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“The Village Wedding,”

A Cottage Drama, in Three Acts, by

CHARLES McEVOY.

The man

Charles McAvoy came to live in Aldbourne in 1907 and soon after married Gwendolyn Nuttley of Devon. An insight of Charles can be gleaned from his short but active involvement in village life. He certainly had big ideas for his intent was that all villages in the country should have a theatrical venue and Aldbourne was to have the very first one. Prior to this the village school room had been the location for most village entertainments. Although no theatrical productions had ever been performed here short sketches were often included in concerts. This was to be the very first full length play so it was no wonder the village was all a buzz.



McAvoy actually thought that there might be as many as 50 such theatres in the first year, a great idea that sadly did not happen. Little is known of his acting or writing talents but he was no doubt very well connected as some of societies highest fliers attended the first performance of this play in his newly created venue.

The venue

At first the newly married couple lived in Windmill cottages on Baydon hill but they quickly moved into Yew tree cottage. He must have chosen this property especially as he soon set about the task of converting the old thatched barn and adjoining malt house that stands in the grounds.



The village theatre

His play was a cottage drama in three acts and amazingly a souvenir programme survives. It tells much that we need to know, the players names, who provided the lighting and curtains etc. etc. etc. An amusing request in the programme asked ladies to "Remove their hats, bonnets or any kind of head dress. This rule is framed for the benefit of the audience and the management trusts that it will appeal to everyone and that ladies will kindly assist in having it carried out".



The village band was involved in the production and bandmaster Albert Stacey conducted the orchestra who played "folklore music". George Jerram was in both the cast and the orchestra and when acting the character named William Pictor he had to swap between the stage and his drum in the pit.

The build up

For weeks there was a buzz of excitement around the village, after all this was not an every day occurrence. Daniel Cook, a local builder, was employed in the conversion and expense was obviously no problem for he installed sloping wooden seating supported by supports that were cast in Lottage road by the Loveday iron foundry and an orchestra pit that was "sunk after the most approved fashion". The entrance was by way of a wooden bridge built for the purpose over the brook that runs along side the barn, and through a newly formed doorway. Over the door hung a swing board with the words "Aldbourne village theatre". Cook also built the stage and set and John Gilbert of Swindon supplied the curtain and lighting. The earth floor was covered in sawdust so as to give it a more country feel.

The day

It was the 26th of February and the village was a hive of excitement. From three in the afternoon cars and carriages streamed into the village full of celebrities that included Lord Howard de Walden, Herbert Trench, William Archer, Frederick Whelen, Edgar Wallase, Hannen Swaffer, Alphonso Courlander, Mr and Mrs Basil Peto MP, Granville Barker and Mr and Mrs George Bernard Shaw. The dignitaries were entertained by the McAvoy's prior to the performance.



The play

For the inaugural 4-30 pm performance it was decided to reduce the size of the audience in order to make for a more comfortable seating arrangement but with an increase from 2/6d to 5/- per seat. A hush fell over the crowd when Barker, McAvoy and Shaw took the stage. Granville Barker, after a short address, performed the official opening.

As the title suggests the play was set in a simple country cottage. Act 1 was set in the bedroom with Lizzy Beal (the bride) and her maids assisting with her toilet. Downstairs George Hicks (the groom), wearing a Melton coat, a huge button hole and a pair of lavender trousers was sat with some friends wishing the wedding was over.



Emergency exit

Act 2 was set at the wedding reception. During the festivities the men decided it was a good day for poaching and so went off in hunt of game. Act 3 consisted of the men returning in the early hours of the following morning in the custody of a policeman. Thrilling stuff what?

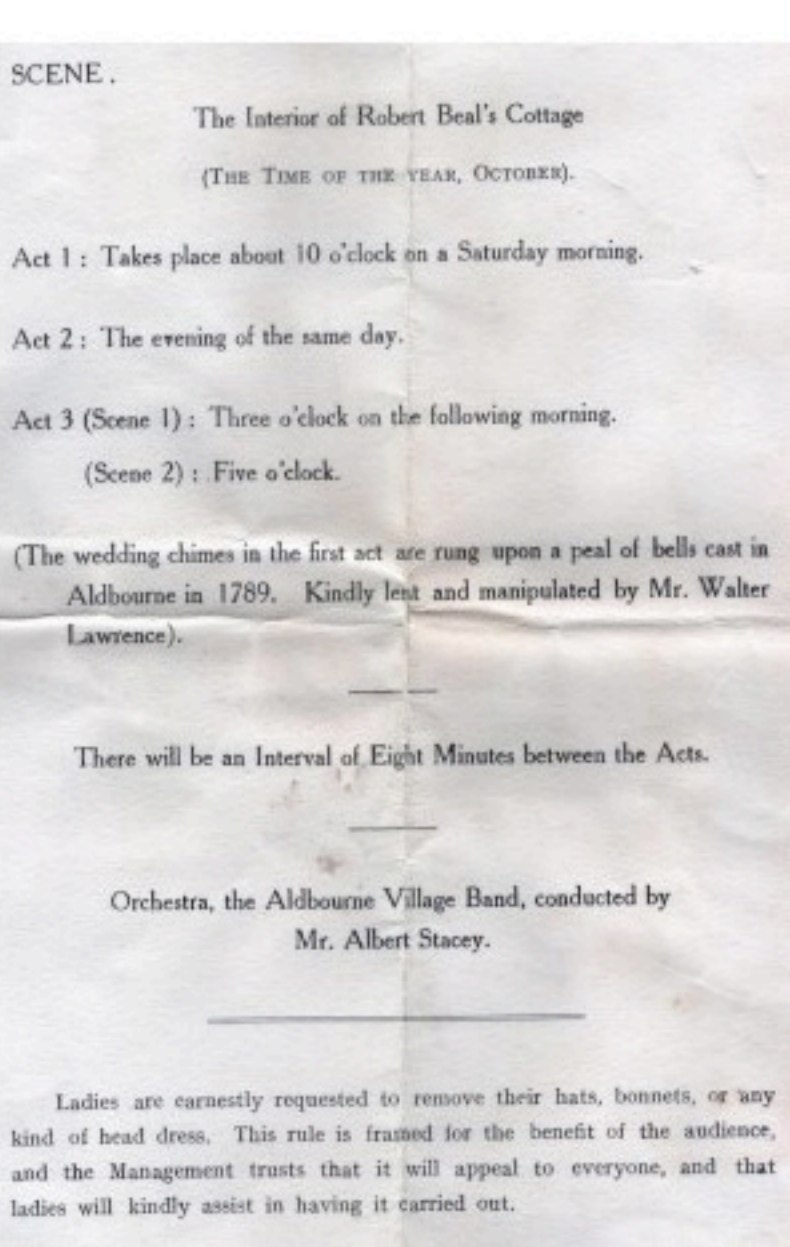
At the end of the evening McAvoy was asked to speak to the audience which he did in a humble manner. Afterwards Granville Barker was interviewed by the local press and when asked if he thought the London audiences might make of the play he said that it would be "a curiosity only". Bernard Shaw is noticeable by his lack of any comment. Whatever their real thoughts were will of course never be known but we can safely assume that they were not overly impressed but if the play did not then the players most certainly did! According to one newspaper report "never was there a company so indifferent to the presence of an audience". They had done the job that McAvoy had trained them to do and do it they certainly did over and over and over again.

What happened afterwards?

There were two performances the first day and another two that same week. Mr. V Maisey actually paid for a whole performance and all 150 spectators watched for free, there's generosity for you.

After the inaugural week the players spent a total of seven weeks on tour visiting towns that included Dorchester, Devizes, Basingstoke, Trowbridge, Warminster, Yeovil, Salisbury, Andover, Marlborough, Newbury, Wantage, Cirencester, Swindon and Oxford.

The May 29th performance in London's Coronet theatre was in fact the troupe's fiftieth performance of the play, a huge achievement and quite unique for an amateur company at that time. It has been said that due to the broad Wiltshire accents the London audience struggled to understand the play and that this was the reason for a shortened run. This may or may not have the case but it was only ever intended for a one-night performance, after all the performers were simple village folk and had to return to their normal life.



“The Village Wedding,”

A Cottage Drama, in Three Acts, by

CHARLES McEVOY.

SARAH PICTER	Miss MABEL HEDGES.
ROBERT BEAL	Mr. CHARLES MARTIN.
DAISY PICTER	Miss ALICE COOK.
FANNY PICTER	Miss EDITH PALMER.
POLLY SAUNDERS	Miss LILIAN LAKE.
LIZZY BEAL	Miss AGNES STROUD.
DICK STRONG	Mr. EDWARD HAWKINS.
WILLIAM PICTER	Mr. GEORGE JERRAM.
GEORGE HICKS	Mr. CHARLES TUCKER.
ALBERT BLACK	Mr. JOHN ORCHARD.
A TRAMP	Mr. WILLIAM FREEMANTLE.
STAGE MANAGER	Mr. WILLIAM FREEMANTLE.
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	Mr. G. NOTLEY.

The future

1913 saw the production of a second play written by McAvoy entitled "The situation at Newbury" this was again performed in the theatre but it would appear that this was to be the last undertaking for the players. What might the future have held if the next four years had not occurred? Sadly we will never know, the war happened and that was that and life for many was never be the same again.

By 1916 the McAvoy's had returned to live in Windmill cottages for a letter addressed from there told of his worry of air raid attacks on villages such as Aldbourne. In 1919 he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the R.N.V.R. Certainly there were no more village productions and the McAvoy's departed sometime in the twenties.

Today the Aldbourne Light Entertainment Company (ALEC) continues the practice of that first company, would Charles McAvoy be pleased? We can be sure he would be delighted.

Graham Palmer