

CELEBRATING 120 YEARS *in 2011*

THE THEATRICAL GUILD

The Charity for Backstage and Front of House



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120 YEARS IN 2011

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ADOPTED CHARITY 2011



MRS. C. L. CARSON.
The Founder of the Guild.

PRESIDENTS AND HOLDERS OF THE CHAIR 1891 TO 2011

Founder

Mrs. C. L. Carson (Kittie)

Presidents

Miss Fanny Brough
Dame Irene Vanburgh DBE
Miss Athene Seyler CBE
Miss Evelyn Laye CBE
Lady Richardson
Miss Wendy Toye CBE D. Litt.
Miss Phyllida Law

Chairmen

Dame May Whitty DBE
Miss Victoria Addison
Miss Jill Esmond
Lady Sinden
Miss Gwen Watford
Lady Hopkins
Miss Joanna McCallum
Miss Liz Robertson
Miss Belinda Lang

THE HISTORY OF THE THEATRICAL GUILD

ACT 1

One summer evening in 1927, Adèle Astaire, Fred's sister, was put up for auction as a dance partner in aid of The Theatrical Ladies Guild, as it was then known, and attracted the attention of a leading department store manager and owner.

"Bidding started at £5," Adèle told the Evening News. "The men were flattering, and the bidding mounted steadily until I was knocked down to Mr Selfridge for £50. We had a waltz and I expect that was the most expensive waltz Mr Selfridge ever had...so few people waltz well nowadays."

This manner of raising money for one of Britain's oldest and best-loved theatrical charities – re-named The Theatrical Guild, or TTG, in 2001, so as not to give the impression that only ladies need apply – persisted down the years in various self-help adventures reflecting the deeply embedded place the charity holds in the affections of the whole theatrical profession.

What is The Theatrical Guild, what does it do, and why does it matter? It exists, in the words of its constitution, to give relief or assistance to members of the Theatrical profession in financial distress – backstage staff, technicians and front-of-house staff working in theatre management, as ushers and in box offices, bars and at stage doors. In other words, it is the unseen, unsung heroes and heroines of the British theatre, the ones not in the limelight.

The bare facts are that The Theatrical Guild at the moment supports approximately 60 beneficiaries annually – each one receiving around £1,000 per year, while also giving one-off grants for immediate cases. In order to continue this work, The Theatrical Guild needs to raise at least £100,000 each year.

The connection between the charity and its practitioners has always been close, from the minute the actress Kittie Carson gathered some of her friends into a well-meaning huddle on 13 November 1891 in her house in Great Russell Street near the British Museum, with the intention of addressing the sad cases of their poor sisters in adversity, maternity and the provinces; not just the actresses, but the cleaners, dressers, choristers and extras.



Kittie and her Busy Bees

THE HISTORY OF THE THEATRICAL GUILD



Dame May Whitty, "I've got everything Betty Grable has, only I've had it longer"

In those days, all actors had to provide their own costumes, so The Theatrical Ladies Guild was also a sort of unofficial wardrobe service to the needy touring thespian,

and no one ever joined without donating a parcel of clothes. And each member thereafter promised a shilling and at least two articles of clothing a year.

Soon after the inauguration, Kittie Carson's dining room was overflowing with new members, not to mention the ever increasing volume of clothing either donated or stitched during the "bee" afternoons, always held on a Friday between 3pm and 5pm (with a restorative cup of tea supplied).

In 1896, premises were taken at 30 Wellington Street in Covent Garden – now, suitably enough, the site of PJ's bar and grill, a popular theatrical haunt for theatre-goers and professionals alike. As membership



Wendy Toye

grew past the eight hundred mark, the offices were relocated in Russell Street nearby, and later back to 90 Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury, near the charity's birthplace. The number of garments donated between

1895 and 1911 was said to be 47,364; that's an awful lot of warm and basic clothing, as well as crinolines, cummerbunds and cami-knickers.

The growth and influence of the charity coincided with the flowering of British stage talent before and after the First World War. The biggest stars of the day were on the committee: Dame Irene Vanbrugh, Fanny Brough and Dame May Whitty, the first film and stage actress to be made a DBE in 1918 in recognition of her charitable work during

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WWI, while two prominent Edwardian members, Lillian Braithwaite and Eva Moore, were succeeded in running the Guild by their own daughters, Joyce Carey and Jill Esmond.

Tea parties held by the Guild at the Royal Albert Hall became a regular feature of The Theatrical calendar in the early 1900's, with songs, recitals and themed tables hosted by the likes of Dame Irene Vanbrugh, Lillah McCarthy, Marie Tempest and Marie Lohr. And the annual general meetings often made the society pages of the newspapers, appropriately commended for the committee members' dress sense. In 1921, Dame Irene Vanbrugh arrived to chair the meeting at the Aldwych

"in a sable trimmed black velvet coat and a black ospreyed toque", while Lillian Braithwaite sported a black crêpe de Chine frock and a mushroom-coloured hat. Nor were the men averse to trends in fashion, though one actor, in a letter read out by his wife at the 1924 AGM in the Haymarket Theatre, declared, on emptying his wardrobe for the charity: "I have found one frock-coat, suitable for villains, mortgage foreclosures and solicitors murdered in the first act; and a suit in which I was married, suitable for deceived victims and long-suffering heroes!"

The sewing bees continued right through to the Second World War. Some of the clothes collections were eventually bought by Cosprop, a big theatrical costumier, as the need for them waned and theatres acquired their own wardrobe departments.

ACT 2

Not much sewing goes on these days, but a new fundraising initiative, The First Night Riders, was formed with the sole aim of raising money for The Theatrical Guild, and in June 2010 a group of motorbike riding entertainment



First Night Riders. Photo by Karen Nichols.

and theatrical professionals took part in an 8-day UK safari around 18 of Britain's most fascinating theatres, raising the profile and much needed funds for The Theatrical Guild.



Phyllida Law

The journey gave a whole new definition to the phrase "touring theatre", starting at the National Theatre on the South Bank in London and taking in the Hampstead Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford upon Avon, the Mill at Sonning, the Grand in Swansea, the Tron in Glasgow and the Curve in Leicester, to name but a few. The Administrator, following the riders safely by car, met many backstage staff en route who have benefitted from The Theatrical Guild's help, and promoted the aims of The Guild to backstage and FOH staff.

The Charity, with its three hundred friends – many more now needed – do what they can to fill the gaps left by the social services and unlucky chance. Technicians fall off the set; sometimes the set falls on them. Carpenters occasionally chop off their own fingers! And if a huge electricity board is shifted by two workmen – when four are stipulated in the rules, but not always available – and one of them puts his back out, the relevant union may not have the best case in the world with the employing management. The Theatrical Guild can then step in and offer financial assistance.

Committee members often visit beneficiaries, or applicants, to assess their circumstances and report back on progress. Although there is plenty of assistance for people in the National Health Service and the other social services, the urgency of the Guild's contribution remains just as pressing. The charity has recently supplied a wheelchair for an arthritic former box office manageress. And a beneficiary succumbing to dementia was recently helped into a home, where contact is maintained on a regular basis. The committee members often have to deal with people at the very end of their tether, and this can be challenging, in a good way, all round.

Each monthly meeting deals with small and large cases, and all applications are considered.

In the minutes of a meeting in 1975, regret is expressed at the death of a regular beneficiary who was wardrobe mistress at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane for eighteen years, while applications for warm underwear, knickers and vests, are seriously pondered.

I love the entry, too, which registers in 1977, with regret, "the death of Miss Beatrice Greeke, an actress aged 87, who regularly called at the office [then situated in the Society of London Theatre's headquarters in Bedford Chambers, Covent Garden] and at times slept in the armchair. She did not need financial help, but was seeking loving friendship and understanding."

Such invaluable pastoral care is endemic to the charity and continues today in the Pass Door Club, which convenes five times a year in the afternoon in the New Players Theatre club underneath the Charing Cross arches. Sometimes there might be one or two people sharing a drink and a gossip; sometimes, one or two dozen. For backstage veterans and former box office staff or front-of-house management, it is a pleasant opportunity to keep in touch and still feel connected to the ongoing history and fine traditions of their profession.



Athene Seyler, former President, with Joanna David, current Vice-President and baby Freddie Fox.

The show must go on...

The Charity will celebrate its 120th Anniversary in 2011. There will be various exciting and fun initiatives leading up to the anniversary to raise much needed money, including the repeat of First Night Riders and the recreation of our famous tea parties.

The Theatrical Guild will be Whatsonstage.com's adopted charity for 2011 and both organisations will be hosting an Inter Theatre Best Dressed Christmas Tree Competition with sponsorship proceeds going to The Guild.

2010/11 will also see a review of the support the Charity currently gives in order to ensure it meet the needs of theatre staff in the 21st Century. Ideas currently being considered include offering a welfare advice service and the provision of training grants.

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul," says Othello in another context, and the cause of The Theatrical Guild, itself dedicated to good causes of all sorts, is well worth fostering. Its work is modest, important, essential and most attractively geared to the everyday needs of colleagues on a human, humane, scale. And in driving up the membership, raising funds and continuing to support the unsung bedrock, backstage and front-of-house heroes of the profession, the charity itself confirms its place at the very heart of the industry it supports so well.

MICHAEL COVENEY

Committee then



Committee now



Photo by Roy Tan

THE THEATRICAL GUILD

“Thank God for The Theatrical Guild”

Sir Noël Coward



Evelyn Laye, former President, and Sir Noël Coward

Invaluable and continued support

“In 2007, after spending 56 glorious years in the profession (the last 20 as a Dresser), I had a stroke, resulting in paralysis on the right hand side of my body. Ten months later I had breast cancer. The Theatrical Guild is a marvellous charity and made me a life long beneficiary. Their help throughout my illness was invaluable and their continued support with small quarterly grants takes the pressure off those unwelcome bills. I would be totally lost without them. Their concern and care for people in need of their service is above and beyond all expectation. It’s not just the money, it’s the personal contact with the profession, showing me that I’m not forgotten.”

Making career dreams come true

“The Theatrical Guild supported me and enabled me to develop my career in theatre design. Having worked in theatre wardrobe for twenty years, with a keen interest in theatre design and no previous training, I was accepted onto, and with TTG support able to complete, the Post Graduate Diploma In Theatre Design course at The Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. This has now allowed me to pursue a whole new career as a Theatre Designer in an industry which I feel passionate about. Without your support, this could not have been possible for me.

Thank you all for making this happen.”

WITH THANKS TO THE NOËL COWARD FOUNDATION AND DEWYNTERS