



**Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Swan Theatre Company
held at the Swan Theatre, 138 Park Street, Yeovil on Tuesday 3 May 2022, starting
at 7.33pm**

Present: James Kneller, Andy Taylor, Elaine Taylor, Terry Skedgell, Graham House, Dick Bennett, Geoff Kneller, Beryl Snadden, Robert Graydon, Ann Lee, David Hallett, Liz Stallard, Sally Matthews, Alison Maynard-Griffin, Annetta Broughton, Alice Browne, Amie Margetts, Mike Stanley, Mark Payne, Andrew Middleton, John Curry, Roger Chadbourne, Brian Williams, John Cooke, Pax Cooke, Maureen Smith, Vicki Hallett.

Apologies for absence were received from: Adrian Harding, Peter Down, Colin Martin, Mary Buckle, Ed Butcher, Rachel Butcher, Di Law, Mike Robbins, Denny Robbins, Ann Cook, Patrick Knox, Richard Cannon, John Crabtree, Liz Holloway, Lynne Bennett, Joe Wainwright, John Margetts, Jean Kneller.

1. **The President**, Beryl Snadden, opened the meeting by welcoming those present and remarking on the favourable reception given to the four plays presented in the shortened season, and encouraging all to find enjoyment from front of house as well as the other activities essential to presenting a public performance.
2. **Minutes** of last year's meeting had been circulated to all members and were approved unanimously.
3. **Functional reports**
 - a. Artistic Manager – **Robert Graydon** presented his report, commenting in particular on the dedication displayed by all members in re-establishing a full programme of productions once the government-imposed restrictions had been lifted. He announced two plays for the forthcoming season but expressed disappointment that it was not yet possible to follow this up with a full programme for 2023. He appealed for directors to come forward and confirmed that full support would be given to anyone who might be hesitating.
 - b. Marketing Manager – **Adrian Harding** was unable to be present and his report was read by Graham House. Adrian noted the slow but steady return of audiences, tempered by a clear reluctance of many to book early and a diminished number of large group bookings. He



drew attention to the success of the new website and the new style of newsletters and other communications.

- c. Facilities Manager – **James Kneller** reported on the improvements undertaken to the Swan which had been possible as a result of the enforced dark period. These included foyer and bar refurbishment and redecoration, a new ventilation system and the beginnings of a new look for the exterior, together with various less visible but equally important structural, mechanical and electrical works.
4. **Alison Maynard-Griffin** presented the annual accounts and responded to questions relating to the value of the building and the nature of stripe and sum-up payments.
 - a. The adoption of the accounts was proposed by Robert Graydon, seconded by Roger Chadbourne and approved unanimously.
 - b. The appointment of Teresa Rodber of Read Accountants as examiner for the next financial year was proposed by Vicki Hallett, seconded by Brian Williams and approved unanimously.
5. **Mark Payne** presented his Chairman's review of the year, dividing his comments between things that went well and things that could be better, followed by a look ahead to possible further improvements to the theatre and the opportunities which might emerge from the forthcoming extended closure of the Octagon theatre. He concluded by noting the sad loss of long-standing members Meg Longman, Ian White, Margaret Akerman and Jane Barrett.
6. **Election of Officers and Committee Members.** Andy Taylor, Returning Officer, confirmed the reappointment of Mark Payne as Chairman, Graham House as Secretary, Alison Maynard-Griffin as Treasurer, the re-election of Annetta Broughton and the election of Ann Lee as ordinary members, all unopposed.

The meeting closed at 8.36pm

Full reports as presented to the meeting are annexed.

Graham House

Secretary, Swan Theatre Company

May 2022

SWAN THEATRE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – TUESDAY 3RD MAY 2022

ARTISTIC TEAM REPORT

This time last year the Swan was reaching the end of over a year of enforced 'darkness' due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We were about to recommence rehearsals for a second shot at 'Night Must Fall'. We had managed to keep the entire cast and crew together during the break and, although we all approached the project with not a little trepidation and anxiety, there was no lack of enthusiasm and energy. There was a tangible sense of excitement that – at last – it looked as though we might be back on track. And so it was that we opened in July with a full – and healthy – company. Since then, unlike a lot of local and national theatre groups, we have resumed our normal offering of a Swan production once every 2 months, with not a single missed performance. This shows, I believe, a sense of true dedication amongst our performers, our technicians, our set designers and builders, backstage crews, Front of House contributors and all the other human support we need to put on a show. We managed this despite variations in restrictions and ongoing anxiety and uncertainty about own personal health. We have been lucky, though. There have been a couple of close calls along the way and every production has carried the risk that anyone might fall ill at any time.

This year we have lost several of our regular directors. Lyn Lockyer and Andy have moved away from the district. Our dear friend Ian White was taken from us far too soon and I believe before he had been able to realise a lot of his artistic and dramatic ambitions. His loss is a considerable one and we miss him.

It used to be traditional for the Artistic Manager to announce the programme for the following year at the AGM. I can't do that this evening. The simple reason is that my Team has just not received enough submissions from members who are interested in putting on a play. I wonder why that is? It is disappointing, but I think understandable. I believe post-COVID anxiety continues and is likely to continue for a while yet. And it may be that ongoing uncertainties make us reluctant to commit to something too far in the future. What I can tell you is that we've now fixed our shows for the remainder of this year. In September I will be directing 'The Unexpected Man' by Yazmina Reza and, in November, Brian Williams will be directing 'Let it Be Me' by Carey-Jane Hardy. You may recall that this was originally scheduled to be directed by Andy Taylor in May 2020 but was a casualty of the first lockdown. Frustrating for Andy as he was passionate about the play and had already cast it. But we thank Brian who has picked up the reins and we look forward to his production. Details of readings and auditions will be announced in due course in the usual way. We also look forward to welcoming Yeovil Youth Theatre as hopefully another of our regular visiting groups.

Going forward to 2023, we have some irons in the fire – essentially enough to fill the remainder of the season – but it is such a real shame that we don't have more. Our aim is always to present a balanced programme of plays and to try to include things that will have a general appeal. We are struggling, so I will repeat my invitation to those of you who would

like to have a shot at directing a play. If the idea seems too onerous and you are anxious, rest assured that you will be fully supported. First time directors always have an experienced mentor to guide them through the process. You will have a Producer who will work with you throughout to ease the burden. And we have an experienced Artistic Team to help you and to put you in touch with the right people to support you. Do give it some thought – our reliance on a core of regular directors will not be sustainable long term – and I am sure there is plenty of talent and enthusiasm out there. Take the plunge – it can be a really rewarding experience!

Playreadings. Some months ago, we decided to have a go at moving these to a Friday evening. This was potentially to give those in rehearsal a chance to attend – rehearsals tend not to be held on a Friday. Perhaps this was a mistake as attendance hasn't been great of late. I've had some feedback that the last evening of the week is not great as people are tired and are reluctant to go out. This could be the case, but as our Friday night performances are consistently the most well-attended, I'm not sure that this is the universal reason. I would welcome some feedback on how our members view playreadings and what they would like to read. They offer another valuable activity in our artistic programme – some members don't want to perform on stage and having a go at reading a part in a more relaxed environment can be fun. But please tell us what you would like – it takes a lot to organise an evening, select the right play, make sure the bar is manned and there is someone to unlock the theatre and lock up afterwards. If it's not what you'd like, we'll try something different.

It remains only for me to thank my team of Ann Cook, Alison Maynard-Griffin, Sarah Ambrose, Rachel Butcher, Sarah Nias, Graham House and Roger Mumford for their enthusiasm, their time, and the experience they bring to the Artistic Team.

Robert Graydon

Swan Theatre AGM – Marketing report

Adrian Harding, Marketing Manager

At last, we are back to normal – almost – and the theatre is filling up again for our productions.

It was a real joy to be involved with our first post-pandemic production, *Night Must Fall*, as it had closed on the day that restrictions were imposed, so it felt rightful that we should open again on the day that indoor gathering restrictions were relaxed.

In the last year, we have performed 5 live theatrical productions, 3 NT Live showings and we have hosted short production runs from our friends at the Castaways and Civic Players. This is something that we can be justifiably proud of, as other amateur theatres in our position have struggled far more than us to maintain a viable operation through the pandemic. We are in this enviable, strong position due to timely decision making and careful financial management by the committee, and by making best use of the closed season to make much needed improvements to the fabric of the theatre. We have also focussed on improved, regular communications to our loyal Swan members to ensure that they are fully engaged with what we are doing and continue to feel part of the family.

The rewards are evident. Our audiences have largely stayed loyal and seem to be as delighted as we are that the theatre is fully back in action, firing on all cylinders.

I refer back to my opening sentence and the hanging word – ‘almost’. There is no doubt that 18 months of potential health-risk and social-distancing has taken its toll. We have detected a nervousness or cautiousness in attending plays from some of our more vulnerable supporters, which is only to be expected. Large group bookings, that we had come to expect, have diminished. This has meant that the audiences for our earlier productions of the year in July and September 2021 were down by about 20% against previous expectations.

But the exceptionally high standard of the performances and the safety precautions which we have put in place have restored confidence, and our audiences are now back, close to full capacity. Well-known plays by Alan Ayckbourn (*Season’s Greetings*) and Agatha Christie (*Go Back for Murder*) sold out on many nights. Confidence has returned to our core audience, and we expect to see full houses at our production of *French Dressing* later this month.

Our charity nights have felt the impact harder than our more straightforward performances. I would therefore ask you all to help by restoring the support for these valuable and beneficial initiatives. If you are associated with any local charities, please spread the word that signing-up for a Swan Charity Night production is an excellent and guaranteed way to raise a great deal of money for your favourite charity, whilst offering a superb evening's entertainment for your supporters. If you are interested, or know of someone who might be, please talk to one of the committee or check the details on our website.

The marketing team hope that you are enjoying the new tone and style of our refreshed communications. Newsletters are now sent monthly. They are packed with pictures as drama is a visual art. We seek to keep Swan Members aware of new productions, abreast of all theatre developments and involved in the essential tasks needed to keep the theatre functioning at its best.

I am grateful to the support of Elaine Taylor and Chrissie Mumford for their help in editing the newsletter, to Richard Jones, Sheila Driver and Lesley Nesbitt for creative help with poster design and programme compilations, and to Jim LeFeuvre and Pauline Dagnall for stupendous on-stage rehearsal photography. Special thanks must go to Ann Rigby who does such a sterling job in managing the box office without ever missing a beat. Her input to the ticketing process and design of the website has been invaluable. The complications arising from returned tickets, substitute audience members and swapping dates are legion, but she handles the task faultlessly, and follows up with a very helpful analysis of each audience demographic and order pattern. We couldn't do our job without her.

We also hope that you like the new website, which has been designed to be light, bright, colourful, informative, and very easy to navigate. Make use of it as often as you can. I promise, you'll enjoy it, and learn a lot about the Swan, past, present and future.

We approach the coming year with fresh confidence and optimism. We are enjoying our selection of plays and look forward to welcoming everybody back into the theatre as often as they can to experience the super-high standards of quality entertainment which we aspire to achieve. Please do what you can to share the love and invite newcomers to enjoy our drama as much as we all do.

As for last year, my ambition as Marketing Manager is still that the Swan will remain firmly at the heart of the Yeovil cultural scene and ***all tickets will be sold-out within 5 seconds of launch!***

Swan Theatre 2022 AGM – Facilities Report

This time last year, I recall we had just gone through a period none of us had expected, with the theatre ‘going dark’ for months on end for the first time ever. We were keen to keep looking forward and at the time I reported on a lot of work that we had completed during Lockdown, and further works still in progress. In 2020, we replaced the roof, improved wiring and replaced the heating system, and had advanced plans for improvements to the décor, and of course the ventilation system.

Well, 12 months on, summer 2021 saw the refurbishment of the public areas – which look wonderful - and we got the Ventilation system installation done in time for our big opening of Night Must Fall in July. Quite apart from the fresh focus on ventilation due to Covid, both have been a great improvement to our facility with a much nicer and fresher feel in the auditorium and public spaces. So, thanks again to those Swan Members who led and helped with this. During the refurbishments, we discovered some problems with damp in the cellar that had compromised the Foyer floor. This was rectified, and to prevent reoccurrence there is now a small ventilation system fitted in the cellar by a specialist company.

It is great that we are back to the business of live theatre, and I am pleased that this is once again our focus. There still is, and always will be a steady drumbeat of maintenance and improvements that we must knit in with the programme. In the last 12 months we have had an inspection by the Fire Brigade, which was all good; and our Environmental Health inspection achieved a 5-star rating. Our 3 yearly electrical inspection, which was expensive at c. £6k. required some rectification work including the replacement of almost all our emergency lighting which must meet specific performance criteria for obvious reasons. To keep the new Ventilation system protected, we have also invested in a good fence, and a roof to provide a shield from the weather, and general security.

Other routine annual inspections took place, such as Fire and Security Alarm checks, and Fire Extinguishers, for which a number had to be replaced, and, for the first time ever, an annual LOLAR inspection of the rigging which highlighted 3 non-compliances. Two were simple ones rectified by members. The 3rd one was that the hemp rope sets were not certifiable. The ropes were deemed as old, and the provenance could not be demonstrated. Consideration was already being given to the option of replacing the hemp ropes with winches, so, in light of the LOLAR report, the Committee decided to replace all the Hemp Sets with hand winches and Steel Wire Rope. We purchased 12 winches and the installation was supported by the LOLAR inspection contractor who carried out all the key safety critical work. The remainder of the work was carried out by Swan Members – my thanks to Jim Le-Feuvre who led The Swan contingent. This was another expensive job, which in total was about £6.5k. This is another great improvement for compliance and safety reasons and makes raising and lowering of the bars much easier. Please ensure you are shown how to properly operate these new winches – just ask Jim or myself to demonstrate. Again, this highlights that running a theatre is an expensive business, and every year further legislative and safety compliance standards are introduced that we must meet.

We have spent a lot of our funds on our theatre over the last 2 years which has depleted our reserves. So, for now we want to focus on resilience in our membership and productions which means that our long-standing plans for the potential bar/foyer extension need to go on hold for a while. We will continue to research options and have had schemes and costs to move the stage door to the Props room, with some alterations to this area, including turning the stairs here through 180 degrees. This is to provide a ‘step 1’ to wider changes to the foyer/toilets etc in the future. Even this task is quite expensive – c. £20k, so for now we are just seeing how our finances recover – maybe next year!

The Curious Incident of the Sign in the Car Park - Another task that we have long been conscious of is the external appearance of the building. Last Summer the electronic sign stopped working. We had a contractor take it down and he put it in the Car Park. Strangely within a few hours, it had gone – we assume stolen. Frustrating, but as it did not work, and had given us 8 years of service we decided to write it off and move on. This prompted us to think again about the exterior, and I am sure you have all noticed the initial changes here – the large advertising sign, and the red flash on the corner. Rest assured that whilst a definite improvement, this is just a first step, and part of a wider scheme that is being put together, again with the artistic talents of Annetta and Graham.

There are of course, still jobs and tasks that need doing. The biggest one is that the ceiling over the stage needs replacing. The first quote we’ve had feels expensive at c£12k, and also potentially a 3 week block to complete, so we need to work out a way forward for this.

Over the last few years, the cadre of people carrying out the maintenance activities is getting smaller and it’s generally the same group of people who build and lead on the set building. This could become a critical pinch point going forward and impact our ability to do maintenance tasks ourselves to save contractor costs. To that small group of people – my thanks, and for the wider membership, please help where you can, and think about how we can introduce more help in the form of willing and able volunteers that you know of. We are trying to think of ways to reach out to new prospective members in this area and others – so please spread the word.

This forth coming year will be my 6th and final year in the role of Facilities Manager. I will of course remain involved, but we will need fresh blood in this role. So again, please consider this for next year. For all the things I have mentioned in this report, I generally rely on other Swan Members to actually “do” the work and in many cases to “lead” the work, even if this is just meeting contractors for quotes or access. Despite my comment above about dwindling numbers – there are so many people who have helped with all the improvements we have achieved - so thank you - you know who you are – and I very much appreciate your support and help.

Lastly, we have a small group of people who regularly come in to keep the kitchen clean and tidy – please help them, tidy up after yourselves and take rubbish home where you can. Thank you.

SWAN THEATRE ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 28 FEBRUARY 2022

REPORT

I think I speak for everyone when I say that I am absolutely delighted that I have something meaningful to report this year! It was wonderful that we were able to reopen to paying audiences in July of last year, and since then it's been full steam ahead.

We have staged 4 productions, generating £28843 of income, and making a surplus of £14452. Houses were a little reticent to begin with, which is understandable, but Season's Greetings was nigh on sold out, and most people you speak to say that they are just so glad to be back.

Just a note on the figures for Night Must Fall – they are higher on both income and expenditure due to it almost being staged twice due to Covid! A lot of people who bought tickets for 2020 donated the money, and then we had to re-do all the publicity materials when it was rescheduled.

We generated £785 net income from 3 NT Live screenings in the year, proving that they are profitable even if not massively well attended.

Other income of note: We received £15499 from SSDC (£12500), Yeovil Town Council (£2499) and Brympton Parish Council (£500) towards our new Ventilation system. This equated to half the cost of the system. In May 2021 the council gave us a Restart Covid Grant of £8000 and also an Omicron grant of £2667 in Feb 2022. Donations of £3170 included £3000 left to us in the will of Margaret Akerman, a much loved and much missed long standing member of the Swan.

Expenditure:

We took advantage of the enforced closure of the theatre to address several maintenance issues that needed fixing, and also to refresh our public areas. A complete refurbishment of the bar and foyer cost £11344, a comprehensive inspection of the electrics in the building which luckily will last for 3 years cost us £5906, £5503 was spent on new winches for the stage rigging system, £1680 on damp issues in the cellar, and £2856 on erecting a fence to protect the air con ventilation unit outside.

A longer term project of moving the stage door has cost £2427 (£1800 to Alan Young the surveyor, and £627 on planning and building regs fees).

We have capitalised two items of expenditure as they will last for many years: The new ventilation system cost us £30327, and our new boiler and heating system cost £10323.

Other items to note: Our fabulous new website designed by PurpleBox cost £1908, credit card fees are shown separately this year (£592) but have always been incurred, St John's Ambulance are charging us £25 per night that they attend, and fees/licences of £837 includes the annual Membermojo licence of £400. This is our membership database but is so much more than that and is money well spent.

Cash at bank stands at £45254, down from £79630 last year, due to the many improvements we have invested in. We aim to keep a figure of £20000 in the current a/c which is sufficient to cover day to day expenditure.

My thanks go to David Hallett of Read Accountants, but as David is an active member of the Swan, for transparency, the accounts will be signed off by his colleague Teresa Rodber. I propose to retain their services for next year.

As Chair it is often difficult to think about what to say at the AGM simply because much of what I could say is covered by the Officer reports that have gone before. In truth that is probably a good thing and a fair reflection of the way the Committee works. The people you have just heard from Graham, Ali, Rob, Adrian, James are the people who do a most of the work.....without them and the other members of the committee, Annetta, Brian, Ann the Swan would not function and I am really grateful to have such a supportive and helpful team.

However it is probably my job to review the year and to look forward.....

What went well:

- Shows returned to the Swan, actors seemed keen to take on roles and we have been generally able to cast roles without too much difficulty. Standards remain high
- Membermojo was embedded in the way the Swan works – not just a membership database, but one which dramatically improves the ease with which we can communicate with members, mailing list or subsets of the membership. Greatly eases the burden on the treasurer and secretary at subs renewal time.
- Adrian has done wonders with Marketing. New website is a huge improvement, regular newsletters.
- Very significant investment in the building some obvious, some less so as we have heard from James. Foyer, bar, ventilation, heating, cellar, green room floor, electrics, winches.....
- Had quite a few new members join – a least 20 since last summer. Mainly female. We do need more male actors! We now have a good system to try and engage with them from the off so that when they sign up we contact them and get them involved straight away. As always the personal touch is what matters here. Thank you to Annetta for leading on that.

What could be better/what issues do we have?

- Audience numbers have not fully recovered from COVID. SG and GBFM had good numbers but pre-covid they would have been sell outs. People are booking later. Confidence has not fully returned. Have people perhaps got out of the habit?
- The capital improvements have depleted our reserves. We still have an extremely healthy position but we do need a period of rebuilding. Costs going forward are likely to increase – our fixed price electricity ends in the autumn – we can expect these costs going forward to triple at least. For that reason ticket prices will rise from the Autumn.
- Set building personnel. This is an area where we are beginning to really struggle. We are having to call on the same people repeatedly and we are so lucky that up to now they have met all the demands we have made of them. However to be blunt none of them are getting any younger and we do need new people to get involved in this area – to contribute to the team, and to lead on production.
- Front of House – continues to be challenging to fill all the roles for each production. There does remain the expectation that all members contribute to this. In particular actors who are not involved in the current production should be signing up almost as a matter of course. It is a legal requirement to ensure the safety of our audiences – and we can only do this if we have a full FOH complement. If you haven't signed up for FD then I am sure Brian will take your name!

Looking ahead.....

- We want to make better use of this building as a marketing tool. So many people say it looks a bit derelict, or I never knew it was here.... The outside needs a considerable facelift.
- Stage door project is one we do want to progress – it is the first step in a potential larger re-organisation – improving the toilets, maybe eventually extending the bar. The barrier at the moment is cost – we want to build our reserves back up before embarking on this.
- We need to keep working at increasing our audience, our membership and involvement in what we do.
- Finally the Octagon? Closing for an extended period – how will that impact us? Might it have a short term positive impact on audiences.....Groups wanting a performance space? Once it re-opens – will it provide greater competition, or will it stimulate interest in the theatre in Yeovil and long term be a benefit to us? Difficult to predict but one to keep an eye on.

This year we have lost a number of established members:

Meg Longman

Ian White

Margaret Akerman

Jane Barrett