

“MAKING HISTORY LIVE”

Queensland's Mercury Theatre achieves its purpose

(Summary of a paper presented by Mrs. WIN. DAVSON, M.B.E., F.T.C.L., A.A.S.A., at a meeting of the Society on 23 May 1974)

“I love and reverence all the Arts . . . but to me, it seems as if when God conceived the world, that was poetry; He formed it, that was sculpture; He coloured it and that was painting; He peopled it with living beings, and that was the grand, divine eternal drama,” said Charlotte Cushman, and these are my feelings also.

The doings of these “living beings”—and of their Gods—have inspired creative people through the ages, and their deeds have been recorded in mime, song, dance, music and words—in performances—and so theatre has evolved.

Theatre, in which drama is only one aspect, arose in the dawn of civilisation, out of fundamental human needs. It arose from a basic instinct, a primitive urge—**to RE-CREATE.**

Theatre has taken many forms, but always it has sought finally to *entertain*.

Mercury Theatre came into being on 18 June 1949, in Wynnum. Gatton Mercury Theatre was founded on 7 February 1951. They form a theatrical complex which is unique in Australia. Both theatres share the same founder, and both were founded on the same Constitution. While that at Wynnum is a seaside Little Theatre in the Greater Brisbane area, the other at Gatton is a country Little Theatre in the Lockyer Valley, below Toowoomba.

Both have the same motto drawn from Shakespeare's “Henry V”:

“Let us
On your imaginary forces work,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.”

Mrs. Davson, founder of Mercury Theatre, Wynnum, and Mercury Theatre, Gatton, was awarded the M.B.E. for services to theatre, culture and the community. For the interest of followers of Australian theatre, copies of the full text of her paper are being lodged with the Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane, and the Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

Both theatres participate in observance of a National Week sponsored by Gatton Mercury Theatre and Mercury Children's Theatre since 1959.

How did this come about—Mercury Theatre and Australia Theatre Week? Well, it all goes back to my childhood. My first stage was a wool-bale on my father's grazing property "Pine Tree Park", at Amby. My mother, the late Mrs. Mary May O'Neill, was a staunch C.W.A. member, a devoted worker for the Anglican Church, and Superintendent of the Sunday School. She organised many concerts for the Church building fund, and our home and the Shire Hall were the venues.

We left the West when I was nine, and came to live in the Wynnum district, an area my mother knew well; for her father, J. T. Sandison, founder in the early 1890s of the still-existent Victoria Pottery at Annerley, had been a member of the Wynnum Shire Council for twenty years before the formation of Greater Brisbane.

From time to time I participated in church and school concerts. Next came plays with the Brisbane State High School Old Girls and Old Boys' Association Drama Club, then with the Brisbane Amateur Theatre (now Brisbane Arts Theatre). The Second World War was now raging, and I became a V.A.D. The Wynnum and Manly Younger Set War Workers was formed, the brain-child of the late Miss Betty Clacher, and I became foundation Drama Director from 1943 until the end of the war when it disbanded. We took concert parties, including plays, to the soldiers at Lytton Fort, as well as staging plays at Wynnum and Manly.

In 1949 I was teaching in a studio in Brisbane and at our home at Wynnum Central. Some of my senior pupils were in the Brisbane Repertory Theatre, in which I then became actively involved.

The inaugural meeting of Mercury Theatre was held at our home. My own office on the executive was that of director. We staged "Milestones" by Arnold Bennett-Edward Knoblock, a three-act play, at the Star Theatre, Wynnum Central on 7 July 1949 with emergency lighting equipment made available by Mr. Sam Greene, the theatre proprietor, during a strike.

The director stated on the programme: "I have founded the Mercury Theatre because I believe there should be in Wynnum a theatre with a policy, character and company of its own to foster an appreciation and love of a great art whose field is the whole of human life with its laughter and tears, sorrow and tragedy . . . The name was inspired



Part cast of "The Search" by Mrs. Win. Davson, staged at the official opening of the Mercury Club Rooms and Mini-Theatre by Sir Gordon Chalk on 10 October 1970. Left to right: Susan Manteuffel, Corinne Manteuffel, Sharon Davson, Leon Kondos, Susan Clinton.

by the London theatre of the same name . . . The policy is to stage plays, using mainly local players and producers, and to interchange productions with the Little Theatre groups in Brisbane. Proceeds of productions will go into general theatre funds, or by special arrangement to some patriotic organisation."

It was never visualised as just another suburban Little Theatre but as a vital and enduring cultural force voicing and serving the needs of a well populated district in Waterloo Bay, slightly removed from city opportunities and rich in latent talent. There was no other Theatre in the district.

GATTON THEATRE FOUNDED

Gatton Mercury Theatre came into being as a separate, independent branch of Mercury Wynnum. It was formed at a public meeting attended by more than forty and chaired by the Shire Clerk, Mr. A. J. Smallwood, in the R.S.L. Hall at Gatton.

When I felt that Mercury Wynnum was firmly established with a strong executive, I resigned as director. By then I

was living at Gatton, and the strain of constant travelling for meetings and rehearsals in both theatres had become heavy. I had the privilege of naming my successor. It was paramount that a producer be director to train members and guide the young Theatre. With the assurance that the executive committee and members would willingly support her, school-teacher and experienced producer, Miss Lois Lenihan who lived with her parents at Manly, became the second Wynnum director. Her position as secretary was taken by Miss Dorothy Raymond.

In its foundation year Gatton Theatre showed almost mercurial progress and reached one hundred members. Duties at times were heavy for the executive committee and members of the general social committee, and to some it was almost a full-time occupation. The Society gained a curtain and improved lighting effects at the School of Arts, and the promise of a grant of a lease of portion of Lyttleton Park, for the erection of Club Rooms, from the Gatton Shire Council.

A two-hour Jubilee Pageant, "Lockyer Milestones", including a Cavalcade of Transport from the Queensland Agricultural College, was staged at the Gatton Showgrounds under the general direction of the author who acted as narrator. The *Gatton Mail* commented: "The district is to be congratulated that there is in their midst a group who will go to the trouble of making our own history live."

On my suggestion the Gatton Shire Council adopted the mauve-pink bauhinia as the district's floral emblem in April 1952 and in October the first annual Bauhinia-time Festival was held. Another notable event in Lockyer Valley history was the Gatton Centenary Celebrations when Mercury Theatre opened the town's festival on 6 April 1955 with the premiere of a local song honouring the town and its emblem.

CHILDREN'S THEATRE

A most important step forward was the founding on 17 April 1957 of a Children's Theatre to cater more fully for those under 18 years. We sponsored, through the Australian Council for Child Advancement and the Arts Council, an International Child Art Exhibition including 400 examples of child art from India, Japan, China, Norway, Austria, Russia, America and the United Kingdom, and featured entries of a local art competition.

Wynnum Junior Mercury was also founded in April 1957 by Miss Lois Lenihan and Mrs. Daphne Raymond.

In Gatton we renewed the drive for our club rooms at Lyttleton Park and met with unexpected setbacks and delays. Then, after years of rehearsals in places wherever we could be accommodated—in private homes, rented halls—and putting up our play set for rehearsal, pulling it down for pictures the next night and putting it up again during work-time the next day, we secured that priceless possession, our own Club Rooms Theatre—a converted Army drill hall in the Gatton Showgrounds, leased from the Commonwealth Government for three years from 1 May 1958. It was officially opened by our Patron, Sir Gordon Chalk, on 23 July 1958.

It was wonderful having a “place of our own”, but it meant a lot of work converting a building in a state of disrepair. The westerly winds whistled through it, and at first we rehearsed in overcoats with pigeons flying overhead, and their droppings meant more cleaning duties.

So we got to work, built a large thirty feet by seventeen feet stage, sealed up broken louvres, weather-proofed and bird-proofed the building, and swung exit doors outwards. As money was not plentiful, we later ceiled the building with dyed hessian and found to our delight that we had thereby obtained excellent acoustics!

The search for second-hand curtains and seats was an exhausting but exciting one. These were finally located in Brisbane from picture theatres which were renovating in readiness to meet the competition from television. With true workshop zeal we made our own lighting equipment—our spots with galvanised iron at the local plumbers, using truck rims for stand bases and water pipes for stands and cross-pieces. The stage sets and equipment, which were not permitted to be stored at the School of Arts, were at last transferred from under our home. All one hundred and forty-four seats were occupied at the opening and included representatives from Wynnum Mercury and other theatres. A number of people had responded to the idea of memorial seats.

The official opening programme included the song “Gatton—Bauhinia Town” with a Mercury Children’s choir. A highlight was “The Stars Grow Pale”, a one-act play I had written, and it was performed under my direction. This had been premiered at the Ipswich City Hall in the Drama Festival the week before. It advocated the annual observance of an Australia-wide Theatre Week to focus the public eye on the benefits of a Living Theatre in the community by impact of publicity, to gain better staging facilities and “play houses” for Little Theatres; to encourage Government and

local authority subsidies or grants; to permit the leasing of sections of recreation reserves or parks for Little Theatre purposes as enjoyed by other particular clubs; to draw attention to the great plays through the ages; the fine religious plays, the best playwrights of today; to foster and encourage the rich but neglected field of Australian drama; and to help raise the prestige and popularity of theatre generally, which some people still thought consisted entirely of "rogues and vagabonds".

(An interesting outcome of this play was the observance of the first Australia Little Theatre Week in Queensland Centenary Year, 1959.)

At the time of signing our lease we volunteered that we would be willing to allow the Show Society the use of the building for the annual show, and we looked forward to a happy association with another organisation also operating for the good of the town and district . . . but we found that we alone had to undertake the gigantic task, prior to the Gatton Show, of dismantling our theatre, finding storage, and then re-installing everything after the show. My husband Maurice's organisation and help were invaluable here, as in other work in the Theatre.

Australia Theatre Week became so popular that it was extended into a nine-day festival with further inter-State and country representatives. The first essay competition under its auspices was conducted in 1965 with the title of "The Value of Theatre in Education". Judges in each State appraised the entries, and donated prizes were awarded.



Christine Davson receiving the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award from the Duke at a ceremony in Brisbane. Gatton Mercury became a registered operator for this Award scheme in 1967.

HISTORY OF THEATRE

Another special project launched in 1965 was for a History of Theatre in Australia. Theatres were invited to send their histories to the honorary director for Australia Theatre Week. A valuable collection has resulted.

Several plans for new Club Rooms on the Old Education Reserve at Gatton, were submitted before the Shire Council passed a plan for the rooms' erection on the North Street land, based on a plan drawn up by Brisbane architect Dr. Karl Langer. Foundations were laid by a local builder, Mr. I. Rosenberg, and so the land was saved from passing out of our hands. Unfortunately, due to the many setbacks causing also loss of our guarantors, we did not have enough money to proceed further at that stage.

But persistent effort brought its reward, and the official opening of our new Gatton Mercury Theatre and Mercury Children's Theatre Club Rooms and Mini-Theatre was performed by Sir Gordon Chalk, Deputy Premier and Treasurer of Queensland, on 10 October 1970.

Mercurians believe in their Theatre and its value in enriching contemporary life. They treasure the following tribute, paid by the late Rev. Edward Hunt on the occasion of its three-act Australian production for the official opening:

“Here's every success to the Mercury
 And all that its symbol guards
 To bring to the town and the country-man
 The wealth of the immortal bards.
 The plays of our land and our English tongue
 Are a light to our darkened age;
 The footlights furnish a culture still
 And wisdom adorns the stage.”