

# The Theatrical Guild

## Our History

### **1891 – 1901.**

“For some time past I have been very grieved to hear of many sad cases of distress among our sisters in the profession... Actress, chorister, extra, dresser, or cleaner ... she deserves our aid”.

It was upon this rallying call in 1891, that the actress Kitty Carson, on behalf of women working in theatre, who, through loss of work, illness and pregnancy found themselves in dire need, founded what was then known as the Theatrical Ladies Guild.

Gathering together her actress friends, they would meet at Kitty’s home in Great Russell Street for weekly sewing bees, making clothes for new born babies which were sent to the destitute new mothers.

Kitty became the Theatrical Ladies Guild’s first Treasurer with Fanny Brough as President.

In 1894, the growing number of Busy Bees, plus collections of cast off clothing, forced Kitty to move into larger premises in Wellington Street. A year later, the Stage Needlework Guild was formed to take over the production of the making of clothes which were then distributed by Kitty herself.

Not stopping there, in 1896, Kitty founded the Actors Children Fund (now TACT) with Sir Henry Irving agreeing to become President.

In 1880, Kitty’s husband Charles Carson became the founding editor of The Stage Directory, now The Stage newspaper.

### **1901-1911.**

“Maternity cases assisted. 1,061; double sets of short clothing given for 1,683 babies; special cases of illness provided with homes or hospital beds; cast-off clothing given to 4,927 applicants (male and female)... commenced only in August 1896; stage costumes, dresses etc, given to 2,125 people, who were thus enabled to accept offered engagements”. Actor and Actresses had to supply their own.

This is taken from the accounts of the first eleven years of the charity, presented at the AGM of 1903 which was held in the St James’ Theatre.

Sewing bees were set up in the provinces. Wellington Street became too small and the charity moved to even larger premises in Russell Street. Before finally moving onto 90, Great Russell Street, Kitty Carson retired as Secretary due to strain and exhaustion.

Amongst the jobs of her successor Miss Millicent Hammond, the most vital was sifting through the mass of applications and making sure that only those genuine calls for help were presented to the committee for consideration. Nothing changes. Then, there was no welfare state.

On the first floor of the new large premises “over 60 chairs were for the bee workers with only two or three more of a lounging kind for the use of distinguished visitors who call from time to time” (The Stage Year Book 1909). Kitty’s Busy Bees were watched over by her portrait and that of Fanny Brough. Illustrious members of the charity at this time included Irene Vanburgh, Lillian Braithwaite, Ellen Terry and Dame May Whitty.

## **1911 – 1921**

The First World War and its aftermath produced particular hardship. Much needed support and fund raising grew during this period.

“Stage-hand, dying from cancer of throat and tongue, unable to work. Wife who had supported the husband and two little children, was taken ill with blood-poisoning. The Guild found them absolutely starving, and immediately provided food, clothing, and firing, placed the father into a cancer hospital and the children into a home, until the wife, for whom the Guild procured medical treatment, was able to look after them again”.

A special fundraising matinee was held in April 1913 at the Haymarket Theatre in which “Well known actors and actresses will appear”. Huge fund raising Tea Parties were held in Kensington Town Hall, the Central Hall Westminster and three times in the Royal Albert Hall, 1911, 1913 and 1917. The first entertained guests with a Grand Pageant of the Stage. Tea and entertainments 6s. On the day 7s 6d. Boxes £1.1s & 10s 6d. Balcony to view only 2s 6d & 1s. “Brilliant affair - smart frocks, handsome furs (ermine perhaps predominant)”.

The 1911 AGM at the St James Theatre reported “the entire house full to overflowing”. Press coverage of AGMs was enormous and very detailed. Kitty Carson, by then retired, and usually in attendance, was given an enthusiastic reception.

Included in the press coverage were descriptions of what the committee members were wearing, which like the Tea Parties, was pretty spectacular.

In one year, between them, the Stage Needlework Guild, the Needle and Thread Guild in Edinburgh and the Middlesex Needle Work Guild made 6,080 garments for distribution.

## **1921 – 1931**

Change at the top. Irene Vanburgh now presided over the Guild. She succeeded Fanny Brough who died in 1914 and remained at the helm until 1950.

Kitty Carson had also died. Louise Stopford who founded the Needlework Guild said - “A better tribute to her life could not be imagined than to support the mother Guild which she had started and the daughter Guild which she had adopted”.

AGMs continued to attract a huge numbers, standing room only. Royalty became involved. In 1924, the Princess Royal was welcomed by the American stage actress and future film actress May Whitty. In a speech at the 1924 AGM, May Whitty praised “the staff of the theatre who make the life of the players so happy.”

At every AGM an appeal was made for clothes for actors and actresses, particularly for actors. "Steal them" from your husband's wardrobe, was Lilian Braithwaite's cry! But none with moths were needed – too many already!

Fundraising included Ivor Novello's All Star Matinee at the London Palladium in 1928 and an All Star Hamlet at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in 1930.

In January 1927, a fundraising dinner dance, tickets £2 2s, was held at the Carlton Hotel and a party at the Waldorf Hotel where Adele Astaire, sister and dancing partner of Fred, was won in an auction for £50 as a dancing partner for Mr Selfridge. "I expect that was the most expensive waltz he ever had" she said.

Sewing Bees continued to be held every Friday. In 1930, the Guild moved to Bayley, Bedford Square. The number of supporters and aid given continued to grow. The need never ceased.

## **1931 – 1951**

Our archives are a little sparse during the Second World War period. No AGMs were held between 1938 and 1946. At the 1937 AGM, a very young Daniel Massey presented the bouquet to Princess Arthur of Connaught. Dame Irene Vanburgh was still president and Sewing Bees never stopped.

In 1933, Gracie Fields opened and financed an orphanage in Peacehaven on behalf of TTLG for children of touring parents. She made frequent visits and took great interest in their welfare.

Fundraising continued with Ivor Novello's radio broadcast on behalf of TTLG in 1933 and Vera Lynn's in 1948. Also in 1933, a theatre supper and ball was held in Grosvenor House with many socialites as guests and supported by Gertrude Lawrence. 1938 saw Irene Vanburgh's jubilee matinee at Her Majesty's in aid of TTLG.

Very occasionally cases proved false. That of the actress unable to work, with two children and a missing husband, ran for several weeks. The Guild supported her with £1 a week and found a boarding school so she could work, half of the fees being paid by the local authority. Then, a stage manager contacted the Guild seeking help to recover the £80 owed to her by this same actress and confirming that the husband had lived at home all along. But another beneficiary was so grateful for the help he had received, that on being employed again, tried to return the money.

At the AGM of 1948, a silence was held in memory of three of TTLG's greatest and longest serving members - Dame May Whitty, Lilian Braithwaite and Miss Vane Featherstone.

1942 saw the publication of the Beveridge Report on welfare - Abolition of Want. It was implemented between 1943 - 1949. The Welfare State had arrived.

## **1951- 1971**

Two big changes happened in the 1950's and 1960's.

The first being that in November 1955, The Theatrical Ladies Guild of Charity was registered as a company under the Companies Act of 1948. "The income and property of the said Association

whencesoever derived shall be applied solely towards the promotion of the objects of the said Association, etc...”.

The following year, 2,000 cases were dealt with and Ivor Novello left a bequest to the charity. The second change came about in 1965.

In June, the Guild's secretary terminated her services. Two courses were discussed. First to employ a new secretary. Second, that the administrative side of the Guild would be run by the Actors Charitable Trust and the General Secretary of ACT would be appointed secretary of the Guild. The second course was unanimously decided upon.

50 Great Russell Street, TTLG's office, was sold and an office was shared with ACT. This arrangement lasted into the 1970's.

In the early 1960s expenditure had exceeded income. Luckily in 1961, a large donation of £2,500 was received from the Actors Orphanage Fund after the charity performance of "Night of a Hundred Stars". Athene Seyler, as President, declared that there was no time to sew and to donate instead. Sir Ralph Richardson made an appeal on behalf of the Guild on Woman's Hour. A preview of My Fair Lady raised £2,000 for the Guild and money came in from a celebrity art exhibition.

In 1963, an article appeared in The Stage; 'Concern for the Aged'. Gracie Fields' orphanage in Peacehaven closed in 1967 due to lack of need in the Welfare State.

## **1971 – 1991**

The office moved around during this period - Bedford Chambers, Endell Street, York Way and the Shaftesbury Theatre. Athene Seyler died at the age of 99 in 1990. She was succeeded as President by Evelyn Laye.

Pyjamas, dressing gowns and shoes were often requested rather than stage clothes, which were now supplied with the job, but an actress who entertained in old peoples homes and clubs, needed dresses for those occasions.

A stage costume worn by Peggy Ashcroft in Dear Liar was given to the Perth Theatre, who had regular collections in aid of TTLG. In 1986, the charity received £945.74 from them.

In 1980, the Ambassadors Theatres and Strand Theatre gave theatre tickets to older beneficiaries who were thrilled at the opportunity to go to the theatre again.

The Combined Theatrical Charities founded in the 1960's and to which TTLG belonged, held an auction at Christie's in 1985 - Curtain Up. Items donated included two of Edmund Kean's swords and an umbrella that belonged to Gerald du Maurier. £30,000 was raised. In the same year, a Thé Dansant was held at the Waldorf Hotel. Two years later, a fundraising recital was organised and TTLG had a regular cake stall at the annual Theatrical Garden Party.

The beneficiaries were not always in need of financial help. One elderly lonely and distressed actress just wanted to be visited from time to time. Another beneficiary came into the office to say how pleased he was with life. On her 104th birthday, a beneficiary was sent flowers and a bottle of whisky.

As a result of new government legislation regarding the NHS, TTLG found it necessary to set up an Emergency Nursing Care Fund, which was to include nursing visitors to beneficiary's homes.

According to the minutes of 1984, TTLG sold 2,000 Christmas cards.

In the 1980's, TTLG sent a letter to all West End theatre staff - "We exist".

## **1991 – 2001**

It was decided in 2001 that our name was sending out the wrong signal. The Theatrical Ladies Guild - so called because it was founded by ladies of the theatre - became the Theatrical Guild, making it clear that men as well as women could apply for support, as in fact they have done, almost from the beginning.

The deepening world wide recession of 1992 doubled the number of beneficiaries and by the end of the year, the charity was left with a surplus of only £34.

The following year also proved a challenge with the introduction of the Care in the Community Act. Until then, the government had paid towards fees at residential homes and nursing homes anywhere outside local authority jurisdiction. This now meant that money had to be found through private means which effected Denville Hall and Brinsworth House, both residential homes for actors and actresses. It caused great hardship and an emergency meeting was called to discuss the situation. Christmas grants for coal and heating were still needed. Loneliness was still a great issue.

Evelyn Laye became president in 1991 followed by Lady Richardson in 1994 and Wendy Toye in 2000. Theatre, Company and General Managers were invited to discuss the promotion of TTG in 2001 and a year later saw a huge poster and leaflet push countrywide, the first for seven years.

The 100th anniversary lunch was held at the Garrick Club. A Bosendorff grand piano was hired for the occasion.

The Endell Street office was bought in 1991 and sold by auction in 1999 after which the secretary worked from home.

A fundraising occasion in 1993 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket with the HM the Queen in attendance, raised £36,000.

TTLG benefited by various generous legacies in 2000 and Lady Richardson gave a donation to be used specifically for publicity.