

Well, what a year to report on. Last June I stepped tentatively into the Chairmanship shoes of this Theatre. The tremendous support I received from the new Committee and other members of Network since then have ensured a fruitful and successful year for us.

We kicked off with a modern piece, Collaborators, directed by John Irvine, followed by a Restoration Comedy, The Provok'd Wife, directed by Alastair Callcutt. Then in October we devised, under the direction of Emma Byrne, a play in 24 hours, delivered on the evening of the David Murray Award. The Award, named after a former long-serving Chairman and husband of our President, Kay, was presented to Mark Johnson for his contribution to the life of Network – particularly his Improv evenings.

Our Christmas show was a new writing piece by Shamini Bundell, The Dark Side, directed by her too. The start of the year saw our participation in the VAULT Festival for 6 of their 8 week season. During that time we presented two pieces: Alan Bennett's Say Something Happened, directed by Charles Leo Raine and Work Makes You Free directed by James McKendrick. We then returned to the classics with As You Like It directed by Bernie Byrnes. My thanks go to the Directors of these shows and their crews and cast who gave us, I hope you would agree, something for everyone to enjoy.

May I return to the VAULT Festival for a moment. As well as our two shows, we hosted 25 other shows and welcomed 4,143 people through our doors. Most evenings had three shows scheduled, five nights a week. Again, it would be interesting to know how many of you came to see shows other than our own productions. I have to say a special thank you to Alex Farrell who was our Theatre Manager for the duration and welcomed all those people through our doors. And also a special thank you to our Technical Manager, Mike Wyer, who ensured our own lighting rig and sound desk were returned to working order after the VAULT departure.

During the Festival we needed a way to funnel three different audiences a night into the bar, into the auditorium and out again, with only a 30 minute break between shows. So with Paul Lunnon's help we engineered to erect some theatre flats along the stage left seating. This worked so well, ensuring audience members went to the bar before, and during show intervals that the Committee have decided to make this a permanent feature. Paul has given us a quote for a permanent, but removable, structure which we will hope to install during the summer dark period.

After Nigel Williams died, we invited his sister and brother, Clare and Hugh, to become our Patrons and we were delighted when they agreed to do so. We subsequently learnt that Nigel had left a bequest to the Company and we wanted to spend this on a lasting legacy. Mike Wyer, our Technical Manager, put in a well-argued case for replacing our aging lantern stock and the Committee agreed. Mike sourced and purchased 11 new Fresnel lanterns which hang above us now. They were in place for the performances of As You Like It and we were delighted to welcome Clare and Hugh to a ceremonial switching on with a beautifully made prop button from David Harvey.

Another great piece of work by Mike Wyer and Fred Johnson was the installation of a contactless card reader to be used behind the bar. Now there is no excuse that you can't buy me a drink because you have no cash. Thank you to Mike and Fred for enabling the new-to-us technology – and how amazing it has been to be behind the bar and confirm that "yes, we can take cards!".

So you have heard about our wonderful directors and the creativity they bring to their shows, leading a constantly expanding and new membership of acting talent. But that can't happen without the support of those operating backstage. I have already mentioned Mike Wyer's contribution in terms of our new lighting and contactless card payment, but he and Ale Coyne have been encouraging and training a new generation of technicians who enable our stage to be lit and sound

effects to be heard. They did this by introducing technical training days and tech socials; and we are very grateful for their work to ensure we are “tech’d up” for each show with a competent backstage crew.

We also need to remember the front-of-house teams, under the leadership of Judith Denwood who welcome our audience, sell tickets and programmes and ensure the show can open on time with all punters accounted for. It can be especially cold doing this job in the winter months. And then, of course, the audience want a drink and Kay Murray as Bar Manager ensures the bar is stocked and staffed for all shows, whether by Network or the many external companies we host. Thank you to her for rocking up in Lower Road with a van full of alcohol and plastic cups (not to mention loo rolls). I often wonder what a bemused traffic cop might make of her load if she was ever stopped on the way to the Theatre.

But to even get you and our punters into see the show, we need our marketing team to sell to you guys and the general public. We have seen sterling work from our Marketing Team – Shamini Bundell, Mark Johnson and Jennie Rich – who were busy all year taking photographs, creating FaceBook events and tweeting about our shows and keeping our mailing lists up-to-date. So I wonder why the ticket sales can sometimes give cause for concern. Perhaps I can hear tonight either formally during questions or informally in the bar afterwards why we are struggling sometimes to grab audiences? Our website gets a lot of visitors too, although this is more of a static, “what’s on” information portal. The last time our webmaster, Simon Worthington came to talk to the Committee, he told us that we were attracting 1500 visitors a month. Thanks to Simon for keeping the website fresh. You may not have found it yet, but there is also a place on the Committee page where the Minutes of our meetings are uploaded for all to see. This gives you a flavour of the range of issues we discuss each month.

New writing is continually coming into our inboxes and Rebecca Mason has taken the role this year of co-ordinating the comments of her Reading Panel members, giving constructive feedback to the authors and occasionally putting a new piece through to the Committee for consideration. So, my thanks to Rebecca for doing this.

Shamini, as well as busy with social media, also co-ordinated the bids for our 2018 season and puts a lot of effort into presenting these to the Committee for discussion and final consideration for inclusion in our programme. Despite all her and the Committee’s best efforts to balance old and modern, mix of genres, mix of cast sizes and ages and to provide a varied and exciting mix of shows – we are often felled at the end by performance rights being denied and our careful programme scheduling gets thrown into the air – or Directors’ schedules change and we can’t perform our meticulously planned programme after all. Thank you Shamini for guiding us through this process.

As well as our own shows and the VAULT Festival, we welcomed 10 external companies during the year bringing much needed income from bar sales and contributions to the Theatre. Some of these shows ranged from one-nighters, to a few days run. Additionally, the theatre was in use for day-time rehearsals for Edinburgh shows and some of the VAULT companies. Although these external bookings do mean we need even more volunteers to run the bar and sometimes our own rehearsals are disrupted, without them the job of paying the rent gets more difficult each year. So keep an eye on the website and if you see a show that interests you, please considering volunteering to run the bar for us!

Finally, I would like to record a large debt of thanks to my two support office holders. Moira Cane as Secretary and Fred Johnson as Treasurer work in so many unseen ways. The meetings are called,

minuted and actions monitored, the bills are paid and monies banked. Not to mention the responding or re-directing of emails and other enquiries that come into the Theatre on a daily basis. They have both provided me with a “strong and stable” environment in which to carry out my own duties as Chair in this great and vibrant Theatre of ours.

I can't finish without mentioning the bins. I tried unsuccessfully a few years ago to introduce the concept of recycling and putting certain items in green bins which would avoid the contents going to landfill. It was not successful. But now that we are all so used to navigating multiple-coloured bins for our refuse we are going to try again! Alex is going to get some new bins for the kitchen and we hope that you will all responsibly dispose of your tea bags and coffee cups in the correct place 😊

I did want to end on an upbeat and optimistic note, but as we potentially face the prospect of a change in ownership of our beloved, stinking arches, and an unknown new landlord who may or may not be a patron of the arts (probably unlikely if they are a pension fund or Russian oligarch!), our long-term future may involve looking for a new home. Who knows what the future may bring but it is certainly going to be an interesting and exciting time. Watch this space! And remember, this is your Theatre – it only survives because you are a member – long may your membership continue.