

## **CHOOSING THE SEASON**

### **GENERAL**

GST's theatrical year is not a calendar year. It has always begun in autumn and usually consists of five plays. Two of these are put on before Christmas, usually one in October and one in late November. These productions currently take place at the Gatehouse in Highgate. We then have the family show, normally in February, and this is the show most likely to have parts for children. This, and the spring show (normally in April) are currently taking place at the Phoenix Theatre, which is attached to King Alfred's School in Golders Green. These two productions are usually held during school holidays. Our final show of the year is the open-air production in Little Wood although in 2019 we are experimenting by running two plays in the wood in repertory. Occasionally there will be deviations from this format: we have sometimes put on a sixth production, for example. We also usually take one production to the Isle of Man for the Easter Drama Festival, although organisation of this generally falls outside the remit of the Casting and Selection Committee and it is invariably not a new production but one put on earlier in the season. Five productions in a year is therefore the norm. It is the task of the **Casting and Selection Committee** to decide what those productions are going to be.

The Committee is also responsible for selecting **Studio Productions**. In an average year we will put on three of these. A separate note has been prepared to set out the main purposes of Studio Productions.

### **CASTING AND SELECTION COMMITTEE**

The Casting and Selection Committee is elected at each Annual General Meeting in October. It consists of five people, four members and a Secretary. Each of the members serves for two years: the Secretary's post is permanent. At each AGM two of the members retire and are replaced by two new ones. This ensures both continuity and fresh ideas. Any fully paid-up member of GST is entitled to stand for election to the Committee and information relating to that process is issued by the General Committee Secretary before the AGM.

### **THE SEASON**

Planning the annual season is a long-term process. When a new committee takes over in October the expectation is that the forthcoming season of five plays will already have been selected by the previous committee. So, for example, the Committee taking over in October 2019 should not expect to have to choose any of the plays for the 2019-20 season. Not only that, the new Committee will also start work in the hope that one or two plays or directors for the 2020-21 season might have been pencilled in. The main task of the new Committee in 2019 will therefore be to select the remaining productions for the calendar year 2020 and the February show for 2021. The February show, which is usually the family show, needs to be planned well in advance as it will often be a musical or have music and dance in it, and therefore will require a much longer preparation time.

In practice matters very rarely work out that simply. For example, it often turns out we cannot obtain a licence to put on plays which we want to do. A play remains in copyright for 70 years after the death of its author so a licence to perform it has to be obtained for any play still in copyright: these requests are frequently refused and directors sometimes have to undergo the frustration of

finding several of their choices unavailable. Other complications may arise: for example, our plans to do 'Peter Pan' in 2018 were scuppered when we discovered that it was going to be performed by another group at the same venue only a few weeks earlier. It is therefore extremely probable that the incoming committee will have as its priority completing the unfinished work of the previous committee before starting to consider the five plays for which it is primarily responsible.

## **HOW WE GO ABOUT CHOOSING THE SEASON**

The practice in many amateur dramatic societies is to identify the plays they want to do and then find someone to direct them. Although this has been done by GST in the past, the current practice is to start the selection process by identifying **directors** and asking them to select a play (or plays) that they might like to direct, within broad guidelines suggested by the Committee. The rationale for this is that directors are more likely to be committed to a play they have chosen themselves rather than one that has been selected for them.

GST has a number of experienced directors who direct regularly and who can expect, on average, to be offered a directing slot every two to three years. We are always looking for new directors: however, it is a GST requirement that no director will be given a full production until he or she has successfully directed a Studio Production first. Once a director has in the view of the Committee successfully produced a Studio Production (in effect a rehearsed reading) their name will be added to the list of potential directors for a full production. During the course of a season we try to ensure a mixture in terms of the levels of experience of the directors invited but it is sometimes the case that new directors may have to wait a little for a slot simply because of the need to organise the season some way in advance. The Committee maintains a list of members' interests so that we can identify all those who have expressed at one time or another an interest in directing.

Once a director has been invited to take up a slot the Committee asks that director to put forward a play or (preferably) a list of plays that he or she would like to do. (In the rare cases where a director may not have a particular play in mind the committee will usually offer a choice from a list of plays suggested over the years as possible productions). The Committee will then consider the director's choices. This will involve reading the plays if they are unfamiliar or, quite often, asking the director to attend a C&S meeting to talk about the play(s) selected. If a director very much wants to do one play in particular then the Committee will generally be supportive. However, there are many reasons why the Committee might not endorse a particular play: for example, it might be though too obscure to attract an audience, it might be difficult to cast, it might be considered the wrong play for the venue or it might be very expensive to produce. We would also take into account whether we had done the play before and, if so, how recently. The Committee will also be looking at how the play might fit in with the plays already selected for the season. In the latter context the Committee is trying to take into account the elusive quality of balance.

## **THE BALANCE OF THE SEASON**

In choosing the five plays that will make up a season, the Committee is trying to achieve a number of objectives, of which the following are the key ones:

### **a Variety**

It is important that the season contains a good mixture. Therefore, in an average season, the Committee would try to include at least one classic play (Shakespeare, Wilde, Sheridan etc); at least one play with plenty of parts for children (usually the February show); one new play; at least one

comedy and perhaps something unusual, possibly a forgotten play that deserves revival or a play that a particular director is very passionate about. Some of these categories overlap, of course. We have also, from time to time, put on plays written by GST members themselves but point d) below is particularly relevant in that context. It is not our practice to consider for production unsolicited manuscripts from people who are not members of GST.

### **b Opportunities to perform**

Most people join an amateur dramatic society in order to act: if they don't get the chance to, they will go elsewhere. We therefore need to ensure that members get enough opportunities to do exactly that. With a membership of over 200 (although admittedly not all of these members will want to act) this is very difficult to achieve and over the years there have been fairly regular accusations that we do not provide enough parts for young people, old people, women, young men, dogs etc etc. We take account of these criticisms where we can and recently, for example, to address a recognised and accepted imbalance we put on two plays ('The Regina Monologues' and 'Di & Viv & Rose') which had all female casts. It is, however, inevitable that some people will feel that they have not been given enough opportunities to act and there is no simple solution to that problem.

We also adopt a policy of open auditions for productions. This means that, at any audition, established members are competing against people who may never have performed for GST before. The key justification for this policy is that it allows new blood into the group and one of the main reasons why GST has survived where other local drama groups have not is because we are constantly welcoming new talent. There is, however, no doubt that this creates tension when newcomers are given parts which might have gone to others who have been members for some time. The Committee and directors constantly need, therefore, to be aware of this element when it comes to deciding casting for a particular show and always try to bear in mind that, just because someone auditions well, it does not necessarily follow that their performance will be at the same level (and, of course, vice versa – some excellent actors perform poorly at auditions).

### **c The venues**

GST does not have its own theatre. While this is in most respects a pity it is also an opportunity because the three venues we currently use (the Gatehouse at Highgate, the Phoenix Theatre in King Alfred's School and Little Wood) are all very different. This means that GST probably has the opportunity to do a wider range of plays than we could if we were restricted to one venue. But it is important to recognise that a play which will be viable in one venue may not be in another: a director thinking of putting on a modern play with a small cast is much more likely to make a success of it at the Gatehouse than in the Wood. The Gatehouse also has its own regular audience and the approval of the Gatehouse's manager is needed for each play we produce there. Matching venues and plays is, therefore, an important part of what the Committee tries to do.

### **d Making Money**

GST has to make money from its productions: if it fails to do so, then it cannot put on any shows at all. So, sordid though it may be to some, profitability is crucial to the Committee's considerations. However, the Committee's intention is not that all five productions in the season should make a profit (though it would be splendid if they did) but that the season as a whole should at the very least break even. In general, the family show is profitable because it involves children and children bring families and friends to see it. The open-air show in the Wood usually does well because overheads are fewer and, as we frequently do Shakespeare, there are no royalties. Other shows may be more of a gamble. It is a fact of life that the Committee has frequently had to recognise that

people are less likely to come and see a play if they have never heard of either the play or the author, however good it may be. This frustrates those members who want us to do more contemporary work dealing with current social concerns but the fact is that we cannot afford to put on more than one such play in a season as a main production, if that. One of the purposes of our Studio Productions (rehearsed readings) is to put on plays such as this, which we would not be able to mount as full productions.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, therefore, what the Casting and Selection Committee attempts to do is to put forward a varied season of plays that will allow as many members as possible to appear on stage and, at the same time, ensure that we manage at the end of it to make some kind of a profit. You cannot, however, please everyone. For every play we do that people like, some people won't like it: for every play that some people are cast in, some people won't be cast: for every play that makes a profit, some will make a loss. This is inevitable. But, hopefully, the above will clarify how we try to go about making the process as effective as possible. And, anyone who thinks they can do it better, is very welcome to stand for the Committee at the next AGM!

Casting and Selection Committee

July 2019