

Here at the Venture Theatre we are very proud of our excellent sets so this month we are introducing you to our chief set builder, Mike Cox. Mike is a mechanical engineer so he is used to practical work. He loves working with wood and he still has a tea trolley at home which he made at school. It's still in service and has even been used as a prop at the theatre!

Mike started set building forty years ago for an amateur musical theatre group in Loughborough but he joined the Venture Theatre as a set builder about ten years ago. Since then he has built many much-admired sets, some for their beauty and creativity, some for their ingenuity and cleverness. The set for *Rebecca* was so lovely that when the curtain went up it got its own round of applause from the audience! Mike enjoys the challenge of problem solving with set building so while *Rebecca* was his best looking set, there have been others which he describes as "more fun". *Blithe Spirit* required that the set was destroyed at the end of the play. Things had to fall off the walls, pictures came down and the grand piano fell over. But of course, it all had to be put back together for the next night's performance! On the last night, however, they really went to town, knowing that they wouldn't have to rebuild it!

*"A lot of bits and pieces like that I do at home. I've got a workshop there so when it needs intricate or small pieces I do those at home. I've got suitable tools, saws and that, so I can actually cut things at right angles and make proper joints which you can't do with a hand saw here."*

*One Night in November* was about the bombing of Coventry during the Second World War and featured the air raid with a bomb hitting the house. The set had to collapse and the wall burst in but all in such a way as to make it possible to put it all back together for the following evening. *"Unfortunately, I was operating it at the back,"* Mike told us, *"so I never got to see just what the effect was from the front but everybody said it was good."* And it certainly was!

So how do the set builders go about it? The first stage is to try and get the Director to come up with his or her ideas for the set. Some Directors provide their own sketch, others use the sketch in the script. *"The sketch needs scaling so that it fits onto the stage that we've got,"* Mike explained. *"Particularly when the sketch in the script is not designed for a stage that's the same shape, width and depth as ours. Sometimes the interpretation of the play means that you can't do it the same way. The stairs have to go over the other side and the window somewhere else. Sometimes too the Director's sketches are, to some extent, wishful*

*thinking in terms of how much space you actually have. You try to keep to the script sketch as far as possible because that's how the actors are going to use the set and how the playwright intended it to be structured."*

The set design also has to take into account the practicalities of the production and how the actors are going to get from one part of the stage to the other, especially when different entrances and exits are required. *"I like to come to rehearsals at a fairly early stage once the set is starting to take shape so I can actually see how the actors are using it. It does sometimes need a bit of tweaking so as to provide a bit more space or a bit less space or there's an awkward sight line to sort out."*

There's also some overlap between the set builder and the set dresser which is usually a separate person. *"There's a grey area between the two. For example, if the dresser wants a curtain up, do they want a pole or a rail? Do they want a pelmet? Do the curtains need to open or are they always closed?"*

The stage manager is also involved to some extent with set building. *"Quite often I'm both but the stage manager has actually got to work the set and make use of it so he's got to know the thoughts behind it and how it's laid out, where the entrances and exits are going to be."*

As with all the jobs that go on in the theatre, there is always scope for new people to come down and help with set building. *"Anybody that's a little bit practical would be very welcome,"* said Mike. *"Although there are clever and intricate bits to do, there's an awful lot of more straight forward things like putting flats up, getting the angles right."*

Obviously, we hope Mike won't be retiring for a good while yet but he did say that ultimately he will need someone to take over from him so there's plenty of scope for new volunteers to learn new skills. Why not become a member and have a go?