

Aylesbury Repertory Company

The Aylesbury Repertory Company probably deserves more of an honourable mention in the show business hall of fame than it will ever receive. The Market Theatre first opened in 1911. It is hard for us today, with a myriad forms of entertainment, to understand the importance of live stage performances in the social life of the Edwardian town.

Hilary Mason writing in 1973 for 'Buckinghamshire and Chiltern's Life' complained of the problems confronting young actresses trying to launch their careers in 1939. Once they left stage school they were deemed to be fully trained, but were completely lacking in experience. Of course, without that vital experience, employment would be out of the question. The novel solution to this conundrum for Hilary was provided by her agent who asked her if she had a spare £25. The answer was initially a flat 'No'. This was a pity, he pointed out, as a Rep Company would re-pay her over a ten week period at £2.10s 0d per week, in the form of wages. Thus it was that Hilary came to Aylesbury clutching five white five pound notes.

She approached the Borough Assembly Room, which was situated at the end of an alley running between the Green Man and what is now the Halifax in Market Square. It was, Hilary wrote, a very hot day. On arrival she found, in the box office, a woman clad only in a pair of khaki trousers and a brassiere. Without batting an eyelid she passed over the cash and so became a member of Aylesbury Rep.

Hilary's digs were obtained for 25s a week, (including meals), but occasionally she dined out at the 'Old Beams' opposite the theatre which provided a two course meal for 1s 3d, or three courses for 1s 6d. The 'Bull's Head' offered more princely 'Theatre Dinners' at 4s 6d each.

Actors in those days were expected to provide their own costumes unless they were doing a period drama. Hilary tells how the problem with one play in Aylesbury was resolved when her landlady bought, for 6d per yard, a length of 'crash linen' off the market, and for half-a-crown (about twelve pence in modern currency), made a beautiful flowing gown.

Hilary recalled Peter Ustinov playing Colonel Pickering in 'Pygmalion' for Aylesbury Rep, but remembered his most disconcerting performance as that of a seedy doctor in a story of Empire called 'White Cargo'. This was about the effects of a beautiful black girl by the name of 'Tondeleyo' on the white men in a far flung outpost. Peter kept on changing his accent from one performance to another – one day French, then German, the next Italian etc., and even crisp upper-class English. This disconcerted the other performers, so the director asked Peter what his game was. Peter explained: "If I cannot experiment in weekly

rep, then where can I do so?" Unanswerable logic, but a trifle unnerving for the rest of the cast, so they made small bets on what accent he would use next.

Eventually World War II put a complete stop to the theatre, as the building was requisitioned by the Ministry of Food, and turned into warehousing for the duration.



In spring 1947 moves were made to reinstate the theatre. Bill Stephens of the famous wartime BBC radio programme 'ITMA', ('It's That Man Again'), took on the project of rebuilding the Aylesbury Repertory Company. Once the Ministry of Food had moved out all he had were four bare walls. No stage. It was a mad rush to get the theatre open again with builders, electricians, plasterers and painters working against the tight deadline of 9th September. The actors themselves were decanted to a nearby hotel for rehearsals. Stephens radically proposed a "peoples' theatre" in which the opening programme of plays was to be decided by public ballot. Favourite choices turned out to be hits from the West End and those books that had been adapted into films, like 'Rebecca'.

In 1948, a young Ronald Barker wrote asking for a place with what was now the 'Manchester Rep'. His first performance was in 'Quality Street' by Sir J M Barry. In this he played the part of 'Lieutenant Spicer'. Ronnie would have fulfilled a similar role to that of Hilary before him, as the most junior member of the cast. He would have been an assistant stage director as well as an actor and when not performing, acted as prompt for the others. He would also have been delegated to scrounge whatever props he could lay his hands on from the shopkeepers of the town. Imagine him wandering into Jowitts in Kingsbury, which sold all manner of hardware goods. Perhaps here was sown the seed for the 'Four Candles' sketch. Maybe even Arkwright from 'Open All Hours' was based on an opportunist Aylesbury merchant.

The Borough Assembly Rooms were pulled down in 1980 to make way for Hale Leys. Aylesbury today has a new theatre in the making on the site of the old Bucks Herald building on Exchange Street, a mere stone's throw from the site of the old Borough Assembly Rooms. It remains to be seen whether the new venue will live up to its illustrious ancestry.

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