Agamemnon and After... the 'lost cause' that became the Oxford Playhouse


For the first time this thesis traces the history of the Oxford Playhouse from its beginning to the present day. I call it *Agamemnon and After... the 'lost cause' that became the Oxford Playhouse* because it was a production of Aeschylus's tragedy in 1880 by a student, Frank Benson, later one of Britain's foremost Shakespearean actor-managers, which led - fortuitously - to the theatre's launch in 1923.

Since J.B. Fagan staged the first successful production of Chekhov in England in 1925 most directors have contributed to Britain's dramatic heritage. Even the happy-go-lucky Stanford Holme, who took the Playhouse downmarket in the 1930s, has his niche in history for taking theatre to the people during the Second World War. A few, like Peter Hall, have achieved international stature.

Yet the Playhouse itself, though historians often mention it in the same breath as pioneers of the repertory movement like Birmingham and Liverpool, has never received full recognition - in part because its own records before 1956 have vanished, in part because of its ambivalent relationship with Oxford University.

By leafing through old journals, collecting documentary evidence, including missing programmes, and interviewing as many people as I can, I have pieced together the story of the last 83 years.

It has many surprising twists, but most fascinating, and complex, is the role the university has played, or rather failed to play. Central to my thesis is the contention that even from 1961 to 1987, when the Playhouse was the University Theatre, it was an ill-starred partnership: as I put it when I was *Oxford Mail* theatre critic, a shotgun marriage that ended in a messy divorce.
AGAMEMNON and AFTER... the ‘lost cause’
that became the OXFORD PLAYHOUSE

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Leicester

by
Don Chapman B.A. (Oxon)
Department of English
University of Leicester

June 2006
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Agamemnon... and after</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Tuning the Playhouse fiddle (1923-29)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Serving town as well as gown (1930-38)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: The war years and after (1939-56)</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Frank Hauser and the Meadow Players (1956-73)</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Anvil Productions (1974-87)</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postscript</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Word-count excluding acknowledgements, abbreviations and bibliography: 99,841]
Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to the director of the Oxford Playhouse, Tish Francis, and her former co-director, Hedda Beeby, for inspiring me to embark on this project and for their unfailing support during its long gestation; to my supervisor, Richard Foulkes, Professor of Theatre History at the University of Leicester, for his expert midwifery; and to all the many people, individually credited in the footnotes, who allowed me to record their memories of working at the theatre.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Meadow Players' former general manager, Gordon Stratford, for holding my hand while I explored the 100 boxes of company papers now in the Theatre Museum store at Olympia; to Richard Mangan, administrator of the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection at Greenwich; to Simon Bailey, the Oxford University Archivist, and the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford; to Carl Boardman and his staff at Oxfordshire Archives; to Malcolm Graham and his staff at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies; and last, but by no means least, to Chris McDowell, librarian at Newspaper House, Osney Mead, Oxford.

The collection of programmes and other memorabilia the late Louis Frewer collected while secretary of the Oxford Playhouse Guild has proved an invaluable resource. To it I have added my own collection and other programmes, memorabilia, etc. which I have purchased or been given, notably Arthur Brough's Playhouse correspondence (courtesy of his daughter, Joanna Hutton); Seph Colegrove's small but illuminating collection of papers relating to his time as Playhouse manager (courtesy of his daughter, Gillian Winsey) and Peter Bayley's letters from Nevill Coghill at the time of the university takeover.

Very few have refused my request for an interview. Ronnie Barker instead wrote me a four-page memoir. Judi Dench professed her willingness to meet me, but in the most charming way was always otherwise engaged - I suspect from reading John Miller's biography of her because she does not like reliving the past. Perhaps the most notable absentee is Dr. Nicholas Shrimpton, who was successively a University Theatre Curator, a University Theatre Board member and the university's first representative on the trust which was set up following the closure of the university theatre in 1987. I have received no response to the letters I have written to him.
Abbreviations

BADA  British and American Drama Academy
BDL  British Drama League
COTG  City of Oxford Theatre Guild
DALTA  Drama and Lyric Theatre Association
DC  Don Chapman
ESC  the English Stage Company (based at the Royal Court Theatre)
ETC  (Oxford University) Experimental Theatre Club
F  the Oxford University women students' magazine, *Fritillary*
JMC  (University Theatre) Joint Management Committee (initially Sub-Committee)
JOJ  *Jackson's Oxford Journal*
LEA  (Oxfordshire) Local Education Authority
MPB  Meadow Players Board
OC  *Oxford Chronicle*
OCDM  Oxford Council of Drama and Music
OJI  *Oxford Journal Illustrated*
OPAC  Oxford Playhouse Action (later Appeal) Committee
OT  *Oxford Times*
OUDS  Oxford University Dramatic Society
OUP  Oxford University Press
OWIDS  Oxford Women's Intercollegiate Dramatic Society
RSC  Royal Shakespeare Company
STOP  Save the Oxford Playhouse (campaign)
TC  the student magazine, *The Cherwell*, later newspaper, *Cherwell*
TI  the student magazine, *The Isis*, later just *Isis*
TOM  the dons' journal, *The Oxford Magazine*
UTB  University Theatre Board
UTC  University Theatre Curators
YPA  Young Playhouse Association
Introduction

The Oxford Playhouse owes its existence to the prestige of the university city as a seat of learning, its chequered history to its fickle relationship with town and gown. Suppose it had become the university theatre visionaries dreamed of with a professional company staging plays for the language faculties and a professor supervising the efforts of students with theatrical ambitions. Suppose, like Bristol, it had under its wing a drama school, where men and women bent on a career in the theatre could learn their craft.

For 24 weeks of the year it might have managed. For the 28 out of term? Box office returns suggest it is a rare community where one per cent of the population are ardent theatregoers. Cities as large as Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield can provide enough patrons. Between 1911 and 1939 the Newcastle People’s Theatre, a group of raw amateurs, created one for a bill nobody could call lowbrow. Oxford with a far smaller population has always struggled. In 1954 if the City Council had levied the sixpenny (2.5p) in the £ rate the Government allowed it to spend on the arts, so small was its catchment area that it would have had £25,000 to share out, nearly £8,000 less than it spent on libraries. Nonetheless, commentators have persisted in regarding Oxford’s role as vital to Britain’s dramatic well-being. When William Archer and Harley Granville Barker published their blueprint for a National Theatre at the beginning of the 20th century they wanted trustees from Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities to serve on its board. After the First World War the British Drama League called for theatre faculties at the major universities; after the Second J. B. Priestley insisted there should be at least four: at Oxford, Cambridge, London, Glasgow or Edinburgh.

As I shall show, historically the university’s primary objection to the theatre was its corrupting influence on student morals: a view that resurfaced as late as 1960 when the

future dramatic critic of *The Guardian*, Michael Billington, fell foul of his Anglo-Saxon tutor for staging Nigel Dennis’s satire on religion, *The Making of Moo*. But nearly as widespread was the view that theatre was a time-waster. And both underpinned the attitude that it was at best an applied science, not worth the status of an academic discipline. Oscar Wilde might ask tongue in cheek:

> Why should degrees not be granted for... acting? Are they not given to those who misunderstand Plato and mistranslate Aristotle?^5

The dramatic critic of *The Times*, A.B. Walkley, thundered:

> You may suppose... play acting to be taken out of the hands of the OUDS and made a subject in the Schools with a Regius Professor... Would any sensible man like to see Oxford thus Americanized?^6

Even some dons, who were active in student drama, shared his disquiet. Peter Bayley, who chaired the University Theatre Fund, which led to the take-over of the Playhouse by the University, said:

> I was always opposed to the idea of there being a Department of Theatre... It would... destroy the quality of the best undergraduate acting... It would all be run by some bloke, probably not a very successful actor or producer.\(^7\)

This belief in the amateur has its origins in the system whereby Fellows run their colleges like monasteries. A don may at different times find himself laying down wine for the college cellar or choosing stone for the repair of its buildings. A determined professional like Ronald Hart-Synnot, first full-time Estates Bursar of St. John’s, to whom we owe both the present Playhouse and New Theatre, might exploit it. A purposeful don like Christopher Ball, the Warden of Keble who raised £250,000 in an effort to stave off the Playhouse’s closure, might rise above it. Lesser mortals, ensnared in the arcane procedures of academia, tried to make the Playhouse conform. Miss Elizabeth Sweeting, first administrator after the take-over in 1961, wrote of the Curators of the University Theatre:

> Oxford University, not having had a theatre before, used a term applied to other establishments not primarily academic.\(^8\)

What is more, they tried to run it like them. Richard Williams, who became artistic director in 1984 after helping Manchester University sever its ties with its theatre, was appalled by

\(^7\) Taped interview 13 July 2001.
Oxford's dilatoriness:

It was all happening in... committee... Nobody... got everyone together... to say how are we going to deal with this problem, how are we going to bring pressure to bear.⁹

The first Playhouse, which opened in 1923 in the former big game museum in Woodstock Road, resulted from the chance intervention of Jane Ellis, 'a young, obscure actress'¹⁰ from London, the present purpose-built theatre in Beaumont Street in 1938 from the largesse of Eric Dance, son of the Edwardian equivalent of Andrew Lloyd-Webber. Despite being the Oxford Mail's dramatic critic from 1959 to 1994, I was unaware of the former's existence when I agreed to write the Playhouse's history. I imagined it would prove hardly more taxing than the short history of the Oxford Mail I wrote in 1978 to mark the paper's 50th anniversary.

In fact, tracking Jane Ellis down, though it took twelve months, proved a minor problem compared to piecing together the first 33 years of the theatre. All the Playhouse's own records from 1923 to 1956 had vanished, a loss which no doubt explains why nobody had successfully completed the task before. It turned what I thought would prove an agreeable retirement pastime into a twelve-year labour of love and led me to seek the aid of Richard Foulkes of Leicester University, Britain's first professor of theatre history. Hence this thesis. On his recommendation I have dutifully read the various treatises on the semiotics of stage performance. But, as I hint in a footnote to my bibliography, 50 years as a practising critic, first as a trainee reporter in Keighley and Swindon, later after I retired from the Oxford Mail as an occasional reviewer for the Oxford Times, have left me feeling that the definitive guide to the subject has yet to be written.

In a sense the opus you are about to read is the tip of an iceberg. Sustaining it are the annual files of reviews, news reports and other documents I have gathered with the help of grants from Leicester University, the Playhouse, the Mackintosh Foundation and the Society for Theatre Research, the programmes I have collected (though sadly barely any survive for some years towards the end of the 1930s), and the interviews I have recorded, which now number more than 100. I have tried to do justice to the succession of talented

⁹ Taped interview 10 September 2003.
directors, designers, actors, staff and patrons who have enriched Playhouse history, to set
the theatre's contribution in context with what was happening elsewhere in the repertory
movement, to acknowledge where it helped to stimulate other initiatives. It is the university
connection which remains the most fascinating - and complex. Jane Ellis sent her graduate
boyfriend back to Oxford in search of a suitable hall because she thought 'culture should
flourish there.' In the 1920s J. B. Fagan got a host of academics to lend their names, but not
their backing, to his scheme to rebuild the theatre. In the 1930s the Poet Laureate, John
Masefield, made another attempt to revive his post-First World War dream of a university
theatre. In the 1940s - thanks to Peter Brook! - came academia's most astonishing flirtation
with the stage: the Oxford University Drama Commission.

When the university did finally bow to student pressure to provide them with a
platform and in the process relieve Frank Hauser of trying to make the Playhouse pay - a
task which he found no easier than his predecessors despite greater civic and Arts Council
patronage - it should have heralded a period of stability. In fact, the theatre's problems
multiplied as the Curators struggled to run an institution they never really understood. And
once the Thatcher Government introduced its swingeing cuts in university funding at the
start of the 1980s, divorce was inevitable. Revisiting the newspaper reports of the period,
most of which I wrote myself, I have been surprised at the vehemence with which I castigated
the university's protracted and ineffectual efforts to disengage. Those who worked for the
theatre shared my frustration. At the end of a four-day interview with Miss Sweeting, who
left Oxford in 1976 to become Director of the South Australian Arts Council, I asked if she
had a magic wand, how she would have run the theatre differently. She replied: 'I would have
taken it away from the university.'

\[11\] Draft among Jane Ellis's Papers. Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Greenwich.
\[12\] Taped interview 28 July 1999.
Agamemnon... and after

In 1922 the Oxford University Vice Chancellor, Dr Lewis Farnell, was strolling along the towpath at Henley Regatta, when he encountered three student violinists busking from a punt.

One was a socialist with the motto on his breast, 'I grab everything', the second a Russian Communist - Bludsky - with the motto, 'I smash everything'...the third... a tall, thin man wearing a mortarboard... with the motto, 'I ban everything.'

Farnell recognised himself as the last and dropped a shilling into their fishing-net. It makes an apt beginning, not just because he came close to stifling the Oxford Playhouse at birth nine months later. His contradictory character encapsulated academic Oxford's attitude to the theatre, his 54-year career spanned the struggle to get the city an arts theatre and the attitudes that bedevilled it, he wrote the most vivid account of the event which began it.

Commentators agree that drama played a role at the medieval university from its infancy. Students began staging plays in Latin and Greek in the 16th century. Tutors resented them wasting their time and the effect on their morals. In 1584 the university passed a statute banning common players. In 1593 Privy Council extended it to a five-mile radius. Shakespeare and others received money from the city to come and 'a sort of theatrical Danegelt' from the university to go away.

The rising tide of Calvinist sympathisers, which culminated in the closure of all playhouses in 1642, left its indelible imprint on academic attitudes, which the re-

---

establishment of two theatres in London following the restoration... did little to change. The great era of university plays and masques... of 'university wits' and playwright-director dons had vanished... to be followed by a dark age lasting more than two centuries.4

The Licensing Act of 1737 (10 Geo. II, c.19) limiting legitimate drama to the two London ‘patent houses’ and royal residences, prohibited the ‘playing of interludes' within Oxford and Cambridge universities. Another act in 1788 (28 Geo. III, c. 30) allowed provincial justices to license ‘tragedies, comedies, interludes, operas, plays or farces,' but did not apply within 14 miles of either. It was not until the Theatres Act of 1843 (6 & 7 Vic., c 68) that there was a major effort to resolve the anomalies, and that continued to treat the universities as special cases. No theatre could exist within 14 miles without the consent of the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor, to whom it gave the right to censor plays the Lord Chamberlain had enjoyed since 1737. Cambridge waived its powers in the 1890s. Oxford exercised them until the 1968 Theatres Act ended them. Though Farnell was their most active enforcer, others did not hesitate to invoke them.

Oxford’s population grew from 13,257 in 1811 to 20,710 in 1831. But there were no major industries and it took another 70 years to reach 49,285.5 Though the proportion of dons and students fell from a tenth to a twentieth between 1801 and 1861, the city remained under the thumb of the university as it had been since the St. Scholastica’s Day riots of 1355. In 1851 printing took four per cent of the workforce; domestic and allied jobs (serving the university) 27 per cent.6 For six months Oxford was a small market town with an unemployment problem. As a result, the growth of commercial theatre did not follow the pattern elsewhere. It was not until 1836 that the Theatre Royal, Oxford’s first dedicated venue opened in George Street, close to the site of the present New Theatre.7 Out of term it provided downmarket fare for residents. In term, it became the Victoria Concert Room, staging music-hall bills, frequently raided by the university police, the Proctors.8 Quality companies acted at the Town Hall or similar venues. Henry Irving said:

6 Victoria History. As above, p. 213.
7 Jackson’s Oxford Journal 8 July 1836.
8 Thomas F. Plowman. In the Days of Victoria. London: John Lane, 1918, p. 180. The Vic was officially out of bounds to students. But dons regarded it as a harmless nuisance.
Owing to the regulation that forbade theatrical performances... I saw Oxford only in the vacation, which was rather like seeing *Hamlet* with the part of Hamlet taken out.9

Brasenose spawned the first modern drama society.10 In 1847 it staged a burlesque of *Macbeth* at Henley Regatta, outside the 14-mile limit. Over the next 20 years other students made forays into drama. Then in 1869 the Vice-Chancellor decreed ‘there were to be no more theatricals.’11 A drag group, The Shooting Stars, had upset the authorities.12

By the time Farnell arrived at Exeter College in 1874, the student wanting to see plays had to go to London. Terence Greenidge likened him to Mussolini.13 Judy Mabro called him a right-wing misogynist, who ‘believed the University was Oxford.’14 He was not a philistine. With Victorian double-standards he admired past licence while damning his own age’s. ‘The... madcap of the tavern, [Prince Hal], was given to Shakespeare on real evidence, some of which would be found in the ancient proctorial books of our university, if they had survived.’15 Farnell confessed:

Stage thrills have been among my most valued moments... None has been so intense as that which seized me when the palace doors opened and revealed the Queen with the dripping axe standing over the corpses of the king and the prophetess. Benson... has never come so near to greatness as he came on that evening.16

The play was Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, the venue Balliol hall, the date 3 June 1880, the production ‘the first serious attempt in Britain, some schoolboy efforts aside, to perform a Greek play in the original tongue.’17 With a double First in Classics Farnell recognised its quality. Effectively it led to the launch of the Playhouse 43 years later. James Adderley, who founded the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS), wrote:

Though he never belonged... it was [Frank Benson’s] *Agamemnon* which did more than anything else to turn the attention of the Oxford dons from the imbecilities of the ‘Vic’ to the seriousness of real art.18
Benson was 21 and in his second year at New College. He had only the mummers’ visits to his home and a love of poetry kindled at Winchester to draw on. Adderley (18) was better versed. His family was noted for its amateur theatre week. When he arrived at Christ Church from Eton in 1879, he was shocked to find Oxford offered only the ‘Vic.’

The audience consisted of so-called Oxford gentlemen in their worst form. The occupants of the stalls never scrupled to pelt the performers with any nasty thing... in their hands or their heads.19

While he tried to promote drama, Benson read female roles for his college Shakespeare society and excelled as an athlete. He staged Agamemnon on a whim and chose Balliol because its Master, Benjamin Jowett, was a theatre buff. Having cast it with classicists and athletes, persuaded W.L. Courtney, a philosophy don at New, to join them, and himself chosen the plum role of Clytemnestra, he visited Jowett. ‘Do you know anything about Greek, Mr Benson?’ - ‘No, Mr Master, but I think it is about time I began.’20 It was. He was reading for classical honours, though he gained only a pass.

Farnell said: ‘I went... prepared to scoff; but... sat through it thrilled to the marrow.’ Others echoed his approval.21 They repeated it at Winchester, Eton and Harrow and for three performances in London. Irving and Ellen Terry invited Benson and George Lawrence, who played Cassandra, to visit them. Terry said: ‘Enlist under our banner.’ Benson ‘realised what his profession must be... began, in fact, to wonder whether he might not have a mission to reform the British stage.’22 Having won the three-mile race and with it the 1881 Inter-Varsity Athletics Match, he set about it, returning to Oxford with his Shakespeare company in 1883. Courtney got Jowett, by this time Vice-Chancellor, to licence the ‘Vic’. An amazed Oxford Times critic noted women, several wearing evening dress.23

Adderley pursued his own agenda. In December 1879 he started a club like the Cambridge ADC.24 He was president and secretary of the Philothespian Society, claiming in its minute book the university statute, banning funambuli, histriones or gladiatores (rope-

21 Benson said (as above, p. 125) ‘I treasure letters from Tennyson, Gladstone, Goschen, Browning, Millais, George Eliot and many others.’
22 Benson and the Bensonians, p. 11.
23 Oxford Times 27 October 1883.
24 The Amateur Dramatic Club founded in 1855 by F.C. Burnand.
dancers, actors or prize-fighters), applied only to professionals. Its first show in March 1880 consisted of comic sketches and John Morton's *Box and Cox*. The *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduate's Journal* hoped it was a good augury. In May it asked:

What has become of the Amateur Dramatic Club... Is it overwhelmed by the monologues of Mr Brandram, the Major, and Bret Harte? Actor replied it still existed 'but is systematically opposed by the university authorities.'

The Philothespians had seen the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Evan Evans, who told them: 'You may do as you like in your colleges... but publicly I forbid you to act.' A Cambridge student noted they had the ADC, but no 'regular theatre to which good London companies might be invited.'

We are allowed to have... Christie Minstrels &c, *ad nauseam*. We are even allowed to have Mr Brandram read a play of Shakespeare. But to see it acted... would be too great an abomination!

The Philothespians got no nearer recognition until Jowett became Vice-Chancellor in 1882. That term another undergraduate arrived at Christ Church from Eton. Whereas Adderley was only keen on amateur drama and became a clergyman, 19-year-old Arthur Bourchier wanted to become an actor. He became president and took the lead in Bulwer Lytton's *Money* at the Holywell Music Room.

Adderley and Bourchier tackled Jowett about recognition in 1883. He agreed provided 'performances should be in public and confined either to Shakespeare or the Greek drama; the ladies' parts should be played by ladies; no undergraduate should disguise himself in women's attire.' They began rehearsing *The Merchant of Venice* with Bourchier as Shylock, Courtney as Bassanio and his wife, Cordelia, as Portia. It opened in December at the Town Hall. Adderley was the prologue: an aged Doctor of Divinity.

...Eh! What's this? A poster - six by four! 'Permission!' 'Patronage!' 'Vice-Chancellor!' Stage plays in Oxford! There I go again, another muddle in my foolish brain...

He ended with 'an earnest wish that a proper building might soon receive the votaries of

---

26 As above, 6 May 1880.
27 Mr S. Brandram, M.A., recited *The Tempest* to a full Sheldonian Theatre on May 11. The week before Major Hughes Hallet declaimed *The Merchant of Venice*.
29 Mackinnon, p. 46.
32 Before the reform of censorship in 1968 all posters bore a surtitle: 'By kind permission of the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and the Mayor [later Lord Mayor] of Oxford.'
Thespis.' The Philothespians repeated the play at Stratford, Leamington Spa, Charterhouse and the Vaudeville Theatre, London, but their club with its layabout gamblers and soaring bills was not a good advertisement. Bourchier and Adderley decided to form another society.

OUDS' first meeting was in November 1884. Henry IV Part One opened at the Town Hall in May 1885 with Bourchier as Hotspur and Alan Mackinnon as Hal. Cosmo Lang, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke the prologue. Like Adderley, he was dressed as a Doctor of Divinity.

"...The curtain's rising - at this shrine of Science We meet to join in nuptial alliance Oxford, a bachelor praeclaro nomine, And the famed Grecian maiden called Melpomene... Her Virtue's self as pledge for her suffices, To him a sponsor generous our Vice is...

For better or worse, the university was tying the knot with the Muse of Tragedy. The author was the future Viceroy of India, George Curzon, then a Fellow at All Souls.

The authority whom Mr Curzon facetiously designates... 'our Vice', meaning Mr Jowett... has much to be answerable for... Before Oxford was within one-and-a-half hours' reach of London [by train]... something might be said in favour of... a theatre. There is... no excuse... now... A nuisance... is to be inflicted upon Oxford... for no other... reason than that Mr Jowett wants to catch a little cheap applause."

Most reviewers took a more sympathetic view. Oscar Wilde declared:

I hope that the university will take some official notice of this delightful work of art. Why should degrees not be granted for... acting? Are they not given to those who misunderstand Plato and mistranslate Aristotle?

Wilde returned to the theme when he reviewed Twelfth Night in February 1886.

I am led to hope that the university will some day have a theatre of its own... The dramatic spirit, though she has long tarried at Cambridge, seems to be migrating to Oxford.

Twelfth Night opened the New Theatre, beside the Vic. Courtney was the first modern 'theatre' don. He contributed to several journals, in 1890 joined the Daily Telegraph, and wrote a number of plays. In December 1884 he and Bourchier lent their names to an appeal for a new theatre. When the Vic proprietor, Henry Hatch, went to renew his licence, Jowett

33 OC 8 December 1883.
35 The Dramatic Review 23 May 1884.
36 Quoted Carpenter. As above, p. 43.
37 Collection of Oxford Theatrical Advertisements (M. adds 129 b 9), Bodleian Library.
opposed it as 'a highly dangerous structure in case of fire.' While not wishing to 'appear disrespectful,' the Magistrates granted the licence. Ten days later a group of businessmen met in the Council Chamber. Courtney said the university 'had not always been helpful.' A body with one object in view - 'training... men mentally' - would think that. But men needed their amusement as well as their study. The theatre would be 'worthy of Oxford... conducted on the lines of the best provincial theatres... and should at least [rival] the theatre... at Cambridge.' The plans were based on advice from the Mayor of Cambridge, W.B. Redfern, proprietor since 1882 of its Theatre Royal. Courtney said: 'I have tried [to interest] my friends... and if they will not support it... I am afraid the university... will not... subsidise it.' The businessmen were keener. In October the *Investors' Guardian* reported the registration of The Oxford Theatre Company. The shareholders were Thomas Lucas, the theatre’s managing director; Owen Grimbly, a local grocer; James Dormer, a brewer’s manager; Frank Twining, another grocer; and H.W.G. Drinkwater, the architect. Curzon also played a key role as Bourchier, by then a leading actor-manager, disclosed later.

Hatch died in October and in December 1885 the Vic was sold. Meanwhile, Wilkins & Sons battled to complete the 900-seat New Theatre. Of its opening, C.M. Howe wrote: 'The undecorated walls were streaming... No wonder one critic complained of the damp!' Jowett sat in the front row flanked by 'senior members... and ...critics from London.' Bourchier, who was Feste, spoke Courtney and Edward Armstrong, Vice-Provost of Queen's prologue.

...What's this? Where am I? Is it all a fancy?  
A product of some Eastern necromancy?  
...A brand-new theatre? Why then 'tis clear,  
My day is over, I've no business here.  
At last! Instead of Darkness shines the Day:  
Arise thou modern Spirit of the Play!  
(*Exit the Ancient Spirit of the Drama, enter Modern Undergraduate*)

---

38 Courtney wrote: 'the little Master rubbed his hands in glee over... getting rid of a plague spot.' As above, p. 63.  
39 OC 14 February 1885.  
40 As above, 28 February 1885.  
41 Of W.F. Lucas & Co., a firm of underwear manufacturers.  
42 'It... was not me, nor Jowett, nor Courtney, nor... Lucas that brought the transformation, but the present Chancellor, Lord Curzon... who with... diplomacy and perseverance, went from man to man in the abominable Council [the university governing body, Hebdomadal Council] (*laughter*) broke down the prejudice and obtained leave for... this building.' OT 20 June 1908.  
43 OC 17 October 1885.  
44 It closed in 1886.  
45 OM 21 February 1935.  
46 JOJ 20 February 1886.
I thought I heard some ancient voice invoke
The Modern Spirit. Can it be a joke?
No, everywhere around me signs arise
Of some new order dawning on men's eyes...47

More ventilation shafts had to be fitted and the rear gallery seats raised so patrons could
'catch more than a glimpse of the stage.'48 The Chronicle - victim of a spoof? - noted:
The first step has been taken towards developing the stage to a place among...
university studies... Further progress would be marked by making a 'pass' in
theatrical... knowledge a voluntary portion of the preliminary examination.49

To round off his Vice-Chancellorship Jowett invited Irving to lecture. 1,400 packed
the Examination Schools. Now a more liberal regime allowed students to see plays, he hoped
they would receive no greater moral injury than when allowed only the relaxation of comic
songs. 'Macready... said that "a theatre ought to be a place of recreation for the sober-minded
and intelligent." ...It is to be hoped [yours] will always deserve that.' Bourchier thanked
him. Jowett said:

Things we hear with our ears and see with our eyes make a far deeper impression...
than what we read... Some would ban drama, either because of the abuse and evils
associated with it, or because it gave too much pleasure. Those who say such things...
really take up arms against human nature. They do not see that there is a piece of the
drama in all of us... The influence of the theatre is indirect; it is not intended to teach
us that vice is always punished and virtue triumphant, but to present a fair picture
of human nature... [It] tends to permeate all classes of society, so that the condition
of the stage is not a bad index... of a nation's character.50

The Regius Professor of History, Sir Charles Firth, declared: 'The New Theatre
seems to promise a brilliant future to the drama.'51 The euphoria soon faded. Redfern, who
booked the plays, might offer better fare in term than Hatch did in the vacation. The same
companies came, except those staging Shakespeare, etc. now came to the New. In November
Benson paid his first visit. On November 5 he had his own firework: a matinée featuring
Beerbohm Tree, about to embark on his long reign as London's leading actor-manager.

I had to catch a train... to appear in London. Iago's last words are: 'From this time
forth I never will speak word,' but I had to leave the stage before my cue... so, giving
a whispered goodbye to Othello, I hurried from the theatre... As I was passing through
the stage-door I heard [Benson]'s voice ringing forth: 'From this time forth he never
will speak word.'52

47 JOJ, as above.
48 OC 24 April 1886.
49 OC 10 April 1886.
50 OC 3 July 1886.
51 The Oxford Magazine 17 February 1886.
52 OC 17 March 1905.
OUDS looked as if they would remain dumb too. *Twelfth Night* had emptied their coffers. In 1887 they did Euripides’ *Alcestis*, not a patch on *Agamemnon*, but it made £200. Mackinnon introduced ‘smoking concerts’ and for the next eight years staged the annual play, ‘giving the major parts to the same people... filling up the minor parts with... athletes.’ Irving’s son, Henry Brodribb, who came up in 1888, played Decius Brutus in the 1889 *Julius Caesar*, a walk-on. Nigel Playfair, who arrived in 1892, got a note offering him Sir Eglamour in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In next year’s *Tempest* he played Stephano, but only because J.B. Fagan left. Nobody noted the ‘smoker’ fare was no better than the Vic’s. Academic resentment festered. Of the 1891 *King John*, the Vice-Principal of Brasenose, Arthur Chandler, wrote: ‘The university is being transformed into a third-rate histrionic company.’

In 1892 the fire Jowett feared might engulf the Vic, damaged the New. It reopened in April with *The Middleman*. Beside such fare, it presented companies like Benson’s. From 1887 to 1904 it played host to Ben Greet’s Pastoral Players in Commem Week if they could not perform in Worcester Gardens. But Oxford was only 90 minutes from London. Dons and students went; and far from sating their appetite, it fuelled their dissatisfaction. While OUDS staged lavish shows and got cross when patrons moaned about prices, cognoscenti despaired.

The Shakespearean productions of Irving at the Lyceum and... Benson at... Stratford... may have stimulated a serious interest... The Ibsen campaign... caused new ideas to ferment in the brains of the younger generation. The... percolation into England of new... theories, such as those of Strindberg and Maeterlinck, was having its unseen effect. The fresh tone of dramatic criticism... particularly in Shaw’s essays, was rousing the dramatic conscience. There were the plays of Wilde. There was Pinero. There was Jones. There was early Shaw. [But] the... result of the nineties... is very slight in comparison with what was to follow.

Oxford got a taste in the vacations. In August 1901 the Elizabethan Stage Society gave its version of *Everyman* at a University Extension Delegacy Summer Meeting. In August 1903 its founder, William Poel, staged the first modern production of Marlowe’s *Edward II* at the New, providing a glimpse of theatre in the melting pot.

The... actors brought to their task elocution greatly above [that of] our Shakespearean companies, an obvious respect for the text of their author, and a desire to co-operate in the... illumination of his work rather than to blaze out as individual stars... Granville Barker’s *Edward II* was a fine... performance... Nothing could have been more

---

53 Carpenter. As above, pp. 46-47.
55 TOM 11 February 1891.
56 Benson and his company were the mainstay of the Stratford festivals from 1886 to 1916.
58 OC 9 August 1901.
impressive than... the gradual breaking down of Edward's spirit. One can imagine how a 'robust' actor... of a quarter of a century ago would have... stormed through these scenes and we may well be thankful... The audience was so concentrated on the play... that the meagreness of the mounting... passed almost unnoticed... Such... concentration would have been impossible if [they] had been dazzled with the... changing scenery and glittering dresses of one of... Tree's revivals... But is there not a golden mean between... Tree's tableaux and... Poel's faded curtains?\footnote{59}

The 25-year-old Edward was Harley Granville Barker. As director he was about to achieve the golden mean the Chronicle critic yearned for. William Archer had sown in his mind the idea of a national theatre. It would present a changing repertoire and offer budding dramatists more scope than the private Sunday shows of the Independent Theatre Society. With J(ohn) E(ugene) Vedrenne, he took the Court in 1904 and created a new style of acting, production and staging.\footnote{60} When losses forced them to give up in 1907 Lord Lytton told a dinner in their honour he hoped they would meet again 'to congratulate our two guests... on the completion of their experiment [to establish] a real National Repertory Theatre.' Sadly, they continued only briefly at the Savoy and, though Barker made another attempt with his wife, Lillah McCarthy, the First World War ended it.

The first effort to drag Oxford into the 20th century occurred in 1904. Students formed the Olympian Dramatic Club 'to do for drama what the United Club did\footnote{61} for politics. It soon developed loftier ambitions, financed no doubt by parents. Under its banner in 1905 Tree gave a matinée of Hamlet in the Town Hall. His company performed in drapes because 'Hamlet is the play of all others which most lends itself to a purely mystical treatment.'\footnote{62} A dinner followed. The president, Gervais Rentoul, later MP for Lowestoft, gave Tree an illuminated address; his father, Judge Rentoul, said he must have seen 40 Hamlets, 'but today was a miracle.' In Commem Week the club staged Robert Marshall's The Second In Command at the Royal County Theatre, Reading.\footnote{63} Few used the special trains. A venture in aid of the Royal Berkshire Hospital lost £40.\footnote{64} The Olympians faded, though Rentoul Junior played Angelo in OUDS' 1906 Measure For Measure, Petruchio in the 1907 Taming of the Shrew. Lily Brayton was Katharina: the first professional actress to appear with the club.

\footnote{59} OC 14 August 1903.
\footnote{60} In three years they staged 32 plays by 17 authors, 28 for the first time and eleven by Shaw.
\footnote{61} OC 17 March 1905.
\footnote{62} OC 10 March 1905.
\footnote{63} OC 30 June 1905. Naturally, the same restrictions applied to them as to OUDS.
\footnote{64} Reading Mercury 1 July 1905.
The Mermaid Society staged Milton's *Comus* in Worcester Gardens in 1904. The National Theatre Society from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, paid their first visit to the Corn Exchange in 1905 with plays by Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory. Companies brought Shaw, Maugham, and Ibsen to the New. 1908 offered a better example of how Oxford saw drama. The New closed for a facelifit. Charles Dorrill, who had succeeded Lucas, got Bourchier and his wife, Violet Vanbrugh, to stage the final show. The Vice Chancellor, Dr. T.H. Warren, graced the last night. Evelyn D'Alroy spoke Malcolm Watson's epilogue. She summoned the spirits of Robertson, Pinero, Barrie, Jones, Shaw and Shakespeare as proof that the Spirit of the Drama could never die and begged 'guiless grads' not to succumb to that 'thrice damned jade,' Musical Comedy.

They stood in a row... with the greatest composure until the entrance of... Shaw, at which they appeared overcome by excitement and whom they hustled off... after decorating... with ass's ears and a bunch of carrots. As [they] walked off, Shakespeare appeared and, at the suggestion of a national memorial executed a cake-walk... The mention of musical comedy brought on Miss Winifred Bateman as *The Merry Widow* and... William Burchill as Prince Danilo... [Then] amid the... plaudits of the audience, the Spirit of the Drama was greeted... by Mr Greenly, president of [OUDS], and the curtain fell to prolonged applause.

The new theatre, by W.G.R. Sprague, cost £10,000. Its circle, balcony and gallery were on cantilevers. It seated 300 more, had an asbestos safety curtain and a sprinkler. It opened in October 1908 with James Welch's company in *When Knights Were Bold*. The prologue, by the Magdalen classics don, poet and future Public Orator, A.D. Godley, was spoken by a former member of Irving's company, Harry Percival Riley.

...Townsmen or dons, whate'er their rank and station, all
Regard this stage as strictly educational.
Be London's theatres by plays defaced
Which mar the morals and degrade the taste,
You (let me emphasise the pronoun - YOU)
Howe'er so frivolous the piece you view,
Feel no anxiety, but know 'tis meant
For Intellectual Enlightenment
Because it first has satisfied the care
Of the Vice-Chancellor and eke the Mayor...!

---

65 *OC* 24 June 1904.
66 Collection of theatrical advertisements, as above.
67 *OC* 29 May 1908.
68 The Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Committee, formed that summer.
69 The musical comedy had taken London by storm the previous year.
70 *OT* 20 June 1908.
71 *JOJ* 3 October 1908.
72 *JOJ* 20 June 1908.
73 Collection of theatrical advertisements, as above.
A fortnight later a circular signed by six academics\textsuperscript{74} called for an Oxford Drama Society.

It is difficult to get plays of literary quality produced even in London... But there are a few repertory companies like Miss Horniman’s, or the... Irish Players... performances by which can be arranged, if there is adequate... guarantee.\textsuperscript{75}

Annie Horniman, granddaughter of the first man to package tea, had a passion for drama.\textsuperscript{76} She financed the first public airing of Shaw in 1894, built the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, for the Irish Players in 1904, launched the first repertory theatre in Britain in 1907 and recruited the Abbey stage director, Ben Iden Payne, to run it.\textsuperscript{77} He aimed ‘to do for the provinces what... Vedrenne and Barker have done for the metropolis.’\textsuperscript{78} His company had visited the New in March during the rebuilding of its base in Manchester, the Gaiety Theatre. The circular coincided with its second visit. The instigator was Gilbert Murray.

He fancied himself as a playwright.\textsuperscript{79} After failing with his own work, he made his mark as a translator of Euripides and Aristophanes. It was Barker’s production of \textit{Hippolytus} in 1904 that prompted Vedrenne to go into partnership. Murray’s friends included Archer, Barrie, Galsworthy and Shaw. An interest in the Vedrenne-Barker management gave him a foot in theatre. Academics viewed him as a later age would ‘television’ dons.

We get first-rate music... and it looks as if [t]here was an almost equal interest in drama if we could get good drama... I wonder if this could be hitched onto Payne, or if anyone else could form the nucleus of a stock company.\textsuperscript{80}

Barker responded:

As to your University Theatre, Payne is the natural solution. But I should strongly advise you to wait and see how he gets on... Drama costs more than music, remember.

Murray probably tackled Payne when he became involved with the company. In October it staged a matinée of \textit{Hippolytus} for the Classical Association at Birmingham.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{74} As above. The academics were the Balliol classics don, Cyril Bailey; the ex-Professor of Poetry, A.C. Bradley; the editor of the Oxford History of Music, W.H. Hadow; the Regius Professor of Greek, Gilbert Murray; the Merton Professor of English Literature, Walter Raleigh; and the University Lecturer in Modern English Literature, Ernest de Selincourt, shortly to become Professor of English at Birmingham.

\textsuperscript{75} OC 30 October 1908.


\textsuperscript{77} Ben Iden Payne. \textit{A Life in a Wooden O}. Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 54 and 73-76.

\textsuperscript{78} JOJ 21 March 1908.


\textsuperscript{81} Murray helped Lewis Casson produce it. Pogson, pp. 56-57. They also did a matinée at the New. ‘A crowded... house roared: “Author!”’ Murray said: ‘Unfortunately the author is dead!’ OC 6 November 1908.
If the Drama Society could get 5-600 members, it could persuade good reps to come for one or two weeks a year.

The extreme modesty of the proposal seems to indicate... scepticism [but if] support is forthcoming, is there any insuperable reason against a theatre... subsidised by the university, perhaps even some day by the municipality?82

By November 400 had promised to join. In 1909 Dr. R.W. Macan, Master of University College, became president.83 The society began operating before the Manchester company’s fourth visit in October. The treasurer was B(enjamin) Blackwell, the subscription half-a-crown. By going to his bookshop a fortnight before booking opened the 532 ‘members’84 could obtain cheaper tickets. In November Shaw spoke on the National Theatre project.85 In 1911 Barker read an act of his The Madras House.86 Small companies staged moralities like The Interlude of Youth.87 Major ones included the Irish Players, the Greek Players and Liverpool Rep. Appearances were deceptive. In 1913 it held its last meeting. Murray told the five members present subs had ‘declined’ from 75 in the first year to 45 in the last; bookings from £164 to £33. Most ‘members’ had never paid up, let alone bought tickets! They had rarely got good plays, and ‘in Oxford they had enough lectures.’ Five trustees would use the £116 left in the kitty ‘for the promotion of good drama.’88

Academic displeasure hastened its end. ‘One of the most attractive engagements’89 of the 1912 autumn term was to have been Stanley Houghton’s Hindle Wakes and Galsworthy’s The Pigeon. Oxford never saw Hindle Wakes. The Vice-Chancellor, Dr. C.B. Heberden, banned it. A mill worker spends a ‘dirty weekend’ with the owner’s son during Wakes Week. His parents insist they marry. Fanny refuses. ‘My husband, if ever I have one, will be a man, not a fellow who’ll throw over his girl at his father’s bidding.’ A tryout became a hit.90 Posters asking: ‘Should Fanny marry Alan?’91 produced packed theatres both sides of the Atlantic. Miss Horniman commented:

82 P.J.P. QC 6 November 1908.
83 TOM 4 February 1909.
84 Listed in Oxford Drama Society 1909. M. adds 41 e 8, Bodleian Library.
85 TOM 25 November 1909.
86 The Isis 27 May 1911.
87 TOM 10 March 1910.
88 OC 24 October 1913.
89 OC 11 October 1912.
90 Pogson, p. 125.
I will not insult any man by asking him to go against his judgement... I have paid my two guineas to the most revered censor and he has passed Hindle Wakes; I am not going to ask favours from any amateur censor.92

The Chronicle felt otherwise.

[It] will remind the public of... a... very despotic power... [It] is used very sparingly: but... often a précis of the plot is demanded or, if the play has been printed, the Vice-Chancellor has been known to read a piece.93

Heberden struck again when Payne’s own company came in 1913. Phyl’s author, Cicely Hamilton scoffed:

The Oxford undergraduate can come up to London when he likes to see what he likes. So I don’t think the Vice-Chancellor’s ban... will be very effective.94

Watcher was not so sure.

It must discourage managers from bringing original work... in fact, it is undermining what the Oxford Drama Society has been endeavouring to accomplish.95

The Horniman company continued to visit until the First World War, as did others like the Irish Players.

Dorrill watched Riders To The Sea one night, appraised the packed house, sighed and said, ‘I don’t understand a word of it, but can you... come this time next year?’96

He recognised the call for ‘new drama’ and tried to meet it between catering for downmarket patrons. Oonah Ball said: ‘The Drama Society never recovered from the veto.’97 The campaign continued. Only two days after the society’s demise Reginald Lindsay, a second year student at Worcester, launched A Plea For A University Theatre.

There will come a time when the university will not only recognise, but make use of the theatre... As a seat of learning it must ultimately recognise that it has... a torch by means of which its... learning can be kindled to life.98

It prompted an offer from H. Theodore of Manchester.

My partner, [Iden Payne], and myself are prepared to [stage] a four or six week season of really good plays... A complete cycle of Ibsen’s [plays] in chronological order [as suggested by Shaw] would be an excellent start for what would become, I hope, an annual event.99

---

92 OC 8 November 1912.
93 OC, as above.
94 OC 21 February 1913. The play on her pet theme of marriage as a trade never reached London. The balcony of the theatre that was to present it collapsed. Iden Payne, p. 115.
95 OC, as above.
97 Letter. OC 23 May 1919. She was a Drama Society committee member.
98 TI 25 October 1913.
99 TI 1 November 1913. I have not discovered who Theodore was.
It also prompted a lively correspondence. T.F. Strachey was the only contributor against.100

The average man of intelligence would very much rather see a successful play from London well acted than have a four weeks’ Ibsen season... There should be another theatre for such risky enterprises... The Oxford theatre is not a repertory theatre.101

Local champions of ‘new drama’ were familiar with Archer, Shaw and Barker’s campaign for a national repertory theatre. Archer and Barker said trustees from Oxford, Cambridge and London universities should be on its board.102 They knew the work of Dublin and Manchester reps. They had sampled Liverpool’s efforts. Glasgow was another pioneer. Alfred Wareing got fans to raise £1,000 to hire the Royalty from Howard and Wyndham’s.103 His Scottish Playgoers Company opened there in 1909. He made a loss of £3,019, but by the time ill-health forced him to resign in 1913 had cut it to £125 and had a record which included Britain’s first Chekhov, The Seagull.104 But for his ill health he would have launched Liverpool Rep too. In 1909 he persuaded the city to form a Playgoers Club, Charles Reilly of Liverpool University Architecture School heading a committee of academics and businessmen. It led to the purchase of the Star Music Hall, which in 1911 became Liverpool Rep.105 Nearer Oxford was Birmingham Rep. In 1907 Barry Jackson, the son of Maypole Dairies’ founder, formed the Pilgrim Players. It led to Britain’s first purpose-built rep theatre in 1913.106 It seated 464 and was austere, but had an apron stage, modern lighting, a cyclorama, flies and good backstage facilities.107

Theodore’s offer made enthusiasts believe there might be backing for a similar rep at Oxford.

With the extraordinarily intellectual public... Oxford should find its place as a dramatic touchstone or as a kind of incubator for the greater stage of London.108

A visit from Sheffield Rep fanned their enthusiasm.

---

100 Probably a misprint for J.F. Strachey of University College.
101 TI 22 November 1913.
108 TI 22 November 1913.
Though the repertory companies are at present only winning their way slowly... they are already exercising a potent influence for good.\textsuperscript{109}

It spread to Bristol in May. A visit by Horniman's company led Muriel Pratt to stage a season at the Theatre Royal with her husband, William Bridges-Adams. Two terms passed without mention of Theodore. Then in its last issue of summer term *Isis* noted:

We have received, unfortunately too late... an article by... Reginald Lindsay... dealing with the nine-days' season which Mr Iden Payne intends giving... next term.\textsuperscript{110}

The First World War prevented it. W.A. Darlington, future critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, commented: 'The serious theatre found itself with nothing to say and... nobody... to listen to.'\textsuperscript{111} Come the Armistice it was stuck in a time warp.

There had been occasional excitement... A Waterloo Road theatre... known... as the Old Vic, was playing Shakespeare with... enthusiasm though, as yet... little artistic effect. The big provincial theatres were served by... West End successes, the smaller by... melodrama and... revue. An Entertainments Tax had been imposed in May, 1916 (seven years later it would already have brought £57m to the Exchequer)... The theatre had little to cheer about.\textsuperscript{112}

Nor did the returning students, whose numbers increased from 400 in 1918 to 3,600 in 1919. One complained that the New's programme was 'so mournful... as almost to require us to weep.'\textsuperscript{113} The repertory movement was ailing too. Companies without their own theatres had vanished. After making £790 in six months at Glasgow, Lewis Casson joined up and Howard and Wyndham's went commercial again. Bristol folded in 1915. Miss Horniman continued at Manchester until 1917. Basil Dean left Liverpool in 1913 following a disastrous production of Hauptmann's *Hannele*. In 1916 Muriel Pratt and Bridges-Adams took over.\textsuperscript{114} Birmingham was most vigorous, staging 32 plays between September 1915 and July 1916. In 1918 came its first hit: John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*.

In Oxford there was renewed talk of a repertory theatre - from the future Poet Laureate, John Masefield. As a dramatist, he enjoyed the standing, if not the success, of Galsworthy. Barker aired *The Tragedy of Nan* in 1908, then insisted Vedrenne include it in their Haymarket season. The *Witch* gave Lillah McCarthy a star vehicle. Masefield wrote to

*The Times*:

\textsuperscript{109} OC 30 January 1914.

\textsuperscript{110} T\textsuperscript{1} 13 June 1914.


\textsuperscript{112} *The Theatre Since 1900*, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{113} OC 2 May 1919.

\textsuperscript{114} Goldie, p. 113.
Many of our best writers come, and will come in the future, from [the] University. [They] might find in a repertory theatre... an incentive to writing plays and a means of learning the art... Such a theatre would be costly. It would also be priceless. Oxford is a city divine in her beauty and in her young men. They went out from her with a unity of sacrifice never seen before... They have come back... from the presence of death... For some years to come this university city will be the birthplace... of half the kindling thought of the new England and through that... of the world.\textsuperscript{15}

Noting the many university theatres in Europe and America, W.R.C. responded:

\begin{quote}
It is... disgraceful that in a great university city the plays of Congreve or Chekhov, Sophocles or Ibsen, can never be performed - let alone Shakespeare or the... comedies of Moliere.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Z called for a revival of the Drama Society.

\begin{quote}
No matter how enthusiastically members... took up the scheme, a theatre-going public large enough to support a rep... on the Birmingham or Manchester lines does not exist.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Watcher noted:

\begin{quote}
One whom we had come to regard as an almost thoroughpaced Philistine... declared all this mumchance about a war memorial was... beside the point when... we had the most glorious chance... of instituting the best and most enduring memorial of all: a university theatre.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In 1919 Bernice de Bergerac staged a Pageant of Victory.\textsuperscript{19} The director was Philip Ben Greet, John Martin-Harvey St. George, his son, ‘Michael’, who had just arrived at Christ Church, Henry V. Birmingham Rep visited the New with Abraham Lincoln. Gladys Cooper, Bourchier, Fay Compton, Playfair and Charles Hawtrey graced an OUDS gala.\textsuperscript{20} In 1920 it returned with Hardy’s The Dynasts.\textsuperscript{21} Of Masefield’s theatre there was no news.

When the Union of East and West staged two Tagore plays the Chronicle noted:

\begin{quote}
[It] is not likely to materialise, but an instrument of securing these occasional performances of the intellectual drama ought to be found.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

In November Gertrude Kingston addressed the first Oxford meeting of the British Drama Society...
League (BDL). 80 societies belonged ranging from village groups to major bodies, among them OUDS and OWIDS - the new Oxford Women's Intercollegiate Dramatic Society. Later BDL would spearhead the amateur movement. Initially it aimed higher. In 1919 it agreed:

That this Conference urges the importance of establishing: (a) A National Theatre policy adequate to the needs of the people (b) A faculty of... theatre at the universities.124

Talk of university theatres naturally loomed large at Oxford.

The... question was largely one of finance and here they had the example of Germany, where every little town had its theatre... When such a movement... began in this country, it should begin in the educational centres. But there was no time like the present and [Miss Kingston] would be glad to hear of a disused garage, which could be fitted with 6-700 seats.125

Playfair, celebrating his first hit at the Lyric, Hammersmith, the transfer of Birmingham Rep's Abraham Lincoln, backed her.

[It was] time Oxford had a rep... and the... University realised that there were people who quite seriously... proposed to devote their lives to the drama.

Despite Farnell banning The Grand Guignol in 1922, there was plenty to enjoy. Birmingham Rep was bringing five plays. The Irish Players and the Macdona Players would follow. 'The literary drama [is] to have a prominence... unknown since the days of the Drama Society.'126

Ironically, the building that would become the Oxford Playhouse had briefly been a garage. In 1906 a red brick big game museum opened at 12 Woodstock Road, opposite Somerville College.127 Its owner was the hunter, Charles Victor Alexander Peel, third son of Charles Peel of North Rode in Cheshire.128 After gaining a first in law, his brother joined the Oxford solicitors, Morrell & Son,129 and in 1905 wed Morrell's daughter. By then Peel had numerous skins. He felt they could inspire others.130 For £40 he bought the lease of Sizewell, OC26 November 1920. 124 Geoffrey Whitworth. The Making of a National Theatre. London: Faber & Faber, 1951, p. 156. 125 OC, as above. 126 OC28 April 1922. The Macdona Players toured Shaw plays. 127 OC15 June 1906. 128 'On leaving Eton, he went for a tour round the world, which marked the beginning of his big game hunting career. He was interested in photography... and wrote extensively from 1894 onward for the naturalist and sporting press.' Biographical note. Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. 129 Later Morrell, Peel and Gamlen, now merged with Manches & Co. 130 'So many young men... toil away the whole of their lives indoors... when, by emigrating to one of our many great colonies, they would in all probability earn a higher wage and... lead a far healthier life.' Popular Guide to Mr C.V.A. Peel's Exhibition of Big Game Trophies and Museum of Natural History and Anthropology, Oxford 1906, pp. 3-4. G.A. Oxon Bo 810 (16), Bodleian Library.
a cottage with a 102ft frontage, from St. John’s College and while taxidermists stuffed the skins built a home for them.

The building is... well adapted to... its requirements, measuring 70ft long and 42ft broad, the side walls being 20ft high to the roof-plate... The doors are tastefully furnished with handles... of mounted tusks and horns.\(^{131}\)

The *Oxford Times* said it was ‘a properly organised museum.’ Elizabeth Bostock recalled: ‘It was very popular... Father was particularly fond of the giraffe.’\(^{132}\) In 1911 Peel married and moved to North Devon. The Museum got ‘neglected.’\(^{133}\) After the First World War he offered it to Oxford City Council gratis. It refused. So Peel gave the contents to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, then sold the building to George Layton as ‘a motor garage.’\(^{134}\)

In 1922 Layton sold it to the auctioneer, Alfred Ballard.\(^{135}\) He intended to hold sales there,\(^{136}\) but soon filed plans to convert it.\(^{137}\) St. John’s had approved its use for ‘dramatic entertainments.’\(^{138}\) The museum became the auditorium, the cottage to the north dressing rooms. Between he built a stage with a flat roof pierced by a lantern.\(^{139}\) It was 32ft wide, 19ft deep, and 4ft above the museum floor. There was a forestage with steps either side of the proscenium, which was 18ft 6in wide and 12ft high, rising to 13ft 6in. To the rear stairs led to two ground-floor dressing rooms, a third first-floor dressing room and ladies’ cloakroom. To the left a door opened into a vestibule with a gents’ cloakroom and exit to Woodstock Road. To the right was an understage storage area.

Ballard was secretary of the City of Oxford Dramatic Club from 1907 to 1923,\(^{140}\) played Claudius in *Hamlet*, its first production, and remained its leading actor until 1924.\(^{141}\)

\(^{131}\) *OT* 14 July 1906.
\(^{132}\) Elizabeth Bostock (née Rose) speaking to the author 1996. Peel shot the giraffe in 1904. It now graces the vestibule of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum.
\(^{133}\) *OC* 23 July 1920.
\(^{134}\) Certificate 19 February 1920 among deeds to 12 Woodstock Road. University Archives. Advertisements stating it would open (*TI* 5 November 1919) ceased in 1921.
\(^{136}\) Certificate 2 October 1922 among the deeds.
\(^{138}\) With copy of the plan January 1923 in St. John’s College Muniments.
\(^{140}\) *OC* 16 November 1923. The club appeared at the New.
\(^{141}\) He was a director of the Super Cinema, which opened in 1924, and had an interest in the George Street Cinema. Obituary *Oxford Times*, as above. Taped interview with his daughter, Joan Critchley, 17 January 1997.
The press said of his conversion:

[It] should prove a... boon to amateur dramatic societies... with seating accommodation for 400-500... designed so that it may still be used for auction sales.142

Ballard held sales there in March and April, 1923,143 two days before what was now the Oxford Playhouse opened. By then he was trying to launch a professional theatre, while its director, J.B. Fagan, fought to prevent Farnell from closing it.

The son of a Belfast surgeon, James Bernard Fagan was 50. He came up to Trinity in 1892 to read law, but left in 1893. His daughter, Gemma, said he returned in 1894 to study for the Indian Civil Service. 'The Benson company arrived at the New... and he left... to work with them.'144 No records confirm this 'family legend', but he joined Benson in 1895. For two years he acted with Tree, then turned dramatist, launching his career in 1899 with The Rebels. In 1914 he married another Bensonian, Ada Bryant. As Mary Grey in 1911 she acted in his version of Robert Hichens' novel, Bella Donna, which ran for 254 performances at St. James's Theatre, then in 1917 played the lead in another of his hits, Damaged Goods, which ran for 282 at St. Martin's. Brieux's study of venereal disease marked Fagan's debut as producer. In 1918 he took the Court, following its revival with several shows, culminating in the British première of Heartbreak House.

Between 1912-1914 Barker staged three Shakespeares at the Savoy with Lillah McCarthy. Their aim was 'to restore [him] to the theatre as a writer of living plays.'145 Fagan continued where the war forced them to leave off.

He distilled the experiments... into a set of principles which were to inform much of the best Shakespearean work of the mid-20th century.146

Gilbert Davis, a student who went into the professional theatre, wrote:

With Twelfth Night, he showed us it was possible to produce Shakespeare simply yet well. Then followed The Merchant of Venice, in which he... again proved that a production need not be elaborate to be really fine... A Midsummer Night's Dream... was... not so successful.147

142 OC 2 March 1923.
143 OC 16 March and 20 April 1923.
147 OC 4 March 1921.
Nor did Davis like Othello, but thought Henry IV Part 2, 'best of all.' Fagan got Heartbreak House in 1921 because Shaw wanted Ellen O'Malley to play Ellie. After 63 performances the shutters went up. Fagan was left with massive debts, £7,676 of which were unpaid royalties. 'He can pay me entirely at his convenience,' Shaw wrote to Fagan's solicitors. 'If the other creditors force a bankruptcy, I shall of course put in my claim... otherwise he may dismiss it... until his next period of prosperity.'

That was his play, The Wheel, which ran for 139 performances at the Apollo in 1922. Even more profitable was Treasure Island, with Bourchier as Long John Silver. It ran for 137 at the Strand and would be revived every Christmas.

While it was still on, Fagan came to the New in 1923 to direct Henry IV Part One for OUDS. Five of the cast would turn professional. The Chronicle's Undergraduate Correspondent felt 'the most finished' acting came from Eric Dance, the King. Its critic said Tyrone Guthrie's Glendower was a clever portrait 'of a vain and imaginative Celt.' Hugo Dyson thought Gyles Isham 'splendid' as Hotspur. All raved over R.S. [Reggie] Smith's Falstaff. Only Richard Goolden's 'comic genius' was wasted as First Carrier. Fagan was unaware of Ballard's theatre. The person who realised Masefield's dream, was 'a young, obscure' actress from London called Jane Ellis.

[She] was only one of many... who thought that Oxford should have a repertory theatre. But it was she, and she alone, who took decisive action. She went to Oxford, found the building, provided a backer to guarantee the rent and asked J.B. Fagan to be its director.

Her real name was Helen Olive Stockbridge, born at Hauxton, Cambridgeshire, on 21 June 1895. Her father, Ellis Stockbridge, was a brewer's agent, her mother Elizabeth Pick, his mother's companion-help. When he died in 1901 they had four children and a fifth imminent. Elizabeth's father gave them a shepherd's cottage at Blackmore End in Essex. There Helen grew up with her brothers and sisters. They were poor, but someone cared.

Marguerite, the eldest, later Deputy Chief Education Officer of Essex, ended her schooldays at

---

148 OC 20 May 1921.
151 OC 16 February 1923.
152 TI 21 February 1923.
153 Dyson in TI as above. He became a noted Shakespearean lecturer at Oxford.
Cheltenham Ladies College, She claimed all her teachers despairs of her except her English mistress. "When she was supposed to be studying Euclid, she was deep in the pages of Shakespeare's plays."

By 13 she had resolved to become an actress. She wrote to Ellen Terry, who invited her to London. Her command of Shakespeare impressed the actress. She told grandfather Pick: 'Helen has the talent to succeed on the stage.' It cut no ice. Her daughter said: 'She might as well have said she was going into a brothel.' She probably made her debut as Jane Ellis at the Queen's Theatre on 27 September 1913 in This Way Madam!, Ellis being her father's first name, Jane his mother's. She claimed her career began in September 1914, when she entered the not yet royal Academy of Dramatic Art. She was there only a term. Between jobs she continued training. She walked on for Ellen Terry in the trial scene from The Merchant of Venice at the Coliseum, she understudied Maria in Fagan's Twelfth Night at the Court. Her main outlet was The League of Arts, established in 1919, and The Guildhouse, which Maude Royden launched in Eccleston Square in 1921. Jane Ellis figured for the first time in its monthly in 1922.

The Guildhouse Dramatic Club gave a delightful programme... consisting of Quality Street, Act I, by Sir J.M. Barrie, produced by Miss Mary Lane; The Land of Heart's Desire by W.B. Yeats, produced by Miss Jane Ellis; and Lonesome Like by Harold Brighouse.

156 David M. Dorman. People You Know - No. 8. Peterborough Standard 30 April 1954. 'Colchester College' was probably Colchester Technical and University Extension College, which included the Albert School of Science and Art and Colchester Pupil Teachers Centre. In 1907 the centre became a secondary school, in 1909 Colchester County High School for Girls. The first head, Miss Mary Collins, was an inspirational teacher of English and drama. A.M. Brown. Colchester County High School: The First Fifty Years. Privately printed for the school, 1961, pp. 5-9.
157 Dorman, as above.
160 Clare Hope, RADA Librarian. Undated letter to the author, 1996.
161 In 1916 she studied singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Letter to the author 31 May 1996. She was a pupil at the Espinosa School of Dancing and at Lady Benson's drama school. Memoir by her daughter. Jane Ellis's papers. Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Greenwich.
162 She said she fainted when Shylock produced his knife, a piece of business she was asked to repeat for the rest of the run. Dorman, as above. The Coliseum programme for the week of 18 February 1918 lists only the principal actors. It formed part of a variety bill.
163 The Times 28 February 1919.
165 Eccleston Guildhouse Vol. III No. 6 June 1922, Fawcett Library.
The League launched its own dramatic society, the League of Arts Dramatic Circle, the same year. Edith Craig was producer, Martin Shaw music adviser, Paul Nash scenic artist.166

Jane Ellis said in a letter to Richard Burton that she managed to obtain a ticket for the British Museum Library.

I read plays... from the Greek, Ibsen, Chekhov, the lot. I lived on bread and cheese mostly, for I hadn’t a penny... I happened to read about the French theatres... Why hadn’t we such a theatre?... London was too ambitious, but what about Oxford, which I knew a bit? Culture should flourish there. So, looking back, I am amazed that I, a penniless enthusiast, should dare, but I did: I decided a theatre must be founded there.167

She got a student friend, ‘now a parson and my husband,’ to find a hall.168 ‘A solicitor I knew (dear Mr Pyke), who only liked musical comedy, but his wife was fond of me,’ guaranteed the £480 a year rent,169 and Fagan, ‘the only manager I knew,’ agreed to run it. She ‘suggested that eminent folk... contribute £10 each’170 and devised the repertoire.

This is the layout I presented to poor Fagan: eight weeks of Playhouse during term-time and rehearsals during the holidays. For those days, this would not be an ordinary theatre at all! 1... English plays of all periods, but also plays of all other nations... 2. One week of ballet and dancing... interspersed with songs... 3. A short lecture by a thoughtful producer... 4. A grand supper with the actors at the top tables and the undergraduates paying for entry... Much of this didn’t materialise. Finance missing as usual... By now I was getting exhausted. But the whole affair was going... well and, as I was utterly unknown, Mr Fagan took over.

Her schedule listed Fagan as hon. advisory director, her as director with ‘executive power,’ Ballard as business manager, Pyke as treasurer and a committee of her, Fagan, Mary Grey, Pyke and C.K. Allen. Allen directed and took the lead in OUDS’ 1913 The Shoemaker’s Holiday. After war service he became a University College Fellow.171 He helped Fagan with Henry IV that spring and organised OUDS’ first overseas tour.172 The schedule stated:

166 Pamphlet C23. Edith Craig Archive, Ellen Terry Museum, Smallhythe Place, Tenterden, Kent.
167 Draft. Jane Ellis’s papers. She wrote to Burton to thank him for bailing out the Playhouse in the 1970s. Her daughter, Elizabeth Hartzell, thought it unlikely she sent it.
168 Leonard Bosley had already graduated. He came up to New in 1920 as an ex-service Rhodes Scholar and left in 1922 to read for holy orders at Manchester. He must have found Ballard busy with the conversion.
170 44 names ranging from Asquith to Gladys Cooper appeared in early programmes.
It appears to us only right that Oxford should encourage the efforts which are being made... to raise the standard of the acted drama in England - the only great country in the world where neither Government nor Municipality will move a finger to support the most democratic of the arts.

It was signed by Barrie, Oxford's Mayor Tom Basson, Arnold Bennett, Bouchier, Robert Bridges, Courtney, Curzon, Elgar, Galsworthy, Oxford's MP Frank Gray, Hardy, Henry Arthur Jones, John Lavery, Masefield, Lillah McCarthy, Milne, Murray, Pinero, Playfair, Shaw, the OUDS president Clive Shields, and Alfred Sutro.

Goolden liked to claim he was Fagan's first recruit. "Oh, no; I'm prenatal," said [Flora] Robson... But Mr Goolden also traced his first association... back to March, 1923.¹⁷³

He was 28 and should have graduated in 1922, but wanted to become OUDS Secretary.¹⁷⁴

Robson, nearly 21, had been jobless since leaving Ben Greet's Pastoral Players.¹⁷⁵ She returned to Welwyn Garden City. Goolden left for Scandinavia with OUDS. By the time he returned their future no longer looked as rosy. Fagan sent an appeal letter to the Vice-Chancellor. Farnell replied:

Even the excitement created... by my refusal to sanction the Grand Guignol does not seem to have spread any knowledge... that... I should be consulted regarding the... licensing of a new theatre, and I should... have to... approve of every play.¹⁷⁶

Farnell felt it his duty to stop students repeating the rowdyism that had marred pre-war Oxford.

They came... when our country was suffering from war-reaction, from the demoralisation of the 'jazz'-spirit... We were exposed to worse dangers... Russia sent its evil angels abroad and some of them may have visited Oxford.¹⁷⁷

The 'jazz spirit' led him to tell music teachers attending a summer course:

Our civilisation is threatened... by dreadful noises... Don't take your music from America or from the niggers. Take it From God, the author of all good music.¹⁷⁸

As for evil angels, in 1921 he sent down Arthur Reade, editor of Free Oxford, a Communist youth journal, for advocating 'the methods of the Red Terror.'¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³ Diary note of Playhouse Guild meeting. OM 6 December 1954.
¹⁷⁴ He came up to New to read law in 1918, switched, and spent five years reading for a one-year degree in French! Anthony Wood Column, OM 30 July 1973.
¹⁷⁶ Farnell to Fagan 11 April 1923. Reprinted OC 20 April 1923.
¹⁷⁷ Farnell, p. 290.
¹⁷⁸ Quoted. OC 12 August, 1927.
¹⁷⁹ OC 23 December 1921.
As he said, Farnell’s first assault on the theatre was banning Sybil Thorndike and the Grand Guignol. He caused more trouble by forbidding Maude Royden to speak on The Social Relations of Men and Women, a lecture she gave without offence in Cardiff and Cambridge.\textsuperscript{180} He survived an attempt to oust him and for two terms avoided further trouble. Then in March 1923 he banned the birth control expert, Dr. Marie Stopes, in April the Rag Regatta and ‘the new theatre.’\textsuperscript{181} In the case of the regatta, Farnell claimed, he ‘was pulling the strings.’\textsuperscript{182} He got the college boat captains to act for him. There could be no string-pulling with regard to the Playhouse. To his fury, Fagan published their entire correspondence. Farnell told Fagan:

> Oxford is primarily a city with a university, and the university exists for purposes of study. It might therefore have occurred to you... before the new project was launched, that the head... should be taken into your confidence.

Fagan replied:

> It was only a little over a month ago that we learned... of a... hall... The... licence... was not granted until last Monday... The following day I communicated with you.\textsuperscript{183}

Curzon, by this time Chancellor of the university, summoned his Vice-Chancellor. Farnell claimed he was ‘very embarrassed.’

> Being very fond of the theatre, he had... signed the [Playhouse] petition himself! I... put the position frankly... [It] was like a high judge signing a petition to himself on behalf of the plaintiff!... I... summoned a meeting of... ex-Vice-Chancellors and the Warden of Wadham, who was to be my successor... [and] determined to license the theatre as the best way of saving the Chancellor’s face.\textsuperscript{184}

Knowing Fagan would publish it, he phrased his letter to him more diplomatically.

> I consent... on condition a) that no undergraduates take part... b) that those concerned... make a fresh application to me in the Long Vacation, or to the next Vice-Chancellor... This will allow you to open... at the date... you had arranged.\textsuperscript{185}

Fagan was in Paris, but the reprieve came just in time for the theatre’s launch on April 26.

Fearing the worst, Ballard had reverted to providing an amateur platform. Harry Percival Riley staged the entertainment.\textsuperscript{186} Fagan wrote to Farnell on his return that it was not possible to evolve a season ‘with the speed of an ukase.’\textsuperscript{187} He would reapply in October.

\textsuperscript{180} OC 17 February 1922.
\textsuperscript{181} OC 20 April 1923.
\textsuperscript{182} Farnell, pp. 294-295.
\textsuperscript{183} OC 20 April 1923.
\textsuperscript{184} Farnell, p. 294.
\textsuperscript{185} OC 27 April 1923.
\textsuperscript{186} A triple bill of J.B. Buckstone’s farce, The Rough Diamond, and two plays by Riley. Programme. Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection.
\textsuperscript{187} OC 4 May 1923.
Watcher felt the 1843 Theatres Act needed amendment. Oxford's MP, Frank Gray, called for a Royal Commission. Dr. G.B. Grundy, Vice-President of Corpus Christi, deplored the portrayal of Farnell as 'an academic Lenin.' Playfair riposted:

A man who has reached the age of 19 without being able to translate a simple passage of Latin unseen... is passing a far more frivolous evening in trying to acquire that knowledge than in witnessing a play of Galsworthy.

It was the last straw for The Times drama critic, A.B. Walkley. 'If the new... Playhouse is... established, I hope it will not be on the... pretext that it is a good substitute for unseen Latin.' He loathed the very idea of drama as an academic discipline. He preferred the Vic of his own student days.

The proper thing was to sit with your legs dangling over the front of your box and to exchange gibes with your friends... being mesmerised by Mme. Card... A characteristically festive, English and Academic evening... The recent fuss... must have struck many old members... as slightly indecent. It was... assumed that... you might argue about [Oxford's] theatrical requirements as you might about those of Northampton or Stockton-on-Tees... The Press have criticised the Vice-Chancellor as though he were the master of a suburban board school... But he is not; he is the University of Oxford personified and entitled to the reverence which that great university should inspire in all well-regulated bosoms.

As I shall show, that view would bedevil academic attitudes for the next 65 years.

188 OC 27 April 1923.
190 Letter. The Times 9 May 1923.
191 Letter. The Times 10 May 1923.
192 You may suppose... play acting to be taken out of the hands of the OUDS and made a subject in the Schools with a Regius Professor... Would any sensible man like to see Oxford thus Americanized?' Review of Harley Granville Barker's The Exemplary Theatre (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922). Walkley. More Prejudice. London: Heinemann, 1923, p. 99.
193 The Times 23 May 1923.
Fagan oversaw the launch of the Oxford Players but did not plan to direct. He was going to New York. In June he announced the Playhouse would have a 'presentational stage,' new lighting and the producer would be Theodore Komisarjevsky. The Moscow Art Theatre's ex-director must have had second thoughts. By October Reginald Denham was producer, the first of three young men who would make names. Meanwhile Ballard took what bookings he could get. Fagan claimed the stage was the first in Britain, though there was one in Vienna. It involved projecting the forestage 12ft. and extending it the width of the auditorium. Buff draw-curtains divided it from the inner stage. 'By a special apparatus... the players will always appear in natural light.' There would be no fittings or footlights. 'This stage will present things, not re-present them.'

In practice Denham said the apron turned the stage into a tunnel and the director had to get his actors upstage before a scene ended. John Gielgud recalled that stagehands humping furniture onto it became the butt of students. Isis referred to 'the sofa crawl and... potted shrub shuffle.' To buttress Jane Ellis and Flora Robson, Fagan recruited Florence Buckton

---

2 *The Isis* 21 June 1923.
3 Fagan presented *The Government Inspector*, the first play the Russian émigré directed in London.
6 Fagan. Quoted *OC* 12 October 1923.
8 *The Isis* 28 November 1923.
from the Old Vic and the Bensonian, Dorothy Green. To strengthen his OUDS recruits, Richard Goolden, Reggie Smith and Tyrone Guthrie, he got another Bensonian, Earle Grey, and Peter Creswell, later a BBC producer. His stage manager was Herbert Lugg, his designer Molly McArthur. His bill echoed Birmingham Rep's, which did *Heartbreak House*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Return of the Prodigal* in 1923, *The Master Builder* in 1924. Fagan's novelties were Goldoni's *Mirandolina* and de Musset's *No Trifling With Love*. He thought dons and students would support him as avidly in practice as they had in principle. Like the Drama Society he would learn he had to compete with other attractions. At 4s 9d and 3s 6d reserved, 2s 4d unreserved, prices were 'reasonable.' The New Theatre's ranged from 5s 9d in the stalls to 8d in the gallery. A season ticket cost a guinea (plus 3s 6d entertainment tax). The cinemas were stiffer competition. The dearest seat at the Electra was 2s 4d, George Street 1s 10d, the Scala 1s 6d.

Fagan rehearsed *Heartbreak House* in London, as he did the first play of most seasons. Shaw was at the read-through. Guthrie was Shotover.

Fagan beckoned... He had never realised... how inexperienced I was... I might... stay on at the same wages - £5 a week - assist the stage manager and make myself... useful. Grey took Shotover, Guthrie his role as Hushabye. He assisted Lugg, who had returned to the stage after a spell as a chicken farmer. He also helped Fagan and Molly McArthur paint the backcloth. Denham said it was still wet when the curtains parted at 8pm on Monday 22 October 1923. A cold disguising her youth, Flora Robson as nurse spoke the first words: 'God bless us!' 'The hall was packed,' Dr. Lewis Farnell in the front row.

The simplicity of the scenes... and the interest of watching the white-coated stage attendants setting them... carried the audience through the short intervals... The play itself was a brilliant success. The... pink and violet light thrown over the white stage and its white properties gave just the air of mystery *Heartbreak House* requires, yet it was not so strong as to give us pink or violet actors.

Shaw attended the last night. He told the mainly student audience:

I imagined I had written a... semi-tragic play after the manner of Chekhov. From your empty-headed laughter I appear to have written a bedroom farce.
last. For if Oxford is not highbrow, what on earth is Oxford? It was a question which would vex every Playhouse director.

The Importance got a less warm press. Patrick Monkhouse, son of the Manchester Guardian critic, Alan Monkhouse, begged Fagan for ‘more beefsteak and less meringues.' St. John Hankin’s Return of the Prodigal upset the dons’ journal, The Oxford Magazine. Complaints led Ballard to install a glass roof leading to the gents and gas heating. It was not just the lack of a foyer, the smoking ban, the creaking chairs behind the front stalls, the traffic droning past the draughty doors, that deterred patrons. Emlyn Williams had just arrived at Christ Church.

First-nighters began to notice that long speeches tended to be directed... at the hidden backs of chairs... On the first night of The Master Builder, after Hilda had [asked] a couple of... questions which seemed to puzzle Solness as much as they did me, I heard the prompter call... ‘She’s in the wrong act!

The Hilda was Jane Ellis, the Solness Grey. Faith Celli joined the company for the last two weeks. She was an impressive Camille in No Trifling With Love, a feebler Lydia Languish in The Rivals. First term takings did not permit the share-out Clause Four of the Constitution envisaged. They did warrant a £10 bonus.

Summing up, the women students’ journal, Fritillary, said it was disconcerting ‘to meet... the same types in amazingly thin disguises... sometimes even in the same frocks.' There are usually full houses towards the end of the week, but few go on Monday and Tuesday... People have wisely, though selfishly, waited.

The future novelist, Charles Williams, could see no ‘justification for putting Miss... Ellis into leading parts.' In the vacation she directed Yeats’s Countess Cathleen at the Guildhouse.

At the Playhouse a company of ‘West End actors and singers’ staged Masks and Faces, the

---

16 OC 2 November 1923.
17 P.J.M. TI 31 October 1923.
18 ‘We were sorry to find the audience even poorer than the play.’ The Oxford Magazine 15 November 1923.
19 Plan No. 3076 22 October 1923. Oxford City Archives.
20 TI 23 January 1924.
22 Jane Ellis's papers. As above.
23 According to her draft letter to Richard Burton.
24 Fritillary December 1923.
25 TOM 6 December 1923.
26 TI 5 December 1923.
27 Advertisement. OC 7 December 1923.
film actress, Gertrude McCoy, Henderson Bland's *The Afrikander*, Mlle. de Bergerac the first pantomime.

The first play of 1924 was Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Mary Grey was Lady Cicely. Other newcomers were John Gielgud and Raymond Massey. Massey so impressed Shaw he played Le Hire in *Saint Joan* in London in March. Arundell del Rey wrote:

> It is difficult to describe [the atmosphere] except by comparing it with the gallery at Covent Garden... or the foyer of... Birmingham Rep... There seems to be a... friendliness... between the opposite sides of the footlights.

*Love For Love* and Gielgud's Valentine fostered it. A month into a run as *Charley's Aunt*, he accepted Fagan's offer to join. He said Congreve's rarely performed comedy 'shocked North Oxford... but delighted... the university.' A woman behind Williams asked:

> 'How does he pronounce it, John Jeel-gud?' When he got going though, all nose and passion ...and unbridled oboe of a voice - no peering at the back of furniture for this beginner.

Goolden got his chance in Milne's *Mr Pim Passes By*.

> We sat and enjoyed and forgot to criticise. We wish we could say the same of Miss Ellis... Miss Robson was also unconvincing... She looked a withered 40 rather than a[n] active 65.

Fagan brought back *Love For Love* for three more performances while he staged *Hamlet* for OUDS at the New. Minnie Rayner, imported to play Mrs Hardcastle in *She Stoops To Conquer*, said he 'gave them a night off [to] see... Gyles Isham.' The Players fared better with Goldsmith's comedy than Wilde's. Even Jane Ellis 'for once stood still and played her brief part excellently.'

The Lord Chamberlain banned Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna*. Théâtre de L'Oeuvre had to stage its three London matinées in 1902 privately. If he spares the citizens of Pisa, General Prinzivalle says, the Pisan commander's wife must go to him 'nude under her mantle.'

---

30 A.delR. *TI* 23 January 1924.
31 *Early Stages*, p 46.
32 *George*. As above, p. 308.
33 *TOM* 7 February 1924.
34 *The Playhouse magazine, Repertory*. Vol. IV No. 2, 8 May 1933. The Northamptonshire baronet's son was Hamlet. He 'could have walked on the prostrate corpses of his admiring girls from Carfax to Magdalen.' Joan E. Bates. Taped interview 3 September 1996. The future Lord Chancellor, Gerald Gardiner, was Horatio; Robert Speaight the Player King.
35 As the maid. *TOM* 21 February 1924.
was the nakedness... that appalled the censor.\textsuperscript{36} The Players were the first to act it publicly. 'The choice can hardly be called a happy one.'\textsuperscript{37} Gielgud got mumps and Fagan took over the General. Then he and Isham fell ill. Isham was to play Romeo in a revival sponsored by the mother of Juliet, Paulise de Bush. Gielgud deputised. Isham reclaimed the role, but as a result Gielgud got Romeo in Barry Jackson's version with Gwen Ffrangcon Davies. He did not return until October. Denham took the lead as well as directing Shaw's \textit{Man of Destiny} in a triple-bill with Schnitzler's \textit{An Episode} and Yeats's \textit{The Land of Heart's Desire}. Flora Robson was Mary.

'The beautiful throb of [her] voice'\textsuperscript{38} did not grace Sophocles' \textit{Oedipus King of Thebes}. It might have been better if it had. Fagan directed Murray's version.

[His] presentational stage has seldom been seen to such... advantage... The chief blemish... was the chorus... The... consultation of the book... did not improve the situation.\textsuperscript{39}

Fagan asked Goolden to stiffen the amateurs. Goolden wrote his words on cards, muddled them and the critics twiggled.\textsuperscript{40} Future theatre director, Norman Marshall, then a student, wrote:

The competent repertory producer... bothers his cast as little as possible so... they can concentrate on... their lines... Fagan... was too scrupulous... to be capable of smearing a veneer of polish over unfinished work.\textsuperscript{41}

Since his American trip fell through he had been much in evidence. Denham resigned. Gemma Fagan recalled: 'He was paid off and... drove a very hard bargain.'\textsuperscript{42} Their quarrel did not go unnoticed. At the end of term Rey commented:

I would suggest... a young, able and attractive lady, who can be trusted with modern parts... The actors and Mr Denham are... working with intelligent enthusiasm, but there is something - possibly dual control - which holds them back.\textsuperscript{43}

Flora Robson got Angelica in \textit{Love For Love} because Jane Ellis wanted Miss Prue. 'She was despised ...for using such means... but without her ambition the theatre might never have existed.'\textsuperscript{44} Some, like Gielgud, remained ignorant.

\textsuperscript{37} A.delR. \textit{TI} 27 February 1924.
\textsuperscript{38} Emlyn Williams. Letter to Kenneth Barrow. \textit{Flora}. As above, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{39} C.C. \textit{The Cherwell} 15 March 1924.
\textsuperscript{40} Goolden reminiscing. Playhouse Guild meeting. \textit{Oxford Mail} 6 December 1954.
\textsuperscript{42} Gemma Mayne. Taped interview, as above.
\textsuperscript{43} A.delR. \textit{TI} 12 March 1924.
\textsuperscript{44} Flora Robson. Quoted. \textit{Flora}. As above, p. 26.
I think all of us... were surprised that Jane Ellis had been engaged, as she was not a good actress. But... we did not know she [was] Fagan's backer!  

Fagan could not sack her. Instead, he axed Robson and Guthrie. Guthrie joined the BBC in Belfast. Denham staged If I Were King for the Oxford City Dramatic Club at the New, then returned to London. In September he had his first hit: Vajda's Fata Morgana. He gave Flora a small part. Fagan took over at Oxford. At RADA he spotted Veronica Turleigh and Alan Napier. His star recruit was a 19-year-old he met at a party.

[Elissa] Landi had no thought of a stage career, having purely literary aspirations. Some impersonations of famous actors... led to an invitation.

She made her debut with Turleigh in Pinero's farce, Dandy Dick. Athene Seyler was their aunt, 19-year-old Glen Byam Shaw Landi's admirer.

Even Harold Acton's anti-Victorianism was completely overcome... Reginald Smith [as the Dean] confessing his Oxford debts... must not be missed.

Playgoers ranged from rich students like the Earl of Longford to paupers like Williams; from the ex-actress, Lillah McCarthy, and the literary dragon, Lady Ottoline Morrell, to Prof. Soddy and Prof. Murray; from budding historians, A.L. Rowse and A.J.P. Taylor, to future authors, Evelyn Waugh and Peter Quennell. Acton broadcast his poems through a megaphone. He soon became Cherwell's theatre critic, Megalophonides. Landi and her mother were in demand. Chaperonage was as much part of Oxford life as in the days of Charley's Aunt. A student who took a girl to the Playhouse had to buy a seat for her minder. An Isis cartoon showed a couple sandwiching a frump. The lady was Monna Vanna, the chaperon The Green Goddess, the man The Bad Man.

Fagan rehearsed Dandy Dick in London. Ibsen's The Lady From The Sea showed the
problems of rehearsing one play while performing another. There was a ‘vagueness about the words,’ a ‘small audience’ and ‘surely the stage was... better without those Glendower curtains?’ The drapes from Henry IV Pt. 1 had replaced the buff curtains which ‘became very tired.’ Monkhouse said of The School For Scandal: ‘If this were the kind of performance which the... Players intended to go on giving, they would appeal for backing in vain.’ The Eights Week triple bill lifted his spirits. Acton approved too, though only of Eckersley’s A Collection Will Be Made. The upturn was short-lived. Robert Speaight fumed: ‘Twelfth Night did not... begin to be a production.’ Katharine Monro and Kathleen Moseley:

The spirit of the play was captured [only]... when Olivia was speaking, and the fact that Miss Isham was fresh... confirms our belief that tiredness was responsible.

Another triple bill was to follow. Like Molière’s Tartuffe and a ‘new comedy with music,’ it failed to materialise.

The second term the average receipts were over £48 less than... the first term, and in the summer term they were £40... less than... the [second] term... In future I propose to issue a programme for the summer term early... Unless the subscription list reaches a certain number we shall not [proceed].

Monro and Moseley commented:

Though [Denham] did not aim so high, his productions were more finished. He tuned his fiddle before he played... Fagan is a greater musician, but... takes it for granted his fiddle has been tuned.

Speaight summed up:

[Veronica Turleigh’s] voice... has sometimes the ache of violins. Though less ethereal, Miss Robson played in a major key and had a greater power over sheer emotion.

Gielgud, Goolden, and Mary Grey were all good, but ‘those responsible do not seem... to use Miss Ellis in the right way.’ Of her Maria in Twelfth Night he wrote: ‘I yearned for the exquisite art of Mrs Philips.’ To compound the insult she was not a company member. She

54 TI 7 May 1924.
55 Guthrie, p. 27.
56 P.J.M. TI 14 May 1924.
57 TI 22 May 1924.
58 Everybody’s Husband by Gilbert Cannan was ‘more disgusting to the mind than a tawdry pink ice-cream to the palate.’ Megalophonides. TC 24 May 1924.
59 R.W.S. TI 28 May 1924.
61 OC 14 March 1924.
62 Fagan. Quoted OC 6 June 1924.
63 F June 1924.
64 TC 21 June 1924.
was an opera singer. Her maiden name was Bertha Selous. She graduated from walk-ons. Dilettantes like her besieged Fagan. His concern was to escape the treadmill of weekly rep. That summer the *Daily News* noted:

> Fagan has... selected a site for... a Cambridge playhouse... Under the new system they will present four plays... alternately at Oxford and Cambridge.

Sadly, it proved idle gossip.

Jane Ellis got her first good notices in *Candida* in October 1924. She was ‘such a masterly Proserpine ... the house applauded... for several minutes... to overcome her reluctance to take a call.’ Shaw might have written the part for her.

Miss Garnett, is a brisk little woman of about 30... not very civil in her manner, but sensitive and affectionate.

Monkhouse called the season ‘by far the most interesting... Fagan has presented.’ Gielgud was back. Virginia Isham became ASM. There were two young actresses to replace Elissa Landi: Gwendolen Evans, who had acted for Fagan since a child, and Kathleen Moseley, a Lady Margaret Hall graduate. Fagan’s assistant was James Whale, a 28-year-old whose career would embrace London, Broadway and Hollywood. Like Fagan, he was keen on design. Unlike Denham, he got on with his boss.

Gielgud’s Marchbanks was as well-received as Jane Ellis’s Prossie. Acton called him the ‘perfect iconoclastic Boy.’ Critics were even warmer about Synge’s *Deidre of the Sorrows*. Monkhouse thought it ‘the bravest thing the... Players have... done.’ Gwendolen Evans suffered comparison with Landi, when Fagan revived *Everybody’s Husband* and *A Collection Will Be Made* with Cannan’s *In the Park* and Pirandello’s *The Man With The Flower In His Mouth*. Jane Ellis, ‘who is coming on famously,’ found another showcase

---

65 Her uncle, the hunter Frederick Selous, opened the big game museum. As Bertha Selous she wrote a novel (*My Lord Lucifer*. London: Heinemann, 1930) and a number of plays. In 1940 the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, staged *No Traveller Returns*. Sadly, the war authorities ‘refused her a travel permit’ - *Irish Independent* 17 October 1940.
66 *School For Scandal* was ‘chiefly remarkable’ for her Mrs Candour. *F June 1924*. 67 Reprinted *OC* 11 July 1924.
69 P.J.M. *TI* 22 October 1924.
70 *TI* 15 October 1924.
73 *TI* 29 October 1924.
74 *TI* 5 November 1924.
The big excitement was the Pirandello. It was his first play to have a professional public airing in Britain. 'A miracle repeated nightly,' said Monkhouse, 'with a tremendous performance of the man dying of cancer.' Critics were not so kind to Sierra's *Cradle Song*. Acton protested: 'If Spanish drama is being given... why waste time... instead of having the far... more valuable plays of Benavente?' In response Fagan followed Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* with Shaw's *Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, Benavente's *His Widow's Husband* in John Garrett Underhill's translation, and Strindberg's *The Stronger* in an uncredited version. According to Michael Meyer he was the first 'to stage Strindberg adequately in England.' Critics preferred the Spaniard. The most ambitious term so far had included concerts 'in costume' by the Elizabethan Singers, a Greek dance display by Miss Alice Chamier, and a charming backstage sketch by Kathleen Moseley.

Sadly, fewer watched their efforts. 'Last term the loss was heavier than in the whole of the first year.' In January 1925 John Fernald, future Principal of RADA, complained:

> Newcastle, Liverpool, Bristol, Birmingham... have their reps... But when Oxford gets one it pretends it hasn't.

R.C.M. commented:

> Any millionaire or man of fortune... will reap both spiritual and financial fruit if he [invests]... in the improvement of... the Playhouse.

There were 'men of fortune,' women too. The future Lord Nuffield's car factory was booming. In 1926 he would give £10,000 towards a chair of Spanish studies. But his interest went no further than Gilbert and Sullivan. Murray was preoccupied with the League of Nations, Masefield had his own open-air theatre on Boars Hill. After her divorce from Granville Barker, Lillah McCarthy had settled for the role of Lady Keeble, wife of a professor.

---

76 *Ti*, as above.
77 *Megalophonides*. TC 15 November 1924.
79 'We must have more Benavente.' *Megalophonides*. TC 29 November 1924.
80 *OJ* 18 June, 22 October and 26 November 1924.
81 *TJ* 3 December 1924.
82 'You will probably come across our Ibsen King [Earle Grey]... or an enthusiastic Prossie [Jane Ellis] explaining the... same author to the company's raw... recruit [Kathleen Moseley]...Our beautiful young man [John Gielgud] may drift in, the ends of his grey silk scarf ('Positively my only prop') floating some yards behind.' Saturday Morning at the Playhouse. F November 1924.
83 TOM 22 January 1925.
85 Editorial. As above.
Lennox Robinson said thanks to Col. J.J. Shute Liverpool had a theatre lectureship, A.E. Morgan, Professor of English at Sheffield, had written a book.\footnote{A.E. Morgan. \textit{Tendencies of Modern English Drama}. London: Constable, 1924.} Fagan’s theatre was no more than a demonstration that student interest in drama was ‘not inseparably connected with... legs.’ A theatre at Cambridge might help. The solution was to relate the Playhouse programme to the university’s. ‘Am I an optimistic fool to think that a theatre of this kind will sooner or later exist in every university town?’\footnote{Lennox Robinson. \textit{The Observer} 11 January 1925.} The \textit{Oxford Magazine} observed that although the number of reps had increased, some like Birmingham were in crisis.\footnote{TOM 19 February 1925.}

The movies have come. And the cheap motor car... The motor car is an enemy of the theatre, particularly in... industrial towns where the... desire of every sensible person is to get away from the... squalor.\footnote{Ivor Brown. \textit{Theatre Arts Monthly}. Vol. IX No 11. November, 1925.}


In January 1925 \textit{The Oxford Magazine} noted: ‘Last term’s programme made one hurry... to encyclopaedias... This term we know where we are.’\footnote{TOM 22 January 1925.} Maugham’s \textit{Smith} gave Kathleen Moseley her chance. Fernald thought her ‘adequate, but... Algy... received no help from the actor.’\footnote{TC 24 January 1925.} Possibly Gielgud was too excited about the next play. \textit{The Cherry Orchard} resulted from Fagan’s discovery of George Calderon’s version. Like Fagan, he was a Trinity man. After being called to the Bar, he spent two years in St. Petersburg. A theatre at Cambridge might help. The solution was to relate the Playhouse programme to the university’s. ‘Am I an optimistic fool to think that a theatre of this kind will sooner or later exist in every university town?’\footnote{Lennox Robinson. \textit{The Observer} 11 January 1925.} The \textit{Oxford Magazine} observed that although the number of reps had increased, some like Birmingham were in crisis.\footnote{TOM 19 February 1925.}

The movies have come. And the cheap motor car... The motor car is an enemy of the theatre, particularly in... industrial towns where the... desire of every sensible person is to get away from the... squalor.\footnote{Ivor Brown. \textit{Theatre Arts Monthly}. Vol. IX No 11. November, 1925.}


In January 1925 \textit{The Oxford Magazine} noted: ‘Last term’s programme made one hurry... to encyclopaedias... This term we know where we are.’\footnote{TOM 22 January 1925.} Maugham’s \textit{Smith} gave Kathleen Moseley her chance. Fernald thought her ‘adequate, but... Algy... received no help from the actor.’\footnote{TC 24 January 1925.} Possibly Gielgud was too excited about the next play. \textit{The Cherry Orchard} resulted from Fagan’s discovery of George Calderon’s version. Like Fagan, he was a Trinity man. After being called to the Bar, he spent two years in St. Petersburg.\footnote{Percy Lubbock. \textit{George Calderon. A Sketch from Memory}. Glasgow: Grant Richards, 1921, p. 40.} The Stage Society aired his play, \textit{The Fountain}, in 1909. The same year he staged his version of \textit{The Seagull} for Glasgow Rep. Reviews were enthusiastic, but south of the border poor translations blunted Chekhov’s impact.\footnote{Laurence Senelick. \textit{The Chekhov theatre}. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 97.} Calderon wrote:

\begin{quote}
I want to... make [the spectator’s] vision ‘normal’, like the unassuming Irishman’s. For we Britons... come to the contemplation of exotic art with a certain want of ease.\footnote{\textit{Two Plays by Tchekhov. The Seagull. The Cherry Orchard}. Tr. George Calderon. Glasgow: Grant Richards, 1912, pp. 7-8. Reprinted 1924.} Fagan wrote:
\end{quote}

Fagan was not unassuming. He was Irish. He understood.\footnote{‘Tchechov brought a new technique to the stage and in \textit{The Cherry Orchard} he brought it to perfection... A word and a look serve where another dramatist would have written a scene.’ Fagan. Programme note.} To allow extra time he rehearsed
Cherry Orchard with Smith. Rowse was spellbound, ‘especially by the end.’ T.B.D. raved:

We would back [Fagan’s] production... against that of any other rep... As the curtains closed ...the whole audience became silent... The applause which finally came was as full and sincere as the silence.

They had to turn more than 100 away on the last night. Playfair offered to transfer it to the Lyric, Hammersmith, when his own production of The Rivals ended.

Fagan’s ‘attack on the wicked ways of the Press,’ The Earth, followed. He had
‘touched it up... since 1909.’
Not only the League of Nations but even the crossword puzzle figure. It hardly needed these rejuvenations... The multiple Press deserves the lash... no less than it did.

Another triple bill competed with Denham’s Peer Gynt for OUDS at the New. It included the British première of Turgenev’s The Country Cousin. Fagan said it had an ‘essential humanity’ that would live long after more perfect plays. Critics were not so sure. Joan Buckmaster simpered, Paulise de Bush was a ‘timid amateur.’ The Hon. Mrs Buckmaster acted for OUDS. De Bush was the daughter of W.J. Bush and his opera singer wife. Critics were kinder about them in The Admirable Crichton. ‘The Playhouse has probably never had a larger first night audience.’

Fagan ended term with a play by an Oxford graduate. Phyllis Bell had staged Richard Hughes’ The Comedy of Good and Evil at the Three Hundred Club, but this was its first public airing. Fagan’s 12-year-old daughter, Gemma, played Gladys.

The pivot... is the arrival of an imp of darkness... in the... household of a... Welsh clergyman. ...His wife... has a wooden leg. She awakes... to find that a [real] leg... has taken [its] place.

Houses were ‘excellent.’ The crisis was over. Fagan would have a short summer term season and reopen in October. Hughes’ play was his first transfer. It went to the Ambassadors.

Reviews were ‘favourable,’ but it was ‘too great a strain for London playgoers.’ Shaw

98 Ti 28 January 1925.
100 TC 7 February 1925.
101 OC 6 February 1925.
102 TC 14 February 1925.
103 He became Baron Sax Coburg for his firm’s chemical work. Abingdon Herald 9 May 1974.
104 OJ 18 February 1925.
105 OC 13 March 1925.
106 OC 3 April 1925.

41
‘enjoyed’ it. ‘But did you understand it?’ Shaw: ‘No... I hate plays that I can understand... They are not like life, which nobody understands!’ The Anmer Hall company began summer term. They were billed for two weeks, coupling five nights of Maugham’s Caroline and five of Roland Pertwee’s Slipping on the Peel, with two of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. They stayed three. Monkhouse hailed Gillian Scaife’s Caroline and Nora in Ibsen. He was less happy about the Pertwee. ‘The Doll’s House will be played all next week... Thank God for that!’

Playfair brought The Rivals to Oxford when he transferred Cherry Orchard. It had another week at the Playhouse first. Gielgud was understudying Noel Coward in The Vortex. So Creswell was Trophimoff. O.B. Clarence replaced Goolden as Firs, Virginia Isham Veronica Turleigh as Barbara, Byam Shaw Lugg as Yasha. The other actors were the same. Gielgud was back for the Lyric opening, which went ‘well... even though the theatre was not... full.’ James Agate called it the best play in London, Basil Macdonald Hastings the worst. Fagan billed both notices.

We began to play to... good audiences... Though a few people walked out... the general verdict was enthusiastic. We could not remain at the Lyric... but moved to the Royalty.

Darlington enthused:

Once we knew we were allowed to laugh... even the lunatic billiard player... began to make sense... I had a way of practising shots with an imaginary cricket-bat.

Calling it ‘an imperishable masterpiece,’ Agate wrote: ‘In a rep... one part must go astray... Miss Ellis as the governess was miscast.’ It was Jane Ellis’s final role for the Players.

When the play moved to the Royalty, Nora Nicholson took over.

Improving reviews may have encouraged her to move on. In April she played the maid...
in Komisarjevsky's revival of The Government Inspector at Barnes.\textsuperscript{118} Fagan had to drop her after Agate's review. That summer he staged Cobra, a Broadway hit about a philandering student, at the Garrick.

First... was Sophie Binner, who came blackmailing the unhappy Jack in college.... A cheque for 1,000 dollars disposed of her. Next came Eliza... She was far more dangerous.\textsuperscript{119}

Jane Ellis played Sophie for a few weeks,\textsuperscript{120} then Elsa Lanchester took over. The Royalty brought backstage changes too. Gielgud's 25-year-old brother, Val, recalled:

I was in John's dressing room... Fagan... had been deprived unexpectedly of... his ASM. Half-jokingly, I suggested I should like the job.\textsuperscript{121}

Speaight noted: 'Next season [Fagan] intends to run each play - there will be four in all - from Wednesday to Saturday week.\textsuperscript{122} Cherwell's London correspondent scoffed:

Unless the repertory theatres... arrange a system of exchange, their... difficulties will never be solved... I am doubtless rash in assuming that... Fagan and... Playfair have any [such] idea... [Their] intention is clearly to give The Cherry Orchard a long run... It will not get it.\textsuperscript{123}

In fact, it did not close until September after 120 performances.\textsuperscript{124}

It was one of four 'flying matinées' Fagan staged for the Oxford University Delegacy of Extramural Studies. Delegates wondered why the Playhouse was 'a makeshift barn.'

It was one's cynical pleasure to remind them that the municipalities of England, while supporting picture galleries, libraries and swimming baths, will have no truck with the stage... Oxford would add enormously to her prestige if... she were the first university to recognise and support a repertory theatre.\textsuperscript{125}

Fagan directed only two plays in the autumn. On the strength of Cherry Orchard he was mounting an Irish Players season at the Royalty, during which he introduced London to Sean O'Casey and Juno and the Paycock, and he had a play of his own on the stocks. Whale had gone, but the guest directors he invited showed he was keen not to short-change Oxford. Milton Rosmer began with Maugham's The Circle. Stage manager Val Gielgud found himself acting.

\textit{The Oxford Magazine} thought that he was excellent, 'so reminiscent of and yet so unlike his Programme. Jane Ellis's papers.

\textit{The Times} 19 August 1925.

\textsuperscript{120} In October 1926 she wed Leonard Bosley. She was a British Drama League adjudicator from 1930-34 and directed amateur shows at Peterborough after the Second World War.


\textsuperscript{122} \textit{TC} 3 June 1925. The change did not happen.

\textsuperscript{123} Lionel Millard. \textit{TC} 30 May 1925.

\textsuperscript{124} 'It... first revealed... that the play was a masterpiece... Three years later a company from the Moscow Art Theatre... [proved] in Russian the... rightness of Fagan's treatment.' [A.V. Cookman]. \textit{The Times} 16 January 1960.

\textsuperscript{125} XYZ. \textit{TC} 14 October 1925.
brother.' 126 Allan Wade directed Shaw’s *Misalliance*; Rosmer Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, which he had just done at the Everyman, Hampstead. It drew a poor house.127 The night after was big ‘for a Tuesday.’128 By Saturday the theatre was packed.129 Fagan directed the last two plays. Gemma was Margaret and Goolden Lob in Barrie’s *Dear Brutus*, 130 Val Gielgud and Gwendolen Evans the illicit lovers in Lennox Robinson’s *The White Blackbird*. 'Less than 60... were present... It is only... my own welfare that prevents me... telling... Fagan... to pack up.'131

Programmes still billed Pyke as lessee but, now Jane Ellis had left, Fagan needed another backer. He turned to the Carnegie Trust.132 Since 1921 it had made grants to drama. In 1924 it began aiding reps. Fagan’s £480 was one of the first. A condition was that he should have city and university backing.133 Farnell’s successor as Vice-Chancellor, Joseph Wells, chaired the meeting to fulfil it. On the platform were the Warden of New, H.A.L. Fisher; the Heather Professor of Music, Sir Hugh Allen; the Merton Professor of English, George Gordon; and the Trust’s Irish representative, Sir Horace Plunkett. Fagan said Oxford Arts Theatre Guild members would get visiting speakers for their five shillings, but ‘the real thing [is] that you will be asked to support the... Players.’134 The Earl of Oxford was president. The committee boasted five college heads, counting the Vice-Chancellor, and 14 other notables. The executive was Fagan, Prof. Gordon; C.K. Allen; Cyril Bailey; and the Rev. James Thompson, Home Bursar of Magdalen. Sir Hugh said:

> If enough money is forthcoming... I can build a building which will be on the top the finest concert hall in Oxford and underneath a... beautifully equipped theatre.135

Term ended with the British premidre of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* in a new version by the future Heather Professor of Music, Jack Westrup.136 The producer was Nugent Monck of the

126 **TOM** 29 October 1925.
127 **OJ** 11 November 1925.
128 **TOM** 12 November 1925.
130 'Val Gielgud’s... voice reminds one of... John... but he is a far subtler... actor.' M(aurice) R(oy) R(idley). **TOM** 26 November 1925.
131 **TC** 5 December 1925.
133 Elizabeth East, Administrator of the Carnegie U.K. Trust, to the author 10 April 1996.
134 **QC** 4 December 1925.
135 Allen had just been to Canada, where ‘in Toronto a beautiful theatre has been built... [for] Toronto University, and over it... a swimming bath, which is extraordinarily good for sound.’
136 Sumner Austin, a local opera singer, was Orfeo, Mrs Philips Eurydice.
Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich. He raised the £3,300 for it by involving the community. The rich man does not mind if he loses his money... The guinea guarantor... will see that his friends, enemies and relations [buy] tickets first.

A pity nobody followed his example at Oxford. While Fagan’s cavalier approach had a lot to do with the Guild’s failure, if Oxford’s worthies had been as keen to back his efforts as they were to lend their names, it would not have failed so pathetically. Thompson wrote to the Mayor, Amos George:

We should... welcome... a site in St. Aldate’s... Fagan’s scheme is to erect a building... with a stage big enough for a chorus and orchestra, and an auditorium to seat 1,500 or even 2,000... on the lines of a Greek theatre... [We] want to make Oxford... headquarters of the best music... opera and drama in the country.

He implied Fagan had the executive’s blessing. The first they knew was 14 January 1926. Next day Thompson wrote again: they were unable to make an offer. In two months’ time, things might be different. The truth was the Guild had no money and none was forthcoming. Later in 1926 Christ Church created a Memorial Garden to its war dead on part of the site, in 1936 St. Catherine’s Society erected a student centre where Fagan wanted his theatre.

The success of Juno encouraged him to introduce London to O’Casey’s The Plough and the Stars. George Owen directed four of the first seven plays of 1926. The critics rubbished Galsworthy’s The Skin Game and Milne’s The Truth About Blayds. A.J.A. commented: ‘A few days ago I saw... Uncle Vanya [at Barnes], the sort of play one hopes to meet... instead of this commercial milk-and-water business.’ Reaction was warmer to Fagan’s revival of Shaw’s Arms and the Man and Owen’s of Chesterton’s Magic with Val Gielgud as the magician.

Shortly after... J.B. revised his opinion. I ceased to play leads... In... one of the recurring crises... I [was] forced to try my luck elsewhere.

Critics also liked the English premiere of Achard’s Marlborough Goes To War and Vanbrugh’s The Confederacy with Bourchier and Violet Vanbrugh’s daughter, Prudence Vanbrugh, as Clarissa. Her mother came. So did O’Casey. Fagan wanted him to attend the première of Juno.

---

138 Quoted. The Other Theatre, as above, p. 93.
139 Incomplete correspondence in the Town Clerk’s file for 1926. Oxford City Archives.
140 It is now the University Music Faculty.
141 TC 30 January 1926. It was the first play of the Chekhov season Komisarjevsky directed for Philip Ridgeway.
142 Val Gielgud. As above, p 45. He became assistant editor of Radio Times.
but he stayed in Dublin for the opening of *The Plough*.\(^{143}\) Juno’s transfer to the Fortune gave Fagan another chance. The programme said he had asked several big names to address the Guild ‘in vain. We shall continue our efforts.’ He had received £240 from the Trust.\(^{144}\) Six months’ rent. A year would pass before he claimed the other half.

Fagan promised two plays in Eights Week\(^{145}\) and more in the conference season.\(^{146}\) A university triple bill marked the tercentenary of the Heather chair of Music.\(^{147}\) Critics should have covered it at length. The General Strike prevented them. Fagan, about to open *The Plough*, cancelled his Oxford productions. *Spe Deiectus* - Hope Dashed - wrote:

> We have had... one dramatic general strike, one undramatic coal strike, and one Musical Festival. There is also [Anmer Hall’s] company. But of the... Arts Theatre Guild... and the... Players... we... hear [nothing].\(^{148}\)

Hall brought Turgenev’s ‘hitherto unknown’\(^{149}\) *A Month in the Country*. ‘There were 83 others there... Magnificent!’\(^{150}\) Clemenceau’s *The Veil of Happiness* and Barrie’s *Rosalind* did no better and houses were also ‘poor’\(^{151}\) for two matinées of Christopher Scaife’s *The Triumph of Death*. Guthrie, about to run the Scottish National Players, directed under a pseudonym.\(^{152}\) The company ended with the English première of Gogol’s *Marriage*.

Days after *Spe Deiectus’s* letter Oxford learnt that Terence Gray and Harold Ridge had bought the Cambridge Theatre Royal and were turning it into ‘the most advanced theatre’\(^{153}\) in Britain. Like Fagan, Gray was Irish.\(^{154}\) Both used the term ‘presentational.’ Both loved lighting. But whereas Fagan was a pragmatist with one foot in the commercial theatre, Gray was an idealist, who hated its ‘illusion and glamour.’\(^{155}\) His ‘aim was to graft Gordon Craig's

\(^{144}\) OC 23 April 1926.
\(^{145}\) Eights Week spread over a fortnight.
\(^{146}\) OC 12 March 1926.
\(^{147}\) Two operas, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* (Vaughan Williams), *Coffee and Cupid* (based on Bach’s *Coffee Cantata*), and a ballet based on Wycherley’s *The Gentleman Dancing Master*.
\(^{148}\) Letter. TOM 3 June 1926.
\(^{149}\) OC 28 May 1926.
\(^{151}\) H.S. Barnes. *Tl*, as above.
\(^{153}\) OC 18 June 1926.
\(^{155}\) *The Other Theatre*. As above, p. 53.
ideal... onto an efficient repertory house.156 He was 30. Ridge, five years older. Fagan, back in Oxford to direct OUDS' _A Midsummer Night's Dream_ in Magdalen Grove, said they planned to exchange productions.

In July the Players staged _Dear Brutus_ for an American women teachers' summer school and _Heartbreak House and Dear Brutus_ for the British Association. In September Fagan's play, _And So To Bed_, opened in London. Nobody thought the 'historical romp' about the singer, Mrs Knight (Mary Grey), Charles II (Allan Jeayes), Samuel Pepys (Edmund Gwenn), and the diarist's wife (Yvonne Arnaud) would run. By September the House Full boards were out at the Queen's and it moved to the Savoy. Fagan had two hits. The other was _The Plough_. Not long after O'Casey and Fagan fell out. O'Casey called Fagan a 'little manager born within view of Oxford University.'157 The jibe captured Fagan's passion for the alma mater he had abandoned in his youth, but as his own fortunes improved he had little time to foster it and Oxford showed no signs of reciprocating.

Veronica Turleigh rejoined the Players in the autumn. Newcomers included Mona Mullins and Alan Webb. The producer was Jevan Brandon-Thomas. Leslie Hull was managing _And So To Bed_. Seph Colegrove took over at Oxford. A departure was cheaper seats early in the week. They made no difference to _Hedda Gabler_. Femald scoffed: 'Turleigh speaks ...Hedda as if she was... Death in a morality.'158 Fagan 'lent' Alfred Clark from _And So To Bed_ for Molière's _The Bourgeois Gentleman_. The _Chronicle_ thought it 'a letdown after the... travelling French company that visited Oxford.'159 The cheapest seats for Shaw's _The Devil's Disciple_ cost 1s 8d on Monday and Tuesday. Femald protested: 'The audience was there in greater force... Instead of... soldiers and... crowds, we were given four anaemic automatons.'160

Fagan returned with the English premidre of Strindberg's _The Spook Sonata_. _Cherwell_ confessed it had met nobody who understood it, but the appeal was strong. 'It must be... to persuade the audience... on Monday [not]... to giggle.'161 As the word went round, it did not stop...
them other nights.\textsuperscript{162} Michael Meyer said only Germany staged Strindberg's work regularly in the 30 years after his death.\textsuperscript{163} Shaw may have encouraged Fagan. In 1926 he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature provided he could use it to fund an Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation.\textsuperscript{164} G.F.A. commented:

*The Spook Sonata* and *The Cherry Orchard* are the two most important productions yet undertaken by the Playhouse.... Until the war Ibsen was the most vital... influence on English playwrights... Now... we feel the need for rebellion against the rules of the well-made play... it is either to Strindberg or to Tchehov that we must turn.\textsuperscript{165}

Of A.E. Filmer's production of *The Seagull* he wrote:

My own opinion is that Tchehov represents the main stream. He has regained the freedom of the Elizabethan subdivision of the act into scenes, without sacrificing any of the realism which has... evolved since. He has also revived the aside and the soliloquy.\textsuperscript{166}

The Festival Theatre opened a month late. The producer was Herbert Prentice from Sheffield, the leading man Maurice Evans, the stage director Norman Marshall.

The programme... contains... lengthy notes on *The Oresteia*... and a cast-sheet printed on transparent paper so that it can be... read [in the] dark... Except for its situation... it has the better of the... Playhouse at every point.\textsuperscript{167}

The late launch prevented Gray bringing his second play to Oxford while Fagan took *Spook Sonata* to Cambridge. Instead Oxford saw a dismal drama about a man who refuses to give up a swampland farm, *The God o' Mud* by Arnold Ridley, whose comic thriller, *The Ghost Train*, was still playing to packed houses in London. The University Opera Club, launched on the strength of *Orfeo*, ended term with Gluck's *Alceste*.

What of the Arts Theatre? There is an influential committee... and one has no right to suppose it has been idle... But... [a] site is not of much value without the money.\textsuperscript{168}

Emlyn Williams wrote his first full-length play, *Full Moon*, while recovering from the breakdown which prevented him taking finals. Fagan included it in his first season of

\textsuperscript{162} 'I laughed so much...I was in danger of being asked to leave.' A.J.P. Taylor. *A Personal History.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983, p. 75.

\textsuperscript{163} *Strindberg.* As above, pp. 572-574.

\textsuperscript{164} Fagan used the version by Edwin Björkman, who called himself 'Strindberg's official translator.' Prof. Michael Robinson, University of East Anglia, letter 12 January 2001. Meyer said his work was 'dreadful.' As above, p. 574.

\textsuperscript{165} G.F. A(armitage). *TOM* 18 November 1926. Armitage was a student at Corpus Christi College.

\textsuperscript{166} G.F.A. *TOM* 25 November 1926.

\textsuperscript{167} *TC* 27 November 1926.

\textsuperscript{168} *OC* 31 December 1926.
1927.\textsuperscript{169} Newcomers included Peggy Webster, Maud Risdon from RADA, and producer Claud Gurney.\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Uncle Vanya} marked his professional debut.\textsuperscript{171} The same night Fagan's revival of \textit{Juno} opened at the Criterion.\textsuperscript{172} Then he began rehearsing \textit{The Greater Love}, which opened at the Princes in February, following it with George Shiels's \textit{Professor Tim} at the Vaudeville. Fagan wrote \textit{The Greater Love} for his wife, but because of \textit{And So To Bed}'s success Sybil Thorndike was 'the good revolutionary' in his study of Czarist Russia. 'Fireworks if you will, but fireworks that do go off.'\textsuperscript{173} So did the play. Shaw, in Oxford for the read-through of \textit{The Philanderer}, attended the first night of \textit{Vanya}. The \textit{Chronicle} praised Moseley's 'notably finished little picture'\textsuperscript{174} of the nurse. Shortly she would become a teacher. Peggy Webster's Sonya recalled Gwendolen Evans. 'She is a great acquisition.'\textsuperscript{175} In \textit{The Philanderer} she became Margaret. St. John Ervine begged: 'Please don't call yourself PEGGY... [A name] must be... easy to say [but] also distinctive.'\textsuperscript{176} The critics thought the play old hat, as they did Barrie's \textit{Quality Street}. Gurney's first solo effort was \textit{Androcles and the Lion}. 'It is always... unfair to judge... on a Monday night, and this week it would be particularly unfair because there were some exceptional scenic mishaps.'\textsuperscript{177} The culprit was Webster.

You reached the stage up a flight of stone steps, which led straight into the back wall of the set - and right through it if, as... happened to me, you missed your entrance.\textsuperscript{178}

The week after the first exchange took place with Cambridge.

At Bletchley each company had to change into the other one's train... I almost collided with... Maurice Evans. 'Hulloh,' he gasped. 'How's your theatre?' 'Terrible,' I gasped back. 'How's yours?' 'Extraordinary!'\textsuperscript{179}

George Marks said: 'One of the largest audiences which the [Festival] has yet held'\textsuperscript{180} gave \textit{Vanya} a warm welcome. He ignored the Players' difficulties. Margaret Webster wrote:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[169] George, pp. 417-418.
\item[170] He came up to St. John's after war service, but left without a degree. While teaching at his old school, Hurstpierpoint College, he started staging plays. Letter. Martin Williams, school archivist, 18 April 2000.
\item[171] \textit{OM} 17 November 1945.
\item[172] \textit{OC} 14 January 1927.
\item[173] \textit{The Times}. Quoted \textit{OC} 25 February 1927.
\item[174] \textit{OC} 28 January 1927.
\item[175] \textit{TC} 29 January 1927.
\item[176] Margaret Webster. \textit{The Same Only Different}. As above, pp. 315-316.
\item[177] \textit{OC} 19 February 1927.
\item[178] Webster, p. 318.
\item[179] Webster, pp. 318-319.
\item[180] \textit{Cambridge Evening News} 21 February 1927.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Our... scenery looked ridiculous... bathed in merciless light from far too many... arc lamps... The [student] critics duly... served us on toast for the university’s breakfast.

The talking point at Oxford was the transparent programme credits. Marshall had cut C.K. Munro’s *The Rumour* by an hour. It still had 50 characters. ‘It is difficult to conceive of a play which combines as much... long-winded preaching with clumsy construction.’

Emlyn Williams arrived in time to read the reviews of *Full Moon* before seeing the last performance. Fernald said: ‘If I could write a play like [it] I should... dance about on chimney-tops.’ Next day Williams saw the dress-rehearsal of Strindberg’s *Intoxication*. Fagan asked him: ‘Have you thought of going on the stage? ...Come to me if you need help.’ Strindberg divided the critics. L. claimed the Players had ‘touched one of the highest peaks in their career.’ The dons’ journal said it was difficult to see why Fagan had done it.

It is... straightforward... compared with *The Spook Sonata*, but it bears the impress of Strindberg’s... obsession [with the] powers of evil operating ...through the medium of sex.

Term ended with a visit from *The Beggar’s Opera*.

*[It] deserves something better than our anachronism of a Playhouse... it is in the inert spirit that tolerates [it] and a gymnasium that would be scorned by any American high school that Oxford’s failures on river, track and field have their... roots.*

Fagan found Williams a part in *And So To Bed*. Apart from the Rileys’ Dickens recital the Playhouse remained dark. After taking finals, Williams got a message. ‘All-day dress-rehearsal Strand Monday, *Spook Sonata*, walk-on for eight perfs, £3.’ Wearing claimed the version was Björkman’s, but there was no credit in the programme. It is possible that it was the translation Fagan produced with Baron Erik Palmstierna, the Swedish Ambassador.

---

181 TOM 24 February 1927.
182 TJ 2 March 1927.
183 TJ 9 March 1927.
184 TOM 10 March 1927.
185 OC 11 March 1927.
186 L.N. TOM 17 March 1927.
189 On 24 October 1929, when Fagan was to stage Strindberg’s *Thunderstorm* at Oxford, the Embassy Press Attaché, Eskil Sundström, wrote: ‘Baron Palmstierna [says]... you would like to have a revised translation... [He] would like to do it... with you... as in the case of *The Ghost Sonata.*’ Letter. Swedish National Archives: Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Palmstierna wrote the foreword to the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation’s first publication: August Strindberg. *Easter and Other Plays*. London: Cape, 1929. It included their *Ghost Sonata*.
**Watcher noted:**

One finds London critics speaking with profound respect... of Oxford audiences who support intellectual performances... Let us hope they will not make closer inquiry.\(^{190}\)

A month later he reported: ‘The... Players have... been playing to crowded houses [at] the Royalty Theatre, Glasgow.’\(^{191}\) Fagan was unlikely to mount another season at the Howard & Wyndham venue where Glasgow Rep had operated before the First World War. ‘But there are those who... [see it] as a... test of the support which a permanent [company] would receive.’\(^{192}\)

Provincial theatres were looking increasingly to rep companies. After hosting the Raynor company, Leon Salberg started one at the Alexandra, Birmingham, in 1927\(^{193}\) and Northampton Repertory Players began playing at the Theatre Royal.\(^{194}\) Fagan directed the first two plays of the five-week Scottish season, Gurney the rest. Evelyn Neilson, a 20-year-old actress from Troon, was Margaret in *Dear Brutus*.\(^{195}\) While he was in Scotland Fagan visited Dunfermline. The Carnegie Trust paid the second half of the grant. It would not repeat it: Fagan catered mainly for students. He argued that the Playhouse was a training ground for other reps. The Trustees insisted: ‘It should not be necessary to seek external assistance.’\(^{196}\) By the end of 1927 they had given £11,930 to 18 companies. They got Inland Revenue to waive a tax demand on their grants to Lena Ashwell, but it prompted a rethink.\(^{197}\) In future they would help only companies ‘catering for rural needs or... poor districts.’\(^{198}\)

*And So To Bed* was bound for New York. Williams, who was going with it, joined the Glasgow company in London to prepare for the Oxford summer season.\(^{199}\) Fagan and Gurney shared the direction. In the autumn *Agoo* pointed out that since the first year the Playhouse had never paid its way.

All that has happened is that the Carnegie Trust has given... its nominal support, and

\(^{190}\) OC 1 July 1927.
\(^{191}\) OC 29 July 1927.
\(^{192}\) Glasgow Herald 29 April 1927.
\(^{196}\) Elizabeth East, as above.
\(^{199}\) ‘I had one line as a workman in *Uncle Vanya*... and no lines as a footman in *The Circle*, but I was to be the burglar in *Heartbreak House* and - my plum - Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night.*’ Emlyn, p 28-29.
that some league... has formed a committee of distinguished absentees from Boars Hill. 200

Gurney, running the theatre in Fagan's absence in the States, said: 'Sometimes it is like pulling a hearse up a long hill.' Having succeeded in Glasgow, he was keen to breathe fresh life into Oxford. He could not improve audiences' comfort. He would try to make productions more interesting. Leon Davey, his new ASM, was a scenic artist. 'I intend to provide at least one or two scenes per play, which are not... grey draperies.' The fare suggested he had been visiting The Gate Theatre, which had premièred three of the plays. 201

Tired of staging commercial hits for reps in Southend, Wakefield and Plymouth, in 1925 Peter Godfrey and his wife sank their savings in a Covent Garden loft. The authorities refused to license it. So they made the 80-seat venue a club. Their first success was Ashley Dukes' version of Kaiser's From Morn Till Midnight.

Lights dimmed... voices... died away... People began to lift eyebrows... But from the moment ...the cashier... stared into the eyes of the lovely lady... a strange excitement stirred... It all ends in a Salvation Army shelter where... he flings himself against the Cross and throws his money... to be trampled on... Officers... scramble for the notes. 202

Clere Parsons said it 'ought to be seen several times.' 203 Once was enough for Frank Roby.

It is most improper... to imply that... members... would at the first touch of temptation be false to their Master. 204

Stage manager Neville Rainsley fetched Virginia Isham 'to see the protest parade of Salvation Army girls.' 205 Strindberg's Easter followed. 206

One was ready to be sunk in depression, but not to be twisted with... laughter...
Lindkvist... wears galoshes... Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! ...Alas, poor lowbrows! ... You cannot pretend you did not shout with laughter. 207

The chance to catch a rare play brought at least one national critic.

The Oxford Players deserve every credit... Hampered as they are, their performance is an astonishingly good one. 208

Granville Barker's version of Jules Romains' Dr. Knock appealed despite a 'thin
house,'2 0 9 and A.G.C. Codd advised readers to see Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine, 'if only to say how much better you could have done it.'210 The Chronicle ended a warmer notice:

Congratulations once again to... Claud Gurney and... Leon G. Davey for a mise-en-scene, which can only be described as... making bricks without straw.211

Fernald wrote: ‘What a distance is... Gurney removed from... Fagan!’212 Despite competing with Fay Compton as Barrie’s Mary Rose at the New, his earlier What Every Woman Knows, did well thanks to the performance of Evelyn Neilson as Maggie.213 The Rivals was disastrous.

‘Virginia Isham was the only player... to score full marks. Her Mrs Malaprop was a... joy.’214

Miss Risdon and Miss Nixon [Lydia Languish and Julia]... were wondering all the time if they would manage to remember the next line but two... Halfway through scene three Mr Creswell forgot his part... completely.215

The truth was they were exhausted. Gurney recruited John Counsell in January 1928. He said Gurney’s chief failing was to concentrate on act one.

Then, in a desperate effort to catch up, he...rehearsed... not only all day but after the show... I seldom had more than two hours’ sleep... on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.216

The actor to crack was Napier: he had a breakdown.217

For most of the vacation the Playhouse stayed dark. The Opera Club did Monteverdi's The Coronation of Poppaea, at the New. The Players’ began 1928 with Mr Pim Passes By.

‘Next to Mr Goolden... Kathleen Boutall takes highest honours... She will be a big asset.’218 On Saturday they had to turn 30 away.219 Watcher said the programme resulted from the ‘plebiscite.’220 In the autumn Gurney had invited suggestions. The Chronicle said he received 182,221 Colegrove listed 97!222 The Importance and The Silver Box were top with seven votes each. Dramatists included Barrie, Chekhov, Congreve, Galsworthy, Ibsen, Pinero, Shaw,
Sierra, Strindberg and Wilde. Julia Hartley-Milburn and Robert Morley arrived for the next production. Goolden played Louis Parker's *The Man in the Street* between two 'bitter studies in matrimonial misfits' by Barrie.\(^{223}\) The week after he shone as Foresight in *Love For Love*, reprising the role he played in 1924. 'The full text would doubtless have been impossible, but a good deal has been left in.'\(^{224}\) Too much for S.R. Daniels.

> Is there such a dearth of good... plays that it should be necessary to dig up the garbage of the most licentious period of English history?\(^{225}\)

*The Importance of Being Earnest* followed Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. Osbert Lancaster scoffed:

> The only member of the cast who displayed the slightest understanding... was Miss Maud Risdon as Lady Bracknell... Why Algernon Moncrieff should have been dressed as if he was... en route for a Bank Holiday at Brighton is inexplicable.\(^{226}\)

*The Saturday Review* claimed the Playhouse was at the end of its financial tether due mainly to the lack of an adequate building.\(^{227}\) There were other factors. The accounts Colegrove sent Fagan's manager showed wages were far higher than they would be in the 1930s.\(^{228}\) OUDS revived Emlyn Williams' one-act play contest winner, *Vigil*, in a triple bill for the National Union of Students congress. Their president, future travel writer Peter Fleming, directed.\(^{229}\)

The Rileys did their Dickens show, Michael Martin-Harvey staged a display of 'rhythmic dancing.'\(^{230}\) Colegrove had an inquiry about the summer.\(^{231}\) In the event OUDS staged the first amateur production of Galsworthy's *Escape* and the English premiere of O'Neill's *Where the Cross is Made* for the American Women Teachers.\(^{232}\) Gurney was preoccupied. Fagan's Glasgow season prompted Robert Fenemore, who had managed the first tour of *And So To Bed*, to extend it and stage an additional three weeks at the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, in partnership with Robert Cochran. Their ambition was to make their Masque Theatre 'a repertory company for

---

\(^{223}\) 'Morley is... Harry Sims in *The Twelve Pound Look* and... Richard Garson in *Half-an-Hour*. Both are capable performances, but it is a little disconcerting to find the same mannerisms.' \(OC\) 3 February 1928. Counsell, pp. 22-23, wrote: 'Although only 19... he was giving... very much the same performance... with which he [later delighted] London audiences.'

\(^{224}\) Clere Parsons. *TC* 11 February 1928.

\(^{225}\) Letter. *OC* 17 February 1928.

\(^{226}\) *TI* 22 February 1928. He did not review again!

\(^{227}\) Quoted. *OC* 23 March 1928.

\(^{228}\) Goolden, Gurney, Napier got £10; Creswell £7; Virginia Isham, Ruth Nixon, Maud Risdon, Malcolm £6; Evelyn Neilson, Davey £5; Counsell, Morley and Colegrove £4.


\(^{230}\) *TOM* 24 May 1928. Michael Martin-Harvey was a disciple of Isadora Duncan.

\(^{231}\) Violet Harley, Fagan's secretary. Letter 7 March 1928 among Colegrove's papers.

\(^{232}\) *OC* 20 & 27 July 1928.
Scotland' under Gurney's direction.  

In the summer Fagan, back from America, where *And So To Bed* had followed a London run of 331 performances with 189 at the Schubert Theatre, joined the Festival Theatre board. Gray said they would work together and rebuild the Playhouse. The 'final' season began with Milne’s *To Have the Honour*. Newcomers included future playwright, 20-year-old Rodney Ackland, and 18-year-old Patricia Hayes. Students adored her. A 23-year-old who would become as famous got a chillier reception.

The only real blot on [*You Never Can Tell*] was William, the... waiter... Robert G. Newton pushed [him] into the wings and brought out... the most hackneyed... stage puppet.

The tie-up with Cambridge led to another swap: the plays they would have exchanged if the Festival had not opened late. *The Spook Sonata*'s reception did not augur well for its transfer. Ackland said the cause was the 'American translation... full of exchanges like: “Go! I tell you to go - Very well, I'll go, but I'll stay just the same!”' Gurney made a curtain speech. J.R.V. Collin felt he should have given it ‘at the beginning.’ Next night he did. He also put a slip in the programme. Fleming said Newton ‘mopped and mowed with a touch of genius as the... repulsive Johanssen.’ He also caught George Marks's eye at Cambridge. The literary critic, William Empson, was ‘too late... to hear’ Gurney’s briefing, but commented ‘all the impressive moments... were stock jokes... and so well-trained is the Festival Theatre’s audience that they were received with... reverence.' Gray did not offer enlightenment at Oxford. You paid twopence for it with the read-in-the-dark cast-list.

233 J.W. Herries. *The Masque Theatre. The Repertory Movement in Scotland*. In the programme for Royal Gala Performance of *The Admirable Crichton* in aid of Edinburgh Royal Infirmary Bicentenary Extension Appeal, Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, 11 July 1931. They began in Glasgow in April with Milne’s *To Have the Honour* with Evreinov’s *A Merry Death*, following with the British première of Quintero Brothers’ *A Hundred Years Old*, Galsworthy’s *Windows* with Chekhov’s *The Artist*, *Dr. Knock* with O’Neill’s *Before Breakfast*, the British première of Auerheimer’s *The Good King* with Crayshaw Williams’s *E and OE*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. They ended with *The Circle, Dr. Knock* and *A Hundred Years Old* in repertoire with *Colossus*.

234 Terence Gray. Quoted *OC* 12 October 1928.

235 ‘[Mr Gurney said:] “It’s... all right for you to take [their] chocolates or flowers... but for heaven’s sake don’t fall in love with any of them.”’ Teresa Jennings and Patricia Hayes. *Patricia Hayes: A Funny Old Life*. London: Robson Books, 1990, p. 38.

236 B.M. *TI* 24 October 1928.

237 Interview with the author *OM* 26 January 1980.


239 Margaret Saumarez-Smith. *F* December 1928.

240 Peter Fleming. *TI* 14 November 1928.


242 *Granta* 23 November 1928.
The meaning of *The Man Who Ate the Popomack* is not at first sight much easier to define... It is more successful... because... [W.J. Turner chose] to plant his symbolism in a climate where... tragedy and farce grow amiably together - in dreams.243

‘The last week at the old Playhouse’ prompted critics to bring out the black crêpe.

I.R.M., ‘sitting... with frozen feet... in that gloomy barn,’ lamented:

Where shall we three meet again: North Oxford, the University and the... Players? Are we to turn Expressionist? ...The play’s the thing, and if we get anything as good as *The Women Have Their Way*, we shan’t have anything to complain of.244

In January the city’s new evening newspaper, the *Oxford Mail*, noted that the Council was considering plans for a new 600-seat Playhouse and, if approved, building would start ‘in February.’245 The Oxford City Dramatic Club billed *The Sport of Kings*, which marked its merger with the Operatic Society, as the last play before the theatre was demolished.

The plans were repeatedly revised... The... obstacle, which has proved insuperable, was the [Council’s] insistence... that we should sacrifice five feet... of the already inadequate width of the site... Oxford can... pity in peace the... citizens of almost every other municipality in Europe (outside the British Isles), who not only have to suffer such incubi, but are... made to pay for them by their elected representatives.246

The ‘obstacle’ was the widening of Woodstock Road. A councillor explained:

The proposed building would have projected five feet in front of the existing building... The Town Planning Committee had no alternative.247

In March the the *Oxford Mail* absorbed the short-lived effort to combat it, the *Oxford Evening Times*, in May the *Oxford Times* the *Chronicle* and *Journal*. Charles Fenby, being groomed to become the *Mail* editor, was a keen Playhouse patron as a student and would champion it again. For the moment comment was left to the university journals. Anthony Gishford wrote:

The Festival... has aroused mistrust... but even a Playhouse resembling the... Festival... is more desirable than no Playhouse.248

*The Oxford Magazine*:

Our... Players have been robbed... of a new opportunity; but they still have their old one... of giving us good plays... which... rely for their success upon no external... stimulus.249

243 J.R.V. Collin. TC 24 November 1928.
244 TOM 29 November 1928.
245 OM 11 January 1929. No plans survive in the City Archives.
246 Terence Gray. Letter. TOM 2 May 1929.
247 Christopher Cookson. Letter. TOM 9 May 1929.
248 A.G. Editorial. 77 1 May 1929. Gishford was now editor.
249 TOM 2 May 1929.
It goaded Gray to respond:

The theatre I like best... is the Redoutensaal in Vienna... a raised platform without
curtain, proscenium, footlights, flies... or any of the abominations of the 19th
century playhouse... If the... theatre in Oxford is ever built... it will be the simplest
and the least mechanical theatre in the British Isles.\(^{250}\)

It also goaded Frank Smith, a resident ‘the wrong side of Magdalen Bridge,’ to ask:

Did [the Playhouse] not convey in almost every gesture that it was a university
thing...? May I suggest East Oxford... for our second theatre?\(^{251}\)

Speaight wrote from the Savoy, where he was now Hibbert in Journey’s End, to ask
why academic Oxford did not rise in protest.

From the answer is traceable the ultimate defeat of an intelligent theatre... The....
leaders of education... (with a few... exceptions)... have never taken the trouble to
inform themselves about things theatrical... If the vast floating population of dons,
doctors and clergymen had for one evening... varied their activity and brought their
female appendages... Fagan would soon have had the money to provide better seats.\(^{252}\)

It was a fair point. But Fagan had never wooed academia with the zeal he might if he had not
been preoccupied. After reviving Marlborough Goes to War at Cambridge,\(^{253}\) he directed The
Knight of the Burning Pestle in Magdalen Grove for OUDS.\(^{254}\) He assured reporters Oxford
would get its theatre.\(^{255}\) Anmer Hall was running Cambridge while Gray concentrated on the
merger. His plan involved the Gate too. To give Oxford and Cambridge a London platform he
would rebuild it where the National Sporting Club had been.\(^{256}\) Richard Cave said London
County Council thwarted the plan,\(^{257}\) Gray lack of backing. ‘The international... crisis...
rendered the financing... unrealisable.’\(^{258}\) The Wall Street Crash put paid to the venture.

Isis reported in October that the Players were making ‘a fresh start.’\(^{259}\) Since 1923
they had lost £1,985.\(^{260}\) The cost of keeping open was £1,400. As a guarantee against loss

\(^{250}\) TOM 16 May 1929. The Redoutensaal was almost certainly the theatre Fagan mentioned to
the Chronicle in 1923. See above Footnote 5.

\(^{251}\) Letter. TOM 23 May 1929.

\(^{252}\) Robert Speaight. TI 23 May 1929.

\(^{253}\) TC 4 May 1929.

\(^{254}\) OM 20 June 1929. Gemma Fagan was Princess Pompiona in Beaumont and Fletcher’s
comedy, John Glyn-Jones the Knight, Valentine Dyall the Prologue, Lionel Hale Humphrey.

\(^{255}\) OT 28 June 1929.

\(^{256}\) The Times 10 October 1929.

\(^{257}\) Theatre in Focus. As above, p. 13.

\(^{258}\) Letter from Gray, Monte Carlo, 22 February 1967, to B.J. Utting. The Festival Theatre

\(^{259}\) TI 16 October 1929.

\(^{260}\) TOM 17 October 1929 said losses had averaged £330 for six years.
they needed 750 subscribers. Gurney was preoccupied with the Masque. Fagan returned. He replaced the creaking chairs with tip-up seating from Queen's Hall.\textsuperscript{261} Newcomers included John Boddington from Greet's company and an actor from Liverpool later better known as a director, Jack Minster. Gibson-Cowan was stage director, Vincent Pearmain, future RSC public relations chief, manager. Critics liked Fernald's version of Chiarelli's \textit{La Maschera e Il Volto (The Mask and the Face), Marks even more.}

The Oxford Players have [not] contributed much to the gaiety of Festival-going... But this time... Fagan has brought a sparkling play... Its... cleverness is not academic or bewildering as is Pirandello's.\textsuperscript{262}

The barb was at Guthrie's expense, who had opened for Hall with \textit{Six Characters in Search of an Author}. Hall's revival of \textit{Marriage} came to Oxford while the Players took \textit{The Mask} to Cambridge. Stephen Spender loved it.\textsuperscript{263} He hated Andreyev's \textit{He Who Gets Slapped}:\textsuperscript{264}

Synges's \textit{Deirdre of the Sorrows} was to follow. Palmstierna's offer to help Fagan produce a new version of Strindberg's \textit{Thunderstorm} led him to juggle his programme and substitute Milne's \textit{The Dover Road}. Nigel Playfair's son, Giles, who had just come up to Merton, noted:

Members of the university will not face the draughts... without a very special inducement and that... is not supplied by light comedy, be it never so charmingly played.\textsuperscript{265}

The Players took it to Cambridge, where \textit{Deidre} opened on Thursday. Guthrie gave Oxford Murray's version of Euripides' \textit{Iphigenia in Tauris}. 'When the house lights came up... [Murray] was wiping tears off his spectacles.'\textsuperscript{266} The Players returned with \textit{Deidre}. 'The outstanding acting of Olga Martin laid a welcome stress on... Navarcham... Michael Scott's conception of Naisi... was also interesting.'\textsuperscript{267} For J.F.M.: 'Gemma Fagan was Deidre.'\textsuperscript{268} Scott was 24. From 1923-26, while training as an architect,\textsuperscript{269} he moonlighted at the Abbey

\textsuperscript{261} In a curtain speech he said they had kept a dozen. \textit{OM} 23 October 1929. All twelve were among the effects when the City Council took over.\textsuperscript{262} George Marks. \textit{Cambridge Evening News} 29 October 1929.\textsuperscript{263} \textit{TC} 2 November 1929. The poet was at University College.\textsuperscript{264} 'The whole situation is... in the title, and we never get much further.' \textit{TC} 9 November 1929.\textsuperscript{265} G.P. \textit{TI} 13 November 1929.\textsuperscript{266} R. Kingston Davies. Letter 8 August 1996. Davies was in his first term at Balliol.\textsuperscript{267} Gabriel Carritt. \textit{TC} 30 November 1929.\textsuperscript{268} \textit{TI} 27 November 1929.\textsuperscript{269} He converted the Rotunda Supper Rooms into the Gate Theatre in 1930 and rebuilt the Abbey in 1951. He called the Playhouse 'a tin shack with a corrugated iron roof.' \textit{Michael Scott Architect in... conversation with Dorothy Walker}. Kinsale, County Cork: Gandon Editions, 1995, p. 59. The rain drumming on the lantern gave that impression.
Theatre, Dublin. After he qualified, he still acted occasionally. Term ended with The Beaten Track by J.O. Francis. For the only time Fagan, his wife and Gemma acted in a play together.

It was saved from complete failure only by the beautiful... performance of... Mary Grey... Fagan did not know his part and had made no attempt at production.270

Diarist said the theatre would close for Christmas.271 'What of the future?' he asked in January. 'Fagan's laconic speech at the final performance... was ominous. “Silence is golden... This term has been otherwise.”'272 His regime was over. He would have another transatlantic hit with The Improper Duchess. But that, like his final role as a Hollywood scriptwriter, only burnished his image as a showman. Theatre historians overlooked his contribution to British theatre. Gray got the credit for the experiments Fagan first tried at Oxford. Neither succeeded in getting dons or students to patronise their theatres. Neither advanced the cause of drama as an academic discipline. But as Gray acknowledged with characteristic hyperbole, Fagan deserved better of posterity.

He had a more genuine love of the theatre than any man... His... record of dramatic achievement in Oxford and... London remains unrivalled.273

270 A(nthony) G(ishford). TI 4 December 1929.
271 OM 30 November 1929.
272 OM 9 January 1930.
Serving town as well as gown (1930-38)

Nevill Coghill, the don who would become the champion of university drama, directed his first play in 1930. After four weeks at Huddersfield, Gurney, Fenemore and Cochran staged a 14-week Masque Theatre season at Glasgow and Edinburgh. Earle Grey played The Man with the Flower in his Mouth when the BBC screened its first television play. The Playhouse sputtered back to life occasionally, before becoming a midget golf course 'when the craze crossed the Atlantic.' Among the visitors were three young actors.

Whether it was... Stanford Holme... Edward Wilkinson or... Arthur Brough who won... within three weeks a company was being formed under... Sir Philip Ben Greet.

John Counsell said he first met Holme when he came to see Brough about Greet’s proposal. Brough claimed John Boddington, who acted in Fagan’s last season, alerted him, Wilkinson: ‘We were there to decide whether to rent or buy the place... I don’t... remember playing the round of golf!’

He was 26 and a RADA graduate. He met Holme and Brough in 1925 when he joined

---

3 Including premières of Bridie’s The Anatomist and Chekhov’s Platonov. S.G.R. Oxford Magazine 22 May 1930: ‘In three seasons the Masque... will have added eight new plays to the English stage.’
5 Michael Martin-Harvey mounted another display of ‘rhythmic dancing.’ S.G.R. The Oxford Magazine 6 March 1930.
6 Oxford Mail 12 March 1938.
8 John Counsell. Counsell’s Opinion. As above, p. 35.
11 There he rubbed shoulders with Gielgud, playing Horatio to his Hamlet.
Greet. In his prime the actor-manager had 25 companies staging Shakespeare outdoors in summer, indoors in winter. Theodosia Johnston made her debut with him in 1924. She married Holme in 1926. He was one of Greet’s ASMs. Frederick Arthur Baker was another. He became Arthur Brough when he left RADA. The trio formed the Pioneer Players in 1927 and staged their first summer season at Seaford with Greet in 1928. Holme and his bride, now acting as Thea Holme, took the leads in Tom Walls’s 1927 tour of Travers’ farce, Rookery Nook, and his 1928 tour of Thark. Wilkinson acted in the 1928 Stratford-upon-Avon festival, then went on their first American tour. After a second season at Stratford he rejoined Greet as business manager. In 1929 Brough married Edith Addyman, daughter of the theatre critic, Frank Addyman. The manager of Folkestone’s Pleasure Gardens asked Greet to stage a season at Leas Pavilion. He was to tour America and suggested Pioneer Players. The Holmes said yes, then decided to go with him. Brough and his bride, who acted as Elizabeth Addyman, started the rep with £60. There Wilkinson met Counsell, who arrived at his parents’ prep school as it opened. Soon he was stage manager.

My major contribution was... the... stage-lighting... The dimmers were home-made out of drainpipes... It was not much more dangerous... than a similar job I did at Oxford.

In September Diarist noted the Playhouse was to reopen and there were renewed
rumours of an arts theatre. Fagan told his sister, Moya:

---

13 Her father, Philip Johnston, restored the murals in Oxford’s Painted Room, where Shakespeare was reputed to have stayed when travelling between London and Stratford.
14 He was born at St. Jean de Luz in 1904 and raised in England, but was American. He told Edward Hodgkin (taped interview 2 July 1998) he was illegitimate. On Holme’s birth certificate the French town clerk said his father was Lester Holme, a 46-year-old ‘rentier,’ Holme’s mother 23-year-old Eva Heart. On his marriage certificate the Registrar of Camberwell said Holme’s father, a judge, was dead. I have not succeeded in tracing Holme’s parents. The Liverpool MP, T.P. O’Connor, sent him to Eastbourne College. He left at 14 for Selfridges. Letter. Robin Harrldon, secretary, Old Eastbournian Association, 21 October 1998. Holme made his stage debut in 1922 in The Rattlesnake at Shaftesbury Theatre. Who’s Who in the Theatre. Eleventh edition. Pitman, 1952.
15 He was born in 1905. He played Mr Grainger in the TV series, Are You Being Served?
17 She had ‘hairy tales of playing Lady Macbeth up and down fire escapes... with candles guttering all over her.’ Note on Greet from her daughter, Joanna Hutton, 17 February 1999.
18 Their wedding cheques.
19 Harold Ridge. Stage Lighting (Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1928) shows such a dimmer, p. 29.
20 Counsell, p. 30.
21 OM 24 September 1930.
St. John's... will let us have the site... for £10,000... Gray's representative is... negotiating with the tenants... If they are not too exorbitant [it] should be ready in... 18 months.\textsuperscript{22}

The trio countered with Greet, who promised 'plays by known and unknown authors... It is perhaps not too great an ideal to look for the growth of a school of local dramatists.\textsuperscript{23} His manager, Alfred Lugg, had overall charge. The producer was Holme, stage director Counsell, business manager Wilkinson, the actors Aileen Etlinger, Jean Shepeard, Rosamond Burne, Anne Annersley, Beatrice Lyons, Stringer Davis, Wilson Featherstone, and Frank Moore.

Greet's name resonated with older dons, who recalled his annual visits at the turn of the century. The trio were happy to trade under it but fostered no illusions about arts theatres. Wilkinson said:

\begin{quote}
The Fagan regime [was] aimed at the university. We decided... there was no future in that. You had to have the town as well... We chose as an opening play one of the Aldwych farces.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The Oxford Mail blamed the first night audience on the 'reputation of the ex-museum for highbrow stuff.'\textsuperscript{25} L.A.L.S. thought Rookery Nook passed muster.\textsuperscript{26} The Oxford Magazine said Holme 'gave a competent... imitation of ... Ralph Lynn.'\textsuperscript{27} When he relaxed, he did better.

The production was a prodigious success... with the undergraduate element, who ever thereafter flocked to the Playhouse whenever Stanford appeared in farce.\textsuperscript{28}

Vane's Outward Bound proved they were as good in serious vein. 'No modern play will suffer in [their] hands.'\textsuperscript{29} Lugg welcomed a civic party with 'coffee and ices for the ladies and smokes for the [men].'\textsuperscript{30} Giles Playfair said critics exaggerated the theatre's drawbacks.\textsuperscript{31} The directors agreed.

\begin{quote}
If you'd been with... Greet, you were used to anything! It had quite a good stage... [A curtain put paid to the draught] about the fourth row.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Hay Fever with guest-actress Winifred Evans and Robertson’s Caste also pleased.

\textsuperscript{22} Letter 4 July 1930 courtesy of his daughter, Gemma Mayne.
\textsuperscript{23} Diarist. OM 9 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{24} Wilkinson. Taped interview, as above.
\textsuperscript{25} OM 13 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{26} The Isis 15 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{27} TOM 16 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{28} Counsell, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{29} L.A.L.S. Ti 22 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{30} OM 23 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{31} The Cherwell 25 October 1930.
\textsuperscript{32} Wilkinson, as above.
Robins Millar's *Thunder in the Air* was less to critical taste. Wilfrid Rooke-Ley protested:

> The repertory movement is growing all over the country with the recognition that the theatre is as vital... in the life of a city as the art gallery or the public library. Is Oxford to be among the first or the last to recognise this?"³³

Lionel Hale, who had joined the company,³⁴ echoed him. 'It is not their efforts that are needed but ours.'³⁵ Lugg took the same line with Rotarians.³⁶ In fact, the company's rocky finances were the result of his management. Brough informed Greet that in their first month Lugg, his wife³⁷ and future son-in-law³⁸ had drawn £140.³⁹ From Philadelphia Greet replied: 'I had very little faith in the place... Poor old Lugg, trying to be a disciplinarian amongst three young upstarts.'⁴⁰ He could not argue with the figures. Ben Greet Productions had spent £160 on the launch. The first four plays cost an average £184 and each lost £50. Their £275 capital had gone. The trio sued Lugg in the name of Pioneer Players.⁴¹ He maintained that Ben Greet Productions had hired him and the case collapsed.⁴²

> Margaret Rutherford, who met Elizabeth Addyman at the Old Vic theatre school, was acting at Epsom, when she got a telegram asking her to take over Mrs Frush in *Thark*.⁴³ It made £6. The trio decided not to take up Ballard's offer of a year's lease. They did extend their season a week into the vacation to see what support they could expect from the city.⁴⁴

We must... find plays of the same calibre as *On Approval*, *Rookery Nook* and *Hay Fever*... immediately one tries anything serious [the students] get slightly birdie... Anne Annersley we should keep... She is an... actress with an enormous following of undergraduates... She draws at least £15 a week.⁴⁵

In 1931 Thea Holme became Wilkinson's assistant.⁴⁶ The Broughs arrived from Folkestone, where they stayed dark until spring, bringing their leading actor, C.T. Doe, with them. The

³⁴ Giles Playfair (My Father's Son. Geoffrey Bles, 1937, p. 240) said Balliol had sent Hale down. To stay in Oxford he joined the rep and kept the *Isis* editorship, worth £200.
³⁵ TI 12 November 1930.
³⁶ OM 17 November 1930.
³⁷ Probably Beatrice Lyons.
³⁸ Alfred Davison, assistant manager.
³⁹ Letter 11 December 1930.
⁴⁰ Letter 15 January 1931.
⁴⁴ OM 9 December 1930. The play was Milne's *The Dover Road*.
⁴⁵ Holme to Brough. Undated.
⁴⁶ She had been in *Leave It To Psmith* at the Shaftesbury Theatre.
guest nights continued. 'Holme's appearance... at the close... is now regarded as part of the... entertainment.' While he wooed audiences, Sybil Thorndike knocked his efforts. 'OUDS is doing good work, but productions are not frequent enough. Oxford needs an arts theatre.'

_Undergrad_ riposted:

Perhaps... a rep... which is establishing itself... by good acting and good entertainment [is]... disqualified from being... an 'arts theatre.' May the disqualification remain... for ever!

Fagan cast a long shadow. In January his play, _The Improper Duchess_, opened at the Globe, a hit first in London, then New York. His former stage director, Gibson-Cowan, in Oxford to produce _Hassan_ for OUDS, wrote of Percy's _If Four Walls Told_:

A performance which... would have left many London productions... behind... But Oxford should demand... more than... commercial revivals.

Yet when the company tackled _The Importance of Being Earnest_, the dons' journal rubbed them. It made little difference to the play's reception.

What does it matter if people miss their lines at the beginning? We know that Stanford will apologise divinely at the end... The Playhouse's greatest asset is... the goodwill with which it is now surrounded.

_Takings reflected it._

Of the main trend... there can be no doubt... we made money. Our total income was... £175 above the autumn. The worst week was [Hastings Turner's] _The Lilies of the Field_, the best... _The Importance_... Attendance... 14,494 (an advance of 3,800) but this includes about 2,000 comps... Total expenditure: [nearly] £1,239, so we made a profit of £8.

_Terence Gray got Fagan to produce_ _The Stronger, The Man with the Flower in his Mouth and Androcles and the Lion_ at Cambridge. The Masque mounted its most ambitious season in Scotland. At Oxford the trio opened a week before summer term. On sale beside the threepenny programmes was a twopenny magazine called _Repertory_. Wilkinson’s new

---

47 Diarist. _OM_ 21 January 1931.
48 Sybil Thorndike. Quoted _OM_, as above. She was appearing at the New Theatre.
49 Letter. _OM_ 23 January 1931.
50 Gibson-Cowan. _TC_ 31 January 1931.
51 _TOM_ 12 March 1931.
52 Harry J. d’Avigdor-Goldsmid. _TC_ 14 March 1931.
53 Wilkinson to Brough 25 March 1931.
54 In 1932 Norman Marshall ran the Festival Theatre while Gray organised an exchange with the Gate. After that failed he continued for another two terms, then quit.
55 Both the Bodleian Library and Oxfordshire Archives have sets. A number of repertory companies produced similar magazines in the 1930s.
assistant, Oxford law graduate Richard Glyn, helped finance it. It trailerd the arrival of Joan Hickson. Derek Kahn raved about her Filomena in Quintero Brothers' A Hundred Years Old. It was among the box-office also-rans. Of '22 or more plays' the successes had all been farces. The moral was obvious.

Business in the last three weeks has been really very good... Young Idea £159, Spring Cleaning £153, Hay Fever £141... Repertory sells well and will pay its way.

A contributor wondered how long the honeymoon would continue. 'To follow the... London stage is not the province of repertory... is that all Oxford - young Oxford - wants?' In Commem Week they premièred Hale's first play, Beargarden. Wilkinson blamed 'good weather' for it grossing under £99. At the end of June they did their first schools show.

Over 300 [children saw] Sheridan's The Rivals... Giles Playfair... was outstanding as Faulkland... Joan Torrens, the editor of Fritillary, ...was charming as Julia.

They repeated it with The Importance and The School For Scandal in a three-week summer season, George Devine now playing Faulkland. Then they toured the resorts.

Sometimes we had proper stages, sometimes not... I remember one engagement where... we played in a corner of an hotel and lived on biscuits.

Unlike Fagan, the trio often employed students. In the vacation they acted under their own names, in term used aliases and 'heavy make-up so the Proctors wouldn't catch them.' Holme's waggish personality made him popular and his beautiful wife, Thea, had the lure of being a West End actress. She played Yasmin in OUDS' Hassan to Peggy Ashcroft's Pervaneh and campaigned openly for Playfair in the bitter election to become president which followed Hale's rustication, Peggy Ashcroft for Devine who won by three votes. Joan Bates recalled:

When you had undergraduates to tea, which was a favourite Oxford hobby then, having

---

54 The future Col. Sir Richard Glyn, MP.
55 Stanford Holme. OM 16 August 1939.
56 TI 13 May 1931.
57 Wilkinson to Brough 6 June 1931.
58 Repertory Vol. 1. No. 6. 25 May 1931.
59 Letter 9 June 1931.
60 Repertory Vol. 1 No. 9. 15 June 1931.
61 About 'a couple who... add a little excitement to a quiet... marriage.' OM 20 June 1931.
62 Wilkinson to Brough 4 July 1931.
63 Diarist. OM 1 July 1931.
64 OM 28 July 1931.
65 Financially, it was a 'failure.' Repertory Vol. 2. No. 1. 5 October 1931.
69
your husband's pupils to tea... it was awfully difficult to know what to talk to them about. [What they'd seen at the Playhouse] was... a great topic.\textsuperscript{71}

The crisis that followed the Wall Street crash led the Labour Government to resign in August 1931 and Ramsay MacDonald to form a National Government. One of its first acts was to increase the levy on theatres and cinemas.

With... one exception... Oxonians will have to pay more entertainment tax... At the Playhouse the management has decided to reduce practically all prices.\textsuperscript{72}

Wilkinson told Brough:

We think general poverty demands it... We have had the hoped for pickup since the election. If the Socialists had got in, I think we should have had to shut up shop.\textsuperscript{73}

Barrie's \textit{Mary Rose} with Yvonne Rorie was the first to profit.\textsuperscript{74} A wise choice for a civic visit,\textsuperscript{75} though \textit{The Ghost Train} might have been even better. 'Miss Rutherford made us laugh every time she opened her mouth.'\textsuperscript{76} OUDS made their debut with a Sunday night airing of Chekhov's \textit{Ivanov}.\textsuperscript{77} Term ended with Wodehouse's \textit{Good Morning, Bill}. By Friday 'there were seats in the orchestra pit.'\textsuperscript{78}

Like Fagan, the trio had a core of regulars. Gladstone's ex-private secretary, James Legge, his wife and family had been patrons since the 1920s.

My mother was a great supporter. I remember her saying... 'It's no good only going to the plays you like... Otherwise, when you want to go... the thing will have folded.'\textsuperscript{79}

John Glyn-Jones remembered Frank Beecher, director of Hartwell's Garage, his wife and daughter, Jean, who would become designer. Wilkinson called Charles Fenby a 'tower of strength.' The \textit{Oxford Mail} editor sponsored \textit{Ambrose Applejohn's Adventure} at Christmas in aid of the Radcliffe Infirmary. The trio discontinued \textit{Repertory} in the New Year. The car factories cushioned Oxford, but the recession was biting. 1932 began with \textit{Mr Pim Passes By}. Geoffrey Tyrrell, to prove another stalwart, became stage manager. OUDS got John Gielgud to direct \textit{Romeo and Juliet} with Christopher Hassall as Romeo, Peggy Ashcroft as

\textsuperscript{71} Joan E. Bates. Taped interview 3 September 1996.
\textsuperscript{72} OM 5 November 1931.
\textsuperscript{73} Wilkinson to Brough 4 November 1931.
\textsuperscript{74} The new ASM, John Glyn-Jones, who had just left Magdalen 'degreeless,' recalled: 'Yvonne Rorie... was Mary Rose.' Correspondence with the author August-October 1996.
\textsuperscript{75} OM 28 October 1931.
\textsuperscript{76} D.E.W.K. 71 4 November 1931.
\textsuperscript{77} When Devine drew his pistol it stuck and blew a hole in his trousers. Wardle, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{78} OM 5 December 1931.
\textsuperscript{79} Harry Legge. Taped interview 22 September 1998.
Juliet and Edith Evans as the Nurse. The trio responded with Coghill's first play, *The Tudor Touch*, as a curtain-raiser to Harwood's *The Man In Possession*.

Calls for an arts theatre continued to dog them. Sir Nigel Playfair told the National Union of Students Congress: 'By failing to provide chairs of dramatic art, [the universities] are neglecting a very necessary part of... education.' The *Oxford Magazine* said: 'There is... a serious theatre-going public who have, since... Fagan's departure, been rather neglected.' It hoped the proposed 2,500-seat Prince of Wales Theatre might improve things. The syndicate behind the venture 400-yards north of the Playhouse remained a mystery until 1960, when Ronald Hart-Synnot, St. John's first full-time Estates Bursar, revealed it was he, St. John's governing body, and 'a group of potential leaseholders.' Like the site he must have offered Fagan and the one to which the Playhouse moved in 1938, it belonged to the college. It led the New Theatre to produce plans to double its size to 1,800, provoking 'a theatre war with almost brick for brick competition.' In June the City gave permission for the New. In July the syndicate abandoned their scheme.

Holme was constantly looking for ways to make money. In April he announced a season at the County Theatre, Reading. Glyn was manager and no doubt financed it. The company included Joan Hickson, Margaret Rutherford and Ambrosine Phillipotts. They played twice nightly. Prices ranged from sixpence to three shillings, but it was not a success. Counsell ran Oxford, making his debut as director with Kennedy and Dean's hit, *The Constant Nymph*. 'By far the best thing the Playhouse has yet done,' averred the future playwright, Terence Rattigan. John Charlton produced Hay and Wodehouse's *A Damsel in Distress*, then took it to Reading while Reading gave Oxford *Cavalier* by Christ Church graduate, Arthur Watkyn. The

---

80 'Weary of love,' Henry VIII 'prays for a dream of dalliance to quicken his jaded senses and gets a... procession of his former queens, abusing him.' D.C.W. 11 February 1932.
81 *OM* 4 April 1932.
82 *TOM* 10 March 1932.
84 In 1936 it became Belsyre Court, the block of flats where Hart-Synnot died in 1976. Obituary college year book 1976-7.
85 *OM* 19 May 1932.
86 *OM* 13 June 1932.
87 *OM* 20 July 1932.
88 *OM* 2 April 1932.
90 Stanford Holme. *OM* 16 August 1939.
91 *TC* 4 June 1932.
92 Holme played a man who renounces misogyny when he meets his cousin.
autumn opened with *Pyjama Party*, Holme’s response to *Oxford Blazers*, a summer show Giles Playfair devised to tour the south coast. It ended with a London airing at the Little Theatre. The cast were Diana Bosanquet, who had just left Somervelle, and Elizabeth Gwynne, later better known as the cookery writer, Elizabeth David. The highlight of term was Greet’s visit to direct *Twelfth Night* and play Malvolio. He berated the ‘moderate’ first night audience. In America he was used to packed houses. The trio marked Christmas with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the afternoon, *When Knights Were Bold* in the evening. Eve Turner ‘was outstanding as Helena’.

*Knights* launched the rebuilt New in 1908. Soon a new Art Deco theatre would rise in its place. The last show before the demolition was OUDS’ *King John*. The trio did their best to cash in. *Repertory* reappeared. They issued 10,000 blotters with the first bill of 1933. They chose more ambitious plays. Counsell directed and played Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man*, then directed and was Fainall in *The Way of the World*.

Shaw is followed by Congreve. It is almost like the early days... when pearls (not always... well strung) were presented to those few who made the pilgrimage.

Yvonne Rorie was ‘an utterly lovely Raina’ in the first, Eve Turner a ‘delightful’ Millamant in the second, Virginia Isham Lady Wishfort, Pamela Stanley Mrs Marwood. The daughter of the late Baron Stanley, had just left Webber-Douglas. A week later came Sylvia Coleridge. Fagan died suddenly in California on February 17 just after the trio’s decision to launch another guild with a clubroom and amateur drama society. In the New’s absence they

---

98 Giles Playfair, pp. 272-281.
97 Thea Holme was Viola, Ambrosine Phillpotts Sebastian, Joan Harker Olivia, Wilkinson Sir Toby, Holme Aguecheek. *OM* 18 October 1932.
98 *TOM* 19 January 1933.
99 *OM* 27 February 1933.
100 F.A.V.M. *TOM* 26 January 1933. Frederick Madden taught at the Dragon School.
101 B.H.deC. I(reland) TC 21 January 1933.
102 B.H.deC.I. TC 28 January 1933.
103 *OM* 18 February 1933. He was 59.
104 *Repertory* Vol. 3. No. 3. 6 February 1933. Holme was chairman, Beecher treasurer. The committee included Lady Keeble; William Brownlow, 31-year-old heir to Baron Lurgan; J.S. Chaundler; Dr. Counsell; Leslie Davey; Mrs H.A.L. Fisher; Fenby; Legge; Brasenose classics don Maurice Platnauer and Rooke-Ley. *OM* 23 March 1933.
continued in the vacation. Counsell was to be co-producer, but a row led to him leaving. Holme directed all five plays, then did a three-week season at Bournemouth.

Virginia Isham, who had toured in And So To Bed, staged a revival in Fagan's memory, the ex-Old Vic stage director, Frank Napier, who had acted with the Rep at Reading, directed the rest of summer term. The highlight was Macbeth with Valentine Dyall, repeating his 1930 OUDS role as Macbeth, Sylvia Coleridge as Lady Macbeth. That week's Repertory, its last as a separate publication - in term it became part of the programme - said Guild members took minor roles. Napier ended with three more frivolous shows. Novello's I Lived With You gave the future film-star Reginald Knowles his first major role. Apart from one disastrous week the theatre stayed dark for the summer. In July Virginia Isham launched the short-lived Commonwealth Theatre Company. The director was Rooke-Ley, the producer Ida Teather, the play Fletcher's The Faithful Shepherdess.

With Holme at the seaside was Psyche Altham, whom he intended to play Wilde's Salome. Diana Churchill, Rosalind de Bunsen, and Diana Moore all made their debuts that autumn. Miss Altham did not. The Vice-Chancellor, Dr. F.J. Lys, banned Salome. Holme capitulated immediately. If he had wanted to make a fuss he could have pointed out that Q Theatre had just staged a student play, which was far more shocking. Rattigan and Philip Heiman's First Episode was about an actress playing Cleopatra in a student production, who finds herself vying for Antony's favours with a male.

The more serious side of the play, especially the homosexuality, was... toned down... Even so... reviewers found it a disturbing picture of university life... It was perhaps lucky for Rattigan that news... did not reach... Oxford.

---

105 Counsell, p. 42. He did not name the actress he quarrelled with. In September he took over the Theatre Royal, Windsor. It closed seven months later. He re-opened it in 1938. In 1945 Holme arrived and stayed for seven years as his associate producer.
107 The 21-year-old was the son of Lawrence Knowles, a local accountant. OM 13 November 1937. He would achieve fame as Patric Knowles.
108 OM 7, 21 and 25 July 1933.
109 In the cast was the future director Frith Banbury, who came up to Oxford to please his father and left a year later to join RADA. 'We were due to go on several weeks of one-night stands. This was aborted after one week!' Taped interview 19 February, note 15 April 1999.
110 OM 26 September 1933.
112 Darlow and Hodson, p. 64.
Amazingly, it escaped notice. *Salome* provoked another furore about university censorship. As in 1923, it led to a question in parliament.\textsuperscript{113}

The trio marked their third birthday with Dodie Smith’s *Autumn Crocus*. Thea Holme, about to star in *The Shadow Princess*, commuted from Hammersmith to play the teacher; Geoffrey Toone was the innkeeper.

I don’t know how many marks the *Sunday Referee* critic... will give... the acting, but I hope it will be the maximum - they deserved it; and the same goes for Jean Beecher’s sets.\textsuperscript{114}

Cecil Chisholm did give three for the acting, three for Holme’s production, and three for elocution, but only two for the sets and teamwork, which meant Oxford ended a mark behind Bristol and Coventry in the *Referee*’s league table; level with Cambridge, Croydon, and Harrogate; ahead of Manchester, Morecambe, Northampton, Plymouth, Sheffield and Southend. Holme scoffed when the paper commissioned the survey.\textsuperscript{115} But Chisholm ‘didn’t... bear any malice.’\textsuperscript{116} *Autumn Crocus* impressed him. It was Playhouse policy he questioned.

Holme is gathering a permanent audience for the standard fare. Apparently that is as much as Oxford can stand... Either its stomach is surprisingly weak or a clever publicist is needed to awaken the Oxford youth.\textsuperscript{117}

Toone directed *Strange Orchestra*. He’d toured in Ackland’s play so began making suggestions. Holme said: ‘Why don’t you do it.’ He was, said Toone, ‘splendidly lazy.’\textsuperscript{118} The trio were about to do another season at Bournemouth, but that was no excuse. Stephen Thomas directed. *New Leaves* about a gambler, whose family prefer cash to respect, by ‘George G. Samuel’ replaced *Salome*. A supporter ‘dashed off’ the play. On Monday Peter Glenville saw ‘a very rough and unready’ rehearsal.\textsuperscript{119} On Tuesday patrons ‘enjoyed for nothing... a dress rehearsal.’\textsuperscript{120} Samuel was probably Fenby.\textsuperscript{121} The Lord Chamberlain’s examiner, G.S. Street, said: ‘A fantastic farce which begins brightly but degenerates.’\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{113} OM 14 November 1933. Capt. Cunningham Reid, MP, asked the Home Secretary ‘if he [would] consider introducing legislation to repeal... Section 10 of the Theatres Act.’ He would not.
\textsuperscript{114} A.D.W. TC 14 October 1933.
\textsuperscript{116} *Repertory Programme No. 2. Strange Orchestra* 17 October 1933.
\textsuperscript{117} Set of undated clippings from the *Sunday Referee*. Playhouse archive.
\textsuperscript{118} Taped interview 15 January 2001.
\textsuperscript{119} *TI* 8 November 1933.
\textsuperscript{120} *TOM* 9 November 1933.
\textsuperscript{121} When the present Playhouse opened, a *Picture Post* caption (5 November 1938) said: ‘He once wrote a play for them.’
\textsuperscript{122} Department of Manuscripts, British Library. LCP Corr. 1933/12400.
Max Cameron Miller, another local actor who would become a favourite, made his debut in Galsworthy's *Windows*. Michael Martin-Harvey did Gluck's *Iphigenia in Aulis* for the Opera Club.129 At Christmas the trio staged their first pantomime, *Dick Whittington*. The *Mail* gave it a rave review. Eric Barker, who played the sea captain, called it 'an uneasy compromise between inexperienced slapstick and repertory niceness.'124 He would become a household name as a radio comic, but still saw himself as an actor and playwright. 1934 began with his *Now in Town*.

It is doubtful if a good play can be written about a rather objectionable young man... It is doubtful if... Barker was... the man to get the most out of his own hero.125

Martin-Harvey directed a scratch corps that included Elizabeth Addyman, Yvonne Rorie and Tyrrell in a week of ballet,126 then redeemed himself with Bridie’s *The Anatomist*.127

A 40-page brochure marked the reopening of the New. ‘February 26... Tom Arnold presents Hassard Short’s Drury Lane production of *Wild Violets*.’ Joan Bates found it brash. The majority thrilled to a venue that rivalled the most modern cinema and had shows to match: next week Novello in *Proscenium*, the week after Byam Shaw in *Richard of Bordeaux*. Gyles Isham’s *Dr. Faustus* for OUDS made do with the Town Hall. Holme, mounting a third season at Bournemouth, left Martin-Harvey to face the competition.

The... company continues the policy which it suddenly embarked upon [with *The Anatomist*]... It is... to be hoped that this will not prove commercially disastrous.128

Judging by the first night of Walpole’s *The Cathedral* it was artistically disastrous.

As the scripts... had not been available until the end of last week... the performance would have to be regarded as a dress-rehearsal.129

The final play posed extra problems. The University French Club staged two performances of *La Paix*. The Rep worked right through Tuesday night to set Martin-Harvey’s modern-dress *Taming of the Shrew* with Henry Baynton as Petruchio. Benson’s ex-leading man, ‘under the influence of drugs... brought his dresser... who turned out to be his keeper.'130

---

At Easter the City Dramatic and Operatic Society, no longer able to afford the New, staged Herbert's *Tantivy Towers* to a 'disappointingly small'131 audience. The hiring charge worried OUDS too. Masefield seized the moment to renew his plea for a university theatre.132 Hebdomadal Council could not ignore an appeal from the Poet Laureate. It set up a committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Lys, to investigate.133 Masefield met concerns that his appeal would clash with that for the new Bodleian Library by agreeing to rely on private donations.134 He was unable to satisfy concerns about the cost.135 Architects, who prepared plans for a site in St. Michael's Street, said 350 raked seats in a fan-shaped auditorium with an apron would cost £15,000-£15,500, 250 seats £10,000.136 Hugh Hunt, who ran the 200-seat Maddermarket Theatre, forecast overheads would be about £130 a week; John Baxter Somerville, who ran the 372-seat Croydon Rep, about £120.137

While the committee deliberated, *The Times* published an article on American university drama by Allardyce Nicoll.

[Such] ventures are looked upon... much in the same way as the early humanists considered the performance of Latin plays by their pupils... One may well ask whether a similar support in English universities would not be of incalculable benefit to the... stage.138

It cut no ice with the committee, who advised Council to reject Masefield's proposal.

1) There is no demand for it from senior members... or undergraduates. 2) No near estimate can be made of... the costs... 3) If a theatre were established it should be like those in American universities, fully endowed and not dependent... on its earnings... 4) The present is not an opportune time.139

There is no evidence they asked senior or junior members, but no doubt fearing Masefield would go public if they gave him reasons 1 and 2, Council told the Registrar to give him only reasons 3 and 4. They thanked him for his interest in 'this important project, which many of us... hope may yet be carried out at some more auspicious time.'140 Did they? Dr. Lys' *Salome* ban suggested most dons continued to view the theatre with deep suspicion. Despite all the

131 OM 13 March 1934.
134 Report of meeting 23 April 1934. URL/TH/1 File One.
135 Hugh Hunt told Masefield 20 March 1934: 'The sum is considerably larger than we... imagined.' Letter URL/TH/1 File One.
136 New Hall Smith and David Booth, architects. Estimates. URL/TH/1 File One.
worthies who lent their names to the venture, Holme's guild had proved no more successful than Fagan's.

Cameron Miller played his first major role in Chesterton's *Magic*, Wilkinson his 100th in *The Tudor Touch*. Thea Holme was Cecily in *The Importance*, Margaret Rutherford, 'summoned from London,' Lady Bracknell, Holme Worthing. At the end he 'would not come forward' to make his usual speech to the Whit Bank Holiday audience. Next day they learnt why. 'Playhouse Sensation - Season To End On Saturday.' Oxford's amatures had just launched a Guild of Drama. Beecher, its chairman, said:

> It seems to me that among the amateurs are to be found the people to help... Suppose 1,000... visit the Playhouse more or less regularly. Would they subscribe a minimum of £1 a year to have their own theatre? ...Would each college subscribe £10? A meeting took place after the last performance. The Mayor, Ald. Miss Tawney, presided. Beecher outlined the rescue plan.

> The most we can hope to do is carry on and make... ends meet. If 250 people would subscribe £1... we could carry on indefinitely.

He suggested four unpaid directors should handle the finances.

> There were no arrangements for the receipt of subscriptions... but as soon as the speakers ended... people began writing out promises.

The *Mail* commented: 'It seems highly probable that Oxford will collect the fund required.'

The future Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, thought so too. '[If] Holme and his company... had depended on cash value, curious incidents of production and that abysmal building would have destroyed them long ago.' A committee sought subscriptions, listing 52 worthies including the Mayor and eight college heads, who promised support. In ten days they had £269 towards the £500 capital target, £230 towards the £250 subscription target. By October both targets had been reached.

Jordan’s registered The Oxford Repertory Company ‘to encourage dramatic art among

---

141 OM 22 May 1934.
142 OM 28 April 1934.
143 Letter. OM 23 May 1934.
144 Quoted. OM 28 May 1934.
145 TI 30 May 1934.
146 OM 7 June 1934. Appeal leaflet, Bodleian Library, GA Oxon c 250 (vi). The committee consisted of Beecher; J.S. Chaundler (manager of Westminster Bank); Fenby; Michael Holroyd, Senior Tutor in Ancient History at Brasenose; OUDS Senior Treasurer Kenneth Lawson; Legge; Platnauer; and the Rev. Roy Ridley
members of [the] university and inhabitants of Oxford.\textsuperscript{147} A leaflet said it would be ‘precluded from distributing profits’ and run by a volunteer Council.\textsuperscript{148} Dr. Macan, Prof. Murray and Bailey at last saw a way of using the £116-plus in the Oxford Drama Society coffers. The leaflet said the revamp ‘owed much to their bounty.’ Holme remained director, but a subcommittee chose the plays. The four-month closure marked the end of Pioneer Players. The Broughs continued to act occasionally. Wilkinson became a BBC producer in Belfast.\textsuperscript{149} Betty Tayler was stage manager. Charles Comock returned as manager. Old faces included Sylvia Coleridge, Elizabeth Campbell, Glyn-Jones and Cameron Miller, new ones 15-year-old Diana Harris,\textsuperscript{150} Somerville graduate, Valentine Richmond,\textsuperscript{151} Reginald Jarman, who had worked with Holme for Greet, and Eric Dance.

William Brownlow said he enticed Dance to Oxford.\textsuperscript{152} According to Counsell his father, the impresario Sir George Dance, told him to have nothing to do with the stage.\textsuperscript{153} He arrived at Christ Church in 1920 and did little else before taking his first exam in 1923. He was not sent down - the reason Isham said he played Hamlet in Fagan’s version.\textsuperscript{154} He remained ‘out of residence’ until he graduated in 1925.\textsuperscript{155} When his father died in 1932 he ceased practising as a barrister and went to RADA.\textsuperscript{156}

The Playhouse reopened with Bax’s \textit{The Rose Without A Thorn}. Thea Holme, filming \textit{Loma Doone}.\textsuperscript{157} commuted to play Katheryn Howard.

The building blossoms in a mixture of cream, scarlet and pale green, the stalls are brilliant in their newness, there is a carpet down the aisles, the exhaust fans are in full blast, and the most distinguished audience ever... arrives to see the first production.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{OM} 4 October 1934.\textsuperscript{148} Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection. \textsuperscript{149} He became senior drama producer for the North in 1936, head of programmes from 1939-47, then responsible for bringing television to northern England. \textsuperscript{150} She wanted to go on the stage. ‘The next thing I knew [my aunt] said... ‘Holme [will] take you... You’re the youngest... he’s ever had.’ Taped interview 16 June 1998. \textsuperscript{151} Daughter of Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, later Master of Downing College, Cambridge. Taped interview 15 October 1998. \textsuperscript{152} Leslie Plummer. Taped interview 29 October 1998. \textsuperscript{153} Counsell, p. 60. \textsuperscript{154} \textit{OM} 14 February 1968. \textsuperscript{155} Letter. Simon Bailey, University Archivist, 11 June 1997. \textsuperscript{156} Leaving two years later - aged 33 -with the Principal’s Prize and the Kendal Prize. RADA Librarian, Claire Hope. Letter 23 July 1998. \textsuperscript{157} \textit{News Chronicle} 16 October 1934. \textsuperscript{158} Diarist. \textit{OM} 16 October 1934.
Hale was there. So was Devine, the heads of 13 colleges, the Mayor, and many other worthies. The first major test was *The Seagull*. Jarman directed and played Trigorin, Sylvia Coleridge was Mme. Arkadina. It was the last show of term, Jarman's *Much Ado About Nothing*, that excited the critics.

It has the best Beatrice I have seen in... Sylvia Coleridge.... It has surely... Holme's best performance... His Benedick is not the incisive soldier [but] it has more charm.

The first seven plays made 'a tiny... profit,' *Much Ado* a big loss. *Toad of Toad Hall*, vying with *Aladdin* at the New, broke even the first week but lost heavily the second.

1935 began with Shaw's *Too Good To Be True*, Holme 'on a motorbike [as] a gloriously funny Private Meek.' It made a small profit. Keith Winter's *The Rats of Norway* wiped it out. Rachel Kempson and Stephen Haggard in Masefield's *The Witch* sank it deep in the red. 'Here is one of the best plays of the century with one of the best young actors and a beautiful actress... Does Oxford want such quality?' Obviously not. It lost 'over £100.' The dons' journal blamed the cinemas. A bigger threat was the New. *The Witch* competed with Beatrix Lehmann and Ralph Richardson in Priestley's *Eden End*, Romains' *Dr. Knock* with Owen Nares and Adele Dix in Griffith's *Youth at the Helm*, Maugham's *The Sacred Flame* with Glenville as Hamlet in Coghill's 50th birthday revival for OUDS. Morton's version of Agatha Christie's *Alibi* and *Backward Boy*, which Watkyn wrote for Holme, stemmed the tide. 'A first-class detective play lifted above the common rut by the delightful character of Hercule Poirot... Brough [was]... excellent.' Holme in a bespoke role - a 21-year-old with a mental age of seven - was an even bigger draw.

In the vacation came more good news. The cinema was producing large sums in entertainment tax. The Chancellor of the Exchequer responded by scrapping duty on theatre seats below sixpence, cutting it on seats above, and exempting venues whose main purpose

---

159 Anne Twigg was Nina, Valentine Richmond Masha, Dance Constantin.
160 Unsigned, probably Fenby. **OM** 4 December 1934.
161 Frank Beecher. **OM** 18 February 1935.
162 P.M.D. **TC** 26 January 1935.
163 C.F. **OM** 5 February 1935.
164 Stanford Holme. **OM** 18 August 1939.
165 **TOM** 14 February 1935.
166 P(eter)M. D(wyer). **TC** 2 March 1935.
75
was educational. Beecher said his one claim to fame was his ridding the Playhouse of entertainment tax. Hazel Terry, 17-year-old daughter of Dennis Neilson-Terry, arrived for summer term. From the Old Vic came 19-year-old David Tree, son of Viola Tree, grandson of Sir Henry. The Rep marked George V's silver jubilee with What Every Woman Knows. 'We may congratulate ourselves... that repertory in Oxford is still alive, while it has died in Cambridge.' Gray's stage manager, Joseph Macleod, who took over the Festival after he left, was giving up. He told Guild of Drama members:

What... England needs is a nationwide system of repertories, doing plays of the locality and not imitations. I failed in Cambridge, or... Cambridge failed me. But Oxford is bigger.

Thea Holme, in The Aunt of England at the Savoy, commuted to direct The Winter's Tale. This time people came. The Springtime For Henry programme thanked them for 'a successful season.' To add to the euphoria, the Rep broadcast Coghill's play, The Tudor Touch, live from the Playhouse with Holme as Henry. To cap it, Thea launched a summer festival in Worcester College Gardens. She got the rights of Hsiung's Lady Precious Stream, staging it in repertoire with Bridie's Tobias and the Angel and The Two Gentlemen of Verona. Holme directed Precious Stream and Tobias, Thea Shakespeare. The publicity focused on the younger actors: Terry, Tree, and OUDS President David King-Wood. Hsiung's London hit with Thea in the lead, Viola Lyel as the Princess of the Western Regions, and King-Wood as the hero proved the ideal launch pad. The festival was 'well attended.' The sun shone.

The 1934-1935 accounts confirmed Beecher's view that the Playhouse could not make money. Outgoings were £4,270, income £4,080 - a shortfall of £190. The relaunch cost £197, refurbishment £311, but subscriptions and donations of £720 more than offset it. Allowing 50 per cent for depreciation, they had assets of £156 and reserves of £117.

---

168 Interview with Stanley Parker OM 20 July 1943.
169 TOM 9 May 1935.
170 OM 24 June 1935.
171 OM 8 June 1935. Jarman was Leontes, Mary Gaskell Hermione, Barry K. Barnes Polixenes, Virginia Isham Paulina, Glyn-Jones Autolycus.
172 OM 24 June 1935.
173 OM 1 July 1935.
174 Twelfth Night replaced Two Gents in the last week.
175 Students John Irvine, Paul Leach and Rodney Philips, were also in the company.
176 'Chorus of praise for Lady Precious Stream... "Excellent production" - Morning Post.' Advertisement. OM 23 July 1935.
Beecher stressed the difference entertainment tax relief had made.178 He made no mention of rebuilding the Playhouse. He saved that for a first night speech. Masefield’s plea for a university theatre had leaked.

It would be a pity if the interests of the university and city were separated. It ought to be possible to build an adequate repertory theatre for the whole of Oxford... Surely 1,000 people could be found who would subscribe £10?179

The dons’ journal agreed,180 but Legge predicted the project was doomed unless they created ‘sufficient interest... to build what in 1925 the Oxford Arts Theatre Guild promised.’

Since the war no fewer than 300 theatres had disappeared... The... majority had been turned into cinemas... The film industry is beginning to realise that it cannot go on without the theatre... The only way of teaching actors... is through the stage.181

The hit of the autumn was Obey’s Noah. Gielgud lent the costumes from his London production and like him Holme directed and played Noah. Thea Holme and Viola Tree returned in Precious Stream before they repeated the roles in London. King-Wood, still a student, was again hero - by special dispensation. A student who had appeared with the Rep commented:

If a school of acting were founded with some form of academic compromise such as the study of stage history... universities might at last make a... contribution to the modern stage, and people... would no longer have to cover their activities with smoke screens.182

Virginia Isham, no doubt relying heavily on memories of Fagan’s production, revived The Cherry Orchard.183

Such a good production of such a good play that one shudders for the state of its box office. Let it do anything of this calibre again and soon there will be no more talk of securing new premises; the job will be to keep the old!184

Holme followed with Maria Marten. Then he got Haidée Wright to repeat her Broadway role in The Royal Family. As Theatre Royal, Kaufman and Ferber’s play about the Barrymores had just ended its London run. Glenville played her son, Dance ‘the ageing stage star.’185 Critics loved Miss Wright. ‘Only a really good audience deserves [her] and last night she was casting pearls.’186 She went on casting them.

178 1934-1935 accounts, as above.
179 OM 15 October 1935.
180 ‘The university seems content to get along without an... aula magna, but... a theatre and hall in the same building might have desirable results... for both.’ TOM 24 October 1935.
181 OM 18 November 1935.
183 Mary Gaskell was Madame Ranevsky, Nicholas Phipps Gaev, Earle Grey Lopakhin.
184 C.F. OM 19 November 1935.
185 TC 7 December 1935.

Will seat 600... cinema equipment which is the first of its kind in the country... a stage comparable in its dimensions with those of the moderate-sized London theatres.

It was the brainchild of Maynard Keynes. Gray’s departure from the Festival and the closure of the New Theatre, Cambridge, prompted the famous economist to suggest King’s include an auditorium in a new student hostel.\(^\text{187}\) When his college refused, he leased the site. By the time the Arts Theatre opened in 1936 it had cost £32,000, all but £2,550 from his pocket. ‘This sounds like a dream... [but] encourages hopes that we may get something, even though we have not such powerful... forces behind us.’\(^\text{188}\) In fact, Dance’s return had brought the new Playhouse a step closer.

The Rep spent Christmas at Bexhill. Another new venue, the De La Warr Pavilion, invited them to launch its 1,000-seat theatre. They opened on Boxing Day with a matinée of *Toad of Toad Hall*, which ran in repertoire with *Precious Stream*. Goolden, who had created the role of Mole in 1930, ‘supervised.’ Holme directed *Precious Stream*: Thea Holme in the title role, King-Wood as the gardener. Then they headed the cast of Armstrong’s thriller, *Ten Minute Alibi*. The season ended with Holme’s Noah.\(^\text{189}\) Legge said it made ‘a small profit.’\(^\text{190}\) ‘During the year,’ he added, the Council ‘associated’ Dance in ‘the management.’ In the summer of 1935, while acting in Regent’s Park, he asked Counsell whether he would reopen at Windsor. Dance ‘would put up... the money, and suggested £5,000 to start.’\(^\text{191}\) Then he changed his mind and decided to invest in the Playhouse. If he offered Counsell £5,000 with the promise of more, clearly he could provide most of the £10,000 Beecher wanted.

Noel Iliff, who had directed at the Festival Theatre, Cambridge, arrived in 1936.

F.A.V.M. wrote of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*:

Five acts, Monday night - and not a hitch! Miss Coleridge’s performance from ‘flower girl to duchess’ was outstanding... Nicholas Phipps made a worthy Higgins... Dance... a courteous ... Colonel Pickering.\(^\text{192}\)

Fenby was equally impressed with *The Circle of Chalk*.

\(^{\text{187}}\) *Cambridge Arts Theatre. Celebrating Sixty Years*. As above, p 1.

\(^{\text{188}}\) TOM 5 December 1935.

\(^{\text{189}}\) Programmes. Bexhill Reference Library.


\(^{\text{191}}\) Counsell, pp. 59-60.

\(^{\text{192}}\) TOM 30 January 1936.
The effects... gave us the... feeling... that we had misjudged this theatre. Surely that was a cyclorama... in the snow scene? Surely this lighting could not come from the switchboard, the sound of which we know so well?193

Newcomers included Cicely Nicks, who was a graduate of St. Hugh's. She played Mrs Sullen in Farquhar’s *The Beaux’ Strategem*. Again Fenby hailed Iliff’s ‘ingenious production’ and ‘clever set.’194

Summer term opened with *The Apple Cart* to mark Shaw’s 80th birthday.195 Phipps was King Magnus. Thanks to Speaight, who played Becket, the Mercury Theatre included the Playhouse in its first tour of T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. ‘On Monday they were standing down the sides.’196 It may have prompted the Rep to revive another Mercury success, Kataev’s *Squaring the Circle*. F.A.V.M. rejoiced to see Holme in a part that gave full scope to his comic talents.197 Pamela Stanley was at the New in *The Two Mrs Carrolls*. The curtain-raiser was *The Spartan Girl*, with which the Guild of Abbey Players, Abingdon, had just won the BDL Festival. The University Experimental Theatre Club (ETC), launched by Coghill and Gilbert Higehet, made its debut at the Taylorian Institute with Dryden’s *Love For Love*. Thea Holme was directing OUDS’ outdoor *As You Like It*.198

The Rep’s final play was Behrman’s *The Second Man*. ‘Holme must be congratulated on an excellent term’s work. There is... more good news. The Playhouse is being rebuilt during the vacation.’199 The City Council had granted outline permission, though there could be no question of compensation if it had to be set back from Woodstock Road.200

The plans... will leave the exterior unchanged, but an inner wall will... make the building soundproof. A balcony will be constructed over the foyer... The stage will be taken back and widened by 50 per cent. A new lighting plant will be put in, and a cyclorama.201

Dance must have felt - rightly as it turned out! - widening Woodstock Road would involve too much demolition. After the final performance he held the first of the parties for which he would become famous: a wake for the old and appetiser for the new. The City had other ideas.

193 C.F. OM 4 February 1936.
194 OM 25 February 1936.
195 W.T. OM 28 April 1936.
196 F.A.V.M. TOM 21 May 1936.
197 TOM 11 June 1936.
198 In Magdalen Grove. Nova Pilbeam was Rosalind, Michael Denison Orlando, Yvonne Rorie Celia.
199 A.A.F. TC 20 June 1936.
200 OM 8 June 1936.
201 OM 19 June 1936.
On July 30 members debated a motion prescribing 'a new line of frontage' in Woodstock Road. The future Labour cabinet minister, Coun. R(ichard) Crossman, moved it should be referred back. Ald. L.H. Alden: 'Are you going to hold up the business of the City for private interests?' Crossman's motion collapsed.

The weather was just as unkind to the second festival. Of Alice In Wonderland W.T. said: 'The lack of rehearsal in the open air was... apparent.' The Happy Hypocrite opened indoors. And, while A Midsummer Night's Dream managed a first night outdoors, it too moved inside. Novello let Thea Holme give the first provincial airing to the musical romance Clemence Dane and Richard Addinsell based on Beerbohm's fable. King-Wood took Novello's role, Thea Holme Vivien Leigh's. Harry Legge conducted. An appeal leaflet in October said 1935-36 'ended in a small deficit which was covered by assets.' The loss on the festival was 'met by private benevolence.' Despite reducing outgoings to £3,671, the Rep had lost nearly £355 and had under £245 to offset it. The council ceased operating. Legge, Ridley, Platnauer, Lawson, Chaundler and J(ohn) N(orman) Bryson, Tutor in English at Balliol, opened an account in the name of Friends of Oxford Repertory and Dance took over. He was seeking a site 'in a more central position.'

The autumn began with Darlington's Carpet Slippers. The Daily Telegraph critic revamped his 1930 hit, Magic Slippers, and Viola Tree guested. Betty Tayler became business manager, Valentine Richmond PRO, Tyrrell stage director, Diana Harris stage manager, Helen Tarver, Penelope Palmer and Sylvia Wilkinson her ASMs. Gina Malo, an American film-star, made her debut as Ellie in Heartbreak House. For its second show ETC chose Cocteau's Wedding on the Eiffel Tower and The Infernal Machine.

As long as it... continues to give us plays... that we should not otherwise see, it can be sure of a welcome... The Playhouse Company cannot be expected to take too many risks. The first company may with some truth be said to have died of Strindberg and Pirandello. Its successor... has wisely tempered boldness with discretion.
Discretion that week meant *East Lynne*, with Dance as the lawyer, Gina Malo as his bride, Comock as the villain thriving, 'on hisses and a... shower of peanuts,' the week after Coward's *Private Lives* with sets by Anthony Holland. The 24-year-old, designer of several London productions, wrote offering his services. The Rep welcomed him. It had not had a designer since Jean Beecher departed for Africa. Oxford appealed, but it was the 'wonderful company' that made him stay - plus the prospect of a new theatre.

In December the City refused an application to redevelop 8-10 Beaumont Street because of its 'limited area' and its desire 'to preserve the... elevation of the street.' The *Mail* said Fagan hoped to open a new playhouse opposite, but 'difficulties arose over leases.' Dance had probably already done a deal with the owner of Eversleigh Hotel and the architect next door. Hart-Synnot demanded a meeting with the Planning Committee chairman. By January Legge was talking of the project being under way within the year. H.S. Goodhart-Rendel, ex-Slade Professor of Fine Art, claimed it would ruin the street's '18th century urbanity.' Hart-Synnot responded with a sketch of the Georgian façade by the St. John's college architect, Edward Maufe. Despite a petition from 30 residents, the City said yes subject to agreement with St. John's on 'widening Gloucester Street.' Hart-Synnot stressed the new theatre's educational role. He told the college solicitors, Morrell, Peel and Gamlen: 'We do not want... [a] commercial theatre putting on best-payers, however bad.'

At Christmas the Rep revived *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with 'characters from... *Through the Looking Glass*... from... Nancy Price's version.' Price used a live pig at the Little Theatre for the baby the Duchess hands Alice. Holme had to have one too. 'This piglet... arrived and had to sit in a chair in the prop room.' In the New Year David Tree took

---

209 A.S. OM 24 November 1936.
210 H.B. OM 1 December 1936.
211 Interview with Stanley Parker. OM 20 July 1946.
212 Taped interview 27 May 1997. He had worked at Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff and Coventry.
213 OM 8 December 1936.
214 OM 28 January 1937.
217 OM 1 March 1937.
218 Letter 11 February 1937 among St. John's muniments.
219 Programme credit.
a break from filming to appear in George Birmingham's *General John Regan*, a portrait of rural Ireland that enabled Holme to raid the farmyard again.

The fowls... were a fearsome distraction. And it must be hard to hear laughter... and not know whether... it rests with yourself or the plump little pigling... at your feet.221

Thea Holme headed the cast of Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Henry Fielding. Then the Rep staged her only play, *Love at Short Sight*, with a bespoke role for her husband: a short-sighted archaeologist who breaks his spectacles and is cured of his shyness with women.222

The University launched its £1m. appeal for the new Bodleian Library and other ‘urgent needs’ in February 1937. Walter Andrewes had his own shopping list.

There is the matter of a University Gymnasium, of a University Swimming Bath, of a University Theatre - comparatively small itemsfinancially... but of the utmost importance in the life of an undergraduate.223

The New was ‘far too large’ for *Macbeth*. OUDS must hope that the new Playhouse would result in a ‘fusion [of] repertory and university... interests.’224 Renée Asherson, about to join Birmingham Rep, played the lead in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and Mrs Dancy in Galsworthy’s *Loyalties*. Term ended with Coghill’s ‘first operatic venture’:225 a double bill of Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* - which the BBC televised - and Holst’s *Savitri* for the Opera Club.

Dance had continued the management council’s policy of doing the occasional more upmarket play. Summer term began with *Back to Methuselah*. Jackson premièred Shaw’s ‘metabiological pentateuch’ at Birmingham a fortnight before Fagan’s Players made their debut. It ran four nights and a matinée. ‘It must rank as the bravest feat ever performed by a rep.’226 It was still brave in 1937. Holme staged it in three parts. ‘We got quite a lot of people for the first, but by... the third... hardly anybody came.’227 Holland had a field day.

His setting for the first scene [of Part Three], with the television effect, is extremely neat and his temple in Part Four has an imposing simplicity.228

221 David G. Cleage. *TI* 27 January 1937. The fowls were another leaf from Nancy Price’s book, p. 190.
223 W.F.A. *TI* 10 February 1937.
224 *TI* 24 February 1937.
225 *OM* 10 March 1937.
226 The Theatre Since 1900. As above, p. 143.
227 Sylvia Wilkinson. Taped interview. As above.
228 B.H.deC.I. *OM* 4 May 1937.
tunic of black velvet with lawn sleeves... [to] the priestess in pale blue rubber.\textsuperscript{129}

The week after John Gielgud was at the New in Emlyn Williams’s *He Was Born Gay*. He told Andrewes: ‘*Love For Love* is one of the plays I want to do.\textsuperscript{129}’ Did he renew acquaintance with it at Woodstock Road? If so, he saw another rising actor, William Fox, steal the show as Valentine just as he had done in 1924.

From the furthest prospect of the Shavian future the Playhouse... returns to another golden age... Their spokesman apologised for a hasty production... but they never had less reason.\textsuperscript{21}

One person it did not amuse was Phyllis Konstam, guest star of *The Mask and the Face*.\textsuperscript{292} Another was St. John Ervine, conducting a survey of British reps for *The Observer*.\textsuperscript{293} He rubbed Congreve’s ‘dull and dirty’ comedy.

The audience... was almost as badly behaved as... at Northampton... Except for... Eugene Leahy and... Thea Holme the company was mediocre... The prices... are very low.\textsuperscript{294}

Yet he was to comment of the sixpence to three-and-sixpence Newcastle charged:

The theatre can be returned to prosperity if managers will only learn the lesson that is now being taught in the provinces. Reduced prices will bring larger audiences.\textsuperscript{295}

He might have thought more of Brothers Capek’s *And So Ad Infinitum*. Fenby claimed it was ‘one of the most elaborate productions ever... [with] a cast of over 30.’\textsuperscript{296}

In July students staged a season at the Arts Theatre, London; Masefield and Coghill put on *Oxford Summer Diversions*, which they hoped would become ‘an annual festival of music, poetry, drama and other arts.’\textsuperscript{297} The Rep did a summer season indoors.\textsuperscript{298} A programme note said it proved there would be ‘every possibility’ of staying open in the vacations when the theatre was built.

The new Playhouse will have a ground floor and a balcony, seating 430 and 156... It

\textsuperscript{229} D.E.M. *TC* 8 May 1937.
\textsuperscript{230} *TI* 20 May 1937.
\textsuperscript{231} B.H.deC.I. *OM* 18 May 1937.
\textsuperscript{232} *TI* 26 May 1937. ‘I think [such plays] are lewd, brutal and vulgar.’
\textsuperscript{233} He said there were 40, of which he visited 16: Oxford; Cheltenham; Coventry; Stratford; Altrincham; Birmingham; Newcastle; Northampton; Colwyn Bay; Liverpool; York; Brighton; Hull; Leeds; Bradford and Manchester.
\textsuperscript{234} *The Observer* 6 June 1937.
\textsuperscript{235} As above, 27 June 1937.
\textsuperscript{236} C.F. *OM* 1 June 1937.
\textsuperscript{237} *OM* 30 July 1937.
\textsuperscript{238} Handbill. M Adds 129 b 11. It featured Sherwood’s version of Jacques Deval’s *Tovarich*, Coward’s *Hay Fever*, Naomi Royde-Smith’s *Private Room* and Edgar Wallace’s *The Case of the Frightened Lady*. 83
Lord Lurgan was chairman. Sir Frederick Minter of F. G. Minter Ltd., Putney, told Dance it would cost £19,000 and take six months to build.

A repeat of Kataev's *Squaring the Circle* launched the autumn. The week after they took it to the Arts Theatre, Cambridge. A second company under Dance's direction staged *Night Must Fall* at Oxford. Cicely Nicks returned as Mrs Bramson, Leslie French was Danny.

Miss Nicks is an old friend and... has seldom played better... Miss Brown... is a welcome newcomer... She has both brains and technique.

Pamela Brown had made her debut as Juliet at Stratford. She got a chance to show her mettle as Elizabeth in *The Circle*, then scored again as Vivie in *Mrs Warren's Profession*. The programme claimed *Annie Green*, or *The Girl Who Died Twice* was Anon, but Ridley knew better. 'Valstan has brought off a difficult job with complete address.' The authors were Valentine Richmond and Stanford Holme. Their melodrama set 'in the Oxfordshire of Regency days' starred Katharine Page.

Never once did she fail to bring out the... pathos of her... situation, and her speech from the gallows in full sight of Tom Tower and the Bodleian... evoked many... expressions of grief.

The City bought the old Playhouse from Ballard for £4,500 and freehold from St. John's for £1,075. Two months later the estate agent died. The car factories had swollen Oxford's population to 90,000. It was 'the most prosperous town in Britain.' Few seemed keen to invest in the new theatre. Minter allowed a third credit. 'It is therefore necessary to have a sum of £14,000 ...to start.' On November 29 they had £12,869; by January 11 it had risen only £24. *The Times* dramatic critic, Charles Morgan, wrote:

What is needed to free the Playhouse from debt and to give it stability for the future

---

239 Friends of Oxford Repertory leaflet, as above. In fact the stalls seated 492, the circle 100.
240 William Brownlow was now Baron Lurgan. Supporters included the Vice-Chancellor, five other college heads, the Mayor, and 24 worthies ranging from the Earl of Oxford to Lilian Baylis.
241 Letter 17 September 1937 among St. John's muniments.
242 M.R.R. TOM 21 October 1937.
243 TOM 11 November 1937.
244 K.C.L. TI 10 November 1937.
245 OM 20 December 1937.
246 He was 53. OT 18 February 1938.
247 Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom report OM 2 December 1937.
248 Diarist. OM 24 November 1937.
is the gift of £10,000 as the coping-stone to its own labours.\textsuperscript{240}

The Vice Chancellor, A(lexander) D(unlop) Lindsay, Master of Balliol, Sir Hugh Allen, and Prof. Gordon underlined the point.

If a... donor can be found... it should be possible for... Dance... to run the new theatre with success... Music... will also gain by... a hall suitable for concerts and... operas.\textsuperscript{250}

Term ended with Coghill’s double-bill of \textit{Dido and Aeneas} and \textit{Master Peter’s Puppet Show} for the Opera Club. The Christmas show was Marion de Forest’s version of \textit{Little Women}. It was no match for the New’s \textit{Dick Whittington}.

Our present pantomime ... has already been witnessed by over 60,000 people. Less than five years ago... [in] a theatre of less than half the seating capacity we were only able to run for one week - and then not always to full houses.\textsuperscript{251}

Behind the scenes Dance and Hart-Synnot toiled away, the Estates Bursar acting as progress-chaser. At the end of February ‘the house breakers... opened their attack.’\textsuperscript{252} 1938 began with Macrae’s \textit{Indoor Fireworks}. Theatregoers found a plea in programmes saying the management would be grateful if they would ‘each donate one stall.’\textsuperscript{253} Pamela Brown was Hypatia in \textit{Misalliance}. \textit{Suspect}, with guest actress, Dorothy Holmes-Gore, vied with French’s \textit{Much Ado} for OUDS at the New. After it opened he began rehearsals for Dance’s revival of \textit{Ghosts} with Holmes-Gore as Mrs Alving and himself as Oswald. Les Comédiens de Paris, paying their fifth visit since 1931, gave two performances of \textit{L’Avare}.\textsuperscript{254} Holme directed the final show. Valentine Richmond was Gwendolen, Pamela Brown Cecily, Rita Treckelle Lady Bracknell, Holme Worthing in \textit{The Importance of Being Earnest}. Dance held a party after the last performance. The Mayor recited Valentine Richmond’s \textit{envoi}.

...Who knows what sports will follow here, what pageants sad or witty?
Something refined, of course, for it’s been bought by Oxford City...

In the six months before it became a gas-mask distribution centre\textsuperscript{256} it was busy. In March Oxford Art School Players staged \textit{And So To Bed} with John Brookes, its principal, as

\textsuperscript{240} \textit{The Times} 23 November 1937.
\textsuperscript{250} Letter. \textit{The Times} 26 November 1937.
\textsuperscript{251} Stanley Dorrill, New Theatre managing director. \textit{Tt} 26 January 1938.
\textsuperscript{252} TOM 3 March 1938.
\textsuperscript{253} ‘25 shillings, a trifling amount... but... over £600 when taken collectively.’
\textsuperscript{254} C.J.R. \textit{OM} 8 March 1938.
\textsuperscript{255} Quoted in full by the \textit{OT} 18 March 1938. It was her swansong. In 1939 she wed the barrister, Horatio Vester.
\textsuperscript{256} \textit{OM} 29 September 1938.
Pepys. In June Unity Theatre presented a double bill of *The Case of the Baffled Boss* and *Living Newspaper No. 1 - Busmen.* Later that month Constance Cummings played Katharina in OUDS summer major, *The Taming of the Shrew.* In August Masefield and Coghill mounted their second *Oxford Summer Diversions* there. Robert Levens, Classics Tutor at Merton, was manager. He had no experience of university drama, but was familiar with its practice. In 1933 he married Daphne Hanschell, a talented Somerville graduate.

[Women students] were not allowed to act in the men's... plays... But if you were a respectable don's wife and I was only... 21 or 22... that was all right!

The diversions ranged from Coghill's revival of *Troilus and Cressida* to *Djroazanmo,* a Mask Theatre ballet by Ernst Bek. On Wednesday:

The first half of the programme was devoted to... Chaucer's *The Nonne's Priest's Tale,* spoken by Prof. J.R.R. Tolkien... wearing a beard and... robes of the 13th century... One can only stand amazed at his bravery in reciting without a manuscript.

That spring Cobden-Sanderson published *Marshal Ney: A Play in Five Acts* by the Christ Church historian, J.C. Masterman.

Dance... wrote to me: 'I think it would be ideal for the opening of our new theatre...’ Eric's advisers [thought it] too risky... The production was postponed... [He] undertook to start the autumn programme of 1939 with it. Then came the war... *Ney... was forgotten.*

*And So To Bed* was the choice. Charles Lefeaux was Pepys, James Cutler Charles II, Veronica Dayne Mrs Knight, Thea Holme Mrs Pepys, Pamela Brown Mrs Knapp, Rosalie Crutchley Julia, Holme Prodgers. It opened on October 20, 15 years almost to the day after the curtains parted on Fagan's Players. Irene Vanbrugh delivered Christopher Hassall's prologue.

...Surely to build a theatre in a town
While everyone is pulling theatres down
Shows courage, foresight, and sagacious knowledge
Worthy the President of any College...

The Senior University Burgess (MP), A.P. Herbert, declared it open, ranging tongue-in-

cheek from the Munich Crisis to the iniquities of Entertainment Tax.

257 OM 1 April 1938.
258 OM 6 June 1938.
259 TOM 2 June 1938. The director was Jack Hawkins, Willoughby Gray Petruchio.
260 Taped interview 15 August 1996.
261 OM 3 August 1938.
262 OM 5 August 1938.
263 OM 4 August 1938.
265 Printed in full in the souvenir programme.
I was going to compare the difficulties of repertory theatres with the difficulties of our country... but I think I am the only man in this city... indeed the country at the moment, who is not an expert in foreign affairs.  

The Munich By-Election, triggered by the death of Oxford's MP, Capt. Bourne, became a litmus test of Chamberlain's efforts to appease Hitler with the winner, Quintin Hogg, later Lord Haitsham, championing the Tory prime minister, the non-party Master of Balliol, A.D. Lindsay, opposing. Picture Post devoted three pages to the opening between compiling a six-page election feature. A leaflet Hart-Synnot paid for revealed the cost had risen to £24,000.

Its erection in advance of adequate subscriptions is due... to... Dance who, after making a loan of £10,000, has guaranteed the present deficit of £8,700.

The Playhouse Oxford Ltd., would lease it to the Oxford Repertory Players Ltd., which would be run by a Council of Management. The architect of the only repertory theatre built between the wars was F.G.M. Chancellor of Frank Matcham & Co.

The auditorium is... 67ft long and 53ft wide, with a proscenium opening 28ft wide. A large orchestra pit has been provided with musicians' room attached to the same... The stage, which is 28ft deep by 53ft wide, is equipped in the most modern manner.

Critical reaction was sympathetic. Darlington noted:

Charles Lefeaux... Thea Holme... Pamela Brown... and Veronica Dayne... showed that the standard of acting in the new Playhouse is not likely to fall short of that in the old. And when the play was over and... Dance had outlined the policy of the new theatre in a speech of thanks, the proceedings were brought to a climax by a party on the stage.

The one raspberry came from Shaw. Refusing to contribute to the souvenir programme, he wrote:

Can you not open your new Playhouse without boring the audience with messages? They will pay to hear a play. Either give them that or give them their money back.

As I have shown, Holme's efforts to woo town were no more successful than Fagan's

---

266 OT 21 October 1938.
267 Picture Post 5 November 1938.
268 It was registered on 17 October 1938. Jordan & Sons Ltd. said its business was 'to build a repertory theatre at Oxford.' OM 18 October 1938. It had four university representatives (The Vice-Chancellor, the Heather Professor of Music, the President and Bursar of St. John's); four subscribers' representatives (Lord Lurgan, Dance, Legge and Chaundler). The Mayor represented the city.
269 F.G.M. Chancellor. T/ 19 October 1938.
270 Daily Telegraph 21 October 1938.
271 Souvenir programme.
to woo gown. The mushrooming of Oxford's population during his regime made no difference
to the size of his audiences. It was the plush New Theatre that benefited. Theatre-minded
students supported his downmarket offerings as avidly as their predecessors had Fagan's
upmarket ones. They sometimes trod the boards in term, something Fagan would never have
permitted. At least one, George Devine, would play a mould-breaking role in postwar British
theatre. As in Fagan's day, there were not enough of them. A few dons took a more active role.
The majority remained hostile or indifferent, as their treatment of Masefield demonstrated.
Despite its constitution, the new Playhouse, like the old, failed to meet Masefield's demand
for a university theatre to assist in the study of worthwhile plays ancient and modern, a
drama faculty remained as unthinkable as when Walkley dismissed it. In effect, though Dance
was an Oxford graduate, his Playhouse was as much the result of a chance intervention by an
outsider as Jane Ellis's.
The war years and after (1939-56)

The Playhouse constitution implied it was the university theatre Masefield dreamed of.¹ The six dons on its nine-member council reinforced the idea, as did the Vice-Chancellor presiding over its annual meetings. In practice little changed. Even the building was not all it seemed. The seats were secondhand.² There was no cyclorama, no grid. Felix Krish³ became technical director. A few new actors augmented the regulars. *Hail, Nero* starred Leslie French and gave Pamela Brown a chance to shine. Rosalie Crutchley impressed in *Fanny's First Play*. Others made guest appearances: Cicely Nicks in *Dandy Dick*, Richard Goolden in *Mr Pim Passes By*. The highlights were Shaw's *St. Joan* with Thea Holme and *Around the World in Eighty Days* with Anthony Holland's scenery.⁴ OUDS made its debut with *The Duchess of Malfi*. Efforts to promote music were less happy.⁵ The old Playhouse, now The Red Barn - a name Unity Theatre may have coined⁶ - staged shows until the City withdrew its licence, forcing Oxford Summer Diversions to stage its 1939 festival elsewhere.

The looming hostilities led patrons to protest at 'the introduction of recruiting speeches.'⁷ With occasional help Holme directed, acting in old favourites like *Rookery Nook*.

¹ First object: 'To encourage the study and practice of dramatic art amongst the members of the university... and the inhabitants of the city and county.' Oxford Repertory Players Memorandum and Articles of Association. Playhouse Archive.
² The chairman of the University Theatre Curators, T.S.R. Boase, President of Magdalen, writing in the brochure to mark the Playhouse's reconstruction, 1964, p. 9.
³ Son of Serge Krish, Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra conductor.
⁴ 'The toy train, the exploding ship, the heaving billows... were all a delight.' M(aurice) R(oy) R(idley). *The Oxford Magazine* 9 March 1939. The stage version was by Thomas Wood Stevens.
⁵ 'If the architect... had [abolished] the arch, he might have provided... a first-class theatre and... concert-hall... As it is, the best thing would be to build... an apron.' Editorial note on first concert. *TOM* 24 November 1938.
⁶ Editorial note. As above.
⁷ Holme said the Director of National Service told them to make these appeals. Letter. *Oxford Mail* 6 May 1939.
Katina Paxinou thrilled a packed house as Sophocles' *Electra*. A six-week closure followed a six-week season of twice nightly rep. Shaw's *Candida*, with Thea Holme as Prossie, ended her husband's regime. Two weeks later Britain was at war. Theatres and cinemas closed. The Government soon lifted the ban in safe areas, but by then Betty Tayler had wed Lionel Hale, Krish and several actors had joined up. Celia Chaundy became manager. Diana Harris took over backstage, Willard Stoker from Perth Rep as director.

Holme's departure and Stoker's arrival heralded another attempt to go upmarket. There was no shortage of replacements for the actors he lost to the war. 'They were glad to have jobs outside London.' Denis Price and his wife Joan Schofield, Norman Claridge, Julian D'Albie and his wife Rosemary Scott, acted in plays ranging from Giraudoux's *Amphitryon* 38 to Shaw's *The Millionairess*. Finding patrons was another matter. In December Stoker staged *Twelfth Night*.

This fair city is renowned for lost causes... It may yet be recorded that the apathy of its audiences... smothered its very talented... company.'

Oxford had not lived up to his expectations. His last play was *The Cherry Orchard*. Within months service personnel, evacuees and refugees would produce the audiences he wanted.

Angela Wyndham-Lewis as Anya marked the arrival of one: her stepfather, J.B. Priestley. In March he let Oxford première *The Long Mirror*. It drew packed houses for a fortnight. Otherwise, hit by the black-out and severe winter, the theatre struggled. French, who succeeded Stoker, rebuked Oxford for not producing 600 citizens to honour 'the world's greatest dramatist on his birthday' and his *Romeo and Juliet* with Robert Eddison and Pamela Brown. At Gabriel Pascal's request Deborah Kerr played Margaret in *Dear Brutus* and Pattie in *The Two Bouquets* before filming *Major Barbara*. Daphne Peretz sparkled as Laura, then struggled until French gave her another chance to sing. As trainloads of

---

9 The Greek National Theatre was on a British Council tour. *OM* 15 June 1939.
10 *OM* 15 August 1939. He was unfit to serve because of poor sight. He staged concerts for the troops, then from 1942 ran tours for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). By the war's end he had given 481 performances for what became the Arts Council, more than anyone else. Leonard Crainford. *CEMA Bulletin*, March 1945.
11 Anthony Holland. Taped interview, as above.
13 He took charge of 'two repertory theatres in Edinburgh and Glasgow.' *OM* 10 February 1940. Later he was director of the Connaught Theatre, Worthing, then Birmingham Rep.
14 C(harles) F(enby). *OM* 24 April 1940.
15 She found learning lines a nightmare. Daphne Peretz. Taped interview 8 February 2000. Revue, in which she would make her name, was more to her liking.
casualties from Dunkirk rumbled into Oxford, he found the answer to the twice-nightly
weeks of July and August: seven Playhouse Revues with guest stars and guest contributors.
Most prolific was Christopher Fry. French invited him to succeed him.\(^\text{15}\)

The influx of evacuees increased as the Battle of Britain gave way to the Blitz. James
Agate noted: ‘People are going from house to house asking... to sleep on the floor.’\(^\text{16}\)
John Byron found him a bedsit. For four months the Sunday Times critic played guru to the
students.

Intellectual productions do worse... than in any other city... A pity. The company...
happens to possess a perfect cast for... Hedda Gabler... Pamela Brown has the exact
quality to suggest the... self-centred, meddlesome egoist... Ibsen drew.'\(^\text{17}\)

Nominally, D'Albie, who succeeded Fry when he joined the Non-Combatant Corps, directed.\(^\text{18}\)
In fact, Agate did.\(^\text{19}\) Michael Meyer, then at Christ Church, wrote:

Of the 40 or so Heddas I have seen... Pamela Brown's remains the best. I think it was
this production that first awoke my interest in Ibsen.\(^\text{20}\)

The Tesman was Peter Ashmore. For most of 1941 D'Albie remained in charge, leavening his
fare with the odd classic. Pamela Brown recalled:

When I first joined... audiences were very small and our work was... heart­
breaking... Now... [it] has become a... pleasure.\(^\text{21}\)

Agate spoke in a Union Society debate calling for a university chair of drama. He said
an undergraduate made the excellent point that if ‘dons were allowed to contact the living
drama they would kill it.’\(^\text{22}\) The war muted demands for more active academic involvement.
But, unlike the First World War, there was a steady stream of youngsters coming up before
they enlisted and student drama thrived. To meet debts of more than £1,000 Coghill formed

\(^\text{15}\) It led him to write Jennet in The Lady’s Not For Burning for Pamela Brown, Margaret for
\(^\text{17}\) James Agate. Sunday Times. Quoted in an Open Letter to Oxford Playgoers, 13 January
1941. With Housemaster programme.
\(^\text{18}\) A Cambridge graduate and First World War veteran of wide experience.
\(^\text{19}\) ‘There was a good Lövborg [Byron], an excellent Judge Brack [D’Albie], and a delightful
Tesman. But far more important than any of these... was a notable new Hedda.’ Alan Dent.
Manchester Guardian. Quoted Ego 5. As above, p. 72.
\(^\text{21}\) Quoted Diarist. OM 7 February 1941.
\(^\text{22}\) Ego 5. As above, p. 46. ‘Leslie Banks virtually assured the success of the motion.’ TOM 31
October 1940. ‘With such a chair... you would have... a continuous stream of... educated
young men to devote their lives to the theatre.’ Banks. Quoted OM 17 September 1940. Since
moving to Oxford, he had resumed his campaign for a drama professor.
the Friends of OUDS. They only added to the deficit until Glynne Wickham, future drama professor at Bristol, staged *Much Ado*. ETC did *The Ghost Sonata*, Frank Hauser the amateur première of Bernard's *The Unquiet Spirit*, Ashmore a student revival of *The Ascent of F6*, Coghill most of the Friends' shows. Despite being a member of the Playhouse Council, he still longed for a university drama department with its own theatre.

I do not think this present moment a ripe one for launching an appeal, but I do think it a moment for securing an option on a good site.

Rosalie Crutchley was Eliza to Esmé Percy's Higgins in *Pygmalion*, Pegeen Mike to Cyril Cusack's Christy in *The Playboy*. Alan Badel made his debut in *The Black Eye*, Donald Pleasence in *Sweeney Todd*. Neither New Theatre nor Playhouse wanted to open on Sunday. Both objected to last buses leaving at 9.30pm. Stanley Dorrill claimed that the New was now attracting 20-25,000 patrons a week, Mrs Chaundy: 'We are doing bigger business than... ever.' To combat wartime restrictions, she moved curtain-up from 7.45pm to 7.15pm, then 7pm, in 1942 to 6.45pm, in 1943 to 6.15pm. Holland left for the RAF in 1941. Tanya Moiseiwitsch succeeded him.

The programme was chosen six weeks in advance. Tony said: 'Don't ever let them choose two period plays in the same batch.' ...The very first batch... included two period plays, [*The Witch* and *The Seagull*]. Pamela Brown returned occasionally after she joined Thea Holme in the BBC Repertory Company. There were Rosalie Crutchley and Jane Henderson (who followed Ashmore from Aberdeen), Sigrid Landstad and Angela Wyndham-Lewis, Winifred Evans and Nora Nicholson. The men came and went. Ashmore, a conscientious objector, was a fixture. Peter Copley was invalided out of the Navy. John Maxwell succeeded Diana Harris when she joined up. Another military invalid was Raymond Somerville, cousin of Coghill. In 1942 came a refugee from Nazi Germany, the Austrian film-star Frederick Richter.

---

23 Carpenter. *OUDS Centenary History*. As above, p. 144. Wickham was at New.
25 At Christ Church in 1941, his first production.
26 Peter Brook, then at Magdalen, called Coghill a 'monopolist preventing would-be young directors doing anything more glorious than... front of house.' Letter to Carpenter, p. 147.
27 Coghill to Douglas Veale, University Registrar, 5 May 1943. URL/TH/1 File One.
28 'He told me how Mrs Patrick Campbell taught him.' Taped interview 2 July 1997.
29 *OM* 15 April 1941.
30 *OM* 23 May 1942.
31 *OM* 21 February 1941.
32 *OM* 18 August 1941.
Moiseiwitsch combatted clothes rationing with the help of wardrobe mistress Anne Winkworth. '[Winkie] would... convert a curtain... to a loose cover... with the maximum of safety pins and the minimum of sewing.' but scene setting was no easier than it had been at Woodstock Road.

The carpenters... couldn't get the timber... and anything... they built [in their basement] they couldn't get up the stairs. So they had to build it on stage and that meant Sunday.

Electrician Bill Neill lit the shows. Ashmore succeeded D'Albie in November 1941. Though he had only a couple of student productions to his credit, he was to prove a more adventurous director. He said every six plays should include a Chekhov and a Shaw. Mrs Chaundy jibbed at Chekhov, but he did nine Shaws in his first year. His Christmas show was Obey's Noah with himself as Noah and Rachel Kempson as Naomi, his first coup a modern-dress Merchant of Venice in August 1942 with himself as Shylock and Rosalie Crutchley as Portia.

Dance was a captain in the 35th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. In his absence Mrs Chaundy ran things as she thought he would have done and, after his capture at the Fall of Singapore in 1942, kept an even tighter rein. Occasionally the war struck home. In October the Mail announced Tanya Moiseiwitsch's engagement to Pilot Officer Krish. They wed in December. In February he died in a flying accident. Otherwise 'our only contribution... was the nightly fire-watching. Four of us took a weekly turn,' among them Muriel Pavlow, who came in 1943 to repeat 'her London success' in Quiet Wedding. It ran a second week, an increasingly common event. In February came Donald Houston, also destined for stardom, in March Ursula Howells. William March was Basham in On the Rocks, the future Hollywood director, David Greene, Lennie in Of Mice and Men. The highlights were a première and another Shakespeare. Downfall by Douglas Reed, ex-Central European correspondent of The Times, Percy heading a cast of 20 as Hitler, failed to live up to expectations. But the two week run did give Ashmore extra time for Romeo and Juliet with Byron, invalided out of the

He had lost a leg in a car crash.

'He knew what he was after and had a genius for extracting a subtle something from his actors that they were not aware of.' Nora Nicholson. Chameleon's Dish. London: Elek, 1973, pp. 99-100.

'He looked like a 20th century company promoter.' As above, p. 99. Guthrie came. He said: "Very interesting, but too much uppy, downy." He meant too many curtains. I hadn't learnt enough then to know that you don't do that with Shakespeare. You press on.' Tanya Moiseiwitsch. Taped interview, as above.

In February, though it was December before Oxford learnt. OM 23 December 1942.

OM 19 January 1943.

93
RAF, and Olga Edwardes. The set by Moiseiwitsch and lighting, 'which did credit to... Ashmore who designed it;'40 let the action flow. They had learnt from The Merchant.

The policy remained standard fare with the odd plum. Finding student drama 'monopolised by possessive professors,'41 Peter Brook did Dr. Faustus at the Torch Theatre, London, then revived the University Film Society to make Sterne's A Sentimental Journey. Ursula Howells recalled its première 'was a disaster... You couldn't follow it. And it went on and on.'42 But it sowed the seed for the most concerted effort to build a university theatre. According to the Warden of New College, A(lic) H(alford) Smith, Sir Alexander Korda 'showed interest.'43 Brook's successor as Film Society president, H.P. Paget, and the vice-president, John Cavanagh, scurried to London to see his agent, Sir David Cunynghame. Coghill told Veale the film industry envisaged postwar expansion and needed intelligent recruits.

Coghill seized his chance. With Veale, the Film Society senior member Lord David Cecil, Paget and Cavanagh he devised a plan to send a commission to study American university drama departments as a prelude to creating one at Oxford,44 then put it to Cunynghame, who said Korda would give £5,000 to finance it.45 Hebdomadal Council set up a committee,46 which chose Frederick Gibberd as architect and asked Prof. Allardyce Nicoll, head of drama at Yale, which universities to visit.48 The Times noted: 'Many ...will welcome this... while others... may regard it as the thin end of a very dangerous wedge.'49

40 Stanley Parker. OM 8 June 1943.
43 OM 1 November 1948. I wrote to Brook about Korda. His Paris assistant rang me on 17 March 2000. He had 'no comment' to make on that and, despite his letter to Carpenter - see above, note 26 - denied Coghill was the 'possessive professor.'
44 Letter 29 April 1944 marked Personal. UR6/TH/1. File One.
45 Minute 15 May 1944 marked Private. As above.
46 Minute. As above. He said Oxford was the only university to respond, though they asked several.
47 Hebdomadal Council Acts. Vol. 188, p. cviii, 4 July 1944. Members were: the Senior Proctor, Dr. Harold Hanbury, the Warden of Wadham, Maurice Bowra, Prof. T.G.B. Osborn of Magdalen, A. Lane Poole of St. John's, Coghill and David Cecil.
48 'What is needed... is a university department working in close co-operation with a local repertory theatre [with] its own... stage school... The former would have... those aiming to train themselves in the history, criticism and philosophy of the drama... [the latter] those [intending] to pursue a professional... career.' Allardyce Nicoll. Letter 8 September 1944. UR6/TH/1. File One. Virtually the setup Bristol University would adopt.
49 The Times 19 October 1944.
That summer Coghill staged *Measure For Measure* with Richard Burton as Angelo.50 Gielgud helped with the costumes. On the strength of *Love For Love*, Hugh Beaumont had asked him to mount a season. He got Coghill and the Cambridge ‘theatre’ don, George Rylands, to help direct it.51 It was vital the Commission included an Oxford man ‘with professional knowledge.’ Before Coghill’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* opened at the Haymarket in January 1945 he was able to canvas expert opinion. Hamish Hamilton, who lit it, got the job. The Commissioners went in high hopes.

The Government is most anxious for as rapid as possible increase in good British [film] production so it may play its full part in the recovery of the export market, which should be worth several million pounds... a year.52

In December 1943 the Playhouse raised prices. The Government ruled that Entertainment Tax ‘be paid on all plays which are non-educational.’53 It followed Beaumont’s recognition that he could claim by forming Tennent Plays Ltd. to do shows on a non-profit basis.54 The Playhouse passed on the tax and kept the difference on exempt plays. *French Without Tears* was Tanya Moiseiwitsch’s last. Guthrie wanted her. Ashmore took a break. Malcolm Morley filled the breach.55 Then they alternated plays, giving each of them a fortnight to prepare.56 Finding actors became easier as the tide of war turned. A week after D-Day Rosalie Crutchley played *St. Joan*. With doubling Ashmore had no problem recruiting 21 men. Then Morley did *Tobias and the Angel* and *Old Acquaintance* while he rehearsed *Hamlet* with David Markham. Mrs Chaundy claimed exemption when possible. Ursula Howells was *Lady Precious Stream*, Michael Golden *The Master Builder*, Jane Henderson Thérèse Raquin in *Guilty*, Yvonne Mitchell Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*. In the run-up to Christmas Ashmore did *The Cherry Orchard*, Morley *Candida*. Ashmore’s last play before he took another break was Maxwell Anderson’s *Winterset*.

52 Cunynghame to Veale 18 December 1944. UR6/TH/1. File One.
53 *OM* 18 December 1943. Prices rose from 4s 6d, 3s 6d, 2s. 6d and 2s (1s unreserved) to 6s 6d, 5s, 3s 6d and 2s 9d (1s 3d unreserved).
55 He introduced pre-war audiences to Strindberg’s *The Father* and Ostrovsky’s *The Storm*. At Oxford his fare was less exciting, though it did include *The Lady of the Camellias*.
56 Stanley Parker. *OM* 17 June 1944.
For two months Fry took the plums. Frith Banbury and Michael Gough played Joseph and Charles Surface in *The School For Scandal*. Joan Greenwood was 'as good a... Nora as I've seen' in *A Doll's House*, Pamela Brown Elizabeth Bennett, Byron Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, John Stuart and Joan Greenwood *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Ashmore returned with *Rosmersholm* and staged *The Wild Duck* and *John Gabriel Borkman* later in 1945. His Shakespeare was *Macbeth* with Michael Golden. He also did four Shaws. Yvonne Mitchell was Eliza in *Pygmalion*. 'When we came out we found the amber glow of the coffee bar spreading its radiance.' The blackout had ended. In May Germany surrendered. In July Labour swept to power. In August Japan capitulated. Winifred Evans returned to London. Cameron Miller took over the Theatre Royal, Leicester. Frank Shelley came from Perth for Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

The Friends marked OUDS' 60th birthday with *The Taming of the Shrew*. Coghill, back from the States, told *The Oxford Magazine* their wartime shows had made £787. The same issue reported the Commission's findings. The advice members received from Harley Granville Barker and Nicoll quashed Coghill's hopes of a drama faculty, or postgraduate course (though there should be a Reader in Drama), but highlighted the need for a university theatre with a professional company, where students could see plays they were studying, and encouraged the 'showing (and... making) [of] educational films.' The speedy report had an ulterior motive.

[Warden Smith]... had received confidential information that the Government was [taking] over CEMA and... intended to encourage the study of drama... by having a professional company which would go round and perform.

The General Board approved the Commission's findings 'provided that the university did not incur any expense.'

---

58 Stanley Parker. OM 28 April 1945.
59 Because of travel problems, they were there only three weeks, not five. They had to omit their visit to Hollywood and the University of Southern California, 'paid too little attention to Yale (which has only a graduate course in drama) and Harvard (which has none), and too much (perhaps) to... Cleveland and Iowa... Any tendency to enthuse over undergraduate play-production... was damped by... Granville Barker and... Nicoll, both of whom... deprecate[d] undergraduate acting, not merely as a waste of time, but... uneducative.' TOM 14 June 1945.
60 '[it] might open up all kinds of possibilities... But... will funds be forthcoming... to keep it running (as it may well have to be kept running) at a loss?' TOM, as above.
61 Veale to Hebdomadal Council members 30 May 1945. UR6/TH/1. File One. Announcing that CEMA would become the Arts Council, Maynard Keynes said its aims were 'the carrying of the arts throughout the countryside and maintaining metropolitan standards.' *The Times* 13 June 1945.
In October 1945 the Playhouse learnt that Dance had died in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. They stood in his memory at the company’s annual meeting. The year showed an increase in profit. Hart-Synnot outlined plans to repay the remaining cost of the theatre.

In November the Mail said Mrs Chaundy and Ashmore were going to America ‘as a prelude to a possible visit by the Playhouse.’ Fry began another stint in December with In Good King Charles’s Golden Days, which had sets and costumes by new designer, Jay Hutchinson Scott.

Ashmore revived Charley’s Aunt for Christmas, then was away until March. Morley and Fry shared direction. After four more shows, Ashmore left to stage Pygmalion for the Old Vic. Several fine productions followed. Critics hailed him as another Peter Brook. Then his star waned. Shelley took over at Oxford. The 33-year-old was as mercurial as Ashmore, but tougher. He too loved Shaw, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov, and had one talent Ashmore lacked. His farce, Postman’s Knock, brought Harold Hobson to Oxford.

Rattigan came to see Morley’s version of While the Sun Shines, which drew full houses for a month. Jane Henderson left to join Bristol Old Vic. Outside London the theatre was beginning to suffer. Military personnel, refugees, and returning students cushioned Oxford and helped the amateurs too. A body set up to co-ordinate student shows lamented the lack of venues. There was no mention of the university theatre. Hebdomadal Council allowed Gibberd make a model with some of the £1,000 left of Korda’s money, but restrictions on

---

Footnotes:

63 In April 1943. OM 23 October 1945.

64 Of 300 plays... between 1939 and 1945... Shaw has been represented 30 times, J.B. Priestley by 12... Maugham by nine, Shakespeare, Emlyn Williams and Bridie by seven... Ibsen and Coward... by six, and Tchekov by five.' Oxford Times 14 December 1945.

65 OM 3 November 1945. Diarist said Geoffrey Tyrrell was taking over ‘when Miss... Chaundy... goes to America.’ OM 13 December 1945. In the New Year he noted she had ‘received her sailing orders.’ OM 9 January 1946. There was no further mention.

66 ‘[He] was extremely talented, but... had... two fatal flaws... One was... laziness... the other... that he... wasn’t capable of standing up for himself.’ His cousin, Frith Banbury. Taped interview, as above.

67 His real name was Mario Francelli. While studying journalism at University College, London, Sybil Thorndike saw him act and told him to go to her sister, Eileen Thorndike’s Embassy Drama School. A bombing raid cut short his military career and he went into rep. Taped interview 6 June 1997.

68 ‘[The Playhouse] has a young manager (very able...); a young author (it did a new play this last fortnight); a young scene designer (of outstanding merit); it is... the youngest theatre in England... It has to take more than £450 a week... But it is... financially and artistically a success.’ Harold Hobson. Sunday Times 1 December 1946.

69 Donald Houston and Gordon Whiting ‘rivalled their counterparts in the West End.’ Rattigan. Quoted OM 9 August 1946.

70 Geoffrey Whitworth said the British Drama League now had 71 societies in and around Oxford, 12 per cent of which were college groups. OM 27 September 1946.

71 They were reduced to playing in the suburbs. TOM 28 November 1946.
building made its realisation a thornier question.\textsuperscript{72} Playhouse actors continued to come and go. In October 15-year-old Claire Bloom arrived from Central School.\textsuperscript{73} Of Pink String And Sealing Wax K.B.T. wrote:

> The two young sisters are played by... Patricia Gilder and... Clare Bloom, who manage to live themselves back into their childhood with... irrepressible charm.\textsuperscript{74}

Gilder was 16.

> They had to decide which [of us] to keep. Claire was very... pretty... but she was limited and I think they thought I was a bit more versatile.\textsuperscript{75}

At Christmas she was Alice in Wonderland. 1947 ushered in one of the worst winters on record. Despite a freezing theatre Rattigan’s Flare Path ran two weeks. The Friends of OUDS issued rugs for The Pretenders.\textsuperscript{76} Morley left for Montreal, where his Midsummer Night’s Dream led Saskatchewan University to invite him become drama professor.\textsuperscript{77} Stuart Latham and Alfred Farrell filled in.

> The... company has seemed to be in a state of flux, but... has now more or less settled down and... ‘old regulars’...are... being supplemented... by ‘new regulars’ such as... Jillian Palmer... and John Moffatt.\textsuperscript{78}

Palmer, a Rank ‘starlet,’ kept disappearing to act in films.\textsuperscript{79} Moffatt was from Shelley’s old stamping ground, Perth.\textsuperscript{80} His first major role was Laertes to Shelley’s Hamlet.\textsuperscript{81}

Fry returned to direct Congreve’s The Way of the World. Stella Andrew made her debut in Patrick Boxill’s\textsuperscript{82} first production, This Happy Breed. She would become another regular and briefly a film-star. The return of proper programmes provided room for a

\textsuperscript{72}Sir Alexander Korda and... Rank would be willing... to offer a permanent endowment for a Readership. They would not be willing to offer an endowment for a building, which.... could not be built for five or six years.’ Veale. Note 11 October 1946. UR6/TH/1. File two.
\textsuperscript{73} Claire Bloom. Limelight and After. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982, p. 57. She was then spelt Clare.
\textsuperscript{74} K.B.T. TOM 14 November 1946.
\textsuperscript{75} Patricia Gilder. Taped interview 6 November 1999.
\textsuperscript{76} Carpenter, p. 154. Wickham, back from the RAF, directed. Kenneth Tynan, whose posturing was as much part of postwar Oxford as Acton’s in the 1920s, was Bishop Nicholas. Wickham became OUDS’ first postwar president in May 1947.
\textsuperscript{77} He said no. Note in the programme for French Without Tears, 18 August 1947.
\textsuperscript{78} J.B.H. reviewing A Quiet Weekend. OM 22 April 1947.
\textsuperscript{79} Jillian Binns (née Palmer). Taped interview 14 January 2000. Her future husband, Graham Binns, was about to resume his university career.
\textsuperscript{80} ‘I remember... feeling... daunted. I’d... arrived... somewhere... very professional.’ Taped interview 5 March 1999.
\textsuperscript{81} ‘The undergraduates who crammed the Playhouse... cheered... Shelley to the rafters - and well they should.’ P.N. Unidentified cutting. Playhouse file. Kay Lauterer was Gertrude, Patricia Gilder Ophelia, guest actors Reginald Jarman, Alfred Sangster, and Ronald Campbell Claudius, Polonius and Horatio. Shelley directed.
\textsuperscript{82} A student with Shelley at the Embassy School. Later he would follow Morley to Canada.
Playhouse Newsreel. It claimed Deborah Kerr was now ‘the highest paid [film] star in America.’ Michael Finlayson succeeded Boxill, who stayed as an actor. His first play was *The School For Scandal* with John McKelvey as Sir Peter Teazle beginning a stint that would last off and on until 1953. Shelley’s self-scripted Christmas show, *The Cinderella Story*, hardly matched the music of Patricia Gilder’s composer brother, Eric, but the chance to see ‘regulars’ in pantomime proved irresistible. Charles Morgenstern was musical director, Moffatt’s Ugly Sister Tony Hancock.

In December the amateurs formed an Oxford Council of Music and Drama (OCDM). Coghill was president. It gave him a chance to plug the Commission’s theatre. Admitting the university ‘had not done enough for other people,’ he said it could provide them with a vacation platform. But it was vital they had their own hall and... they should be thinking: ‘What site, what kind, and who pays?’ Who pays?’ taxed the university. Gibberd had made his model by February 1947, showing a tiered 700-seat theatre with interchangeable stages for Greek, Elizabethan, Restoration, Georgian, Victorian and modern plays. It had foyers at ground and first-floor levels, a gallery, lecture hall, grid, scene dock and workshop. Behind was an amphitheatre. Gibberd estimated it would cost £187,000.

Much could be omitted (such as the open-air theatre)... but there would be... the cost of endowment for running expenses and... the cost of the site. Korda said it was difficult to approach the American film industry when it was facing reduced quotas. They should try J. Arthur Rank or Sir Philip Waters of Associated British Cinemas. The university decided to stage an exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, which Rank or some other British film mogul ‘might open.’ The Arts Council would organise it, then take it to...
other university cities. Coghill said its exhibitions expert was confident of selling 2,500 copies of the Commission Report. Council approved their printing from the £820 left of Korda's money and models of the five stages.

Priestley compiled the first postwar British theatre survey. Vital to longterm health, he said, were university drama departments. 'We need at least four... at Oxford... Cambridge, London...Glasgow or Edinburgh.' Alldyce Nicoll had asked in 1944 if Oxford knew another university was considering one. In October The Times Educational Supplement announced a degree course at Bristol. Oxford shelved plans for a Reader. But the exhibition went ahead with Harold Wilson, President of the Board of Trade, opening it. Nothing better reflected the theatrical euphoria of 1948 than The Masque of Hope OUDS staged on May 25 to mark the visit of Princess Elizabeth. There were other landmarks if not all lived up to expectations. The Playhouse had belonged to CORT (the Conference of Repertory Theatres) since it began in 1944. Shelley's production of Power Without Glory seemed ideal to end its Festival of English Repertory at Stratford. It proved a damp squib, but kept the company busy while David Raeburn staged Shoemaker's Holiday for OUDS. In June Morgenstern issued a souvenir brochure for Shelley's 50th anniversary revival of The Seagull. Peter Parker, future chairman of British Rail, made his debut in Tynan's Winterset, which ETC repeated at the Theatre des Champs Élysées in Paris at Easter, and spent the summer as Hamlet in Tynan's production of the 1603 First Quarto. Frank Hauser, back from the war, and OUDS

100 It was the idea of Wickham, who directed. Coghill wrote the script; John Veale, the University Registrar's son, the music. Tynan was Fear, John Schlesinger Black Market, Robert Hardy Rumour, Anthony Richardson Knowledge, David Raeburn Tyranny, John Hale Neptune, Elizabeth Baldwin Hope, Corinne Hunt Joy. Glynne Wickham. All Right on the Night. The Masque of Hope at Oxford. In A Night at the Theatre. Ed Ronald Harwood. London: Methuen, 1982, p. 187.
101 After a tryout at the New Lindsey Theatre, Clayton Hutton's play transferred to the Fortune Theatre and was now on Broadway.
102 An 'emotional Irish stew with too many turnip ends.' R.B.-S. OM 24 February 1948.
103 He used Calderon's version. Chris Castor was Madame Arkadina, Patricia Gilder Nina, Shelley Trigorin. Moffatt, who was Constantine, recalled: 'That first night [was] one of those times when the thing just... took wing... People think that weekly rep must... have been very tatty. But I can remember thinking... if we'd had another week this wouldn't be as good.'
senior member, Dr. Merlin Thomas, Tutor in Modern Languages at New College, toured France with Hauser's outdoor revival of *The Silent Woman*.

In October came the Playhouse's silver jubilee. The play chose itself: *Heartbreak House*. Louis Frewer compiled a brief history for Morgernstern's 32-page souvenir. The first night was a black tie affair with the Vice-Chancellor, the Mayor, and stars ranging from Goolden to Houston. Shelley's production rose to the occasion. It was still running when Wilson opened the Ashmolean exhibition. He was glad the Commission had not suggested a Final Honour School of Cinematography, but Government efforts to boost the industry could benefit from a steady flow of graduates. By the time they built the theatre the British should be able to help and he hoped the Americans would too, once their sterling balances were released.

Implicit... is the hope that Oxford, whence came some of the first Elizabethan playwrights, may play a shaping part in the present widespread revival of interest in dramatic art, and central to that hope is the proposed new theatre.

Not everyone agreed.

I have lately contacted a wealthy native of Patagonia... prepared to donate... £2m. for the endowment of a co-educational... College of Dancing... There is one... condition: the college must be named after St. Vitus.

In hindsight, the theatre was a recipe for disaster. Dr. W.L. Ferrar, the Bursar of Hertford, who opposed the motion which Congregation endorsed by 70 votes to 23, said students would use it only a few weeks of the year. 'In five years time we [may] have a... School of Drama as one means of keeping it open.' Even with a professional company it was far too ambitious. Coghill was seduced by the opulence of American university theatres, and the lure of a cinematic crock of gold muted criticism. The new Vice-Chancellor, Dr. John

---

105 The Superintendent of Rhodes House Library would play a key role in keeping the theatre afloat.
106 'It is hard to believe that the performance given 25 years ago was better.' Hobson. *Sunday Times* 24 October 1948. Shelley was Shotover, Patricia Gilder Ellie.
107 *OM* 1 November 1948. To stem the 70m-dollar outflow in rentals to the US the Labour Government imposed a 75 per cent duty on imported films. When this threatened the distribution of British films in the US, it lifted it provided the Americans exported only 25 per cent of their earnings. They started making co-productions in England, 'thus diluting and almost destroying the indigenous cinema... Wilson... reduced the wartime art of the British cinema to unimportance.' Andrew Sinclair. *Arts and Cultures*. The history of the 50 years of the Arts Council of Great Britain. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995, pp. 72-3.
110 Quoted *OM* 2 February 1949.
Lowe, Dean of Christ Church, who chaired the subcommittee which approved the theatre and Reader of Drama, informed Wilson in February 1949 that the cost of building and endowing it was £400,000 without the site. He was in for a shock. After nine months of badgering Wilson’s private secretary conceded:

Owing largely to the devaluation of the pound sterling in relation to the dollar, the sterling earned by the American film companies... has been used up to a much greater extent than had been expected... It [is] not possible to press [them] to make any money available.\textsuperscript{112}

The university found itself in the red. Coghill ordered 3,500 copies of the Commission’s Report, not 2,500. The Arts Council sold 75.\textsuperscript{113} The Korda Fund was £200 overspent. They hushed it up, but it damaged Coghill’s reputation for life.\textsuperscript{114} Meanwhile, the Rockefeller Foundation gave Bristol 20,000 dollars to develop a five-year programme.

Three-fifths of the money is to be spent on equipping a new drama studio. Work is to begin next week and the building should be ready by Christmas.\textsuperscript{115}

To rub salt in the wound, ‘it followed the principle\textsuperscript{116} proposed by the Drama Commission!

Hutchinson Scott’s sets for \textit{Heartbreak House} were his last. He joined Tennent’s new rep at Brighton. Inigo Monk had a hard act to follow. At Christmas he left. Margaret Tracey from Bristol succeeded him.\textsuperscript{117} Tennent’s bought \textit{Cinderella Story} for Brighton. Hancock repeated his Ugly Sister. Moffatt was Shelley’s \textit{Mother Goose}. Jan de Hartog’s \textit{Death of a Rat} and \textit{The Drunkard} ran for a fortnight, Shelley postponed Finlayson’s revival of \textit{The Father} to mark the 100th anniversary of Strindberg’s birth. Critics preferred Nancie Jackson, Sheila Macintosh and Patricia Gilder as \textit{The Three Sisters}, Rachel Kempson as \textit{Candida}, Moffatt as Lord Foppington in \textit{A Trip to Scarborough}. McKelvey left in April, Stella Andrew, Patricia Gilder, Mary Pratt, Moffatt and Robert Brown in July.\textsuperscript{118} Margaret Tracey went too. In August

\textsuperscript{111} Hebdomadal Council Acts 6 December 1948 Vol. 201 p. cxliii.
\textsuperscript{112} Letter signed Miss E. Gower 26 June 1950. UR6/TH/1. File Two.
\textsuperscript{113} Letter from Arts Council to Veale 26 April 1950, as above.
\textsuperscript{114} When Mrs Geoffrey Whitworth asked the Pilgrim Trust for £1,000 to help OCDM acquire a building in 1953 its chairman, Lord Kilmaine, sought the Vice-Chancellor’s advice, adding: ‘One would feel doubtful whether any organisation under the presidency of... Coghill was run on sound... business lines.’ Confidential letter 1 April 1953, as above.
\textsuperscript{115} The \textit{Times} 27 July 1950.
\textsuperscript{117} ‘Three-weekly Old Vic rep... was quite gruelling... but my stint at the Playhouse was another experience... I got very thin!’ Letter 20 January 2000.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{OM} 2 July 1949. Moffatt said: ‘I was happy as could be... but we were suddenly... all given our notice.’ Taped interview, as above.
Somerville replaced Mrs Chaundy. The theatregoing slump had reached Oxford.

The company chairman, Michael Holroyd, said that because of its size and low prices the Playhouse rarely made £100 a week, but during the war and after they had put £2,000 to reserve and £2,605 in the holding company’s debentures. Business was normal until March 1949. Then ‘fine weather [and] the countrywide... slump brought a succession of deficits of over £200.’ They were £2,336 in the red. Moffatt suspected the university was trying to take over. Actually, Holroyd and the other council dons were severing its academic ties in anticipation of their own theatre. In September its principal aim changed from encouraging drama amongst members of the university and inhabitants of the city and county to ‘promoting... the interest of the public in... entertainment of an educational nature.’ In October the ‘non-profit' company became a charitable trust. The deficit had forced them to look more closely at the accounts and what they found was not a good reflection of their stewardship.

The theatre reopened with a new designer, Sidney Jarvis, and new actors. Douglas Wilmer, who would make his name as television’s Sherlock Holmes, was The Admirable Crichton, Geoffrey Edwards the valet in By Candlelight, Philip Ashley the Bishop in See How They Run. Stella Andrew was about to make her film debut. Other ‘old hands’ drifted back. Mary Pratt and Moffatt joined Jane Henderson and Conrad Phillips in the hit of the autumn, The Glass Menagerie. There were not enough to offset the failures. In November the Playhouse appealed vainly to the City for a grant of £2,000 - the equivalent of a halfpenny rate. The Christmas show was 1066 And All That. Moffatt was the Guide, Claude Ricks the Common Man. In the cast were Edward Woodward and Richard Baker. The first play of 1950 was a première: R.F. Delderfield's Spark in Judaea. The week after The Chiltern Hundreds made

119 'She had a flat in Beaumont Street.... She’d been paying the rent... out of Playhouse funds.' Shelley. In conversation. Confirmed by Louis Frewer, secretary of the Playhouse Guild and Council member, taped interview 15 September 1998. I traced Mrs Chaundy to Tavistock, but pleading age she referred me to her ex-publicity manager, Colin Fairrie. He said she ran a model agency after she left Oxford. Taped interview 23 January 2004.


121 Shelley said Heartbreak House, which ran for two weeks, failed to break even, while his ‘best’ production, The Seagull, lost £53. OM 22 May 1950.

122 Notes of Treasurer’s report. Annual meeting 31 January 1951.

123 ‘Moffatt thought I had a voice which might broadcast well. So I wrote to the BBC and... was taken on as an announcer.’ Richard Baker. Letter 14 January 2000.

124 It attempted to explain Pilate’s ‘efforts to spare Christ his final ordeal.’ Programme note.
up for the £150 it lost,\textsuperscript{125} drawing a record 3,700.\textsuperscript{126}

Several reps had closed in 1949 and the Playhouse would follow, Holroyd warned, if it did not get more backing.\textsuperscript{127} ‘Three disastrous weeks’ brought things to a head: two before Christmas, which lost £780, and the final week of All That, which ended £313 down.\textsuperscript{128} Holroyd was Senior Fellow of Brasenose, a supporter since Fagan’s day and chairman since 1941. His vice-chairman, Edward Colegrove, had briefly been Fagan’s manager. They started another Guild and sold the debentures. In March Vice-Chancellor Lowe launched a £5,000 appeal, backed by a host of worthies. A leaflet outlined the ‘new policy.’ They were changing to fortnightly rep and would exchange plays with Cambridge and London. Shelley took sole charge. Coghill, who presided at the Guild’s inaugural meeting, told a packed theatre its aim was to ‘bring home to Oxford... it was their theatre.’\textsuperscript{129} After a rocky start takings improved. Treasurer Frank Birkett told the Guild in September they had ‘more or less broken even.’\textsuperscript{130} What he did not say was earlier losses meant they ended 1949-50 with a £1,883 deficit to add to 1948-49’s £2,336.\textsuperscript{131} Present Laughter drew 6,286 and made £280; Man and Superman 5,100 and £30; The Philadelphia Story with Stella Andrew while her first film, They Were Not Divided, was showing in Oxford, 4,900.\textsuperscript{132} Birkett omitted the failures. Top of the list was Shelley and Coghill’s Romeo and Juliet, which lost £270.\textsuperscript{133}

Hugh Goldie came in April from Liverpool. He co-produced The Apple Cart, with Shelley as King Magnus, and Man and Superman. During the summer break, they repeated them at Cambridge. It was the closest they came to exchanging. Shelley claimed the scheme failed because ‘our prices were so much lower.’\textsuperscript{134} Another reason was that Cambridge had no

\textsuperscript{125} Shelley. OM 22 May 1950.
\textsuperscript{126} OM 11 September 1950.
\textsuperscript{127} Report of company annual meeting. OT 27 January 1950.
\textsuperscript{128} Notes of the treasurer’s report, as above.
\textsuperscript{129} Quoted OM 13 February 1950.
\textsuperscript{130} OM 11 September 1950.
\textsuperscript{131} Note of the treasurer’s report, as above.
\textsuperscript{132} Audience figures come from Birkett’s Guild report, profit figures from Shelley’s report on The First Year of Repertory Production, March 1951.
\textsuperscript{133} Shelley, as above. Patricia Gilder, who was Juliet, recalled Coghill thought every word precious. ‘He wanted an innocent man to match the innocent Juliet. [Jack Cassidy] looked marvellous, but... it was too much to land him with a huge part.’ Taped interview, as above.
\textsuperscript{134} Cambridge charged 7s 6d, 6s, 4s and 3s (6s, 4s, 3s and 2s Monday night, Thursday matinee), Oxford 5s, 3s 6d, 2s 9d -1s 6d unreserved (Saturdays 6s 6d to 2s. 9d - 1s 6d unreserved).
resident company. They did not name the London theatre, but it must have been the Lyric, Hammersmith. The Appeal fell well short of target. Students remained indifferent. The Guild was the one success. By September members had topped 600 and would go on rising. Goldie, now associate producer, directed My Sister Eileen. Among newcomers were Mary Savidge and Donald Hewlett. His wife, Christine Pollon, enchanted as Ann Veronica and partnered Denis Price in Rebecca. Hewlett had his first success at Christmas in When Knights Were Bold. Guest ‘stars’ helped takings. Rebecca made £171 in the run-up to Christmas, Daphne Laureola with Jane Henderson £55 in a week in October. The Mail’s new critic, S.P.B. Mais, felt Shelley had his heart in the theatre, but did not always choose the right plays, a view P.V. echoed. Shelley replied with a list of flops including Ashmore’s Merchant of Venice, which played ‘to about two-fifths capacity.’ On Monday Next marked the arrival of Paul Mayo, a designer who had several London shows to his credit. It did best the first year of fortnightly rep, making £308, Musical Chairs worst after Romeo and Juliet losing £265.

Since August, Birkett told the company annual meeting in January 1951, they had made £1,125. With the appeal they had turned an overdraft of £270 into a balance of £1,200. Now they had to recoup the loss of £2,336 on 1948/49. By March the position was less rosy.

The New Theatre is our major difficulty... There is no other town... so small with a theatre so large... If it were transplanted... to Windsor or Worthing... the local reps... would... feel the draught. Shelley listed 15 measures he had taken to promote the theatre from books of matches to a costume hire service. A Farmers’ Conference had proved lucrative and the establishment of a Playhouse Theatre School should help. The principal was Isabel Van Beers, her co-directors

---

135 The Company of Four took shows to Cambridge. See Cambridge Arts Theatre Celebrating Sixty Years, as above, pp. 49-51.
136 A Film and Theatre Ball in June and a garden party in July took it over £1,000 but was ‘too small a reserve fund.’ Diarist. OM 20 July 1950.
137 OM 11 September 1950.
138 ‘Of the 7,000 undergraduates... we get something like 500... a term... It was suggested that season tickets might [help]... We sold 27.’ Raymond Somerville. OM 25 September 1950.
140 P.V. reviewing Musical Chairs. TOM 16 November 1950.
141 Letter. TOM 23 November 1950.
142 The First Year of Repertory Production. As above.
Shelley and Goldie. It began operating with an intake of 12 students in October 1951, among them Margaret - later Maggie - Smith. Mrs Van Beers made students audition for speaking parts in Playhouse productions, but ‘she nearly always got [them] because she was so good.’

Shaw died on 2 November 1950. Shelley paid tribute after the curtain fell. He claimed the ‘Playhouse has done more Shaw plays than any other theatre in the country, if not the world, some 80 productions in all.’ They went up by two in 1951. Getting Married marked the Guild’s first birthday. Pygmalion with Hy Hazell as Eliza and Shelley as Higgins ran three weeks. In between, the company stuck to standard fare. Goldie left to become stage director of Fry’s latest play, A Sleep of Prisoners. Shelley remained buoyant, replying to Terence Greenidge’s complaint that he would not stage his play about Oxford:

I am... toying... with the idea of presenting two new plays... this Festival year. If they go well, perhaps Oxford will have an opportunity of seeing itself in Mr Greenidge’s mirror.

He did one. At the invitation of the Arts Council Oxford became one of the centres staging regional festivals as part of the Festival of Britain.

Sadler’s Wells got a £1,500 guarantee to come to the New, the Playhouse £400 to revive The Provok’d Wife and première Stephen Spender’s To the Island. Mais loved the Vanbrugh, shared other critics’ disappointment with the Spender. ‘By the last scene the audience had forgotten the tragedy and were laughing at almost every line.’ Trewin said one line in Masefield’s celebration ode to mark the Queen’s unveiling of the National Theatre foundation stone was more memorable than any in Spender’s play.
Parliament had voted... a million pounds towards [its] construction... and the state was spending £120,000 a year to maintain repertory companies in London and the provinces. The battle against the Philistines seemed to be over. 154

A similar feeling of misplaced optimism attended Oxford's celebrations. 155 Despite the grant the venture cost the Playhouse £400. 156 The profit of £324 on 1950-51 would have been bigger without the Festival of Britain.

In July the Playhouse hosted an atomic energy conference. What kept it in the black was the downmarket fare. Apart from Pygmalion the most lucrative play was probably The Happiest Days of Your Life, which also ran for three weeks. Another success must have been Novello's Fresh Fields, which was Coghill's third choice, when he presented radio excerpts from The Provok'd Wife and To the Island. The theatre reopened with the Oxford Operatic Society's Festival show, Merrie England. Oliver Wilkinson did the first two autumn plays. 157

Susan Dowdall from Bristol Old Vic Theatre School appeared in Edward My Son. Ronald Barker had a walk-on in The Sport of Kings. 158 Shelley saw him and cast him in Pick-Up Girl. The company's new PRO had made his mark. The season continued with plays featuring 'guest stars': Micheline Patton in Venus Observed; Hy Hazell in Who Is Sylvia?; Jessie Matthews in Larger Than Life. The Christmas show was Charley's Aunt with Hewlett and Barker. More than 25,000 saw it during its five-week run and its £414 profit meant the company ended the year 'just on the right side.' 159

A £100 Guild grant enabled Shelley to redecorate. By its second birthday it had more than 1,000 members. It led to a more daring programme in 1952. McKelvey's revival of A Hundred Years Old, was at their request.

[Shelley's] Papa Juan is as full of love, and of proper self-importance, as of years... Susan Dowdall is equally happy as Currita, letting her charm speak for itself. 160

157 He trained at the Embassy, where he met Shelley. He had spent the last five years as drama director of the Iona Community. Taped interview 20 November 1998.
159 'We had a little more... than was required to meet... our creditors, and we had our “last ditch reserve” of... £3,500.' Holroyd. Chairman's Report, as above.
160 D.L. TOM 7 February 1952.
One night he proposed to her. It should have boosted the box office, but no mention of their engagement or marriage appeared in print. It lost £224. Of the shows that followed only the Operatic Society Pirates of Penzance and Coghill and David William(s)'s OUDS Hamlet made money.

We reopened for the autumn... with a deficit of over £2,000... There was less than £1,500 between the Playhouse and bankruptcy.

The actors remained ignorant. The tension showed in what Susan Dowdall called ‘petty bitchery.’ Francis Matthews was one who felt he was not treated fairly. After twice-nightly rep, he jumped at the chance to become leading juvenile, making his debut in His Excellency.

There are two young men... one an English major, Francis Matthews; the other a Salvanese captain. Ronald Barker brings out the contrast... beautifully.

Matthews said:

I was... the chap, who wears a suit well and doesn't bump into the furniture... Ronnie... got all the good juvenile leads.

The council sacked Wilkinson. Malcolm McIntyre replaced Somerville as manager.

'It [was] impossible to reduce expenses below... £475-£500 per week.' They had to do 'popular' plays. Guild members called the bill 'a disgrace.' Shelley did try. He began with Muriel and Sydney Box's dramatisation of their hit film, The Seventh Veil. It broke even.

James Parish tried out Top Box. It lost £270. Even old favourites failed. The problem was not peculiar to Oxford. Mervyn Jones, who investigated the 'repertory crisis' for The New Statesman, noted:

Birmingham Rep has had to ask for an increased municipal grant; the Liverpool Playhouse makes a handsome profit. The Arts Council has a sickly child at Salisbury and a thriving youngster... at Chesterfield... Nobody can say... 'Do this and you will succeed.'

Arts Council secretary-general W.E. Williams said more local councils must support their reps. He still believed in facilitating buildings, as at Chesterfield, Nottingham and Swansea,
but now questioned the wisdom of sending companies to theatreless areas.170

At Christmas Shelley revived Cinderella Story. It made £221.171 ‘On 31 January 1953 our deficit was £529 (against £2,067 on 31 July 1952).’172 See How They Run made another £340. Holroyd said they might ‘rise higher’ every third or fourth play. They were doing a Shaw season with £500 from the Arts Council, and trying six weeks at Norwich. Misalliance was Hewlett and Pollon’s last play,173 You Never Can Tell McKelvey’s.174 Derek Francis made his debut in Major Barbara. John Gordon Ash175 ran Oxford while Shelley was at Norwich.176 He began with two four-handers to cut costs. The A-team’s return improved the acting, but not the reception. By the time Shelley resumed with Alibi, he faced a crisis. McIntyre said they would offer light refreshments.177 A patron fumed: ‘There seems little point in selling rolls... in the bar, if in the theatre only tripe is available.’178 The Guild blamed the programme for halving its membership to 600.

Many pot-boilers were very indifferently presented... It was... most unfortunate that most of the members of a talented and much liked company... departed.179 Hewlett, Pollon, Matthews, McKelvey, Savidge, Cassidy, Rosemary Dorken and Mayo had all left in recent months.

By the Guild’s annual meeting Shelley had better news. To mark the Playhouse’s 30th birthday he was staging Ustinov’s The Love of Four Colonels; Kieran Tunney and Simon Wardell’s new play, Aurora; Rattigan’s The Deep Blue Sea, and The Cherry Orchard. He said

---

171 Barker stopped every performance with Shelley’s Tapioca Number, a forerunner of the patter songs Barker himself wrote for his television show, The Two Ronnies.
172 Chairman’s Report. As above.
173 ‘I was tired... So was Christine.’ Donald Hewlett. Taped interview, as above. They hardly saw one another. They were drifting apart. He drifted into television, starring in two long-running series: It Ain’t Half Hot Mum and You Rang M’Lord.
174 He left to be producer at Bromley, where he joined Matthews and was soon followed by Mary Savidge and Mayo. Matthews, later TV’s Paul Temple, continued to suffer from type-casting. ‘The necessity to be good-looking... was becoming less... The actors... [exciting] attention were... the Peter O’Tooles, the Albert Finneys and the Tom Courtenays.’ Taped interview, as above.
175 While in the navy, he started a company in Algiers and, after a spell at Leicester, another at Horsham. It had just folded. Taped interview 9 September 1999.
176 Charley’s Aunt began the ‘Coronation Summer’ season at the Theatre Royal. Rookery Nook, the week of the ceremony, followed, then Night Must Fall, Housemaster, Rebecca and Black Coffee. There is no record of how well they did.
177 Diarist. OM 27 August 1953.
178 F(rank) T. Dunn. Letter. OM 31 August 1953.
films and TV had put rep ‘up against it.’ Cultural shows did not pay, nor necessarily did popular ones. The subject exercised the birthday tribute writers.

Who must take most of the blame - town or gown? Town has the... lures of four cinemas and a large theatre... And gown? Let... Coghill answer... This term there will be 15 major... productions. ‘You see, there are too many plays chasing too few people.’

*Isis* listed 29 in 1952-53, ranging from *The Infernal Machine* to *Toad of Toad Hall*. Coghill said: ‘It is sad to see permissions to act... frittered away on work negligible or worse.’ He did not say it was impossible to control student activity without a drama department, a point Peter Senn would make. He did lament the absence of a ‘theatre, hall, or even classroom.’ The glut of shows made it hard to find venues, grist to his campaign - and the city’s for a little theatre. At OCDM’s annual meeting Mrs Whitworth said that if they found the land, Lord Kilmaine would get the Pilgrim Trust to help. In fact, he asked the Vice-Chancellor: ‘If there is hardly... support... [for] the Playhouse, why start... another theatre?’ Maurice Bowra replied that if there had been a real need, the university would have given it higher priority, but it had not abandoned the idea and ‘this is possibly a case in which a good scheme might stand in the way of a... better.’

Holroyd fell ill shortly after the curtain rose on *Love of Four Colonels* and died the same night. *Aurora* looked as exciting on paper with Diana Churchill playing the sleeping beauty, who ends sharing a cave with her lover’s grandson. Hobson was scathing. Rattigan’s *Deep Blue Sea* had greater appeal. ‘The sensitivity and perception... inspire the liveliest anticipation of *The Cherry Orchard.*’ Shelley got Agnes Lauchlan, to play Mme. Ranevsky and the translator, David Magarshack, to assist him. ‘The best’ of the birthday shows drew ‘record feeble bookings,’ and came off after a week. During its run the CORT held its annual conference in Oxford. Peter Senn noted:

180 *OM* 5 October 1953.
181 In fact there were six counting Cowley and Headington.
184 *OM* 24 September 1953.
185 Letter marked Confidential 1 April 1953. UR6/TH/1 File Two.
186 Letter 13 April 1953, as above.
187 *OM* 13 October 1953.
188 *Sunday Times* 1 November 1953.
189 D.L. *TOM* 12 November 1953.
In Derby they love... Molière, Sheridan, even Machiavelli... The manager [said] prestige productions... brought in bigger audiences than... popular plays... The Derby Playhouse is smaller than... Oxford['s]. But... the conclusion seems inescapable. Oxford is... lowbrow.

Senn said few city people attended student shows, but they drew off the university audience.

If Oxford had a drama faculty it could control student acting. Prof. Joseph Wright from Vanderbilt University,\textsuperscript{191} Tennessee, told him they staged four productions a year, directed by tutors.

Nearer home there is the experience of the Bristol Old Vic. The company, so its managing director told me, draws some of its strongest support from Bristol University. Yet this is the one British university which has a drama faculty and a theatre.\textsuperscript{192}

Shelley revived \textit{Ambrose Applejohn's Adventure} for Christmas. Moffatt was to stay for Charles Hawtrey's \textit{The Private Secretary}. Then Fry offered him Jacob in \textit{The Dark Is Light Enough}. Barker took over the lead. A farce which predated \textit{Charley's Aunt} proved as funny thanks to his acting and Ash's direction. Ash did another 'pot-boiler'\textsuperscript{193} then \textit{Journey's End}. Shelley played Stanhope - his last major role as director. The Playhouse was joining forces with the London Mask Theatre. Hugh Goldie would take over.\textsuperscript{194} The Mask had been one of Britain's leading experimental companies,\textsuperscript{195} but by 1954 its capital had sunk to £4,000. Its chairman, Ronald Jeans, said its aims would be 'better served in a first-class rep.'\textsuperscript{196}

Coghill, who succeeded Holroyd as Playhouse chairman in January 1954 knew Jeans and the Mask manager, Thane Parker, from serving on the Elizabethan Theatre Company board. In 1952 Colin George and a student friend formed the Oxford and Cambridge Players 'to take Shakespeare to the people'\textsuperscript{197} in a large pantechnicon. Among the members were George and Gordon Gostelow from Oxford, John Barton and Toby Robertson from Cambridge. Parker took them under the Mask Theatre's wing and to mark the Coronation they renamed

\textsuperscript{191} On a year's exchange with Alex Reeve at Northampton.
\textsuperscript{192} Senn. \textit{OM} 4 December 1953.
\textsuperscript{193} Senn. \textit{OM} 1 January 1954. The play was Agatha Christie's \textit{Ten Little Niggers}.
\textsuperscript{194} \textit{OM} 1 March 1954.
\textsuperscript{195} \textit{OM} 26 February 1954. The Mask began life at the Westminster in 1938 when Anmer Hall's manager, Thane Parker, and director, Michael Macowan, formed a non-profit company to stage quality plays - a venture ended by the war. In 1946 Parker met Priestley. Learning it was dormant, he wrote them a play. \textit{The Linden Tree} ran for 422 performances, made £32,000, and they returned to the Westminster. Laurence Marks. \textit{OM} 17 December 1954.
\textsuperscript{196} Writing in the programme of \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, 5-10 April 1954.
\textsuperscript{197} Peter Senn. \textit{OM} 26 March 1953.
themselves the Elizabethan Theatre Company. Coghill said Shelley told him it was time to move on 'some years ago.' Shelley claimed *Aurora* was the catalyst.

I knew it was a very bad play and I shouldn’t have done it, even to make money... I was so disgusted with myself I thought I ought to resign.

He broke the news at the read-through for *The Dover Road*.

I wish the company every success... but I shall be surprised if repertory... can run much longer... What with amateur dramatic and operatic companies, and the bloody university... there are far too many EFFING AMATEURS.

The night before the Operatic Society had opened in *The Gondoliers*. A week later OUDS were to stage *King John*. Shelley was too shrewd to air his views publicly. Ash had no inhibitions. In February OUDS president, Michael Pimbury, and Coghill, its Senior Member, seized on a claim in the *Sunday Times* that Oxford needed a laboratory for the humanities as much as for the sciences, to plug the case for a university theatre. Ash riposted:

Far too many college productions are taking place... and, as each and every one... offers a direct threat to the... town's professional theatres, it is only right that [they] ...should be confined to... halls of the most uncomfortable kind.

He found few backers in the furore that followed before Coghill scuppered the debate by admitting in a programme profile his favourite theatre was ‘a garden in summer.’ Ash commented: ‘Well, really!'

After directing *Don’t Listen Ladies!* he left, as did most of the company. Goldie kept only Francis and Barker. Coghill departed for the United States to lecture at Michigan State College and stage *The Winter's Tale* in one of its two theatres. While there he sought funds for the university theatre from the Rockefeller Foundation. He told Bowra he had met Dean Rusk and needed the Vice-Chancellor’s backing before he saw him again. Mrs Whitworth was busy too. OCDM launched a Margarethe Bayliss Memorial Fund and St. John Ervine addressed the Drama Luncheon Club she set up to promote it. The chairman was Warden Smith, who had

198 ‘Despite a capable *Henry V* by John Barton, the season was a disaster. Nonetheless, because the... company was committed to tour, the Arts Council gave them a £2,000 grant.’ Stephen Fay. *The Life and Times of Peter Hall*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, p. 68.
199 Taped interview 6 June 1997.
200 Barker, as above, pp. 173-174.
202 As above, 7 March 1954.
203 As above, 21 March 1954.
204 Letter 16 April 1954. UR6/TH/1. File Two. Bowra obliged. There was ‘a large body of academic support’ and building licences were easier to get than they were. Letter 20 April 1954.
headed the University Drama Commission. He said: 'That scheme was not likely to succeed because they aimed too high.'

The new regime began by raising prices. Parker said they had to if they exchanged plays with the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, which the Elizabethan Theatre Company used as its base. Their first Oxford show was the company's *Merchant of Venice*. Mais said it deserved a larger audience. The theatre stayed dark in Holy Week, then Goldie staged *Carrington, V.C.* with Heather Chasen, who had just made her debut at the Arts Theatre, London, in Peter Hall's *Blood Wedding*. The director, who would run RSC and the National, had become John Fernald's assistant in January. He directed *The Merchant* and would shuttle between Oxford and London for the next year. Patrick Dromgoole said of *The Government Inspector*, his eleventh production in ten months:

Francis (heavyweight) and... Barker (middleweight) give the best performances... Many... have not yet bridged the... gap between the excellent amateur and... average professional.

In May came the first exchange. *Carrington, V.C.* was 'as big a success' in Cambridge. But whereas Oxford stayed away from... *The Government Inspector*, Cambridge supported that strongly too... which suggests [it] has a regular theatregoing public, whereas Oxford, although much bigger, has only irregulars.

They returned with Tuesday first nights, making good the loss of Monday with a matinée on Wednesday. Anthony Hudson became manager.

In theory the Mask Theatre and Playhouse Council fixed the programme. In practice, Goldie did the routine plays, Hall the more daring ones. Rosenthal's 'homosexual problem' play, *Third Person*, went to Cambridge. In its place came the Footlights' revue, *Out of the Blue*, on its way to the Phoenix. In August there was another exchange. They took *The Letter* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the Marlowe Society brought their Summer Festival plays.

---

205 OM 24 May 1954. Margarethe Bayliss was a well-known local producer.
206 OM 2 April 1954. Seats in the first four rows of the stalls went up from 5s 6d to 7s 6d, those in the next four to 6s. There were two fewer rows of 4s 6d, one fewer of 3s 6d, and all three rows of 2s unreserved were now at the back of the stalls. The circle cost 6s and 4s 6d.
207 OM 6 April 1954
208 TI 5 May 1954.
209 Senn. OM 18 June 1954.
210 He moved to Oxford in 1953 to open the city's first laundrette. OM 19 May 1954.
211 In Jonathan Miller it has 'its own Danny Kaye.' Senn. OM 22 June 1954.
212 Fernald's production of *Hannibal's Way*, adapted by Jenny Laird from Beauvaisis's *Les Derniers Outrages*, and Hall's of Bellak's *The Troublemakers*, 'concerning freedom of thought and expression in an American university' -hardly ideal for August!
at the Helm and The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse were Goldie's last plays. The council said it was too much to ask one man to run the theatre.\textsuperscript{213} In truth, the next three shows were a desperate attempt to avoid closure.\textsuperscript{214} Shelley had some close shaves in his nine years. He had kept the Playhouse open. In seven months the Mask had brought it to the brink. It cast further doubt on Coghill's business acumen. It posed the question of ex-varsity directors dictating the choice of plays. But most reps with artistic aspirations were in trouble.

Politicians, mayors and civil servants must realise that... theatres with any pretence to high standards cannot be expected to pay. Good theatres, in fact, like symphony orchestras, must be run at a loss.\textsuperscript{215}

Laurence Marks explored the possibility of a City Council grant.\textsuperscript{216} The trouble was it had one of the smallest catchment areas. A sixpenny rate would raise only £25,000. In his last column before he left for Fleet Street Senn said not enough people wanted the Playhouse. 'We should no longer delude ourselves that [it] has only to weather the present storm.'\textsuperscript{217}

Feeling it was only a matter of time before the Playhouse closed if it was not subsidised, the holding company offered it, first to the university, then to the city. The rent would be £2,500 a year, or the lease (which expired in 2037) could be sold for £20,000.\textsuperscript{218} Coghill and Bryson said that was much cheaper than it would be on the open market.\textsuperscript{219} Earlier Vice-Chancellors might have showed interest. Warden Smith, who had just succeeded Bowra, disillusioned doubtless by his experiences as chairman of the University Drama Commission, did not. After hearing a theatre was 23rd on the priority list, the Playhouse was suitable only for OUDS, ETC, and the Opera Club, and a scheme was afoot for students 'to take over a... hall in St. Ebbe's,' the University Committee on Financial Questions said no,\textsuperscript{220} as did the City.\textsuperscript{221} In November Lionel Harris staged the English première of Hochwälder's The Public

\textsuperscript{213} OM 26 August 1954.
\textsuperscript{214} 'We have been playing to quarter-full houses.' Parker. OM 23 October 1954.
\textsuperscript{215} Findlater. The Unholy Trade. As above, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{216} Birmingham gave its rep £3,000; Coventry the Midland Theatre Company £3,500; Bristol its Old Vic £1,500; Canterbury the proceeds of a fourpenny rate; Chesterfield maintenance costs; Leatherhead £500; Guildford a £500 guarantee. OM 26 October 1954. In the Manchester Guardian Gerard Fay compared Oxford to Cambridge. The Arts got £500 from the Arts Council and college grants of between £20 and £500. The Playhouse would need similar support and would have to give up its company. Reprinted OM 2 November 1954.
\textsuperscript{217} Senn. OM 29 October 1954.
\textsuperscript{218} Secretary, J.E. Critchley, to the Vice-Chancellor 6 November 1954. UR6/TH/1. File Two.
\textsuperscript{219} It would cost £4,000 a year. Vacation lettings could produce £2,400, and student ones £1,000 - a total of £3,400, 'well within sight of balancing the annual budget.' Note 8 November 1954, as above.
\textsuperscript{220} University Committee on Financial Questions 23 November 1954. As above.
\textsuperscript{221} OM 4 December 1954.
Prosecutor. The future thriller writer and Oxford Times editor, Anthony Price, enthused: 'If... the last days of the Playhouse are approaching, the company seems determined to end with a bang.' A melodrama and music hall marked Hall's return. He directed Emma Litchfield's A London Actress, then played the piano for The Cave of Harmony. Barker was the villain, then wielded the chairman's gavel. The acts included Maggie Smith singing The Boy I Love is Up in the Gallery. It 'had little success in recalling... patrons.' But Romeo and Juliet promised bigger audiences - thanks to party bookings.

Elizabeth Robinson, the theatre's first 'marketing officer' had arrived. The production introduced another ex-Cambridge director, Peter Wood, who staged it in repertoire with Richard II. Coghill outlined the programme for the first half of 1955. It included plays by Rostand, Eliot, Anouilh, Shaw, Ibsen and Whiting. The reason became clear the day after the Christmas show opened. Believing it had the 'quality to warrant support from public funds,' the City had made the theatre a £2,000 guarantee against loss. Parker said: 'Reps have been going down like ninepins... What Oxford has done will set an example.' He kept his seat on the Playhouse council, but wound up the Mask Theatre and became proprietor of a village store.

Its last show was its most successful. Miss Robinson promoted Listen to the Wind hard. Once on, the children's musical with music by Vivian Ellis and book by Jeans's daughter, Angela, needed no selling. Mais said 'it was a... treat to listen to a wind which had not come over... gale force from the other side of the Atlantic,' Hobson that they had poured

---

222 A.P. OT 5 November 1954.
223 Hall said: 'I didn't think she would develop the range she has... I did think she had star quality.' Michael Coveney. Maggie Smith. A Bright Particular Star. London: Victor Gollancz, 1992, p. 55.
224 P.S. OM 23 November 1954.
225 OM 4 December 1954.
226 After serving as a wartime entertainments officer, she acted with the Denville Players in the Channel Isles, then ran small companies in Matlock and Sidmouth. Conversation with the author, which she refused to tape, 10 October 1996.
227 After Cambridge Wood spent three years in Seagulls Over Sorrento, then six months in Paris. OM 29 April 1955.
228 Letter. OM 29 November 1954.
229 OM 17 December 1954.
230 OM 21 December 1954.
'new wine... into the stale old bottles of Christmas.' Restrictions on Sunday shows stopped university and city amateurs staging a gala in aid of the Playhouse. They pressed on with plans for their own theatres. Kilmaine wrote to the Vice-Chancellor again. The City would lease a disused school to OCDM for £100 a year, the Education Committee was willing to pay, and Mrs Whitworth wanted the Pilgrim Trust to meet the cost of conversion. Smith replied: 'Mrs Whitworth's scheme would meet a definite need.' Meanwhile, encouraged by the City Council's guarantee, the Arts Council gave the Playhouse £500 and told it to submit another bid for 1955-56.

A cast of 23 and an orchestra made Listen to the Wind costly. They had 'been aspiring above [their] station.' In future there would be 'stricter control.' The first casualty was Cyrano de Bergerac. Michael Richardson replaced Disley Jones. Barker left to tour in Glenn Melvyn's comedy, Hot Water. Hall made do with a company of ten, among them Susan Dowdall and Billie Whitelaw. His leading man was Leonard White, who would direct one play while he was in London. Instead, he did four of the next five. Giraudoux's The Enchanted was Hall's last show. Fernald's appointment as principal of RADA meant he was the Arts Theatre's only producer. He met White at the stage-door. 'He said: "They want me to take over."' Next day he arranged a meeting with Coghill. Within minutes White was back at the Playhouse and Hall was on the train to London. Miss Robinson launched an Arts Club with WEA lectures, sessions for students, and a club for under-18s. Only the youth club thrived. The Guild struggled too, but paid to redecorate the exterior, the bar, and for 10,000 leaflets.

Parker wanted White to succeed Hall, but he was keen to go into television so Wood got the job. With Richardson's help he had staged an impressive School For Scandal. Anouilh's Thieves Carnival, which marked the arrival of Michael Bryant and Wendy Williams, and

---

233 Sunday Times 19 December 1954.
234 Diary note. OM 28 October 1954.
235 Letter to Kilmaine 14 January 1955. The Trustees agreed to give £500 if OCDM raised the other £2,500. By September the cost had risen to £4,000 and the City wanted £350 rent. OM 29 September 1955. OCDM had only £232 in its Little Theatre Fund. The rep took the upper floor for £190 a year as a workshop, OUDS' the ground floor as a store for £185. Note 19 September 1955. UR6/TH/1. File Two.
236 Marks. OM 7 January 1955.
237 As a student at Oriel, he designed three Opera Club shows and OUDS' Richard III.

116
Whiting's *A Penny For A Song* also impressed the critics. The public were less easy to please. Of eight plays since January only Graham Greene’s *The Living Room* had made money. The threat of closure resurfaced. The Arts Council gave them £1,000 for 1955-56, which it raised to £1,500 in July, the City a further £500 guarantee from July to September.

The new season... requires a company of only six and will save £200-300 a week on salaries. Even so... it seems probable that a... loss of about £3,000 cannot be avoided.

Charging 2s 6d for all seats on first nights produced a larger audience for *Design For Living*, which began the summer. The City provided a bigger fillip by increasing its guarantee to £1,500. What swayed councillors was the Arts Council. Drama director J.L. Hodgkinson said: ‘We regard the Playhouse... as one of our strong points. If [it] went... it would be a real blow.’

What was a... profit of £11 a week in 1939 in the average theatre has dropped to a loss of £12... in spite of a rise in... attendance from 2,000 before the war to about 3,000 today.

Nobody questioned his arithmetic. If weekly attendance had risen to 3,000, the Playhouse would have been three-quarters full. The plays were ‘a sensible attempt to attract a wider audience while maintaining... integrity.’ Despite a heat-wave Wood’s revival of *The Circle* drew most patrons since *The Living Room*. The Bank Holiday show, *Laura*, made a profit and for the first time in seven years the ‘House Full’ boards were out for the first night of *The Eagle Has Two Heads*.

We have maintained a fairly good level of audiences and... the quality of the acting now is higher than... since the early days of Fagan... The tide is... turning a little in our favour.

The autumn began with *The Confidential Clerk*, which went to Cambridge. ‘The business done... there was... about twice as good... As a result, it is expected [it] will show a profit.’ Wood followed with *Mademoiselle Colombe*.
One could not wish to see a more perfect Colombe than Wendy Williams, whose presence... makes it obligatory to perform at least one Anouilh... every three months.²⁴⁸

It also marked a landmark in Bryant’s career.

He... saw [the film] East of Eden with James Dean and... came back and gave a... Method performance... That’s when Michael started being a brilliant modern actor.²⁴⁹

An Arts Council leaflet in the She Stoops to Conquer programme cited its tenth annual report.

The total expenditure from public funds... amounts... to fourpence per head... threepence from Parliament (through the Arts Council) and a penny through the local authorities. Such a parsimonious provision... is among the lowest provided by any civilised nation.

There were about 30 reps with the prospect of survival.²⁵⁰ In an effort to promote exchanges like that between Guildford and Salisbury, it got Oxford to agree a scheme.²⁵¹ The trouble was finding a partner. She Stoops did not even go to Cambridge. The company stayed in Oxford while ETC staged its first musical, Crime of Your Life,²⁵² rehearsing The Narrow Street,²⁵³ which came off after a week.

Wood extended the run of Seagulls Over Sorrento with James Grout as Chief Petty Officer Herbert, one of three actors he recruited from Stratford for the Christmas show, Nicholas Stuart Gray’s Beauty and the Beast. It ran happily for five weeks. Backstage the mood was graver.

The future... now hangs on the decision of the City... It can either buy the building, renew its subsidy, or simply do nothing and stop its ears to the ensuing grief.²⁵⁴

There was one ‘gleam of hope.’ The BBC and ITV were toying with televising rep. Hudson returned from Birmingham saying a telecast was likely in the spring. Had a council a duty to provide plays?

[It] does not seem a lot of money when one realises that the public libraries cost the ratepayers (or... ‘made a loss of’?) £32,836 last year.²⁵⁵

Miss Robinson maintained the Playhouse would not need grants if it had ‘a popular company.’

²⁵⁰ ‘If Britain in ten years time possessed 30... outside London... the prospects of the living drama... might be transformed.’ Arts Council. Tenth Annual Report. Housing the Arts. 1955-56, p. 10.
²⁵¹ Marks. OM 18 November 1955.
²⁵² Such shows appealed to students who now totalled 7,305, 6,173 men and 1,132 women, the highest number since 1949.
²⁵³ A new play based on Maugham’s novel by Robertson’s mother, Felicity Douglas.
²⁵⁴ Marks. OM 30 December 1955.
²⁵⁵ As above, 13 January 1956.
She resigned because it was 'an unhappy theatre.' Too many thought it 'semi-amateur,' or 'a university theatre.' Actors and staff protested, but the damage was done. The City decided enough was enough.

Coghiii did his best to paper over the cracks. They would carry on at least until the end of March. The Arts Council had offered another £1,500, provided they could match it. The Guild responded with £250. The students rallied too.

Indifference by members of the university has hitherto been the Playhouse's main weakness; suddenly they have taken its cause to heart... At least £750 has come from undergraduates joining the Playhouse Guild.

Gielgud came to open a student exhibition. The Guild held a ball. In February the Mail said the crisis was over, then corrected itself. With £350 from Beauty and the Beast and £1,200 in the campaign fund they had the £1,500 they needed, but might lose it before the end of the financial year. Darlington noted:

Left to its own resources, even the best run rep may die... Fortunately... there is a growing feeling [a] theatre is an asset to a town.

Coventry's rebuilding scheme included one. Cheltenham had bought the Opera House. Rolls Royce had rescued Derby Playhouse. Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch, was now run by a trust.

Wood began 1956 by turning The Comedy of Errors into a musical set on the New Orleans waterfront, commissioning a score from David King.

Even on a pouring wet Monday... the Bard in jazz tempo, with... cigars, roller-skates and an Angelo amusingly played by Ken Wynne as Groucho Marx, filled 300 of the 500 seats.

Grout directed and played Algernon in The Importance, then left to appear in Dulcie Gray's Love Affair at the Lyric, Hammersmith. His Miss Prism, Barbara Atkinson, returned to Birmingham. His Worthing, Toby Robertson, went to Stratford. Patricia Kneale, who had been understudying Irene Worth in Hauser's production of Betti's Queen and the Rebels at the Haymarket, played the wife in The Browning Version. Charles Laurence made his debut in A

---

256 Letter. OT 13 January 1956. She later regretted it. Conversation, as above.
257 OM 16 January 1956. A diary note said it 'had the effect of hardening opinion against renewing the guarantee.' OM 17 January 1956.
259 Editorial. Manchester Guardian 1 February 1956. Actually £750 was the total students raised.
260 OM 14 February 1956.
Phoenix Too Frequent. The double-bill lost £250. When We Are Married was an even bigger flop. Their £1,500 had shrunk to £700. It would be ‘morally wrong’ to continue. The Deputy City Treasurer quashed ideas the council might take over. Eden’s Tory Government was fighting inflation. It would veto any attempt to bail the theatre out.

86 British theatres, most of them out of the West End, have closed... The Arts Theatre, which provided the West End with Waiting For Godot and The Waltz of the Toreadors, seeks intelligent plays... Theatre Workshop... has made a left-wing corner for itself... At the Court... a newly founded English Stage Company... is trying to encourage our best writers to turn their hands to the theatre... [But] he would be an optimist who expected the Arts Council grant (£25,000 last year to provincial repertories) to be increased.

In fact, it had decided to devote most of its resources to ‘the maintenance and enhancement of standards.’

The version of Treasure Island, which ended Wood’s regime, was the one Joan Littlewood devised for Theatre Workshop. In July he would succeed Hall at the Arts Theatre. ‘Mourners’ at the last night on 14 April 1956 included Parker and Goolden. Despite the funeral rites the future was not in doubt. Soon the Playhouse would benefit from greater civic and Arts Council patronage. Even so, it continued to struggle. As previous directors had learnt to their cost, Oxford was not big enough to support an ‘art’ theatre. Apart from the war years, which flooded the city with eager patrons, it had difficulty filling seats whether the plays were highbrow or lowbrow. The dons paid lip service. In five years’ time it would become a university theatre. But it heralded no change of heart about the role of drama as an academic discipline. It was the result of a shotgun marriage that would end in a messy divorce.

263 F.E. Birkett, treasurer. Minutes of Playhouse council meeting 23 March 1956.
264 OM 24 March 1956.
265 Molly Hobman. OM 2 April 1956.
267 L.A.M. OM 16 April 1956.
Frank Hauser and Meadow Players (1956-73)

Several directors expressed interest in the Playhouse. The holding company chose Frank Hauser. Driving back to London with his friends, Minos Volanakis and Harold Lang, after inspecting the theatre, he said he had 'the only good idea in my life, which was to do a new play instead of a rehash.' If, as he had done with The Queen and the Rebels, the first Ugo Betti play staged in Britain, he could assemble good companies, hitch their talents to a star, and sell shows to London, he could succeed where previous directors had failed. Apart from a Hamlet with Alec Guinness, which never recovered from a disastrous first night, he had prospered since he left Oxford. His work as a BBC radio producer had impressed actors. His productions at Salisbury and for the Midland Theatre Company had pleased the Arts Council.

His passion for European drama and 'the heavyweights... written about but not performed,' would become increasingly unfashionable as the new wave of British dramatists gained the ascendancy. He needed an associate with a different agenda and, though he valued Lang's advice, he was not a good director. Volanakis did several fine productions, but was unpredictable. The English Stage Company (ESC) George Devine launched at the Royal Court six months before Hauser began set the pattern for the future.

1 Frank Hauser. Taped interview 24 August 1999.
2 They funded both. The Queen and the Rebels, which opened at the Haymarket in October 1955, was a Midland Theatre Company production
4 Hauser called his early death 'a personal catastrophe.' F.H. Obituary: Harold Lang. The Times 17 November 1970. Gordon Stratford said Lang, who taught at Central, 'always started the first two weeks... by destroying the actors' innate habits... They would then have one week's rehearsal... doing it the way he wanted them to, which was never... enough.' Taped interview 7 August 2001.
5 Hauser met Volanakis, then 28, when he came from Greece on a British Council scholarship.
6 It began with Angus Wilson's The Mulberry Bush. 'It was the starrily cast revival of... The Country Wife which... helped to keep [it] alive. What clinched that survival, within six months, was Look Back in Anger.' At the Royal Court. 25 Years of the English Stage Company. Ed. Richard Findlater. London: Amber Lane Press, 1981, p. 27.
Hauser’s immediate concern was funding his new company. Richard Burton gave him £2,000,7 the Arts Council £1,000, the students £600 they had raised. His biggest break was the appointment of his friend, Peter Parker, to run the Duke of Edinburgh’s conference on Human Relations in Industry at Oxford. He introduced him to the ideal manager, 41-year-old Elizabeth Sweeting.8 They launched Meadow Players9 on 1 August 1956, Hauser’s 34th birthday. Alan Bullock, Censor of St. Catherine’s Society, was chairman; the other directors John Brookes, head of the Technology College (now Oxford Brookes University), Nevill Coghill and Merlin Thomas; secretary Jack Butterworth, Dean of New College; treasurer Frank Birkett.

Hauser went to Paris for his first play, the British premiere of Giraudoux’s Electra, and would rely heavily on French drama.10 Miss Sweeting spruced up the theatre.11 They began two weeks before term to show they served town as well as gown. Harold Hobson enthused:

The... proper policy for the Playhouse is to put on plays that the local New Theatre and the not-so-distant West End won’t; to gamble on Oxford’s intelligence and taste.12

Hauser cast Catherine Lacey, star of his first radio play, as Clytemnestra, Mary Morris as Electra. Most critics had doubts. Kenneth Tynan preferred the second play, Cocteau’s Knights of the Round Table. After two weeks it went to Cheltenham, while the Playhouse staged an Arts Council touring production.

What [rapidly became] clear was that we would have to have two companies... It was daft to do a play like Electra... and take it off after a couple of weeks.13

7 As a radio producer Hauser helped his career by casting him as Henry V.
8 She was working as a management trainee for Marks and Spencer, who seconded her to Oxford as the Duke’s social secretary. As a Royal Holloway College student she directed The Cherry Orchard and The Importance of Being Earnest; as an Imperial College lecturer Hamlet. By 1946 she was a member of its English Board and set on an academic career. A summer at Perth Rep changed her mind. She joined The Company of Four at the Lyric, Hammersmith. ‘By the end of the year I was... a fully-fledged member of the management.’ Elizabeth Sweeting. Beginners Please. Working in the Theatre. Reading: Educational Explorers, 1971, p. 29. She became box office manager at Glyndebourne in 1947, then assistant manager of English Opera Group. She helped launch the Aldeburgh Festival, which she ran for eight years.
9 The name was a quixotic gesture ‘to affirm support’ for Christ Church Meadow when the City wanted to drive a relief road across it. Hauser. Souvenir. Oxford Playhouse 1938-59.
10 When George Devine and Tony Richardson set out to revitalise British theatre, ‘most of the writers on their list were French: only two of 21 were British.’ Findlater, p. 12.
11 The youngest recruits painted the foyer: 18-year-old Susan Hampshire, on her way to stardom; 19-year-old Oxford girl, June Speight, who would succumb to multiple sclerosis.
12 Sunday Times 7 October 1956.
13 Hauser. Taped interview, as above.
The world première of Canetti's *The Numbered*, taught Hauser another lesson. Rarities brought critics. They did not fill seats, if they got bad notices. Volanakis failed to breathe life into a satire on death. By Thursday the theatre was three-quarters empty. The Suez Crisis did not help *The Mulberry Bush* or Nicholas Moore's *Lock and Key*.14 Even the Christmas show, Franklyn Black's *The Heartless Princess* with Susan Hampshire, struggled.


Quietly but inexorably Oxford is once more bent on proving that it neither deserves nor wants the Playhouse. Or so it seems from the lamentable attendances.16

While it was at Cambridge, Coghill staged *Dr. Faustus* for OUDS with Vernon Dobtcheff and Dennis Potter. They got first use of the apron stage, a gift from Northern Aluminium Company.17 Hauser wooed local firms. Relations with the Playhouse Guild were less happy. Members fell from 1,775 to 375.18 Having turned down the chance to buy the Playhouse, Congregation ruled it was time for 'an auditorium such as exists in almost all universities.'19 The reason the proposers gave was that the university was planning to develop a number of important sites. But the fact that Warden Smith would soon cease to be Vice-Chancellor and they could expect greater sympathy from his successor, T.S.R. Boase, President of Magdalen, must have been a factor.

Meadow Players' first hit was Volanakis's revamp of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. A cast of 23 led by Constance Cummings staged an 'all-singing, all-dancing' romp 'in gorgeous Atticolour.'20 Laurence Marks' successor, the poet and future dramatist Adrian Mitchell, enthused:

The bawdry, which rears its grinning head in every other line, is open and bright as

---

14 Moore was Ariadne Nicolaeff, better known as a translator.
15 *The Observer* 3 February 1957.
16 *The Isis* 27 February 1957
17 *Oxford Mail* 6 March 1957.
18 *Oxford Playhouse Guild Minute Book* 5 June 1957. Miss Sweeting's assistant, Richard Bevis, who ran the student campaign to save the Playhouse, was now membership secretary.
19 It was proposed by Dr. A.L. Goodhart, Master of University, supported by five other college heads and 14 dons. UR6/TH/1. File Three. Hebdomadal Council said it would consider 'combining it with some [other] building.' Acts Vol 226 p. lxxvii, 18 February 1957.
20 Note in *Dr. Faustus* programme.
the Greek sky. Better than that, it is marvellously funny.  

It should have transferred but, without asking permission, Peggy Ramsay sold the rights to the Court. So the company got only the royalties of Volanakis's ESC revival. Hauser claimed directors, anxious to stage new English plays, overlooked the riches of Europe. The buzz the Court programme generated encouraged critics to undervalue his efforts. His next play was a homegrown effort the Court had rejected: Robert Bolt's *The Critic and the Heart*. Again Peggy Ramsay's 'cavalier treatment' of Jack Minster, who directed, proved costly, robbing the company of Bolt's second stage play and first hit, *Flowering Cherry*. Pamela Brown refused an invitation to act, but directed Roussin's *Figure of Fun*. Hauser followed with Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*. The *Oxford Magazine* sighed: 'At last the Playhouse has done something ordinary.' While it visited Cambridge, the Scouts staged their gang show. Stage director, David Buxton, did the English première of Neveux's *Zamore*, Hauser the curtain-raiser, Robert Tanitch's *A Prior Engagement*. Hart and Kaufman's *The Man Who Came to Dinner* ended his first year. The Arts Council hailed 'a promising start.'

After James Grant Anderson's summer season, Hauser went straight into his second year 'with an £800 overdraft.' He told Mitchell's successor, the novelist, D.A.N. Jones: 'Enlarging the circle... would make £2,000 a year difference.' The English première of Anouilh's *Le Rendezvous de Senlis, Dinner with the Family*, proved his salvation. John Barber enthused:

At Oxford last night I found a play by a master dramatist... acted bang up to Shaftesbury Avenue's highest standards. It must be booked for London.

Donald Albery bought it. To spread costs Hauser now had two, sometimes three, plays on the

---

21 *OM* 13 March 1957.
22 Hauser told the translator, Dudley Fitts, to get an agent. 'The second day I got a call from Benn Levy, Connie's husband. "What's this about ESC taking over Lysistrata?" ...That saint of literary agents had... double-crossed us.' Taped interview, as above.
23 *OM* 26 January 1957.
26 Retitled *Change in the Wind* by Pauline Bentley. Buxton had been Midland Theatre Company stage director. Later he was Birmingham Rep production manager, then director of the Mercury Theatre, Colchester. Correspondence with the author August-September 2004.
27 A 23-year-old St. Catherine's student, later author of several theatre books.
29 Cedric Richards' *Honeymoon Beds, Private Lives, The Ghost Train, Worm's Eye View, Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon* and *Love in Idleness*.
30 *OM* 24 May 1958.
31 *Daily Express* 2 October 1957. The version was Edward Owen Marsh's.
go. He interspersed his productions with other companies’ and did Sunday shows ‘for Guild members.’ Their secretary, Louis Frewer, felt they were ‘little more than a nuisance... except when money was sought.’ In December 1958 they suspended operations. Volanakis staged the English première of de Ghelderode’s Mademoiselle Jaïre, Hauser Betti’s Crime on Goat Island. Although it lost £900, he was buoyant. Dinner With the Family opened at the New Theatre, London, Lysistrata at the Court, in December.

He said he could not hope to please ‘middle class (North Oxford), factory (Cowley) and the University.’ He had to be flexible. After beginning 1958 with Roussin’s Une Grande Fille Toute Simple, and Ustinov’s Paris Not So Gay, he revamped his programme to stage Bernard Kops’s first play, The Hamlet of Stepney Green, which Theatre Workshop had dropped because they were in trouble with the Lord Chamberlain. Kops said a new crop of writers were breathing ‘life into the mouth of the dying muse.’ The week before his play opened, The Birthday Party introduced Oxford to the one who would prove most durable, Harold Pinter. Hauser’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream visited Cambridge, Bloemendaal, Geneva and Venice. Because the Oxford Council for Music and Drama feared it might affect its version in aid of Oxford’s Historic Buildings it did not play Oxford. Hauser could afford to be generous. Dinner, which made £3,000, had paid for the season. He even seemed to have found a source of new plays to rival ESC’s. Parker suggested they run a contest for Commonwealth writers. ‘Competitors from Australia, India, Malta, Canada, New Zealand, Ceylon, the West Indies and many parts of Africa... sent in plays.’ Sadly, it came to nothing. Hauser recalled:

32 Minute Book 15 December 1958. As above.
33 Tynan felt Hauser was showing ‘a worrying preference for plays that bear no relation to recognisable human behaviour.’ The Observer 8 December 1957.
34 Joan Greenwood now headed the cast.
35 Writing in the 1959 Student Drama Festival programme.
36 In Merlin Thomas’s version, Darling. ‘Mai Zetterling triumphantly impersonates the actress of most people’s imaginations... ‘I am pure...’ she says... though she becomes the mistress of her leading man (Joss Ackland), seduces an undergraduate... (Alan Ayckbourn), and has had an affair with her producer (Edgar Wreford).’ Felix Barker. Evening News 21 January 1958. Ayckbourn was briefly an ASM. Paul Allen. Alan Ayckbourn. Grinning at the Edge. London: Methuen, 2001, p. 58.
37 TOM 13 May 1958.
38 A Peter Wood tryout for Michael Codron. Daphne Levens wrote of Stepney Green: ‘Fantasy seemed redundant in underlining a realism which had no recognisable life ([in] contrast to last week’s dazzling paradox, when Harold Pinter screwed realism to the pitch of fantasy and made it more real with every twist).’ TOM 22 May 1958.
39 ‘Earlier in the season I might have felt like fighting them... but not now. Everybody’s too tired.’ Hauser. News Chronicle 2 June 1958. Joss Ackland was Bottom, Ruth Meyers Titania, Lang Oberon, Alun Owen, John Woodvine, Jocelyn James and Ann Walford the lovers.
40 OM 5 April 1958.
‘Somebody won it, but we never did it. A sort of Caribbean Dr. Faustus... Before its time. No decent Caribbean actors.’41 Anthony Knowles and Andrew Broughton, who managed the tour of Dinner, supplied the summer fare.42 The highlight was John McGrath’s A Man Has Two Fathers.43 It showed how creative student drama had become.44 Of the third National Union of Students Drama Festival, Bryan Izzard wrote:

Bristol students have the use of two excellent theatres... Dr. Glynne Wickham suggests we should all ‘strike’ and boycott lectures to remind [Congregation] of the promise to act.45

The last summer visitors were the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry.46 They came from a brand-new £300,000 theatre. The Arts Council, which gave Meadow Players £3,000 for 1958-59, had something to cheer,47 though ‘the bane of weekly rep’ continued to cause concern.

Hauser was to start his third year with The Dream. Two versions of Anouilh’s Jezebel48 and the military revolt in Iraq changed his mind. David Lean had to delay filming Lawrence of Arabia and Rank gave its £1,000-a-week star, Dirk Bogarde, leave to take a £7-a-week role in rep.49 The dishy star of Doctor in the House brought crowds of girls to the stage-door, but neither he nor Hermione Baddeley impressed the critics.50 The première of William Cooper’s Prince Genji was to follow. At the last minute Hauser substituted de Filippo’s Too Many Ghosts (Questi Fantasmi).51 ETC staged the première of Alan McClelland’s Bloomsday, which Hilton Edwards had dropped from the Gate Theatre programme because the

41 Hauser. Taped interview, as above.
42 Robin Maugham’s Odd Man In; Doris Lessing’s Mr Dollinger; Maupassant’s Hardly Respectable; Salacrou’s The Honour of the Family; and Gazzo’s A Hatful of Rain.
43 McGrath, then a student at St. John’s, would found the 7:84 Theatre Company in 1971.
44 An OUDS one night stand in aid of TI Defence Fund for two students charged with breaching the Official Secrets Act. Knowles and Broughton revived it with the same cast: Patrick Garland, Vernon Dobtcheff, Michael Simpson, Howard Jenkins and Dudley Moore.
45 TI 22 January 1958. Wickham was senior lecturer at Bristol Drama Department.
46 ‘Local authority had taken up the torch lit by Barry Jackson... in 1913 and rekindled by Eric Dance... in 1938... By 1970... 20 new theatres had been constructed, 15 of which were designed... for repertory. By 1980 the total, including major conversions... such as Manchester’s Royal Exchange, had risen to 40.’ George Rowell & Anthony Jackson. The Repertory Movement. A History of Regional Theatre in Britain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 88-89.
48 An early Anouilh (1932), never seen in Britain. Hauser accepted Annabel Maule’s version.
49 Bogarde, who played Orpheus in Point of Departure in 1952 was keen to tackle another Anouilh.
50 Hobson said he showed the ‘virtues of the drama,’ she swam ‘gallantly against the tide’ (Sunday Times 28 September 1958), Tynan he rang ‘what changes he could on limited acting,’ she had yet to weld her ‘brilliant fragments’ into a performance (The Observer 28 September 1958).
51 It was the Italian playwright’s first airing in Britain.
Bishop of Dublin ‘forbade his flock to see it.’\textsuperscript{52} Hauser returned with a sell-out \textit{Candida}.\textsuperscript{53} The Christmas show was \textit{The Singing Dolphin} by Beverley Cross. After saying John Justin and William Russell would play \textit{Genji}, in January he got Michael David. At £2,000 it was his dearest show. Though critics admired the staging,\textsuperscript{54} most felt the play was ‘no more than a fragile dramatic essay.’\textsuperscript{55} Hauser told the the theatre magazine, \textit{Encore}, his ‘heavies’ lost ‘up to £1,000 each.’ But without them the Playhouse would have no real function. The answer was to tour. ‘The first season lost £4,000, the second will have nearly broken even, the third is so far showing a profit.’\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Genji} went to Brighton, where the Queen attended the last night. Hauser sighed: ‘If she’d come a week earlier, we’d have probably moved into London.’\textsuperscript{57}

For his next production he paired Molière’s \textit{The School For Wives} with \textit{The School For Wives Criticised} in H. Baker and J. Miller’s 1739 version. After singing the praises of the Court and Theatre Workshop Cecil Wilson wrote:

\begin{quote}
Repertory... battling with the TV monster is beginning to realise that you cannot entice the public... with London’s cast-off[s]... Oxford Playhouse gallantly shows the way... Next month it will stage the British première of \textit{The Green Years}.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Puget’s \textit{Les Jours Heureux} charmed first in Oxford, then Cambridge, where Richard Cottrell wrote that Meadow Players had ‘provided almost all the worthwhile visits... in the last two years.’\textsuperscript{59} It ended at Edinburgh, where \textit{The Scotsman} enthused:

\begin{quote}
Theatres like the Oxford Playhouse... not only represent the hope of the British theatre; they also put on the plays which are most worth going to see.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

While they were away Don Taylor launched The University Theatre Fund with Webster’s \textit{The White Devil}. A letter reminded readers of Congregation’s resolution.\textsuperscript{61} By November it had raised nearly £1,900. Hebdomadal Council had to do something. It got a

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{52}] \textit{7/7} 19 November 1958. McGrath, now a Royal Court playreader, and Michael Simpson, now a Playhouse ASM, directed.
\item[\textsuperscript{54}] Based on Lady Murasaki’s \textit{Tale of Genji}, it had eight sets and 35 costumes. Nicholas Sekers, a Hungarian theatre buff, gave 250 yards of brocade from his West Cumberland Silk Mills.
\item[\textsuperscript{55}] Patrick Gibbs. \textit{Daily Telegraph} 27 January 1959.
\item[\textsuperscript{56}] Hauser. \textit{Encore} No. 18 Jan-Feb 1959.
\item[\textsuperscript{57}] Taped interview 26 August 1999.
\item[\textsuperscript{58}] Unspecified clip in Meadow Players cuttings Vol. 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{59}] \textit{Varsity} 24 April 1959. He would become Playhouse front of house manager and founder-director of Cambridge Theatre Company.
\item[\textsuperscript{60}] \textit{The Scotsman} 29 April 1959.
\item[\textsuperscript{61}] Oxford University Theatre Fund appeal letter May 1959. Bowra, Boase, Bullock, and four other college heads were patrons; P(eter) C. Bayley, Fellow of University College, chairman.
\end{itemize}
committee to take another look at taking over the Playhouse. The holding company would sell
the lease for £18,000, a sum it later reduced to £16,500. Hauser, fighting a losing battle
to maintain the fabric, welcomed the move. So did the Arts Council. Its Secretary-General,
W.E. Williams, said Hauser’s company was ‘one of the most effective in the country.’

Volanakis designed and directed his own version of *The Bacchae* with Michael David,
Sean Connery and Yvonne Mitchell. It lost nearly £1,500. Hauser did *Twelfth Night*. It
went to Lisbon, Copenhagen, Zurich, Verona and Rome. John Gordon Ash, who ran Cheltenham
Opera House for Frank Maddocks, provided the summer fare. Hauser returned with *The Man
of Destiny, Don Juan in Hell and The Cocktail Party* before taking them and *Twelfth Night* on a
British Council tour of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. He marked the theatre’s 21st birthday
with *My Friend Rollo*, Felicity Douglas’s version of Achard’s *Patate*. By the time I wrote Leo
McKern was ‘a fireball of lovable protest,’ it was bound for London.

Toby Robertson minded the shop in Hauser’s absence, staging Vanbrugh’s *The
Relapse* and his mother, Felicity Douglas’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass* with Jane Asher.
He was also to direct the first production of 1960, Santha Rama Rau’s version of *A Passage to
India*, but got cold feet. On his way home Hauser called on Zia Mohyeddin. Robertson’s
message awaited him. He scooped up the Pakistani actor and took over. Staging *Passage*, *Time
Magazine* said, was ‘like trying to rewrite *The Bhagavad-Gita* as a sonnet,’ but at last
someone had done it. Bernard Levin enthused: ‘A profoundly moving experience.’

---

63 To repay Dance’s estate and other debts. J.E. Critchley to Boase 16 October 1959.
UR6/TH/1. File Three.
64 Williams to Boase 21 October 1959.
65 It was the first major revival of Euripides’ play since 1908.
66 John Warner was Feste, Ruth Meyers Viola, Prunella Scales Olivia, Edward Hardwicke
Orsino, George Selway Sir Toby, Christopher Hancock Sir Andrew.
67 Maddocks, who ran the Theatre Royal, Bath, was giving up Cheltenham and gave him a final
fling: *A View From the Bridge, Tea and Sympathy, The Bad Samaritan, The Summer of the
Seventeenth Doll and Epitaph For George Dillon*. John Gordon Ash. Taped interview 9
September 1999.
68 OM 13 October 1959. Henry Sherek let Hauser try it out. The comedy was in its fourth
year in Paris. As *Rollo* it opened at the Strand on October 27.
70 ‘I rang... and he said: “Well, Graham Greene’s offered to put £500 into any production...
provided it’s *A Passage to India.*”’ Taped interview, as above. Hauser first asked Mohyeddin to
play Dr. Aziz when he was in London on a British Council bursary, but he had just signed a
film contract.
Albery and Tennent’s bought it for the Comedy Theatre. By the time it opened there it had played a total of five weeks in Oxford and been seen by 18,000 people.

St. John’s refused to sell the Playhouse site. The University Grants Committee (UGC) gave the university £16,500 to buy the lease. Hebdomadal Council invited Elizabeth Sweeting to run the theatre, made a deal giving Meadow Players four weeks in term, free use out of term, and said it would improve the fabric ‘as funds allowed.’ A Sunday night airing of Nigel Dennis’s satire on religion, The Making of Moo, by Michael Billington showed it marked no change in academic attitudes, an Isis editorial that not all students welcomed it. A crass case of internal politicking briefly deprived Coghill of a seat on the board. Longer term it soured Hauser and Miss Sweeting’s relationship. For the moment both were happy. Hauser ended his fourth year with The Taming of the Shrew starring Brewster Mason and Sian Phillips. It lost £900 and there was no tour to recoup it, but he could feel sanguine.

In March the Arts Council announced that they had doubled [our] grant [to £6,000]. The increase, together with a happier year at the box office, means that plans for next season can be... bolder.

In June Candida joined Passage and Rollo in London. Northampton Rep provided the

---

73 ‘The theatre was sound, but the auditorium in poor condition.’ University Surveyor, Jack Lankester. 2 December 1959. UR6/TH/1 File Three.

74 Bowra to President of St. John’s 29 January 1960. As above. File Four. Fund members felt it better to have somewhere now than the ‘dim hope of a fully tailored theatre.’

75 His Anglo-Saxon tutor at St. Catherine’s refused permission. Bullock overruled the tutor, who resigned as Junior Dean, and Fleet Street descended. Humphrey Carpenter. O.U.D.S. A Centenary History, as above, p. 184.

76 Bayley held a sherry party to brief students and the Isis editor, the future broadcaster David Dimbleby, leaked the news. Bayley. Taped interview 13 July 2001. ‘Unless the Meadow Players are to be disbanded (and it would be a tragedy... if they were), we shall still not have our own theatre...’ TI 11 May 1960. I shared Dimbleby’s doubts for other reasons. ‘With professionals and amateurs... there is bound to be altercation... and it is not too difficult to imagine who will cause most.’ DC OM 12 May 1960.

77 Bayley threatened to resign. ‘They’d obviously dropped him.’ Taped interview, as above. Coghill begged him not to (Letter 6 December 1960). Bayley persisted, the university empowered the Curators to co-opt, and Coghill joined them.

78 Hauser: ‘[I said to Elizabeth]: “We just carry on as before. I can’t imagine myself knocking on your door when I want to go in...” I was very wrong.’ Taped interview, as above. ‘She wouldn’t take the side of Meadow Players if it seemed to her [it] would be at the expense of the University Theatre... Frank... naturally anticipated that his person was being installed in the manager’s seat... then had a shock when he found out that was not the case.’ Cottrell. Taped interview 22 September 2003.

79 Note in Shrew programme.

80 Denison planned to revive it with The Importance and tour. But the Arts Council refused to back him. So he did Candida for Bath Festival. Michael Denison, pp. 101-105. From the Piccadilly Theatre it moved to Wyndham’s, running 160 performances. Passage ran for 261, Rollo another three weeks after moving to the Duchess.
Hauser began his fifth year with *The Apple Cart*. While it was at Cambridge, Lincoln College Players staged *King Lear*. Volanakis did Pirandello's *Naked*. 1960 ended with another new play, David Grant’s *Seaman Leading*. *The Times* critic felt they were ‘people he has known well.’ Too well perhaps! One threatened a libel action and it closed early.

The Playhouse became the University Theatre on 1 January 1961 during the run of *Charley’s Aunt*. The board became a committee of Curators, Miss Sweeting ‘head of a department not of professorial status,’ on £1,400, a £400 increase. Her office was one side of the circle, Hauser and his new manager, Gordon Stratford’s the other. The University wanted a weekly rent of £400, but Hauser said the Arts Council had doubled his grant so he could do better productions. They settled for £270. The Curators set up a subcommittee to improve the theatre with the help of RSC consultant John Wyckham and a management subcommittee to supervise student input. To their disgust the first show was City of Oxford Dramatic Club’s *The Clandestine Marriage*.

82 *The Times* 30 November 1960.
83 ‘Had David Grant libelled anybody...? Absolutely not.’ Hauser. Taped interview, as above.
84 Directed by Peter Ashmore. ‘It must have been the only time *Charley’s Aunt*... made a loss.’ Stratford. Taped interview, as above.
85 The Vice-Chancellor, Proctors and Women’s Colleges Representative were ex officio Curators. Boase represented Hebdomadal Council; J[ohn] W.Y. Higgs, soon to become Finance and Estates Bursar of Exeter College, the Board of Faculties; Butterworth the University Chest; Edwin Slade, Fellow and Tutor in Law, St. John’s; Bayley, Hale, and Levens, Congregation. Plus Coghill!
86 Later Administrator. Most of her staff she took with her, including her stage manager, Iain Mackintosh. All became eligible for annual rises, paid holidays and pensions.
87 Stratford was 34. He managed *Dinner and Passage* in London and had served spells in rep at Guildford and Bromley. Taped interview, as above.
89 Note 20 October 1960. As above
90 Bayley, Hale and Sweeting, chaired by Higgs. Later it also had student representatives.
92 With Leo McKern, Yvonne Furneaux and Diane Cilento. Hobson was one of the few it impressed. *The Sunday Times* 12 February 1961.
Rinehart's dramatisation of Narayan's *The Guide*, then *Hamlet* with Jeremy Brett. In May Hebdomadal Council launched a £50,000 Reconstruction Appeal. By October it had reached £11,041. The Playhouse closed in July to refurbish the offices and dressing rooms. Richard Cottrell replaced Richard Bevis. The highlight of summer was Prospect Productions' debut. The success of *The Glass Menagerie*, which Iain Mackintosh and Adrian Brine staged at Easter to fill a gap in the programme, encouraged Mackintosh and Miss Sweeting to form a company to stage summer plays for Oxford and Cambridge. It began with a double bill by Brine. Queen *After Death* and *The Guide*’s failure to transfer left Hauser in debt. The Arts Council bailed him out with £7,000. Sir William Emrys Williams commented:

> Had we not been able to... Meadow Players would... have gone broke... We have put them down next year for £10,000, but if their... poor houses continue, £10,000 will... not be enough... Such a small fraction of the 9,000 students... appear to be regular patrons of their own theatre.99

Another blow was the temporary collapse of the link with Cambridge.

After the... Arts Theatre’s decision to go into partnership with Theatre Workshop, it looked as if Meadow Players’ production of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy... would have to be shelved... for want of a second theatre until the Old Vic offered.100

Hauser began his sixth year with *Heartbreak House*, which transferred to Wyndham’s in November and marked the arrival of Larry Nolan, the company’s first stage carpenter.101 It won a rave review from Bernard Levin,102 but did not impress Robert Muller.

> ‘Revivals like [this] allow us to see competent artists... neither good nor fashionable enough to work for Mr Hall or Mr Devine, nor bad enough to appear in boulevard trash.’103 It was a

---

94 Mohyeddin was the Guide. ‘The only missing ingredient is the literary quality of E.M. Forster.’ Robert Muller. *Daily Mail* 7 March 1961.
95 It went for a month to the Strand. Bamber Gascoigne said it was the ‘ideal antidote’ to Peter Wood’s disastrous Stratford *Hamlet* with Ian Bannen. *The Spectator* 30 June 1961.
96 Hebdomadal Council Acts vol. 239 p. xxxiv, 1 May 1961. The committee, chaired by Boase, consisted of Bayley, Coghill, Denison and Peter Fleming. The 26 sponsors ranged from Dame Peggy Ashcroft to Emlyn Williams.
97 George Rylands suggested he became Miss Sweeting’s assistant. Taped interview, as above.
98 *Whiteman* by South African Oxford graduate, Michael Picardie, and Ken Hughes’s *Sammy*. The English première of Betti’s *Irene* and Henry Livings’ *Big Soft Nellie* followed.
100 DC OM 23 September 1961. Neither the Theatre Workshop or Cambridge Arts Theatre histories mentions the partnership, which must have been brief.
101 From Carlisle Rep. He came at Stratford’s insistence. Taped interview, as above.
102 Laudring Roger Livesey’s Shotover, Dulcie Gray’s Lady Utterword, Judy Campbell’s Hesione, George Benson’s Mangan, Donald Eccles’ Mazzini Dunn, Joan Young’s nurse, Perlita Neilson’s Ellie, Michael Denison’s Hushabye and Barry Sinclair’s Utterword, he wrote ‘a catalogue of excellence is what the cast for a masterpiece should be.’ *Daily Express* 2 November 1961.
view which would make Hauser’s life increasingly difficult. Volanakis’s Oresteia, the first since Benson’s in 1905, had a cast of 35, which included Catherine Lacey, Yvonne Mitchell and Ronald Lewis. Even with full houses it would lose ‘nearly £5,000.’ \( ^{104} \) Tynan felt: ‘For the specialist it is not time wasted, but... for most of us very little... will be time gratefully remembered.’ \( ^{106} \) Trewin wished ‘the Gilbert Murray version had been used.’ \( ^{106} \) OUDS’ Devil’s Disciple boasted future professional actors Ian McCulloch, Neil Stacy, Michael Johnson, \( ^{107} \) and critic Sheridan Morley; University College’s Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance future actor Michael Emrys-Jones, \( ^{108} \) director Braham Murray and newscaster, Peter Sissons; ETC’s 25th anniversary Peer Gynt another clutch headed by Sam Walters, later director of the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond. Even so, I said it was impossible not to have qualms.

How long will the Playhouse be able to function as a University Theatre, if the colleges are not made to pool their... resources...? \( ^{109} \)

David Giles directed Felicity Douglas’s version of Alice in Wonderland at Christmas, Hauser Iolanthe for Sadler’s Wells. \( ^{110} \) He planned to begin 1962 with Aldous Huxley and Beth Wendel’s The Genius and the Goddess but it needed rewriting. So he flew to America to consult them. It enabled him to see Passage in New York, \( ^{111} \) but meant revamping his programme. He got Constance Cummings, his ‘goddess,’ to play the lesbian in Sartre’s Huis Clos and Colin Graham to revive Billetdoux’s Chin-Chin. After making a profit of £630 in 1960-61, the University Theatre lost £1,403 in 1961-62, which the Chest met by taking responsibility for Miss Sweeting’s salary and the rates. Opting for the cheapest orchestra pit and other savings reduced the reconstruction estimate from £78,000 to £58,250. \( ^{112} \) Artistically, the Curators at last had something to celebrate: Peter Dews’ Henry IV Parts 1 & 2 for OUDS.

The radiant centrepiece is Oliver [Ford] Davies’ Falstaff... rounded out by actor and producer with a skill that seems almost too good to be true. \( ^{113} \)

\( ^{104} \) OM 21 October 1961. In tackling it ‘a provincial rep’ was ‘carrying out a national theatre’s job.’ Richard Findlater. Time & Tide 16 November 1961.

\( ^{106} \) The Observer 12 November 1961.

\( ^{106} \) Birmingham Post 8 November 1961. Volanakis used the version of Agamemnon by the American poet, Edith Hamilton, and made his own of The Libation-Bearers and Eumenides.

\( ^{107} \) He became Michael York.

\( ^{108} \) He became Michael Elwyn.

\( ^{109} \) OM 30 December 1961.

\( ^{110} \) It opened at Stratford the day after Gilbert’s copyright ended.

\( ^{111} \) Donald McWhinnie’s production at the Ambassador Theater starred Mohyeddin as Dr. Aziz, Eric Portman as Fielding, and Gladys Cooper as Mrs Moore, but did not last long.

\( ^{112} \) Minute 11 January 1962. UR6/TH/1 File Six.

\( ^{113} \) DC OM 21 February 1962.

132
The best college play was Michael Rudman's *A Month in the Country* for St. Edmund Hall,\(^\text{114}\) which returned for a second week in August. *The Genius and the Goddess* moved to the Comedy, but lasted only 20 performances.

Miss Sweeting and Mackintosh with Cottrell, who ran the Cambridge end, chose a more commercial programme for Prospect's second season.\(^\text{115}\) Then the theatre closed for five weeks while a new wardrobe above the dressing rooms replaced the one front-of-house. Jack Butterworth, who had taken over from Bullock as Meadow Players' chairman, became Vice-Chancellor of Warwick University in the summer. John Bamborough, Principal of Linacre House, succeeded him. Nicholas Sekers joined Sir Isaiah Berlin, Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, and A.J. Ayer, Wykeham Professor of Logic, on the board. Curators felt it better the City support the company than their appeal. Councillors gave £1,000 in 1962-63 and £3,000 thereafter, their first annual subsidy.

The patronising attitude of Muller and other national critics hurt Hauser. Attacking what he called the 'committed' trend in criticism, he wrote:

> The new dramatists have done striking work... and nobody... begrudges the stage its *Mousetrap* and *Boeing-Boeing*. What is missing is... the heavyweights which are written about but not performed.\(^\text{116}\)

It was Tynan he was gunning for. Stratford said Mohyeddin met him at a party:

> 'Did you see *Queen After Death* at Oxford? Wasn't it wonderful...?' And Tynan said: 'Ah, yes, but de Montherlant. That sort of thing... must be stopped.'\(^\text{117}\)

Hauser began his seventh year with two 'heavyweights.' He got Barbara Jefford to 'double' the parachutist in Shaw's *Misalliance* with the revolutionary in Camus's *The Just*.\(^\text{118}\)

\(^\text{114}\) 'There are three performances which are superb by undergraduate standards: James Smith as Rakitin... Annabel Leventon as Vera... and David Aukin as the... doctor.' DC OM 15 June 1962. Annabel Leventon became a professional actress, David Aukin executive director of the National Theatre, Rudman, like Braham Murray, one of Britain's top directors.

\(^\text{115}\) Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner, Look Back in Anger*, the English première of Achard's *Domino* and Mervyn Peake's *The Wit to Woo*.

\(^\text{116}\) Plays & Players, as above.

\(^\text{117}\) Taped interview. As above. Of *Queen After Death* (*Tynan Right & Left*, London: Longmans, 1967, pp. 88-90), Tynan wrote: 'If... Devine is right and a resurgence of historical drama is imminent, we should all be grateful to the... Playhouse for [presenting]... one of the most numbing examples of the genre... and an object lesson in how not to do it.'

\(^\text{118}\) John Turner said Hauser rang. 'Do you want to come and do a marvellous play with a marvellous actress, pussy?' 'Pussy' was his pet endearment for all actors, male or female. Taped interview (with Barbara Jefford) 10 October 2003. It led to their marriage in 1967.
The plays marked the launch of The Friends of the Playhouse Company, the idea of his new assistant, Henry Hirsch, and caused the first tiff between landlord and tenant. Curators felt they diverted attention from the Appeal. While James Gillhouley staged Sardou’s Divorce à la Carte, Hauser polished Misalliance for the Court, from which it moved to the Criterion. Brian Way did Pinocchio at Christmas. During the run teachers and pupils attended the first meeting of the Young Playhouse Association (YPA) - another Hirsch initiative - of which Gerard Gould, senior English master at Lord Williams School, Thame, became chairman.

The closure for the reconstruction in March 1963 left the Curators only four weeks to fill. They upset local amateurs by giving all four to students. Meadow Players opened with Chekhov’s The Proposal (Hirsch) and Genet’s The Maids (Volanakis). Hauser premiéred Dallas Lambert’s The Affliction with Roy Kinnear. Alan Simpson did their final show, The Playboy of the Western World. On the last night Oxford’s Mayor, Ald. Evan Roberts, looked forward to an autumn re-opening. In fact, the date had already slipped. Appeal gifts had all but dried up. The wind-up of the Playhouse Guild produced £309, the liquidation of The Playhouse (Oxford) Ltd. £1,000. They were offset by late extras. When Curators approved the £53,755 tender, they found they had not allowed £5,000 to reseat and recarpet; when Sekers gave new curtains, they realised they had not budgeted for any!

To underline their lack of business acumen, instead of asking Miss Sweeting to progress-chase, they let her spend nine months studying theatre in Europe and America. After Vienna Opera House ‘with a peg for every seat,’ she returned to earth with a bump when the Playhouse cloakroom hooks ‘collapsed on the first night.’ By then the cost had

---

119 Sekers funded Hirsch. ‘He was a... strange, melancholic, Hungarian... dead bright... but totally unfitted for the theatre.’ Hauser. Taped interview. As above.
120 14th University Theatre Curators’ meeting 25 October 1962, minute 115 (h).
121 The English version by Louis Manson and Diane Hart moved to the New Arts in March. Codron wanted it, but Kinnear said no. Eric Shorter referred to his ‘bloated exasperation.’
122 Daily Telegraph 19 February 1963. ‘He said: “They’re all making fun of me. They always do. I’m not going on with it…” Great shame. Sweet little play.’ Hauser. Taped interview, as above.
123 17th UTC meeting 14 March 1963. Minute 130 (c).
124 As above. Minute 130 (b). In fact, when the company was liquidated on 6 June 1964 it produced £1,560. 25th UTC meeting 11 June 1964, minute 198.
125 Special UTC meeting 27 March 1963, minutes 1-3.
127 22nd UTC meeting 20 January 1964, minute 175. The Arts Council gave her a ‘grant for a study tour in Europe.’ The U.S. Embassy underwrote her visit to American University Drama Departments. Sweeting, pp. 105-112.
reached £86,128, of which only £50,569 came from the appeal. Mackintosh ran Prospect's third season from her office. Once a wet May gave way to a fine June, the Century Theatre at Binsey sold out every night. Meadow Players ended their season at Cambridge.

By and large town and gown produced the £350 a week the theatre cost to run. On £270, the company did not. With £13,000 from the Arts Council and £3,000 from the City, John Higgs and Miss Sweeting reckoned they should 'pay a more realistic rent.' A meeting in October resulted in £300 the first year, £311 the second, £330 the third: the subsidy would continue! Mackintosh held an exhibition to mark the Playhouse's silver jubilee. Hauser reopened it on 14 January 1964 with Mollière's School For Wives trilogy. Derek Godfrey headed the cast. OUDS began the university offerings with Rudman's Twelfth Night. ETC provided a better showcase of student acting with Murray's capital punishment show, Hang Down Your Head And Die.

A typical circus motley invite us to enjoy their jolly japes. Except that this is not a circus... Bringing up the rear... is the hangman... and left trampled under the feet of the other performers is the white faced auguste, an exquisite mime in the form of Terry Jones... carried screaming to the gallows as... the company... take their final bow.

The Opera Club was the first to use the pit, created by lowering the forestage, for Albert Herring. Seat prices included a 'reconstruction levy,' a sixpenny tax on student shows to wipe out the deficit.

Codron invited Volanakis to revive the Hedda Gabler with Joan Greenwood he had first staged at the Playhouse in 1960 for the New Arts Theatre. He shelved the revamp of Aristophanes Festival of Women he was to stage at Oxford and reprised Genet's The Maids, this time with Brecht's The Exception and the Rule. At Easter the city's amateurs made their debut: the Operatic Society with Patience, the Boy Scouts with their Gang Show, the City of A 225-seater playhouse-on-wheels. Celebrating 40 Years of the Century Theatre. Blue Box Theatre by the Lake, Keswick. Souvenir brochure, 1992.

Feydeau's The Birdwatcher in Cottrell's version, Donleavy's The Ginger Man, Vanbrugh's The Provok'd Wife, which transferred to the Vaudeville.

Peter Ustinov's Photo Finish and Margaret Rawlings' version of Racine's Phèdre. OM 6 April 1963.

Profit from the Playhouse. TOM 2 May 1963.

'Visitors were able to see... the enlarged circle, which will seat 174 in place of... 101; the louvred ceiling with its five lighting banks...; the proscenium arch... being remodelled.' OM 21 October 1963.

'There are now 471 [stalls] seats, where there were 491... and, when the forestage is not in use... 22 more.' OM 19 January 1964.

DC OM 12 February 1964.
Oxford Theatre Guild with the amateur première of Paolo Levi’s *The Pinedus Affair.*

Hang Down Your Head had an airing at the Comedy, as a result of which Roger Stephens bought it for Broadway. Miss Sweeting got another grant, this time from the British Council, to study university theatres abroad. The Arts Council hailed the growth in their number at home. Its own position was looking rosier. The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s decision to fix its grant for two years meant it could plan ahead. A Labour Government in October and Jennie Lee’s appointment as Arts Minister gave its work a bigger fillip.

Despite contracting an ulcer Hauser would look back on 1964 as the peak of his 17 years at Oxford. He said he hoped to form a permanent company with a set agenda. As his first ‘special project’ he paired Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* with the Soviet dramatist, Aleksei Arbuzov’s *The Twelfth Hour,* written in the Chekhovian idiom and dealing with a similar set of people 20 years later. The former was as fine as any Chekhov production that season.

Perhaps finer, since it is the most complex of the dramatist’s four masterpieces, and... Hauser... and his... company, by some miracle... struck the right note almost at once.

It did well at Oxford, Cambridge and Southampton University’s new Nuffield Theatre, but needed longer to recoup the nearly £3,000 it cost to stage. Reviewing *Twelfth Hour,* which Hauser rehearsed on tour in increasing pain from his ulcer, Hobson said:

I cannot believe that any London management... would be making a mistake if it brought these productions in repertory to the West End.

London saw neither. What B.A. Young called ‘a firm Party bias’ in *Twelfth Hour,* which ‘grew stronger throughout the evening,’ killed hopes of a transfer. During its run with County Council backing the company held its first Schools Day: 600 children heard Michael Clarke...
tell how he designed it, saw Hauser conduct a rehearsal, then attended a matinée with Mme. Alla Tarasova, Mme. Ranevsky in the Moscow Art Theatre Cherry Orchard at the Aldwych. It marked the start of what the Arts Council hailed as a groundbreaking education project.

His eighth season over, Hauser went into hospital for an operation. Robert Hewison and Michael Palin did Keep It To Yourselves, a new musical, for ETC; the New Shakespeare Company Twelfth Night; the Lincoln Theatre Company, of which Billington was now associate producer, A Taste of Honey; Prospect, expanding its touring programme thanks to £3,500 from the Arts Council, Otway’s The Soldier’s Fortune, You Never Can Tell and a Vanbrugh tercentenary revival of The Confederacy.

In the autumn Stratford got Hauser, still recuperating, to cut costs by doing plays in repertoire. They hired producers and, with grudging consent from the Curators, did their first three shows in three-week blocks with students in a four-week block between. Tony Tanner’s Hay Fever opened in Cambridge, then played Oxford, while Robert Chetwyn rehearsed A Doll’s House. Robert MacDonald toured with them while he mounted The Country Wife. In their absence the John Ford Society marked Exeter College’s 650th anniversary with The Canterbury Tales based on Coghill’s Penguin version. Stuart Weir said it ‘was on the face of it a good idea.’ He failed to notice that Martin Starkie, who devised and directed it, was no longer playing Chaucer in the last act. He had had ‘a nervous collapse.’ Coghill came to visit him in his sickbed. ‘He said: ‘I like what you did and ... I’d like to give you the dramatic rights.’ Without knowing it, he had made his former pupil a millionaire.

Despite losing £3,953 in 1963-64, bringing the total deficit to £7,463, the Curators pressed on with plans to expand. With the Chest’s blessing, they bought the lease of 12 Beaumont Street from St. John’s, and would acquire the lease of 11 in 1966. Allowing
students to join the management subcommittee led to regular box office reports. But the Curators’ failure to promote Meadow Players’ work made relations with Hauser increasingly edgy.\(^4\) He continued staging plays in repertory in 1965, his team now led by Judi Dench and John Turner. They opened with *The Alchemist*, then left on tour. ETC began term with Ann Jellicoe’s *The Sport of My Mad Mother*. OUDS followed with *King Lear*.\(^4\) It drew 95 per cent: a figure only *The Alchemist*’s 88 approached. Meadow Players returned with Anouilh’s *Romeo and Jeanette*. Alan Brien enthused:

To see it is to realise how few British playwrights can please audiences without lowering their... standards and... how fortunate Oxford is to afford a company... of this standard.\(^15\)

It alternated with *Alchemist* while Volanakis rehearsed de Musset’s *The Firescreen*. London critics saw it during Southampton University’s Arts Festival. COTG did *The Magistrate*, drawing 41, the Operatic Society *The Gondoliers* (77), the scouts their *Gang Show* (83). In the week between Meadow Players drew 35.\(^15\) The City upped their grant to £3,500.

Hauser broke with repertoire for his final two plays. Bob Swash wanted the first and the second might transfer too. *A Heritage And Its History* was the first of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels she let Julian Mitchell adapt. It divided critics and public, averaging 42.5 per cent. After a gala which raised £1,800 for St. John Ambulance Brigade, it departed for Cambridge and Hull. St. Edmund Hall and Queen’s did *The Cherry Orchard*.\(^15\) Andreas Teuber revived *The Plough and the Stars* for OUDS.\(^15\) Hauser took over *Il Matrimonio Segreto* at Glyndebourne from Giorgio de Lulli. Two days after it opened *A Heritage* transferred to the Phoenix. Volanakis staged Aristophanes’ *The Parliament of Women* at Oxford with Sheila Hancock (54 and 68). It moved to Cardiff, but got no further.\(^15\) ETC premièred *You Can’t Do Much Without A Screwdriver*, ‘the best home-grown musical... Oxford has produced.’\(^15\) The

\(^{14}\) *In* 1964 Meadow Players gave performances of plays by Molière, Brecht, Genet and Wycherley. How many teachers... told their pupils... to see [them]? ...None at a level guess.’ Hauser. *TOM* 21 January 1965.

\(^{14}\) Bayley directed. Lear was one of his pupils, Clive Mitchell.

\(^{15}\) *Sunday Telegraph* 28 February 1965. Tony Tanner directed.

\(^{15}\) JMC meeting 22 April 1965.

\(^{15}\) ‘Though neither has the range and maturity for Mrs Ranevsky and Gaev, Maria Aitken and Ian Marter make spirited attempts.’ DC *OM* 5 May 1965.

\(^{15}\) Peter Ustinov’s daughter, ‘Tammy... makes [the] petit bourgeois wife a little too shrewish... but steadily develops and rounds her part.’ Stuart Weir. *OM* 12 May 1965.

\(^{15}\) Hauser, minding the show after Volanakis left for Athens to mount a modern Greek version, said ‘Sheila Hancock... wasn’t really keen’ on a transfer. *Western Mail* 3 June 1965.

\(^{15}\) *DC OM* 2 June 1965. Wood’s production mocked Victorian Britain. John Gould wrote the score, Chris Miller the book. The cast included Diana Quick, Robert Scott, and ITN’s future political editor John Sergeant.
National Youth Theatre director, Michael Croft, told a summer school:

With new theatres at Coventry, Nottingham, Chichester, Guildford and Worcester, and talk of more, I have never felt more optimistic about the future of the provincial theatre.\(^{156}\)

He did not ask where all their shows would come from. The Playhouse, which had already closed for one week, closed for six more and after a fortnight in September went dark again.

Hauser began his tenth year with Barbara Jefford and Turner in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Lang rehearsed Anouilh's *Antigone* with Barbara Young, and when that opened Anthony Besch began *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Nolan built the sets at their new workshop at Eynsham.\(^{157}\) They staged all three in repertoire at Southampton and Cardiff. ETC premièred Julius Hay's *The Horse*.\(^{158}\) In January Bullingdon Rural District Council gave the company 100 guineas.\(^{159}\) It was modest beside the City's £3,500, but welcome.

This week a London critic spoke of the Playhouse company in the same breath as the National and RSC. It would be a pity if, when the Meadow Players have reached such a peak... the public on their doorstep let them suffer from lack of cash.\(^{160}\)

Hauser began 1966 was Robert Lowell's version of Racine's *Phedre* with Barbara Jefford.

It is... magnificent... allowing us to feel to the full the terrific undertow of shame in which Phaedra tries to hold back her adulterous love of Hippolytus.\(^{161}\)

He chose it before the poet decided to stand for the University Professorship of Poetry. But reporters saw it as 'a bright political move'\(^{162}\) and, Hauser said, was why Lowell lost to Edmund Blunden. Tanner revived Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with Hugh Paddick and Marcella Markham.\(^{163}\) Then it toured with *Phedre* while Gilbert Vernon mounted *The Lady's Not For Burning*.

The star student show was Coghills OUDS *Dr. Faustus*. Hauser said: 'Nevill was the world's worst director,' but had 'wonderful ideas.' Casting Richard Burton as Faustus and his

---

\(^{156}\) *Oxford Times* 30 July 1965.

\(^{157}\) *OT* 1 October 1965. The ex-railway station was seven miles from Oxford, but the company did not have to share it with students.

\(^{158}\) First staged at the 1964 Salzburg Festival, it was translated by his son, Peter, who was at Merton, and directed by Teuber.

\(^{159}\) *OM* 13 January 1966.

\(^{160}\) Editorial. *OM* 15 January 1966. Eric Shorter wrote: 'We must still look to... Hauser... to give us something really challenging like *Phedre*.' *Daily Telegraph* 11 January 1966.

\(^{161}\) *DC OM* 11 January 1966. Turner (Theseus) rated it among her finest performances.


\(^{163}\) Michael Gearin-Tosh, later a Curator, said it rivalled Alan Schneider's version, which Albery imported from Broadway. *The Guardian* 20 January 1966.
wife, Elizabeth Taylor, as Helen of Troy was one.

Immediately she makes her long-awaited entry... you can see why [Coghill]... was so careful to include her in... the bargain... The appearance of the one woman whose beauty and fable can stand comparison with Marlowe’s rolling words... lifts the atmosphere... Her reappearance... raises it to fever pitch and Burton’s... soulful delivery of ‘Was this the face that launched a thousand ships...?’ provides the perfect springboard for the tempestuous magnificence... of Faustus’s end.\textsuperscript{164}

Unfortunately, critics struggling to meet deadlines had not bargained for her late appearance or her non-speaking role. Their frustration boiled over in Irving Wardle’s review.

Those who visit the production to see Miss Taylor as the speechless apparition of Helen of Troy will not be out of the theatre before 10.45pm.\textsuperscript{165}

It took £12,221. By then Coghill was boasting how much the film version would make. Higgs had produced a paper on developing 11/12 Beaumont Street and creating a workshop to the rear. He and Coghill felt the proceeds offered a ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity. They should get an architect to prepare plans for something more ambitious.\textsuperscript{166} The Burtons’ Hollywood attorney, Aaron Frosch, confirmed the film might make £125,000 and the Curators said yes.\textsuperscript{167} With a supporting cast of 53 students, it had its première in October 1967. It was a flop. Burton had to finance the Burton-Taylor Building.

\textit{Die Fledermaus} proved too much for Operatic Society audiences. It lost £600. Way’s \textit{Treasure Island} directed by Merton graduate Richard E. Hughes, now Hauser’s ABC Television trainee, drew 36. The director remained bullish. The Arts Council had upped his grant for 1966/67 by £5,000 to £21,000, his touring grant by £16,000 to £20,000.

It has chosen the... company along with the repertory companies of Bristol, Birmingham, Coventry, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield as a... centre to to serve the... region... in the hope of making it to the Oxford region what the National Theatre is to the nation.\textsuperscript{168}

He could have a second company, stage summer seasons, more classics, more new plays, have an accountant and a publicity officer. Concerned that the theatre had lost another £3,740 in 1964/65, the Chest tried to raise his rent again.\textsuperscript{169} Eventually they agreed a minimum £400 a week, maximum £500, in 1967; minimum £420, maximum £520, in 1968. Hauser ended with Giraudoux’s \textit{Amphitryon 38}, another vehicle for Jefford and Turner. It pleased

\textsuperscript{164} DC OM 15 February 1966.  
\textsuperscript{165} The Times 15 February 1966.  
\textsuperscript{166} JMC meeting 16 November 1966. Paper B, para 11.  
\textsuperscript{167} 40th UTC meeting 2 February 1967, minute 275.  
\textsuperscript{168} OM 28 March 1966.  
\textsuperscript{169} Chest Secretary, J.K. Batey, to Sweeting 1 February 1966 with UTC minutes.
the critics but drew only 43. OUDS revived *The Winter's Tale*. ETC did Paddy Scannell and Adrian Benjamin's version of *Tristram Shandy*. Summer fare included a fortnight of music from the The English Bach Festival. Then the theatre went dark for eight weeks apart from a student revue, *Four Degrees Over*.\(^{170}\)

Hauser commissioned James Morris to write an outreach show about Oxford, Mark Lane to adapt his book, *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*. Peter Godfrey became accountant; Glyn Robbins, son of wardrobe mistress Betty Robbins, PRO; Miss Sweeting's front-of-house manager, Michael Healey, Hauser's assistant. His tenth anniversary play resulted from meeting Leo McKern in the Strand.

He'd... been to the National... [to] audition... for *Volpone*. Olivier... said that he supposed he would have to take the secondary role... Leo... knew only too well that Mosca could steal the show. Frank asked him if he would rather come to Oxford... Leo said he would.\(^{171}\)

Ironically, Hauser's Mosca, Alan Dobie, threatened to throw his revival.\(^{172}\) Despite his muted performance McKern's fireworks and the superb playing of the company made it a classic.

Hutchinson Scott has devised a clever revolving setting... Stephen Bradley, Elric Hooper and Lindsay Kemp [on his knees!] people the household with... Volpone's hermaphrodite, eunuch and dwarf... The stage is set for the gulling of the four dupes: ...Bob Hornery's... sovereign-eyed Voltore. James Grout's slavering... Corbaccio. Nan Munro's strident... Lady Politick Would-Be... Leonard Rossiter's... Corvino, a twitching puppet pulled by the strings of jealousy, avarice and conscience.\(^{173}\)

Volanakis directed a disappointing revival of *The Homecoming* with Pinter in a set by new designer, Franco Colavecchia; Grout a more exciting version of Pirandello's *The Rules of the Game*, with Rossiter and Judi Dench.

[She], exuding animal vitality and petulant wilfulness, watches him with minatory eye and ready claw like a caged cheetah. [He], breathing the calm, mannered confidence of the compulsive melancholic, handles her with the self-amused fatalism of a bomb disposal expert.\(^{174}\)

Oxfordshire County Council, taking 'the first step' in a £2,500 policy to promote the arts, gave the company most of it and appointed Gould the county's first - part-time - schools drama adviser.

\(^{170}\) It was devised and acted by David Wood; future children's author, Adele Weston; John Gould; and Robert Scott. After rave reviews at Edinburgh, it moved to the Fortune Theatre. \(^{171}\) *Stratford*. Letter 19 August 2001. The National postponed its revival.\(^{172}\) '[He] said: "I think Mosca's got to be played very slowly." And I said: "No, he's called The Fly."' Hauser. Taped interview, as above.\(^{173}\) *DC OM* 21 September 1966. Turner recalled Grout saying: 'You MUST come and see Len Rossiter.'\(^{174}\) *DC OM* 22 October 1966.
Hauser felt he should resign at the end of 1966/67. The Arts Council recommended Michael Elliott, Ronald Eyre, David Thompson, David William, Colin Graham, Albert Finney, Anthony Page or Grout as possible successors. By the time the Curators protested nobody had told them, he was having second thoughts. In January he said he would do another year with the help of Grout and Sean Connery. By the year's end he had decided to stay.

I should have gone... What spoiled me... was I thought: 'I've had ten years of financial disaster and getting an ulcer... and the first time [we've]... got some money... I'm going to hand it over to somebody else.'

Connery did not direct, but gave £3,500 to enable Volpone to transfer to the Garrick. By then the play that led to Hauser's change of heart was also London-bound. He got Judi Dench, Ian McKellen and Ian McShane for Arbuzov's My Poor Marat and renamed it The Promise. Calling it the real thing, Hobson feared other critics might reject it because it dealt in 'honour, loyalty, affection and hope... whilst [today's] dramatists... concern themselves with perversion, cruelty and sexual licence.' In fact, everyone loved Arbuzov's treatment of the Siege of Leningrad.

[It] may be... an altogether more terrible affair than the London Blitz... But the fervour with which the three... teenagers flung together in... one shell-shocked room embrace the future of the brave new world and the growing disillusion with which they face the task of building it in time of peace are only too familiar.

Mohyeddin played Mosca in London. Dobie was in The Silence of Lee Harvey Oswald at Hampstead. The company dropped plans for its own version. It also mothballed The Oxford Entertainment after a brief airing. Five of the cast were in Volpone. Rave reviews swelled audiences for The Promise. The Christmas shows further boosted attendance. Hauser staged She Stoops to Conquer with Ghosts. The gamble paid off. In the final weeks of a five-week run they drew 85 and 84 and only one week fell below 70. BBC-2 screened Up The Theatre by Tony Palmer. The Times noted:

It was rubbish... to think that... a university town is full of bright... young people...

---

175 Meadow Players Board meeting 12 October 1966, minute 14.
177 Hauser. Taped interview, as above.
178 Connery had given up James Bond. He promised himself that from 35 on 'I'll do only the things that excite me.' Daily Mail 13 January 1967. 'I'd particularly like to do a play... for... Hauser.' The Times 26 January 1967.
179 Sunday Times 4 December 1966.
180 DC OM 30 November 1966.
181 Grout directed She Stoops. Rodney Bewes of TV's The Likely Lads, was Tony Lumpkin; Janet Suzman from RSC, Kate; Richard Easton Marlow; Lewis Flander Hastings. Ronald Eyre did Ghosts in Meyer's version, June Jago as Mrs Alving, James Laurenson as Oswald.
Oxford undergraduates could not be less interested.182

The first market survey proved it.183 880 replied to Robbins’ questionnaire: 15.9 per cent of the audience. 20 per cent were students, three per cent senior members.184 Palmer returned to the fray in March. Hauser replied that the schools’ change of attitude was the most notable advance in his lifetime, and a drama faculty was vital if university theatre was ‘to come into any order.’185 He spoke from experience. While he prepared Promise and Volpone for London he mounted Love’s Labour’s Lost for OUDS (76.5).186

Meadow Players’ next show was the first public airing in Britain of Genet’s The Balcony. It had a cast of 19, led by Jefford and Turner, most from She Stoops and Ghosts. Volanakis’s designer was Eric Sandie. Though he never admitted it, it was an alias. ‘Madame Irma’s house of illusions’ was a ‘mirror of society in which ideals and... institutions are exposed and defiled.’187

It was built of something called Melinex, which was used for aircraft mirrors... Poor Larry [Nolan] was trying to spread [it] on wooden frames... It crinkled... At Guildford Barbara and John... said: ‘Can we play... in black drapes?’188

Reviewers loved it. Ronald Bryden wrote:

In stunning settings by Eric Sandie - a chandelier glittering in blackness over a revolving labyrinth of silver foil mirrors - Volanakis has mustered an impressive cast... to give full weight to this malign revolutionary modern classic... I found myself wondering with alarm whether any greater dramatist is at present writing in the western world.189

Hauser reprised Amphitryon 38 with She Stoops and The Balcony, taking it to the Kenton Theatre, Henley, to reopen England’s fourth oldest playhouse.190 The company’s final play was Grout’s Richard II with Richard Easton. A set book averaged 82.5. After that, only two shows drew more than half-full houses.

183 Stratford said they made Glyn Robbins PRO because he was the only candidate to mention marketing.
185 Hauser. TC 8 March 1967. Palmer’s article appeared on March 1.
186 ‘Here... Hauser seems to have said, is a play crying out for the mock-heroic treatment... four... youths of undergraduate age... trying to confine their passions in the same straitjacket that the play’s pedants are words... But it is one thing to ask young men and women to play themselves... another to... convey the right mixture of high spirits, wit and impetuosity.’ DC OM 8 February 1967.
187 Programme note.
188 Stratford. Taped interview, as above.
189 The Observer 5 March 1967.
190 Since the Fire Service refused to renew its licence, an appeal had raised £18,000 for a facelift.
Thanks to the company’s rent increase, the Curators still made a surplus of £927, their first.\textsuperscript{191} The Arts Council gave YPA £700\textsuperscript{192} and got Hauser, with 16 other luminaries, to look at theatre in Britain.\textsuperscript{193} His company returned in August with a three-week summer season: John Cox directing \textit{The Importance}, Richard Hughes \textit{The Caretaker}. Hauser was busy elsewhere. On August 9 his \textit{Magic Flute} launched Sadler’s Wells’s season. The day after Prunella Scales, Colin Campbell, and Derek Fowlds took over in \textit{The Promise} at the Fortune. He was also casting the play for New York.\textsuperscript{194} He signed Eileen Atkins, then turned to Anouilh’s \textit{Ardèle}, with George Pravda as General St. Pe and Patricia Jessel as his wife, which began his 12th year. Hobson enthused:

\begin{quote}
Anouilh has started writing plays again... Therefore there is a special interest in... \textit{Ardèle}. It is exquisitely played.\textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

Healey did David Halliwell’s \textit{Little Malcolm And His Struggle Against the Eunuchs}, Lang \textit{The Wild Duck}. The student highlight was Michael Rosen’s \textit{Backbone}. It was not thought worthy of the NUS Drama Festival, but won the £250 prize for original work and in May 1968 the Court promoted Bill Bryden’s Sunday night airing to the main house.

Hauser got a call from Elisabeth Bergner’s agent. The 66-year-old Austrian film star was ‘bored.’ Could he offer her a play? They settled for Giraudoux’ \textit{The Madwoman of Chaillot}, her last stage success. Hauser was restaging \textit{The Promise} for Broadway. Volanakis found himself directing an even more temperamental actress. The cast of 26, drawn mainly from earlier plays, included Stephanie Beacham, Amy Dalby, and Janet Henfrey. The preview at Guildford sold out. Hauser, back from America, had to stand.\textsuperscript{196} Bryden was ecstatic.

\begin{quote}
It takes a few minutes to adjust to the fact that her Madwoman isn’t the huge painted crane [sic - crone?] Martita Hunt created [on Broadway and in London], a few more to get used to her accent... Then you forget both.\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

Despite the hype, it averaged only 58 per cent in Oxford. The response to \textit{Theatre 67}, the schools contest based on it, was equally disappointing. Of 220 within a 30-mile radius, only 13 entered. Hauser, who received a CBE in the 1968 New Year’s Honours,\textsuperscript{198} repeated last year’s work.

\textsuperscript{191} 46th UTC meeting 30 November 1967, minute 306.
\textsuperscript{192} OM 10 July 1967.
\textsuperscript{193} \textit{The Times} 21 September 1967.
\textsuperscript{194} McShane and McKellen were happy to continue. Judi Dench was about to star in \textit{Cabaret}.
\textsuperscript{195} \textit{Christian Science Monitor} 2 October 1967.
\textsuperscript{196} \textit{The Promise} ran for 289 performances in London, but flopped in New York.
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{The Observer} 3 December 1967.
\textsuperscript{198} He claimed it was compensation for not giving him the Old Vic when Michael Benthall left. Taped interview, as above. In fact, though Michael Elliott took over in 1961, the Old Vic was already earmarked to be the temporary home of Olivier’s National Theatre company.
year's Christmas recipe with three plays: The Rivals, Gaslight and The Glass Menagerie, the first two directed by Cox and Healey, the last by Sheila Hancock.199

John Higgs succeeded Boase as chairman of the Curators in October 1967.200 Meadow Players' chairman, John Bamborough, had extensive dealings with him.

I... remember... saying to Frank: '[The Curators] haven't really got your interests at heart...' Higgs... I always regarded as the man who had the power... I remember feeling that Frank had better watch his back.201

The problem was the university had no control over Hauser. Though the set-up at Oxford was unique, other reps faced similar problems. ‘A series of dismissals and resignations at Stoke-on-Trent, Liverpool, Northampton, and Harrogate’ prompted Wardle to conduct an inquiry.

It suggested... there was a heavy price to pay for the civic repertory boom... The situation boiled down to a triangle of forces: a theatre director with an enterprising policy; a board of governors nervous of the effect... on their regular audiences... and the Arts Council, whose role [was] ambiguous.202

Wardle alleged there was an alliance between boards and the Council ‘that directors should remain biddable employees who never stay... long.’ Boase said he and Higgs favoured a one-year deal if Hauser was leaving.203 His decision to stay kyboshed their hopes.

Higgs' major worry was the extension. In March the university approved plans.204 It would take three years to get the cash. Coghill's own finances were about to improve. Richard Hill and John Hawkins composed some musical vignettes based on The Canterbury Tales, which they issued as an LP with excerpts from Coghill's translation. Canterbury Pilgrims won Starkie, the narrator, a grammy nomination. It led him to have another go at turning The Tales into a play, this time with music by Hill and Hawkins and lyrics by Coghill.

[It] is the most successful show... that's ever originated at the... Playhouse... There's no other... that's made so much money or been seen by so many people.205

199 She knew Tennessee Williams. ‘When I was... in Entertaining Mr Sloane in New York this shy little man came... and did the adoring fan bit, then he told me who he was and it was my turn to be all bashful.’ OM 20 January 1968.
200 Exeter College's 44-year-old Estates Bursar was an expert on agriculture in developing countries. Who Was Who, 1981-1990. Lady Higgs. Phone interview 3 June 2003. His passion was student drama. He came to Oxford from Cambridge as a postgraduate and helped Coghill with shows. As a lecturer, he started open air plays at Reading University in 1948.
202 The Times 16 December 1967.
205 Starkie. Taped interview, as above. It opened at the Phoenix in March 1968, ran for 2,082 performances, and won the Variety Critics' Award for best musical. It has been on somewhere in the world ever since.

145
ETC staged the British première of Gunter Grass's *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*.

OUDS got David William to direct *Hamlet* with Richard Heffer as Hamlet and Diana Quick as Ophelia.²⁰⁶ Like Hauser William felt Oxford needed a Drama Faculty.

Hauser previewed Enid Bagnold's *Call Me Jacky* with Dame Sybil Thorndike²⁰⁷ for Donald Albery while touring *The Rivals* and *Glass Menagerie*. Hobson called it 'curiously rewarding,'²⁰⁶ I a 'kinky, updated *Heartbreak House*.'

Mrs. Basil could be Hesione Hushabye 50 years on... and Shaw might easily have invented the drunken... cook... But the other characters Mrs Basil's undergraduate grandson... brings down from Oxford... a lesbian... don, a homosexual... and their... partners, mean something quite different by heartbreak.²⁰⁹

Stephen Wall, the don who would become chairman of Meadow Players' successors, Anvil Productions, voiced the view that killed hopes of a transfer.

> It brings back the days of *Chalk Gardens* and *Days By the Sea*, presented by respectful Tennent's, in a theatre where it was always afternoon... It makes you realise afresh the inevitability of Osborne.²¹⁰

*Jacky* ran for two weeks (62 and 47). Volanakis's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* - 'a great deal better than... Devine's for the... Court'²¹¹ - averaged 42.3 with *Menagerie*. Bryden enthused:

> Some of the highest pleasures I've had... have been the... Playhouse's...deeply thought out remountings of important plays which a decade ago... misfired... Last year saw a brilliant... *The Balcony*. An equally fine revival of Brecht's *The Good Woman*... has just closed.²¹²

Norman Vaughan, star of ATV's *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, played Trinculo in Hauser's revival of *The Tempest*.²¹³ The staging impressed me more than the acting.

> The curtain rises on a ghostly galleon ploughing... through faery seas forlorn. Ariel appears in a great mirror... above the stage. At her command the winds begin to blow... Before Prospero's outstretched arms the bows divide to reveal a rocky isle... The action... proceeds. Then at Prospero's behest the bows of the ship come together again... And the ship resumes its journey as he bids us adieu.²¹⁴

²⁰⁶ She became OUDS' first woman president in March. 'When Ophelia is on the stage [it] has real stature... When she is off... it becomes a thing of shreds and patches.' DC OM 14 February 1967.

²⁰⁷ Hauser said at 85 she was too old, 'but couldn't turn down the chance to work for me.' Taped interview, as above. In the cast were Greville Hallam, Heather Chasen, Edward Fox, Sheila Burrell, Paul Eddington, Georgina Ward and Raymond Platt.

²⁰⁸ *Sunday Times* 3 March 1968.

²⁰⁹ OM 28 March 1968.


²¹¹ DC OM 13 March 1968.

²¹² *The Observer* 31 March 1968.

²¹³ David Dodimead was Prospero, Yolande Bavan Ariel, Harold Lang Caliban, Francesca Annis Miranda.

²¹⁴ OM 1 May 1968.
The national critics came the second week when Hauser did Auden’s gloss, The Sea and the Mirror, as a postscript.

From David Dodimead’s wry Prospero to Norman Vaughan’s beanpole Trinculo, the language is handled with measured respect... In Shakespeare their ensemble is not quite so happy.\footnote{Irving Wardle. \textit{The Times} 8 May 1968.}

It sold out, boosting audiences from 62 to 97. It led Hauser to say that next season he would try to crack a ‘harder poetic nut.’\footnote{The Times 18 May 1968.}

The Theatres Act of 1968 should have ended the Vice-Chancellor’s powers with the Lord Chamberlain’s. But parliament failed to repeal Section 22 of the Oxford Police Act, 1881, delaying things by 18 months. Students tackled two plays that term that had vexed the censor. Rosen did Wedekind’s \textit{Spring Awakening} for ETC,\footnote{Rosen had helped Bill Bryden restage \textit{Backbone} at the Court. ‘He has clearly learnt a great deal... Nicky Gurrey and David Freud play the young lovers with impressive sympathy... It is the portrayal of... the boy... by Michael Wood which is the real tour de force.’ DC OM 22 May 1968. Wood would achieve fame as a maker of TV history programmes.} St. Catherine’s Wilde’s \textit{Salome}. OUDS’ \textit{Government Inspector} apart (80), none did well. Hauser ruled out another summer season. Miss Sweeting found herself scratching. Since she won an MBE in 1966, her stature had grown. She was ending a stint on the Arts Council Drama Panel. Her book on theatre administration had become the profession’s bible.\footnote{Theatre Administration. Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1969.}

A chapter on Theatre and University listed departments at Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham, and developments at Exeter, Hull, Lancaster, Sheffield and Southampton. She had less to say about programming. Some dates filled themselves. Only \textit{Ballet For All} (55) more than half-filled the theatre. \textit{Summer} was about to open at the Fortune.\footnote{Romain Weingarten’s play was still running in Paris. Its Gallic whimsy defeated London.} Beatle Paul McCartney came to see his girlfriend, Jane Asher. Oxford stayed away. During the closure from August to mid-September, the Curators resurfaced the stage with a £700 Arts Council grant. Despite the poor box office, they ended with a surplus of £751. Concerned that the accounts allowed nothing for depreciation, the Chest told them to transfer £1,600 to an Equipment Fund, £400 to a Fabric Fund.\footnote{Chest Secretary to Sweeting 30 January 1969. With UTC minutes.}

Hauser began his 13th year with Ben Jonson’s \textit{The Silent Woman} which he had first staged as an undergraduate. \textit{Arms and the Man} followed, the first of three shows by Healey, now Hauser’s associate director. 22-year-old Cambridge graduate Kerry Lee Crabbe became...
his assistant. The 'harder poetic nut' was Browning's *Pippa Passes*. Billington said its first professional airing demolished the 'academic notion' that it was 'unstageable'; Hobson that it had the 'thunder of indisputable drama.' It was too esoteric to transfer. With *Arms*, it toured, ending at the new Northcott Theatre at Exeter University. ETC staged the British première of Jack Gelber's *The Apple*. The future TV personality, Gyles Brandreth, persuaded OUDS to let him revive H.J. Byron's Victorian burlesque, *Cinderella.* Coghill wrote the prologue, which Michael Redgrave recited. Diana Quick followed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company's first venture.

Meadow Players did another outreach show, *The World of Molière*, as a trailer for Michael Bogdanov's revamp of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, The Bootleg Gentleman*. It proved a disastrous Christmas show, averaging less than quarter-full houses. During its run they and Prospect joined the Dramatic and Lyric Theatre Association. Having failed to interest the National or RSC, the Royal Opera House and Sadler's Wells asked them to supply the drama for their DALTA tours. The Arts Council saw it as a godsend. Its worry was no longer failing reps. It was major theatres. The report of the team Hauser served on listed 21 and identified 12 'as the *minimum* requirement of our major cities,' Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, and Oxford. Oxford City Council agreed to give the New Theatre £5,000 a year if a plan to form two companies to own the site and run the theatre went ahead. Such patronage hardly

---

221 As well as helping backstage and playing bit parts at Ipswich Rep, he had directed two plays in its studio. His Ipswich schoolteacher, Stratford's brother, Trevor, suggested him.

222 *The Times* 23 October 1968.

223 *Sunday Times* 27 October 1968.

224 'With student protests... and unrest around the globe, what Oxford need[s is] not more... but something different.' Gyles Brandreth. *Under the Jumper*. London: Robson Books, 1993, p.12.

225 'With the help of Kathy Henderson's delightful settings, Michael Coveney's stunningly simple... choreography, and Nigel Osborne's catchy music... [Brandreth] has produced... a nice mixture of old-fashioned elegance and good fun.' *DC OM* 13 November 1968.

226 Bruce Kerr and Steve Wright acted as couriers to Penn(sylvania) State University Choir's tour of Europe in 1967. It led them to form an Oxbridge drama company to tour the States.

227 Christopher Heywood was Molière, Murray Noble Louis XIV, Ann Sutton and Douglas Fairbanks Jnr.'s daughter, Melissa, their wives and mistresses.

228 Bogdanov wrote the music and lyrics. Bill Wallis headed the cast of 15.

229 'This means we're really joining the Big League. We're up alongside RSC, even though we don't get as much [Arts Council] money.' Spokesman. *OM* 21 January 1969. In 1968-69 they got £50,000, RSC £200,000, though that also subsidised Theatreground.


231 *OM* 5 November 1968. Like other theatres, it became a charity to avoid Selective Employment Tax and qualify for a rate rebate. Oxfordshire County Council gave the new company, Oxford Theatre Productions Ltd., £2,000 a year.
justified Arts Council hopes that local authorities would play a bigger role in funding. In the inflation-hit 1970s it would prove wishful thinking.

Hauser had not had a hit since *The Promise*. He economised by staging fewer plays longer, and reviving *The Tempest*. Healey's *An Enemy of the People* joined *Bootleg Gentleman* in January, opening to 38, rising over three weeks to 55 and supplying the theme for the second schools' contest. Then both toured while the students took over. Though I said Paul Foster's *Tom Paine* embodied 'most of the theatrical mannerisms that have blossomed off-Broadway since the last war,'[232] Ian Small's ETC revival drew 67. Despite a panning from Frank Dibb Richard Stroud's OUDS *Romeo and Juliet* averaged 88.5.[233] The box office fell to 54 for Healey's *Tempest*, improving to 79 and 82 with *The Sea and the Mirror*. The new Prospero, Joseph O'Conor, was Old Jolyon in the BBC television serial, *The Forsyte Saga*. *Uncle Vanya*, boasted a bigger draw: Nyree Dawn Porter, whose Irene Forsyte had made her a star. It averaged 83, then toured. The highlight of summer term was Merlin Thomas's *Le Misanthrope* for the French Club, Maison Française, and OUDS (52). With the Footlights (55), it was the only show to more than half fill the theatre. It closed from August to mid-September. The Curators' report to Congregation remained upbeat.[234] Meadow Players had played 22 weeks (55 per cent), students 14 (64), visiting companies six (37), amateurs two (45). The news that Nyree Dawn Porter would launch Hauser's 14th year as Saint Joan suggested the upturn would continue. Landlord and tenant came to a swift rent agreement based on 40 per cent of takings 'with no minimum or maximum limit.'[235]

Joining DALTA led to a rethink. If Meadow Players toured larger theatres, Stratford said, they should do plays for DALTA, then bring them to Oxford. Simon Hoggart pondered the wisdom of staging *St. Joan* at the Opera House, Manchester.

> From the stalls the stage towers above one, as if the actors were standing at the bottom of a well. From the gods it is like a tiny television screen.[236]

More alarming was the news that DALTA might fold.[237] The company planned three new plays: the Israeli dramatist Nissim Aloni's *The American Princess*, Hauser's *Curtain Up*, and The

---

233 OT 21 February 1969.
234 They had belatedly realised they were supposed to file annual reports.
235 Bamborough to Higgs 2 July 1969. With UTC minutes.
Signalman's Apprentice. Despite good performances by Grout and Gordon Jackson a good set and a chilling theme, Brian Phelan's first play averaged only 22.

A young apprentice... played with great menace by Neil McLauglan, arrives... and gradually we piece together the true situation. The Beeching axe has fallen but for some reason... the British Rail broom has never swept up.238

Healey's The Miser joined St. Joan in repertoire, rising from 69 to 91. I dismissed student James Pettifer's first play, The Blood on the Marsh is No Reflection of My Red Coat (ETC 51) as 'in the same... lifeless mould as so many... Expressionist plays.'239 Dibb slated Jonathan Miller's Twelfth Night (Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company 99) for 'muting and nullifying the poetry and coarsening and flattening the comedy.'240 Curtain Up, in which Diana Quick made her professional debut, followed the pattern of previous outreach work.

Built round a forthcoming production of Macbeth... Crabbe... shows what efficient use may be made of a shoestring budget, and there is a most effective performance by Nicholas Amer [as] the director... Diana Quick makes a very sympathetic stage manager.241

Healey toured with Peer Gynt, which provided the theme for the schools contest, Theatre 69. It had choreography by Leo Kharibian, music by Michael Dress and a cast of 25 headed by Lewis Fiander. Bryden called him 'a young actor of... enormous sweetness... The role's a bit much for him yet... But he gives genuine manic elation to Peer's fantasies.'242 There was no hope of recouping the outlay. 'The collapse of DALTA' meant they would end the year £3,000 deeper in debt instead of £2,000 up.243

A £19,000 overdraft forced another rethink. Hauser decided to concentrate his output between September and January.244 The Curators liked the idea of more visiting companies, but worried how they would find the ‘£1,000-£1,200’ a week guarantee Meadow Players asked for on tour,245 the students wanted more weeks in autumn, not spring and summer when they faced examinations. Student director Andy Samuels said Hauser's aims stank of 'commercial greed.'246 The clubs made the same point more tactfully.247 The Times

238 DC OM 22 October 1969.
239 OM 5 November 1969.
242 The Observer 14 December 1969.
244 Bamborough to Higgs 24 November 1969. With UTC minutes.
245 58th UTC meeting 4 December 1969, minute 390 (b).
246 TC 4 February 1970.
247 The first need was 'a more varied' programme; the second a 'company of high quality playing in repertoire throughout the season.' Report to JMC 4 February 1970.
commented: 'The militants do not help their case with cries of "Get Frank out."' They agreed to continue sharing the autumn, but the company would play the first half of spring term. Soon after, the Arts Council took DALTA under its wing and appointed Jack Phipps to run it. It seemed the ideal solution. 'What we didn't know was that Arts Council Touring and Arts Council Drama Department were daggers drawn.'

Crabbe's *Toad of Toad Hall* with Bill Wallis as Toad (65) joined *Peer Gynt* (51), then ran in repertoire, averaging 64. While the Curators awaited the cash for the Burton-Taylor Building, another project made news. The Samuel Beckett Theatre was the idea of Francis Warner, an English don at St. Peter's College. He got the dramatist to lend his name to an 115-seat studio in the basement of a new student block, the architect, Buckminster Fuller, to design what became a 250-seat ‘submarine’ under the quadrangle, big names ranging from Henry Moore to Pinter to help raise the £270,000 it would cost.

Meadow Players began 1970 with Volanakis's revival of *The Blacks*. Bryden said the Genet 'should have dated with the passing of colonialism.' Instead it seemed more topical.

Ten years ago, when the play was first produced at the... Court, there weren’t enough competent black actors... to put it over. That’s no longer true. Volanakis has mustered a cast which generates... as much power as... when I first saw it... in the West Indies.

It went to The Round House, then visited Rome, Antwerp, The Hague, Brussels, and Ostend: the company’s first trip abroad in eleven years. The company manager gave the cast unsigned for advances on their salaries with the result that a production which should have eased the overdraft made a loss of £935.

The first student offering was Merlin Thomas’s *Andromaque*. A French set-book drew 95, compared to *The Blacks* 39 and 51. Constance Cummings and Benn Levy’s son, P.H.S. *The Times* 16 February 1970.

Stratford. Taped interview, as above.

OM 10 November 1969.


*The Observer* 1 February 1970.


MPB meeting 16 February 1971.
Jonathan, managed 41 with Edward Bond's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* for ETC, director Clifford Williams 58 with Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* for OUDS. Their President, Ian Small, protested:

> We tried to find out what plans... Meadow Players had... but were provided merely with possibilities. We were... in the invidious position of having to deny... Williams certain plays... on the off-chance that these would be... in [their] programme.

What is more, the company planned to duplicate a student production of Sartre's *In Camera*. It resulted from the collapse of *American Princess*.

Healey had left for television. Hauser got Crabbe to revive *In Camera* with Ian Hendry, Joanna Dunham and Barbara Young. He directed the curtain-raiser, Chekhov's *The Bear*. During the run Francis Warner staged *A Beckett Evening* for his theatre, now forecast to cost £350,000. The Playhouse benefited for the first time from the Arts Council's new touring policy. The Young Vic brought *The Cheats of Scapino* and *Waiting For Godot*, RSC's Theatreground *Dr. Faustus*. Both drew 64. Miss Sweeting had no difficulty finding shows for the summer, but even Ballet for All less than half-filled the theatre. More alarming were the small audiences for two prestige shows. Meadow Players drew 27 per cent for their week of recitals, Richard Pilbrow eleven for Stanley Eveling's *Mister*. The theatre closed from August to mid-September. The theatre lost £3,100 in 1969/70, bringing the total deficit to £6,371. Curators blamed £2,500 for depreciation, 'decline in income,' and increases in technicians' wages. The Chest bailed them out with £7,000.

Hauser's version of Sartre's *Kean* (68) had its première in September. At last he had another hit and a star vehicle to please DALTA audiences. My review set the pattern for critics who flocked to the national press night.

__With that virtuoso actor, Alan Badel, in the title role... [it] makes the perfect start__

---

255 Levy managed to obtain the production rights for ETC and borrowed the Court costumes.  
256 Letter to JMC 4 February 1970.  
257 Charles Lewsen's *How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear*, the singer, Jake Thackray; *Shakespeare and the Golden Age*, a recital of verse and music by Sheila Hancock, Eric Hope, and John Justin; *The Bible Translated* with Pinter and Janet Suzman; and *Mainly Victorian*, words and music by Venetia Barratt, Katharina Wolpe, and Edward Woodward.  
258 63rd UTC meeting 5 November 1970, minute 425.  
259 65th UTC meeting 11 February 1971, minute 443 (1).  
260 Stratford found a copy in Blackwell's. Hauser felt it would cost too much, the version was poor, and it needed a star. When he learnt Alan Badel wanted to do it, his doubts deepened. With the help of Merlin Thomas he revamped act one. Badel said: 'You've got to cut far more than that!' Hauser's doubts evaporated. Felicity Kendal helped. 'She was the only person who wasn't afraid of Alan.' Taped interview, as above.

152
to the... company's 15th season... Felicity Kendal is stunningly effective as the no-
nonsense Anne Danby and one suspects... it is her superbly timed... performance
which provides the counterbalance to... Badel's... pyrotechnic display.261

Philip Hope-Wallace enthused: 'Kean is a collector's piece.'262 Crabbe's revival of Juno and
the Paycock (50) opened at Southampton, then played in repertoire. Together they drew 59,
67 and 84. Hauser followed Alan Badel as Kean with Badel as Othello.263 It opened to 85, drew
98 with Kean, 96 in its final week. Then they left on tour. After calling Othello 'a run-of-
the-boards set text,'264 Robin Thornber said of Kean: 'This is what DALTA should be doing.'265

ETC began the autumn term with the British premiere of Brecht's Turandot or The
Whitewashers Congress (70). OUDS did Three Sisters (83), Miller Hamlet for the Oxford
and Cambridge Shakespeare Company (99) with Hugh Thomas 'exuding intelligence in every
gesture'266 as the Prince. A programme insert detailed the proposed improvements.267 It was
November before the first £30,000 arrived and the university felt confident enough to
thank the Burtons for their generosity - a good time for Higgs to say he was leaving.268 His
successor, the Provost of Oriel, Dr. K(enneth) C. Turpin, inherited two problems: getting
the estate agents who leased No. 13 to leave and signing a new lease with Meadow Players.
When they met in February 1971, Bamborough dropped a bombshell. They might leave. As
touring was more profitable, 'sentiment might give way to commerce.'269 They were hoping to
make the New Theatre their base.270 Miss Sweeting said the Arts Council felt that Meadow
Players had 'outgrown the Playhouse.'271

The Christmas show was Kharibian's version of The Owl and the Pussycat Went to
See... It averaged 58.25 and provided the theme for Theatre 70, now shrunk to a display of

261 OM 9 September 1970.
263 Joanna Dunham was Desdemona, Maggie Jones Emilia, Lee Montague Iago. Kean built to a
climax during the last act of Othello. It was too much to ask Badel to switch from the
posturing of Sartre to the tragic mantle of Shakespeare.
266 DC OM 17 November 1970.
267 Martin Card's feasibility study for 11-13 Beaumont St. involved the company giving up
their offices in 11 and 12, relocating a BBC radio studio, and reaching agreement with E.J.
268 To take up a post with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation. Note 16 December 1970.
269 66th UTC meeting 11 March 1971, minute 442.
270 The Arts Council inquiry convinced Hauser the future lay in larger scale shows. He hoped
the Council would back his move as a way of helping the New Theatre.
work by 31 children. Hauser ended the year with a rare television appearance, interviewing Dame Sybil Thorndike. His main concern was transferring Kean. It had a further fortnight in Oxford before it opened at the Globe. The first production of 1971 was Crabbe’s The Merry Wives of Windsor with John Rhys-Davies as Falstaff. After averaging 48, it toured. DALTA extended the run from ten to 18 weeks. Crabbe had to mount a second production. Robert Bolt’s A Man For All Seasons opened in Liverpool, then toured with Merry Wives to mediocre reviews. He decided it was time to move on.

Preoccupied with Kean, Hauser gave less help than he should have done to his deputy. But he could not have chosen a worse moment to upset the Arts Council. Without more cash from the Treasury it could not fund DALTA as it wanted and faced a string of complaints from disgruntled companies. Hauser had been led to expect ‘£75,000 by 1971.’ In March he learnt he would get £57,500 with no guarantees for touring. The Council had lost faith in its pin-up director. Howard and Wyndham’s purchase of the New ended his hopes of moving there. He agreed to play 16 weeks at the Playhouse at a rent of £12,500 and found a base lower down George Street at the Old Fire Station, where he could concentrate activities under one roof.

Christ Church and the Opera Club began 1971 with The Marriage of Figaro (91). ETC did Nekropolis, ‘a kind of modern miracle play’ (38), Stephen Wall OUDS’ Coriolanus (54.5). The highlights were two Sunday shows and the première of Pinter’s Old Times. In summer term one director who would turn professional, David Snodin, directed Ghosts for

272 Merry Wives took only £900 at Manchester against nearly £6,000 for Kean and Othello. Peter Barrington. OT 14 July 1972.
273 Brian Dickie, Glyndebourne Touring administrator: ‘We have a deficit of £17,000 already... This year... will cost us £146,000.’ Liverpool Daily Post 12 February 1971.
274 Hauser. Why the Playhouse is so nervous about the future... OM 1 October 1971.
275 In effect it was a cut of £11,000 when actors’ wages alone had risen by £7,000. As above.
276 68th UTC meeting 10 June 1971, minute 451.
277 ‘One engine room for [scene] painting, one for rehearsals, and offices... [the] perfect base for a touring company.’ Stratford. Taped interview, as above.
278 Andrew Hutton. OM 20 February 1971.
279 He cast the president elect in the title role. ‘The trouble with Charles Sturridge is that he is never more than an impetuous youth.’ DC OM 3 March 1971.
280 Alan Bennett staged The Dirty Nurse, a benefit for the Oxford & Cambridge Shakespeare Company, with Prunella Scales, Patrick Garland, and Michael Block. Warner got Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault, who were bringing Rabelais to the Round House, to give a performance of Beckett’s Oh, Les Beaux Jours (Happy Days) in aid of his appeal.
281 Peter Hall’s production with Dorothy Tutin, Vivien Merchant and Colin Blakely drew full houses, then toured Cambridge, Guildford and Nottingham on its way to the Aldwych.
OUDS(62); another, Elijah Moshinsky, *Measure For Measure* for ETC(44). The Cambridge Theatre Company brought *Hay Fever* (45), The 69 Theatre Company Paul Ableman’s *Green Julia* (33). Wamer gave the few who bothered to go a preview of his play, *Lying Figures* (19), which he was taking to the Edinburgh Festival. The highlight was the première of Simon Gray’s *Butley* (87). The success of *Old Times* prompted the producer, Codron, and director, Pinter, to air it in Oxford before it opened at the Criterion. Miss Sweeting looked back on a good year, though costs had ‘mounted steadily,’ and forward to the Burton-Taylor extension in 1972. It gave her the excuse for another programme insert.

*Kean* gave Meadow Players the excuse for another brochure. Badel, on the cover, was still drawing full houses at the Globe. With LEA and Arts Council backing they were setting up a theatre-in-education TEAM to tour the southern region. Even so, Britain’s economic crisis made Hauser pessimistic. He got Phyllis Calvert, Michael Gwynn and Lee Montague for *The Cherry Orchard*. It opened at Leeds. Volanakis took advantage of the Lord Chamberlain’s demise to produce a bawdier version of Aristophanes’ *A Diet of Women*. The Musicians Union banned Sadler’s Wells from staging it because of its agreement with West End managers to use live music. Composer Yannis Markopoulos employed Greek instruments, for which it was impossible to find players. Stratford offered to employ an orchestra but not use it. The MU said that ‘was immoral.’ The ban cost Meadow Players £2,000, Sadler’s Wells £3,000.

*Cherry Orchard* got a tepid reception at Oxford (51, 47 and 46), *Diet* a bad press at Cambridge. People walked out at Liverpool. Hauser said:

> It was better when there was a Lord Chamberlain... Minos went wild and had ‘fucks’ and ‘shits’ all over the place.

It continued to delight and infuriate in Oxford (55 and 54). Miller drew sell-out houses for

---

282 The Australian graduate directed several shows at Melbourne University. ‘He has been... shattered... by the cavalier approach... undergraduates adopt here.’ *OM* 22 May 1971.

283 He hired the theatre for £500 and a Toronto millionaire financed the production.

284 *OM* 28 August 1971. With the Chest’s £7,000 she showed a profit of almost £6,000. Late-night shows, Sunday performances, lunchtime concerts and exhibitions boosted takings, but ‘stretched... resources... to the limit.’ 1970-71 Annual Report. With 69th UTC meeting minutes 28 October 1971.

285 ‘A government which closes Rolls Royce and Upper Clyde Shipbuilders is not going to grieve too much about the fate of a provincial rep.’ *OM* 1 October 1971.

286 Taped interview, as above.


288 Taped interview, as above. Judd said it lost £4,000 at Liverpool. MPB meeting 20 October 1971.
his Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company Julius Caesar. Sturridge demonstrated his promise as a director with Hugh Thomas's version of Hard Times (76) for ETC. The Opera Club premièred Stephen Oliver's Duchess of Malfi (40) - the 21-year-old graduate's ninth opera. Meadow Players toured with Colette by Elinor Jones, music and lyrics by the authors of the The Fantasticks, Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones. Its star, Fenella Fielding, drew the critics, but not the public (40 and 37). TEAM's first show, Victoria And Her Men or Dizzy's Faery, did not reach Oxford, ending a schools' tour at Thame.

Stratford had been begging Hauser in vain to write a pantomime. The financial crisis forced him to reconsider. Kharibian directed Aladdin, Alix Stone was the designer. It opened to 62, dipped to 56, then drew 86 and 71, ending with a fortnight at Southampton. Edgar Wreford directed Romeo and Juliet with Felicity Kendal and Terence Wilton. Wardle called it 'an examination revival infected with classroom boredom.' Even so, it drew 45, 70 and 75, then embarked on a profitable tour. Robbins left to become Arts Council Touring's PRO. After visiting Swindon's new civic theatre, the Wyvern, with Space Mission TEAM folded. Nursing a £26,000 deficit Meadow Players gave up their final week to OUDS. Phipps had £500,000 to run DALTA, but they no longer commanded a share. Prospect's Toby Robertson, who talked of touring, not with one company, but three, had supplant Hauser as the Arts Council's golden boy.

Sir Hugh Willatt said he must do more lucrative plays or retrench. Bamborough and Merlin Thomas lobbied him to no avail. In 1972-73 they would receive £34,000, plus £23,500 towards the deficit. When Miss Sweeting returned from chairing a conference in

---

280 It opened off Broadway in 1970 with Zöe Caldwell as the French writer. Fenella Fielding took over. Tony Tanner, now living in the States, offered to stage the British première.
281 Where Lady Longford, on whose biography, Victoria RI, it was based, saw it. OM 16 December 1971.
282 MPB meeting 30 September 1971, minute 3. Despite Kean, which ran 300 performances, led the Variety Club to name Badel Stage Actor of the Year, and critics Felicity Kendal The Most Promising Young Actress, DALTA losses hit the company hard. It needed £23,000 to meet its deficit before A Diet of Women lost £4,000 at Liverpool.
283 The Times 21 January 1972.
285 Letter with minutes of MPB meeting 6 March 1972. Bamborough said it was unreasonable to ask them to wipe out a loss 'accumulated over several years,' (MPB meeting 14 April 1972, minute 6). The Council's deputy drama director, Dennis Andrews, said £34,000 was as much as some companies received altogether, and future grants might be less 'because of the change in role... from... a national touring company to... a regional rep.'
286 MPB meeting 24 May 1972, minute 5.
Adelaide, the Deputy Drama Director, Dennis Andrews, informed her it should be enough for nine weeks in Oxford and eight for Southern Arts. Hauser had his own plans. Meanwhile, the deficit led the County to transfer the £2,000 grant it had given the New before Howard and Wyndham took over, and the City to follow suit, raising their subsidy to £6,000.

The students began 1972 with five weeks of frenetic activity including four late night shows. Paul Burge did OUDS' Macbeth (71.5) with Sturridge and Joanna Jane Powell, Moshinsky ETC's Oedipus (65). Dibb found Mike Baker's late night airing of The Three Cuckolds more rewarding. I warmed to University College and Wadham's première of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (48). Theatre Company paid its first visit with Plugged Into History, the Welsh National Theatre with Feydeau's A Pig In A Poke. Neither did well. The University Gilbert and Sullivan Society made its debut in summer term with The Yeomen of the Guard (63). OUDS did Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead (87), ETC its most ambitious show since Hang Down Your Head.

Lord Widgery rejected an appeal by Oz magazine, whose School Kids issue was judged obscene. Rhodes Scholar and future QC, Geoffrey Robertson, edited the transcripts and two productions took place: one off Broadway, the other at the Playhouse (47). Faynia Williams, a postgraduate at St. Antony's, directed. Most lucrative was Hugh Thomas's The Importance of Being Earnest for Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company (78). It proved there was an audience in summer for the right product. Hauser unveiled his plan to tap it: a festival. He struck a deal to do eleven weeks in 1972-73 at a rent of £840; then five between July 30 and September 2 at £600; and 15 between September and January at £800. The

---

296 'We expect that the Board will take this opportunity of studying afresh the needs of Oxford and the region.' Andrews to Sweeting 19 May 1972. His letter formed para. 1 (a) of a paper on Meadow Players with 73rd UTC meeting minutes 11 May 1972.

297 OT 16 June 1972.

298 'Despite its success on Broadway, [it] doesn't seem the most likely fare for an English audience. But if any professional directors see Andy Lipman's production ...they might well change their minds.' OM 8 March 1972.

299 'Mel Smith makes [the] mistake [of sending] up the... excerpts from Shakespeare... Otherwise the direction is strong.' DC OM 17 May 1972.


301 After leaving London University, she went to RADA, then spent six years as an actress.

302 OM 19 August 1972.

303 The university was keen to charge £900 from August 1973. The theatre was in the red by £392 and needed a new lighting board. 76th UTC meeting 30 November 1972, minute 504. Pressed by the Arts Council, they accepted a summer rent of £600 and cut that for 1973-74 to £800.
Playhouse closed for 12 weeks for work on the extension. Negotiations with the estate agents had failed. They would stay in No. 13, meaning a smaller workshop, but the Curators could extend the foyer into Nos. 11 & 12, have a new box office, ladies' lavatory and coffee bar. Inflation had increased the cost to £150,000. Coghill said Burton would give another £30,000. With £20,000 from the Workshop Appeal and £5,000 interest it should be enough.

Hauser said it was 'almost certain' he would begin his 17th year with Dr. Knock. He had made a new version. Rex Harrison would head the cast and Bernard Delfont bankroll it. It came to nothing and he turned to his version of Molière's The Misanthrope (35, 67, 69). Billington said it was the best he had seen. Robert Brustein dismissed it as tawdry. The Dean of Yale Drama School came to England in search of the repertory movement, which had 'influenced the shape and substance of theatres throughout the world,' and failed to find it at Nottingham or Cambridge either. 'What I am still seeking is a theatre willing to risk its existence in order to advance its frontiers.'

OUDS did Peter Barnes' The Ruling Class (56), Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company As You Like It (96). The most ambitious offering was ETC's West Side Story (77). While playing Amiens Jim Wingate rehearsed the cast of 70. The National Theatre ended the pre-Christmas shows with a sell-out performance of 'Tis Pity She's A Whore. Hauser turned to Perrault's Sleeping Beauty for his second panto, relying on much the same team as before. After averaging 66.5 it went to Southampton, leaving Miss Sweeting four weeks to fill before the first student show of 1973. The highlight was Roy Dotrice in John Aubrey's Brief Lives. Merlin Thomas marked the 300th anniversary of Molière's death with Tartuffe (60). OUDS' second woman president, Joanna Jane Powell, was Hermione in The Winter's Tale (80). Jane Glover revived Cavalli's little-known Rosinda for the Opera Club.

Having cleared his deficit, Hauser asked the Arts Council for £75,000 in 1973-74. He said:

The Arts Council ultimatum may turn out to have been a blessing in disguise. Grants

---

304 Special UTC meeting 20 June 1972, minute 2.
305 75th UTC meeting 2 November 1972, minutes 497 and 498.
306 MPB meetings 14 April 1972, minute 8, and 22 June 1972, minute 7.
308 The Observer 29 October 1972.

158
have remained the same, but costs have shot up alarmingly... We may be one of the few... to start the next financial year with a clean balance sheet.\textsuperscript{309}

The Council offered £50,000. Local bodies should supply the rest. Bamborough told Turpin:

The major factor... is the size of the 'catchment' area... the Arts Council is... taking the view that companies should regard whatever... they receive... as a contribution.\textsuperscript{310}

The City and County could not increase their aid before local government reorganisation. The university refused, and Curators would not back an appeal to the Arts Council.\textsuperscript{311} Bamborough informed its chairman, Patrick Gibson, without extra money Hauser would resign and 'the directors would probably dissolve the company'.\textsuperscript{312} Andrews said the Arts Council did not want to drive them out of business. The situation arose from 'the general drama policy, which was aimed at phasing out touring companies'.\textsuperscript{313} The board decided to wind up Meadow Players at the end of 1973-74. Their last play of 1972-73 was Eric Chappell’s \textit{The Banana Box}, a tryout for Leon Gluckman. David Scase directed. Leonard Rossiter was the meddling landlord. It went to Hampstead in May and the Apollo Theatre in June, resurfacing as \textit{Rising Damp}, the TV sitcom that won Chappell a BAFTA award.\textsuperscript{314}

Hauser announced Meadow Players’ demise at his festival press conference. The Arts Council accepted with regret: his efforts had ‘become part of British theatre history’.\textsuperscript{315}

Public reaction was muted. I said ‘the Arts Council must be rubbing their hands with glee.’\textsuperscript{316}

Barber commented:

Shunting... ‘civic reps’ round... larger theatres, has proved disastrous... There is some truth in... Hauser’s [claim] ‘that Birmingham will get a bigger grant... because Birmingham has a bigger percentage of people who don’t go to the theatre...’ My own associations... suggest... Oxford would... like a young director... who would... involve both town and gown... One visualises... a team who, if they did think of reviving \textit{Saint Joan}, would never dream of giving the role to Nyree Dawn Porter.\textsuperscript{317}

The City’s efforts to involve the dons in a rescue only heightened the divisions.

We had Coun. Mrs Patsy Yardley urging members to invite the Arts Council to [a] meeting... her husband, [Curator] Coun. David Yardley, saying... the university was

\begin{tabular}{l}
\textsuperscript{309} \textit{OM} 23 February 1973. \\
\textsuperscript{310} Letter 28 November 1972. With 75th UTC meeting minutes 2 November 1972. \\
\textsuperscript{311} 76th UTC meeting 30 November 1972, minute 505 (c). \\
\textsuperscript{312} MPB meeting 2 March 1973, minute 3. \\
\textsuperscript{313} As above, minute 4. \\
\textsuperscript{314} \textit{Chappell... trades on our... preconceptions about people of different races, background, and... outlook to tickle us into a laugh... It is bound to become... Rossiter’s play. He seems to know every frayed nerve-end, tic, grimace and warped passion welling up in the breast of the downtrodden social outcast.’ DC \textit{OM} 21 March 1973. \\
\textsuperscript{315} \textit{OM} 3 April 1973. \\
\textsuperscript{316} \textit{OM} 14 April 1973. \\
\textsuperscript{317} \textit{Daily Telegraph} 23 April 1973.
\end{tabular}
[negotiating] with three other companies... It does look as if the university is doing its best to batten down the coffin lid on the still breathing corpse.318

Curators informed councillors that they had accepted Meadow Players’ notice and were considering who should succeed them. Councillors replied they must involve them if they wanted their backing. As the news sank in, Hauser became increasingly bitter. He knew a faction thought his plays bourgeois. He failed to realise how badly his dalliance with the New Theatre had eroded his position. Thanking Meadow Players ‘for their long service,’319 Curators looked forward to a company whose shows would be ‘more evenly spread’ and would provide a more varied programme now ‘the New... was concentrating on pop concerts and films.’320 That spring they did. The highlight was Alan Bennett’s Habeas Corpus with a star cast led by Sir Alec Guinness. Codron’s company rehearsed in Holy Week, then drew sell-out houses for a fortnight before Ronald Eyre’s production opened at the Lyric.

OUDS president Mel Smith did Iolanthe for the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Oriel, Merton and Wadham got a new song from Sandy Wilson for their 20th birthday revival of The Boy Friend. Polka drew 85 for their daytime children’s shows, the Footlights 68 at night, making it the most lucrative week in Playhouse history. Catering and Habeas Corpus profits resulted in a £6,374 surplus. The theatre closed in July to install a new switchboard. A subcommittee chose Hauser’s successor from a short list of three. Though they did not name him until the autumn,321 they felt Gordon McDougall offered the best approach.322 He was 32 and about to become visiting drama professor at Waterloo, Ontario.323 At Christmas he flew back to outline his plans. Anvil Productions hoped to have a company of 15. They would do six or seven shows during their 18-20 weeks at Oxford and visit Southampton, Brighton and Swindon. They would also provide late-night shows, workshops and theatre-in-education.

It will need... backing from every... source and in particular from the local

319 79th UTC meeting 17 May 1973, minute 527 (a).
320 As above, minute 527 (b).
321 Neither unsuccessful candidate recalled the occasion. Cottrell guessed it was an effort to escape the touring that made running Cambridge TC taxing (Taped interview, as above), Giles Havergal a way of giving Glasgow Citizens a southern base. Phone call 23 January 2003.
322 Report with 80th UTC meeting minutes 14 June 1973, para 7. A Southern Arts region company was ‘preferable’ to one serving ‘Oxford and Glasgow, or Oxford and Cambridge.’
323 After leaving Cambridge in 1963 he worked for Granada Television in Manchester until 1966 with spells as Havergal’s associate at Barrow-in-Furness, and Devine’s at the Court. From 1966-68 he was director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, then returned to Granada to set up the Stables Theatre to promote cross-fertilisation with television.

160
authorities, whose... assistance... has previously been only one fifth of that given by the Arts Council.324

In a Britain racked by unrest, fuel shortages and a three-day week it was wishful thinking.

The City marked the festival with a reception. Backstage the air was frostier. What hurt most was the Curators allowing the company only twelve programmes for each show. Stratford had to buy copies for critics and VIPs.325 Hauser felt The Merchant of Venice had suffered from sentimentalising Shylock. McKern, who played him, agreed.

To throw shadows of a deeper black around his villain... Hauser has done two things... The first is to make all his comic characters as comic as possible... Goolden’s Old Gobbo is worth the journey to Oxford alone... The second... to darken the characters of Antonio [John Turner] and his most intimate cronies (all rather older than usual) so that they can edge the Jew still further into the murk... Bassanio (Philip Voss)... can’t look Antonio in the face when he mutters his news about the rich lady in Belmont... The trial scene goes especially well with Barbara Jefford's Portia, once again unaccustomedly mature, working hard at being mannish... The play naturally ends in gales of laughter.326

The inclusion in the hand-picked cast of Goolden enabled the company to steal a march on the Curators’ plans to mark the Playhouse’s golden jubilee in October.327 A souvenir programme told the story of The Professional Theatre Company in Oxford 1923-1973. Hauser’s revival opened at Southampton, then played Cambridge, giving Wreford a month to rehearse Dear Brutus. Though Shorter feared Barrie’s play no longer ‘cast the spell’328 which won it its reputation in 1917, critics gave it a warm welcome too.

Fascinating to sense, even on a fearfully hot night, a large audience... knit in the last act... into that special silence which signals a theatrical spell at work in no matter how faded an idiom.329

The final play was The Wolf by the Hungarian dramatist, Ferenc Molnar. His widow made one condition when she let Hauser stage the British première. He and his ex-assistant, Henric Hirsch, must use Molnar’s title.330 The Merchant drew 80 the first fortnight, 51, 59

325 MPB 17 August 1973, minutes 4 and 5.
327 Learning the festival would include Dear Brutus, he offered to play Lob and accepted Old Gobbo too. ‘I don’t usually work in the provinces nowadays, but I felt, having been in at the birth, that I would like to be in at the death.’ DC OM 30 July 1973.
330 When Hauser told Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray’s lodger, Gladys Boot, he wanted to revive The Guardsman, she produced a copy of Molnar’s works with the version of The Wolf David Belasco first staged in New York in 1914 as The Phantom Rival.
and 50 with *Dear Brutus*, dropping to 42 and 37 the final weeks. *The Wolf* sent the box office soaring again, opening to 63, drawing 73, 77, 82 and 83 in repertoire, then a solo 97.

Why it should have had to wait from 1911... for its first production in Great Britain must remain one of life's mysteries... Hirsch and... Hauser have come up with a... version that catches exactly the sardonic, tongue-in-cheek charm.... Alix Stone has designed some settings and costumes which suggest most elegantly the style of pre-First World War Hungary... Hauser has directed it with all the brilliance he can bring... and the cast have a field day.... Essentially it is a vehicle for stars. For the perpetually erupting volcano of anger, jealousy and frustration that... McKern turns the lawyer, Kelemen, into. For the captivating vision of homely wife and all things to all men that Judi Dench makes of Vilma. ... Above all for four romantic projections of the shy office manager... as soldier, diplomat, artist and nobody... Edward Woodward has such fun with.\(^3\)**31

It transferred to the Apollo Theatre in October. Arthur Thirkell hailed it as one of the 'most glittering comedies to grace the London stage.'\(^3\)**32

Judi Dench was chair of The Festival of British Theatre. The play the company took to Southampton, Croydon and Hull, was not such a good advertisement for it. After failing to get Harrison or Badel for *Knock*, Hauser asked Alfred Burke. It was a mistake. 'Alfie Burke was not a funny man.'\(^3\)**33

[Volanakis] makes... Burke play [Dr. Knock] as a managing director in a white coat... One is longing all the time... for the... battery of twitches, frothing enthusiasm and... menace that... Leonard Rossiter would have brought.\(^3\)**34

In six weeks the production lost most of the 13-week festival's profits.\(^3\)**35

The Curators got Gyles Brandreth to organise their jubilee gala, Dame Flora Robson and Sir John Gielgud to cut the cake at a champagne party. They hoped to begin work on the building it was in aid of in December. Burton's solicitors had supplied 65,000 dollars and promised another £35,000, bringing the total to £100,000. Hopes of more evaporated.\(^3\)**36

Coghill told the Registrar some friends were keen to establish a professorship of drama.\(^3\)**37

When Curators realised it might divert funds from the Burton-Taylor Building their

\(^{331}\) DC OM 5 September 1973.
\(^{333}\) Hauser. Taped interview. Romain's widow blamed Granville Barker's version, now out of copyright, for it not enjoying the same success in Britain as in Paris. Programme note.
\(^{334}\) DC OM 17 October 1973.
\(^{335}\) MPB meeting 26 October 1973, minute 4.
\(^{336}\) 81st UTC meeting 1 November 1973, minute 536.
interest waned. They adopted YPA and the Playhouse Company Club. There was no question of McDougall inheriting Meadow Players' assets. Betty Robbins and her daughter bought the costumes and started a hire service at the Old Fire Station, which became the new Oxford Area Arts Council's headquarters; Nolan the workshop equipment and freelanced from Eynsham. Stratford became administrator of Nottingham Playhouse. Delfont compounded the royalties of *The Wolf* at £1,500 so Meadow Players could wind up 'solvent.' In fact, it took two years to complete what should have been a formality.

When Frank started Richard Burton lent him £2,000. [Burton's attorney, Frosch] maintained that this was repayable... Eventually our accountants... found [a] formula. The company's final show was *Cinderella*. Some thought the hit number, *Australia*, was Hauser's two-fingered salute to Miss Sweeting. In 1974 she would return to Adelaide as a centenary professor. Actually, Betty Benfield, who sang it, was Australian. I said Hauser's 17-year regime was like a surreal version, 'with the Playhouse as Cinderella, the Arts Council and university [as] fairy-godmother, and Hauser playing Buttons, sometimes Baron Hardup, but mostly Prince Charming.'

A list of the famous players he has tempted to Oxford... gives some idea of his achievement. So does a list of the productions... But the real reason... Sir Hugh Willatt, the Director-General of the Arts Council, said few men had done more... in the last 20 years was because he devised a system of repertory... other companies were glad to follow. He proved you could present exciting actors in exciting productions outside the West End. His more loyal supporters would... say his career... started to go wrong when his fairy godmothers [began having] designs on the roles of the Ugly Sisters.

His departure prompted the biggest celebration in the theatre's history. Hauser walked into the auditorium 'expecting a bit of a singsong,' to find an audience 'packed with stars... [who] gave him a standing ovation.' It ended with *The Wolf* cast singing *Frank's For the Memory*. Then everybody flocked to the Old Fire Station for a party. Judi Dench said:

> It's Oxford's loss, of course. But in a sense it's the theatre's gain. In my view he's been too loyal... It's time he shared himself round a little bit more.

The following Christmas he reprised *Cinderella* at the London Coliseum with Twiggy. He

---

338 82nd UTC meeting 29 November 1973, minute 549.
339 Working first for Richard Eyre, then Geoffrey Reeves.
340 Board meeting 1 February 1974, minute 5.
341 Bamborough. Taped interview, as above.
343 DC OM 21 January 1974.
spent several summers teaching at California University, Davis. He directed plays at Chichester. Sadly, few other companies took advantage of his talents.

Hauser had a lot in common with Fagan. Both took a keen interest in European drama. Both were acute businessmen. Both saw the commercial theatre as a way of underwriting upmarket programmes. Both could be cavalier in the way they ran their companies. The Arts Council provided Hauser with a more enduring form of subsidy than the Carnegie Trust had Fagan, and the takeover of the Playhouse by the university relieved him of the problems of running it. But despite the growth of the car industry Oxford was still not large enough to support an 'art' theatre. As the company’s marketing survey proved, dons and students were less avid patrons than the local populace. And those who did take an interest had their own agendas. So long as the Arts Council acted as a buffer between Hauser and the university they coexisted as uneasy bedfellows. Once the Arts Council's touring policy failed and he fell from grace his critics seized their chance to oust him.

His regime coincided with the new wave of British drama, but it is doubtful if his preference for 'uncommitted drama' made much difference. While he won acclaim for *A Passage to India, The Promise* and *Kean*, Volanakis struggled to interest audiences in Greek tragedy, Brecht and Genet. A drama faculty might have helped. The majority of dons remained hostile. They were only just waking up to the fact that gown no longer ruled town and, despite 12 years running their own theatre, most had no idea what it entailed. It would make life difficult for his successors. It would prove a nightmare when financial straits forced the university to give up the theatre.
Anvil Productions (1974-87)

Frank Hauser 'departed under a glittering cloud' at the beginning of 1974, and a few months later 'another young man in his early thirties burst upon the scene brimming with enthusiasm and ideas,' just as he had done in 1956.

In some ways Gordon McDougall was better equipped for the task... He found in Nicolas Kent a fellow director whose approach to the theatre counterbalanced his own and gave Anvil Productions a broader cultural base. In others... it seemed... the authorities had needlessly tied one hand behind his back by jettisoning every relic of the Hauser regime.¹

Keble English don, Stephen Wall, Prof. Harold Baldry of Southampton University, Swindon's arts and recreation supremo, Denys Hodson, and Robert Weir, the chairman of Oxfordshire County Council, became directors;² Alwyn Scrase Dickins of Warwick University secretary, David Aukin administrator;³ Nicola Russell, later RSC's head of publicity at Stratford, PRO.

Anvil faced the same problem as Meadow Players: lack of cash. McDougall forecast his first season would cost £70,618: £40,000 from the Arts Council, £16,000 from the local authorities and Southern Arts, leaving a shortfall of £15,000. Councillors refused to increase their £10,000, the Vice-Chancellor, Sir John Habakkuk, said no to a guarantee,⁴ and the fall of the Conservative Government in February led the Arts Council to cut its grant by £8,000. McDougall had to replan. By using fewer actors, and cutting his Oxford weeks from 20 to 13, he hoped to stage three touring shows plus one solely for Oxford. He would still be £10,000 short - and Miss Sweeting would struggle to fill the extra weeks.

² Later they were joined by trade union official David Buckle, actresses Constance Cummings and Louise Jameson, and ex-Arts Council drama director, 'Dick' Linklater.
³ He and McDougall had been friends since both belonged to the Public Schools Debating Association.
⁴ Habakkuk to Turpin 22 January 1974. With 82nd University Theatre Curators meeting minutes 29 November 1973.
Curators got the University to give £7,900 towards setting up Anvil. Regretting local councils were not as generous as elsewhere, the Arts Council responded with a £3,000 guarantee, raising Anvil's grant to £35,000.

Two impresarios helped fill the vacuum before Anvil began. Michael Codron brought five shows and Gyles Brandreth got Ray Cooney to stage a summer festival like Hauser's, this time with the New Theatre. Of Codron's three tryouts and two post-London shows only David Hare's *Knuckle* (80 and 77) and Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist* (62) more than half-filled the theatre. The National drew 91 with *Spring Awakening*, Polka 85, the Footlights 81, Prospect - halfway through a world tour - 56 with *Twelfth Night*, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Pericles*. The Playhouse closed for a fortnight in May and a week in June, ostensibly for work on the Burton-Taylor Building, more likely for lack of shows. The time it took to get the cash - they were still £7,500 short in March 1975 - had halved its value. The centre with its ground-floor offices, first-floor OUDS clubroom, and second floor 50-seat studio was woefully inadequate. A more imaginative venture was under way in East Oxford. The new Oxford Youth Theatre in Magdalen Road was a £28,000 black box, 60ft by 40ft, with 130 movable raked seats. Roy Copeman, director of what they christened the Pegasus Theatre, said: 'Basically, it is an open space with walls.'

Brandreth claimed the Playhouse, having got rid of Meadow Players, 'needed some middlebrow fare that would put bums on seats.' He got Cooney to finance him in return for any transfers. Ian Carmichael and Barbara Murray in Robert Chetwyn's revival of Benn Levy's *Springtime For Henry* provided the ideal launch-pad (73, 80, 73). Meanwhile, Peter Coe rehearsed *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* with BBC Television's new Dr. Who, Tom Baker, (46, 45, 47), and Sir John Clements revived *Saint Joan* at the New with Julia Foster. The final plays recouped Cooney's investment. Nancy Mitford's version of Roussin's *The Little Hut* with James Villiers, Geraldine McEwan and Gerald Harper went from the New to the Duke of York's Theatre, William Douglas Home's *The Dame of Sark* with Celia Johnson from the

---

5 Habakkuk stressed it was on top of its annual £15,000, grants totalling £17,000 'in the last four years,' and £30,000-plus for maintenance and equipment. Letter to County Council chairman and Arts Council chairman. With minutes of 84th UTC meeting 7 March 1974.
6 Arts Council chairman Patrick Gibson to Habakkuk 5 April 1974. As above. Soon after South Oxfordshire District Council made Anvil a £800 grant.
7 90th UTC meeting 6 March 1975, minute 604 (a).
9 Gyles Brandreth. *Under the Jumper*. As above, p. 50.
Playhouse (65, 70, 77) to Wyndham's. Nicholas Walsh, in charge while Miss Sweeting was in Australia, filed a jubilant report: 74 performances in 63 days had drawn over 31,000 patrons and taken nearly £44,000. The box office was academic: the organisers paid £800 a week rent. But £6,000 in bar takings was a bonus. 1973-74 showed a surplus of £3,107. It provided no grounds for complacency.

The cost of wood... has doubled in the last 12 months, the cost of advertising... in the last 15... At a time of economic crisis I don't see why the theatre shouldn't pull in its belt... People will... have to understand that... we won't be able to honour all [our] promises.

McDougall chose Gogol's *The Government Inspector* for his debut in a new version by himself and Christopher English, with Richard O'Sullivan, star of TV's *Man About the House*. Sets were by Saul Radomsky, a South African designer who had worked at the Northcott Theatre, Exeter. It opened on October 15 to good notices 'from both national and local press, *The Times, The Guardian, The Financial Times* and *The Sunday Times* being particularly encouraging.' The box office rose from 50 to 78 over three weeks.

Following a capacity schools' performance,... [we] ran a workshop with 80 children... and made contacts... which will lead to further work in classrooms.

Efforts to involve the students were less successful. McDougall confessed:

I had this idealistic vision that we might... create a [drama] department... [The attitude of dons was]: 'Why do we need [that] when they... waltz straight into the profession?' Teach people how to act? You might as well teach them how to weld!

At first relations with staff were edgy too. Nicola Russell recalled: 'We... came in with... 'Nothing will ever be as good as Meadow Players.' New to PR, she learnt her first marketing lesson when they visited Swindon. Wyvern programme director Tony Clayton said bookings were abysmal and suggested sacking the goat for eating the curtains. The story made the national press.

On her return Miss Sweeting compiled a survey. She said the Playhouse was 'vulnerable at all points.' The National Theatre's impact on the Arts Council budget meant regional companies like Anvil and touring ones like Prospect would battle to survive and...
demand larger guarantees or box office share. Initially Anvil had paid £800 rent. The Chest said weekly costs had risen from £900 to £1,040, and in 1975-76 were likely to reach £1,229. They made a deal whereby Anvil took 65 per cent of the box office, the university 35. It would produce £1,018, if Anvil played to 60 and ticket prices rose at the start of the Arts Council year in April; £1,230, if they rose up again at the start of the academic year in August. They hoped Anvil would average 66. In fact, Dennis Potter's first stage play, Only Make Believe, drew 20 and the Christmas shows only half-full houses. McDougall got Potter to adapt his TV drama and commissioned another, 'which we didn’t do because it wasn’t good enough.'

Richard Wilson, who had worked with McDougall at Manchester, rehearsed it on tour. Crankenheim's Mixed Up Monster by Tony Connor proved a lacklustre children's show. Kiss Me Kate, directed by Aukin’s wife, Nancy Meckler, received a warmer reception from the critics but hardly better houses.

Anvil drew up a £200,000 budget for 1975-76: £154,720 for seven shows, £42,065 for overheads, £3,215 for contingencies. 21 weeks at Oxford should produce £54,600, 24 weeks on tour £48,000. Aukin hoped the Arts Council would give £66,000, local authorities £10,000, the Young People’s Theatre Association £6,000, Southern Arts £5,000, industry £10,400. In fact, because of the economic situation the City decided not to up its grant and Jack Lambert, the Arts Council Drama Panel chairman, said it might have to review its spending too. If it did not get £50m in the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Budget, ‘Britain faced the prospect of no professional arts within three years.’

Despite increasing DALTA spending from £354,422 in 1970-71 to £802,336 in 1973-74 and getting smaller outfits to tour, there were not enough companies to meet the demand.

Anvil's first show of 1975 was the British premiere of Scott Fitzgerald's only play, The Vegetable, with Frances de la Tour and Al Mancini. The director was Nicolas Kent, who would soon succeed Aukin. Revivals in Paris and Holland apart, it was its first airing since it closed after five nights in Salt Lake City. Michael Billington wrote:

The great American novelists almost invariably fail as dramatists: witness Henry

---

16 Taped interview, as above.
17 OM 11 January 1975.
20 He began directing at Cambridge. After a year as a trainee at Liverpool he worked for two years at the Traverse. Taped interview 17 November 2003.
James, Ernest Hemingway, John dos Passos, Saul Bellow. [Now] one can add another name to the list.\textsuperscript{21}

With a schools matinée it averaged 52. Another schools matinée helped Ballet Rambert draw 80. The hit show was a sell-out \textit{Orfeo}.\textsuperscript{22} The Curators gave the Opera Club special terms to mark its golden jubilee. St. Peter's scrapped plans to house the Samuel Beckett Theatre in a nearby school. Francis Warner continued to fund-raise, claiming he now had £300,000, £100,000 from Richard Burton.\textsuperscript{23} OUDS revived \textit{Pericles}. James Roose-Evans was to direct, but cried off. Kent took over. It averaged 39. The Playhouse closed 'for the traditional Holy Week spring-clean,' The New from June for rewiring, ending hopes of a 1975 festival.

McDougall wanted to share Anvil's 'goodies... not hav[e] all... first nights in Oxford.'

His \textit{As You Like It} arrived from a five-date tour with a sheaf of good notices. It drew 58 and 80. He got Angela Richard to play Celia by offering her the lead in the Brecht/Weill musical, \textit{Happy End}. Billington enthused:

\begin{quote}
Booted off the stage at its première in 1929 and disowned... by its author, \textit{Happy End} now stands as one of Brecht's most seductive... works... McDougall's... unerring... production... full of Kurt Weill's unforgettable, sawn-off melodies, is regional theatre at its... best.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

After saying Bob Hoskins was Bill Cracker 'to the nasal life,' he ended:

Our beleaguered impresarios are always bemoaning the lack of product; but if one of them doesn't snap up this... he wants his head and his bank balance examining.

It opened at the Lyric on August 26. 'Hardly had the lights faded on the last Meadow Players success ...than the first Anvil... hit followed it into the West End.'\textsuperscript{25} Attendance climbed from 54 to 73. The Arts Council upped Anvil's 1975-76 grant from £60,000 to the £66,000 Aukin hoped for. Less tightly-run companies, said \textit{The Listener}, were 'facing bankruptcy.'

The truth is slowly beginning to dawn that a theatre system heavily dependent on state patronage can be as brittle as the one which operated under old-style commercialism. The vogue word... in the Arts Council these days is 'cost-effectiveness.'\textsuperscript{26}

The highlight of summer was the première of \textit{Otherwise Engaged}, Simon Gray's first play since \textit{Butley} opened at the Playhouse in 1971, with the same star and director, Alan Bates

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Guardian} 31 January 1975.
\textsuperscript{22} The version of Monteverdi's opera was by musical director, Jane Glover, now Junior Research Fellow at St. Hugh's, the producer Peter Wilson, now working for Welsh National Opera.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{OM} 13 February 1975.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The Guardian} 16 May 1975.
\textsuperscript{25} From Welsh Wizard to Scottish Sorcerer. As above.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Listener} 29 May 1975.
and Harold Pinter. It averaged 84 and transferred to the Queen's Theatre. Miss Sweeting cancelled a visit from the Abufami Company. Her staff needed extra time to install equipment in the Burton Building. The students took over in October, though it would not open officially until 1976. 1974/75 ended with a £1,512 surplus, raising the total balance to £8,643.\(^{27}\)

The Arts Council's new touring policy led the Actors Company to switch from the New. Its first show was *The Last Romantic* by Kerry Lee Crabbe. Briefly he was Anvil's playwright in residence. '[McDougall] seemed to me... a young whippersnapper.'\(^{28}\) None of the autumn shows made money. Miss Sweeting must have sighed with relief as she drafted her letter of resignation. She was to become director of the South Australian Arts Council.\(^{29}\)

There was money... and a willingness to spend it, provided they could be convinced... and they wanted to be convinced... In Australia they were eager to get on.\(^{30}\)

One of her successor's first duties was to inform Curators the cost of running the Burton Building was £3,770 or £73 a week; the income in the first eight months £220.\(^{31}\)

There was more corridor, stair and emergency exit space than there was performance... space... The so-called OUDS clubroom had to double [as dressing rooms].\(^{32}\)

Anton Rodgers' revival of *Death of a Salesman* (54, 73, 81) with Mark Kingston as Willie Loman and Judy Campbell as his wife launched Anvil's second year. The first student show marked the return of another ex-Playhouse actress as director. Yvonne Mitchell did St. Catherine's *Twelfth Night* with its English Tutor, Michael Gearin-Tosh, and his pupil, her daughter, Cordelia Monsey. Burton came with his wife to see the Burton Building,\(^{33}\) stunning guests by saying he had acquired a site a few yards away for the Beckett Theatre and would return in 1976 to play *Timon of Athens*, the year after *King Lear*. Neither happened, but Warner continued talking of a theatre on the site. Only 20 attended a party Kent held for local businessmen. But four responded to the new administrative director's call: Selfridges gave

---

\(^{27}\) Financial statement with 92nd UTC meeting minutes, 12 June 1975.

\(^{28}\) Taped interview, as above. He became a film- script writer. In 2003 he adapted Pinter's novel, *The Dwarfs*, which went from the National Theatre studio to the Tricycle Theatre.

\(^{29}\) Sweeting to Turpin 13 October 1975. With 92nd UTC meeting minutes. Leonard Amadio, former director of the South Australian State Arts Department, wrote: 'The Arts Council of South Australia was transforming itself into a professional body [and] needed an experienced director... Sweeting was a natural choice.' Obituary. *The Australian* 29 December 1999.

\(^{30}\) Taped interview 28 July 1999.

\(^{31}\) Note with 96th UTC meeting minutes 4 March 1976.

\(^{32}\) Barry Sheppard. Taped interview 3 December 2002.

\(^{33}\) OM 19 November 1975.
£1,200; two car dealers £50; a building firm £100-worth of timber. Anvil's 'Christmas Festival' began with McDougall's Uncle Vanya (40 and 52). At Harlow nobody laughed and Wardle accused him of treating it as a tragedy. At Oxford audiences roared and critics accused him of sending it up. The Christmas show was a version of Beauty and the Beast he got from Frank Marcus with Debbie Bowen as Beauty and Christopher Gable as the Beast. It opened to 37, then averaged 64, falling to 41 in the fifth week. His final show was Feydeau's Fitting For Ladies, in a new version by Peter Meyer, with a one-acter he christened For Heaven's Sake Don't Walk Around With Nothing On (53, 67).

McDougall hoped his company secretary, Scrase Dickins, would get Miss Sweeting's job. The Curators chose Barry Sheppard, 36-year-old manager of the Horseshoe Theatre Company, Basingstoke.

I feel rather like Edward VII taking over from Queen Victoria... Miss Sweeting has done so much to establish the status of theatre management. We used to be the back-seat boys... Thanks to her we aren't any more.

A joint management committee was a welcome departure. At Manchester he had had no say in student shows. He told the Playhouse technical director, Ken Bonfield, and chief technician, David Colmer, to intervene if they were not good enough. In retrospect he wished he had taken the same line with the university and Anvil. He should have ended the system whereby the Chest paid his salary, the Surveyor's Department was responsible for upkeep. He should have demanded more say on wages. He should have had greater programme control. Giving so many weeks to students, so many to Anvil, meant sometimes he had to refuse shows from impresarios like Codron. Miss Sweeting did leave him one welcome legacy: Brandreth would mount another festival.

---

34 McDougall. Taped interview, as above. Richard Wilson was Vanya, Anton Rodgers Astrov, Amy Nissen Yelyena, Gabrielle Lloyd Sonya.
35 After reading drama and French at Bristol, he became a lecturer at Birmingham College of Education. Miss Sweeting, who came as an outside examiner, suggested he apply for a place on the Arts Council's theatre administration course. From 1968 to 1974 he ran Manchester University Theatre, modelled on the Playhouse and posing similar problems. 'I sometimes first knew what was coming... when I read it in the Manchester Evening News... There was very little interchange between the 69 Theatre Company, the [university drama] department and the students.' Taped interview, as above. After 69 moved to The Royal Exchange in 1973, he set up Contact Theatre.
36 OM 6 February 1976.
37 [With] a substantial increase in the revenue grant... I could budget [for major spending]. But... it just wasn't the way the university... worked.' Taped interview, 4 December 2002.
38 'There was one [committee] landing these rates on my desk... another... deciding what level of support... They'd say: 'Oh well, inflation has been three per cent, we'll give them three...' whereas they had just put my wage bill up by ten!' As above.
Among the first student offerings of 1976 were a Lincoln College revival of *Faust Part One* bankrolled by the Goethe Institute with Christopher Gable as Mephistopheles, Doug Lucie as Faust (61), and Wall's OUDS *Othello* with Ghanaian student Hugh Quarshie (86). Anvil filled a vacant week with the Feydeau double bill (34) before their next show, the first airing outside London of Christopher Hampton's *Savages*. Despite TV star Patrick Allen heading a cast with two Chilean actors, Marcelo Romo and Francisco Morales, sets by Mario Tardito, former designer of the Chilean National Ballet, and rave reviews, Kent's revival averaged only 29. More to Easter audiences' taste was the Oxford Operatic Society's *Yeomen of the Guard*, with Robin Wilson, son of Britain's Labour Prime Minister, Harold, as one of the yeomen (87). Anvil ended a short tour by opening the Edencourt Theatre, Inverness, of which McDougall was a native, with Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. It averaged 42, hardly better than the City of Oxford Theatre Guild's *Ring Round the Moon* (39).

The second week the company had another first night at Cowley. McDougall invited Steve Gooch and Paul Thompson, authors of a play about Ford, to do another about Oxford's car industry.

We were very misguided... The last thing people... wanted to see... is stuff about them being on the shop-floor when they came off their shift. The week of previews for British Leyland workers was dismal, *Made in Britain's* fortnight at the Playhouse a disaster (11.5). ETC began summer term with *After Eights* (37), another vain attempt by their revue group, The Etceteras, to translate to Oxford the success they enjoyed at Edinburgh.

There is an astonishing talent in the form of Rowan Atkinson... Any man who can have an audience laughing nonstop for five minutes by... pulling faces... has got to go far. The 21-year-old was doing an M.Sc. after graduating from Newcastle.

The Gilbert and Sullivan Society did better with *The Gondoliers* (57), the Student Union better still with *Cabaret* (60). Costs had not risen in 1975-76. The reason for the £10,773 deficit was the economic climate. But Sheppard felt programming had not helped. *Savages* and *Made in Britain* might have done better in the autumn. And there should be a

---

39 'Gordon and David had been tremendously active in getting the Chileans visas. It was one of the things the Heath Government did [after the overthrow of Allende's Government].' Kent. Taped interview, as above.

40 As above.

He got the Surveyor's Office to floodlight the façade and asked for a V-shaped board above the canopy, new showcases, and a hoarding on the back of the Burton Building. He got everything except the board, which was 'out of character' with Beaumont Street. For the same reason the showcases, which Brandreth funded, had to be flat, not bow-fronted.

The 1976 Festival, which Simon Clarke financed, did not involve the New, but was as ambitious as 1974's, with two revivals, a première, and six Sunday shows in the theatre and six lunchtime shows and four lectures in the Burton Building. Michael Meacham opened with Arms and the Man (64). Patrick Magee did Waiting For Godot (37) as a 70th birthday tribute to Beckett. The new play was Dennis Cannan's Dear Daddy (45) directed by David William with Nigel Patrick and Phyllis Calvert, which transferred to the Ambassadors. 109 performances in 63 days took nearly £40,000, of which the Curators' share was £11,430 in rent. Of the Sunday offerings only Emlyn Williams as Dylan Thomas sold out, but the lunchtime shows averaged audiences of 50 or 70 per cent of capacity. Not as good as 1974, Sheppard said, but:

A programme of this sort... seems... desirable... Box office during the first seven weeks of [1976-77 was] £8,890 against £414 in... 1975 when there was no festival."

The Curators told Sheppard to arrange another in 1977 and asked McDougall to attend their next meeting. They felt their £10,773 deficit was largely due to Anvil. Sheppard said the second year was usually 'the most difficult.' In the third they could expect 'real growth.'

Kent made a deal with the Midland Bank (HSBC), enabling Anvil to mount a seven-week, five-show, autumn season, then left on holiday. While he was away, the English Stage Company cancelled David Storey's latest play, which was to open the Edinburgh Festival and the organisers asked Anvil to step in with Pal Joey. Critics anticipating Night were not happy to find themselves watching 'a small-scale revival of a 1940 Broadway musical.' Kent was even less happy about Anvil's terms and renegotiated them. Philip Hedley's revival with Pat Kirkwood and Ben Sherman reached Oxford after a tour.

---

42 'I am in favour of... high, realistic... prices... Friday and Saturday... concessionary rates... the less popular nights... 400 patrons paying... £1 is preferable to 200 paying £1.50.' Sheppard. Report October 1976. With 98th UTC meeting minutes 10 June 1976.

43 Festival Report. With 98th UTC minutes.

44 As above, minute 675.

45 'A substantial amount in four figures.' OM 27 July 1976.

[It] is worth seeing just for Anna Quayle's electric rendering of the strip number, *Zip!* ... But... there were times when I would happily have... hid under the seat.\(^7\)

It drew 35 and 36. Kent, as shrewd a businessman as Hauser, needed to watch spending. McDougall had spent part of the summer in Japan studying Kabuki theatre and returned with Mitsuru Ishii, who was designing his *Tempest*. The other novelty was film-star Gayle Hunnicutt as Miranda.

Green silks ripple across the stage to represent the storm-tossed sea, clouds of glitter... the magical imposition of sleep... Curiously though... the production lacks the one thing you would have expected the Japanese influence to give it: a sense of style.\(^8\)

The box office rose from 58 to 82 over three weeks. During them the company gave four performances of Ted Irwin's revival of *Look Back In Anger*, the first of several small-scale shows for Southern Arts. Their next major show was Simon Gray's *Dog Days* (52, 61), written between *Butley* and *Otherwise Engaged* but not staged.\(^4\) During it they aired their second Southern Arts show: Terrence McNally's *Botticelli* with Athol Fugard's *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*.

Balliol began term with Sophocles' *Electra* (33). ETC tackled Howard Brenton's *Magnificence* (19),\(^5\) OUDS *The Duchess of Malfi* (61), Jesus and Christ Church *Valmouth* with the help of Sandy Wilson (24), Wadham *The Entertainer* (28). It meant the Curators no longer had a stick to beat Anvil. In 1975-76 its attendance had averaged 46 to the students' 53. Now the boot was on the other foot.\(^3\) By the end of 1976-77 it would have staged eight shows in 19 weeks. Following *Beauty and the Beast*, McDougall tried a panto: Crocker and Gilder's *Puss in Boots*. Selfridge's sponsored it. The director was Kharibian. Kent forecast it would make a loss.

![Image](attachment:image.png)

Over five weeks it averaged 50. Kent responded by cutting everything from staff to heating.

Cambridge get... £15,000 from Cambridge District Council for 12 weeks work... [Anvil] get £5,000 from the City Council, £5,750... from the County Council, and

\(^7\) DC OM 21 September 1976.

\(^8\) DC OM 5 October 1976.

\(^4\) 'McDougall's production... is a fascinating shaft of light on the other two... the slightly squasy filling to the sandwich.' DC OM 28 October 1976.

\(^3\) 'The performance of the evening is Rowan Atkinson's... It is a long time since a student actor portrayed crabbed... age with such... aplomb.' DC OM 17 November 1976.

\(^5\) 100th UTC meeting 25 November 1976, minute 682.

\(^2\) OM 1 December 1976.
two smaller sums from other local authorities... £11,600 for 20 weeks work.

The first show of 1977 proved the company's salvation: Ayckbourn's trilogy, *The Norman Conquests*, starring David Jason as Norman. Michael Ockrent’s production of *Table Manners* drew 69, McDougall’s of *Living Together* 75 in tandem, the third week his *Living Together* and *Round and Round the Garden* 84. *Puss* took £2,000 less than hoped. *Conquests* was cheaper ‘and the box office... exceeded all expectations.' It left on a seven-date tour.

The Curators’ outlook was less rosy. In March Brandreth told them he would not be able to stage a festival in 1977. The Opera Club began term with Verdi’s *Joan of Arc* (58). The conductor was the new Heather Professor of Music, Denis Arnold, soon to become a Curator. ETC did *Guys and Dolls* (60), OUDS *Troilus and Cressida* (34). The box office at Easter demonstrated it was unwise to economise. The Holy Week closure underlined another problem: inflation. New seats cost almost £50,000, only a few thousand pounds less than the 1962 reconstruction. McDougall tried to cash in on his hit *Happy End* with an update of *The Threepenny Opera*.

It’s all very well to set the action in London at the time of the Silver Jubilee and have the Royal Messenger arrive on a motorbike with the Queen’s pardon for Mack the Knife. But how do you... reflect the change on the unacceptable face of capitalism? ...Somehow the... passion of Brecht's indictment... never comes over.

It opened Torquay's Spring Festival, drawing just 160 to the 1,400-seat Princess Theatre. It did better at Oxford (48, 61). Kent revived John Arden’s *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* (35).

The hobnailed boots echoing through [it]... underline the message that it is a play about the horror and futility of war. But it wouldn’t have worn so well if it was simply a piece of pacifist propaganda. Underlying it is... Arden’s intuitive mistrust of any regimen society seeks to impose upon itself... Donal McCann builds quietly but menacingly to his big moment as Serjeant Musgrave, then fizzles out, leaving the audience listening - as the author intended - for the soft thud of the burnt-out shell hitting the earth.

Merlin Thomas began summer term with Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro* for La Maison Française and OUDS. It drew 38: the first of several student shows that failed to draw.

---

53 Kent. OM 8 January 1977.
54 OM 5 February 1977.
55 102nd UTC meeting 3 March 1977, minute 690.
56 DC OM 16 April 1977.
57 DC OM 26 April 1977.
58 Western Morning News 21 April 1977.
59 DC OM 12 May 1977.
Sheppard must have felt relieved that the first summer bill - Polka (57) and the Footlights (70) - was a box office banker. He did well to stay open apart from the first fortnight of August, though only Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (58), David Gordon Productions' *The Sacred Flame* (54) and Cambridge Theatre Company's *An Inspector Calls* (50) drew decent audiences. The bonus was *The Old Country*. Codron took advantage of the August break to open Alan Bennett's latest vehicle for Sir Alec Guinness in Oxford, as he had *Habeas Corpus* four years before. Again it sold out.

In the absence of a festival David and Anne Norrington, who ran the Norrington English Centre, hired the theatre and staged a Festival Week for their foreign students. The box office (29) suggested few went. But the Norrintons clearly felt the £1,475 was worth it. They were among the backers when Sheppard presented a paper in October suggesting the theatre mount its own festival in 1978. The others were the British Tourist Authority, Northern Ballet, Kent Opera, Oxford Pro Musica, and the Horseshoe Theatre Company. The Curators agreed. The £4,150 deficit was better than 1975-76's £10,773, but they needed the money. They vetoed Anvil's demand for a bigger box office share but, agreeing it was in their interest to help,60 got the Chest to reconvene the working party that had fixed Anvil's tenancy terms.

During the summer *The Stage* gave Anvil its seal of approval, stressing the efficient way McDougall and Kent ran the company.

The least troublesome companies... are those with heavy touring commitments... While not advocating the breaking up of our... resident theatre companies, it does seem... an increase in touring ...would give the taxpayer better value... and might prove the salvation of... smaller theatres.61

Roger Lancaster analysed the revolution in an Arts Council report.62 Sir William Emrys Williams, Secretary-General from 1952 to 1963, had felt it was better to raise standards in key places than take the arts to the people as CEMA had done. But there were now nearly 50 reps, most at theatres built in the last 20 years, and a growing number of civic theatres. In

60 106th UTC meeting 24 November 1977, minute 714. Anvil's average £2,431 weekly take was better than the average £2,250 guarantee it received on tour. But it ended with £259 less because of the £259 the theatre charged for labour and £274 Anvil spent on publicity.
1969-70 the Council gave five small-scale touring companies £15,022. Seven years later it and the arts associations were funding 130 at a cost of £1.5m. A 'startling number' of their writers, directors, actors and designers were being offered work by major reps, the National and RSC. Yet of the 1976-77 £9.5m 'drama cake' they received only 1.9 per cent.

A team of seven ran Anvil. 'Often we didn’t see each other for weeks.' Even so, they couldn’t provide product for everywhere and, if anything, things were worse for the larger theatres. Wage increases and the poor spring led Howard and Wyndham and Moss Empires to say they would close their remaining venues if the Arts Council did not give them more help. The New could manage with a £20-£30,000 guarantee, but at Newcastle the local authority, which ran the theatre, thought a loss of £100,000-plus reasonable.

Once you start totting up [similar] losses on theatres in Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool it is not surprising the commercial companies decide they’ve had enough... the Arts Council hesitates to pick up the gauntlet.

Anvil launched their seven-week autumn season with You Never Can Tell, which had won rave reviews on tour. Despite the economic climate McDougall was 'more confident and relaxed' than at any time since he succeeded Hauser. The team of actors he recruited in July was 'the most talented bunch he ha[d] had at his disposal. And best of all, he [was] keeping them together for nearly six months.' Shaw’s comedy, backed by Midland Bank, opened to 58, then averaged 56 in repertoire with Brand. Sadly, Tom Wilkinson, who played the title role, scratched his eye at the dress-rehearsal and the first night had to be delayed. It meant Oxford saw only eight performances of Ibsen’s tragedy, not ten - a pity. I rated it 'the most impressive thing McDougall had done. He could not extend the run. Anvil were rehearsing their third and fourth plays; Gloria Romo, Chile’s leading mime before the coup, had begun a busy season of Sunday night theatre; and a programme of LEA workshops was under way.

Richard Wilson directed the first airing outside London of David Hare’s 1975 Court hit, Teeth ‘n’ Smiles. While they were in Oxford, a second cast premièred C.P. Taylor’s Ophelia in Harlow. When Kent, who commissioned it, asked Jane Asher, he had only the first

60 Moving On, pp. 6-7.
61 McDougall. Taped interview, as above.
62 DC OM 8 July 1977.
63 DC OM 17 September 1977.
64 OM 7 October 1977.
act to show her.

I rang Cecil up... asked... what happened next... [and] agreed to do the play, [though it] hasn’t turned out a bit like he said.\(^{68}\)

I enthused:

When the light go up on Poppy Mitchell’s... surreal setting... it is... the same Ophelia who stares vacantly into the darkness. Only she is not Shakespeare’s character. She is... Taylor’s... and you don’t really need to know anything about Shakespeare’s tragedy in order to appreciate... how a sensitive young man breaks out of the goldfish bowl of idealism... a sensitive young girl fails to... Asher moves like a creature from another world, reliving Ophelia’s past with all the... vulnerability of an innocent young girl, yet never letting [us] escape from the glittering coffin of her mind.\(^{69}\)

The Sunday before it arrived Oxford Music Theatre made its debut with *Two American Dreams*, the result of a partnership between Anvil and Oxford Pro Musica to provide small-scale shows. Peter O’Shaughnessy gave two late-night performances of his one-man Shakespeare show, *Will*. Then, after a final week of *Teeth ‘n’ Smiles*, they left on tour. It was Anvil’s most ambitious, least lucrative, autumn. In 1974 *Government Inspector* averaged 72, in the same three weeks in 1975 *Death of a Salesman* 75, in 1976 *The Tempest* 68 during a seven-week season that drew 56.5. This year the seven weeks had averaged 47.

The company consistently plays on tour to higher houses in cities with smaller populations... The Playhouse with its university theatre image has never persuaded the general public... that it offers regular professional entertainment of a high quality and is now losing the regular audience it once had.\(^{70}\)

Reviews of student productions that term seemed to support McDougall’s view. Only OUDS’ *Timon of Athens* (60) received favourable comment.

In the autumn Councillor Sheila Zinkin made a vain attempt to get the City to buy the New Theatre. Howard and Wyndham’s wanted about £100,000. I said the Council, which owned the site, should buy it, then lease it to a company.\(^{71}\) The new owner took the same view.

[Paul Gregg] reckons... a house rent of £5-£6,000 would have been a better return than the £600 per annum [the Council] will get in ground rent. But he’s not sorry... Howard and Wyndham’s have left the theatre in a much better condition than when they bought it.\(^{72}\)

Gregg was 35. After helping to turn Southport into a resort to rival Blackpool, he rented the Apollo Theatre, Manchester, and wanted to rent the New too. Renamed the Apollo,\(^{73}\) it became

\(^{68}\) OM 22 October 1977.  
\(^{69}\) DC OM 25 October 1977.  
\(^{70}\) McDougall. Paper with 105th UTC meeting minutes 27 October 1977.  
\(^{71}\) DC OM 24 September 1977.  
\(^{72}\) DC OM 7 January 1978.  
\(^{73}\) It has now reverted to being the New Theatre.
the flagship of the chain of London and provincial venues he welded over the next 20 years into the Apollo Leisure Group. His first move was to reinstate the panto as a star attraction. Anvil got Graeme Garden of TV's The Goodies, to write its festive show, The Magicalympical Games, and Richard Murdoch to head the cast. It averaged just over 50.

McDougall's first offering of 1978, Orton's What the Butler Saw, drew 55 and 44. Midway through, Ian McKellen gave a performance of Acting Shakespeare, which raised £482 for Save the Children. It meant the ‘house full’ boards were out at the Playhouse and the New, where the comedians, Little and Large, began Gregg's regime. Kent paired Rattigan's The Browning Version with Schnitzler's The Soul Mate in a new version by Horace Samuel and Crabbe. Like Ophelia and Teeth ‘n’ Smiles, it toured smaller venues, its 62 suggesting it might have supported a longer Oxford run. The Opera Club began term with the première of The Lambton Worm (44), which had libretto by Anne Ridler, score by Robert Sherlaw Johnson, university lecturer in music. On Thursday it made way for an Old Tyme Music Hall in aid of the Oxford Area Arts Council, which was raising funds to turn St. Paul's Church, Walton Street, into an arts centre. OUDS chose Richard II (68). Codron revived Pinter's The Homecoming with Timothy West (67) and premièred Alice's Boys by Felicity Browne and Jonathan Hales with Sir Ralph Richardson (85).

The Observer launched summer term with a spring festival, which it guaranteed against loss to the tune of £4,000.74 It was the idea of two students: Caz Phillips and George Economou.75 The fortnight featured student groups from Iran, Poland, Exeter, Manchester, Newcastle, Southampton, York, Middlesex, London, Oxford and Cambridge, and involved lunchtime, afternoon, evening and late-night shows in the Burton Building, professional contributions ranging from Virginia Woolf's diaries read by Yvonne Mitchell and Margaret Rawlings to Steven Cripps's Performance Sculpture. Kent toured a revival of The Recruiting Officer while McDougall mounted All's Well (that ends well). Trevor Nunn's musical Comedy of Errors inspired him to adapt Shakespeare's later comedy and commission 16 songs from Nick and Tony Bicat, who had won an Ivor Novello Award for Teeth ‘n’ Smiles. It opened at Poole, and preceded Recruiting Officer to Oxford. Chris Gray enthused: ‘Musically the show is

74 107th UTC meeting 2 February 1978, minute 713(d).
75 ‘Apart from its quota of very good... players in recent years neither [Oxford or Cambridge] has produced... much.... At any rate that is what is felt by the instigators.’ Victoria Radin. The Observer 23 April 1978.
of a high quality.'Jeremy Treglown was less impressed.

With its tired theatrical marriages, affairs and intrigues it is something like Rattigan's *Harlequinade*. But the backstage action is too thin for the show to cohere."

McDougall said it worked better at the new Hong Kong Arts Centre. After failing to get Miss Sweeting's job, Neil Duncan took its 400-seat theatre and was keen for a British company to open it. With a British Council tour of South America to follow, spirits should have been high. In fact, the box office for *All's Well* (22, 20) and *Recruiting Officer* (34, 40) meant that costs in 1977-78 had exceeded takings by £117,659. In two years their deficit had soared from £2,000 to £21,000. Sheppard, about to stage his first festival, had reason to feel anxious. How would Oxford react to ten weeks and more than 130 events?

Northern Ballet opened with 'an admirably mixed triple bill' and a 'smashing' *Coppelia*. The Horseshoe Theatre Company provided eight weeks of drama: *Hobson's Choice; Time of Life*, a new play by Charles McKeown; and D.H. Lawrence's *The Daughter-in-Law*. Scottish Opera alternated *L'Elisir d'Amore* with Oxford Music Theatre's *Cosi fan Tutte*. Pro Musica gave nine concerts at Christ Church. David Norrington hosted six jazz sessions at the Randolph Hotel and 25 events in Holywell Music Room. There were ten shows in the Burton Building and Pegasus Theatre, plus pub shows and street theatre. Sheppard filed an upbeat report. The ballet had drawn 68, the operas 59, *Hobson's Choice* 60, *The Daughter-in-Law* 57, *Time of Life* 27. Of the £40,375 box office the theatre retained £14,208. The sponsors had not fared badly either, losing only £11,000 of their £40,000 guarantee. It was worth repeating, but a limited company should run it."

Sheppard's annual report was upbeat too. Attendance had risen from 49 per cent to 53, income by 25, expenditure by 12, meaning a surplus on the year of £5,285, a decrease in the deficit to £992. He reckoned it now cost £1,400 a week to run the theatre. Only visiting shows had met it, thanks to *The Old Country, The Homecoming and Alice's Boys*, a bonus there was no hope of repeating in 1978-79. Student shows averaged £1,269, helped by *The Observer* Festival, but there had been no ETC major and two OUDS plays instead of

---

76 OM 23 May 1978.
77 The Times 25 May 1978.
78 John Cowan. OM 27 & 30 June 1978. Cowan, real name Cormac Rigby, was a national dance critic.
three 'as a result of the clubs' financial problems,' Anvil £1,107. Since 1974 expenditure had risen by 47 per cent, just below inflation; income by 52, just above.80

Other companies visited Hong Kong, but only for odd performances. Anvil's sell-out three weeks was a novelty. The South China Morning Post lamented: 'What... are we going to do when this company leaves?'81 Backstage the atmosphere was less happy.

We were trying to cast our South American tour... Just nobody was good enough for the bloody British Council. We got no money at all... for Hong Kong... [Their] man was so angry... he... coughed up £5,000 out of his own budget.82

The plays were Heartbreak House and Habeas Corpus. The former meant Anvil faced the test every company had since Fagan began with it. It broke box office records in Cambridge: drew 47 and 58 in Oxford.

McDougall's expert revival... demonstrates the... play has lost none of its power. One great strength... is his Captain Shotover. Michael Gough doesn't look 88. But... his weather-beaten face and booming voice have the authority of an old seadog... Another is the Ellie Dunn of Gabrielle Lloyd... But there are no weak performances.83

Richard Wilson's Habeas Corpus did better with 70.

Ronald Eyre's version was fashionable resort... Wilson's is end-of-the-pier... It doesn't deflate the comedy... It throws [it] into even sharper relief.84

Anvil had no time to capitalise. The company left for Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela after a week.

We built the sets out of... Triboard, which the RSC had used... to have really light sets for flying... in the meantime [the British Council] commissioned... sets out of plywood, which we ended up humping around... They kept being left on the tarmac.85

The shows were a bonus, like the lunchtime show, The Jetty, stage manager Guy Hibbert's second play.86 The season proper began with Ian Watt-Smith's revival of Anthony Shaffer's Sleuth. As word went round, the box office rose from 48 to 60. It fell from 48 to 43 for Kent's Streetcar Named Desire. Despite an all-American cast, he admitted it was probably the worst thing he ever directed.87 Codron's only show was Julian Mitchell's first play, Half Life. With Gielgud heading the cast and inflated prices it sold out and made £2,941,

80 Report, as above.
81 OM 15 July 1978.
82 McDougall. Taped interview, as above.
83 DC OM 19 September 1978.
84 DC OM 4 October 1978.
85 McDougall. Taped interview, as above.
86 He would make his name as a television dramatist.
87 Taped interview, as above.
a record. The week after 7:84 drew 28 and made £56 with John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy’s *Vandaleur’s Folly*. The only successful student show was OUDS’ *Dr. Faustus* (73).

Behind the scenes Sheppard refereed an increasingly bitter dispute between Anvil and the university. The working party said scrapping the company was not an option. Closing the Playhouse for 20 weeks would cost £20,000; if they stayed open, students and visitors would not produce enough revenue; in any case the lease demanded a rep. To complicate matters, while St. John’s froze the ground rent, it kept upping 11 and 12 Beaumont Street’s in line with inflation. The Curators asked the Chest to increase their grant so they could raise Anvil’s box office share to 70. When it refused, they decided to keep the share at 65 for the first £4,300, then raise it. Anvil suggested it would better if they ran from June to February with short breaks in September and December, doing eight shows in 19 weeks, plus a three-week festival show. Their chairman, OUDS Senior Member Stephen Wall, said he briefed students at the first opportunity, OUDS president Simon Bell that he found out ‘by accident’ two days before the Curators’ meeting.

It provoked the same outcry as Meadow Players’ efforts to vary their playing weeks. Students said two-thirds of them had examinations in summer and the other third were staging shows outdoors.

If the right product emerged a loyal... audience would be attracted... Last year Anvil... got a higher box office take. This year they wish to rob the university of... peak times as well. They should present a ‘popular’ programme while they paid off their deficit. Wall responded that they hoped to reduce it from £21,000 to £14,000 by April 1979, but there was no such thing as a ‘safe’ play. He and Merlin Thomas, who said Meadow Players ‘would have welcomed... a similar scheme,’ were Anvil’s only supporters. John Creaser, Senior Tutor of Mansfield and ETC vice-president, threatened to refer the dispute to Hebdomadal Council; the Master of St. Catherine’s, Sir Alan Bullock, to sponsor a resolution in Congregation. In the event Anvil got six autumn weeks, not five. Sheppard said the row created ‘bad feeling’ for

---

89 109th UTC meeting 11 May 1978, minute 730.
90 110th UTC meeting 8 June 1978, minute 734; special meeting 29 June, minute 3.
91 Wall to special UTC meeting 12 October 1978.
92 OM 16 November 1978.
93 JMC meeting 17 October 1978.
94 Special UTC meeting 19 October 1978, minutes 7, 9 and 19.
'the most minor adjustments.' But it strengthened the hand of the pro-student lobby. When Albery left to become chemistry professor at Imperial College, Gearin-Tosh, who had primed Bullock, replaced him as Curator. When Turpin retired in 1979, Arnold became chairman.

At Christmas Anvil did a daytime children's show, Ken Campbell's *School For Clowns*, and an evening revue, *City Delights*. It averaged 53 with the children's show, 50 without. 1979 began with Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce* (81). While Richard Wilson's revival was at Cambridge, Kent staged the first airing outside London of Nigel Williams's *Class Enemy*. It drew 55, then left on tour, ending with a sell-out two-and-a-half-weeks at the Young Vic. The Opera Club began term with *Fidelio*, the first English production of the 1806 version (66). Gearin-Tosh was director, Arnold conductor. Merlin Thomas did Racine's *Britannicus* (49) for Maison Française and OUDS. Most lucrative was Worcester and St. John's *The Crucible* (93), a set text. At Easter David William's Chichester Festival hit, *The Aspern Papers* with Cathleen Nesbitt drew 76, which even with a guarantee of £2,500, earned nearly £1,800, Ayckbourn's *Ten Times Table* with Irene Handl £4,656. The second *Observer* Festival drew 48. Sheppard said it could become a 'national event.'

Margaret Thatcher's triumph at the 1979 General Election and Norman St. John-Stevas's appointment as Tory Arts minister with a seat in the Cabinet implied Britain's first woman prime minister gave high priority to the arts. Sheppard commented:

> Since Jennie Lee, most ministers... have been rather grey, shadowy figures... Perhaps more than anything I welcome... St. John-Stevas because he has got stature."

Far from receiving more some Tory councillors felt Anvil should get less. A sherry party Kent held for county councillors led to a bizarre pantomime.

> I heard this waah-waah, waah-waah, outside my office... The Chief Constable of Thames Valley strode in: 'Did you write this letter?' [a copy of the invitation Kent had sent]. 'It's bribery and corruption. I'm thinking about pressing charges.'

Kent was so stunned the Chief was halfway down the stairs before he called him back.

> Would you remember that at least 20 councillors came to the party... I assume you will be pressing charges for accepting bribes."

Kent learnt later the Chief had cautioned Councillor Norman Douglass for wasting police time.

---

95 Taped interview, as above.
98 Taped interview, as above.
With only two student shows and no input from Anvil Sheppard had to look elsewhere for his pre-Festival fare. Three Arts Council Touring shows followed Oxford Music Theatre’s revival of Stoppard and André Previn’s *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (61). Cambridge TC drew 31 with a new musical by Monty Norman and Julian More, *Songbook*, Triumph Theatre Productions 36 with Jonathan Miller’s revival of Etheredge’s *She Would If She Could*, Birmingham Rep 30 with its Malvern Festival plays, Shaw’s *Misalliance* and Eliot’s *The Elder Statesman*. The Footlights shared the final week with Polka (68). Sheppard paid £902 in guarantees - the main reason for the loss on the year of £579. Anvil’s absence and the Festival had shifted ‘the problem of high summer’99 to June. He suggested moving visiting shows to Easter and the town societies to June.

The 1978 Festival had lost £4,100, but would have made £400 without the opera, which the organisers dropped in 1979. To cut costs they formed a charitable company. A deal with Paul Elliott enabled Horseshoe to tour its Wilde plays after Oxford. David Gilmore’s *An Ideal Husband* averaged 46, Guy Slater’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* 60.5. Northern Ballet drew 70. Anvil fared worst with Julian Amyes’ revival of Peter Nicholls’ *Privates on Parade* (24) and Goldoni’s trilogy, *The Country Holiday* (43), in a version by McDougall and Nicola Russell’s husband, Barry. It marked the arrival of Anvil’s £5,000 thrust stage.

It... has been designed in such a way by Michael Knight that its bolt-together steelwork... comes apart... and the company can take it on tour. It juts out into the auditorium at an angle of one in 12 and has the effect... of tipping the action... into the laps of the audience.100

Almost 20,000 came - half residents, half tourists - a 17 per cent increase. Sheppard reckoned 12,000 tourists were worth £250,000 to Oxford. In fact, the Festival had thrived despite the worsening economic climate and a seven per cent drop in tourism.

The Thatcher Government’s policies were biting. In his first budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, raised VAT from eight to 15 per cent and cut the Art Council’s grant by £1m, forcing it to renegotiate with clients. Sheppard and Kent issued an angry press release.

They can’t economise... They can’t present Romeo without Juliet... Prices may have to go up to the order of 17 per cent, which will mean a top price for tickets of well over £3.101

---

99 Annual Report, as above.
100 OM 22 September 1979. Knight never saw it in action, dying of leukaemia.
In July Weir wrote to St. John-Stevas, pleading that theatre tickets should be zero-rated.\textsuperscript{102} In October Wall wrote again, with Arnold’s support,\textsuperscript{103} saying VAT had already hit attendance. If Anvil’s Arts Council grant was reduced ‘the future of the company could be at risk.’\textsuperscript{104} With a box office of 56, ironically its returns for 1978-79 were its best yet. It had produced an average £1,618 a week. For the first time it had paid its way, but for 15 weeks, not 20. Students had fared slightly worse (50: £1,380); visitors better (50: £1,097), but there had been the bad spell in June.\textsuperscript{105} If Anvil had played then to the same level of business, it would have produced £4,842.

I hailed the 1979-80 season McDougall launched with \textit{Country Holiday} as an \textit{Annus Mirabilis}.

At the time we attributed a lot of its buttonholing assurance... to the new thrust stage and undeniably this brilliant technical innovation did make a great deal of difference to the auditorium. But theatrical feast followed theatrical feast.\textsuperscript{106} Anvil did 11 shows, four world premières and one English première. McDougall’s second play was \textit{King Lear} with National Theatre actor, Alan MacNaughtan. Eric Shorter enthused.

\textit{Is there ultimately much dramatic lightning? Frankly, no... What matters is that a regional theatre should have found not only the confidence but also the cast to scale Shakespeare’s highest peak.}\textsuperscript{107}

\textit{Country Holiday} averaged 38.5, \textit{Lear} 78, then left on tour. Counting Festival shows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bath, Brighton, Cambridge, Cardiff, Coventry, Croydon, Guildford, Harlow, Hull, Lincoln, Newcastle, Peterborough, Poole, Reading, Salisbury, Southampton, Stevenage, Stirling, Sunderland, Swindon, Taunton, Weston-super-Mare and Wolverhampton have all seen one of more shows from Oxford in recent months...
  \item Bath... will shortly receive its third.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{itemize}

It was Ian Kellgren’s revival of Graham Greene’s spoof, \textit{The Return of A.J. Raffles} (61.5). Two premières followed. The return of the thrust stage enabled McDougall to stage D.H. Lawrence’s \textit{Touch and Go} and Tenniel Evans Hibbert’s first full-length play, \textit{Heaven-Sent}, without decor. Kent ended the first leg of a ‘stunning autumn’\textsuperscript{109} with Howard Barker’s \textit{The Love of a Good Man}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Across the wastelands of Passchendaele a rich English lady and her daughter come...
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Oxford Times} 20 July 1979.
\textsuperscript{103} 117th UTC meeting 29 October 1979, minute 790.
\textsuperscript{104} 10 October 1979. With 116th UTC meeting minutes 14 June 1979.
\textsuperscript{105} Annual Report, as above.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{From Welsh Wizard to Scottish Sorcerer.} As above
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Daily Telegraph} 8 October 1979.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{OM} 27 October 1979.
\textsuperscript{109} \textit{OM} 10 November 1979.
in search of a corpse. Only they are not the poppied fields of Flanders we like to think of on Remembrance Sunday... The year is 1920 and the great clear-up which followed the great slaughter is still taking place. 'Where we are standing,' says a character... 'is not ground so much as flesh...' I am not sure the slow-changing lantern slides in which... Kent chooses to project his production... do full justice either to the stylised nature or the rumbustious irreverence of ...Barker's black comedy... But the cast give some marvellous performances of the specimens in this maggot tin of humanity.¹¹⁰

The Lord Mayor, John Hamilton, called it 'the product of a sick mind.'¹¹¹ The box office, which had dipped to 45 for Touch and Go and Heaven-Sent, fell to 20.5, but it went to the Court.

Anvil's daytime Christmas show was Star Talk by Geoffrey Case. Despite promotion by the Oxford Star its three-week run averaged 23; the evening show, Nicholas Barter's revival of Ayckbourn's Absurd Person Singular more than made up(63), then left on a 14-date tour. The season ended with a rare revival and Anvil's fourth première. Rodney Ackland's Before the Party had not had a major airing since 1949. With a cast headed by Phyllis Calvert, Michael Gough and Jane Asher, it marked Tom Conti's debut as director. Nicholas de Jongh enthused:

The old distorting glass which bathed English theatre for so long in a sentimental glow has been... replaced with one which views that... generation with withering accuracy... This must be bound for London.¹¹²

It was, running for nine months, first at the Queen's Theatre, then the Apollo, after its Oxford fortnight (89) and a short tour. On the strength of Class Enemy Kent got Williams to write 'a play about the Asian community in Britain,' hoping for another good part for the Pakistani actor, Renu Setna. In the event Trial Run also boosted an actor who would make a bigger name, Art Malik. After drawing 43, it toured, ending at the Young Vic.

Ostensibly Anvil was riding high. In fact it was feeling the pinch as inflation soared. Kent said the Curators should not treat the company worse than Cambridge, where it got 70 per cent. Sheppard said Anvil's terms were better than visiting companies, but most of them now expected guarantees of £6,000, raising ticket prices and making audiences even more choosy.¹¹³ The dispute prompted more soul-searching. Arnold said students found Playhouse costs prohibitive and a theatre beyond their means 'did not make sense.' With a deficit of

¹¹⁰ DC OM 10 November 1979.
¹¹¹ OM 19 November 1979.
£750,000 in 1978-79 there was no chance of the university raising its grant. Curators set up another working party with the Chest, Joint Management Committee and Anvil. They said the university theatre had 'fully justified' the hopes of the Drama Commission, but no other University theatre had such modest support. The Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, got £50,000 (£75,000 in 1980-81); the Contact Theatre, Manchester, £42,218 (£50,500); Oxford £18,813, which should rise to £49,035, plus £11,152 to cover the deficit.

The Arts Council reckoned inflation in the performing arts was now 27 per cent. If the Playhouse subsidy stayed tied to the official inflation rate, by the end of 1980-81 the deficit could be £20,000. The university had twice written off its debts and would continue to unless it tackled the underlying problem. It should regard the theatre as an 'educational necessity.' The working party suggested a student rent of £500, more help for Anvil, a new sound system, a cellar buttery, a computerised box office, new heating, and an endowment appeal. The Chest said funding on that scale was a matter for the General Board. They did, however, approve a student deal, splitting the first £3,000 60/40 instead of 50/50. In the meantime, Anvil's finances worsened.

The Arts Council's grant... for 1980-81 represents an increase of 12.5 per cent... This means a cut in real terms of about ten per cent.

In February 1980 Sheppard forecast a deficit of £9,584, rising to £34,138 in 1980-81. The theatre was already £6,000 down and the hardest six months were to come. Coghill, nominally still a Curator, resigned. Arnold wrote: 'The Curators... fully realise that without certain actions of yours... it is unlikely they would be in existence.' His sister replied: 'Your letter... has gone into his files as the crown to one of his lifelong ambitions.' He died in November unaware his pet project was ailing.

The Opera Club began 1980 with Spohr's *Jessonda* (40). ETC returned with *Volpone* - a set book (83). OUDS did *Twelfth Night* (48). The Easter bill, which Sheppard

---

114 118th UTC meeting 29 November 1979, minute 796.
116 Wall to Arnold 21 April 1980. With 120th UTC meeting minutes 13 March 1980.
117 Budget forecast. With 119th UTC meeting minutes 7 February 1980.
118 Arnold to Coghill 19 February 1980, as above.
119 K. Johnston to Arnold 27 February 1980, as above.
120 The version was by Clive Brown, writing a thesis on the German composer, who conducted, the director Sally Day of Welsh National Opera.
staged with Southern Arts and Arts Council Touring, fared worse. Only Coward’s Present Laughter came near breaking even (46). The second Observer Festival drew 54. Wall launched a new student group, Oxford Acts, with The Comedy of Errors and Plautus’s play which inspired it, The Brothers Menaechmus (38). Rowan Atkinson returned with five sell-out performances. Bernard Dheran, Michel Duchaussoy and Alberte Aveline - ‘the Paul Scofield, Albert Finney and Dorothy Tutin of the French theatre’ 121 - entertained schoolchildren as part of Comedie Francaise’s 300th anniversary celebrations. If the university needed proof the theatre was now beyond most students’ reach even the Gilbert and Sullivan Society took to the open air, braving ‘rain and mosquitoes’ 122 with Patience. Sheppard’s efforts to fill the vacuum began badly with two shows that lost £2,500, then revived with Brian Clark’s Whose Life Is It Anyway? (65), San Quentin Drama Workshop’s Endgame and Krapp’s Last Tape (78), the Footlights and Polka (80).

They should have provided the ideal launch-pad for the festival. In fact, it came nowhere near meeting the £150,000 it cost to stage. Oxford Music Theatre drew 25 and lost £4,200 with Stravinsky’s The Soldier’s Tale and Dominic Muldowney’s The English Soldier’s Tale. Tony Craven, who had succeeded Slater as director of Horseshoe, drew 35 and lost £1,389 with Priestley’s I Have Been Here Before. Only Northern Ballet’s Cinderella (80 - £1,783) and Anvil’s revival of John Chapman’s Simple Spymen (41.5 - £3,802) recouped costs. 123 The Playhouse lost £27,074 in 1979-80, due mainly to the box office (down £8,000), but wages added £4,000 more than expected. Anvil produced £33,859, £3,000 below estimate, students £16,371, £1,000 above, visitors £21,491, £5,730 below. 124 There were no economies Curators could make. The working party said they needed a bigger grant. The Chest Secretary, Bill Hyde, would ask Cambridge how it funded the Arts, then with Sheppard prepare a case for Hebdomadal Council. 125

With two world premières, two British premières, plus a new version of Peer Gynt by Adrian Mitchell, Anvil’s 1980-81 season rivalled 1979-80’s. Chris Gray noted:

A playwright I was talking to… [said it] was rapidly taking on the mantle once worn by… Nottingham… The same spirit of adventure, the commissioning of new plays,

121 OM 18 March 1980.
123 Brian Rix, about to become Secretary-General of Mencap, directed.
124 Annual report. With 122nd UTC meeting minutes 19 June 1980.
125 123rd UTC meeting 30 October 1980, minute 825.
the importation of successful foreign work... is now being shown... in Oxford.\(^\text{126}\)

The first British première was Jean-Claude Grumberg's *The Workshop*, which Paris critics voted best play of 1979. Kent commissioned an English version from Tom Kempinski. As in 1979, Anvil staged it for a week at the end of the festival (37), then brought it back to launch the season (29). An *Oxford Star* pullout boasted that in six years Anvil had played 'nearly 300 weeks in over 60 theatres... and produced 54 shows, including 13 world premières... and six transfers to London.'\(^\text{127}\) It did not help takings. Despite good reviews McDougall’s *Much Ado About Nothing* set in World War Two Sicily drew 36 and 33, then continued to poor houses in repertoire.

There are lots of... good performances... and by playing Benedick as a come-hell-or-high-water veteran... Maurice Roeves is able to bring... the... sense of honour he needs to match [Louise] Jameson's [Beatrice]. Their scenes... really fizz.\(^\text{128}\)

Without travel grants schools could no longer afford Shakespeare.

McDougall did *Peer Gynt* because Ian McDiarmid wanted to play Peer. Mitchell added songs for which Nick Bicat wrote the music. It had 29, three of which arrived the Saturday before it opened. McDougall was still polishing his production on the first night. By the time national critics saw it, it had hit its stride, but continued to struggle. Kent told *Cherwell*:

*Peer Gynt* was... reviewed favourably in *The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*... But the night I went there were only 57... Our deficit for the coming year could be £40,000.\(^\text{129}\)

A *Guardian* survey noted:

Between them [25 companies] have accumulated deficits [totalling] £2,227,400. Since the Arts Council... finances nearly 1,200 companies, arts centres, and touring and fringe troupes, the total deficit... is likely to run into several million.\(^\text{130}\)

As an Oxford language student in the 1950s, Ariane Mnouchkine worked backstage for John McGrath and Anthony Page.

Now she has her own theatre on the outskirts of Paris... Her company, Theatre du Soleil, has a world-wide reputation. Her standing as a director is as great as... Page’s and her fame as a playwright probably outshines... McGrath[’s].\(^\text{131}\)

McDougall and Barry Russell saw her version of Klaus Mann’s novel, *Mephisto*, in Paris and

\(^\text{126}\) *OM* 16 August 1980.
\(^\text{128}\) DC *OM* 23 September 1980.
\(^\text{129}\) *Cherwell* 1 November 1980.
\(^\text{131}\) *OM* 25 October 1980.
asked for the rights - Russell to translate, McDougall to direct.

Not since Twelfth Hour... have I seen a play that summons up a... period so... convincingly. Mephisto... reeks of the violence and corruption of pre-war Germany. Yet all we see of Hitler is a posturing puppet in a cabaret sketch. Our guides [to] the... years between 1923 and 1933 are [a rep] company... Mnouchkine builds... carefully in short sharp scenes to her... climax when the stage Mephisto(pheles) realises he... has joined forces with the devil and the actors stride down the stage with their grisly placards... But as remarkable... is the performance. At last the talented company of actors and musicians... McDougall has brought together... show their... range... From the... cabaret vamping of Louise Jameson to the... neuroticism of Ian McDiarmid’s... actor who sells his soul everything contributes to the total effect.\textsuperscript{132}

McDougall arrived at the Playhouse next day to learn McDiarmid was in hospital.\textsuperscript{133} He had to go on. Kent said: ‘I think Mephisto was one of the best things I’ve ever seen... And Gordon was better in it than Ian.’\textsuperscript{134} As the one critic who saw both, I disagreed, but ‘it will be thanks to... McDougall the actor as much as... McDougall the director if the play does transfer.’\textsuperscript{135} Finally it did. Anvil’s last show was The Man Born To Save Us. A play about Ramsay MacDonald by J.B. Fagan’s grandson, Stephen, appealed to termtime Oxford no more than Mephisto (40). Stephe Hemelryk’s Miranda saved ETC’s Tempest (51).\textsuperscript{136} Another woman student lifted OUDS’ Three Sisters (63).\textsuperscript{137} With Anvil no longer able to get LEA grants Sheppard at last got his wish to stage the Christmas children’s shows. An extra Saturday matinée failed to satisfy demand for David Wood and Whirligig Theatre’s Nutcracker Sweet, and Caricature Theatre’s Pinocchio did well too (91). Anvil’s Ayckbourn was Time and Time Again (68).

McDougall began 1981 with The Philadelphia Story, the first revival of Philip Barry’s hit comedy since its London opening in 1949, Gayle Hunnicutt, Alan Rickman and Fiander taking the roles Grace Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby played in the film, High Society. Wardle wrote:

Flander, as the debonair first husband... does achieve the right kind of animation...
But one out of three does not make... much of a triangle.\textsuperscript{138}

After opening to 63, it dropped to 51. The Workshop transferred to Hampstead in January

\textsuperscript{132} DC OM 3 November 1980.
\textsuperscript{133} With a broken wrist, elbow and hip. ‘Climbing out of bed in my split-level bedroom... the ladder went one way, my feet... the other.’ OM 19 September 1981.
\textsuperscript{134} Taped interview, as above.
\textsuperscript{135} OM 10 November 1980.
\textsuperscript{136} DC OM 26 November 1980.
\textsuperscript{137} ‘Nobody else suggests a violin stretched to breaking point as evocatively as Jenny Waldman in her wonderfully sad portrait of Masha... But Imogen Stubbs and Yvonne Cohen make good shots at her sisters.’ DC OM 3 December 1980.
\textsuperscript{138} The Times 27 January 1981.
with Lee Montague as the tailor. Kent claimed he made the play ‘a million times better.’\footnote{139} For me it was the studio atmosphere.

Even two rows from the back of the 160-seater auditorium you cannot help feeling you are actually in the Parisian tailor’s workshop.\footnote{140}

Meanwhile, Kent rehearsed Anvil’s final Playhouse show. He asked Howard Barker to expand his one-act \textit{I’m Bleeding}. \textit{No End of Blame} drew 26 despite ‘a sensitive production.’\footnote{141} Like \textit{Workshop}, it needed a smaller theatre. The Burton-Taylor Building having failed to fulfil its promise and the Beckett Theatre an improbable dream, Anvil pinned its hopes on St. Paul’s. The Oxford Area Arts Council asked the Arts Council for £80,000 to meet its £200,000 appeal target. But no money was forthcoming. The arts centre was not ready in time for \textit{No End of Blame}; Roger Williams had to transfer his revival of Pinter’s \textit{No Man’s Land} to the Clarendon Press Centre.

As president of the Cost and Management Accountants Institute, Hyde invited Ross Davies, editor of \textit{The Times} Business Diary, to a symposium he organised.

He told me that... the Playhouse... is losing about £50,000 a year... A report... will go to... Hebdomadal Council this spring. Closure... [is] a possibility.\footnote{142}

His imprudent aside provoked a frenzy of speculation. Sheppard conceded most of the coverage was fair, but said every report had confused the theatre with its resident company.

The Playhouse... receives no subsidy... and is dependent... on... box office receipts, with the university making up any shortfall.... From each £1... it receives 26p, with 61p going to the producing company and 13p to the Government (VAT).\footnote{143}

The county upped Anvil’s grant to £7,100, the city to £7,750. The Arts Council cut its by £2,000 to £203,000.

[It says it] is an increase of nine per cent... because the 1980-81 figure was made up of £185,000 for running the company in Oxford and £20,000 for touring. But... [Anvil claim] it is a one per cent drop... McDougall says: ‘No-one has reported it yet but the Arts Council has cut its touring budget... by half. Most... will go to ballet... opera and big companies... It is very unlikely... we will get anything.’\footnote{144}

The biggest casualty was Prospect, which had become the Old Vic when it took over the theatre from Olivier in 1976. On his return from touring China, Toby Robertson took a sabbatical. Timothy West, who replaced him, did a disastrous \textit{Macbeth} with Peter O’Toole.

\footnote{139} Taped interview, as above.  
\footnote{140} \textit{OM} 10 January 1981.  
\footnote{141} \textit{DC OM} 12 February 1981.  
\footnote{142} \textit{The Times} 9 January 1981.  
\footnote{143} Letter, \textit{OM} 11 February 1981.  
\footnote{144} \textit{OM} 9 March 1981.
The Arts Council withdrew its £300,000 grant. A South African *Waiting For Godot* was the last the Playhouse saw of the company which began there 20 years earlier.

Sheppard forecast a loss of £39,819, a deficit of £68,459. The box office was down from 48 in the half-year 1979-80 to 46, staff costs up 30. Curators approved the submission to Hebdomadal Council. It asked was it true that the Arts Council was unlikely to support another resident company?

Discussions... revealed considerable uneasiness about [Anvil's] general attitude and the standard of productions. That uneasiness beggared belief.

*The Workshop*... transferred to... Hampstead... where - thanks to a determined theatregoer who paid £50 to sit on the stairs - it played to 105 per cent... *Mephisto*... goes to the Round House... after further weeks at Oxford and Cambridge... *No End of Blame*... has just finished a short tour at Brighton and will be transferring to the... Court... Of the other six productions *No Man's Land*... which is now on tour, will transfer to the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith... and Adrian Mitchell and Nick Bicat's pop version of *Peer Gynt* won a nomination... for the London drama critics' best new musical award, as did the... company... for... *Mephisto* and... *Workshop.*

Anvil's attitude was another matter.

With a population of under 550,000 Oxfordshire is... very small... to support a 1,700-seater theatre, a 600-seater playhouse... and a wide range of other [events. McDougall says:] 'It doesn't help... to have to compete... with subsidised visits from the National... Glyndebourne and the Royal Ballet,' [and] 'if I wandered in... as an outsider and saw some of the student productions... I don't think I'd go... again in a hurry.'

He had provided critics with another stick to beat Anvil and some were only too keen to, as a letter Sheppard sent Arnold demonstrated.

I am by no means convinced that... 'sacking'... Anvil would... resolve our problems... What we need... is a company more clearly focused on the needs of Oxford... I think [Anvil] would prefer to become a totally touring company, taking over the function of... Prospect... I also feel the Arts Council would like clearer definition of this sort. ...We should explore the possibility... It might... be acceptable to all... if tackled tactfully.

The first student production of 1981 was St. John's and Worcester's *Romeo and Juliet* with Stephi Hemelryk and Nigel Williams (57). University College's *Dr. Faustus* (49) and OUDS' *Troilus and Cressida* in repertoire with Voltaire's *Candide* (47) followed.

---

145 With 125th UTC meeting minutes 5 February 1981.
146 Registrar Dr. Alan Dorey to Arnold 8 May 1981. With 126th UTC minutes 5 March 1981.
147 DC OM 9 March 1981.
148 As above.
Whatever their merits, they showed the university theatre was a nursery for talent.

Imogen Stubbs... went to RADA... Jenny Waldman... became administrator of the Foco Novo Touring Company. Jon Cullen... left New College for the Guildhall School. Mark Payton... went straight into the West End.\(^{150}\)

Curators realised it was no time to air doubts about Anvil. Arnold told Hebdomadal Council:

'The Arts Council... has axed its support [to] 41 organisations.'\(^{151}\) Lancaster, its recently retired drama director, now an Anvil Board member, said rocking the boat 'would be fatal.'\(^{152}\)

Some shows that spring did well. Donald Howarth's *Waiting For Godot* (64) made a fine farewell to Prospect. Sheila Hancock's *Dandy Dick* (60) benefited from Andrew Sachs, Manuel in the TV sitcom, *Fawlty Towers*. John Moffatt fared less well with Neil Simon's Broadway hit, *The Good Doctor* (42), Richard Cottrell, freelancing after five years in charge at Bristol Old Vic, worst with Pinter's *Betrayal* (42), losing £1,128. In the throes of a takeover, *The Observer* withdrew from the spring festival. The students raised £3,000 and did one week instead of two (32). The summer festival organisers scrapped plans for 1981 and concentrated on 'a major international festival' in 1982. They invited McDougall to run it and got an agency to raise the £150,000.\(^{153}\)

Merlin Thomas began summer term with *Le Misanthrope* (48). ETC and Merton did Justin Gilbert's version of *Titus Alone* (45). More to popular taste was the Gilbert and Sullivan Society *Gondoliers* (63). Moving the city's amateurs backfired. COTG drew 21 with David Hare's *Knuckle*. The Operatic Society paid their usual rent (now £2,500), but *South Pacific* drew 92 and in 1982 they decamped to the New. The Footlights (59) and Polka (66) were the most lucrative draw, though Northern Ballet came close with *Nutcracker* (89). The worst was Michael Frayn’s *Make and Break* (36), which lost £2,165. Sheppard closed for August, hoping for better things in 1982.

Jacob de Vries Ltd., who set up the Benson and Hedges Aldeburgh Festival, have only just begun their quest for sponsors. But their confidence... may be judged by the calibre of the board... under the presidency of Lord Goodman... John Mortimer... is chairman, Norman St. John-Stevas... vice-chairman, and other [members include] Miss Elizabeth Sweeting... back in Oxford after her stint [in] Australia, former Warden of New College Sir William Hayter, and Alec Cluer, a financial broker with strong theatrical interests.\(^{154}\)

\(^{150}\) Humphrey Carpenter. *OUDS Centenary History*. As above, pp. 212-213.

\(^{151}\) With 127th UTC meeting minutes 14 May 1981.

\(^{152}\) 128th UTC meeting 11 June 1981, minute 853 (b).

\(^{153}\) OM 25 March 1981.

\(^{154}\) OM 4 July 1981.

193
Not for the first time in Playhouse history an array of big names proved no guarantee of success.

Hebdomadal Council postponed its decision on the theatre’s future and asked the working party to do ‘more sums.’ The 1980-81 deficit was not as large as Sheppard feared: £19,848, bringing the total deficit to £48,487, thanks to bigger audiences for visiting shows, ‘the party bookings organiser and increased expenditure on publicity.’

The Curators met Anvil.

[They felt] a careful eye should be kept on box office potential... The new season’s productions were as... ‘safe’ as it was possible to predict... but [they] were prepared to consider anything that would help to keep... open.

In October the working party filed another report. They claimed the theatre was now costing the university £40,000-£45,000 a year. Closure would cost £200,000. The Burton Building was too small for students and the lease stipulated a resident company. Sheppard added that Anvil and touring productions were worth £250,000 a year in subsidies. With 16 theatres ‘fighting to hold on to their grants’ it would be ‘regrettable’ if Oxford surrendered its voluntarily.

Hebdomadal Council gave £50,000 for 1981-82, but said it would not continue after July 1983 unless things improved and the Warden of Keble College, Christopher Ball, succeeded in raising outside funds. The Curators responded by introducing a flat price for professional shows, Anvil by cutting its box office share from 65 to 62.5. Neither helped takings. Victoria Chaplin and Jean Baptiste Thierée’s Le Cirque Imaginaire, from a sell-out season at the Riverside, drew 44 and lost £816, Mephisto 41 and lost £340. The first of Anvil’s ‘safe’ shows, Nicholas Barter’s Home and Beauty, proved anything but, averaging 28.5. The second, Bob Carlton’s The Crucible, did better(50.5), but in happier times a setbook would have brought more school parties. After opening to 42 McDougall’s revival of The White Devil did best (70). Bad weather affected Theatr Clwyd’s Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the

---

156 Meeting with Anvil Board 9 September 1981, minute 3. As above.
158 Sheppard. Personal Statement October 1981, para 10. As above.
159 Registrar’s secretary, Rosalind Brain, to Arnold 5 November 1981. With 129th UTC meeting minutes 29 October 1981. Ball’s appeal, which did not become public until a year later, resulted from Wall telling him ‘closure was in the air.’ OT 26 November 1982.
160 127th UTC meeting 28 May 1981, minute 850.
Galaxy (48), Anvil's Christmas Ayckbourn, How the Other Half Loves (55), and Northern Black Light's Kimoon and the Paper Dragon (49), but Wood's The Ideal Gnome Exhibition managed 91.

McDougall began 1982 with an economy Macbeth (57), featuring Ann Firbank and Tim Hardy, then took a break to become visiting professor at California University, Davis. Before he left, he produced a paper with students. Until 18 months ago there had been no variation: resident and visiting companies had averaged 50 'since the days of weekly rep.' The problem lay temporarily with the recession, longer term with the theatre's image. It needed more amenities and lower prices.

At £3.90 the Playhouse is the second most expensive regional theatre in the country. And this figure was only agreed this year as a result of Anvil [dropping] its share of the take.

Kent mounted an unsuccessful revival of S.N. Behrman's Rain From Heaven with Sheila Gish (36). Wall battled to avoid paying £2,000 a year for Anvil's offices.

Over the first seven weeks... this season the company's share of the box office... was an average £3,284... On tour the... share over a nine-week period was an average £4,902.... In a... year the company 'loses' [about] £32,000... at Oxford.

The Curators marked the university theatre's 21st birthday with a party at which the sculptor, Carol Martin, gave them a bust of her father, Nevill Coghill, on permanent loan. ETC, St. John's and Merton began the student year with Whiting's The Devils (27). As a late night extra Rohan Theatre Group premièred Beckett's Lessness. Lucy Bailey, one of St. Peter's first women students, used six professional actors for the speaking roles and her tutor, Warner, as their non-speaking focus. There was no mention of the Beckett Theatre Trust, but it funded the show and her trip to Paris to see the author. OUDS staged Cyrano de Bergerac (55) and The Winter's Tale (64), the Opera Club Paisiello's Nina. It had not appeared at the Playhouse in 1981 and its 1982 show did nothing to help its finances (21).

161 'Our belief has to depend on what we hear and not what we see. Unfortunately, the words are not... well spoken.' B.A. Young. Financial Times 23 January 1982.
162 A Paper by Playhouse Users. Signed McDougall, Jenny Waldman (OUDS), Ian Brunskill (ETC), Lynn Binstock (OU Opera Club), Nicholas O'Brien (Merton Floats), Rupert Steele (St. John's Mummers). With 131st UTC meeting minutes 5 March 1982.
163 Wall to Hyde 27 January 1982. As above.
164 Agendum 5 19 February 1982. With 130th UTC meeting minutes 4 February 1982.
165 'Nonsensical as it all might seem... the flashing lights and speaking faces do have a curious fascination, like a slow motion juggling routine with speaking billiard balls.' DC OM 19 February 1982.
Bogdanov's National Theatre production of Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* made headlines in December by showing a Roman soldier buggering a druid. Having failed to get the Attorney General to bring a case under the 1968 Theatres Act, the anti-porn campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, sued the director for procuring an act of gross indecency. It led Anvil to stage a 75p late-night reconstruction in aid of the Council for Civil Liberties.

Resident playwright Guy Hibbert took transcripts from two shorthand writers with him in the Old Bailey courtroom... then edited them as he raced back to Oxford.166

The case collapsed after three days.167 Their final shows suffered from the pre-Easter drop in theatregoing. C.P. Taylor's hit *And A Nightingale Sang...* averaged 29.5 and produced £2,315 in a fortnight when Sheppard needed £1,650 a week to break even;168 Kempinski's *Duet For One 24* and £949.

Ann Firbank gives a positively searing performance of the violinist that makes her recent lacklustre Lady Macbeth all the more puzzling.169

Sheppard relied on visitors for most of spring and summer. Only two shows made money: Great Eastern Stage's *Travesties* (53 - £2,472) and Polka (74 - £1,769) with ETC and St. John's (45 - £1,270). Feeling the Footlights were not the force they were, Sheppard got Frank Boyce and Jack Latimer to try out the revue they were taking to Edinburgh. Weekly attendance in 1981/2 slumped from 2,264 to 1,904, income from £1,500 to £993.

An experience shared with virtually every other regional theatre as well as with the West End, where at one point in May 17 theatres were dark, four were for sale and the average audience was 30 per cent.170

The Falklands Campaign, the Pope's visit to Ireland, Wimbledon and the World Cup had all hit the box office.171

The reason [the Playhouse] made a loss was that of the £216,000 it took... it kept only £46,000... And the reason the loss was so great was that, unlike [Anvil] and the students who share... most visiting companies demand guarantees [of] £7,500 to £8,000.172

The 1982 festival collapsed when the sponsor withdrew, and one in 1983 seemed 'remote.'173

The theatre closed for eight weeks from July to September.

168 133rd UTC meeting 13 May 1982, minute 888.
169 *DC OM* 6 April 1982.
171 As above, para. 9 (i).
172 *OM* 1 March 1983.
173 *OM* 10 July 1982.

196
The recess will enable the installation of [a] box office computer... But if the theatre stood to make a profit... or even break even... its doors would be open.¹⁷⁴

Hebdomadal Council vetoed the working party proposal that the Playhouse should ‘operate under the present system until at least July 1987.’¹⁷⁵ Its cost had risen by £24,000 to £86,000 and would have been £102,000 without the £16,000 Ball had raised. The university spent £34,000 on overheads like Sheppard’s salary, had to ‘prop up the theatre’ with £31,000 on top of its grant of £19,000 and would have to meet the deficit when other departments were being cut.¹⁷⁶ It would not allow Ball to make a public appeal in case it had to launch ‘a more general appeal,’¹⁷⁷ but supported his plan to raise £250,000 to provide ‘a breathing space of five years,’ while Curators reached a longterm solution. If he succeeded by September 1983, the theatre could stay open until July 1987. McDougall told Dr. Margaret Rayson, who chaired the Joint Management Committee, it was ‘a recipe for disaster.’ If they sought funds to buy time, they could not go back in five years’ time and demand more. ‘What the Arts Theatre had done was go for a once-and-for-all £1m.’¹⁷⁸ Ball called the Cambridge appeal, launched that spring, ‘a dodgy last resort’ by an organisation that devoted less and less time to students.

When the Playhouse became the University Theatre ... the vision was, and still is... high quality student productions and professional theatre rubbing shoulders.¹⁷⁹

Anvil reverted to a 65 per cent share, but in the light of the university’s decision would base its 1983-84 Arts Council bid on 20 weeks at Oxford.¹⁸⁰

McDougall had been trying to get the Russian director, Robert Stura, a visa. The Round House and Edinburgh Festival agreed to take The Cherry Orchard on that assumption.

When [it] fell through the natural thing was to go for Mike Alfreds [of Shared Experience] who’d won an award... for his... Seagull and [would win an] award for his... Cherry Orchard at the National. But he did a... disastrous production... [The designer] Nadine Baylis said: ‘This is the least shared experience I’ve ever had.’¹⁸¹

It averaged 49 and made £3,402. McDougall’s modern-dress revival of Middleton’s Women Beware Women also averaged 49 but, with concessions, made only £2,680.

¹⁷⁴ OM 10 August 1982.
¹⁷⁵ Working Party 4th Report, recommendation (i), as above.
¹⁷⁶ Hebdomadal Council to Curators. With 134th UTC minutes, as above.
¹⁷⁷ 134th meeting, minute 898.
¹⁷⁸ Taped interview, as above.
¹⁷⁹ OT 26 November 1982.
¹⁸⁰ 135th UTC meeting 28 October 1982, minute 906.
¹⁸¹ Taped interview, as above.
I inherited *The Cherry Orchard* company... It was a nightmare... They... sat and waited for direction like a student company.

Kent remained associate director, but Terry Hawkins took over as administrative director. Kent's next play was *The Bottom Drawer*, which he commissioned from Stephen Bill. The farce about two teenagers who decide to wed marked the stage debut of John Gordon-Sinclair, star of the cult film, *Gregory's Girl*. It averaged 49.5. During the run the company gave a brief airing to *Hard Feelings*, a play about the 1981 Brixton riots by its former playwright in residence, Doug Lucie. Lincoln and University Colleges' *Othello* with Harry Matoyu, drew 47, OUDS' *Merchant of Venice* 57: both better than the New Vic's *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (40 - minus £1,095), which began the autumn, and Cambridge TC's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (42 - minus £1,254) which ended it. The children's shows helped revive the balance-sheet. Wood's *The Owl and the Pussycat Went to See...* drew 98; Caricature's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 96. To add to the festive cheer, Derrick Goodwin's revival of Ayckbourn's *Relatively Speaking* averaged 72 and made £7,616 in three weeks before leaving on a 12-date tour.

In a programme note Sheppard said the Playhouse had already raised £100,000 towards the appeal. Ball wasted no time. Begging letters went to every actor who had trod the theatre's boards. By the spring of 1983 donations were averaging £2,500 a week. The box office was healthier too. Attendance was up eight per cent, income 12. Sheppard was now predicting a 1982-83 deficit of £50,342, or £342 counting £50,000 from the appeal; a 1983-84 deficit of £33,937, a profit of £1,603 with the Appeal money.

Anvil's first show of 1983 was Kent's 19th century Balkans *Twelfth Night*, Doug Fisher playing Feste, as he had done in Rudman's 1964 OUDS revival. It averaged 41 - not good for a set-book. The Opera Club began term with *Orfeo et Euridice* (34). OUDS did *As You Like It* with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (46). McDougall's final show was *The Oedipus Plays*, a compression into one evening of *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

I'd commissioned Stephen Spender about three years before... Finally [I] called him and said: 'Stephen, I've announced it for March and, if you don't have a script, I'm going to write it...’ He was producing choruses up to three days before.

---

182 'He'd been at the Library Theatre when I was at Manchester... There was no major shift... [But] he was much easier to talk to.' Sheppard. Taped interview, as above.


184 Revised estimate. With 137th UTC meeting minutes 3 March 1983.

185 Taped interview, as above.
I commented: 'There is room for refinement. But, marvellously, Sophocles lives!' Michael Coveney:

After The Greeks at the RSC and The Oresteia at the National, Sophocles' Theban plays in a new version... The trilogy is not really a coherent proposition. However, these three great plays do constitute an impressive evening... and... Spender and his director... have imposed a... consistency on them that is, for the most part, fascinating.187

During the run, which averaged 54.5, there was a gala for the Appeal, now standing at £152,701. Fund-raisers began to think what they would do if they exceeded their target.188 It was small beer compared to Cheltenham.189 The Everyman closed for a £2.5m. Corporation facelift. The theatre would become the hub of a complex with a multi-storey car-park. The Oxford Area Arts Council revived its appeal for the St. Paul's Arts Centre. It had raised and spent £65,000 on repairs. But the director, Adrian Litvinoff, had had to suspend operations while he sorted out the finances of the Council's headquarters. If he could raise £50,000 to equip the 300-seat auditorium a donor would double it.190

Amid the ballyhoo about the stars who were aiding the Appeal Glenda Jackson caused a stir because she could not. She was keen to play Mother Courage for McDougall, but RSC had the rights.

Even if the actress... was... unknown, we would not have given... permission. Oxford is less than 60 miles from London and... a lot of our patrons travel that... distance.191

It was not the first time Anvil had fallen foul of a major company. In 1977 they pencilled in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof to find the National had the rights. But McDougall felt RSC was having its own back. In 1974 he beat them to Happy End.

I even had Trevor Nunn... promising they would do it at The Other Place... and not invite the press. But I pointed out that... would ruin my chances of a... transfer, whereas they could bring their production in... regardless. So I refused and [mine] did transfer.192

For the rest of the season Sheppard relied on touring companies. Extemporary Dance

186 OM 10 March 1983.
188 Report 23 April 1983, minute 7(c). With 138th UTC meeting minutes 3 March 1983.
189 OM 26 February 1983.
190 OM 30 March 1983.
191 Peter Harlock, RSC's chief press officer. OM 14 March 1983.
192 McDougall. As above.
was one of several losers (33 - minus £1,531). There were enough winners to mitigate the
damage. A May Day Gala raised £4,000 for the Appeal.

The moment that seemed to sum it all up came towards the end... Janet Suzman spoke
a few words... Then a spotlight picked out a seat in the stalls and an old lady in
scarlet hat and coat rose... to acknowledge the applause... Like the... Playhouse, Dame
Flora Robson has not enjoyed the best of health recently. But the 81-year-old
actress, who spoke the first words from the stage... in Woodstock Road 60 years ago,
was there to Bless This House... And if - as Gyles Brandreth, the organiser... would
have us believe - the S.S. Playhouse was in danger of sinking... it surely couldn't go
down while such a star-studded crew of old sailors [from Ronnie Barker to Emlyn
Williams] were manning the pumps.193

OUDS began summer term with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (55). The Gilbert and
Sullivan Society did *The Mikado* (59). After a run of visiting shows, during which even Polka
struggled (56), the Footlights, dropped in 1982, reinvigorated the balance sheet with their
centenary revue, *Hawaiian Cheese Party* (77), enabling Sheppard to end the year on an
upbeat note. Income was up 18.25 per cent. The theatre had lost £42,778, but the Appeal
meant it could start 1983-84 with a clean sheet.194

[It] now stands at £236,000... A succession of big names like Hardy Amies, Anthony
Powell, John Cleese, Susannah York, Judi Dench, Prunella Scales and Patrick
Garland continue to follow the example of Ronnie Barker, whose £6,000 remains
the biggest.195

Hebdomadal Council agreed the theatre could stay open until 1987, but stressed the
need for a longterm plan.196 It formed another working party with its own chairman, one
Curator, one Chest member, and three outsiders to report by the end of 1983-84. Curators
thought it had 'undervalued'197 their case. So, while Arnold joined the working party, Dr.
Rayner, Dr. Nicholas Shrimpton and junior member, Clare Shire, restated it. A marketing
executive could not have produced a more glowing document.

Oxford... has for the last 20 years run Britain's most successful... drama course...
not only without paying a single academic salary, but without... a Faculty of Drama...
It is no disrespect to the... expensively run departments... at Bristol, Manchester
and Hull to say that their track record... bears no comparison.

It also exposed their tenuous grasp of Playhouse economics and the terms of the lease by
adding the university had no duty to support a theatre 'for the citizens,' though it might help
improve the viability of a building 'needed by students... no more than 24 weeks.'196

193 DCOM 3 May 1983.
194 Annual Report. With 140th UTC meeting minutes 8 June 1983.
195 OM 16 September 1983.
196 Dorey to Arnold 21 October 1983. With 140th UTC meeting minutes. As above.
197 As above, minute 948.
198 *The Case for a University Theatre*. With 141st UTC meeting minutes 27 October 1983.

200
A ‘substantial deficit’ meant Anvil faced ‘continued retrenchment’ in 1983-84.\textsuperscript{199} Wall and McDougall told Arts Council officers they welcomed Hebdomadal Council’s plan.

[They] hoped [it] would benefit the company, particularly because they foresaw the possibility of the[m] eventually taking over responsibility for the Playhouse.\textsuperscript{200}

Having lost Mother Courage, they took advantage of RSC’s decision to release Educating Rita and got Midland Bank to sponsor it. Peter Farago’s revival with Bill Simpson and Ishia Bennison averaged 79. Jane Howell’s Duchess of Malfi with Annabel Leventon also did well the first week (74), but fell to 38 the second.

After the gala Curators could not ask its stars to return to mark the Playhouse’s 60th birthday. They held a Fun Day, ending with a revue.

If the Warden of Keble... walked down to the front of the... stage... with a spring in his step, it was understandable... He had the happy task... of informing the audience they had raised the... £250,000... If he limped up the aisle at the interval, that was also understandable. He and his wife, Wendy, had just walked the 43 miles from Stratford-upon-Avon as their own - £4,500 - sponsored contribution.\textsuperscript{201}

In all, the Appeal raised £251,285. £44,778 had already been used to meet the 1982-83 deficit, leaving £206,507 for the next four years.\textsuperscript{202} Curators wanted to spend the surplus. But it stayed in the account and was swallowed up, with interest, by a £14,000 shortfall in college junior common room contributions.

McDougall did Peter Whelan’s Clay (38). OUDS revived Marat /Sade (51). The Footlights reprised Hawaiian Cheese Party (80). Wood’s The Selfish Shellfish (98) and Barter’s Table Manners (65.5) also did well. But Sheppard’s efforts to economise by getting his second children’s show from The Other Oxfordshire Touring Theatre backfired. The Runaway Train drew 22. Anvil had another spat about weeks. Curators decided to give the extra week to the students because it had cut its residency from 20 to 15.\textsuperscript{203} It was academic to McDougall, as was the Arts Council’s decision to increase Anvil’s grant by £15,000 to £230,670. In the spring of 1984 he left for Edmonton, Canada, to run a complex with a 690-seat proscenium arch theatre, a 690-seat thrust stage and a 240-seat studio.\textsuperscript{204} His successor had increasing difficulty running one 592-seater.

\textsuperscript{199} 140th UTC meeting, as above, minute 947.  
\textsuperscript{200} Minutes of a meeting between Anvil and the Arts Council 2 September 1983.  
\textsuperscript{201} DC OM 24 October 1983.  
\textsuperscript{202} 143rd UTC meeting 2 February 1984, minute 972.  
\textsuperscript{203} 142nd UTC meeting 24 November 1983, minute 462.  
\textsuperscript{204} Prof. Gordon McDougall. Curriculum Vitae, 2000.
Kent's last show was *The Playboy of the West Indies* by Mustapha Matura, who transferred the action of Synge's play to the Caribbean. The fortnight averaged 32, despite rave reviews and a cast of top black actors.

Kent's production gains enormously from the ramshackle splendour of Adrianne Lobel's coconut-fringed rum bar setting and the explosive talents of his Caribbean cast... Underpinning it is the feeling that the happy-go-lucky, gullible Trinidadians are not much different from the moody, superstitious Irish: both drowning the squalor of their existence in liquor, both desperate for a bit of glamour.205

McDougall's swansong, *Dance of Death* in a new version by Ted Whitehead, was no more of a draw (34).

Though Barbara Jefford's... appearance bears little resemblance to Strindberg's world-weary Valkyrie, clinging on tenaciously to the only role life has left... the iron has entered the soul of her performance... and Reginald Marsh, who plays the spent artillery captain with breathtaking effectiveness, as visibly rallies from each heart-attack at the thought of reengaging the enemy.206

Maria Aitken ended their regime with Coward's *Private Lives* (63). Since Oxford, she had served her apprenticeship at Coventry and Northampton, making her name as Elvira in the National's *Blithe Spirit*.

Anvil's board picked McDougall's successor in March, shortlisting six of the 61 applicants, among them Kent. They chose Richard Williams, director of Contact Theatre, Manchester.207 In six years he had staged 40 productions, winning the *Manchester Evening News* best show award two years running. Meanwhile, Ken Chubb, who converted a Kilburn dance hall into the Tricycle Theatre in 1980, saw *Playboy* on tour. It packed his venue for three weeks, returned for another four, and he invited Kent to become director, launching his long reign in charge of the fringe venue.208

The hit of spring was Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God*, (99). With Polka's *Wind in the Willows* (72) it provided a bumper week. After losing £3,500 at the New in 1982 and £2,500 in 1983, the Operatic Society returned with *Show Boat* (88), paying £2,750 rent. Later shows failed to maintain the momentum. Only the Gilbert and Sullivan

206 DC OM 2 February 1984.
207 The 37-year-old from West Kirby was involved in student drama at Manchester where he read English and at Oxford where he did his teaching diploma. From the Everyman, Liverpool, he went to Nottingham as PRO, then became Arts Council regional drama officer and David Hare's assistant at the National. He returned to Nottingham as Richard Eyre's associate director in 1975.
208 *Playboy* proved a cult play, having a tenth anniversary revival in 1994, a 20th in 2004.
Society Iolanthe, (77) and The Footlights (74) bucked the trend. The 1983-84 deficit was £51,098, which the Appeal grant all but wiped out. Without the British and American Drama Academy (BADA) it would have been higher. Anthony Branch and Carolyn Sands, promoters of the new Oxford summer school, hired the Playhouse for £1,500 while Lindsay Anderson rehearsed The Playboy of the Western World, then for another fortnight for £5,500 while it took place. So the theatre closed for five weeks, not nine.

Before he left Manchester Williams helped the university relinquish control of Contact. Its predicament was much the same as Oxford's. The difference was the way it handled it.

We had Professor Welland... the Professor of Drama... good representation at board level from Manchester City and Greater Manchester Councils... They ...put together a package which pretty well replaced what the university was pulling out of... In contrast there was the Oxford way... a committee over here [communicating by letter with a committee over there]... Nobody... got everyone together.209

The County, City and four Oxfordshire District Councils had nothing like the clout of the northern authorities. But, as officers were to protest, Hebdomadal Council made no effort to involve them. In June 1984 under the headline Wanted: Ideas For Theatre the Mail reported:

A special working party has already received written evidence from the Curators, the Oxford Playhouse Company and OUDS. Now it is inviting... evidence from other interested parties... The working party has set aside part of Tuesday morning.210

Ball, who might have banged heads together, was now chairing a university committee to help fund its museums, libraries and academic work.

Williams met the Curators in May and outlined plans for closer co-operation with the students. Once in post, everything became secondary to survival.

[Before I came] there was nothing to suggest that things were as bad as they... were... The big element was the pressure... coming from the Arts Council... We were being encouraged to do more touring... on less and less money.

Wall made the same point to Dr. Rayner. Anvil's inability to present 20 weeks resulted from the drop in value of its Arts Council grant and the size of the catchment area, which meant most plays would 'only hold up for one or two weeks.' He dismissed her claim that Anvil's 16 weeks were the problem. 'A potential increase... of £4,400 is hardly a major factor given the size of the deficit.'211

209 Taped interview, 10 September 2003.
210 OM 22 June 1984.
Williams began with the version of *Cider With Rosie* he first did at Manchester, averaging 79.5. The honeymoon continued for the first week of *Henry IV Part One* (69). When schools had so little for theatre trips it was a mistake to run it a further fortnight (41.5). But having reclaimed their week, the Curators gave it back: no students wanted it. Williams plunged straight into *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. It did well too (63.5). It was Anvil's best opening ever. Over seven weeks it had averaged 62 and £2,939. Sheppard filed an upbeat report to Hebdomadal Council. Income had risen by 23 per cent. The theatre was £30,000 in profit. He asked if Curators could have a copy of the report the working party had produced in June. Neither Curators or Chest had seen it - nor would they - and another term would elapse before Council pronounced its verdict.

Worcester and University College's revival of Stoppard's *Jumpers* drew 95 and Christmas got off to a good start with Bogdanov's New Vic revival of *Under Milk Wood* (98). But Whirligig overstretched itself with 12 performances of Wood's *Papertown Paperchase* (74). Bowing to his board Williams, who was no Ayckbourn fan, got Peter Farrago to revive *Way Upstream*. The National had a cruiser chugging across a flooded stage, Anvil a bottomless boat. As Elinor Fairhurst, who had become joint PRO for Anvil and Sheppard in a bid to save cash, said: 'There is no way you can tour water.'

Anthony Augarde, who had succeeded Dibb as *Oxford Times* arts editor, began his notice: 'What a terrible play!' For Ayckbourn its 52.25 was poor. But Polka compensated with a reprise of *Wind in the Willows* (81).

Williams began 1985 with another classic, *She Stoops To Conquer* (55), and his first attempt to give theatregoers the occasional 'extra' - Tim Albery's revival of Terry Johnson's *Insignificance* (29). The university had never produced a final Appeal statement. During the run Sheppard repaired the omission. It was an effort to prod Hebdomadal Council. It said no time must be lost in reaching a longterm solution, but 'on the face of it 16 months already' had. It achieved its aim. In March Curators at last received Council's report.

The university's subsidy... of... £145,000... was not... unreasonable... compared with... other theatres of similar size, [but] the working party advised that much could be done to improve [its] earning power.
Among weaknesses were Anvil's 'limited involvement' and the revenue from student shows.

[A] market survey [showed the public] failed to distinguish between Anvil and visiting companies... or... between student and professional work... [The theatre needed a] policy which would... integrate the operations of [all] three.216

Council did not accept the working party's recommendations, nor did it say what they were, but it drew 'heavily on them in reaching its own conclusions.'

[They involved] the replacement of the Curators by a small board... chosen for the most part of financial and business expertise... meeting... frequently with wide powers.217

It would have five members: one from the university, a professional theatre administrator, and three outsiders. Sheppard would be manager and chief executive, Williams consultant artistic director.

Curators feared the theatre might suffer 'in the pursuit of profitability.'218 They wanted a second board member to protect student interests. Neither Sheppard or Williams was happy. Anvil's board dismissed the proposal out of hand. While Council struggled vainly to get it to change its mind another six months elapsed.

There was no point at which the Curators and the Anvil Board, some high-ranking people from the university... Barry [Sheppard], myself, [and] Terry [Hawkins] sat down and [explored] the problems... It was all done through this very rigid committee structure.219

The Bad Lib Theatre, a team of ex-Footights, began term with Feeling the Benefit (42). The Opera Club followed with Rossini's La Pietra Del Paragone (40). OUDS marked its centenary with two plays. Williams directed the first: Wycherley's The Country Wife (66).

The hit of term was St. John's and Exeter's revival of Tim Rice's musical, Blondel (72), which had just closed in London owing £400,000. She Stoops returned for a final week (56). Then came a run of shows, of which only the Operatic Society Merry Widow (82 - rent £3,000) made money. In summer term the Gilbert and Sullivan Society's intergalactic HMS Pinafore drew 76, OUDS' second centenary show, Katie Mitchell's circus-style Good Person of Szechwan 44. It led the treasurer to complain that OUDS could no longer make a profit at the Playhouse. Country Wife had lost £1,000, Good Person £750. The most lucrative show was The Seagull. Williams invited Charles Sturridge, director of the acclaimed TV serial,
Brideshead Revisited, to direct. A deal with the Lyric, Hammersmith, meant he could stage it on a scale not possible since Hauser’s day and it came with a sheaf of rave reviews.

Neither Samantha Eggar nor John Hurt tries to overpower us [as Arkadina and Trigorin]... Together they make the perfect foil for the breathtaking vulnerability John Lynch and Natasha Richardson bring to Konstantin and Nina.

Seats were like gold dust. In August it moved to the Queens Theatre. Of other shows only the Footlights did well (74). There was no hope of BADA taking the theatre again. Playboy had lost heavily. It closed for ten weeks for a £120,000 development programme. Hebdomadal Council was at last responding to the other working party recommendations.

The new box office went ahead. RITA, a new £75,000 computer system, replaced Ticketshop. A restaurant in the second-floor gallery did not. The university applied to convert it in the wake of the Odsal Stadium fire disaster, in which 56 Bradford City soccer fans lost their lives. As the Curators noted at their final meeting, the plans fell foul ‘of the County Fire Service’s quite new demands.’

Means of escape from the first floor balcony... and the second floor coffee lounge is via two staircases which are unseparated at the ground floor... A fire... in the foyer... is likely to cut off the means of escape.

In the autumn the upper floors would have to remain closed.

They suddenly decided after 50 years the theatre wasn’t... safe... Every time we thought we’d come up with [a solution] it was thrown out... The simplest was to straighten out the eastern staircase [to] issue straight into the street... We were defeated by 18in. The bottom step was too close to the door.

The bombshell compounded Hebdomadal Council’s dilatoriness. The Registrar wrote at the end of September:

Negotiations with... Anvil... were prolonged; then the fire precautions... cast doubt over the re-opening... Finally the intervention of the Long Vacation hampered progress.

Things were not quite as comatose as when grass grew between the cobblestones in High Street. It was still unthinkable to call a meeting.

20 DC OM 5 June 1985.
221 Developed by RSC, Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Exchange.
223 152nd UTC meeting 13 June 1985, minute 1035(b). My italics.
224 Divisional Fire Service Commander A. C. Hughes to J. Priest, City Chief Environmental Health Officer, 12 June 1985. With 151st UTC meeting minutes 16 May 1985.
The proposal that [Williams] be consultant director was not acceptable... Council decided to go ahead with the small management group and leave it to them... now that a temporary solution has been found to the fire... problems by... partitioning... the foyer.226

After procrastinating for two years it was passing the buck. A longterm solution would involve major outlay and it could not guarantee the money.227 The new board should press ahead in hope.

It held its first meeting in September. Hyde, who had retired as Chest Secretary, took the chair. The other members were RSC's production controller, James Sargant,228 Dr. Shrimpton and David Hurt, the director of Thames Business Advice Centre. In 1986 Robert Weir, director of corporate affairs at the Oxford marketing firm, A.C. Nielsen, left Anvil's board to join them. J. Morley represented the Chest. Sheppard was secretary. They inherited a going concern. In 1984-85 Anvil played 18 weeks (cf. 15) and averaged £2,869 a week (£2,307); students eight (six), averaging £3,024 (£2,299); visitors 21 (25), £1,936 (£588). Weekly takings of £2,503 did not meet the £2,645 get-out, but the theatre lost only £6,707 after the Appeal £50,000. Anvil would not stage another Shakespeare in 1985-86, but would do major revivals of The Importance of Being Earnest and Travesties before taking them to Singapore for the British Council.229 The euphoria did not last long. In September Anvil learnt its Arts Council grant would be £249,000.

The increase [of £10,000] doesn’t even keep up with inflation - it’s about half inflation. But we were grateful [for] any.230

The first patrons to encounter the glazed partition dividing the foyer were attending a concert. The night after:

When I saw the... tickets... I wondered if the management was trying to get us in the right Forties mood... The truth turned out to be more prosaic. The new box office computer isn’t working yet. Neither, I'm afraid, is the New Vic['s]... Spivs.231

It drew 23 and lost £4,242. Williams began his second year with a reprise of Chalk Circle

226 Dorey to Arnold 27 September 1985. With 152nd UTC meeting minutes, as above.
227 Legislation relating to University Theatre TH/1, TH/1/4, TH/1/5; MC2352/85.
228 While still a student at Cambridge, he became the Arts Theatre's stage manager. After graduating he joined Sadler's Wells, then ran ABC Television's design department before joining Tussaud's. In 1971 he became RSC's production controller, where he stayed for 30 years, masterminding touring, the move to the Barbican, and the conversion of the Swan Theatre. Taped interview 25 November 2003.
229 152nd UTC meeting, as above, minute 1037.
230 Hawkins. OM 4 September 1985
231 DC OM 17 September 1985.
Pygmalion (director Philip Grout) proved again that a three-week run merely diluted audiences (49.3). Malcolm McKay's Airbase underlined the difficulty of selling new work.

It had a cracking cast: Mark Rylance and Greta Scarachi... It was high-profile. It was controversial... I felt [it performed] a lot of the things that theatre should.232

Sadly, 'the story-line [was] about as convincing as... a B-movie.'233 It drew 27 the first week, 16 the second, then failed again at Cambridge.

The board felt the theatre was 'too heavily subject' to Anvil. They wanted to involve other companies.234 The Arts Theatre, Cambridge, was 'keen on commissioning productions jointly,'235 but unless they could get its resident company to waive its guarantee it was not a source of revenue. Its Rosmersholm drew 49 and £509. The New Vic's Buddy Holly at the Regal (28) proved even more disastrous than Spivs, losing £4,591. OUDS failed a third time with Schiller's Don Carlos (30). At last Wood's The Gingerbread Man produced the returns the board was looking for (74). Polka also did well (57). Most gratifying was Anvil's departure from Ayckbourn. The Importance averaged 76.3. Travesties opened to 82 and drew 64 when it returned in February. British Council backing meant Williams could recruit a strong cast headed by André Melly. The visitors showed yet again the difficulty of finding shows which made money. Local Murder by Coronation Street writer Peter Whalley drew 39 and lost £1,768; the Broadway hit, The Owl and the Pussycat, 61 but made only £2,761. The one success was Great Eastern Stage's Just Between Ourselves (60 - £4,118). Ayckbourn!

In the first half of 1985-86 they had lost £19,000. There was no hope of limiting the final deficit to £39,000. Only Anvil had done well, but for eleven weeks, not 15.

It soured relations with the board. To aggravate them, PRO Elinor Fairhurst, who had been promised an assistant, opted to work only for Anvil.236 To cap everything, Hawkins told Sheppard the company was axing its last show. Although cheap, it would have doubled the deficit. Thanks to Cider With Rosie, Educating Rita and The Seagull they had been able to stretch to a seventh show for three years - 'we cannot assume another windfall'237 - and the Arts Council would demur at them doing 'seven productions this year and only four or five

232 Williams. Taped interview, as above.
233 DC OM 1 November 1985.
234 University Theatre Board meeting 19 November 1985, minute 19.
235 UTB meeting 17 December 1985, minute 25.
236 UTB meeting 17 December 1985, minute 28(a).
next.' Sheppard retorted that because their year ran from April to March whereas his ran from August to July they had staged only five. His disquiet led Williams to attend the Board's next meeting. He was planning six plays in 1986-87, plus another if funds allowed. The Arts Council was offering £280,000, a 12 per cent increase, but that was 'catching-up money.'

They settled for Anvil playing 14 weeks, but insisted it stage *Charley's Aunt* at Christmas, not *The Rivals*.

The Opera Club began 1986 with its diamond jubilee production: the British première of Schubert's *Fierrabras* (58). A few weeks later Prof. Arnold, who had done so much for the club, died suddenly in Hungary. A consortium led by New College drew 78 with *Twelfth Night*. Wall managed 57 with OUDS' *Winter's Tale*, Samuel West as Florizel, Patrick Marber as Autolycus. The hit of term was another musical by another college consortium: *Grease* (92). Sheppard relied on visitors for most of his spring and summer programme. He struggled. Religious observance was still strong enough to excuse the Holy Week closure. But when he closed again in May, it was by default. Amateurs brought most cheer to his balance sheet. The Operatic Society (£3,250 rent) drew 83 with *Carmen*, COTG 67 with Keith Dewhurst's *Lark Rise*, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society 68 with *Patience*, the Footlights' 59.

Then the theatre closed for eleven weeks until mid-September.

It would be nice to... report that work is going ahead on the facelift - now estimated to cost £300,000... But if any work does go ahead it will [be minor]. The university has reaped the reward of frittering away two of the four years bought by the... Appeal... The Warden of Keble... would have done more to secure the longterm future... if he had invested his... quarter of a million in one of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals.

Effectively, the £67,607 deficit had already sealed the theatre's fate.

The Board tried to sound positive when it met Hebdomadal Council's general purposes committee in May.

Much seemed to depend on the content of the letter... expected within the next few days from the University Grants Committee. This would clarify the limits of the university's resources and determine its policy for the next three to five years.

In fact, it would be another six months before Council made its decision and then it was

---

258 UTB meeting 20 February 1986, minute 48.
259 UTB meeting 25 March 1986, minute 54.
260 OT 2 May 1986.
261 DC OM 4 July 1986.
262 UTB meeting 19 May 1986, minute 69.
hedged with ifs and buts. In July the Chest Secretary wrote to Sheppard, enclosing a copy of the circular he had sent to all departments following the University Grants Committee cut in funding. The theatre would receive £22,738 in 1986-87 with a 4.77 per cent increase to cover inflation and a two per cent cut to meet Sheppard's salary.\footnote{I.G. Thompson to Sheppard 11 July 1986. With UTB meeting minutes 19 May 1986.}

Weir, who succeeded Hyde as chairman, submitted the Board's plan in October after consulting ex-university theatres at Exeter, Newcastle and Southampton. He felt the theatre was viable if it met fire regulations, created a trust, had a company resident 30 weeks, and encouraged students and amateurs.\footnote{Robert Weir. Outline proposal to Hebdomadal Council October 1986. With UTB minutes 12 September 1986.} Assuming that company was Anvil, 1986-87 would produce £443,000: £380,500 in box office; £255,000 from touring; £279,000 from the Arts Council; £55,000 from the university and £50,000 from local councils: a total of £1,082,000 against expenditure of £1,080,950. Assuming the university remained leaseholder and continued footing the £27,000 maintenance bill, it would save £60,000 of the £142,500 the theatre cost.

Comparing Oxford with Exeter, Newcastle and Southampton was not all that helpful, but showed they got more aid from their local councils and, like Manchester, had cut their university ties amicably. The board felt the university should meet half the refurbishment cost and an appeal raise the rest. They proposed closing in May 1987 and reopening in September 1988. Their optimism was surprising. The university had made a similar offer to Anvil a year before. It hated operating as a resident and touring company, did not want to get involved in 'a time-consuming public appeal,'\footnote{UTB meeting 3 October 1986, minute 100.} or with the theatre's upkeep. And where would it find the cash for 30 weeks? Nonetheless, Hebdomadal Council got Sargant to produce detailed costings.\footnote{UTB meeting 28 October 1986, minute 108.}

Williams began 1986-87 with Hamlet. 'It was to be a modest affair.' Then the British Council asked him to take it to Elsinore to open its new 2,000-seat amphitheatre.\footnote{OM 25 July 1986.} As a result he had more cash and could plan on a grander scale. He got David Threlfall, who had made his name as Smike in RSC's version of Nicholas Nickleby, to play Hamlet and lured...
Jean Marsh from the States for Gertrude. That led the Edinburgh Festival to invite Anvil to appear there. And just when it seemed the cast would have to kick their heels until the autumn the British Council asked them to tour Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Limassol and Nicosia. A prestige venture became a nightmare.

Our usual venues... were very keen to have... Hamlet. But we had a production with 18 people... which was very... expensive... We were suddenly playing Wolverhampton Grand.246

To add to their problems the tour fizzled out after Israel. As a result of playing Smike Threlfall had strained his knee. By the time Anvil returned it was so inflamed he could not continue. Jean Marsh 'aggravated an old back injury.'246 The opening at Wolverhampton had to be delayed and Williams found himself 'trying to organise a wedding with one hand and two new... actors with the other.'250 David Acton took over Hamlet, Andrée Melly replaced Jean Marsh, and at the end of the week Williams wed Joanna Macgregor, who composed the music.

Williams's Hamlet drew 61 at Oxford, which with school parties climbed to 94 the second week.

[He] has thrust Shakespeare's tragedy forward to the 18th century into a court rife with intrigue... Courtiers lurk behind every arras of Nadine Baylis's cunning, curtained setting... But forget... the frills and this is a revival that does justice to a lot of the great set-pieces.251

Kim Grant's Waiting for Godot to mark Beckett's 80th birthday averaged 28 over three. The board were not pleased,252 especially as Anvil's third play, Tristram Shandy, directed by Williams in a version by Peter Buckman, ran only a week (47), as did its fourth, Debbie Shewell's Rosencrantz And Guildenstem Are Dead (94). Even so, with three Sunday shows, the theatre had made a good start to 1986/87. It cut no ice with Hebdomadal Council. On November 3 it decided it could no longer afford a university theatre and, after long dithering, set about closing it. The first Sheppard knew was when Assistant Registrar Derek Roberts253 arrived with his staff's notices. He vented his anger in a press release.

I am... bitterly disappointed that the university has... seen fit to withdraw... before seeing a successor management... installed. [It means] no chance of continued employment to a staff which has worked hard... to meet the economies demanded.254

246 Williams. Taped interview, as above
246 OT 26 September 1986.
250 OM 26 September 1986.
251 DC OM 30 September 1986.
252 UTB meeting 22 July 1986, minute 85.
253 'He had been personal assistant to Sydney Bernstein at Granada Television. So there was a bit of show business in his blood.' Sargant. Taped interview, as above.
He dismissed claims that the deficit for the last four years averaged £192,500. The true figure was £100,000-£150,000.

Hebdomadal Council left the door open for the board to mount an operation to run the theatre 'in the same way as the former university theatres at Southampton, Exeter and Newcastle,' but Shrimpton conceded it 'could hardly be a worse time.' The county Alliance spokesman, Michael Hart, a don at Exeter College, called for a meeting of city and county.

The councils are already considering the future of arts provision... Now we shall have to incorporate the future of the Playhouse in our plans.

Prompted by Oxford Area Arts Council's difficulties, they had asked consultants to conduct a survey into local arts funding. Felicity Harvest and Karen Merkel recommended a 50 per cent increase.

Both [City and County] are slammed for their lack of policies... 'Oxford spends just 69p per head... Chester... £8.78.'

Over ten years the Old Fire Station had mushroomed: 12,000 attended classes. Since 1985 St. Paul's had attracted groups ranging from Poland's Theatre of the Eighth Day to Hull Truck between providing a platform for students and amateurs. Councillors could not ignore the report. Although the university had made no formal approach, Nigel Thomas, chair of the City recreation committee, said it would do what it could. 'But people must [realise we have] very limited resources... because of Government restrictions.' Bill Dufton, director of Southern Arts, said if a trust was formed, it would need rapid decisions by several bodies. Sheppard felt the moment had already passed.

He had been fielding calls from interested parties. The university's withdrawal provoked further inquiries - and criticism.

Whatever agonising the university has had to do over the savage cuts in its own subsidy... it has frittered away the money you and I gave... Worse, by peremptorily announcing its decision at this late stage... it has effectively guaranteed the Playhouse will have to close next July... The task the university couldn't achieve in four years it is asking [others] to pull off in nine months.
The most serious contenders were Oxford's Apollo Leisure Group and a private developer, Mackenzie-Hill. Since acquiring the New, Paul Gregg's empire had grown. His group had several major theatres and had begun servicing council-run venues. But after meeting Gregg's operations director, Sam Shrouder, Weir said: 'We don’t want the Playhouse to go the same way as the New.'

St. John’s insisted that Mackenzie-Hill must 'be taken seriously.' He owned a site close to the Playhouse stage-door, which produced low rents. It prompted him to float a plan to redevelop the area bounded by Gloucester Street, George Street, Magdalen Street and Beaumont Street. After looking at the Demgate, Northampton, where a large theatre, a smaller one and a studio coexisted, he proposed a similar complex costing £16m: a 2,000-seat theatre to replace the New, a 400-seat Playhouse and a Beckett studio with a central box office, foyer, restaurant and bars. Sheppard said: 'It would have met so many ambitions.' Sadly, it came to nothing.

Hebdomadal Council would not commit the university to helping with a rescue, but had not ‘closed the door’ to meeting part and would help with the running costs in return for students performing there. Sargant dusted down his plan. If all parties agreed, they would form a trust, launch an appeal, and close for refurbishment in July 1987. The City agreed to join a consortium, the County ‘to make a major contribution.’

Sir Patrick Neill, said the university would guarantee £55,000 a year for the next five years, but was surrendering the lease to make clear it would not bail the theatre out if it ran into difficulties. It cast a pall over the board’s next meeting, which Linklater attended as Anvil’s caretaker chairman. The proposal ‘would need substantial revision’ and few were likely to back it.

Ironically, the box office returns were the best since the board took over. Income was 500 per cent up. The Opera Club drew 93 with *The Magic Flute*, Oxford College Players.

---

262 Sheppard. Taped interview, as above.
264 Taped interview, as above.
266 J.E.S. *Summary* 19 November 1986. As above.
267 OM 18 November 1986.
268 OM 22 November 1986.
270 'There was a feeling... that [Wall] was too much part of the university.' Williams. Taped interview, as above.
271 UTB meeting 16 December 1986, minute 124.
68 with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, OUDS 73 with *Peter Pan*. Wood got Christmas off to a
good start with *The Old Man of Lochnagar* (78), which the New Vic lost with *The Last of the
Mohicans* (24). For the festive fortnight Sheppard paired *Charley’s Aunt* (68.5) with
Polka’s *Hansel and Gretel* (55). After *Charley’s* third week (44), Philip Grout was to direct
*The Rivals*. But Anvil postponed it to the spring, substituting Stephen MacDonald’s cheaper
*Not About Heroes* (37.5). Weir continued to lobby the university. He said Southern Arts and
the County felt it was ‘walking away from the problems’. Did it ‘merely wish to buy a stake
in the theatre year’ or would it be ‘an active partner?’ Neill said both, but the University
Grants Committee was unlikely to pay the rates once it ceased being a university building and
the university was unwilling to act ‘as a financial longstop.’

The actions of the present Government have placed us in a grave financial situation -
so much so that we are having to contemplate the loss of a further 140 academic
posts.²⁷⁶

In January 1987 Sargant and Hurt had a ‘most encouraging’ meeting with City
officials. They wanted the local authorities to match the university’s £55,000 before they
sought Anvil’s approval, which they implied they would get. A letter Linklater sent Weir
showed that was wishful thinking. The Arts Council Secretary-General, Luke Rittner, had
told the county it was unable to fund the Playhouse and intended ‘to continue funding Anvil as
a touring company.’ The chances of it joining a trust were nil. The board floated Plan B: a
trust which would run the Playhouse as a receiving house. They thought they could mount a
48-week season with university and council backing of £120,000 at a profit of £955.²⁷⁸

In the gap year they would keep the Burton Building open and convert the workshop
into a studio seating 175.²⁷⁹ The university £55,000 would cover the cost. Or they could hire
St. Paul’s. Since its administrator, Judith Ackrill, left in the summer, volunteers had run it.
In December the Area Arts Council was thrown into further disarray when Litvinoff left to
become Warwickshire’s first arts officer. It led to the sale of St. Paul’s and the disbandment

²⁷² As above, minute 123.
²⁷³ E.R.B. Note 4 January 1987. With UTB minutes, as above.
²⁷⁷ Linklater to Weir 27 January 1987. As above.
²⁷⁹ Paper. With UTB minutes, as above.
of the arts council. The City went into partnership with Apollo Leisure to revamp the Old Fire Station, which reopened in 1991 with a 171-seat theatre funded by the Mackintosh Foundation. Dorey told Weir the university was interested in converting the workshop but could not give £55,000. If the Playhouse reopened, they would have to reconvert it.

Students already have access to college facilities providing some 50-60 seats. Their main need is a venue... between that and the Playhouse.280

In February the University Gazette carried a note saying why Congregation should endorse closure and airing the possibility of the workshop conversion.281 By the time the note appeared its capacity had fallen ‘to under 100’,282 the board had scrapped it, abandoned a trust with Anvil and were focusing on Plan B.283 Dons and students had been remarkably quiet. The new Oxford Magazine’s arts correspondent wrote of the university theatre, St. Paul’s and the Old Fire Station:

No sooner do we begin... to preview the arts... than it is announced that there will very soon be precious little left to view.284

Though late to enter the fray, the students stunned everybody by the vigour with which they put their case. The Board ‘agreed to differ’ when OUDS president, David Hubbard, pressed them for the theatre to stay open as a student venue.285 What they did not know was that he had teamed up with the University Student Union (president, Mark Stephens), ETC (Sam West), and Opera Club (Duncan Watt), to Save The Oxford Playhouse: a campaign with the convenient acronym, STOP. They gave their proposal to the Vice-Chancellor on March 3 before the first performance of OUDS’ Richard III.286

The university could cut costs to a minimum... with a professional staff of five - an administrator, a technical supervisor, and three assistants - and leave amateurs (usually students) to run the bars, man the box office, and sell programmes.287

A 5,477-strong petition backed it.288 Neill passed it to the board saying their case was ‘well-researched,’ but should not prejudice pursuit of the longer term.289

280 Registrar to Weir 19 February 1987, as above.
281 Oxford University Gazette 19 February 1987, p. 521.
282 UTB meeting 21 February 1987, minute 154.
283 As above, minute 155(b).
285 UTB meeting, as above, minutes 155(a) and 156.
289 Rosalind Brain to Weir 10 March 1987. As above.
A few blips apart, Sheppard’s 1987 bill maintained the momentum of the autumn. The Gilbert and Sullivan Society drew 86 with *The Yeomen of the Guard*, ETC and Oriel 72 with *The Tempest*, though with Helena Bonham-Carter filling cinemas in *A Room With A View* as Miranda, her first stage role, they must have hoped for more.

Barry Edelstein makes a plausible... Prospero... Bonham-Carter in combat jacket, tutu and leg-warmers turns Miranda into a recognisable teenager - the truculent product of a one-parent family... But the poetry, magic and comedy... disappear almost without trace.290

The Opera Club drew 45 with a rare airing of Mendelssohn’s *Comacho’s Wedding*, OUDS 71. Less lucrative was the Easter attraction: *Annie* averaged 49 and lost £5,649. In February the box office for visiting companies was £4,000 above estimate, for students £5,000. Only Anvil had disappointed, ending £5,500 down.291 Now things were less rosy. Even so, it was a marked improvement on 1985-86. Efforts to create a trust to run the theatre as a receiving house were less happy.292 After meeting City recreation committee members Weir said he was confident it would recommend ‘£30,000 a year for the next five years’293 and hoped the county and district councils would make similar offers when he met them. He was deluding himself. As Sargant reported:

This meeting should have been held four years ago... If [the university was] suggesting... participation in a building brought up to licensing requirements there would be... more sympathy.... Surely this was the least [it] could do? ...Because of officer commitments and elections [it was] not possible to reconvene for another three months. [A] decision in under six months [was] unlikely.294

Academic bureaucracy had come face to face with local government bureaucracy.

The Playhouse’s ‘14 full-time and up to 40 part-time staff’ became increasingly restive. Raymond Cross, the technical manager, said that ‘the university seems concerned only with saving the bricks and mortar.’ Publicist Kate Quick:

There will be redundancy money for long-serving staff, but there are others like myself who have not been here long enough to [qualify].295

Their anger boiled over after they received their redundancy notices. Weir said he was close to a rescue plan and the theatre would reopen in September 1988.

290 DC OM 18 February 1987.
291 UTB meeting 21 February 1987, minute 153.
293 OT 6 March 1987.
It involves £50,000 a year... from the university, £30,000 a year... from Oxford City Council, commercial sponsorship, setting up a trust to take over the theatre's lease [and] appointing a new administrator.  

There was no mention of their jobs.

Jill Glynn, party bookings organiser... said: ‘We are supposed to walk out of here in July without a backward glance while the... plans for a bright new future are... announced.'

Sheppard, who had security of tenure, was incandescent.

Weir upset STOP too by saying all student privileges ‘would cease with the closure.’

They would have to get the university to negotiate with the Trust. STOP wasted no time.

The [Warden] of New College, Harvey McGregor, QC, and the Principal of St. Hugh’s, Miss Rachel Trickett, are among... backing a motion... to keep the university theatre open while its future is worked out. [It] will go before Congregation... on May 19.

It precipitated a frank exchange of views. Board members said STOP’s scheme jeopardised plans for a trust and, if it was adopted, they would resign: the students that the board must safeguard their interests. Eventually they agreed to an Oxford Playhouse University Sub-Committee (OPUS) provided it was understood that trust members would be advised by it, not mandated, and in return STOP halted its campaign. It was a convenient fudge. The chances were that by the time any trust had to honour its pledge all the STOP campaigners would have gone down.

Anvil’s last show was The Rivals. The houses (50) showed the board had been right to insist on Brandon Thomas, not Sheridan, for Christmas. The Registrar said the company could remain rent free until August. But the theatre would close in June, cutting off access to its wardrobe, its offices would only be open Monday to Friday, it would have to give up the title of Oxford Playhouse Company and staff would have to use the Burton Building toilets.

Linklater replied: ‘If this is so we must... reconsider... being in Oxford at all.’ Williams had already made plans for 1987-88. Anvil would open with Dr. Faustus, then stage Fuente
Ovejuna and a new version of the medieval mystery plays by Peter Buckman, ending with the première of a musical about the American negro singer and actor, Paul Robeson. A total of four productions. There was no way the company could have delivered the 30 weeks the board wanted.

The last professional show was Great Eastern Stage’s Taking Steps (61 - £5,602) - Ayckbourn! The Operatic Society, which had already booked the New for 1988, did Oklahoma! (80 - rent £3,500). The Theatre Guild, which as City of Oxford Dramatic Club had staged the first show at the University Theatre, brought down the curtain on it with Commedia by former student actor, Nigel Frith, now lecturer at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (24 - £1,280). Sheppard forecast a deficit of £31,500, to which he would have to add a £30,000 shortfall in Appeal contributions ‘through non-payment by major donors as a result of the closure,’ £24,000 outstanding for the purchase of RITA and some £8,000 in redundancy pay. A total of £94,000.

The board looked forward to the trust taking over in October, launching an appeal in November, appointing a new chief executive in January, accepting the lease in April, and starting the refurbishment in June, the Playhouse reopening as a receiving house in time for its 50th anniversary in October 1988. It was wishful thinking. In June the City put its £30,000 on ice while it deliberated with other councils. The County froze a similar sum. Latest estimates... are double those suggested... County... officers and [the] University Surveyor’s department say the cost is likely to be at least £400,000. What is more, officers doubted whether ‘even the lower sum’ could be raised in time for the golden jubilee.

Sheppard went about the melancholy task of paying off his staff and ‘mothballing’ the theatre.

The university did interpret the rules about redundancy... quite generously - doubling the minima... and making... payments equal to the minima to those who didn’t... qualify.

304 OM 3 April 1987.
305 UTB meeting 7 July 1987, minute 208(b).
309 Sheppard. E-mail 2 August 2004.
By August they had gone except for Cross, who would act as caretaker. The university had to find Sheppard a job. There was some suggestion he should deal with film and TV companies wanting to use the university as a backdrop. Then Wood asked if he would manage Whirligig's next tour. He left in 1988 'on secondment.' The Chest paid him until August 1989, when he reached 50 and qualified for early retirement.

He did not have the same academic stature as Miss Sweeting, who was a member of Somerville Senior Common Room and taught the occasional pupil at St. Catherine's. He was not such a prominent member of the theatrical establishment. But he was a more assiduous financial controller and a far more energetic programmer. His misfortune was to take over as Britain embarked on a period of financial instability, from which neither it or the theatre would recover until the 1990s. Anvil changed its name to the Oxford Stage Company but continued to occupy its offices in Beaumont Street. The board held its last meeting before the official closure on July 7. After it Weir wrote to the Vice-Chancellor. Members still thought a trust was 'the most favourable solution.' The letter fell like a stone into the depths of the long vacation. The University Theatre was no more.

Postscript

The Playhouse board continued to meet after the closure, Robert Weir, James Sargant and the University Assistant Registrar, Derek Roberts, spearheading efforts to find a solution. But, as before, it was the chance intervention of an outsider which provided the catalyst.

Immediately their daughter, Julia, was old enough, the University Reader in Human Anatomy, J.S. Weiner,¹ and his wife started taking her to the theatre. By her teens she was an ardent Young Playhouse Association member. She returned to Oxford in 1987 after accompanying her husband, Oliver Miles, on a succession of diplomatic postings abroad² to discover the venue that had given her so much pleasure was closing. ‘This cannot be. I must do something.’³ She launched a petition among her friends and at the Oxford Polytechnic, where she had begun a course in social work, then at the suggestion of Judy Brundin, wife of a Jesus College engineering don,⁴ lobbied M.A.s queuing up to vote for the next University Chancellor. By the time Roy Jenkins triumphed in the contest to succeed the Earl of Stockton she had 3,000 signatures, many big names that would impress Hebdomadal Council.

The result was the Oxford Playhouse Action Committee (OPAC) with herself as its chairman; the University Professor of Epidemiology, Martin Vessey; his wife, Anne, as its secretary; an Oxford merchant banker, David Suratgar, as its treasurer; his wife, Barbara; the former party bookings organiser, Gill Glynn; her husband, the theatre producer, Victor Glynn; the wife of a West Oxfordshire solicitor, Gay Lavelle; and Gerard Gould, the former chairman of the YPA. They each contributed £1 to underwrite the venture, then began a vigorous fund-raising campaign. It led to Suratgar joining the Playhouse board as OPAC’s member in January 1988.⁵

¹ Later Professor of Environmental Physiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
² He was British Ambassador in Libya, Luxembourg and Greece among other postings.
⁴ Clark Brundin, later Vice-Chancellor of Warwick University.
⁵ OPAC meeting 12 January 1988, minute 1.
The board was still exploring the possibility of Apollo Leisure taking over the theatre and was also negotiating with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Really Useful Group, which wanted to stage ‘high quality original drama’ out of the profits of his lucrative musicals. When both bids failed the board reverted to its plan for an independent charitable trust to run the Playhouse as a receiving house. With £60,000 a year for the next five years from the university and £30,000 each from the City and County Councils, members felt they could launch a successful appeal for half the £500,000 modernisation would cost in time to reopen in October 1989. In fact, it was November 1988 before the university named the trust members, by which time the cost had risen to £800,000 and the reopening date had slipped to ‘early in 1990.’ The chairman was Brian Henry, a pioneer of ITV and former director of Southern Television, the other members Sargant, Bridget Hayward of the Really Useful Group, stage designer Robert Lush, former opera singer Dudley Good, Suratgar, Dr. Nicholas Shrimpton and OUDS president Lizzie Taylor.

In anticipation of the move OPAC changed its name from Action to Appeal Committee and Suratgar succeeded Julia Miles as chairman. Despite feeling she was being sidelined, Mrs Miles continued to seek backers, fund-raise and bend the ear of any star she thought might help from Rowan Atkinson to Judi Dench. Among other efforts, she tried unsuccessfully to involve her former statistics tutor at the London School of Economics, Sir Claus Moser, Warden of Wadham, and got Leonard and Rosalind Ingrams to stage benefit opera galas at Garsington in 1989 and 1990, both of which produced in excess of £10,000; Gill Glynn persuaded Midland Bank to introduce an Arts Credit Card and floated a scheme whereby city streets competed with one another to raise £500. Such ventures provided welcome revenue. As Henry and Suratgar stressed when they unveiled plans for a £1m. appeal to an invited Playhouse audience of 300 in February 1989 - the maximum the fire chiefs would allow - the trust could not begin taking money until the Charity Commissioners registered it and the university handed over the leases. It did not stop OPAC issuing an Appeal leaflet with the punch-line: ‘Send a Chekhov today!’

---
7 OPAC meeting 7 November 1988, minute 2.
8 Later he would become chairman of the Playhouse Trust Board, then as Lord Moser president.
10 OM 3 February 1989.
Meanwhile the theatre sputtered back to life occasionally. In February 1988 Hebdomadal Council agreed to spend £6,000 on emergency fire proofing to meet regulations that had become even more strict since the King's Cross Tube disaster, enabling OUDS to stage *Coriolanus*, the University Gilbert and Sullivan Society *The Gondoliers*, later in the year another student group *Calamity Jane*. In January 1989 the Oxford Stage Company, soon to move from its Beaumont Street offices to a new home in George Street, gave theatregoers a chance to catch Philip Grout and Richard Williams' production of Andy Rashleigh's *Robeson - Song of Freedom*, which had been a hit at the Young Vic. Suratgar finally achieved charitable status in July 1989. Getting the university to hand over the leases proved trickier. The first director the trust appointed decided it was too risky to uproot her family and move south from the Edencourt Theatre, Inverness, to a venue without deeds. For once Hebdomadal Council's dilatoriness proved a bonus. With Sargant's backing, 'Biddy' Hayward sold board members the idea of appointing joint directors - with the added carrot that initially the Really Useful Group would underwrite their salaries.

Tish Francis was 36, grew up in Oxfordshire and had been an avid YPA member. She recalled going round the venue, which had given her so much pleasure as a teenager, 'was heartbreaking.' Hedda Beeby was 30. Neither had run a theatre before but had the no-nonsense approach to cut a swathe through academic, local government and domestic politics. An early fallout was Dudley Good, whose blue and gold ox head, which the trust used as a logo, the pair said, was no image for an attention-grabbing appeal. Since leaving York with a social science degree Tish had worked for a variety of groups including the Covent Garden Community Association, Spare Tyre, the Almeida, Shared Experience, Graiae and Opera Factory. Hedda had been events co-ordinator for Andrew Lloyd Webber's Palace Theatre and box office supervisor for his Really Useful Group. They met when Tish canvassed the Group for a contribution to the £100,000 she was raising to convert Soho Laundry into a major rehearsal centre. Biddy Hayward was too busy to hear her case and deputed Hedda. The pair clicked and Hedda joined, first the Laundry project, then Tish Francis Associates, her arts development consultancy.

14 OPAC meeting 16 August 1989, minute 2.
15 Taped interview 13 May 2004.
16 Tish Francis. Taped interview, as above.
They began work in 1990, combining weekdays in Oxford with consultancy work in
London at weekends. They had no staff apart from Julie Hudson and - once the money started
arriving - Nick Mills, a freelance accountant (later full-time financial controller), who
worked one day a week at an orange box. A letter Henry sent Ingrams on 1 January 1990
showed the theatre’s bank balance was healthy at nearly £125,000, but modernisation would
cost £1.25m - and as Trust chairman he was not prepared to take charge until the leases had
been ‘safely transferred.’

The pair swiftly doubled the funds. A five-year £25,000 a year sponsorship
package from the Thame consultancy, CPM Field Marketing, drew a reciprocal £25,000
from a Government scheme to encourage business investment in the arts. A COTG revival of
Michael Frayn’s *The Clouds* produced £4,000, a grant from the Rhodes Trust £25,000. In
between, they recruited patrons - Dames Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, Hauser, Rowan
Atkinson and Codron - and vetted the plans Michael Reardon and Associates, architects of the
Swan Theatre, Stratford, had drawn up. They eventually persuaded Trust members to abandon
ideas for a brasserie - ‘We’re here to run a theatre, not a restaurant’ – though it was in
the three-stage, £3m-plus scheme they unveiled on 12 July 1990. The first stage, costing
£350,000, involved work to comply with fire regulations and a face-lift for the foyer, box
office, bars, and exterior in time for a 1991 opening; the second, costing £700,000, work
on the offices, auditorium and ventilation; the third, costing £2m, the establishment of an
endowment fund to safeguard the future.

I called it the end of a 30-year marriage of convenience, ‘the flight of the painted
lady from the clammy clutches of Oxford University back to the fickle arms of her old lover,
showbiz.’ In fact, though the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Richard Southwood, said he was handing
over the leases to London Weekend television director Jeremy Potter, who had succeeded
Henry as Trust chairman, it would be another nine months before the university finally
relinquished its sticky embrace. The fund-raising continued. In the run-up to the reopening

---

18 Brian Henry to Leonard Ingrams 1 January 1990.
19 OM 15 February 1990.
20 OM 31 January and July 7 1990.
21 OM 29 June 1990.
22 Tish Francis. Taped interview, as above.
23 OM 12 July 1990.
Atkinson held two open rehearsals for the next edition of his award-winning television series, *Mr Bean*. John Retallack, founder of the Actors Touring Company, who had succeeded Richard Williams as director of the Oxford Stage Company, staged a gala performance of *Measure for Measure* at the Rose Theatre, the venue into which he had converted the Newman Rooms to provide a temporary Oxford platform for his productions. And the Campaign for Oxford University took the Playhouse under its umbrella, though to ensure it benefited you had to tick the right box and it produced only £25,000. By March 1991 a £15,000 grant from the Pilgrim Trust had swelled the Playhouse Appeal to £410,000.

Nicola Russell, who masterminded publicity for the relaunch, told reporters Sir Robert McAlpine’s builders would be working flat out until three days before it reopened on April 15. They were more interested in Prince Edward, assistant technical manager of the Really Useful Group’s Theatre Division, which was staging the first show, the première of Geraldine Aron’s *Same Old Moon*. There was one close shave when cameramen snapping *Inspector Morse*’s Kevin Whately accepting a £5,000 cheque from Central Television spotted the Prince sitting in the stalls. But they managed to spirit him away and his bodyguard proved a godsend on reopening night when the police informed the directors there had been a bomb scare. After hearing the details, he told them not to worry. ‘It was obviously a hoax.’

Sadly the play, watched by a star-studded first night audience that included Michael Palin, Jeremy Irons, Sinead Cusack, Robert Hardy, Timothy West and Prunella Scales, failed to provide the explosive start the directors wanted and the bill which followed: Manchester Library Theatre’s revival of Herb Gardner’s *I’m Not Rappaport*, the English Shakespeare Company with John Woodvine heading the cast of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Volpone*, the New Vic version of *The Manchurian Candidate* and Opera Factory’s *Cosi Fan Tutte* and *Romeo and Juliet* failed to put enough bums on seats. Nicola Russell, by now a highly respected public relations consultant, who as a novice PRO had launched Anvil Productions 16 years earlier, recalled: ‘It was a very dodgy opening season.’ In their efforts to lure audiences back the directors had over-reached themselves. There was another factor. After the Playhouse closed, its patrons looked for alternative venues and found them in the Watermill Theatre,

---

25 Tish Francis. Taped interview, as above.
26 Taped interview 28 May 1997

224
Bagnor, the Hexagon, Reading, the Wyvern, Swindon, and the Everyman, Cheltenham. The principal beneficiary was The Theatre, Chipping Norton, where Tamara Malcolm had been struggling to interest the public in a bill that included such now famed front-runners of alternative theatre as Paine's Plough and Théâtre de Complicité. Suddenly she had an audience and could employ a staff to help her run the 200-seater former Salvation Army citadel. Despite the ballyhoo most people failed to realise the Playhouse had reopened until Retallack, who had filled the Rose Theatre with locals and tourists, returned with a 'spellbinding'\textsuperscript{27} revival of \textit{The Tempest}.

Tish Francis said: 'The theatre went through the kind of three-year bumpy start path of any new business.'

\begin{quote}
[It] needed to reach out much further than it had ever before... not just to get back the audiences that had been coming, but... new ones.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Gradually they found the right mix, supplementing visits from RSC, the National, Cambridge TC, and other companies that had been staples of programming in Elizabeth Sweeting and Sheppard's day with treats like a 100th birthday \textit{Charley's Aunt} and attractions to entice newcomers such as jazz festivals and schools galas, in between providing a platform for the Oxford Stage Company, the students and local amateurs. There was 'a nasty funding deficit' in 1993, the year Princess Margaret graced a gala to celebrate the Playhouse's 70th birthday, when they realised they were stretching themselves too far and appointed their first administrator, Catherine Mallyon. But basically it remained a success story.

In December 1992 the Foundation for Sports and the Arts made them a Christmas present of £150,000, lifting the Appeal total to £700,000.\textsuperscript{29} In January 1993 PASS, a new ticket booking system to replace RITA, heralded a ten-week improvement programme. In June the same year with David Wood they sponsored their first children's show, \textit{Rosie and Jim's Big Theatre Adventure}. In December they staged their first pantomime, \textit{Cinderella}. By 1995 they felt secure enough to fulfil their long-cherished ambition: to generate their own productions as well as acting as a receiving house. Some felt the revival of John Mortimer's \textit{A Voyage Round My Father} was hardly a brave choice to mark the reopened theatre's fourth birthday, especially when Elijah Moshinksy, who had begged to do it, decided at the last

\textsuperscript{27} Don Chapman. \textit{OM} 9 August 1991.

\textsuperscript{28} Taped interview, as above.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{OM} 21 December 1991.
minute to direct an opera instead. But with Mortimer, soon to become a Patron, to help Laurence Boswell and a cast headed by Robert Lang and Lynn Farleigh, the show in association with the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, proved popular in Oxford and on tour, setting the pattern for other, more adventurous, efforts like Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter & other pieces* in 2004.

In November 1995 came the breakthrough that enabled them to complete the modernisation programme they had begun five years earlier - a National Lottery award of £2.2m. Having raised 'more than £1.35m in cash and kind from more than 2,000... supporters, business trusts and foundations,' they had a head start over competing bidders. But they left nothing to chance, even digging me out of retirement to pen a plea in support. I told Peter Gummer:

Hedda Beeby and Tish Francis have picked the love of my life off the floor, done their best to tidy up and breathe fresh vigour into her since they arrived... but they do desperately need that £2m if she is to be in as good shape as she should be to meet the 21st century. Look kindly on this begging letter in support of their application. Apart from anything else, they have asked me to write a history to mark the Playhouse's 75th birthday in 1998 and it would be nice to give it a happy ending.31

The theatre closed on 30 June 1996 for an eleven-week building programme involving a complete overhaul of the façade, a new fire exit from the second floor gallery to Gloucester Street, a new ventilation system, a new green room, revamped dressing rooms and a circle bar serving food as well as drinks. The biggest transformation was in the auditorium where by bringing the circle a metre forward and curving it to echo the lighting baffles in the roof the project architect, Bryan Martin of Michael Reardon Associates, achieved an Art Deco feel reminiscent of the New Theatre, and 616 more widely spaced red seats in one block between side aisles in stalls and circle made the theatre more intimate - and comfortable. Sir Claus Moser, now Trust chairman, commented: 'This is the moment we've been longing for... Oxford... has a lovely new theatre.'32 While the work proceeded the directors revived the Rose Theatre in St. Aldate's, where in addition to hosting an Oxford Stage Company revival of *Hamlet* they presented their now familiar mix of young people's theatre, dance, music, comedy and drama. The reopening show was the Siobhan Davies Dance Company in *Trespass + Affections*, the official relaunch show a gala starring Alan Bennett and Prunella Scales.

31 DC to Gummer 18 June 1995. I had yet to discover a chunk of the archives was missing!
32 *OM* 16 October 1996.
Oxfordshire County Council’s decision to scrap its £190,000 arts budget in 1997, of which the Playhouse received £45,000\(^3\) - now happily rescinded - led to cuts in the development programme and a 20 per cent increase in ticket prices, but the Appeal fund was boosted by another £20,000 from Oxford colleges, bringing the total who supported the theatre to 21. The arms-length relationship with the university as one of the Playhouse backers, not its lease-holder, had eased friction with dons and students. The Mackintosh Foundation’s creation of a Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre meant that from 1990 drama enjoyed at least some academic recognition. The suggestion of the third incumbent, Alan Ayckbourn, that it should fund a Student Drama Officer made negotiations with groups vying for the Playhouse’s five university weeks easier to manage, and the return of the Burton Building to its control in 1999 with a manager to run the 50-seater studio provided a test-bed where applicants could demonstrate their skills.

Quite a few people thought the directors were a domestic as well as a professional duo. In fact, both had partners and sons. Tish Francis opted to settle in Oxfordshire. Hedda Beeby continued to shuttle between Oxford and London, sharing a nanny until primary school loomed, then in 2001 decided to return to the capital to work for the Ambassador Theatre Group. Tish admitted it was very tough operating on her own after running the Playhouse as a partnership, even though she now had a team of more than 50 full-time and part-time staff to help her. So, to further her ambition to produce theatre of the quality it did in Hauser’s day, in 2003 she invited two long-standing friends, producer David Aukin and his wife, Nancy Meckler, artistic director of Shared Experience,\(^4\) to become her artistic associates.

It is too early to appreciate the benefit of their involvement, but the annual review she published recently to give sponsors and friends a deeper insight tells its own story.

We are now in a strong position where the distinctive eclecticism of our... programme, embracing as it does subsidised, commercial, non-professional and student productions, has... been greatly enhanced by that of our own productions - great... classics, emotionally charged multicultural work and top quality all-round family entertainment... The merits of this gearshift can be seen in a marked increase in audiences, ticket sales, media and public response.\(^5\)

In 2004/5 performances at home and on tour rose from 372 to 416, attendance from

\(^{3}\) The Stage 27 February 1997.

\(^{4}\) By a happy coincidence Shared Experience has its headquarters at Soho Laundry and Hedda Beeby is chairman of its board.

141,806 to 194,839 - an average of 66 per cent. Amajuba - Like Doves We Rise, seen by 17,000 people in ten theatres, was one in-house product. The other was Peter Pan. The theatre generated £5.59 for every £1 it received in core funding, contributing £8m to the local economy.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

In my introduction I said that I had asked Elizabeth Sweeting if she could have waved a magic wand, how she would have run the Playhouse differently. At the end let me amplify her reply.

I should have taken it away from the university and given it a separate existence... one in closer alignment, but in no way dependent... I should have encouraged the teaching of drama and made the theatre available for that, but on strictly limited terms... (and you would have kept student involvement?) Oh yes, but in our hands and on our terms.36

The longterm endowment to underwrite the Playhouse’s future remains as much a pipe-dream as it was in Fagan’s day, but in other respects the 2006 theatre is nearer to Miss Sweeting’s vision than it has ever been - and in better nick too!

I have more than 300 books and pamphlets lining the walls of my study, which I have consulted while compiling my thesis, and as many playscripts in another room, but to list them all would be tedious.

Programmes, brochures, etc.

The most complete set of Oxford Playhouse programmes, though it has woeful gaps, is the one the Playhouse Guild secretary, Louis Frewer, collected, to which I have added my collection, purchases and donations. With other material he gathered it will form part of the Playhouse archive at Oxfordshire Archives, Temple Road, Cowley, along with my year by year files of cuttings, reviews, and other records, the few remaining papers of Seph Colegrove, manager in the later 1920s, Arthur Brough's correspondence file relating to the early 1930s, Julia Miles's Oxford Playhouse Action Committee minutes, etc., my files of Playhouse personnel, my tape-recordings, and Oxfordshire Archives' own holdings of University Theatre Curators meeting minutes, Arts Council reports and other memorabilia.

The Bodleian Library, Oxford, has shorter runs of programmes, other memorabilia detailed in the notes, and posters. The Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Westgate, Oxford, has a less extensive programme collection. The Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection at Greenwich has a range of handbills and other material, including Jane Ellis's papers relating to the launch in Woodstock Road. The Theatre Museum has a comprehensive archive relating to the Meadow Players, including cuttings books minutes and programmes, at its store in Olympia.

Newspapers and magazines

In the absence of Playhouse records before 1956 I have relied on press reports in journals listed in the notes and the University Registry and Chest archives prior to 1970, now in the University Archives at the Bodleian Library. A supplementary source of information is St. John's College's records relating to its land holdings in Woodstock Road and Beaumont Street among the college muniments. The most prolific sources are the weekly newspapers, the
Oxford Chronicle, the Oxford Journal Illustrated, the Oxford Times, the evening newspaper, the Oxford Mail, the dons' journal, The Oxford Magazine, and the student journals, The Isis, The Cherwell and the women students' magazine, Fritillary.

Works relating to drama at Oxford


The Repertory Movement


Biographies, memoirs and letters


General


In recent years there have been three major reappraisals of theatre in the post-war era: *The Lost Summer: The Heyday of the West End Theatre* by Charles Duff (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), *British Theatre Since the War* by Dominic Shellard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), and *1956 And All That: The making of modern British drama* by Dan Rebellato (London: Routledge, 1999). All three give an overview of a period of change, yet only one mentions the Playhouse in passing. The lack of a proper record is partly to blame, but throughout the period the theatre received national attention, underlining the need for greater historical recognition.

Footnote

Since the Indiana University Press published its seminal attempt to explore the semiotics of stage performance, *Approaching Theatre* (Andrè Helbo, J. Dines Johansen, Patrice Pavis,
Anne Ubersfeld. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987), followed two years later by Iowa University Press's *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (ed. Thomas Postlethwait and Bruce A. McConachie. Iowa City, 1989), there have been a rash of academic studies. But at the risk of arrogance, I highlight the admission of Jacky Bratton, Professor of Theatre and Cultural History at Royal Holloway, London, that she and fellow practitioners 'still do not well know what we are supposed to be doing, what we can seek to know, what in fact we are talking about.'\(^1\) In a lecture on *The Study of Theatre History in Universities*, Agne Beijer, Professor of Theatre History at Stockholm, asked delegates to the 1951 symposium on *The Responsibility of the Universities to the Theatre*:

> Has... the historian... any real chance of pinning down the theatrical experiences of the past, classifying them and putting them in black boxes as the entomologist does... his butterflies? Of course not, in any case not with the exactness of the scientist. The experience in itself is too elusive as well as too uncertain, for it depends on the individual and the atmosphere of the time. To reach at least approximate results he must, among the instruments of his scientific equipment, choose to use something as suspect as historical imagination. And what chances of error this historical imagination gives rise to we all know.\(^2\)

Like any self-respecting critic, I have for the last 50 years debated with myself how to 'pin down' and recapture particular performances for my readers. I admit I have often failed despite having the luxury of an overnight deadline and the opportunity, frequently indulged, to burn the midnight oil. In essence, I have concluded, the critic must recapture what it was like to be there, suggest while passing judgment the emotions the play evoked, the symbiotic relationship between actors and audience. The 83-year history of the Oxford Playhouse has been a continuous roller-coaster, but I hope, at least occasionally, I have recaptured the thrill of occupying one of its seats.

---


Addendum

The material from this thesis has subsequently been updated and amended for the published book: *Oxford Playhouse - High and Low Drama in a University City* by Don Chapman.