

THE BANBURY CROSS PLAYERS

THE PLAY'S THE THING (*working title*)
8th - 11 November 1995

Now that *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is over we must start work on the new play project. The first working session will be held on

Monday 9th September at the Mill at 7.45pm.

It is essential that everybody interested attend this meeting, when we will go into the *modus operandi* in detail. However, it some work must be done before then and so I am letting you all have an outline of what it is all about now.

You will find enclosed notes which are intended as a starting point for our work on the play. Nothing in them is sacrosanct; they can be enlarged upon, added to or messed about with in any way you like. The only fixed point is that THREE(?) groups of people will work independently on different aspects of the story and produce in effect three separate plays which at a later stage I will meld into a whole.

Attached is a list of people (*to follow*) who have indicated an interest in this project and they are divided provisionally into three groups. Not everyone wishes to take a part in the production and some people have already been earmarked as Directors. At this stage, however, I want you all to work equally as script-writers.

If you wish to change from one group to another, please do so by all means but make sure you let someone in both of the groups involved, know what you are doing. (There is no need to tell me). If you wish to recruit other members of the Society into your group you may do so and pass on to them copies of this literature. I would like to know if you have done this.

I want you all to come to the meeting in September with an outline (preferably in writing) of one or more aspects of the story which you would like your group to undertake. It would be ideal if Groups could get together before the first meeting and come to some consensus but if holidays make this impossible bring your own individual ideas and I will give you a chance to sort these out with your group at the Meeting.

Finally, please bear in mind -

- this project will only work if each and every one of you contributes to it and I would not be undertaking it if I did not think you all had a contribution to make.
- like John West's salmon the quality of the finished product will depend on what we leave out. You must be prepared for the fact that at least fifty per cent of all the work we all do will not be used.

See you in September.

TONY NEALE.

THE PLAY'S THE THING (working title)

In 1945 the citizens of the small provincial town of B***** were intent on celebrating the end of the war. A Committee was formed to organise the event, under the chairmanship of the local MP, Sir William Knowles. Sir William is a claret-drinking socialist (at a time before this species was properly identified). The following are notes made by Tim Stringer a journalist on the local paper about the event.

Sir William gained considerable support in the area during the war when, serving on the Cabinet under Churchill, he championed the agricultural cause and supported the maintenance of farm subsidies. His popularity is now on the wane by reason of the fact that, as a junior Minister in the Attlee government, he is charged with the passage through Parliament of the forthcoming Town and Country Planning Bill, which the local farmers see as the first step towards the nationalisation of land.

Sir William sees the victory celebrations as an opportunity to boost his image in the Community and forces through a proposal to commission a play from an established playwright to be performed by the newly constituted local amateur dramatic society. In the face of considerable opposition, he insists that the subject matter of the play should be clearly defined and should concern the building of the canal through B***** in the 18th Century. This, he thinks, will portray the town at the beginning of a period of economic prosperity and, as instigator of the project, he will be identified with an optimistic outlook for a prosperous future.

The vicar's daughter, Vita Brevis, is consulted as to how to proceed, as she is known to be "artistic". She suggests asking for the help of Jean Greatforest with whom she worked on the wireless up north during the war. It is understood that Jean ran her own theatre company back in the 1930s and is about to open a new company in Manchester. She is however "free" at the moment and, through Vita she is engaged to write and direct the new play.

The Amdrams do not look forward to Jean's arrival, since they blame her for the shelving of their plans to present "Hay Fever" as an opening production and when she arrives, her foul mouth and dishevelled attire do little to assuage their fears. They are mollified, however, when Jean points out that Coward was a homosexual who use the stage as a platform from which to castigate family values. Jean had intended this remark as a rare act of diplomacy being the only good things she could think to say about Coward. But the Amdrams accept it as a salutary warning and now regard the "Hay Fever" idea as a subversive plot on the part of one of the younger members, Gay Badinage, who has been the most outspoken supporter of the production. This is a unfair on Gay

(Tim was having an affair with Gay - TN) who was solely motivated by a desire to play the ingenue part and wear a beaded frock.

Jean is now lionised by the Amdrams, her language and attire being accepted as symptoms of artistic eccentricity.

Unlike the Amdrams, Sir William has high hopes of Jean before she arrives. Relying on reports that she is a member of the intellectual left, he sees in her the ideal person to write up the history of the canal in such a way as to put the present Government policies in the best light, thereby assuring his own political future. What he does not realise is that cultural differences, far stronger than any political allegiance, are working against any alliance between himself and Jean. For a start, it is clear that Jean does not know exactly what a "canal" is. She does not associate the word with the "cut" which ran along the end of the street of back-to-backs in which she spent her deprived childhood in Rochdale. (Had she made this connection, it is unlikely that she would have regarded the canal as an unparalleled human achievement in the vanguard of economic prosperity, since she had actively, and successfully, campaigned for the filling-in of the Rochdale cut on the ground that it was a notorious source of infection and a danger to children - three infant members of her own family having drowned it). Whilst ignorant of the exact meaning of the word, Jean is convinced that it is some instrument of capitalist oppression of the working classes. This view derives from an essay she once wrote whilst on a three week summer course at Ruskin College sponsored by the WEA. This was entitled "Working Class Movements in the Early Nineteenth Century and their Affect on Theatrical Design" and consisted entirely of unattributed quotations, including the following by Cobbett - "..... while the poor creatures that raise the wheat and the barley and cheese and the mutton and the beef, are living on potatoes, an accursed canal comes kindly through the parish to convey away the wheat and all the good food to the tax-eaters and their attendants in the Wen".

Jean has been allocated the, now obsolete, air-raid shelter for the Town Hall for use as a production office and has chalked Cobbett's words on the wall behind her desk. Sir William regards this as an act of sacrilege, since the works of Cobbett are to him in the nature of a Bible - ie great wisdom, not to be taken literally. He is further disillusioned on attending a rehearsal of the play to find a local farmer, Massey Ferguson, being encouraged by Jean to improvise a speech attacking the canal in the character of his 18th century counterpart. Unfortunately, as far as Sir William is concerned, this improvisation comes out in virtually the same words as a speech made by the same gentlemen shortly before at an NFU meeting, attacking the Government national roads programme, which is to be a natural follow up to the Town

and Country Planning Bill.

Unfortunately Tim gave up his account of events at this point due to Gay breaking off with him because he was given a better costume to wear in the play than she was. It is also unfortunate that, as a journalist, Tim made his account somewhat factual and left out all the gossip. We shall have to put it back in.

In general terms we do know of certain other things that occurred in connection with the production -

- (a) Owing to Sir William falling out with the project, no co-operation was given by the Town Council particularly with rehearsal space and for some time rehearsals took place in a haunted Mill in Bodicote.
- (b) Considerable friction grew up between Jean and the Amdrams due to her tendency to cast "incomers" (ie people moved to B**** from London to work in newly opened factories in the area). Jean regarded these as "real" people.
- (c) Jean also caused ructions by bringing in her own set designer (an artist called Gamboge Tint). He upset Black and Decker (first names not extant) the two willing guys who always did the set and lighting, by making "impossible" demands on them - eg asking that the flats be painted some colour other than green and refusing to incorporate a French Windows into the set.
- (d) The local Vicar, Rev Baleful Glance, was able to blackmail Sir William into supporting the project once more by bringing to light certain facts of local history concerning Sir William's ancestors. In the first place there was considerable evidence to support the view that his predecessor Sir William Knollys in the sixteenth century was the model for Shakespeare's Malvolio and further more in the nineteenth Century his great, great, great grandfather, Sir Jasper Knowles had been involved in a scandal concerning an orphan in the local Work House upon which Charles Dickens was said to have based "Oliver Twist".

NOTES concerning your Group's contribution:

- (a) I hope you can see that these notes offer scope for chronicling the curious alliances that grow up in the course of the production of a play and that these will justify the project's secondary working title "Strange Bedfellows".
- (b) You need not confine yourself to incidents and characters mentioned in these notes.
- (c) Your scenario may concern a single small incident and cover a whole aspect of the story.
- (d) It would help if you could centre your scenario on one or two characters.
- (e) Please do not bring your scenario to a resolution. I will write the last scene of the play.