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| **Collection title:** Behind the scenes: saving and sharing Cambridge Arts Theatre’s Archive**Interviewee’s surname:** Goldsmith **Title:** Ms**Interviewee’s forename(s):** Sally**Gender:** F**Occupation:** Chair of Cambridge Operatic Society |
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| **Abstract:** | ‘All those times you have played air guitar, all those times you have stood in front of the mirror with your hairbrush, you could actually do that for real, and we will welcome you. That is the power of community theatre’. Chair of Cambridge Operatic Society (CAOS) Sally Goldsmith discusses amateur theatre in Cambridge and explains how the society’s annual production at the Cambridge Arts Theatre is produced.  |
| **Key words:** | Opera, Musical Theatre, Amateur Theatre, Gareth Mullan, Sam Fuller,  |
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| **00.16** | **Can you tell us how you first became involved in CAOS (Cambridge Operatic Society)?** |
|  | Goldsmith was friends with Will Howe, who is on the committee of CAOS; he mentioned that the Society needed a someone to do their marketing. Goldsmith’s first show with CAOS was their 2017 production of *Sweeney Todd*. After a couple of years, some of the committee members suggested she stand for the role of chair as she had experience, having been chair of the Bury St Edmund’s Amateur Dramatic Society. She decided to ‘give it a go’. One of Goldsmith’s goals as chair is to ‘really knit CAOS into the community’. She points out that while Cambridge has four amateur theatre companies, it only has one audience. She hopes that the companies can feel bonded in their aim to provide good theatre for their shared audience, rather than feeling competitive. She wants actors from other amateur companies to feel able to join CAOS as well. This is already the case for many people; one of the lead roles in CAOS’ current show, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, is played by Gareth Mullan, the chair of CTC (Cambridge Theatre Company). Goldsmith also wanted to ensure that the Society runs in a ‘business-like’ way. She draws upon experience from her full-time job in the Civil Service. She tries to make sure that everyone has equal responsibilities and equal say. |
| **00:05:26** | **Do other Cambridge-based amateur theatre groups operate in the same way?** |
|  | Goldsmith believes that most of the groups operate in the same way, with similar committees. This is especially the case as many people will be involved in multiple societies. For example, Louis Ling, who founded CTC, used to sit on the CAOS committee. Most of the companies are now under charitable status. CAOS has been a charity for a long time and took on incorporated status a couple of years ago. This ensured that their governance and finances are clear, which is especially important for CAOS as they produce some of the most expensive amateur shows. Goldsmith says that putting on a show ‘takes a lot of planning’ and is in awe of professional theatre companies who do many shows in a year. She says that it requires ‘good organisation’ and ‘great relationships’. CAOS’ committee is drawn from across the community; people come together from a range of professions to make great committee and a ‘great group of friends’.  |
| **00:07:56** | **How do you all balance being on the committee and having day-jobs?** |
|  | Unlike professional companies which rehearse intensively for three-four weeks, the CAOS shows have a five-month rehearsal period. Rehearsals take place on week-day evenings or Sundays. Goldsmith finds it can be hard work to finish a day of work and then go out to rehearsal! They start with music, then choreography, and finally the director knits everything together. They start planning the show about 6 months before it goes on stage. This involves confirming the show with the Arts, putting together an audition booklet and putting information up on social media. Every year they ‘cross their fingers and hope somebody turns up’ to auditions and ‘every year they do!’. Goldsmith is always astonished by the talent in CAOS. She doesn’t know why its members aren’t professional actors. The committee meet once a month. After each show, they ‘take a deep breath’ and relax for a couple of months. Then the cycle begins again, and they meet with the Arts Theatre to discuss the next show. Goldsmith says that CAOS has a ‘very close working relationship’ with the Arts. The committee is also busy finding rehearsal space and settling the Society’s finances at this point in the planning process. Goldsmith describes it as ‘organised chaos’: the Society lives up to its name! |
| **00:12:35** | **What falls specifically within the remit of the committee chair?** |
|  | Goldsmith explains that her role is to ‘knit everything together’ and uses the analogy of a conductor in an orchestra. She must make sure everything is working but let everybody to do what they do best; to chair the meetings but not say too much in those meetings. She ran the monthly ‘Newsletter from the Chair’ as she was eager to keep all the 200+ members of the Society involved. CAOS charges £10 for membership. The newsletter was especially important during covid to keep everyone in the loop. CAOS also organised monthly social events over zoom. The committee is completely transparent about their meetings and now puts minutes up on the website.  |
| **00:17:56** | **I’m interested in how CAOS funds its productions. Are they financed by profits from previous shows or fundraising and memberships?**  |
|  | Goldsmith reckons that most of their shows cost about £75,000 - £90,000. The Society is quite old, so there is money in the bank from the past. As a charity, they have an obligation to look after the interests of the Society. They must be ‘quite savvy’ about finances, but they do not intend to make a profit. Some shows make a loss, and some make a gain. They have started to claim gift-aid and run various fundraising events like quizzes and cabaret nights. Goldsmith feels the responsibility of managing a society which is over 100 years old. She believes this year’s show *Priscilla* will be popular with audiences post-COVID. The Penguins group (volunteer technicians) provide stage crew, as do the Arts Theatre and this helps to keep outlay to a minimum. The Arts Theatre also support with marketing. It is all a real joint effort. And if the show breaks even that is a good place to be for a charity, to sustain the society’s charitable purpose which is bringing the performing arts to the community.  |
| **00:23:40** | **Can you speak a bit more about the practicalities of the relationship with Cambridge Arts Theatre?**  |
|  | Goldsmith explains it starts with a meeting with Dave Murphy, Dafydd Rogers and Chloe Brindle. CAOS provide a short, long-list of possible shows and research what rights are available. The Arts Theatre suggest an available slot for the production. There is then a discussion to pick the show, CAOS want a show which works for them, and the Arts try to pick something which also works with their wider programme. It can be robustly challenging. *Priscilla* was a real departure for the society this year, but Goldsmith believes it is a great direction for the society to go in. Historically the society had done Gilbert and Sullivan, then moved towards musicals, and now may also be able to explore more modern shows. The discussion gets the choice down to a shortlist of two. The Cambridge Arts Theatre must have the last word, because to perform at the Arts is a privilege, and the show must work with the wider programme. There is then a conversation with the Arts Theatre marketing team, and with a professional director – the inclusion of a professional director for the production is a condition of performing at the Arts. The appointment of the director, which is arranged by CAOS, is approved by the Arts Theatre, ‘it is a reputational, credibility thing, both for ourselves and for the Theatre’. Then the production is largely managed by CAOS, auditions and rehearsals. Chloe Brindle [CAT Programming and Productions Manager] is our point of contact at the Arts Theatre and we invite her to see the show as it develops.  |
| **00:31:08** | **Can you talk about the impact of COVID on your productions?** |
|  | Goldsmith explains they were one of the last amateur companies to perform before lockdown with a performance of *The Sound of Music.* As lockdown lifted in 2021 the society hosted several masterclasses – topics such as acting, acting with song, dance etc - which were conceived to get people ready to perform again. It also got the message out about the society to recruit more performers. They began production of their 2022 show *Priscilla* with auditions in September 2021, rehearsals began in October 2021. The society undertook stringent COVID security measures, masking, handwashing, deep cleaning, twice weekly lateral flow with reporting. 19 December 2021 was due to be the last pre-Christmas rehearsal, COVID was again prevalent in the city, and everyone was nervous. Chloe Brindle rang and asked if the society wanted to discuss postponing. The closer you get to the production the more money you lose. CAOS business manager, Sam Fuller, did an analysis showing how much money they would lose if they cancelled at each point up to the production – if they had cancelled the week before the production was on stage, they would have nearly bankrupted the society. An extraordinary committee meeting just before Christmas unanimously agreed to postpone. The creative team were supported. Another amateur production *KIPPS* at the ADC theatre had lost 5 company members in one night to positive COVID tests, so there was concern members of the CAOS cast would contract COVID and this would close the show. Instead CAOS began to look for a new slot for the production – they were very happy to postpone to the end of March 2022. ‘Health and safety and people’s welfare was top of the agenda’.  |
| **00:38:37** | **What is the unique benefit of community theatre, what is its purpose?** |
|  | Goldsmith believes community theatre gives everyone the opportunity to have a go, regardless of background and ability. Community theatre is inclusive and welcoming. It allows people to try. It allows people to help. Goldsmith reflects that it is complementary to professional theatre and fulfils a different purpose. She reflects on the benefits that individuals can gain from taking part. People’s passion in the amateur theatre circuit is as string as if they were professionals. ‘All those times you have played air guitar, all those times you have stood in front of the mirror with your hairbrush, you could actually do that for real, and we will welcome you. That is the power of community theatre’. |
| **00:41:26** | **ENDS** |