



# The Bancroft Players

Newsletter  
December 2016



1959: John Coxall with Barbara Taylor in 'The Shoemakers Holiday', Woodside Open Air Theatre.

## John Coxall: Farewell our friend

St Mary's Church, Hitchin was Spacked on Monday November 28 as family, friends, Bancroft Players, Round Tablers, Rotarians and people representing his many interests in the town and beyond gathered in a funeral service celebrating the life of John Coxall.

The Reverend Fizz Gibbs conducted the service and organist Alan Childs not only accompanied the hymns, but gave a moving rendition of a favourite of John's, J. S. Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*.

John's son, Simon, recalled fond and often hilarious memories of his Dad, while nephew Ben Hull read from Revelations Chapter XXI.

Richard Whitmore, long-time friend and fellow Bancroft Player, delivered the eulogy, an abridged version of which appears inside this newsletter.

He spoke of John's deep commitment to the community, of his many interests and, in particular, of his involvement in three theatres associated with the Bancroft Players: St Anne's, Woodside Open Air Theatre (The Dell) and his crowning achievement, the Queen Mother Theatre.

Rory Reynolds read *Farewell My Friends*, a poem by the great Nobel prizewinning poet Rabindranath Tagore, and Gina Abbatt sang John Rutter's blessing, *A Clare Benediction*. John's choice of exit

music, Mendelssohn's *Scherzo* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, recalled the first Dell production in 1951.

After the service many repaired to The Hitchin Priory for refreshments and a look at photographs documenting John's life as actor, family man and builder of theatres.

The following was inscribed in the Order of Service and is very appropriate to John:

*For when the One Great Scorer comes  
To write against your name  
He marks - not that you won or lost  
But how you played the game.*

Rosemary Bianchi

The QMT



Queen Mother Theatre, Woodside, Hitchin, SG4 9SP. 01462 434875, box office 01462 455166. Reg charity no: 283439.



November at the QMT was book-ended by two plays that showcased the range and ambition of the Bancroft Players in very different ways.

The month opened with Martyn Jolly's staging of the classic *Waiting for Godot*, left, in the main theatre, and closed with Big Spirit's innovative promenade production *Lights Out at Blake's Theatre*.

Photos: Julian Newman Turner and Zara Schafer.

Rory Reynolds

Artistic Director's blog

# "Dear Santa: send scripts, shows and the Xmas Quiz"

It's out - the hit of the cinema screen is also available as a book: *Amazing Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

Another J K Rowling winner and, when you get the book, you buy - wait for it - the screenplay. Yes, things are getting pretty edgy when you have a bestseller that is actually a screenplay.

Good news for all us theatre types - we're always reading scripts and having to picture in our heads what the actual play will look like on the stage.

Now, strange to tell, it's become a mainstream activity.

I'm saying all this in a madcap attempt to get you guys to read some scripts and submit them for next season. Alright, we can't have *The Cursed Child* or *Amazing Beasts* but there are loads of great texts out there...

As I write this, Rosemary is putting the final touches to *The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe* so I hope you'll be along to see it. It looks like such fun and there are all ages in the cast from Juniors to senior citizens - great stuff!

Keith Swainston is casting his Studio production of *hang* very soon (see notice on page 7) so please come to that.

I've also just bought the scripts for *Steel Magnolias* so why not come along and read through that too as the copies are in the foyer.

But wait, what's that sound? That tinkling? Is it? Can it be?

Why, yes - it's Santa bringing us the grand Christmas Quizzo. Oh, thank you Santa! It's a Brian Hull special for the whole BP family - we are so-o-o lucky!

Do you belong to the BPs? Of course you do! Then you're in the family and it'll be great to see you there! Merry Thingy!

Rory



## Bancroft Players' 200 Club

I seem to have got out of sync with my congratulations, possibly something to do with the new publication dates, plus I have been doing the draws earlier in the month AND my piece for last month seemed to slip through the net. (*Apologies!* - Editorial Team)

So here are three months of winners and my congratulations to all of them. Don't forget December sees our £100 winner.

**September Winners**  
 £25: Keith & Kate Swainston  
 £20: Marion Everitt  
 £15: Mike Mackenzie  
 £10: Sue Mason

**October Winners**  
 £25: Wendy Whitmore  
 £20: Bev Bollons  
 £15: John Addison  
 £10: Anthony Sudweeks

**November Winners**  
 £25: Bill Weedon  
 £20: John Lambert  
 £15: Brian Seal  
 £10: Chrissy Harrison

Paula Downes

## QMT Playwriting Group

The QMT's new playwriting group will skip December and instead serve up a double dose of scripting goodness in January.

Sessions are scheduled for the last Tuesday of each month, meeting in the QMT foyer at 7.45pm. However the holidays have pushed December's to January 3, with January 31 next.

The group is open to anyone, BP member or not, so tell your friends.

A Facebook group is in the process of being set up to share resources (and homework assignments). Message Andy Darley, or email [andy@andthenhesaid.com](mailto:andy@andthenhesaid.com), to be added.

# Magic awaits through the wardrobe to Narnia



Photo: Julian Newman Turner

Louis Bailey prepares to take flight and join the battle against the White Witch

December 9 sees the opening of our Christmas show **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, dramatised by from the classic children's book by C.S. Lewis.

The Queen Mother Theatre is alive to the howling of wolves, the roar of lions, the bustling of beavers, and the paralysing spells of a wicked witch.

No, it's not another social in the bar, it's a rehearsal for the upcoming production of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

This classic tale of four children and their journey into the magical kingdom of Narnia is unfolding on the main stage of the Queen Mother Theatre and tickets are selling fast.

Director Rosemary Bianchi said: "We are using live images and music to make

the setting really magical. The props department is very busy creating extraordinary masks and puppets, while Anne Cowley is tasked with creating live sound effects and accompaniment.

"The cast is amazing, responding to directions like 'Can you fight like a unicorn please?' with artistry and good humour."

The play itself is a skilful adaptation by poet Adrian Mitchell and includes all the iconic elements of the original story.

Like all good tales there are funny moments (especially concerning beavers and fishing), times of tension and

trepidation as the children get close to the wicked queen, and of course the arrival of the great lion, Aslan.

There is also a visit from a mysterious red-coated stranger!

The 24-strong cast includes a wide array of members ranging through Juniors, Big Spirit, and adults, and including a few newcomers both on and back stage.

It plays from December 9-11 and 16-18, and the cast will also be helping to turn on the lights at the Christmas Tree Festival at Holy Saviour Church, Radcliffe Road at midday on December 11.

## MEANWHILE, BACKSTAGE...

BY MATT GRAY



## Casting news: Proof

Thank you to all who auditioned - the standard was extremely high. Tamsin and David were very impressed by all who read, which made casting the show a real challenge. The cast is:

**Robert:** Keith Swainston

**Catherine:** Georgina Bennett

**Claire:** Grace Maynard

**Hal:** Harry Harding

# “Generous, kind and courageous”

## Remembering QMT co-founder and former Bancroft Players chairman, John Coxall

An abridged version of the eulogy delivered by his long-time friend, Richard Whitmore, at John's funeral service in St Mary's Church, Hitchin, on November 28 2016.

When a chap has the widely-used nickname of “Cockers,” the worry is that – although it is a term of great endearment – it might make it quite difficult to give our old friend a dignified send-off. But I shall try.

John Cameron Coxall was born in Grove Road, Hitchin, in 1932. On leaving school he was articled to Tony King, the Surveyor for Hitchin Urban District Council. It was during this time he met Margaret Leonard and they married in 1957. After a spell in the Army he was invited to become a partner at John Shilcock, the old-established Hitchin firm of chartered surveyors and estate agents. There he remained for 30 years until his retirement.

During this time John and Margaret's children Anna and Simon were born. The couple were later blessed with three grandsons, Frank, Johnny and Jack, to all of whom we send our sympathy at this sad time.

Many of John's interests touched on service to the community. He ran two

local charities, Rands and the Hitchin Educational Foundation, served 10 years as chairman of the Howard Cottage Association in Letchworth and was involved with the Heritage Foundation.

He was chairman and secretary of Letchworth Round Table and, during 1982-83, chairman of the Rotary Club of Hitchin. He was later made an honorary member and received the prestigious Paul Harris Medallion for outstanding services to the community - an award that is not given lightly and of which John was justifiably very proud. In 1999 he served as chairman of Hitchin and District PROBUS Club.

It was during his grammar school days that John first became interested in amateur dramatics, although he might easily have been put off by an unfortunate episode while rehearsing for his first major role as Lady Capulet in the school's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. While moving furniture from the stage to rehearse, he accidentally

knocked over the lectern sending the treasured school bible sliding across the floor – an incident witnessed by the headmaster T. E. Jones, who was so furious that he cancelled the entire production on the spot. The following day he relented and said the play could go ahead but Coxall would not be taking part. However, after the producer had explained that young John's good looks made him the only boy remotely suitable for the role of Lady Capulet, the head grudgingly lifted his ban and John was re-instated in the role.

His first appearance with the Bancroft Players was in March 1949 in the comic role of Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer*. The follow year, when his sister Ann took the title role in Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, John was cast as her brother Stephen. At the time Shaw, then in his 90s, was living nearby at Ayot St Lawrence: when told about the Coxall pairing he said it was the only time he had known the characters to be played by a real-life brother and sister.

At the age of 19, when John was still a trainee surveyor with Hitchin Council, it was he who suggested the council should convert the woodland adjacent to Windmill Hill into an open air theatre. Tony King liked the idea and encouraged him to design a theatre space and take charge of its construction. For this, John was allocated a budget of £200. The Dell, as it became known, was completed in time for the



Set building with Bob Adams and Edgar Bennett in the late 1940s.

1951 Festival of Britain celebrations and opened with a Bancroft Players production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which John played a leading role. He went on to appear in more than 30 BP productions, his last being the musical *Annie* in 1994.

As a gifted craftsman John also enjoyed working backstage with the set-building team, particularly when, as he grew older, he found he was having trouble remembering lines.

There is no doubt that, without John's business skills, the Bancroft Players would not be in the enviable position they are in today – one of the few amateur dramatic societies to own and run their own theatre. John negotiated the purchase of the society's first home, St Anne's Hall, in 1956. The rather run-down wooden building with a corrugated iron roof stood in Garden Row, just off Verulam Road. Under John's guidance members transformed it into 'The Players' Theatre. It seated 80 people and served as our home for 28 years.

When we built the Queen Mother Theatre in 1983 the little hall that John had originally bought for £800 was sold to a developer for £26,000, thus giving our fund-raising appeal for the new theatre a brilliant start. Running the QMT meant we now had an annual financial turnover of thousands, rather than the few hundreds before. So we relied very much on John's business acumen throughout that first 30 years. As our chairman during much of that time, he played a leading role in the development of the building to the size it is today.

Having joined in the 1940s, John was the Society's longest-serving member - a distinction that now passes to his sister-in-law, Sally Hull. Sally will tell you that "Cockers" also had a very mischievous sense of humour and, having been one of his regular targets for practical jokes, she well remembers how his face would crinkle up with glee at the sight of someone making a fool of themselves.

In more serious moments, however, John could be a master of diplomacy, not least when having to deal with



*Richard Whitmore and John Coxall in 1977, holding a model of the QMT by David Payne. St Anne's Hall, the society's first home, is behind them.*

controversial decisions. First and foremost he was a good listener, always fair and never passing judgement on disputes or opinions until he had heard the whole story. His naturally cheerful nature that had been his great virtue throughout life no doubt helped to see him through the ten years of his progressively worsening Parkinson's disease.

The second half of this time was spent at Wymondley Nursing Home, where, Margaret will tell you, he was wonderfully cared for, becoming a much-loved "Father Figure" to those who nursed him. So much so that he frequently found himself being asked for advice on matters ranging from the legal problems of home-buying to boyfriends. Advice that he was always pleased to give.

We who knew him well will not be surprised by this because – that was John. A generous, kind and – at the end – very courageous man who throughout life, had adhered to that motto of Rotary to which he proudly belonged – "Service above Self."

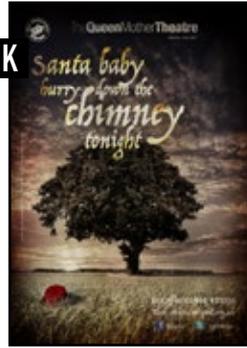
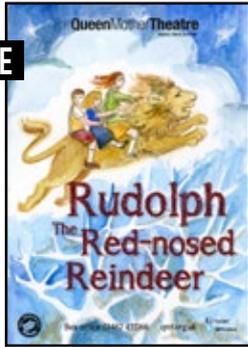
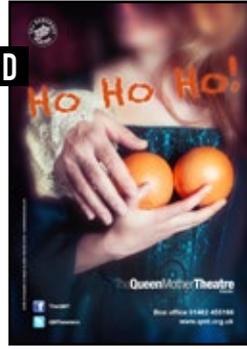
John was just old enough to remember the Hitchin lawyer and historian Reginald Hine, a flamboyant figure from the early part of the last century who was the first Vice-President of The Bancroft Players. I'm pretty sure John would enjoy my pinching a couple of lines from Mr Hine's work to see him on his way. They were first spotted in the 1930s on a wreath that Hine had sent to the funeral of one of the "Hitchin Worthies" who appear in his book of that name. As our John proved to be an undoubted "Hitchin Worthy" of the 21st century, they surely apply to him as well.

*Gone to earth old friend  
And lost to mortal view.  
Good luck to you, where'er you wend  
Fresh woods and pastures new.*

*Richard Whitmore*



# How well do you remember 2016's shows?



Oh no! Santa promised Julian he'd take care of the 2017 calendar - but he sent his elves on a Photoshop course and now they've 'improved' all the posters.

Which just goes to show - never trust an elf with complex software.

Can you save Santa's day by identifying the correct titles for each of the 14 shows staged in 2016 by the Bancroft Players, Big Spirit and the Juniors?

Put the answers into the spaces provided below, and the shaded letters will spell out a seasonal message from the newsletter team.

Stuck? The answers are at the bottom of this page.

## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

### The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

(Main theatre)

9-11 and 16-18

December

### Auditions: hang

(Richard Whitmore Studio)

Mon 12 and Weds 14

December

### Christmas Quiz

20 December

### Playwriting group

3 January

### Proof

(Richard Whitmore Studio)

18-21 January

### Playwriting group

31 January

A: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

B: \_ \_ / \_ \_

C: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

D: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

E: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

F: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

G: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

H: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

I: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

J: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

K: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

L: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

M: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

N: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

O: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

P: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

Q: \_ \_ / \_ \_ / \_ \_

Answers: A - One Man Two Guvnors, B - The River, C - The Vicar of Dibley, D - The Ballroom, Merry Christmas to you all!  
E - The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, F - Vernon God Little, G - Country Wife, H - The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, I - The Tempest, J - The Lady in the Van, K - Sklyght, L - Waiting for Godot, M - Be My Baby, N - The New Electric

# After the nightmare, Big Spirit is living the dream

*With the terrifying 'Lights Out at Blake's Theatre' complete, the QMT's youth group is already turning to new challenges. Rory Reynolds explains.*

Well it's full steam ahead now for *Legally Blonde - The Musical*. I can't tell you how excited everyone is - it is literally the dream musical show.

We have plenty of time to get the thing into good shape (it's on at the end of April) and with such a catchy songbook and a funny, lively script - we definitely want to do it justice.

We have a philosophy in the Youth theatre which is 'keep on truckin', that is to say, keep on acting. We have a strong belief that the more you act, the better you get at it. Strange that isn't it? It's almost as though acting is a craft.

Well of course it's a craft, that's why it's better to learn through doing than through reading a book or passing an



*The cast of Lights Out at Blake's Theatre*

exam in it. To this end we pile play on top of play - or rather playlet on top of playlet.

The playlets are a chance for the older Big Spiriters to exercise their director-muscles by taking on a shorter piece and then directing the younger ones in it. We hold some director classes and offer constructive supervision along the way to ensure that all the right stuff is being passed on.

Now is the season for the drama school auditions. There's always a handful of 18, 19 and 20-year-olds looking to get into RADA, Central, Mountview or LAMDA and the very excellent Rob

Hughes takes charge of prepping them for the challenge. He recruits the likes of Carlyss Peer, Adam Wright and Kaffe Keating to help him and all in all I think he does a splendid job.

Thousands apply and just a handful are chosen so it's always a bit of a lottery but I think the record of Big Spirit in getting actors into prestigious drama schools is second to none.

Thanks for your support with our last show by the way - it was pretty unusual and not many theatres would have given us the run of the place like you guys did. So thanks to you all.

Happy Christmas from us to you!

## Audition reminder

# hang

First performed at the Royal Court last year, *hang* is a three-hander that runs for 70 minutes and simmers all the way to the boil.

Three (there are no names just numbers) is a woman who has suffered some traumatising crime against her family. Now she has the chance - the power - to determine the perpetrator's fate. She has been invited to meet two paper-shuffling bureaucrats who will help her decide. The writing is poised and poetic, with pitch-black humour. We are asked to consider our own response to the worst kind of horror: would we seek an equally vicious revenge?

The play is set in what the writer calls the 'nearly now', in a clinically nondescript meeting room. The dialogue is stylised, with floating half-sentences tripping over each other from one character to the next, letting us hear interrupted thought. This will be very difficult to learn, requiring the actors to know not only their own lines, but a good proportion of the other actors' too. Like learning a three part harmony. It's not going to be easy, but it will be great fun!

**Contact:** Keith Swainston on 07799 803623 or keith.swainston@hotmail.co.uk

## The Studio

### THE ROLES:

The characters do not have names but are numbered:

**One:** female

**Two:** male or female

**Three:** female

### THE DETAILS:

**By:** debbie tucker green, directed by Keith Swainston

**Auditions:** Mon 12 & Wed 14 Dec

**Performances:** 15 - 18 March

**Rehearsals:** Mon & Wed from Jan 4

**Scripts:** Available from Box Office

**Age:** Age unimportant - casting will depend on appearance and how well the actors audition.

## Who's who in the Bancroft Players

### Executive Committee 2016 to 2017

Richard Whitmore  
*President Emeritus*

Frank Pratt  
*President*

Les Edwards  
*Chairman*

Susan Mellor  
*Secretary*

Tim Hallas  
*Treasurer*

Rory Reynolds  
*Artistic Director*

Nicki Pope  
*Production Manager (Main Theatre)*

David Lester  
*Production Manager (Studio)*

Chris Lane  
*Theatre Manager*

Julian Newman  
*Turner Business Manager*

David Borner  
*Committee Member*

Elliott Bunker  
*Committee Member*

Emma Saunders  
*Committee member*

Zara Schafer  
*Committee Member (The committee post of vice president is vacant following the death of John Coxall.)*

### Appointments 2016 to 2017

Vice-Chairman  
*Chris Lane*

Box Office Manager  
*Vacant*

Bar Committee  
*Frank Pratt, Roger Nobes*

Bar Rota  
*Maureen Nobes*  
Bookings Manager  
*Edith Pratt (evening), Keith Crook (day)*

Diary Organiser  
*Keith Crook*

Fire Officer  
*Chris Lane*

First Aid Officer  
*Paula Downes*

Front of House Manager  
*Paula Downes*

Health & Safety Coordinator  
*David Hillelson*

Junior Theatre Group  
*Alison Hudson*

Keys Distributor  
*Keith Crook*

Licensing Manager  
*Tim Hallas*

Membership  
*Edith Pratt*

Newsletter  
*Rosemary Bianchi*

Properties  
*Audrey Hawkins, Julie Chamberlain*

Publicity Manager  
*Julian Newman Turner*

Refreshments/Stewards  
*Lyn Bryars, Mo Mutton*

Set & Design Manager  
*Rosemary Bianchi*

Technical Manager  
*Alan Bailes*

Workshop Coordinator  
*Clive Hall*

Wardrobe Liaison  
*Sally Hull*

Welfare:  
*Vacant*

What's On Distribution  
*Susan Mellor*

Youth Theatre Group  
*Rory Reynolds*

200 Club  
*Paula Downes*

## Audition notice Main Theatre Steel Magnolias

A great opportunity for six strong female actors.

Truvy Jones runs a successful beauty salon in Chinquapin, Louisiana, where all the ladies in the neighborhood have a standing Saturday appointment.

Along with her anxious and eager assistant, Annelle, Truvy styles the hair of many of the women about town: wealthy widow and former first lady of Chinquapin, Clairee Belcher; local curmudgeon Ouiser Boudreaux ("I'm not crazy, I've just been in a bad mood for forty years"); intelligent and compassionate career woman M'Lynn; and her daughter Shelby, the prettiest girl in town.

Shelby's engagement is the talk of the town, but the joy and excitement of her wedding quickly turn to concern as she faces a risky pregnancy and a myriad of health complications. Eventually, when Shelby dies from complications related to her diabetes, M'Lynn has to deal with the most difficult of life's challenges: the loss of one's only child.

As the women of Chinquapin make their way over life's many hurdles together, they find comfort (and a fair amount of verbal ribbing) in one another. "You have no idea how wonderful you are," M'Lynn tells the ladies at the end. Truvy responds, with a smile: "Of course we do."

### THE ROLES:

**Truvy Jones:** Playing age - 40s. Should be able to convince as a professional hair-stylist

**Shelby Eatenton-Latcherie:** Playing age - mid 20s. Will need boyish, short hair for Act II

**Annelle Depuy-Desoto:** Playing age - a little younger than Shelby. Should be able to convince as a professional hair-stylist

**Clairee Belcher:** Playing age - 60s

**M'Lynn Eatenton:** Playing age - 40s

**Ouiser Boudreaux:** Playing age - 60s

## Christmas quiz

Join us at the the Great Christmas Quizzo for a festive ponder about the big questions of life - such as 'which other reindeer pull alongside Rudolf?' - force yourself to eat mince pies and while you're at it, why not partake of a libation?

Great prizes, great fun! Bring a team or come as you are.

PS you might have to join in the odd carol - sorry about that!

The shindig kicks off at 8pm, Tuesday 20 December, QMT bar.

### THE DETAILS:

**By:** Robert Harling, directed by Brian Seal

**Auditions:** Mon 6 and Wed 8 February

**Performances:** 15-20 May 2017

**Scripts:** Available from Box Office

**Accent:** All characters have a Deep South (Louisiana, USA) accent.

### COMING SOON:



**The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**  
9-11 and 16-18 December, Main theatre.



**Proof**  
18-21 January, Richard Whitmore Studio.

### Newsletter: Last date for copy

Items for publication should be submitted to the editors at newsletterqmt@live.com no later than the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. We aim to publish the next issue by the 26<sup>th</sup> of the month.