

**MINUTES OF STEVENAGE FESTIVAL GENERAL MEETING**  
7.30PM, FRIDAY 1 NOVEMBER 2013

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

Those present were:

Ron Walker (Chairman)  
Carolyn Williams (Secretary)  
Anne Graham (Treasurer)  
Rebecca Hughes (Committee, Hertfordshire Music Service)  
Alan Cowles (Stevenage Locomotive Society)  
David Handley (Stevenage Symphony Orchestra)  
Chris Hobbs (Lytton Players)  
Ken Moore (Stevenage Churches Together)  
Robin Osterley (Stevenage Choral Society)  
Paul Ruff (Stevenage Leisure)  
Dave Slade (Lytton Players and GCT Drama Academy)  
Martin Sproat (Stevenage Choral Society)

**2. Apologies**

Hilary Spiers (Committee)  
Gill Hutchinson (Committee & Knebworth Players)  
Sherma Batson (SBC)  
Tony Burton (Independent poet)  
Kimberley Creak (Premiere School of Dance)  
Roger Hill (Stevenage Play)  
Stephen McPartland MP  
Catherine Lomax (Gordon Craig Theatre)

**3. Minutes of Last GM on 11 November 2011**

The minutes of the last General Meeting on 11 November 2011 were then reviewed and confirmed as a true record of that meeting. It was noted that, because the Festival occurred every two years, so did the general meeting (rather than being an Annual General Meeting)

**4. Chairman's Report on 2011 Festival**

Ron Walker tabled his Chairman's Report which is attached to and forms part of these minutes.

Ron extended his thanks to everyone who had made the Festival possible, including the current committee, the staff of the Gordon Craig (who had been particularly supportive) and all the participating groups.

**5. Treasurer's Report**

Anne Graham tabled a summary report of the income and expenditure relating to the 2013 Festival. This showed that the Festival had started with reserves of £6060 and was carrying forward reserves of £4336 into 2013.

Anne also tabled a report showing the income and expenditure broken down by performance. It was noted for the first time this showed the allocation of the central overheads, publicity costs etc across the performances, so their true costs could be seen. The decision to run a mini film festival to fill dark nights had proved a poor one because of technical and licence problems and very low audiences and this had lost the Festival £2000. The Knebworth Players show, by its nature, had been relatively expensive to stage and again, because of low turnout, had lost £1700. By contrast, the dance shows had sold well and the other shows had more or less broken even. The Symphony Orchestra had managed to win a grant from the BBC to support their performance which was very welcome.

Shows at the Gordon Craig had kept to their budgets and the theatre's help in keeping costs under control was appreciated. Anne emphasised the need for groups to complete and return their budgets as early as possible

Although Stevenage Borough Council funding had been lost, the Festival was extremely grateful to Councillors Batson, Chester, Clarke, Gardner, Holywell, Stewart, Bibby, Pickersgill and Burrell, plus the Youth Mayor, who had all made donations from their locality budgets amounting to a total of £2362. Hilary Spiers efforts in securing this funding were appreciated. Lytton Players had also generously donated £572 from their fund raising performances and this was much appreciated.

The meeting approved the accounts for the period 01/01/12 to 31/10/13.

## **6. Election of Committee and Officers for 2013/15**

The following committee was then agreed unopposed for the 2015 Festival:

Ron Walker – Chairman  
Carolyn Williams – Secretary  
Anne Graham – Treasurer  
Hilary Spiers – Fringe manager  
Gill Hutchinson - Theatre manager  
Rebecca Hughes (Hertfordshire Music Service)  
Unfilled - Publicity manager  
Unfilled - other committee posts

It was noted that Lee Hooper had stepped forward to fill the role of publicity manager for the 2013 Festival. He had done an excellent job and introduced many new ideas and saved the Festival money. However the pressure of work from his regular job running Stagecoach meant that he could not continue so the post was again vacant. As in previous years there was general agreement that publicity was very important and lots of suggestions for additional publicity work were made (see section 7) but there were no volunteers to join the committee to help. Anyone interested in this important role could be co-opted onto the committee at a later date. It was suggested that the Festival could approach a local school or college and present the role as a project for a marketing student.

## **7. General Discussion**

The following points were made in the discussion of the past and future festivals:

- The key challenge for both the Festival and the groups concerned was getting audience numbers and revenue up, although it was noted that it had generally been a quiet year for the theatre.

- The Festival had paid £1800 for a leaflet drop to all houses in Stevenage. The committee were not confident that this had been properly done although the company concerned were insistent that it had and were threatening legal action if the Festival's concerns were made public. For future Festivals it was suggested that the Post Office could be used (although it was acknowledged to be more expensive) and discussions had already started with the Advertiser newspaper.
- Now that the Festival was controlling its own print, there was no reason why the template posters could not be supplied earlier in the year. However it was also noted that publicity should not go out too early - the end of month payday period was recognised as the target to hit.
- It was agreed that a mix of methods including social media and direct mail was still needed
- The Festival website was potentially in need of an update. Whereas it was still functional, it was updated by a third party which incurred cost each time and introduced delay. Martin Sproat offered to advise as required.
- The chairman took the meeting through a note from Hilary Spiers outlining some possible events for 2015, in particular marking the 40th Anniversary of the Theatre.
- Joint community production of Dido and Aeneas, if Heritage Lottery funding could be obtained - it was agreed that this was a good idea although careful thought would need to be given to staging and production. It was recommended that Hilary should organise a meeting of all the involved musical directors and other interested parties to work through the practicalities of the production. This would need to be done before a funding application was submitted.
- There was a discussion about fund raising and sponsorship - it was agreed that the committee should approach local businesses for sponsorship in return for naming and logo in the publicity. Local branches of national businesses were unlikely to be in a position to help. Direct fund raising by groups for the Festival could also be considered (on the Lytton Players model). It was noted that only around £2000 was needed to get the Festival to a break-even position - more if spending on new events was planned.

## **8. A.O.B**

- 2015 dates of 13-27 June in the Gordon Craig Theatre. It was noted that the Boxfield Gallery was booked from 18 May to 28 June, which covered the Festival period. Because of how the booking system worked, the Foyer Gallery was available from 11 May to 15 June only (unless a double six week period was taken up to mid July).

There being no further business, the meeting closed at approximately 9pm.

## Chairman's report November 2013

Welcome to everyone to this review of the 2013 festival and a discussion of the views of those of you who performed, presented or attended.

The chairman's report this year will reflect on some of the decisions we had to make after the last AGM. There were quite a number of items we needed to consider in planning for this festival.

- A. The relatively small carry over sum - our working capital - of just over £6000, that we must preserve if the Festival is to continue
- B. Whether we could even run the festival given the loss of SBC funding for the festival as a whole.
- C. We needed to consider the relatively high costs of some types of shows, like musicals with a band or orchestra and all the other related costs. These shows inevitably run at a loss.
- D. We did consider reducing the length of the festival given the financial constraints.
- E. We looked at whether we could find alternative sources of sponsorship to support the finances.
- F. Audience numbers continues to be a problem for the Festival. We considered what improvements we could make to the advertising and promotion of the shows and the overall Festival.
- G. We had to examine how we could keep our costs to a minimum. We have a certain level of overhead expenditure whatever the size of the festival and however radical the program. These costs, as can be seen in the accounts, are made up predominantly of publicity costs.
- H. And, was it right, as in previous years, to identify the overhead costs as a lump sum in the accounts rather than assign it to the individual shows to give a better idea of their overall financial performance?

So what were the answers to these questions? Here's the outcome of our decisions and why we made them:-

- A. **Working Capital and Funding** - in the past we have been lucky to be directly sponsored by SBC but in these financially restricted time this is now not possible. We need to preserve our £6000 of working capital to give us the financial resources to book the theatre in advance and go into the Festival with confidence that the bills will be paid. But if it goes, we cannot plan for a future Festival. Although £6000 is a small sum, in the past we have launched with less so we felt with care it was manageable. But we cannot allow it to be eroded by making substantial losses on performances.
- B. **Cancelling the festival** was considered but we felt that it would be very unfortunate to kill off the festival and that we could, if we were very careful with the finances, take the risk of continuing for 2013.
- C. **High Cost Shows** - the financial situation meant we sadly could not support high cost/low revenue shows in the program as we needed to ensure as far as possible that every show 'pays its way', even though there may be good artistic and social reasons for supporting them. In

past festivals the most expensive (to us) shows have been those produced by the Fusion Youth Theatre. Sadly, as you may know, Fusion has closed down meaning that we did not have to face that difficult decision this time. Also, in the past the performances put on by Stevenage Symphony Orchestra have always been very expensive and have hardly ever cleared a profit. We had to think very carefully about bringing them into the 2013 programme but as they were clever enough to get BBC sponsorship were able to give them a slot on the understanding that it would be at no cost to us.

**D. Length of Festival** - when we looked at the possible financial models for the festival we considered that our options were:

- to have a week's festival rather than a fortnight which meant not being able to accommodate everyone
- to have 'dark nights', or
- to put in some 'fillers' of less expensive types of performance.

We finally decided on the third option believing the minimum costs could be covered and held a 'film festival' within the festival of four consecutive nights. So we maintained the two week format, filling 'dark nights' with a trial film festival. In the event, this proved to be the wrong option as due to technical problems and poor audiences we lost badly on these shows.

**E. Sponsorship** - we approached a number of local organisations for funding with little success, for example, both banks and building societies showed little interest in being involved. However on the positive side we did get very welcome support from Stevenage Arts Guild and from individual councillors who were prepared to give us a slice of their locality budgets.

**F. Audience Numbers, Advertising and Promotion** - this year we were very fortunate to have Lee Hooper, from Stevenage Stagecoach, join the committee and he has a lot of experience in publicity for Stagecoach and others. He put together a print and advertising package which compared very favourably with that provided of The Comet in previous years. He also encouraged the use of social media and Facebook promotion. Ticket prices were held at 2011 levels in most cases and overall audience numbers held up relatively well, given the recession. But shows without large numbers of children in them still struggle to sell sufficient tickets.

**G. Containing Costs** - we are very grateful to all the groups involved for setting realistic budgets for their performances and sticking to them. We have also kept overhead costs to a minimum, helped by Lee's work on the advertising and printing costs. We are also thankful to the Gordon Craig Theatre for their offer of a 'not-for-profit' rate and some sensible cost packaging.

**H. Allocation of Overheads** - this year Anne Graham, our Treasurer, has allocated a proportion of costs to each show to illustrate what the whole cost of a performance. Therefore, we could see if the show 'as a whole' could stand on its own. In some instances this showed how some shows are very close to the financial edge and some are hanging over.

## **Review of the 2013 Programme**

So to the shows:-

This year again we included a performance from the Gordon Craig Theatre School as part of the Festival promotion but did not incorporate the costs or revenues into the Festival accounts.

The **Primary Schools** concert was as usual brilliantly organised and all the parents and grandparent supported their children. Fewer schools than usual took part this year which limited our opportunity to clear a small profit.

The two main **Senior School** shows were less than break-even and I am always surprised that so few parents attend their youngsters' stage performances. As a committee we will need to look at the content of these shows - we need to encourage a better quality and variety of performance from some quarters.

The **Dance Extravaganza** performance organised by Gemma Self has always been a success for the Festival. Because the show sold out in 2011, and we had requests from more dance schools to be involved, we introduced an extra **Let's Dance** show organised by Kimberley Creak of Premiere School of Dance. Both shows cleared a good profit and the total seats purchased were far more than a single full house.

**Stevenage Symphony Orchestra** put together a great performance including a World Premiere of a new piece 'Legend of the Tor' by Alison Wrenn. It was reasonably attended but if not sponsored would have made a loss.

**Stevenage Showcase** is our variety show made up of a number of different acts, including established acts as well as those receiving 'Talented Young People' awards from Stevenage Arts Guild. It was a reasonable well attended show. But we still made a very small loss.

The **Parnassus** poetry performance was enjoyed by those in attendance but numbers were very small as usual so no profit.

**Stagecoach** theatre school put on a very professional show based on Alice and had very good house because of very sound publicity through their own network. The show still made a reasonable profit so a great evening.

**Knebworth Players** presented the Jeffrey Archer play 'Beyond Reasonable Doubt', a very interesting play of two halves which left every one wondering 'what if' as they left the theatre. But unfortunately again not enough seats were sold to cover costs. Being a play with a stage set it is necessary to open for two nights so the show incurs two nights of costs. Even with such well-known author we found a good audience could not be attracted and we made a significant loss.

**Last Night of the Proms** as usual was a great evening of music and even had an operatic singer singing with a wind band (that has got to be a first for Stevenage). Even the free flags and hats however could not bring a profit to the accounts.

The planned '**Film Nights**' included the films *Howards End*, *Quartet*, *Here We Go Round The Mulberry Bush* & *Les Miserables*. In the event for reasons of a licence (*Howards End*) and a damaged film (*HWGRTMB*) we only had two films on show. Both should have sold out and when talking to people many said they were going to come, but on the day we had very disappointing audiences. We priced the shows at £5 to encourage a good attendance but it is clear that plan failed and both nights ran at a loss. Half a house each night would have broken even but unfortunately we fell well short of that target.

**Songs of Praise** - now the traditional conclusion of the Festival - as usual, made you very proud to be a member of the community who has the sort of people represented in the interviews, all doing good things for those who need help.

The **Art and Photography Exhibition** was held after the main body of the Festival as there was a mix up in the booking of the new display space by GCT. Much more space offered a much bigger display but the gallery space is less accessible to the general public and would have benefitted greatly from coinciding with the Festival theatre performances.

**The Stevenage Play** - a multi-media show by and actor/actress Mandy Romero was a very different presentation based around a young man's experiences in Stevenage and the film *HWGRTMB*. An interesting and completely different event from our other shows, reaching out to a new audience.

The **Big Sing** was held in the community centre in Great Ashby and a really good crowd attended culminating with a performance of all the songs learnt in the afternoon. This hopefully will be a new element of the Festival program.

Many other events are included in our program which we don't organise but we are happy to incorporate in the festival umbrella. One was a demonstration for the South Stevenage flower club, also a talk all about Nelson. A talk on the Intercity Story given for the Loco society, and a further demonstration on the subject of Floral Profusion for Floral Arts. In addition there was a Musical evening at a local church which we also incorporated in the program, and a photographic exhibition and a walk organised by the Friends of Forster country. So we cover many diverse subjects, and try to offer something for everyone.

### **Further Thoughts and Thanks**

Each Festival we award the Roy Mugridge prize for an outstanding performance by a young person and this year it was given to a young singer. Roy was one of the founders of the Festival and I was pleased that his widow Barbara and daughter Anne joined Gill and myself in the judging panel.

We were supported by many Stevenage councillors attending the shows and in particular the Mayor and Mayoress, Jack and Margaret Pickersgill, or their deputies attended a significant proportion. They all went away happy with our efforts for the Town and their support is much appreciated.

It should go without saying that I and we should be very grateful to the committee members for all the hard work they have put in over the last two year to bring forward the Festival this year. It should go without saying, but it won't.

Lee who joined us this year, put together a very good package of advertising and publicity which was targeted and should have made every household in the town aware of the festival. New banners and posters as well as hand outs went well with the festival program which made much of the festival were as previously the advertising predominated. My thanks to him for all that sound effort.

Anne restructured the whole accounts spread sheet to identify and allocate all the cost to each show and therefore gave us a much better understanding of the individual shows actual costs. You can see her efforts in the financial report.

Hillary has organised most of the fringe section of the festival, the talks and events outside the main theatre would all have had her touch in some way. As Chair of the Arts Guild and a knowledgeable musician she is also our contact with many other community and musical organisations.

My abiding memories of Rebecca this year was at the end of the 'Last Night' when she was loading up the van carrying all the musical instruments back to the music centre. Gone midnight, music stands and enormous timpani drums alike stacked in the truck, Rebecca drove off into the night. The amount of work Rebecca puts into the various musical shows through the festival, particularly those involving large numbers of children, parents and teachers, is enormous; she is a real gem.

The "Big Sing", dreamed up by Hilary and Rebecca, was a new venture where over 80 people came together for a day to make music. The funding was underwritten by the Arts Guild and by the Hertfordshire Music Service

Gill is our backstage manager and ensures that in the technical meetings, the shows get what they need. Then on the night she makes sure that what they need is supplied and that the performers are where they should be when they should be, in fact the shows would not go on without Gill's organisational skills. This year she had the support of an 'apprentice', Joe, and he would have learned a great deal by following her lead. Gill, who now lives in southern Hertfordshire, even stayed in Stevenage for the duration of the festival to be close at hand each night. Real dedication!

Joe is a student at John Henry Newman school and joined us as part of his studies. He attended meetings to see how we pull the plans together and was backstage every

performance to assist Gill and learn how a professional stage works. His efforts were much appreciated and he is to be commended for his attitude. He was a real credit to his school and himself and we made sure this was noted in his learning records.

Carolyn, well what can I say, there are many things I have not mentioned above and indeed many that are, that had Carolyn's touch, as secretary she kept all of us (and particularly me) in line acting as the glue in the gaps. Reminding us all of things that needed to be done and in most cases doing them herself. It cannot be underestimated how important the secretary's job is in an organisation and Carolyn fulfils that role brilliantly.

As for me, as you would expect in a committee with a predominance of ladies, I just do what I am told!

I hope you all enjoyed the festival, it is disappointing the lack of bums on seats but it was not for the want of trying and your efforts gave the festival many very great moments I just wish more people from Stevenage had been there to appreciate them.

Ron Walker  
Chairman, Stevenage Festival