

EVER THOUGHT ABOUT JOINING YOUR LOCAL THEATRE?



**TYNEMOUTH PRIORY THEATRE
IS RUN ENTIRELY BY
VOLUNTEERS.
COULD YOU BE ONE?**

Join the Team at Tynemouth Priory Theatre

*Editorial by Ray Lowry, Company
Secretary Tynemouth Priory Theatre*

An actor colleague at Tynemouth Priory Theatre recently asked me what I enjoyed about being company secretary. Barely disguised in the question was the idea that only being on stage was enjoyable and that the back-stage, front-of-house work was a necessary evil. He was outwardly grateful that people like me were prepared to work so he could show off but I detected an inward pitying disbelief – that anyone could get satisfaction out of helping to run a theatre.

I have news for him. It is possibly more satisfying than actors can credit.

So I began to analyse what it is that I “get” from the non-acting side of Tynemouth Priory Theatre, though I do join the cast for some productions and enjoy that side enormously.

This is what I found: I get **positive emotion** doing most of the things I do (helping build sets, dressing sets, dismantling sets, managing customer and member databases, servicing the management committee, helping maintain the fabric of the building, supporting ticketing, doing front of house and so on).

Helping run the Theatre can be great fun. But it is more than that because I get **engagement**: not just being a passive observer of events but having to run with the momentum of the proceedings.

Combining the immediate audience-related feedback together with the long-term flourishing of the theatre imbue our activities with **meaning**.

The theatre is not just bricks and mortar – it is a great collection of people which gives us **positive relationships**, not just passing acquaintances.

And because there are well-defined crescendos in the life of an establishment like ours, we have regular doses of **accomplishment**, what's sometimes called an "achieving life".

It's all quite an attainment for what some regard as "just a hobby".

Needless to say I now realise from our psychologist daughter that these benefits I get from involvement Priory Theatre (positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment) are ingrained in well-being theory and go by the mnemonic PERMA¹. But I assure you it works whatever the theory.

So I invite you to consider: could joining Tynemouth Priory Theatre contribute to your well-being, and I don't just mean sitting in the audience and being

¹ Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness, Well-Being - and How to Achieve Them (Martin E. P. Seligman)

entertained? Please have a look at what follows and see if it could interest you.

Perhaps you have some spare time now you have retired/sold your company/ you are trying to rebalance your work-life balance; or the children have left home (and before they come back...). You might want to do something different in life, say try your hand at carpentry, become a marketing guru, manage a sizable organisation and get involved in servicing an audience.

There's a lot to do and we would welcome your involvement, no matter how much time you can give or how much responsibility you can handle.

*History of the Theatre*²

Tynemouth Priory Theatre club was formed in 1946 by Miss Ria Thompson. Forty founder members signed up and paid a membership fee of 10/6d (52p). The first full length production was *Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward and was performed in Holy Saviours Parish Hall which for a time became the club's temporary home. A shortage of venues and a lack of funds meant that for many years the Priory did not have a home of its own, and each time the Parish Hall was hired, it meant setting up all the seats and lighting and transferring all the scenery on a truck from the rehearsal rooms in order to build the set overnight. Membership gradually increased, and by 1951/52, the theatre membership stood at 375.

After many successful performances over the years, the club prospered and found a more permanent home when the former Wesleyan Chapel and School

² From Tynemouth Remembered Summerhill Books ISBN 9 781906721770, edited by Charlie Steele

(built 1882) in Percy Street was purchased in 1971. The members then set about transforming it into a traditional theatre, which entailed significant alteration work, including changes to the outside of the building. The arched Chapel windows were bricked up and sealed, and the external walls rendered, however the original stone date plaque was left intact above the front door and the former Chapel is now only recognisable by its frontal profile.

When conversion work was complete in 1972, the team gradually built up to five productions a year plus pantomimes and occasional interims and in 1976/77 the theatre hosted its first drama festival, and sadly, three years later in 1980, the founder, Ria Thompson died. As testimony to Ria, and its founder members, it is with a source of great pride that the organisation now own their own theatre. Many visitors have often described it as a little jewel.

Over the years many building improvements have been carried out and refurbishment work has ensured the comfort of all the patrons whilst affording good facilities for the members.

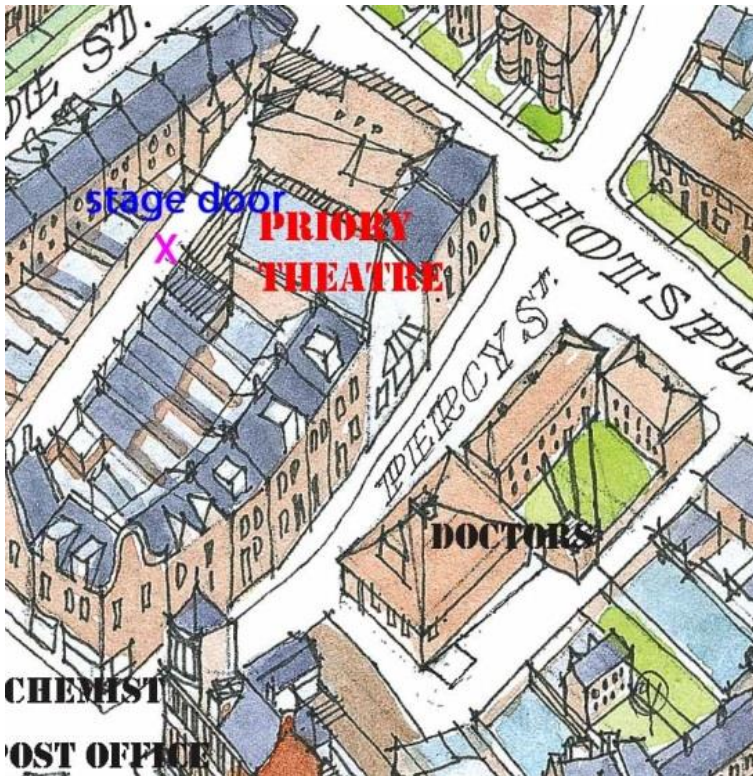
The main focus of activity is performing plays within the theatre; however the social side is regarded as being equally important.

There are regular club nights when members put on play-readings, mini-play performances, quiz nights and the like. Coffee is served every Saturday morning when members meet to chat, discuss and plan various social activities. Play-readings are a regular occurrence too, usually before any formal auditions. Everything within the theatre, whether associated with productions, rehearsals, stage management, wardrobes, props or maintenance is carried out by the members. Sets, backdrops and

costumes are all made and stored in-house.

The theatre relies on ticket sales and raffles, and along with its own Script Library, income is also generated by hiring out scenery cloths, sets and furniture to other theatre groups. During the main theatre season, five main productions are scheduled. Each play is performed over six nights from Monday to Saturday. During the winter season, pantomimes run throughout January, usually with twelve performances which include Saturday Matinees.

Tynemouth Priory Theatre is at the heart of the village



Members talk about what they do in the Theatre apart from acting.....

Front of house

“Apart from the on stage and technical, we need people to sell programmes in the auditorium and to sell raffle tickets; we run a raffle at every show, and it seems to be extremely popular and is quite useful as a fundraiser, which helps us to keep the seat prices as low as we can. We need four people each night for that work and another couple of people in the foyer to meet people, direct them to their seats, show them where they can collect their tickets and that sort of thing. So we need half a dozen people every night and anyone who’s interested in volunteering to help would be more than welcome”.

The management committee

“We meet once a month to discuss pretty well any issues arising in relation to the theatre, both in terms of the productions and the Theatre as a business. We are involved in appointing

directors for plays; we're also actively involved in considering some improvements to the theatre. The amount of work which is involved in these things is quite considerable involving architects and builders and it has to be remembered that all of this is being done by people who are volunteers and doing it in their spare time.

It's quite a big responsibility, certainly for the senior members on the committee, the officers, because we own the building and we're responsible for its upkeep. We have no income apart from what we produce by selling tickets. We don't receive any grant aid or any support of any kind financially. So it's important to keep the thing on an even keel. Fortunately, we are in a fairly sound financial position but it wouldn't take very many mistakes to spoil that".

"Our constitution says that we have to have three trustees—that's the secretary, the chairman and the

treasurer—and a committee of nine. And it's those 12 people who meet together once a month and administrate the theatre—discuss the business of the theatre, projects, the future, everything to do with the theatre, every aspect of it.

And everybody on the committee usually has a fairly defined role, for example hirings, publicity, technical etc. So we have an item on the agenda in the committee meeting where we discuss anything that's happening with the hirings, and the same for other standing responsibilities. So truly the committee run the theatre”.

“We appoint somebody every year to head a play-reading committee, or a group of play readers. And it is their role to forage for plays. And the directors—the people who direct plays—we encourage them to go out and seek a play that they want to do. And then the various plays are read by a group of people who then get it down to the five

which we will produce during the course of the year.

But if there was anything that came in unsuitable then it would be the committee, the main committee, that would say “Sorry, we’re not doing that” or “We don’t think that’s a very balanced season” or “We don’t think that this would appeal to our audience so can you find something else”? So the committee have the ultimate decisions on what goes on”.

A shared enterprise

“I get an enormous pride from seeing the theatre doing well, from seeing, say, during the pantomime, everybody enjoying themselves. Seeing the theatre flourish with lots and lots of people in it all working. I enjoy seeing people come together as a team and that’s also part of the chairman’s role, as well I think, to encourage and to remind people how well they’re doing. Because there’s a lot of people in Priory Theatre who work very, very hard and who don’t always

get a lot of credit for it. Which I think that's important.

I get a lot of pride out of seeing Priory Theatre doing well, hearing people say what a lovely little theatre it is, and enjoying the productions that we do. So its pride and pleasure; I also direct plays, which is nothing to do with being chairman, so I get a lot of satisfaction from that.

But I like, I suppose I like my own history within the theatre - I hope this doesn't sound silly - I like my longevity. I like the fact that I've been part of it for a long time and that we can carry forward the hopes and dreams of the people who founded the theatre in the late 1940s. And I think that's one of the worries that I have now, that there aren't the people, many people, who I can see will carry that on".

"I think the theatre plays a very important part in community life. You can tell by the audience reaction as the

people go out. We can seat 189 people in that theatre and I think the last play we did, the Agatha Christie, we had average audiences of about 75%, so we're playing to substantial houses.

And there are so few opportunities for live theatre these days. Short of the Theatre Royal, which is prohibitively expensive to a lot of people, the idea of local theatre is something that we can't afford to let go.

Even as a non-participant in some plays, for instance, if I've been away on holiday and I simply come back and I just go in there and see a play, you think, there is something about live entertainment on stage which no amount of film or television or electronic games is going to replace and we simply have to keep it going".

Looking after a theatre building

"I think it's unique. There are very, very few amateur groups who own their own theatre. I would say that 90% of the

groups in this country would give their eye teeth to have this place. It started off in 1947 when a handful of people in Tynemouth, led by a lady called Ria Thompson—her photograph's in the foyer—wanted Tynemouth to have a theatre and they just got together and they started producing plays at Holy Saviour's church hall.

It started off with one three-act play, and then they gradually built up and built up until they were doing five in a season. In the early days, the plays were put on for three nights, then it went to six nights, and ultimately went to seven nights. We used to do the plays, right up until about four years ago, seven nights.

And they saved and they worked, they really did, and eventually in 1972 bought this place. None of the current theatre was here. It was a disused Wesleyan chapel. It was used as a Post Office sorting office at one time. And we came in here in 1972 and completely

changed it. We've gradually extended and built onto it. All without any grants, we don't get any money from anybody, and that's an enormous sense of pride that we can run this place on our own without any help at all. So I think that is one of the things that make it special.

Another thing that makes it special is that we have about 500 season ticket holders, people who come to see all of our plays. They book at the beginning of the year, the same seat, for the same night, for each play. And some people have supported us for 30 – 40 years. So that's a source of great pride.

We are unique: we own the building and we don't have to answer to anybody ... we don't have to ... if you get funding, or grants, there are usually conditions. And we don't have to ... we just do what we (our members, the society, our audience) want”.

Costumes

“As soon as you know what play is being done, you start to think of the costumes. But when the play is cast, that is the key, that is when the costumes come to life. But you have to think ahead, even in though we are not full time professionals. For example, I have already bought a suit for a period production over six months before it is even cast (and we have to take a chance that the man cast to play the part will fit the costume!). For this sort of production, where the costumes can be complicated, it pays to start early, even if you can’t complete the work until the characters are cast. For example, we will be making some elements of the women’s skirts in advance, and then finish them off when we know who the individuals are after casting. I am always going round the charity shops, for instance buying black shoes for the men, because these days the actors don’t have the right ones themselves as they used to (they might need brown

shoes but all they have at home are trainers!).

When the actors in a play put on their costumes, it sends them onto a different level. It lifts their performance, but only if the outfit is right. If the outfit is wrong, you certainly get the vibes. And whether a costume is right or wrong extends to the undergarments as well, though some actors do not like wearing authentic undergarments, especially if they are uncomfortable. Sometime authenticity has to second place to comfort, because, for example, it can be very hot up on the stage, and tight corsets might inhibit their performance of long stretches of dialogue.

To be a good wardrobe person, one of the most important characteristics is to be a good people-person, to be able to deal with all the people involved in the production, especially the performing artists. If you haven't got the right way with actors, the wardrobe could be a boiling point! Often we will show an

actor how to put on a costume, and go out later to see they have rearranged the wearing to suit themselves. But you can't be too forceful because we are all volunteers and if an actor goes off in a huff, the director will want to have words. Diplomacy is high on the wardrobe person's must-have skill list".

There are other non-acting jobs as well at Tynemouth Priory Theatre:

- Set design, building and painting
- Props
- Sound engineering
- Lighting
- Sales and catering
- Social organisation
- Secretarial
- Marketing and publicity
- Building maintenance
- Human resources

*The back-stage routine on opening night
by a non-acting member*

“If you arrive early at the theatre, if you are the first one there, the place is quite dead. Except for the emergency lighting in the auditorium, there is complete darkness, for a theatre has to be well blacked-out to withstand daylight for a matinee.

The first person there, especially on the opening night, is the stage manager. He or she unlocks all the doors, fires up the electrics, unleashes the emergency exits and opens up a signing-in book for performers and staff.

The theatre gradually comes to life as people arrive. The actors, especially the principals are among the first to show up and sign in. On opening night, there are a large number of relatively new things to remember, so plenty of time has been allowed to check and double check. As the last few stragglers check in, the noise back-stage rises, as people

chatter and laugh nervously. But this is soon quietened when the audience is let in, about half an hour before curtain up (7 o'clock tonight).

As the auditorium fills up so an unfamiliar commotion washes back stage, a sound that has not been heard by the cast before in this production. The audience. It is both inspiring and terrifying. "How will they react? Will we perform well? Will it all come together?" If these sentiments are not articulated they are in people's minds.

The stage manager marks the progress to curtain up with regular timed announcements on the back stage intercom. Each dressing room has a live audio feed from a microphone on stage, so performers can keep an ear on how the show is progress, helping to time their next entrance. Over this feed the stage manager announces "fifteen minutes", "five minutes", and finally "please take your places for beginners". The next thing you know it's curtain up.

At the half way break everyone is surprisingly tired. It is mostly to do with the emotional effort going in to the first showing in front of a live audience. The state of the audience is much debated. Are they better than last time? Is this a typical first night audience? Did anyone drop a clanger?

The cast and crew assemble in the green room to chatter, drink coffee and socialise. It really has become an extended, happy family backstage, a bit cramped, but everyone getting on with everyone else, enjoying the experience and working as a real, if temporary, team.

All too quickly its back on for part two, then it's over. There is no post mortem tonight, just get the costumes off, tidy up for tomorrow, and off to the pub. It is only nine o'clock, so there is plenty of time to unwind. Once the drinks are in, the evening is gone over in detail. 'This went well, they liked that, did you see

what went wrong, someone missed a cue' and so on. The verdict is usually unanimous, and mostly it is positive. People trickle out of the pub and go on to other celebrations, or home. It is very satisfying, knowing that we have made some people's evening by doing what we did tonight”.



What is on offer by being a member of Tynemouth Priory Theatre

- An absorbing hobby
- A new circle of friends
- Social activities to get involved with
- Making a contribution to your local community
- Helping to preserve a long tradition
- A great deal of personal satisfaction and fulfilment
- Possibly the start of a career in showbusiness...

Please get in touch and come to look around (with no obligation)

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<http://www.tynemouth-priory-theatre.com>