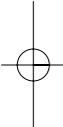
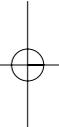
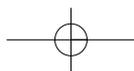




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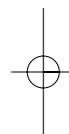
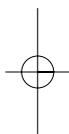
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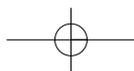
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Introduction

The Oxford Playhouse owes its existence to the city's renown as a seat of learning, its chequered history to its fickle relationship with town and gown. Its story has been one of struggle and conflict involving the city, the university and theatre professionals.

Wishful thinkers dreamed of making it a university theatre with a professional company staging plays for the faculties and a professor supervising the efforts of students with thespian leanings. Like Bristol University it would have had under its wing a drama school where men and women bent on a career in the theatre could learn their craft. That might have been possible for the 24 weeks a year when students are in residence, but for the 28 out of term? Box office returns suggest it is a rare city where even one per cent of residents are passionate theatregoers. Places as large as Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield may provide enough enthusiasts: between 1911 and 1939 Newcastle People's Theatre, a group of raw amateurs, created an audience for a bill nobody could call lowbrow.¹ Oxford, with its smaller population, has always struggled. Even if Oxford City Council had levied the six-penny (2.5p) in the £ rate the Government permitted local authorities to spend on the arts in 1954 its catchment area was so small that it would have had only £25,000 to share out: nearly £8,000 less than it spent on libraries.

Nevertheless commentators have persisted in regarding Oxford's role as crucial to Britain's dramatic well-being. When William Archer and Harley Granville Barker issued their blueprint for a National Theatre at the start of the twentieth century they envisaged trustees from Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities on its board.² As a result of the resurgence in dramatic interest which seems to follow every major conflict after the First World War the newly-formed British Drama League (BDL) called for theatre faculties at the major universities; after the Second J.B. Priestley insisted there should be at least four: at Oxford, Cambridge, London, Glasgow or Edinburgh.³

Historically the university's primary objection to theatre was its corrupting





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influence on student morals: a view that resurfaced as late as 1960 when Michael Billington, future dramatic critic of *The Guardian*, fell foul of his Anglo-Saxon tutor for staging Nigel Dennis's satire on religion *The Making of Moo*.⁴ As prevalent was the view that drama was a time-waster. Both underpinned the attitude that it was at best an applied science not worth the status of an academic discipline.

Oscar Wilde might ask tongue in cheek: 'Why should degrees not be granted for ... acting? Are they not given to those who misunderstand Plato and mistranslate Aristotle?'⁵ The dramatic critic of *The Times* countered:

You may suppose ... play acting to be taken out of the hands of [Oxford University Dramatic Society] and made a subject in the Schools with a Regius Professor ... Would any sensible man like to see Oxford thus Americanized?⁶

Even some dons active in student drama shared his disquiet. Peter Bayley who chaired the University Theatre Fund which led the university to take over the Playhouse told me:

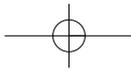
I was always opposed to the idea of there being a Department of Theatre ... I just thought it would rather destroy the quality of the best undergraduate acting because it would all be run by some bloke, probably not a very successful actor or producer who was brought in to be director.⁷

This belief in the amateur has its origins in the system whereby fellows run their colleges like monasteries. A don may at different times find himself laying down wine for the college cellar or choosing stone for the repair of its buildings. Lest that create the impression that Oxford adopts a laissez-faire approach to the management of its affairs I should add that the running of the university itself, from its governing body, Hebdomadal Council, to its least committee, is regulated by a mass of statutes, decrees and other regulations. Ronald Hart-Synnot, the determined first full-time professional Estates Bursar of St. John's College, who played a crucial role in the building of both Oxford's present Playhouse and New Theatre, manipulated the system to his advantage. Christopher Ball, the purposeful Warden of Keble College who raised £250,000 in an effort to avert the Playhouse's closure, ran the appeal committee his own way while paying lip service to university protocol. Lesser mortals tried to make the Playhouse conform to the arcane procedures of academia.

The University of Oxford

It is impossible to follow the Playhouse story without some knowledge of the way in which the University of Oxford functions: a subject of endless bafflement to local





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residents and tourists. The oldest university in the English-speaking world was not founded at any particular date but came into existence in the second half of the 12th century. It is a federation of more than forty self-governing colleges, halls and other institutions, each run by a body of senior members usually called fellows with at their head a figure known variously as master, president, provost, principal, warden, rector or dean.

The colleges, like the university's academic departments, are scattered round the city and the majority offer places to undergraduates studying for first degrees or postgraduates studying for higher degrees in any subject. But All Souls has only fellows, Linacre, St. Cross, Wolfson and Green take only graduates and a few have a bias in favour of particular disciplines. At Green College for instance the emphasis is on clinical medicine. Undergraduates used to be styled junior members but now both they and postgraduate students are called student members of the university. The exception is Christ Church, known familiarly as The House, not college, where the fellows are called students.

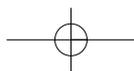
In addition to being responsible for the teaching of their specialist subjects with the help of college lecturers and other tutors fellows are expected to play an active role in the running of their colleges and of the various university departments. They are the senior members of the university commonly called dons.

All the colleges are financially independent and some have extensive endowments and land holdings. Hence the increasing employment in modern times of full-time professional bursars and other officials to advise college governing bodies.

The titular head of the university is the Chancellor, elected for life by the members of Convocation, that is any graduate member of the university who cares to turn up and vote. But in practice the Vice-Chancellor is responsible for the day-to-day running of the university with the help of its governing body, known until 2000 as Hebdomadal Council, now just called Council, and its parliament, Congregation. The qualification for attending the latter's meetings has changed from time to time, but at the time of writing, broadly speaking, included academic, senior library, administrative, computer and research staff. While each college organises the tutorial teaching for its students, the university academic departments or faculties headed by their various professors are responsible for arranging the syllabuses they teach, lectures, seminars and examinations.

The Vice-Chancellor is the university's chief executive officer, the Registrar is the head of its civil service and the Director of the Finance Division is responsible for its treasury department formerly known as the University Chest. Since the advent of government grants in 1919 it has mushroomed to the point where it now controls a multi-million-pound budget. A large army of fulltime employees underpins the smooth running of the university ranging from experts





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in finance, computing, public relations and other fields to library clerks and laboratory technicians.

The university financial year runs from August to 31 July. The academic year starts on October 1 and is divided into three terms (until 1918 there were four) with set dates separated by the Christmas and Easter vacations and a longer summer recess known as the long vacation. But most people are more familiar with the three eight-week periods starting on Sunday known as full terms when the students are in residence: Michaelmas term which runs from October to December, Hilary term which runs from January to March, and Trinity term which runs from April to June. During their 24 weeks in residence students are supposed to concentrate on lectures and tutorials; during their 28 weeks away on preparing for the next term.

Students and dons tend to stage indoor theatrical productions in the second half of the autumn and spring terms to allow time for preparation and rehearsal and move outdoors to college lawns in summer term but there are numerous exceptions.

As I explain in my opening chapters, drama, professional or amateur, was virtually non-existent at Oxford in term-time from the mid-sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries thanks to a succession of statutes which empowered the university authorities to ban plays and theatres. Before the opening of the New Theatre in 1886 prestige companies appeared at the Town Hall in the vacation rather than the ramshackle Theatre Royal, which became an officially frowned upon, tacitly tolerated variety hall in term.

After the Master of Balliol College, Benjamin Jowett, sanctioned the creation of the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) and the building of the New Theatre during his four years as Vice-Chancellor his successors continued to veto plays they disapproved of. The late Stanley Dorrill, who succeeded his father as managing director of the New in 1912, told me he had to discuss his term-time programme in person with the Vice-Chancellor until the 1930s, and change it if it did not meet with his approval. Using the Vice-Chancellor's other power to ban theatres within the university environs, the combative Rector of Exeter College, Dr Lewis Farnell, came close to stifling the Playhouse at birth in 1923 because he thought one theatre was distraction enough for workshy students.

Both OUDS, the leading university dramatic society, and the City of Oxford Dramatic Club, the leading group of local amateurs, staged productions annually at the New Theatre. Smaller professional companies appeared at makeshift venues like the Corn Exchange. College societies performed in college halls in winter, on college lawns in summer, as did OUDS when it staged open air productions. Smaller city groups made do with church halls, less often venturing out of doors.

