

Cody Farnborough Amateur Operatic Society

Putting on a Show



A group of volunteers from CFAOS came along to share their passion for musical theatre with a small, but clearly interested, audience with a presentation and exhibition.

<http://www.cfaos.co.uk/productions/current/current.htm>

Theatre Manager Mike Davall began the presentation by telling us that the aim of the company is to put on shows comparable with professional productions, and to at least break even. Realistically, the choice of show is restricted to a list of perhaps 45, because of the available resources. The shows that are due to be produced are The Sound of Music, for March 2013, The Wizard of Oz, for September 2013, and The Producers, for March 2014.

Mike explained that the first task when planning a production is to contact scenery companies to check availability. Next, the rights holders need to be contacted to seek permission. Essential to planning any production is NODA, the National Operatic and Dramatic Association, who can offer invaluable advice, and, should an actor be unable to appear, may even be able to provide a substitute. At this early stage, it is important to be aware of what other local companies are planning, to avoid taking audiences from one another, and to organise publicity accordingly.

CFAOS maintains a shortlist from which to make their choices. This currently comprises: Anything Goes; Summer Holiday; My Fair Lady; Guys and Dolls; Oklahoma; Cabaret. Reserves are: Me and My Girl; Sweet Charity.

Mike's next step is to produce budgets and find the break-even point. He must do this before the final choice is made, to ensure its viability. He showed us an example to illustrate the many factors that must be taken into account.

June Thomas then took over to tell us about the production side. Her first job is to oversee the election of a Production Team, who will, at this point, know which show they will be working on.

Next, she will get together with the Musical Director and Choreographer to select an audition piece, which will be published in advance to give performers the opportunity to practice. They will then co-opt four additional members of the Production Team to conduct auditions. Because CFAOS is such a talented and adaptable society, there is usually no problem filling roles.

Once the cast has been chosen, the rehearsal schedule is published. The first rehearsal is a read-through, which is light-hearted and fun. Then the four months of rehearsal start in earnest, with coaching in dialogue, singing and chorus. The company aims to be basically prepared two to three weeks before opening night, so that they can concentrate on polishing and refining in the final days. The last step is a full test run at Princes Hall, so that performers can learn the geography of the backstage area well enough to manage in the dark.

June told us that *The Sound of Music* presented a challenge because children can only do five performances a week, but this show runs for six, which has meant that two teams needed to be prepared. Their ages range from five to sixteen and the law requires matrons to look after their welfare.

Two production meetings take place during the rehearsal period, which cover every aspect of the show. Costumes for the children have caused particular problems for the team because they have exceeded the budget. It has also been difficult to source the 11 nuns habits required.

Mike took over from June to explain that CFAOS productions differ from professional productions only in the lack of previews, understudies or new cast rehearsals. In every other respect, they aim to reach the same standards.

The next step is to draw up plans, for which Mike will examine photos of other productions and research the production manufacturing information on exactly how the sets were created. The sets simply have to work.

The company does sometimes build scenery themselves, for example a sally for *Oklahoma*. This was accomplished at a scenery hut complex at Farnborough Technology Park, consisting of a workshop and store. (Mike mentioned that they are in the process of raising funds to build a new facility, the site of which has already been provided). It is in the workshop that the story boards are created.

When assembling his crew, Mike is able to draw on a team of regulars. In addition, he will call on cast members who aren't appearing in the current show, which gives them a valuable opportunity to learn about production. The team must be extremely adaptable, because they are usually only able to access the venue one week ahead of opening night to get used to everything and to become fast and efficient in their allotted tasks.

CFAOS uses a live orchestra, which the Musical Director hires using a stock list of musicians. His particular challenge is to balance the sound he needs with the inevitable budgetary constraints.

Mike ended with the hope that he would see us at *The Sound of Music*, and at future productions too. He and his colleagues went on to answer a variety of questions from the audience. Afterwards, we were invited to spend time chatting to the society members on hand, Mike, June, Ron Walker (Box Office Manager) and Eric McLoughlin (Committee Member), and to explore the material on exhibit, including photos, story boards, and playbills (the work of an extremely talented member of the society). Also on display was a selection of the many awards that CFAOS has won, evidence indeed of the very high standards for which they are rightly known.

For information on Cody Farnborough Amateur Operatic Society, please visit their website:

<http://www.cfaos.co.uk>