

The Playgoers' Society of Dartington Hall – a History

by Zoe Clough

Dartington Playgoers has been producing high quality theatre for 75 years. It's a significant milestone, so I thought it was worth taking a look back at the Society's history and achievements.

The greatest achievement must be this - we're still here!
Smaller, yes. Less ambitious, no.

I'm going to make the bold claim that the history of the Playgoers is woven into the history of Britain.

In 1947 the Elmhirsts, Leonard and Dorothy, engaged Leonard Bennett to produce a drama society open to anyone living on the estate. There had been amateur theatre before with The Northerners, who used the then newly renovated Barn Theatre. The new Playgoers' first production, Noah, was in 1948, which is of course the year the NHS was born. The man who wrote the Labour Party manifesto which laid the foundation of the NHS and the welfare state was Michael Young, a Dartington Hall School pupil. He arrived in 1929 and was taken under the Elmhirst's wing. That he went on to have a profound influence on postwar Britain must in no small part be thanks to his education at Dartington and the influence of the Elmhirsts. Who knows, he may have been an amateur thespian as well.....

Scampering forwards, this chunk of history is taken from a pamphlet produced in the late 1970s by Jack Hamshere. Thanks to Peter Tysoe for his archive which supplied this and a collection of programmes, plays and some illustrations – like these by Sally Cottis.

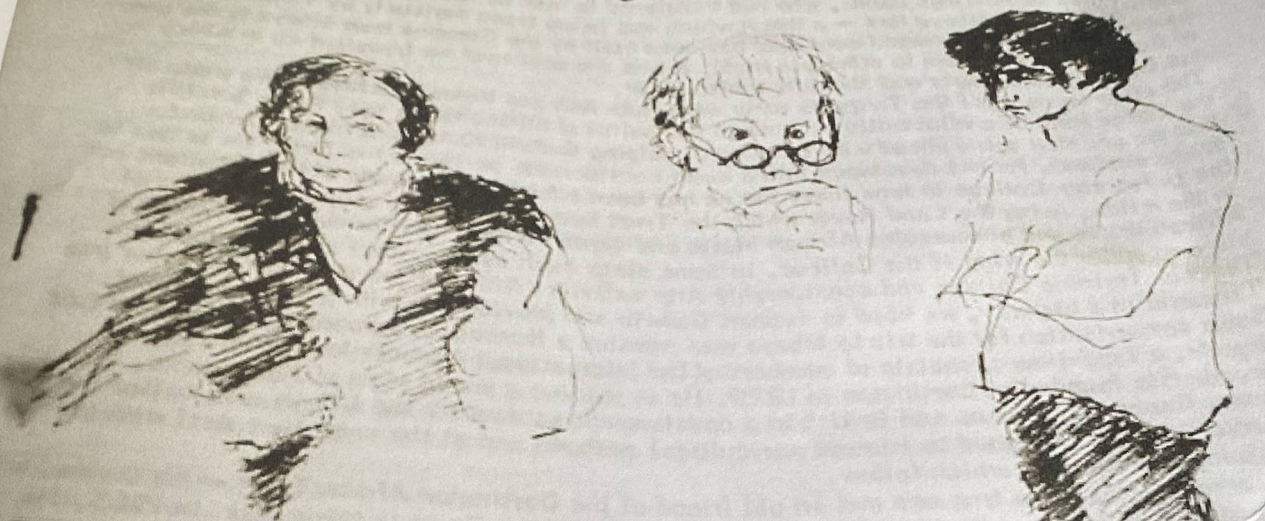


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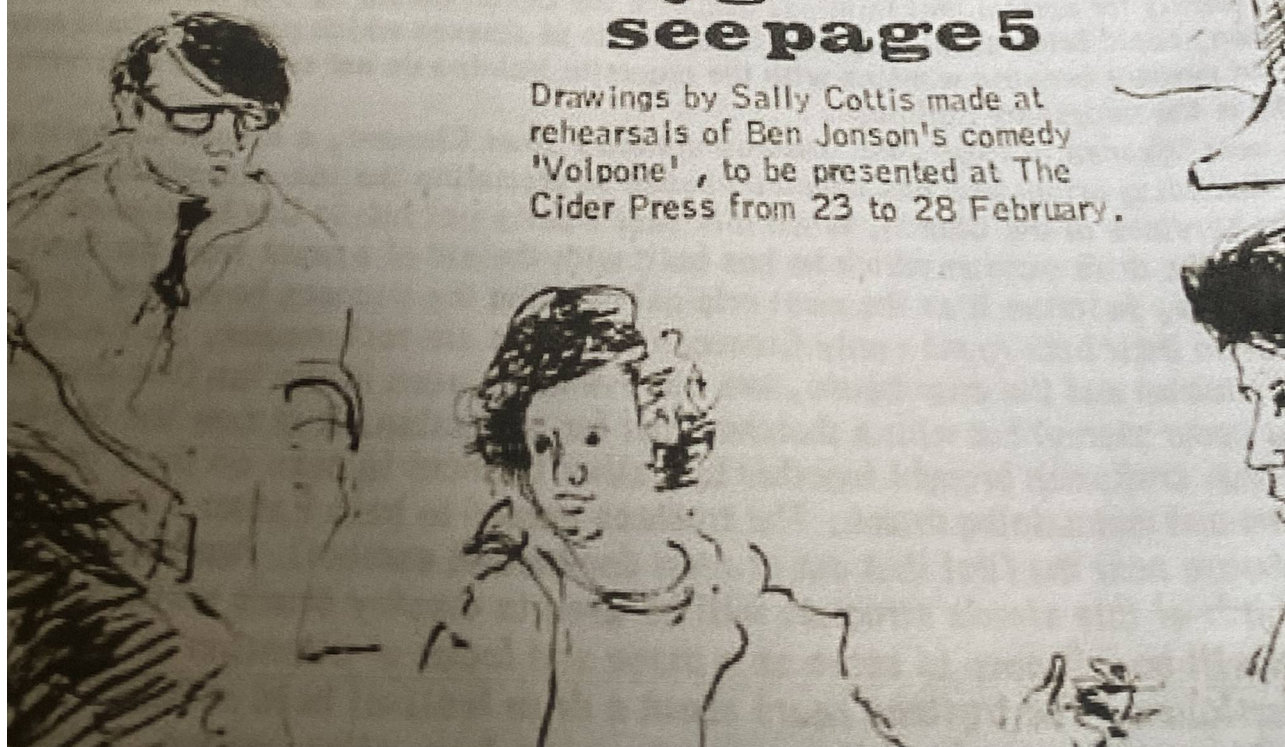
weekly newspaper & entertainments guide



Who?

are the new Playgoers ●
see page 5

Drawings by Sally Cottis made at
rehearsals of Ben Jonson's comedy
'Volpone', to be presented at The
Cider Press from 23 to 28 February.



“The Trustees were generous in their support, introducing professional designers, including Reece Pemberton, Dorothy Marshall and Elizabeth Waghorn, and installing Paula Morel as wardrobe mistress and Horace Davies as theatre technician. With all this help and encouragement the Society flourished, and soon outgrew its restriction to members of the Estate.

“Leonard Bennett was succeeded by Wilfred Walter, an experienced member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, with Miriam Adams as his assistance. ‘Wally’ was appointed at the same time to direct the newly formed Drama section of the Arts Dept, (later to become the Dance and Drama Dept of the Dartington College of Arts). He established a tradition of close cooperation between students and Playgoers which proved of great value to both sides.

“The death of Dorothy Elmhirst in 1968 was a sad blow to the Society. In a very real sense Dorothy was our founder, and her constant interests and critical encouragement inspires some of our best work during the early years.”

In 1949 the first of six productions that year – yes six ! - was The House of Bernarda Alba, which happens to be our autumn production this November. It’s a long time to wait for a repeat.

In 1978 the Playgoers took part in the Shakespeare Festival in London with The Taming of The Shrew.

Our open air Shakespeare productions are probably what we are best known for, a tradition which continues last year with As You Like It directed by Patrick Cooper.

In 1980 Maurice Ash, the Trust chairman (?), wrote to Peter Tysoe who was our chairman at that time.

He said:

“I want to say how grateful I am for the use to which you put the Hall and the gardens with Twelfth Night. I think I have never felt so aware of the continuity of this place. You are doing us a great honour by these summer productions generally, and must have established a place in the calendar far and wide. Dorothy Elmhirst would have felt all her hopes for the Society fulfilled.”

So, what of the future?

Well, it's uncertain, because as the current trustees and executives struggle with the charitable Trust's precarious finances, there is no guarantee on offer (at this time) that we can continue to use the venue we rent on the estate. Foxhole, where we stored our equipment, has been mothballed so is no longer available.

The Playgoers will go on playing, in some form, but our historic link with the world famous Dartington Hall estate may sadly be lost.

End

