

## Amateur dramatics at the Stage Club

*The [Stage Club](#) in Singapore helps amateur dramatics hone their acting skills. Peter Myers finds out how as he joins their rehearsals for [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (20-23 May, [DBS Arts Centre](#))*



*Rehearsals in session at the Stage Club*

The term ‘amateur dramatics’ has been known to cause nausea in many, suggesting mediocre productions that are awkwardly performed by cliques of wannabe thespians.

While this is often the case in small-town theatre groups, cosmopolitan enclaves can harbour surprisingly professional theatrical troupes. Although they may have opted for the banking or law-firm job, these committed Renaissance men and women have found an outlet to air their talents on the amateur stage.

The Stage Club, the only English language am-dram group in Singapore worth its salt, is one of these. Club member Bob Corwin, who has acted and directed in amateur and ‘pro/am’ productions in London, Hong Kong and Singapore, rates the acting talent at the 60-member club ‘extraordinarily high’.

In fact, the group prefers the ‘community theatre’ definition – arguing that the only difference between them and the professional outfits is that The Stage Club doesn’t pay its talent. As another member, professionally stage-trained Anna Vardy, explains: ‘Our reputation now is that we are very professional. And people only have to pay \$37 dollars for a ticket in a professional theatre, compared to \$100 and \$200 at the Esplanade.’



*Actors waiting their turn*

As well as the obligatory traditional British Christmas panto, The Stage Club puts on four or five shows a year, three of them at DBS Arts Centre. When I caught up with them, rehearsals were busily under way for their latest production – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – abridged to two hours and a 25-strong cast by veteran club member Barry Woolhead. 'It's a play that's so easy to love,' Woolhead tells me, 'as both an audience member and an actor. Everyone knows the story to some degree.' Corwin settles into the *AMND* director's chair and explains how he aims to achieve something very 'visual but meaningful'.

'The forest clearing is a forest clearing; Theseus' palace is Theseus' palace. Within that there are various moods, which reflect what is actually going on, and lighting and music will play a big part in this.' Corwin is untroubled that not everyone involved has performed in a Shakespeare play before – or, in a couple of cases, ever acted at all. His advice to the newbies holds true for the entire cast: 'If you're going to screw up, screw up magnificently, with great verve and vigour, because the audience don't know the script by heart.'

Even for non-thespians, groups like The Stage Club are fantastic social networks. 'The Stage Club is all about enjoying what you love doing,' Vardy says. 'You can get as involved as you want, that's the great thing. When I came out here, I wasn't working and had a fiancé doing 14-hour days, so I could put my life into it. We have members who are pilots and regular business travellers. They still get invited to the social events and are included.'

Regular get-togethers are held at the group's semi-detached black-and-white HQ in Wessex Estate that they've dwelt in since 2006 (their previous base, off Whitley Road, served the group for 40 years, but was eventually condemned, having fallen into disrepair).



*Writer Barry Woolhead & writer/director Bob Corwin*

Club president David Hickman showed me round their sizeable rehearsal room – there’s a ‘BYO’ bar, but most social events tend to migrate to nearby [Colbar](#) – then into backrooms filled with workshops, costumes, a box set and nostalgia-inducing play posters dating back to the club’s inauguration in 1945.

Hickman and his wife Eileen first joined the club in 1977. Now they’re retired, the bulk of their time is devoted to it. Displaying an altruism that’s increasingly rare in today’s ‘me-time’ society, between them the couple take on administrative matters, stage-management duties and set construction. Someone has to. ‘It’s surprising how few people know which end of a hammer or a saw to pick up these days,’ Hickman laughs.

And what’s next for the club? The October show could be either a thriller or a comedy, or something completely different – they’re always open to suggestions. If you’re keen to direct, this could be your ideal opportunity.

Next year, in February, expect a classic helmed by the club’s artistic director Nick Perry – something like a Peter Schaffer or a Neil Simon. Because the May plays are aimed at schools, a curriculum text will be staged. Last year, Vardy, who is playing Helena in *AMND*, made her directorial debut with coming-of-age drama *Little Women*. ‘If I’d stayed in London, I’d have never got this chance,’ she says. ‘I put a proposal together and asked them to take a risk with me, which they did. It was amazing and I’m going to do it again.’

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* runs from 20-23 May at [DBS Arts Centre](#). Join The Stage Club ([www.stageclub.com](http://www.stageclub.com)) for \$60 (family membership), \$40 (individual) per annum.

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by Peter Myers