

Reach for the stars

On Wednesday 16th April the Woodhouse Eaves WI held its monthly meeting in the Village Hall. After important notices were read out, birthday presents for the next four weeks distributed and cups of tea enjoyed, we settled back to listen to Paul Read and his talk entitled “Reach for the stars”.



From the outset it was clear Paul was used to giving a performance – he spoke from the stage and every word could be heard, even from the back of the hall. He now works as a principal dresser in the theatre, and he began by describing the excitement we all feel when attending a live performance. The scenery, lighting, costumes and make-up all contribute to the illusion of being in another world. The reality of working backstage is quite different from the glamour traditionally associated with the theatre – Paul works in the dark, wearing black clothes, often in cramped conditions and with little time to help performers change costumes.

Paul demonstrated some of the tricks of the trade used so that costumes can be changed quickly – skirts laid out so they can be stepped into, false shirt fronts and cuffs, lots of Velcro and even magnets to hold clothes together! Performers often wear one costume on top of another. Everything is tightly choreographed, and Paul has to know the show by heart so that his work behind the scenes runs smoothly. The costumes may be bought off the peg for a modern production but are often made specifically to an actor's requirements and may be extremely expensive. After every performance the costumes are washed, ironed and repaired if necessary. Once a show ends the costumes are sometimes sold to a costume warehouse but are often just

destroyed. Paul showed us some of the dresses he has salvaged, including ones worn by Elaine Page in “Evita”.

Working as a principal dresser goes far beyond helping with costume changes, however. Paul described himself as an amateur psychologist as he must understand the personality of the performer he is working with. Some actors are quiet and others are jovial, a few require a nip of alcohol before they can go on stage and many are superstitious. Paul’s job is to make sure everything is organised to the actor’s (often exacting) requirements. He gave us an insight into working with stars such as Steve Coogan, Ian McKellen, Honor Blackman and Helen Mirren and is clearly proud to be held in such a position of trust.

After a vote of thanks, the winning raffle ticket for the Easter hamper was drawn and the meeting was closed. As always, we had enjoyed an entertaining evening!

Judith Harrison
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