

# > bournemouth sixty years young

**Stephanie Smith, President of BBLOC, shares some memories of the first sixty years of one of the south's premier musical theatre groups and looks ahead to a truly fabulous future.**

Bournemouth and Boscombe Light Opera Company - or BBLOC as it better known locally - started life as the Boscombe Light Opera Company in 1954 and is Bournemouth's biggest amateur musical theatre company. To celebrate its 60th anniversary year, the company is delighted to be presenting the south coast premiere of *Sister Act* at the Pavilion Theatre, Bournemouth from 22 to 26 July 2014.

BBLOC's first two shows were at the old Hippodrome Theatre in Boscombe and following its closure in 1956, the company moved to the Pavilion Theatre in Bournemouth and changed its name to the Bournemouth and Boscombe Light Opera Company.

Looking back 60 years to *Katinka*, the company's first show in 1954, the production costs were in the region of £1,500 (60 times less than the cost of those for the current show!) with the price of the programme 1/- (10p in today's money). A notice in the programme read: 'It is particularly requested that members of the audience will refrain from smoking until after Act One' ..... how times have changed!

The company have also staged shows at the Regent Centre at Christchurch in recent years and performed numerous concerts at both large and small venues, including the old Winter Gardens and the Pavilion Theatre, as well as constituting the chorus for Louis Clark's *Hooked on Classics* Christmas concert at the Bournemouth International Centre in 1987. As a result of these shows and concerts, a large amount of money has been donated to charity over the years.

BBLOC is no stranger to blazing a trail of 'firsts'. Going back to the very early years, *Night in Venice* in 1955 was the southern amateur premiere, with the company acting as guinea pigs for the new version of the show which was still in manuscript. Eric Maschwitz, who wrote the book and lyrics,

came to see a performance with a view to editing and streamlining. Following WW2, Maschwitz developed a great relationship with the amateur operatic companies and in his autobiography writes:

'This is real show-business - an unpaid replica of life behind the scenes in the professional theatre - the stage slang, the etiquette, the bouquets, the telegrams, the 'first-night-nerves' - even the superstitions. For a succession of magical evenings Miss Smith becomes Evelyn Laye, Mr Jones a Bruce Trent or Norman Wisdom. There are dressing-room parties, the eager scanning of the newspapers for the 'notices', the regretful farewells at the end of the run. The day after that exciting last night Miss Smith is once more the secretary, Mr Jones the manager of the bank. These people have a deep true love of the Theatre which is, alas, too often lacking in the professionals of today.'

1962's *New Moon*, with a cast of 80, and *Naughty Marietta* in 1964 were both firsts for the south of England as was a new version of Franz Lehár's

opera, *The Count of Luxembourg* in 1969. More recently, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in 2007 was the Wessex amateur premiere; the company were the first in the area to stage *The Producers* in 2010 and one of the first in the UK to be asked to stage Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Whistle Down the Wind* in 2012.

1972 was probably the landmark year for BBLOC when they hired a professional producer - Ricky Price - for the first time.

Ricky trained as an actor at Liverpool before going on to learn classical and modern, American jazz and musical comedy in London, including a year with Ballet Rambert. He toured in musicals as a dancer/singer, also doing sketches and choreography. He spent 12 years with Sadler's Wells as dancer, ballet master, choreographer and, finally, as staff producer. He appeared on TV in various operettas and dance spectaculars, and in the film, *Moll Flanders*. In the amateur world Ricky spent 11 years as senior producer at the NODA Summer School; directing the British premieres



of *Gigi* at Norwich and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Bermuda; adjudicating at the Watford International Music Festival and directing and choreographing all types of musical theatre for societies around the country.

*Hello Dolly* was the first of 20 superb shows Ricky was to produce for BBLOC. It was the first time 'Dolly' had been produced in Bournemouth - it was a sell-out and was repeated for a second week in May.

The company has continued to hire professional producers for its main shows and has been delighted to welcome such talented and creative individuals as the late Alan Carter (ballet master for the classic film 'The Red Shoes' with experience of dance and professional theatre throughout Europe), Jonathan Kane, Judi Campbell, Ray Jeffery and Martyn Knight who has been with the company now for 10 years. The very successful production of *Whistle Down the Wind* in 2012 was directed by Frank Ewins, a company member who had played various leads with BBLOC prior to this. Together with equally talented Musical Directors such as Sam Newgarth, John Stringer, Mike Reynolds and Ian Peters, BBLOC has been truly fortunate in their production teams.

BBLOC has also received many Bournemouth Echo Curtain Call Awards and NODA recognitions

over the years, acknowledging performance excellence.

The company recently formed a cabaret group - Bitesize - with the aim of raising its profile and generating additional funds. This cabaret group performs a range of musical theatre repertoire in a 'songs from the shows' format' in a variety of venues. The critical reception has been fantastic and Bitesize continue to go from strength to strength, wowing audiences with their talent and professional cabaret productions.

Sixty years is a long time and BBLOC has many memories of talented players and hard workers without whom they would never have survived. There are still members who go back to the very early days - one of whom, now in her 90's, was a founder member of the company and still a staunch supporter. The company has a history booklet which celebrates its first 50 years and this is being updated for the 60th anniversary.

A few shows which particularly stick in the memory might include *No No Nanette* in 1985 when the whole company learned to tap dance for the first time; *The Student Prince* the following year when the leading man lost his voice and had to mime his part which was sung by two subsequent replacements in the pit. Not easy for the leading lady to perform opposite a silent leading man! The National Press headline read 'Leading Lady gets

through three Leading Men in one week!' Flying characters for the first time in *Wizard of Oz*; *Half a Sixpence* in 1987 when the company received a visit from the late David Heneker, the writer of the music and lyrics for the show 25 years previously. At the time *The Echo* critic wrote:

'He told us how much he and his wife had been overwhelmed by such a beautiful and thoughtful production. He had been called up on stage by professional director, Ricky Price. It was an emotional moment'.

BBLOC are proud that many past members of the company have gone on to further training and successful professional careers in musical theatre, of whom the most recent are Jack Donnelly who played the lead role of Jason in BBC's *Atlantis*, and Matt Jeans who will be making his West End debut in the 2014 revival of *Miss Saigon*.

As everyone knows, the cost of putting on shows in this day and age is enormous and is felt by all companies but in spite of this, BBLOC has every intention of continuing to nurture the talent of the future and delight its audiences for many more years to come.

If you are in Bournemouth in July and would like to book tickets for *Sister Act* call: 0844 576 3000 or online at [www.bbloc.co.uk/sisteract](http://www.bbloc.co.uk/sisteract)

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