

MINUTES OF STEVENAGE FESTIVAL GENERAL MEETING
7.30PM, FRIDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2019

1. Welcome and Introductions

Those present were:

Ron Walker (Chairman)
Carolyn Williams (Secretary)
Anne Graham (Treasurer)
Hilary Spiers (Committee & Arts Guild)
Gill Hutchinson (Committee & Knebworth Players)
Christina Luchies (Committee, Hertfordshire Music Service)
Martin Sproat (Committee, Stevenage Choral Society)
Glenn Walker (Committee)
Paul Ruff (Stevenage Leisure)
Rebecca Kelly (Hertfordshire Music Service)
David Handley (Stevenage Symphony Orchestra)
Gill Brown (Stevenage Choral Society)
Chris Ripple (Parnassus)
Pippa Collins (Jupiter Singers)
Matt Pallant (London Show Choir)
Divya Kasturi (Divya Kasturi Company)
Lauren & Andrew Moore (Stagecoach Stevenage)
Ross Edwards (Lytton Players)

2. Apologies

Cllr Simon Speller
Cllr Richard Henry
Cllr Margaret Notley
Michelle Lloyd (Stevenage Library)
Tony Burton (Stevenage Writers)
Margaret Brett (Stevenage Floral Art Society)
Geraldine Hyman (Theatre Train Hitchin)
Graham Mortlock (SMVC)
Nadia Ismail (Talentreel)
Duncan Rutherford (Somewhere2Sing)
Julie Filler (Camps Hill Cheerleaders)

3. Minutes of Last GM on 10 November 2017

The minutes of the last General Meeting on 10 November 2017 were reviewed and confirmed as a true record of that meeting.

4. Chairman's Report on 2016 Mini-Festival and 2017 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 committee, the staff of the Gordon Craig (who had been particularly supportive), councillors providing locality budget support and all the participating groups.

5. Treasurer's Report

Anne Graham tabled a summary report of the income and expenditure relating to the 2019 Festival. This showed that the 2019 Festival had incurred an operating surplus of £2465, having started with reserves of £11104 and carrying forward reserves of £13569 into 2020/21. This was a good improvement over the near £5k loss reported for 2017.

The Festival had been encouraged by the Arts Council to make grant applications to enable some more ambitious and inclusive fringe events to take place. However these applications had then been unsuccessful which was disappointing. As it was unclear why the applications had been declined (it was understood that it was more to do with decisions as to where funds should be allocated, rather than the intrinsic merits of the projects) the committee would be thinking hard about whether to repeat the rather time-consuming experience. However, funding from individual councillors' locality budgets had then been secured to allow some of these events to proceed in modified form. This revenue had been channelled via Stevenage Arts Guild and did not appear in the general Festival accounts. Hilary Spiers efforts in securing this funding to allow the events to take place were much appreciated.

It was noted that the difficult decision to cancel the Philippine Theatre show, because of very poor ticket sales, had been justified, as continuing with the show would have thrown the Festival into an overall loss. It was hoped that the Festival could find a way of working with this community again in future. Whereas the general ethos of the Festival was to work as a collaborative venture, with loss-making shows being subsidised by the ones that made a surplus, sometimes it was necessary to pull a show that was heading for a major loss.

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

The meeting then approved the accounts for the periods 01/11/17 to 31/10/19.

6. 2021 Festival

It was noted that the dates for the 2021 Festival in the Theatre were currently Saturday 12 June to Saturday 29 June. It was noted that there was a great demand for weekend slots for adult groups and Paul Ruff confirmed that at this stage it might be possible to spread the Festival over more weekends in June. So the Festival would not be a continuous period of GCT performances but more a 'Festival month'. He needed confirmation of the required dates by Easter 2020. The committee would as usual contact all the groups normally involved, or who had expressed an interest. The Gordon Craig programme would need to be finalised by the end of 2020.

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.

It was agreed that the approach to schools/music centre performances might need a bit of a rethink as audiences were small and the pressure on staff was great. Nevertheless, giving young people an opportunity to perform on stage in a large theatre was a great opportunity that needed to be retained in a way that was right for

today's generation. The Primary Schools Concert did appear to be working well and had been allocated the Concert Hall on Wed 16 June.

A provisional timetable, taking into account current expressions of interest, demand for weekend slots but not yet including the secondary schools/music centre nights might be:

Sat 5 June	Sparks Theatre Festival Launch?
Sun 6 June	Sparks Theatre
Mon 7 June	
Tue 8 June	
Wed 9 June	
Thur 10 June	
Fri 11 June	Jupiter Singers (2 nights together, Friday & Sat preferred)
Sat 12 June	Afternoon workshop with Kerry Ellis London Show Choir (2 nights together, Friday & Sat preferred)
Sun 13 June	Stagecoach - 4pm Matinee Performance Possibly a film or open-mic night later. Possibly Divya Kasturi's 'Dance on Screen' film production
Mon 14 June	
Tue 15 June	Dance Extravaganza
Wed 16 June	Primary Schools Concert (Concert Hall)
Thur 17 June	
Fri 18 June	Lytton Players – Variety Night
Sat 19 June	Somewhere2Sing? – requested a Saturday
Sun 20 June	
Mon 21 June	
Tue 22 June	
Wed 23 June	
Thur 24 June	
Fri 25 June	Parnassus Poetry (Ellen Terry Suite)
Sat 26 June	Theatre – Festival Finale

It was suggested that the Theatre bar should be kept open on nights when a large group were likely to use it (Jupiter Singers and London Show Choir in particular). Paul Ruff said this could be arranged. A 'deposit' charge should be included in the budget for the shows but would only need to be drawn upon if there the business did not materialise.

Pippa Collins said that the Jupiter Singers would be very happy to perform at either a New Town or Old Town Festival launch.

Paul Ruff recommended that the Festival Committee look closely at the 'BOPA' requirements before the next Festival to ensure full compliance.

Divya Kasturi said that she was working on a high-tech South Asian dance and puppetry show that would be launched at Warwick Arts Centre and then go on tour. She would like to bring it to Stevenage as part of the Festival if this could be made to work.

Ross Edwards suggested that there was scope for the Festival to showcase more local bands, beyond the Rock in the Park event. It was noted that there had been a beer festival in the Old Town this year that could possibly expand its music element as part of the 2021 Fringe.

There was some discussion of the need to plan and co-ordinate social media and the committee would take this up at their next meeting.

7. Election of Committee and Officers for 2019/21

The following committee was then agreed unopposed for the 2021 Festival:

Ron Walker – Chairman

Carolyn Williams – Secretary

Anne Graham – Treasurer

Hilary Spiers – Fringe manager

Gill Hutchinson - Theatre manager

Christina Luchies - Hertfordshire Music Service

Martin Sproat - Webmaster

Glenn Walker - Programme designer

Shaun Parker – Committee member

Lauren Yorke – Committee member

Trish Washer – Committee member (in her absence, agreed by email).

8. AOB

None



STEVENAGE

Festival of the Arts

25TH ANNIVERSARY

Stevenage Festival 2017-2019 Chairman's Report

It is only just now 25 years since the first Stevenage festival closed in 1994. The first was held in October and, being the first, we were on a steep learning curve. It included a play, a concert by SSO, a magic show and it featured the Male Voice choir. They have also passed the test of time as the only ever-present act through all the years since those early beginnings. So, what are my conclusions? We were told it would not work and it clearly has. We ran it to raise the profile of the arts in the town, and it has. We wanted disparate arts organisation to pool their talent and they have. And we wanted to give the people of Stevenage the chance to stand on a professional stage and perform or show off their skills in many other ways, and they have.

We have seen children as young as four and older people into their eighties on the same stage performing to an audience and bringing pleasure to all. We have seen wonderful images and heard wonderful sounds, we have been enhanced by joy and laughter and moved to tears. All emotions have been experienced and that is the thing about the arts, it is all encompassing and inclusive.

So as I reflect back over those years 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.

But as you all know, these things do not happen as if by magic, all these hundreds and hundreds of shows need to be planned and delivered to the stage or display place. And that need hundreds of dedicated people prepared to volunteer and make themselves available to make it happen, blood sweat and tears have been shed to bring the final article to completion. 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.

But foremost in the list of those I have to acknowledge are the members of the Festival committee. In the 1994 festival there were just four of us. That has more than tripled now but the focus is still the same, to give the opportunity to all those afore mentioned people to weave their webs of wonder for us all.

Dozens and dozens of dedicated people, who, by going not just one extra mile but many, ensured the future of the festival and its ongoing success. I thank them all, but my overriding thought must go back to the very beginning of this journey and the help and faith of one of my co-founders, the late and very much missed Roy Mugridge. If it were not for his support for this idea and the finances he found from the arts guild coffers, this would never have happened.

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

Gordon Craig Theatre Performances

And so to the 2019 festival. With the increases in theatre costs from the redesigned cost structure, and the ever-present battle to fill seats, we needed to be more selective and therefore planned for 2019 an eleven-night festival down from the fifteen previously held. We are lucky to have such a large theatre at our disposal, but filling 500 seats is a challenge, so we have to be more and more sure that the shows we put on will attract the audience.

So what to choose? Dance had become very popular, to the extent that at one point we had three separate dance shows, plus dance elements in the schools shows, and audiences became too thinly spread. We therefore cut back this time to a single dance show. It has always been a principle of the Festival that local groups share the opportunity to perform and our Dance Extravaganza show, involving a number of local dance groups working together, demonstrates all the good things about that model. We are grateful to Gemma Hurst who organises this successful event year after year with the minimum of fuss. At the moment it looks like choirs are having their moment, with a number of them wanting to be involved, so we will have to see how we can do this most effectively.

As it transpired we had a few challenges during the year. One organisation dropped out very late in the day leaving us with two dark nights but luckily two other groups – Sparks and Stagecoach - stepped forward to fill the gap.

For the first time we decided to include a show from our Filipino community which was very ground breaking as it was new not only to the festival but also a UK premiere. It was a costly show, and very exciting artistically, but unfortunately the tickets failed to sell in sufficient numbers. So, sadly, I had to make a late decision to cancel as proceeding with high costs and virtually no revenue would have bankrupted the whole festival. We ended therefore with one dark night. It was very disappointing to everyone who had worked so hard on the production and we hope very much to find a way of including more risky events like this in future Festivals.

We had some successes as well – a new community theatre company – Sparks – put on a wholly original musical called Armadia, which was both an artistic and financial success – it was great to see the Gordon Craig Theatre being used for this local production. Shaun Parker, who runs Sparks and wrote the whole thing, has proved a valuable addition to our Festival Committee and has also encouraged us to harness the power of social media in spreading the word about our events through the community.

Pippa Collins brought in two of her amazing choirs featuring lots of local singers. Because the – pretty impressive - stage set up is the same, by having these on two consecutive nights we save a lot of cost and, as the choirs are from different areas, there is no clash of audience.

Stagecoach Stevenage pulled together an impressive evening of twenty five musical hits in one show. This was put on at short notice to fill one of our dark nights and sold out completely - a brilliant outcome and a great lively show. Thank you Lauren and Andrew.

As in previous years we have been pleased to host the musical performances organised by the Hertfordshire Music Service – the primary schools, the secondary schools and students from the local music centres all worked hard to provide great events for all to see. The dedication of the staff of the music service is remarkable and I'd like to think Christina and Rebecca and all the staff involved for their hard work giving young people across the town the opportunity to support their musical studies with an opportunity to perform.

Parnassus as ever presented a varied show of music, song and poetry. Sadly, due to the ill health of a family member, their leader Grant Meaby was unable to attend and to perform but did submit a very touching poem which was performed on his behalf by Parnassus and Festival stalwart Chris Ripple. This year the Roy Mugridge award was designated to be won

by a piece of original writing. I am glad to say that Grant's poem took the trophy; the first time that poetry has taken that honour.

The presentation of a number of Arts Guild awards by the Deputy Lieutenant for Hertfordshire preceded the Festival finale which was our Silver Anniversary Concert. Many dignitaries from the county attended this very full program of pieces and performances from all sectors of the arts. We enjoyed a ballet performance from our local Damani Campbell Williams, a jazz piano recital by James Treweek, a couple of songs from sopranos Sara Brady and Maddy McConnell Smith, a performance of her own song by Alanna Wilson, dance from Divya Kasturi and the Sabihah Stars, some musical theatre from Stagecoach and of course, the hardy perennial Stevenage Male Voice Choir.

We organised our usual art exhibition here in the Pi at the Gordon Craig theatre, with contributions from many of our local visual artists. Particular thanks are due to Margaret Brett and the Floral Art Society, who also provided arrangements for our Finale performance, and to Chris Pike and the Photographic Society who oversaw the exhibition and also arranged for photographs to be taken of many of the performances.

I am now going to hand over to Hilary Spiers and Christina Luchies. Hilary is responsible for our fringe events and Christina looks after the liaison with Herts Music Service. You will hear in their report how the special efforts we made for 2019 underline how arts change people's lives and engage the participants in ways that are far reaching. We would very much like to expand our fringe team for the future so we can do even more and also offset much of the pressure and responsibility that currently falls on these two.

Stevenage Festival Fringe – Hilary Spiers and Christina Luchies

2019 was the 25th anniversary of the Stevenage Festival and we had ambitious ideas to celebrate. In addition to the usual programme in the Gordon Craig Theatre that Ron has just described, over thirty fringe events took place during the festival. Most of these were organised and funded by local groups without any financial help from the Festival. However, we had big plans to make this year better than ever and had been encouraged by the Arts council at Stevenage Cultural Strategy meetings that a grant application would have a good chance of success. A lot of time and energy was spent putting this bid together. Unfortunately the first attempt was not successful.

We were encouraged to try again with some amendments. A second bid was submitted but unfortunately was again rejected. On the strength of the earlier encouragement we had started making plans and were obviously very disappointed that we were turned down. However, a plea to several Stevenage councillors was successful and funds from their locality budgets of approximately £5000 were secured. We had to downsize our plans a bit but we were in fact able to carry out most of our original ideas. A big thank you to the councillors who donated (Cllrs Phil Bibby, Howard Burrell, Michelle Gardner, Graham Lawrence, Margaret Notley, John Gardner, Richard Henry. and the Youth Mayor). We also had small grants from the Stevenage Community Trust and the Heritage Hub at the University of Hertfordshire.

One of the earliest fringe events was at the end of May when the Old Town Business Community put on an open day at Springfield House. This was free to the public and very well attended consisting of a craft fair, pebble trails in the beautiful garden, barbecue and a heritage trail of the High Street. Without funding from Jody Hanafin, an Old Town councillor, this could not have happened. I think they are hoping to repeat the event again next year as it was so successful.

A large proportion of the money from our councillors was used to fund various workshops.

As part of our Songwriters project, a song written by a young student from Peartree School was professionally arranged for choirs and performed both at the Primary Schools concert and the Festival finale.

This is a great example of how music and the arts can provide real benefits to participants. The mother of the young songwriter commented in an interview that her daughter was deeply affected by a family death, '*...she did not know how to express her grief...I am so relieved she's (...) using her music... I know she is thinking about Gran but not always talking about it.*'

Because of the songwriter experience and her workshop with the professional composer and performer, her mother went on to comment, '*Her confidence has grown so much! People at school who have never talked to her before are talking to her now... it makes a difference if other people recognise her. It is one thing if mum and dad tell her but the external feedback makes a huge difference*'.

The young songwriter said: '*...Lots of people in school now come up to me because they know I write songs ... and I make new friends in different places...*'

The numbers of students attending the songwriter drop in sessions at the music centre has risen since this performance at the Gordon Craig. And this in turn has been an important factor in keeping the sessions running.

It is vitally important that we provide our creative young people with a high profile event to showcase their achievements and also to encourage others. The mental and physical benefits of such participation can never be underestimated.

Drumming and steelpan sessions were held plus workshops to provide junk percussion. This all contributed to the amazing parade for the launch event in the town centre. Children from several local primary schools joined the general public in the Town Centre which culminated in a noisy drumming session by the clock tower led by the Mayor Simon Speller and Risenga, the drumming teacher from Herts Music service.

One of the participating families was going through terminal illness and other domestic difficulties. Even though the pain and illness was sometimes overwhelming, they still attended every workshop as well the launch event in the town centre. Their gratitude was remarkable as it gave them something to look forward to. As a consequence the child has since joined two musical groups at the centre and is continuing on a musical journey, using it as an outlet which gives him a means to cope.

The Festival events meant that schools were able to target families that might not normally engage with the school or with music and it was wonderful to see how friendships with other families were formed as a result of the workshops and the launch.

The grant from the Community Trust was used to fund a children's ceilidh. Local expert Barry Goodman visited four local primary schools where Herts Music Service provides class teaching for beginner strings. Barry taught a whole class the dances and the Music Service taught the children simple music to accompany the dancing. On the day 120 children from 4 schools had an amazing afternoon joined by the mayor. Half the children played violin together with several professional musicians while the rest danced. Then they changed over so they all had a chance to both play and dance. A great time was had by all.

As a result of this experience the violin teacher has reported a marked improvement in those children's progress compared with students who were not lucky enough to be involved.

An impact on staff development has also been identified as the tutor was able to reflect on the difference in outcome between the participating and non-participating schools she is teaching in. This will lead to improved planning and contribute towards better outcomes for all.

We certainly hope to repeat this again in the future.

The 2019 festival was also the first time that North Herts College has participated. We were delighted that students from several departments were able to take part. The Art Department's

Annual Fashion show was held in our beautiful parish church of St Andrew and St George and some amazing creations were seen.

Musical entertainment was provided by the steelpans group from Stevenage Music Centre and this, together with the opening launch, has seen a big increase in students participating in steelpans. As a result of this the group has grown and since played at several other events in the town and are receiving further invitations such as the Chairman's Garden party in Hertford in the summer.

North Herts Business Studies students were involved in creating the new logo for the festival and the Travel and Tourism students created a New Town fun trail which was distributed at the launch. These projects provided useful work experience for the students. The College also hosted an open day and we were able to put on a stunning photographic art exhibition entitled Space for Nature at their Stevenage campus.

In addition to these events, funding was used to help two other fringe events. A family concert was held at Stevenage Music Centre where pupils from Woolenwick Infants School and the Divya Kasturi Indian Dance group joined with Stevenage Symphony orchestra to provide a concert of diverse music from around the world. Continuing on our world music theme, we also held a family ceilidh at Alleynes School where members of the Irish Network joined with us for a rousing evening of traditional dancing.

2019 was the 25th anniversary of the Stevenage Festival and we wanted to bring back some of our talented young people who had moved away. We were able to provide travel expenses for performers from the Czech Republic, Wales, Leeds and Kent to return to Stevenage to take part in our wonderful Finale concert.

Ron Walker, Chairman

Back to me!

Very well-done Hilary and Christina, you excelled as usual. There are many other things I could mention – Rock in the Park, organised by Geoff and his team as part of Stevenage Day, the Herts and Beds Cinema Club, the Underwater Photographers, Stevenage and Knebworth Arts Group, Town Centre Management, Nick Mallinger at Stevenage Borough Council. My apologies if I have missed anyone – the Festival is such a great example of a community working together.

Christina won a pride of Stevenage award for her musical work with young people, well deserved.

And now some comments on the back-room operations that make the Festival come together. All the shows in the theatre were overseen by Gill Hutchinson and the back stage team ensuring the smooth running of performances of all sorts. Paul Ruff displays endless patience in allowing us amateurs to disrupt, in the nicest possible way, his smooth running of a commercial theatre. And his ticketing, marketing, catering and front of house staff all do their part to help make our events a success. Thanks are due to all of them.

Our publicity on our website and social media moved up a stage this year with thanks to Martin and Shaun. We also had another fabulously produced program edited and designed by Glenn – it must be the best yet. Glenn also brought our logo and general look up to date - perhaps good for the next 25 years.

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 securely into our next Festival in 2021.

I do reflect however that we could do much more, and take more risks, if we could successfully attract funding from various arts organisations. Stevenage has grand ambitions set out in its cultural strategy for arts and culture events, including Festivals. But, the failure of our two applications for funding is a worry and maybe needs to be considered by these

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funding organisations as we certainly put on the sort of events they claim they wish to support.

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 2021 Festival when we will entertain you again.

Ron Walker