

Dr Malcolm Benson, left, with no previous acting experience, is one of three doctors who have taken part in the community plays. In *Soldiers* he was cast as a primary school headmaster from Wales. Mick says: "His accent owed more to Karachi than Cardiff! He brought the doctor's manner — a certain detachment — to the part, which was what was required. Just right."



Property mistress Cynthia Mancey is a part-time teacher and mother of two. Was 'ribbed' by members of the production team who had to lug a very heavy cast iron railway bench from Didcot Railway Museum for a scene in *Soldiers*. Mick says: "She has the ability to have the cheek to ask people for things — and the talent to know what is right. Doesn't do it simply for the display of her name in the programme."



Home Help Rose Robinson, 49, had experience of only one amateur production before auditioning for a part in *Soldiers*. In rehearsal once she needed 20 prompts in one evening, but on stage was virtually word perfect. Mick says: "She's tremendous. A real find. Her uninhibited comments kept directors and production team on their toes. She brought a raw talent to the play impossible to find in the sophisticated professional theatre."

The man with 1986 in mind

By
STEVE WRIGHT

OVER the next two years Mick Jones will devote most of his spare time to a project cynics would say is doomed to failure.

He will be helping to stage a play with a cast of more than 100, half of them without acting experience.

"It could be a recipe for disaster but that is what makes it so interesting," he says.

Amateur

Mick Jones is an amateur playwright and the plays he writes are not designed for actors in the professional theatre but for the characters in his home village of Wheatley.

His passion is for community theatre. And it doesn't matter if the actors cannot act.

"We try to make the play as slick and as professional as possible but that is not the most important thing — it's the enjoyment."

"It is all about enthusiasm and bringing in as many people as possible, particularly those who wouldn't normally appear on the stage."



MICK JONES... "It could be a recipe for disaster"

"It's a social thing because it draws people of different kinds closer together. Take for example people out of work. Give them an identity and something to do and life becomes worth living again. There is more to life than going to work."

Mick, a painter and decorator, is currently researching material for his next play to be called *Wheatleyshire* due to be staged in 1986.

Nervous

The cast will be roughly the same size as in his two previous productions *Wheatley 1870*, performed in 1982 and *The Soldiers Have Taken Our Horses*, produced earlier this year. In all these two productions involved about 1,000 people — about a quarter of the village's population.

"Some people are very nervous about going on the stage but once they come along to rehearsals they are hooked. We do lots of workshop activity and they get to

start to get this feeling of being part of a group," says Mick.

He doesn't think lack of experience is a handicap. "If we are doing a Shakespeare play it would be, but the whole idea of this drama is community involvement and parts are written to go round different abilities."

"Many of the actors play characters which are virtually themselves and they do it in a way that no professional could do."

"The professional could do a facsimile but some qualities couldn't be reproduced on the professional stage. A certain rawness would be missing if we have a scene with a tug-of-war, the people will be pulling against each other — not acting."

Workshops

It is these qualities which have attracted the interest of the London-based National Theatre.

Mick has met Bill Bryden, the theatre director and it is hoped to develop links which could result in a cross-flow of ideas between the two styles of theatre.

There are plans for the Black Fox Band which provides the music for the Wheatley community plays to attend musical workshops run by the National Theatre. Mick hopes that a stage crew from London will run workshops in Wheatley for some of the cast in Wheatleyshire.

But for the moment these plans lie in the future.

Mick, of Farm Close Road, Wheatley, is currently sifting through local records and talking to old characters in the village as part of his research for the play — a fantasy exploring the futures that could face Wheatley.

The script will not be written for another year and though a director — Nigel Messenger, a lecturer at Oxford Polytechnic — has been appointed the cast will not be chosen until late in 1985.

The culmination of two years' of planning and preparation will be the staging of the play for three nights during the Wheatley Festival in 1986.

For Mick Jones, 42, playwright, composer and on the night a member of the band, the time (and the equivalent of £1,000 in lost wages) will have been well spent.

Magic

"I have always been stage struck — I think there is a magic about the theatre. But I wouldn't want to be a professional scriptwriter. I enjoy the total involvement — not just the writing of it but being a part of it."

"It's there all the time. You talk to people and have a chat — and they might be in the play. All the time there is this involvement and enthusiasm in the village. The spirit is tremendous."

"My reward is seeing the smiles on the faces of the cast after the production."

"After the last play there were people with tears in their eyes. They were tears of joy — because they had achieved something."