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BACKSTAGE MEMORIES OF A PREVIOUS SEAGULL    From Peter Ellis

I was delighted to see that The Questors are going to do "The Seagull" again. The announcement in Questopics brought nostalgic memories of the 1947 Production in the "Old Tin Hut" flooding back.

I had only been a member for a few months when I received a call list for set construction for "The Seagull", with a little note scribbled at the bottom; "Peter, you are SM - George!". It took me a little while to figure out that SM meant Stage Manager, since I was fairly green to backstage work, having only helped a little on set construction for a couple of productions. "George" was of course George Benn, Stage Director for many years. He had also been an officer in the army during the war and used the army method of getting volunteers!

I suppose I was delighted at having this great honour bestowed upon me, but it was a daunting prospect, since in those days the Stage Manager was also responsible for the construction of the set, and as this was in the days of the old Iron chapel, there was no workshop at all. As far as I can remember, there were one or two nights a week set aside for set construction, the rest of the work had to be done whenever the theatre was free; Saturday and Sunday mornings and frequently after rehearsals had finished at 10 o'clock in the evening.

Most of the work was done at the front of the auditorium, space being made by moving back the front 5 or 6 rows of seats. Timber and other materials were stored under the stage, involving lots of crawling on all fours to find and retrieve it.

The set designs for "The Seagull" were by Norman Branson. They were beautiful designs, two exteriors, and one "convertible" interior set, but were quite complex from a construction point of view. Norman, being an architect, could also be quite demanding. On one occasion we had just completed the miniature "stage within the stage" for Act, 1, which consisted of a rostrum with two Ionic columns joined by a pediment. Norman arrived and stood at the back of the auditorium and sized up our handiwork. "Did you put any entasis on those columns?" he enquired. I tried hard to think of a good excuse, but had to admit that I had no idea what he was talking about. It turned out that entasis was the slight barrel shape that the Greeks built into their columns, so that they appeared to be a nice straight taper!

In those days, and it is probably the same today, we had a small team of willing and competent helpers on set construction. One of the stalwarts who helped on "The Seagull" set was the woodwork master at the local school. He had taught my elder brother and although he was very friendly and never criticised my crude carpentry, I was always rather nervous in his presence and felt I might get a detention for not making a proper joint!!

I will always remember the first run through with props and partially completed sets. There is a scene in Act 2 where Trigorin enters stage left and walks slowly across the back of the stage reading a book with a fishing rod over his shoulder. Now the girl in charge of props, Isobel Benns, was very conscientious and had borrowed the rod from a fishing tackle shop with a very hellpful proprietor, "Yes, m'dear, if he's fleshing from the shore of a lake, this is the sort of rod he would be using." Unfortunately, the rod was about 15 feet long and the set was only about 14 feet wide at that place: wing space was very restricted and we actually had to plug in the last section of the rod when Trigorin was half way across the stage! Everyone out front was having muffled hysterics as more and more fishing rod appeared from the wings with Trigorin almost on the other side of the stage; however, Phillip Allen was

a very experienced and unflappable actor, and he avoided disaster by elevating the rod as he turned to come downstage. All this without even looking up from the book, although he did tweak the cyclorama lights slightly as he turned. Alfred, who was producing (sorry, directing) was not amused; "Isabel, we will have to do something about that fishing rod", he said after the scene. Isabel was upset. "Stanislavsky would have found a way round the problem", she muttered.

With the burning of much midnight oil the sets were just about finished in time for the first dress rehearsal. I was very nervous about this event, as, although I had acquired some skills at set building, I had very little experience of stage management. I also discovered just before the curtain went up that I would have to prompt as well; as the prompter was absent that afternoon.

Fortunately, nobody dried, and as the first Act ended I thankfully closed my book and turned my thoughts to changing the set - but why were the cast still on stage like a load of dummies? I hastily looked back at the script - yes, that was the last line - but there was another word that stared up at me from the page; CURTAIN - my god, I had forgotten the curtain. I spun round, grabbed the rope and whisked the tabs across as fast as I was able. Alfred's voice "Right. I've just a few points before we go on, so cast out front while they change the set".

We changed the set, and Alfred was still giving out his points to the cast. He then went on to the lighting, and finally "Oh, Peter, that curtain" my heart sank, "It was about the right speed, but just half a thought too early!!" I breathed again, but suddenly panicked. How long were Alfred's thoughts?