

The gangs who've been entertaining you!

OLIVER WILLIAMS

WHEN Scouts and Guides take the stage at the Spa Centre next year they will be celebrating four decades of an amateur entertainment institution.

Having assembled its cast from groups across Warwickshire, the WAGS Gang Show will stage its 40th anniversary performances over six days in February and March.

Tony Guy, a former producer and chairman and now the business director, has been at the heart of the variety shows since their humble beginnings at the run-down Jephson Gardens Pavilion in Leamington and through the highest points when the show was seen by tens of thousands of people in the USA.

"Cut me in half and I'm scouting", Tony said of his 45-year involvement in the movement.

"How my wife has put up with me for 30 years I don't know.

"She doesn't scold at all."

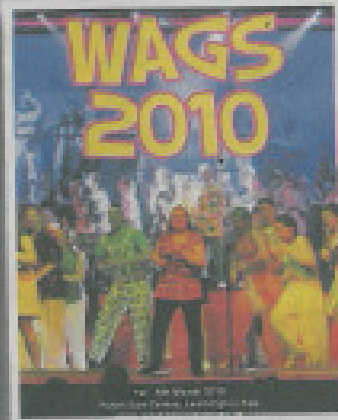
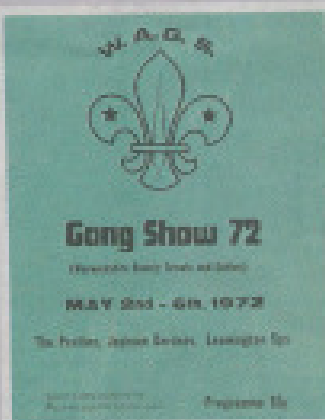
The 73-year-old, who has been a scout leader, chairman and county commissioner, had already established a gang show in his birthplace Blackpool when he persuaded Warwickshire's executive scouting committee to stage its own event in 1971.

"There's no talent in Warwickshire was the first cry," Tony revealed in 1980.

"We've no experience of this type of thing we can't do it.

"How wrong could they be?"

Since the first ever show at the



Pavilion in 1971 - where dust fell from the ceiling when the marching band played and rows of seats had to be closed due to a leaking roof - the show has gone from strength to strength.

Tony gauges some of this success by the past 'gangsters' who have gone on to careers in the public eye, such as Richard Hammond from the BBC's Top Gear, and the show's guest stars, who have included Alvin Stardust and Russ Abbot.

He now rates the show as being among the best in the country. Ralph Bowler, the West End producer and founder of the gang show format, was a major inspiration for Tony to help steer the show to its success.

"Apart from my father he affected my life more than anyone else," Tony said. "I love doing it but the most important thing I get out of it is to see what the kids get out of it."

"When they're in the gang show they put their left foot forward, they smile, they dress properly, the discipline is brilliant and they appreciate it."

"To see them evolve from very often being quiet children to having their parents say 'you've changed my child' is great."

Bowler's involvement with WAGS, for which he wrote special material and helped with rehearsals, led to some of the most exciting times in the show's existence.

In 1979, Texan scout leader Lon Seibers came to watch a performance and was so impressed he asked organisers to 'bring the lil ol show to Dallas'.

Tony said: "It was unbelievable. It took us two years to organise, cost about £300,000 to put on and 400 people went over there.

"People are still going back to Dallas 38 years later."

"The whole of Warwickshire was fundraising and everywhere you went there was a scout raising money with jumble sales, face painting or raffles."

WAGS travelled to Texas in April 1980 and staged shows in Fort Worth, Dallas and the Texas Stadium, which was then the home of the Dallas Cowboys American football team.

The show was staged as part of a larger event to celebrate scouting and the trip was featured in a Central Independent Television documentary called Dallas or Bust, which was watched by millions of viewers.

"Television fame only lasts ten days", Tony said.

"I'd walk around town or go to a restaurant or a pub and people would come up to me and say 'you've been on television.'

"It's better than 15 minutes but it only lasts for a short time unless you get back on again."

Following the publicity gained from the trip to Texas, WAGS performed in front of Princess Anne at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford in 1984.

After the show the Princess went back stage and met most of the 120-strong cast with Tony carrying out the introductory honours.

Having produced the Warwickshire show for 35 years, Tony handed over the reins to Nigel Bailey in 1998.

He now has the task of organising 4,500 ticket sales, generating £37,000 income and selling advertising space in the show's programme.

"It is now much more professional than it was in the early 70s", Tony said.

"Theatre has changed. We always try and keep up with what the latest thing is in the West End and if you think of all these shows with their lighting effects it is very hard to do but we still do it."

"Another thing which has changed is that you wouldn't be able to take a large group to Dallas nowadays without a tremendous amount of hard work.

"Everybody has to be CRB checked and there are a lot of health and safety rules. The technology around the administra-



Above right Princess Anne meets WAGS members in 1984

Right WAGS members on parade in Texas in 1980

Pictures submitted



tion has also changed. Before mobile phones it was hard to get hold of people."

The legacy of WAGS is best measured by the amount of people who have been involved in the shows over the years.

Tony estimates that about 2,000 families and up to 6,000 people have had parts to play either on the stage or behind the scenes.

Meanwhile the popularity of scouting has grown in the past five years, with membership increasing by 15 per cent in Warwickshire and ten per cent nationally.

Tony said: "We are always looking for people to help produce or organise the show, do ticket sales, admin or costume sewing."

"We now have a thing called the Warwickshire Active Support Unit for people who can't commit to be a scout leader but want to help out flexibly. We just want to encourage young parents to come and help as then stay helping."

Tony plans to write a book and help produce a DVD covering the history of the WAGS Gang Show to mark the 40th anniversary.

He also intends to continue to prove Warwickshire has got taken for the next decade.

Tickets for next year's gang show are available now by calling 0845 4 0348 or going online. waggangshow.org.uk

Then and now - Tony Guy in his scouting days and, now, the former producer for the WAGS gang show is chairman of the business committee. WAGS 22-10-10 Gang Show Oct 14

Left the first ever gang show programme and this year's event.

Right and below: pictures from gang shows down the years. Photos submitted

