

Chelmsford's Leading Musical Society Reaches 100 Years

In November 1920, an event took place that was to bring a profound change in the theatre scene of Chelmsford. A public meeting at the town's Corn Exchange in Tindal Square led to the formation of the Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (CAODS) which is now celebrating 100 years of being the town's, now the city's, leading musical group.

CAODS's first production was Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, *HMS Pinafore*, staged from 5 to 9 April 1921 at the long-since demolished Empire Theatre in Springfield Road. Unfortunately, the Coronavirus pandemic has meant that along with last autumn's production, the show the society was planning for April 2021, which would have marked the centenary, has had to be postponed. Only one other event has prevented CAODS from putting on its shows, and that was the Second World War.

The society's opening production was to receive critical acclaim. It was described in one local newspaper as *un beau debut* and "which invited comparison with professional presentations". And professionalism has been the hallmark with which CAODS has strived to stamp its 174 musicals over the last century.

In 1925, CAODS moved the venue for its shows from the Empire to the Regent Theatre. Built as a music hall in 1916, the Regent's auditorium, which seated 1000 patrons, came complete with boxes and an extensive balcony. The dressing rooms and backstage facilities were far less extensive. For the cast, it was very cosy and stage crew had to store props and scenery in an outside passage at the back of the theatre. And if the director required members of the cast to enter from front of house, they had to do so in full costume via the street through a busy shopping area as they made their way from the stage door to the front entrance.

After the war in 1947, still at the Regent Theatre, CAODS resumed its run of shows with *The Desert Song*. The society also extended its repertoire by staging plays. But unlike musicals, the plays did not attract sufficiently large audiences to make them pay and so were discontinued. However, the immediate post war years were good for musicals with shows like *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* and *South Pacific* crossing the Atlantic and becoming available to amateur societies.

In the meantime, the society had found a new home at the Civic Theatre in Chelmsford's West End. The auditorium is about half the capacity of the Regent but backstage facilities are much more extensive.

In recent years, there have been productions of Old Time Musical Hall, reviews and concerts mainly as fundraisers to enable the society to continue to stage two musicals a year.

In 1968, CAODS staged *Oliver!* which attracted a large number of children. After the show, it seemed a pity to let all that young talent drift off, so a junior section of the society was formed which in 1972 became independent adopting the name Chelmsford Young Generation Amateur Musical Society (CYGAMS). The two societies still retain close links.

CAODS has brought to Chelmsford a wide range of musical productions, ranging from the old favourites like *My Fair Lady* to new shows hot off the stages of London's West End and New York's Broadway. These have included *Jesus Christ Super Star*, *Copacabana*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Legally Blonde*, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. CAODS is proud to have a number of NODA (National Operatic and Dramatic Association) awards for best musical in the Eastern Region. The society also won a Chelmsford City Council Panic Award, a celebration of local live entertainment, for its production of *My Fair Lady*.

To kick off its centenary season CAODS staged Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's hit musical *Evita* last September and just managed to bring to the city in February 2020 *Shrek the Musical* before the onset of the Coronavirus lockdown.

CAODS has been fortunate over the years to engage the services of some excellent professional directors. Phyl Payne joined the society in the post war years. In 1973 a new inspirational director, Ray Jeffery, was engaged for *Kismet* and he has been responsible for the success of most of CAODS shows until 2009. In that year, Sallie Warrington made her CAODS debut with *Chess* and continues to bring her directing skills to the society. Both Ray and Sallie are brilliant directors who have helped ensure CAODS maintains its pre-eminent position in the region's musical theatre.

The society hopes that it will be back on stage in September 2021 with *Sweet Charity* under the direction of Sallie Warrington. And in March 2022 director Ray Jeffery takes the helm for *Kipps - the new Half a Sixpence Musical*.