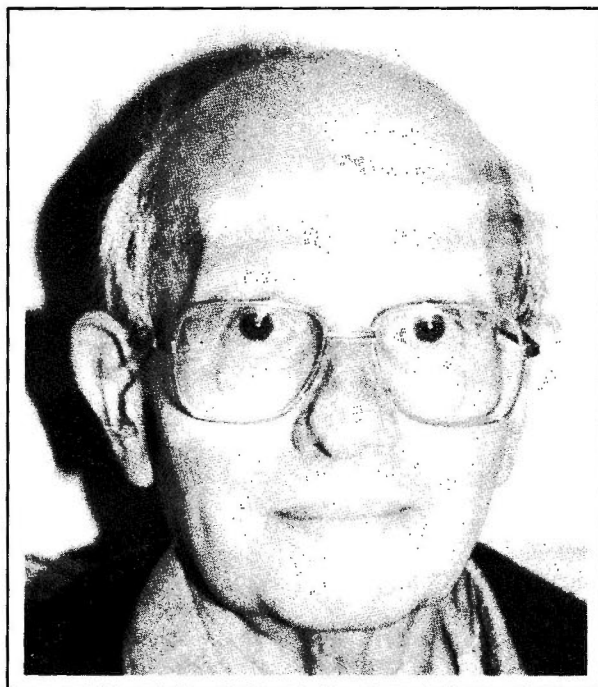


PEOPLE



George Young

"I hope this is going to be about the history of the Community Theatre, and not about me personally," was the first thing George Young said, when I went to talk to him at his home in Folly View Road, Faringdon.

"My life is not interesting at all, but the theatre is very important to me, and it ought to be very important for the people of Faringdon. They are very fortunate to have it."

Well, my task is not so very difficult, despite Mr Young's characteristic modesty. For his life and times in Faringdon, where he first settled just after the war, are virtually synonymous with those of the town's amateur theatricals. His arrival coincided almost exactly with the foundation of the first theatre group more than 40 years ago, and he has been actively involved ever since.

A Londoner, brought up in a hard-up East End dockworker's family, Mr Young's initial career was in

the chemical industry. Although it was a reserved occupation, he volunteered for military service — seeing out most of his time as an RAF radar mechanic stationed in relatively-peaceful southern India.

Though he initially returned to his former occupation after the war, he soon switched direction by taking a teacher training course. It was his first teaching post, at the old Faringdon Secondary Modern School, that brought him to Faringdon in 1949. He was later to become head of science, and stayed with the school until retirement, including the move to the new buildings at Tollington (among those he taught was the Community Theatre's patron, entertainer Pam Ayres).

The Faringdon that Mr Young first came to was still lit by gas lamps. It was a much busier shopping centre, but a much less congested one, from the point of view of traffic. The school at that time was in Southampton Street, where the headmaster was the rather fearsome Arnold

Willes (it was Mr Young who recommended to the District Council that his name should live on when the new houses of Willes Close were built on the site).

Many a pupil of that school will share memories with Mr Young of the spartan conditions. He still chuckles at the memory of the ex-POW cabins, pressed into use as extra classrooms, which were known colloquially by their occupants as The 'Uts. They were reached along the lane by the cricket field, which in winter often flowed with rainwater, inevitably known as The River 'Ut. Tollington must have seemed luxurious indeed by comparison.

Within a year of starting his new job, Mr Young was drawn into the activities of the new theatre group, formed in 1949 as the fruit of a series of local drama classes. He is now one of four vice-presidents drawn from among those earliest members, who also include Doris Gregson, Nancy Reeves and Eileen Drew.

In those days, plays were produced in the Corn Exchange. There was no permanent stage, but heavy wooden structures were pushed together to form a platform. On the Sunday morning following a production, the scenery had to be dismantled and manhandled to the home of one of the members, Stanley Mills, where it was stored in his garage.

The 'changing rooms' for the actors were the offices of the Savings Bank, at the rear of the Corn Exchange. Rehearsals were held at the old Friends Meeting House, after which members would retire to the Duke of Wellington opposite.

The group's very first production was *The Ghost Train*. But the first in which Mr Young took part on stage was *Distinguished Gathering* (he is pictured here, with Nancy Reeves and Kath Allinson (a games mistress at the Secondary Modern

School). His second was *What Lies There*. Although he was to appear in many more subsequent productions, it was behind the scenes that Mr Young perhaps contributed most – particularly with the lighting, but also with props, set-building, and administration.

The year 1953 saw a move into Faringdon's famous Little Theatre, a nissen hut on the former marines camp, now the Butts Close housing estate. The first performance was of Emyln Williams' *The Late Christopher Bean*. Here, for the first time, the group had a theatre of its own, with permanent facilities, including a job-lot of tip-up seats bought in for the purpose. It even had its own social club, housed in the former camp armoury next door, and of which Mr Young was secretary/treasurer for a number of years.

The Little Theatre was home to the group for almost 20 years, but when

redevelopment plans forced them out, they had nowhere to go. For six years from 1972, they stored their scenery in what is now the Community Centre's Jubilee Room, and were restricted to putting on a couple of guest productions at Buckland Village Hall.

Largely through the inspiration of Bill White, now the Community Theatre's president, the present splendid new permanent theatre was built — launched in 1978 with a production of *Post Horn Gallop*. It is a facility of which the Community Association and the theatre group are justly proud — but which Mr Young feels is not sufficiently appreciated by Faringdon. "It has given me, and still gives me, a great deal of satisfaction to see a small town like ours with such a splendid theatre of its own, and I sincerely hope it can carry on," he says.

Older members readily acknowledge that Mr Young, as one of the 'old originals' and Chairman for many years after the move into the Community Centre theatre, has been instrumental in helping to keep amateur theatre alive in Faringdon for so long.

It is some time since he last appeared on the stage, in an Alan Ayckbourn play. On that occasion he had no lines to say at all. Already busy with his front-of-house role, Mr Young had merely to change into overcoat and flat cap. and walk on to the

set just once throughout the entire play, silently place a drum on a table, and walk off again. It is still remembered as a supremely funny moment, though he said not a word.

Ask him about his favourite productions from the years gone by, and he will pick out the comedies and the Aldwych farces. "I suppose I just loved the opportunity to make people laugh," he says.

Mr Young, a bachelor who has a brother living in Hampshire and a widowed sister-in-law in New Zealand, will soon be 78. He is not a well man, and finds it difficult now to get to the theatre. He has left a considerable gap. For his part, Mr Young says he misses the great team spirit involved in bringing a production to its final performance. With a twinkle in his eye, he suggests that, as much as anything, the members probably miss his regular exhortations that there is never as much rehearsal time left as they think...

But the real debt to his practical contribution over more than 40 years is encapsulated by this phrase in a recent letter of good wishes to Mr Young from the Community Theatre: "As one of our oldest and most respected members, your influence and support is being sorely missed."



Pictures from the past: (above) Mr Young's first stage appearance, in *Distinguished Gathering*, performed in 1950. He is seen with Nancy Reeves and Kath Allinson.

(Left) At work outside the former 'Little Theatre' with colleagues Arthur Probert, Bob Drew and Cyril Wirdnam.