

PRESS RELEASE FROM POULTON DRAMA ON THEIR ROYAL SHAKESPEARE JOURNEY AND DEBUT.....

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE! LIVING THE DREAM

Well, where do we begin to tell the fairy tale journey which started over a year ago? It's a long story, but here goes.....Many moons ago, we heard the news that the Royal Shakespeare Company wanted to join together a professional cast with local amateur casts for their upcoming tour of A Midsummer Night's Dream. 'A Play for the Nation', was the vision of Deputy Artistic Director Erica Whyman who required 14 groups to play the principal roles of The Mechanicals and to share the experience across the country. The Mechanicals are some of Shakespeare's best loved characters, (including the iconic role of Nick Bottom the Weaver). They are an under-prepared, yet loveable bunch of craftsmen and women who put themselves forward to entertain royalty at the end of the play. This would require 6 actors, 1 rehearsal actor and a local Director to lead the team in each local area and be main liaison between the team and the RSC.

Initially, some members of Poulton Drama attended an information evening at the Grand Theatre, Blackpool, following which the society Chairperson, Cathy Davies and the Committee met to discuss whether this was something they felt they could get involved with. A previous experienced actor, award winning director and member of Poulton Drama for 9 years, Tony Stone, offered his skills and was chosen to be the team's local director and all members were then informed to attend a reading of the play if they were provisionally interested in auditioning for the roles and, more importantly, whether they would be able to commit to the lengthy and somewhat arduous process.

Finally, after two readings and several members interested, a cast was finalised - Anthony Henry (Bottom, the Weaver), Garry Houghton (Flute, the Bellows Mender), Catherine Lloyd (Quince, the Carpenter), Roger Lloyd-Jones (Starveling, the Tailor), Huw Rose (Snout, the Tinker) Ian Rowe (Snug, the Joiner), and Sarah Jane Stone (Rehearsal Titania/Puck). These actors were no strangers to the stage, having over 100 years of acting experience between them, and numerous NODA awards over the years. Primary School teacher Anthony has been with Poulton Drama for five years and has previously featured in a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Ian and Roger have also been with the group for 5 years, but have been acting for 60 and 30 years respectively, and played many leading roles between them.

Head of Performing Arts and Media Studies at St Mary's Catholic Academy, Cathy has performed with Poulton since 2012. In the same year, Primary School teacher Huw was nominated for NODA's Best Actor award for his performance in Willy Russell's Blood Brothers, which appeared at the Grand Theatre for a week-long run. Garry has been with Poulton Drama for 4 years but has been acting for 18 and has previously starred in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice and The Taming of the Shrew. Sarah Jane is an award winning actress, singer and choreographer, now teaching performing arts locally. Having played the role of Titania previously, her skills were utilised in rehearsals for the Queen of the Fairies and Puck.

So, the first hurdle was over. The next challenge was to complete a written application, which required detailed information on the proposed cast, a history of Poulton Drama and an extensive explanation of why we should proceed to the next stage. From this application, we were fortunate and delighted to be chosen for the next stage, and were asked to prepare Act 5 Scene 1 to present to the RSC Audition Panel at AKS School in Lytham. There, we met other competing groups and took part in a wide range of observed workshops, improvisation exercises and the presentation of our scene.

After some weeks, we were excited to learn that we had been invited to attend the next series of auditions which were held at Northern Stages in Newcastle. Not only were there a large number of groups attending, but for the first time, we met Erica Whyman. Again, we were given scenes to prepare and a similar format of extensive and exhaustive auditions, workshops, improvisation and discussions took place throughout the weekend.

Finally, after the longest two weeks in memory, the news arrived from Erica Whyman, that the Poulton Drama team had been successful and would be performing alongside 18 professional actors at the Grand Theatre, Blackpool in April and for two performances at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford in July. We were then immediately contacted by the BBC and 'Inside Out' Director, Sally Williams, who was to make a documentary about Poulton Drama, about the overall experience of being involved in 'A Play for the Nation' which would be televised in May. She would be following us to capture the whole journey and would attend workshops, rehearsals, and interview us in our workplaces and homes.

The team and society were obviously ecstatic and couldn't quite believe it was actually happening! The school teachers in the cast had to hurriedly approach their schools and make arrangements for special leave to attend rehearsals and performances. The Blackpool team was allocated the wonderful Kimberley Sykes as our dedicated RSC Associate Director who would work closely with our local Director, Tony.

The following few months were filled with a variety of workshops and cleverly thought out tasks which each team had to undertake. Task One involved each cast member having to prepare and recite individual monologues from one of Shakespeare's other plays. These were filmed by the local director and relayed back to Erica and Kim who gave feedback and constructive thoughts. Task Two was to devise a choreographed dance routine to a selected piece of music. Our team chose Bruno Mars "Uptown Funk" and had the advantage of choreographer Sarah Jane on the team. This again was videoed and relayed back to the RSC Directors, and really gave them a true flavour of Blackpool, causing great hilarity along the way. This task was to help shape the Bergomask dance at the end of A Midsummer Night's Dream and explained there was method to the madness! Task Three was to help with focus on the voice only and required one of the scenes to be performed as a radio play and be recorded in a professional recording studio. This was also relayed to the RSC Directors and again feedback was given.

Amongst all these tasks, additional three-hour intensive workshops took place on movement from the RSC Dance Director, Sian Williams, and voice and text from Michael Corbidge, Senior Voice and Text Coach to the RSC. Several other members of Poulton Drama grasped the wonderful opportunity and attended these workshops alongside the cast, which offered tremendous support and a real feeling of teamwork.

The professional rehearsals started on 4 January 2016 and the Poulton Drama Team rehearsed with them four nights a week by video link for the full six weeks before the tour opened in Stratford. During this rehearsal period, which was primarily under the direction of our local director Tony, the group was joined on two occasions by Kimberley Sykes and one of the assistant Stage Managers from the production. Our "Bottom," Anthony, also had to travel down to London for specific rehearsals with Ayesha Dharker who was to play Titania.

After the tour commenced, the group continued to rehearse and again were joined by Kimberley on the Wednesday prior to opening night in Blackpool. We were all delighted when Erica arrived at the weekend to take final rehearsals.

Kimberley said “there were some brilliant discoveries and some really ground-breaking individual moments during rehearsals. There is a huge potential and talent in this group who are really supportive of each other and are now ready to push themselves to the next level and perform for the Nation.”

We met the majority of the professional cast finally face to face for technical and dress run and then at last, opening night arrived at Blackpool Grand Theatre, Tuesday 5 April. The theatre was packed to capacity. We were full of anticipation and apprehension but so ready for the experience and the adrenaline kicked in. The performance received a full standing ovation and rave reviews. The rest of the week went by in a whirlwind, including a very special 50th birthday celebration party for our rehearsal Titania and choreographer Sarah Jane, to which all cast and special guests were invited. We also escorted members of the cast and production team to the treats of Blackpool , including a day at the Pleasure Beach, afternoon tea at The Tower and a night out at Funny Girls. We all had a fabulous time together. The week was a sell-out and the closing night was tremendous. However, we weren't too downhearted, as we knew the best was yet to come a few weeks later at Stratford.

BBC Documentary Producer, Sally Williams, who worked closely with us all over many months and said “this was one of the most enjoyable commissions I have undertaken. The cast have become good friends and I feel very much part of their extra-ordinary journey. The varied tasks they had to study and undertake over the year were amazing, and watching the footage of opening night still brings a tear to my eye!” The documentary, ‘The Best Bottoms in the Land’ was aired on 20 May and all of Poulton Drama and their families were glued to the TV screens to see what Sally had put together for a 28 minute screening out of over 40 hours footage. It was a wonderfully positive documentary for both Poulton Drama, the Grand Theatre, and of course our main home town Blackpool.

Fast forward a few weeks, and our Director Tony received further instructions on re-staging our scenes to adapt to the thrust stage and entrances at the RST. We got together for an initial orientation rehearsal in Poulton before embarking for Stratford on Sunday 26 July. Our cast were all booked into the Falcon Hotel and met for a lovely meal together on arrival with supporters from Poulton Drama and family members who had travelled down to watch our performances. On the Monday morning, we met up with Erica and Kimberley to be taken onto the main stage and run through any changes and entrances to adapt to the thrust stage. What a feeling to walk onto that stage, where so many famous awe-inspiring actors have stood and performed, and look out into the auditorium. It was an indescribable feeling and one which we all absorbed and relished every second. We went through our scenes for a technical/dress run on the Monday afternoon and then went on to perform for two nights. Further full houses and standing ovations were just the icing on the cake. Following the first night we had a private reception and celebratory drinks with the cast and supporters from Poulton Drama in the Swan Theatre Bar, and following our closing night, we all went across to the infamous pub, The Black Swan, more commonly known as “The Dirty Duck” to seal what had been a completely incredible journey. The professional cast were so generous and gracious to our team, and we particularly took to our hearts, Lucy Ellison, who played an outstanding and unforgettable performance as Puck.

Our local Director Tony Stone said, “This has been the ultimate experience for both myself as director and the very hardworking and dedicated cast and supporters from Poulton Drama. We all relished the opportunity and experience, and of course performing in Stratford at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre was really a dream come true. We keep thinking we might just wake up and it really will all have been a dream!”

Every member of Poulton Drama who either took part or supported will cherish this experience for the rest of their lives. It has undoubtedly enhanced our society and the relationships within. We now have strong ties with the creative team from the RSC and the BBC and many of them have become dear and true friends. We are truly honoured to have been part of theatre history. **Ends**