we have so many priorities that make demands on our time; work, families, personal stuff; it's a time when sometimes we just cannot put Riverside Players at the top of our agendas and so to have a full compliment of Directorial staff for the summer musical was worth celebrating. Our celebration was short lived, in our haste to get a show on the road we made mistakes, within two weeks we had problems. The director's artistic vision for the show was in danger of putting RP in breach of the very strict Performance License Regulations and poor communication had left some members feeling disillusioned. We had to take action and the fall out was not pretty, RP lost some very talented people. Lessons were learnt and very quickly the committee approved some "Guidelines and best practice policies" for all future show directors that aim to help anyone involved in directing, negotiate their way through the minefield of tasks and responsibilities that come with the job.

Once again it was "every available hand to the pump". We begged borrowed and stole. We called in more favours than we had ever done before. We put aside our personal priorities to keep the show on the road. As a committee, our special thanks must go to Sue Bell who was dragged into the seat of LSOH Director.

For any of you who came to see that show you would probably have been blissfully unaware of the traumas that had been overcome - what the cast & crew of LSOH achieved was amazing and my hat goes off to them.

Time flies and the summer was no exception. Everyone wanted Cinderella to be the best ever pantomime; we wanted to "Rock Old Windsor" like it had never been rocked before and to do that we had to put ideas into plans, and plans into action. In an effort to "catch up" the committee worked

through the traditional August break, each with a specific task or tasks to accomplish, to ensure that when the auditions came around, we were ready. Songs, music, script, costumes, scenery, props, stage coaches, colour themes, dress styles, fabric samples, dances, stage direction, young performers licenses, tickets, programmes, bar stock and magical moments all had to be thought through. As anyone who has ever been involved with a Riverside Panto knows – these things don't just happen overnight.

September came and went – so far so good, we had a blip in October when our leading lady unfortunately had to step down but with some re-jiggling of parts and a second round of auditions we recovered, but the hard year to-date was taking its toll and exhaustion was beginning to set in whilst the list of jobs to do grew ever longer. Suffice it to say that at the end of the dress rehearsal, two days before opening night, we still had a list of things to do and get.

It would have been very easy to say "let's just go with what we have" – no-one but the production crew would ever have known that it should have been different" but this was Riverside Players and this was panto and it was a panto we had dedicated to the memory of Pete Burgess, a long time supporter who had sadly passed away just a few months earlier. "Second best" could not be the mantra. In a last concerted effort to "pull it off" it was all hands on deck.

Cinderella was a phenomenal success; it was everything a Riverside Panto should be, entertaining; colourful; funny; lively; the collective effort of a group of very talented people. But Riverside Players would not exist if we didn't have an audience and increasing our audience numbers has to be on the agenda for 2009. Our bank balance cannot sustain the higher costs of running 3 productions a year with the lower income revenues from dwindling audience numbers for very much longer.

As I look back at my year in the Chair I liken it to that of the ill fated Apollo 13 mission to the moon. I started the year full of enthusiasm and energy. We had fresh blood at mission control, and though I knew there would probably be challenges, it would be a good year, a profitable year, a fun year. Nothing could have prepared me for the malfunctions that beset the journey and on more than one occasion I found myself asking the questions, "why am I doing this? what is the point?"

Everyone had worked incredibly hard but it had always been two steps forward and three steps back and then, just as I thought we would land on the moon, we had reached the final performance of the 2008 Riverside Players' calendar, the fates intervened and threw us one almighty curve ball.

At 5.45pm (or there abouts) the Memorial Hall and all who travelled in her were plunged in to darkness – we had a power cut. It was a horrible situation to be in, no idea when the power would return and no opportunity to re schedule the final performance for a later date. It was everything, something or nothing but a decision had to be made, time was running out. As our audience sat in their cars in the pouring rain waiting for a "yeh or nay" I took a step back and looked around the hall and in the semi darkness of the emergency lights, I found the answers to the questions I'd been asking all year. "Why am I doing this? What is the point?"

I saw little Ellie Welsh sat quietly in the corner trying to hold back the tears as the realisation hit her that all her family and friends, all of whom had booked tickets for the final performance might not get to see the show.

I saw Carol patiently talking to the youngsters, reminding them to keep in the hall where we could see them.

I saw Jill, back from the shops with a bag of candles, lighting up the bar.

I saw my husband Wal, a man dragged into the panto with heels kicking and promises of curry dinners forever, sat with his head in his hands, the sparkle gone, exhausted, shattered, so utterly disappointed that it might all just end like this.

I saw Sue Pickles on the phone to the power board demanding to know when we would be switched back on.

I saw Val & Dodger, valiantly explaining to those audience members in the lobby, what was happening and why we couldn't let them in.

I saw Vicki, working out what scenes & songs could be cut from the show to ensure that if we did go up, we would be finished by a reasonable hour. We had our young performers to think about and it had already been a long day for them.

And I saw Roger, Mark & Simon, huddled together working on a plan involving car batteries, by passed circuits, extra wiring and a few knobs to get us lights on stage.

Why am I doing this? Quite simply because I - we have all made a commitment to our supporters to provide entertaining shows. On the good days we enjoy it, on the bad days we grin and bear it.

What is the point? The point is – it's not just about me, it's about all of us, the committee, cast, crew, audience, family and friends. Riverside Players have passion, creativity, energy, and integrity; in the darkness of the power cut, at 8.30pm we made the decision. We had no music, no lights in the dressing rooms and only one bank of static lights at the back of the stage but we had talent, incredible talent and we had an audience who were in full support of our decision to "just go with what we had".

That final performance was not the one we had been planning for, it was not the one we had rehearsed and rehearsed, it was not as good as it should have been, maybe it was "second best" but as the memorial hall rocked to "We are the Champions" and the curtains closed on a standing ovation I thought back to that afternoon, 5.45pm (or there about) when disaster struck and thought..... this was our finest hour.

So as I step down from the chair on behalf of all the members and myself, I would like to say a huge thank you to Roger and Doger, Jill, Carol, and Sue, Vicki and Simon - Mission Control - you gave us a year of unfaltering hard work - it was a job well done.

And so.... this is Pam Dyson signing off.... Over and out.