

Rye Arts Festival Short Story writing competition

Treading the Boards By Maya Little

Winner of 11-18 competition

The performer walked to the centre of the stage, and thus began the series of movements that took place every night, so routine that the floorboards sometimes seemed to dip in pre-emption of the next step. On matinee days, the floorboards were particularly lucky, graced twice by the same thundering stomps and faux-shocked turns of the actors.

Today, however, the floorboards were in for something a little different. They had a vague awareness of the warmth along one side of the stage.

This dull warmth was interpreted slightly differently by the stage hands; namely, as fire. Now, you and I might raise the alarm in a situation like this; a simple cry of 'fire' generally suffices. However, this particular theatre, with its drudging actors and floorboards quite poised to give way, could not afford to lose a paying audience. And so, the stage hands, though none of them were mute, played the part remarkably well.

An elaborate mime, to rival the play on stage, began. One stage hand gestured wildly to another; movements that could be interpreted as 'Buckets! Fetch buckets!' or as the expression of an unusually aggressive opinion on handbags. The buckets began to be flung between the stage hands, as an actress, blind to all but her cue line, came rushing from the dressing room, letting out a screech-cum-whimper at the sight of the fire beginning to spread up the stage curtain, then rushing past it. Her petticoats trailed through the fire and caught as she hurtled onto the stage.

The audience was greatly impressed – nobody was quite sure why the flames were necessary, but in this type of theatre it hardly mattered. It was the spectacle, not the plot, which was the point. A reviewer later praised the genuine note of terror in the actress's scream as she fell, writhing, atop her own dress.

The floorboards had not felt such excitement since the visit of the tap dancing Bruce Forsyth impersonator.

Back stage, where a sort of mob mentality had all hands hurling as much water as possible onto the curtains, there was a sudden shift. Half the group continued hurling water in loose, seasick motions, the other half, the sharp tang of smoke breaking their resolve, began to leave the theatre at a run.

Fire is a temperamental beast, prone to outburst and sulks. Having burnt through the curtains in a sluggish sulk, it suddenly met with the wood panelling of the auditorium walls, and decided it was high time for an outburst. The walls took to the fire like an old friend, and the audience, suddenly awakened from their stupor, began to bustle and fluster in an entirely useless way. It was such a shame, the newspapers reported, that the stairs were wooden too.

The reviewer, well versed in making quick exits, and thus the only audience member to make it out alive, gave the performance four stars, due to the play's 'innovatively immersive nature'.

The floorboards smoked gently for days.