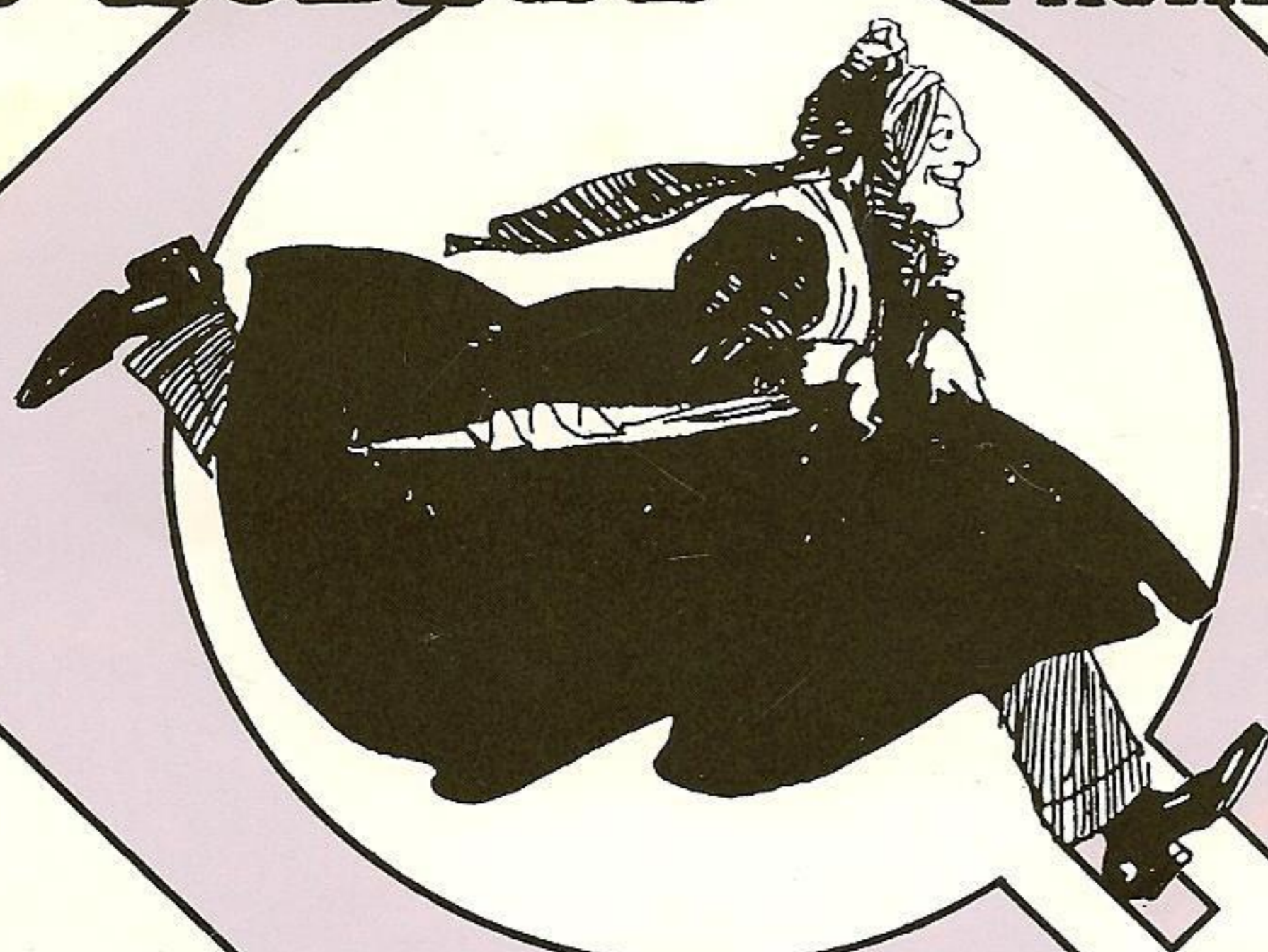


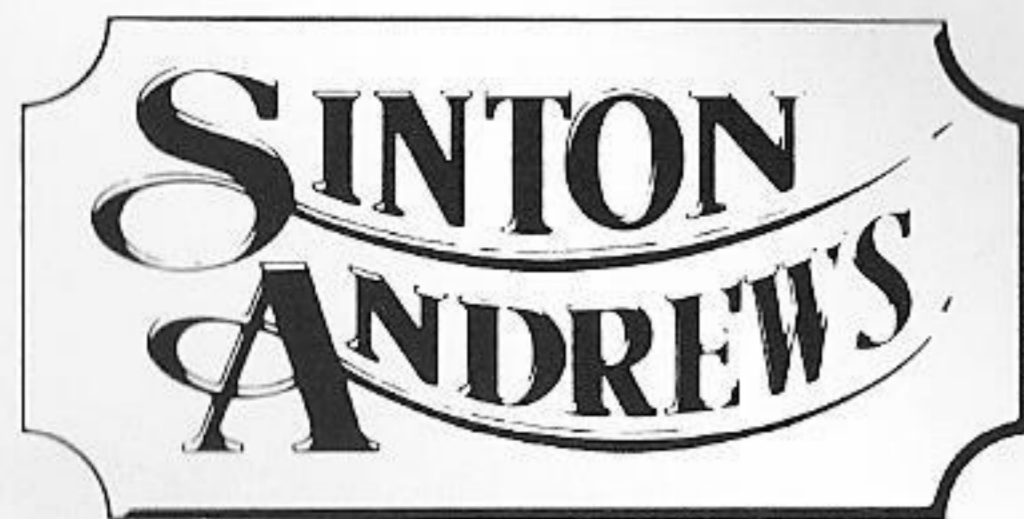
◆ THE QUESTORS THEATRE

Charley's Aunt

by Brandon
Thomas



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THE QUESTORS THEATRE

First performance 31st December 1988.

CHARLEY'S AUNT

A Play in Three Acts

by **Brandon Thomas**

Directed by Rodney Figaro

Designed by John Rolfe

Lighting designed by Andrew Dixon

Sound by John Greaves



Sponsored by

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CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS

John Good
Programme

WALTER BRANDON THOMAS was born in Liverpool on Christmas Day, 1856 into a respectable business family with no connections in the theatre. When Walter was twelve the family lost their money and the boy was apprenticed to a shipwright, working a twelve hour day with a five mile walk to and from his work. But he started to write and his thoughts turned constantly to the theatre. He met and impressed Mr. and Mrs. Kendall, leading theatre managers in London, who told him that he must come and see them if he ever thought of going on the stage.

When his father died he borrowed a pound, set out for London and joined the Kendalls' company at a salary of one pound a week, afterwards raised to twenty-five shillings! He established a reputation both in Shakespeare and in character roles in a range of plays now largely forgotten - "My Milliner's Bill", "The Little Minister", "The Squire", "A Court Scandal", "The Eternal City."

But writing was in his blood and by 1888 he had written "The Colour Sergeant", "Comrades" (in collaboration), "The Promise" and "The Highland Legacy."

In 1890 the famous London comedian, W. S. Penley, said to Brandon Thomas, "I'm thinking of going into management. I liked your last play so much. Why don't you write a comedy for me?" Brandon Thomas was delighted, and suddenly had an inspiration. "You've played every character under the sun; have you ever thought of playing a woman?"

Brandon Thomas wrote the first draft of "Charley's Aunt" in two months and read it to Penley, who laughed so much he slid down on to the floor and lay there helpless. As soon as Penley was free to take the leading part, the play was sent to various prominent managements. Every one of these immediately turned it down. Penley and Brandon Thomas, convinced they had a gold mine, made up their minds, while they were looking for backers, to try the play out, discreetly, away from London. They chose Bury St. Edmunds, in Suffolk, where London critics would not be likely to follow and disclose the plot of the play.

Penley headed the cast, the author directed the rehearsals. Nina Boucicault (later to figure as the first "Peter Pan") was in the cast, also a young hopeful, A. E. Matthews.

And so, with high hopes and second-hand scenery, "Charley's Aunt" opened at Bury St. Edmunds in February, 1892. The author was unable to be present on the first night as he was himself acting in London in "A Pantomime Rehearsal" at the Royal Court Theatre—another obstinate success which had been running for nearly three years and of which he was also part-author.

Penley, though a big London star, was hardly known in the Provinces. Consequently the audience on the opening night at Bury St. Edmunds were few and far between and the manager of the theatre politely invited them to come forward and sit together in the stalls.

The audience chuckled, then laughed, then roared, and so exuberant was their reception of the play that Penley immediately wired Brandon Thomas, "Your fortune is made."

In December the Royalty Theatre suddenly fell vacant. But a London production needed more capital and a wild search now started to obtain £1,000. Neither Penley nor the author had that sum; so Penley gave Brandon Thomas first chance of finding the money. A forty-eight hours search ended fruitlessly. His uncle, respectable and God-fearing, offered the £1,000 for any business venture but not the theatre; the backer of "A Pantomime Rehearsal" had just used his available cash in a non-theatrical business. At the eleventh hour, Miss Sheridan, descendant of the famous dramatist, introduced him to a business financier. The necessary thousand pounds was promised and the Royalty Theatre secured. Incidentally, the gentleman was on the verge of bankruptcy, which was only discovered when his creditors started to queue up at the theatre.

On December 21st, 1892, "Charley's Aunt" opened at the Royalty Theatre, Dean Street, Soho. This time the house was full, as Penley commanded a large following, and Brandon Thomas was also well-known both as a dramatist and actor. There was the usual excitement before the curtain rose and it was not long before ripples of laughter spread through the auditorium. Penley as Lord Fancourt Babberley was warmly received on his first entrance, and soon the laughter grew louder. But when Charley's real aunt failed to appear and "Babbs" took her place, it was as though lightning had struck the theatre. Penley's appearance in the now familiar black satin dress, complete with bonnet, fichu and mittens, stopped the show. For in 1892 the stalls contained plenty of real chaperones, each and every one the spit and image of "Charley's Aunt."

The fireman laughed so much he fell against the bell and rang the curtain down in the middle of the act. The Duke of Cambridge was so overcome that his stall collapsed beneath him and he remained sitting on the floor, speechless with mirth. Even the cast found it difficult to keep their faces straight. Every look Penley gave, every line he uttered, was a roar of laughter. Phrases which have now passed into the English language were then being heard for the first time.

It was midnight before the audience allowed the final curtain to ring down after demanding speeches from everyone.

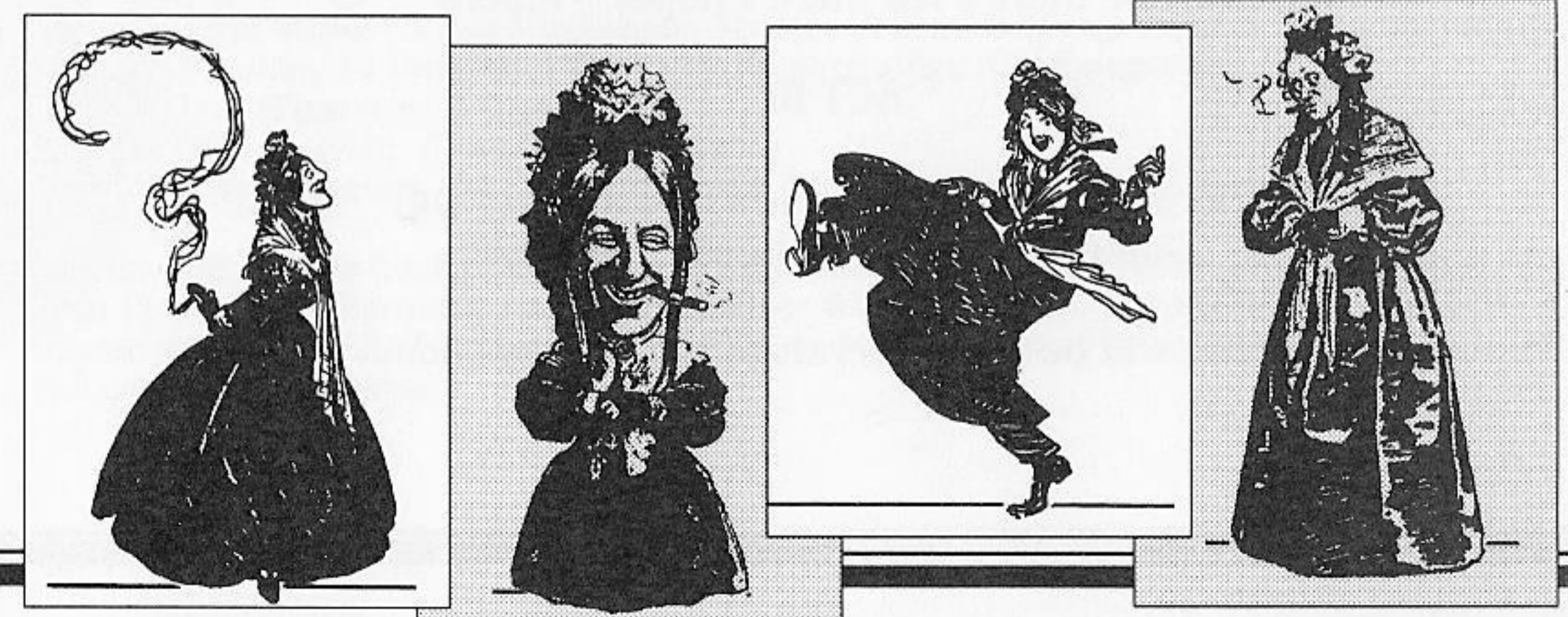
Within a month, the Royalty was too small to hold it and the play was transferred to the old Globe Theatre, in Wych Street, Strand. There it ran continuously for four years, breaking all records of the London theatre.

Soon there were seven companies on the road in England. An American production opened at the Standard Theatre in New York on October 2nd, 1893. There were tours in Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. The play was translated into every language under the sun and the now famous lines were heard in Swedish and Norwegian, in Afrikaans and Gaelic, in Zulu and Esperanto. At one time the play was being performed in no less than forty-eight theatres on the same night. It was said that no day passed without a performance somewhere on the globe.

In 1914 the author died, but the play continued under the management of his widow. With her death in 1930 her son and two daughters carried on the tradition, for many years visiting every production, seeing that the author's intentions and standards were being maintained and bestowing approval (or reproof) on new generations of Jacks, Kittys and Fancourt Babberleys.

"Charley's Aunt" was filmed (as a silent!) in 1925 with Syd Chaplin (Charlie's brother) and again three times with Charles Ruggles, Arthur Askey and Jack Benny as successive Aunts. Jose Ferrer, John Mills, Ray Bolger and Griff Rhys Jones have played the part and on television. Eric Sykes and even Danny LaRue have streaked across the small screen pursued by an amorous Spettigue.

And here, at The Questors, the tradition continues. "Charlie's Aunt" is still running nearly ninety-seven years after that first performance at Bury St. Edmunds.



CHARLEY'S AUNT

CAST

JACK CHESNEY	} Undergraduates at St. Olde's College, Oxford	Mr. John Dobson
CHARLEY WYKEHAM		Mr. David Hovatter
LORD FANCOURT BABBERLY		Mr. Stephen Gray
BRASSETT	a college scout	Mr. Alan Chambers
KITTY VERDUN	Spettigue's ward	Miss Nathalie Fisk
AMY SPETTIGUE	Spettigue's niece	Miss Karen Turner
COLONEL SIR FRANCIS CHESNEY, Bart.	late Indian Service	Mr. Kenneth Ratcliffe
STEPHEN SPETTIGUE	an Oxford solicitor	Mr. Ivor Davis
ELA DELAHAY	an orphan	Miss Sheree Clapperton
DONNA LUCIA D'ALVADOREZ	a millionairess from Brazil	Miss Pam Gower

The time is Commemoration Week, 1892.

The place is Oxford - at St. Olde's College and its environs.

ACT I

Jack Chesney's Rooms in College (Morning)

"What chiefly distinguishes man from the apes is luncheon." - Wilde

ACT II

The Quad outside Jack Chesney's Rooms (Afternoon)

"While there's tea there's hope." - Pinero

ACT III

Drawing room at Spettigue's House (Evening)

"Dinner lubricates business." - Boswell

There will be two intervals of 15 minutes each..

DIRECTOR
STUNT CO-ORDINATOR
DESIGNER
LIGHTING DESIGNER
SOUND

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In February, 1985 "The Importance of Being Earnest" opened at the St. James's Theatre. At that time "Charley's Aunt" had been playing for just over three years at the old Globe Theatre just off the east end of the Strand, less than a mile away...

BRASSETT: Pardon me, sir - only four of champagne - and I think, yes, one of claret.

JACK: Oh, hang that claret! It's been open a month.
(*ASIDE to CHARLEY*) He's sneaked those other two bottles. He's a corker!

(Charley's Aunt. Act 1)

ALGERNON: ...I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE: Yes sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne?

(The Importance of Being Earnest. Act 1)

LORD FANCOURT BABBERLEY:

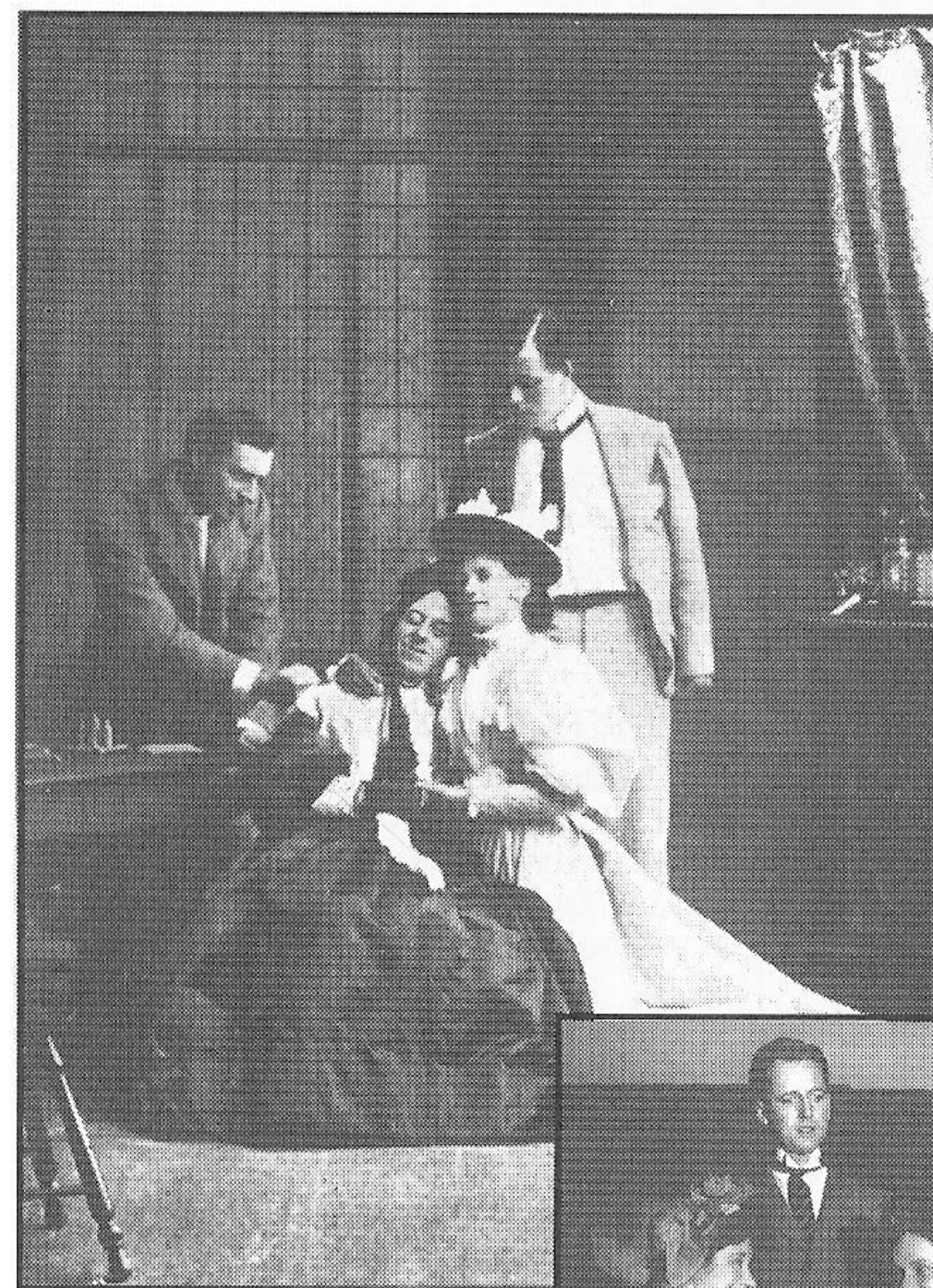
(*AFTER FOUR PAIRS OF SWEETHEARTS HAVE BEEN UNITED*)
...and in future I resign to Sir Francis Chesney - all claims to "Charley's Aunt."

(Charley's Aunt. End of Act III)

JACK:

(*AFTER THREE PAIRS OF LOVERS HAVE BEEN UNITED*)
...I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

(The Importance of Being Earnest. End of Act III)



The 1892 production.
Mr. H. Farmer as Charley. Mr. W.S. Penley as "Babbs". Miss Nina Boucicault as Kitty. Mr Percy Lyndal as Jack.



The Questors 1961
Production
Awen Griffiths, Alan Drake, George Ritchie (Auntie), Barry Hill and Dorothy Boyd-Taylor. The cast also included Lister Beck, Philip Wright, Paul Imbusch, Betty Ogden and Sylvia Estop. The play was directed by Barbara Hutchins (Kit Emmet).



**THE QUESTORS THEATRE
ART EXHIBITION
IN THE FOYER**

MURIEL BOOTH AND ARCHIE ROBERTS

MURIEL BOOTH

Although having had no formal training Muriel has been painting for the past ten years and has attended adult education art classes. Many of her paintings have been bought, one or two going as far as Canada and America. Muriel's work covers a wide field of subjects and her media include oil and watercolour paintings and pencil and charcoal drawings. For this her 4th exhibition at the Questors Theatre however, she has restricted her work to the study of trees and flowers.

ARCHIE ROBERTS

Archie has studied art for 10 years through adult education. He tried his hand with various media then finally settled on pen and ink. Then he studied calligraphy for 3 years and is now a member of the "Society of Scribes and Illuminators". Archie has exhibited at the Guildhall - City of London, Imperial College, Chichester and four times at Questors. He has won prizes in various local events. His subjects are mainly landscapes and still life.

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Directed by Anthea Dobry - New Play.
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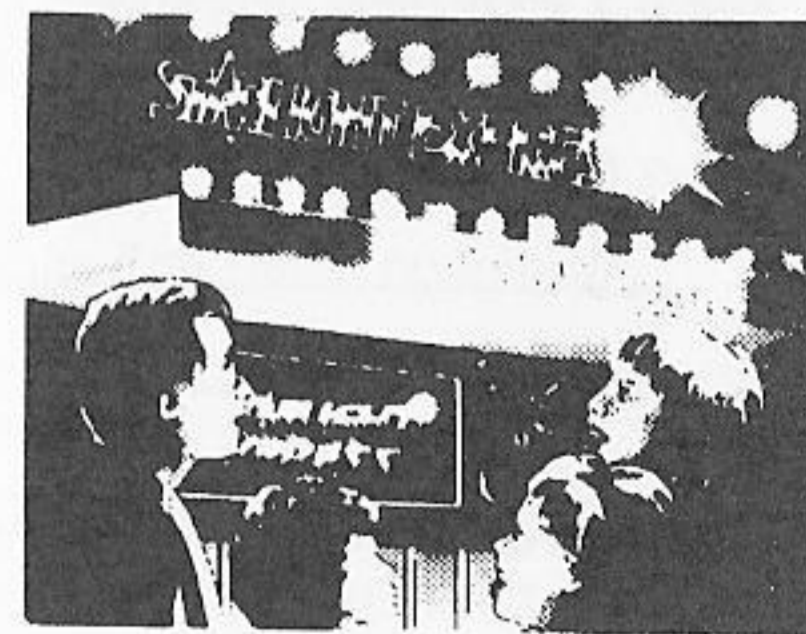
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