WHERE WE DREAM

WEST BROMWICH OPERATIC SOCIETY & THE FINE ART OF MUSICAL THEATRE

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multi story

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WHERE WE DREAM

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We can do it, we can do it
We can make our dreams come true

FRANÇOIS MATARASSO

Black Country Stories

MULTISTORY 2012

REGULAR MARVEL NO. 1 APRIL 2012

The first edition of *Where We Dream* included 100 numbered copies reserved for the people who shared in its creation, of which this is:

No.

For:

WHERE WE DREAM:

West Bromwich Operatic Society and the FINE ART of Musical Theatre

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WHERE WE DREAM

AN ACCOUNT

It should not be necessary to preface a book about an amateur theatre company with an explanation of its nature and purpose. Unfortunately, the arts world has become mired in ways of writing about its practice that are as misconceived as they are unproductive. Ever-increasing pressure to 'prove' worth in a public culture that struggles to distinguish value from price has produced a narrow emphasis on evaluation among those who distribute and depend on public subsidy. Worse, in trying to satisfy unsatisfiable demands, they have been increasingly drawn into using scientific concepts and methods that are inappropriate to the task in hand.

Where We Dream aims both to resist this thinking and to explore other ways of understanding people's experience of creating and recreating art. It is the first publication in a series called *Regular Marvels*; an account of its underlying ideas and methods may be found online at http://regularmarvels.com/. For now, it is only necessary to say that *Where We Dream* is not an evaluation or a consultant's report. No public body commissioned this book, which reports on no policy initiative or spending decision. It stands in a different place.

Where We Dream tells the remarkable and everyday story of one amateur theatre group, among the thousands that exist in Britain today – a company founded in 1938 that staged its 80th production in April 2012. It is a story of social change in West Bromwich, a Black Country industrial town in hard times, and of its people's continuing strength. It is a story of artistic ambition and pride in quality; a story of changing tastes and social norms; the story of a social enterprise that sells up to 5,000 tickets a show and donates its surplus to charity. Above all, it is a story of families, friendships and love, of dreams that matter partly because they exist in forms and places that a utilitarian public culture will always struggle to understand.

Where We Dream has nothing to prove because nothing about people's experience about art can be proven. Instead, it describes what happens when WBOS get together to make amateur theatre, in the hope of understanding better its distinctive value. It aspires not to persuade, but to entertain and enlighten. Readers, in recreating it, will make it their own.

WHERE WE DREAM

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This book is for all the members of
West Bromwich Operatic Society
past, present and future

And for all those who share their dreams
in non-professional theatre

OVERTURE & BEGINNERS

THE PRODUCERS FIRST NIGHT

Birmingham, late November 2011, early evening. Along New Street and around the Town Hall, the Christmas Market offers *glühwein* and frankfurters, cake, strudel and chocolate to the last office workers and the night's first revellers. Bars and restaurants spruce up for the evening trade. There's a chill in the air but the party season is just starting.

A few hundred yards away, past streaming traffic on Suffolk Street Queensway, an audience is gathering at the New Alexandra Theatre. The foyer windows shine in the orange sodium night. Above each one is the rubric: WORLD CLASS THEATRE.

The glassy eye of a pigeon stares from the poster for tonight's show. It's wearing a German helmet, complete with swastika. Above, in block letters: *THE PRODUCERS*, and then '*A New Mel Brooks Musical*'. And at the top, freehand in a scatter of stars: *WBOS Musical Theatre*.

Inside, the preparatory rituals are being observed: sweets chosen, interval drinks ordered and programmes bought. People swap news and titbits about the production. Committee members in evening dress welcome loyal supporters. On gowns and lapels, NODA (the National Operatic and Dramatic Association) long service medals glint in the lights: sky blue for 25 years, maroon for 50.

The bubble of anticipation grows as the 5-minute warning sounds. People make their way to the auditorium.

There have been so many nights like this in the past 110 years, since a man named William Coutts invested £10,000 to build this palace of dreams. So many fantasies have been played under this arch: melodramas and pantomime, musicals and variety. All lies, every one, but good ones – the best, good enough to be true. So many audiences, settling down in their tip-up seats, wanting to be transported away from work, ordinariness and private troubles.

'I was always nervous before I went on stage. I've often thought about this. Why do we put ourselves through it? I mean, I was a nervous wreck. Driving to the theatre you'd be going through all your words, all your music; you'd get there and then – suddenly you hear the overture and the adrenaline starts. Two or three minutes on stage: you're there. You're there.'

The dimming lights act like a mother's hush. You could touch the silence. *Boinnng!* A spongy thump on a bass drum, and the horns pipe up that catchy, irrepressible, tasteless tune and already you're singing along under your breath, 'Springtime for Hitler and Germany…'.

The orchestra is out of sight in the pit. There's just the velvet curtain to watch as your fingers tap along. What's waiting behind? Then it starts to move.

Opening night...
It's opening night!

BECOMING A BUTTERFLY:
INTRODUCTIONS TO WBOS

MAX — Don't you ever want to become a butterfly? Don't you want to spread your wings and flap your way to glory?

Of course, it doesn't start there. Opening night is the end of months of rehearsal, learning lines and routines, getting better, getting it right, And that's not counting the heavy lifting done by the officers, committee and non-acting members: securing the rights, booking a theatre, hiring costumes, props and set, planning, organising, selling tickets and raising funds. Nowadays, a production can cost the Society £80,000 or more to stage, most of which will come from ticket sales. It's real business this show business, even for amateurs.

But even that is not the start. Nor the auditions or the discussion about which will be the next show.

That polished opening number the audience is enjoying at the New Alexandra Theatre is the culmination of skills and knowledge, experience and judgement, built over decades. West Bromwich Operatic Society was established in 1938, before the Second World War, when everything, almost everything, was rather different.

ROMANCES AND REALITIES

Marjorie Smith, a founder member of the new society, still remembers the local productions that preceded it and inspired the formation of WBOS. There was a school *Mikado*, for which she played the violin, aged 15 or 16, then *The Country Girl*, which fired her interest in singing rather than playing, and *The Arcadians*. There was *The Quaker Girl* – '*How the dickens they put that on at*

the Town Hall with all the scenery I don't know, but they did' – and others now forgotten.

> *'I can remember very well the people who took the leading parts. There were six of us in the dancing troupe. We were very keen; we used to go to extra rehearsals. We wanted to do the best we could, so we went over to the studio of the fellow that taught us one night, somewhere in Birmingham.'*

Such efforts and their successes inspired a group of enthusiasts to form a new Society, bigger and better than what had gone before. There were plenty of other amateur operatic groups about, in Cradley Heath, Stourbridge and Brierley Hill: why shouldn't West Bromwich do as well?

The Maid of the Mountains was West Bromwich Operatic Society's first production, in 1939, at the Plaza Theatre in Paradise Street (could there be a better home for a palace of varieties?). The music was light opera, demanding vocal talent and training to pull off with conviction. Young men and women with years in school and church choirs understood its language and enjoyed singing it.

> When he fancies he is past love
> It is then he meets his last love
> And he loves her as he's never loved before.
>
> Harry Graham, 1916

The Maid of the Mountains had been a London hit during the Great War. Perhaps because it came from a dark time, it is a romantic fantasy – what is easily dismissed as escapism. An operetta about brigands and 'fisher-folk', justice, love and betrayal, it was certainly not much like the lives of the shop girls, clerks and teachers who performed it. The cast played characters called Beppo and Baldassare but Mussolini was the best-known Italian in 1939.

Five years earlier, in 1934, J. B. Priestley published his account of a journey through the depressed cities of England. He came to the Black Country, that distinctive agglomeration of ancient and industrial towns to the west of Birmingham, which is still an unknown land to most outsiders. His visit to West Bromwich fired some of his most furious and despairing lines, about a place he called 'Rusty Lane'.

> The whole neighbourhood is mean and squalid, but this particular street seemed the worst of all. It would not matter very much - though it would matter - if only metal were kept there; but it happens that people live there, children are born there and grow up there. I saw some of them. I was being shown one of the warehouses, where steel plates were stacked in the chill gloom, and we heard a bang and rattle on the roof. The boys, it seems, were throwing stones again. They were always throwing stones on that roof. We went out to find them, but only found three frightened little girls, who looked at us with round eyes in wet smudgy faces. No, they hadn't done it, the boys had done it, and the boys had just run away. Where they could run to, I cannot imagine. They need not have run away for me, because I could not blame them if they threw stones and stones and smashed every pane of glass for miles. Nobody can blame them if they grow up to smash everything that can be smashed.
>
> J. B. Priestley, 1934

Not all West Bromwich was like Rusty Lane, even in the 1930s. There was prosperity with the penury, including a proud High Street with some of the best shops in the Black Country. There were craftsmen and engineers shaping metal with exceptional skill. There were churches and chapels, concert parties, bands, free libraries and parks. There was, in short, everything you could expect of an English industrial town.

Still, life in West Bromwich wasn't easy for most people: hard work and counting coppers. So the contrast was always there, between the everyday, good and bad, and the dreams created by someone standing on a stage, dressed unlike anyone you ever saw, and singing something that will take your breath away.

'It's just a tremendous feeling to stand on that stage, with the audience out there, being part of something West Bromwich should be proud of.'

In West Bromwich, in 1939, you were only going to get those dreams in the cinema or on stage. How wonderful to step up from the cheap seats and have a chance to do it yourself.

POST-WAR DREAMS

Everybody's a dreamer and everybody's a star
And everybody's in movies, it doesn't matter who you are

Ray Davies, 1972

It would be eight hard years before WBOS was back in front of a West Bromwich audience, on the other side of a war.

The Maid of the Mountains' successor, in 1947, was *The Gypsy Princess*. Central European aristocracy instead of mountain bandits – both social groups swept into history by the war – but the romanticism was all there. Rusty Lane was still there too, but the boys were lobbing stones at imaginary Jerries in bombsites now. The High Street's shopkeepers were asking when rationing was going to end – hadn't we won the bloody war? So were their customers. The foundations of the welfare state were being laid.

A new style of American musical reached Britain that year. *Oklahoma!* opened in the West End in April 1947, a herald of changes in culture and artistic taste that would transform the world and West Bromwich with it.

'I remember when Oklahoma! came over, it had a terrific effect on us. It was just: wallop, on – 'OKLAHOMA!' Wow! The energy of it sort of took your breath away.'

Sheila Hancock, 2012

Fresh names were heard: Rodgers and Hammerstein, Irving Berlin, Lerner and Loewe. A whole new world of dreams was being born

that would, in time, shove Ruritanian princes right off stage, to make way for characters who could sing like pop stars, act like film stars and dance at the same time too.

And, in the deep south of the United States, that same year, a 12-year-old boy made his debut on Mississippi Slim's Tupelo radio show. His name was Elvis Presley.

In late-Forties West Bromwich, that was all to come. The Operatic Society were happy to be back on stage at the Plaza performing for local audiences again. After *The Gypsy Princess* came *Nina Rosa*, *Belle of New York*, *The Student Prince*, *The Geisha*, *The New Moon*, *The Vagabond King*, *Wild Violets*. Why change a winning formula?

> This year we have for your entertainment the light hearted musical play "Wild Violets" which was first produced at Drury Lane in 1932. We hope you will enjoy our choice as it has fine comedy and lilting tunes.
>
> West Bromwich Operatic Society, 1954

In 1954, Iris Richards was working at a local solicitors' when her friend suggested she come with her to audition for the Operatic Society.

> *'I was 23 and I'd never heard of them but I'd always sung in choirs. We both went and auditioned. In those days it was really high-class singing; sopranos, contraltos, bass and tenor and so on. You'd got to be a real singer to qualify. I wasn't bad, but I didn't get in. And neither did my friend.'*

But some of the original members were retiring and there was a shortage of women. A few months later, a second audition got both Iris and her friend into the cast of *Goodnight Vienna*. Iris has been a member ever since.

Sheila Clift, a professionally trained soprano, joined for *The Desert Song* in 1966 and took many leading roles in subsequent years, retiring from the stage only in 2005 after *Summer Holiday*. Like other members who have stopped performing, she took on backstage roles. For *The Producers*, she shared responsibility for the prompt book with Sylvia Hill. She still sings too, but in the less physically demanding environment of a choir.

> *'I've done some lovely shows, wonderful shows that they'll probably never do again because the younger element want to do the more modern shows, which don't call for a soprano voice.'*

Marjorie Smith didn't re-join the Society until 1958, almost 20 years since she'd been in *The Maid of the Mountains*. After the war, she had been involved with a different drama group: there was no shortage of opportunities for social theatre then, austerity Britain or not. She played the youngest sister in *Bless the Bride*, though she was nearly 40: but, as she says, she was the smallest. From then on, she was in every show until 1983, when she retired through illness. Today, she's an Honorary Life Member and she still sees every production. She also makes good use of her season ticket at West Bromwich Albion.

RE: GENERATIONS

As time has passed and members have had children, and then grandchildren, there are members who have been, almost literally, born into the Society.

> *'I've always been involved because my parents met through West Bromwich Operatic. I'm third generation basically because my nana was a founder member, as was my great aunt.'*

Like others in the company today, Sarah Moors remembers coming to rehearsals as a child and playing with friends at the back of the room. With her parents performing and on the committee, the society was part of everyday life, its members and their children all part of a tribe united by a passion for song and dance.

'As a kid growing up at the Operatic you're surrounded by lots of adults all the time. There were children, but you were involved in an adult thing. You weren't treated as adults: you kind of got on with it. You talked to everybody by their first name, so it became a bit like an extended family.'

Such familiarity made it easy to join in when a show called for children. The 1987 *Oliver!* was a first step on stage for many of this second and third generation. Sarah went on to perform throughout her adolescence, only stopping when she moved away to university. On one trip home, she saw the current production from the stalls:

'When you're in it, you don't appreciate how good or bad it is. I sat in the audience and I was thinking, "O my God, actually, they are really good". And that was a bit of a surprise to see how good they were.'

She came back to West Bromwich after university and started work, re-joining the company with new assurance and a better understanding of performance. The teenager who had been going through the routines and keeping up with everyone else had matured into someone interested in character and the craft of acting.

'I nearly got the lead in the first show when I came back. The following year I got Anita in West Side Story *and the year after that I was the lead in* Me and My Girl.'

Today, with a career, a young family and a husband who wouldn't put musical theatre as first choice for a night out, she limits herself to the spring production. It's easy to imagine that her children will one day be part of the company's fourth generation, perhaps its lead performers of the 2030s.

Unlike many community groups, WBOS has no difficulty in involving young people, particularly in the past 20 or 30 years. Open auditions for a production of *Oliver!* in 1987 attracted many new

children who wanted to carry on afterwards. The response was the creation of a Youth Section – since renamed WBOS Youtheatre – which has put on a series of independent productions, starting with *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1987.

Many young people have moved from the Youtheatre into the main company, but there is nothing inevitable about it: they have to audition along with anyone else.

> *'It was bit daunting at first, because they're a really good Society. I didn't think I'd get in actually. It's been good to be accepted.'*

It is not inevitable the other way either. Some young people lose their interest in performing as they grow into a world of exams, further education and career choices. Others opt out because of the increasing complexity of teenage social life – boyfriends, girlfriends – and competing social networks.

> *'At a certain point my school friends were more important. Rehearsals are on a Friday night and I was missing out on things at school, so I ended up leaving. I wasn't that interested in performing any more. I just kind of did it. I wasn't really loving it.'*

Ten years on, at a different point in her life, Emma was back in the company, married to another member and loving it again.

The Youth Section was not set up purely to feed the adult company. It was an initiative in its own right, rooted in the belief that young people should have the best chances to learn, perform and enjoy theatre. It has thrived through the dedication of the adults involved, some of them working with the young people on Fridays while rehearsing with the main company on Mondays and Wednesdays.

But it has also thrived because of the growing popularity of musical theatre and the increasing numbers of young people who dream of a career on stage. For them, WBOS is a stepping-stone towards professional goals. Lauren, dancing in *The Producers*, was also in the Youtheatre production of *The Pajama Game*, and rehearsing for a spring show with a Walsall company, while studying for her A-levels.

> *'I'm auditioning for musical theatre schools in London next year. I'd like to be a choreographer, actually. This is a way to gain experience.'*

A few former members of WBOS Youtheatre have gone on to make professional careers; others have tried and been disappointed or found the price too high. No one goes far in musical theatre without hard work and tenacity, but the amateur sector remains the proving ground for professional actors it has been for at least a century. It's just that, fuelling and fuelled by TV talent shows, there are now so many more dreaming of being the solution to a problem like Maria.

AND AGAIN…

> *'Step – turn – leap – turn – leap – turn – step. Yes? Step-turn, leap-turn, leap-turn, step-turn. ONE–two, THREE–four, FIVE–six, SEVEN–eight. Yes? Okay, try that for me. Ready? Let's go. "Prisoners – of love…"'*

Rehearsals take place at a West Bromwich primary school, from 7pm to 10pm, Mondays, Wednesdays and Sundays too, when the show gets close. Thirty men and women in track suits, jeans and T-shirts work on dance routines or run through the chorus songs, accompanied by the musical director on the school piano. The hall is lined with children's paintings and health awareness posters. Fluorescent tubes cast a wan light over everything. There is not much scope for illusions here: just repetition and practice.

Those not in this scene congregate by the tables to one side of the main hall. The non-performing members are there too: the officers and committee, those who prefer a backstage role or who've hung up their dancing shoes, family members helping out. People chat, swap news about absent friends, flick through the script, check texts and emails. Behind them the lines are being repeated:

> So the rule is when 'mounting' a play...
> Keep it funny, keep it sunny, keep it gay

Dancers swing school chairs around as stand-ins for the Zimmer frames they'll use on the night. Max and Leo tussle with a script or run through the 'Guten Tag Hop-Clop' under Franz's suspicious eye. The prompt ladies watch the book, Adam plays the piano; everybody just gets on with the job.

The bubble of voices from the side bothers no one. Would a professional cast put up with it? But this is also an evening with friends, as social occasion.

> *'I've got a lot of friends there. Your relationships move quickly when you're doing something like that because one minute you know somebody to just go "Hi" and the next minute you're doing a scene where you've got to kiss them. So you get to know people quickly.'*

It's social, but still serious. There is plenty of work going on at the tables, planning the production, checking advance ticket sales, talking over marketing ideas or changes to the schedule. But it is a smooth operation. No stress, no panic: everyone has been here before, one way or another.

And in the hall, it's serious too. The production's choreographer, Claire Kramer, is heavily pregnant but she's working from the floor, spinning and kicking with the best of them.

'I tend to forget that I'm eight months pregnant and still think I can do all the things I used to do before, so I am finding it really difficult now. But I don't let it stop me – I just get on with it.'

Standards are high. Expectations are high. You need to be good enough to keep up, even in the back row. And to get a role, you'll audition along with everyone else, however many times you've proved yourself before. Nothing gets taken for granted.

Audition weeks can be hard. People have to decide which roles to try for, partly on the basis of what appeals and what they think they can do, but also taking into account what others might want. One young mother says she would never go for a role against her sister: it's just not necessary.

'It's a very unusual hobby in that you're friends with people, but then for two weeks you're competing against them round audition time. And that's always a bit of a squiffy time. It can be tense and cause issues. But once it's done, the week after, it's gone. Done, move on.'

Members have a pretty good idea of their own capabilities and not everyone is after a role. Being in the chorus (without a radio mic.) or one of the dancers is fine. If you haven't got a great voice, you haven't got a great voice. You can still help fill that stage, be part of the team.

ROGER And what are you going to sing, Donald?

DONALD I would like to sing... 'The Little Wooden Boy'.

ROGER Next!

The auditions themselves are formal, in front of a panel led by the company's longstanding professional director, Mike Capri, and several of the most experienced members, some of whom have a string of successful lead roles behind them. Sometimes, public auditions are held to encourage new people to try their hand. You need to be good to get a big role in these conditions.

It is a long Sunday, but the main roles will usually have been assigned by the end of it; some of the lesser parts may be filled later. From time to time, an extra audition is needed for a big show.

Decisions are announced on the WBOS website and at the following rehearsal: delights, surprises and, inevitably, disappointments. Some people will have been cast against type or expectation, but there is great confidence in Mike's judgement and experience. One person remembers being given the confidence to try for a bigger part – which she won – by a word of encouragement from the director at the right time.

By the following week, everyone has got used to the shape of the production and their place within it. Now, it's about filling that place to the best of your ability.

'The week of the show, I'm immensely proud of what we've achieved. Not just the people on stage but how we've put it all together, how we've got the right people in the right place, in the right jobs. I'm incredibly proud of everybody.'

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

VOICES OF CURRENT MEMBERS

KATHRYN — I was in a school choir. My mother was a very good singer.

DAVE — My mum used to love watching all the old musicals and I picked up on it from that.

CALLUM — The closest I'd come to a musical was probably Jeff Wayne's 'War of the Worlds'. My dad used to listen to it in the car.

ADAM — I was always quite loud, so I think my mum wanted to find somewhere I could vent my performance side.

SARAH — I took part the first time when I was 7 because they did 'Carousel' and they needed children.

EDWARD — My mother was involved and I came along to have a look. They were short of dancers. If you were male and had two legs in those days you were in.

JAKE — When I first auditioned, two years ago, it was the first time I'd sung in front of anyone, ever. I was 22. I've never been so scared.

EMMA — I got bitten by the bug when I was about 20. Quite late compared to a lot of other people.

DAVE — It gives you a nice sense of purpose outside work – something to look forward to, away from the day-to-day grind.

NICK — There are times when I can't do a show and I find that devastating.

HILARY — We always fit in coming to rehearsals; definitely.

CHRIS — If I've got to cut shifts around so I can come to rehearsal, I will do that.

JAKE I'm also in other amateur theatre companies. Basically it takes up my entire life, every evening rehearsing for something.

SIMON You go away at the end of the rehearsal not just feeling you've had a good time: you've achieved something.

BETHANY Even if you've had a bad day, it just cheers you up.

JAKE I just had a small part but I didn't miss a rehearsal. I couldn't get enough of it. I'd come to the principals' rehearsals and watch it all.

KATHRYN I fell over at rehearsals. I grabbed hold of Helen, the other stilt walker, and we both ended up in a heap. Mike Capri said to me 'You won't do that again'. And I didn't.

BETHANY I don't tend to go for main parts. I like dancing in the chorus.

VIVIEN Alongside all that there's the business side of it: we are dealing with a lot of money.

PETER As a job, I sell locks and ironmongery, and this keeps me sane. The week of the show, I'm a different person at work.

DAVID I can be on front of house in the theatre and see people coming in that we meet and shake hands with every year.

CRAIG Walking out onto the stage the first time, nervous as hell. But as soon as I was out there and I'd got my first lines out, that was it.

SIMON Being on stage, it's a rush, there's an adrenalin through being there in front of all those people. It's a marvellous feeling.

CRAIG It's got to be right. If you're going to do something, make sure you do it well.

SARAH You've got to put a bit of your soul into it, a bit of your own heart. Only then will you tell the story.

JAKE That first performance was immense. It was really, really special. It was a strange feeling; I just felt I belonged, like it should have been happening all this time.

VIVIEN Being on stage is thrilling, when we're all doing it together, with that wonderful camaraderie.

TYE Everyone is the same; you do it for the attention.

GRAHAM If you get a responsive audience, it's absolutely fantastic.

ANGELA The children didn't move from the edge of their seat. They didn't have a sweet. They didn't drink. They didn't do anything while the performers were on stage.

HILARY It's lovely seeing the reaction of the audience, especially if they all stand at the end of the show, which they occasionally do.

CRAIG At the end of the show, we're elated, depressed and just totally exhausted. But there is the sense of satisfaction that stays with you for a long time.

PETER It took me six months to get Evita out of my system. It was such an experience. Shows like that don't come round very often for amateurs.

JAKE You take part in something that no one else understands. You become a bit of a tribe.

SIMON You're part of the group; they make you feel very welcome.

NICK It's a very easy company to feel passionate about because they have very high standards of performance and very high standards of care for people.

HILARY I think most societies are good, but I've been here for so long; this is where my heart is.

CLAIRE For me anyway it feels like a kind of extended family.

VIVIEN Lots of friends; lots of weddings and babies along the way.

CHRIS We've done shows together for 30 years. I started very young.

CALLUM I've done professional things here and there but I always come back here because that's where my heart is.

VIVIEN I think you have to live it to know it, really. And we do live it.

JIM If you belong to something, you are proud of it, because you give your best to it. You are proud of what it does. That's the essence of it all.

MEGAN Without this I wouldn't be anywhere near as confident, near as happy, as I am. I hope to continue for many, many years to come

CHRIS It's a wonderful, wonderful life to be with a company like this.

CRAIG Then Monday comes round and we're back to work.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WEST BROMWICH OPERATIC SOCIETY

IN 10½ THEATRES

'We moved around so many times. We closed the theatres – that's what they said. That's what we were called, weren't we? The society that closed the theatres.'

Few professions love their history more than actors, perhaps because their art is so transient. Professional or amateur, it makes no difference – recalling old friends, past glories, tears and embarrassments is as natural to actors as getting dressed in front of one another. And the parade of shows, each associated with a venue and a time in one's life, make it particularly easy to recall those intense moments.

It is generally forbidden to record or film amateur productions of works still in copyright, even for personal use. When the sets have been packed off and the costumes returned to the hire company, when the scores have gone back to the publishers, rubbed clean of their soft pencil marks – all to await the next amateur company's call – there's not much to show for those intense experiences on stage.

So, in lofts and spare bedroom cupboards across West Bromwich are boxes of past programmes, posters and photos. These are the only tangible traces of performances that vanish as the stage lights die and the make up is wiped off.

Like family photographs, they serve to prime the memory. An old cast photo will prompt laughter and wistful stories, sometimes a tear. Watching someone remember as she turns the pages of an old programme can be like seeing her recede to a place accessible only to those who were once there. Shared memories are a cornerstone of community. They are shorthand through which people reconnect with – and renew – past feelings. They bind us together.

1939 & 1947–1956
THE PLAZA THEATRE, WEST BROMWICH

> Now they're gone, they're gone, they're really gone
> You've never seen anyone so gone.
> They're a picture in a museum, some lines written in a book
> But you won't find a live one no matter where you look.
>
> Randy Newman, 1999

1939	The Maid of the Mountains
1947	Gypsy Princess
1948	Nina Rosa
1949	Belle of New York
1949	Rio Rita
1950	Student Prince
1951	The Geisha
1952	The New Moon
1953	The Vagabond King
1954	Wild Violets
1955	Goodnight Vienna
1956	Rose Marie

'It got pulled down, when they built the Ring Road…'

The Plaza is gone. Its successor, the Kings Cinema, is gone. Even Paradise Street is gone. The actors and variety stars who once took curtain calls have gone too. Names like Issy Bonn linger in some memories, for now. Some will remain in books about British popular culture in the 20th century, but always needing more explanatory footnotes. Nothing is less funny than the jokes that made our grandparents laugh.

But among the Operatic Society's older performers and audience members, there are still happy memories of a theatre that belonged to West Bromwich and helped make the town proud of what it had and what it could do.

1958–1959
THE WINDSOR THEATRE, BEARWOOD

> This has been an interesting building but its present state is disappointing. Built in 1930, it operated mainly as a full-time cinema until 1946, when it became a variety theatre. In 1957 it was a repertory theatre but closed in 1960, to reopen three years later as a skating rink. It is now a snooker hall.
>
> The Theatres Trust, 2012

1958	White Horse Inn
1959	Bless the Bride

In 1957 the Plaza's owners bowed to the inevitable. A cinema screen rose in front of the stage. In future, it would be the high impact, close up dreams of Hollywood, or perhaps Ealing Studios, that people would queue to be part of on Friday nights. For a while, they kept Sunday nights for the old audience, offering comedians, singers and variety acts on the still serviceable stage.

But after 20 years West Bromwich Operatic Society were homeless. So began a nomadic existence that would take them first to Smethwick, then Dudley, Wolverhampton, Birmingham – even Lichfield. Remarkably, their audience followed, while they found new supporters in each new venue.

'White Horse Inn was at the theatre in Smethwick – Bearwood, the Windsor; and we did Bless the Bride there…'

1960–1964
THE HIPPODROME, DUDLEY

> The Hippodrome, built as a 'twice nightly' theatre in 1938 next door to the Plaza and opposite the Odeon Cinema, replaced the Opera House, destroyed by fire in 1936, on the same site. Externally like a super cinema of the time, in buff brick. At the centre, above the canopy, there were originally glazed, now blind, panels between the brick end bays. The name HIPPODROME in a central panel has been removed.
>
> The Theatres Trust, 2012

1960	The King and I	1963	The Most Happy Fella
1961	The Merry Widow	1964	Glamorous Night
1962	Kismet		

The Hippodrome in Dudley, a handsome Thirties building, became the company's home in the early 1960s and the place where it experienced some of its happiest productions. A new generation was becoming involved, creating its own networks and friendships. It was in *Kismet* that Vivien and Peter Davis met. Their daughters perform with WBOS today: Emma and her husband John were both in *The Producers*.

> *'And then we went to the Hippodrome at Dudley and played* The King and I, *which was an absolutely wonderful success. On the Friday night we had the notice out, "House Full". We'd never done that, ever. And they were standing up at the back of the stalls.'*

But like the Plaza and the Windsor before it, the Dudley Hippodrome was finding theatre uneconomical; it closed in 1965 and became a Bingo Hall. A stage once walked on by Laurel and Hardy, Bob Hope and George Formby is now threatened with demolition.

1964–1971
THE KING'S CINEMA, WEST BROMWICH

> *'And then Dudley Hippodrome closed down. So we went to the King's Cinema in West Bromwich – the old Plaza – and we managed to turn that back into a theatre for the week. We did* Merrie England. *We played there until '71, when we did* Hello Dolly.'

1964	Merrie England	1968	Waltzes from Vienna
1965	Oklahoma!	1969	Annie Get Your Gun
1966	The Desert Song	1970	The Count of Luxembourg
1967	Orpheus in the Underworld	1971	Hello Dolly

When the Hippodrome closed, the committee persuaded the management of the King's Cinema to let them turn the building back into a theatre for a week each year. It is a sign of how financially successful the company was by the mid-Sixties that it could afford to pay at least the equivalent of a week's cinema takings to put on its productions.

It was hard work. The production team, stage crew and others would arrive at the cinema at the end of the last screening, when the audience had stood for the National Anthem that still ended every show in those days. They spent Saturday night and Sunday morning taking down the screen and the huge loudspeaker system, and then installing the set, lighting and props, ready for a technical rehearsal on Sunday afternoon. There was a full dress rehearsal on Sunday night. On Monday, the show opened for the week and on Saturday, with the cast party still going on, everything had to be done in reverse.

Then even the cinema closed. The town that gave the company its identity would rarely see them perform again. Concerts were possible at the Town Hall and smaller shows were tried at the Wesley Chapel in the High Street, but the company's growing ambitions required space and resources that could only be found in big theatres.

1972
THE TOWN HALL, WEST BROMWICH

> TOWN HALL, High Street. 1874-5 by Alexander & Henman. Quite large, of brick, asymmetrical, Gothic – the motifs no longer of High Victorian assertiveness.
>
> Nikolaus Pevsner, 1974

1972 The Mikado

> *'Years ago, we used to do one major production and then we'd do a concert in West Bromwich Town Hall, which holds about 600 people.'*

The Town Hall has seen a number of WBOS concerts over the years but it is not a theatre. Even with a lighting rig, it could never accommodate the company's dreams. *The Mikado* concert in 1972 was a stopgap, until a better solution could be found. It was, but only by going further afield. So an annual autumn concert of songs from the shows entered the WBOS calendar, for the home audience.

1973–1979
THE GRAND THEATRE, WOLVERHAMPTON

> LICHFIELD STREET. From the Station W. First the GRAND THEATRE, 1893-4 by C. J. Phipps, brick, with a five-bay upper loggia of arcading. The interior is quite splendid.
>
> Nikolaus Pevsner, 1974

1973	The Gypsy Baron	1977	King's Rhapsody
1974	Gay's the Word	1978	The Music Man
1975	Showboat	1979	Carousel
1976	The Land of Smiles		

'I remember my first time performing at the Grand Theatre in 1973, it was a show called Gypsy Baron and I was playing the part of Saffi, which is the lead soprano. To walk onto the stage is fantastic because you can look out and see the sea of faces of people sitting in the gods and the dress circle. To go from the Kings Cinema to performing in Wolverhampton was amazing. I was very nervous while I was waiting in the wings. The wings are so big that scenery can easily be wheeled off and on – we had never had that before, so it meant our shows could become more technical.'

Sheila Clift, 2008

The Grand lived up to its name. It was the finest theatre the company had yet performed in and the members were to form a lasting affection for it. But their travels were far from over.

One Monday night in the middle of the pantomime season, the manager called the cast on stage to tell them not to come in the following day: the theatre's backing had been withdrawn and it was closing with immediate effect. The effect could have been catastrophic for WBOS, who had had an April booking for *Die Fledermaus*. John Richards, who was then chairman of the Society, took immediate action.

'Straightaway I got on to the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham, actually without consulting the committee, and within a week we'd got a booking at the Alex. All the posters had been in print so we had to change them.'

Birmingham would become West Bromwich Operatic Society's home for the next 15 years, the platform for its growing success and confidence.

1980-1995

THE ALEXANDRA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM

The Alexandra Theatre was built in 1901 by William Coutts at a cost of £10,000 and bought by a year later by Lester Collingwood for just £4,450. Collingwood was a flamboyant personality who sported a magnificent moustache. He had extensive theatre experience and was particularly associated with the melodrama *When London Sleeps*, in which he toured for some time, playing the role of the villain. The theatre reopened in 1902 with a melodrama called *The Fatal Wedding*. Collingwood also initiated the Alexandra's panto tradition, beginning with *Aladdin*, which ran for eight weeks. Sadly, this golden age came to an abrupt end in 1911 when Collingwood was involved in a traffic accident at the age of 56. On his way to visit an actress friend in Sheffield, his car collided with a milk float and he was killed instantly. It was revealed some time afterwards that he had amassed the considerable personal fortune of £12,000.

Ambassadors Theatre Group, 2011

1980	Die Fledermaus
1981	The Merry Widow
1982	Kiss Me Kate
1983	Dancing Years
1984	Brigadoon
1985	Orpheus in the Underworld
1986	No No Nanette
1987	Oliver!
1988	Hello Dolly
1989	Fiddler on the Roof
1990	Funny Girl
1991	The Music Man
1992	Carousel
1993	My Fair Lady
1994	Barnum
1995	Half a Sixpence

'We did 15 shows at the Alex; we were very happy there. We had quite a nice relationship. We started to get big houses as Birmingham people began to get to know us. We really had a lot of success there.'

The Alex's foyer is a 1960s glass and steel box that gives no hint of the Victorian theatre behind, reached by a bridge over John Bright Street. This odd architecture reflects the disrupted history of a building that has seen good times and bad in its 110 years.

Between 1911 and 1964, it was owned and run by Leon Salberg, a natural impresario born in Warsaw, and his son Derek, who is still remembered with affection by older members of the Operatic Society. David Hopkins, the Society's stage manager between 1975 and 1997, learned his trade at the Alex, working for Derek Salberg in the early 1960s:

'The Alex did fortnightly rep, which means one play ran for two weeks and during that time the next play was being rehearsed. He also ran a weekly rep company at the Grand in Wolverhampton. At the start of the season, Derek would hire a nucleus of actors to cover different parts, so he would have a resident cast at the Alex and a resident cast at the Grand, who would play all the parts between them, through the season. Where the play demanded extra people, he'd bring somebody in, just for the run of the fortnight or the week. At the Alex, he'd run rep from early Spring through to October, solid. Then October through to December, he would receive shows like the D'Oyly Carte. In December he'd produce his own pantomime. It was a brand new one every year at the Alex but that panto would go to the Grand the next year with a different cast, then to Bournemouth, Chester – he'd got several theatres contracted. And then after panto he would be receiving again till early Spring when the rep would start again.'

By the time Salberg retired in 1964, his young assistant stage manager had already decided against a career in the theatre. Like other WBOS members, he took a job in industry and made his love of theatre a pastime not a profession.

The era of family-run repertory theatres was coming to an end. After 1968, the Alex saw a succession of owners, redevelopments and changes of direction as it navigated the swells of taste and fashion. Its proscenium has mutely framed melodrama, non-stop variety, operettas, pantomime, classics, revues, social realism and the ever-popular musical. It has seen thousands of forgotten troupers and some more familiar names: Laurence Olivier, Topol, Peter Ustinov, Britt Ekland, Frank Finlay and Maggie Smith. In 1982, Arthur Lowe died while performing in *Home at Seven* at the Alex. *Exeunt omnes*.

Between 1980 and 1995 West Bromwich Operatic Society provided a thread of continuity through all these changes in theatre style and management. Whatever was happening at the Alex, Birmingham audiences could be confident that there would be one great amateur musical each spring.

'And then the same thing happened there – just before we were doing Barnum*, they suddenly closed the theatre. Fortunately, it reopened in time for us to do the show.'*

The immediate crisis was averted but the Society felt the new management had little interest in them as amateurs. They began to consider another move.

SINCE 1996

THE GRAND THEATRE, WOLVERHAMPTON

There was a not unexpected level of public outcry at the closure in 1980. A 'Save The Grand' action group was hastily assembled. Following several rounds of tense negotiation with the City Council, a compromise was reached. When the Grand re-opened its doors in August 1983, it was arguably one of the best-equipped theatres in the country.

Wolverhampton Grand, 2012

1996	West Side Story
1997	Me & My Girl
1999	Barnum
2000	Anything Goes
2001	Oliver!
2002	Evita
2003	Jesus Christ Superstar
2004	Ragtime - The Musical
2005	Summer Holiday
2006	The Witches of Eastwick
2007	The Full Monty
2008	Show Boat
2009	La Cage Aux Folles
2010	Beauty & The Beast
2010	Jesus Christ Superstar
2011	Oliver!

Fortunately, the Grand had reopened in the intervening years and was thriving as a venue for some of the region's leading amateur theatre groups, including Bilston Operatic Society, South Staffs Musical Theatre Company and, naturally, Wolverhampton Musical Comedy Company.

'There are four or five of us that use the Grand now, so we've got a lot of competition. And we're the outsiders, really.'

Many members had happy memories of their time in Wolverhampton in the 1970s, and were delighted to be back. The Grand has been the company's principal base since 1996, and the scene of some of its best loved and most admired recent productions: *Ragtime*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *Beauty and the Beast*. It was at the Grand that they presented their 70th anniversary production, *Show Bo*at, in 2008.

SINCE 1998
VARIOUS THEATRES:

The Civic Theatre, Lichfield; Wesley Chapel, West Bromwich; The Dormston Mill Theatre, Sedgley; The Garrick Theatre, Lichfield; and The (New) Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham

1998	Guys & Dolls
1999	Godspell
2000	Return to the Forbidden Planet
2001	Little Shop of Horrors
2002	Wizard of Oz
2003	Godspell
2004	Alice
2007	A Chorus Line
2008	Boogie Nights
2009	Rent
2005	The Full Monty
2006	Jekyll & Hyde
2010	Jesus Christ Superstar
2011	The Producers

In recent years, as the company and its ambitions have grown, it has expanded into other venues, each with its own character, suited to the wider range of its productions.

The first big change was the creation of WBOS Youth Section in 1987. Under its first director, Peter Davis, it rapidly attracted members and established a base at the Civic Theatre in Lichfield, and its successor, the Garrick. These smaller modern theatres saw a new show each autumn. From 1998, emulating the adult company, they have also put on a concert in the spring, often at the Dormston Mill Theatre in Sedgley.

'The interest in the Town Hall concerts waned a little bit from the audience, so we decided to do a small production. We did Godspell *in the Wesley Church round the corner. We did it in the round, which went down very well.'*

At about the same time, the main company decided to replace its autumn concerts with a second theatre production, albeit on a smaller scale than the spring show. After *Godspell* and *Return to the Forbidden Planet* at the Wesley Chapel in West Bromwich High Street, they followed the Youtheatre to Lichfield and Sedgley.

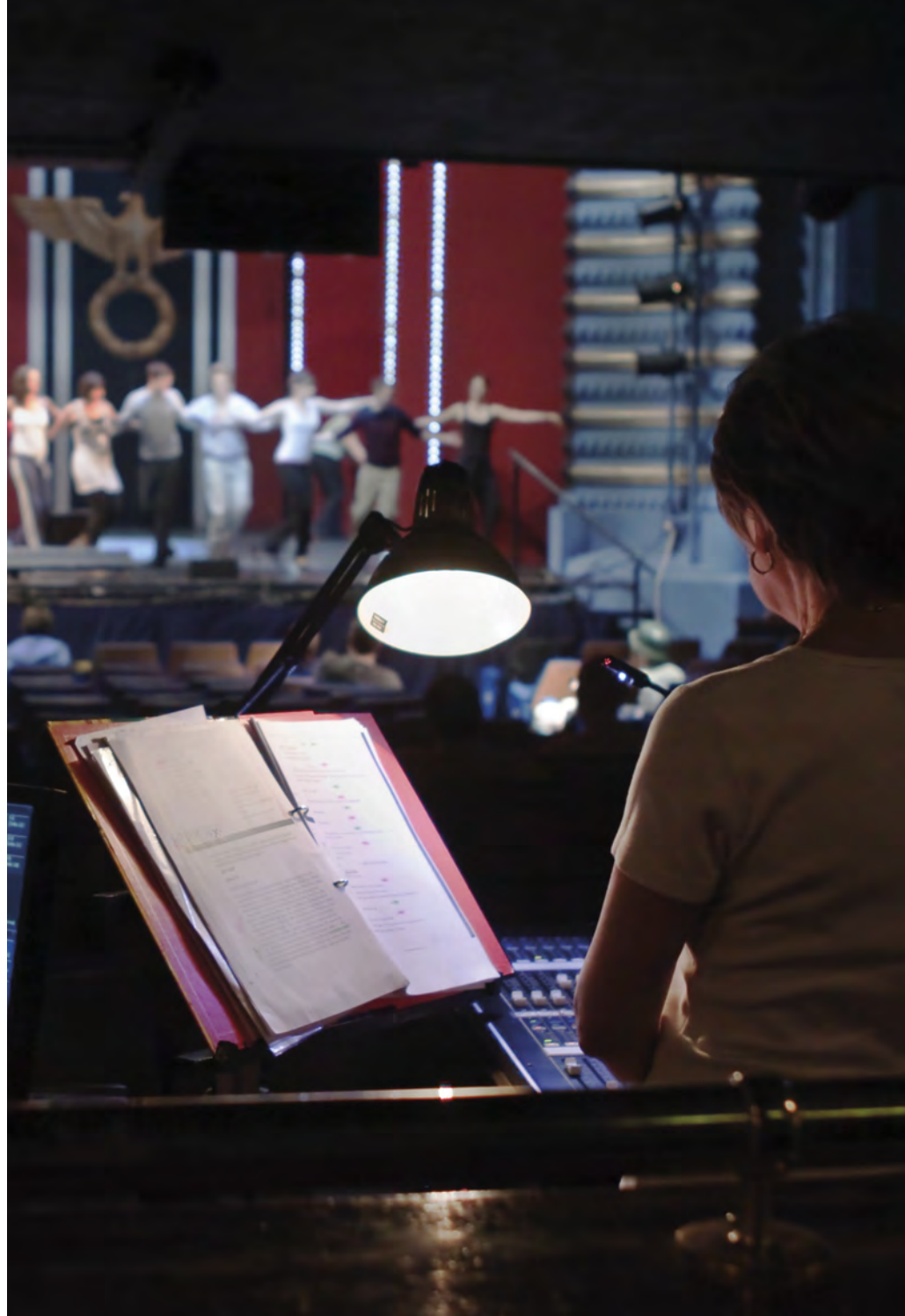
But the company's ambitions have grown with its confidence and membership. The autumn productions have got bigger and bigger, so that today, there's little to distinguish them from the spring shows. Having put on the technically spectacular *Beauty and the Beast* at the Grand in April 2010, the company decided to go back to the Alex that autumn for their first tour:

'Last year we did something special because we had the rights to Jesus Christ Superstar, so we did a two week run – a week at the Grand in Wolverhampton and another at the Alexandra in Birmingham.'

In April 2011, the huge success of their third production of *Oliver!* at the Grand and its positive effect on the company's reserves, meant that it was possible to take *The Producers* to the Alexandra Theatre, where the potentially bigger audiences might offset the unfamiliarity of the show.

THEATRES OR PERFORMERS

MAX What can we do, blow up the theatre?



In the 1968 film of *The Producers*, Max and Leo, with Franz's help, try to escape the trap of their success with 'Springtime for Hitler' by blowing up the theatre. According to the script: *There is a terrific explosion. pieces of the theatre go flying through the air*.

Thirty years later, in the musical version, Max seems to have realised that destroying the building wouldn't prevent the show from going on, so he tells Franz to go after the cast:

> MAX Here. Go. Go buy bullets. Kill. Kill all the actors.

West Bromwich Operatic Society has lost a lot of theatres. Some, like the Plaza, have indeed gone flying through the air, while others stand boarded up, their future unknown. The biggest – in Birmingham and Wolverhampton – have been helped up again more than once.

It takes a confident amateur theatre group to joke about all the venues they have closed. In truth, it has not been easy finding another home every few years, building new relationships with theatre staff, learning different practices and, above all, keeping an audience.

The other truth, the more important truth, is that West Bromwich Operatic Society has not closed theatres – it has survived a social, economic and cultural revolution that hit the Black Country harder than most places.

The theatres, especially those big playhouses with big dreams to sell, had looked so solid, cornerstones of local life in West Bromwich, Bearwood, Dudley and Birmingham. But they collapsed like stage flats. Their permanence was an illusion. Like so much of local trade and industry they depended on economic forces over which they had no control. When tastes changed, when younger competitors offered fresh kinds of entertainment, they could not adapt. Businesses went to the wall. Jobs were lost. In the latter part of the 20th century, in the Black Country, it was a familiar, devastating story.

The people who had sat in the Plaza's plush seats after work, dreaming of different places and better lives, away from Rusty Lane, were left to make the best of it.

> During the Fifties we lost many professional theatres all over the country, and quite large towns became theatreless for the first time. In these circumstances the responsibility of keeping the flag of live theatre flying has devolved upon the amateurs, for this offers for an increasing number of people their only opportunity of seeing live theatre.
>
> *The Amateur Stage*, October 1960

But that is not the story of West Bromwich Operatic Society.

Having lived with closures and endings – as a group and in their own working lives – the members have come through stronger, more confident and more ambitious than they were 30 or 50 years ago.

They have survived partly because their economy depends on no one. No subsidies, no grants, nothing that can be taken away without warning. They were there before there was an Arts Council and they will be there after its last restructure. What people do for love, they can neither be made to do nor prevented from doing.

Here is a group, three quarters of a century old, that has changed with the times while keeping hold of everything about itself that matters. The cast of *The Maid of the Mountains* would not know, and probably not much like, the music and performance style of *The Producers*. They'd be sniffy about so much leg being shown and embarrassed by the social informality. The technology, from microphones to Facebook, would leave them bewildered.

But none of that would matter after five minutes because they would recognise the love of performing, the laughter and the friendship, the effort and the drive to do better, the commitment to putting on the best show possible and, ultimately, they'd recognise that priceless feeling of being appreciated by an audience that has had a wonderful evening.

The form has changed, just like the buildings that frame the shows, but the substance shows remarkable continuity. What matters about West Bromwich Operatic Society – the love of theatre and love for each other – remains unchanged. Theatres come and go. It is the people who go on; it is the people who matter. And these people have overcome.

A GREAT BIG BROADWAY SMASH:

BEING ON STAGE

The culmination,
The restoration,
The consummation,
The titillation,
The celebration of love...

For the next two and a half hours – with a merciful break in the middle – the 30 singers and dancers of West Bromwich Operatic Society give it their all.

'I feel at home when I'm singing, I'm nervous before but when I'm on stage, I feel at home.'

In the pit, a dozen musicians zip through a score that's like a selection box of the best bits of Broadway's musical repertoire – *homage*, no more – with the panache of people who'll only have this fun, this week. Echoes of tunes vanish before you can say what they remind you of. On Monday, it may be back to the mixture of teaching, practice and responding to the fixer's phone call. For now, the job is just to make this music fizz.

> The only possibility seemed to be to try to pay a kind of homage to all the excessive moments, the maddest highlights of all the musicals we'd ever seen.
>
> Robin Wagner, 2001

On stage, the cast moves with total assurance. The dance routines would make a North Korean military parade look sloppy. There's no sign that all this was happening in a school hall with a piano accompaniment a week ago. It helps to have a professional set, costumes and lights but if the performances did not match them, the gap would be humiliating.

> *'I start off as a lesbian – she's the lighting director – then I go to a pianist, then I go to a stormtrooper, then I go to Prisoner Cell Block H.'*

> *'I'm the foreman of the jury in Act Two, I'm an accountant, a theatre goer, a little old lady and a policeman out of Village People, in a very camp number.'*

The jokes, the camp and the slapstick all get their laughs. The theatre's not full but the audience laughter feels big. Routines that had lost their point in repetition suddenly come alive when an audience meets them for the first time: it really *is* funny.

Scene quickly follows scene as the amateur crew, under their professional stage manager, operate the gear like clockwork. Flats come down, scenery is rolled in, furniture placed and the audience barely notices.

Beyond the glare of the lights, hundreds of faces turn towards them, oblivious to anything beyond the multisensory spectacle. The leading actors have their big numbers in turn, sometimes more than one, holding the evening itself in their hands for the next few minutes.

> *'The ego bit of it is, when you know that you're doing a number well and you know that the audience are absolutely with you and you've kind of struck a chord – that is a great moment. To make an audience feel like that and to know that you're doing it and to be in control of that – that is kind of cool.'*

By Wednesday night the first reviews are pinned to the backstage notice board, among the company information and good luck cards.

> I cannot remember laughing as much from a musical as I have done tonight from this show.
>
> Simon Pugh is superb as producer Max Bialystock, there's a fine performance from Leon Davies as accountant Leo Bloom, and the latter's wife. Rachel, is a delight as blonde Swedish bombshell Ulla.
>
> The dancing was of a very high standard and the chorus and company numbers were very confidently executed.
>
> A hilarious contribution, too, from Nick Sullivan (Carmen Ghia) and the dancers are stunning in a show which is sexy and naughty at times but never tasteless.
>
> The company have produced a triumph.
>
> Online reviews of *The Producers,* 2011

Max and Leo couldn't have asked for more.

LET 'EM KNOW YOU'RE PROUD:

THE SPIRIT OF WEST BROMWICH

'An Amateur Production with Professional Standards'

Wild Violets Souvenir Programme, 1954

The old programmes carefully conserved by WBOS members form a unique story of changing life in the company, but also in West Bromwich and the Black Country. Each is a moment in a lifelong game of musical statues, a snapshot of this close-knit, evolving group of people through the lens of a particular show.

Whole lives can be traced in the movements of individual names from chorus, to leading role, to committee, to president. Eventually, there are obituaries, affectionately marking each loss felt by the company.

There is a sadness in these old programmes, too, in their unconscious tracing of economic decline over the past 60 years The changing advertisements of local businesses are like an ebbing tide whose waves end further and further down the beach until there's almost nothing left but sand. The changing nature of local businesses and their falling numbers mark the diminution of the Black Country's economic muscle since the 1950s.

For SPRINGS of Quality and Reliability WRITE OR TELEPHONE The Dart Spring Co., Ltd. of West Bromwich, Telephone WES 1791 (6 lines). Our Technical Consultants and the very latest Spring Testing Apparatus are always at your service.

Wild Violets Souvenir Programme, 1954

As rationing ended, the Society's souvenir programmes became increasingly thick and glossy, with 20 or 30 elegantly typeset pages.

There are portraits of the Producer, Chorus Master and Principal Characters, a synopsis of the show, the musical numbers, cast and production credits, lists of Patrons, Vice-Presidents and Officers – and page after page of advertisements from local shops and industry.

> Jones & Co. The Shirtmakers – Hatters – Hosiers Agents for CHILPRUFE UNDERWEAR & HENRY HEATH HATS, 274 High Street, West Bromwich Telephone WES 0805
>
> The Aston Cabinet Co. Ltd. A Guarantee of Quality – When you see this Seal on any piece of wood Office Furniture it assures GOOD QUALITY, WELL CONSTRUCTED and RELIABLE Products totally built by craftsmen. "Astrola Works", Roebuck Lane, West Bromwich Telephone WES 0717 – Established 1910
>
> Obtain your B.S.A. Cycle for pleasure and your Television for home entertainment from BERT SHINTON, 200/2 HIGH STREET – 15/17 BULL STREET WEST BROMWICH
>
> FRESH EGGS from our Farm daily – Prime English BEEF • MUTTON • LAMB – WALTER BELCHER LTD. 162 High Street, 20 Bull Street & Oakleigh Farm, West Bromwich Telephone WES 0253 WES 0812 – Hotels specially catered for
>
> You can Always Rely on SELA SWEETS OF QUALITY Specialties include:- DAIRY MINTS, CRYSTAL MINTS, BARLEY SUGAR and SELA-COUGH (for Throat and Chest) Manufactured solely by:– SELA PRODUCTS LTD • WEST BROMWICH
>
> *Wild Violets* Souvenir Programme, 1954

In 1954, the programme had 22 half-page and six full-page advertisements. *'Quality is the first consideration and at a very moderate price'*, say Henn's, *'The Leading Jewellers'*.

> *'The High Street was the Golden Mile. You'd walk from Carter's Green up one side to Dartmouth Square, cross over the road and then walk all the way back down.'*

Sometimes, these businesses' support went beyond paying for an advertisement: Messrs. Bert Shinton are thanked for the loan of bicycles and Dartmouth Garage for that of a car. Members were also employees – or sometimes directors. Some of the town's leading citizens took part: in 1954, three of the seven current and past Presidents were magistrates; three more Justices were Vice-Presidents (an honorary title through which WBOS still attracts donations).

Many local businesses stayed faithful over the years. In 1969, for *Annie Get Your Gun*, familiar names reappear in the programme: Dartmouth Garage, Sela Sweets (offering exactly the same range as in 1954), Henn's and the Dart Spring Co. Ltd. But the first of the chains appears – H. Samuel (*'Britain's Largest jeweller'*) – and some of the other advertisers give their locations in Birmingham, Coventry or London as well as West Bromwich.

The 1960s was the high point of the Society's relationship with local industry. It continues after that but always reducing in scale and reach, as the base of the local economy slowly eroded. In 1974 – *The Land of Smiles*, in Wolverhampton – the programme's advertisers include Amoco, and the TSB, as well as '*An invitation to Local Businessmen*' to take up the opportunity to advertise at the theatre.

In 2011, *The Producers* programme reflects its time – lively, humorous and cleverly designed, it focuses on entertaining audiences, informing them about the cast and production, and recording the Society's news, officers and supporters.

What advertising there is relates to the theatre world. None of the businesses is based in West Bromwich. The High Street shopkeepers and directors of small engineering firms are gone.

> *'The factories aren't here for the people to go into. If you look at the industry there used to be in West Bromwich – Salter's, Dart Spring, Kendrick and Jefferson – all these companies have now gone. So there isn't the same infrastructure. They're not here any more.'*

The closure of so many local businesses in the past 70 years is not the only cause of the gradual recession of commercial advertising from the Society's programmes. There have been other social changes and there are looser ties between commerce, workers and community than there were.

Loyalties once taken for granted – between a family and 'their' grocer or butcher – faded as the supermarkets and chains bought up the High Street and then abandoned it for retail parks. The 89p shops and market traders cannot fill the gaps left by Bodenham's, Bryden's, Thompson & Rose, Walter Belcher and Kendricks. The days are past when a shop would announce: '*Personal attention • Prices Reasonable • Policy – Courtesy*'.

There is more than nostalgia and sentimentality at play here. Spend an afternoon walking the streets of West Bromwich and the meaning of 'post-industrial' will be evident. Concrete bases lie where factories once stood: 16% of local property is vacant. The High Street belongs to amusement arcades, cheap food outlets, employment agencies and pawnshops. Few of the nation's familiar chain stores think it worthwhile opening here.

Government statistics tell the same story in different language. A man born here can expect to live three years less than the national average; in four out of ten local households there is someone with a long-term illness. Nearly a quarter of working age people in the Borough are entitled to a key state benefit, compared to 15% nationally.

West Bromwich and the Black Country were struggling when Priestley came in 1933. When he left, he wrote that:

> If there is another economic conference, let it meet [in Rusty Lane], in one of the warehouses, and be fed with bread and margarine and slabs of brawn. The delegates have seen one England, Mayfair in the season. Let them see another England next time, West Bromwich out of the season.
>
> J.B. Priestley, 1934

There has been material improvement in people's lives since that was written, and the words sound old-fashioned now. But they are not out of date.

West Bromwich Operatic Society was formed not long after Priestley came to the town. Its members have seen local industry destroyed; many have been personally affected. But the company is still here, striving for excellence, just as toolmakers and engineers once did in the West Bromwich workshops. It continues to take the good name of West Bromwich abroad and to feel that the town should be proud of it.

> *'I teach in an area with the top five per cent deprivation in the country. Without the arts, without sports, without getting the children to look outward, those children's lives could be very much curtailed. And I don't want curtailment. I want our children to have choice, to have passion and excitement in their lives, to have respect for themselves and for others. And by working together, whether it's on a sports field or on a stage, the children learn about themselves and learn about others in such a wonderful way, such an exciting way, such a stimulating way. What a wonderful way to have a challenge.'*

WHERE DID WE GO RIGHT?

THE STRENGTHS OF WBOS

AMBITION AND EFFORT

> I do it because I love doing it, even when the results are disappointing. I do it to do it.
>
> Wayne Booth, 1999

West Bromwich Operatic Society has always wanted to be the best company it could be, through the changing fashions and passing years. Its claim to be an amateur company with professional standards is bold, but members are proud of their reputation and relish the challenge of adding to it with each new production. So, for every show, every part is cast through an audition.

> *'Other companies I've been with seem to settle for good: they don't want something that's perfect. But in this company they do work to that standard. People get a part because they are the best person for it.'*

That standard can mean that a lead role goes to the newest member. Simon Pugh had never performed with WBOS before he took the part of Max Bialystock. He'd been impressed by the standard of previous productions and joined for the chance to be in *The Producers*, a show he has always loved.

The company's past repertoire needed singers with strong voices and technique. Changing musical tastes and new technology now allow performers with different kinds of voices to take centre stage. But technique remains important and many members take private lessons, study singing and performance at college, and go to NODA training events. They can be clear-sighted about themselves:

'Clearly, it's in my blood to be a bit of a show off – and yet there are times I don't necessarily feel that. I'm very critical of what I do. People can congratulate me but I will think, "On the third bar of the second number I sang a note that wasn't quite right". They don't need to know that but I will be striving for that kind of perfection.'

Working with other talented people gives everyone a pretty good idea of their own strengths and weaknesses. They are keen to stretch themselves, but no one wants a role that will expose their limits or let down the team.

'I was never a leading man – I wasn't good enough. I knew that, but I got tremendous enjoyment out of the parts I did play, and being part of something to be proud of.'

Those who do take on leading roles also accept a lot of the weight of the production. Sarah Moors decided against making theatre her career partly because she felt she'd get to sing more interesting roles in amateur productions: after all, for every Elaine Paige, there are thousands of talented actors who spend their professional lives in chorus lines – when they are in work.

With WBOS, Sarah has played some memorable roles and enjoyed their challenges. She was thrilled to have the opportunity to take on the role of Evita but she found the experience all consuming. Centre stage throughout the evening, with 19 numbers and 15 costume changes, she felt she had pushed herself to the limit. It was a physically and emotionally exhausting experience.

'Every time I went off, there were four people round me putting more jewellery and hair and wigs on – all this stuff going on all the time, and no time to think.'

Although others remember her performance with admiration, she feels that she would not want to be in such a difficult role again. Not all professional actors have as much self-awareness.

Other performers have also sometimes found their roles emotionally difficult. To be beaten to death by Bill Sykes week after week in rehearsal and night after night on stage is not funny. Playing characters far removed from one's own is part of the fun of amateur theatre but there are times when people have to open themselves to difficult experiences. In rising to such challenges, members develop real confidence.

Callum MacArthur joined the company for *Jekyll and Hyde* and has been there ever since. He played several roles in *The Producers*, most memorably perhaps, an accountant whose pastiche of an African American work song made the most of his voice.

'I was very shy. I used to sit in a corner with my arms folded – and next thing I've got this new-found confidence. It developed the nights of the concert. I was on the stage and I'd sung this song and all of a sudden people were standing up and clapping – for me. And it was an achievement that I'd never really been good at anything before, but all of a sudden I've got involved with this thing and people were appreciating what I'd just done.'

Many other members spoke of the confidence they had gained through WBOS, and it is not a superficial change. Because it is based on real achievement – skills learnt, talent developed, fears overcome – recognition by one's peers and by audiences is very meaningful. In the past, it might have been called not confidence but character.

COURAGE AND CHEERFULNESS

'I love The Producers. *I love how controversial it is. There are still going to be people who don't agree with it, which is quite fun.'*

Amateur theatre is often portrayed as safe, a part of the arts world interested in challenging neither itself nor its audiences. That is not true of WBOS. Its members are driven by the desire to do new, more difficult work, sharing with the best of the professional arts world an innate restlessness and an instinct for how far to go.

The skill is in finding a balance between familiarity and novelty, taking the audience somewhere uncomfortable enough to be thrilling without ever losing their confidence. A trusted performer has the audience's permission to challenge it and WBOS is used to managing the subtleties of this relationship.

The Producers sold only moderately, as the company expected that it would. It takes time for a new show to establish itself in people's affections. And it is risky – or should that be *risqué*? – with its high-stepping Nazis and the rest. Mel Brooks has a go at everyone: Jews, gays, Swedes, the elderly, critics, theatre audiences – Germans shouldn't feel singled out.

Fortunately, the surplus made on *Oliver!* gave WBOS licence to do something that would probably lose money but which the members believe is important.

> *'This is another advantage of having a respectable bank balance, in that the Society can afford to do the odd show that they want to do themselves and not have to rely on a box office.'*

The core audience, those who have known and followed the company for years, will come because they trust its ideas. They don't have to know the show.

The relationship between the audience and the company is double-edged. Every performer knows that they have friends and family out there, given the 25 tickets they commit to selling. The audience as a whole comes wanting the evening to be a success, wanting to see people do well, expecting an enjoyable night. And yet that places its own pressure on the cast because there is nowhere

to hide if is not good. Some of the audience will be at home when you get there, or at work on Monday morning. A professional actor who has had a bad night or a bad production can slip away and lick their wounds far from the audience. An amateur must cope with the embarrassment of family and friends.

> *'Some colleagues are incredibly supportive and come to see the shows and love them and know that we're high standard. The ones that do go and see it – and there's been quite a few over the years – are normally really surprised and come back going "Oh my God, I didn't know you could do that". And they normally come back again.'*

There can be other risks. WBOS ran into trouble in 2005, when they planned to stage *The Full Monty* at the Dormston Mill Theatre: some residents objected that it was 'too racy' for Sedgley.

> *'One or two of the neighbours thought we were lowering the tone. The theatre was fine with it - they were backing us to the hilt. It was just a few of the locals. Still, it gave us a lot of publicity.'*

Another change of venue, another triumph plucked from the jaws of disaster. The company went to the new Garrick Theatre in Lichfield – some distance from West Bromwich in more ways than one – and put on a very successful week there. Kathryn Trigg, the business manager, noted that the press coverage did a lot for ticket sales.

The fuss over *The Full Monty* was a surprise, but the decision to stage *Ragtime* in 2004, just a year after its West End première, was taken knowing that it might cause offence.

> *'My God, they stuck their neck out with that – but, it succeeded and I still rate it as one of the best we've ever done. It was tremendous.'*

Ragtime is set in early 1900s America and portrays relationships between immigrant groups, including African-Americans and East European Jews. Particularly controversial is its use of the racial slurs current at the time, including the word 'nigger'.

Attitudes to diversity have changed greatly since 1975, when the company blacked-up for *Show Boat*. Needing African-Caribbean performers WBOS advertised locally and auditions were held at the Grand. Those who came were shown the script so that they could make up their own minds about the language. Some felt that it was an appropriate reflection of historical reality; others preferred not to take part.

The controversy didn't stop there. During one of the performances, somebody shouted 'You can't say that!' Despite the risks, the production was a big success and for many members, *Ragtime* is one of the company's finest achievements.

> *'Ah, that was a fantastic show. The finale of act one is something to remember, it really is.'*

And several of the cast have returned to the company to perform in subsequent shows.

INTEGRITY AND RESPECT

An underlying integrity, evident in a basic consistency between values and behaviour, has helped WBOS handle such controversies. It is a powerful resource that makes members credible in their work within and for the Society. Outsiders might not like that work, or approve its values, but the least friendly would accept that the company does what it says.

That consistency can be seen in the respect people have for one another. Everyone says theatre is teamwork, but it is often hierarchical in practice. That is not the case with WBOS, which feels like a shared enterprise. Someone may have a leading role in this production, but a smaller one next time. Friendships span the company, creating ties between people with very different jobs.

> *'When you make a commitment to a show, it does become difficult, but I'm a very proud person and I take responsibility. Because it's not just about me, it's everybody. It's the team and everything that's involved. So yes, it is really, really important and you make a commitment.'*

Everyone knows that success on the night depends on each person, from the director to the programme editor, the business manager to the wig master. Since everyone is doing their job as a gift to the group, their contribution is always valued.

The Society has several ways of giving formal recognition to this contribution, including Honorary Life Membership and the Kathleen Hoggins Memorial Award, which is given to members who go the extra mile.

> *'That's what makes my award last week all the more humbling: compared with other people who've had that award, I'm still a new boy.'*

Each programme records the names of Presidents going back to 1938, current Vice-Presidents, recipients of NODA long service medals and other achievements of note. This is not egoism: it is formal recognition of commitment and of the Society's core values. Indeed awards are made *because* of people's commitment to those values. There is a strong sense that the idea of WBOS is greater than any individual.

> *'It's a company that is also a group of people who look after you as friends, and in some cases as family, and that's very special. It's cheesy, but it's true.'*

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

'It's the friendship. The social events are really good. Well, you can see: we're a happy family.'

For most members, being in the Operatic Society means the Operatic Society being in your life. It is not a separate activity to be picked up and put down at will. It is a serious commitment because so many other people depend on you. Claire Kramer became pregnant after agreeing to choreograph *The Producers* but she saw the job through, giving birth to her daughter days before the show opened.

The Society is the backdrop of its members' life events. Many have met partners there. Callum MacArthur – costume designer, Kevin, in *The Producers* – met his wife when they auditioned to join the company on the same night: they now have a young daughter.

In some families, the Operatic Society involves almost everyone. Three generations may be involved in the same production: parents and children often play across from each other. Cross-generational leisure activities are not so common nowadays but they are at the heart of WBOS. The group becomes, in effect, a kind of large, fluid family – but one with strong common interests.

'We all auditioned for Oliver. *That was 10 years ago, and I auditioned for Bet – the part that my sister had played previously, and she was auditioning for Nancy, and my Dad was auditioning for Fagin.'*

Some people become involved only because of their partner's passion for it. John Richards started shifting scenery when Iris wanted to get back on stage once their girls were old enough for babysitters. He went on to become not just Chairman of WBOS, but Regional Representative and ultimately President of the National Operatic and Dramatic Association in its Centenary Year.

'I've made an awful lot of good friends. You go round the amateur circuit in the Midlands and you invariably meet someone you know because it's such a family.'

The company also surrounds people in the bad times: when relationships have ended, when illness has struck, when loved ones have died. Members speak movingly of how they have been supported through personal difficulties and part of their commitment to the company reflects the relationships that have been built at these times.

'I had meningitis and the guys were putting on shows in my hospital room. One was singing down the phone to me because I couldn't make it to the rehearsals, teaching me my harmony down the phone.'

Could one ask for more, from what many members describe as a hobby?

PRISONERS OF LOVE
AMATEURS & PROFESSIONALS

> The modern system of art is not an essence or a fate but something we have made.
>
> Larry Shiner, 2001

Members of WBOS can be sensitive about being called amateurs, not because it is inaccurate, but because of the perception that amateur is a synonym for mediocre, self-regarding, even incompetent. And it is true that the word is sometimes used almost as an insult – and not least between artists.

It was not always like that. There was a time when to be an amateur was prestigious. It was someone who was seriously committed to the pursuit of knowledge in science, philosophy or art, someone motivated only by a love of learning. Since they were not paid, the amateurs were genuinely disinterested. In the past, that also meant that they were wealthy, probably aristocrats or landed gentry, because only those classes had leisure time to dedicate to something that was not edible, usable or tradable.

Some amateurs dedicated their lives and fortunes to knowledge in science, philosophy, history and the arts. Others, lacking artistic talent themselves, surrounded themselves with artists in need of a living, or amassed great collections that have become the heart of public museums today. In all these roles, amateurs were deeply influential in the development of art forms and in shaping public taste and ideas of art. Crucially, there was a close interactive relationship between amateur (unpaid) and professional (paid) artists: gentlemen and players.

Professional artists, by contrast, usually had low social status. Throughout most of European history, there was no reason to distinguish a painter or a potter from a builder: all useful trades, but anyone who worked with their hands could have no claim to high

status. Performers were generally held in still lower esteem, perhaps because their art does not even produce anything useful. Their living was precarious and they often inhabited the disreputable margin between entertainer and beggar. The Border style of Morris dancing uses blackface as the traditional disguise of street performers.

There are always exceptions. It was possible to be a performer without forfeiting one's social position if there was no payment involved. The people who performed in Classical Greek theatre or medieval mystery plays were amateurs playing a role at a designated season with religious meaning. People with a talent for song, story or a tune have always been appreciated in community celebrations, but again because they performed for pleasure and honour.

The status of professional artists in Europe began to change in the 18th century, when the ideological, social and economic changes of the Enlightenment took hold. A distinction began to be made between the 'fine arts' and something of lower value called 'craft'. The relative power of patrons and artists was gradually reversed. In 1717, the Duke of Saxeweimar had Bach imprisoned for wanting to leave his service; by the 1791, Haydn could leave the Esterházy court to work in London where he made much more money from concerts and teaching. By the 1830s, statues of Beethoven were appearing all over Germany, where those of noblemen had stood. More importantly, he was being claimed as higher than anyone: for Bizet 'He is not a human being, he is a god'.

Romanticism had elevated the artist to an unprecedented status. Freed from the ties of patronage by new consumer markets, artists began to describe their work as a vocation – a word that had previously meant being called by God to serve in the church. Art was establishing itself as an alternative religion with claims of transcendence and spiritual value, a position it retains today, partly because Christianity is a weak force in European society.

The professional artist became someone who had answered that higher call, sacrificing worldly advantages for a nobler purpose. Of course, artists have to eat like everybody else. Unless they have a private income – like aristocratic amateurs – or a wealthy patron, they must sell their work in the market. The independence claimed by artists in the 19th and 20th centuries was partly illusory because it had been achieved by trading a relationship with one or two wealthy individuals for a relationship with thousands or even hundreds of thousands. And a mass market can be as demanding, as deceptive and as dismissive as any aristocrat.

Before the industrial revolution an artist who failed to find a patron could have few illusions about their importance. They became an assistant to somebody more successful or they found another trade. Today, with the example of Vincent van Gogh always before them, an artist who fails to sell can see that failure as proof of their own genius. It can be quite a big consolation.

As the social status and economic power of artists has changed in the past two centuries, so has that of amateurs. The aristocracy has been pushed or retreated to the margins of more democratic societies, generally abandoning any claim to shape public discourse. The rich amateurs who make public taste now are more likely to be self-made men (and they still tend to be men) like Charles Saatchi.

At the same time, education and leisure extended to the growing populations of industrial cities. At school, in public libraries and working people's educational associations, people learned new tastes and skills. Church and chapel supported choral singing and – in more liberal quarters – concert parties and amateur drama. A growing consumer market gave ready access to books, music hall and theatre – then film, pop music and television. Over the decades, the pleasures of the aristocracy became those of working people, albeit adapted to suit other lives and interests and mixed with other influences from folk and popular culture.

The number of amateurs grew and continues to grow as new creative tools become available to more people: cameras first and now computers and the Internet. Much of their work is informal, created by individuals or loose groups of friends and like-minded people. As a result, it is difficult to know how many people are seriously engaged in photography, music, dance or writing, but it is certainly in the millions.

Where things need to be more structured, as in theatre, it is easier to get a sense of the scale. The National Operatic and Dramatic Association, for example, has 2,549 member societies across the UK and Ireland. But this is only part of the amateur arts world. According to Department for Culture, Media and Sport research there are almost 50,000 amateur arts groups in England. Between them, they have about 6 million members and a further 3.5 million volunteers – so about 15% of the population is active in amateur arts organisations. In a typical year, they promote 700,000 performances or exhibitions and get about 160 million attendances. Amateur arts organisations have a collective income of over half a billion pounds, almost all raised through ticket sales and their own fundraising.

A further difficulty with assessing the extent of amateur arts practice is that it does not have neat boundaries. Contrary to what some people would wish, and perhaps also to some of the tenor of the previous paragraphs, the arts are not divided into two separate and antagonist worlds: the amateurs and the professionals. it is better understood as a complex ecosystem in which people may play different roles at different times or in different aspects of their career.

> Citizens are increasingly spending significant amounts of their leisure time engaged in serious creative pursuits. These pro-ams are people who have acquired high level skills at particular crafts, hobbies, sports or art forms; they are not professionals but are often good enough to present their work publicly or to contribute seriously to a community of like-minded artists or creators.
>
> Stephen J. Tepper, 2008

There are members of WBOS who have worked professionally: singing with big bands, as dancers, or in fringe theatre. Others have had to choose between seizing a chance or continuing in the existing course of their life and staying amateur: even 50 years later, there can be a hint of regret at the path not taken. Nowadays, there are also young members who hope to go on to drama college or conservatoire and so into the professional theatre.

'In a dream world, I would love to be an actor. But I'm not unrealistic – I'm not one of those that's just got my head in the clouds about being a big Broadway star. I would carry on doing this for ever.'

On the other side, professionals are involved in WBOS productions, including the director, the musical director and the choreographer, who are all paid by the company. For the shows themselves, a stage manager and musicians are hired, along with the staff of the theatre itself. Finally, there is also the input of the professionals who created the original production, including set and costumes, which is to some degree a revival when staged by an amateur company.

The same intermingling exists in the professional world, many of whose stars discovered performance in amateur groups where they were growing up. Lionel Bart, in whose debt thousands of amateur groups will forever be for having given them *Oliver!,* wrote his first work as a member of amateur groups in London. Much choral music involves a professional orchestra working with an amateur choir. The Crouch End Festival Chorus, which sang in Mahler's 10th Symphony at the opening of the 2010 BBC Proms is just one example of the excellence achieved by amateur choirs. In America's different arts ecology, it is estimated that amateur musicians perform almost half of all live symphonic music.

New technology is further blurring the lines between amateurs and professionals as more people create, publish and distribute their work online. Wikipedia typifies a world where people with global expertise can work alongside people with local or specific knowledge to create something neither group could achieve alone.

> In a cozy corner of the electric flame department of the infernal regions there stands a little silver gridiron. It is the private property of his Satanic majesty, and is reserved exclusively for the man who invented amateur theatricals. It is hard to see why the amateur actor has been allowed to work his will unchecked for so long. These performances of his are diametrically opposed to the true spirit of civilization, which insists that the good of the many should be considered as being of more importance than that of the few. In the case of amateur theatricals, a large number of inoffensive people are annoyed simply in order that a mere handful of acquaintances may amuse themselves.
>
> P. G. Wodehouse, 1909

It is the humourist's prerogative not to believe what he writes and, given Wodehouse's love of musicals, it is tempting to believe he would have loved *The Producers*, watching from whichever balcony in the afterlife is reserved to those who make us laugh. Amateur theatre is an easy target because its enthusiasts have been known to take themselves very seriously, something English humour delights in mocking. But if some amateur actors do take themselves very seriously, so do some accountants, some plumbers and some arts managers: self-importance is a non-exclusive character trait.

Seriousness is essential to art. The question is what you are serious about. Good things start to happen in art when people are serious about something that is bigger than technique, bigger than audiences, bigger than them. The Canadian sociologist Robert Stebbins, one of a rather small number of academics to have taken an interest in amateur art practice, coined the phrase 'serious leisure' to distinguish the work of committed amateurs from those for whom their engagement with art is a casual entertainment. He describes serious leisure as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling'. In conversation with amateurs, Stebbins found that people used the word 'serious' frequently, associating it with such qualities as 'earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness'.

Watching WBOS at work – or should that be at play? – one sees apparently contradictory things. There is happiness *and* seriousness but little sign of the self-importance Wodehouse mocks. These are no prima donnas elbowing their way centre stage (though they are hardly introverts either), but hard-working performers having fun. And that air of good humour is the lasting impression you get from spending time with the company – laughter, affection and mutual support.

'That's what it's all about – it's giving; it's giving, not taking. That's why it's here. That's why it's successful.'

Some of that lightness is due to the advantages amateur performers have over their professional counterparts. The show is important, very important, but nobody's career is riding on it. Deeply as they care about it, the amateurs have not invested their whole identities in this performance: they may be critiqued, but not damned. There is too much else in the rest of their lives, including work, since this is not it.

The other big difference for WBOS is that they are enacting a production created by others – by professionals. They do not have to invent how to stage a scene, or how to make the show come together. They know it works, because others have done it before. Amateurs are not usually looking for originality – itself a Romantic ideal – but for quality, which defined art before the Enlightenment. It's a critical difference.

MAX You have exactly ten seconds to change that disgusting look of pity into one of enormous respect.

Wayne Booth, a professor of literature who spent 40 years playing the cello with fellow amateurs, has written about the joys and pitfalls of what he called 'amateuring'. He knew that he would never be as good as the least of the professional players, but his effort and practising was the tribute he paid to music, because he valued it so much. He believed that 'If anything is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly'. Booth hated low standards and mediocrity. His argument is that since playing music is such a valuable experience, doing it at whatever level you can reach is always better than not doing it at all.

Booth is perfectly right. It is *because* the practice of art offers such unique and enriching rewards that everyone should be able to take part, in the ways and to the extent that they find congenial.

Art does not need protecting from untalented practitioners: it can look after itself. But untalented performers might need protecting from their more skilled peers who have an interest in controlling who is and who is not able to take part.

There is a parallel with cooking. Preparing one's own food, however basic or unappetising to someone with a more refined palate, offers satisfactions that the most expensive ready meal cannot give. It is doing, not watching others do. And by doing we can improve our taste and technique. But it is not always in the interests of processed food retailers or professional chefs to encourage people in that idea.

> Participation is the hallmark of a vibrant cultural scene, not just participation for the trained and well heeled but participation that's available to just about everybody.
>
> Bill Ivey, 2008

The serious amateurism recognised from different angles by Booth and Stebbins exactly describes how the members of WBOS approach their theatre work. It is a hobby but one that is undertaken seriously, both because of the respect they have for the art of musical theatre and because it is by investing themselves fully that people get most from taking part. Its value comes from doing, from understanding something from the inside, experientially, and its greatest prize is not the applause, joyous as that is, but nurturing skill, ability and understanding in community.

Members with demanding jobs and young families said that people asked them how they find time to do it. The consistent answer was that they could not imagine *not* doing it. They were prisoners of their love of theatre and of the families and friends with whom that love was shared.

'From the heart, I'd say love. It's a love for theatre but I also met my wife here so it encompasses everything.'

THE BIG FINISH

LEO Here's my visor... my Dixon
Ticonderoga number two pencil...
and my big finish!

The curtain goes down for the last time at ten past ten. The house lights flicker on to an auditorium that feels utterly changed. The warm, expectant atmosphere of 7.30 is gone. Now people are gathering their bags and coats, stretching limbs stiffened by sitting still, and patting their pockets for car keys and parking tickets. It's time to get home, through the chilly night to houses where a hall light has been burning since teatime. Give the cat some milk, check the answerphone. Perhaps a hot drink before bed while you swap impressions. 'Wasn't she good, tonight?' 'Yes, but she had a better part in the last show; I think they could have made more of her.' 'Oh, that bit with old ladies and the Zimmer frames!' '*I wanna be a producer, with a big show on Broadway…*'

> *'You feel sad at the end of the show. But good, if you've done a good performance and the audience have enjoyed it. That's the main thing.'*

The cast hurries offstage after the last curtain call, scurrying up narrow staircases to dressing rooms littered with discarded costumes, wigs and props. Make up applied with care at 6.45 is wiped away in seconds. A shower will have to wait until home – there are friends to drop off, babysitters to relieve, work in the morning. A few laughs, brief congratulations and everyone is heading for the stage door, gym bags slung over one shoulder. They'll be back tomorrow, to do it all again, but no one will relax before the final bow on Saturday night. It has been good, so far, better than expected even, but it's not over till it's over. On the drive home, people replay their roles, the missed notes and the moments of perfect connection.

Grab your hat and head for the door
In case you didn't notice, there ain't any more!

And then, it is the final curtain. Saturday night brings the mixed emotions endings always bring. If it weren't great, who would be sad to see it end? Words so carefully learnt, steps drilled into memory, are let slip. Thirty minutes ago everything depended on them; now, nothing does. The last time you sing your big number is the last time. The orchestra is there for you, the audience is all on you and then it's over, for good. There'll be another show, other roles, but will you ever sing Leo, or Ulla or Franz again? Even if you get the chance, it will never be like this, the first time, with these friends, when it really did all come together.

> *'That sense of shared endeavour means that when you've done a show together you always have those shared memories.'*

The costumes, their outsize style designed to be read from 30 yards, have become oddly intimate in the past seven days. Max has lived in that suit: he *is* that suit. Now they're packed away, the whole empty cast going back to the hire company like shed skins. The stage crew is already striking the set, ripping up gaffer tape and winding cables round forearms. Bialystock's seedy office, the Shubert Theatre, Roger de Bris' rococo apartment and Franz's pigeon coop are collapsing as they were meant to. By 1am they'll be flat-packed again, crated and ready to go, just that little bit more worn by another week of use. Soon, it will all be on its way to Bridlington or Brighton or Bristol, to the next amateur company willing to give this risky show a go. The whole charade will get reassembled.

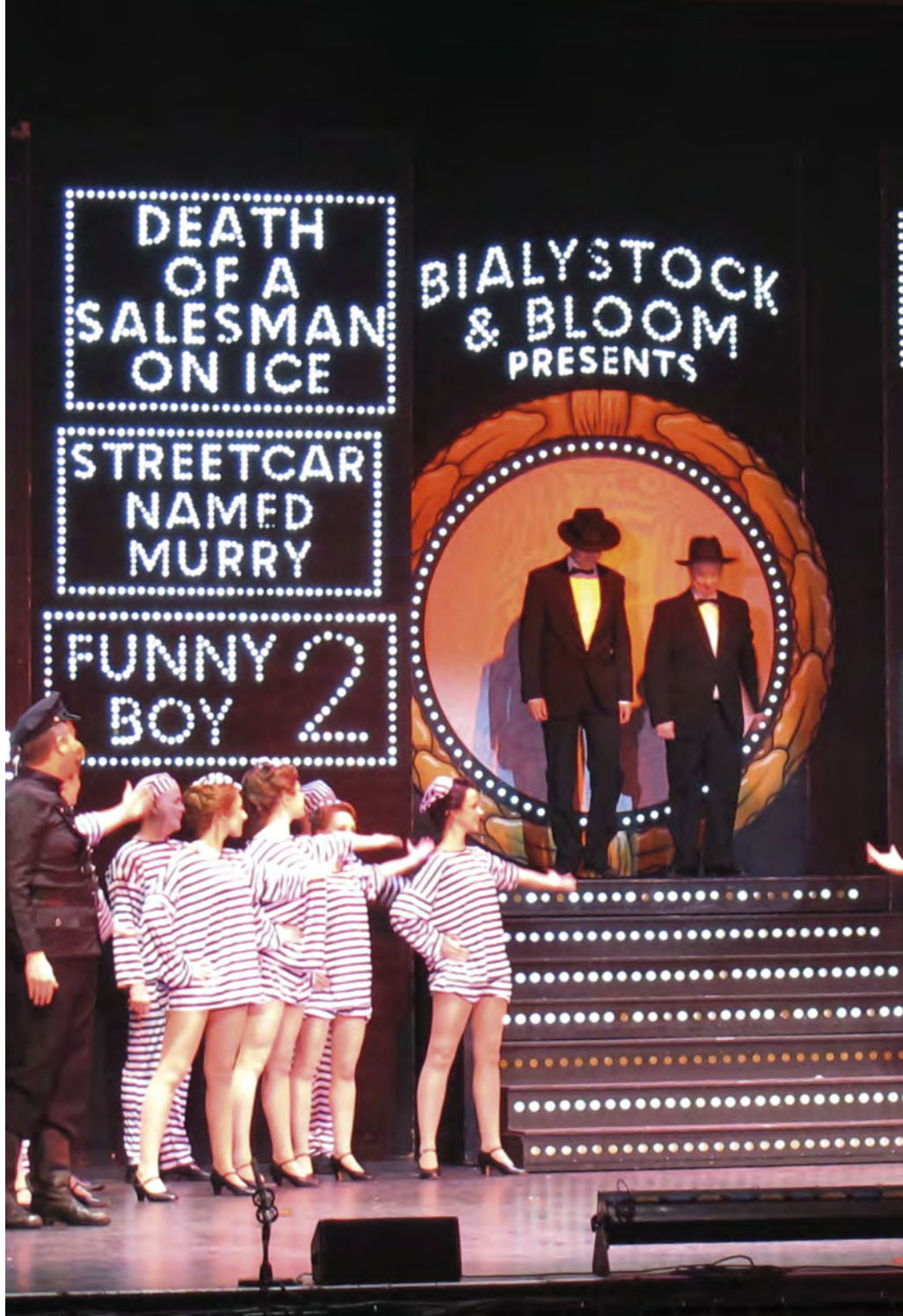
> *'The arts enrich all your life. It doesn't necessarily lead to a job, but it can lead to a satisfaction that lasts forever, that makes you enjoy your job more, I believe, because your soul and your mind and your spirit are fulfilled.'*

Some see *The Producers* as an absurd fantasy, entirely detached from the real world's concerns of earning a crust, living with love and loss, trying to get by, the world of politics and science, of jobs and economics, of telegrams and anger. At best, in this view, musical theatre, indeed the whole sad boiling of the arts, is a distraction from what matters in life. It's a waste of time, money and care that fills people's heads with absurd fantasies. It is the view Dickens satirised in the utilitarian ideals of Mr Gradgrind, the industrialist of *Hard Times*, who wanted nothing but facts, facts, facts. But Dickens also gave us Sleary, the circus owner, as counterweight.

> 'People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurtht!'
>
> Charles Dickens, 1854

Sleary, for all his faults, is wiser and kinder than Gradgrind, for all his ideals. He knows people and knows they must be amused.

We are more than our knowledge and bank accounts, more than science and reason, more than facts, more than work. We are those but we are also imagination and intuition, feeling, love and trust, honour, joy and sacrifice. We are in the gutter, perhaps, but we see stars. We are animals. We are such stuff as dreams are made on. Make the best of us, indeed, where we dream.



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Marjorie Smith
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Lisa Tibbetts
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John Wetherall
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In the early stages of this process, I met and interviewed people involved in a range of mostly amateur cultural groups in the Black Country, including the Black Country Society, Capsule, Charlemont Community Centre, Ideal for All, Knit and Natter, Salop Drive Growing Group, Sandwell Museums Painting Group, The Public Tea Dances, Viva Musica, Wednesbury Library Craft Groups, West Bromwich Model Rail Club, West Bromwich Writers' Group, the Yemeni Community Association and Bill Sneyd. Although the work eventually focused on the Operatic Society those conversations were invaluable in shaping my understanding of the town, community and the place of amateur culture in its people's lives.

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SOURCES

All passages in italics are taken from interviews with members of the company. All quotes from The Producers libretto and book are taken from Brooks, M. & Meehan, T., 2001, *The Producers, How We Did It*, New York.

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WHERE WE DREAM

We can do it, we can do it
We can make our dreams come true

West Bromwich Operatic Society (WBOS) is 'an amateur company with professional standards'. The members perform at major theatres in the West Midlands, selling thousands of tickets to enthusiastic audiences. They have always been self-sufficient and given their surpluses to local charities.

But according to government statistics the Black Country is an area of 'low engagement' in the arts – although four of its many amateur theatre companies, including WBOS, are older than the Arts Council itself.

Where We Dream follows WBOS through creation of Mel Brooks' *The Producers* from rehearsals to curtain call at the New Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham. Along the way it tells the story of a company that has thrived while so much of the world around has gone. It celebrates resilience, friendship and fun, and people's determination, always, to put on a great show.

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