

Oldest Student Member — Don Manning

I was a member of the second Student Group in 1947/48 (one year only, then). That, I believe was the first fully structured Group with professional Speech and Movement tutors, but Alfred Emmet as the principal tutor.

I was only just 16 years old when I applied to join the Group, having performed some Shakespeare at the then Greenford Grammar School. I was interviewed by the formidable (to me!) Rena Rice, as General Manager and offered a place, on condition that I undertook to “learn to speak the King's English properly”! I believe my mother would have been most offended, had I told her!

Our graduation play was **The Pleasure Garden** by Beatrice Mayor which offered a large number of character parts — I had two.

I never auditioned for the main company! I suspect I was too young (17) and soon moved on elsewhere. But for two or three years, as a young male, I was useful in several later Student Group productions.

I appeared in several other main productions during the next two or three years, including **The Thracian Horses** (1949) — I can be seen in the photo, upstage left in a rather fetching tunic and headband.

Two other productions are perhaps of particular interest. I had several spots in the first revue **By Request** (1949) and took part in what, in retrospect, was the groundbreaking **Christmas at the Market Place** (1950) by Andre Obey. The latter was, I believe, The Questors' first attempt at a thrust-stage production.

Of course, all the productions mentioned took place in the Old Tin Hut. For **Christmas at the Market Place** a low stage was built in the front right hand corner of the theatre. Entries and exits were made through the front half of a dummy Romany caravan built in front of the left hand forestage entrance. Some seating was moved onto the main stage and more, longitudinally, to the right hand side of the temporary stage. Thus we had audience on three sides.

The cast became a gypsy troupe performing the Christmas story in a country market square. That gave me an opportunity for what I can only describe as a double Stanislavsky transformation. In addition to personating a gypsy, I had, in the persona of the Archangel Gabriel, to put across the gypsy's simple version of the Annunciation. Not merely was that a bit trying for a young non-believer but one night my parents were sitting in the front row and I had to direct this naive address straight to them. This was not made any easier by the fact that my mother had her face hidden in her hands, presumably in embarrassment, and my father was roaring with laughter. However, I did get some satisfaction when the theatrical celebrity who gave the live critique after one performance (do you still have them?) said that I was the only credible 'gypsy'.

Naturally, I have many mixed memories of the old theatre: of the crowded changing room (a corridor) which became a main thoroughfare during performance; of the primitive liquid dimmers for the stage lighting, which were extremely non-linear in

operation and could gurgle like a drain during quiet moments; and, not least, the primitive outside toilets.

I did have a small, more recent, contact with The Questors during the 50th Anniversary of the Student Group (1997). As the Senior Ex-Student present, I was entertained and had the honour of cutting a birthday cake jointly with the youngest member of the then current Student Group. Quite touching really.

I fear I have rambled on a bit, but I do feel part of an important ongoing theatrical tradition. And in fund-raising days I remember parading through the streets of Ealing in theatrical dress in the company of a radio comedian, Leon Cortez, who gave burlesque versions of Shakespeare as our celebrity guest at, I think, a garden party. In recent years I still engage in serious singing and until recently, musical theatre.

Don Manning 2014