



The Barns Green Players has been pivotal to village life for generations.

Still as strong as ever, the Players staged their annual pantomime at the village hall in January. As AAH watched the dress rehearsal, director Graeme Muncer, cast members Neale Francis and Juliet Montague, technician Simon Gale, head of wardrobe Felicity Currie and stalwart Pauline Muncer assured us that everything would be alright on the night!

Neale: Barns Green Players was formed from the village youth club after the war. Later, it joined forces with the local Women's Institute and the Players is still popular today.

Pauline: I first joined in 1971, when the group was already well established. At that time, we performed a play in autumn and organised a Drama Festival too. People came from all over Sussex to perform One Act plays and we had adjudicators too. It was great fun, but eventually ended.

Graeme: These days, we have two or three productions a year. Typically, there will be a Two Act comedy in May and most years we'll host a Review, allowing people to perform sketches. This is a chance for actors to test themselves on stage and for writers to try out new material. It's good fun, as we've done classic comedy by *The Two Ronnies* and such things. Then after Christmas we have the pantomime.

Pauline: A long time ago, when I was one of the younger members of the group, some of us decided that we wanted to perform a panto. The first one was *Aladdin* in 1972. Gradually, we stopped doing old-time musicals and the panto became an annual event. But I have gone from playing the young lead to being a prompter off stage!

Neale: We have a particularly good reputation for pantomime. Some people enjoy our shows because they are intimate and more relaxed than big town productions. The Dame will go into the audience and have fun with them, whilst there's always a lot of ad-libbing and slapstick on stage too.

Graeme: I have lived in the village since I was three-years-old and have only been away for two years since then. I've been involved with the Players since I was 12, as my parents were members, so it's been a big part of my life. I'm playing the Dame this time, which is fun as I can slap on a bit of make-up, slip on a bra and have a laugh. I don't have to worry about the lines as much as the others!

Pauline: Barns Green is a wonderful place to live and has a great sense of community. It hasn't changed much and I wouldn't live anywhere else. The Players are key to it being an active village, as the group offers so many things for people to do. You don't need to feel lonely here, as there's always something that needs doing.

Neale: Whatever your hobby, you can get involved. You don't have to act. I've been a member since I was 14-years-old and I remember my dad, David, always playing the villain in the panto. So I always wanted to do something similar. But out of a membership of 85, there's only 20 or 30 who regularly want to act. The rest are backstage painting scenery, making costumes or helping in the kitchen. We like everyone to be involved as the group is part of the community.

Felicity: I was out with a few friends who were already involved in the group and they happened to hear that I had her sewing machine. I offered to help for one night and nine years later, I essentially run

The Barns Green PLAYERS



CASTING THE NET OVER THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

the wardrobe department, albeit with a great team at my side. I've never had any desire to go on stage, but many of us have skills to contribute in other ways.

Neale: Some of the sets we have are incredible. We have a working fountain on stage and if you look closely at the clock faces on the furniture, they're real time pieces. There's great attention to detail which audiences appreciate. I play the role of Lumière and several people have been involved in making the arms for my costume.

Felicity: The candle arms are essentially made of drink bottles and foam, but there's a working electrical candle device too, so it's been fun to design. *Beauty and the Beast* has interesting characters, so

making the costumes and props has been fun, but challenging. Normally, there wouldn't be quite so much for us to do backstage, as we're very good at sharing with other theatre groups.

Neale: Sadly, there aren't as many village theatre groups as there once was. Billingshurst and West Chilington are still active, but amateur dramatics societies have gone in Ashington and Southwater. We were down to about 30 people at one point, but we've always had a strong committee, including Simon. He is a technical wizard and even managed to create rain in our last play, *Allotment Gate*.

Simon: As well as being involved with the Players, I'm on the Barns Green Village Hall committee. What we've done as a

group is to make the hall more cohesive, improving the parking and facilities so that it works to the benefit of the whole community. The Players have invested profits from previous shows into lighting and sound equipment. That not only means we're able to stage better productions, but that other hall users benefit. For the pantomime, there are three of us working on the technical side, operating six computers from a small room. It's become so technical that we've even had other groups visiting to see how we do it!

Pauline: I've recently been out to Dubai, as I have a son living out there, and watched a professional production whilst there. I genuinely thought that it wasn't a patch on what we do in Barns Green. It's always a



wonderful event that the whole village turns out for.

Felicity: In Barns Green, everyone knows one another and we even have seen people who have just moved into the new Ashmiles development become members. One told me that joining us has made the alteration to her new life much easier.

Pauline: The group hasn't changed. At its core, it's always been people from the village. We have lots of talented youngsters in the group and older members too, but attracting people from that middle age group is difficult, particularly men, as they have young families and jobs. For this show, Graeme has been able to bring in some of his contacts, which is wonderful as they've brought new life to the Players.

Graeme: I acted in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* at the Theatre Royal, playing Boris the Spy. Although the Players is my home group, I've acted in productions staged by other local amateur dramatics societies and it was nice to be in a Theatre Royal show. I managed to drag two or three of the cast to do *Beauty and the Beast*.

Juliet: I'm from Haywards Heath, but I met Graeme at the Theatre Royal where I was in the chorus and was understudy for the role of Truly Scrumptious. Originally, I was going to play the Prince in this panto, but now I am the Beast too. It's fun as the sound team is distorting the Beast's voice! As well as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, I've been in a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Brighton, but acting is just something I do for enjoyment. I've never done a pantomime before, so this is a new experience for me. Having known nothing about the group beforehand, I've been impressed, especially by the work backstage as they take so much pride in

their work. It's made me realise that I really need to learn my lines!

Graeme: This year's pantomime has been written by Nigel Currie, another long-serving member. He also wrote sketches for our recent Review as well as last summer's play. I am directing and I've got a talented cast and crew to work with, so it should be good!

Juliet: I have several solos along with Belle. As well as songs from *Beauty and the Beast*, we've got contemporary tunes from *The Greatest Showman*, as well as others. It's been interesting to see everyone working together, constantly tweaking and introducing new things, even at the dress rehearsal. I'm told that's normal for the Barns Green Players!

Simon: We have held open auditions as it's nice to have new blood, even if they're from outside the village! We have children here whose parents have been members too and they are the lifeblood of the group.

Pauline: I haven't been onstage for about 15 years and these days I'm a prompter, giving people their lines when they miss their cue. For me, I just love being a small part of the show as The Players has really been my life. We're lucky to still have this group and others like HAOS in Horsham, as they're a good place to meet people. You'll find that there are many ways you can get involved - often in ways that you never imagined.

● For more about Barns Green Players visit: www.barnsgreenplayers.co.uk or email: members@barnsgreenplayers.co.uk

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