**Report by the Chairman of The Repertory Players to the Annual General Meeting**

**Sunday March 25 2012**

Ladies and gentlemen

The past year has not been an easy one for The Repertory Players, and although the circumstances surrounding the difficulties we have faced are not entirely divorced from the overall economic situation within Zimbabwe as a whole, we have had some unique problems which have had to be addressed and resolved.

Zimbabwe continues to face enormous economic, political, social and other problems, all of which have the general effect of placing a strain on the finances of all organisations, whatever their field of endeavour, and on all the people of the country. What does this mean for Reps? It means less money in the market, in turn resulting in smaller audiences for shows and decreased receipt of funds through any of our existing streams of income. While this is not the only cause of the problems we have faced it is a real and ongoing one.

Fairly soon after the 2011 AGM, the Reps Executive Committee found itself in an extremely difficult position. For some time, shows were making losses. Membership was stable but stagnant. There was reduced income in the bars and in the Wardrobe. Subscription income for 2011 – for which members were incentivised to get paid in December of the previous year – was already spent on paying bills. We also found ourselves faced by huge utilities bills, the result of these not being dealt with earlier.

What were we to do?

The choices were simple: close up shop, or carry on and hope for the best, or accept the facts and create a strategy for the future that involved not only addressing the problems but also changing our own behaviour in order for us to stop the slide. As members know, we decided to take the latter course, adopting an attitude of recognising that meaningful change backed by solid determination would bring us back from the brink and place us on a course of stabilisation leading to growth and development.

The action we took covered several key areas, among them:

* Reviewing our production policy, leading to the staging of more commercial productions in the theatres;
* Stimulating new membership;
* Stimulating bar income through an exceptional level of activity in the members’ bar;
* Reviewing and, where necessary, changing pricing;
* Looking at all opportunities for increasing income, from traditional and non-traditional sourcing streams;
* Initiating a Debentures scheme, funds from which were to help pay outstanding bills as well as allow for investing in methods of saving income or increasing income.

We called a Special General Meeting late in the year, aimed at obtaining approval for and providing a platform for launching the Debentures scheme, so that members were became aware of the difficulties and the unenviable situation we were in. The Debentures scheme was a moderate success, bringing in about $15 000, considerably less than the $100 000 we mooted as being needed for long-term stability and development.

However, a combination of all the factors listed above has created a situation in early 2012 far removed from that of just six months ago. We have paid off all our debts and created a much more satisfactory cash flow position and we are now actively looking at doing what we can to move forward instead of simply furiously treading water. This has been a remarkable transformation of status.

It means that we can this morning confidently state that Reps is both stable and strong, and that we have every reason to believe that the future is bright on all fronts. However, it must be said that this will remain true only for as long as we continuously maintain the momentum we have created and remain committed to the path we have chosen, not allowing ourselves to fall into a comfort zone of any kind. In this environment we must be vigilant and resourceful, ensuring that we plan carefully, undertake our operations with care and flair and never feel complacent about our situation, which could be reversed should we fail to acknowledge that our current strength comes from our substantial efforts to be a commercially successful operation, notwithstanding our status as an amateur theatrical society, to which we all belong for the love of theatre and for the fun it provides.

After last year’s AGM the Executive Committee held a Strategic Planning Seminar, drawing up for the society a forward plan for the period 2011 to 2013. Details of this were made known to members soon after the adoption of our Strategic Plan and a report-back in December highlighted action taken and what courses of action were being followed into 2012. Soon after today’s AGM a second such seminar should be held and the plan updated, so that achievement of what we set out to do can be facilitated through continuation of activity and, where necessary, additional action.

Adding to previous sub-committees, we established a wider system of sub-committees, which are tasked with handling ongoing activities and reporting to Exco on the status of these activities. The portfolios are:

* Production – chaired by Sue Bolt
* Finance – Sue McMillan
* Backstage – Marc Thomas
* Marketing and Publicity – Stan Higgins
* Technical management – Mike Blackburn
* Office and property management – Ryan Lawrence
* Training and development – Kevin Hanssen
* Bar management and social events – Tim Garrard
* Membership – Mike Southall

Members of Exco have been active across all areas of endeavour and I am delighted to say that we have had a year in which there has been a high level of co-operation between members of the committee and a clear common understanding of where the society needs to go now and in the future. We have enjoyed good feedback and input from many members of the society and we have been fortunate that most of our sub-committees have been fully operational, although I would like to say that I would like to see more activity flowing from the meetings from some of the committees. New faces are coming onto these sub-committees and from them will come the Exco members of the future. I believe that everyone coming on to Exco should do so with a background of active and successful participation in one or more of these sub-committees, which provide a valuable insight into how Reps works.

Highlights of the past year include the successful resolution of the financial issue; the appointment of a Theatre Manager in the form of the very experienced and creative John Bonney, with whom I have thoroughly enjoyed working; the appointment of a Director of Productions in the form of the exceptionally talented Zane E Lucas, whose contribution to the society will, I predict, be on a huge scale; the streamlining of many operational structures and procedures; the continued staging of a great many Repertory Players productions on both stages and the hosting of a good number of hire productions, also on both stages; the coming on board of corporate and show sponsors; the increase in membership on a scale not seen for several years; the additional value added to the Wardrobe by Collina Mvududu and her small support team, especially with regard to longer opening hours; the major increase in social event activity related to the members bar, much of it spearheaded by Jenni Ferguson, whose tireless efforts are worth noting; the continued hard work on the part of the staff in all departments; the commitment and dedication of members, especially with regard to onstage, backstage and support activities; the support from the community at large, which stems from a recognition that Reps plays an important role in the life of Harare and Zimbabwe; the support of the Beit Trust, whose grant to Reps will assist in the upgrading of Theatre Upstairs very shortly.

We have enjoyed support from our first two corporate members: Old Mutual, whose sponsorship came through last year and which is one of Reps’ greatest supporters; and ZB Financial Holdings, which came into contact with us last year through HIFA and has in early 2012 made good with corporate sponsorship. We have also enjoyed the continued support of many organisations, among them such good friends as African Distillers, sponsor of our annual awards competition and ceremony, as well as the schools’ theatre festival. Significant show sponsors have also come on board, the first being Spar Zimbabwe’s sponsorship of the 2012 pantomime. This financial input has been both generous and welcome and I thank them most sincerely for their confidence and active support.

In addition to these organisations, I would like to thank each and every person and organisation whose input and efforts have helped Reps in one way or another. They are too numerous to mention by name, but they provide a support network that is both remarkable and invaluable. We have also enjoyed practical support from bodies such as the City of Harare, ZESA and, through the Belgravia Shopping Centre Owners’ and Tenants’ Association, the ZRP.

I have been inundated with communications of all kinds this past year, none of them a burden, because each and every one of these communications has been about Reps’ best interests and it has been a pleasure to be in receipt of such positive and easily forthcoming advice, ideas, suggestions, criticisms, feedback and even expressions of gratitude and commendation.

In our Strategic Plan we have outlined our belief that Reps is and should be the leading performing arts institution in Harare and Zimbabwe. For 81 years this has been the case and I believe it is truer now than ever before. We in Reps are proud of this society and its history and with the role it is playing in the community at large and the performing arts sector in particular. Despite incredible obstacles, we are both active and strong and, with continued determined effort and hard work, we shall take this society to even greater heights.

I am a relative newcomer to this society, especially when compared to the length of membership and service of people in this room today like John Bonney, Steve Bonney, Tim Garrard and many others. So I am well positioned to make an observation that is worth making, in that I feel the strength to which I have referred is underlined by a factor I believe to be unique to Reps among clubs and societies in general: there is a genuine love for the society and for this theatre and its activities.

I do not use that word lightly.

It is this element that, for me, is the best guarantee of the continued existence of Reps and the bright future that I know it has in store for us all in Harare and Zimbabwe.

Thank you.

Stan Higgins

Chairman.