

**MINUTES OF STEVENAGE FESTIVAL GENERAL MEETING**  
7.30PM, FRIDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2023

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

Those present were:

Ron Walker (Chairman and Stevenage Art Society)  
Anne Graham (Treasurer)  
Carolyn Williams (Secretary)  
Sue Pettitt (Committee, Hertfordshire Music Service)  
Martin Sproat (Committee, Stevenage Choral Society)  
Kimberly Creak (Premiere School of Dance)  
Sam Daisley (Stevenage Museum)  
John Prebble (Junction 7 Creatives)  
Chris Ripple (Parnassus)  
Duncan Rutherford (Somewhere 2 Sing)  
Alice Keane (Somewhere 2 Sing)

**2. Apologies**

Stef Ellis (North Central Herts School of Dance)  
David Handley (Stevenage Symphony Orchestra)  
Divya Kasturi (Divya Kasturi Company)  
Jasmin Keshavarzi (Singspace Choir)  
Michelle Lloyd (Stevenage Library)  
Kelly Monk (Footworks)  
Lauren Moore, Stagecoach  
Paul Ruff, Gordon Craig Theatre  
Hilary Spiers, Festival Committee Fringe organiser  
Jo Ward (Stevenage Museum)  
Sagen Zac-Varghese (Lister Hospital Art Society)  
Mary Green (Stevenage Art Society)

**3. Minutes of Last GM on 12 November 2021**

The minutes of the last General Meeting on 12 November 2021 were reviewed and confirmed as a true record of that meeting.

**4. Chairman's Report on 2023**

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

**5. Treasurer's Report**

Anne Graham tabled a summary report of the income and expenditure relating to the 2023 Festival. This showed that the 2023 Festival had incurred a small operating surplus of £422, having started with reserves of £7016 and carrying forward reserves of £7428 into 2024/25.

The Festival's reserves policy was to have sufficient cash in order to ensure that the Festival could be wound up at any time with all commitments honoured. This was a figure in the region of £7k, so the Festival was financially sound to continue. However it was noted that the reserves had fallen sharply by over £5k since the pre-covid years. During the covid period we had prioritised putting on shows as and when we

could, but had not been able to put on some of the shows that provide the most surplus (e.g. the Primary Schools) and audiences had been down for others. It would therefore be essential for the 2025 Festival to be a financial success and make a significant surplus in order to rebuild our reserves (which would also be impacted by inflation).

It was noted that communications needed to be improved over the holding of the front two rows for performers – these seats were not needed for the Premiere performance and could have been sold, thus improving revenue.

There was some discussion about grant funding – this remains an aspiration but previous refusals (after time consuming application processes) have rather discouraged us. We will continue to think about it and would welcome any practical help. Likewise with commercial sponsorship, particularly programme advertising – the switch from printing thousands of programmes to just a few hundred is environmentally responsible but meant that previous sponsors were no longer interested, so we need to find a better way selling ourselves and of aligning what we do with their needs.

The meeting then approved the accounts for the periods 01/11/21 to 31/10/23.

## **6. 2025 Festival**

It was noted that the dates for the 2025 Festival in the Theatre were currently Thursday 19 June to Saturday 28 June. We had not booked the full fortnight as it had become clear that we do not have enough theatre-filling shows to cover fourteen nights. Rather, we would concentrate on a well-supported, condensed version.

The current outline plan was as follows

- Thur 19 June –Herts Music Service
- Fri 20 June – Yes We Can (Theatre or Concert Hall?)
- Sat 21 June – Premiere (maybe x2)
- Sun 22 June – Stagecoach x 2
- Mon 23 June – Secondary Schools
- Tue 24 June – Dance Extravaganza
- Wed 25 June – Primary Schools (in Concert Hall)
- Thur 26 June – tba
- Fri 27 June - tba in Theatre, Parnassus in Ellen Terry
- Sat 28 June – Finale

Should any new ideas for shows come forward, we currently have two spare nights. It might also be possible to take additional nights but the operational needs of the Gordon Craig Theatre would take priority and we would have to work around existing non-Festival bookings.

It was noted that Somewhere to Sing would like to be involved in the finale performance. They currently had 60 members in Stevenage and more elsewhere. They were keen to explore working with other performers (dance etc) and maybe supporting the Yes We Can performance (they had some members who could sign).

It was expected that the Gordon Craig programme would need to be finalised by the end of 2024. The committee would be following up with the various groups to confirm

their dates and any additional requests for dates should be made as soon as possible.

The booking for the Pi Gallery was yet to be finalised but would cover the Festival period. Fringe events could take place any time in June. The committee would be contacting all the groups to start putting the programme together and would be interested in any ideas.

Fringe events would focus on promoting existing events being run in June 2025 by groups and organisations, rather than attempting to run our own, as this had not been successful in 2023 with some new events having to be cancelled because of lack of support.

## **7. General Discussion**

The following points were discussed and noted:

- The Festival's social media presence, particularly Facebook and website, was thought to have worked well, although more could always be done (within the constraints of a small team). It would be hugely beneficial in raising awareness if all participants amplified each other's messages about the Festival.
- It was recommended that the Festival should focus on its strengths (i.e. putting on community based shows at the Gordon Craig Theatre that otherwise wouldn't happen) and not spend too much effort on other things that others do better
- Accepting that our audiences would always be friends and family might help thinking about the best pricing and publicity strategies to use (e.g. discount codes for this group)
- Some research had been done into online directories of events and entries for the Festival would be added to these, time and resources permitting. There was some debate however as to how much these were used by potential audience members.
- It was suggested that we could use the community stage at Rock in the Park to preview the Festival shows. Also, more use could be made of Event Island.
- The Westgate shopping centre could be a location for aerial dance displays, possibly against a backdrop of art from local artists
- It wasn't yet clear what gallery space would be available at GCT in 2025, but there was an appetite for displays of art and also crafts. It was noted that Cllr Lorraine Rossati was a keen photographer.
- Sam Daisley confirmed that the Museum would include the 2025 Festival in their forward planning

## **8. Election of Committee and Officers for 2022/23**

The chairman thanked everyone who had served on the Committee for 2021/23.

It was noted that Gill Hutchinson was no longer able to take an active role backstage but would hopefully remain on the committee assisting with policies, procedures and practical advice (Ron would contact her to confirm). Sue Pettitt had agreed to act as backstage manager for the Finale performance (in addition to her own shows).

The following committee was then agreed unopposed for the 2023 Festival:

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Ron Walker – Chairman  
Carolyn Williams – Secretary  
Anne Graham – Treasurer  
Hilary Spiers – Fringe manager  
Gill Hutchinson - Committee member  
Martin Sproat - Webmaster  
Glenn Walker - Designer  
Lauren Moore – Committee member (Stagecoach)  
John Prebble – Committee member (J7C)

It was acknowledged that those in charge of running shows (e.g. Sue Pettitt, Kimberly Creak, Steph Ellis), along with Paul Ruff from the Gordon Craig, would of necessity become ad-hoc members of the committee for the relevant period and receive meeting invites and minutes. However, for the purposes of the charity commission returns etc. the formal committee was as listed above.

John Prebble was a very welcome addition to the committee, to provide a link with the J7C community.

Ron said that this would be his final Festival as chair, so one of his tasks for the coming two years was to find his successor – any nominations or ideas welcome.

### **9. AOB** **None**

## **Stevenage Festival 2023 Chairman's Report**

How in just few words can I sum up the 2023 festival? I would need to describe the efforts and emotions of all those concerned, but in a few words I can't! So, you will just need to use your imagination. But, in doing so, remember the blood sweat and tears that have been shed to bring the final article to completion, and then reflect on how lives will have also been lifted by the experience.

That is why the festival exists, to enhance our life experiences and to bring us joy! Unfortunately, this year we had three shows cancelled for various reasons, and so the festival in the theatre was smaller than is usual, even though we had two new groups with new shows included.

The Theatre!

The opening performance of the Festival was put on by the combined senior schools. Each school brought a different aspect to the stage and included some wonderful performances. We really have some talented teenagers in this town. Our particular thanks to Sue Pettitt from Hertfordshire Music Service who made this event happen, along with the school arts co-ordinators.

The next was our usual Dance Extravaganza,

Again, a number of dance school join together to put on a show of delights with vibrant colours and great technical dancing skills. A good audience watched dancers from all ages show off their skills. Steph Ellis did a magnificent job of co-ordinating all the dance schools to produce the usual sparkling and seamless performance.

Parnassus

Parnassus as ever presented a varied show of music, song and poetry. Led by the incomparable Chris Ripple the audience were well entertained with lots of thoughtful words and enjoyable music.

Lytton Players put on a show entitled 'Lights Up'

An evening of songs and sketches from the Lyttons, bringing together lots of their best material from past performances was well received as always. Austin Arnold from Lytton Players was the key person making this all happen for us.

Ad Libretto, Musical Improvisation

This was something new for this year's Festival – the informal improvisation show, based on making a musical around the life of an audience member, was by all accounts very entertaining, although ticket sales were disappointing.

Yes, We Can!

A highlight of the Festival, and for the first time, this year we presented a show, put on to incorporate the joy of performance, demonstrated by a very important sector of our community those with special needs. It gave us an award-winning performance and is a must for future years. As an addition to her usual dance presentation, Kimberly Creak from

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Premiere School of Dance produced this outstanding show featuring many people who have never performed in public before and to rapturous applause given by the audience who attended. Not for the first time a Festival show, that brought a tear to my eye of pleasure and pride! We should also mention local school teacher Emma Louise Walton who stepped in at the last moment to be the compere for the event.

### Premiere School of Dance - Out of the Darkness

Following the success of the previous night Kimberly gave us another show featuring many of the various performances given in the past by this very talented school of dancers.

### Primary Schools Concert

Our show of the youngest school students always brings lots of 'Ahhh' moment when the various schools around the town show off how music and singing is set into the lives of our youngest students at an early stage. This was another success for Sue Pettitt from Hertfordshire Music Service.

### Finale

This as it turned out, this show was not the festival's final performance as due to a clash of dates we moved Stagecoach from the second weekend. But that was a mere technicality! As usual all the local dignitaries were invited to attend, including the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, and were entertained by lots of various acts as is the nature of the usual last show. The second half included the presentation of the Roy Mugridge Award (of which more later). The rest of the second half was our version of the 'Last night of the Proms' with all the flags waving. A star was also born as we gave local performer Éamonn Walsh his first compere role on a big stage, holding the whole event together with his highly entertaining patter and some great jokes (at the expense of Luton). I should also thank both Hilary Spiers and Sue Pettitt who expertly pulled together the acts and the music for this show.

Stagecoach Early Stages came on the last Sunday afternoon, followed that evening by the Stagecoach Main stagers.

Stagecoach Stevenage have been excellent supporters of the Festival for many years and pulled together impressive afternoon and evening performances - a brilliant outcome and a couple of great lively shows. Thank you, Lauren.

### Conclusion

So, as I reflect back over this year's shows and then back over the decades, I must thank the thousands and thousands of Stevenage people who have gone that extra step to join in and lift all our lives, for such is the measure of the arts in all its forms.

These often unseen and unheralded back stage people need also to be counted in the vote of thanks. But in the process of taking part, all be it behind the scenes, their lives will have also been lifted.

The arts raise up the spirit of us all, and we must not forget that with the chaos of life.

And so to the Roy Mugridge award – which we give to an outstanding performance in each Festival. What to choose?

In every year since Roy passed away, we have been joined by Barbara his wife, as part of the judging panel. Sadly, earlier this year Barbara also joined Roy. However, Anne our treasurer, and their daughter, stepped in to join the judging panel. Therefore, keeping the continuity that we would wish.

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As is usually the way, dance plays a very important part in the Festival, but most performances are groups, so to pick out an individual is difficult. The same can be said for music and singing. In the event, there were a number of specific performances that stood out from the rest. A group of four young ladies singing separate parts of a musical piece, two different young ladies singing a second piece - all these individual voices were stunning. We also considered an amazing rap poem by a pupil from one of Stevenage's special schools. The last option was a dance piece performed by a solo performer alone on the stage. All would have been worthy winners but in the end the dancer took the judges eye. She has taken the stage on the 'Yes we can!' show and was born with cerebral palsy - not that you would know it from her wonderful dance performance - but her excellence illustrates the hard work and commitment she showed to her craft.

As it transpired we had a few challenges during the year. Three organisations dropped out late in the day leaving us with three potentially dark nights but luckily the one new show helped to fill the gap.

As part of the Finale evening there were presentations of a number of Arts Guild awards by the Lord Lieutenant for Hertfordshire and organised by Hilary. Many dignitaries from the county attended this very full program of pieces and performances from all sectors of the arts, showing off what Stevenage people can do.

With this year's change of Theatre management, we had to try to understand what this meant to the Festival. Although most of the personnel were the same, we experienced changes to processes, not least the hanging arrangements in the gallery area.

Particular thanks go to Margaret Brett and the Floral Art Society, who provided their floral pieces, and to the Photographic Society who along with the members of the Stevenage Arts Society, pulled the exhibition together at the last moment. They also arranged for top quality photographs to be taken by their members of many of the performances, which is very important to us as a record of what was achieved.

As always significant portion of the festival content is outside the theatre and that is called the fringe.

### Stevenage Festival Fringe – Hilary Spiers

Very well-done Hilary, you excelled as usual. We had a comprehensive programme of events from arts groups across the town. The ones that work best are where groups and organisations open up their existing meetings and events to a broader audience, under the Festival umbrella. It is very difficult for the Festival to organise events from scratch, and two like this had to be cancelled due to lack of support. For the future, we will learn from this and focus mainly on showcasing existing organisations and events.

There are other things I could mention – Rock in the Park, organised by the SBC team and Kris of the Practice Roomz, as part of Stevenage Day, well done to them. We were also very pleased to develop a relationship with the Arts Group at the Lister Hospital which, working with the Stevenage Arts Society at Springfield House, led to the construction of over 100 blue clay poppies and their installation at the Church of St Andrew and St George in a moving artwork to commemorate those who we lost during Covid.

The staff of GCT, lead by Paul Ruff, display endless patience in allowing us amateurs to disrupt, in the nicest possible way, the smooth running of a commercial theatre. And the backstage, ticketing, marketing and catering from the GCT team are essential to make our events a success. Thanks are due to all of them. A special mention to Dave Knott backstage and Ana Drakes in the ticket office who worked closely with us to help make everything run smoothly.

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I should also at this point mention Gill Hutchinson who has been our stage manager for many years. Sadly, Gill's eyesight has deteriorated to a point where she can no longer do this job but we would like to thank her for everything she has done backstage in past years. Luckily for us, today's backstage crew at the Gordon Craig are so professional that, together with the huge efforts of our show-runners, we did manage to keep everything running smoothly backstage without breaking anyone or anything. We hope that Gill will continue to support us with her expert advice and guidance.

Our publicity on our website and social media moved up a stage this year with thanks to Martin, Glenn and Carolyn. The fabulously produced program edited and designed by Glenn was printed in smaller numbers to save paper and distributed in a more targeted way. Social media is the main communication tool going forward and we continue to develop, maybe too hesitantly, our presence in this new world.

As you will see in the accounts put together by Anne, our treasurer, we managed to make a small surplus over costs. So, we can continue into our next Festival in 2025, although we must ensure that we at least break even on that year, in order to continue the Festival into the years after that.

I do reflect however that we could do much more, and take more risks, if we could successfully attract grant or sponsorship funding from various arts organisations. We shall be examining this in more detail for the future and would appreciate any help and guidance as to how to succeed at this, as we have so far failed to 'tick the boxes' or even know what the boxes are to be ticked.

For some time now, Stevenage has grand ambitions set out in its cultural strategy for arts and culture activities, including our Festival, and this has been a higher profile in recent years, including the introduction of Junction 7, a dedicated organisation working in that field. We were delighted to work with Junction 7 this year on a number of fringe events.

Above all, I must thank Carolyn who, as our secretary is involved in most if not every part of the running of the festival and therefore ensures we are able to deliver the professional package you saw this year.

I hope you will all join us for the 2025 Festival when we will entertain you again.

Ron Walker, Chairman