

Imogen Stubbs'

WE Happy Few

performed by **The Parlement of Foules**

Bremen University's English-language drama group

produced by arrangement with Nick Hern Books

23 - 26 June 2015

Theaterhaus Schnürschuh

Buntentorsteinweg 145 | 28201 Bremen



PROGRAMME

Please **switch your mobile phone off**. If you wish to take photographs, please note that **the use of flash is strictly forbidden**. In the interest of the other members of the audience and the cast, anyone using a mobile phone or flash during the performance will be requested to leave the theatre immediately.

CAST

The Artemis Players

Hetty Oak has spent her life working behind the scenes in professional drama	Franziska Ptok
Flora Pelmet , Hetty's friend and assistant, with similar theatre experience	Lisa Eisold
Helen Irving , formerly a successful stage actress	Leandra Thiele
Rosalind Roberts , Helen's daughter, fresh out of drama academy	Jana Middendorf
Charlotte (Charlie) Peters , a cockney girl	Chantal Waltersdorf
Jocelyn Thripp , an eccentric, upper-class elderly lady	Anna Schmieding
Ivy Williams , help in the Pelmet household	Hannah Elleringmann

Their support team

Gertrude Rosenbaum , a German Jew who has fled from Nazi Germany	Anja Taudte
Joseph Rosenbaum , Gertrude's son	Oliver Kück
Reggie Pelmet , Flora's brother	Finn Lorenzen

Other auditionees for The Artemis Players

Sharon Poulet	Xu Si
Elsie Carter	Anja Taudte
William Beadle	Finn Lorenzen

Further characters

Leonard , a minister, responsible for allocating resources	Anja Taudte
Maureen , Leonard's assistant	Xu Si
Keith , producer of BBC radio <i>Children's Hour</i> programme	Finn Lorenzen
Guide at the London Theatre Museum	Xu Si
Mayoress of the Isle of Dogs community, London's East End	Xu Si
Beryl , young mother at one of the performance venues	Xu Si

The play opens and closes in a room at the London Theatre Museum, with the action moving to various locations in Great Britain ranging from the Isle of Dogs in London's East End to the Isle of Skye on the west coast of Scotland.

There will be an interval of 20 minutes. A bell will ring three minutes before it ends.

We Happy Few: A Brief Synopsis

Great Britain during World War II: Most of the men have gone off to fight, leaving the women to take care of the homefront. Given the cost of the war, the country has put nearly all of its resources into the war effort, and food and other goods have been rationed to assure that the country will have enough to send to its troops. While most of Great Britain understands the importance of the war, the strict rations and the idea of family members fighting in the war have cut into the country's morale, especially amongst children.

To help keep the children distracted from the horrors of the war, and to serve as a reminder of what the country is fighting for in the first place, Hetty Oak assembles a group of women to perform Shakespeare plays across Great Britain. The troupe, collectively known as the Artemis Players, come from all walks of life. Some are upper-class and straight out of acting school, while others are proud members of the working class. It is up to Hetty, a strong-willed woman determined to fight for what she believes in, to unite these women even when all signs point to them breaking apart.

Throughout the war years, the Artemis Players perform various Shakespeare plays across the country, but misfortune tends to follow the troupe wherever they go. Together, the women must overcome both their differences and their bad luck, all the while being forced to come to terms with the grim realities of the war.

We Happy Few: The Play's History

We Happy Few was written by British playwright Imogen Stubbs in 2003. The play was originally performed in 2003 at Malvern Theatres in Worcestershire, England. After surviving this trial run, Stubbs further developed the play to prepare it for production in London. The show opened at London's Gielgud Theatre on 29 June 2004, and continued to run until the end of July. The show was directed by Stubbs' husband, Trevor Nunn, and starred Juliet Stevenson as Hetty Oak and Marcia Warren as Flora Pelmet.

About the Writer: Imogen Stubbs

Imogen Stubbs is an English playwright and actress. Primarily an actress, Stubbs has starred in numerous theatre productions across the United Kingdom, including leading roles in plays such as *Othello*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Hamlet*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. Stubbs also reprised her role as Desdemona for a BBC television production of *Othello* in 1990.

We Happy Few was the first play written by Stubbs. Her extensive knowledge of Shakespeare can be clearly seen throughout the play, with numerous references to multiple Shakespearean plays. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Telegraph* in 2004, Stubbs described *We Happy Few* as “a relatively old-fashioned, heart-warming sentimental piece.”

The Real-Life Artemis Players: The Osiris Players

The Artemis Players in *We Happy Few* are based off of a real life theatre group called the Osiris Players. Like the Artemis Players, the Osiris Players consisted of a small group of women who traveled across the United Kingdom performing numerous plays. The group was founded in 1927 by Nancy Hewins. Much like Hetty Oak in *We Happy Few*, Hewins was spirited and willing to work through difficult times. Also like Hetty, Hewins was committed to keeping her troupe all-female.

Due to economic reasons, there were never more than seven women in the troupe at any given time, and the troupe often had to perform on makeshift stages in very small towns across the country. However, like the Artemis Players, the Osiris Players were resilient and determined. Many of the women took up other jobs in order to keep the group afloat, and every member of the troupe also helped with the props, cooking, and changing tyres while on the road. Given the low number of actors in the troupe, the women were required to play multiple roles. Though this proved difficult, the troupe almost always rose to the occasion, even once giving a performance of Macbeth with only four actors.

During World War II, the Osiris Players put together 1,534 performances of 33 plays, 16 of them by Shakespeare. Due to the lack of available petrol during the war, the troupe traveled to and from each performance with a horse and dray.

The Osiris Players toured regularly until the mid-1960s, with Hewins directing the troupe until the very end. Unfortunately, due to rarely performing in large towns, the troupe never received much recognition, and Hewins' death in 1978 went largely unnoticed.

An Interview with the Director: Michael Claridge

Eric Penkala from the University of Guelph-Humber is currently on an internship in Bremen and conducted an interview with the Foules' director Michael Claridge:

What led you to ultimately decide to stage *We Happy Few* with the Foules?

It was partly a very pragmatic decision: Following auditions, I knew we had a cast of roughly ten females and two males. In recent years, we have done a number of plays with women playing men, and I wanted to give our female actors the chance to explore sufficiently well-written female roles onstage. A further reason was the topicality of the play: The final big scene occurs on VE Day (the day in 1945 when war in Europe formally ceased), a date we have just celebrated for the 70th time. Last but not least, the play gives actors the chance to perform snippets from different plays by Shakespeare.

What about a German audience watching a British play – what should they watch out for?

There are some very British lines, comments and reactions which Anglophiles will particularly appreciate. The title of the play, and its reference from Shakespeare's *Henry V* to a handful of brave English soldiers and their heroic leader standing up to (and indeed defeating) an enemy force that vastly outnumbered them, is part of the British 'island mentality' that – mostly – manifests itself in a positive attitude, a cheerful optimism in the face of seemingly insuperable odds.

Despite taking place during World War II, *We Happy Few* explores a lot of issues that are still prevalent today, for example, sexuality, religion, feminism, and parent/child relationships. How well do you feel that the play has addressed these issues?

Some would benefit from more thorough treatment – but that would require a trilogy! I think Imogen Stubbs has tried to press a number of buttons, to present her audience with a whole range of potential issues, and wants them to take away the 'message' that best fits each person.

What we shouldn't do is to simply dismiss everything as irrelevant to our day and age: Yes, 1939-45 had its own time-specific elements, but so many of the issues the play raises are still relevant today. To take just one example, consider how some male characters treat some female characters in the play: Are things really so different today, especially in the world of work, despite all the gains made by feminism?

There are quite a few funny and unusual lines of dialogue in this play. Do you have any personal favourites that you think the audience should listen for?

We have all become aware how many personal favourites this play contains – so many that it's almost impossible to select THE best one! But asking someone to listen out for a line is a spoiler... Just sit back and enjoy the great lines when they come!

PRODUCTION TEAM

Costumes and props	Juliane Bramkamp, Franziska Ptok
Make-up	Franziska Ptok, Lisa Eisold
Hair	Juliane Bramkamp, Jana Middendorf, Franziska Ptok
Light concept	Franziska Ptok
Sound concept	Tobias Turowski, Franziska Ptok
Sound and light operators	Helena Gaubiz, Alex Kind
Publicity	Anne Güse, Alex Kind, Eric Penkala
Flyer/poster design	Alex Kind
Programme	Alex Kind (editor-in-chief), Eric Penkala, Michael Claridge
Schools pack	Franziska Ptok (editor-in-chief), Hannah Elleringmann, Eric Penkala
Assistant direction, voice coaching and music research, choral direction, choreography, character-development work, background research	Franziska Ptok
Director	Michael Claridge

We would like to express our gratitude to ...

Our very good friends at the **Schnürschuhtheater** for housing us yet again.

Those current and former colleagues from Bremen University's course programmes B.A. English-Speaking Cultures and M.A. Transnational Literary Studies who have given the Foules projects unstinting and most active support over the past months and years, especially **Elisabeth Arend, Logie Barrow, Marcus Callies, Tim Giesler, Katja Müller, Jana Nittel, Elizabeth Reick, Norbert Schaffeld, Nancy Schrauf, Janet Sutherland, Ian Watson** and **Andrew Winter**.

The **Sportgemeinschaft Findorff e.V.** for lending us the cricket equipment we are using. For those interested in cricket: The SG Findorff have various teams of different levels, ages, and formats of the game, some of them competing at the highest national level. They have recently completed construction of a new cricket pitch and would greatly welcome new players!



www.sg-findorff.de



During the rehearsals we have taken a number of photographs documenting our progress. The Foules usually rehearse on campus in an open space in the building GW2, home of the Faculty of Languages and Literatures at Bremen University. Only the last weekend rehearsal as well as technical rehearsal and dress rehearsal take place at the Schnürschuh-Theater.





Auditions for the Parlement took place in December last year. In January, the cast met for a first read-through of the play. In order to prepare the students for the stage, director Michael Claridge and experienced Foule Franziska Ptok gave workshops on the basics of acting during the semester break. Rehearsals then started in mid-April.

photos © Alex Kind



Who - what - are **The Parlement of Foules**?

We are a flock of students from the **B.A. English-Speaking Cultures** and the **M.A. Transnational Literary Studies**, both of which are situated within Bremen University's Faculty of Languages and Literatures. This is the eighteenth year of Foule activities; *We Happy Few* is our twenty-fourth production.

The name "Parlement of Foules" (das Vogelparlament) comes from a dream-poem by **Geoffrey Chaucer**, centring on a conference of birds – or fowls – to choose their mates on St. Valentine's Day. At the end of the poem, the debate is unresolved, and the birds agree to assemble a year later to decide.

Our "Parlement of Foules" assembles twice a year and our next performances will be here in the Schnürschuh in January, 2016.

The Foules within Bremen University's course programmes

The M.A. degree in **Transnational Literary Studies: Literature, Theatre, Film** contains the option to focus primarily (but not exclusively) on theatre. This includes the possibility of working on a stage production in French or English, work that can focus on acting, assistant direction, publicity and many other areas. We believe Bremen is the only university in Germany offering such a qualification within modern foreign languages.

One of the many thematic links between the Foules and the B.A. English-Speaking Cultures is the course "**Shakespeare's London and Shakespeare's Globe**", which is offered biennially and includes a weeklong excursion to London and workshops at Shakespeare's Globe.

Contact

If you would like details of future productions, contact our director Michael Claridge at claridge@uni-bremen.de. There is also the possibility of being added to the mailing list of the **Bremen English Drama Network**, informing lovers of English-language drama about relevant activities, workshops, performances, guest lectures, etc. in and around Bremen.

Follow us on...

www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/foules for a collection of reviews and publicity material of previous productions.



The Parlement of Foules



@The_Foules

for regular updates on the rehearsal process.

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