

Amateur Stage

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Below Stairs

INSIDE...



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FRENCH

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BELOW STAIRS

by Trevor Pilling, music by Alan Lewis

Kay Smith looks at the highs and lows of staging the fourth production of this two-year-old musical

Staging a new unknown musical is a huge challenge for any amateur group, but when my partner Mark Hastings and I first saw a performance of **Below Stairs** during its premiere at Elgiva Theatre, Chesham, in May 2002, we were in no doubt that it would go on to be a big success. Little did we know that two years later we would be staging it ourselves! It so happened that a group with whom I served my amdram apprenticeship – the talented Riverside Players in Old Windsor – asked whether we would consider directing their summer show. As they were also a bit short on ideas, I persuaded them to give it a go.

VENUE

Riverside Players usually performs at the Old Windsor Memorial Hall, a village hall with limited space. It was therefore decided to give **Below Stairs** the benefit of a larger stage and better backstage facilities. The Magna Carta Arts Centre, Staines, fitted the bill perfectly and was near enough to Old Windsor not to inconvenience local supporters.

PLOT AND CAST

The show has quite a large cast and is perfect for groups with a mixed age group wishing to include a large chorus. The story, set in 1914, centres on ladies' maid Lucy Ambleside who is determined to improve her lot in life. A dream part for any young actress, she must be able to sing and, preferably, dance. We were lucky to have a young, talented and experienced member who switched





eloquently from cockney ladies' maid to French music hall singer and on to American society lady with ease. With songs ranging from romantic ballad to saucy music hall, the part is demanding as she is on stage for most of the show and has some quick costume changes, but the strength and passion of the character makes her a joy to work with for both actress and director.

As the show's name suggests, there is a distinct flavour of the classic TV series *Upstairs Downstairs* and the characters of Mr Town and Mrs Lovegrove are reminiscent of Mr Hudson and Mrs Bridge: both are wonderful parts for the slightly more mature actors. With much of the action taking place in the kitchen, these two come into their own making it quite clear who is in charge with memorable songs such as *Order In Our Lives* and *I Am a Very Fine Cook*. Young, and not very able, under kitchen maid Emily completes the scene with a chorus of servants and kitchen maids.

No musical is complete without a love interest and in this case Lucy has three suitors: music hall impresario Gerald Land, Irish gigolo Edward Waterflower and the kind, steady Tom Snodgrasse, the local PC, who eventually wins Lucy, having admired her from afar for some time. There are 16 named characters in all (6F 10M) including bootboy Ben and comedy duo Fred and Bert.

REHEARSALS

MD Mark Hastings and I have learned from experience that rehearsals work best when everyone knows the songs. We therefore spent the first six or eight rehearsals purely on

music having first given every cast member a CD with all their songs to familiarise as much as possible beforehand. I also believe that a musical is only as good as its chorus, so as much time as possible was spent with the chorus before we embarked on the script. With two rehearsals a week for about 12 weeks, this reduced script rehearsal considerably. Luckily our two leads were enthusiastic enough to agree to additional weekend rehearsals.

We were also fortunate that two of our actresses were choreographers and this helped spread the workload on some chorus numbers. Even though many were not dancers, I was keen to involve the whole chorus, and the beauty of the chorus numbers in this show is that great effect can be achieved using simple movements. This worked particularly well in *Order In Our Lives* and made the show more interesting for chorus members.

SCORE AND MUSICIANS

Alan Lewis's brand new score is well-written with, as well as the overture, finale and other incidental music, 16 original and memorable musical numbers, ranging from the comical *Ridiculous* to the beautifully poignant *When I'm Alone at Night*. The advantage of a new musical score is that your audience have no preconceived expectations. This is also the disadvantage, as the cast have to start from scratch, and so a lot of work had to be put in at the beginning to ensure everyone knew the songs. The score is available either for piano or arranged for piano,

keyboard and bass. In our case we had an 'orchestra of one' using Mark's own orchestral keyboard arrangements, which enabled us to use the same music at rehearsal as in performance, making the cast feel more confident and avoiding any nasty surprises at tech/dress rehearsal!

SCENERY, SOUND AND LIGHTING

We had the benefit of experienced construction and backstage teams. There were 18 scene changes but, with clever use of a front-of-stage apron and adapting/combining some scenes, we managed with three different sets plus roll-on pieces. Much of the action takes place in the kitchen and, as this clearly sets the period, we constructed this as a hard set and used two dropcloths for park/veranda and seaside scenes.

In the kitchen the script calls for a staircase in the centre but we felt this restricted some of the acting space and so opted for two sets of stairs sideways on. This had the bonus of giving depth and height to some of the choreography (although one of the cast may not agree having

slipped and fallen from top to bottom at dress rehearsal! Luckily no bones broken!) A realistic model of an old-fashioned kitchen range, along with lots of copper, brass and earthenware pots and pans, gave the scene authenticity.

If I have one criticism it is that there are too many scene changes jumping from and to the kitchen. This did give our stage manager a few headaches during the technical rehearsal although she and her backstage crew did a sterling job on performances. (Alan Lewis tells me that this has since been remedied, with now 16 scene changes in place of the previous 18.)

The lighting crew did a wonderful job, particularly in the nighttime kitchen scenes, creating an effective candlelit and moonlit atmosphere. During Tom's song





When I'm Alone at Night in the Ypres trenches, we brought two soldiers on stage at the graveside of their lost comrade to add poignancy. To enhance the sombre mood of the projected WW1 black-and-white newsreel footage, we introduced some silhouette, strobe and narrow spot lighting. Normal daytime lighting was used in the park and seaside scenes and the evening veranda scene included an old-fashioned street lamp.

After drawing up a microphone plan and with some quick swapping around by the cast, we were able to ensure that everyone was heard with just eight radio mikes.

COSTUMES

Our costume ladies did a great job recreating the 1914 look. We had a problem with Tom's policeman's uniform and there was some difficulty finding the correct army uniforms for the period. But all in all the costumes were very effective and only one or two needed to be hired. Kitchen scenes consisted of various types of cook and kitchenmaid costume, plus footman/butler outfits for the men.

Mrs Pankurst and her suffragettes all had day wear with hats and gloves, while the seaside scene required a few bathing costumes for men and women. The rest wore day wear.

Lucy has the most costume changes, one being a saucy outfit for the music hall number *A Parlour Maid*. Although not in the script, we included two further dancers in this routine wearing similar costumes.

SUMMARY

Below Stars is a new, poignant, funny and uplifting musical with an old-fashioned feel. The songs and characters are memorable and every production – ours was the fourth – has received great acclaim. The most worrying part of staging an unknown show is ensuring bums on seats and this did prove to be a small downside. However, in fairness, this may also have been partly due to the fact that we were not in our usual venue. Certainly, the audience feedback convinces me that this show must be seen far and wide. When we are still hearing comments like "Will you please stage it again", "I'm still humming the tunes" and "I didn't ever want it to end", how can it possibly fail?

