Acting for the fun of it

by ROFFE THOMPSON

Thousands are doing it. They build their own stages, make scenery and rehearse for weeks for a one-night show. The solid support they get must be the envy of professionals

Pinner stages *The Paragon*. Mrs. Wood directs Pamela Moore and Peter Farr. Don Whatmore looks on

NOT LONG AFTER Miss Eileen Herlie became an overnight sensation in *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, a group of amateur actors decided to perform the play. There is a point in the action where shots are heard off-stage. Provided with two pistols loaded with blank, the amateurs' stage manager rushed outside the stage door and fired—straight into the face of a passing motor-cycle policeman. The officer, astonished, fell off his machine. He picked himself up, purple of face. "What the blazes," he demanded, "do you think you're doing?"

"It's j-j-just part of a play," the horror-struck stage manager replied.

"I'll just take a look and make sure you're telling the truth," the policeman said. He entered the tiny, makeshift theatre—and remained, fascinated, for the rest of the play. He was learning why, in the Greater London area alone, 4,000,000 people cheerfully pay to see amateur performances put on during the winter and spring months by some 3,000 theatrical societies. The solid support given by the public to amateur societies is enough to make professional theatre managers grind their teeth in envy. Perhaps the enthusiasm of the amateurs has something to do with the backing they get.

Rehearse In Local Café

Take the case of The Pinner Players, who operate in a London suburb. They rehearse in a local café, which is cleared for them after the last customer has gone. They make their own scenery in an old barn in which there is hardly room to turn round. They cajole local tradesmen into advertising in their programmes and displaying their posters. And, when the first night comes, they turn themselves into cashiers, programme sellers, usherettes and whatever else is needed.

Their three regular producers, Donald Whatmore (who is in the rubber business), Ron Ward (publicity manager to a woollen company) and Mrs. May Wood (manageress of a ticket agency), work in rotation—unless the next on the list is wanted as an actor. If so, they cheerfully take direction from their fellow producers like the rest of the cast.

Whatmore got into amateur dramatics via a nervous breakdown which he suffered about thirty years ago. He emerged from the breakdown too shy to talk to anyone, too nervous to go out of an evening. "You must join an amateur dramatic society," his doctor prescribed. "There you'll meet all sorts of people under the pleasantest conditions and you'll find the world isn't nearly as bad as you think." Whatmore took his doctor's advice. At first he found it hard going. Then, his shyness cured, he became fascinated by his hobby. He has, ever since, acted in and produced amateur plays. In the years between he has had many an amusing moment on stage and some that were downright embarrassing.

In one farce, he was on the stage chatting with another actor. A maid, carrying out a tray loaded with glasses and a decanter, was supposed to drop the tray, making the two men jump violently. But on the first night she was so overcome with nerves that she merely picked up the tray and walked off with it into the wings. "You little idiot!" everyone heard the producer growl. "You forgot to drop the tray!"

"Oh, so I did," she said, and walked back on to the stage and flung the glassware down at Whatmore's feet and stalked off again.

Now Whatmore can afford to grin at the memory. "But at the time," he says, "we jumped all right!"

Whatmore's most embarrassing moment, however, came when he was playing in *Yellow Sands*. His part was that of a bibulous old gentleman who sang a song at a party, accompanying himself on the piano. The initial trouble was that Whatmore couldn't play a note. His wife, an accomplished musician, got over that difficulty by teaching him just enough chords to make him sound reasonably expert—which he was supposed to be. "We had hired a beautiful little cottage piano," Whatmore recalls, "but it wasn't delivered until the last moment. No one had a chance to try it before the curtain rose." At his cue, Whatmore sat down at the piano. The rest was agony. Not only was the piano completely out of tune, but for some reason the entire range of notes came out an octave too low.

"It is difficult to decide who suffered most," Whatmore says. "Me or the audience."

Housewives On The Stage

Whatmore has been with The Pinner Players since 1943, when they restarted activities after the war's intervention. The membership numbers seventy, of whom about forty are acting members. Among these are bank clerks, secretaries, an optician, a milliner, housewives and quite a number of boys and girls who are still at school. President of the society is Norman Wooland, the radio and screen actor. They put on three plays each season at the Vagabonds Hall in Pinner. Each play runs for six nights with a nightly audience of about 180.

"The day I open my box office," says Harold Hansell, secretary and business manager of the society (and an accountant for a cheese company by day), "I know I'm going to sell at least 700 tickets by evening. There have been times

when I've sold more than 800 on the first day—more than four full houses."

Whatmore the producer—as distinct from Whatmore the actor—always types out his own copy of the script and leaves plenty of space for notes and diagrams. His producer's copy bears a striking resemblance to an Alfred Hitchcock film script. Each page that requires it has a careful scale drawing of the stage, showing every detail of actors' positions, moves and props. He finds, as a result, that two rehearsals a week for six weeks are enough to give him a polished performance, since by the time rehearsals arrive most of the preliminary work has already been done on paper. He designs all his own sets, helps to make them and often acts as his own stage manager.

Profits Are Not Big

Profits made by The Pinner Players are given to local charities and, to date, nearly £1,000 has been raised in this way. This is a more impressive figure than might appear. Profits are not easily made by amateur societies. Hall hire, royalties, set construction, costume hire, props and lighting equipment, printing of tickets, posters and programmes and so on make even the simplest production a very expensive business. Only the enthusiastic support of audiences who fill the hall night after night at admission fees of half a crown or three shillings makes it possible to stage amateur shows at all.

It costs The Pinner Players about £120 to put on a play. *Blithe Spirit*, for example, cost exactly £117 4s. 4d. Hire of the hall was £25; royalties £21; rehearsals £6 17s. 6d.; hire of costumes and wigs £16 18s. 6d.; lighting equipment £13 5s. 6d.; furniture £4 10s.; printing £17 12s. 3d.; set construction £9 12s. 7d.; and sundries £2 8s. Sale of tickets, assuming the "House full" notices go up for all six nights, brings in £140. Programme sales bring £12 and programme advertisements another £7. Tea in the intervals, all the materials for which are provided free by the members, brings in another £5.

Until recently, amateur societies used to pay entertainments tax unless profits were given to charity. Now, on strict condition that no payments whatever are made for services of any kind, exemption from this tax can be obtained on application to Customs and Excise. This has relieved the amateur societies of a burden that often made the difference between covering costs and making a loss.

The Pinner Players select their forthcoming productions in a strictly businesslike way. They have a Reading Committee whose job it is to consider all suggestions put up to them by members and friends. Final recommendations are made to the main committee, upon whose decision rests the title of the next production.

Starting A New Company

How does an amateur theatrical company begin? Take the case of a comparative newcomer into the ranks of amateur theatrical societies—The Tower Players, produced by Miss C. A. Lejeune, the film critic and broadcaster, and officered by such Titans of entertainment as Sir Ralph Richardson, Sir Michael Balcon, Herbert Wilcox, Anna Neagle, Eileen Herlie and Michael Wilding.

First, The Tower Players got the loan of a room in a local club. They built a tiny stage out of "begged and borrowed" timber. They were lent front curtains from a nearby school and supplied furniture from their homes for stage properties. Then they rehearsed in their own private homes for weeks. Eventually they put on a show for one night only.

Friends, relatives and anyone else who could be bullied into coming were admitted free. About a hundred people were eventually crammed into a room that would comfortably hold about sixty. After the performance The Tower Players explained their aims and objects. They rather timorously announced that a collection would be taken as the audience went out. "Nothing, absolutely *nothing*," it was announced, "will be too small to be welcome." To their surprise, they realized £20. With this as capital, the company took the plunge. They engaged a hall and went to work in earnest.

Their first production was *The Eagle Has Two Heads* during which the encounter between the motor-cycle policeman and the stage manager took place. They followed with *The Guardsman, The Silver Cord, Broadway*, and Terence Rattigan's *Playbill*.

The production of *Broadway* demonstrated the spirit of co-operation and camaraderie that activates members. The casting of the play, which calls for more actors than this little company had available, looked like an impassable obstacle, but sufficient members of another company gladly gave their services. Some travelled many miles every Sunday evening for rehearsals; three took their parts with them on an Austrian holiday and came back letter perfect. Enthusiasm could hardly go further.

By an oversight, Michael Wilding was not notified of the production of *The Guardsman* and *The Silver Cord*. This was remedied when *Broadway* came round. At the end of that performance he got his own back very neatly. He was asked to make a speech from the stage. "As a vice-president of The Towers Players," he said, "I am delighted to be here. But I'm not sure I am wise in making a speech. I made one after *The Eagle Has Two Heads*. As a result I was not invited to the next two plays!" The audience loved it, and as Wilding had unexpectedly brought Marlene Dietrich with him (it was during the filming of *Stage Fright*), his fellow members readily forgave his sly dig.

West End Props Are Used

Since the war, amateur theatricals have developed at an amazing rate. There are upwards of 20,000 societies in England and Wales, each with a membership of from twenty to one hundred. There are, in addition, thousands of smaller groups enthusiastically putting on plays in practically every town and village in these islands. There are certainly a million men and women busily engaged on the amateur stage. At least 100,000 amateur performances are given every year which are seen by 50,000,000 people. This adds up to admission fees of £5,000,000—a startling measure of the enthusiasm with which the work is undertaken and supported.

To help amateur societies is the British Drama League, with 8,000 affiliated members, the National Operatic and Dramatic Association, with 1,000 affiliated members, Messrs. Samuel French, Ltd., who supply acting editions of every play for which amateur rights are available, and the Old Times Furnishing Company, from whom amateurs can hire anything in the way of props from complete replicas of West End productions (often the identical effects used in those productions) down to single articles of furniture and decoration. This firm sends out consignments to some hundred amateur societies every week all over the country.

At Samuel French's, in the house in London's Southampton Street where actor David Garrick once lived, amateur producers and actors can sit in a softly lighted reading-room and browse for hours over any play in which they are interested, with expert attendants at hand to answer queries and give advice. Into these offices pours a steady average of 1,500 letters a day seeking information and advice and ordering plays.

Women Outnumber Men

The playwrights most in demand today by amateurs are J. B. Priestley, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham, Terence Rattigan and Chetham Strode. Barrie still holds his place and lately Pinero has made a strong comeback. Where possible, amateurs prefer a play that calls for only one set and a reasonably small cast. While there seems no lack of young women who wish to face the footlights, many societies find it difficult to get enough young men to play juvenile leads. Hence such plays as *Blithe Spirit* (one interior set throughout, two males, five females) are in great demand.

The greatest problem of the amateur society is to find a suitable hall in which to present its plays. Sometimes, like the King's Langley (Herts) Players, amateurs solve their problems in the grand manner. These enthusiasts raised more than £3,000 towards building their own theatre, got a grant from the Ministry of Education and have just completed a thoroughly satisfactory edifice after three and a half years' hard work.

Stars Began As Amateurs

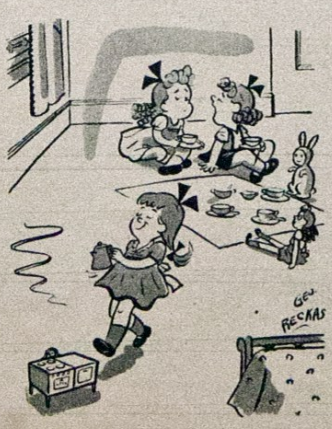
The amateur stage has produced, among other notable figures, such well-known actors as Clive Brook, the late Alfred Drayton, Ronald Colman, Charles Laughton, Michael Redgrave and Margaret Rutherford. All these stars learned how to face their first stage emergencies as members of amateur societies. Like amateur Don Whatmore, they found there was always some way to wriggle out of the most embarrassing and difficult predicament.

Once, for example, Whatmore was playing the Bobby Howes part of Bob Seymour in *For the Love of Mike*. The curtain was supposed to come down on a safe burglary at the end of the first act. To Whatmore's horror, the man playing this character lost his head. He forgot to burgle the safe. He bungled his lines. Then—without a pause—he went straight into the third act. Just in time, Whatmore managed to get over to the prompt side and hurriedly whisper "Keep quiet" to the prompter.

Then he proceeded to rewrite the play as he went along. Fortunately, in this case, he had produced the play in addition to acting in it. He had done the stage managing as well and, therefore, knew it inside out and end to end. Somehow he contrived a suitable moment for bringing down the curtain.

"The audience seemed a bit puzzled," he says with a reminiscent smile, "but we managed to get through without disaster. It was a very near thing."

THE END



"Did you see that filthy stove"