

# Real to Reel

Newsletter of Oral History Tasmania Inc.



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## NEWS FROM THE EXECUTIVE – Jill Cassidy

### Seminar and Annual General Meeting

Assuming that Tasmania does not experience an outbreak of the coronavirus, the seminar and AGM will go ahead on Saturday 5 September at the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery at Inveresk. Debra Cardogan-Cowper will speak from 1 pm about the oral histories she conducted with Ross residents, followed by Terrie Pollard's talk about the first 20 years of older people in the Sheffield area. As a reminder of details see <http://oralhistorytas.org.au/comingEvents.html>

### Important note

- You will have seen that the format has changed to cater for Covid restrictions. Please arrive early so we can begin the AGM promptly at 12.
- Because of the continuing restrictions we are unable to provide lunch or afternoon tea, but feel free to bring your own food/thermos/mug. There will be time for a drink and social chat after the seminar.
- The meeting room can hold a maximum of 40 people. Although we don't usually reach that number, the event has been widely advertised and people can just turn up on the day. If you have not already done so it's advisable to let us know you intend to come by emailing [president@oralhistorytas.org.au](mailto:president@oralhistorytas.org.au)

### Oral history workshop

We were delighted to put on a face-to-face workshop on Saturday 15 August. Interstate oral history practitioners have expressed their envy that we have been able to meet in person rather than virtually.

### Fireside chat

Our first 'fireside chat' via Zoom in June was a successful initiative; it gave attenders from around Tasmania a chance to interact on a more social level than is sometimes possible at the seminar, and without having to travel long distances. We intend to have another chat in November – perhaps on the deck rather than by the fire?? Further information will be sent later in the year.

### 2021 conference

Preparations are under way for the national conference to be held in Launceston in October 2021 (Covid willing). The national president Al Thomson has formed the national program committee, of which I'm a member; we are currently drawing up a Call for Presentations which will be sent out in the next few weeks. We are delighted that UTAS and the Queen Victoria Museum have both agreed to be partners.

## **Documenting Covid-19** (with thanks to OH Qld)

### *The National Library of Australia*

The National Library of Australia is tasked with the preservation of Australia's national story and is ensuring that the stories and experiences of Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic are preserved for the next generation, in a variety of formats. The Library plans to conduct oral histories with a group of diverse interviewees to capture the different perspectives and experiences they've had. Find out more [here](#).

### *Corona diaries*

'Members of the 2019 Nieman group have launched a platform for audio stories from around the world about how people are coping with the coronavirus pandemic. Few people's lives are untouched by it and as the world continues to grapple with the health, social, and financial implications of the crisis, everyone has a story to tell about these unprecedented times.' Read full story [here](#) and follow the link to the website to tell your own story, or go straight to the website [here](#). [Hover the cursor over the word 'here' for the link.]

## **Institutional member: the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery**

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) was established by the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1848 and continued by the Tasmanian Museum Act 1950 until early 2018. The new Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Act 2017 establishes TMAG as a statutory authority. The Board of Trustees is provided with financial support from the Tasmanian Government and is accountable to the relevant Minister of the Crown. Other funds come through grants, bequests and donations. Staff are appointed or employed through the Department of State Growth subject to the State Service Act 2000; it has 64 paid staff (full time equivalents) and 100 volunteers.

TMAG is a combined museum, art gallery and state herbarium and has the broadest collection mandate of any single similar institution in Australia. It collects and conserves material evidence of Tasmania's cultural heritage and biodiversity. The focus of collecting is on historical, scientific and artistic items, and the goal is to acquire works and objects to enhance the State Collection. The acquisition of items is guided by collection policies which have been established for every area of the institution and ensure all items are of significance and align with our goal.

A systematic program of collecting oral histories relevant to the collection and exhibition program was commenced by the Cultural Heritage Department in 2007. The interviews serve two purposes. Firstly, they are important historical documents recording interviewees' memory of their lives or of key events in which they participated. Secondly, the interviews are potential exhibition items. Some interviews relate to donations, but most are related to particular projects.

TMAG has a number of sites including the Historic Houses Narryna and Markree. Visitation to all sites was 451,653 for the 2018–19 financial year.

Current exhibitions include:

*West: Out on the Edge* until 18 October 2020 which presents a captivating new multidisciplinary exhibition exploring Tasmania's distinctive, complex and compelling – yet elusive – west.

'*We're not going to the mainland*' is on show in The Power of Change until 2020. It's a special display recognising 30 years of the campaign for LGBTI equality since the 1988 Salamanca protests.

Research is currently underway for a new social history gallery focussing on the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries; also an exhibition on the Pedder and Franklin protests and working with migrant communities in documenting their heritage.

Elsbeth Wishart, Senior Curator Cultural Heritage, [elsbeth.wishart@tmag.tas.gov.au](mailto:elsbeth.wishart@tmag.tas.gov.au)

<https://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/>

### Opening hours

Daily between 10.00am – 4.00pm (26 Dec – March 31)

Tuesdays to Sundays 10.00am – 4.00pm (1 April – 24 Dec)

Closed Good Friday, Anzac Day and Christmas Day

Free admission although due to Covid 19 bookings are required.

## AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE THEATRE ROYAL, HOBART, 1948–1986

Barb Lypka and Christine Goodacre

*Based on a talk given at the Oral History Tasmania seminar on 21 September 2019.*

The Theatre Royal in Hobart is the oldest working theatre in Australia, still being used for the purpose for which it was designed and built. The well-known Colonial Architect John Lee Archer laid the foundation stone in 1834. One thousand people attended, the regimental band played, every ship in the harbour showed its colours and those equipped fired their guns all afternoon. He was recorded as saying: 'I hope to see the Theatre Royal flourish like a palm tree beside the riverside, dispensing those intellectual joys and domestic virtues that raise us to the highest attainments'. The theatre first opened on 5 March 1837.

The history of the Theatre Royal provides some excellent case studies in how Tasmanians, and others, have risen in support of local theatre and how theatre management has adapted to the values and interests of local audiences. The period 1948–86 well illustrates this, in part because it was the time during which the theatre transitioned from private to public funding. This resulted in more professional and imported productions on the Theatre Royal mainstage but by the end of the period there were the beginnings of a move towards a rebalancing with the emergence of more local theatre. There are a number of people associated with the theatre who well recall this period and this oral history project focusses on their recollections.

The project was sponsored by the Friends of the Theatre Royal (FOTR). FOTR was formed in 2004 and its role is to assist in promoting the Theatre Royal's cultural and historical significance to the people of Tasmania and Australia. It also has a role in promoting the Theatre Royal programs and events and assist in raising funds for special projects and special purchases.

### *The theatre*

Initial plans for the theatre were prepared by Peter Degraives who was one of the colony's earliest entrepreneurs. There was a certain amount of controversy about the location for the theatre, in what was then called 'Wapping', near the dock and the outlet of the Hobart Rivulet; altogether a bit squalid. There were also questions as to whether, at a time of austerity, the extravagance of a theatre was really needed. The result was that support was limited and Degraives and his son Henry ended up being responsible for the major part of the cost.



*The Theatre Royal stage.  
Postcard collection FOTR*

From Peter Degraives on, the theatre remained in private ownership for approximately 114 years from 1837 to 1951. After his death in 1852, the theatre was auctioned in 1853 to Richard Lewis. In 1889 it was sold again to CE Davies, and CJ & David Barclay who bought the theatre for £4000. Davies was the more active of the partners and the founder of *The Mercury* newspaper. With the death of Davies in 1921, the theatre was once again sold to a private owner. It changed hands yet again in 1923 when it was bought by Bernard McCann for £10,000. There were a number of significant renovations of the building before the 1911–12 renovation which was the last, although colour schemes varied during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first major renovation was in 1856, when the downstairs foyer and gallery were added and gas lighting installed, replacing sperm whale oil. The second major renovation was in 1911–12, when the dress circle foyer was added and the current interior design and colour scheme installed, along with electric lighting.

### *The oral history period 1948–86*

This period is illustrative of themes throughout the history of the theatre: community support, performance reflecting the cultural and social trends of the time, and changes to the building enabling it to support these performances. The theatre was often in difficulty and its existence threatened and this period was no exception. It was during this time that the theatre transitioned from private to public funding. Bernard McCann was the last private owner and after the Second World War economic conditions were dire. With a downturn in attendances and post-war austerity, a suggestion was put forward that the theatre be used as a wool store. The

building was in a dilapidated state and at one point it was threatened with demolition to make way for a new government road plan.

The theatre was saved, and in 1950 when the theatre ownership was vested in the National Theatre Fine Arts Society (Natfas), the government subsidized the purchase on a matched funding basis. Operational and production costs were not funded until later in the period but then only partially and the theatre's ongoing viability then and now relies mostly on income from more popular productions.

A key event at the beginning of our time period was the visit of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in the Old Vic tour of Australia in 1948, which brought glamour and inspiration to an otherwise uncertain period. Olivier is said to have saved the Theatre Royal from destruction by his public appeal to Tasmanians to keep the theatre alive at a time of threat. Laurence continued his advocacy of the Theatre Royal for well over three decades.

1948–86 was also a period of cultural and social change for Tasmania, and Australia more broadly, with an influx of migrants. Migrants brought with them different cultural and arts traditions, which then influenced ours. Revolutionary changes of the 1960s–1970s in politics, music and social structures were also reflected in the performing arts.

It is also worth noting that at this time we see an early manifestation of the ambition for the theatre to become an arts centre including a dramatic academy and music conservatorium. Australian content was beginning to develop in the dramatic arts which can be traced through performances at the Theatre Royal throughout the 1970s–1990s. (It was not, however, until the 1990s that the theatre saw the emergence of Aboriginal productions.)

During the seventies and eighties social changes were emerging that began to have an impact on the sustainability of the Theatre Royal. The collapse of the Tasman Bridge in 1975 resulted in changing patterns of theatre attendance and in a reduction in the number of community members involved in amateur productions centred on the Theatre Royal. Home video was introduced and this seriously challenged the viability of live entertainment, with Tasmanians having one of the highest rates of video ownership across Australia.

The size of the theatre, having retained its original physical proportions, was considered too small for the emerging larger scale productions of ballet, opera and musicals. The limited seating capacity also meant that it was not economically viable to reasonably expect to recoup the costs of these productions. Conversely, the theatre was too large for some of the new, experimental drama productions, and local amateur theatre companies found it too expensive.

The 1984 fire came after a government-funded restoration of the theatre to its 1911–12 glory, with a public fundraising campaign initiated for the second restoration. The early eighties was also significant because of a management change in 1982, when there was a review of theatre in Tasmania. This was aimed at developing a statewide management structure and rationalisation of the provision of professional theatre across the state. The Theatre Royal was absorbed under the umbrella of a single statewide theatre authority, the Tasmanian Theatre Trust. This was not a straightforward period from a management perspective, with a public outcry of incompetence, misappropriation and regional bias. The Trust was disbanded and a new Act of Parliament established the Theatre Royal Management Board in 1986 with John Unicomb as general manager. Unicomb was one of the most ardent supporters of the theatre and one of Tasmania's most notable theatrical identities in the latter half of the twentieth century.

#### *Why an oral history*

While there have been a number of articles and books published about the theatre, there has not been a deep or particular analysis of the period of 1948–86. Michael Roe's 1965 book, *A History of the Theatre Royal, Hobart, from 1834*, detailed the history of the building, performance and performers and included the



*An autographed photograph of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in the Theatre Royal dressing room, Hobart, 1948.*

*Olivier urged Tasmanians to take pride in the oldest theatre in Australia: 'Don't let it go'.  
Collection Theatre Royal Hobart*

recollections of some of the key people associated with the theatre.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, however, we saw that the written history did not particularly focus on the voice of performers, producers and technical staff in a way an oral history would facilitate and there was not a history that covered the entirety of this key period. We believed that an oral history would give voice to a variety of perspectives on key people and events: that of the audience, critics, performers, set designers, technicians. It is an approach that is often more bottom up than written histories, which are often commissioned by boards or management. Oral histories complement the documentary evidence and give voice to the people involved. They also reflect social, economic and theatre history developments.

Oral history interviews were complemented by printed resources, which included programs, a draft performance timeline, a list of companies which played at the theatre and copies of programs and posters.

### *The oral history process*

We interviewed the following 16 people for the oral history project.

Theatre managers: Dr Rod Morice (first business manager 1968–72), Fay Thompson (secretary of Natfas and appointed theatre manager in 1974);

Technical staff: Don Mitchell (a mechanist 1946–56), Bill Dowd (set design and costume), Greg Thompson (theatre technician 1970–80s);

Box office staff: Stuart Heathorn, from a theatre family and also associated with Polygon Theatre Company;

Performers: Barry Davies (who performed first on the Theatre Royal stage in a school choir and sang in productions from the 1950s to the 80s), Robert Jarman (producer and performer), Ken Short, Noreen Le Mottee (worked in theatre for over 50 years), Judith Ker (dancer), Gillian Unicomb (first performed at the Theatre Royal as a child, produced costumes and designed sets as well as performed, and recounted experiences of John Unicomb as theatre manager), Lyall Beven and Mavis Brinckman (singers and performers – featured in over 20 opera performances);

Theatre Royal Hotel manager: Peter Cooley who was associated with the theatre until his family sold the hotel next door in 1988;

Critic: Wal Eastman.

We developed a written plan for our project, recruited volunteers and established an operational group, comprising a coordinator, researchers and interviewers. Importantly, we gained the support of Theatre Royal management and attended an Oral History Tasmania workshop. With this background we addressed issues around ethics, legalities, interview priorities and technical support, purchasing a recorder and drafting letters of introduction from the Theatre Royal and consent forms. The operational group developed a list of potential interviewees, working through the difficult process of assigning priority through factors such as health and age and the significance of individual contributions. Transcribing the interviews was challenging at times and we paid for some transcriptions, as this was an onerous task for volunteers.

### *Oral History case studies*

The Oral History project was not an attempt at a complete history of the period. Our objective was to augment an historical overview of the 1948–84 period with a focus on those performing or working in the theatre, their experience of the theatre and contribution to it.

Our selection of stories below illustrates and details historical material already available and adds to our map of significant issues and trends. The first-hand experiences of performers, technicians and producers fill the gaps in the history of theatre production, and the human-interest stories embedded in the case studies help bring the theatre to life.

### *Case study: adapting a historical icon*

The theatre was in a dilapidated and neglected state in 1948 and was not properly renovated nor modernised until after the fire of 1984. The age, history and condition of the theatre contributed to it being seen as the most beautiful atmospheric place, but there was tension between preserving the historical value and integrity of the theatre, and the demand for progress and improvement to maintain the theatre's viability. The financial demand of preserving a theatre of iconic status and of ensuring its financial viability presented policy and programming tensions over the period.

# Contributors



*Contributors to the Oral History Project.*

*Top: Stuart Heathorn, Robert Jarman, Judith Ker*

*2nd row: Don Mitchell, Dr Rodney Morice, Ken Short*

*3rd row: Gillian Uncomb, John Uncomb, Lyall Beven and Mavis Brinckman, Wal Eastman*

*4th row: Noreen Le Motte, Fay Thompson, Bill Dowd*

*Bottom: Barry Davies, Peter Cooley, Greg Thompson*

When Fay Thompson first started working at the Theatre Royal in 1967, the under-stage conditions and dressing rooms were ‘totally primitive’. Sometimes referred to as Tasmania’s first theatre entrepreneur, Thompson facilitated the introduction of professional companies at the theatre as secretary to Natfas and later as theatre manager 1974–1984, responsible for theatre operations. Googie Withers and John McCallum appeared at the theatre in 1968 in a production of *Relatively Speaking*.

...there were no showers or anything. There were pretty primitive loos so Googie wrapped in her mink coat used to dart across the lane to the Theatre Royal Hotel. *Relatively Speaking* was one of the first big shows and Googie Withers and John McCallum were big, big people to us in those days. She used to come and sit in my office quite often and was freezing cold. She always had a big mink coat on. I apologised for the dressing room but she said, ‘Darling, I don’t mind sitting there. I’ve sat where the greats of old British theatre have been for many years and it’s a delight to be here’. (Noreen Le Motte)<sup>2</sup>

Many theatre greats have appeared at the Theatre Royal in addition to Olivier and Leigh in 1948. They include Noel Coward, Victor Hugo, Marcel Marceau, Roger Woodward, Warren Mitchell, Spike Milligan, Michael Redgrave, June Bronhill and Dame Sybil Thorndyke who declared it the greatest theatre she had played in outside of London.

Changes to the structure were seen to compromise the theatre’s historical integrity but the process of continuous adaptation is what has made the theatre viable today. When many of the old dressing rooms were demolished in the renovations following the fire of 1984, there was public outcry because the demolition ‘shattered the Theatre Royal’s sense of history and atmosphere’. The Board responded that, ‘it was sad but necessary if we are to have a living working theatre rather than a slowly decaying museum’.<sup>3</sup>

Technicians, performers and directors adapted to the lack of resources. The technical equipment throughout most of the period was basic. The first sound desk was provided by the Davies Brothers (owners of *The Mercury*) in 1963. ‘You could play two LPs [long-playing records] as well as reel to reel tapes...it was rudimentary to say the least, but it wasn’t to say that you still couldn’t do some fantastic shows. John Unicomb used to drag his old system in there to make a bit of noise but really it was all about voice projection.’ (Greg Thompson)<sup>4</sup>

Voice projection was compromised as technical equipment improved over the period. ‘...it’s an art that is long lost. ...most of the early operas and musical were performed with a single mic or two but you projected without it, you got those great voices.’ (Barry Davies)<sup>5</sup>

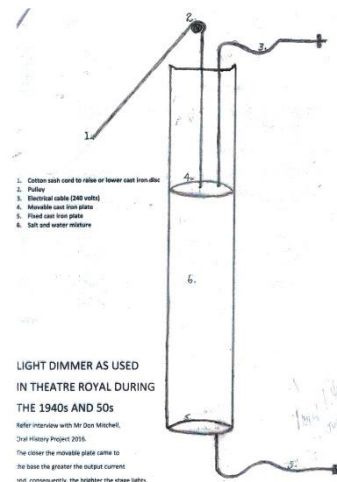
The theatre was equipped with basic and often dangerous lighting systems. Light dimmers were a particular problem. Don Mitchell, a part-time mechanist at the theatre 1946–1956, started work at the age of 15 and was recruited by Stanley Burbury, a thespian and a judge who later became the first Australian to be appointed as a governor. Mitchell provided this account of the lighting system.

Well, my biggest challenge was on the dimming of the lights and the system that we combined to figure out. They were concrete pipes, ten-inch concrete pipes filled with water which had a certain amount of salt mixed in with it, and at the bottom there was a cast iron disc. On a rope was another cast iron disc with the other side of the circuit on it. ... wheelbarrow stuff!

If you had too much current going through it for too long, the water boiled all over the people standing around. One of the worst bits was getting the timing right and the concentration of salt in the water right to get the required dimming. And then some person would come along and say we want another floodlight here and another one over there, and of course that would increase the current and it’d boil over at any rate.’<sup>6</sup>

#### Case study: new standards

Public sector funding for the performing arts is relatively young in Australia—some 50 years. For the period 1948–1960s the arts relied heavily on ‘enlightened public patronage’ and extensive community fundraising.



Drawing by Phil Tyson of light dimmer used at the Theatre Royal 1940s–50s, following his interview with Don Mitchell. The closer the movable plate came to the base the greater the output current and, consequently, the brighter the stage lights.

Collection FOTR

Bruce Piggott used his influence and skill to build a post-World War II Tasmanian theatre based at the Theatre Royal at a time when there was little available by way of public funding. Piggott (1913–2000) was a Hobart lawyer, president of the Australian Law Council, thespian and president of the National Fine Arts Society in Tasmania (Natfas, 1948–62). His vision was for a complete theatre: music, dance, drama and opera. He was able to garner support from prominent Tasmanians. Nettlefold, Crisp, Davies, Burbury, Jennings, Fitzgerald, Von Bibra, Alcorso, Underwood and Rouse are names scattered throughout the history of the Theatre Royal.

Professional theatre was thought to maintain the dignity of the building but it was also necessary to make the building available as regularly as possible to pay for the significant costs of maintenance and upgrade without compromising the theatre's reputation for quality. Protecting the Theatre Royal brand required professionalism and quality in both popular and serious entertainment.



Judith Ker and Mischa Slavensky on the Theatre Royal stage 1960s.  
Collection FOTR.

Piggott improved the skills of local performers by introducing post-war migrants such as Walter Stiasny, Stefan Haag and Kurt Hommel who were European artists. They provided tuition and direction and made a major impact on the development of Tasmania's performing arts. Former dancers with the Borovansky Ballet company, Mischa Slavensky and Judith Ker, were amongst the recruits and were star attractions. They performed at the theatre and together they ran a ballet school and assisted with training a corps de ballet for theatre performances.

We got on very well because I respected his knowledge and his teaching and the fact that he was an amazing partner. I remember we had the pas de deux (I think it was the *Don Quixote* one), the piece where I do a lot of pirouettes holding his hand. Usually I could do about six going round. I did about two and stopped and he was so cross! But the reason I stopped was because he had re-done a bit of his costume the day before, the sort of jabot down the front, and as I started the pirouettes I realised that a thread of it had come undone and was around my neck. I realised that if I kept on going and did the full amount of pirouettes, I would probably have been choked. ... It wasn't my fault!' (Judith Ker)<sup>7</sup>

#### Case study: a ghost helps to raise funds

Inventive fund-raising schemes were common. In August 1951 a children's Ghost Club was established to provide opportunities for younger members of the community to assist with fundraising. Over the years there had been many reported sightings in the theatre of a mysterious ghost called Fred. The fundraising initiative made full use of the promotional value of the ghost. A ghost cartoon was a regular feature in *The Mercury* to advertise the Restoration Appeal and Mr Davies of *The Mercury* was seen wandering the streets of Hobart with the ghost. Reports of a ghostly presence in the theatre increased. The marketing campaign had successfully enhanced the theatre's reputation for atmosphere and mystery.

Bill Dowd recounted his experience. From the age of 14 he was interested in acting, stage-managing and theatre design. In 1969 he secured a professional position in Sydney doing the props for 100 performances of Harry M Miller's original Australian production of *Hair*. From then until his retirement in 2006, he worked as a professional stage manager, scenic artist, costume and set designer and lecturer. Highlights of his career include set design for the original Australian productions of *Cabaret* (1971) and *Guys and Dolls* (1972), designing for Opera Queensland and Australian Opera, and lecturing in Design at the University of Southern Queensland.

In 1964, still a teenager at art school, Dowd was engaged at the Theatre Royal to assist with painting the set for *La Belle Helene*.

There was connected with this show, a scrim, or a gauze. This gauze had to be painted. We're talking about a piece of fabric that is at least 10 metres high and probably 10 metres square. The only time I could do it was after rehearsal overnight. It was close to midnight and I had to paint this gauze off a 16-foot ladder while it was in the air but it was *really* spooky and I was painting like fury and trying not to look round.

In the theatre in those days, the two double doors at the back of the stalls used to be left open at night so the rats wouldn't chew through the bottom of the doors. But every time I'd glance over my shoulder, I'd see these

shadowy figures, I thought, in the foyer; then I started getting the cold finger up the back routine, and it was really, really spooky. The sweat was pouring off me and I was going like the clappers trying to finish .... and it's really hard painting scrim. I had a great 8-inch brush trying to get it even, and I was pushing it into the fabric. Anyway, I finally finished. ...I staggered across the stage in the dark [after turning off the lights] and ran up the lane, a bit like my father had done fifty years before, feeling the breath of Fred on my neck.'<sup>8</sup>

#### *Case study: sustaining the Theatre Royal*

For a period, musical theatre dominated local theatre. The Theatre Royal Light Opera Company and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society sustained the operations of the theatre and provided a stepping-stone for local talent. When national funding subsidies first commenced in the early post-war period, they were largely sponsored by the non-government Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Subsidies required a commitment for joint arrangements to use local performers as supports in touring professional productions. Increasingly, more drama in programming was encouraged—musicals were not of sufficiently high standard to warrant subsidies, an ongoing tension in theatre sponsorship.

International performers who first cut their teeth on the Theatre Royal stage include Elizabeth Whitehouse, one of Australia's most recognized sopranos now located in Europe; Garry Bennett, one of the three tenors working with classical music megastar Andre Rieu; and Michael Siberry, now one of the leading lights in the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. Another was Australian actor and writer Michael Boddy (previously married to Tasmanian poet and writer Margaret Scott) who with Bob Ellis co-wrote the Australian classic of the 1970s *The Legend of King O'Malley*; and with Marcus Cooney he co-wrote the musical *Cash* to commemorate John Unicom's Tasmanian Theatre Company. Robyn Nevin, doyen of Australian theatre, first experienced the stage at the Theatre Royal as a production assistant whilst working with the ABC in Tasmania in the late 1960s.

The Theatre Royal Light Opera Company (TRLOC) was formed in 1968. It was an amateur theatre company promoting the presentation of light opera and musical comedy in Tasmania and encouraging local talent in this art. Its productions were of an excellent standard which drew large audiences and its shows were a financial success. The company had a membership of about 50 regular performers and it produced more than 20 musicals and light operas over its 20-year existence. It functioned as a significant creative hub. Gwyneth Dixon became a long-standing director of the company. Dixon (1920–2011) was a 'tour de force' of Tasmanian theatre over many decades. She was recognised as a prominent and gifted conductor, singer and actor.

Ken Short, a popular ABC radio personality, performed with TRLOC in shows such as *Camelot* and *The Mikado* (playing Ko-Ko). It was common practice at the time to use media personalities to help attract greater audiences.

The 1968 TRLOC production of the *Pirates of Penzance* featured Short as the Major-General.

Gwen Dixon always said as we started the season, that when ... the Major-General sang, 'I'm the very model of a modern Major General', she was getting a spray from me on stage; she was right underneath [in the orchestra pit]. At the matinee she got an umbrella, a child's umbrella, and she'd texted on it, 'For a short, sharp shower', and that afternoon when I sailed into the patter song, she put it up and twirled it round so everyone could read. That was a bit of fun.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1982, it was prominent Tasmanian media personality Sue Becker who captured the attention of audiences in a very successful production of *Auntie Mame* by the Polygon Theatre Company.

...*Auntie Mame* was absolutely colossal. Sue Becker was quite eccentric. She was amazing though; she arrived at the first rehearsal and she knew every line. We were all quite stunned because it was an enormous role. But she was manic, and I remember our poor costume lady had to buy a tailor's dummy. The costume lady called it 'Silent Sue' because if she took a costume to Sue, she would just reject it out of hand. It was just, 'Auntie Mame would never wear that!' So we decided we'd get this tailor's dummy, Silent Sue, on which to fit costumes. It was a fun show and it was quite a spectacular show. Sue was a drawcard. She always said on her radio program, 'I'd love to play *Auntie Mame*' and that's the reason in a way we asked her. She was fantastic. She WAS Auntie Mame.'<sup>10</sup> (Stuart Heathorn)



*Ken Short and Nell Dobson in The Mikado at the Theatre Royal, 1968.  
Collection FOTR*

### *Case study: impact of social change*

From 1960 through to the 70s there were major social changes which began to transform tastes in theatre production. Two stories reflect the challenges of the new and popular at the theatre.

*Brief Lives* was one of the more successful plays of the period. It premiered in 1967 and was a British play about John Aubrey, a 17th-century Englishman who met and kept accounts of many of the famous men of his day, including René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Christopher Wren. Roy Dotrice OBE, British stage television and film veteran, played the part of John Aubrey at the Theatre Royal in 1975.

... the one that I always go back to was *Brief Lives*. It lasted two and a half hours. Dotrice was on stage the whole two hours, and there was something like eight hundred props. It was set way back in the 1500s or 1600s. There were stuffed birds, there was food, there was every possible thing and he lived in it and he cooked in it on a little tiny oil stove thing and ate a meal and then when interval came he sat in a chair and went to sleep. And the audience came in and out and he was asleep in the chair and everybody was respectful of not waking him up. And then in the due time, he woke up and continued the show. (*Fay Thompson*)<sup>11</sup>

A veteran of Tasmanian theatre, Noreen Le Mottee's description made the production come to life.

A performance that I was absolutely blown away by was Roy Dotrice. It was a one-man show and he was this old gentleman in his house full of books and cobwebs and dust. There were cobwebs all over the stage. He blew dust off his books. It was just the most amazing piece of theatre; a wonderful, wonderful performance by this man going through his memories.<sup>12</sup>

Brave effort was required to introduce new material. 'There is a tendency for Tasmanian theatre identities to stick with what they know and to promote what is popular like musicals and revue because they promote viability and can offset losses often incurred in the production of more serious theatre.' (*Robert Jarman*)<sup>13</sup>

Dr Rod Morice, business manager at the Theatre Royal 1968–72, was appointed after a period of decline in audience attendances. Theatre was seen as a minority pastime and it had a reputation for 'tweeness'. To keep the theatre open, he modernised theatrical offerings and foreshadowed subscription seasons. At 28 years of age he quit his job as a Glenorchy doctor to manage the theatre with the objective of improving production standards and building more sophisticated and younger audiences. He had a strong belief that people were just as sophisticated in Hobart as anywhere else and deserved only the best theatre.

*America Hurrah* exemplified New Theatre; a belief in artistic and social expression dealing largely with the social pressures on the psyche. The production was directed by Australian John Tasker and was first performed in 1966. When it played at the Theatre Royal, controversy raged about the relative merits of government subsidies for imported professional versus local amateur theatre. The play was described by some as a brew of lust, incest, rape, adultery, murder and homosexuality. It played to packed houses of mostly under-30s.

Morice explained:

*America Hurrah* is a play with three little plays in it and the final one is called *Motel*. When it was put on in Sydney, the police laid charges. In *Motel*, actors in papier mâché costumes covering their whole bodies deface a motel room and write expletives on a wall. In Sydney the police raided the stage, and broke up the set to get the expletives that were written down, as evidence. I asked the New Theatre and John Tasker, would they come down to Hobart, but I took the precaution of talking to Tasmania's solicitor general then, Roger Jennings; he was very keen on theatre. He looked into the powers of the police in banning productions. He couldn't act for us, so he got a solicitor to represent us. So, the company came over and I picked up John Tasker at the airport and I immediately drove him to the Royal Tennis Club in Hobart, in Davey St. We met Roger Jennings and the appointed solicitor, and we watched them play royal tennis and then we had a meeting in the dressing room. Roger Jennings had found a loophole in the Act about prohibiting plays.

The theatre was booked out; every seat was taken, up into the gods as well. At about six o'clock on opening night, the police served me with a prohibition notice [at my home]. The prohibition notice said that if I went ahead and staged this play, I could be fined several thousand or a certain amount of time in gaol. We went ahead and had the opening night but I had our lawyer sitting next to me. We'd set it up so that when *Motel* finished, the whole theatre would be plunged into total darkness. We took away the stairs from the orchestra pit up onto the stage, so that the police couldn't easily get up onto the stage, and we had the actors in the papier mâché costumes go immediately to the dressing room where all the other actors in the production were sitting in singlets and underpants. When they took off their doll costumes they were in singlets and underpants too, so that if the police went into the dressing rooms they wouldn't know who the people were, who wrote the words on the wall. Anyway, nothing happened that night, but the next morning, our lawyer was phoned by the police lawyer to say

they were proceeding with charges. Our lawyer said, ‘Well,...the prohibition notice has to be served in the proscribed manner, and it has never been proscribed.’ And so on that loophole, we got off. Tasmania became quite famous, or infamous, across Australia, for putting on this banned production.<sup>14</sup>

### *Case study: emergence of professional theatre*

When the Australia Council for the Arts (later the Australia Council) was set up in the late 1960s by the Commonwealth Government to distribute arts funding nationwide, there were three main objectives: the highest possible creative standards; as wide an audience as possible free from economic and locational barriers; and arts should help define an Australian identity.<sup>15</sup>



John Unicomb.  
Collection FOTR

The guidelines proved a challenge for Tasmania because of the Council’s preference for statewide companies. In Tasmania, the subsidy was allocated by the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Board to the Tasmanian Theatre Company (TTC) established by John Unicomb at the Theatre Royal in 1971. Unicomb (1928–2012) was an actor, director, manager and mentor to the performing arts industry. He made an outstanding contribution to Tasmania’s cultural life through the direction of the TTC 1972–1984; and later as general manager of the Theatre Royal following the theatre’s re-opening after the fire of 1984 when he led the effort to restore and modernize the theatre to current standards.

For over a decade, the TTC produced theatre of a high professional standard. Originally a local production company, some of its offerings were more than equal to any in the world. Unicomb himself performed or directed dramas and musicals including *Death of a Salesman* (1983), *Fiddler on the Roof* (jointly with TRLOC, 1975) and *Equus* (1975).

To sustain the viability of the theatre, it was necessary to introduce professional touring companies from elsewhere. Gillian Unicomb: ‘...he was able to keep this thing going, no matter what, when it wasn’t possible just to have a fully professional theatre company working full time (in Tasmania) and you had to supplement it and that led to some of the most amazing people coming in.’<sup>16</sup>

The consequence was that smaller Tasmanian companies were locked out of funding subsidies. The Tasmanian government launched a review of theatre in 1982 to consider the best way of promoting professional and amateur theatre in Tasmania. Accusations of regional bias, competition from venues like Wrest Point, and the costs of state government investments necessary to restore old parts of the Theatre Royal, sparked the review. Tasmanian-based professional and semi-professional companies, including Don Gay from the Polygon Theatre Company, led a push back against imported theatre.

Don Gay (1944–2015) had a huge impact on the development of Tasmanian theatre. He was the artistic director of Polygon which was formed in 1973 to produce local theatre. It became a full production company with a semi-professional status in the late 1970s. Gay mentored countless young actors and directors in almost every aspect of the performing arts. As a writer, Gay enjoyed exploring personal stories and the history of Tasmania, co-writing a musical version of Marcus Clark’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*. At the Theatre Royal, his successful productions included *Auntie Mame* (1982), *The Department* (1982), *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1981) and *Sea Scope* (1982).

...the whole theatre industry went through a bit of a change because there was an enquiry into professional theatre and the Theatre Royal, Tas Theatre Company and Polygon were all being looked at to see how things could be improved. We were given some of the Tas Theatre Company’s funding to produce big shows because one of the beefs that the Tas Arts Advisory Board had was that the Tas Theatre Company was a strictly entrepreneurial body by this stage; in other words they didn’t actually produce anything, they just brought everything in... a bit like what the Theatre Royal does now. They brought everything in from interstate, so there was no real development for artists to earn a living here. And up until about 1975, well up until the demise of the Tas Film Corp, people were working in ABC Radio Drama, Polygon, Tas Theatre Company because they originally started off as a production company. I can see perhaps why John changed the whole charter for the Tas Theatre Company because it was so expensive to produce theatre. If he’d used a few more local people maybe that would’ve cut the cost down. Polygon used mainly local people... we couldn’t pay full equity rates but we got close at times. (Stuart Heathorn)<sup>17</sup>

## Future

A much stronger original Tasmanian voice is starting to emerge in local theatre productions, a move away from reproducing the latest hits from Broadway and the mainland. Up to the last decade, Tasmanian theatre was influenced by a number of factors: a 'dark' obsession with the past resulting in a gothic Tasmanian theatre-making culture, including in films and novels, probably the result of our convict past; a focus on musicals which were (and continue to be) a big part of the theatre culture; the size of the Theatre Royal requiring imported productions to make it viable.<sup>18</sup>

...for new work, [the Theatre Royal Main Stage] is quite a hard space. It's a big theatre, it's got a lot of seats, and if you're doing a musical you can play here for a few weeks. But if you're doing a straight play, four performances and you've kind of exhausted your audience, and it's an awful lot of money to put on a play to only then do four shows. But that's where this new space next door [Theatre Royal Studio Theatre in the Hedberg complex] is going to be incredibly important for the development of new work and for that work being able to find an audience and for actors to be able to find an audience... It's going to make it much more accommodating for [Tasmanian] companies.' (Robert Jarman)<sup>19</sup>

The next period in the Theatre Royal story centres on the Hedberg development. This is a partnership with the University of Tasmania in which the building will be jointly managed by the state government through the Theatre Royal and the university. The existing theatre will be provided with new amenities and greater accessibility but most importantly, it also comes with the new Studio Theatre which has a seating capacity of about 300 and a commitment to better foster Tasmanian theatre-making in a space designed in part for the purpose.<sup>20</sup> The Hedberg will also be home to the Conservatorium of Music.

## Conclusion

The Friends of the Theatre Royal Oral History Project 1948–1986 has diversified the telling of the Theatre Royal story and has helped to build support for the theatre by making the history more accessible to other than traditional audiences. The 16 contributors to the project looked back on their experiences of the theatre and helped us understand how it has changed over the years. Their perspectives, not often found in formal administrative documents, have filled the gaps in the history of theatre-making in Tasmania and have added to our evolving identity as a creative community. Over the period, the Theatre Royal helped build that creative community, fostered skills in theatre production and introduced Tasmanian audiences to quality in theatre performances. Major social changes occurred in the period which were reflected in the stories about theatre programming and management.

The Theatre Royal has survived for more than 180 years because it has adapted to protect its iconic heritage but not without difficulty and a massive investment from the community. Its size and issues of financial viability had a major influence on directions in Tasmania's theatre industry. In 2020 it is again poised to re-set theatre development, this time with a strong focus on Tasmanian-made theatre, but once again live theatre is facing fresh challenges. Technology has diversified the availability of entertainment and live theatre is increasingly becoming a luxury experience. Ironically too, the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening the viability of live theatre but there is every confidence that the Theatre Royal will once again survive.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Roe, *A history of the Theatre Royal Hobart from 1834*, Law Society of Tasmania for the National Trust of Australia (Tasmania) and the National Theatre and Fine Arts Society of Tasmania, Hobart, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Fay Thompson interview with Phil Tyson for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, October 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Mercury 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Thompson interview with Phil Tyson for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, October 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Davies interview with Phil Tyson for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Don Mitchell interview with Phil Tyson for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Ker interview with Jean Elder for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> William Dowd interview with Helen Edwards for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, December 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Ken Short interview with Julie McDonald for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, October 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Heathorn interview with Helen Edwards for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, December 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Fay Thompson interview with Phil Tyson for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, October 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Noreen Le Mottee interview with Helen Edwards for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, October 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Jarman, Performing Arts Heritage Network, Annual Conference, Hobart 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Dr Rodney Morice interview with Lou-anne Folder for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, Pearl Beach NSW, April 2016.

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<sup>15</sup> Professor David Throsby, *Funding of the Arts in Australia 1900–2000*, pp.9–10.

<sup>16</sup> Gillian Unicom interview with Helen Edwards for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, June 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Heathorn interview with Helen Edwards for the Friends of the Theatre Royal, December 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Jarman in conversation with John Xintavalonis as part of the 180<sup>th</sup> celebrations of the Theatre Royal, March 2017, Friends of the Theatre Royal archive.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Jarman in conversation with John Xintavalonis, March 2017. Friends of the Theatre Royal archive.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Munro, CEO Theatre Royal, interview with authors, June 2018.

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### Do you have a project to tell us about?

We are always looking for items for the newsletter, anything from a few sentences to a lengthy article. All members are interested in knowing what is going on in the state, and you may make some good contacts through responses to the article. See contact details at the bottom of the page.

### WEBSITES

**Oral History Tasmania:** [www.oralhistorytas.org.au](http://www.oralhistorytas.org.au)

**Oral History Australia:** [www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au)

**IOHA (International Oral History Association):** [www.ioha.fgv.br](http://www.ioha.fgv.br)

### EQUIPMENT HIRE

A **Fostex digital recorder** is available for hire to members. It comes with its own lapel microphones and *User Guidelines*.

Cost of hire: \$20 a week, plus transport costs if necessary. You will also be required to sign a form agreeing to pay to replace any part that is damaged or lost while you have the recorder, up to a maximum of \$250 for individuals or \$500 for groups or institutions.

To make a booking, contact Jill Cassidy on 0418 178 098 or email [president@oralhistorytas.org.au](mailto:president@oralhistorytas.org.au)

#### THE OBJECTIVES OF ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA

- promote the practice and methods of oral history
- educate in the use of oral history methods
- encourage discussion of all problems in oral history
- foster the preservation of oral history records
- pursue common objectives and maintain links with other Australian oral history associations through membership of Oral History Australia Inc.

### MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

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### ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA EXECUTIVE

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*Real to Reel* is edited by Jill Cassidy. The next edition is due in December 2020. Contributions are welcome and should reach the editor no later than 30 November. They can be emailed to [president@oralhistorytas.org.au](mailto:president@oralhistorytas.org.au)