

History of the Society

Our break from the Faringdon Community Centre

Press articles with kind permission of 'The Faringdon Folly':

Theatre crisis meeting (Apr 1995)

Drama group severs links with Community Centre (May 1995)

Call for goodwill in theatre row (Jun 1995)

Players hope for theatre return (Aug 1996)

Curtain to rise once more at town's theatre (Oct 1996)

FDS shares vision of a centre for the performing arts (Apr 1999)

Lawyers called in as lights go out for Community Centre (Apr 1999)

Crisis meetings as players fight for independent theatre (Jun 1999)

April 1995 - Theatre crisis meeting

AFTER cancelling its current production in mid-rehearsal, Faringdon's highly regarded amateur theatre group will be meeting next week to take what could be a crucial decision for its future.

The Folly understands that Faringdon Community Theatre, which is affiliated to Faringdon Community Association, believes it has been treated unfairly over facilities being made available at the Community Centre. There has been frustration following accusations that the group were refused access to the theatre itself, and denied a room to rehearse in.

There has been further concern (reflected in complaints by members of the audience, one of whom wrote a letter for publication in the February issue of the Folly) over the condition of toilets and other maintenance problems.

The Folly has received letters (not for publication) from other loyal theatre goers, anxious that we should sound a warning for the future of one of Oxfordshire's best local groups. There appears to have been a growing unease among members that the standard of their productions, as well as the spirit of the company itself, is being threatened.

After calling off their summer play, *Visiting Hours* by Richard Harris, the group released this statement: "Due to circumstances beyond their control, members of Faringdon Community Theatre have decided to cancel their next production, currently in rehearsal. The members of the group would like to thank all audience members for their support and apologise for any disappointment the decision may cause. Details of future productions will be posted in the Faringdon Folly."

The committee decided to add nothing to the statement at this stage - until a general meeting is held next week. But it seems certain that the future direction of the group will be debated, including its continuing status within the Association, and possible alternative venues.

The Folly arranged an appointment with the Chairman of the Association, Andrew McGaw, so that the Association could give its side. He confirmed that he had received a letter of complaint, believing the problem was down to 'personalities' - but the interview was later cancelled, and Mr McGaw made it clear that he would not be able to respond before the Folly went to press two days later.

The matter seems likely to be on the agenda for the AGM of the Association in May. The Theatre Group hands all its profits to the Association, which last year added up to some £3,000.

Faringdon is one of the few local communities with a purpose-built theatre. It is rented by the Association along with the rest of the Community Centre from the Town Council, which at its meeting on April 12 ceremonially signed a new lease which came up for review this year (see photo). Both Council and Association expressed satisfaction with its final terms - including a 50 per cent increase in rent, to £1,500 a year.



The Mayor, Margaret Broughton, and the Chairman of the Community Association, Andrew McGaw, sign the new lease agreement for the Faringdon Community Centre with satisfaction on both sides. But the Association now faces internal unrest from the Community Theatre Group, who claim growing difficulties over the Centre's facilities.

May 1995 - Drama group severs links with Community Centre

Members of Faringdon Community Theatre have broken their ties with the Faringdon Community Association.

The move comes, in the words of committee member and spokesman Peter Webster, "in the realisation that we had to do something positive after putting up with the unpleasant and obstructive atmosphere at the Community Centre, or there was a danger of the group breaking up".

The players are to reconstitute themselves as the Faringdon Dramatic Society. Plans are being made to mount their next production, a pantomime, at the Com Exchange.

It means they will be abandoning the purpose-built theatre at the Community Centre - leaving behind all the lighting and other equipment that goes with it. The deteriorating relationship between the theatre group and the Association to which it has been aligned for several years, was highlighted

in the April edition of the Folly, following the cancellation of the current production in mid-rehearsal. At a subsequent special meeting, members voted 23-5 in a secret ballot to "go independent". But Mr Webster stressed that move to the Com Exchange was seen as a temporary situation, which could be altered "if the situation improves". There was unanimous backing to return to the community theatre as an independent hirer, in those circumstances.

It has been revealed that at least ten members were no longer prepared to "set foot" in the theatre under the Centre's present management regime. Mr Webster said the group had received no reply to a letter of complaint sent to the Association's Chairman, Andrew McGaw, prior to the special meeting. The letter arose out of allegations that the group was refused access to the theatre and denied a rehearsal room.

After the frustrations were aired in an information sheet for members earlier this year, the Centre's manager, Mick Ledbury, had written saying that no more dates would be offered and there would be no more drama activity until the 'problem' had been sorted out.

In a separate development, the Mayor of Faringdon, Margaret Broughton, has offered to meet with Mr McGaw and the Chairman of the theatre group, Beryl Rees, to try and mediate.

As the Community Theatre, the Group handed over all its income to the Community Association, and so now has to start raising funds of its own for lighting, etc. Although most of the equipment in the theatre is owned by the Association, some items including curtaining, scenery materials and some costumes came as direct gifts from benefactors and may be claimed by the Society.

Mr Webster said that the demands of mounting a production at the Corn Exchange were being treated as a challenge. "We will have to change our approach, but not our standards," he said.

The Dramatic Society will be contributing to a one-act play festival at Wantage in June, and a number of members are taking part in the top-rated Arcadians production at Quenington, Gloucestershire, in August, which is to go on tour to Royal Sandringham.

June 1995 - Call for goodwill in theatre row

Nancy B. Reeves
Faringdon

I AM extremely concerned and upset by the decision of the Dramatic Society to suspend productions in the Community Centre.

It was in 1948 that my husband Bill, then Superintendent of the Evening Institute, organised a drama class with the resulting production of The Ghost Train. This was so much enjoyed by the cast that we decided to form a Dramatic Society with Bill Carter as Producer, Gilbert Gregson as Stage Manager and Bill Reeves as Secretary/Treasurer.

For five years we grew from strength to strength, rehearsing in each other's houses, making the scenery in garages and putting on plays in the Corn Exchange, extending the stage and improvising with lighting and scenery. When the opportunity arose to take over the disused cinema at the Marine Camp we accepted the challenge enthusiastically, and for 19 years relished in the privilege of having our very own theatre with all its facilities both for producing plays and enjoying a social programme. Then in 1972 the blow fell when the whole site was taken over for the new housing estate – now Town End Road and Marines Drive.

We were thus homeless, and for six years we struggled on, putting on plays in Buckland. When the Community Centre was to be extensively altered, we were overjoyed when we learned that, largely due to the influence and encouragement of Bill White, a community theatre was to be specially built. Our first production was Post Horn Gallop in 1978. Since then, 44 plays and 11 pantomimes have been staged there. I was in the very first production, The Ghost Train, and have since taken 26 parts and produced 19 plays, there being some gaps in my activity due to illness. I have now been a Vice president of the Society for a number of years. During its history, the Society has had many problems, but survived them through the good will of all concerned. Now, there has been a clash of personalities which has led the Dramatic Society to make what seems to me a disastrous decision - to put on productions in the Corn Exchange.

Only one or two of the present members know anything of the days before we had the privilege of using the Community Theatre, and cannot appreciate the difficulties of rehearsing and staging a production where there are no stage facilities, curtains, lighting, dressing rooms, etc. etc. -trying to turn the hall into a theatre when there is a purpose built one just across the road!

Both sides have much to lose by this decision - the Community Centre through loss of revenue and the fact that many people come to plays when otherwise they might never cross the threshold, and the Dramatic Society through the privilege of having access to a theatre upon which much money and expertise has been spent over the years. Surely with goodwill and tolerance on both sides this unhappy situation can be resolved before irretrievable breakdown? There are members within the Society and certainly many patrons who are deeply disturbed by this acrimonious turn of events. It will require much grace to admit that there are faults on both sides, but surely worthwhile to preserve the tradition of dramatic excellence built up over the years by so many former members.

August 1996 - Players hope for theatre return

FARINGDON Dramatic Society could be set to make a partial return to the town's Community Centre theatre. following a split with Faringdon Community Association which led them to switch recent productions to the Corn Exchange.

The Association is negotiating with the Society, for their use of the Community Centre for a pantomime production in January/February next year. But the Society, is determined to retain its newly independent status, and will be treating the agreement for the pantomime as a one-off production on a trial basis. Provided that they are satisfied with the facilities at that time. they are prepared to discuss with the Association the possibility of using the Community Centre as a venue for other productions in the future. confirmed the Chairman. Alistair Warner.

But the Society's next planned production in November will be at Faringdon School. The play will be Agatha Christie's 'Witness for the Prosecution'. The Corn Exchange has meanwhile been booked for next year's Spring production, on May 15, 16 and 17.

The Society is planning to spend as much as £10,000 on lighting over the next three years - having been forced to leave behind at the Community Centre all the equipment built up over previous years. Some £3,000 of this cash will be spent on a basic lighting system for the Corn Exchange, and Faringdon Town Council has made a grant of £300 towards it.

The Society has pledged to hold any lighting bought directly with this money 'in trust' for the town, so that it could be available to other towns people free, on request.

Mr Warner said: "Faringdon Dramatic Society are thrilled to receive this grant. Not only does it demonstrate their continued support for the Society in its endeavour to bring the very best in amateur theatre to Faringdon, but it also forms the vital first step in our campaign to raise additional funds for lighting equipment from the Vale District Council and from the Arts Council National Lottery Fund."

The Town Council has also agreed to install a special 63a socket in the Corn Exchange. to make it easier for the Society to hire lighting equipment from other dramatic groups. It means that lighting can also be more comprehensive for future productions there.

October 1996 - Curtain to rise once more at town's theatre

FARINGDON Dramatic Society is set to return to the Community Centre Theatre for a pantomime production in the New Year - for the first time since leaving the Community Association to become independent in May 1995. But it will not be a permanent arrangement.

The Society has reached agreement following protracted negotiations over terms. It has booked the Theatre to perform the pantomime Sleeping Beauty on January 23, 24 and 25, and again on January 30 and 31 and February 1. It will be directed by Carole Tappenden. But for its next production, an Agatha Christie whodunnit, the Society will be performing at Faringdon School. The production of Witness for the Prosecution, directed by Joan Lee, has been booked for November 7, 8 and 9. In order to help those who find the out-of-town venue difficult, the Society is laying on special transport. Meanwhile the Corn Exchange has been booked for the Society's May production, on May 15,16 and 17. The Chairman of the Society, Alistair Warner, has made it clear to the Folly that the use of both Faringdon School and the Community Centre Theatre are somewhat experimental'. He declares: "We will, after each of these productions, be meeting to evaluate their relative merits, and deciding how suitable we think they are for use in the future. "Provided that they are found to be acceptable, then the Society will be free to choose between the Corn Exchange, the Community Centre Theatre and Faringdon School, for the venue that is most suitable on a production-by-production basis.

"I do not see the Society making any long-term commitment to any one venue, as was the case in the past, for the foreseeable future. Each director will be given the flexibility to choose the venue that they feel will be most appropriate for their production."

April 1999 - FDS shares vision of a centre for the performing arts

FARINGDON Dramatic Society has projected a blueprint for the town's ailing Community Centre to become a new focus for the performing arts.

As well as providing a home for their own productions and for visiting theatre groups, concerts, recitals, choral, dance, slide lectures and other local activities, ambitions even stretch to the provision of a 'part-time' studio cinema.

The Society has already won initial support in principle from the building's landlords, the Town Council, for their bid to set up a partnership with other local organisations to refurbish and re-equip

the theatre to give it an exciting new lease of life. They are particularly keen to offer a professional venue for local youth theatre productions and workshops.

Their vision is to separate the theatre from the rest of the building - whatever role it takes following the financial collapse of the Community Association that ran it until last month.

Whatever future lies in store for the rest of the Community Centre building, Faringdon Dramatic Society believe that their members have the proven enthusiasm and practical skills to be able to take a lead role in transforming the theatre into a self-contained, vibrant arts and activities centre. Said spokesman Alistair Warner: "We see the theatre as a real asset for the town, but it needs redeveloping and taking forward in new ways.

In return for having significant control over the way the theatre is operated, the Dramatic Society is prepared to invest cash as well as voluntary labour in ambitious schemes such as the urgent re-flooring of the stage and refurbishment of the below-stage storage area, new curtains, better lighting and sound, a new access onto Swan Lane, fixed seating and possibly even a balcony and orchestra pit.

Mr Warner explained that his Society was looking to be the lead partner, in association with other community groups, in a non-profit-making venture, which could attract substantial grant funding.

April 1999 - Lawyers called in as lights go out for Community Centre

The trouble-hit Faringdon Community Centre has now completely closed down, as an unpaid £500 bill led to electricity supplies being cut off.

Meanwhile, Faringdon Town Council, as landlords, are taking legal advice on the terms and conditions of the lease under which the Community Association rents the building. Documents are also likely to be examined to establish the status of a sub-tenanted flat from which the Association currently collects the rent. Questions will be asked, too, about how a £500 Council grant to the Association towards roof repairs appears to have been swallowed up by debt repayment. At the same time, the Council will also need to resolve what action to take over the £4,000 rent arrears owed to it by the Association - a bill which continues to mount up for local taxpayers.....

June 1999 - Crisis meetings as players fight for independent theatre

FARINGDON Dramatic Society members believe they are winning growing support for their ambitions to spearhead a new local Trust to take over the development and running of the town's Theatre.

But as expected, the annual meeting of the Society was vehemently opposed to any scheme which would bring them under the umbrella of the Community Association - as 'franchisees' or in any other guise.

The members decided, instead, to seek a long lease of 20-25 years directly from the Town Council. The plan would be dependent upon the Theatre being physically separated from the rest of the

Community Centre. They are determined that no revenue from the theatre should be used to prop up debts incurred by the Association.

Explained spokesman Tim Reeves: "All the proposals made in the Town Council discussion document for the new management structure of the Theatre were unpopular with the meeting, since they all rely upon a single structure for both the Theatre and the rest of the Community Centre. The meeting felt that the past experience of the Society was that this would be likely to lead to conflicts of interest in the running of the Theatre, and accentuate communication problems - fundamentally the same reasons that the Society decided to separate from the Community Association in 1995."

The Society believes that a long-term lease would make it easier to obtain grant-funding. It wants to be a major shareholder in a new Limited Company in which other organisations in the town would be invited to join. The major refurbishment of the Theatre, possibly including fixed seating, upgraded lighting and sound and even cinema equipment, would become a community enterprise.

But the whole future of the Community Centre is still highly uncertain. The rescue package which could be offered by Morlands Brewery in return for the right to take over the Community Centre bar operation, is expected to be on the table for consideration by Community Association members at a special meeting on June 29. But there remains the option that members could decide to wind up the Association altogether.

The following night, June 30, Faringdon Town Council is also holding a special meeting of its own. Councillors may be asked to vote on a scheme in which they would take over responsibility for direct management of some aspects of the Centre as one of a number of 'stakeholders' which would include Morlands running the bar. Alternatively, they may be faced with taking back entire responsibility for the building as main leaseholders.

It remains to be seen whether the Dramatic Society's ambitions for separating the Theatre from the rest of the building and from any Association involvement, can be accommodated or will win support.

In any case, any proposed new arrangements are likely to come under scrutiny from the owner of the building, Lord Faringdon - who leased it to the town under a 60-year deal. Through a sharp letter to the Town Council from his agent, he has already expressed concern over various aspects of both the past management regime and the condition of the building, as well as seeking details of the schemes proposed. The Council asked for a meeting with him, before pursuing any of the options.