

Co-op fare

Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope.
Age Exchange Theatre Company.

The Archers used to be billed as an everyday story of country folk, and it remains popular for exactly that reason. The smalltalk in Martha Woodford's shop does far more to keep an audience than the occasional sensational death of a character. It is precisely the same humdrum ordinariness which makes Age Exchange's *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope* so fascinating.

The production takes its somewhat unwieldy title from the motto of the Co-operative Women's Guild, for whose centenary it has been compiled. Like previous Age Exchange shows it is built up entirely from the reminiscences of old people, in this case some of the pioneering members of the CWG. From their memories of childhoods spent in staunch Co-op households, of "Co-op breakfasts" - milk from the Co-op dairies and Co-op bacon - and of the Co-op's Wearsheaf shoes, however, emerges a picture of the developing political awareness of women in the first decades of this century.

"Come and buy", the Co-op shops used to exhort them, that was how they could help build the socialist heaven on earth. But they had other ideas; they wanted to "talk and act" like their husbands and fathers. Joining the Guild gave them the chance to do both.

Annie and Jessie and Alice and Muriel, the four characters in the play (all of them amalgams of scores of real-life Guildswomen) never do anything dramatic in their lives. But as the play makes clear their chaining of a branch meeting or travelling to London for the annual CWG Rally was at least as useful to their fight as a Suffragette chaining herself to railings or throwing herself under the King's horse.

Commissioned by the Co-operative Women's Guild, *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope* is being performed principally at branch meetings and for Woodcraft Folk youth groups. Its scrupulous attention to detail, however, and demonstration that history is really made up of people not events deserves a far wider audience. Maybe on Channel 4 - as an all-woman, mildly left-wing piece of community theatre it seems ideally suited.

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