

## Memories of Peter Wilson at Westacre Theatre



***Prospero, The Tempest 1998***

**Peter** was involved from the very beginnings of theatre at West Acre and was a key figure, on and off stage, in its formative years. The second open air season in 1991 was played out on the lawns in front of Abbey House. After picnicking in the sun, along the banks the River Nar, the audience was treated to Peter giving a carousing, garrolous, yet suprisingly wistful version of Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*. Next year he played with similar gusto and panache the rollicking womaniser Sir John Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In 1993 the location was moved over the river to the magnificent setting of the ruins of the Augustinian Westacre Abbey and for the next ten years or more, against the backdrop of the old Abbey walls, we were privileged to witness Peter in a host of other famous Shakespearian roles – Oberon, Petruchio, Prospero – each one played with intelligence, wit, great timing and charisma.

He never fluffed a line – or if he did no one ever noticed. And his presence in the company with his characteristic humour, kindness, and professionalism laid the benchmark for all the rest of us to aspire to. He was a joy to work with. He was quick-witted and caring. Playing Petruchio one night, the voluminous pantaloons he was wearing split right down one leg and, quick as a flash, he whipped off his rag of a scarf, tied it round his leg and played on like an Elizabethan buccaneer. Despite great luck with the weather over the years, sometimes it could be unseasonably cold and wet and many times he discarded a coat or a cloak to whisk round the shoulders of a shivering cast member. In *Taming of the Shrew* one stormy night he whipped off a tablecloth and draped it over a wet and weeping Kate.



***Oberon, A Midsummer Night's Dream  
with Issy Huckle as Puck 1993***

Even playing great roles he was unassuming, never seeking undue time in the spotlight. Again as Petruchio, for his first entrance half way through a scene and despite the director's grandiose plan of him emerging from afar off with great fanfare, Peter preferred the quiet approach, arriving from the back of the stands and quietly, almost unnoticed, mopping his face in a pool of water on set with his back to everyone, a far more effective way of introducing a weary traveller, albeit a leading character.

In the final year on the open-air site he directed Alan Bennett's *Habeas Corpus* in addition to playing the lead role of the lascivious Dr. Arthur Wicksteed GP. It was so successful that the production was brought back in 2005 as one of the opening plays in the new theatre-in-the round tent and was packed out every night.

Behind the scenes, Peter was also very active as the first Chairman of the Board of Trustees for Westacre Arts Foundation, the charity that is responsible for developing and overseeing the cultural activities here. His knowledge of theatre, his understanding of funding issues, his contacts and his experience of the world of commercial theatre and its inter-action with big business were all invaluable in the whole process of transforming an invitation to 'do a play in the garden' (so generously offered to a struggling theatre company by Garlinda and Henry Birkbeck in 1990) into the thriving, vigorous, and vital West Norfolk cultural hub that Westacre Theatre has morphed into over the past 33 years.

And it should be remembered that Peter's involvement and commitment to West Acre was so generously given at a time when he was quite busy as a leading figure in the London Theatre world, heading a major, international production company and being Chief Executive of The Theatre Royal, Norwich.



He was a truly remarkable man and will be greatly missed by all who knew him. RIP

Andy Naylor and Issy Huckle,  
Westacre, September 2023