Welcome to Network Theatre Company’s 80th anniversary AGM. At last year’s AGM we were unsure whether we were going to be part of the sell-off of railway arches by Network Rail. But, as part of the fabric of Waterloo station, Lower Road arches were not included in that sale. Time will tell if this will be good news for us or not. As a landlord Network Rail are interested mainly in whether we pay the rent on time and take no responsibility for the internal state of the arches they let out.

Onto happier events - the season of plays and activities since the last AGM continue to inspire me with the creativity, professionalism and enthusiasm of all who get involved in our Theatre.

Odes to Joy kicked off the summer, with 8 plays by different writers, giving new writers a chance to see their work brought to the stage. Our thanks go to Rebecca Mason for organising the evening.

Our Autumn production of The Pitmen Painters was a sell-out run (a rare thing these days at Network), so many congratulations to the cast and crew for such a great production and marketing effort. It was great to welcome a new Director, Moira Cane, to our season.

December brought a new piece of writing by Rebecca Mason and new members to the Network stage. Rebecca directed the production and gave us a fun evening for the Christmas run-up.

We then went into a 7 week run of the VAULT festival. This is a staggering 3 show a night, 5 days a week, plus matinees extravaganza. Alex Farrell again acted as the venue manager for the entire run and welcomed thousands of people through our doors. Daniel Carter was the creative director behind our own production during the Festival. Ringmaster, a piece devised by the cast and creatives, based on La Ronde, was an exciting contribution to the Festival.

Finally, we gave you Love and Money, directed by John Irvine which played to very good reviews and good houses. I may be biased, but I thought it was an excellent ensemble piece.

Our membership secretary, Alastair Callcutt, has been doing a great job of collecting membership and participation fees from casts and crews. He has made it easy for this to be done by attending early rehearsals of productions with his tablet to help everyone pay their fees. Thank you Alastair.

On the technical/theatre side there has been a lot happening - the safe has been relocated to the box office area and there are charging points within the safe to allow the card and phone to be ready for use behind the bar. But to everyone’s great excitement we finally got WiFi installed throughout the Theatre. This was down to the tenacity of Paul Evans and many meetings with OpenReach.

Your Committee took the decision to introduce audition fees for non-members of the Theatre. We will trial this for the rest of the year to see if it has any detrimental effect on numbers. The audition process was also streamlined by asking auditionees to complete their form online, book into the audition evening and bring a photo with them. It does mean Committee members need to be on hand at auditions to take the administrative burden off the artistic team on the night. It has not, so far, reduced the numbers attending, provides a small additional income stream and makes the evening easier to manage.

Our FoH manager, Judith Denwood, left half-way through the year to take a diplomatic role in Rwanda. This was such exciting news for Judith and we were thrilled for her to have the opportunity to take the overseas posting.

As a result, the Committee re-jigged roles to cover her absence. Alex Farrell is now the Volunteer Co-ordinator who organises the bar and front of house rotas. She will be providing training for anyone who would like to take on these vital roles.

This left a vacancy for the Theatre Manager and this role has been undertaken by Paul Evans, in conjunction with his role as Technical Manager.

Paul has undertaken a number of projects throughout the year, including the refurbishment of the control room and the props room. And thanks go to Eshani Weerasinghe, Jennie Rich, and Paul Lunnon who helped clean and replace lots of the props. I hope you might take a look backstage tonight if you haven’t yet seen the splendid work that has been done to ensure our backstage staff can work in comfort and safety.

More work is to be done and a list of priorities are being drawn up and agreed for further work. A recent health and safety and fire inspection conducted on behalf of Waterloo Station, has revealed a lack of certification in these areas and we are working hard to rectify this.

Our Bar Manager, Kay Murray, continues to supply our fridges and cupboards with good stocks of drinks. You may have noticed that we are also trialling some re-usable glasses. These were donated to us by the Vaudeville Theatre and I am keen for this to be rolled out fully, so that we get rid of single-use plastic cups. Our bar staff have been doing an amazing job of collecting, washing and drying the glasses after each event. My thanks go to them for their help in reducing our waste.

Shamini Bundell has been doing great work on social media to ensure our shows are well publicised and Simon Worthington has also helped me a lot to keep the website up to date. As well as this, Shamini was key in collating bids from directors and presenting the Committee with options for our programme of shows.

Owain Jones took over the role of co-ordinating submissions of new writing for the Reading Panel. My thanks go to him for ensuring all submissions are considered in a timely fashion and feedback given to the authors.

Rebecca Mason suggested a new role of Compliance Manager and has been looking at things like insurance and other areas where we need to ensure we are meeting statutory demands. I thank her for undertaking this role.

Lee Copp continues to manage the diary and the flood of enquiries which come in every week seeking to use our Theatre. These external bookings give us much needed income and bar profits and my thanks go to Lee for taking on this demanding role.

And my two supporting Officers: Moira Cane as Secretary and Fred Johnson as Treasurer. We are a tight team and have learnt a lot this year as we steer this great Theatre through some choppy seas. Whether it is looking after our finances, replying to the stream of enquiries which flood into our inboxes, arranging and minuting meetings or just generally being a supportive supplier of Sauvignon blanc, I could not do this job without them. Thank you so much to them both for enabling Network Theatre to thrive.

And I am not going to mention the bins!

Thank you for your support for Network and I look forward to talking with you all later and hearing your ideas of how we continue to carry our Network Theatre through its 80th year!