

Look out – there's a writer about!

RON ALDRIDGE has spent 30 years as a writer, director and actor – but it is only now that he has attended an amateur company's première production of one of his own plays. It was a novel experience – and one he thoroughly enjoyed. He reports on his pilgrimage to Hartley Wintney.



IN February this year I went, for the first time, to see an amateur performance of one of my plays. The play was *It's Never Too Late*, performed by the Hartley Arts Group, based in Hartley Wintney in Hampshire.

The first contact I had with the group had been a phone-call from Bruce Lachlan, one of the members, asking if I would be prepared to do one of my drama workshops for the group, and informing me it was about to present the amateur world première of *It's Never Too Late*.

I do drama workshops for amateur companies, one with a special focus on performing comedy, and one with a special focus on directing it. We agreed on 'performing comedy'. The day was held in the group's rehearsal hall, and about 30 members turned up.

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I found them to be such an enthusiastic, interested and lively group, constantly asking questions and prepared to participate in whatever was thrown at them. They seemed to enjoy and were willing to accept the disciplines that comedy demands, so they were a joy to direct when we worked on excerpts of other plays of mine.

The rules of comedy are much stricter than for drama and, like music, it is essential that you vocally hit the right 'notes'.

I deliberately didn't work on *It's Never Too Late*: I didn't want to interfere with the rehearsal process, but I obviously met the cast and the director and assumed that if they felt that any of the workshop content could be useful to them they could then apply these principles and disciplines wherever they felt they wanted to.

There was obvious talent in the group and I was really looking forward to seeing the production which was due to open in about two or three weeks' time.



The only previous production of the play was the professional world première presented at The Mill at Sonning Theatre, near Reading. Hartley's director, Jason Farrow, had seen it, and he enjoyed it so much he chose it for his directorial début for the group.

I went on the third night. I like third nights. The first night is all about adrenaline, the second night is 'Can I do that again?' – and the third night, I always feel, is where it really gets into its stride.

I was given a great welcome, and a drink or two, and I felt surprisingly relaxed as I waited for the show to start. We had a full house, the audience was bubbly, and because this was the first amateur production I had seen of a play of mine, I was intrigued, to say the least. I had absolutely no idea what to expect – so let me say at once that the production was a total delight.

The story was there, the truth was there, the laughs were there, they didn't cheat or try for cheap laughs, as some professionals are prone to do, and I felt delighted that a production I'd had nothing to do with had worked so well.

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and very controlled, and was handled with integrity, respect and sensitivity.

It was the same with the cast. The company served the play beautifully and was very respectful of the author's intentions.

Special mention must be given to the two leading ladies, Irene Airtton and Lottie Raley. The success of the play depends, in the main, on the relationship of these two friends, and they were a delight. So complementary to each other, they played it for real and didn't try to be 'funny'.

If the author has done his work properly, then the situation should be funny, the interplay between the characters should be funny, and some of the lines should be funny. The actors then don't need to be 'funny'; they need to be 'real'.

The men were just as real too – Gabriel Hearst, Keith Robertson, Gary Comerford and Steve Ormerod – I was proud of all of them.

Of course there were things I'd have done differently, but what pleased me so much was that these were all little things, nit-picking, a question of interpretation etc. I had no problems with what they did with the play.

So... many thanks to Tony Davis, the chairman of the group, it was a wonderful experience!

NODA REVIEW

This is what NODA regional representative Nick Williams thought about *It's Never Too Late*:

WORLD premières are special things and for a small group like HAG to present one speaks volumes for the vision of the society. Jason Farrow, in his directorial début, drew performances of wit from the cast.

It is written to be delivered with staccato pace in places and the cast gave bravura performances led by Irene Airtton as Susan. Her character, wracked in the misery and mystery of mid-life divorce, developed well from the taken-for-granted to the truly liberated.

Backing up ably – and demonstrating that words can be delivered while power-exercising – Lottie Raley as Lizzie was just the right foil as confidante and busybody. The whole of the cast provided strong characterisation to drive the plot along to its dénouement.

All involved in the production can take satisfaction from their efforts. I look forward to seeing more of Jason Farrow's direction – and there is a lot more to come, based on this excellent showing.

30 years of theatre

RON ALDRIDGE'S career as director, writer and actor has spanned 30 years. He has directed in repertory, on the London Fringe, at the Edinburgh Festival, in numerous touring productions, and in the West End.

His one-man play *Hovering* was nominated for an award at the 1994 Edinburgh Festival, and he has had numerous plays produced in repertory and on the London Fringe. His comedy *You're Only Young Twice* is still enjoying a successful amateur journey throughout the country, and his latest comedy, *It's Never Too Late*, was recently published by Weinberger. His new adult comedy, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, will have its professional world première in spring next year.

As an actor, his West End appearances have included the lead roles in the award-winning *Children of a Lesser God*, the long-running comedy *Run For Your Wife*, and *The Odd Couple*.

His television appearances include *London's Burning*, *Fool's Gold*, *The Bill*, *2.4 Children*, *EastEnders*, and the role of Bronco in *Only Fools and Horses*.

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