

INFORMATION FOR NEW MEMBERS

Revised February 2009

THIS IS WHERE YOU COME IN ...

Thank you for becoming a member of the Crescent Theatre. If this is your first experience of joining a long established theatre group - or any other group for that matter - it can be a bit alarming. Existing members are purposefully going about whatever they have to do and you are wondering how you can fit in.

This booklet, designed especially for you, is to remove any uncertainties you may have about what we do, where you may fit in and who to talk to about anything you want to know or want to do.

If you want to “do” theatre in all its aspects you couldn’t do better than join the Crescent. Our role as an amateur theatre in the heart of a major city is unique. We have attracted audiences from as far afield as London, Oxford, Brighton and Glasgow. The range of our work is enormous - from two actor performances in the bar to classical and exciting new work, both in the Studio and the Main House. The season can include Christmas spectaculars, musicals, Youth Theatre productions and recently released plays.

We are lucky to have such a well-equipped theatre. We are equally lucky to have members with the know-how to take on the wide variety of jobs involved. They took the first step you have just taken and have learned by example and experience and a modicum of training.

It is important to remember that you don’t have to have any special skills to be a Theatre Member. If you *have* it’s a bonus for both of us! It’s not compulsory to act or direct (unless you want to, of course!) - the attraction of lighting, sound, props, set building, publicity, music, wardrobe or administration, etc. will, I suspect, already be within you, but if not, we can soon bring it out. We can ask no more of you than you are prepared to give. We hope that our enthusiasm proves infectious and that when you take on any one of the varied jobs in the place you see it through and show commitment to whatever you take on. All depends on the team. There is a direct link between the coffee-maker, front-of-house, and the actor on stage. The enjoyment you will have in being part of that team and watching an audience having a good time is like no other, believe me.

The word “crescent” is defined as “increasing” and this is exactly what we are about - increasing the quality of our productions, increasing the number and range of our productions, increasing our audiences and increasing the regard and affection in which the Crescent has so long been held. Without our audiences there is no Crescent Theatre, but equally without enthusiastic staff members there is no Crescent Theatre.

AND THAT IS WHERE YOU COME IN - WELCOME

THE CRESCENT'S HISTORY

The Crescent has a history going back to December 1923 when a few City Council employees entertained their colleagues with a Christmas party revue. They discovered, in the words of Noel Coward, that they had “a talent to amuse”.

They also had ambition - to raise the funds to acquire their own theatre within a decade. Plans were made at a meeting on 30th January 1924 and the Municipal Players were in business. For the next seven years plays were mounted in the Council House canteen and at the Midland Institute while fund-raising progressed. In 1931 the opportunity came to lease premises at Nos. 17, 18 and 19 The Crescent, together with the derelict Baskerville Hall behind. With bare hands and hired tools the Players converted the decaying buildings into a theatre with raked auditorium, stage, dressing rooms and workshops and this opened with much national and local press publicity in April 1932.

Artistic policy was underlined by the Company's motto - “Plays of Quality” - and classical drama, foreign and unusual plays, not normally seen in the Midlands, featured in the seasons' programmes. The company now included members not in the employ of the Council and enjoyed considerable success until the outbreak of war in 1939 when Government restrictions closed theatres. Restrictions were relaxed in 1940 and despite the blackout and air raids the theatre remained open, intending to help the war effort. A decision was taken that the Crescent should become the City's Garrison Theatre, solely for the entertainment of troops and auxiliary services. Fitting in rehearsals and performances between daily work and voluntary Civil Defence duties, the depleted Company embarked on a programme of revues, comedies and chiller/thrillers until the end of hostilities. In 1946 the theatre was one of the first to join the newly-formed Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain, the brainchild of Norman Leaker, founder member and first Crescent Chairman.

During the next ten years adjoining properties were acquired housing a rehearsal theatre and the professionally run Crescent Theatre Training School. Plans were made to double the size of the auditorium, shows went on tour and all was set for expansion when the Council dealt a stunning blow. The land was needed for development and the Company was given notice to quit. Despite the uncertain future activities continued - a Junior Theatre was started, fund-raising increased and “Uncle Vanya” went to the Edinburgh Festival.

This time there was no question of a members' D-I-Y job. With the theatre's capital now fairly substantial the Board opted for a purpose-built theatre. The Council offered a site in Cumberland Street and an interest-free loan. Ownership of the building was vested in The Crescent Theatre (New Building) Trust Ltd and a limited company formed to run the theatre.

That building (our previous home) opened in October 1964, with its revolutionary (literally!) design of the revolving auditorium/stage, but minus the top storey as costs had risen and the money ran out. Regrettably there was now no room for the Training School but the flexible staging gave greater scope to designers and directors and the building was in great demand from other companies wishing to hire it.

Artistic policy was modified to embrace wider box-office appeal. The number of productions was increased and musicals were now a regular item in the programme. Studio productions ensured that new members were given opportunities and experience. A new Youth Theatre was formed in the 1980s which has gone from strength to strength and built a reputation for innovative artistry. Tours in the summer and the “Wassail” in winter escalated in popularity playing such venues as Warwick and Dudley Castles, Coughton Court and Harvington Hall and there have been two tours of Shakespeare comedies to venues in France.

In the late 1980s history appeared to repeat itself as the Council disposed of the ground lease to developers and the theatre’s 1960s architecture did not fit in with the proposed prestigious scheme. The Company once more faced the prospect of losing its home. After long and delicate negotiations, the developers, Brindleyplace plc, agreed to finance a new building on a canal-side site fronting onto Sheepcote Street (our present home).

The artistic policy which has been developed over the years has been the cornerstone of our operations as we move into this next phase in our wonderful new building, but hopefully, we will continue to expand and develop in many ways.

The Crescent Theatre Company is a team with over eighty years of tradition behind it, providing an integral part of Birmingham’s cultural scene. Many members have gone on to professional show business, others becoming part-time pro’s in radio and television.

THE LIMITED COMPANY, BOARD OF MANAGEMENT, MEMBERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION

The Crescent Theatre Limited is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee, not having share capital. This means that, should the company ever be wound up, all limited company members shall contribute the sum of “two shillings and sixpence” or its equivalent and members will have no other liability to any debts. The Company is administered by a Board of Management, whose powers are defined in the Memorandum and Articles of Association and which is elected by Limited Company Members at the Annual General Meeting. The Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary are all elected for three year periods; the

Business, Arts, Production, Members and Marketing Managers for two years and the five General Members for one year. All Board members can seek re-election at the end of their term of office. Only Limited Company members may make nominations or be nominated for the Board of Management. Ordinary members may attend the Annual General Meeting, Extraordinary General Meetings and General Meetings, but only as observers. Other meetings are held and all members are encouraged to attend. Board meetings are held monthly where all matters of policy for the operation of the theatre are decided and the Officers report on their areas of responsibility.

The Theatre operates two licences: the Theatre Licence which allows the building to be used for theatrical purposes and includes a liquor licence for serving alcohol to anyone who has bought a ticket for a performance. The Theatre Licence is only in operation when a performance is taking place. At all other times the Club Licence is in operation; this allows liquor to be served to paid-up Members only during the appointed hours defined by the local licensing authority. Only one licence can operate in the building at any one time.

Ordinary Members and Limited Company Members

As a member of the Crescent you will have a chance to get involved with all activities and will probably discover in yourself skills and talents that you never suspected were there! The extent to which you get involved, and the time you spend in the theatre, is entirely up to you, but as a rough guide we expect all members to do at least one Front of House duty on each show unless you are in the cast or working backstage. Remember that if you audition for a show but are not cast, you may still get involved in the production side, by “crewing”, helping with Props or wardrobe, etc. These are all good ways of getting to know other Crescent members and “belonging” to the Theatre. The Theatre is run to professional standards, but we endeavour to be informal and friendly and welcome approaches by new members willing to get involved.

Membership subscriptions are due on 1st August in each year, although if you join for the first time on or after 1st April your membership will run for the coming season.

Members who have been actively involved with the Crescent’s activities for a minimum of six months are encouraged to apply for membership of the Limited Company at no extra charge. This gives you the right to stand for the Board, to nominate other Limited Company members as Board members and to vote in elections and at Company meetings. Application forms for Limited Company membership may be obtained from the Company Secretary or the Membership Manager.

Communication - @ct and Notice Boards

Information is passed to the membership and to individuals in various ways. The easiest way to get an up-to-date picture of what is happening is to visit the website, www.crescent-theatre.co.uk. The website will tell you about audition dates, what's on, members' information, production blogs and much more. An in-house magazine - @ct - is sent to members by email or post, with articles written by members and information about productions, events etc. It can be used by any member to pass information to the rest of the membership. Directors provide information about the productions of their plays prior to auditions; the business of Board meetings is outlined. The Editors are always happy to receive contributions from members.

In order for you to receive @ct and other communications it is important that you keep the Membership Manager informed of any change of telephone number, email or postal address.

Information can also be found in the members' office - notices about auditions, "build" days for sets, letters of appreciation, etc. can generally be found on the Notice Board; other information about rehearsal dates and personnel involved in particular productions is also posted on notice boards there. Correspondence for individual members can be left in the pigeonholes.

Theatre Administration

The Crescent employs staff to carry out many of the day-to-day administration and technical tasks. The Operations Development Director, who is usually available at the theatre during normal office hours, is responsible for the day-to-day running of the theatre and the supervision of all other paid staff. He also handles the letting of the theatre to outside companies. If you have any queries about the Theatre in general, the Operations Development Director, Ian Thompson, is a good starting point.

Wardrobe Hire

Wardrobe has around two thousand costumes available for Crescent productions and hire to outside companies. The sewing room is used for the production of new costumes so the stock is always growing.

Wardrobe Hire is open by appointment for other drama groups, universities, schools and so on to hire for very modest prices which contributes to the theatre's income. Costumes are not hired for fancy dress.

Volunteers are very welcome to help - no knowledge of history or costume, or even sewing ability, is necessary as helpers have fun learning by doing as well as having an opportunity to meet the casts and find out what other theatre groups are doing.

Marketing and Publicity

How did you find out about the last play you saw? How did you decide whether to see it or not? Even if it was “word of mouth” the production had been communicated at some level. The best show in the world will fail without an audience, hence effective marketing is crucial to the success of any production.

Marketing is basically a balance of four elements - the price, place, product and promotion. All these elements can be directly applied to the theatre and require just as much thought and planning as any other product on the market.

Getting involved with marketing the Crescent means a direct influence on our success. Some areas you might consider helping with are *design, print production, distribution, press and PR, direct marketing, database management, market research, internal promotion, newsletters, sponsorship, event organising, recruitment and photography.*

Our website is a vital tool in marketing and to keep people up-to-date with all our activities, auditions for forthcoming productions, archive material about past productions and volunteering/member opportunities.

So if you thought that theatre marketing was just posters and press releases - think again!

Health & Safety

Members must take care whilst in the Theatre not to endanger themselves or others. This particularly applies to those parts open to the general public and the backstage and overstage areas where specified safety procedures must be adhered to. Full information on Health and Safety can be found in the Theatre’s Health & Safety Policy.

THE PLAYS

ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

Choosing the Plays - Arts Manager

The Art's Manager's role is to monitor the artistic standards of the theatre. The Arts Manager's principal task is to choose the season by attempting to select plays which will not only please the public, but will satisfy the needs of members and receive Board approval. Often the task is further complicated because plays are not available for production - this is particularly the case with musicals. Once directors have been allocated to each production and casting has been approved, the Arts Manager is on hand to make sure everything possible is done to ensure that the production meets a high artistic standard.

Suggestions for plays for the coming season are always welcome.

Directing

Once the season is announced, potential directors make themselves known to the Arts Manager, who will decide who is to direct each of the productions. The Crescent is fortunate in having a number of excellent directors, but there are plenty of opportunities for new directors to take on productions.

Directing is not a task to be taken on lightly as it obviously involves a considerable commitment of time, effort and emotion for several months. Directors must not only have the artistic vision for the production but must also have the ability to manage people well and be able to express their ideas in such a way that the designer, actors and technical crew are able to put these ideas into practice.

In a large-scale production, such as a musical, the director will work alongside specialists such as a Musical Director, Choreographer or Fight Director who will take responsibility for particular aspects of the piece.

Production Assistants

The Production Assistant has the important role of liaising with all members involved in a production - the director, cast, technical crew, wardrobe and so on. P.A.s are the link throughout the rehearsal period and the run of the play, keeping a list of everyone involved, marking moves on the prompt script, noting down quick changes and props. and prompting at performances. The PA is often more involved in a production than anyone else as they are present from the auditions, attending all rehearsals, Technical and Dress Rehearsals, right through to the last night performance. For this reason it is often a good introduction to the theatre for new members, working with an experienced PA, giving them the

chance to get to know several people from the beginning, actors as well as technicians. A good PA ensures the smooth running of a production, making sure that everyone is in the right place at the right time. Although quite a demanding role in terms of time commitment, it can be highly enjoyable and rewarding and is a good way for new members to get to know people in the theatre.

Acting

Many people join the Crescent to “tread the boards”. If you want to be considered for a part, you should attend one of the auditions for the production. These usually take place around ten to twelve weeks before the opening night. Announcements are made in @ct, on the website and on the noticeboard in the office. There is usually a “familiarisation” session and an audition for a production, sometimes more, but if you cannot attend on any of the dates, you should contact the director and see if it is possible to arrange to see him or her on another occasion.

If you are fortunate enough to get a part, you will normally find yourself committing up three sessions a week (generally two evenings and morning or afternoon on a Sunday) to attend rehearsals up to the technical rehearsal and probably every night from then until the production closes. You also need to allow a realistic amount of time to learn lines. A director will normally ask for “books down” after about three or four weeks from the first rehearsal and, if you are not reasonably confident with your lines by then, you will find rehearsals heavy going and relatively unproductive, as well as being distracting for your fellow actors.

TECHNICAL PRODUCTION

Putting the Play on stage

The most important thing to remember about putting on a production is that it is a team effort. The best actors in the world cannot disguise a rotten set; a sloppy lighting cue can destroy a well-played scene. Unlike a football team, where a good striker or goalkeeper can win a match alone, if a show is going to be really good then everyone involved must get their bit right. For this to happen constant communication is essential. Each production, whether it be in the main house, studio or a touring show, will have someone appointed by the Head of that section to be responsible for each aspect of the “technical” part of the production - set design, wardrobe, lighting and special effects, sound, properties and stage management. In each case they will liaise with the director and with each other to agree how a production will look and sound and what is required to achieve it. The leader of each section for the show should visit rehearsals to familiarise themselves with this particular production of the play. The Director is the co-ordinator of the whole project but should use the creative input of the backup team - they are, hopefully, the experts in their particular areas.

Set Design

For people who have never designed a set before, it can be extremely daunting to design a Crescent production, but anyone interested should not be put off! New designers will usually be started on a simple show - perhaps a single interior set - and when they feel ready, having gained experience and confidence, they will be encouraged to tackle more complex productions. Support and help is always available.

Once a designer has committed him or herself to a show, they should read the play and discuss the production with the Director and possibly the Lighting Designer. A rough design is produced from these initial ideas, which can then be discussed again with the Director and Lighting Designer, before the design is finalised. It is a good idea to visit a few rehearsals before the final design. A scale model and ground plan should be produced (help can be given with these) which should be ready for the Pre-Production meeting, usually held about six weeks before the first night. The Designer is then responsible for making sure that the set is painted and dressed as required. This includes finding suitable furniture (from stock, hiring, borrowing or buying) and set-dressing. Although designing is a big commitment it is extremely rewarding and, with support and help, need not be excessively frightening.

Costume

Everything worn by actors on stage is the costume designer's responsibility, even if the clothes are contemporary. Usually one costume designer is appointed for each production and then, if necessary, the designer gathers a team around them in order to produce the required costumes.

Following discussions with the director on how the production will look and what costumes are required, the costume designer will assess whether items are already available from the thousands held in the Crescent Wardrobe, by hiring from outside companies or must be specially made. After casting the costume designer will attend some rehearsals, maintaining close contact with the director, and the wardrobe team will carry out fittings and alterations. Everything, including all accessories, must be assembled in time for the technical rehearsal. This is the first time that the actors will wear their costumes on stage so the designer must be on hand to resolve problems or carry out minor changes. Finally the costume designer will attend the two dress rehearsals to make sure that the clothes look right and that the actors know what they should be wearing and when and are confident and happy with what they are wearing.

Sound

This section provides all of the director's requirements that have any association with the production of sound. This usually consists of music before the show and during the interval, plus any music and sound effects required during the action of the play.

For musical productions the section provides sound reinforcement, generally in the form of strategically placed microphones to enhance the singing voices. Radio microphones are also used to pick out lead characters who cannot be picked up by static mikes.

The main equipment used consists of a Soundcraft Theatre mixing desk, professional quality MiniDisc recorders, CD and cassette players. The outputs from the mixing desk are connected to various amplifiers and on to loudspeakers around the auditorium, some of which are in permanent positions while others are more mobile, placed in specific positions on the set.

Electrics

The primary function of the electrics section is to provide lighting and special effects. The lighting designer will produce a lighting design which they are responsible for rigging, colouring and focusing. Following the technical rehearsal and dress rehearsals the lighting designer supervises operation during performances.

Other members of the section are encouraged to help rig and operate on all productions and this is the best way for entry into stage electrics for newcomers, before taking on design responsibilities. Studio productions are an ideal starting point for people with no previous experience.

Outside companies hiring the theatre almost always require a lighting designer and operator and this involves prior liaison with their director and stage manager.

The number of productions staged in a season puts a heavy toll on the wide range of equipment that the section possesses and there is an ongoing responsibility to maintain it in good working order. This includes conducting annual portable appliance testing. The electrics section also takes an overall responsibility for the electrical distribution around the building and carries out maintenance and annual inspections as required.

Music

The Crescent season normally includes a full-scale musical, and other productions may also require live incidental music, songs, etc. and new members are positively encouraged to become involved, playing an instrument, singing or arranging. At Christmas the highly popular Wassail is produced which tours to outside venues as well as being presented at the theatre. Types of music include choral and solo singing, palm court trio, skiffle groups, barbershop and electronic music.

Properties (Props)

If you want to be involved in the actual performance of a play but cannot commit yourself to the whole rehearsal period or every night of the run, or don't see yourself as an actor, then props is probably the place for you. Any inanimate object used by an actor in the course of a play is the responsibility of the Props section. This might include food which is eaten, everyday objects like telephones, newspapers or crockery or items which have to be specially made such as a radio-controlled beefburger used in a production of "Jack and the Beanstalk"! The Props section is also responsible for any weapons used, such as guns or swords. A list of all the things needed is given to the Props master/mistress by the Director. Substitute props are often required for rehearsals so that actors can familiarise themselves with their use. The real thing, in correct style or period, is provided at the technical rehearsal. A member of the Props team must be present during each performance to ensure that props are placed in the correct position on stage, at the correct time, or are on the Props table from where the actors can collect and return them. The good thing about props is that by working in the wings you actually feel part of the performance.

Stage Management

The Stage Manager co-ordinates the work of the other technical sections during the running of a play, giving cues over the headset system to lighting, sound and flying sections and liaises with other departments (props., costume/wardrobe, set design, music) to make sure the play runs smoothly. All the work for each play/show is written down on cards or wall-charts and in the Stage Manager's script.

The stage crew are responsible, under the direction of the Assistant Stage Manager, for moving furniture and scenery and fliers fly cloths and pieces of scenery in, following the instructions of the Stage Manager.

If you want to work backstage and you're not sure where to start, stage management is a good place to begin. No experience is necessary, you will be involved in the running of the show and you can see what all the other sections do. You don't have to be strong, but you do have to be quick, quiet and calm when working backstage - training will be given in anything else you need to know. Full details of all the duties of stage management are in The Guide to Stage Management.

A Typical Schedule for a Main House Production

	ARTISTIC	TECHNICAL
Around 10 weeks before	Auditions and casting	Initial set design
8 weeks before	Rehearsal period	Pre-production meeting Completion of set design Lighting design Sound design Production of costumes Production of props
1 week before	Technical Rehearsal	
3 days before	First Dress Rehearsal	
1 day before	Second Dress Rehearsal	
Performances		
End of Last Night	Strike set	
Following week	Post production meeting	

The time scale is approximate and depends on the type of production and the time allocated for Technical Rehearsals etc.

Technical Rehearsal

The bringing together of the artistic and technical sides of a production occurs at the technical rehearsal. This is normally the first time the cast will have

been on the set. The function of the “Tech” is to allow the Stage Manager and technical crew to rehearse the various lighting states, sound effects and any other technical aspects of the production. It also give the cast experience of the entrances and exits, costumes and props. Technicals can take a long time, usually lasting several hours.

First Dress and Second Dress Rehearsals

These two rehearsals give the cast and crew a final chance to iron out the last wrinkles in the production. The second dress (or preview night) in particular is run as close to performance conditions as possible.

At the conclusion of the Second Dress Rehearsal the director hands over responsibility for the production to the Stage Manager who will oversee it during the run.

The Run

Evening performances generally begin at 7.30pm in the Main House and 7.45 in the Studio. The Stage Manager is responsible for the smooth running of the production during this period. He or she will usually require cast and crew to be in the building by the “half” (6.55pm/7.10pm) ready for the auditorium doors opening.

Some productions will also have a matinee performance on a Saturday starting at 2.30pm. For special shows, particularly at Christmas, there may be Sunday performances.

Any queries, problems, suggestions etc. should be addressed to the Stage Manager.

The Strike

At the end of a production the stage has to be cleared as quickly as possible to make way for the next show. This is the “strike” where all the hard work of the previous few weeks, building and painting the set, has to be undone in a couple of hours!

The strike begins as soon as the audience have left after the last performance and will continue until the stage is clear. There is **always** a strike on the last night and, even if you do nothing else, your assistance in this operation will always be appreciated. Wear old clothes and bring a pair of stout gloves if you have any - this will protect you from nails etc. Hard hats are available.

FRONT OF HOUSE

Every production put on at The Crescent Theatre, whether it be a Crescent Theatre production or a visiting company, must have certain front-of-house staff on duty to comply with licensing and fire regulations. In addition, The Crescent runs a licensed bar, coffee bar and, of course, that essential, the Box Office, all of which must be staffed at certain times and always during performances. The theatre derives a significant income from the bar, coffees, sweets, etc. and it is therefore most important that members volunteer to carry out these duties. Don't wait to be contacted - put your name down for the next show NOW!

Front of house is our shop window. Like the actors we are there to make sure the audience has a good time and wants to come back again.

House Manager & Stewards

Every performance requires a **House Manager** to be present. This is a paid member of staff who is the licensee for the evening and is responsible for the security of the building and the safety of the audience before, during and after a performance. The House Manager's duties begin at 6.30 for evening performances and end when the building has been locked up.

In addition, legally three stewards **must** be present in the main auditorium and two in the studio, throughout the whole of a performance to ensure the audience's safety. On duty from 6.30, before the performance they also sell programmes, check tickets and show people to their seats and ensure that latecomers are seated with the minimum inconvenience to audience and performers. At the end they ensure an orderly exit of the audience, close the auditorium doors once everyone has left and check and remove litter from the auditorium.

Bar

This is the Crescent's third largest source of revenue, after tickets sales and theatre hire, and it is important that it is adequately staffed at all times the Theatre is open to the public. The bar needs two people on most performance nights, opening up at about 6.45 and closing at 11.00pm. Training can be arranged to get used to the layout of the bar.

Refreshments

In the Bar area of the Theatre we sell coffee, tea, ice creams, sweets whenever there is a performance. The coffee bar is open before the show and during the interval. The coffee and ice cream counter generally requires to be staffed by two people.

Box office

Without ticket sales, the Crescent Theatre could not exist. Unlike many amateur theatres, which have a “local audience”, the Crescent has to compete with the professional theatres in the city centre for its clientele.

Central to the ticket selling operation is the Box Office - it needs one person for each performance night to assist the paid Box Office Staff member and is open from 6.30pm to 7.45pm.