

News Guide re SDMS 55 Years!

2013 April 13th, Interview with Alan Jenkins, Chairman SDMS



With dazzling costumes, some big production sets and a full cast of performers, the Kings Theatre in Southsea has been home to many a production. But it's not just the professional companies who put on shows at such an historic venue.

Portsmouth is home to a wide range of amateur dramatics groups who regularly stage their own plays and musicals. One such group is the South Downe Musical Society, which is celebrating its 55th anniversary in May.

In 1958, founding members of the group managed to raise enough money to perform *The Street Singer* at the Trinity Church Hall, Fareham (pictured). Now the group is about to take on one of the biggest stages in the area, the Kings, to perform *Crazy For You* from April 23-27.

Alan Jenkins, 48, lives in Cosham and is the chairman of the SDMS. He joined in 1991 after landing a role in *West Side Story*, and he's about to take on his 54th production with the group.

Alan feels it's about time the group put on *Crazy For You*, a 1992 musical by George Gershwin, again.

'We performed it previously in 1996, but there are a lot of these kind of revival shows happening at the minute.

'It was successful for us in 1996. It has toe-tapping music, and there is singing for the chorus and dancing for the dancers. It meant we could have quite a large cast involved in it.'

Across the city and surrounding area, amateur dramatics groups have a very strong presence in theatres, community centres and town halls. Alan believes their success is partly down to the type of musicals and plays they put on.

He explains: 'It's very difficult to pick shows because you never quite know what the public flavour of the month is. It's also very difficult to try to compete with professional productions.

'Hiring costs, rights fees, orchestra, costumes, scenery and lighting can often create budgets of anywhere between £30-40,000, which can be huge risks in a time of economic austerity. 'The trick is to do the best that you can do.'

SDMS also performs an evening of songs entitled *Showstoppers* once a year. Alan explains: 'It's a little bit of everything, from something really classic to Andrew Lloyd Webber. They are popular with the company because it gives certain members the chance to do something they wouldn't normally.'

Alan also believes the group strives for quality productions and that's why it has kept going over the years.

He says: 'We've done the big traditional musicals as well as the usual ones that aren't done that often, such as Chess. We're performing Evita soon and we are one of only two companies in the UK to be performing it in a large theatre. There's us and a company in Scotland.'

'I can honestly say that, although some shows are better than others, I've never been in a show where I've been embarrassed to be part of it. We try to provide quality entertainment and it's good for anyone of any age to be involved.'

Amateur dramatics groups tend to have much cheaper ticket prices because none of the cast is being paid – it's their hobby. And this can make the shows more appealing to a theatre-attending audience.

Alan says: 'Sometimes major professional productions can cost about £50 a ticket, but we have similar shows at a much cheaper price. At a time when everyone is tightening their belts, theatre prices are important. It's good entertainment and value for money.'

It's also quite an easy hobby for anyone taking part, he adds.

'You can be any age, race or colour. You don't have to be super fit and it doesn't cost a lot of money. You don't need special equipment to take part, although you may occasionally need baggy clothing and dance shoes.'

'We have members involved in the next show that range from 16 into their 80s. It seems to be like that with every show.'

To be part of many companies, including SDMS, there's usually an audition process. But it doesn't mean that anyone can't be involved.

Alan explains: 'We can always find a way for people to be involved in a show. If someone came along and they weren't suitable for singing we wouldn't send them away, we could either coach them or ask them to help backstage.'

The group has had a number of actors go on to perform professionally, with Christopher Marlowe performing with them in the past, and others including James Hume and Stuart Price. Alan himself played a part in the Kings Theatre pantomime for 10 years, and he says without SDMS he wouldn't have got the chance.

'It would be nice to be talking in five years' time about our diamond anniversary and celebrating that, and I see no reason why not if we are careful and keep doing what we're doing. We are all competitive, as is the nature of the entertainment industry, but we have also made some lifelong friends. We've even had a few marriages within the society. 'Why can't we be here in the future celebrating our 80th, 90th or 100th anniversary? There's always a place for this kind of organisation.'

Interview courtesy of The News