

VARSITY DRAG

The Cambridge University Footlights has always been a springboard for bright young lads not averse to putting on frocks. Robert Hewison, whose book marks the club's centenary this month, looks back at a curious comic tradition

What bond joins Germaine Greer with John Cleese, the Bishop of Lincoln, Jack Hulbert and Lord Killanin? All once had to audition for membership of a club which has produced more comic performers and writers than ENSA or the Windmill Theatre: the Cambridge University Footlights. From Davy Burnaby of the Co-Optimists to the talents of the Fifties and Sixties and beyond - Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, John Bird, John Fortune, David Frost, Graham Chapman, Bill Oddie, Tim Brooke-Taylor, Graeme Garden and Eric Idle - the Footlights acted as our foremost nursery of comic talent.

This month the Club celebrates one hundred years of Cambridge May Week performances, interrupted only by the First and Second World Wars. The Footlights has its own peculiar customs and traditions - one of them has been for male actors to play women's as well as men's parts.

The Footlights Club began when a group of undergraduates went to entertain the inmates of a local mental home. The show was such a success that one of them suggested they become a permanent institution. On June 9, 1883 (May Week, by tradition, takes place at the beginning of June) the club gave its first performance, a farcical curtain raiser, *The Lottery Ticket*, and a burlesque of heroic tragedy, *Bombastes Furioso*.

In 1883 revues did not yet exist, and the early Footlights shows were a mixture of Gilbert-and-Sullivan-style burlesques and pantomime-like burlesques. Pantomime - the Footlights put on *Aladdin* in November 1883 - has always involved men dressing up as women. But at Cambridge the Footlights were faced with a particular problem: ➡➡➡➡➡



L. HEWITT: 'CHEER-OH CAMBRIDGE'



THE CAST OF 'SAY WHEN', 1930



ABOVE, HARRY ROTTENBERG, 1898; ABOVE RIGHT, VICTOR STIEBEL, 1927, WHO DESIGNED HIS OWN FROCKS

ABOVE LEFT, PHILLIPS HOLMES, 1927, FUTURE HOLLYWOOD STAR; HUMPHREY BOURNE, ABOVE: 'SIR OR MADAM'



THE CAST OF 'ALMER MATER,' 1892, THE FIRST PLAY TO HAVE AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT



AT THE ART THEATRE WITH,
 ABOVE, NEVILLE
 BLACKBURN IN 'TURN
 OVER A NEW LEAF', 1936.
 LEFT, C. B. SCOTT IN
 'THE NEW DEAN', 1900

"GOSH, HOW I LOVE MY CLOCHE." SONG AND DANCE AT THE DORCHESTER, 1951



12-12-23
 THE EXQUISITE "HEROINE" OF THE
 RECENT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY AMA-
 TEUR DRAMATIC CLUB'S PRODUCTION:
 MR. CECIL BEATON AS PRINCESS TECLA.
 The Gyps Princess, the musical comedy
 recently produced by the Cambridge University
 Amateur Dramatic Club, had an exquisite
 heroine in Mr. Cecil Beaton, who wore the
 above costume as Princess Tecla.

CECIL BEATON AS PRINCESS TÉCLA, 1925



LORD KILLANIN, 1933

