



ONSTAGE

The Autumn 2000 newsletter of Victoria Theatres Trust

Vol.1 No.2

'The Maj' gave 2600 people gilt, plush and *Bad Lads*

The acquisition of Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, by cinema entrepreneur and former television identity Mike Walsh, has prompted **Mimi Colligan** and **Frank Van Straten** to survey the long and colourful history of this beloved theatre.

The building now known as Her Majesty's opened on 1 October 1886 as the Alexandra Theatre, named in honour of the then Princess of Wales.

Melbourne architect Nahum Barnet (1855–1931) designed it for Jules Joubert, a French-born adventurer, entrepreneur and theatrical agent from New South Wales, on a site at the north-west corner of Little Bourke and Exhibition Streets.

Since 1880 the corner had been occupied by L.L.Smith's Hippodrome, a sporting and athletics venue and although 'off-Bourke Street' the site was only a block away from most of the other main

Melbourne entertainment venues found along Bourke Street.

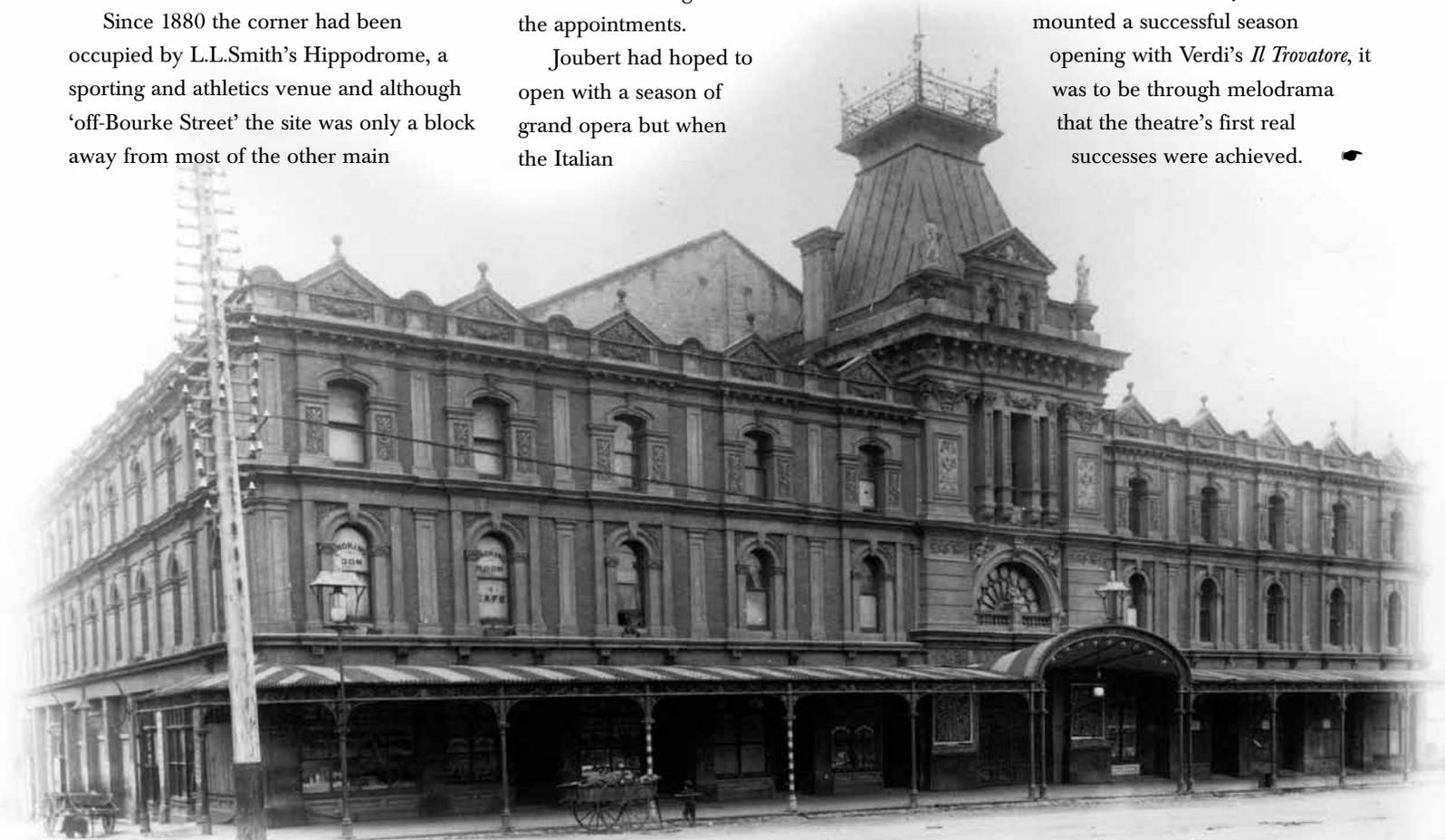
Barnet chose a French Renaissance style featuring a central tower with a half-wheel window over the entrance. Ground floor level was completed with an iron verandah. Inside, decorations were in typical 19th century style with much gilt and plush velvet. Seating capacity was about 2600 and publicity stressed the Australian origins of the appointments.

Joubert had hoped to open with a season of grand opera but when the Italian

company was delayed he had to settle for *Bad Lads*, a 'farical comedy' directed by Captain de Burgh, an ex-British Army officer, and his wife Julia Sidney.

The high hopes of the first night were soon dashed—within a year of the opening both Jules Joubert and Captain de Burgh had become insolvent.

Although the long promised opera season arrived in December 1886, when Martin and Fanny Simonsen mounted a successful season opening with Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, it was to be through melodrama that the theatre's first real successes were achieved. ■



Alfred Dampier, an English Shakespearean actor-manager, leased the 'Aleck' (as the theatre had become known) between 1888 and 1893. Advertised as 'The Australian Theatre' several notable plays on Australian themes written by Dampier and Garnet Walch were produced, including *Marvellous Melbourne* (1889) and stage versions of the novels *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *Robbery Under Arms*.

Imported sensation dramas such as *The Scout and the Trapper* (1891) were staged with spectacular realism. Cliff-hanging suspense, to be a feature of the moving pictures just 10 years hence, was created on stage with the aid of large water tanks to simulate lakes and rivers, and mechanical devices such as roller tracks enabled live horses to gallop across the stage.

Madame Fanny Simonsen's Grand Opera Company returned in August 1891 for a 13 week season offering works of the calibre of *Lohengrin*, *Les Huguenots*, *Rigoletto*, *Martha* and *Faust*. Following this season the Alexandra continued fairly successfully as a playhouse, but in 1894, at the height of the depression of the '90s, Dampier himself went bankrupt.

By 1898 the building was showing signs of wear and some critics saw it as a house of cheap melodrama, a view reinforced by the popularity of Bland Holt's productions of sensational melodramas at the Theatre Royal, Bourke Street.

With a change of name to the Queen's Theatre to honour Queen Victoria's jubilee, and the waning of the depression in the late 1890s, Dan Barry and William Anderson leased the theatre and continued with melodramas such as Barry's *Wilful Murder*, based on the local real life Deeming murders.

Anderson's management continued until 11 May 1900 when *The Gates of Bondage* closed the season—and the 'old Alexandra'.

Enter: James Cassius Williamson

Just eight days after its closing, and following some renovations, James Cassius Williamson opened the theatre as Her Majesty's, with a revival of *HMS Pinafore*. From now on Her Majesty's was to be the venue for a great number of theatrical successes. Further renovations by architect



William Pitt preceded the musical comedy *Florodora* in December 1900.

For the next 29 years Her Majesty's (renamed His Majesty's in 1924) was the main outlet in Melbourne for J.C.Williamson's Theatres Ltd. Highlights included musical comedies such as *Our Miss Gibbs*, the Melba-Williamson Grand Opera seasons of 1911, 1924 and 1928, visits by ballerina Anna Pavlova in 1926 and 1929, and musicals *The Desert Song*, *Rose-Marie*, and *The Student Prince*.

Disaster

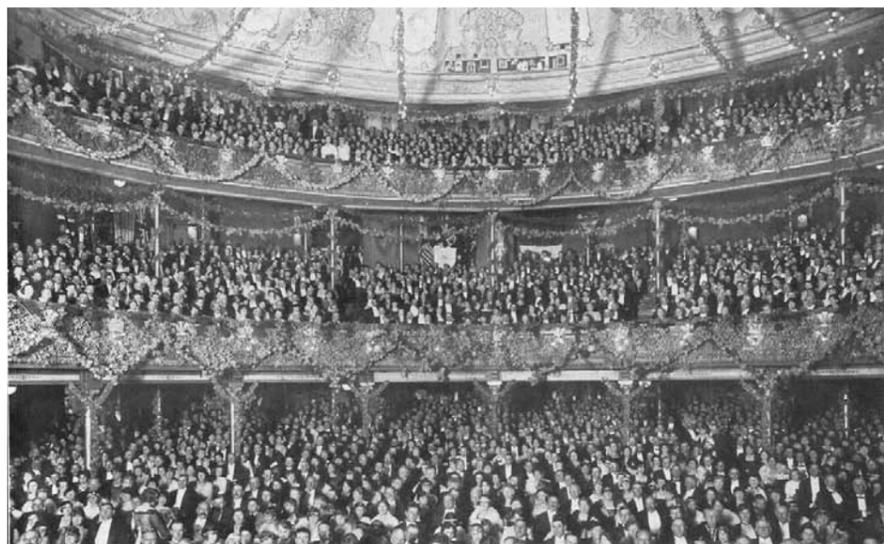
Disaster struck on 25 October 1929 when the auditorium was gutted by fire.

Also destroyed was the lovely central tower. Although the management stated the theatre would be rebuilt within six months, it was five years before a reconstructed theatre was opened.

But even in its derelict condition 'The Maj' still played a part in Australian show business: film maker F.W.Thring used the stage for several Efttee Films productions, including *His Royal Highness* starring George Wallace, *Diggers* and *Waltzing Matilda* both with comedian Pat Hanna.

Another new medium, radio, was

Gala night at the old Maj: a performance for the visiting Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VIII) on the night of 5 June 1920. Nine years later the interior was reduced to rubble in a fire. All that remains of the old interior are some supporting pillars, reused to support the circle and balcony.



housed in rooms off the main foyer when 3AW became a tenant.

New interior, old exterior

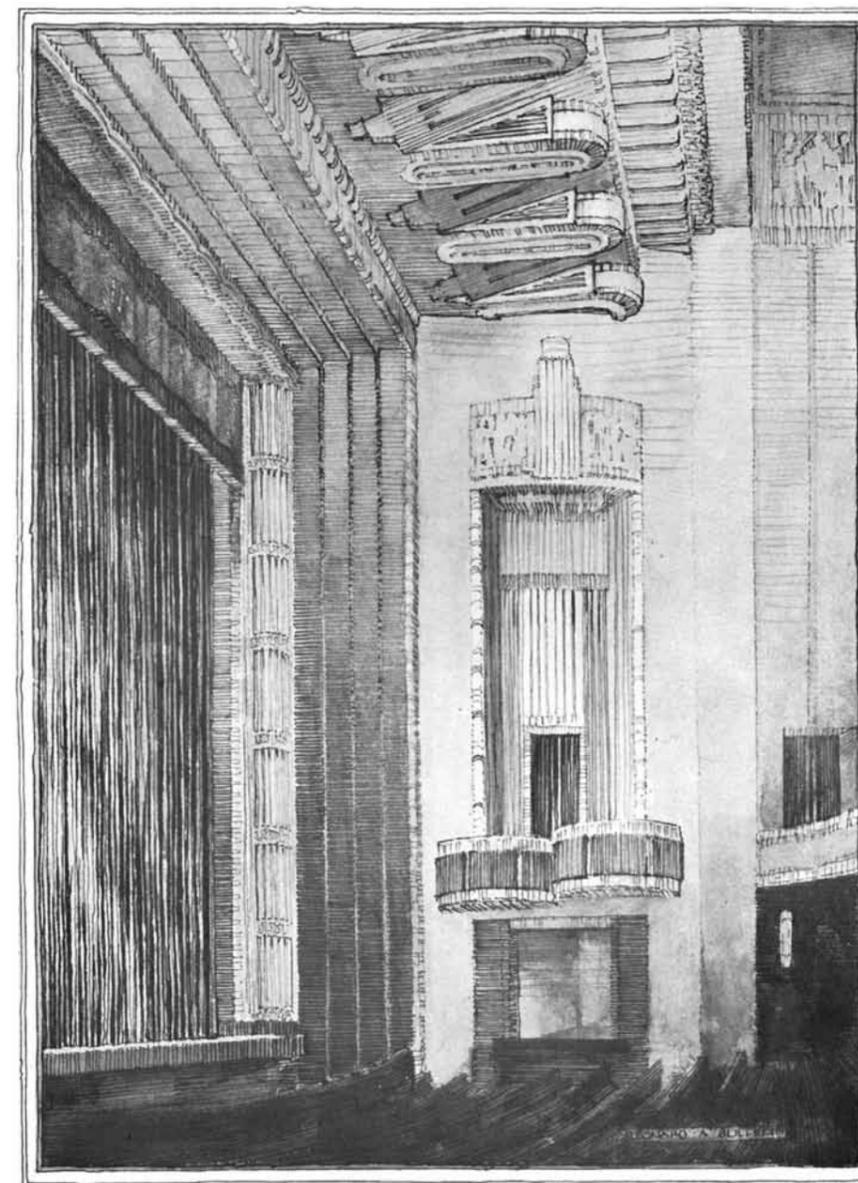
In September 1933 the JCW management decided to rebuild the theatre at a cost of £60 000—a large sum particularly considering the Great Depression was at its peak. Charles N. Hollinshed and Albion Walkley, designers of the Comedy Theatre for JCW in 1928, were chosen as architects.

The results of this work survive today and help make Her Majesty's such an interesting building.

Sadly the distinctive towered entrance has disappeared. Even so, the result is a fascinating mix of 19th century exterior and 20th century art deco or European art moderne interior.

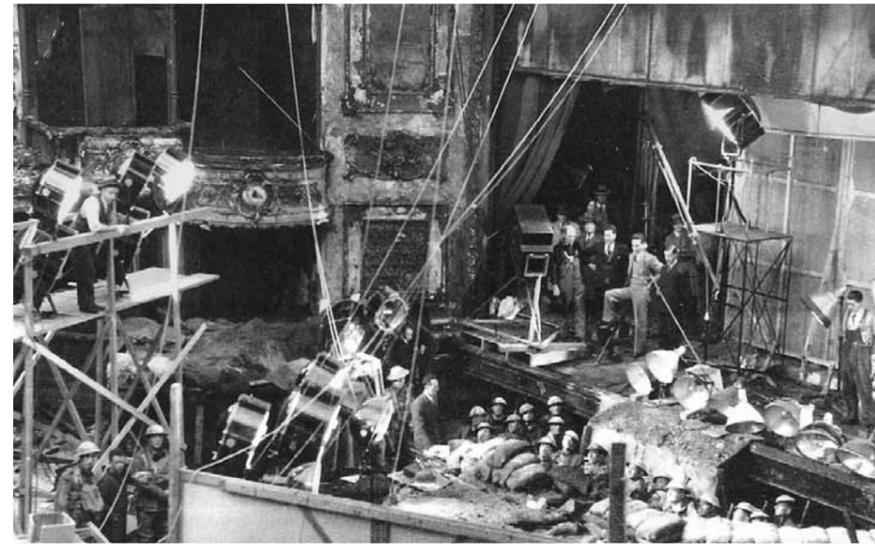
In the September 1934 issue of the Sydney trade periodical *Building*, a congratulatory article noted the 'spaciousness and elegance' of the new interior, 'decorated in the modern manner with a certain vertical emphasis, maintained in the graining of the timber, as its principal attraction'. The journal also praised the use of 'Queensland walnut inlaid with pewter and macassar ebony' and the 'entire absence of mouldings as seen in 19th century theatre decoration'.

It is interesting to note the architects did not apply the modern methods of cantilevering, but retained two columns to support the dress and upper circles. The most likely explanation is that the original



Architect's rendering of C.N.Hollinshed's art modern interior (above) opened on Saturday, 28 July 1934 and largely unchanged today.

Below: Filming in the burnt out theatre of Efttee Films' *Diggers* in 1931, with the old orchestra pit standing in for trenches in the battlefields of France.



columns remained structurally sound and the reconstruction was not justified on the grounds of expense.

Also significant in the theatre's modernisation was the appointment of an acoustics consultant, H. Vivian Taylor. 'The Maj' was the first live Australian theatre to use an acoustics expert.

Architectural historian Ross Thorne in his *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905* (Sydney 1971) praised the break with the 19th century: 'One of the most noteworthy details of the...design is its lack of revivalist picture palace-type decoration in Renaissance, Gothic or Moorish style'.

A good house for good shows

His Majesty's reopened on 28 July 1934. Sporting its new interior and restored exterior (except for the central tower), the theatre's history from then on covers many theatrical genres, with musical comedy perhaps the most important.

From the 1934 opening with *White Horse Inn*, through old favourites of the 1930s like *The Chocolate Soldier*, *The Merry Widow*, *No, No, Nanette* and the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire, the theatre's reputation as a good house for good musicals was confirmed. This continued with the new style of American musical theatre of the '40s and '50s such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Oklahoma!*, culminating in the long running *My Fair Lady* in 1959.

It was the success of *My Fair Lady* which led the JCW management to update the air conditioning of the theatre, making it even more comfortable for its patrons.

Ballet has been another drawcard for the Exhibition Street theatre. Melbournians had their first experience of the great Diaghilev tradition with the arrival of Colonel de Basil's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

The impact of this and subsequent companies from 1936 to 1940 influenced classical dance in Australia for many years and provided a direct link to the formation of the Australian Ballet. *Prince Igor*, *Scheherazade* and *Graduation Ball* were among the ballets performed in this period and several dancers from these companies stayed on, most notably Edouard Borovansky.

The Borovansky Ballet was closely associated with the JCW organisation and



Hollinshed's interior of 1934 remains basically unaltered today. An art deco—art moderne gem, it is one of the few remaining intact in Australia.

'The Maj' from 1943 until 'Boro's' death in 1959. Notable productions included *Petrushka*, *The Sleeping Princess*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Pineapple Poll*. Dame Margot Fonteyn's first performances in Australia were as a guest artist for Borovansky. She appeared at Her Majesty's in June 1957.

In this post-1935 period the theatre also

proved to be a successful opera house. Williamson's 1955 International Grand Opera season was notable for the productions of *Aida* and *Turandot* and the singers Gabriella Tucci and Umberto Borsi. The Sutherland-Williamson season of 1965 saw a triumphantly returning Joan Sutherland and a young Luciano Pavarotti on the stage of 'The Maj'.

With the excellent acoustics making it suitable as a playhouse for larger audiences, the 1949 season of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Company included *Macbeth* with Diana Wynyard and Anthony Quayle in the leading roles. As the Royal Shakespeare Company the troupe returned in 1970 and again in 1973 with Peter Brook's famous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A new owner

When 'The Firm' was finally wound up JCW's theatre properties were put on the market. Her Majesty's was auctioned on 4 May 1978, two days after its sister house, the Comedy, opposite. The extremely desirable 3330m² site—virtually an island site with a frontage to both Exhibition and Little Bourke Streets and backing onto Cohen Place—

marked it as an attractive development proposition. It was undoubtedly its development potential that attracted Gabriel Rose, described by the press as a 'motel owner and former builder'.

Through his company Tideswell Investments, Rose paid just over \$1 million for the property

At this time it was occupied by the musical *A Chorus Line*, but Rose refused to give any guarantees that Her Majesty's would survive demolition.

It was not surprising, therefore, that following Tideswell Investment's two decades of ownership the theatre needed urgent upgrading, especially backstage.

This neglect contributed to Her Majesty's failing to attract a number of major shows, a situation exacerbated with the Victorian Arts Centre's theatres opening in 1984 and the refurbishment of the Princess, completed in 1990.

In 1985 great concern was felt that Her Majesty's might be demolished and replaced by a commercial building. Arguments by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and the then Historic Buildings Council persuaded the government to refuse a permit to redevelop the site and the old theatre lived on.

All the buildings on the site are now on the Register of Heritage Victoria.

Under the management of Gabriel Rose and his son, Adrian, Her Majesty's has hosted productions such as *Annie*, Derek Jacobi in *Hamlet*, *Evita*, *Barnum*, *Guys and Dolls* and *Cats*, and seasons by Barry Humphries, Peter Ustinov, the Two Ronnies, Marcel Marceau, Peter Allen, Tommy Steele, Spike Milligan and Reg Livermore. In 1998 there was a superb production of *An Ideal Husband* directed by Peter Hall.

The Roses' company placed the theatre on the market once more, and on 12 November 1999 it was sold to Sydney theatre entrepreneur Mike Walsh.

The hugely successful Australian puppet version of *The Hobbit* goes into 'The Maj' for a brief return season in March, followed in late April by Dennis Smith's production of the classic Neil Simon comedy *The Sunshine Boys*, starring Jack Klugman and Elliott Gould.

At the conclusion of this season Walsh will spend \$4 million to refurbish and re-equip the backstage facilities. Auditorium and foyers will be upgraded later.

It is anticipated the theatre will be used not only for live productions but also for films, linked with Walsh's extremely successful Hayden Orpheum Cinema in the Sydney suburb of Cremorne. The art deco Orpheum gives an interesting link between the two theatres having opened in 1935, just a few months after the rebuilt His Majesty's.

The history of Her Majesty's as a building cannot be separated from the history of Melbourne theatre. 'The Maj' is not just a historic building with a long tradition of presenting opera, ballet, musical comedy and drama, it is a working and workable theatre.

It possesses one of Victoria's—and Australia's—most notable surviving art deco interiors, a superb example of the work of the specialist theatre architect C.N.Hollinshed.

The Victoria Theatres Trust congratulates Mike Walsh on his acquisition of this theatre gem and, under its new and sympathetic management, wishes it well. ■

Sources:

Melbourne daily newspapers 1885–1999
Mimi Colligan, *Her Majesty's Theatre 1886–1896: report prepared for the National Buildings Council, 1986 Building*, September 1934
Fact Sheet, Heritage Victoria, 2000
Pictures: Performing Arts Museum
Frank Van Straten collection
State Library of Victoria



1999 Green Room Awards

The hit musical *The Boy From Oz* and Opera Australia's *Billy Budd* each garnered six awards in the 17th annual Green Room Awards, closely followed by five to *Cloudstreet*. The awards were presented at the Victorian Arts Centre on Tuesday, 15 February.

The Green Room Awards, the Australian arts scene's most coveted, are given to practitioners in the categories of Cabaret, Dance, Drama, Fringe, Music Theatre and Opera, as well as acknowledging Lifetime Achievement and Outstanding Technical Achievement.

A highlight of the ceremony was the bestowing of a Lifetime Achievement Award on Jill Perryman, one of Australia's best loved performers, presented to her by the Victorian Minister for Education and the Arts, Mary Delahunty.

In a first for the Awards, one director has taken out the Direction award in both Opera and Drama categories—Neil Armfield went home with one for *Billy Budd* and one for *Cloudstreet*.

In the Opera category this year two special awards were presented, one to the retiring Director of Opera Australia, Moffatt Oxenbold, and the other collectively to the State Orchestra of Victoria for its contribution to the artistic life of Melbourne.

The full listing of this year's Green

Room Awards can be seen on their website: www.greenroom.org.au
See *A life on the boards*, page 7

Intimacy with 16 577 others

Now open for business is Melbourne's newest intimate theatre. It seats a mere 16 578 people. Intimate? Not! Just you and 16 577 of your closest friends!

Mind you, if you have 74 000 friends it can seat them too, but not quite as intimately, you understand.

Of course we're talking about the splendid new Colonial Stadium at Docklands. The handsome souvenir booklet published with the *Herald Sun* in February eulogies it as 'a new breed of stadium...a place of magic' and 'people-friendly'.

That's good to know.

The booklet details the three principal seating configurations for concerts at this 'showbusiness showcase':

- 'In the Round', with the stage in the centre of the arena: capacity 74 296 with the furthest seat 102m from the stage,
- 'End Stage Mode', with the stage about two-thirds down the arena: 45 000 capacity with the furthest seat 149m from the stage, and

• 'Intimate Mode', with the stage one-third of the way down the the arena: 16,578 capacity, with the furthest seat a mere 91m from the stage.

Compare these configurations with the distance from the stage to the furthest row of the upper circle in the State Theatre at the Victorian Arts Centre—41m.

For sporting events, the Stadium's capacity is 54 000, although for some events about 1300 seats will have restricted viewing.

For those of us used to other similarly intimate venues—La Mama. for instance—it's reassuring to know that for our comfort Colonial Stadium has installed eight kilometres of handrails, 1500 doors, 650 toilet partitions, 13 326 teaspoons and 3000 piles (this latter figure apparently unrelated to the seating in any way).

Further details can be found at www.colonialstadium.com.au ■

National Theatre

A brightly designed new booklet has just been issued by the National Theatre outlining the history of the National Theatre movement, the theatre itself and its backstage technical details.

Well endowed with sumptuous pictures of the foyers, theatre and studios, the booklet is available from the National Theatre, corner Barkly and Carlisle Streets, St Kilda, or through the postal address PO Box 1173, St Kilda South, Victoria 3182. ■

Exeunt

The Victoria Theatres Trust pays tribute to those members of the performing arts profession in Australia who took their final curtains during 1999. In true theatre style the cast is listed in alphabetical order...

Peter Adams actor	Joff Ellen comedian, early TV performer	Johnny O'Connor singer
Queenie Ashton AM actor	Elaine Fifield dancer	William Orr entrepreneur, producer
Robin Bailey British actor; Australia's original Professor Higgins in <i>My Fair Lady</i>	Bob Gibson musician	Peter Pagan actor
Jon 'Trish' Barrie drag artiste and dancer	Hayes Gordon OBE actor, director, teacher	Diana Parnham actor
Nancye Bridges musician, historian	Anne Haddy actor	James Penberthy composer
Kenn Brodziak OBE producer	Don Harper musician	Marianne Permezel musician, composer, singer
Anna Buckley Victorian Arts Centre stage crew member	Elaine Haxton designer	Joan Rayner AM actor, director, dramatist, puppeteer, children's theatre producer
John Casson OBE director producer son of Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson	Sydney Irving entrepreneur	Norman Spencer AM director, dramatist, pioneer television producer
Gordon Chater actor	Rhondda Johnson playwright	William Stoyles executive
Peter Condon dancer, stage manager	Roma Johnson actor	Elizabeth Sweeting MBE arts administrator
Horrie Dargie musician, producer	Rosalind Keene singer	David Taranto comedy producer
Phillip Edgely actor	Judd Laine dancer, teacher, choreographer	Georg Tintner conductor
	Phil Lanham singer	Joyce Turner actor
	Julian Leather actor	Anne Woolliams dancer, administrator ■
	Bobby Limb musician, actor, producer	
	David Martin playwright	
	Tom Miller actor, producer	

By popular demand: another look for Ballarat's lost theatres

Ballarat reruns the search for the city's lost stages.

Ballarat's 2000 Heritage Festival's *Pastimes of Ballarat* segment is replaying the popular 'Ballarat's Lost Stages Theatre Walk' first featured in autumn last year.

The walk on Saturday, 25 March tracks the sites of the city's lost theatres, with performances at each stop recalling the styles of the era.

Peter Freund, knowledgeable and genial historian of Ballarat's magnificent Her

Majesty's Theatre, will lead the trek, which leaves from the corner of Main Road and York Street at 2.00pm and ends at the Grainery Lane Theatre.

Costing just \$5 for an adult, \$3 concession, bookings can be made through MajesTix on (03) 5333 5888—or pay on the day.

And while in Ballarat, try to see *Dance Hall Days—French Posters from Chéret to Toulouse-Lautrec*, a National Gallery of

Australia Touring Exhibition, at the Fine Art Gallery, 40 Lydiard Street North, Ballarat.

The exhibition is now open every day and runs until 23 April from 10.30am to 5.00pm.

Details on (03) 5331 5633 or check the gallery's excellent website: <http://www.ballarat.edu.au/arts/bltag/index.htm> ■

Swat's in a name?

The 2000 edition of the excellent *SWAT* (Stage Whispers Amateur Theatre) *Directory* is now available at most newsagents.

At \$25 it's an invaluable reference for anyone interested in the Australian performing arts scene.

In its 152 pages are detailed listings which include theatrical companies, lighting, sound and special effects sources, agents, costumiers and make-up suppliers, dance studios, educational resources, eisteddfods and festivals.

Agents, personnel, schools, technical suppliers and theatrical producers (professional and amateur), listings of

venues throughout the country (complete with technical details), capacities and contact names are also included.

In case you can't find a copy of this invaluable reference, write to Box 318, Monbulk, Victoria 3793, phone (03) 9752 1065, fax (03) 9752 1429 or e-mail stagews@stagewhispers.com.au ■

A life on the boards

ON STAGE pays tribute to the Green Room Awards' Life Achiever for 2000.

Jill Perryman is one of Australia's legendary ladies of the theatre. It all began in 1953 when, following early office work with The Firm, Perryman joined the chorus of the 1953 musical *Call Me Madam*. Ten musicals later she had risen from chorus to leading lady.

Her first big break came when imported US star Carole Cooke, as Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*'s Australian premier season, fell ill just days after the opening.

On went Jill, performing the role a number of times during the season.

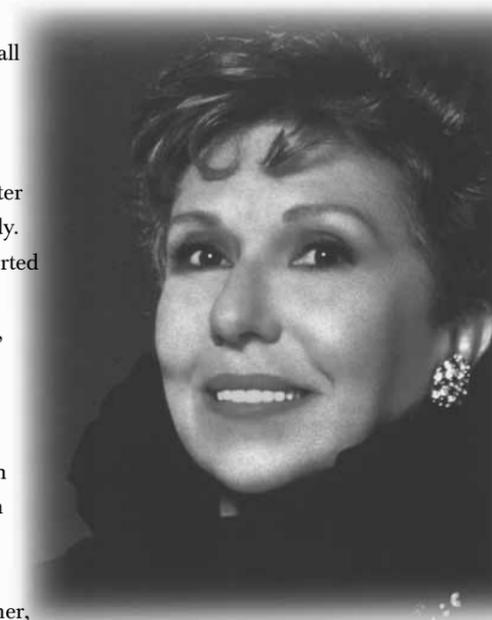
She was to star three decades later in Gordon Frost's acclaimed revival season and *Dolly!* won for her a Green Room Award, Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award for Best Musical Theatre Performer, and a Mo Award for Performer of the Year.

She was already a favourite with audiences of the Phillip Street Theatre's reviews in the '50s and '60s when *Funny Girl* elevated her to national stardom in 1965. For her extraordinary performance as Fanny Brice she was given the Erik Award for Best Actress.

I Do, I Do followed; *Leading Lady*, shortly after, tailored to her special talents, played to full houses.

Marriage to dancer Kevan Johnston, whom she met at the Phillip Street Theatre, saw her move her home base to Perth.

The Johnstons raised two children. Her Golden Swan award in 1995



acknowledges Jill Perryman's contribution to performing arts in Western Australia.

Jill Perryman's other musical theatre credits include the original tour of *Side By Side By Sondheim*, *Chicago* and *Company* for the Perth Playhouse, JCW's *No, No, Nanette* (another Best Actress Erik in 1972 for this), *Can Can*, *The Pajama Game*, *A Little Night Music* and *Annie*.

She also performed in the concert version of Sondheim's *Follies* at the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts.

She has been developing a large following in recent years in revue and cabaret, as part of Woolloomooloo's

Tilbury Hotel *Legends* season, and has taken her one-woman show around Australia and to Singapore.

Non-musical theatre is another of her strong points, including *Noises Off* in Adelaide and Perth and national tours of *'night Mother* and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*.

For the Hole In The Wall Theatre Company, Perth, she has appeared in *The One Day Of The Year*, in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *Love Letters* and *Wallflowering*, for the WA Theatre Company, *Dinkum Assorted* and *The Man From Muckinupin* and for Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre *Gulls*.

Her 1973 television series on ABC-TV, *Perryman on Parade*, won her a Penguin Award for Best Variety Performer, and other TV appearances have been in *Bellbird*, *Dynasty*, *GP*, *A Country Practice*, *Palace of Dreams* (her appearance on the episode 'Tickled Pink' won her a 1979 Penguin for Best Single Performance), and *An Evening With Jill Perryman*.

She added an AFI Award for Best Supporting Actress in 1980 for her appearance in the film *Maybe This Time*, and a 1981 United Nations Citation for the documentary *Africa—The Dispossessed*, filmed in north-east Africa with Leonard Teale.

To her huge collection of theatre and humanity awards Jill Perryman added an AM in 1991 and an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 1991. ■

Romantic reminder

The State Library of Victoria has acquired a poignant memento linking the ill-fated explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills with Melbourne's stage scene of the mid-1800s.

It is a small kid glove, one of a pair made by young actress-singer Julia Mathews to whom Burke had proposed marriage.

On the evening of the expedition's

departure in 1860 Julia gave one glove to Burke and the other to Wills. Burke is thought to have taken this romantic keepsake on his fatal journey, but Wills left his in Melbourne.

It was preserved in a collection of memorabilia assembled by his sister-in-law, Mrs Catherine Wills.

The State Library of Victoria acquired the collection which also includes letters, photographs and press clippings.

English-born Julia Mathews came to Australia as a child. She began acting in

Melbourne at an early age and soon developed a good singing voice. On tour, she met Burke in Beechworth, Victoria, when he was a trooper stationed there.

A few months after Burke and Wills were buried, in 1863, a farewell benefit for Julia Mathews was presented at the Princess Theatre.

Mathews was the first Australian-trained singer to appear at Covent Garden Opera House, London—in Offenbach's *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein*. She died of yellow fever in the United States in 1876. ■

At the theatre with Henry Lawson

The works of the great Australian writer Henry Lawson (1867–1922) contain many references to theatre. Here **Elisabeth Kumm** annotates *Shades*, a poem written in 1910.

In extremely poor health and depressed Lawson had spent much of the previous year in hospital and prison. In 1911 he was hospitalised again, and destitute.

The poem's manuscript survived in the Mitchell Library, Sydney and was not published until 1984. We are grateful to HarperCollins Publishers Australia for allowing us to publish this piece.

Jennie Lee (1852 – 1930), the diminutive



English-born actress, first portrayed Jo, the

orphaned crossing sweeper, in a dramatisation of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* in San Francisco in 1875. Lee's performance proved an instantaneous success and her husband, J.P. Burnett, who had written the dramatisation, reworked the play further to make the character of Jo central to the story.

Following its first performance the English journal *Athenaeum* (26 February 1876) reported 'A more striking revelation of talent it is difficult to conceive, and has certainly rarely been made. In get-up and action the character is thoroughly realised and hoarse voice, the slouching, dejected gait, and the movement as of some haunted animal, is admirably exhibited'.

Jo was subsequently performed throughout Great Britain with unvarying success. Jennie Lee made her Australian debut at the Princess' Theatre, Melbourne, on 29 April 1882 playing, naturally, Jo. Maggie Knight portrayed Gusta and J.P. Burnett played Inspector Bucket.

Jennie Lee played the role for over 20 years. In fact her association with the role was so total she is said to have signed her name 'Jo' at the end of her letters. She played Jo for the last time in Australia in

Shades

What is that which slinks and sidles in the sunlight and the gloom,
With a hand that pains its features while the other claws a broom?
Dirt and rags and always hunger—ignorance and misery;
With one touch of human kinship: 'he was werry kind to me'.
Jennie Lee as 'Jo'!¹ She passes, bowing primly on the stair
In the child-like mid-Victorian dress our mothers used to wear.

Jennie Lee as 'Jo'! She passes, white-haired, from this worldly stage,
G.V. Brooke has gone before her, hard-up in a golden age,
Worshipped on the miners' mountains, worshipped on the diggers' flats,
Borrowed from the Yids and throwing silver to the gutter brats,
Careless as the Land that loved him, gay and clever, free and frank—
Was the shade of Sidney Carton with him when the *London* sank?²

Shades of seasons when the servants of our fathers served us still—
Love and drink and Nellie Denver³, good old Jaikes⁴ and 'Master Will'⁵;
Shades of Maggie Knight⁶ and Deering⁷ in the distance glimmering;
Shades of Beck⁸ and Big Jack Ryson⁹—Titheradge as the Silver King!¹⁰
Ah! the all-star days have vanished like a past year's glorious rain—
We, who saw it once, will never see *The Silver King* again!

1908 at a Melbourne matinée performance, prior to her departure for Europe.

2 The Irish tragedian **Gustavus**



Vaughan Brooke, born in 1818, died when the ship *London* sank in the Bay of Biscay in January 1866.

He was returning to Australia under contract to George Coppin, who had engaged him to reappear at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, in March 1866. Only 19 of the 289 passengers on board *London* survived the disaster. *The Times* (London) reported on 19 January 1866: 'Mr Brooke exerted himself incessantly. Attired only in a red Crimean shirt and trousers, with no hat on, and barefooted, he went backwards and forwards to the pumps until working at them was found to be useless... One of the passengers who saw him said "He had worked wonderfully, and, in fact, more bravely than any man on board that ship..."'

Following a substantial career in England and USA, Brooke made his first appearance in Australia in 1855 for George Coppin. He became a favourite, his most acclaimed roles being Claude Melnotte (*The Lady of Lyons*), Evelyn (*Money*) and the title

roles in *Richelieu*, *Virginius* and *Othello*. In this last named play his performance was considered so powerful it set a benchmark by which subsequent actors in the role were judged for decades to come.

When news of his death reached Melbourne the trustees of the Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria) commissioned the sculptor Charles Sumner to create a bust of Brooke, which can still be seen in the library's foyer near the grand staircase.

3 Nellie Denver, Wilfred Denver's wife, is the

leading female character in Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman's play *The Silver King*. When the play was first performed at the Princess' Theatre in London on 16 November 1882, Mary Eastlake played Nellie Denver. In Australia, Annie Mayor created the role.

Annie Mayor played the role again when the play was revived in Melbourne on 27 September 1884. On subsequent occasions the part was taken by Maggie Knight (1886), Isabel Morris (1887), Clara Cowper (1889), Gracie Warner (1890), Henrietta Watson (1892), Harrie Ireland (1896), Eugenie Duggan (1898), Maud Jeffries (1898, 1904 and 1905), Lillah McCarthy (1901), Ethel Warwick (1909) and Katherine Grey (1911).

4 Daniel Jaikes is Wilfred Denver's faithful manservant in *The Silver King*. When the play was first performed in London in November 1882 Jaikes was played by Wilson Barrett's brother George. In Australia comedian Phil Day created the role. He played it again in March 1884 and July 1886. For the September 1884 revival Charles Holloway assumed the role.

Comedian E.W. Royce played the role for the 1889, 1890 and 1892 revivals,

William Elton in 1896 and Horace Hodges in 1898 and 1901.

5 Wilfred Denver is the hero of *The Silver King*, introduced as a pathetic drunk who has lost all his money gambling on the horses at Epsom. He subsequently falls in with a gang of thieves, headed by Captain Skinner, and when a man is killed, wrongly believes himself to be the murderer.

After saying goodbye to his wife, Nellie, and his children, he disguises himself and escapes to London by train. To baffle his pursuers he jumps from the train and takes refuge in a country inn. Subsequently he learns that the carriage he had been travelling in had caught fire and he is believed dead.

The next three years he spends abroad where he makes a small fortune. On returning to England he discovers his wife and children are about to be ejected from their home by their landlord—none other than Captain Skinner. Through the services of Daniel Jaikes, his faithful manservant of old, he gives his family enough money to pay the rent and return to their home.

Disguised as an old man he learns Captain Skinner was the murderer of the man three years before and he himself is innocent. With Skinner captured, Denver is reunited with his family.

The role was originally written for Wilson Barrett and first performed by him at London's Princess' Theatre on 16 November 1882. In Australia G.S. Titheradge played Wilfred Denver and the role is considered by many to be one of his best.

Other actors to play Wilfred Denver in Australia included Alfred Bucklaw (1889), Charles Warner (1890), Walter Bentley (1892), Scot Inglis (1896), Julius Knight (1898, 1904 and 1905), Henry Kolker (1909) and William Desmond (1911). The originator of the role, Wilson Barrett, played Wilfred Denver when he toured Australia in 1898 and again in 1901.

6 **Maggie Knight** (1860–1917) was a distinguished character actress whose career on the Australian stage spanned over 40 years. Born in New Zealand she began her stage career at an early age playing children's roles with Fanny Cathcart and other visiting stars. She migrated to Australia in the late 1870s and quickly established herself as an audience favourite.

One of her early successes was *Gusta* in *Jo*, opposite Jennie Lee, at Melbourne's Princess' Theatre in 1882. She also played Nellie Denver in the revival of *The Silver King* at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, in July 1886.

7 **Olly Deering** (1843–1906) was a popular character actor whose name appeared in playbills regularly from the 1870s until his death in 1906. Deering was born in New South Wales, the son of Henry and Eliza Deering, who were both on the stage.

Olly Deering was admired for his versatility and during his career played a variety of roles, his repertoire including comedy, drama, pantomime and musical comedy. He appeared in the first production of *The Silver King*, playing the minor role of Bilcher, a betting man.

When the play was revived in Sydney in March 1884 he was seen as Gaffer Pottle and on the occasion of Charles Warner's production, in May 1890, he played Elijah Coombe, the marine store dealer.



8 The English actor and playwright **Philip Beck** (1854–1889) made his Australian debut in 1886 when engaged by Williamson, Garner &

Musgrove to appear in *The Crimes of Paris* at the Theatre Royal in Sydney. The play, which opened on 10 April 1886, also featured Maggie Knight and G.S. Titheradge in leading roles. Beck subsequently appeared in the first Sydney production of Pinero's *The Magistrate*, in which he played Captain Horace Vale. He remained with Williamson, Garner & Musgrove for nearly two years, becoming a popular favourite in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

In 1888 Beck joined the Brough-Boucicault Comedy Company for four months. His most successful role was as Blifil in *Sophia*, a dramatisation of Fielding's *Tom Jones*.

That year he accompanied the novelist Fergus Hume to England. En route Beck dramatised Hume's novel *Madame Midas* and on their arrival in London, in July 1888, played the character Vandeloup at the Stratford Theatre.

Beck returned to Australia and in March 1889 the play had its debut at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney. It was

subsequently performed at the Alexandra Theatre, Melbourne in June that year.

Throughout his life Beck suffered from severe depression. He committed suicide on Christmas Eve 1889 as the ship he was travelling on docked at Colombo, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), having left Brisbane for London four weeks earlier. In this he tragically mimicked Gaston Vandeloup, the character he played in *Madame Midas*, who committed suicide in the last act of the play.

9 Unknown.

10 **G.S. Titheradge** (1848–1916)



performed the role of Wilfred Denver in *The Silver King* for the first time on 27 October 1883 when the play had its Australian premier at the Theatre

Royal, Melbourne.

An accomplished and popular actor, English-born Titheradge made his Australian debut at Melbourne's Academy of Music in May 1897.

He subsequently performed with Arthur Garner's London Comedy Company and Fred Marshall's Comedy Company.

When Marshall's company disbanded in 1882 he went to the USA and England. While in England he was engaged by Williamson, Garner & Musgrove to return to Australia in the lead role in *The Silver King*.

The first production of *The Silver King* had a very successful run in both Melbourne and Sydney and the role of Wilfred Denver became one of Titheradge's most memorable.

Titheradge revived the role in September 1884 and July 1886. In 1887 he became a principal member of the Brough-Boucicault Comedy Company, during which time he created over 140 parts. He didn't portray Wilfred Denver again, however, until 1898.

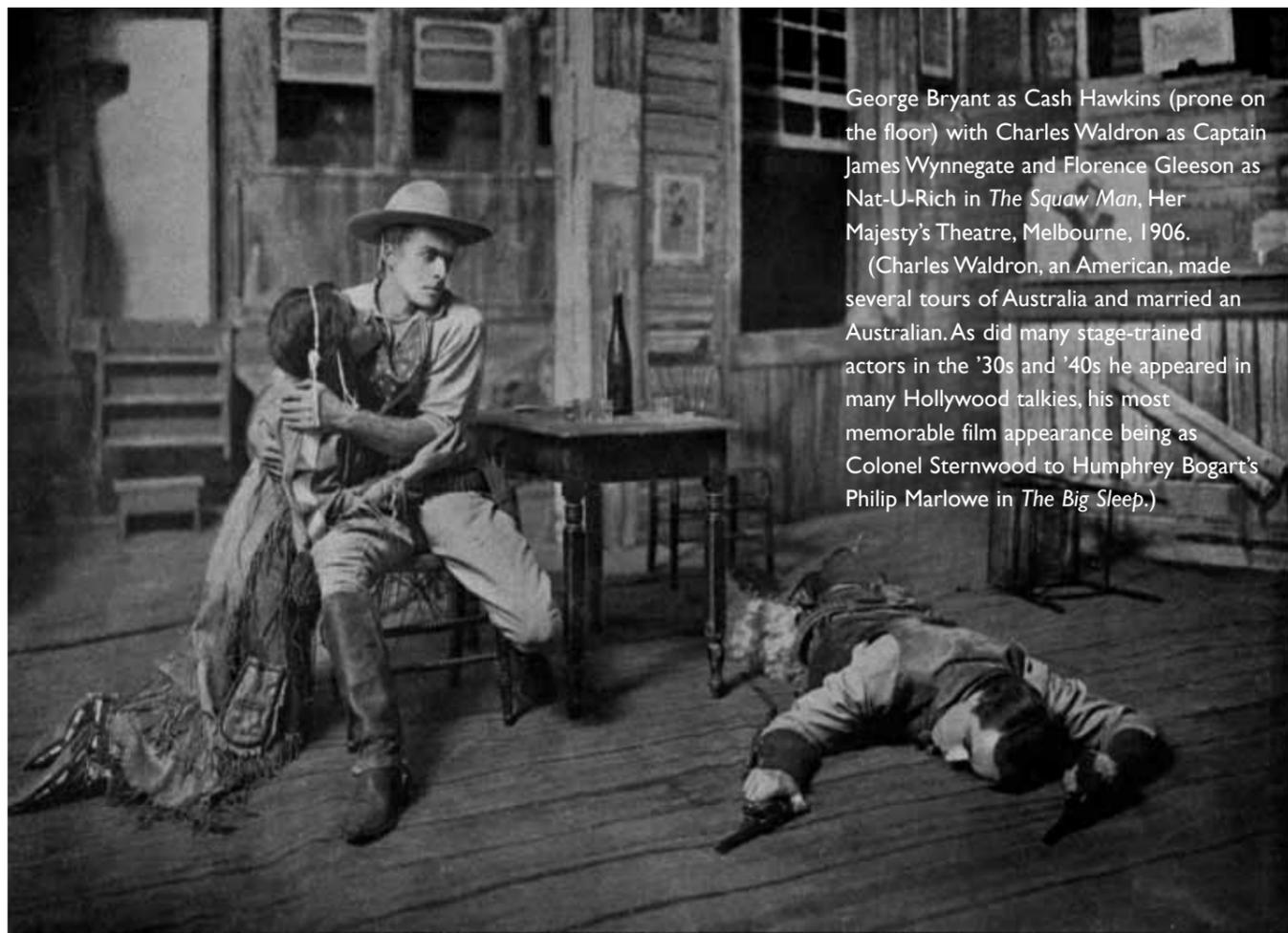
From 1898 to 1908 G.S. Titheradge acted in England and the US, performing with Mrs Patrick Campbell, Marie Tempest and Margaret Anglin.

In 1908 he accompanied Margaret Anglin to Australia and acted with her in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

In September 1909 he played Wilfred Denver for the last time before a Melbourne audience. By 1910 he had retired from the stage and in 1916 he died in

Memories of melodrama at PAM

Villainy is remembered in the collection of the Performing Arts Museum reports **Margaret Marshall**, Assistant Curator.



George Bryant as Cash Hawkins (prone on the floor) with Charles Waldron as Captain James Wynnegate and Florence Gleeson as Nat-U-Rich in *The Squaw Man*, Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 1906.

(Charles Waldron, an American, made several tours of Australia and married an Australian. As did many stage-trained actors in the '30s and '40s he appeared in many Hollywood talkies, his most memorable film appearance being as Colonel Sternwood to Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*.)

George Bryant's villainous character Cash Hawkins of the melodrama *The Squaw Man* is now remembered in the Performing Arts Museum's Collection.

Bryant's grandson, Dennis Mayor, has donated costume accessories including spurs, a leather gun holster, belt and wrist cuffs worn by Bryant in this role.

Born near Queenscliff, Victoria, in 1862, George Bryant was a colourful character of the Australian stage and screen. He gained a contract with Williamson, Garner & Musgrove following a supporting role in the 1885 production of *The Magistrate* at the Bijou Theatre, Melbourne.

Following a disagreement with J.C. Williamson over working conditions, he left for the USA in 1890. Bryant claimed that, on arrival, he found Williamson had barred his employment with major theatre

companies on the West Coast.

To pay his way to New York, Bryant drew on his earlier employment with the Melbourne Botanical Gardens and promoted himself as a distinguished New Zealand botanist. In this new role he gave public lectures about life and nature in Australia, including canoeing on the Murray River.

In New York George Bryant became a successful leading actor, performing in productions of melodrama, farce, Shakespeare and other literary classics.

He returned to Australia in 1906 with an American company, at the invitation of J.C. Williamson, to direct and perform in *The Squaw Man* (which in 1913 went into history as the first feature film made in Hollywood and helped found Paramount Pictures. Its director Cecil B. DeMille made it twice more, in 1918 and 1931).

Apparently it was not until rehearsals began that Williamson recognised Bryant from their previous encounters.

Bryant went on to act in a wide range of plays for various Australian companies. Particularly successful stage performances for him were *The Girl of the Golden West* (1910) and the title role in Gregan McMahon's *Abraham Lincoln* (1924).

Between 1911 and 1938 Bryant acted in 12 feature films including *For a Woman's Sake* in 1911 (which he also directed) and in 1913 *Moondyne* as an escaped convict who takes refuge with an Aboriginal tribe.

In 1932 Bryant helped his daughter Beryl to found Bryant's Playhouse in Sydney and he performed in several productions for this amateur group.

In 1943 George Bryant died just short of his 81st birthday. ■

New Helpmann awards a double honour

AEIA's newly announced awards honour both Helpmann and national performance excellence.

Named in honour of Sir Robert Helpmann, the Australian Entertainment Industry Association has announced the establishment of the Helpmann Awards for Performing Arts in Australia to serve and promote the Australian entertainment industry at national and international levels.

They are the first nationwide awards for the Australian performing arts industry in recognition of distinguished artistic achievement and excellence in theatre, musical theatre, opera, ballet or dance, and visual or physical theatre.

The Nominating Council may also give a special AEIA Award for a performance outside the regular categories.

In celebrating the Australian performing industry, the Helpmann Awards will join Broadway's Tonys, the West End's Oliviers and Australia's APRA, ARIA and AFI awards.

To be eligible for the Helpmann Awards, performances must be produced by an AEIA member and presented in Australia, be an Australian or world première or, in the opinion of the Nominating Council, be nationally significant.

The Awards will be presented annually at ceremonies alternating between Sydney and Melbourne. To be eligible for the inaugural Awards in 2001 productions must be either running on 1 February 2000 or 'officially' open between 1 February 2000 and 31 January 2001.

The Helpmanns will comprise 24 categories: Best Musical, Best Play, Best Opera, Best Ballet or Dance Work, Best Visual or Physical Theatre, Best Direction of a Musical, Best Direction of a Play, Best Direction of an Opera, Best Choreography in a Musical, Best Choreography in a Ballet or Dance, Best Original Score, Best Musical Direction, Best Costume Design, Best

Scenic Design, Best Lighting Design, Best Sound Design, Best Female Actor in a Play, Best Male Actor in a Play, Best Female Actor in a Musical, Best Male Actor in a Musical, Best Performance by a Female in an Opera, Best Performance by a Male in an Opera, Best Performance by a Female Dancer and Best Performance by a Male Dancer.

The AEIA's prestigious James Cassius Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Performing Arts will be incorporated into the Helpmann Awards ceremony from the inaugural event in 2001.

For further information contact Jan Stoneham, Chief Executive, AEIA, 8th floor, West Tower, 608 St Kilda Road, Melbourne 3004, phone (03) 9521 1900, fax (03) 9521 2285, e-mail aeia@aeia.org.au – or visit AEIA's wonderful web site www.aeia.org.au ■

Clocktower Centre poised to launch

An outstanding new \$7.5 million performing arts centre was officially opened on Sunday, 27 February at Moonee Ponds in north-west Melbourne.

Actual curtain-up has been delayed by industrial action and Melbourne's heatwave summer conditions.

Nearing completion, the 500-seat state-of-the-art theatre comprises a raked auditorium with stalls and dress circle, a proscenium stage with direct dock access, full technical facilities including fly tower, a mechanical lift which can extend the stage or can be lowered as an orchestra pit.

Full backstage facilities include dressing rooms, green room and a rehearsal room.

Audiences will enjoy the large foyer, bar and café and the theatre includes access for the disabled.

The first venue to be built to the new Arts Victoria benchmarking standards, the Clocktower Centre is also the first project

of its type to attract funding from the Victorian Government through the Community Support Fund.

Centre Manager, James Buick, told ON STAGE he expects the first attraction to hit the Clocktower's stage will be Hit Productions' *Goodbye Mrs Blore*, some time in April.

A series of Morning Music concerts is also planned, featuring talents such as Dennis Walter, Jackie Love and Toni Lamond. Children's holiday and schools programs, and a season of Melbourne Theatre Company's *Second Childhood*, are also scheduled.

Oz Opera's *Rigoletto*, Bell Shakespeare Company's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Playbox Theatre's *Secret Bridesmaids' Business* will also be included.

'The Clocktower Centre will be the cornerstone of the cultural life of the City of Moonee Valley,' Mr Buick says.

'It will be a centre for all members of the community.' ■

The Dame does lunch

Where would modern musical theatre be without Stephen Sondheim? And who better to lend it celebrity approval than Dame Edna Everage?

The Dame is a featured performer, singing 'Ladies Who Lunch' no less, on a new two-CD set of Sondheim's music, *Sondheim Tonight*.

The Jay Records album is a live recording of a recent tribute concert from London's Barbican Centre. Other artists include Cleo Laine, Julia McKenzie, Julia Migenes, Michael Ball, Maria Friedman, Jonathan Pryce, Millicent Martin, Len Cariou and Elaine Stritch.

Also included are world première recordings of two Sondheim non-vocal compositions, 'A Very Short Violin Piece' and 'A Piano Sonata'.

Proceeds from both the concert and the resulting CD album, which runs for over 2½ hours, are to benefit the Alan Jay Lerner Cancer Research Fund. ■

The rise and demise of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust

With a few exceptions, principally the formation of the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1932, the arts in Australia have only survived on patronage. The setting-up of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust saw a new age dawn.

The Trust preceded the Australian Council for the Arts, which later became the Australia Council. These bodies have been the funding arms of government. Through them, at arm's length, the government supported and supports the arts.

The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust has folded—but its history is illuminating in the way governments have thought in the past. The Trust's rise and demise reflects an era of arts funding in which the arts have grown up in Australia. Were its coming and going timely?

The early years

The early years of government funding of the arts began before the First World War. The Commonwealth Literary Fund was founded in 1908 and the Commonwealth Advisory Board in 1912.

However, it wasn't until the setting up of the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1932 that government support became really serious.

The ABC's charter was to provide quality broadcasting, especially music. By 1936 it had formed symphony orchestras in each state. In 1942 its Act was amended to make it mandatory for the ABC to give live symphony concerts. Until the 1950s it also maintained such diverse activities as dance bands, and small ensembles. These gradually disappeared. The Act was amended again in 1980, removing the legal obligation to provide live concerts—nonetheless they continued.

This article, by well known choreographer and dance educator

Robert Ray,

is adapted from a paper he prepared for his Master of Education (Arts Administration) at RMIT University late in 1999.

Because of its detail and importance, ON STAGE will run the article over the next two issues, concluding with the Spring 2000 edition.

The Dix Report recommended a separate arm be formed and named Music Australia. It would be responsible for entrepreneuring the orchestras and raising sponsorship. The ABC declined to go down this road and continued to present concerts, with ticket prices subsidised by government. This was the last vestige of government funding with voluntary

sponsorship. Only in the mid- and late-1990s has the ABC relinquished control of the state orchestras.

The ABC was the only government funded organisation until the setting up of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1954. However, with its live symphony performances, its importation of soloists—both vocal and instrumental—as well as conductors of high international reputations, it was a potent force outside of broadcasting. It had enough power to change the design and concept of the Sydney Opera House from an 'opera house' to a 'symphonic hall'. (This muscle flexing of the time has left Sydney without a suitable venue for opera and ballet. The Sydney Opera House is an opera house in name only).

Enter Nugget Coombs

In the 1950s government patronage of the arts outside its support for the ABC was minimal. At that time, the Menzies government didn't even support the universities. The chief advocate for government support for the arts was

Dr H.C. Coombs, better known as 'Nugget' Coombs. He was a legendary bureaucrat, intellectual and, privately, a cultured man.

Herbert Cole Coombs was a youngish Western Australian who had trained at the London School of Economics. Maynard Keynes, an economist who had married a Russian ballerina, Lydia Lopokova, had influenced him. Keynes was also a member of the Bloomsbury set, and while not an artist himself, was passionate about the arts.

Nugget seem to follow his lead, and married a woman who was passionate about music. He was one of the 'brightest boys' of the home front before and during the Second World War. Prime Ministers Curtin and Chifley made him successively Director of Rationing, Director-General of Post War Reconstruction, and Governor of the Commonwealth Bank. He had shown himself to be an 'organiser and administrator of great power and ability'.¹

Coombs moved in artistic circles and was befriended by their members. With his links to banking he had direct access to the Treasurer and the Prime Minister. It was probable that there was much talk about the arts, if not officially then over a cup of tea or drinks.

He was in an ideal position and was the ideal person to start a campaign to raise £100 000 and get the government on side.

He saw a way to Menzies' heart for supporting the arts with the visit of the new Queen, Elizabeth II, to Australia in 1954. While Menzies didn't care much for the arts he did care about royalty, in particular the new Queen. Dr Coombs proposed the formation of a Theatre Trust in her honour.²

An offer too good to refuse

How could Menzies refuse with a title like The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust? Linking 'Australian' with 'Elizabeth' was a well considered and clever move.

'The ultimate aims must be to establish a native drama, opera and ballet which will give professional employment to Australian actors, singers and dancers and furnish opportunities for those such as writers, composers and artists whose creative work is related to the theatre,' Coombs said

'The Trust would usually proceed by offering financial support by guarantee or by direct financial participation on a profit sharing basis to existing organisations or to companies to present opera, ballet and drama in Australia.'³

He went on to add that while the Trust did not undertake to solve all the problems

of Australian theatre, he thought by lending administrative and financial support it would make it easier for artists to be creative and present their work. He also had a vision of an environment where creative artists 'should come to flower, when many of them now are mute and inglorious from lack of opportunity'.

It cannot be underestimated that the success of Dr Coombs lay with his personality. He was agreeable, modest and good humoured. He was also gently persuasive. Leslie Rees referred to him as 'the great persuader'. His gentle insistence must have been an effective tool behind the scenes. He didn't ally himself with any factions and remained above petty jealousies and feral egos.

The Royal Tour of 1954 was the biggest show in town. The royal

progress was filmed, broadcast, written about relentlessly.

The star of the tour gave her name willingly to a Trust whose main aim was for the promotion of the arts beyond commercial management. By the end of 1954 £90 000 had been raised by committee. Banks, insurance companies, city stores, soap and aspirin manufacturers, mining firms, and newspapers all gave privately.

To this was added £30 000 from government, or more precisely £29 836 on the principle of £1 for every three raised. The Trust was set to go. But to go where? It had no access to theatres (they were all either owned by Williamson's or the Garnet Carroll-Tivoli circuits), and there was no staff.

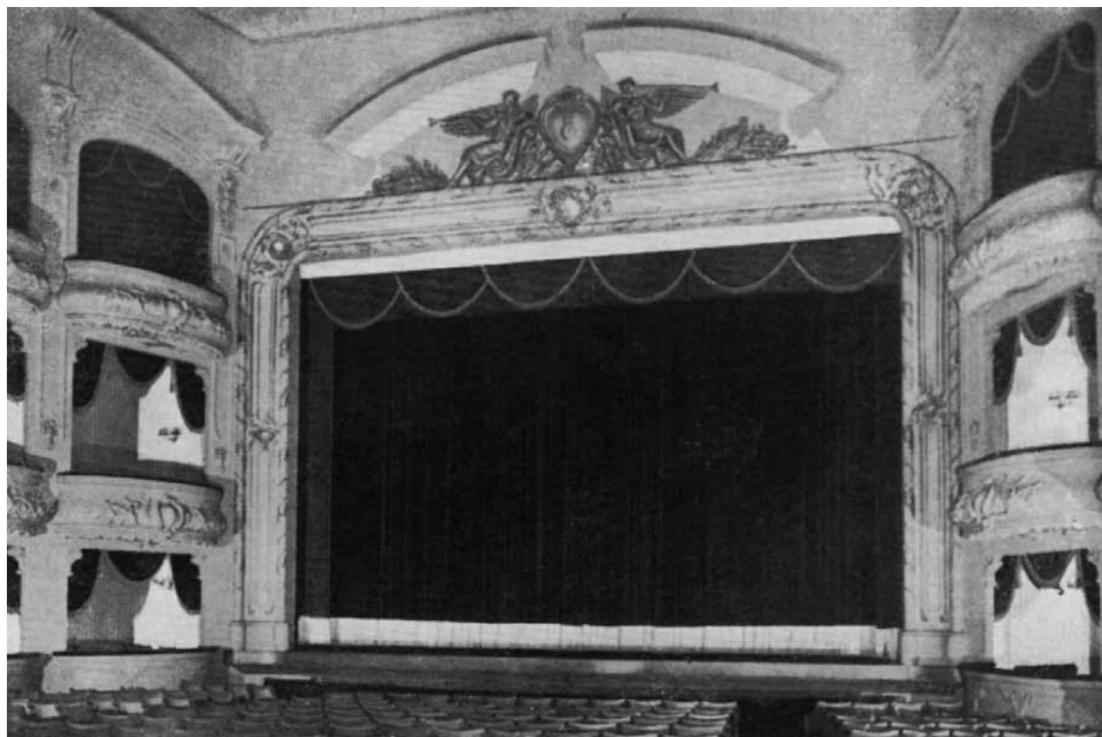
An Englishman, Hugh Hunt, was appointed its first Artistic Director in February 1955. Hunt had been associated with the Abbey Theatre Dublin, the Bristol Old Vic and the Old Vic in London. There seemed to be no Australian who could match his experience. However, like so many subsequent appointments of English men or women instead of Australians, his appointment was coloured by his 'ruling class' aloofness and sense of superiority.

Hal Porter's view

Playwright Hal Porter's contemporary reflection of such appointments, without naming names, was typical of what the locals felt:

'The use of homosexuals in the theatre is as old as the theatre. As talented heterosexuals do, talented homosexuals rise to various planes of fame... What does alarm is that, during the last 10 years or more, there have been imported a coterie of untalented English homosexuals, English tonks unheard of outside their own country, to dominate sections of the Australian theatrical scene. If one cannot protest about the employment of a Pommie poofter, instead of the Aussie poofter, one can record dismay at the employment of the fifth raters who got nowhere near even spear-holding in Drury Lane, yet who are invited to pit a puniness of vision, and a cockeyed theatrical sense, against the perception of the highly sensitised Australian public.'⁴

The Elizabethan Theatre, Newtown, Sydney, formerly the Majestic and a picture theatre for 30 years until the AETT acquired it in 1955. It was destroyed by fire in 1980.



All mod-cons: spraying the Elizabethan Theatre with perfume prior to a performance.



The founding governors of the Trust, while worthy and sincere, were not experienced theatre people. The local theatre people who had been battling for years were excluded. Their opinions were not sought, as it was felt that if given a say they might, out of self-interest, fight among themselves.⁵ While Dr Coombs' stated intentions for the Trust were noble and clearly resonated with government, they were also quite vague and lacking in detail. The objectives were there, but not the methods of implementation.

Hugh Hunt had a natural mistrust of locals. He imported English actors, English plays—even going to the trouble of importing an English secretary! His style and manner naturally put him off side with Australian artists everywhere.

A Majestic beginning

Despite the problems, which weren't so apparent at first, the Trust began with great panache. It leased its first theatre in Sydney's inner (then exclusively working-class industrial) suburb of Newtown. It rescued the once fine Majestic Theatre from 30 years of movies and renamed it The Elizabethan Theatre.

Renovations were made. Business firms donated furnishings. Myer of Melbourne even donated the chandelier. The seats were replaced and for a donation of £10 you could have your name on a brass plate attached to the back of a seat. Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh succumbed. The new theatre opened on 27 July 1955 with a company of H.M. Tennant's that Garnet Carroll had imported by arrangement with Binkie Beaumont in London. The plays were *Separate Tables* and *The Sleeping Prince* by Terence Rattigan starring Ralph Richardson, Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson. While the company did feature some Australian actors, it

was hardly very Australian or new. It had already played Melbourne at the Princess Theatre, doing well enough as a commercial presentation, without the help of government money.

The Trust got closer to its initial intention with the returning of Judith Anderson in her American triumph of Robinson Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. The Australian cast gathered around her included Clement McCallin and Doris Fitton.

'*Medea* inaugurated a pattern the Trust was doggedly to adhere to, made an expensive Commonwealth tour, and a meagre profit of £2742. Albeit meagre, it was a profit. Later attempts to herd shrewd Australians together in a "theatre of Australians by Australians for Australians" were scarcely so successful.'⁶

One of its earliest ambitions was to set up a national professional theatre company which would train actors to 'West End standards'.⁷ This company would tour to all major centres. It comprised Clement McCallin, Leonard Teale, Ray Lawler, Ethel Gabriel, Peter Kenna, Gordon Petrie, George Ogilvie, Dinah Shearing, Madge Ryan, Zoe Calwell and Malcolm Robertson among others.

Despite oppressive summer heat in Sydney and no air-conditioning, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was a success. The original cast is shown, with Fenella Maguire as Bubba Ryan, June Jago as Olive Leech, Ray Lawler as Barney Ibbot, Kenneth Warren as Roo Webber and Madge Ryan as Pearl Cunningham. Not on stage: Ethel Gabriel as Emma Leech and John Llewellyn as Johnnie Dowd.



The cost of going on the road

Even in the 1950s, however, touring Australia was expensive. More often that not the Trust had to work in collaboration with J.C. Williamson's Theatres. Many thought this was selling out the ideals of the Trust which were, clearly, to present theatre which wasn't necessarily commercially viable.

The Trust responded in two ways—it reduced touring and concentrated its efforts with sponsorship of already existing companies, The Union Theatre Repertory Company in Melbourne and The Old Tote Theatre Company in Sydney. These companies were already attempting to present plays outside the safe ventures of Williamson's.

The Union Theatre Repertory Company had been formed at the University of Melbourne in 1952 by John Sumner, an Englishman who had been brought to Australia to manage the university's theatre.

In 1954 it got lucky with a play by an Australian about Australians—*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The author was Melbourne-born Ray Lawler.

The Playwrights' Advisory Board, which had been set up in 1938 to encourage Australian playwrighting, awarded Lawler its 1955 Prize. Its

chairman, Leslie Rees, was an enthusiast who showed the play to Hugh Hunt. After the play made £1800 for the UTRC in three weeks, Hunt announced he had bought the rights for the Trust.

Because of prior commitments, the Elizabethan Theatre was free only for three weeks in January. Presented in this un-air-conditioned theatre in the blazing heat of a Sydney summer, audiences didn't need too much imagination to believe they were in Queensland. Judith Anderson, left, at the Canberra premiere of *Medea*, with AETT's Artistic Director Hugh Hunt and the then Governor General Sir William Slim and Lady Slim.



June Jago as Olive in Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, AETT's purchase from the UTRC, Melbourne, and a sellout success both in Sydney and London.

Nevertheless, the play was a sell-out and went on to reverse the trend. It was presented in London's West End in 1957 where it played for seven months at the New Theatre. The London season was ended abruptly for it to play on Broadway where unfortunately it failed.

The next home-grown venture was the less than fabulous *Lola Montez*, a musical. Like the *Doll* it had been tried out at the UTRC and there were hopes it might become the Australian *Oklahoma!* The book was by Alan Burke, with music and lyrics by Peter Benjamin and Peter Stannard. Alas it wasn't to be. The importation of an (unheard of) English dancer Mary Preston, who couldn't sing, didn't help the hokey musical. It lost the Trust £31 581. (Continued in the next issue of ON STAGE.)

References:

- 1 Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama*
- 2 Author's discussion with Dame Margaret Scott
- 3 Dr H.C.Coombs, *Meanjin*
- 4 Hal Porter, *Stars of Australian Stage and Screen*, 1965
- 5 Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama*
- 6 Hal Porter, *Stars of Australian Stage and Screen*, 1965
- 7 Tim Rouse, *Arguing the Arts*

© 1999 Robert Ray

For the newly formed AETT's Australian Drama Company Judith Anderson was invited back to Australia in Robinson Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*.



Is there any news?

...asks London correspondent
Evan Hercules

Here in London we seem to get practically no news from Melbourne in the daily papers or on television. We hear nothing at all about theatre in Melbourne. People often ask politely 'Is there any?'

There is no shortage of news, however, about Sydney—and not all is related to the Olympics. We have read about the '99 Sydney Festival, the launch of the Lloyd Webber musical *Cats* under canvas, the success of *Company* at Belvoir and the production of *Cloudstreet* (claimed to be a West End sellout—actually a short season in a Hammersmith fringe theatre in West London). *Cosi* did just as well but has not been heralded.

The Sydney Dance Company, The Australian Chamber Orchestra, The Bell Shakespeare Company—all have press coverage here. The Sydney Theatre Company is now acclaimed in London as Australia's principal theatre company, or so we are led to believe.

Our northern cousins seem to have a hot line to the media centres in London. Is this because Sydney has established itself as the media centre for Australia, I wonder?

It would seem so, and there is a cross media filter link between the press and TV networks. Principal Australian newspapers with TV interests are headquartered in Sydney and many have financial interests in foreign capitals, such as London.

There is also frequent exchange of journalists between Sydney and London. This must help in self-promotion.

It is about time we started to get up and promote ourselves. We can't expect the Australian (Sydney) media centres to do it for us: they appear to be too busy doing it for themselves.

Something to say? Say it in ON STAGE

Deadline for submissions for the Winter 2000 issue of ON STAGE is Wednesday, 31 May 2000.

Send them to The Editor,
care 14/246 Albert Street,
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002

Lloyd Webber acquires Holmes à Court's London theatres

\$A213 million to spend?
Bad luck! You've missed out
on 13 London theatres.

Composer Lord Lloyd Webber has staged a \$A213 million coup by buying 13 theatres in London's West End from Australian businesswoman Janet Holmes à Court, according to a January report by AAP.

Lloyd Webber, through his Really Useful Company, becomes the major controlling force in the West End, his closest rival being Sir Cameron Mackintosh—who owns three theatres and who previously presented most of Lloyd Webber's musicals.

The deal includes the Stoll Moss group of 10 leading West End theatres including Her Majesty's, scene of a record breaking run of Lloyd Webbers' *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The late Robert Holmes à Court was involved in a dispute with Lloyd Webber after taking out a minority stake in the Really Useful Group when it was a public company, to try to force the sale of the Palace Theatre.

Lloyd Webber refused and now the roles have been reversed between the camps.

The deal caps months of negotiations after Holmes à Court put the theatres up for sale last year. American entrepreneur Max Weitzenhoffer had been in competition with Lloyd Webber, who said his coup, in partnership with Nat West Equity Partners, was partly aimed at protecting London's theatres from 'money men' not familiar with the business.

It is probably the most thorough shake-up ever of London's theatre-land, with a total of 20 theatres set to change hands. ■

Theatre at the time of Federation

Theatre in Sydney at the Time of Federation is the current exhibition at the Visitor Centre of the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

One of a series of slice-of-life displays examining aspects of life at the time the country was changing from colonial to national, the exhibition ranges from vaudeville at Harry Rickards' Tivoli to Sarah Bernhardt's tour, Wagnerian operas and the pantomime *Djin Djin*.

The futuristic curiosity *Australis, or the City of Zero* is included, reflecting the changes taking place in society at the time with the emergence of Australian themes in locally generated productions, as well as the usual importing of non-Australian companies and stars.

Much of the material has been drawn from the National Library's extensive J.C. Williamson Collection, supplemented by items from a recently acquired collection of programs covering the years 1890–1910 which came from one very busy theatre-going family in Sydney. ■

Sitelines

In this regular feature ON STAGE continues to report on unusual and interesting Internet sites.

Have you any discoveries?
Share them with VTT members
through ON STAGE.

The State Library of Victoria's magnificent website includes a growing number of 'virtual' exhibitions, two of which will be of particular interest to anyone investigating our early performing arts history.

S.T. Gill: The Colonial Cruikshank is a compilation of a fascinating selection of drawings and watercolours collected by the State Library over a period of 125 years, including many of Gill's depictions of early entertainment in Victoria. Check it out at <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/gill/index2.html>

Life on the Goldfields explores the world of the diggers at the time of the 1853 Goldfields Petition. Valuable information and illustrative material includes audio clips relating to diggers' entertainment. You'll find it at <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/goldfields/entertai/entertai.htm>

The wonderful Theatre Royal, Hobart, has an excellent site at <http://www.sased.edu.au/tasonline/theroyal/history.hrm>. The site explores the theatre's long, colourful history with text and photographs—and there's even a piece about Fred, the resident ghost! ■

The Victoria Theatres Trust is devoted to...

- the preservation, renovation and promotion of the theatre heritage of Victoria,
- the recording and publicising of Victoria's theatre heritage,
- the encouragement of new theatre developments,
- the building of links between theatre owners, administrators, entrepreneurs, technicians, architects, designers and audiences,
- the study and awareness of world-wide trends in the design of theatres, and
- the establishment of links with organisations of similar aims around the world.

Information published in ON STAGE is done so in good faith. The Trust does not accept responsibility for any errors which may occur but would be pleased to correct any error or omission.

Deadline for articles and pictures for the Winter issue of ON STAGE is Wednesday, 31 May 2000.

Address them to The Editor. Articles can be posted to the address above, or e-mailed to The Secretary,

Elisabeth Kumm, at ekumm@hassell.com.au

Every effort will be made to return any hard copy illustrations if a specific request is made to do so, but no responsibility will be taken over their return.

© March 2000, Victorian Theatres Trust

ON STAGE is published quarterly by the Victoria Theatres Trust. Correspondence should be directed to The Secretary, Elisabeth Kumm, 14/246 Albert Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002. The contents are subject to copyright for both text and illustrations and are not to be reproduced by any means, including print or electronic media without prior permission of the copyright holder(s).