

Quality Control – First published in The Stage

This feature was inspired by an amateur production of Our Country's Good that I was asked to review, and was first published in The Stage. Apparently it generated their largest ever mailbag, including one letter from the Home Office and another demanding I be sent to the gallows. I received my first ever fan letter and my most enjoyable hate mail to date.

IT WAS Saturday night; there was nothing on the box and my dancing days are over. Accepting the overwhelming odds, I placed my bet and entered the auditorium to watch another amateur production. Within twenty minutes the rustle of sleeves was audible as we checked our watches.

Yet still I go back for more in the desperate hope that magic will occur.



THE AGONY AND ECSTASY OF AMATEUR DRAMATICS

The indignation that greets an honest review of such a performance astounds me. Like respect, rave reviews must be earned and not demanded. Societies cry "Make allowances, we're only amateurs!"

Why so? 'Amateur' does not mean third rate; it simply implies 'unpaid' or 'non-professional'. Unfortunately, talentless amateurs perpetuate the misnomer with displays of turgid incompetence on our provincial stages and still demand clemency.

The issue is *not* money but ability, which emerges from the most humble sources. Most professionals begin as amateurs and 'amdrams' are essential to their discovery and development. So let the unpaid talents stand proud and cast shadows over the whingers.



Alas, the stage is often littered with neurotics instead of actors. While not exclusive to the amateur stage, the problem is more prevalent there. Perhaps they simply do not understand their craft. Acting is not about putting on a mask, pretending to be a character and entertaining an audience with invention; it is about destroying the masks, baring the raw soul and presenting truth. Or rather it should be.

The renowned teacher, Rudy Shelly, stated throughout his career that an actor should perform to just three people at the very back of the auditorium: the first is blind, the second profoundly deaf and the third speaks no English. Each must understand and enjoy the performance equally.

When actors walk on stage they carry responsibilities. Not least of all to the paying audience who have parted with hard-earned currency and deserve quality in return.



It is not acceptable to deliver shoddy, wooden portrayals of well-written characters. We, the audience, do not wish to see performers lost on the stage, forgetting lines and laughing at their own jokes. For too long local theatre companies have adopted the mantle 'amateur' as an excuse for using performers who are at best inept dreamers, at worst incompetent morons with no business on the stage.



Yes, the pros also get it wrong sometimes, but when amateur companies cannot even work out the difference between a director and a producer, what hope is there?

Presumably members of these theatre societies actually enjoy theatre. So why do they not attend professional productions and *learn* from them? Gone are the days when a society stalwart may claim "But that is *my* spot! I *always* stand there." In professional theatre, directors do not create horseshoes of actors on the stage. Actors can walk and deliver lines *simultaneously*! Sets do *not* fall over, lanterns are placed *behind* the masking borders, directors *understand* the play...

**FRANKIE SAY
RELAX
DON'T DO IT!**

The knowledge is there for the taking. So can the petty gauleiters of the amateur societies cope with the truth? Can they face the fact that their techniques are outdated and their productions appalling? Or must we continue paying to watch them present their antiquated formulas in lieu of quality productions? The responsibility is ours. We must fight back, revolt, demand quality and oust them all.



But in the meantime, may the amateur productions continue unceasingly. They fill me with delight. It brings me immense pleasure to view the quagmires of hysterical incompetence out of which, occasionally, a sparkle appears that just might indicate a true star in the making.

Ten Ways to Spot a Travesty on the Amateur Stage

1. Every actor sports blue eye shadow and a red dot in the corner of each eye and body make up will not reach beyond collars and cuffs.
2. Actors take five seconds to arrange themselves and 'find their character' *on stage* before starting to act. Ditto before exiting.
3. Blackouts are slightly dimmed versions of the previous state during which the actors and stage crew believe themselves to be invisible.
4. A stage death comprises: loud scream, moment of silence, glance at the audience, heavy collapse, final exhale, applause from the audience, respectful nod or smile from other actors and final adjustment of body by the obviously breathing corpse.

5. Absolutely every scene will be rewarded with rapturous applause from two thirds of the audience regardless of the mood the actors attempted to set. The remainder will cringe in embarrassment.
6. The budget will have stretched to one new toy for the technical crew (e.g. intelligent lighting, explosive devices, projector, cloud effects gobo), which will be used at every opportunity whether the script requires it or not.
7. Costumes will be too big, too tight, too clean and too absurd not to be laughed at. Wigs will be uncontrollable, teeth will sparkle and actors will have just visited the hairdresser whether they play heroes, slaves or pantomime animals.
8. If remotely possible, at least one scene will occur with UV lighting. Several actors will prance about on stage with black leotards and UV sensitive paint; one of them wearing large, white underpants beneath their leotard, which will shine brightly under the UV light.
9. The set will not work. Handles will come off, actors will trap themselves in, under or behind anything that moves, the dry ice machine will leak and two-dimensional backcloths will wobble in the breeze. In a Great Travesty the wrong backcloth will be dropped and a second will appear midway through the scene probably entangling itself and stopping halfway.
10. The curtain call will be embarrassingly twee with 'serious', rigid backed actors frowning and young starlets grinning inanely. They will continue bowing until every angle has been addressed and several pairs of feet will turn to exit before the curtain has hit the stage.