

Curtain call

It is 90 years since the Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society first performed. Member Nikki Laker explains why the society has plenty to sing about



WHEN the curtain goes up on Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* at the Civic Theatre in Chelmsford on Tuesday, September 21, it will mark what is arguably the most spectacular show staged by Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (CAODS). It will also be a fitting production to celebrate the society's 90th anniversary and, it is hoped, will also attract huge interest at the box office.

The beginnings of CAODS can be traced back to a public meeting held at Chelmsford's Corn Exchange in November 1920. The amateur theatre

movement was already in full swing throughout the country and the meeting decided Chelmsford should have an operatic society of its own. Its first production was staged at the Empire Theatre (long since demolished) which then stood on Springfield Road. It was Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore* and was, by all accounts, a great success receiving ecstatic reviews from the local press. Following that first production, the society went on to stage musicals annually and these events soon become one of the highlights of the Essex social calendar.

In 1939 however, following the production of *The Belle of New York*, advance preparations for the next production, *Virginia*, had to be halted due to the outbreak of war. During the next six years the committee met periodically to discuss the possibility of resuming activities, but wartime conditions made it impossible and it was not until 1947 that the next production could be staged. *The Desert Song*, performed at the Regent Theatre, was a great success and instantly CAODS was back in business.

With the success of its return to the stage, members of CAODS decided it

was time that the society exercised the dramatic side of its name and so a schedule of plays were presented at the Regent Theatre, either side of the annual musical production. This continued for some years until it finally became too financially hazardous to continue. The Regent Theatre seated around 1,000 people and while there were often queues for the musical productions, filling it for a straight play was not so easy.

The immediate post-war years were great ones for the theatre generally. Shows such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* and *South Pacific* had crossed the Atlantic and were now available for amateur production, something that CAODS has taken full advantage of over the years. The society engaged a new director, Phyl Payne, who was a busy theatrical agent and ex-dancer who brought with her an air of great professionalism and a string of successful productions.

During one of these, *Oliver!* in 1968, it was decided to form a junior section of the society to provide a theatrical outlet for the many young people who had presented themselves at auditions for that show. By that Christmas, CAODS had formed a junior society, one of the very first in the country. In 1972 it became independent of the adult society, adopting the name Chelmsford Young Generation, but still retains very close ties with the parent company and many of its members continue their theatrical interests as adults into CAODS.

This has helped to ensure that the society has maintained a good cross section of age groups and at least one show has boasted three generations from one family on stage, with two generations a common occurrence. CAODS also shares Young Generation's magnificent headquarters for rehearsals, costume storage and scenery building.

In 1974, the society engaged a new, young director, Ray Jeffery, who, to quote a local critic, 'caused a wind of change to blow through the society' which he thought had a rather



Edwardian and genteel air about it. CAODS had by that time moved from the beautiful Regent Theatre, to its present home, the Civic Theatre. It is largely down to Ray's efforts that CAODS can rightly claim to be among the premier amateur musical societies in the country – the only sense in which the productions are amateur being that the cast do not get paid.

Other directors have also added to the society's fine reputation. Jeremy Tustin graduated through Young Generation and CAODS before going professional and Sallie Warrington last year directed the society's two-times NODA award-winning production of *Chess*.

Although *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Ray Jeffery and under the musical direction of the society's own

Patrick Tucker, will be a fitting finale for the CAODS 90th anniversary, it is but just another milestone in the society's journey of musical excellence. Stunning, stylish and lavish staging together with slick professionalism will continue to be the society's hallmark as it continues on its quest of bringing a touch of West End theatre into what is known geographically as the West End of Chelmsford.

GET TICKETS

You can see CAODS perform Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* at the Civic Theatre from September 21 to 24. For ticket information, call 01245 606505