Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria

By Cheryl Threadgold

Submitted in fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swinburne University of Technology, 2019.

Copyright © 2019 Cheryl Elizabeth Threadgold. 
Except where otherwise indicated, this is an open access work distributed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.
# Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria

## Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 7

**Chapter One:** ................................................................................................................................. 12

**Australian Early Colonial Amateur Theatre (1788-1850)** ......................................................... 12

- **Convict Era** ................................................................................................................................. 12

- **Goldfields Theatre** ....................................................................................................................... 17
  - Ballarat ......................................................................................................................................... 17
  - Entertainment on the Gold Fields ................................................................................................. 19
  - Sandhurst ...................................................................................................................................... 20
  - Castlemaine ................................................................................................................................. 23
    - Castlemaine Theatre Company Today ......................................................................................... 24
  - Dunolly ........................................................................................................................................ 26
  - Tarnagulla .................................................................................................................................... 26
  - Lamplough ................................................................................................................................... 27
  - Walhalla ......................................................................................................................................... 27
  - New Theatres Built During the Gold Rush .................................................................................... 28
  - Reflection on the Gold Rush in Victoria ....................................................................................... 29

- **Mechanics’ Institutes** .................................................................................................................... 29

- **19th Century Theatre** ................................................................................................................ 33
  - Melbourne ................................................................................................................................... 33
    - Royal Victoria Theatre (The Pavilion, Theatre Royal, Victoria Saloon) .................................. 33
    - Queen’s Theatre Royal .............................................................................................................. 34
    - The Melbourne Garrick Club ..................................................................................................... 34
    - Chilperic Amateur Opera Company ......................................................................................... 36
  - Bairnsdale .................................................................................................................................... 37
  - Bairnsdale Today – Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company ......................................... 39

- **East Asian Influence** .................................................................................................................... 41

- **Workplace Theatre** ...................................................................................................................... 41

- **Minstrelsy, Vaudeville and Pantomime** ...................................................................................... 42

- **English v. Australian Plays** .......................................................................................................... 43

- **The Next Century** ....................................................................................................................... 43

**Chapter Two: World War One** .................................................................................................... 45

- **Pre-World War One (1900-1913)** .............................................................................................. 45
  - Victoria in the New Century ......................................................................................................... 45
  - Australian Theatre Society ........................................................................................................... 47
  - Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company ..................................................................................... 47
Chapter Three: World War Two Era ................................................. 92

World War Two (1939-1945) ......................................................... 92
Concert Party Entertainment .................................................... 92
Salvation Army Concert Parties .............................................. 92
Chapter Four: Growth of Amateur Theatre

1950s ......................................................... 139

Personal Reflections ......................................................... 139
Arrow Theatre Company ......................................................... 143
The Victorian Drama League ......................................................... 146
One-Act Play Festivals ......................................................... 147
Bendigo Theatre Company (originally the Bendigo Operatic Society) ......................................................... 147
Heidelberg Theatre Company (formerly Heidelberg Repertory Group) ......................................................... 150
Beaumaris Theatre ......................................................... 152
Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group ......................................................... 155
The National Theatre ......................................................... 157

Amateur Theatre in Victoria: 1939-1945 ......................................................... 97

The National Theatre Movement of Australia ......................................................... 97
Melbourne ......................................................... 97
Ballarat National Theatre ......................................................... 99
Swan Hill National Theatre ......................................................... 102
The Swan Hill Theatre Group Today ......................................................... 103
City of Heidelberg Branch, National Theatre Movement of Australia ......................................................... 106
Melbourne University Drama Groups ......................................................... 106
Melbourne University Dramatic Club (MUDC) ......................................................... 106
The Tin Alley Players ......................................................... 106
The Marlowe Society ......................................................... 107
The Little Theatre ......................................................... 107
The Colac Players ......................................................... 110
War Years ......................................................... 110
The Colac Players Today ......................................................... 111
Camperdown Theatre Company ......................................................... 112
Frankston Theatre Group ......................................................... 114

Post-World War Two Era (1945-1949) ......................................................... 115

Post-War Amateur Theatre in Victoria ......................................................... 115
Mordialloc Theatre Company ......................................................... 116
MLOC Productions (formerly the Mordialloc Light Opera Company) ......................................................... 119
Mildura Theatre Company ......................................................... 123
Portland CEMA Theatre Group ......................................................... 125
Warrnambool Theatre Company ......................................................... 127
Music and Drama in Kew ......................................................... 130
Williamstown Little Theatre ......................................................... 130
Sale Theatre Company ......................................................... 134
Foster Art, Music and Drama Association (FAMDA) ......................................................... 135
Council of Adult Education ......................................................... 138

Instruction Manual for Producers of War-Time Concert Parties ......................................................... 93
‘Theatres of War: Wartime Entertainment and the Australian Experience’ Exhibition ......................................................... 94

Hiawatha ......................................................... 95
1970s .................................................................................................................. 199

Personal Reflections ......................................................................................... 199
The Australian Performing Group (Alternative Theatre) ................................. 201
Actors Theatre and Drouin Butter Factory ...................................................... 202
The Powderkeg Players .................................................................................... 203
Altona City Theatre .......................................................................................... 204
The Mount Players (Macedon) ........................................................................ 206
Dramus Theatre Incorporated, Hamilton ......................................................... 208
Medimime Productions Incorporated (Barwon Health, Geelong) ..................... 210
Anglesea Performing Arts Group ..................................................................... 211
Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company .......................................................... 213
Essendon Theatre Company ............................................................................ 216
Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated ......................................................... 217
Port Fairy Theatre Group ................................................................................. 220

1980s .................................................................................................................. 222

Theatre Presented in Prison .............................................................................. 223
Creswick Theatre Company ............................................................................ 224
The Diamond Valley Singers .......................................................................... 225
Peridot Theatre (Mount Waverley) ................................................................... 228
BATS Theatre Company (Berwick) ................................................................. 231

Chapter Six ................................................................................................. 235

1990s .................................................................................................................. 235

Personal Reflections .......................................................................................... 235
Victorian Drama League .................................................................................... 237
Music Theatre Guild of Victoria ................................................................. 238
Gippsland Associated Theatre Incorporated ........................................ 238
Lyrebird Awards ...................................................................................... 238
Here There and Everywhere Theatre Company (Traralgon) .................. 239
Theatre of the Winged Unicorn (Ceres, Geelong) .................................. 240
Heidelberg Allstars ................................................................................ 242
Encore Theatre Company Incorporated (Clayton) ............................... 244
Aspect Theatre Company ....................................................................... 247
Warragul Theatre Company Incorporated .......................................... 249
MOaRTZ (Moe, Gippsland) .................................................................... 251

2000-2018 .................................................................................................. 254
Personal Reflections ................................................................................ 254
Harrow Sound and Light Show (Harrow, Western District) ................. 258
Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group (Queenscliff) ......................... 260
Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe (Colac) ........................................................ 262
Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC) (Pakenham) .................. 264
Torquay Theatre Troupe (Torquay) ........................................................ 267
Footlight Productions (Geelong) ............................................................. 269
Friends of Black Rock House Incorporated (Black Rock) ................... 272
CenterStage Geelong (Geelong) ............................................................. 274
Off the Leash Theatre Company (Warragul) ........................................ 276
LOTS Theatre (Moorabbin) .................................................................... 280
Youth Theatre .......................................................................................... 282
Impact Theatre (Warragul) .................................................................... 282
GSODA Junior Players (Geelong) ........................................................... 283
University of Melbourne ....................................................................... 285
Deakin University .................................................................................. 285
Monash University ................................................................................ 286
Ark Theatre ............................................................................................. 286
Bunjil Place ............................................................................................. 286

Conclusion .............................................................................................. 288

List of Plates ........................................................................................... 289

Reference List ........................................................................................ 298

Introduction

The theatre of a given people or a given time must be judged as a whole, as a living organism which isn’t healthy unless it is healthy in every limb. That is another reason why it is worth speaking about the amateur theatre.¹

The contents of *Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria*, a treasure trove of collective history, culture and personal recollections, have remained sequestered from researchers for more than a century and a half. This is a story long overdue to be told. Sparkling with theatrical allusion and enriched by community heart and soul, this valuable cache has been ensconced in sheds, theatres, homes or boxes. It is preserved also in folklore, traditions, websites, photo albums and scrapbooks passed down through generations, or firmly secured in the memories of participants, whether city or country dwellers.

As researcher and storyteller, I feel privileged to be presenting this story about amateur theatre in Victoria. The narrative emerging from the research data has emphasised the importance of live performance for communities in past and present generations. For example, convicts wasted no time in presenting plays in their new land, whether to temporarily escape from their harsh new reality, to alleviate homesickness, or to satisfy a genuine love of theatre. Over time, these performative styles and play texts filtered through to influence Victoria’s fledgling arts sector in the mid-nineteenth century.

I respectfully acknowledge that for many centuries, Aboriginal Australians presented cultural live performances for their communities. These Indigenous rituals, sacred ceremonies, and Dreamtime stories of Creation represent the first known performances presented in the many Aboriginal Nations by members of a community, for their community. Aboriginal Australians continued this entertainment for white incomers, and today are respected and admired worldwide for their high-quality music, dance, song and dramatic performances. They deserve studies, but are outside the scope of this project.

In Victoria, there are three principal components of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘living organism’ of theatre.² First is Commercial Theatre, where the professional theatrical arts sector sets the
benchmark to which other theatre-practitioners can aspire. Professional theatre practitioners work in the industry for a livelihood, rightfully receiving financial payment for their work.

Next is the Independent theatrical arts sector, which is usually financially subsidised in some way. This can include Alternate Theatre, Circus, Cabaret, Experimental Theatre, Community Theatre, Multi-Cultural Theatre, Aboriginal Theatre, Educational Theatre, Street Theatre, LGBT Theatre, Youth Theatre, Women’s Theatre, Disability Theatre and Stand Up Comedy.

Amateur theatre is the third component of Victoria’s theatre scene, comprising over one hundred musical and non-musical amateur theatre companies currently operating in Victoria, not including school productions. These amateur theatre-makers dedicate their time, talent and skills to create theatre for communities with no financial reward. The meaning of the Latin-derived word ‘amatorem’ is ‘to love’, and a deep love for theatre inspires theatre-making in this arts sector.³

Thoughts of amateur theatre may conjure images of incompetent dilettantes muddling around onstage while regaled by loyal family and friends. Fortunately, this is not the situation today. While there may still be loyal attendance from family and friends, contemporary amateur theatre offers audiences quality shows in local communities at reasonable cost, and usually includes free parking. Audiences purchase tickets and this money pays for the various costs associated with theatre-making, from hiring rehearsal and performance venues to paying for licensing fees, insurance and costumes. The amateur theatre-makers themselves, however, are unpaid.

Unfortunately, a negative connotation of ‘incompetency’ remains associated with the term ‘amateur’. Perhaps this is one reason why amateur theatre research was mostly ignored during the twentieth century. A term with a negative connotation does not do justice to today’s fine local theatre scene, but, so far, an accurate term to describe this arts sector has evaded linguists. The term ‘amateur’ has therefore been used in this book to describe the unpaid theatre-maker to conform with its historical use over past centuries.
This treasure trove of valuable theatre history presents the first known historical lineage of the musical and non-musical amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria. A past, present and ongoing continuum of theatre companies has played an important role in both entertaining communities and becoming integral to local historical and cultural records. Over time, these theatre companies have formed, and then closed for various reasons. Some have re-opened or started anew, but as long as people feel a need to perform, create theatre or spectate, the cycle will continue.

Through personal interviews, these stories shine with human interest and insightful reflection. These personal voices have told stories about the unique cultures and histories of their individual theatre companies of varying sizes and locations. Adding another voice to this story, I temporarily step inside the narrative at the beginning of each decade from the 1950s to relate autobiographical theatrical experiences. These lived experiences within amateur theatre since 1958 aim to inform and enhance researched history.

Involvement by everyday people in amateur theatre companies remains hugely popular. There is also a rapidly developing school production sector in Victoria presenting increasingly high-quality shows. The ever-growing, but still relatively recent, school theatre sector is not within the scope of this book, but there is discussion about youth theatre.

Amateur theatre commenced in Victoria in 1842 with the opening of The Pavilion Theatre in Bourke Street (also known as the Royal Victoria Theatre, Theatre Royal and the Victoria Saloon). The story contained in this book starts earlier, in 1788, with an overview of convict theatre and early Australian colonial theatre. The Gold Rush era saw amateur performers join professionals to entertain diggers, Mechanics’ Institutes became performance venues for amateur theatrical productions, and theatre companies formed across regional and urban Victoria during the nineteenth century.

Early twentieth-century writers such as Louis Esson and Vance Palmer were determined to establish a national identity through locally written plays, and amateur actors contributed significantly by performing these works by unknown writers. World War One gave amateur performers opportunity to join concert-parties to entertain troops, or
present productions to raise funds for war-related charities. Service men and women also presented their own shows, often in prison camps.

The elusive search for a successful Australian Drama continued in the 1920s, with the Pioneer Players presenting locally-written works, while amateur theatre activity across Victoria increased post-World War One and World War Two. Innovative theatre became popular during the 1930s, such as Workplace Theatre, and the Melbourne Worker’s Theatre and New Theatre introduced political theatre. Melbourne University Theatre and the Melbourne Little Theatre and National Theatre Movements were also established.

Four theatre companies formed in the 1930s are still operating today: Geelong Repertory Theatre Company (1932), The Gilbert and Sullivan Society (1935), The Hartwell Players (1938) and The 1812 Theatre (1938). The formation of the Council of Adult Education in 1947 and the Victorian Drama League in 1952, brought welcome structure and guidance to the many amateur theatre companies established in Victoria.

In 2018, most amateur theatre companies are incorporated, for reasons including protection of committee members from liability. Some companies use the term ‘incorporated’ as part of their title and others do not, so the term will be used once when initially introducing each company. Citations are limited to promote and facilitate the reader's engagement with the narrative.

Harold Baigent confirms the presence of this life force phenomenon known as ‘amateur theatre’ as a sparkling component of Brecht’s ‘living organism’ of theatre:

The amateur theatre should be the backbone of the theatre in any country. From its ranks come many of the finest professional actors and producers. It provides dramatic fare in the remotest villages. It makes the general public theatre-conscious. It acts as a leavening throughout the community, stirring up interest in the theatre and breeding new generations of theatregoers [ … ] the amateur theatre is a vital part of the living theatre.5

As researcher and storyteller I feel a deep passion for this theatrical research treasure, but it does not belong to me. These jewels of the past and present belong to the thousands of
volunteers who have wholeheartedly dedicated their time, talents and skills to create
theatre for their communities.

Theatre-making for love. Amatorem.
Chapter One:

Australian Early Colonial Amateur Theatre (1788-1850)

Convict Era

On the high seas on a warm summer night, 2\textsuperscript{nd} January, 1788, convicts entertained passengers on board the \textit{Scarborough} ship with a play and songs.\textsuperscript{1} Amateur theatre would soon arrive in a mysterious, unknown land, but for now, after tedious difficult months at sea, the magic of live performance would glow for the passengers like a warm, comforting beacon.

Pretending to be someone else, even temporarily, is an escapist phenomenon common to many art forms, enjoyed by practitioners and audiences through the ages. At the time the first fleet left for the Great Southern Land, later known as Australia, amateur and professional theatre in England and Ireland had a well-established history. Amateur theatre included drama in churches, where priests mimed the Story of the Marys at the Tomb, and guild members enacted stories of miracles and moralities in city streets.\textsuperscript{2}
People from all walks of life had the opportunity to enjoy live performance of different genres in venues of varying sizes and prestige, either as participants or spectators.

There was no professional theatre in the colony at this time, and amateur theatre had already been introduced by some of the new arrivals, even before landing in Botany Bay. While English styles and content were popular, Irish theatre also made its mark in the early colonial settlement, even though only twelve percent of convicts were of Irish nationality. In 1789, just eighteen months after the arrival of the first fleet, the first recorded amateur theatrical performance presented in Australia was Irish dramatist George Farquhar’s comedy, *The Recruiting Officer*.4

Presented to celebrate the birthday of King George the Third, *The Recruiting Officer* was staged in a makeshift theatre in Sydney Cove to an audience of about sixty people, including Governor Arthur Phillip.5 The comedy had already been presented during the eighteenth century in North America and Jamaica, and its depiction of the culture and conflict between civilians and military officers made it a popular performance choice in British outposts. Australian novelist Thomas Keneally’s *The Playmaker* (1987) and playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *For Our Country’s Good* (1988), both based around the production of *The Recruiting Officer*, suggest it was the marine officers who initiated this first known theatrical production and trained the convict actors.6 7 8 After intense research, historian Robert Jordan believes *The Recruiting Officer* was presented by the convicts themselves.

As well as improvisation or using play texts brought on the sea journey to Australia, convicts sometimes wrote their own plays which were often of a high standard. For example, the three-act comedy *Jemmy Green in Australia*, written by English-educated convict James Tucker in the 1840s, was eventually broadcast nationally by the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1987.9

Tucker also wrote the novel *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh*, which was discovered when the original three hundred-page, hand-written manuscript appeared at a Royal Australian Historical Society exhibition in Sydney in 1920.10
First published as a novel in 1929, the story exposes the horrors of convict life, presumably from Tucker’s own personal experiences. Pertinent to this story is the amateur theatre company established in the camp by comedic Cockney prisoner Jemmy King. In marked contrast with Tucker’s depiction of the harshness and brutality of convict life, King’s inventive creativity includes making costumes from bags and leftover materials, lamps from tin cans, and a ‘tolerable melody’ played by an orchestra comprising a tin violin, flute, tambourine and drum.

Singing ballads was also a popular form of entertainment among the transportees and original lyrics were often used to protest about living conditions in their new
environment. Songs of complaint written by convicts included ‘The Plains of Emu’, ‘The Convict Maid’ and ‘The Death of Captain Logan’. But while convicts and their audiences may have enjoyed the escapism to a different world offered by songs and theatrical performances, opinions differed between free settlers and authorities regarding the moral and political suitability of entertainment in a penal colony.

Undaunted by these conflicting opinions, convicts remained theatrically active on Norfolk Island between 1793 and 1794, at Emu Plains near the Blue Mountains in New South Wales in 1822, and at Port Macquarie and Parramatta in 1840. Considered ghastly by today’s standards, an alternate form of entertainment during early colonial settlement was the viewing of executions presented to mass audiences. Even worse were the publicly viewed dissections performed in hospitals on bodies of the executed.

In 1796, theatre-lover Robert Sidaway, also a watch-case maker and former convict, used convict labour to build Australia’s first regular theatre containing one hundred and twenty seats in Bell Row, now Bligh Street, Sydney. Alas, authorities closed the theatre two years later, for as well as the rowdy audiences, convicts were suspected of pickpocketing patrons and robbing their homes while they attended the theatre.

---

Theatre Playbill. For the Benefit of J. Butler and W. Bryant: at the Theatre, Sydney on July 30, 1796, will be performed ‘Jane Shore’ … after the play ‘The Wapping Landlady’ and ‘The Miraculous Cure’.
George Hughes, nla.obj- RBRS N 686.2099441 F692, National Library of Australia.
Earlier allegations of misbehaviour influenced the third Governor of New South Wales, Governor Philip Gidley King, to disapprove of theatres after his appointment in 1800. Public live performances also declined because potential actors became assigned to private masters in isolated areas. Early nineteenth century playwrights included Scottish journalist David Burns who wrote *The Bushrangers* after witnessing the hanging of convict-turned-bushranger Matthew Brady in the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land in 1826. With its criminal protagonist, romance and observations of torrid conditions in the penal colony, *The Bushrangers* was performed three years later in Edinburgh, Scotland, but not in Australia until 1971 when presented by high school students in Sydney.

Merchant Barnett Levy introduced the acting profession to New South Wales after first staging concerts in 1826 in the assembly rooms of the Royal Hotel in George Street, Sydney. He eventually obtained a licence from Governor Richard Bourke to open the Theatre Royal inside the hotel in 1833, and the first show presented was the Gothic melodrama *The Miller and his Man*. When Levy died in late 1837, the theatre closed. It is interesting to note that these performances were advertised as ‘amateur theatricals’ to convey respectability, in view of theatre’s rowdy reputation at the time.

It would not be long before amateur theatre would commence in Victoria, influenced by the performatives styles and content of English and Irish traditional productions presented by early colonial theatre. This influence continued to culturally impact upon productions presented in Australia for at least another one hundred years, until Australian audiences gradually gained confidence in the works of their own writers. Eric Irvin believes theatre was ‘in the blood’ of the people in the early nineteenth century, and it is pleasing to observe that two hundred years later, nothing has changed. In 2018, over one hundred amateur musical and non-musical theatre companies operate in Victoria alone, with thousands of volunteers throughout Australia dedicating their time, talent and skills, for the love of theatre.
**Goldfields Theatre**

By 1850, news of gold discoveries in the newly settled territory of California had reached Australia. These gold findings, located so many thousands of miles away, had been changing and enriching the lives of Americans since 1848. There was no anticipation of discovering riches locally, so it was a surprise for theatregoers enjoying Melbourne’s first pantomime at the Queen’s Theatre, to learn of an imminent large-scale gold rush in Australia! The Goblin of the Gold Coast, or Harlequina and the Melbournites in California, presented by Mr Montague (whose first name is unknown), predicted local gold discoveries. Parodies on songs of the day were popular, and while the title of the original song is unknown, the pantomime introduced a new parody titled ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! For the Gold’.

However, unbeknown to the audience, Victoria’s first Lieutenant-Governor, Charles Joseph La Trobe was already aware of suspected gold discoveries in his state, but had not publicised the news for fear of disrupting law and order. In August 1851, La Trobe reluctantly publicly announced gold findings, referring to them as the ‘outbreak’ of gold, rather than a ‘discovery’.

But gold certainly had been discovered, and after Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe’s announcement, thousands of eager gold-seekers wasted no time in reaching areas rumoured to have rich pickings, such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Castlemaine.

**Ballarat**

Once again, the escapist phenomenon of theatre sparkled with its pretence and illusion as a welcome distraction from life’s challenges, this time from the rough conditions on the goldfields. Playgoer William Furley’s recollections of Ballarat theatrical productions in the 1850s and 1860s include seeing Othello presented at the Montezuma Theatre, corner Main Road and Eureka Street. Presumably this was an amateur production, because it is documented that amateur performers on the Ballarat Goldfields performed in a wooden-framed structure known as the Montezuma Theatre.
The Montezuma Hotel and Theatre followed the custom at the time of combining theatre with a drinking house, with separate entrances as indicated by this 1861 ink and pencil sketch. In contrast to the Montezuma Theatre, the elegant Her Majesty's Theatre in Ballarat was built by the Clarke family and first opened in 1875 as 'The Academy of Music' to avoid an existing stigma against theatre at the time. In 1898 it became 'Her Majesty's Theatre', and is regarded today as the 'best preserved' theatre building in Australia.
While there is no record of amateur performances being presented in the Adelphi Theatre in Ballarat, this sketch by an unknown artist depicts the basic interior of a hastily constructed tent theatre in 1855. Visiting Irish performer Lola Montez was so favourably received when presenting her Spider Dance in 1856 in the new Victoria Theatre, Ballarat, that audiences threw gold nuggets on to the stage.27

**Entertainment on the Gold Fields**

Differentiation between amateur and professional performances on the Victorian goldfields is sometimes blurred, but amateurs filled in as replacement entertainers when professionals were absent. Whether the professionals regarded the amateurs with disdain is unknown, but both theatrical arts sectors appear to have worked together to entertain the diggers with various styles of shows. One popular style of performance was an early form of bawdy music hall known as ‘concert hall’, presented in the makeshift tents, theatres and hotels which sprang up in the gold-mining towns.28

The diggers came from many parts of the world to fulfil dreams of finding their fortune, and some who had started out by seeking gold ended up treading the boards themselves. Others improvised to create their own entertainment, having either brought instruments
from home or crafting them from items found on the goldfields. Their popular ballads and songs often elevated bushrangers such as Ben Hall to hero status.\textsuperscript{29}

At a time when amateur theatre companies were forming across the state, the gold rush adversely affected Melbourne’s professional theatre scene because actors, workers and theatregoers had left to seek fortune at the diggings.\textsuperscript{30} Manning Clark describes the exodus in theatrical style: ‘As in \textit{Macbeth}, men stood not on their social rank in going, but went at once’.\textsuperscript{31} The gold discoveries generated trade and wealth, and a growing population enabled the new state of Victoria to prosper. By the 1880s, Melbourne was ranked beside London as one of the wealthiest and most technically advanced cities in the world.\textsuperscript{32}

Efficient organisation was required to import the increasing number of overseas visiting professional performers during the Gold Rush era. This was the beginning of theatrical management in Australia, and by the end of the nineteenth century, J. C. Williamson’s were known as the largest theatrical booking agency in the world.

\textbf{Sandhurst}

Sandhurst, renamed Bendigo in 1891, was another theatrically active town during the Gold Rush era. In an insightful and valuable gift to future generations, the President of the Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Club, H. C. Peters, had the foresight to maintain a scrapbook between 1856 and 1859 including press clippings about the company’s productions.\textsuperscript{33} These archival treasures reveal interesting glimpses of amateur theatrical culture and performance in Victoria during the mid-nineteenth century. One newspaper clipping dated 28th August, 1857 and written anonymously for \textit{The Courier of the Mines}, reviews the Amateur Dramatic Club’s performance at the Haymarket Theatre: ‘There was a great house last night – long before the rising of the curtain, the pit, the boxes – every available corner from which the stage could, or could not be seen, was crowded’.

This review extract indicates strong public support for amateur theatre at the time, with ‘the pit’ referring to the area of benched audience seating in front of the stage.\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, ‘the pit’ in twenty-first century conventional theatres refers to the area accommodating the show’s orchestra.\textsuperscript{35} Originally situated at floor level in front of the
stalls, more recently this pit is sometimes built underneath the stage. Another form of ‘pit’, ‘mosh pit’ is the term used at modern day rock concerts for an allocated audience space in front of the stage for dancing.36

The two-act drama *Robert Macaire* was also presented in 1857 at the Haymarket Theatre and the reviewer praises amateur actor Mr Downer as Pierre, who ‘played as he always does, admirably well; he is one of the most finished actors, whether amateur or professional’.37 The farce *Box and Cox* followed, but the writer laments being unable to stay to see the concluding piece, *Grimshaw, Badshaw and Bradshaw*. He acknowledges the production was a good fundraiser for charity: ‘a very handsome sum has been realised by the efforts of the Club for the benefit of the Benevolent Asylum’. The reviewer’s comments indicate that a high standard of amateur theatre existed in the mid-nineteenth century, with good attendances and support from the local press.

Without modern-day costs such as performance rights, expensive hiring fees for venues or insurance, theatre companies could use box-office takings to focus on raising funds for charitable causes. *The Bendigo Mercury* dated 22nd July, 1858, published a preview story titled ‘The Amateur Dramatic Performance’, which fundraised for the Mechanics’ Institute. The article mentions that the cast attracted audiences because local identities, traders and professionals were included, such as the town’s doctor. The popularity and cultural status of amateur theatre in this era is also evident in comments published in the *Bendigo Mercury* on 18th February, 1859, under the heading ‘The Haymarket Theatre’:

> The amateurs always draw, and the object of their performance last night being for the benefit of the Benevolent Asylum, was a sure card. At all events, the ladies are the best judges and we heard the flattering term ‘those dear amateurs’, way often applied during the evening.

The term ‘those dear amateurs’ could be interpreted as demeaning and patronising. However, historian Leslie Rees believes the term was well-intended, because performers in amateur shows at that time were regarded as ‘ladies and gentlemen’ to distinguish them from ‘the rough and tumble rowdyism of the professional milieu’.38 However, Rees disagrees with the ‘tolerant and indulgent’ terms used by newspapers of the day to describe amateur activities, believing the performances and mostly imported material did
not deserve such praise. An example of these terms can be recognised in a review in the Bendigo Advertiser dated 19th May, 1859. Titled ‘The Amateur Performers in Aid of the Funds of the Hospital’ and performed at the Haymarket Theatre, the extract reads:

Stalls, boxes and dress circle were radiant with fashion and beauty and the brilliant jets of gas, so preferably provided [...] were well-nigh eclipsed by the bright eyes which everywhere flashed, glorious as tropical meteors, yet soft as summer lightning, on the gay and crowded scene.39

A second newspaper, the Bendigo Mercury, reviewed the same production on the same night, using less indulgent language. The writer does appear to agree strongly that the Sandhurst players compare favourably with professionals, referring to them now as a ‘society’ rather than a ‘club’:

The public of Sandhurst are indebted to the Amateur Dramatic Society for many pleasant entertainments, but last night’s performance was their crowning triumph. The Sandhurst Amateurs have arrived at this enviable pinnacle of perfection that they have no occasion to plead their amateurship to disarm or extenuate criticism. They may fairly challenge comparison with any company of professionals which has as yet appeared in Sandhurst.

Charities benefitting from the Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Club’s box-office takings included the Miners’ Accident Society, which assisted injured miners. Others included the Sandhurst Benevolent Asylum, the Mechanics’ Institute and the Burke and Wills Memorial Fund.40

Suburban and regional newspapers today often support their local amateur shows with preview stories, but a reviewer rarely attends. Fortunately, modern-day hard copy and online theatrically-themed publications such as Stage Whispers, the Melbourne Observer and the Victorian Drama League’s newsletter Theatrecraft send honorary writers to review amateur theatre shows, as do online theatrical sites, including Theatre People.41 42

Sandhurst’s theatre scene was boosted further with the opening of the Royal Princess Theatre in 1874, and the Sandhurst City Dramatic Club performed there, presenting
Hamlet in 1878 for the Easter Fair. In 1882, The Pickwick Club formed in Sandhurst, as did performance groups of diverse styles such as the Bendigo Histrionic Club, the Sandhurst Garrick Club, the Philanthropic Dramatic Club, Bendigo Shakespearian Society, Literary and Dramatic Society, Operatic Society, Glee Club, the Liedertafel and Amateur Dramatic Club, with opera introduced by amateur theatre companies in 1888.

Another goldmining town theatrically active in both the past and present is Castlemaine.

**Castlemaine**

Local resident Raymond Bradfield writes about professional and amateur theatre burgeoning in Forest Creek in 1857, with new theatres and music halls created in association with the public houses. At least three amateur theatre companies were formed in Castlemaine during the Gold Rush era, including The Oddfellows Lodge amateur dramatic society.

Their first show was Douglas Jerrold’s drama The Rent Day, followed by a Grand Tableau of the Order, then a one-act farce called An Irish Engagement, by Walter Watts. Theatricals were so popular that another community theatre group formed c.1857, called the Forest Creek Amateur Dramatic Society, which opened with Edward Fitzball’s drama Innkeeper of Abbeville, to a full house at the Red Hill hall. Early productions of the Castlemaine Dramatic Society included Sheridan’s The Rivals at the Theatre Royal, followed by Money, written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The Mount Alexander Mail reported the latter play enjoyed a packed house, yet the small loss at the box-office may have been due to admitting one hundred and twenty people to ‘the pit’ but only selling sixty-five tickets.

As a result, the Mail suggested the Society should devise a method of preventing ‘this unlawful and rather ungenerous form of ingress’. In another real-life drama for the company, leading player Miss Hudson developed a ‘temperament’ during final rehearsals for a repeat season of Money. Courageous Mrs A’Beckett Evans, an elderly, retired performer, agreed to play the role at short notice, and the Mail critic diplomatically notes ‘awkward moments’.
**Castlemaine Theatre Company Today**

More than a century later, Castlemaine is still abuzz with the magic of live theatre. The Castlemaine Musical Theatre company, formed in 1959, eventually merged with the dramatic group to share resources and become the Castlemaine Theatre Company Incorporated.

During an interview in Castlemaine in 2016, company Secretary, Kate Stones and President, Ken McLeod explained that the town’s two hundred and thirty-seat Phee Broadway Theatre, owned by the Alexander Shire Council, was named after company founding member Phee Broadway OAM. The company performed in this theatre, but when safety issues arose in 2015, the Council required theatre companies to pay hourly rates for a duty Safety Officer. This meant the company could no longer afford to present productions in this venue. To add to their problems, at the time of the interview, the company was homeless after an old church and hall they used in the town of Chewton was condemned in 2011. Kate referred to the company as being ‘nomadic’, without a permanent rehearsal and performance venue. They were hoping to obtain space in a new high school being built in the town, and in the meantime used a room in the Castlemaine Hospital and the Scout Hall for rehearsals.

‘Finding affordable spaces to rehearse and perform in is becoming difficult’, said Kate, acknowledging that this problem is mirrored by other theatre companies in country towns and suburbs. The Castlemaine Theatre Company solved the problem of storing costumes and props by using containers in the carpark of the Chewton Community Centre and in private sheds. Volunteer assistance is vital to theatre companies but, when discussing recruitment, Kate felt that people’s attitudes today are different. ‘They want an exchange’. This can mean expectation of a complimentary ticket for helping with ushering, selling programs or refreshments during a production. Instead of complimentary tickets, the company presents gifts of appreciation to participants at the end of each show.

Successful productions presented by the company include *Monkey and the Monk*, directed by Kate Stones and presented in 2015 in the Castlemaine Town Hall, thanks to financial assistance from a grant. *Monkey* retells a traditional Chinese legend made famous in the 1980s by the Japanese TV series *Monkey Magic*, which achieved global
cult status. Ken spoke of the company’s good fortune when their leading man, Yen, auditioned, and the audience loved him. ‘Eight hundred people attended that show’, said Ken proudly, and Kate linked the production with the town’s local Chinese heritage: ‘There was once a tent population here of ten thousand Chinese’.

From a personal perspective, Ken was formerly a professional actor, and came to Castlemaine in 1990 as a single dad. He went down to the local theatre company to meet people and they were auditioning for Half a Sixpence. ‘I said I didn’t audition, so they gave me one line in the show’, said Ken. He could observe how everything worked, although he found amateur theatre different to the professional scene. ‘I took warm-ups, which had not happened before’. Ken once ‘did everything’ in the company, including acting, directing and set-building, but acknowledges that others need to be involved too. ‘We have a great backstage crew now’.

Kate’s personal story includes working as a Visual Arts Officer at the Art Gallery and gradually making performing arts her work and passion. ‘I have no illusions of becoming a professional actor’, explained Kate, ‘but I facilitate drama workshops with people with disabilities and recently finished a Masters of Directing at the Victorian College of the Arts’. Kate said joining the Castlemaine Theatre Company in 2009 has entirely changed her life. Kate and Ken feel they are custodians of Castlemaine Theatre Company’s history. ‘It has a momentum of its own’, said Kate.

In a 2018 update, Kate advises she is now President and the company’s relationship with the local Council has shifted in a positive direction. Venue hiring fees have become affordable and significant improvements have been made to the venue. Kate believes these changes are primarily due to a sustained campaign by local community theatre-makers plus a turnover of Council staff, with a new Chief Executive Officer, Cultural Development Officer and some new councillors. In 2019, the Castlemaine Theatre Company celebrates its sixtieth anniversary.

Other goldrush towns relatively close to Castlemaine and also steeped in rich theatrical history are Dunolly, Tarnagulla and Lamplough.
Dunolly

In Dunolly between 1839 and 1870 there were saloons for drinking and listening to contemporary ballads in buildings mostly made of canvas, or occasionally constructed with wood or iron.48 The Dunolly Dramatic Society formed at the Family and Commercial Hotel in 1859, and adopted the operational rules of London’s Garrick Club, presumably excluding women. The President was former professional actor and postmaster Mr Daniell, and the company fundraised for the Dunolly Hospital. Processions held on the Queen’s Birthday included all the townspeople, with solicitors and doctors joining in the patriotic expression behind a wagon on which theatricals were played.

In theatrical style, Dunolly’s main street was christened ‘Broadway’, and theatres presented legitimate drama, including Shakespeare, while professional performers entertained in better appointed buildings with a stage. On 11th April, 1857, Harrington’s canvas hotel opened in Inkerman with a ‘talented company’, but the correspondent from Castlemaine’s Miner’s Right disagreed with Harrington’s interpretation of ‘talented’: ‘There was however only one fiddler there, and anything would have been preferable to the mild squeakings of the non-professional fiddle!’

Twelve years later, this area would be the location for the discovery of the ‘Welcome Stranger’, claimed to be the world’s largest nugget, weighing two hundred and ten pounds gross (sixty six kilograms).

Tarnagulla

Situated fifteen kilometres from Dunolly, the central Victorian township of Tarnagulla sits in the heart of the Golden Triangle. Residents living here in the nineteenth century were able to follow their passion for performing in the many varied amateur groups. These included The Tarnagulla Philharmonic Society, The Tarnagulla Glee Club, the Tarnagulla Star Minstrels, the Tarnagulla Black Diamonds, Tarnagulla’s Christy Minstrels, the Tarnagulla Brass Band, and the Tarnagulla Dramatic Club, formed in February, 1868 after a meeting held at the Victoria Hotel.49 50 It was disappointing for all involved with the Dramatic Club’s first production Dream at Sea when Mr Cobden, the manager, mysteriously disappeared and rehearsals were postponed.51 The Dramatic
Club’s fund-raising productions included *Two Galley Slaves* in October, 1868 for the John Titus Relief Fund, the Mechanics’ Institute, the cemetery, the Cricket Club and the Dunolly Hospital.\(^2\)\(^3\)

The many amateur performance groups suggests Tarnagulla was a popular town for gold seekers. The Poseidon Lead, situated seven kilometres east of Tarnagulla, is said to have yielded the greatest number of large nuggets taken from one small area anywhere in the world.\(^4\)

**Lamplough**

Another popular town for gold seekers was Lamplough, located sixty kilometres from Tarnagulla in the Victorian Central Highlands. Lamplough was the site for twenty to thirty thousand people seeking fortune on the goldfields between 1859 and 1860, which exceeded the number of people on any of the two hundred and fourteen Victorian gold fields listed in the Registrar-General’s Return.\(^5\)\(^6\) There were two main theatres in Lamplough, the Garrick Theatre and the Theatre Royal, but although visiting professional entertainers are documented, surprisingly no records have been sighted regarding amateur performance groups.

**Walhalla**

This was not the case in Walhalla, Gippsland, where records show various amateur groups entertained audiences and fundraised for charities. Gold is believed to have been the impetus for the development of the Gippsland region, although gold-mining lasted here for a shorter time than in other areas.\(^7\) This was partly due to the remoteness of the Gippsland goldfields, and the high cost of freight to deliver machinery and mining in the mountains.\(^8\) At one time, the town of Walhalla, which became one of Victoria’s most successful gold mining towns, had ten hotels.\(^9\) Cultural interests in Walhalla in the 1870s included amateur dramatic and choral clubs, which entertained the townsfolk and raised money for local projects such as the new school.\(^10\) The diverse range of shows advertised on local billboards included Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, cantatas, minstrel shows, plays, farces and melodramas.
New Theatres Built During the Gold Rush

Successful gold-diggers sought to spend their new-found wealth on professional entertainment and city theatres regained popularity. It is remarkable to imagine six grand theatres being built in Melbourne over seven years, between 1855 and 1862. These included the Theatre Royal (1855), the Olympic Theatre (1855), Prince of Wales Theatre (1858), Haymarket Theatre (1862), Polytechnic Hall (1862) and St George’s Hall (1862).⁶⁰ ⁶¹

Among the impressive theatres built in Victoria’s gold-mining towns in regional areas were the Theatre Royal in Sandhurst, now Bendigo, built on to the Shamrock Hotel as a concert hall (1854), Her Majesty’s Theatre, Ballarat (1875) and Castlemaine’s Theatre Royal (1854, rebuilt after fires in 1855 and 1888) which remains the oldest operating theatre on the Australian mainland.⁶² ⁶³ ⁶⁴
**Reflection on the Gold Rush in Victoria**

With his reputed cultural interests, Governor La Trobe would no doubt have been pleased with his State’s developing, yet still fledgling, amateur theatrical arts sector. The Gold Rush era has been referred to as ‘the Elizabethan Golden Age for artists and artisans’ until the late 1860s, when society eventually settled to become ‘normal’. The Gold Rush era created instant demand for entertainment, giving amateurs the opportunity to perform and develop skills. As populations increased in goldfields towns, it also resulted in a need for more amateur theatre companies to form.

Across the state of Victoria, regardless of gold discoveries, the amateur arts sector continued to develop and prosper, bringing pleasure and creative and cultural satisfaction to many hundreds of participants and spectators.

**Mechanics’ Institutes**

The choice of venues for amateur theatre groups performing in Victoria during the 1850s included public halls, church halls, or Mechanics’ Institutes. With no major overhead expenses at the time, such as insurance, venue hire or show licensing fees, theatre groups could donate ticket sales to charitable causes, including maintenance of their local Mechanics’ Institute.

The popularity of Mechanics’ Institutes in Victoria is confirmed by a former President of the Mechanics’ Institutes of Victoria Incorporated, Wallace Kirsop, who writes that more Mechanics’ Institutes have been created in Victoria than in any other English-speaking territory. Another past President of the Mechanics’ Institutes of Victoria Incorporated, Peter Pereyra, says the movement was active for over a century, in more than one thousand Victorian towns and suburbs. With few alternate performance venues, no doubt many amateur shows were presented in the Mechanics’ Institutes existing in Victoria at that time.

The Melbourne Mechanics’ Institution in Collins Street, Melbourne (now known as the Melbourne Athenaeum Incorporated) was Victoria’s first Mechanics’ Institute, established in 1839.
The concept of Mechanics’ Institutes started at the University of Glasgow in 1799, when Professor George Birkbeck was lecturing a group of working men about using tools and machinery, and realised they were keen to improve their scientific knowledge. When Professor Birkbeck decided to introduce a course of free lectures, attendances increased markedly. The founding ethos of the Mechanics’ Institutes was to ‘provide an education to all, and through education, society will benefit’. The Mechanics’ Institute Movement aimed to help and educate the working middle-class, later broadening this aim to include all members of the community.

In Victoria, subsidies were granted by the Government to encourage communities to call their public halls ‘Mechanics’ Institutes’. These multi-purpose institutions brought communities together in a central common ground meeting place to enjoy various activities and facilities, including a library. Things did not always go according to plan, however, such as in the case of the Mount Best Mechanics’ Institute. Established in 1909 to house the local school destroyed in the 1906 Black Tuesday bushfires, the Mount Best Mechanics’ Institute burnt down again in 1933 following a performance of *All A Mistake* by the Mount Best Dramatic Society. The present hall was rebuilt in 1938.
Among the two hundred Mechanics’ Institutes or their buildings currently heritage listed in Victoria, are some which have been refurbished as modern-day performance venues. For example, for many years the Williamstown Musical Theatre Company has presented large-scale musical theatre productions in the Williamstown Mechanics’ Institute.\footnote{72}


The Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company now resides in the atmospheric, beautifully renovated former Mechanics’ Institute, known today as the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre.\footnote{73} In southwestern Victoria, the Camperdown Theatre Company performs in The Theatre Royal, an extension of the original Camperdown Mechanics’ Institute.\footnote{74} In Brunswick, the Moreland Council’s principal performing arts venue is The Mechanics’ Institute Performing Arts Centre, the Frankston Mechanics’ Institute is sometimes used as a performance venue for the Frankston Theatre Group, and the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute remains part of Ballarat's rich cultural heritage.\footnote{75} \footnote{76}

The Mechanics’ Institute Hall in Warrandyte, established circa 1880, opened in its third venue in 1928, on the corner of Mitchell Avenue and Yarra Street.\footnote{77} The Warrandyte Arts Association (WAA) was formed in 1956 to be an umbrella association of drama, music, craft, painting and pottery groups, which still use the hall today. In 1986, the WAA was handed full responsibility to manage the Hall and became incorporated into the Warrandyte Mechanics’ Institute and Arts Association. Thanks to fundraising, grants and hard work by the WMIAA, this Mechanics’ Institute offers the community a multi-purpose facility and is also the base for the Warrandyte Theatre Company.
Today, Victoria’s first Mechanics’ Institute, the Athenaeum Theatre, situated at 188 Collins Street, Melbourne, is regularly used for performances by professional and independent theatre companies and for events such as the Melbourne Comedy Festival.

Modern-day interior of the Athenaeum Theatre, 188 Collins Street, Melbourne. Image by courtesy of the Athenaeum Theatre.

The performing arts centres and school theatres built in various suburbs and country towns in recent years have replaced many Mechanics’ Institutes as performance venues. They may lack the friendly, intimate charm of the Mechanics’ Institute, but these well-equipped, state-of-the-art venues meet contemporary audience and production requirements. They do, however, pose a modern-day challenge for amateur theatre companies to pay the expensive hiring costs.

Ironically, several theatre companies which initially collaborated with their local Councils to help design and build their local new performing arts centres, in some cases even financially contributing towards the building project, are now unable to afford hiring the venue to present their shows.

The overall cultural, social and educational value of Mechanics’ Institutes to communities in Victoria has been significant. As theatrical performance venues, they have contributed to enriching the cultural and historical fabric of the performing arts in Victoria.
19th Century Theatre

Melbourne

After the new city of Melbourne was founded in 1835, theatrical activities merged with settlements in urban and regional areas. British theatre-maker John McGrath writes of a new society creating its own forms, meaning in this case that new residents would forge a cultural identity by establishing their own theatre companies: ‘These forms in turn bring into being a world in which this society sees itself and gives itself a place’. 79

Royal Victoria Theatre (The Pavilion, Theatre Royal, Victoria Saloon)

In 1842, Melbourne’s first live theatre, The Royal Victoria Theatre (predominantly known as The Pavilion, Theatre Royal and Victoria Saloon) opened in Bourke Street. 80 Theatre was associated with public houses at the time, so accordingly The Pavilion theatre was located next to the Eagle Tavern. Accessed from Bourke Street, The Pavilion was built from wood and measured sixty-five feet by thirty-five feet. 81 The Colonial Office in Sydney initially refused to issue a licence for professional performances at the venue, suspecting rowdy audiences and inappropriate management. 82 It was then decided that a means of opening the theatre and acquiring a license was to use amateur performers and raise funds for charity.

Six gentlemen enrolled themselves as an Amateur Theatrical Association for charitable and benevolent purposes, and the Sydney authorities permitted The Pavilion to open for monthly theatrical presentations.

The new theatre was not well-attended, perhaps due to its leaky roof and patrons needing umbrellas in wet weather, or the building swaying when windy.\textsuperscript{83} The building’s owner Thomas Hodge or Hodges changed the venue name to Theatre Royal Melbourne in the hope of a successful licence application, but magistrates refused to renew the theatre’s licence when it expired in 1845.

In the same year, Councillor J. T. Smith was granted a licence to build a theatre to attract a higher class of patrons than for The Pavilion, and the Queen’s Theatre was built on the corner of Queen and Little Bourke Streets.\textsuperscript{84} With the arrival of free settlers and pastoralists, a middleclass society was growing in Australia, along with expectations of more conservative style theatre without audience brawls and onstage misbehaviour.

\textit{Queen’s Theatre Royal}

Theatregoing had become a popular pastime for Melbourne’s increasing population, and just after the Pavilion stopped operating in 1845 another theatre, The Queen’s Theatre Royal, opened on the corner of Queen and Little Bourke Streets, Melbourne.\textsuperscript{85} Mimi Colligan and Frank Van Straten describe the socially structured seating arrangements: ‘The moneyed classes paid up to seven shillings to sit in the dress circle and boxes, while the pit and galleries at sixpence or a shilling were filled with just as appreciative members of the so-called ‘lower orders’’.\textsuperscript{86} Similarly, bookings today for professional shows require an economic decision by the theatregoer to select a preferred seat location. Amateur theatre is more egalitarian, with mostly one-price tickets for seats throughout the venue (discounted for children and concession-card holders).

\textit{The Melbourne Garrick Club}

Professional gentlemen in Melbourne’s upper-crust society enjoyed literature and performing, so when Irish actor Gustavus Vaughan Brooke visited in 1855, he inspired them to form the Melbourne Garrick Club.\textsuperscript{87} Modelled on the London-based Garrick Club, established in 1831 for ‘men of refined minds and cultivated tastes’, the Melbourne
Garrick Club aimed to produce amateur theatricals to fundraise for charitable institutions. With no permanent clubhouse, productions presented by the Melbourne Garrick club admirably continued until 1870, including Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, presented at the Theatre Royal in 1859, under the patronage of His Excellency Sir Henry Barkly KCB, the stewards of the champion race and the Victoria Jockey Club.\(^{88}\)

Garrick Clubs also formed in Geelong, Sandhurst, Bairnsdale, and Castlemaine.\(^{89,90,91}\)

On February 21, 1856, *The Melbourne Punch* differentiated Melbourne Garrick Club members from other sections of society, by declaring: ‘The Club is known to contain a number of authors, artists, barristers, surgeons and other inflammable elements – in fact it represents the New Chum section of society’.\(^{92}\) While there are no longer Garrick Clubs in Victoria in the twenty-first century, London’s Garrick Club remains a gentlemen-only club with over one thousand members.
Amateur Theatre for All: Melbourne and Suburbs

In contrast to the exclusive membership of the Garrick Clubs, people from all walks of life participated in amateur theatrical groups formed during the nineteenth century in town and country areas of the Port Phillip District, later to be named Victoria. In April, 1862 when the A.B.C. Club presented an amateur performance to fundraise for the Benevolent Asylum at the Theatre Royal, the newspaper Bell’s Life reported the ‘audience was perfectly satisfied with the entertainment’. Various groups formed in Melbourne suburbs in the late nineteenth century, such as a Harmonic Society was formed in Coburg in 1884, a Brass Band in 1890 and a Minstrel and Dramatic Club in 1891.

Cultural activities were also popular in the new village of St Kilda, with dramatic, musical and other entertainment presented in various foreshore locations. A room adjoining the Junction Hotel was often hired by professional and amateur entertainers in the 1860s, and the St Kilda Dramatic Club performed ‘grand amateur entertainments’ in the Grey Street Assembly Hall in the 1870s.

A show presented by the Warrandyte Variety Troupe in aid of the Mechanics’ Institute was favourably reviewed by the Evelyn Observer and South and East Bourke Record on 29th September, 1893. The company is described as comprising ‘several respectable young amateurs’ who enjoyed music and singing, with above-average voices, and who wished for self-improvement. The entertainment included a Minstrel medley and a clog-dance.

*Chilperic Amateur Opera Company*

As well as dramatic theatre companies, amateur theatre in the nineteenth century comprised musical companies such as the Chilperic Amateur Opera Company. The company appears to have taken its name from the operetta *Chilpéric*, described as a ‘burlesque of the medieval’ and first performed in Paris in October, 1868. The theatre program below is from the company’s performance on December 23rd, 1890 at the Bijou Theatre, 225 Bourke Street, Melbourne. The company has omitted the French accent over the ‘e’ in the operetta title *Chilpéric*. Perhaps this time of growing
public sentiment towards a national identity influenced an attempt to Australianise the title.


Melbourne amateur theatre companies may have had access to performing in fine theatres, but regional groups such as the Bairnsdale Amateur Dramatic Club, enjoyed performing in locations such as the local school room.

**Bairnsdale**

The popularity of amateur entertainment in Bairnsdale, East Gippsland, saw the town first acquire a volunteer Brass Band and the Glee and Choral Societies. A dramatic club was then founded by a breakaway group dissatisfied with the Glee and Choral Society’s leader claiming for the use of his piano and printing. In 1874, The Bairnsdale Amateur Dramatic Club presented *The Area Belle* in the school room, in aid of the piano fund.
The following advertisement promotes this production in the *Bairnsdale Courier* newspaper, August 1874:

Advertisement in the Bairnsdale Courier newspaper, August 1874, promoting The Area Belle. By courtesy of the East Gippsland Historical Society Collection.
This advertisement provides a good indicator of audience requirements when attending theatre productions in regional areas in the late nineteenth century: ‘Dogs not admitted. Horses’ heads to the east. Front seats three shillings. Back seats two shillings. Children under Thirteen, half price. Infants, five guineas’. The high price for infants is a hint to leave disruptive babies at home, and the instruction for ‘horses’ heads to the east’ is in marked contrast to today’s car parking arrangements. Bairnsdale singing teacher and newspaper editor Hermann Vogt wrote in his account of the Dramatic Society’s show a year later, in August, 1875, that the Overture to La Gazza Ladra was brought to an untimely finish by the ‘customary stamping of feet’.

A new hall erected by Harry Payne behind the Main Hotel in Pyke Street, Bairnsdale in 1877, inspired performances by more groups and there was much theatrical activity in Bairnsdale. This included the dramatic club which presented plays and operettas, and a minstrel club titled the ‘Amateur Ethiopians’. In 1883, an Amateur and Dramatic Musical Society formed by Mr Winkelmann in Bairnsdale, presented The Unfinished Gentleman and continued until 1888. This was later replaced by groups such as the Garrick Drama Club formed in 1886, a Philharmonic Society (1888), Choral Society (1889) and several amateur and musical groups formed in the 1890s which lasted for a short time. Australian writer Hal Porter confirms the popularity of nineteenth century theatre in Bairnsdale: ‘Now dozens of amateur theatrical societies have sprung up in Bairnsdale’s history – the thespian, operatic and debating societies, the glee, play-reading, elocution and recitation clubs, but were not evergreen’.

**Bairnsdale Today – Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company**

Fast forward to the twenty-first century in Bairnsdale. Life Member and past President of the Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company Incorporated, Helen Gottschalk, and current President, Susan Gibson, talked about the earlier ups and downs of their theatre company when interviewed in Bairnsdale. ‘There was a strong Scottish and Irish influence from ‘day one in Bairnsdale’, laughed Scottish-born Helen. ‘The Scots had the land, the Irish had the pubs, and the English had the accent’.

Helen served a term as President of the Bairnsdale Drama Group when it formed in the early 1970s, but the company ceased operations when encountering financial troubles,
and diverted all remaining monies to the Shire of Bairnsdale. ‘We thought our costumes and equipment would be safe stored in the shed we had bought on the industrial estate’, said Helen, ‘but in the late 1970s, equipment disappeared, and rats destroyed the costumes!’ The Production Line Theatre Company was established in 1986, but temporarily ceased operation in the late 1990s, before reviving in 2000.  

A group of theatre lovers who formed a committee to re-establish the Production Line Company, decided to present Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*, with seven committee members each contributing two hundred dollars of their own money to help establish the company. There was only two hundred and eighty dollars in the bank, but private money and sponsorship enabled the company to start casting the first show.

The company first rehearsed in a room at the Bairnsdale Adult Community Education and performed at the Bairnsdale Aquatic Recreation Centre. The Salvation Army Citadel was also used for rehearsals, and in 2003 the company acquired the lease of the old storage-friendly geriatric hospital in Ross Street. After presenting three successful royalty-free Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, the theatre company eventually had funds to purchase two keyboards, lighting and other equipment.

Nowadays, as a result of help from the Shire which leased land to the company, and the efforts of dedicated volunteers to accrue funds and obtain sponsorship, the Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company proudly owns ‘The Shed’. This facility was officially opened in 2013 and is located at the end of Aerodrome Road, next door to the Shire-owned Wool Shed. Rehearsal facilities are in the Wool Shed, and as the floor space is similar to the size of the theatre, this greatly assists the building of sets.

The Production Line Theatre Company now presents one musical and one play each year at the Forge Theatre in the Arts Hub, and members annually visit the One Act Drama Festival in Foster. Opening nights have been used to fundraise for the Bairnsdale Hospital, for breast cancer and for the Bowerbirds hospital volunteer group. Criteria for selecting shows includes cast availability, cost of rights and, as for other companies, shortage of men is a problem.
Also shared with other companies is the big conundrum: ‘will any audience come?’ The Production Line Theatre Company’s shows are so well received that audiences travel from Orbost, Sale, Stratford and outlying country areas. As ticket-seller, Helen is dealing with the public regularly and knows people feel a sense of belonging and connection with the company. Susan works in the Bairnsdale Library and also gets good feedback from patrons. Both Helen and Susan obviously love their involvement with the Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company and being part of a team creating quality theatre.

**East Asian Influence**

Returning to the nineteenth century, Australian theatre became influenced by East Asia. Apart from a Chinese presence on the goldfields, visiting exhibitions from Asia in the 1850s to 1890s brought exotic furnishings and decorative items into the country. These exhibitions inspired theatre companies from the late 1800s to present Eastern influenced shows such as Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera *The Mikado*, or *The Town of Titipu*. Playwrights would stereotype characters to include the dominant white uniformed male, perhaps with a submissive Asian lover, or ‘comic Chinaman’. At this time an image of Asia existed in Australia as being ‘feminine, alluring, seductive, exotic, inferior, immoral and dangerous’. More than eighty productions linked to the East were presented in Australia between 1845 and 1929. Amateur theatre culture is enriched and enhanced by Eastern-influenced shows such as *The Mikado*. Now royalty free for performances, *The Mikado’s* colourful, exotically costumed characters in a Japanese setting, introduce audiences to a new socio-culture, building bridges between East and West.

**Workplace Theatre**

Creating theatre and the fun of pretending to be someone else, even temporarily, also became a popular leisure pastime in the workplace. The *Leader* newspaper dated 14 October, 1876 favourably reviewed a production presented by typographers:

> A dramatic performance in aid of the Melbourne Printers’ Library was given in Princess’ Theatre on Saturday evening. There was a very good attendance in all parts of the house. The entertainment commenced with the farce of the *Unfinished Gentleman*, all the characters in which were sustained by members of the typographical craft. For an amateur undertaking it was more than usually successful, the cast being well made out, and the actors themselves thoroughly imbued with a spirit of emulation.
Minstrelsy, Vaudeville and Pantomime

It would be remiss not to include minstrelsy, vaudeville and pantomime in a history of amateur theatre in Victoria. Although particularly popular from 1850 to 1930, these entertainment genres were viewed as the poor cousins of ‘legitimate’ drama and literature. Based on the American minstrel shows, the minstrel concerts comprised comic skits, variety acts, dancing and music, and performers with blackened faces.

Amateur minstrels formed groups in towns such as Chewton, Castlemaine, Kyneton, Elphinstone and Taradale (named the Buffalo Bill Rattlesnake Minstrels). The Amateur Barfield Kentucky Minstrel Troupe presented a concert in 1896 to raise funds for the local Mechanics’ Institute. According to records the Troupe enjoyed a ‘crowded house’ and supplied refreshments for the audience after the concert.

The popularity of minstrelsy saw amateur minstrel competitions held in capital cities, and in Melbourne in 1886, the Williamstown Crows won gold medals in an amateur contest. In 1878, an article in the Albury Border Post read, ‘Black face business as a rule (by amateurs) is very popular and draws good houses’. Despite its overt racist sentiment, Minstrelsy added to the culture of amateur theatre because it introduced new entertainment styles, toe-tapping music, theatrical camaraderie for performers, and fund-raised for charities.

Perhaps one reason why minstrelsy was regarded by some as ‘low-brow’ was its connection with larrikinism, which emerged in Australia in the 1860s when street youths indulged in anti-social, sometimes violent, behaviour in towns and cities. Larrinkins were dedicated followers of minstrelsy and cheered the white performers with their blacked-up faces. In the twenty-first century, the practice of white actors performing onstage with blackened faces would be regarded as unacceptably racist.

Vaudeville evolved from the minstrel shows, with music hall style acts incorporated into the minstrels’ program. Older-style pantomimes were based on a children’s story or nursery rhyme, with colourful, fun characters. A different style of pantomime depicted history such as the diggings at Ballarat or ‘Victoria’s Progress from 1841–1881: from chaos to splendour’.
English v. Australian Plays

Understandably, the tendency for theatrical productions to be sourced from Britain or Ireland irritated local creative and performing artists. From the perspective of Melbourne settlers, however, the plays of predominantly English origin and performative styles could ease their homesickness, or fulfil a love of English literature. Also, imported plays would reliably attract good box-office sales.

But local writers persevered, and while the content of many nineteenth century poems and plays viewed Australia negatively, new works began to positively reflect Australia’s identity. Critics of locally written works included an anonymous writer in The Australasian in 1891 who agreed with theatrical manager J. C. Williamson that Australian dramas were not well-written, and the professional industry could not use them. The writer alleged that the works of Australian playwrights were of poor standard, and because they themselves were not theatregoers, their scripts lacked ‘stage efficiency’. Writer and medical doctor James Neild was theatrical critic for the Australasian between 1865 and 1890 and campaigned for locally-written drama and presentation with an Australian setting.

Nevertheless, The Bulletin became critical of Australian drama. This contradicted the publication’s views when first established in 1880 by J. F. Archibald and John Haynes. Australians were encouraged to think independently of England and writers were urged to write for Australia rather than for the British market. Perhaps the criticism was a wake-up call to Australian writers to improve the quality of their work. Nevertheless, the attitude of The Bulletin did not impede the late nineteenth century discovery of nationalist writers and poets Henry Lawson, Andrew Barton ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Joseph Furphy.

The Next Century

Victorian amateur theatre had developed in the nineteenth century into an active and well-supported theatrical arts sector in urban and regional areas. Regardless of social or cultural class, Victorians in their new settlement had warmly welcomed the creative,
social and transformative benefits of amateur theatre into their lives, whether as participant or spectator.

We know now with the benefit of historical hindsight, that exciting times lay ahead for theatre in the newly federated nation. These would include local writers such as Louis Esson and Vance Palmer establishing a presence for Australian plays through local performances, and the significant role played by amateur actors in performing these works to help establish a national identity. Shining through the challenges of two wars and the Great Depression, the theatrical life-force of amateur theatre would continue to ensure ongoing entertainment for audiences in communities across Victoria.
Chapter Two: World War One

Pre-World War One (1900-1913)

Victoria in the New Century

The new twentieth century had arrived and the glowing sense of optimism felt by most Australians was well-justified. After all, the 1890s Depression was over, and a growing national consciousness strengthened determination to establish a unique Australian identity. There was also extraordinary talk of man flying like a bird, and exciting scientific advances such as aviation and radio communication would soon be revolutionizing world travel and lifestyles. People were gathering in support of special causes, such as a mass meeting in 1900 to support women’s suffrage, held at the Melbourne Town Hall on 27th July. Changing cultural and social attitudes shared the stage with the imminent new scientific discoveries and a demand for entertainment.

Attending live theatre performances was already a popular recreational activity for Australians, but the new entertainment genre of motion pictures had been introduced late in the previous century. On 13th September, 1900, four thousand people attended the Melbourne Town Hall for the premiere of the drama film Soldiers of the Cross, which depicts the lives of early Christians. This multimedia presentation, featuring a mix of moving film, glass slides, oratory and music, was created by Australia’s first film studios, Limelight Productions, built in 1898 by the Salvation Army at 69 Bourke Street, Melbourne. The event’s large attendance indicates a keen public interest in new technology and entertainment. In the twenty-first century, increasingly sophisticated multimedia effects are also used in professional and amateur live theatre productions, enhanced by advanced digital technology.

When Australia celebrated Federation on 1st January, 1901, a need had arisen from Melbourne’s growing population to build more city-based commercial theatres.

The elegant new Opera House opened in Melbourne in Bourke Street in 1901, replacing the demolished Prince of Wales Opera House and the Melbourne Opera House which had existed on the same site. The new Opera House would be renamed The Tivoli in 1912. Outdoor theatrical entertainment was also popular early in the new century, including the St Kilda foreshore ‘beach shows’, which started in 1905. The performers and companies in these beach shows leased space from the Lands Department for a token rent of two pounds a month.

At the same time, amateur theatre companies continued to form in regional and metropolitan areas. The popularity of live performance at this time suggests that, following Australia’s 1890s Depression, there was increased importance placed on theatrical activity with its associated cultural and social benefits to communities. Bairnsdale, located in Gippsland, was one theatrically active town, and locally produced productions at Payne’s Theatre continued into the new century. In Linton in south-western Victoria, the Grenville Standard writes of a three-act comedy being performed in the Parish Hall in 1908.
But not all Australians were happy with the social and cultural direction taken by their new nation. Writers such as Vance Palmer, Louis Esson, poet Frank Wilmot and theologian and critic Frederick Sinclaire wished to further the attempts of nineteenth century local writers to establish an Australian national culture through their written works. In doing so, they challenged teachings that supported the Empire, the Church and commercialism, believing that Australian writers should forget the past and welcome a new ‘coming Australia’.

**Australian Theatre Society**

Publicist and critic Leon Brodsky shared Esson’s vision for a National Theatre. Brodsky was so passionate about the cause that he delivered a paper to the Australian Literary Society discussing the need for an Australian Drama. The society promoted the study of Australian literature and encouraged Australian authors, and Brodsky’s paper was well received. This led to a meeting between Brodsky and a small group of like-minded people at a nearby café, where the idea for an amateur theatre company was born. This theatre company would focus on performing the works of local playwrights.

When the Australian Theatre Society was founded in 1904, Brodsky and Esson’s vision for an Australian Theatre where amateurs, tutored by professional actors, would present local plays, was now realised. The Australian Theatre Society continued until 1908 but disbanded after members converted it into a more socially focused playgoers’ club, to the disappointment of Brodsky who was overseas at the time. Amateur actors enjoyed high public regard at this time, and were in demand to workshop and perform unknown Australian plays. The *Bulletin* editor, Arthur Adams, urged Australian dramatists to ‘Get your plays produced. Failing the managers, get it done by amateurs’.

**Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company**

The arrival in 1910 of professional actor and producer Gregan McMahon from Sydney, introduced a welcome energy life force for Melbourne amateur theatre and local writers. He established the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company, mostly using experienced amateur actors. They rehearsed in various halls, such as the Athenaeum in Collins Street,
and first performed on 26th June at the Tmn Verein Hall, an old German beer hall in Victoria Parade, East Melbourne.

The double bill comprised Act Two of Richard Sheridan’s satirical play *The Critic* and St John Rankin’s comedy *The Two Mr Wetherbys*, alternating with Henrik Ibsen’s drama *John Gabriel Borkman*. Medical student Frank Kingsley Norris (later to become Major General Sir Frank Kingsley Norris) was praised by critics for playing John Borkman, the former manager of a bank who had spent several years in gaol.

The Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company operated successfully until 1918, presenting modern English and European drama, and thirteen Australian plays rejected by commercial theatre.

McMahon’s productions attracted members of Melbourne’s elite, with many of his actors and audiences being recruited from their ranks of academics, lawyers and financiers. The elegant, formal attire worn by these high society members added glamour to theatre.
foyers on McMahon’s opening nights, and boosted the image of Melbourne amateur theatre.

McMahon’s formidable reputation even caused Irish playwright Bernard Shaw to once remark: ‘My impressions of Australia are sheep and Gregan McMahon’.

**Australian Drama Nights**

The four Australian drama nights organised and presented by journalist and *Herald* art critic William Moore between 1909 and 1912, were another grand effort to present Australian plays. Mostly performed by amateur actors, the first Australian drama night was presented at the Oddfellows Hall in Latrobe Street. The authors were responsible for presenting their plays to emphasise a ‘playwrights’ theatre’, where scripts could speak for themselves. Realistically however, the actors needed skilled stage direction to creatively interpret the scripts and ensure the plays were showcased to their full potential.

The second drama night, presented before a full house at the Turn Verein Hall, featured *The Burglar*, a politically questioning one-act play by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Moore’s light comedy, *The Tea-Room Girl*, and Louis Esson’s debut performance play, *The Woman Tamer*, based on larrkin culture. These were followed by an Australian song then poetry written by Hugh McCrae and Mary Gilmore, recited by Moore’s friends. There was no pre-booking or division of seats for these drama nights, and the motto ‘Citizens in evening dress not admitted’ was well-received by the men, but ignored by female patrons. Louis Esson utilised the drama nights to showcase his own plays, but was privately discontented. In a letter to A. G. Stephens of the *Bulletin*, prior to the opening of the 1911 season, Esson expressed his annoyance at the ‘weak, conventional and characterless’ plays, describing the event as a ‘pleasant social game for amateurs’.

The third drama night event held on 13th and 14th December, 1911, was presented in conjunction with the newly-formed Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company at St Patrick’s Hall. The plays included Esson’s *Dead Timber*, a dispirited picture of life on a small selection, *The Only Game*, a sports-themed play by William Moore, *The Children’s Bread*, described as ‘a tragedy or farce according to how you look at it’ by painter
Blamire Young, and *The Sacred Flame* (a title used later by Somerset Maugham) by Alfred Buchanan.\textsuperscript{19, 20, 21} The collaboration with the Melbourne Repertory Theatre saw a marked improvement in production standards. The repertorians were mostly amateur actors, but well-rehearsed by McMahon who also took over directing the plays.\textsuperscript{22}

McMahon’s involvement even led to the Governor-General and Lady Denman accepting an invitation to attend a performance and expressing their support for local writers and actors. At the fourth and final drama night held at the Turn Verein Hall on 15\textsuperscript{th} May, 1912, plays presented included *If Youth But Knew*, set in the morning room of a London home, written by novelist Kathleen Watson, *The Mysterious Moonlight*, a sports-themed play by William Moore, and a new play by Esson titled *The Sacred Place*, adapted from the author’s short story published in the *Lone Hand* magazine in 1907.

**Towards a National Drama**

Most theatre companies, whether professional or amateur, depend on box-office takings for survival. They therefore usually prefer selecting low-risk productions that will guarantee good audience attendances. Fortunately, modern-day Australian playwrights such as David Williamson, Jack Hibberd, Hannie Rayson, Ray Lawler and Joanna Murray-Smith have achieved fine reputations over the years, and developed a strong audience following of their works in both commercial and amateur theatre.

Plays written by emerging Australian writers may not immediately guarantee full capacity houses, but in recent years some amateur theatre companies have commendably included a new Australian-written work in their annual season programme. For example, in 2017 the Brighton Theatre Company presented *Hats Off!* by Melbourne writer Alison Campbell Rate.\textsuperscript{23} *Hats Off!* tells of five women approaching middle-age who reminisce about their university days and the future. Also, in 2017 the Powderkeg Players in Sunshine presented *Breakfast with the Bears*, a children’s show written by local writer Stephen Andrews.\textsuperscript{24}

Gregan McMahon’s repertory theatre company offered opportunities for amateur actors, Australian authors and audiences to benefit from his professional experience. He balanced presenting Australian works with the plays of overseas playwrights such as
John Galsworthy, Anton Chekhov, George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen, which pleased patrons who preferred imported productions. The Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company folded in 1918 when McMahon moved to Sydney to work professionally for the Tait brothers, who were now running J. C. Williamsons’ company.

Esson was now regarded as the unofficial leader of Melbourne’s playwrights. He was discontented with the direction of Australia’s national identity and creative spirit, and negatively viewed the growing social importance of the suburban home, which he believed threatened to stifle the creative spirit. This concern can be recognised in his political comedy The Time is Not Yet Ripe, first performed by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company under the direction of Gregan McMahon on 23rd July, 1912. Regarded as Esson’s best-known work, a central character in The Time is Not Yet Ripe claims that the suburban home ‘stand(s) for all that is dull and depressing in modern life’.

This conflict of opinion between the artistic, self-categorized ‘in-group’ and broader social ‘out-group’ would soon pale into insignificance when a far more serious conflict took place in the wider international population. World War One commenced on 28th July, 1914.

World War One (1914-1918)

Entertainment during the war years was important to Australians, regardless of professional or amateur status. Performances lifted the spirits of serving soldiers, provided escapism for the population from news of horrors in conflict, or presented patriotic fundraisers and recruitment drives.

A productive and creative way for amateur performers to contribute during World War One was to utilise their talents to entertain troops and communities, and donate funds from the ticket sales to assist war-related charities. Amateur concert parties such as ‘The Boomerangs’ and ‘The Gaiety Girls’ performed in military camps and town halls. The spirit of ‘all in’ saw rival theatre producers collaborate to present special fundraising
benefits and concerts, and local communities formed entertainment groups for fundraising pageants and festivals.

Singing and music were particularly popular forms of entertainment, and new works included the patriotic song composed in 1914, ‘For Auld Lang Syne: Australia Will Be There’. After the outbreak of World War One, restrictions on international travel presented challenges for professional theatre companies such as J. C. Williamson Theatres Ltd or the Tivoli Circuit, so as an alternate solution, producers elevated local talent to star status.

One theatre group which presented light-hearted style shows to boost the spirits of those at home was the Maffra Amateur Dramatic Society, located in Gippsland. The group had already been operating for over thirty years, with its first production, ‘A Grand Entertainment’, being presented in 1880 to aid the local Mechanics’ Institute.

**Maffra Amateur Dramatic Society/Maffra Dramatic Society**

Shows presented during the war by the Maffra Amateur Dramatic Society included the comedy of manners *She Stoops to Conquer*, and the three-act farce *The Private Secretary*. The charities fortunate to benefit from these performances included the Australian Sick and Wounded Soldiers’ Fund, the Red Cross Society, the Mechanics’ Institute, YMCA Camp Work and Mrs G W Mead and child, who were possibly the family of a fallen soldier. These charities and other fundraising causes are mentioned throughout *Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria*, because historically they reflect elements of society at the time.

After the war in 1919, the company staged *Dandy Dick* to support the Mechanics’ Institute, and continued raising funds during the 1920s. Performances took place in Bairnsdale as well as Maffra, and £45.0.0 was donated to the Sale Hospital from performing *The Gondoliers*. Since then, the Maffra Amateur Dramatic Society appears to have ceased and restarted at various times, but precise details are unknown since a fire at the *Maffra Spectator* newspaper office destroyed the theatre company’s early records.34 Fast forward to 2018 and the company, now known as The Maffra Dramatic Society Incorporated, presents up to two shows per year. An interview with company members
Carolyn Walsh and Alison McNair shines a spotlight on the company’s volunteers. Carolyn said she started with the group by helping to design sets in 2004 and has since worked on every show. ‘Because I’m a housewife, it allows me to have an outlet, use my artistic abilities, and get the mind working’.

While Carolyn remains behind the scenes, her colleague Alison McNair loves acting. A scientist, Alison had performed in revues at the local hospital before joining the Amateur Dramatic Society. She has also performed in shows with her children, including playing Mother Goose in *Humpty Dumpty*. Alison agreed with the transformative benefit of amateur theatre, pointing out it had broadened her social life when catching up with members outside the theatre group. Alison has observed amateur theatre develop confidence in participants, particularly young people who sometimes grow up within the company.

The Maffra Dramatic Society admirably continues the fine fundraising work of their fellow members more than a century ago. In 2014, the company was the only amateur theatre group in Victoria to be granted performance rights to *Calendar Girls*, with all show proceeds and profits from calendar sales being donated to the local oncology department. More than thirty-seven thousand dollars was raised from this wonderful community effort.35

Returning to the World War One era, amateur groups in other communities were also busy entertaining communities and contributing to war-related causes.

**The Merrymakers, Beaufort**

One such group was The Beaufort Merrymakers, established in 1917 in the town of Beaufort, situated one hundred and sixty-four kilometres west of Melbourne. The Beaufort Merrymakers performed to fundraise for charities, particularly the Red Cross, and raised the spirits of those living in nearby regional communities.36 The group’s performances comprised songs, dances, recitations, comedy, and colourful costumes and they also entertained in Ararat, Avoca, Lexton, and Amphitheatre.37 In August, 1918, appreciation was extended to the Merrymakers after a fundraising concert at the Societies’ Hall, Beaufort. The ladies were presented with bouquets, floral crooks, baskets
of flowers and boxes of sweets, while each male performer was handed … a cauliflower!
On 10th December, 1918, the Beaufort Soldiers’ Welcome Home Committee presented a public welcome home to twenty-three soldiers, including three original ANZACs. After a meal with the committee and marching in procession through Beaufort’s principal streets led by the local band, the soldiers enjoyed entertainment in the Societies’ Hall, including performances by the Merrymakers.

**Salvation Army Concert Parties**

World War One troops stationed at various military camps and hostels situated around Victoria would have looked forward immensely to visits from Salvation Army entertainers. Chaplains and Welfare Officers were charged with looking after the spiritual needs of troops, organising concert entertainment for soldiers, or conducting sing-a-longs using the ‘Red Shield Song Book’ containing religious songs and standard hymns.38

![World War One soldiers at a Broadmeadows camp being entertained by enlisted Salvation Army Bandsmen, with supporting Salvation Army officers looking on, c.1916. Image by courtesy of the Salvation Army, Territorial Archivist, Lindsay Cox.](image)

Volunteer members of the Salvation Army Local Corps would entertain with music, comedy sketches and song, and visit troops stationed in hostels or camps near their areas. For example, the Seymour Corps of the Salvation Army visited troops at Puckapunyal, or a concert party and bands from Geelong entertained troops stationed in Colac. Members
of the Salvation Army also accompanied concert party entertainers from various boys’ and girls’ homes, including the Camberwell Girls’ Home and Glenroy Girls’ Home, to entertain troops in Broadmeadows and Puckapunyal.

Girls and Salvation Army Officers from the Glenroy Girls Home at the Broadmeadows Military Camp (with unidentified Military Officer) to present a concert to World War One troops in training in 1915. Image by courtesy of the Salvation Army and Territorial Archivist Lindsay Cox.

**Digger Field Groups and Concert Parties**

The popularity of concert parties demonstrates the importance of live entertainment to active servicemen and women and those in convalescence. Songs were popular in the concerts, particularly when troops could join in the chorus. Some actively engaged servicemen also entertained, joining digger field groups and concert parties organised by various divisions in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and the United Kingdom.\(^\text{39}\)

Names of digger entertainment groups included The Amateur Frolics Company (1918), The Flying Kookaburras and The Flying Kangaroos, formed by the No.1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps and The ANZACS (1917). There were also The Australian Dandies (1918-1919), and The Black Diamond Costumed Comedy Company (1918-1919) which comprised six soldiers from the AIF.
Informal group portrait of Prisoners of War POW artists and committee members of the Gustrow Bing Boys at Gustrow Prisoner of War Camp, North Germany, 8 September, 1918. Collection No.PO1981.038. Image by courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

Groups such as the Kangaroos Two from the Australian Graves Detachment included female impersonators who staged Pierrot-style entertainment, representing a male French pantomime character with white painted sad face, wearing a white pointed hat and loose costume. Another Pierrot troupe, The Anzac Coves (1916-18) which performed in barns and sheds near the battlefields were so popular they toured Britain during 1918 and performed at Buckingham Palace before King George V, Queen Mary and their daughter, Princess Mary.\(^4\)

Allied Prisoners of War (POW) also created their own live entertainment by forming concert parties, such as The Arcadians in Munster, Germany c.1918. When troupes returned home to offer insights into the war experience, they too sometimes entertained for propaganda and enlistment purposes.

‘The Girls Who Stayed at Home’ Concert-Party

One particularly successful all-female volunteer concert-party was ‘The Girls Who Stayed at Home’, comprising nine former students from Tintern Grammar School, Melbourne. Various programs and press cuttings archived in the Arts Centre Melbourne Research Centre, tell the story of the grand efforts by these girls to put together a program featuring song, dance, music and comedy. Known as ‘the society girls’, they intended to perform once, but ended up presenting more than one hundred shows.

Their popularity saw them entertain troops and perform at war-related fundraising events across country and metropolitan Victoria and interstate, sometimes assisted by the
Strolling Players Orchestra. The girls were: Mrs B.G. Cooke, Miss Daisy Gove, Miss Noel Geddes, Miss Olga Geddes, Miss Ellie Morton, Miss Vera Jackson, Miss Gwyn Watt, Miss Lily Hill and Miss Irene Hill.

A press cutting of an unidentified source dated 4 December, 1916, describes a performance by ‘The Girls Who Stayed at Home’ in Sale, Victoria. The article presents an interesting perception of women at the time, and also amateur theatre:

‘It is not humanly possible for amateur performers to live up to their local press boom, or to refrain from swagger when atmosphere surrounding them is all pervaded with an incense of flattery’. So reads the opening of a magazine article before us on amateur productions. Obviously, the writer has not seen ‘The Girls Who Stayed at Home’. It is beyond doubt that their entertainment is the most satisfying that has been given to a Sale audience within the present generation – quantity and quality. Mr D. Grant said the War had shown us what wonderful women we had. They had proved they could work, and now showed they could play.

It was announced that the girls’ one hundredth performance would be their last, except for one special performance for their husbands and friends who would be returning from overseas when peace arrived.

‘The Girls Who Stayed at Home’ raised between eight and nine thousand pounds for comfort funds and are a great example of volunteer performers presenting quality entertainment to help the war effort.

**Louis Esson in New York and London**

National dramatist Louis Esson had applied for military service but was rejected on medical grounds. He left Australia with his family to live in New York in 1916, and saw an amateur group called the Washington Square Players in action. He wrote to Vance Palmer in 1917 suggesting that the Players’ method of performing short plays, regularly in bills of four including two locally written plays, could serve as a model for Australia.
Esson found New York culturally distasteful and moved to London, where he criticised Australian culture and identity. While living there and without any first-hand experience of the Australian outback, Esson wrote *The Drovers*, achieving success and pre-performance publication. Set in outback Australia, *The Drovers* conveys the harshness of the bush, as a stockman lies dying on the stock trail while his mates continue on to find water for their cattle.44

Meanwhile, Irish author W. B. Yeats encouraged Esson to create a national theatre in Australia, and Esson and his family returned home in 1921. It would not be long before his dream of presenting locally written works would be realised.
Interwar Era (1919-1938)

Post-War Recovery

The Armistice was declared on 11 November, 1918 and World War One was thankfully over. A time of recovery commenced, embedded with the nation’s grief at losing over sixty thousand Australian soldiers while serving their country in three theatres of war. This loss of 1.2% of a population of almost five million people, proportionate to total embarkations, was among the highest of the war. The positive energies of live theatre in both the professional and amateur arts sectors played a therapeutic role in this period of rebirth for audiences and active participants. Other performative activities in everyday life would also have contributed to redefining a social identity for the population during this regenerative era. For example, conversations, choice of clothes worn, or food eaten, would have signalled to individuals and others regarding identifying their positions within social groups, and the development of a post-war national identity.

Katharine Brisbane refers to amateur theatre in the 1920s and 1930s as moving from private performances to becoming ‘a force in national consciousness, advancing questions of community and cultural improvement, social and moral justice, and the need for Australia’s own playwrights and actors’. Similar to the twenty-first century, over one hundred separate amateur groups operated in Victoria between the first and second world wars. Brisbane points out that as the commercial theatre died during the Depression, serious amateur companies began to replace it. This indicates the popularity of amateur theatre at this time, in spite of financial challenges from the Depression, and lower box-office takings after the arrival of cinemas.

The 1920s

In Search of an Australian Drama

In 1920, when writer Vance Palmer returned to Melbourne from war service and spending time overseas, he found Dr Stewart Macky running a small amateur theatre company, aiming to train a group of actors to start a national movement. Macky had hoped an established theatre company might tempt Esson to return from England, and ran the dramatic company in conjunction with the People’s Conservatorium. This
Conservatorium, directed by Macky’s wife, was designed to spread knowledge of music among the working-classes.

Initially Macky’s company presented repertory plays, but he aimed to find and produce original works, similar to William Moore’s Australian Drama Nights. However, by mid-1921, Macky needed a regular income and relinquished his theatre company to establish a medical practice in Streaky Bay, South Australia, remaining in touch with Palmer and Esson.

**The Pioneer Players**

The Essons had now returned to Melbourne, and the Pioneer Players were formed in 1922 with Vance and Nettie Palmer and Stewart Macky who had deferred his medical practice in South Australia. Amateur actors would be used to present Australian plays which Esson envisaged would reflect the lives of ordinary Australians.

It was an exciting event on 18th May, 1922 when the Pioneer Players opened at the Playhouse Theatre, located over Princess Bridge and, coincidentally, situated opposite the stage door to today’s Hamer Hall in Arts Centre Melbourne. Their first performance was *The Battler*, a country comedy written and directed by Louis Esson, and stage-managed by J. Beresford Fowler. *The Battler* tells of a prospector returning to the worked-out goldfield he had left as a young man, and temporarily striking it rich. This was not without real-life drama, as the script for *The Battler* and other works had been destroyed in a fire at the Essons’ cottage in Emerald. They returned to Melbourne and in a week, Esson had rewritten the play. The company moved on to stage future seasons at the Temperance Hall in Russell Street, a draughty venue with a high, shallow stage.

The next play was controversial at the time because of its convict theme. *John Blake* was written by Stewart Macky, with the garden scene designed by artist Max Meldrum, who would later win the Archibald Prize in 1939 and 1940. Convict-themed plays had previously been written by convicts, but it was courageous of Macky, a respected physician, to write *John Blake*, knowing the topic at that time would create controversy. Nettie Palmer believed this play ‘astonished Melbourne’, but lamented lack of support from the press. A reporter from the *Argus* attended a performance, but left less than half
way through, describing the production as ‘a series of episodes, not a play’. Macky eventually destroyed all copies of *John Blake*, which indicates his disappointment at the public and press response to his play. One noteworthy aspect of the production was Vance Palmer performing on stage for the first and last time in a group of convicts.

Vance Palmer’s *A Happy Family* was next, based on conflict between the heads of two rural families. Various productions presented by the Pioneer Players included Esson’s *The Drovers* and *Mother and Son*, directed by George Dawe. *Mother and Son*, written by Esson in 1923, tells of human struggle for survival in the bush, when a young man yearning for city life clashes with his mother struggling to survive working on a small apiary in Gippsland, Victoria. The Melbourne underworld play *The Bride of Gospel Place*, written by Esson, was performed as the company’s last show in June 1926, after one performance lost five pounds.\(^59\) This play is lighter in mood than Esson’s other plays, but still carries a sombre tone, depicting inner-city slums and ending tragically.

As with Moore’s Drama Nights ten years earlier, the Pioneer Players’ presented most of their shows without a director, assuming that the playwrights would oversee the staging of the plays. It is hard to understand why a company so keen to succeed would not allocate a director, particularly when observing the improvement when Gregan McMahon commenced directing the Drama Nights. Fortunately, experienced amateur theatre actors in the Pioneer Players helped compensate for the organisers’ minimal production knowledge. Even so, perhaps a lack of production values, particularly the absence of a director, negatively affected the performance quality and explains the poor support from the public and reviewers. Nettie Palmer commented in a letter to R. H. Long that there were ‘bad mistakes’ in a production, and refers to an audience as ‘not united or responsive enough’, even referring to some audience members as ‘hostile’.

A lack of confidence in the Pioneer Players by those closely involved would clearly not have helped its survival. Nettie Palmer confided in a letter to Esmonde Higgins that ‘the Pioneer Players are a white hope at present’. She acknowledges it to be ‘cruel hard’ for actors to spend months rehearsing a play, perform it twice, and then ‘drop it forever’. Tension within the Pioneer Players included mainstay George Dawe, an experienced professional, using old-fashioned techniques such as the leading man keeping his place centre-stage until exiting. Focusing on this technique resulted in restricting the
contemporary playwrights’ demands for naturalism. When Louis Esson returned from a trip in 1925, Vance Palmer had moved to Queensland, Dawe was dead and Macky was involved in his medical practice, so the group presented their last show by recruiting a company to perform for one night only.

There was also external criticism of the city-based Pioneer Players for using the bushman hero to symbolise nationalism. Another issue was their outback characters bearing similarity to Irish rural characters, who differed from Australian outback types. Steele Rudd’s *On Our Selection*, adapted from short stories in the *Bulletin*, had already created a popular image of bush life and been presented onstage by Bert Bailey’s company.

The Pioneer Players closed in 1926, apparently due to lack of ongoing public support. In a positive light, the company gave writers the opportunity for their works to be performed publicly, and for amateur actors to gain onstage experience. The amateur company admirably presented five full length and thirteen one-act plays, all written by Australian authors. In doing so, the Pioneer Players reminded Melbourne audiences that theatre shows could comprise locally written plays as well as imported productions.

Unpaid amateur actors had made it possible for the Pioneer Players to operate, yet in a letter to Nettie Palmer, Hilda Esson blamed amateur performers for the demise of the Pioneer Players:

> The amateur is really a dud. He rehearses the least possible amount, gets his effects in the cheapest way and thinks only of his own little success. What a different history the Pioneer Players might have had if only we had been able to gather together a band of enthusiastic, innocent people to whom it was their chief interest in life.

As an organiser of the Pioneer Players, it is astonishing that Hilda Esson should blame amateur performers for the group’s closure. After all, if she and her colleagues had appointed a director for every play presented, the company might have succeeded.

*Further Towards an Australian Drama*

During the interwar years, there was a feeling among some writers and social critics that a suburban mentality was stifling social reform in Australia. In 1921, similar to the
disenchantment with domesticity and suburbia expressed earlier by Louis Esson, Vance Palmer described the modern suburb as having ‘picture theatres, gramophones, motor cars and villas’, and ‘a place without pride and ancestry or hope for posterity’. Perhaps Palmer believed the cinema would be a threat to live theatre, or that these modern-day developments might affect creativity.

Ironically, in the same suburbia loathed by the disillusioned writers, an authors’ theatre was established a few years later by Mrs E. Coulson Davidson in her private home theatre in the Melbourne suburb of Oakleigh. One play, Murra was later performed at the Playhouse. Her courageous but unsuccessful aim was to form a National Theatre by staging her own dramas based on Aboriginal legends. In another commendable solo effort to advance Australian drama, producer Mostyn Wright founded a Theatre Guild in Melbourne in 1925.

Hilda and Louis Esson, Nettie and Vance Palmer and Macky, appear to have regarded themselves as the elitist ‘in’ group of Melbourne’s theatre scene. This is confirmed in Hilda’s scornful comments in a letter to Louis about her self-categorised ‘outer’ groups, including those led by Mrs Davidson and Mostyn Wright.

By the way, the Institute People are forming a Theatre Guild to produce the best of Australian drama, besides European work, under the directorship of Mostyn Wright. Isn’t it too amazing for words to see the people who are allowed to have their say in this fair land of ours! If it is democracy that gives power to Vidler, Wright, Mrs Davidson and other morons, then one sighs for a tyrant to arise.

Hilda’s reference to other drama enthusiasts trying to advance Australian drama as ‘morons’, is unfair, perhaps reflecting her insecurity and disappointment following the demise of their beloved project, the Pioneer Players.

**Recognition for McMahon, Esson and the Palmers**

The efforts of Esson and his friends to present Australian works were valiant, as was the earlier work of Michael Moore, and Gregan McMahon. McMahon was recognised in 1938 with a CBE, Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In the twenty-first century, Esson and the Palmers have been honoured by the Victorian Premier’s Literary
Awards which offer the Louis Esson Prize for Drama, the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, and the Nettie Palmer Prize for Nonfiction.68

Thanks to the dedicated promotion of Australian works by Esson and his peers, theatre companies today have a good selection of locally-written works for performances, playwrights receive licensing fees, and Government funding helps new writers develop and workshop their plays.

The Australian Drama is rightfully recognised today, but there is more to the story. The twentieth century now presents an encore from Gregan McMahon to continue the development of Victoria’s amateur theatrical arts sector.

**Gregan McMahon Returns**

When the Pioneer Players closed in 1926, professional promoters J. and N. Tait, known as ‘the Tait brothers’, were confident a commercial audience would be interested in the ‘literary drama’. They built the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne, envisaging a venue for repertory productions presented by the newly formed Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company, with Gregan McMahon returning as producer/director.69 The repertory societies would retain their subscription system, and the financiers, the Taits, would have basic audience sponsorship and control over the choice of plays to be performed, and the casts. Louis Esson was concerned with this plan to combine repertory with commercial theatre, suspecting that the players would not earn anything, ‘the firm’ would take the profits, and McMahon would exclusively select casts.

The Tait plan eventuated in Melbourne with McMahon forming the Gregan McMahon Play Company, and opening at the Kings Theatre on 12th May, 1928 with the satirical play about marriage, George Bernard Shaw’s *Getting Married*. McMahon felt restricted by the commercial control and was also becoming frustrated with amateur actors and their ‘dilletantism, exhibitionism and sloppy discipline’. Some of McMahon’s subscribers even pestered him for roles for their family members. McMahon’s annoyance with amateurs was expressed in the play’s theatre program: ‘Amateurs goodbye’.70
McMahon’s attitude towards amateur actors is surprising, considering the successes achieved earlier in the century, but replicates Hilda Esson’s view of amateur actors during the 1920s. Perhaps the new generation of Melbourne amateur actors who emerged during McMahon’s absence in Sydney lacked his structured, disciplined guidance. Several other shows followed, each presented for two weeks. Opening nights were well attended, but audiences remained small before the company moved to Sydney.

In 1929, McMahon established a semi-professional company, the Gregan McMahon Players, which performed at various theatres, including the King’s Theatre.71 Gregan McMahon married amateur actor Mary Hungerford, and was mostly supportive of amateur theatre, possessing a unique ability to move between training amateurs and working with professionals. Although at one time frustrated with his amateur performers, McMahon’s overall support for the amateur arts sector is clear when he wrote in 1938: ‘My organisation occasionally employs a professional actor’.72

Amateur theatricals were also active across the state of Victoria during the 1920s. One regional theatre group was formed in Red Cliffs, located five hundred and forty-four kilometres north west of Melbourne, in the Sunraysia region.

Red Cliffs Players, Sunraysia Region

After World War One ended, the Australian Government introduced a soldier settlement scheme, allocating farming land to returned soldiers.73 Red Cliffs became the largest irrigated soldiers’ settlement in Australia, and many of the new farmers became involved with their local theatre group, the Red Cliffs Players. The group continued until World War Two, then disbanded until 1956.74

More than sixty years later, the Red Cliffs Players remains an active theatre company, rehearsing and performing in the Cardross Hall. Members Susanne Pendock and Cheryl Webb took centre stage in an interview in Cardross, and spoke of the transformative nature of the theatre company today, which as Susanne said, ‘helps young people grow’. Cheryl agreed. ‘They are little mice when they first arrive, then change. It gives a lot of people confidence’. Susanne was proud of the company’s ‘family-ness’, while Cheryl
said: ‘I know we are only a little country town, but we are a company for the people, and only see them at the theatre. Yes, we are like a family’.

When the company re-formed in 1956, members respectfully retained the original title of the Red Cliffs Players and rehearsed in houses, workshops, the Methodist Church hall, the Cardross Hall, Stewart Hall, or at the Returned Servicemen’s League, and performed there. In the Cardross Hall, there is another thoughtful tribute to the past in a wardrobe storage and multi-purpose room behind the main hall. ‘Lizzie’s Room’ is a tribute to former company member, the late Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Gillander. A sign with Liz’s favourite slogan prominently positioned over the make-up mirrors reads: ‘Break a leg you bastards!’.

This endearing tribute to Elizabeth Gillander reflects Cheryl Webb’s view of regional amateur theatre: ‘One of the impressive things about country town theatre companies is their loyalty to the past and strong values of friendship and family’.

**Beulah Amateur Theatrical Society**

To the west of the state in the southern Mallee region, the Beulah Amateur Theatrical Society was also actively presenting theatre during the 1920s. They staged one play per year during this decade, touring each show to entertain residents in Brim, Warracknabeal, Hopetoun, Rainbow and Woomelang.⁷⁵

Amateur theatre-makers across Victoria were forming theatre companies to fundraise for charities and to workshop unknown Australian plays. They would also soon be involved in the development of another new form of entertainment and communication, radio.

**Radio**

Weekly amateur radio concerts were held in the home of technical experimentalists during the 1920s.⁷⁶ Commercial theatre was not interested in radio, but writers realised the value of the medium for presenting their works, using amateur actors. When the Sydney-based Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Federal Department of Productions was established in 1936, all Australian writers were invited to submit scripts and actors were employed as professionals.
Film

The entertainment genre of film had been developing in Australia during this century, but the growth and economic power of the American film industry contributed to the temporary demise of the Australian film production industry due to lack of resources.\textsuperscript{77} Professional live theatre was also affected. First came the silent motion picture, followed by the ‘talkies’, which attracted large audiences. In 1917, American playwright and author Louise Powell wrote a message to theatre practitioners allaying their fears. She strongly believed the silent motion picture would never replace the spoken drama.\textsuperscript{78}

But cinema did negatively impact on theatres in the English-speaking world, except in London, Dublin and New York. The decline of commercial theatre due to patrons preferring to spend their disposable income on the increasingly popular movies, and limited available funds during the Depression, gave amateur theatre companies the opportunity to fill the void and entertain theatre-loving audiences at moderate prices.

The Great Depression

There was high unemployment and hardship for many Australians during the 1929-1939 Great Depression.\textsuperscript{79} Professional theatre was badly affected because revenues fell as audiences shrank and Governments increased entertainment taxes. With heavy taxes and cash needed to cover expenses and pay casts, it became financially difficult for professional theatre companies to compete with the cinema. For example, the cinema industry was making one hundred copies from a master-film and selling seats cheaply. The cinema patron paid fourpence or fivepence tax on a seat in the circle or stalls, but the patron attending live theatre was charged several shillings.

Professional entertainer Nancye Bridges writes of the ‘cruel double blow’ to hit live theatre in 1930, meaning the advent of talking pictures and a severe Depression.\textsuperscript{80} Interestingly, amateur theatre generally managed to survive the Depression and also the cinema industry regarding competing for audiences, whereas professional theatre suffered financially. Regardless of their own personal circumstances during the Depression, amateur theatre performers continued to entertain audiences in regional and city areas, often also fundraising to help others. One example was the city-based
Dramatic Society travelling to the Victorian town of St Arnaud and presenting *Ambrose Apple John’s Adventure*, an Arabian Nights entertainment in three acts, in September, 1929, at the St Arnaud Town Hall. Proceeds were in aid of the Infant Welfare Centre Fund.\(^8^\!\!\!1\)

Theatre companies form in various ways – perhaps started by a group of theatre-minded people meeting in a lounge-room, a choral group deciding to present musical theatre shows, or a dedicated speech teacher such as Maie Hoban starting a theatre company for her students.

**The 1930s**

*Mary (Maie) Hoban*

Mary (Maie) Hoban returned to teaching when widowed with five children during the Depression. She formed the Unnamed Players, an amateur theatre company, to accommodate her students and the company later became the Australian Repertory Players.\(^8^\!\!\!2\) They performed in suburban town halls, mostly presenting works by English dramatists, but gave the Australian playwright opportunities to perform new works.

In 1939, Hoban moved her school, now named the Australian School of Speechcraft and Drama, to Eastern Hill and created the Pilgrim Theatre by converting an old school building behind the vicarage of St Peter’s Church of England in Albert Street.\(^8^\!\!\!3\) Hoban’s students who went on to become professional actors include Patricia Kennedy and Frederick Parslow.

During the same decade, everyday people in regional and urban Victoria were also attracted to the joy of live performance and formed theatre companies, four of which are still operating in 2018. First, the oldest amateur theatre company in Victoria, the Geelong Repertory Theatre Company, was established in 1932 as the Geelong Repertory Society.\(^8^\!\!\!4\)
Geelong Repertory Theatre Company

Led for many years by Dulcie Meakin, the company’s first production was *Pygmalion*, presented on April 6th, 1932. At the time, seven plays were presented annually in the two hundred and eighty-seat GAMA Theatre (Geelong Association of Music and Art), located on the site of the former ‘Steeple Church’ in Ryrie Street. The company became a member of GAMA in 1946, joining the Geelong Chorale and the Music Society. The arrival of World War Two caused the Society to go into recess from 1941-1946. After annexation in 1978 of the GAMA Theatre by the Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC), the company performed in various venues prior to the completion of GPAC in 1981.

In 1983, a wood and timber store called ‘Henry’s’ at 15 Coronation Street, Geelong West was purchased by GAMA for shared use by the three GAMA sections, drama, music and chorale, for rehearsals and meetings. Music-lover Lilian Stott had left money in her will to purchase the property, known as the Lilian Stott Centre. Rising costs to perform at GPAC motivated conversion of the property into a small, versatile theatre and storage facility, to be known as the Woodbin Theatre. Dennis Mitchell led the renovations and
the company’s inaugural production in the new venue was presented on September 27th, 1989. The program included *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard, and Dennis Mitchell’s own play *Behind the Arras*.

When Past President Bryan Eaton was interviewed in the atmospheric foyer of the delightful Woodbin Theatre, he said the Geelong Repertory Theatre Company currently presents five shows per year, mostly plays. The company has an electronic newsletter titled *Rep Rep*, and a Play Selection Committee which Bryan considers to be the most important committee associated with the company. ‘If they make a poor decision, it will reflect on us badly’.

Bryan says audience attendances are strong and it is rare the seventy-nine seats in the theatre are not sold out at each performance. ‘We put on ten shows over three weekends’.


Bryan has been involved in acting since the late 1990s and received a Victorian Drama League Best Actor Award for his portrayal of ‘Johnny’ in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. His administrative roles include company President and a member of the Play Selection Committee. He regards this as a great experience. ‘I worked as a scientist for years’, says Bryan. ‘Moving from Science to the Arts is rewarding and gives focus to an artistic side that is never nourished when a scientist’.
Confirming the transformative benefits of amateur theatre, Bryan said during his years as company President he gained new skills such as updating the website. Conceding that Geelong is a ‘footy town’, Bryan also firmly believes that the ‘Geelong Rep’ is a Geelong institution. The company is proud of its special place in Victorian amateur theatre as being the state’s longest-running amateur theatre company. Just a few years later in 1938, The Hartwell Players were established, and claim to be Melbourne’s oldest theatre company.

**The Hartwell Players**

First known as the Hartwell Presbyterian Merrymakers, membership of the group was initially limited to women associated with the Hartwell Presbyterian Church in Eddy Street, Camberwell.\(^87\) The all-female casts played male roles, led by co-founder Rosabelle Kinsey, but men were admitted in 1952 with the evolution of The Hartwell Players. A fire in Eddy Street meant the group had to move to a Presbyterian Church hall in Burwood, before returning to Eddy Street when restoration work was completed.

When the Eddy Street church was sold at the end of the twentieth century, the company sought another venue. Long-term member Colin Donald explained in an interview that he oversaw the company’s move to the Performing Arts Centre at Ashwood High School. ‘Our last play at Eddy Street was *Macbeth* and the first season at Ashwood was a season of One Act plays’, said Colin. ‘The school allows us to use a disused classroom for a dressing room. The roof leaks and cannot be used as a classroom, so no rent is payable for that part of the school’.\(^88\)
The Hartwell Players aim to present three shows per year, which are selected depending on cast availability. Colin said the company prefers plays with a good number of female actors, and often aims for a younger cast more than other companies. This works in well with the Family Summer activity to which parents bring children, and performers aged between eight and sixteen years are mixed with adult performers. ‘We like to have children for about five years as they progress through school and then afterwards’, said Colin. The company also produces a Shakespearean show which travels to the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Gippsland. Auditions for shows are held at the BDC Dance Studios in Yertchuk Avenue, Ashwood, or at the school.

Colin lamented the difficulty of recruiting young people to the committee: ‘Our youngest committee member is 18, and the next age is 24. People just want to act and not be on the committee’. Storage for props, costumes and front of house consumables for The Hartwell Players is at Fleignier Hall in Oakleigh, provided by the City of Monash. ‘We got the last spot there’, said Colin. ‘It is like a Men’s Shed and we share it with seven other companies’. The company also presents plays written by members, including works written by Colin such as his script and lyrics for the musical Robin Hood in 3D.

On a personal note, Colin joined The Hartwell Players in the 1990s, and says the company plays a huge part in his personal history. Family involvement extends to many
members, even including parents, children and grandchildren from one family in the same show. As with the Geelong Repertory Theatre group, The Hartwell Players are proud of their long history.

**Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Victoria**

Gilbert and Sullivan’s works were enjoying a resurgence in the 1930s, and Melbourne fans were delighted when the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Victoria was founded in 1935, starting first as an appreciation group, then presenting occasional concerts.\(^89\)\(^90\) Their first production staged in 1936 was *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, a parody of *Hamlet* by W. S. Gilbert at The King’s Theatre, followed at the same venue by *The Sorcerer*, with libretto by W. S. Gilbert and music by Arthur Sullivan.\(^91\)\(^92\) Key founding members included Bernard Heinz, Paul Fiddigan, Lennox Brewer, Violet Jackson and Keith Morris.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Victoria Incorporated has rehearsed and performed at various venues including the National Theatre, St Martin’s Theatre, the Alexander Theatre at Monash University, on board the *Polly Woodside* in South Melbourne, Melba Hall at the University of Melbourne and in the Old Melbourne Courthouse. These days the company presents two full productions per year, mostly at the Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre in Preston.

Two key company members, Diana Burleigh and Richard Burman, were asked in an interview how they came to be involved with Gilbert and Sullivan’s works. Diana explained that she saw a school production by D’Oyly Carte in England which inspired her to collect books, now totalling four hundred. ‘I like the cleverness of the word play, but then as you go along, the sheer beautiful melody by Sullivan resonates’.

Diana directed her first production of *Patience* in 1975, and now directs Gilbert and Sullivan productions overseas as well as in Australia. She says until 1961 it was once dictated how the shows should be directed, but there is now more flexibility. Diana’s familiarity with the works of Gilbert and Sullivan leads her to believe there is a subversiveness of Gilbert. ‘He is playing subversive ideas of behaviour, and the more you get to know, it is there’.
Richard remained an audience member of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society until 1976, when he was persuaded to become a ‘performing member’ and join the chorus of Ruddigore. ‘I was happy to be in the back row of the chorus, then Diana cast me in The Sorcerer and I became a principal performer’, says Richard.

**Richard Burman as Sir Marmaduke Pointdextre in the centenary production of the opera The Sorcerer, directed in 1977 by Diana Burleigh. Image by courtesy of Richard Burman.**

Having performed in dramas and musicals for twenty years, Richard adores the four-part harmonies in Gilbert and Sullivan’s works. ‘It is more fun for me than singing modern musical comedies when all are singing in tune’, he laughed.

To further the company’s dedicated appreciation of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, a newsletter with articles of interest titled *Tan Tan Tara!* is published three times a year and sent electronically and by post to company members. The Gilbert and Sullivan Society also offers an extensive library of CDs and books relating to Gilbert and Sullivan and other light opera for the benefit of members, and CDs and DVDs are available for sale through the company website.93

Winding back to the 1930s, the decade of the company’s formation, another group commenced in a small theatre nestled at the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges.
The 1812 Theatre

Lillian Lavender formed The Lavender Players in Ferntree Gully in 1938, but with a small number of people also belonging to another group known as The Hut Players, the two groups merged in 1945 to become the Ferntree Gully Arts Society Repertory Players, under the leadership of Jon and Pauline Lowe. 94

The new company was housed in a converted army hut in Underwood Road, Ferntree Gully, now known as The Hut Gallery.

In 1956 the group became The Repertory Players, and in 1965 moved to the Lysterfield Progress Hall (established 1931) in Kellett Street. This hall was larger than the first venue, but in a dilapidated condition. A wonderful community spirit prevailed for the next six months as actors became carpenters, painters and tradesmen to create the hall into an intimate theatre, which in 1966 opened as The 1812.

The 1812 Theatre in Lysterfield after the fire in June, 1971. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.
Unfortunately, disaster struck in the middle of a performance season of *Ring Around the Moon*, in the early hours of 2\textsuperscript{nd} June, 1971, when the 1812 Theatre lost everything to a devastating fire, probably caused by faulty wiring.

In a splendid community effort, company members such as professional tradespeople, donated their skills and time to complete the building. The show was restaged at the Scoresby Hall, and then, one month later, in a sign of admirable determination by company members, building commenced at the Festival Theatre, a derelict cinema in Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully.

In 1985, a cast and crew of twenty represented Australia in an international festival of amateur theatre in Monaco, with the Australian play *Such is Life ... Ned Kelly*. This overseas tour by The 1812 Theatre was a unique project and great promotion for Australian drama. Very rarely are modern day companies able to organise such a project. When shining the spotlight on long-term member Chris Procter, he explained the impressive operations of The 1812 Theatre, which include a paid office manager for twenty hours per week.\textsuperscript{95} This interview revealed The 1812 Theatre to be one of Victoria’s most active and successfully managed amateur theatre companies.

Operated by a Board of Management, the company presents six shows per year, including four in The Lowe Auditorium which seats one hundred and fifty-four patrons, and two shows in bakery@1812, a versatile venue with modular seating. As owner of the
premises, the company hires the theatre for jazz nights, out-of-town openings for professional shows, workshops, independent theatre productions, and children’s shows.

The 1812 Theatre has purchased properties at numbers one (known as The Bakery), three, and five Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully. With Chris a member of the Arts Advisory Committee for Knox Council, there is now great potential for a community arts precinct to be established in the area. Chris spoke of the company’s aim to get the community involved: ‘We have youth theatre which presents two shows per year, run by a board member’. Chris pointed out it was good to have young people coming through from this group, which offers a grounding and an interest up to the age of twenty-five. ‘The old days are gone of men in their twenties getting involved in local theatre. Social media is a substitute’.

Chris Procter of The 1812 Theatre. Photograph by courtesy of Chris Procter.
Chris has been a member of the group since 1972, and although arriving as an actor, has worked backstage, in set building, design and does lots of directing. He has been on the Board since 1987, is Treasurer and manages the company’s historical archives. Retirement from professional work allows more time for Chris to spend at the theatre and in his role with the Arts Advisory Committee at Knox Council. He began in non-professional theatre at age six, helping his father and other members of the Beaumaris Players build the stage at their current venue in Wells Road, Beaumaris.

Chris believes the strength of the company is due to ‘the infrastructure, our team of volunteers, the Board of Management, an appreciation of tradition, we are not driven to do ‘arty farty’ stuff, and – we understand how to run a business called ‘Community Theatre’’. The 1812 Theatre, with its strong position in the Victorian theatre scene and excellent business and financial management presents a fine example to other theatre companies regarding ensuring their survival.

Returning to the 1930s, this was an active decade for theatre in both urban and regional areas.

The Prosperity Players

One company operating at this time, The Prosperity Players (a group of invited amateur performers), presented the comedy suspense thriller *The Ghost Train* by Arthur Ridley at the Kings Theatre in August, 1931. This event was organised by the State Relief Committee in conjunction with the Victorian Railway Institute, in aid of Melbourne’s Distressed Citizens. The company also presented the show at the Comedy Theatre for the same charity in 1931, attended by the Lieutenant Governor and Lady Irvine, and Private Secretary Mayor H. A. F. Wilkinson. The same year, the company travelled to Camperdown and presented the comedy-drama *The Patsy* by Barry Connor, which relates the romantic escapades of Patsy Harrington. This production aided the Camperdown District Hospital and Camperdown Ladies Benevolent Society. When performed again in the Terang Public Hall, the show assisted the Unemployed Relief Funds and the Terang Ladies’ Benevolent Society.
The Proscenium Club, Gregan McMahon Players, Arts Theatre Players and Cairns Memorial Players

Amateur theatre-makers could enjoy the satisfaction of helping others as well as participate in the craft of their beloved theatre. For example, in 1932 the Proscenium Club presented productions to aid the Newman Bursary Fund, and the Kew Auxiliary of the St Martin’s Home for Boys, Canterbury.97

In Melbourne, the Gregan McMahon Players were performing Robert E Sherwood’s *The Queen’s Husband* at the Comedy Theatre, J. Beresford Fowler’s company the Arts Theatre Players was staging *The White Blackbird* by Lennox Robinson at the Queen’s Hall, and the Cairns Memorial Players presented *Milestones* by Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock at the Cairns Hall in East Melbourne. The themes of these plays included royal romantic satire in *The Queen’s Husband*, powerful drama and controversial suggestions of incest in *The White Blackbird* and industrial and social changes based on an upper-class family in *Milestones*.98 99 100 101

Sarsfield Drama Club, East Gippsland

In East Gippsland, two hundred and ninety-three kilometres away from the busy Melbourne theatres, thespians in the farming district of Sarsfield had also formed a theatre company in the early 1930s. The Sarsfield Drama Club presented shows in the old hall, including musical items, choruses and comedy sketches.102

Mount Best Dramatic Club

Two hundred and eight kilometres from Sarsfield in South Gippsland, the Mount Best Dramatic Club’s annual concerts provided enjoyable entertainment, led by Bert Pocklington. Historian Alf Lonsdale pointed out, however, ‘the actors were complete amateurs’.103 The town experienced unfortunate bad luck with its public halls, losing the first one in the Black Thursday bushfires in 1906. A new Mount Best Hall was rebuilt on a different site in 1909, but in 1933 was destroyed by fire after the dramatic club performed a play called *All A Mistake*.104
Mount Best contributed further to the arts when the South Gippsland Eisteddfod was created on July 3rd, 1933 and presented that year in the Mount Best Hall. This was the result of local school teacher Mr Ridley Griffith organising a concert to be presented in the town, followed by the first interschool elocution contest in the nearby town of Toora.

The Mount Best hall was rebuilt in 1938, and there is no record of further productions from the Mount Best Dramatic Club.

**Melbourne Little Theatre Movement**

English theatre practitioner Brett Randall wanted to start his own company in Melbourne.105 Unfortunately it happened to be the Depression, Randall was out-of-work, had no theatre, no actors, and no partner until meeting Hal Percy at the Green Room Club.106 Randall and Percy successfully founded the Melbourne Little Theatre towards the end of 1931. Randall looked at vacant buildings in Melbourne and found the Fawkner Park kiosk, a venue rented for dances and functions.

Their first play, *The Fanatics* by Miles Malleson was presented on 2 December, 1931 in the Central Hall, Melbourne, with proceeds donated to augment the building fund. A feature of Little Theatre is that everything is done by company members, and audiences were repeatedly reminded that the movement depended as much on them as on the company. Randall and Percy aimed to cast their productions with the best available amateur and professional talent, to present plays of literary and entertainment value, and to encourage Australian writers.

![Brett Randall ca. 1950, brochure by Bernard Kearns, State Library Victoria Manuscripts](image)
The Fanatics was successful and the company could now afford its new home, the Kiosk Little Theatre in Fawkner Park, where a stage was built and dismantled when regular dances booked the venue. It is traditional for a school of stage to be part of each Little Theatre, and so the Little Theatre School of Dramatic Art opened as what was now known as the Little Theatre Laboratory of Dramatic Arts.

In addition to the monthly productions, play-readings were conducted by Little Theatre members on Sundays. The play-readings were free to subscribers who paid five shillings per year and received a concession rate to book other shows. After six months, Randall and Percy proudly stated in a circular that they had presented six new plays to Australian audiences, and four plays by Australian playwrights.

During 1933, His Majesty’s Theatre in Melbourne closed because of a fire in the auditorium, so Randall rented the foyer for one pound a week. The school, with Maie Hoban as associate director, and the Sunday play-readings, moved in, while productions continued to be presented from the Kiosk. Randall realised, however, that he needed to find a permanent home where productions could be presented without interruption.

In February, 1934, the Melbourne Little Theatre opened at St Chad’s Chapel of Ease, a disused little church in Martin Street, South Yarra, where they presented the expressionist drama Von Morgens Bis Mitternachts by George Kaiser. This play had seven scene changes and a cast of twenty-five, with thirteen actors doubling in roles. With a small stage and no backstage room, the dressing-rooms were placed at the front of the theatre, with no way to move from one side to the other without going outside.\textsuperscript{107} The play was a great success, jointly produced by the new directors, Brett Randall and Helton Daniell. Irene Mitchell who would become a legendary figure in Melbourne theatre, joined Randall and his team for the first time.

By mid-1936, productions at the Little Theatre were so successful that city managements invited Randall to stage shows in their theatres, an offer he accepted, although finances remained a problem. These were in addition to the nine regular shows at St Chad’s, where lower admission prices were more appealing to patrons with tight budgets. Brett Randall’s passion, expertise and determination to start his own Little Theatre back in
1931, at a time when he was forced to walk to his playhouse to save the tram-fare, was now rewarded with success.

Coincidentally, John Richardson’s scrapbook has been researched for this book, and Brett Randall refers to John in a story in his publication *Stage Stuff*, titled ‘From the Amateur Point of View’, dated 8 October, 1931: ‘One of the brightest and best of our amateur light juveniles, John Richardson, has been snapped up by Mrs Clapp for second lead in *The Love Step*’. The same edition refers to Fox Hoyts Radio Dramatic Company presenting *That Ferguson Family* at the King’s Theatre in aid of the Melbourne Hospital. Later chapters covering the 1940s and beyond will continue the story of Randall’s ongoing contribution to Melbourne’s arts industry, which started on an amateur basis before eventually turning professional.

**The National Theatre Movement**

A National Theatre Movement in Australia was established in 1937 by Melbourne-born opera singer Gertrude Johnson (1894-1973) on her return from Europe. She believed a National Theatre was needed in Melbourne to provide work for young artists to gain experience in their own country, rather than having to travel abroad to perform. Gertrude’s vision for a National Theatre was to create a home for various branches of the country’s artistic scene, including opera, the drama, orchestral, children’s orchestral concerts, ballet, and Sunday afternoon concerts featuring both chamber music and orchestral.

She planned to earn a living from professional singing engagements, start the National Theatre Movement in Melbourne, then increase it on a national scale. After addressing an audience at the Victoria Centenary Club about the need for a National Theatre in Australia, Gertrude was encouraged to write a proposal about financing and implementing the project and the importance to unite for ‘the advancement of our cultural life’.

In November, 1935, Gertrude was invited by Sir Keith Murdoch to speak at a meeting in the Lower Melbourne Town Hall, resulting in the following motion being carried unanimously: ‘That it is desirable to establish, in Melbourne, a National Theatre’.
were many monthly meetings at the Victoria Centenary Club to discuss forming the National Theatre Movement, and a competition to design a logo in the national colours of green and gold was won by Jack Hanna, a third year Arts Student at Swinburne Technical College.

The Movement began as an amateur production company with semi-professional training programs, and professional drama and ballet companies formed later. With no office, Gertrude and the Honorary Secretary used a portable typewriter in borrowed spare spaces in various theatre company clubrooms. They eventually found a small room in the Nicholas Building (on the corner of Swanston Street and Flinders Lane) to use during the day, and the Shakespearian Society used it in the evenings.

Amateur groups such as the Un-named Players and the Dramatists’ Association presented benefit performances for the National Theatre, and then the Movement’s first major production, *A Joyous Pageant of the Holy Nativity*, was staged at the Princess Theatre on 12th December, 1936. Eventually, the National Theatre moved from the tiny room in the Nicholas Building to a larger venue, the Parish Hall of St Peter’s, Eastern Hill.

This venue had already served as a playhouse in the past for productions presented by Gregan McMahon’s Melbourne Repertory Theatre Society and J. Beresford Fowler’s Arts Theatre Company. In 1938 the Movement’s first opera was presented, *The Flying Dutchman*. Heidelberg, Swan Hill, Yallourn, Coburg, Ballarat and Bendigo branches of the National Theatre Movement would later form. The effect of World War Two on the National Theatre will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Red Cliffs Musical Society**

There may not have been a National Theatre Movement in Red Cliffs in Victoria’s Sunraysia region, but residents could enjoy musical entertainment firstly from a vaudeville group formed in 1921, then the Red Cliffs Musical Society evolved from a choir in 1938, led by Geoffrey S. Beacham. Their first concert, Stainer’s *Crucifixion*, was presented at Easter in the Roxy Theatre, Red Cliffs. There was also a Mildura Musical Society operating at this time, just a fourteen-minute drive away. In 1940, the company’s first full production with sets and costumes, *Maid of the Mountains*, was
staged at the Diggerland Theatre, with net profits going to ‘patriotic purposes’. In December, 1966, the Premier of Victoria, Mr Henry Bolte (later Sir Henry Bolte) opened the new Mildura Arts Centre, which provided a good performance venue for the company.

Four years later, the Powerhouse in Cureton Avenue became available for rehearsals and storage. During an interview in 2016 in the atmospheric Powerhouse riverfront clubrooms and storage area, members Pamela Bradley, Cyndy Wood and Russell Gittins took centre-stage to speak of different styles of productions being presented today, including blockbuster musicals such as *My Fair Lady* and *42nd Street*.

Amateur theatre is all about people, and a love for theatre can pass down through generations. Pamela talked about her parents who lived in nearby Dareton running their own theatre company for twenty years after World War Two. ‘The soldiers’ settlement brought young people’. Keeping it in the family, Pamela started onstage at age five as a glow-worm in Aladdin’s lamp.

Russell writes the annual pantomimes, adapted from fairy stories, and these pantomimes give young people the chance to perform and to see shows. Pamela said, ‘Some of the kids have never been on stage and they love it and still keep going when seventeen or eighteen. Some have gone on to be professional or work overseas’. The company is strict when awarding Life Membership, requiring fifteen consecutive years’ membership and involvement with thirty consecutive shows. ‘This proves dedication’, said Cyndy, who also sings with the Country Women’s Association (CWA) choir as well as performing in the company.

At the time of the interview, the Red Cliffs Musical Society shared the Powerhouse building with the Mildura Theatre Company. Photograph albums containing images of Red Cliffs Musical Society productions depict well-staged shows and striking costumes. It is impressive that three major theatre companies located in the Mildura area can operate harmoniously together, with members taking pleasure in belonging to all three companies and participating in their productions.
While theatre companies in regional and urban areas were mostly presenting imported plays, light operettas or musicals to entertain local communities, others were recognising the opportunity to use live performance for political purposes.

**Melbourne Workers’ Theatre and New Theatre Movement**

Mainstream amateur companies presenting traditional-style theatre shows were not useful for political protest, so in 1936 the Melbourne Workers’ Theatre was formed. This was affiliated with the Communist Party and based on the English Workers’ Theatre Movement operating in the 1920s, and the New Theatre of America. Both groups favoured plays by American writer Clifford Odets, and the topic of the first, *Waiting for Lefty*, was about a taxi-drivers’ strike in New York.

The group’s second production, an anti-Nazi play titled *Till the Day I Die*, became well-known for being banned in theatres in Victoria and New South Wales due to complaints by the German Consul General in Australia to the Federal Government. The play is officially described as ‘Containing a strong spirit of beauty through the presentation of the heroic ‘underground’ struggle of the militant workers whose aim it is to overthrow the dictatorship of Hitler - and all that oppression and poverty for which it stands’.

When the group, now known as the New Theatre League, was banned from venues to stage this production, the Mayor of Collingwood offered the Collingwood Town Hall on the grounds it was ‘a private club performance’. When three thousand people arrived to see the performance, they found hundreds of policemen and the town hall doors locked and bolted. The Mayor climbed in through a window, only to find that all the chairs had been removed by councillors who opposed the performance. The irate crowd moved on to a vacant block of land for a protest meeting and the play was later presented at the Brunswick Town Hall.

Ken Harper comments on the irony of the Australian Government declaring war three years later ‘on the country and ruler it had taken such pain to avoid offending’. The Melbourne New Theatre moved into a loft in Flanigan Lane to present their next play, written by the Melbourne Writers’ Group and titled *The Thirteen Dead*, which explored the events leading to a mining disaster in Wonthaggi.
Annual Dramatic Festivals

Participants in the popular annual dramatic festivals held in Melbourne between 1934 and 1939 were not politically protesting, but were celebrating the joy of live performance. The first event, The Centenary Amateur Dramatic Festival held at the Garrick Theatre in South Melbourne, attracted seven entries and was won by the Cairns Memorial Players. The festivals were abandoned in 1940 because men were scarce to perform in the plays. These competitions eventually became incorporated into festivals presented by the Royal South Street Society in Ballarat, and the Bendigo Society.

Workplace Theatre

Live performance was so popular in the 1930s that thespians also enjoyed theatrical activities in the workplace. Theatre groups operating within organisations provided a popular cultural activity which had continued from the nineteenth century.

Melbourne organisations in the 1930s with workplace theatre included The Age, Myer Emporium and the State Electricity Commission (SEC). The Myer Theatrical Society began when the Myer Male Choir, formed in 1933, became the Myer Choral Society when ladies joined in 1934. Between 1933 and 1936 the Male Choir and Choral Society presented forty-three concerts to raise money for charity, before merging into the Myer Theatrical Society in 1936. The company’s first production commenced rehearsals in early 1937 for *The Girl from Kay’s*, a three-night performance season presented in September of that year at the King’s Theatre in Russell Street, Melbourne to aid the Lord Mayor’s Fund. The Foreword in the program thanks honorary office-bearers and the cast who provided their own costumes.

In contrast, workplace theatre in the twenty-first century focuses on problem solving and staff training rather than in-house entertainment. One example is Workplace Reality Theatre where professional actors re-enact actual workplace situations, assisting the company facilitator to compare good and bad behaviour and work practices. In another instance, in 2012, several amateur actors from Beaumaris Theatre, including myself, re-enacted scripted roles in filmed segments for staff training programs for Monash Health. This use of performance for purposes other than entertainment brings a new perspective to the traditional ‘workplace theatre’.
THE GIRL FROM KAYS
A Myer Theatrical Society Presentation
TO AID THE LORD MAYOR'S FUND
CELEBRATING THE MYER SILVER ANNIVERSARY

KING'S THEATRE
23 25 27 SEPTEMBER
1937
FOREWORD...

WHEN, in 1933, a small group of men started the Myer Male Choir, they little dreamt that they were preparing the way for a flourishing Theatrical Society which would be capable of staging a three-night production of a Musical Comedy in a leading city theatre. This progress is due in no small measure to the enthusiasm of the ladies who, in 1934, joined with the men to form the Myer Choral Society. 1936 saw a still further ambitious development, when the Choral Society was in its turn merged into the Myer Theatrical Society. Rehearsals for the new Society's first production commenced early in 1937.

Between 1933 and 1936 the Male Choir and Choral Society gave forty-three concerts for charity and other deserving causes and raised a considerable sum of money. Those who are responsible for "The Girl from Kay's" are hoping that as a result of the three nights' performances, the Lord Mayor's Fund will receive a substantial cheque.

Success has not come to the Myer Theatrical Society without strenuous and sacrificial service by a large number of honorary office-bearers, and members of the cast who have borne the cost of their stage clothes. To mention any by name would be to run the risk of omitting some who most deserve recognition. Therefore, when we say "Thank you, Everybody!" and leave it at that, we hope that all who have assisted in any way to make possible the presentation of "The Girl from Kay's," will regard this as an expression of individual appreciation of what they have done.

Program cover and Foreword of the 1937 production The Girl from Kay’s, celebrating the Myer Silver Anniversary. Images courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM


**Post-Great Depression**

The amateur theatrical arts sector determinedly continued in Victoria through good and bad times. I believe a contributing factor to be the solid community under-pinning of all amateur theatre groups through volunteer participation, friendships, loyal, supportive audiences, and a genuine passion for theatre.

Fortunately, the professional theatre industry recovered after the Depression when crowds returned to the city theatres.\footnote{120} The evolution of technology, development of sophisticated staging, and global access to world standard shows, has resulted in a high level of productions presented by this arts sector. This in turn sets a fine benchmark for the amateur and independent theatrical arts sectors to emulate.

The Depression was finished, but sadly Australia’s precious years of peacetime were also nearing their end.

In a radio broadcast on 3\textsuperscript{rd} September, 1939, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced to the nation that Germany had invaded Poland, Great Britain and France had declared war in response, and now Australia was also at war, for the second time in three decades.\footnote{121}
Chapter Three: World War Two Era

World War Two (1939-1945)

There is nothing entertaining about an encore of war: a genre of theatre with potential horrors, loss of life and injury. When young Australians enlisted or re-enlisted with the Defence Force, they knew the personal risks involved with signing up for another major overseas conflict. The high casualties suffered in the Great War were still fresh in the minds of many Australian people who, as it eventuated, would be now be challenged for six hard, long years.

Concert Party Entertainment

On a brighter note, live entertainment had proved to be a wonderful antidote during World War One for lifting the spirits of troops and the general public. ¹ Volunteers in regional and suburban amateur theatre communities would again utilise their talent and expertise to assist war-related causes and entertain their communities. As in World War One, they also worked alongside their professional theatrical counterparts to visit troops stationed in camps in Australia and overseas. This entertainment would re-energise and brighten the lives of the brave service men and women serving their country and raise the spirits of a war-weary public.

Salvation Army Concert Parties

With the nation again at war, volunteer concert party entertainers included musicians and singers from the Salvation Army. ² As well as providing entertainment, members of the Salvation Army’s Local Corps organised food and comfort packages and offered practical assistance such as darning socks for soldiers stationed at local barracks.

Music is integral to the Salvation Army’s culture and most young male members at that time went into banding, whereas the women formed Songster Brigades, similar to a choir. When experiencing an active theatre of war, the unarmed bandsmen would become
stretcher-bearers when required. Melbourne Salvation Army archivist Lindsay Cox who is currently working on a book describing the Salvation Army’s contributions to the First and Second World Wars, says most training camps in Australia were pulled down after the first World War, then rebuilt on the same sites in 1945. Camp locations in Victoria included Albury, Bonegilla, Puckapunyal, Broadmeadows and Colac. Volunteer bands and singers from the nearest major town, such as those in Geelong who entertained troops in Colac, would travel to the camps to perform.

**Instruction Manual for Producers of War-Time Concert Parties**

In 1944, an Instruction Manual compiled by vaudeville producer Wallace R. Parnell of the Tivoli Circuit, was donated to Producers of Concert Parties for the fighting forces, by courtesy of the Tivoli Circuit, Australia. Parnell writes of the vast difference between the production of a musical comedy or drama, and the production of fast-moving ‘meaty’ concert parties to be enjoyed by men in the Forces. The author must surely have had amateur groups in mind when preparing this manual, as professional performers would not appreciate basic theatrical advice such as:

> It is imperative your actors enunciate well, and don’t let your actors gabble … or fidget … no eyes on the floor. Have plenty of rehearsals, rehearse entrances and exits carefully, make a point of rehearsing the whole show before you give it, don’t let your actors tell you what to do, and don’t permit suggestive movements.

It is worthwhile to include selected parts of this Manual for Concert Parties here as firstly the basic instructions suggest a lack of confidence in amateur performers by a professional theatre-maker. Secondly, Parnell’s advice reflects the perspective of the troops as audience members while viewing concert party entertainment. While risking insult to the performers with his instructions, Parnell raises valid concern that substandard entertainment, although well-intentioned, could waste the troops’ valuable recreational time.
Parnell’s advice includes:

Don’t let actors just play to the ‘brass hats’ and privileged few in the first two or three rows. Performers should be instructed that these shows are primarily for the rank and file, and it is on them that they should concentrate. Don’t complain about working conditions, tell your company not to answer back to interjections … only hams or rank amateurs indulge in these tactics.

Parnell now makes the important point that the performers are not enlisted for the services, which could cause envy or resentment from their servicemen audiences. A tactful approach is required, such as:

Don’t let your artists ‘put on side’ just because they are actors. The men already envy them and think they are on a good thing, so don’t let your actors rub it in. Speed, speed and more speed – cut the bows and introductions – start with community singing. It is your job to take them out of themselves, and the best way to accomplish this is to make them laugh.

Parnell’s terminology used in the manual is also of historic interest as it represents a section of Melbourne theatrical culture in 1944.

‘Theatres of War: Wartime Entertainment and the Australian Experience’ Exhibition

To acknowledge and celebrate the power of performance in bringing people together during times of war, an exhibition devised by Arts Centre Melbourne titled ‘Theatres of War: Wartime Entertainment and the Australian Experience’, focuses on representative experiences from World War One (1914-18), World War Two (1939-45), and the Vietnam War (1962-75).4

There is also acknowledgement of more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and peacekeeping missions in East Timor. Curated by Carolyn Laffan and Margaret Marshall, this informative exhibition is a reminder to modern-day Australians of the important role amateur and professional performers played in sharing their talents to keep national spirits high during wartime.
**Hiawatha**

A performance of *Hiawatha* involving almost one thousand amateur and professional performers, had been carefully planned in the months preceding the commencement of World War Two. One month after the announcement of the war, *Hiawatha*, with pageantry, music and drama, was presented on 21st October, 1939 before an audience of three thousand five hundred people in the Exhibition Building, Melbourne. Presented by the City Council, the production included a chorus of seven hundred singers, a ballet of eighty dancers and a seventy-five-piece symphony orchestra, conducted by Professor Bernard Heinze. Earlier, seven thousand school children had been invited by the City Council to enjoy seeing two dress rehearsals. During the months of pre-production planning, preparation and rehearsals, the organisers were unaware that World War Two would commence before the show’s scheduled opening night.

The decision to proceed with presenting this production at a time of war would have been regarded by some as questionable, because other Australians were selflessly committing to enlist in the Forces. An article written by Kenneth R. Hendy in Melbourne’s *The Argus* newspaper counteracts this concern by speaking of the patriotic value of presenting *Hiawatha* at this worrying time.

Headed ‘Hiawatha Comes to Melbourne’, and sub-headed ‘An Anglo-Scot Uses Greek Form in a Play about an Indian by a Half-caste Negro’, the article first tells of the old legend of Hiawatha. The great native American prophet, statesman and teacher played a part in building the British Empire with the formation of a powerful confederation of five Indian tribes, which fought with the British settlers in the wars which brought Canada under British rule. Hendy then attempts to validate presenting this show at a time of national uncertainty by symbolising the *Hiawatha* production as a form of weaponry: ‘Now the dramatic presentation of part of the Hiawatha legend is to aid the Empire in its fight against Hitlerism’.

This Australian premiere of T. C. Fairbairn’s adaptation of Coleridge-Taylor’s opera Hiawatha was based on Longfellow’s ‘Song of Hiawatha’. Coincidentally, the lead role of Hiawatha had been sung by Australian Horace Stevens in 1924 at the Royal Albert Hall, London, under the direction of Mr Fairbairn, and Stevens again appeared in the title role in the Melbourne 1939 production. The Argus newspaper favourably reviewed the thirteen-night production, and an article titled ‘Pageantry of Hiawatha’ described the show as ‘an event which musical Melbourne will long remember’. The review praised the show, saying all involved (including amateurs and professionals), ‘came through a herculean task with high honours, sending the great audience of three thousand home thoroughly satisfied and happy that, though the war had caused the cancellation of most of the events of the Melbourne spring carnival, Hiawatha had survived’.

The patriotic intentions to present Hiawatha surely justified presenting grand scale entertainment at this difficult time in Australian history. Audiences at Hiawatha on opening night included the Governor, Sir Winston Dugan, Lady Dugan and other leading Victorian citizens, with proceeds going to the Red Cross and Army Comforts funds.
Amateur Theatre in Victoria: 1939-1945

Many amateur theatre companies in Victoria continued to entertain their communities during the Second World War, recognising that their volunteer talents and passion for live theatre were useful to support the war effort. Across the state, from Swan Hill to the Mallee, and Frankston to Gippsland, theatre companies were presenting shows, cheering local communities, and raising funds to support Australian troops stationed in Australia, or serving overseas. This was particularly commendable due to challenges faced in staging productions at this time, including a lack of male performers absent on active service, and a shortage of materials such as fabrics and paper for programs. The following are stories about some of these groups which operated during World War Two, including university theatre groups and the National and Little Theatres.

The National Theatre Movement of Australia

Melbourne

The National Theatre Movement in Melbourne was operating successfully when World War Two commenced. Based in St Peter’s Church in Eastern Hill, Miss Gertrude Johnson and her team looked forward to eventually purchasing their own theatre. Membership was strong, eight fully-staged productions were presented annually, and affiliated National Theatres were forming in suburbs and regional areas.7

Gertrude’s biographers have written two contrasting opinions about the effects of World War Two on the National Theatre Movement. Firstly, Frank Van Straten believes, ‘The war […] could not have come at a worse time for the National Theatre movement’.8 Van Straten’s view may be influenced by Gertrude Johnson having generously shared all profits from National Theatre productions presented during the war with the Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund.

In contrast, Thérèse Radic writes: ‘With the outbreak of World War II and consequently no imported competition, the Australian National Theatre Movement’s activities increased’.9 Radic observes that while drama and ballet were major concerns of the National Theatre, fifteen operas were presented during the war years. The National Theatre had raised more than fifteen thousand pounds for war charities, which by today’s
equivalence exceeds two million dollars.\textsuperscript{10} Van Straten points out: ‘had they not been so generous, they could have bought themselves a home, and had some cash to spare’.

An entertainment unit was set up in 1940, under the direction of Athol Thompson, to tour revues and musical entertainment to service camps for weekly, then twice weekly performances. Plays performed included revivals of English comedies, thrillers, and Shakespeare, while small operas and ballet evenings also aided fund-raising. Actor Pat Henry talks of acting with ‘the National’ as always being fun. ‘There were so many people with talent, we gave so much of our time, we never got paid, not a cracker, everything was voluntary, but we’d lay down our lives for Gertrude’. Henry’s fine tribute to Gertrude Johnson demonstrates a strong loyalty from her volunteers.

The National Theatre staged operas for six years in Melbourne during the war, giving valuable stage experience to young performers. A shortage of fabrics saw donated gowns from Nellie Melba’s stage wardrobe gratefully received, and bedspreads, tablecloths and domestic curtains were used to make costumes. By 1944, the National Theatre’s wardrobe housed two thousand five hundred costumes. Canvas for making scenery was also difficult to source and programs were reduced in size and quality due to a paper shortage. However, Gertrude Johnson and her dedicated team of volunteers ensured the show always went on. From April, 1940, the ‘National Theatre Movement, Victoria’, changed names to officially become ‘The National Theatre Movement of Australia’.

It is interesting to read how playwrights and players began their professional careers in Australia. For example, the National Theatre started the post-war period with a play by young Australian writer Ray Lawler, titled \textit{Hal’s Belles}. The play tells of a reincarnated Henry VIII meeting his reincarnated wives in a modern London flat.\textsuperscript{11} This play was originally presented by the Middle Park Repertory Theatre, set up by Lorna Forbes and Syd Turnbull in an old cinema at 3 Armstrong Street, which became known as the Arrow Theatre.\textsuperscript{12} They decided to present \textit{Hal’s Belles}, but needed to cast the role of Henry VIII. Someone suggested nineteen-year old Frank Thring who looked like Henry VIII, but had never been onstage before. Thring would later say: ‘That’s how you started then … you were simply pushed on the stage in a suburban dramatic society’.\textsuperscript{13} The play was successful, William P. Carr came to see it, and requested the play with almost the same cast be transferred to the National Theatre. The young Thring would eventually become a
professional, nationally and internationally well-known actor in stage, film and television.

In just over ten years, Gertrude Johnson and her National Theatre had presented ten grand operas, an original comic opera, more than thirty plays, and six seasons of ballet. This illustrates an important aspect of this book which endorses Harold Baigent’s view that the amateur theatre is ‘the backbone of the theatre’ and ‘from its ranks come many of the finest professional actors and producers’.

**Ballarat National Theatre**

Arts-loving Ballarat residents would have been delighted when a branch of the National Theatre formed in their city in 1938, two years after Gertrude Johnson had established The National Theatre Movement. It was envisaged that the Ballarat National Theatre would be the first of a network of companies established throughout Australia, and other branches followed in Heidelberg, Yallourn and Swan Hill. Unfortunately, World War Two would interrupt further growth.

The company’s first production, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, was presented by visiting players from Melbourne in June, 1938 at the Alfred Hall. The company debuted in June, 1939, using their own cast and crew to present *Smilin’ Through*, directed by William Carr. Another early success was *Mr Pim Passes By*, written by A. A. Milne and directed by J. Beresford Fowler in the Plaza Theatre, Ballarat. The latter show was presented for a two-night season in 1940 and later staged at the Horsham Town Hall. Both shows commendably raised a considerable amount for patriotic funds, namely the Red Cross and Australian Comforts Fund. The Ballarat National Theatre continued to help the war effort by staging shows in Ballarat and nearby country towns. Between 1941 and 1943, war conditions meant the branch was unable to continue with full-scale activities, but they toured the one-act play *World Without Men* to various camps to entertain troops.

In 1944, there was a revival of activities including play-readings, and entertainment provided for service men in hospitals and convalescent homes. British director Tyron Guthrie attended a rehearsal of the company’s production, *A Quiet Weekend* by Esther
McCracken, presented at the Alfred Hall. Guthrie was a guest of the then Premier of Victoria, Thomas Holloway, and between scenes praised the company’s work in a comment to the Ballarat Courier on 28th March, 1949: ‘I think the amateurs are doing a fine job of work in Australia, keeping the theatre alive, arousing interest, and so on’.

After searching for suitable venues for rehearsals and productions, the Ballarat National Theatre’s first permanent venue was established in 1949 in Camp Street. With seats for only one hundred patrons, it became known as ‘The Little Theatre’. The first production presented here was George Bernard Shaw’s Candida, directed by Austin McCallum.

Thirty-five years later, the company was required to move out of their venue in 1984 and remained ‘homeless’ for four years until 1988, when the Federation University of Australia bought the Old Courthouse at the School of Mines in Ballarat. The Courthouse was converted into a performing arts venue, with funds contributed by the Ballarat National Theatre towards this conversion. The theatre group acquired preferential user status, and from then on has presented productions at this venue.


During an interview in Ballarat, board member of the modern-day Ballarat National Theatre Robyn Ashmore, said that today the Ballarat National Theatre Incorporated is one of the few surviving theatres in the original National Theatre Movement. It operates successfully presenting plays alongside two other major theatre companies in
Ballarat, the Ballarat Lyric Theatre and BLOC (Ballarat Light Opera Company). Robyn said they work well with the two other theatre groups, but liaise more with BLOC, sometimes donating costumes or using outfits from BLOC’s thousands of costumes. ‘We invite the costume ladies from BLOC and the Presidents from both companies to our opening nights’, said Robyn. The company also includes affiliated organisations such as BLOC in their newsletter, advertising their shows, while Her Majesty’s theatre includes all theatre companies in their promotional brochure.

The Ballarat National Theatre now presents four shows per year and aims to do lesser known plays. While imported shows such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *12 Angry Men* were successful, a locally written play was sold out. *One Boy’s War*, a family’s story set in Ballarat, was written by Mary-Rose McLaren, one of the company’s talented members. In early 2016, the company honoured the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of one of their affiliate organisations, Royal South Street. *Honourable Mentions*, written and directed by Peter Nethercote and Mary-Rose McLaren, was presented at the Courthouse. According to Robyn, the ‘National Theatre’ aspect of their company is part of their history and makes no difference to operations when compared to other companies. ‘We feel a responsibility to keep it going and not let everyone down. People are proud we are a small company and do dramas, not musicals’.

Robyn believes the Ballarat National Theatre is currently a work in progress. When asked about her involvement with the company, Robyn said, ‘It enriches your life. I don’t do it necessarily because I love theatre, I just see a job that needs to be done’. Robyn said operating the lights was great, because in the process, the play can be seen over and over. ‘I realise I have missed theatre during my life. It just makes life better’. This genuine warm response has been heard many times from amateur theatre-makers.
**Swan Hill National Theatre**

In the north west of Victoria, the Swan Hill National Theatre evolved from the Swan Hill Theatre Group, which was established not long after World War Two broke out. In 1939, Melbourne playwright Marjorie McLeod moved to Swan Hill for her husband’s work and started The John Knox Players at the John Knox Presbyterian Church. Their first play, *The Six Miss Seymours*, written by Isabel Handley, was chosen because many Swan Hill men were in the forces. This play’s cast conveniently has eight female roles and only one male. Marjorie McLeod says in her book *All the World’s a Stage* (1980) that the group became so active raising money for patriotic causes that regular church activities were hindered. This issue was solved when the players re-formed as a group known as The Barnstormers, operating separately from the church.

The town of Swan Hill is located three hundred and thirty-eight kilometres north west of Melbourne, situated on the south side of the Murray River. Tourism in the town today boasts a Pioneer Settlement and outdoor museum, an art gallery, annual Show, visiting professional performers and a vibrant amateur theatre company called the Swan Hill Theatre Group, founded in 1943. After peace was declared and the Swan Hill men returned from the war, they found many of their young women friends had become interested in play acting in the local drama group, and so joined them. Now with more men available, it was easier to cast plays and the drama group became a social club, serving the interests of young people who enjoyed play acting, similar to those who like football or chess.

Some of the young men would have encountered international influences during their time away. For example, returned serviceman and former Mayor of Swan Hill Duncan Douglas became interested in play readings and amateur theatre while serving in the air force in Canada, and called a public meeting of citizens to discuss forming a theatre group to present plays in the town hall. After an enthusiastic response, Douglas was elected President, and Marjorie McLeod who became the founder/director/producer, suggested the group ally itself with the Australian National Theatre movement in Melbourne with which she was already connected.
The Swan Hill National Theatre aimed to entertain audiences and present comedies, but Shakespeare fan Marjorie McLeod envisaged more prestige for the group if they attempted Shakespeare. Luckily, some ‘handsome young striplings’, newly returned home from attending boarding schools in Geelong and Melbourne, had been introduced to Shakespeare’s plays, and were prepared to try acting. In 1947, using the most experienced actors, scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and songs from Shakespeare were presented on the bard’s birthday, 23rd April.

Proprietors of shops in the main street of Swan Hill decorated floats for a street procession, which at the time was a novelty for townsfolk. In a wonderful community effort, nearly twenty decorated floats headed by the Swan Hill brass band, led the way into Riverside Park where various entertainments, including maypole dancing, were presented. These processions continued each year, and on one occasion a float merged Shakespeare with Australiana by representing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with a Fairy Queen and Puck in a woodland setting, and children dressed as fairies used a mass of eucalyptus branches for the woodland bower.

**The Swan Hill Theatre Group Today**

Thanks to Marjorie McLeod, the people of Swan Hill were introduced to the performing arts, and the town became famous for its annual Shakespeare Festivals. This strong interest in theatre continues in Swan Hill today, as I discovered when interviewing David Quayle at the Swan Hill Memorial Theatre. It was great to see the Swan Hill Theatre Group retaining an integral presence in the local community. When David arrived in Swan Hill in 1974, the Musical Comedy Society was rehearsing *Showboat* and he participated in the chorus. Members of the Musical Comedy Society of Swan Hill also belonged to the National Theatre group, but neither company was well off financially. David suggested merging the two groups and calling it the Swan Hill Theatre Company.

The company now owns the Memorial Theatre, having purchased it from the Returned Services League in 1981, when they moved premises.
After purchasing the theatre the Swan Hill Theatre Group obtained a grant to replace the roof and engaged unemployed youth to do the work, which gave them experience and benefitted the theatre company.

I enjoyed visiting this theatrically atmospheric venue, where seating is permanently affixed to wooden tiers, and teal coloured fabric-covered seats with arms alternate with seats without arms. This is space efficient but still comfortable for patrons, with a good-sized orchestra pit to the left of the audience.
Behind the stage is a make-up room with twelve small mirrors mounted on wooden backing. In addition, there are male and female dressing rooms for principal performers and ensemble and a huge mirror near the prompt side stage entrance. Outside is a courtyard, workshop and metal shed for storing unused scenery. This impressive theatrical set-up would be the envy of many Melbourne-based theatre companies.

A former Mayor and Councillor of Swan Hill and a Civil Celebrant, David Quayle is particularly keen for the company to reach out to young people. He formed the Healthy Minds Network in 2003, and suicides were reduced from twelve per year to two. The Swan Hill Theatre Group is a vital activity for the town’s young people, who look forward each year to being part of the shows, such as Grease, which are specifically chosen keeping the town’s young population in mind. Theatre provides a terrific interest for the young people of Swan Hill who, according to David, cannot wait to attend the next show’s auditions.
City of Heidelberg Branch, National Theatre Movement of Australia

Travelling back in time now to 1945, the City of Heidelberg also joined the National Theatre Movement. Details of this branch of the National Theatre Movement have been discovered in scrapbook archived at Heidelberg Theatre in Rosanna. A press cutting refers to the City of Heidelberg Eisteddfod Society: ‘As a gesture towards closer cooperation between the various branches of the National Theatre Movement, it has been decided to call them together to compete in a festival of drama, striving in friendly rivalry, a token trophy to be awarded by the Central Body’. In the early 1950s, a breakaway group left the Heidelberg National Theatre and formed the Heidelberg Repertory Group, resulting in the eventual disbandment of the Heidelberg National Theatre. This new group, known today as the Heidelberg Theatre Company, is discussed in the 1950s chapter in this book.

Melbourne University Drama Groups

It is not surprising that with theatre groups forming in many Victorian towns, suburbs and workplaces, university students liaised with staff to form their own groups to present theatre productions.

Melbourne University Dramatic Club (MUDC)

The Melbourne University Dramatic Club started performing in the 1930s, including in the opening of the Union Theatre in 1938, presenting Denis Johnston’s Storm Song, produced by Keith Macartney. The group’s production of Macbeth in 1947 was said to be the ‘most elaborate undergraduate production yet to be seen at the Union Theatre’. The full capacity audiences attending the ten performances of Macbeth included several thousand school children. The company collaborated to present productions with other student theatre groups before merging with the Marlowe Society to form the Melbourne University Student Theatre (MUST) in 1966.

The Tin Alley Players

Another student theatre company the Tin Alley Players was established in 1939 at Melbourne University. They continued for almost forty years, presenting three major
productions a year, monthly play-readings, and participating in wider community events such as the annual Victorian Drama League competitions. University staff members had accepted key operational roles in the company, with Professor Maurice Betz (then Professor of Statistics) as the company’s first President, and Associate Professor Keith Macartney as director of many of the productions.

The Tin Alley Players’ active work during World War Two included touring shows to army bases and rural locations. The company presented plays from the classical and modern canon, but did not often produce works by Australian authors, except Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Considering that students are usually only affiliated with universities for the duration of their studies, it is a credit to all involved with the Tin Alley Players that the group achieved active and productive operational continuity for almost forty years.

**The Marlowe Society**
In addition to the Tin Alley Players and Melbourne University Dramatic Club, The Marlowe Society was established in 1947, aiming to present plays rarely performed in Melbourne. The company’s first production was Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*, which was directed by Max Nicholson and played to good houses. By the 1960s, The Marlowe Society was successfully presenting difficult plays such as Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, while another season titled *Theatre of the Absurd*, presented Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov, as well as showing Absurdist films. By the mid-1960s, the Marlowe Society merged with the Melbourne University Dramatic Club, having achieved a successful twenty-year run of presenting unique-style productions.

**The Little Theatre**
Moving along from Carlton to South Yarra in 1940, the Little Theatre was continuing to operate from its venue at the former St Chad’s Church in South Yarra. The theatre seated one hundred and fifteen people, and the small stage, measuring four and a half by three and a half metres, had no backstage area. Brett Randall was now sole director of the Little Theatre, keeping the company going through difficult times of war, and presenting shows that were acclaimed by critics and the public. These included the Australian premiere of *Oscar Wilde*, a drama by Leslie and Sewell Stokes, based on the life of the
Irish playwright. However, the war was adversely affecting both audiences and artists, and the 1941 blackout threatened to close the theatre and subscribers living some distance away from St Chad’s in South Yarra could not attend during this time.

Not to be thwarted by this war-related problem, Randall focused on his immediate neighbourhood, and determinedly for over three years distributed handbills after dark into the letterbox of every home within a three-mile radius of the theatre. The hand-bills included a message from Randall saying that even without Government wartime financial aid to entertainment, only a ‘Molotov bread-basket’ would temporarily close his theatre.

Randall produced the company newsletter Foyer between 1944 and 1947, which contained local and overseas theatre news. The following image shows the cover of a Foyer newsletter published in April, 1945:

Thanks to Randall’s resilient determination, the theatre’s neighbourhood realised they had their very own local theatre and supported it during the war years.

Brett Randall and Irene Mitchell ran the Little Theatre between them, and Mitchell confirmed her growing reputation as a fine director, stage manager and décor designer with her production of *The Women*, which she produced, designed and staged in 1945. *The Women* had a cast of thirty-one women and twelve scene changes, all presented on the small stage of St Chad’s, South Yarra. Randall and Mitchell’s shows at the Little Theatre were providing Melbourne audiences with a welcome distraction from the uncertainties of war, and so were their country counterparts, such as members of The Colac Players.
**The Colac Players**

**War Years**

In 1943 in the Victorian Western District town of Colac, Army camps were situated at the Colac Showgrounds and an Air Force Base was located at Cressy. Local residents provided entertainment for these men who were separated from their families. Also, a group of young people in Colac called ‘The Night Raiders’ worked to raise money for the war effort, making camouflage nets, and knitting socks and balaclavas to send parcels to local boys on war service overseas. The Manager of the Colac Hospital, Leonard Arnold, formed the dramatic company now known as The Colac Players from ‘The Night Raiders’. For the company’s first show, Arnold chose the drawing room comedy *No Social Standards* written by local writers David Grey and Avery Hopwood. Casting roles through play-readings was difficult though, due to the wartime shortage of male performers.

Arnold was producer and leading man, and members were grateful for his earlier experience in amateur and semi-professional theatre in Melbourne. The play was presented in the Victoria Hall, Colac in September, 1943, with proceeds donated to the War Aids Society. Company co-founder and leading lady Gwen Gaylard recalls that no one had anticipated the success of the play: ‘The Victoria Hall, holding three hundred and fifty people, was booked out and extra chairs were brought in […] people were standing in the aisles and some were turned away at the box office’. The success of this first production by The Colac Players indicates the enthusiasm of the Australian public in a small country town to enjoy the positive energies of live theatre. Gaylard also recalls the benefits from the performances: ‘Apart from making a substantial sum for the war effort, there was the satisfaction of knowing that for a few hours, people forgot the war with its abundant depression and fears and were able to enjoy some light-hearted relief’. During 1944, The Colac Players donated the entire proceeds from shows to patriotic and charitable committees, including the Prisoner of War Fund.

With the end of the war in sight in 1945, the company began fundraising for local charities. Sometimes performances were unexpectedly eventful, such as in April, 1945 when the audience was seated, the play *Mr Pim Passes By* was about to start, and there was a sudden, loud crash from the stage. From the audience’s point of view, the curtain
just bulged and quivered, but behind the scenes, one of the actresses keen to see the audience had stood on a chair, put one eye to a small hole in the curtain, lost her footing, grabbed the curtain, and crashed to the floor holding it. She later made her entrance on cue. In August, 1945, The Colac Players presented the comedy *People in Love*, and with the end of the war seeming imminent, the performers and audience were hopeful of the return to life before the war and above all, the safe homecoming of husbands, sons, brothers and boyfriends.

A custom at the end of live performances during the 1940s and 1950s, was for beautiful bouquets and sheaths of flowers to be brought in by the usherettes, and presented to the lady performers during much applause and many curtain calls. Equally welcome were vegetables in season presented to the men onstage after the shows.

*The Colac Players Today*

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and during an interview with Rhonda Mahoney and Lorraine Henkel in Colac, they revealed modern-day pride of their company’s longevity, and a passion to ensure The Colac Players continue.25 The company unsuccessfully sought official support to purchase their own venue, such as the Regent Theatre when the cinema closed in the late 1970s, and the Victoria Hall in Murray Street. Rhonda pointed out they still need to transport sets to their performance venue. ‘We need tandem trailers to transport everything’, added Lorraine. The company was involved in establishing the three hundred and fifty-seat Colac Otway Performing Art Cultural Centre, known as COPACC, which opened in 2001, replacing the Civic Hall. COPACC is available for community events in May and October, and travelling professional shows visit at other times during the year. Rhonda expressed delight at this arrangement, because ‘back in the early days, the Colac Players were the only form of entertainment in Colac’. The company applies for a small grant to help the expensive hiring costs of COPACC, and this covers about one third.

The Colac Players Incorporated use a Council-owned industrial shed for set-building and rehearsals, having contributed a few thousand dollars towards building the premises. The occasional performance and film nights there stopped when Occupational Health and Safety regulations, such as wheelchair access requirements, were introduced. The
company particularly enjoys performing in the Red Rock Regional Arts Theatre and Gallery in Cororooke. ‘A man who loved entertainment bought St David’s Church in Cororooke and built a theatre and art gallery’, said Rhonda. ‘It is affordable and has seventy-two seats’. As well as local residents attending shows, audiences travel from Camperdown, Apollo Bay and Forrest.

Rhonda gave an example of changing times in country towns, reflecting on the ‘heady days’, when Colac had teachers moving in and out of the town. There was also the State Electricity Commission, and changing bank personnel. ‘Now that doesn’t happen’, said Rhonda. ‘Supermarkets are open long hours and kids are working for money’. Summing up their involvement with The Colac Players, Rhonda described it as ‘a magnificent part of my life’. And Lorraine’s view? ‘I love the concept of it from page to stage’.

**Camperdown Theatre Company**

In another regional area, Victoria’s south-west, theatre had been active in Camperdown many years before World War Two commenced. The *Camperdown Chronicle* dated 10th December 1887, advertises that ladies of the church would be providing entertainment with ‘Tableaux, operatic choruses sung in character, wax-works interspersed with solos’, and duets were sung by the district’s leading singers.26 Years later, in 1942, the *Camperdown Chronicle* reflects on ‘those piping days of peace’ a decade earlier, when various townsfolk, some who would now be away serving in the Defence Forces, took part in various performances with the Camperdown Operatic Society in the old Mechanics’ Hall.27 ‘Scores of others from farm, shop and office became dukes, pick-pockets, millionaires or pirates just for a night […] such a happy group they made’.

The Camperdown Repertory Society was founded in 1948 in the High School Hall, and opened a year later by presenting the comedy *Hay Fever* at Camperdown’s Theatre Royal. In 1984 at the time of becoming incorporated, the Camperdown Theatre Company was established. During an interview in Camperdown, company member Tony Dupleix said that until recently, depending on a production’s size, the company used a variety of performance venues including local halls, school class rooms, the church hall, the hotel or the Theatre Royal.28 The theatre company has an agreement with the Corangamite
Shire Council as owners of The Royal to have twelve performance days, and approximately forty days for rehearsal. ‘We pay a nominal fee and use the under-stage area for storage of costumes, props and some scenery’, said Tony, who also pointed out the company reciprocates by providing expertise for touring shows, such as lighting and operation.

The Camperdown Theatre Company Incorporated tours their shows to Shire towns such as Cobden, Noorat, Lismore and Port Campbell. ‘The drive home at night is about one hour for the Camperdown cast and crew’, said Tony. He emphasised the company is ‘true community theatre where nobody gets paid’.

Tony believes Camperdown is an affordable place for Melbourne people to sell their house, buy one there and have money over, and the theatre company benefits from attracting retirees with theatrical skills. Many patrons come to see a family member on stage. ‘Some come to see any form of live theatre regardless, but they do like to see people who they know’, said Tony. A major strength of the company is the common history, with some members having been involved for almost thirty years. The company’s future is looking good, with younger, new members coming up through dance schools, and retirees moving in and bringing talents with them.

Placing Tony himself in the limelight, when returning to Camperdown after graduating from university, he wanted to do more than farming. He joined four organisations – the Environment group, Scuba Diving, the Victorian Farmers’ Federation, and for something different, the theatre group, in 1981. ‘I do the lighting, learnt to do set design and building for ten years, then stage managed for twenty years’, says Tony. He has also directed, acted and been company President. Tony particularly enjoys working on productions in the atmospheric Theatre Royal, which opened in Camperdown in December, 1927, as an addition built at the rear of the Mechanics’ Institute hall.

‘It’s a magnificent old structure that successfully deters most touring companies with its antiquated facilities’, says Tony. ‘But being the only theatre in town, it is therefore the best theatre in town, and worth our persevering. It’s great to breathe life into the old girl every now and then’.
Frankston Theatre Group

Returning to urban Melbourne, this time Port Phillip Bay, another amateur theatre company presenting fundraising performances during World War Two was the Frankston Players, formed in 1942. Charitable causes assisted by their fundraising included the Red Cross, Australian Comfort Funds and the Salvation Army. The group rehearsed in members’ homes, and performed in the Frankston Mechanics’ Institute Hall. In 1945, the company became the Frankston Theatre Group. In 2018 the company presents their productions in the George Jenkins Theatre, the Mount Eliza Community Centre, or the Frankston Mechanics’ Institute.

During an interview with long-term members Carol McCall and David Copeland in their multi-purpose ‘The Shed’, in Frankston, Carol talked of a difference in today’s company membership. ‘The difficulty nowadays is we don’t have as many professional people’. She recalled Australia Day events in the past when the company built and presented a float in a parade in Frankston. ‘Back then kids did not have cars, and there was involvement on ANZAC Day. Not anymore because they are working long hours on shifts and can’t put part-time jobs at risk’, said Carol.

Carol admitted to being sceptical about the future of amateur theatre and observes some young people want to do shows to just act, but not get involved to help run the company. ‘When young people come back in ten years’ time we may not be here’. Carol recalled lots of families once being involved with the group. ‘Kids grew up with the company’.

Both Carol and David said how much the company would love its own permanent performance venue. The company was hopeful of this happening when the Frankston Arts Centre opened in 1995, but hiring costs are now out of the company’s reach. David said they had hoped for a one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty-seat auditorium, and fundraised to help build the new theatre. Carol explained, ‘The original fundraising was for something not as grand’. David believes there are benefits for a small auditorium, including less costs, but also believes the grander eight hundred-seat theatre is difficult for theatre groups to fill, and the company cannot afford to perform there.
Participation in a theatre company is not just about performing, and Carol enjoys set design, painting and set dressing, and has never appeared onstage. David, now eighty-three, has an architectural background and joined in the 1950s. He has worked as a set designer and scenic artist, while his wife Jayne Copeland has been President and a mainstay of the company. Both Carol and David highly value the friendships enjoyed in their company and a feeling of belonging. Carol said, ‘I think the Frankston Theatre Group has grown with the city of Frankston itself’.

**Post-World War Two Era (1945-1949)**

After six years of conflict, the war was over and Australians were ready to resume their post-war lives and seek recreation. The gradual return of economic and employment stability had instilled a sense of security for individuals to seek or resume recreational activity. This eagerness for recreation contributed to the development and growth of the state’s amateur theatrical arts sector which thrived during this post-War era. Another motivation for people to join theatre groups was to reaffirm or re-establish individual personal and social identities as part of the recovery process for a nation again mourning war-related loss of life and injury.

The positive creative energies shared between all involved with theatre-making, whether participant or audience member, was therapeutic and energising during this time of post-war regeneration. People interested in active participation in the performing arts would be motivated to either join their existing local amateur theatrical group, or start afresh by establishing a new company.

**Post-War Amateur Theatre in Victoria**

Each Victorian amateur theatre company has its own unique history, culture and group-based identity from which members will derive their own identity or sense of self. There are many hundreds of volunteer hours worked by Victorians in the shared friendship and goodwill of a team of fellow volunteers, creating and achieving theatre productions for their communities. This giving of time indicates the social and cultural importance of
‘soul bank’, as in nourishing a ‘heart and soul’ need for creativity, culture and friendship without payment, as opposed to financial reimbursement for the same thing.

The following stories present examples of a selection of Victorian amateur theatre companies which commenced in 1945, and represent further the varied purposes and styles of amateur theatre at that time. While each story is unique to the individual company, a common factor underpinning each company is the desire of members to be part of a creative volunteer group that fulfils their love of theatre, and a desire to share this with their communities.

**Mordialloc Theatre Company**

In the small beach-side town of Mordialloc, situated twenty-four kilometres south east of Melbourne, people sought new beginnings after the war. The formation of two different theatre companies in Mordialloc in 1945 demonstrates the importance of cultural groups in smaller suburbs. These groups were the City of Mordialloc Citizens League Theatre Group, a dramatic group, and the Mordialloc Philharmonic Society. Both companies still operate today as the Mordialloc Theatre Company and MLOC Productions.31

In an interview with long-term member Lorraine Madsen and Mordialloc Theatre Company current President Juliet Hayday, Lorraine recalled the company was started by a group of local businessmen, including Jock McLorinan the pharmacist, delicatessen owner Harry Dunbar, Barney Cohen the dentist, and Parkdale solicitor, Stan Payne.32 Jock had been connected to the Frankston Theatre Group through his wife, and was so impressed, he suggested the group approach Mordialloc Council regarding forming a similar group. The company’s first President was Ed Trait, head of the local newspaper. The four businessmen were already interested in entertainment because during World War Two they were members of the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) and had formed themselves into an entertainment group to perform as a quartet.

Lorraine impressed at our interview as having a bright personality and without hesitation recollected her years with the theatre company, the names of people and shows. She said meetings were held at the Mentone City Hall, and when Peter Randall from St Martin’s Theatre came down to address the company, he said never to say: ‘It doesn’t matter, we are only amateurs!’ Lorraine said she will never forget those words. Although this advice
from Peter Randall is commendable, he was well aware the actors he was addressing were ‘only amateurs’ as compared to his own now professional status.

The first production the company presented was *Cuckoo in the Nest* by Ben Travers, with tickets three shillings (3/-) and programmes threepence (3d.). Lorraine was cast at age sixteen in 1946 in *The House of Thrills*, by Leslie Chadwick-Browning, which she says was rehearsed for seven months in the living rooms of members. ‘This was a busy time in life, with people needing jobs after the War’, says Lorraine. Jock had been involved with entertainers going to retirement homes and clubs, and organised a preview performance of the play at Heatherton Sanatorium, with an interesting audience. Some shouted, ‘Speak up, we can’t hear you’.

Presenting shows off-site before their season was a good way to gauge audience reaction, although it would have been easier to bring a preview audience to the theatre all set up for the final dress rehearsal, and use takings as a charity fundraiser. Juliet pointed out that in early years, non-professional theatre was characterised by being local, and it was unusual for people to travel long distances, although some did if they wanted to do a particular show.

The play was eventually staged in the now demolished Mentone City Hall, but on opening night there was no curtain until the last minute. ‘The cast was sitting on the edge of the stage, sewing on the curtain rings’, says Lorraine, ‘while backstage, a sheet of suspended corrugated iron was used for thunder sound effects’. The play was so successful that the Mordialloc Council agreed the company could use the Mordialloc Mechanics’ Hall (now the Alan McLean Hall) for future productions, which remained the company’s permanent home until the early 1960s. The Allan McLean Hall still exists, owned by Kingston Council, and among its uses is as a collection point for Meals on Wheels distribution and a base for the Kingston University of the Third Age (U3A).

The company’s name changes since have included The City of Mordialloc Theatre Group and the current name of Mordialloc Theatre Company. The Mordialloc Theatre Company has a fine reputation for quality productions, and original member Lorraine Madsen, now in her mid-eighties, is of course a Life Member.
Juliet Hayday is not only the current President of the Mordialloc Theatre Company but is an award-winning principal role performer and costume designer who has worked in all areas of the theatre, backstage, front of house and onstage. Juliet is proud of their company’s production standards and their ‘Dad’s Army’ of set-builders. Although having lost some set-building members, the group is replenished with more men and women.

Post-script: Juliet Hayday advised the sad news that Lorraine Madsen passed away on 2nd February, 2018 and I attended her funeral. It was wonderful to have met Lorraine and recorded her story.

**MLOC Productions (formerly the Mordialloc Light Opera Company)**

The non-performing, but musically appreciative Edward J. Trait, Managing Director of Standard Newspapers Pty. Ltd and president of the Mordialloc Citizens League Theatre Group, founded the Mordialloc Philharmonic Society in 1945. A Philharmonic Society is a group comprising music loving people who promote their love of music through choral performance.
Before World War Two, it was traditional that most communities were endowed with at least four types of musical entertainment, including the concert party, live theatre, black and white ‘moving pictures’, the wireless and church choirs. From this background, the community choirs developed, formed mainly of church choir members in the vicinity, which presented both secular and religious concerts. Church choirs combined religion, meeting and fellowship, and over time members joined local musical theatre groups to continue their singing. Mr Trait ran advertisements in his newspaper, contacted local churches and received positive responses to start the Mordialloc Philharmonic Society, under his own presidency and overall management, with musical direction by Roy Warren. The group was so successful that the need to perpetuate the group was addressed by establishing the Mordialloc Philharmonic Junior Choristers in 1946, and this group grew to 80 choristers.
The Society presented annual concerts, performed at ANZAC Day ceremonies or charity events, and joined other choirs to sing in the Opening Ceremony of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. Choral concerts presented by the Society in the now-demolished Mentone City Hall were performed with piano accompaniment only, and the chorister women wore long white dresses, and the men wore black suits with black bow-ties. There was no specialised lighting and no stage sets. Choral presentations included the *Cantata*, *The Wedding of Shon Maclean*, *The Messiah*, *Elijah* and *Maritana*.

In 1969, the ‘Phil’ was given a more contemporary title, and the Mordialloc Choral Society came into being. Musical director Edward Fazakerley introduced concert versions of shows to the repertoire such as *Brigadoon*, and the soloists appeared in costume, backed by the chorus wearing the traditional attire. In 1977, the company became the Mordialloc Musical Society, presenting productions in full theatrical splendour at venues such as the Aspendale Technical School hall, the Hampton Community Hall and the Parkdale Library Hall (later named the Shirley Burke Theatre).

In 1985, the company became the Mordialloc Light Opera Company, opening in Elwood at the Phoenix Theatre with an Australian amateur premiere season of *The Most Happy Fella*. In 1992 the name re-changed to MLOC Productions Incorporated, moving away from the focus on ‘Light Opera’, and allowing flexibility for styles of productions presented, but retaining the tradition of ‘Mordialloc Light Opera Company’ in the acronym. These name transitions were a response to changing times and public tastes. Today, the company annually presents two fully-staged musical productions at the Shirley Burke Theatre in Parkdale, accompanied by a live orchestra. Recent productions include *Shout!, The Johnny O’Keefe Story*, *Spamalot* and *The Boy From Oz*.

Past President and Treasurer Graeme Marriott became involved with the company in 1979 when performing in *Oklahoma!*36 During an interview, Graeme said the company has been rehearsing at the Parkdale Church of Christ hall since 1978. Storage and set-building space is sub-leased from CLOC Musical Theatre’s set construction shed at CLOCworks in Heatherton. ‘We share some costs and pay CLOC a rental’, said Graeme. ‘It is a very satisfactory relationship being side by side with a large successful company and we receive a lot of advice and help from them’.

Graeme said the mixed ages of the MLOC committee meant younger people may not know the older shows when selecting productions for performance. ‘Some of us want to try the latest all the time, but others think of the older audiences and prefer shows from the 1940s, 50s and 60s’, said Graeme. He feels MLOC audiences get value for money, and from a Treasurer’s perspective it is a reality to think of cost. ‘You can’t run a company purely on cultural gains’.

MLOC celebrated its seventieth anniversary in 2015, and Graeme was asked what he thought was the secret of the company’s longevity. ‘Conservatism – meaning we do not go all out to change the world. We have careful management, avoid taking risks with shows and ensure we remain in a financially satisfactory state’. Graeme admitted it is hard to judge whether a show will be successful, but says they also consider city shows at
the time and work alongside them. As well as committee roles, he has performed in many shows with MLOC as well as other theatre companies. Exuding pride at MLOC’s achievements over time, Graeme said, ‘We have transcended over more than seventy years from a fully choral-based company to a musical comedy company, and for nearly half the time now we have been a fully-fledged musical theatre company’.

Mildura Theatre Company

From Melbourne’s Bayside to the Sunraysia district, theatre has also been active since 1945 in Mildura, a regional city located five hundred and forty kilometres north west of Melbourne, situated on the Victorian side of the Murray River. After World War Two finished, there was no theatre group in the city. Therefore, in 1945, staff members at Mildura High School were thrilled when a letter arrived from the Melbourne Little Theatre advising they would like to visit Mildura to present the play *The Late Christopher Bean*, by Welsh playwright Emlyn Williams. Maude Nettleton reflected on the country hospitality extended to the theatre company from Melbourne:

> We gave them a marvellous time … we booked them in at the Grand, they played in the school hall Friday and Saturday nights and a matinee for the students on the Friday afternoon ... we looked after them, we partied them, took them everywhere, they were tickled pink and came out with a credit of thirty-eight pounds.

The warm welcome extended by the Mildura residents is typical of wonderful country hospitality. Although there were no facilities in Mildura for a theatre at the time, after the Melbourne Little Theatre performance, a decision was made following a public meeting to form a theatre group and call it Mildura Little Theatre. The idea was to present two productions a year, invite the Melbourne Little Theatre back once a year, and have monthly play-readings. In April, 1946, the Mildura Little Theatre presented Melbourne Little Theatre Company’s production of *Outward Bound*, and then the first production of a three-act play was performed on the stage at Mildura High School.

The Mildura High School continued as a venue for productions until the Mildura Arts Centre was opened in 1966. In 1947, a revival of Terrence Rattigan’s comedy *While the Sun Shines* was presented at the one thousand-seat Ozone Theatre in Langtree Avenue, Mildura, with proceeds donated to the Food for Britain Campaign. Schools were
important to local amateur theatre companies, not only as performance venues, but teachers seconded from the city to regional schools regarded joining the local theatre group as a way to meet their new community.

An interview with three dedicated Mildura Theatre Company Incorporated members Naomi Lyons, who was President at the time, Chris Celegon and Jane Broadfoot, took place in their clubroom at Powerhouse on the banks of the Murray River. Each company member displayed devotion to their theatre company, and an impressive respect for the work of past members. Two other major theatrical companies operate in the same region, the Red Cliffs Musical Society and the Red Cliffs Players, and with members happily interchanging between companies depending on productions being presented, there is no animosity or rivalry between the companies.

The Powerhouse building situated on the Murray River bank is also shared with the Red Cliffs Musical Society at either end of the venue. The space is utilised for clubrooms and other uses include rehearsal facilities and props and scenery storage. The delightful clutter of sets and props stored against the wall and costumes lent a colourful theatrical atmosphere to our interviews, which took place at different times of the day at either end of the venue. When the Musical Society presented Sweeney Todd in their space at Powerhouse, the Mildura Theatre Group, separated by high stacks of props and furniture, catered at interval with party pies, timing the smell to waft over the high stacks towards the audience at the right time in the script. These days, the Mildura Theatre Company cleverly avoids expensive performance venue fees by presenting shows in alternative locations such as the Botanical Gardens. At the time of the interview, there was concern that a proposed riverfront development could negatively impact on use of the Powerhouse venue by the local theatre companies.

Jane, Chris and Naomi were asked what involvement in the Mildura Theatre Company meant to them. Chris replied, ‘The whole package is so important. People who just want to be on the stage are misled because there’s the family aspect, they are my family’. Naomi agreed: ‘With my family, I drag them along – my dad has been one of my key set builders and he drives buses for youth productions’. Jane replied she has many fond memories: ‘Quality time spent with people in these groups. It’s hard yakka sometimes, but I have nothing but happiness with my involvement’.
Portland CEMA Theatre Group

Amateur theatre companies form for various reasons, and in Portland on the south-west coast of Victoria the local drama group was formed in 1945 when the volunteer Arts organisation CEMA (Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts) was formed. The CEMA Drama Group was one of the earliest groups established after the umbrella Arts organisation formed in 1945. In an interview with Jan and Ron Colliver in Portland, Ron explained that from the end of the 1940s, CEMA recognised there was a need for an Arts Centre, which came to fruition in 1974. There was a lot of fundraising and lobbying to Government and it became the CEMA Arts Centre until about fifteen years ago when it was renamed. By the mid-1980s it was becoming difficult to financially make ends meet, so the Glenelg Shire Council took over running the building and CEMA leased the premises as a tenant. Ron said the building is the venue for all the group’s meetings, rehearsal and storage of props, sets and archives, and the company pays a hire fee. Jan and Ron told the story of Portland resident Keith Anderson generously donating a house and block of land to CEMA, and money was obtained from selling the block.

Ron described Portland as having a meat industry up until the 1970s and then Alcoa decided to build there, and people were buying land. When Alcoa decided to halt, people got ‘burnt’, with no available work. By the mid-1980s, the smelter was completed and was giving money to the community, including the Arts. People interested in the Arts started arriving in town and by the mid-1990s there were enough people with musical skills to form a concert band. Jan said today CEMA welcomes people with creative ideas, such as poetry. ‘The stronger groups such as Drama, put money back to help the newer, smaller groups’.

In the 1940s and 1950s, shows were rehearsed in the Free Library Hall in Portland and performed there and in the old High School Hall. In the 1970s, the Free Library Hall was demolished for the new Civic Hall. Since then, rehearsals and performances have been in the CEMA Arts Centre, now called the Portland Arts Centre, with one hundred and forty-four seats, while larger shows would be staged in the six hundred and fifty-seat Civic Hall.

Jan said it is often hard to get men to audition for shows. ‘In the eighties and nineties there were a few farmers and the organisation had a lot more country folk, but less people
are now living out on the farms’. Ron pointed out that this is a generational thing and
there are very few young people. ‘But it is a typical country town scenario. The kids are
involved until eighteen, then move off to university or overseas. In the early days people
arrived from organisations like the SEC, schools and banks, but now there is less of that’.

Cast members are either local or travel from outlying areas such as Narrawong,
Heywood, Drumborg or Gorae. Audiences too are mostly local, but sometimes come
from Melbourne if knowing someone in the show. Jan said: ‘You often hear people say
as they walk out, ‘I didn’t think it would be that good’’.

The company presents mixed genres of shows, including Shakespeare, comedies and
dramas, but there have not been any musicals since the 2000s. Two performance groups
operated in the 1980s, the CEMA Drama Group and the CEMA Music Group which did
one big show per year such as Showboat. The two groups would combine for a Christmas
Revue but eventually, with the same people in the two groups, there was a merger to
become the Portland CEMA Theatre Group. Jan and Ron both met at CEMA in
Showboat in the Chorus, while chatting backstage. Jan said from her own perspective,
belonging to the theatre group has given her ‘a community within the wider community.
It has given me a good glimpse of people I would never have connected with if I had just
mixed with the people I worked with’.

At the time of the interview, concern was expressed at the arrival of a cinema company
who, with Council’s approval, were trialling using the Arts Centre from Friday to
Sunday. ‘We are squeezed in around it, limiting our use’, said Jan. ‘There is also less
availability of space and flexibility, for example, there cannot be any set-building at
weekends because of the cinema’.

Jan joined the group in 1980 after seeing a show and she has a dance background. A
versatile member, at various times Jan has been President, Secretary, Committee member
and director and choreographer. Ron joined in 1981, has been Treasurer and directed a
musical, and was still on the committee. When Jan and Ron visited the United Kingdom
they visited an amateur group’s play-reading in a town in Bath, which they had seen on
the Internet. When hearing they were from Australia, the group welcomed them warmly.
‘There is a connection, internationally wherever you go, if involved in amateur theatre’.
Jan is grateful for the long-term friends they have both made and loves watching shows coming together. Ron says being on the committee means passing down hands on experience and involvement with the group, which brings him satisfaction and benefits his wellbeing. ‘I generally come away feeling the world is a better place’.

**Warrnambool Theatre Company**

Further along the coast from Portland, amateur theatre was also active in another picturesque coastal town, this time in Warrnambool, where it can be traced back to 1877. An article in *The Standard* newspaper dated 30th November, 1877 reports a performance by the Warrnambool Amateur Dramatic Society held in the Orderly Room on the Warrnambool Government Reserve on New Year’s Eve. ‘Catching a Brim’ was penned by a local, followed by ‘All That Glitters is not Gold’.\(^{41}\)

A Minutes Book dated 1925 records a meeting of ‘those interested in amateur dramatics’.\(^{42}\) The group started rehearsing the comedy called *Nothing but the Truth*, and The Warrnambool High School Old Students’ Dramatic Society was formed with Mrs Langley as President and Producer. Productions would tour to nearby towns such as Koroit, Terang, Camperdown and Mortlake, with the group mostly presenting music hall humour and fundraising for school amenities, particularly the library.

President of the Warrnambool Theatre Company, Annemaree Stonehouse, and members Margot Johnson and Heather Tuck, explained during an interview that in 1945 the company was known as The Arcadians.\(^{43}\) In 1958 the company became the Warrnambool Theatre Group, first presenting Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, then musicals such as *Salad Days*, *Oklahoma!, South Pacific* and *The King and I*. Joyce and Cyril Hayward arrived from England with considerable theatrical experience and ran the group for almost thirty years. Joyce was a director and set and costume adviser, and British Army-trained Cyril organised and acted in productions. Cyril’s strict schedule included the famous catchery on final rehearsal nights: ‘Synchronise watches!’ This meant the clockwork would begin. The Hayward’s support team included musical director Frank Coggins, pianists Betty Witham and Margaret Dunne, Olive Kettal’s team of costume designers and sewers, and set-building and painting by cast members. Cyril and Joyce
Hayward also taught Drama in schools, and Joyce lobbied for the Warrnambool Entertainment Centre to be built.

The company first rehearsed and performed in a Church hall, with musical performances presented in the Warrnambool Town Hall. When the Town Hall was refurbished in the early eighties, the group rented an old garage in Timor Street where productions such as plays and music halls were staged and costumes stored, while musicals were performed in the High School hall. Annemaree, Margot and Heather spoke of their regret at not purchasing the garage, but instead gave their considerable bank balance to the Council to help build the Performing Arts Centre, with the promise of much-reduced hiring costs. As in the case of other theatre companies in a similar situation, this arrangement only happened for a short time. However, the company enjoys a good relationship with Council.

Rehearsals today are sometimes held in homes, or the Mozart Hall in Gilles Street, Warrnambool, and the company currently fluctuates between one and two shows per year. The prohibitive cost of the Council-owned space now called ‘The Lighthouse’ restricts the company’s choices but they annually use the Mozart Hall as a performance venue. Cast members are mostly from the Warrnambool area, although over the years people out of town have come from Timboon, Terang, Portland and Camperdown, and audiences will travel if cast members are relatives and friends. In the 1960s and 1970s, the company toured shows to country venues for their fund-raising, providing a good opportunity to break in new members.

Annemaree, Heather and Margot are dedicated members of the Warrnambool Theatre Company, each with a different reason for joining. A State Champion in Highland Dancing, Annemaree joined in 1989, performing as a soubrette in an Old Time Music Hall. Since then she has choreographed shows, managed the costume department, been a committee member and President. A passion for theatre is in Annemaree’s blood: ‘Mum was a singer, and I danced professionally until seventeen and taught Highland Dancing’.

Margot joined in 1979 when her son played Son Nine in The King and I. ‘I made costumes and did make-up backstage’. Margot then stepped up as producer, prompt, publicist and President. Margot has never been on stage, and believes her involvement in
the theatre company has increased her confidence to speak publicly in her fundraising role for the local hospital.

Heather has loved her involvement with the company as a performer, publicist and committee member over three different decades. She notices a difference nowadays with all four secondary schools in Warrnambool now presenting major shows, and young members who once wanted experience in the group, now participate in their school productions. Margot, Annemaree and Heather are obviously proud of their theatre company and convey the message that ‘local is good’. They point out there is talent, and an opportunity exists for anyone to experience good community spirit, team work, and perform and/or write material which is stimulating and worthwhile.

“TONS OF MONEY”
A FARCE IN THREE ACTS
CAST —
(in order of appearance)
SPRILES (a Butler) ... ... Mr. J. Rhoden
SIMPSON (a Parlourmaid) ... ... Miss Betty McLean
Miss BENITA MULLETT ... ... Miss Joyce Ranson
LOUISE ALLINGTON (she is French!) Miss Terry Madden
AUBREY HENRY MAITLAND ALLINGTON
Mr. D. Howson
GILES (a Gardener) ... ... Mr. F. Grayson
JAMES CHESTERMAN (a Solicitor) ... ... Mr. B. Harkin
JEAN EVERARD ... ... ... Mrs. O. Candy
HENERY ... ... ... Mr. H. E. L. Jones
GEORGE MAITLAND ... ... ... Mr. A. F. Coggins

SCENES
ACT I: Aubrey Allington’s house at Marlow
(Three weeks elapse between Acts I and II)
INTERVAL OF TEN MINUTES
ACT II: The Same (afternoon)
(One day elapse between Acts II and III)
ACT III: The Same (late afternoon)

THE WARRNAMBOOL LIGHT ORCHESTRA
will render the Overture and Selections between the Acts.
Members of the Orchestra: Mrs. H. Jacobs, Mrs. Walker, Miss Rooney,
Miss Boardman, Miss H. Murfett, Mr. McDowall, Mr. I. Morton, Mr. J.
Buchanan, Mr. G. Stevens.
Overture—“Prolific,” William E. Miles
Entr’a’ct 1—“Spring Flowers”—Dellinger Wood
Entr’a’ct 2—“Bummer Nights”—Lee S. Roberts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
The Arcadians heartily thank the Warrnambool Light Orchestra, Messrs.
Davies Newsagney, Maples, W. H. Brebner & Sons, Dorney & Dent, L. Dodds
Footwarming Bros., J. Goldie, E. Reed, A. E. Nicholls, E. Parker, K. Broadfoot, N. Stevens, J. H. O. Rowland, Miss S. O’Keefe, the High School Auxiliary & all others who have assisted in staging the play.

**Music and Drama in Kew**

Returning to Melbourne, travelling five kilometres east to the suburb of Kew, a love of choral music saw the eventual formation of a theatre company in this post-war era. In June, 1946, The Kew Philharmonic Society formed, aiming to encourage good choral music in the suburb, and would later collaborate with the newly formed Kew Light Opera Company, later to be known as the ‘Q’ Theatre Guild. The two groups performed in the Kew Recreation Hall and then in the New City Hall, with the Kew Philharmonic Society, providing the orchestral music. A little later, the Kew Repertory Players group was formed, which rehearsed in the Highbury Grove Methodist Hall. As well as entertaining their local community, they also fundraised for local charitable organisations. Such fundraising is typical of an era where most amateur entertainment had been presented for war-related and charitable causes.

**Williamstown Little Theatre**

Amateur theatre companies form for various reasons, such as in May 1946 when nine residents of Melbourne’s Bayside suburb of Williamstown, attended a performance by the Arts Theatre Players in Post Office Place, Melbourne. They realised their local Mechanics’ Institute could house larger audiences, so met a week later to form the Williamstown Little Theatre Movement. They started by inviting established companies to perform in Williamstown. First, Gertrude Johnson’s National Theatre performed *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. A working bee spruced up the Mechanics’ Institute, admission was two shillings and five pence, and four hundred tickets were sold.

By the end of the year, four imported shows presented included Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, by the Melbourne University Dramatic Club, *The Beggar’s Opera* from the Victorian Operatic Society, *Acacia Avenue* by Denis and Mabel Constanduros, presented by the Melbourne Little Theatre, and Arnold Bennett’s *The Great Adventure*, presented by WEA Theatre. Local members loaned period furniture or helped to build sets. These imported productions helped Williamstown Little Theatre Movement members learn aspects of theatre-making. By 1950, ‘all-local’ productions were being presented, overseen by local resident actor and producer Alf Davidson, with show tickets being sold by Eddie Marr in his radio shop in Ferguson Street. The company also participated in
One Act Play Festivals. Since those early years, quality productions at affordable prices have been presented in Williamstown for residents and the broader community.

Award-winning director Ellis Ebell was seventeen when he joined the company in 1963. During an interview, Ellis recalled sharing the Mechanics’ Institute with the Williamstown Light Opera Company in the early days. When the Mechanics’ Institute closed in 1967 for structural assessment, the company used the Williamstown Town Hall Supper Room, before moving to the Mission for Seamen in Nelson Place and building a stage there. Their first show was a tribute to the seamen, titled *Sailor Beware*, but eventually the Seamen’s Mission wanted their venue back and Williamstown Little Theatre had to find a new home.

Ellis Ebell, Life Member of Williamstown Little Theatre. Photo by courtesy of Ellis Ebell.

A member riding his bicycle down Albert Street saw potential in an old disused bakery to become their theatre. ‘It was originally a bakery’, explained Ellis. ‘But by then it was an Engineering firm owned by the Matthew Brothers, who said we could rent it’. When the company expressed interest in purchasing the theatre, the owners agreed to deduct the
rent from the purchase price, and the company fundraised to buy their own theatre. ‘We own this theatre’, said Ellis proudly.


There was just one large space when the company moved into the bakery in 1967, with a brick pillar behind the proscenium, holding it up. ‘All the construction work had to be done around this brick pillar’, said Ellis. Seating capacity in the theatre is sixty-nine, plus two seats for the director. Interestingly, Ellis said the stage and theatre are both exactly the same size. Wardrobe and props are stored upstairs in this delightfully intimate theatre, and set-building is done on the stage. The company is fortunate to have a talented and dedicated team for set design and construction. In 2017, the company’s five shows had a different set designer for each set. Among innovations implemented by Technical Officer Roger Forsey are the installation of an Audio Loop for hearing impaired patrons and a computerised cueing system for the theatre’s sound and light operation.

A Play Selection Committee comprises three people, rotates every four years, and aims to produce a varied season of productions. A subscriber base of approximately two hundred names, including social groups, means shows book out quickly. This can disappoint
some theatregoers, but the company presented sixteen performances for each season in 2018 to help accommodate would-be patrons. Members are involved in various activities including working bees every Tuesday night in January, followed by a barbecue. This helps maintain the building and garden.


The company has a strict code of conduct and a production booklet is given to every cast and crew member for every show. Ellis says this information guide contains details of the current production and WLT management, and also information about Occupational Health and Safety measures, mutual respect and support, an induction checklist for members to acknowledge they have been informed of O. H. & S. regulations, and a form for confidential emergency information.

During our interview, members were arriving with refreshments to enjoy a get-together after their hard work. ‘Williamstown Little Theatre is a family-type group, always welcoming people’, said Ellis. Some members have loyally followed the company for many years, including one lady who remembers seeing Ellis in his first production in 1963.

A highlight for Ellis was the move into the new theatre in Albert Street in 1967, which he remembers as being a significant event for a ‘young kid’. Work on the theatre, such as
wallpapering the foyer, continued during rehearsals for the first show, *Barefoot in the Park*. Ellis remembers feeling ‘proud and fantastic’. When asked about Williamstown Little Theatre Incorporated’s success and longevity since 1946, Ellis replied: ‘We have been very lucky to have passionate people who love coming down to Williamstown’.

**Sale Theatre Company**

Amateur theatre was also active at the same time in Gippsland. The Sale Theatre Company Incorporated as it is known today, was established in 1949 as the Sale Repertory Group, following a meeting at the home of Mr and Mrs Cameron. The company performed plays in the now demolished Palais Theatre, and then in the Memorial Hall. Rehearsals were held in members’ homes, and it is interesting to note that this company encouraged the staging of Australian plays. In 1982, the company name changed to the Sale Theatre Company because members felt the term ‘Rep. Group’ was a bit old hat, and that the days of repertory theatre were gone.

During an interview in the Sale Library, Life Member Jocelyn Paterson recalled a reunion held in 1999 to celebrate the company’s fiftieth anniversary, when members returned from Sydney and Melbourne. Jocelyn said, ‘the wonderful attendance at this reunion showed how important the theatre company has been in their lives’. She explained that towns like Sale with floating populations, find difficulty in retaining continuity of membership in a theatre company. ‘Members of the RAAF, teachers and others, all move on, and apart from a core group, people were coming and going, never the same people’, said Jocelyn. Jocelyn agreed the diminished involvement of Esso and the RAAF Base in the town of Sale could have contributed to a decline in the theatre company’s activities. Performers from nearby towns have travelled to Sale, sometimes encountering floods, but make it through to be part of productions. These towns located in ‘the valley’ include Yarram, Bairnsdale, Mirboo North and Trafalgar.

In 2016, the Sale Theatre Company had a small membership and presented one production per year. In 2018, Jocelyn advised the good news that the company has branched out to present musical productions. This includes one locally written spoof on Eurovision, and in 2018 the company is presenting three productions. ‘Sale Theatre
Company is looking to keeping the momentum going into the future, incorporating a musical theme’, says Jocelyn.

**Foster Art, Music and Drama Association (FAMDA)**

The reason for a theatre company to form in Foster was in response to a need for residents to enjoy various genres of the arts in their own community. Foster is situated hundred and seventy-four kilometres south east of Melbourne, and the theatre company formed post-World War Two as the result of a meeting convened by residents and business operators. In 1948, they decided to form a cultural community group comprising film, art, music and drama, and the name given was the Foster Film, Art, Music and Drama Association, usually referred to as Foster FAMDA.

In an interview in Foster with Life Member Jennifer Paragreen, she explained that when the company became incorporated in the 1990s, they removed the extra ‘F’, and FAMDA today stands for Foster Arts, Music and Drama Association. The film aspect is still relevant as the Prom Coast Film Society was formed in 2011 as an affiliate of FAMDA, as had the choir, the Prom Coast Singers, in 1998.

During the 1950s, FAMDA would fundraise regularly for the South Gippsland Hospital, performing in the ‘Hospital Month’ final concert and presentation night. Kate Crowl writes of the significant involvement of schoolteachers in amateur theatre at that time. ‘the district schools had recently become consolidated, resulting in more teachers in town’. Jennifer grew up in Essendon and came to Foster as a young schoolteacher in 1968. ‘The Studentship arrangement meant I had to be seconded to a country town when leaving university’, said Jennifer. The lady in the hardware store said the local theatre group was having its Annual General Meeting that night, and Jennifer attended with a friend. Her future husband was elected as President, and their romance developed when Jennifer was cast in *Salad Days*.

Providing an interesting insight into the ‘other lives’ of amateur theatre-makers, occupations among FAMDA’s current committee members include retired teachers, a teacher, a teacher/principal, a teacher’s aide, a textile artist, a CFA executive, a retired Landcare officer and an unemployed person. Occupations among general members
include retired teachers, doctor, pharmacist, medical practice manager, sales assistant, painter, computer systems manager, farmer, home duties and retired ESSO computer and systems manager.

Stained glass inserts, over front entrance to the Foster War Memorial Arts Centre, representing all genres of the performing arts. Created by Catherine Blamey Wheeler. Photography: Robert Paragreen. Image by courtesy of Foster Arts, Music and Drama Association.

FAMDA Incorporated uses the Foster War Memorial Arts Centre for rehearsals and performances. Visitors are greeted by beautiful stained-glass inserts created by Catherine Blamey Wheeler over the front entrance, representing all genres of the performing arts. Ann Parry created the striking theatrically-themed sculpture in the garden near the front door. Scenery is stored at this venue, and items are also stored in a metal shed behind the Arts Centre. A shed at Bland’s farm, about five or six kilometres out of town, is also used for storage. Farmer Bland’s mother is a company member.

A significant annual event on FAMDA’s calendar is the annual South Gippsland Festival of One Act Plays, which commenced in Foster in 2001, conceived by Bruce Crowl. Held over a weekend, Jennifer said companies come from all over the state and audience members pay only ten dollars to enter a session. ‘We make more profit from those festivals than anything else. There is good business benefit too for the motels’. A problem in attracting younger members is Foster having one of the oldest demographics in the state. ‘It’s great to have the skills of retirees, but we are not picking up young people’, said Jennifer. ‘Once they finish Year Twelve, most of them get up and go’.
FAMDA is a family affair for Jennifer whose husband Brian, brother-in-law Robert and sister-in-law Dianne are Life Members like herself. Jennifer’s contribution to the performing arts includes singing with the Prom Coast Singers and maintaining and updating the FAMDA website. She also presents a weekly theatre program on community radio titled ‘That’s Entertainment’, heard on Sundays from 4.00pm–6.00pm on 3mFM, located in Inverloch. A familiar figure at Melbourne and suburban theatre productions, Jennifer also promotes and reviews shows on her radio program. Jennifer sees her amateur theatre involvement as ‘an intellectual, cultural and social outlet’.
Council of Adult Education

With so many theatre companies forming in the state in the 1940s, the formation of the Council of Adult Education in 1947 was warmly welcomed to encourage various activities in communities, including the performing arts.

Known as ‘the CAE’, the founding Director was Colin Badger, and Frank Crean as the founding Chairman remained in the role until 1974. The CAE offered programs and services to provide learning for the Victorian community, particularly in country areas. Classes were organised for specialists from the Melbourne voice, speech and radio communities to advise on various aspects of the theatre, and a library of play scripts and theatre books was introduced. A Travelling Theatre was created, operating on a professional basis, to stage performances in country centres and to encourage the formation of amateur theatre groups in country towns.

The drama classes produced one or two plays each year for public performances and in 1947-1948, the Union Theatre at Melbourne University was the venue for successful productions of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town and Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. The library initially consisted of forty-two sets of plays which Colin Badger brought to the Council from the Melbourne University Extension Board when appointed Director of the CAE. By 1952, the collection had grown to nine hundred titles. The Drama section of the Council’s first annual summer school was held in Wesley College in 1948.

Up until 1947, Victorians had been self-motivated to participate in theatre groups in their communities, with no overriding operational guidance. While this no doubt worked well for many people, the lack of operational structure and guidelines could have contributed in some instances to the deteriorating reputation of the amateur actor. With encouragement, training and organised state-wide assistance from the CAE, and the imminent establishment of the Victorian Drama League, the next decade would see a marked development of Victorian amateur theatre, and a subsequent improvement in production standards.
Chapter Four: Growth of Amateur Theatre

1950s

From this decade on, I tip-toe inside the narrative of each chapter to temporarily become part of the story about amateur theatre in Victoria. These reflections of personal theatre experiences aim to complement the researched history and to share with you, the reader.

Personal Reflections

My amateur theatre adventure started in 1958, at the Arrow Theatre, Middle Park. The play was titled ‘A Must for Dolly’, a sequel to George Bernard Shaw’s ‘Man and Superman’, written and directed by J. Beresford Fowler.¹ Mr Fowler visited the Alice Uren School of Stage Dancing in Flinders Street, Melbourne, seeking a girl for the title role of ‘Dolly’. On the play’s closing night, ‘JB’, as Mr Fowler was fondly known, kindly gave me a white tin decorated with red painted flowers on the lid, filled with toffees. Today this tin remains a treasured reminder of my unexpected introduction to the wonderful world of amateur theatre.

THE PLAYERS' & PLAYGOERS' REPERTORY PLAYERS

Present the
First Production
of

A Must for Dolly

The Arrow Theatre

ARMSTRONG STREET, MIDDLE PARK

FRIDAY, 31st OCTOBER, 1958

at 8 p.m.

(a sequel to Bernard Shaw's Man and Superman)

by J. Beresford Fowler

with assistance which he gratefully acknowledges from

G. Bernard Shaw

and

Sylvia Archer

Production to aid Henry Lawson Monument Appeal
A Must for Dolly

"I hoped Ann would bear me a superman, but as she hasn't Dolly must bear me one for a grandchild."

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

John Tanner (descendant of Don Juan) .... J. BERESFORD FOWLER
Ann (his wife) .......................................... VIOLET AUBURN
Mr. McLeod (a neighbour) ......................... WILLIAM ALLEN
Archibald Tinning ........................................ REG. CAMPBELL
Louisa Straker ............................................ DAWN MOTT
Dolly (the Tanners' daughter) ..................... CHERYL McPHEE
Octavius Robinson (hopelessly in love with Ann) .......... RUSSELL JOHNSON
Hector Malone ......................................... EDWARD JOBBINS
Violet Malone ............................................. DALENE KOOPS
'Enry Straker (formerly Tanner's chauffeur) .... FRANK BOOTH

The action of the 3 acts performed takes place in the Tanners' breakfast room.

Another act, written by Miss Sylvia Archer, takes place in Hell, but as was usual when Mr. Shaw's play was produced, it is omitted from this production as it would make the play too long for a single evening.

Play produced by J. Beresford Fowler.
Stage Manager: Elaine Underwood.
President of Players' & Playgoers' Association. Louis F. Poussard.
Social Secretary: Celia Garland.
Although a millionaire, John Tanner, as the dialogue suggests, is a careful man as regards the decoration of his home.
After the performance season finished, I recited Dolly’s lines every night before going to sleep to remember them forever. Two years later, Mr Fowler got in touch to say he was re-staging ‘A Must for Dolly’, but as I was now too tall for Dolly’s role, he had cast a younger girl! It was shattering news, but a good lesson about the ups and downs of ‘show-biz’. I performed in more shows for Mr Fowler in the early 1960s, but apart from sending Christmas cards, deeply regret not maintaining contact before his death in 1972.

In 1959 I performed with the then Beaumaris Players in Tennessee William’s ‘Summer and Smoke’, rehearsing after school with director Joyce Brown, and then played the heroine in the melodrama ‘Hiss the Villain’ in 1961. I recall the actors sounding very well-spoken and realise now this was because they were English. When my dear dinkum Aussie Dad heard me trying to speak ‘properly’, copying the Beaumaris actors, I was promptly told not to speak with ‘a plum in your mouth’.

I have dedicated this story to Mr Jack Beresford Fowler.

The 1950s was a great era for my generation of ‘baby boomers’ growing up in Victoria. Entertainment early in the decade included listening to the radio and visualising imagery of plays, family sing-alongs around the piano, slide nights, playing simple outdoor games, reading books, enjoying cartoons at the cinema, and the arrival of television in 1956, just in time for the Olympic Games held in Melbourne. In this positive era of post-war growth and optimism for the future, people dressed up for occasions such as visiting the city, with ladies elegantly accessorised by wearing hats, gloves and high-heeled shoes.

We children were lucky to feel secure in our daily lives. It was safe to play hopscotch and football in the street, and our Mums were mostly ‘there’ when we arrived home from school. Shops closed at noon on Saturdays for the weekend, and football fans headed to the big matches, or in my case, enjoyed hobbies such as attending dancing classes. Sundays were free for family togetherness such as going to church, the traditional midday Sunday roast lamb and apple pie, visiting relatives, or going for a ‘Sunday drive’.

A downside in this era between 1950 and 1953 was the death of three hundred and forty Australian troops fighting in the Korean War, with another sixteen lives lost until 1957.
during Post-Armistice service and ceasefire monitoring. Still recovering from the effects of World War Two, many Victorians sought creative expression and social interaction through live performance.

**Arrow Theatre Company**

In Middle Park, the Arrow Theatre had enjoyed an interesting history before our performance of *A Must for Dolly* in 1958. Engineer and amateur theatre producer Sydney Blacker Turnbull and director Lorna Forbes did not renew the lease of the Middle Park-based theatre so New Zealander William Walsh took over the lease in May 1950, on the proviso it be used constantly for live theatre performances. The theatre re-opened with a production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Master Builder*, giving opportunity to amateur groups to perform in a well-equipped venue, and writers such as Ray Lawler could have their plays performed before an audience. A regular user of the theatre was the Melbourne Drama Guild, admired by Walsh for presenting classical style plays such as *Hedda Gabler* and *Arms and the Man*.

In 1951, twenty-five-year old actor Frank Thring Junior, a star performer of the now defunct Melbourne Repertory Theatre, received financial support from his mother to take over and transform the two hundred-seat theatre in Armstrong Street, Middle Park. Thring formed the successful Arrow Theatre Company, opening with Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* and Christopher Fry’s *A Phoenix to Remember*, directed by Irene Mitchell. Mitchell said she never forgot the afternoon of the opening, with the whole crew onstage trying to fix the front curtain. It had just arrived back from the dry cleaners, exactly seven inches too short! Thring was now actor-manager of the Arrow Theatre, and succeeded in his aim of producing quality plays, including an Australian work, *The Square Ring*, by Ralph Peterson. Sets were designed by director and designer Robin Lovejoy, and young Helmut Newton, later internationally renowned as a fashion photographer, displayed his photographs in the foyer.

Internationally acclaimed, four time Tony Award winner Zoe Caldwell OBE, performed at the Arrow and Little Theatres in her late teens. In her autobiographical book, *I Will be Cleopatra: An Actress’s Journey*, Caldwell writes of two ‘important’ amateur theatres in Victoria at that time, the Little Theatre run by Brett Randall, and Frank Thring’s Arrow
Theatre. Caldwell recalls supplying her own costumes, and learning an important lesson from her first play, *The Gleam*, presented by the Little Theatre Players in December 1950. This lesson was how to ‘listen’ onstage, which Caldwell says conditioned her whole life in theatre. ‘I had a few lines, but mainly I had to listen, not act listening, but listen, that was a big lesson … listen to the other actors and share the stage’, says Caldwell. ‘I believe there is no better teacher than a paying audience’. Caldwell’s reference to the Little Theatre as being ‘amateur’ was principally correct at that time.

The Arrow Theatre Company closed in 1953 due to financial loss from lack of public support, perhaps due to the theatre’s inner-suburban location. Another contributor to the Arrow Theatre Company’s demise was the Union Repertory Theatre Company (later the Melbourne Theatre Company), established in 1953 at the University of Melbourne, whose director John Sumner offered paid work to amateur actors from groups such as the Arrow Theatre Company. After the company’s closure, Frank Thring Junior travelled to England to continue his acting career, while actors from the Arrow Theatre company who went on to achieve fame at home and abroad included Zoe Caldwell OBE, Alex Scott, Moira Carleton and Irene Mitchell.

Before leaving for overseas, Thring arranged with Barry J. Gordon, aged twenty-one, to keep the Arrow Theatre going, and the first production, the melodrama *Sweeney Todd*, was directed by Moira Carleton. The show’s focus on pies resulted in the Four ’n Twenty Pie company providing fruit pies for the audience to eat during interval. At one time, Gordon’s friend Arthur Boyd displayed his ceramic tile paintings in the narrow foyer, but although priced at only twenty pounds each, not one was sold. Today, the works of Arthur Boyd are represented abroad and in all Australian state galleries, and in 2014, his ceramic work titled ‘Card Players’ brought a hammer price of one hundred thousand dollars. Gordon eventually made the Arrow Theatre available for other companies to use for staging productions, including the Players and Playgoers’ Repertory Players.

The Arrow Theatre returned to its original role as a picture theatre when the Shell Company of Australia applied to lease the theatre for eighteen months to show sixteen-millimetre films three nights per week. Since then, the theatre has been used as a film and television production house, a dancing school, Greek Centre, and is currently owned by the Lemnian Brothers’ Club, a Greek community group. In 2010, a commemorative
plaque was installed at the site of the old theatre, on the wall of 1–3 Armstrong Street, Middle Park.

Zoe Caldwell refers to the Arrow and Little Theatres as ‘important’ amateur theatre companies in the early 1950s, but for many other theatrical groups operating across the state at the same time, a sense of ‘importance’ did not matter. Rather, overall focus was placed on uniting communities to participate in the performing arts, to share friendship, and the satisfaction of creating live performance for local audiences.

This extract from a talk given by English poet and playwright Christopher Fry aptly describe the benefits of theatre in this post-war era:

If the theatre can help us to see ourselves and the world freshly, as though we had just rounded the corner into life, it will be what entertainment should be, a holiday which sets us up to continue living at the top of our bent, and worth.
The Victorian Drama League

In the early 1950s, with so many companies, the need was recognised for an overarching organisation to support and assist Victoria’s amateur theatrical arts sector. Also influencing the formation of a Victorian Drama League was the founding of the Council for Adult Education in 1947, and an existing overlap between the ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ theatre communities in Victoria. The Victorian Government’s financial support to theatre and culture since 1948, was also encouraging with regards to establishing the Victorian Drama League.¹⁶

On October 12th, 1951, the inaugural conference of the Amateur Dramatic Societies of Victoria was initiated by Colin Badger, foundation director of the Council for Adult Education. The conference proposed to form a Victorian Drama League to service Melbourne’s amateur theatrical community.

The League was established on 3rd May, 1952, after a ‘constituent meeting’ of over one hundred people at the South Melbourne Town Hall, chaired by Colin Badger. Those attending included a cross-section of representatives from professional and non-professional theatre in Victoria, including Brett Randall and Irene Mitchell (Melbourne Little Theatre), John Casson (Comedy Theatre), Professor Keith Macartney (Tin Alley Players) and representatives from theatre companies in Williamstown, Mordialloc, Heidelberg, Drouin, Yallourn, Yea and the Swan Hill branch of the National Theatre.

Englishman John Sumner, recently arrived to manage the Union Theatre at Melbourne University, spoke about repertory theatre in England. The original aims and objectives of the Victorian Drama League were to encourage and assist the work of amateur and semi-professional dramatic societies by co-operative effort, to organise a one-act play festival, and to establish ‘the most comprehensive and complete’ selection of plays and books about theatre in Victoria. There was also a plan to develop a lending section for equipment, provide an advisory service on creative aspects of play production, and hold regular conferences, workshops and weekend schools. More than sixty years later, the Victorian Drama League (VDL) continues to splendidly support amateur theatre in Victoria and other Australian states.
One-Act Play Festivals

One-Act Play Festivals provide a great opportunity for theatre companies to unite in friendly competition and offer valuable theatrical experiences for all participants. The VDL’s first annual One-Act Play Festival was launched on Melbourne Cup Eve, 1952, in the Mechanics’ Institute Hall in Frankston. Participating groups included the New Theatre, The Therry Society, and companies from Mordialloc, Nagambie, Sale, Albury, Yea and Swan Hill. The festival was so successful, Frankston Theatre Group kindly continued to host future annual One-Act Play Festivals until 1960. In 1956, the League introduced the Junior One-Act Play Festival, hosted by Williamstown Little Theatre. Popular with young performers, audience attendances were small at these Junior One-Act Play Festivals, and the final event was held in 1957.

In the twenty-first century, One-Act Play Festivals remain popular in Victoria, and in 2018 included the Mansfield Festival of One-Act Plays 2018, Anglesea One-Act Play Festival, the South Gippsland Eighteenth One-Act Play Festival held in Foster, Seymour Performers’ Workshop Third One-Act Play Festival, and the Monash One-Act Play Festival, hosted by Peridot Theatre.¹⁷

The 1950s was a decade of growth for amateur theatre in Victoria, and the following stories of urban and regional theatre groups are representative of those established during this era.

Bendigo Theatre Company (originally the Bendigo Operatic Society)

The spotlight now shines on Bendigo, a former gold mining town with a long history of theatre. Theatre companies had been operating in Bendigo (formerly named Sandhurst) for almost one hundred years prior to the Bendigo Operatic Society forming in 1952.¹⁸ The aim of this new company was to offer the Bendigo community an opportunity to enjoy and participate in various facets of theatre while presenting musical productions.¹⁹ Their first two shows, The Chocolate Soldier, followed by The Merry Widow, were successfully presented in 1953 at the Capital Theatre, Bendigo.
Thirty-one years later in 1984, the company changed its name to Bendigo Theatre Company to allay community concern that the original name excluded non-operatic performers. In 2016, during an interview in Bendigo Theatre Company’s multi-purpose Arts Shed, company members Gael Emond and Vernon J. Wall spoke of a community spirit remaining strong within the group, with members’ ages ranging from five to ninety years, and some company memberships even exceeding fifty years.  

The company had no permanent home for rehearsals, costumes, storage and set-building until 1996, when acquiring an old unlined, ex-Army drill hall with an asphalt floor from the Bendigo City Council on a long-term lease arrangement. Officially opened by Bendigo Mayor Rod Campbell in 2010, ‘The Shed’, as the venue is fondly called, is centrally located at 15-17 Allingham Street, Golden Square and has been transformed into a well-equipped black-box space, with splendid storage and set-construction facilities.

Indicating strong community support for the theatre company, Gael explained the renovation could not have been achieved without the support and cooperation from the City of Greater Bendigo, businesses, and the countless voluntary hours given by community members. Bendigo Theatre Company staged its one hundredth show, Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat in June 1997 at the Capital Theatre, and today
continues to present blockbusters such as *Mary Poppins*, presented in 2015 at the new Ulumbarra Theatre.

Entrance to the new Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo, formerly the Sandhurst Gaol. Visitors pass original cell doors and under the gallows to enter the modern theatre. Images by courtesy of Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo. Copyright: Peter Clark Photography.

Interior view of the Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo, one of the largest regional theatres in Australia. Photo by courtesy of Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo. Copyright: Peter Clark Photography.
Heidelberg Theatre Company (formerly Heidelberg Repertory Group)

Whether in town or country, every theatre group has its own unique story, and Heidelberg Theatre Company Incorporated is no exception. It was originally established as the Heidelberg Repertory Group in 1952 by a break-away group from the Heidelberg National Theatre company, led by producer and director Reg Rudd. Situated thirteen kilometres north-east of Melbourne, Heidelberg now had two theatre companies operating in the area, and actors could select their preferred show until the Heidelberg National Theatre company eventually disbanded. The repertory group became allied with the Adult Education Association Drama Group for their launch and presented Liliom by Ferenc Molnar as their first play. At first the company would present six plays per year, at the Eisteddfod Hall in Ivanhoe, which later became known as Banyule’s Hatch Contemporary Arts Space. Shows were also presented by the company in the East Ivanhoe Methodist Church and the Rechabite Hall in Ivanhoe, where they took residence until 1982.

Cue company Life Member Wendy Drowley OAM under the spotlight to share her personal story. Wendy has been acting with Heidelberg Theatre Company since 1953, when encouraged by her mother to go on the stage at age fourteen.

Wendy Drowley in Heidelberg Repertory Group’s tenth production, Lace on Her Petticoat, presented in 1953 at the Eisteddfod Hall, Ivanhoe. Written by Aimee Stuart, the story tells of the gap in social classes decided by lace on the petticoat. Image by courtesy of Heidelberg Theatre Company.
In an interview in 2016 in the stylish Heidelberg Theatre, Wendy said, ‘I have lived my life here – blood, sweat and tears’! One day, Wendy noticed the bus depot was for sale at 36 Turnham Avenue, opposite the Rosanna station, and told members at a wine-tasting night she had found a great spot for their theatre. Through State Government grants and Arts funding, the company purchased the bus depot in 1974, and gifted it to the Heidelberg Council in 1980, when the Council provided one hundred thousand dollars towards converting the depot into a one hundred and twenty-four-seat theatre.

When Wendy started dating her future husband Ted, he soon discovered that to be part of Wendy’s life, he too had to be part of the theatre, and became involved behind the scenes. Wendy says these days there is no more competing in festivals where company members would pack the show onto a truck, drive to the destination, unload, erect the set and stage the show the same night, then repeat the whole process backwards, taking the set home to unpack.

Selected company productions are still adjudicated, but by Victorian Drama League adjudicators who visit the theatre. Another modern-day alternative to travelling is the sharing of productions between theatre companies. For example, in 2010 Williamstown Little Theatre staged their production of Glorious! at Heidelberg, and in 2011, Heidelberg’s production of The History Boys was presented at Williamstown Little Theatre, and the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company’s production of The 39 Steps was staged at Heidelberg. These arrangements benefit the companies involved both artistically and financially.

The company’s impressive costume collection is stored in a building known as ‘Wendy’s Shed’, located at the rear of the theatre. Wendy proudly says, ‘I never throw anything out’.

In the well-appointed Heidelberg Theatre today, what was once a concrete slab where buses were washed, is now a large stage with the capacity to revolve during productions. ‘The whole theatre was designed by actors, not architects’, says Wendy proudly. Thanks to Wendy’s now late husband Ted, Heidelberg Theatre also has a hearing loop for patrons with a hearing disability, and offers individual hearing aids with headphones.
From personal experience, patrons attending Heidelberg Theatre can be assured of a quality theatre experience in a modern, comfortable theatre.

Period costume display on mezzanine floor of Heidelberg Theatre, 36 Turnham Avenue, Rosanna. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.

In 2014 Wendy Drowley was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for Service to the Performing Arts.

**Beaumaris Theatre**

Meanwhile, in the bayside suburb of Beaumaris, situated by Port Philip Bay, nineteen kilometres south-east of Melbourne, new residents from England were yearning for the theatre they had loved back home. Beaumaris was a popular post-World War Two destination for British immigrants to settle on arrival in Australia. In 1953, new residents Angela and Bill Martin had built their home, Talbot House, at 34 Cromer Road, Beaumaris but Angela and her fellow British ex-pats, were missing their homeland involvement in English theatre. Bill used his shop-fitter skills to build a little theatre in the Talbot House attic to seat twenty people comfortably, or thirty people at a maximum. The Martins then offered their attic theatre for performances by the newly formed theatre company called Beaumaris Players.
Today the company is known as Beaumaris Theatre Incorporated, and Life Member Debbie Keyt took centre stage in an interview. Debbie explained that during 1953 and 1957, Beaumaris patrons regarded going to the theatre as a special occasion, with ladies wearing evening dresses and fur coats, and men wearing dinner suits. People auditioned to be members, instead of attending only individual productions. A director would then draw from this repertory-style group for the cast. The mostly English comedies and melodramas presented in early years, would have helped ease the English people’s homesickness. This continued until the 1970s, then the occasional American or Australian plays were presented.

An Evening in the Garden, presented by the Beaumaris Players in 1957 as the final production at the home of Angela and Bill Martin, Talbot House, 34 Cromer Rd., Beaumaris before moving to the new theatre. Image by courtesy of Beaumaris Theatre Archives.

The final Beaumaris Players’ performance at Talbot House was a fundraising event in 1957 in aid of their new theatre, presented in the gardens due to limited seating in the attic. Titled ‘An Evening in the Garden’, the event included dinner, a Noel Coward play, an exhibition of swimming and diving in the pool, dancing and refreshments. One hundred people attended, paying one guinea per person.

1958 was an exciting year for Beaumaris thespians when, in conjunction with the East Beaumaris Advancement League, a new hall was built at 82 Wells Road, Beaumaris, and
the first play presented there was *As Long As They’re Happy*. The local Council later built a front part to the theatre which became the main performance area, and the original hall at the back became the clubrooms. In 2001, annual family shows became popular, the first being *Olivia Twist*. Today, Beaumaris Theatre audiences are offered a variety of shows ranging from dramas and comedies to musicals. There are charity fundraisers, community health lectures, and youth involvement is encouraged in all facets of theatre. There is active volunteer participation in all areas of theatre-making, including weekly set-builds, with lunch provided. Since 2015, the company holds an annual Membership Drive Day, where people come to join and enjoy refreshments.

Debbie Keyt’s first role at Beaumaris Theatre was Ruth in Alan Ayckbourn’s comedy *Table Manners* in 1996. ‘In those days I performed in one show per year as I had three young children and was involved in the school Parent and Friends’ group and School Council, so I declined the first invitation to join the committee’. Debbie was asked again in 2002, said ‘yes’, and has been on the committee ever since. ‘I believe it is a way of giving something back. I love theatre’.
Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group

Returning to the 1950s and travelling across to Strathmore, eleven kilometres north-west of Melbourne, the Strathmore Theatrical Group was formed in 1954 for a different reason to homesickness. When a small group of young residents realised they shared an enjoyment of theatre, they arranged to meet at the Bruce Street home of Mary and Ron Little, who were members of Williamstown Little Theatre. The Northern Light Opera Company based in Moonee Ponds was the only theatrical activity available in the area at that time, and these enthusiastic thespians felt a drama group established in Strathmore would be good for performers not wishing to sing. Another factor for staying local was in those days very few people owned cars. It was decided at the meeting to call the group the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group, which neatly converted to the acronym STAG.

The group first used a member’s home to present a rehearsed play-reading of Gerald Savory’s comedy George and Margaret, in aid of the local Health Centre. The enthusiastic response resulted in new members, a committee was formed, a constitution framed and adopted, and the fledgling group’s first show, And This Was Odd, was later presented at St John’s Presbyterian Church Hall in Essendon. The group used this venue for its first three plays until the Strathmore Community Hall was built on the corner of Napier and Loeman Streets. To help raise finance to cover costs of authors’ royalties, hall rental, costumes, sets, printing and postage, monthly social activities were held such as play-readings, sherry nights and charades.
Fast forward to the twenty-first century and I interviewed STAG President Gail Armstrong in the atmospheric community hall which magically transforms into theatre when the show starts. A huge black curtain is always pulled around the side of the audience pre-show, and Gail explained this curtain was made by co-founder, Mary Little, who in 2018 is still actively involved with the company. ‘Mary’s wealth of theatre knowledge is invaluable’, said Gail.

![Mary Little, co-founder of the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG). Photograph by courtesy of Cenarth Fox.](image)

Front-of-house guidelines are strict because of close proximity between the tiny foyer and the audience. ‘We sometimes work under difficult conditions and try to separate the audience from distractions’, said Gail. ‘It’s hard when people arrive late’. Volunteers must take the phone off the hook, no talking, and someone must always stay behind the curtain near the door and not watch the show.

The hall is council-owned, but STAG members do their own cleaning and have working bees. Gail said matinees are often ‘chocka block’. ‘We have the Bush Walking and Rotary Clubs, and our subscriber list is growing’. STAG is like a second home to Gail, who auditioned for a play with the company in the 1970s and has been President for sixteen years. ‘My car comes here by itself’, she laughed. The quality of STAG productions has been acknowledged by Victorian Drama League Awards. ‘I’m proud of what the group has done over the years’, said Gail.
The National Theatre

Meanwhile, in the 1950s, the National Theatre Movement and the Melbourne Little Theatre, both having commenced in the 1930s on an amateur basis, were undergoing transition to the commercial theatrical sector.

Firstly, at St Peter’s parish hall in Eastern Hill, Gertrude Johnson and her National Theatre Melbourne branch had now presented their first fully professional production, *The Light of Heart*, by Emlyn Williams, directed by Ronald Fortt.27 The National Theatre was also invited to participate in Melbourne’s first Moomba Festival in 1955, presenting *Madam Butterfly* and *Les Sylphides* on an open-air stage in Melbourne’s Treasury Gardens. The National Theatre Movement not only provided wonderful entertainment for Melbourne audiences, but helped start the careers of many actors, dancers and singers, and playwright Ray Lawler. The National Theatre eventually re-opened in 1974 in St Kilda in a renovated cinema, with the schools remaining and the performing groups Ballet Victoria and the Victorian Opera Company.28 After Gertrude Johnson passed away on 28th March, 1973, her estate provided scholarships for students at the Australian National Theatre Movement.

The Melbourne Little Theatre

The Melbourne Little Theatre was also preparing to make the transition from amateur to professional early in 1962, by now having presented more than one hundred and fifty plays.29 In 1951 the company became the Melbourne Little Theatre Guild, and funds raised three years later assisted the rebuilding onsite of a new, modern four hundred and fourteen-seat theatre, which opened in 1956.30


London theatre district’s St Martin’s Lane inspired a suggestion to rename the Little Theatre’s street location from Martin Street, South Yarra to St Martin’s Lane. The Melbourne Council agreed to the change of name and six years later, in August, 1962, the building itself was renamed St Martin’s Theatre, and the company had fully moved from amateur to professional.
**Babirra Music Theatre**

In 1956, the same year as the Little Theatre opened its new theatre, another theatre company was forming in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. The original aim of members of the Jordanville Methodist Church in Melbourne was to stage a variety concert at the church and hopefully form a choir. Well, that was the plan of Deaconess Ruth McGregor and Les Malseed, but those involved enjoyed the concert so much, they instead formed a society called ‘Babirra’, an Aboriginal word meaning ‘singing’. Although the choir did not eventuate, the Babirra Players was born as ‘a group with common musical and church interests formed for mutual enjoyment, and to aid charitable causes’.

Between 1957 and 1972, the Babirra Players performed a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta every year, spending the first half of the year rehearsing, and the second half performing at a different venue each weekend. Most Gilbert and Sullivan shows are now royalty-free, which is financially beneficial to companies. Accompanied by piano, the season usually comprised between twenty and twenty-four performances, mostly in church halls in the eastern suburbs, but also in country towns such as Lake Bolac, Bendigo and Wangaratta. The sets and lighting were transported to the venue the night before each show by car and trailer, and each venue provided a supper for the audience and cast.

The hard work involved in transporting productions to different venues became unsustainable in the 1970s, and it was decided to perform two shows a year at the same venue. Performance venues have since included the Chadstone Shopping Centre auditorium, the Alexander Theatre at Monash University, and the Nunawading Arts Centre, now known as the Whitehorse Centre, where the company has performed ever since.

During a modern-day interview, the President of Babirra Music Theatre, Owen Davies, said an example of the popularity of their company and quality productions, is that participants in shows are not limited to the Eastern suburbs. ‘They tend to come from everywhere’, said Owen. ‘A lot of people are quite happy to travel to do a show they want to do, work with a director or a cast they want to work with, and friends in the
show’. The company’s costumes are currently stored, and sets built, in Fleigner Hall, owned by the City of Monash in the suburb of Oakleigh.

Today, Babirra Music Theatre Incorporated presents between eight and twelve performances in each season, and *Mary Poppins* was so popular, they presented thirteen shows. For ticket bookings, Owen says the company offers three choices: online ticketing, a booking agency, and a Ticket Secretary. Primary ticketing is handled by the box office at the Whitehorse Centre which has a ticketing office and online facility. When asked about criteria for selecting productions, Owen explained their audiences expect a more classic style of show. ‘We have not done shows like *Footloose* or *Grease*, because that’s not who we are’, he said. ‘We are known for doing shows that are a bit more class in nature, and even some newer shows are set in the classic style, for example *Mary Poppins* or *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.’

Owen pointed out the challenge to find the right people for the committee. ‘When seeking committee members, we take people who can contribute in a specific area, as well as people who fit in and understand our culture, our view of the world’. Owen is strongly of the view that a cast working well together and enjoying what they are doing, will create a far greater theatre experience for the audience. In his role as President of Babirra Music Theatre, Owen enjoys receiving compliments about shows from audiences. ‘I was particularly thrilled at opening night of *Phantom of the Opera* when the Mayor of the City of Whitehorse came up to me and said she had seen the professional production in the city, but this was far better’!

**Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions**

Amateur theatre companies are mostly formed by groups of people and named according to the suburb or significant meaning, but performer, composer, director and playwright Cid Ellwood formed his own operatic company. Cid juggled work in his family’s Essendon business to operate Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions, which specialised in light opera and musicals, some written by Cid himself. From 1949, shows presented by Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions were presented at various venues including the Moonee Ponds Town Hall, the Brunswick Football Club, the Box Hill Town Hall,
Essendon Town Hall, Methodist Ladies’ College, Kew and the last recorded production, *Strike It Rich* was presented in 1960 at St Peter’s Hall, East Melbourne.\(^{34}\)

Cid’s contribution to non-professional musical theatre in Victoria was honoured with an Edith Harrhy Award for ‘outstanding service to musical theatre’.\(^{35}\) *The Red Sombrero* in 1956 featured two stars of the future, Nance Grant and Elaine McKenna.
Program Content *The Red Sombrero*, presented by Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions at the Brunswick Town Hall in October, 1956. Image by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.
BLOC Music Theatre

In the Grampians region of Victoria, today’s BLOC Music Theatre originated in June, 1957 after a performance of the operetta In Waltz Time. This show was presented by the Dawson Street Baptist Church at the newly opened Ballarat Civic Hall, in aid of the City Baptist Centenary Fund.36 One year later in 1958, the second show, Blossom Time, was also presented in the Civic Hall, with a noticeable change of wording in the program: ‘The Ballarat Light Opera Company presents for your approval […]’.

In 1962, the company debuted with Oklahoma! at the magnificent Her Majesty’s Theatre, Ballarat, where the company still performs today. Junior productions were introduced in 1977, the same year as the purchase of the company’s premises in Peel Street, Ballarat. During the 1980s the company went from strength to strength and in 1987 won its first Music Theatre Guild of Victoria ‘Production of the Year’ award for Godspell. The company name changed in 2008 to BLOC Music Theatre and the company has since presented major musicals and won more awards.

In 2016 I interviewed BLOC Music Theatre President, Jason Muller in the company’s spacious busy headquarters in Peel Street, Ballarat.37 Auditions for BLOC’s next show were underway in the front studio and we found seats for the interview in the Wardrobe room. Jason’s family are great examples of intergenerational involvement in the arts sector. ‘I started at nine with Mum and Dad who were building sets and making costumes’, said Jason. ‘They needed a couple of young lads for the current junior show and my younger brother and I got hauled in’. Even today, Jason’s mother still makes costumes, his father builds the sets, and his brothers Damian and Nathan have designed the company’s sets. Jason met his wife Majella when performing in Les Miserables with Ballarat Lyric Theatre in 1994, and now their children are involved in BLOC Junior productions. Jason’s father Jim Muller, a Life Member of the company, also compiled the pictorial history of the company’s first fifty years. The book is titled BLOC Music Theatre 1959 – 2009: A Pictorial History.
The company presents two shows per year, one major and one Junior, and Jason said a standing invitation is also extended to external parties for BLOC to underwrite and present a boutique production each year. That group is given a budget and briefed to assemble their own production team, and can plan and present a show using the company’s banner. Performing Arts students from the local university are not permitted to participate in BLOC shows during the year, but can be involved if a boutique production is presented at the end of the year. Similar to some other companies, Jason says BLOC is selective regarding committee members. ‘We are focussed on getting the right people on the committee’.

There is ongoing competition between the two musical theatre companies operating in Ballarat, which Jason believes is a significant factor in the city’s current high standard of musical theatre. Often the same people will audition for both companies. ‘We are lucky we have a lot of technical people who support these companies, for example, there is a lighting company which supports both companies’, says Jason. ‘They charge little to support the companies but produce a high standard of work because they are part of the
community’. From a publicity perspective, Jason feels theatre struggles in the press when compared to sport.

Jason is proud of Ballarat’s Her Majesty’s Theatre, the company’s performance venue. ‘We have one of the best theatres in Australia’. When asked his views on the benefits of theatre in communities, Jason replied:

You see it all over Australia and the world, community theatre brings people of all walks of life together to work on a project. It combines these groups of people who would never have otherwise met. People who would never have thought to become involved in musical theatre may help out because their kids are involved, and then continue to volunteer well beyond their children’s involvement. From the perspective of how it strengthens communities, it is volunteerism.

Jason agrees that ‘the volunteerism and a sense of belonging’ that comes from being involved in amateur theatre is significant to the transformative benefit of amateur theatre strengthening communities.

**Malvern Theatre Company**

Whether in town or country, community involvement in theatre is a productive and enjoyable activity. In the case of suburban Malvern, it was the Malvern Arts Council which instigated forming a drama group, the Malvern Theatre Company, in 1957. The company’s first production, *A Lady Mislaid* by Kenneth Horne, took five and a half months to produce, and was staged at the Holy Advent Church of England Parish Hall, Armadale, for two performances in April 1958. Subscribers paid one guinea plus ten and sixpence for each ensuing year. The company moved eleven times in thirteen years until moving to the Congregational Church Hall at 29 Burke Road, East Malvern in 1971.

Renovations were undertaken, new theatre seats installed, and the company name changed to Malvern Theatre Company Incorporated. In 1997, the company’s fortieth year, the number of annual productions was reduced to five per year. Various reasons for this decision include avoiding demanding set construction requirements if presenting six shows per year, and aligning with the five production seasons of other prominent amateur
theatre companies such as in Heidelberg and Williamstown. Presenting fewer shows per year also made way for longer rehearsal periods, and facilitated a change to having a yearly, instead of six-monthly, subscription brochure.

Long-term member Lorraine Bell was interviewed in the company’s well-appointed theatre, with stylish red fabric-covered seats matching the rich red carpet and curtains hanging from the side walls and across the stage. Lorraine said they need to consider the age demographic of their audience when selecting productions for performance.39 ‘Our audiences are now in their 70s and 80s, and there is a negotiation with directors regarding what to present’, said Lorraine. ‘Pygmalion was great, because everyone knew it, but Death and the Maiden was a box office disaster, with its themes of kidnap and revenge’.

A scene from Malvern Theatre Company’s sixtieth anniversary production of Twentieth Century, presented in 2017 at 29 Burke Road, East Malvern. Cast from left: Maree Barnett (Lily Garland), Andrew Ferguson (Dr. Lockwood), Julie Arnold (Ida Webb), Andrew Walker (Owen O’Malley), Lindsay Fletcher (Oscar Jaffe) and Simon Cooper (The Conductor). Photography: Lorraine Bell.

A spacious workshop and scenery storage area can be found just inside the theatre’s Stage Door. Some props are kept upstairs in the wardrobe section, but the company pays to keep other items, along with furniture and artificial plants, in commercial self-storage in Malvern. A small building in the Stonnington Council-owned theatre’s grounds is also used for storage. The company newsletter Madrago, established in January, 1967, by Joy Wharfe as a liaison between the Committee and members, is still continuing. Its
acronym represents ‘Malvern Drama Group’. When asked about transformative benefits from amateur theatre, Lorraine replied: ‘People who come here to perform in plays are already competent actors and will not be transformed. The theatre ‘supports’ their lives … but doesn’t change them’.

Malvern Theatre Company and other companies have now adopted the practice of every performer signing a Conditions of Engagement form. Lorraine explained the reason behind the introduction of this form. In 1997, an actor who was sacked by a show’s director for being unable to remember his lines, took the Malvern Theatre Company to the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal, claiming the company had discriminated against him because of his depressive illness. The actor wished to be reinstated and receive an apology from the company committee.

Malvern Theatre Company was in a financially healthy situation to afford legal costs, and in the end, the tribunal ruled out discrimination against the actor on the grounds of depressive illness as the cause of his replacement. This was a good outcome for the theatre company, but Lorraine says the issue still caused a lot of stress to committee members, and the production’s cast and crew. The Conditions of Engagement form should eliminate this situation arising again.

Lorraine Bell now takes centre stage regarding her story with the company. She started with Malvern Theatre Company in 1979 as an assistant stage manager and photographer. ‘My mother and maternal grandmother were both very interested in theatre, and my paternal Grandmother, Mabel Arblaster of Eaglehawk, Bendigo, was one of the first professional women photographers in Australia’, said Lorraine. ‘I like to think my interest in theatre photography joins both sides of the family together’. The dedicated work from Lorraine and her colleagues has contributed to Malvern Theatre Company’s reputation for quality productions and longevity over more than sixty years.
Workplace Theatre

Theatrical activity operating within business organisations was also popular during the 1950s. One organisation with active workplace theatre was Shell Australia, and the following image shows the cast of the Shell Dramatic Club’s production of *Castle in the Air*, including a screening of ‘Now or Never’ on 29th April, 1958, presented at Shell Corner. The cast member behind the camera, Frank Van Straten, would become one of Australia’s leading theatre historians.

The cast of the Shell Dramatic Club’s production of *Castle in the Air*, including a screening of ‘Now or Never’ on 29th April, 1958, presented at Shell Corner. Image by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.
Eltham Little Theatre

In Research, twenty-four kilometres north-east of Melbourne, today’s Eltham Little Theatre originated in February, 1958, when a group of theatre-loving people met privately to form a play-reading group in the home of Mrs Joan Sellars. Mrs Esme Barker formed a committee two weeks later, and the newly named The Research Players, read plays in each other’s homes. A split occurred in the committee regarding public performances, so in 1959 the new group changed its name to the Diamond Valley Drama Group and, after presenting three one-act plays at the Eltham RSL for private viewing by a representative from the Victorian Drama League, Mrs Christian, the group was encouraged to present public performances at different venues.

In 1965, the comedy Pools Paradise by Phillip King, was directed by Belle Rothwell as the first play in the Research Hall. Also used as a picture theatre, this hall was the performing venue for the company, as well as the Camberwell Arts Centre, the North Eltham Hall and St Helena Post Primary School. The Eltham Performing Arts Centre was opened in 1988 and the company changed its name to Eltham Little Theatre.

Today, Eltham Little Theatre Incorporated presents a variety of shows ranging from dramas to music halls. During an interview with Life Member Bonnie Rothwell and President, Carol Owen, they explained a Play Selection Committee selects productions for performance, and recommendations come to the main committee for approval. ‘We try to keep it in the vein of Eltham Little Theatre – we are family theatre and community and don’t want to do anything far out’, said Carol. Bonnie pointed out how audiences have changed. ‘Once they came from Williamstown in buses to see a musical. Now young people have big mortgages and even though we keep the prices down, it does not attract them, and some are not interested in theatre at all’. Carol pointed out that people will still spend big money on seeing city shows.

Costumes and scenery are stored at the theatre, and the company newsletter, Chookas, is sent to members as hard copy and electronically. There are difficulties in recruiting volunteers, and Carol views changing regulations as intimidating for some people. ‘As the law changes, it becomes more difficult, and as a committee member, you are very responsible. This can frighten people’. Regulations for theatrical groups can include food
safety laws, a license to serve alcohol, Working with Children permits, and Occupational Health and Safety.

Carol joined Eltham Little Theatre in 2008, performing in the annual music hall. After attending the Annual General Meeting, she became Vice President and Secretary at the same time. Carol admirably ensured she had gained experience in various roles within the company before becoming President. I asked Bonnie Rothwell what involvement with Eltham Little Theatre has meant to her since joining in 1977 to make costumes.41 ‘I don’t know what I would have done without the theatre. After I lost my first husband who was not interested in theatre, and married Harry my second husband, theatre was always his life, and has now also been my life. I have met many lovely people’.

It was a surprise to hear that energetic Bonnie Rothwell, radiating her love of theatre, turned one hundred in 2017. Sadly, Bonnie passed away in 2018, but her fine work remains significant to Eltham Little Theatre’s future successes.

It is wonderful that theatre companies established more than sixty years ago are still operating, and is a credit to all involved. Companies also formed in the 1950s include the Ararat Theatre Company, Croydon Parish Players, Southern Peninsula Players, The Basin Theatre Group, Warrandyte Theatre Company and Williamstown Musical Theatre Company.

For we children known as ‘baby boomers’, the 1950s’ decade offered a wonderfully happy environment for growing up. My Dad, George, worked hard as a Silver Top taxi owner-operator while Mum looked after the home front, and in this decade achieved the ‘suburban dream’ of buying their own home.42 By 1959, Australia’s population had reached ten million, and new immigrants contributed their colourful cultures and talents to enhance our way of life.43

The establishment of the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney in 1958, gave Australian amateur theatre-makers the opportunity to apply to study a structured tertiary course if wishing to pursue a professional career.44 Meanwhile, theatre presented by Victorian communities, in their community, for the community, was an ever-growing,
active arts sector. Things were looking positive for the approaching new decade, which was anticipated with much enthusiasm.

1960s

Personal Reflections

In 1962, I was cast as the daughter Sarah in J. Beresford Fowler’s adaptation of ‘On Our Selection’ at St David’s Hall, Latrobe Street, Melbourne. The venue was located ‘two doors from ‘The Argus’ office’, according to the theatre program. Mr Fowler rewrote the show from memory, having toured in ‘On Our Selection’ playing the juvenile role of Billie Bearup with Bert Bailey and Edmund Duggan’s loosely based adaptation of Steele Rudd’s works in 1912. He writes in the program that when ‘On Our Selection’ was first produced, the weakness in writing was considered to be the melodramatic plot that Bert Bailey thought essential to introduce. Mr Fowler says he retained this, but also aimed to improve the dialogue between characters as ‘more natural and colloquial’. Scripts for Mr Fowler’s shows were always typed on a manual typewriter and we were given our individual scenes for learning dialogue. The theatre program says: ‘After typing copies of ‘On Our Selection’, one disappeared, causing Mr Fowler to copyright the play’.

Luckily, Mum learnt to drive in later life and bought a little green Austin A30 to drive me around to rehearsals and shows, and my brother Bernie and his mates to go surfing. I clearly recall Mum’s astonished look at one of the final rehearsals for ‘On Our Selection’, when Mr Fowler handed her a paintbrush to finish painting the scenic backdrop. Jack Beresford Fowler played Dad in his version of ‘On Our Selection’, and although a deafness disability meant lip-reading fellow actors’ dialogue, he never missed a cue. I loved working with his enthusiastic, high-energy direction, and the quirky behind the scenes disorganisation leading up to opening night.

Mum and Dad bought a copy of Mr Fowler’s book ‘Stars in My Backyard’ as a gift for my being in the show, particularly because it mentions ‘A Must for Dolly’ presented in
1958. Inside the front cover, this treasured book has the following hand-written message from Mr Fowler:

Congratulations to dear Cheryl for her splendid performance of Sarah in ‘On Our Selection’. You had a difficult task because I have such vivid memories of Laura Roberts who played the part originally with Bert Bailey, but the highest praise I can give you is to say with deep sincerity that your performance is as good as hers was. (Signed) J. Beresford Fowler. March 20th, 1962.

‘On Our Selection’ is discussed in ‘The Green-Eyed Monster’, Mr Fowler’s autobiographical book.48

During 1963, I enjoyed attending drama classes at the National Theatre in Toorak Road, South Yarra, under the tutelage of Helen Franklin and Ralda Cunningham, before the Movement purchased the former Victory Theatre, 20 Carlisle Street, St Kilda, which opened in September, 1974.49

In 1964 a delightfully intimate auditorium with comfortable theatre seats, known as the Arts Theatre, opened on the first floor at 107 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. I was first cast as the Princess in a children’s musical play called ‘Listen to the Wind’, directed by Joy Mudge. The popular show ran for about three months. Next came the role of Amy in an original musical version of ‘Little Women’, written by Melbourne writer Ray Kolle, with music composed by Bruce George.50 I remember the script pages being produced as we rehearsed, which was exciting, then journalist Claudia Wright came to a rehearsal with a photographer, resulting in a colour double-page spread in the ‘Australian Women’s Weekly’.
The Arts Theatre productions were professional in all aspects, but with no money to pay actors and crew, these shows were amateur theatre. Ray Kolle became a scriptwriter on the ABC-TV series ‘Bellbird’, and Bruce George was already a well-established Melbourne musician. Amateur actors combine their day-time jobs with theatre, and I loved working as a Secretary at ABV Channel 2 in Elsternwick from 9.00am to 5.21pm, and then performing in evenings and at weekends.

In 1965, in stark contrast to Amy’s character, I played Stella in Tennessee Williams’ ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ at the Muse Theatre in Grattan Street, Carlton. Directed by Alan Money, this theatre with its innovative, intimate upstairs venue in a terrace house, and ‘in the round’ performance style, was ahead of its time in Melbourne, preceding the arrival of La Mama Theatre in Carlton in 1967.\textsuperscript{51} The show ran for nearly a month, and although it was amateur theatre in as much as actors were unpaid, the challenging experience of performing so close to an audience seated on three sides was terrific.
Adelphi Players Theatre Company

Amateur theatre in Victoria remained active during the 1960s, as observed by The Age newspaper dated 22\textsuperscript{nd} February, 1963.\textsuperscript{52} In an article headed ‘Another New Group’, the text reads: ‘New theatre groups are springing up like mushrooms in and around Melbourne. Latest is the Adelphi Players in the Brighton district’. One of many theatre companies formed in the 1960s, The Adelphi Players, now known as The Adelphi Players Theatre Company, remains unique, because for over fifty years, and more than one hundred and sixty shows later, the company’s successful administration and direction has been managed solely by non-performer Michael Mace.\textsuperscript{53}

Adelphi, as the company is fondly known, was formed in 1962 by a group of about twenty people, including Michael Mace, then age seventeen, after the Bayside Theatre disbanded. The company name was chosen because of admiration for the Adelphi Theatre in London. Michael also said in an interview that the English meaning of the word Adelphi, ‘brotherhood’, appealed to members.\textsuperscript{54} Michael’s parents gave up the lounge-room of their Brighton home for rehearsals, and Michael stage managed the company’s first show, The Winslow Boy, presented in 1962 at St Luke’s Presbyterian Church hall in Wilson Street, Brighton.

When a member of the Ormond Uniting Church joined the theatre group, the Adelphi Players were offered use of the church hall. They have continued to rehearse and perform at this church, contributing donations, since 1965 until today. The company has also performed productions at the heritage-listed Labassa, situated in Caulfield, raising worthwhile funds for the National Trust and restoration of the mansion.

Michael says no fees are payable by actors when in Adelphi’s shows, as all insurance is paid for by the company. ‘I would rather see the money go towards petrol expenses, particularly when some travel a long way to rehearsals’. Aware of the importance of keeping historical records and communication, Adelphi has published several booklets celebrating various anniversaries, and a newsletter titled The Adelphi News is sent to about seventy supporters. Adelphi is different from other companies in that usually the same people are cast in productions. Michael is a fan of the repertory system, and
believes actors grow by working together. ‘The people become like a family and work well together. I have seen a first rehearsal as good as a performance’, he says.

Also known as ‘The Travelling Playhouse’, The Adelphi Players Theatre Company have toured their performances to locations across Victoria, and interstate. These performances have raised funds for charities, and helped theatre colleagues in need, such as the Macedon Little Theatre, whose now re-built theatre was destroyed in the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983. All styles of shows are presented by the company, from Shakespeare to pantomimes, and many awards have been won at play festivals.


It is a credit to Michael Mace, both theatrically and personally, that in today’s mobile society, he can retain a regular cast of actors loyal to his company. Michael’s dedicated contribution to community theatre was recognised in the 2018 Australia Day Honours Awards when he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM).

And the motto for the Adelphi Players Theatre Company? From the immortal lines closing Act Two of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* … ‘The play’s the thing’.
Ballarat Lyric Theatre

One hundred and five kilometres west-north-west of Melbourne, the Ballarat Lyric Theatre Incorporated, is another company established by members who split from their first group to start a new group to accommodate show style preferences in their area. Committee members Beverley Horwood and Alison Trevenen met for an interview in their beautiful city, just across the road from St Patrick’s Cathedral, where the company was rehearsing their March, 2017 production of *Cats*. Usually the company rehearses at Clarendon College in Ballarat, but in 2016, the College was apologetic that the company could not rehearse there until risk and compliance policies and procedures were implemented, following the enquiry into sexual abuse in Ballarat. In an ironic twist, brightly coloured protest ribbons fluttering in the breeze, were tied to the front fence of the company’s new, temporary rehearsal venue, St Patrick’s Cathedral Hall. These ribbons represented the Loud Fence Movement, which originated in Ballarat, and is now part of a global protest to institutions to end decades of silence surrounding child sexual abuse.

I asked why a new musical theatre company was established in Ballarat in 1963, when the Ballarat National Theatre and Ballarat Light Opera Company (BLOC) already existed. Beverley explained that the members of BLOC who split to form the Ballarat Lyric Theatre, aimed to focus on staging straight musicals, as opposed to BLOC’s light operatic style of shows presented at the time. The new company’s first production in 1963 was *HMS Pinafore*, followed by *Naughty Marietta* and *South Pacific* in 1964. Gilbert and Sullivan operettas such as *HMS Pinafore* have been popular shows for new companies to present since 1960, when these composers’ works came into the public domain, and became licence-free. Being first to stage a show when amateur rights become available can be competitive for companies, and involves waiting until midnight at the computer, finger poised, ready to quickly press the button and be the successful applicant.

Ballarat Lyric Theatre aims to present a broad spectrum of shows, and Beverley and Alison are proud they were the only amateur company to be given the rights to *Rock of Ages* for 2016 in Victoria. Beverley explained that as *Rock of Ages* is not for children, an estimated percentage of takings needed to be cut from their budget estimate. ‘In Ballarat,
you need to have a show with lots of kids’, said Beverley. It was agreed that Rock of Ages, with its bad language and loud 1980s music, is a good example of a show that people would either love or hate. ‘That’s part of it – people are always going to have different views’, said Alison.

There is no problem recruiting volunteers to assist with shows presented at Ballarat’s magnificent Her Majesty’s Theatre, and a group regularly joins paid employees to help behind the scenes, regardless of which company is performing. Ballarat Lyric Theatre has an amical arrangement with other companies in the area, interchanging with lighting, make-up and cast members. As Beverley points out, ‘We are all striving for the same thing’. Beverley believes theatre takes people from whatever the media is for the day, for example, digital, and gives them a chance to look at another form of theatre which is interactive.

With a current emphasis on the performing arts in local schools, the theatre company is a place for students to perform after graduating, which helps them develop a portfolio and continue doing something they enjoy. From another perspective, the theatre company feels they are battling against today’s school productions presented in Ballarat, firstly because they must be careful not to clash with presenting the same musical. Another issue, as mentioned by other amateur theatre companies, is public expectation of the company’s shows to be better than the increasingly professional standard of the school productions.

Beverley would like to see the Federation University Performing Arts, Ballarat, facilitate students to use Ballarat Lyric Theatre for musical theatre performance training opportunities, ‘but the students can’t do anything until they finish their course’. An example of amateur theatre providing grounding for a professional career is Beverley’s son, Craig Revel Horwood, who started performing in shows with Ballarat Lyric Theatre in 1980. Craig spent time in Paris at the Lido de Paris, then danced professionally in shows on the West End, United Kingdom, and became Resident Director and played Munkustrap in Cats for British theatre producer, Cameron Mackintosh. Craig is now an acclaimed Director/Choreographer in England and a judge on ‘Strictly Come Dancing’.
Now a Life Member, Beverley started helping in the company because of her son, ended up making costumes for almost nineteen years, and has now been Secretary for twenty-five years. Retired school Principal and now company Vice President, Alison, has brought her organisational skills to the committee, and her recently retired husband helps with sets. ‘For me, it (Ballarat Lyric Theatre) is totally different to the role I did in teaching’, says Alison. ‘It adds variety to life, and what I mostly get out of it is watching young people develop their skills’. Beverley sums up her enjoyment of working for the company: ‘After thirty-eight years with the company I love seeing a show come to fruition on stage’.

**Lola Russell Productions**

In the city, Melbourne actors Lola Russell and George Dixon started Lola Russell Productions in 1961, initially presenting Harold Pinter’s first play *The Room* at Melbourne Technical College in the Humanities Department, followed by other productions in various venues. Lola’s home since her birth in 1921 was one of Melbourne’s oldest buildings, the heritage-listed Russell’s Old Corner Shop, located on the corner of Latrobe and King Streets. Amid the towering city skyscrapers, George and Lola persevered running a café in the original tiny building. In 2017, Melbourne City Council Engineers advised one of the building’s walls was unsafe and repairs would cost thirty-thousand dollars. Fans of the couple and their café started an appeal before a developer offered his services free of charge. Sadly, George Dixon passed away at the end of 2017 and the shop, with all its historical and theatrical memories, is now closed.

**CLOC Musical Theatre Incorporated**

Back to mainstream amateur theatre, one of Victoria’s leading musical theatre companies, CLOC Musical Theatre, also commenced after a church choir performance. The company now presents two big-budget, high quality musical productions each year, attracting twelve thousand patrons. This impressive operation began in the Cheltenham Pioneer Memorial hall in 1963, when church choir members decided to present *HMS Pinafore*, and then *Pirates of Penzance*. The Cheltenham Light Opera Company was formed in 1964 to present light opera productions such as *Yeoman of the*
Guard, Trial by Jury, The Mikado, Pirates of Penzance, The Sorcerer and The Gondoliers. In 1968, the company presented their first big American musical, Oklahoma!, with a cast of more than fifty singers and dancers, at the Highett High School hall. This show challenged company members to dance as well as sing and act, and the audience paid one-dollar admission for adults, and fifty cents for children.

In 1969, Grant Alley, age eighteen, joined the backstage crew for Brigadoon, and for the next show was appointed in charge of set construction, a role he has retained for nearly fifty years. As CLOC’s longest-serving member, Grant agreed to be interviewed in late 2015, in CLOCworks, the huge work-shed CLOC owns on land the company leases from the Uniting Church in Heatherton. Sets are built here, and costumes made and stored in a nearby building. Additional storage facilities are in McKinnon, and rehearsal facilities located in Dane Road, Moorabbin. CLOC paid one hundred thousand dollars for renovations to the rehearsal hall, and hopes the lease from Kingston Council will be permanent.

In the 2015 Queen’s Birthday Honours Awards, Grant Alley was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for Services to the Performing Arts, and his passion for theatre shone through as we chatted in his office at the far end of the huge work shed, adjacent to a kitchenette. He credits the founding committee in the early 1960s as being instrumental to CLOC’s success today, recalling the original committee comprised a magistrate,

Grant Alley OAM joined CLOC Musical Theatre in 1969. Image by courtesy of Grant Alley.
banker, head of the Taxation Department and a dentist. ‘I learned my trade from a magistrate’, says Grant. ‘They ran CLOC as a business. They were cautious, yet progressive, and we had change, which you need, but we also had stability’. Never a performer, Grant joined the committee aged nineteen, was President for twenty-five years, and is now Treasurer.

In 1971, while performing at Cheltenham High School, a bold decision was made to relocate to the new Alexander Theatre with state-of-the-art facilities at Monash University, Clayton, and seating for five hundred patrons. In the past, sets had been built in President Vic Proposch’s driveway and stored in his garage, but the company could now establish its first workshop and storage area in Brighton. A church in Brewer Road, Bentleigh, was later used for rehearsals and costume storage.

Since retiring from paid work in a senior management position, Grant maintains regular commitment to CLOC Musical Theatre, working over twelve hours, Monday to Wednesday, each week at CLOCworks. He stays until midnight on Tuesday nights, because a team of mostly males who work during the day, comes in at 8.00pm to build sets. Grant says working together takes on a Men’s Shed environment. Retired men come in during the day to work, as do special needs young people, who learn how to build sets.

A company member is responsible for each structured department in CLOC, and Grant says work experience students can be found in every area, for every show. Every Saturday, a team of twenty men and women attend a costume-making session at Heatherton, and lunch is provided. ‘We are conscious of nurturing new people and looking after existing people’. says Grant. CLOC remains a massive ‘family’ today, but Grant explains it is different from the company’s beginning, when the ‘family’ element meant the same people having roles. ‘I regret losing that out of CLOC, but it was necessary’, says Grant. ‘Principals became mobile, as did others, and the family nature disappeared in the 1960s and 70s’. Grant believes the risks of hanging on to a family corporation ‘thing’, include families ageing, and everyone pulling out at the same time, and then the vacancies being filled by people with good intent, but no knowledge. ‘If there is no infrastructure, then new people have nothing to build on and the company implodes’.
A secret to CLOC’s financial success could be that, like his predecessors, Grant firmly believes theatre is business as well as art. ‘If you can’t get a paying audience, then the show shouldn’t be put on’. According to Grant, CLOC’s show selection criteria covers a wide spectrum. ‘The first thing to consider is ‘Can we sell it?’’ Grant says a company cannot afford to be self-indulgent. ‘Then we need to think of sourcing an appropriate production team, and availability of the director, musical director and choreographer, and of course we need to maintain standards, and do the show well’. Grant explained that audiences can be forgiving if they don’t like an actual show, but would be unforgiving if the show was not done well, and it would take time for CLOC to regain their reputation for quality theatre.

To avoid burnout for volunteers working on three blockbuster productions in a row following Mary Poppins and Wicked, CLOC took a financial risk for the third show and presented the relatively unknown The Drowsy Chaperone in late 2015. Grant says although The Drowsy Chaperone is a good show, CLOC knew there would be a financial loss, but ‘We don’t count it as a loss, because at the end of the day, it achieved its goal, giving everyone a catch-up’.
For thirty-eight years, the company performed at the Alexander Theatre in Clayton, and since 2010 performs at the National Theatre, St Kilda. When changing venues and moving to a new locality, the company lost seventy percent of their audience, but Grant says they have now replaced audience numbers.

‘We needed to keep growing, crank up marketing, and look at our original strategy for planning for the future, for people. How could we do this? Marketing has to be brand-building’, says Grant, who sees the process as about knowing CLOC, rather than about the show.

Grant feels theatre is the greatest leveller, ‘It turns society upside down … for example, a business mogul with a passion for theatre may not be able to wield a hammer or sing, whereas a worker in lower level business could have a terrific tenor voice and get lead roles’.

A graph displayed on Grant’s computer screen shows an increase in CLOC’s profits since implementing strategy plans. ‘Strategy planning was the key to success’, says Grant. ‘CLOC got its act together. If wanting to enjoy fun, someone has to pay for your fun, and we aim to make a profit for the future’. With CLOC Musical Theatre Incorporated’s strong financial situation thanks to skilled management, and top casts, creative, technical and support teams, patrons can look forward to sharing the company’s exciting future. Comparing today’s ticket prices with those in 1968, admission to a CLOC Musical Theatre performance in 2017 costs fifty-eight dollars full price, fifty-two dollars concession, and forty dollars for children. On more than one occasion as honorary theatre reviewer for the *Melbourne Observer* newspaper, I have commented that the only difference between CLOC’s production and a professional show, is that the actors in professional shows are paid.

More has been written in this project about CLOC Musical Theatre than other companies, but it is important to record the ideology, methods and achievements of such an outstandingly successful non-professional theatre company.
**Geelong Lyric Theatre Incorporated**

There are of course many fine amateur theatre companies bringing theatre to their communities in Victoria, and some of these groups were founded in the 1960s in regions such as the City of Geelong, located southwest of Melbourne. Theatre is alive and well in Geelong with at least seven non-professional theatre companies operating in the city. One company is the Geelong Lyric Theatre Society, formed in June, 1965 as the Geelong Gilbert and Sullivan Light Opera Company. The company joined the Geelong Musical Comedy Company and the GSODA Junior Players under the umbrella of the Geelong Society of Operatic and Dramatic Art (GSODA). Seeking to operate independently, the company broke away from GSODA in 1974, presenting Gilbert and Sullivan and light operettas.

Company members Derek Ingles and Wendy Tomkins took centre stage in an interview at the Woodbin Theatre, West Geelong. They explained that *The Mikado* was staged as the first musical at the Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC) in Ryrie Street, Geelong, by the Geelong Gilbert and Sullivan Light Opera Company in 1981. The company has performed at GPAC in The Ford Theatre, now known as The Playhouse, since 2011. In 1982, at the time of Incorporation, the company name changed to Geelong Lyric Theatre Society Incorporated. By 1995, the company was staging big shows such as *Les Miserables* in Costa Hall at Deakin University, and combined presenting musical classics such as *My Fair Lady*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music* with Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.

Storage facilities in the early days were in a hut on the Geelong waterfront, and scenery was kept at the Postal Institute, until Premier Jeff Kennett revamped the waterfront and the company moved to a garage in Sommers Street to store costumes. Wendy said the company rehearsed in the Belmont Park Pavilion, formerly the Bowling Club, and shows were presented at the Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC). ‘In the early days we made more profit and gave some of it away’, said Wendy, ‘but the GPAC cost is huge, it is a Government-owned building’. Selecting the right show can be unpredictable, for example, one of the company’s best shows, *Sweeney Todd*, won a Music Theatre Guild of Victoria Award for ‘Best Production’, but did not attract audiences, losing twenty-five thousand dollars.
There is obvious company pride in the Lyric Youth Theatre company, formed in 2002, which gives opportunity for young people under twenty-one years of age to become actively involved in musical theatre. Both Wendy and Derek are company Life Members, and Wendy, who started in 1974, has wonderful memories of sharing good times in the company with her husband, the late musical director Geoff Tomkins. Derek commenced in 1991 and says he didn’t enjoy it much, but returned for *South Pacific*, liked it and joined the general committee. Both Wendy and Derek say they have particularly enjoyed making good friendships in the company.

**Leongatha Lyric Theatre**

Another example of a theatre company forming from a choir, is the Gippsland-based Leongatha Lyric Theatre Incorporated, which was established when a choir decided not to disband. When I visited the town of Leongatha in Gippsland for an interview with the Leongatha Lyric Theatre’s archivist David Tattersall, he suggested we first tour the properties owned by the company on either side of Watsons Road. David explained that at one stage the company used various venues for storage, including the fire-station and school. It became messy locating things all over the place, so it was decided to purchase this land in the Leongatha Industrial Estate for storage and a work-shed.

The work-shed block is deep with room for further extensions, and inside is a huge workshop area, with props and furniture stored upstairs on the mezzanine floors. Scenery is constructed, painted and stored in the shed, and a separate room contains lighting and sound equipment. Company members Neil Warren and Peter Western (President) were building sets when we visited. They agreed with David that since the company started in 1965, there have been no splits or dissension as can happen in some other companies, when people have wanted to break away and start a new group.

We crossed Watsons Road again, and I noticed the beautiful fresh country air as we returned to the clubrooms and the comfortable meeting room, with table and chairs. Next to that, a huge wardrobe workroom with benches and several donated sewing machines, resembled a professional sewing workshop. Behind this area is costume storage with hundreds of lovely costumes, not yet catalogued. There is also a huge rehearsal space and
area suitable for social functions. As well as owning both properties, the company owns the caravan in the front yard of 13 Watsons Road, which is used for travelling shows.

The group was founded in 1965 by school music teacher Mrs Lyn Carr, after a local choir decided not to disband and instead formed a musical theatre group called Leongatha Lyric Theatre. The company has gone from strength to strength, also establishing Lyric Youth Theatre in 1974, and presenting musicals such as My Fair Lady in 1978. Professional entertainer Frank Rich retired in Tarwin Lower, and in the late 1970s, worked with the company presenting fund-raiser vaudeville music hall shows called ‘Boggs on Parade’.

With no performing arts centre in Leongatha, Lyric Theatre members decided to put efforts and finances into upgrading the facilities at Mesley Hall at Leongatha High School, where they have performed since 1965. David said although a lot of young people are involved with the theatre company, the youth club could not keep running because young people stay until finishing Year Twelve and then leave the town. ‘There is not a lot of employment in Leongatha’, said David. ‘The kids have to move away’.

In the days before the company built its own shed, members rehearsed in someone’s old cowshed or empty garage, building and painting scenery. Sets would be moved into Mesley Hall a few weeks before opening night, and final rehearsals at the school would be punctuated by the sounds of set construction. ‘With the permission of the school management, set painters would often be onstage working during the day behind the stage curtains, while the school students had Physical Education in the body of the hall’.

David said because their audiences are conservative, controversial or confronting plays such as *God of Carnage*, are rarely selected by their committee. Leongatha’s next show was going to be *Mary Poppins*, with a cast of seventy, including fifty children, and a local girl was playing Mary Poppins. Audiences travel to Leongatha from Melbourne, Latrobe Valley and from around the coast, Wonthaggi, Nyora, Foster and Dandenong, particularly if they know a cast member.

David also spoke of the difficulty in recruiting volunteers. ‘Young people have to work and their parents, instead of being happily retired with nothing to do except craft and book-clubs, are busy babysitting grandchildren’, said David. This problem is inherent to many areas of volunteering.

David met his wife Margaret, a school teacher just out of College, at a Young Farmers’ meeting. They started dating, then Margaret’s rehearsals for Naughty Marietta started, so David thought he had better go along and be part of it too. ‘Now it has turned around and I am spending too much time at the theatre company!’

The history of Leongatha Lyric Theatre, Fifty Years of Theatre, was researched and written by David Tattersall and launched at the group’s fiftieth anniversary celebrations in February, 2015. David’s outstanding archival work to preserve the company’s precious history will benefit company members of today and tomorrow, and provide documentation for Leongatha’s local history records.
Windmill Theatre Company Incorporated

Coincidentally, when arriving to teach at Koo Wee Rup High School in 1968, Lyn Carr also formed the Westernport Light Opera Company, now known as Windmill Theatre Company. In 2016 I interviewed Tony Baisman and his wife Elspeth during a set-build in the company work-shed at The Depot, in Henry Street, Pakenham, situated on the edge of Gippsland, located fifty-six kilometres south east of Melbourne. They related how Lyn had earlier founded the Leongatha Lyric Theatre in 1965, and no doubt found these skills and expertise invaluable for passing on to the fledgling company. The company’s first show was Trial by Jury, presented at St Georges Hall, formerly the Koo Wee Rup picture theatre, and this and following shows presented in the 1960s had good patronage, with twenty-four hundred people attending.

Group identity can take on a form of tribal ownership, and presenting two performances at Pakenham High School caused division in the committee when Koo Wee Rup members felt the company was being taken over by new members from rival Pakenham. This situation must have been challenging for company members, who succeeded in remaining cohesive.

The company named changed in 1979 to Westernport Theatre Company, and while some saw this as a good move to encourage larger audiences, others saw it as political to cement the move away from Koo Wee Rup to Pakenham. Westernport initially used the old football shed to store costumes and sets, before being offered the old Shire Depot in Henry Street. The company performed in various venues including Pakenham and Dandenong High Schools during the late seventies and early eighties. In 1984, performances took place at the newly built Monash High School Theatre, where Once Upon a Mattress was presented, and then the new Berwick Performing Arts Centre, which was completed in 1985.

In the 1990s, the company felt another name change was due because cast and patrons now came from the Cardinia, Casey and Dandenong districts. It was agreed the name should retain the initials WTC, and after going around and around in circles in discussion, the name Windmill was suggested in jest, but stuck. In 2002, the Cranbourne Community Centre was built and where Windmill presented Return to the Forbidden...
Planet and Broadway Tribute. In 2005, the Cardinia Cultural Centre was the ideal venue to present Grease, but this brought new challenges because the larger venue was more expensive and the company lost income from not being permitted to run front of house bar and confectionary sales.

In 2007, the company performed at the new Drum Theatre in Dandenong (formerly the Dandenong Town Hall) with a Victorian premiere production of The Producers. For the first time the company had access to fly towers and a spacious orchestra pit and larger dressing rooms, but of course higher costs. Occupational Health and Safety standards and insurance now need to be added to expenses.

The high quality of Windmill Theatre Company shows has been acknowledged by Lyrebird Awards and from the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria. Elspeth explained that being a not-for-profit group means that every show needs to make sufficient money, or there can’t be another one. Nevertheless, they currently have very good budgeting expertise on their committee. Tony says belonging to the company has given him lifetime friendships, and development of self-confidence, and skills. ‘Also, having a social outlet that doesn’t cost a lot of money to provide a life balance where you can work hard and play hard too, to enjoy life and see a whole gambit of people facing problems, which helps put things into perspective for your own life’.
Tony Baisman is one of the ‘treasures’ of the amateur theatre arts sector, devoting much of his time, energy and talents to the Windmill Theatre Company. ‘I plan to keep being involved as long as people want me, until I get a tap on the shoulder and that’s the time to stop’, said Tony. Elspeth laughed and said, ‘He will fight that tap’. Dedicated theatre-makers such as Tony are the backbone of their company’s structure and survival, and the amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria.

Postscript: From 2018, the Windmill Theatre Company has been presenting productions at Victoria’s new state-of-the-art theatre, Bunjil Place in Narre Warren.

**Wyndham Theatre Company Incorporated**

On the other side of Melbourne in Wyndham, the idea for forming an amateur theatre group was proposed by members of a local book club. The fast-growing town of Werribee in Wyndham is situated thirty-two kilometres south-west of Melbourne and is the location for the Wyndham Theatre Company, established in 1968. In an interview with President Alan Thompson at the Kelly Park Community Centre in Werribee, Alan says at the time of the book club, Werribee was a small community, with fewer than ten thousand people. In contrast, in 2016 two hundred and twenty thousand people lived in the same area, exceeding Geelong’s population.

The company’s first production was a one-act play, *Festival Nightmare*, performed for the Werribee Lions Club at the Centenary Hall, which is now redeveloped as the Wyndham Cultural Centre. Alan has impressively kept statistics of shows and patrons, and by 2016 the company had presented one hundred and seventeen productions, with twenty-two hundred cast and crew, entertained twenty-one thousand local residents and invested around four hundred thousand dollars locally in the productions, and, as Alan says, ‘had fun along the way!’ The company rehearses at the Crossroads Uniting Church and at Werribee Secondary College in the Joy Bevan Theatre. They currently perform mainly at the Crossroads Theatre, with youth productions at the Joy Bevan Theatre.

The company has no permanent home, with theatre properties stored in a number of places. From 1974, the company’s home was the theatre at Werribee Park, where they
shared the dressing-room with possums. But Alan says there was a great atmosphere and a comfortable theatre, and then explained the reason why the company had to leave. Werribee Mansion was taken over by a commercial entity that turned the theatre into a Conference Centre, so the company needed to remove all their props and costumes when the venue was remodelled and upgraded.

Alan expressed disappointment on behalf of the company that although the Wyndham Theatre Company contributed to the establishment of the Green Room in the Wyndham Cultural Centre and presented the first full production in the theatre, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the cost to hire the Centre is becoming prohibitive. At the time of our interview, Alan was hoping to negotiate a better deal for the company with the Council. ‘It’s an ongoing issue for most theatre groups’, says Alan.

‘It was presented to the community as a community theatre and it has not turned out like that, and our theatre company put ten thousand dollars of our money in to support it. Schools manage to get large grants and build their theatres, but the Arts spend by the City of Wyndham is on the low end compared to other areas of support’.

Wyndham Theatre Company aims for high quality productions, and an audience will enjoy a great night out for only twenty or twenty-five dollars, and enjoy a variety of styles, from heavy dramas to light comedies. There is an emphasis on targeting youth, because not all youth are sporty. Alan has observed that once students leave Wyndham Secondary College and go to university, they struggle to find an avenue to continue with theatre, and youth theatre in Werribee is a real need. The company places a high focus on youth theatre both as a company and their support of the Werribee Secondary College after-school Drama Club.

Alan believes no community theatre will ever reach its potential without a home, and once a home has been created for a local company, the company can then be financially independent. He is proud the company provides high-quality productions for the residents of Wyndham to experience live theatre without travelling out of the area, and also provides an avenue for school leavers to continue their love of the performing arts.
A dedicated theatre-maker and passionate about his theatre company it is time to learn about Alan Thompson as a person. Now a Life Member, Alan joined the company in 1991 in a lead role in *South Pacific* while working for the Ford Motor Company in Product Development. Retired now after thirty-five years with Ford locally and with overseas assignments in the Philippines, Japan, Europe and America, Alan has redirected his energies and passion for keeping the company running successfully and developing youth, particularly disenchanted youth who are not footballers.

Alan believes the car industry has similarities to theatre because it involves designing and engineering. In theatre, Alan enjoys designing sets and lighting and has won awards. He operates the lighting and audio too. On reflection, Alan is not sure how he was able to do both theatre and work back in the nineties. ‘It was a break from the stress in the world, a good outlet. Both are creative and have a connection’. In 2018 the future is looking bright for the company with a Government Partnership Grant to upgrade the Joy Bevan Theatre, which will become a home for the company in 2020.

**Wonthaggi Theatrical Group Incorporated**

A bad road between Wonthaggi and Leongatha was the reason for forming the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group, so people could see live theatre in their own town.70

The seaside town of Wonthaggi, located one hundred and thirty-two kilometres south east of Melbourne is now the base for the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group, formed in 1969. An interview with company member David Wall took place in the Bass Coast Community Foundations Office in Wonthaggi, where David related how the company started.71 When a group of people from Wonthaggi was driving back on bad roads after seeing a production presented by the Leongatha Lyric Theatre, someone asked why Wonthaggi didn’t have its own group, to save travelling on the roads.

The Council of Adult Education had an outreach program, and they offered the services of a professional theatre director who came to two functions where people gathered. The town had a theatre, but not a theatre group, so in a lovely goodwill gesture, Leongatha Lyric Theatre travelled to Wonthaggi and presented a performance of their production of *Naughty Marietta*, and gave the box office proceeds to the new Wonthaggi group. When
the company presented *Pirates of Penzance* in 1970, Wonthaggi townspeople from all walks of life had the opportunity to perform on the stage. Local professionals, doctors, lawyers and lots of teachers were part of the company when it was formed, and the audience loved seeing them onstage, particularly when the doctor forgot his lines!

In the beginning, rehearsals and performances were held at the Union Theatre, a one thousand-seat theatre built by the gold miners, which burnt down in 1980. The Miners’ Union Theatre had been transferred to the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group and was condemned, so the theatre group transferred it back to the Council. After it was burnt down, the then Council wanted to clear the site and build a car park, however the Miners’ Union local solicitor, a performer, struck a clause to say there must always be a theatre on the site: Council was stuck with a burnt down building. The piano was rescued because someone received a phone call the night before the fire, advising it was best to move the piano in case there was a fire!

The Council obtained sufficient funding to rebuild the theatre with a library in front. David said with a burnt down theatre their group was homeless, so productions were put on the backs of trucks and still performed in halls and barns through the 1980s, as mobile performances. ‘We also used the former bakery building for pantos, melodramas and revues and then the theatre was rebuilt, and is now known as the Wonthaggi Union Community Arts Centre – it must always have the word ‘Union’ in its title’. The impressive resilience of amateur theatre companies to overcome problems and adversity means the show will always ‘go on’. 
The State Coal Mine, Wonthaggi, performance venue for Wonthaggi Theatrical Group, with a new foyer in the front. A long way from performing on the backs of trucks and in country halls after the old Union Theatre burnt down. Image courtesy of David Wall, Wonthaggi Theatrical Group.

The Wonthaggi Theatrical Group acquired land in Baillieu Street after scraping together about five thousand dollars. Then the Catholic school was moving, so two demountable classrooms were transported on trucks to the land, which became home for the theatre company for rehearsal space, set construction and storage. About ten years ago when outgrowing Baillieu Street, the company leased land at the historic State Coal Mine, paying a nominal community group rental. ‘We had a lease to build a rehearsal, set construction and costume storage space and intended to build a foyer, kitchen and servery’, said David, acknowledging this was all thanks to their own resources and a grant from the State Government. Since the interview, these improvements have now been completed.

The Wonthaggi Theatrical Group presents between two and four shows per year, over three weeks, and performers come from Leongatha, Korumburra, Warragul, Foster, Fish Creek and Philip Island. In 2016 they presented a revue, then the big production in May/June, *Evita*, then *The Diary of Anne Frank, Little Shop of Horrors* was presented at the State Coal Mine.
Recounting how theatre can change people’s lives, David recalled Tom Green who played Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, was planning to drop out of High School. ‘He came to the audition because some of his mates were there, he learnt singing and now he is off to do tertiary level musical studies. Some people just don’t know what they want to do with their life’. He also remembered a troubled boy who had no interest in anything attend a working bee with his father, looking uninterested and not wanting to be there. At the end of the working bee he had to be pushed out the door, and now he is studying theatre lighting at the Victorian College of the Arts!

David says the good stories are not just about young people, there are also one or two women who stopped theatre for their children and now it’s ‘me’ time. David has never been onstage and became President after attending an Annual General Meeting in 2002. ‘It has been one of the best things I ever did’, says David. ‘We had been here for a couple of years after moving down for family reasons, elderly parents. He responded to a little newspaper ad. for an Information Session for Wonthaggi Theatrical Group’s *The Odd Couple*. He is proud of the pool of local talent they have been able to nurture, and having a good solid administration base with the committee working very well. ‘Things get done!’

I recall being impressed at the 2014 Music Theatre Guild Awards when Wonthaggi Theatrical Group won the Production of the Year Award for *Jesus Christ Superstar* against strong competition from city productions. Not only that, they also won Best Director Award, Male Lead Role, First Performance in a Featured Role and the Set Design Award. When David Wall accepted the award onstage, he said it was a message to all to never give up. He said they had nothing, but became rich with talent to achieve this incredible success. The company certainly has come a long way since that car conversation on the way home from Leongatha in 1968.

The 1960s were a formative and productive decade for amateur theatre, and a time of social change and growth for Victoria. Other companies formed in this decade include PLOS Musical Productions, Latrobe Theatre Company and Monash University Student Theatre. The second wave feminist movement was gaining
momentum, and personal and cultural changes lay ahead for women in the new
decade and beyond. Bring on the ‘70s!
Chapter Five

1970s

Personal Reflections

My life trajectory took a detour in the 1970s and 1980s to focus on paid work and family, and during that time involvement in amateur theatre was not possible. However, employment in ABC Television at Melbourne’s Ripponlea studios meant involvement in another medium of entertainment. The role of Script Assistant in those days required seven-day availability and assignment to a Producer. There was no modern-day production unit structure including Casting Director, Film Director and First and Second Assistants. The Script Assistant coordinated all administrative aspects of a production and assisted the Producer throughout the casting, development and direction of a script, story or outside broadcast event such as cricket, for television viewing. Production genres included television drama, musical shows, educational programs such as ‘Playschool’, religious or rural-themed shows and sporting events. I particularly enjoyed working on the popular weekly television series ‘Bellbird’, written by local writers and set in a small, fictitious Victorian town of the same name. The Director and Script Assistant worked over a four-week cycle to cover location filming, rehearsal and studio recording to create a block of four (just under) fifteen-minute episodes for one week’s transmission. Among the professional actors in ‘Bellbird’ who had commenced their careers in amateur theatre was Moira Carleton who played Olive Turner, originally from the Arrow Theatre company.1 ‘Bellbird’ was transmitted weekly on ABC Television between 28th August, 1967 and 23rd December, 1977.2

Working in the public relations’ role of Audience Tours Coordinator from 1975, I conducted four one-hour studio tours daily for school and university students, or other interested visitors. School groups would divide into two, with one half visiting the Ripponlea Estate located next door to the studios, while the other students toured the studios, then the groups swapped over. For me this was also a mode of performing, and I loved the daily opportunity of sharing stories about my wonderful workplace to the public. I wrote and narrated a video titled ‘The Start of It’, created in conjunction with
trainee technicians. This video was screened post-tour for visitors, consolidating information already conveyed about the making of a television production. It was never dull coordinating limited tickets for the weekly popular music program ‘Countdown’, with inventive requests for tickets including rolls of toilet paper with ‘please’ written on every square.³

After resigning from seventeen years’ full-time employment to be at home with our first child, I was employed casually on contract for another twelve years with the TV Entertainment Department, working from home to organise audiences for variety shows, then hosting studio audiences at night. Among the variety show stars were Bobby Limb, Harry Secombe, Rolf Harris and Julie Anthony. This may not have been live theatre, but was behind-the-scenes professional work in a different genre of performance – television.

‘The Age of Aquarius’ well and truly dawns in the 1970s, with the New Age movement bringing positive messages of peace and love.⁴ Lyrics from the song ‘Aquarius’ promoted the benefits of the moon being in the Seventh House and Jupiter aligning with Mars. We didn’t care about astrologer Neil Spencer’s logic that because Jupiter aligns with Mars every few months and the moon is in the Seventh House every day, then the song’s astrological claims of the arrival of a New Age were meaningless.⁵ These powerful lyrics transcended any astrological inaccuracies, expressing universal hope for peace, and an end to the Vietnam War. Love beads and ‘flower power’ were passive protest symbols opposing violence, and in the American tribal love-rock musical Hair, onstage nudity and men wearing long hair pronounced physical liberation.⁶ ⁷

The colourful psychedelia reflected in art work and fashions was, we were told, influenced by the kaleidoscope of colours experienced by hippies when using the drug LSD. Hippies were regarded by some Australians as ‘dropouts’, but generally public attitudes towards morality and less-conventional lifestyles relaxed during this era. An example is the increased social tolerance of free love outside of marriage, helped by the arrival of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s.⁸ The ideology of this era helped to broaden public tolerance of adult-themed content in theatre productions, and shows
containing full nudity such as *The Full Monty*\(^9\) and *Calendar Girls*\(^{10}\) have recently been successfully staged in professional and amateur theatre productions. However, amateur theatre companies still risk incurring financial loss if presenting a show with explicit language and sexual references such as *Rock of Ages*\(^{11}\), which may not appeal to all audiences.

Germaine Greer’s book, *The Female Eunuch*, published in 1970, had a powerful influence on many women, challenging them to shun traditional home-maker roles, to explore sexuality, and question the power of authority such as doctors, priests and the police.\(^{12}\) Greer’s ideology and the Women’s Liberation movement unsettled women, changing their attitudes to life, marriage and work. Men became confused too, as their traditional role of ‘man of the house’ came under scrutiny. The gradual return of women to the workforce meant that while also continuing their domestic duties, there was now less time for recreational activities. This impacted on amateur theatre companies regarding less available time for women to be involved, particularly in the more time-consuming role of committee member.

To complement the new era of free-thinking and experimentation, alternative theatre arrived in Melbourne, commencing as amateur theatre. This gave local writers a new opportunity for recognition through the staging of their plays.

**The Australian Performing Group (Alternative Theatre)**

Changing cultural attitudes during the 1970s were reflected in theatre, and an alternative political theatre had evolved globally towards the end of the 1960s.\(^{13}\) Alternative and experimental theatre arrived in Melbourne in 1970 with the development of the Australian Performing Group, based at the Pram Factory in Carlton, in association with La Mama Theatre.\(^{14}\) La Mama had been founded in 1967 by Betty Burstall, who described it as ‘essentially a playwright’s theatre, a place where new ideas, new ways of expression can be tried out [ … ] a place where you can hear what people are thinking and feeling’.\(^{15}\)

Initially, this creative community with egalitarian ideals operated mostly on an amateur basis, with members attending university or working in other jobs during the day.\(^{16}\)
Archived company newsletters dated 1970 and 1971 indicate that the mode of operation changed when the actors, director and writer became salaried through funding. A Community Arts Foundation would also be formed to renovate the Carlton premises. This innovative vision of the Australian Performing Group to present new Australian plays mirrors Louis Esson’s aim when establishing his Pioneer Players group fifty years earlier. Plays introduced at the Pram Factory, such as Jack Hibberd’s *Dimboola* and David Williamson’s *Don’s Party* remain popular with today’s theatre companies and audiences. Louis Esson’s plays, written almost one hundred years ago, are also still available today for modern-day performance.

In 2017, La Mama Theatre celebrated fifty years of presenting ‘cutting edge and experimental productions’ to Melbourne audiences. Sadly, in May 2018, a fire destroyed the La Mama Theatre building, but not the company’s spirit, and performances were re-located to other venues. A courageous and defiant media release from La Mama sent two days after the fire, read: ‘Together with our artists, staff and community we will move with strength into the next fifty years and beyond’. La Mama Theatre is another example of a theatre company commencing as amateur, then transitioning into the subsidised independent performing arts sector, surviving through an iconic reputation, talent and devoted casts, audiences and staff.

**Actors Theatre and Drouin Butter Factory**

Two innovative projects by arts practitioner Margaret O’Donnell (formerly Margaret Henry) and Ray and Ken O’Donnell gave opportunity to amateur actors for performance and brought quality theatre to communities in the regions of Richmond and Gippsland. They first renovated an old factory in Richmond to become the Actors Theatre for drama classes and theatre productions, before relocating to The Abbey Theatre, an old school in Orrong Road. In the town of Drouin in Gippsland, they purchased and converted the Butter Factory into the Old Drouin Butter Factory Arts Complex. Here, many Shakespearian and modern theatre productions, some subsidised and some amateur, were presented for local and Melbourne audiences, including students.
The Powderkeg Players

Returning to mainstream amateur theatre in Victoria, towards the end of 1970 the Parents and Teachers’ Association of Deer Park Primary School asked teacher Rod Cuthbertson to produce a play to raise funds.\(^{23}\) After the success of the show performed by teachers and parents over three nights in a local church hall, the Deer Park Drama Group was formed. Plays continued to be presented in the church hall, including the melodrama *Only an Orphan Girl*, followed by the thriller *Murder for the Asking*. After negotiation with a Government department in 1972, the group was granted a leasehold of three unused buildings on the Station Road side of the Albion Explosive Factory. The Deer Park Drama Group eventually became The Powderkeg Players, staging over eighty-five productions in the new venue.

Situated thirteen kilometres west of Melbourne, the suburb of Sunshine developed as the population increased, particularly when returned soldiers settled on land estates after World War One, and immigrants who arrived after World War Two created a multicultural society. In the mid-1980s, the Government required more community housing for western Melbourne’s growing population and decided to de-commission former Defence land to convert into new housing estates. This involved Station Road in Deer Park, where the Powderkeg Playhouse was situated. When Station Road was widened in 1987 to become a dual carriageway on both sides, the playhouse stoically survived with a few other buildings, situated on an island amid a major thoroughfare. The Powderkeg Players produced up to five shows a year, attracting audiences of almost one thousand people per season. A name change to ‘Sunshine Community Theatre’, retained the suffix ‘The Powderkeg Players’, and aimed to attract wider local government support.

Things changed in 1997, when a truck travelling north along Station Road lost control and ploughed into the Girl Guides Hall on the median strip. VicRoads declared all buildings situated between the carriageways on Station Road must be demolished to improve road safety. Protests failed, and the company had to evacuate everything, including props, scenery, costumes and lighting equipment, from the building. Sunshine Community Theatre almost folded during these difficult times, but members determinedly allowed themselves twenty-four months to find a new home, while property was stored in a factory and members’ houses.
The group was delighted when Brimbank City Council offered them a small, multi-purpose, hall in Phoenix Street, North Sunshine, known as the Dempster Park Hall. The company has since been rewarded for its dedicated determination with successes, such as in 2015, winning the Victorian Drama League Gold Award for Best Drama Production for *Ruben Guthrie*, written by Brendan Cowell and directed by Racheal Holt. In 2018, the company reverted to the name The Powderkeg Players and continues to successfully present theatre to communities in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

**Altona City Theatre**

School performances were also the motivation for Altona City Theatre forming in 1972. Altona is situated thirteen kilometres south-west of Melbourne in the City of Hobsons Bay, with picturesque waterside views and a vibrant, youth-focused theatre company known as Altona City Theatre. In 1972, teachers and students from the Altona North and Altona High Schools sought somewhere for students to continue performing in musicals after leaving school. The non-musical Altona Drama Group already existed but numbers were diminishing, so the two groups merged. As well as presenting musicals, there was an understanding that the drama group’s tradition of presenting pantomimes and plays would continue.

Adrienne Williamson, a Life Member and Ticket Secretary of Altona City Theatre, took a break from box office duties for an interview in the sunny foyer of the modern Altona Theatre. The company was presenting the pantomime *Alice in Wonderland*, and at seven dollars per ticket, the house was full. When Altona City Theatre first started, rehearsals took place in the Altona North High School hall (now Bayside Secondary College), until the Altona Theatre was completed in 1988. According to Adrienne, performers travel from the other side of town and regional areas to participate in a show they want to do. When asked about criteria for selecting productions for performance, Adrienne explained that lots of things need to be considered. ‘The show’s staging and any specific casting requirements are taken into account’, she said. ‘The band size also dictates a show, we need a production team, and to consider whether we would get an audience’. The audience base for Altona City Theatre has younger tastes, and Adrienne says their pantomimes always sell out, with adults enjoying them too. Patrons who brought their own children to shows are now bringing their grandchildren.
The Hobsons Bay Council owns the theatre and Altona City Theatre is the resident group. ‘We own all the technical equipment, and if someone hires the theatre, we provide the technical services and backstage people’, says Adrienne. The Council and theatre group work in well with each other, with the Council leasing the canteen and arranging front of house staff for external hirers, and Altona City Theatre provides everything else. Costumes, props and technical equipment are stored at the theatre, and sometimes costumes, props and set pieces are hired out. The company’s workshop is at the former EPA vehicle testing site in Queens Street, Altona, where flats and bigger set pieces are stored. The company presents two musicals and one pantomime each year, and the junior group, ACTion Youth Theatre, also presents a show. Adrienne says Altona City Theatre is often a person’s first experience of live theatre. In 2018 the panto ticket price was eight dollars, and attracts families to bring their kids along for the first time. ‘At that price they are happy to give it a try’. Different ethnic groups are now attending, and also participating in Altona City Theatre shows for the first time.

A strength of Altona City Theatre, according to Adrienne, is the youth focus. ‘We think this is a good training ground for people, and are willing to give people a go, to try their hand at whatever they want to do. We have had people performing and on the production side, directing, choreographing, stage managing, and operating sound or lights for the first time’. ACTion Youth Theatre started when a teacher in the group wanted to give back and provide child performance classes. Assisted by some committee members, the junior youth program commenced in the late 1980s. Another couple of members took over the teaching and management of this, and in 1995 ACTion Youth Theatre was established.

The question was asked how Altona City Theatre can operate such a successful youth group when some other amateur companies have encountered problems. ‘Having people who are willing to teach and take the group and the fact it is open to everyone, although numbers are limited’, says Adrienne, who explained the group is run by two coordinators, and an older more experienced person oversees ACTion. ‘The Altona City Theatre general committee helps, particularly with shows. The ACTion age groups are approximately eight to twelve, twelve to fifteen and fifteen to eighteen and all groups combine to present a show’. The theatre company also benefits when members from the youth group progress to adult roles in shows and take on administrative roles.
Adrienne’s personal story tells of her joining Altona City Theatre in 1984 after finishing high school, having previously attended shows regularly. She was company Secretary for ten years, became Ticket Secretary, and one of her sons has been a member of ACTion. Thanks to the loyal and dedicated work of company members such as Adrienne, the thriving Altona City Theatre is a great example of inclusive theatre for the community, and excellent organisation of a Youth Theatre company.

**The Mount Players (Macedon)**

Three framed photographs displayed on the wood-panelled wall inside the Mountview Theatre each tell a powerful story. The first image shows the theatre at 56 Smith Street, Macedon before the devastating Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983, the second shows the theatre burning to the ground, and the third photograph triumphantly depicts the new, rebuilt theatre.  

The theatre’s story began in 1972, when professional actor and Macedon resident Neville Thurgood formed The Mount Players with other local supporters, to enter a play in the One-Act Play Festival in Kyneton. The company performed one-act plays, but had no permanent home until obtaining a lease to occupy the old Macedon Presbyterian Church, and converted it into a fifty-seat theatre, helped by a grant from the State Ministry for the Arts. The theatre opened in 1977 with a performance of *The Golden Legion of Cleaning Women*, and was also used by external groups such as the Adelphi Players from Melbourne, the Malmsbury Youth Training Centre drama group and the Australian Christian Theatrical Society.

Life Members Marg and Allan Cameron, Leo Vandervalk, and Pauline Garner met for an interview in the sunny, flower-decorated theatre foyer with comfortable couches. Past President Leo talked about The Mount Players’ annual seasons, comprising four varied major shows, and the Mount Theatre Youth Group also presents one show each year. Marg explained that the youth group formed after the musical *Annie* finished. ‘We auditioned one hundred young girls aged between eight and twelve and had all these interested kids’, said Marg. ‘It is a moving population […] older kids go to university […] and we now have a waiting list’. The company has its own newsletter, ‘Stagestruck’, to communicate news to members.
Leo said one criteria considered when the Production Committee collectively selects shows is whether it will sit with the audience. ‘We offer family entertainment, preferably without bad language’, says Leo. ‘But we have trained our audiences in Macedon and beyond that we are keeping up with theatre generally, and have had a couple of shows with questionable language’. Leo’s 2017 production as director would be *The Full Monty*. ‘I wanted to do *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*’, said Leo, ‘but thought the area couldn’t handle it because it is cutting, and I didn’t think audiences would appreciate it’. Leo has since put the production up to the committee for consideration.

Ownership of the Mountview Theatre has been transferred to the Macedon Ranges Shire Council because the company could not afford to rebuild after the fire. ‘We maintain the theatre except for major works’, said Leo. Pauline feels there is a sense of belonging to the area. ‘I lived in Melbourne for a while and knew I could always come up to the theatre and they would ask how I was going’. Working bees are held to mow the lawns, cull sets and costumes, ‘We had become hoarders’, said Leo, ‘We felt sorry about throwing them out but we couldn’t move in there’. Pauline said the props and costumes are all catalogued, and Allan says he tells everyone not to throw anything out!

The company finds the hardest area for volunteer recruitment these days is for front of house. Pauline pointed out, ‘Some of us are getting old and things like pouring tea if working front of house becomes dangerous with no strength in the hands’. Pauline credits founder Neville Thurgood for the cast’s professional approach to shows. ‘Even though we were all amateurs, he instilled in us that if people pay money, they deserve a good performance, and I think this has carried on through the theatre, there is a professional air’. An interesting perceived weakness is the company having too many people in control. Marg said ‘If that happens, it can close us – it has happened three times and the company has got over this by re-forming itself in the early 1970s, or reassuring itself that the authority that had been assumed had been diminished’.

The biggest threat of all to The Mount Players is bushfires. ‘We have a highly regarded Country Fire Authority (CFA) and some of our members are involved’, said Allan, ‘and they check our fire extinguishers regularly’. After Allan joined the company in 1976, he met and married Marg and became President in 1984. ‘After the fire, the new theatre was designed by architects at our kitchen table’, he said. Leo was President when the new
theatre opened in 1990 and, according to Marg, Leo’s enthusiasm and commitment was instrumental in the rebuilding effort. Allan said the veranda had been designed to go on the other side of the theatre, but was reversed so it could face the mountain. ‘And once again, we had Mountview Theatre’.

**Dramus Theatre Incorporated, Hamilton**

Travelling now to Victoria’s Western District, the 1970s era also saw Dramus Theatre Incorporated form in 1972 in the town of Hamilton. The name ‘Dramus’ came about when the town’s drama and music groups merged, having earlier formed in the late 1950s. During an interview in Hamilton with Life Member Anne Littlechild and Life Member/President Ewen Cameron, Anne explained that the Hamilton Theatre Players and the Hamilton Light Opera Company merged because ‘it was silly to have two groups that people crossed over in’. One company was strong in expertise while the other was financially strong. ‘We got their money and they got us’, laughed Anne. A significant founding member of the company was Peggy Tarr, and Anne recalls her saying, ‘Do a good job, do it well and improve on it, never be satisfied’. Peggy also reminded them: ‘You are not amateurs! You have as much talent as professionals’. Their first show was *Ten Little Niggers*, by Agatha Christie, and the first musical was *South Pacific* in 1974.

These days Dramus Theatre rehearses and performs in their own hall, near the railway station. ‘We had a good (unnamed) benefactor’, said Anne, who explained the first hall cost the company eighteen thousand dollars to buy, and this ninety-seat venue was their second hall, formerly the Railways Institute. Named Hadden Theatre, the venue is a fine tribute to company co-founder Bill Hadden, who organised entertainment for fellow soldier prisoners-of-war in a Changi prison camp during World War Two.
Theatre audiences diminished when three video shops opened in town and also when Foxtel was introduced. ‘People weren’t going out’, said Anne. ‘The Juniors productions kept us going’. The Council generously gave the company a low-cost loan, but the Pyramid Building Society collapsed, and their money was lost. In the early days the company toured shows to other towns and earned good money, such as one thousand dollars. ‘It was hard work’, said Anne. ‘We would go in the afternoon and set up, and get home at about 1.00am and unload. We went to places like Penhurst, Dunkeld and Balmoral’.

Plays are rehearsed over six to twelve weeks, while a musical such as *Me and My Girl* was rehearsed for nine months. Most cast members are local, although some travel from Dunkeld, Glenthompson, or Cavendish about twenty-five kilometres away, twice a week for rehearsals. Audiences who attend Dramus shows are mostly local, but sometimes come from Portland, Digby and outlying areas. Ewen believes audiences attend because they do not have to leave town to see live theatre. Anne believes, ‘They like the feeling they can follow different people in different plays, often coming because they know someone in the cast’.

Ewen said the company would like a grant to provide dressing-room space, props and wardrobe storage space. Anne would like to see youth encouraged back into the company. ‘But if they come back as teachers they are busy with their own school
productions’, said Anne. ‘School productions didn’t happen fifteen years ago. The College now has a five hundred-seat auditorium’. The Dramus Theatre’s first junior group started in 1973 as the Dramus Juniors and continued spasmodically until 2014. ‘Most young people kick-start at nine or ten years, then leave at fourteen’.

Anne and Ewen have talked about the Dramus Theatre company, now it is time to learn their personal stories. First cue Ewen, who says his love of music started when playing the piano at age five, then the church organ at fourteen. His sister introduced him to musical theatre and Ewen joined the company as a singer in 1974, first as a chorus member in *Mame*, then progressing to lead roles. Ewen undertakes many duties at the theatre including lighting, and sound and set construction, and performs if others can do his technical work. Ewen had been President for twelve years at the time of the interview and is obviously a versatile, valuable company member.

Anne’s dedicated membership and directorial skills are also valuable to the company. She joined the drama and music groups in 1964 because of wanting to read plays, and having arrived from overseas, wanting to meet people. She has now directed thirty productions, starting with *Sister George*, then the musical *Mame*. Ewen said in those days a professional director would come from Melbourne as an Assistant, but not when Anne directed. Anne has also been an active committee member, and loves starting with a group of new people in a show and watching them transform. ‘We would watch Juniors arrive who would not speak to anyone, then they would change’. Anne said one of the Juniors is now her Home Help. ‘I nearly died when she came to the door! We have to keep her in town!’

**Medimime Productions Incorporated (Barwon Health, Geelong)**

In the City of Geelong, an amateur theatrical group with a difference started up in 1974, when Medimime was formed by staff from the Geelong Hospital. Originally, the annual productions were presented at the Plaza Theatre, but in 1981, Medimime’s production of *Mother Goose* opened the newly developed Ford Theatre at the Geelong Performing Arts Centre. Medimime follows the tradition of English hospitals when an annual Christmas pantomime is presented by hospital and allied health staff, with friends and family filling in the spare roles. The theatre company also provides a social basis for staff to mingle
and raise funds for the hospital, and improve ties between the hospital and the community.

Dr Liz Lester says that show rehearsals these days are held in the Belmont Community Health Centre, Waurnvale Church and Leopold Primary School, and acknowledges staff shift work impacts on the rehearsal schedule. Pantomimes staged in recent years include *Cinderella, Puss In Boots, Aladdin, Red Riding Hood, The Grinch, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sinbad, Sleeping Beauty, Mother Goose* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Liz thinks audiences enjoy seeing Medimime’s live interactive theatre performances, and health professionals enjoying the lighter side of life, as well as raising money for the community. Since its conception, Medimime has commendably raised more than four hundred and seventy-thousand dollars, with all proceeds from Medimime’s annual productions going to Barwon Health to fund new equipment and purchases.

**Anglesea Performing Arts Group**

The surf coast town of Anglesea can be found forty kilometres from Geelong, along the Great Ocean Road, as can the Anglesea Performing Arts Group Incorporated, founded in 1976. In an interview inside a trendy Anglesea café, Artistic Director Iris Walsh-Howling recounted that the company started when five people met in a house in 1976 and decided to form a theatre company. At one stage the company had thirty-six members and they started the One Act Play Festival in Anglesea. When Iris, a school drama teacher from Mentone Girls’ Grammar School, retired on the coast with her husband, she was told there was a theatre company in Anglesea about to fold, and would she consider directing it. The successful company is now known as Anglesea Performing Arts, with Iris combining retirement with her passion for theatre.

The company pays a nominal fee to rehearse and perform at the Anglesea Memorial Hall, which is owned by Council. Iris said they present a variety of genres, including contemporary and classic works, dark comedy, and original material written by members. ‘We have become a bit of an Ensemble company’, said Iris, ‘and the core is between five and seven, depending on the play selected’. ‘Basically, we are drawing people from the whole of the Surf Coast and Greater Geelong’, she said. ‘We have worked with girls
from the schools in Geelong for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, where one of our members is a teacher, and have also had guest dancers, musicians and artists, depending on the project’.

However, similar to other companies, Iris says there are always problems recruiting volunteers. ‘At the last minute we rummage around to get people involved, and the people who stay with us often have connections such as partners’. The company is allowed two areas in the hall for storage, one for costumes and one for props which, although small and inadequate, Iris says they are very grateful to have. ‘The hall has a basic lighting grid and a grid in front of the stage, so we can perform at auditorium level, in the round, or sometimes we have audiences seated on the stage and the show at ground level’, says Iris. ‘We try to use the potential of the hall to its maximum’.

The Anglesea Performing Arts Group sometimes tours their shows, such as after a season in Anglesea, they might perform in the Potato Shed in Drysdale, then in venues in Lorne and Melbourne. Iris prefers the company’s shows to be thought-provoking ‘because theatre should disrupt the normal flow of things’. Iris says she loves fathoming and thinking about the human condition: ‘Why we behave, how we act’. That is the kind of theatrical experience she wants to give audiences so they can go away and think about it. To date, the company has not become involved with youth theatre, mostly due to limited time. ‘I have come from thirty years’ teaching and it’s a great relief to work with adults’, says Iris, ‘We do still discuss a possible youth theatre, though’.

Anglesea is proud of its annual One-Act Play Festival which started as a fundraiser and has been going for more than twenty-five years. ‘It draws companies from all over Melbourne and Victoria’, said Iris. ‘Our One-Act Play Festival Coordinator organises the program and scripts, liaises with the companies, and other organising includes front of house and backstage’. Iris obviously adores working with her ‘passion in life’ while retired. ‘The discovery of what you can do with theatre, text, the development of people and the wonderful social thing you get when involved with the community and people are wanting to hear what you are doing next. Theatre is giving me a life that is really full in retirement in this gorgeous place I live in’, says Iris. ‘You need to feed your soul to make it tick. That’s what it does for me’.
Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company

Lilydale’s beautiful Athenaeum Hall was welcomed in 1888 with a grand Centennial Fair, and many fine professional, amateur and community events were presented, culminating in Nellie Melba presenting a concert for the Lilydale Patriotic Fund, which raised two hundred and forty-one dollars, eight and sixpence.34 35 By 1974, the Athenaeum building, situated in Castella Street, had fallen into disrepair and was rarely used, but things would change after Christmas Day, 1974 with Cyclone Tracy devastating the Australian city of Darwin, leaving sixty-four people dead and more than half of the inhabitants evacuated. Lilydale business proprietors Russell Johnson and Geoff Page ran ‘The Gift Box’, and were looking for ways to aid the Darwin cyclone appeal. Geoff had been performing in *Angels in Love* with the Maroondah Players, but as it was impossible to stage the play at the Athenaeum Hall because of its rundown, dirty condition, they used the Kilsyth Hall and raised sixteen hundred and fifty-eight dollars for the cyclone appeal. This inspired Russell and Geoff to become interested in bringing live theatre to Lilydale.

In 1974, the Lilydale Council was considering building a five hundred thousand-dollar major theatre in the Shire to cater for professional and amateur productions, so in August, 1975, Russell and Geoff hosted a meeting at their premises in Main Street, Lilydale, to discuss forming the Lilydale Theatre Club. They then looked at the Athenaeum Hall, which although run-down, had a façade classified under a National Trust rating. It was decided to call the new theatre group the Athenaeum Theatre Company, large working bees were attended by members of the community, and the Athenaeum Hall’s committee of management warmly welcomed the new theatre company working so hard to restore the theatre. Russell envisaged converting the former reading room into ‘The Melba Room’, containing Melba memorabilia.

At the end of 1975, the Athenaeum Hall committee of management appointed Russell and Geoff onto the committee. The new company now faced challenges of establishing a reputation in the area for presenting quality shows, and the Athenaeum Hall still had eight major works which needed attending to. A fundraising bazaar was held and a good profit was made from the Athenaeum Theatre Company’s first production, *The Anniversary*, by Bill Macllwraith. The British black comedy tells of family power-play,
as domineering Mrs Taggart, a widow of ten years, celebrates the annual ritual of her wedding anniversary with her colourful, dysfunctional family. A fire in 1991 during a season of Gigi destroyed a toilet block and damaged the kitchen and foyer areas, but a community working-bee ensured the season continued.

I met company members Alan Burrows and Catherine Garside for an interview in the sumptuous, atmospheric Harold Burrows Foyer of today’s Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre. The carpet and wallpaper are rich, red floral, and sparkling chandeliers hang from the ceiling. The walls contain gold-framed photos as a reminder of the past and present. I queried the many photographs of Queen Elizabeth II and was told that company founder, the late Russell Johnson, was a royalist, and members keep that going out of respect for him.

Today, the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company Incorporated is a highly regarded, active and well-managed organisation, with ten Board members on the committee of management and thirteen hundred subscribers. Four shows are presented every year, and Catherine said this can be flexible, with perhaps a musical once every two years. The company is fortunate that all storage and rehearsals are onsite at the Athenaeum Theatre. When asked about criteria for selection shows for performance, Catherine said: ‘We have a two-hundred-seat theatre which has to be filled, and we are not an artistic audience … more general public’.

The company has found great success with shows such as The Vicar of Dibley and Fawlty Towers, but prefer not to program more TV shows in the foreseeable future. Alan spoke of a sense of ownership of seats in the theatre, as some patrons have been attending for thirty years. ‘They insist on having their own seat’, said Alan. Catherine said she once sat next to someone who asked if the person who usually sits in that seat was OK. As a director, Alan sometimes transfers his shows between other theatres, designing the sets to suit both venues and the companies share the costs, including musicians. For example, he may find a good show and first present it with Malvern Theatre Company, and transfer the show to Lilydale between seasons. Calendar Girls sold out at both Brighton and Lilydale Theatres.
Both Alan and Catherine spoke of the fun and goodwill in the theatre company. ‘We feel Russell’s ghost, and as Geoff and Russell were great party animals, we foster that friendly feeling’, Alan laughed. Russell and Geoff always gave presents on the final night to everyone involved with the show, so Catherine said they do the same thing now. ‘There are no fees, we give gifts, and free tea and coffee is always available’, says Alan.

Alan Burrows started at the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company in 1979, to work on a melodrama called *The Sins of Sylvester Slade* with his father, director Harold Burrows. They worked together for ten years producing a musical melodrama every December, with Alan as choreographer. Alan said Catherine was in the first play he directed in 1980, *Cactus Flower*, and the company is very much a family affair. Alan’s parents, Harold and Doreen Burrows, made significant contribution to the company’s early years. ‘My Mum Doreen performed here, and Dad directed’, said Alan.


The foyer is now called the Harold Burrows Foyer. Catherine’s parents were also involved with the theatre, and she feels a sense of family at Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company, ‘After coming back from travelling in Europe it was good to be home, but when coming back into the theatre … this was *really* home!’.
Essendon Theatre Company

The Essendon Theatre Company Incorporated’s home is the Council-owned Bradshaw Street Community Hall, where I had the pleasure of interviewing company President Dawn Hinrichsen. Essendon Theatre Company has full-time use of the stage area, and the large room at the side of the stage has multi-purpose uses as dressing-room, green room, meeting room and office. There is a kitchenette, a nearby room for props and wardrobe storage, and the huge floor space in the main hall can be sectioned off with black curtains when presenting productions. Dawn said at present they share the hall with members of a Taekwondo group, a Rabbit Fancier group which sets up trestle tables to display rabbits once a month, and a dance school. The Essendon Theatre Company was formed in 1976 by members of the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG), particularly Dawn’s parents, Eileen and David, who wanted to produce modern shows which did not suit STAG’s seemingly more conservative committee members. Dawn said teenagers have always been on the committee, ‘We’re very encouraging of young people here and accommodate little kids and teenagers in some way to suit them, and to think of the future’.

The company presents a mixture of comedy and drama, with a preference for plays which can be successfully staged theatre-restaurant style to suit the company’s performance ‘hall’ environment. Essendon Theatre Company has enjoyed many successes in One-Act Play Festivals over the years, even travelling as far as Wagga Wagga, and Dawn says they used to make a big social occasion around the festivals. Successes have also been enjoyed in the Victorian Drama League Awards, including winning the Comedy section in 2008 with Enchanted April, directed by Brett Turner. Dawn believes that local residents feel a sense of ownership of their very own theatre company based in Bradshaw Street, and presenting shows in theatre-restaurant style adds an extra social element to the audience experience.

According to Dawn, a special strength of the company is its inclusiveness, with everyone having a say and a sense of ownership. ‘It brings out the best in people and creates more of a team atmosphere’, said Dawn. The company warmly welcomes new members, and new directors are provided with a mentor. ‘The more the merrier’. Working bees held every Saturday are just part of the strong sense of community spirit in the Bradshaw
Street Hall. There may not be the formal tone of some companies, but Essendon Theatre Company has a very down to earth atmosphere, which obviously appeals to members and local residents. A great example of theatre by the community, in the community, for the community.

**Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated**

This story tells us of theatre companies forming for various reasons, and the Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated was co-founded in 1977 by Michael Bula and David Gorrie when they were students at Melbourne University. The University French Department had presented plays ‘for about one hundred years’, said Michael, ‘but lost the funding under Malcolm Fraser’s Razor Gang’. Michael said the French Theatre could have dissipated when they left university, or continued with other people. ‘We packed it in a suitcase post university’, he said. ‘I had registered the name, and we took it with us and we have never had a year since without any production’. Michael said he has run the company as a cultural business from the outset: ‘Because without that, it would have collapsed. You need the combination of creativity and structure’.

Michael Bula, co-founder of Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated. Image by courtesy of Michael Bula.

I interviewed Michael, a lawyer, in his office in Canning Street, Carlton, formerly known as the Princess Hill Gallery. Michael said that 1999 was a watershed year as audiences
were slipping, so to solve the problem, bi-lingual theatre was introduced. ‘You create the collage’, said Michael. ‘The rule is two thirds French and one third English, a sort of join-the-dots so you have enough English distributed through the text for the non-French speaker to understand’. Michael explained this sounds easy, but can take six months to organise. Initially the company started with thirty-five slides in 1999 and developed a prototype of English SURtitles, which are a capsulized translation of dialogue or libretto projected onto a screen during a live performance, originally developed by the Canadian Opera Company. Today’s plays would have five to six hundred slides, and the company has an agreement with Monash University, whereby Masters students supply the company with SURtitles. ‘This is a practicum for them’, said Michael. ‘Melbourne French Theatre is not just an inward-looking theatre, it is far greater reaching’.

In 2014, Melbourne French Theatre signed a memorandum of understanding with the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne – the company’s place of foundation in 1977. ‘This agreement is historic’, said Michael, ‘because we can access Melbourne University for student prices, which is a great help, and it also means we are participating in Melbourne University and assisting their teaching’. Michael pointed out they have done the full circle, which is now official. ‘Some of the lecturers at Melbourne University participate and act in our plays, and they also work with SURtitles along with Monash’.

In 2016, some statistics for Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated were: thirty-nine years of presenting ninety-eight productions, fifty-two different playwrights, seven hundred and fifteen actors, sixty-five directors, forty-six hundred members of the production teams, and exceeding sixty-six thousand five hundred spectators (including twenty-four thousand schools, university students and teaching staff). Interestingly, the record attendance was in 2005 for Boeing Boeing, when fifteen hundred and thirty-five tickets were sold for seven shows.
Michael said they always employ professional directors and never have an ‘L’ plate director, which also happens to be common practice in larger companies, particularly musical theatre. ‘They are rarely French’, says Michael. ‘Professionalism is more important than language, and they will have a native French assistant to the Director’.

‘We also pay our creative team but there is no payment to actors, although sometimes honorariums are paid for school tours because actors are often performing in their normal working hours’. Since the 1990s, the Le Petit Nicolas student workshop format tour has been performed in secondary schools and sometimes primary schools, and students perform in front of their peers in some of the scenes. Some students join the French Theatre afterwards. ‘The real reason behind it all is that when I was a student there was no French Theatre, and I wanted to repair that’, said Michael.

Regarding funding for shows, Michael said the Victorian Multicultural Council is the only state Government body to provide a grant of a few thousand dollars, and where once
the French Government supported culture, there have been dramatic cuts. ‘We survive by raffles to fundraise at performances, sponsorships and ticketing’, said Michael. For many years the company used the Collingwood College Theatrette for performances and carried paying four thousand dollars a week for performances and rehearsals for several years. ‘Then we got to perform at the University of Melbourne on their Open Stage, a beautiful Black Box stage’, said Michael. ‘We are in the community, and our second show is in our building across the road which can fit sixty people’. The company presents two weeks there and one week at Open Stage. Michael says audience ages range from eight to ninety-three, from all walks of life, and mostly from Victoria but sometimes from interstate. They include French speaking and non-French speaking people, and as one third of the audience are primary and secondary school students, appropriate content and language needs to be considered.

Port Fairy Theatre Group

Two hundred and ninety kilometres south west from Carlton is the historic fishing town of Port Fairy, located on the Moyne River, with its very own theatre company called the Port Fairy Theatre Group Incorporated. Committee member Gail Sedgley runs a dairy farm situated between Port Fairy and Warrnambool, and we met for an interview in Warrnambool. Gail explained that the Port Fairy Theatre Group was originally a 1950s church group which met for Ecumenical Services and to present shows in their own church halls. In 1977, it was the parish of St. Patrick’s turn to present a concert, and the lady organising the event worked in the local bakery and knew the people in the pizza shop next door were talented, as were others. They all met in the Reardon Theatre, a picture theatre, where the band which had used old egg cartons tied around the stage to help acoustics, was relocated to the RSL.

The Port Fairy Theatre Group started by presenting musical revues and skits. The piano purchased by the theatre group for the hall came from the SS Casino, an iron steamship which tragically sank on 10th July, 1932, near Apollo Bay pier. Originally there was nowhere for props and costume storage, but Moyne Shire provided a shed which unfortunately flooded and irreplaceable items were lost. Members worked together and member Di Piery, a seamstress from Myer, made costumes from old curtains and black paper, and people were organised to write material for a revue. The company took over
the Lecture Hall, formerly the Mechanics’ Institute, which had no seats. ‘Moyne Shire Council owns the bluestone hall and we are the custodians who look after rental arrangements and have spent money installing lighting’, said Gail. ‘We have received grants from Arts Victoria for rising damp because of its age’. The theatre group purchased old seats from Reardon Theatre, and a grant allowed them to purchase new seats, and to recarpet. ‘Originally our audience brought their own blankets and cushions because it was so cold and draughty’, said Gail. ‘We got new heating and painted it to strict heritage requirement and we are very proud of the hall’. The company bought a shed and erected it beside the Lecture Hall behind the Library to store costumes, props and staging.

‘Regarding membership, the big issue with a little place like Port Fairy is we have a lot of children who get involved, but then they move on to university’, said Gail. ‘They spend their formative years here, then they are gone’. When asked about criteria for selecting shows, Gail said ‘Cost is major for a little company like us - copyright and royalty costs and cast numbers’. The costs of a professional musician also need to be factored in if required. ‘Advertising is also a huge cost but when we do a big show we try to get sponsors’, said Gail. ‘Local businesses are terrific. They will buy sponsorship pages in the program and for larger sponsorship they get free tickets’.

Two or three shows are presented each year, and they can vary from shows with community messages to comedies: ‘The people in Port Fairy love comedy’. Gail also said it is not difficult to recruit volunteers to help with shows: ‘We have a lot of people in Port Fairy who love the theatre, a small community’. Not everyone wants to go on-stage but they never have problems recruiting help for backstage or to sew costumes: ‘My customers in the Pharmacy would say ‘call on me’, said Gail. Shows are taken on tour for One-Act Play Festivals and the company hopes to do more of this. Gail believes a strength of the Port Fairy Theatre Group is the community spirit, in a nutshell: ‘We all work together as a very tightknit team and have no prima donnas!’

Gail said she loves the great feeling of comradeship and friendship in the company. ‘To have people come to the plays and receive their feedback and know you have done something special for somebody, there is one whole feeling of unity’. All members are working for the same goal and all have the same common interest. ‘We have people who
have never participated, but they will come hail, rain or shine to support us, and without people like that, we wouldn’t be a group’, said Gail. ‘We can rehearse and advertise, but unless your stalwarts will be there through thick and thin, that’s it. We are in a good place’.

Other Victorian theatre companies were also in a good place when forming in this decade. They included the Brighton Theatre Company, Horsham Arts Council, Mountain District Musical Society, Nova Music Theatre, Allegro Theatre and Mooroolbark Theatre.

The 1970s broadened aspects of societal attitude, but by the end of the decade not all Australians were in a good place. While liberating changes are reflected early in the decade in the 1972 Australian Labor Party (ALP) campaign slogan ‘It’s Time’, five years later, ALP leader Gough Whitlam announced his less confident aim: ‘To get Australia back to work’. The 1980s decade would later be dubbed ‘The Decade of Greed’, but this would make no difference to Victorian amateur theatre companies which continued theatre-making for communities.

1980s

My work with live theatre during the 1980s involved mostly writing and directing Church productions in collaboration with groups and individuals from the broader community.

The liberated, flowing kaftan and ‘flower power’ world from the 1970s, which had broadened the outlook of theatregoers with more challenging shows, was transformed. This was a new and different world, where money-making symbolised power and success. As a flow-on from the second wave feminist movement, women who just a few years earlier would have stayed at home with their children felt empowered or bound to return to the workforce, or commence studies leading to employment. Almost forty years later, women are in the very good position of having their life choices respected, although modern-day economic demands can make returning to work a necessity for many. This impacts on amateur theatre because women in the workforce now have less
spare time for recreational activities. The 1980s also introduced new technology, including computers and mobile phones, which improved communication for companies and members.

The Victorian Arts Centre at Southbank was completed in the 1980s, and the Concert Hall, later re-named Hamer Hall, opened in 1982. Professional performances staged here and in other large Melbourne theatres set a benchmark to which amateur companies could aspire. Meanwhile, the amateur theatrical arts sector remained popular in regional and urban areas of Victoria, including a community theatre project involving amateur actors at Fairlea Women’s Prison.

Theatre Presented in Prison

After Victorian College of the Arts students worked with inmates at Fairlea Women’s Prison in 1980 to help present a performance, the theatre company Somebody’s Daughter evolved. While Somebody’s Daughter is now a subsidised community theatre company, the prisoners participate in plays as amateur performers and the experience can be transformative. For example, founder and co-artistic director Maud Clark AM believes that through performance, the women can transform their identities from past labels such as ‘junkie’, ‘bad mother’, or ‘prisoner’.

Clark believes that the arts can succeed in changing people’s lives when other attempts have failed because ‘when people are working creatively, they are working equally’. She points out that the arts are a social leveller, ‘It doesn’t matter how rich you are, how poor you are, how educated you are’.

The women’s prison is now called the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. Acting General Manager Gavin Blair commented that while live performance is good for the women, there are also transformative benefits for prison staff too, when recognising new qualities in the women during their performances.
Creswick Theatre Company

From town to country, there is a theatre company located west-central in the state between Ballarat and Daylesford. This is the former gold-mining town of Creswick, surrounded by pine and eucalyptus plantations first established in 1910 by the Victorian School of Forestry. Here, the Creswick Amateur Theatre was formed in 1981 when some local enthusiasts staged Oliver! at the Creswick Town Hall as their first production. During an interview in Creswick, playwright and director for the Creswick Theatre Company, Carol B Cole, said the company is fortunate these days to rehearse and perform in the Creswick Courthouse with sixty seats. Auditions are advertised in the local paper and Ballarat Courier, and while most performers come from Creswick, some also travel from Ballarat to appear in shows. Audiences usually attend from Creswick and local districts. The company’s variety of theatrical entertainment includes well-known musicals such as Salad Days, Brigadoon, Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat and Guys and Dolls.

Three to four shows are presented yearly, including a pantomime in July usually written by Carol’s daughter in New Zealand. Film nights at the theatre are also popular. Carol thinks the local community feels a sense of ownership of their town’s theatre company. ‘They come and help out front of house and in other ways’, said Carol. ‘We put out a call if needing any special props and wardrobe items’. As experienced by other theatre companies, there is often a lack of males available for shows. ‘I am well known for finding budding actors in the supermarket or down the street’, said Carol: ‘Very few say ‘no’ and some have stayed with us afterwards’. The Creswick Theatre Company does not use an orchestra, but sometimes a pianist, a lady from Ballarat, and members of the Creswick Band might join in. ‘Musician Warren Peart who lived in the town composed music and played piano for several productions before leaving the area’, said Carol.

Carol and her family moved to Creswick from Eltham in 1991 and her daughter Deborah wrote several pantomimes before her death. Daughter Mandy is a playwright in New Zealand, and daughter Megan is also a Creswick actor. Now in her eighties, Carol has written about fourteen plays. Her late husband Geoff was a scenic artist who she said painted delightful scenery and designed posters. Obviously a major player in her theatre company, Carol has been President, Secretary and Treasurer. When asked what she
enjoys about her involvement with the Creswick Theatre Company, Carol replied: ‘the joy of entertaining, mixing with like-minded people, and being involved in something I really love’. Carol’s sentiments have been expressed by many likeminded amateur theatre-makers across Victoria.

**The Diamond Valley Singers**

The overhead costs involved with presenting theatre shows today can prevent groups from sharing box-office takings with charities, but the Diamond Valley Singers was specifically formed in 1985 for this purpose. The company has earned a fine reputation for raising money for local and international charities and giving local performers the opportunity to participate in productions. In an interview in Greensborough, co-founder Doctor Ian Lowe recalled conducting the Eltham Community Orchestra in 1985 when World Vision launched its first Freedom from Hunger Campaign. Ian realised he had an orchestra and could use it to raise some money. ‘We put on a concert, singing teachers Graham and Mavis Ford organised a singing group to present *Trial by Jury* in the Baptist Church, Greensborough, and this led to the formation of the Diamond Valley Singers’.

Since then, musicals have mostly been presented at Warrandyte High School’s theatrette, with the Eltham Community Orchestra continuing to play for performances. Oratorios such as *The Messiah* have been presented in a variety of churches, mainly Diamond Creek Uniting Church, where the company rehearses. By 2016, the company had raised one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for World Vision and other local charities such as Open House in Ivanhoe. Approximately ninety members belong to the Diamond Valley Singers, with ages ranging from post-secondary school students upwards. ‘The primary skill required is that members can sing in tune and hold a part … we are one of the few companies in Melbourne who does not audition our chorus for musicals, or the choir for oratorio, but do audition the principals’, said Ian. As most members cannot read music, rehearsal CDs are provided to help learn parts.
Ian explained that everyone is expected to pitch in and help with the tasks involved with staging a show. To help cover costs such as insurance, an annual membership fee is charged, which in 2016 was fifty dollars single and one hundred dollars for a family, and members are also expected to pay for the hire or purchase of music during the year. ‘We keep all costs to a minimum’, said Ian. ‘Of course, these charges don’t cover all our costs, so we put all our energies into the success of our stage production, which is our major source of finance and donation money’. Because the performances raise money for charity, many larger costs are waived. Ian agrees they produce shows with smaller budgets than other companies. ‘When you do things for people in need, people are happy to donate’, said Ian. ‘That’s how we survive. If we started paying directors, conductors and other people, we couldn’t survive’. Ian pointed out the company’s survival depends on their generosity.

Scenery and costumes are stored on a married couple’s property in Hurstbridge in a shed, and two large containers. The company’s older audience needs to be considered when selecting productions, although they hoped to also attract younger audiences with their 2016 production of *Once Upon a Mattress*. The company prefers to present Gilbert and Sullivan shows because the chorus has a greater role. ‘Choosing the right show is critical
for the company to sell tickets’, said Ian. Ian conducts his orchestra but does not sing or perform. His professional career was in Mathematics and Education, and now an interest in helping the third world means he can use his love of music for fundraising. Ian conducted the orchestra for twenty years until 1998.

Currently Secretary of the company, Ian was President for thirteen years, has worked as musical director for many shows, and as pianist and conductor of the singers. He says the company is enjoyable to work with and this attracts good principal performers and directors: ‘We have volunteer directors who keep coming back to do it for nothing’. Ian pointed out their smaller budget does not allow for hiring of commercial venues, and that other Melbourne companies have folded because one or more shows did not attract large enough audiences to cover the larger budget used for the show, mostly for the theatre hire. Ian says: ‘Our aim is to have fun, express ourselves, improve our musicianship, delight our audiences and raise money for charities’. On a personal level, Ian says, ‘The main purpose of all aspects of my life is helping others’.

Amateur theatre companies have historically been generous in raising funds for charities where possible and it is a splendid achievement that the Diamond Valley Singers can continue their great work today in presenting productions to fundraise for their worthy causes.
Peridot Theatre (Mount Waverley)

Peridot Theatre formed in 1985 and presents shows at the Unicorn Theatre, at Mount Waverley Secondary College. I interviewed the company’s founder Edna Bartlett, her husband Gordon and modern-day company member David Briggs, in the sunny dining area of the Bartletts’ retirement village unit in Waterford Park. Edna, soon to turn ninety, was beautifully dressed for the interview, her short, stylishly groomed auburn hair shone in the sunlight, her green dress represented the peridot’s colour, and she wore a peridot gemstone bracelet. Edna’s daughter Vivien was there too, gently steering her mother’s recollections back on track if diverting a little off course. When asked how Peridot Theatre Company started, Edna explained she had been in the theatre for a long time and learnt a lot about directing from a course at Swinburne.

At a cast party in Camberwell, a lady from Moomba asked Edna why she didn’t present a play in the Moomba Festival and Edna saw this as an opportunity to utilise knowledge learned at her Swinburne course. She contacted companies but was unsuccessful to find one who could be ready in time, so it was suggested Edna start her own theatre company. ‘A musical director challenged me with ‘Edna you wouldn’t dare’ – so I did!’ laughed Edna. ‘Luckily, I am accountant because we had to open up a bank account for insurance and become incorporated […] but we had nothing’. Edna and her friends needed to think of a name for the company, Edna even had a book of names, and they sat in a member’s kitchen working it out. ‘Then David said ‘Peridot’ was on the list, and being a Leo, that’s my birthstone, so we took the colour green and named the company ‘Peridot’, pronounced by some at first as ‘Peridoe’’. David observed that this name makes Peridot stand out, because most other theatre companies are named after places.

Their first rehearsal was in Edna’s daughter Vivien’s loungeroom, where Gordon made a plan of the set. To design the company’s first poster, there were no computers then so Gordon used Letraset, a sheet of typeface numbers and letters, which could be transferred to artwork. He also designed the company logo, which Edna proudly says is still used today, and their acting friends were cast in roles.

The first plays presented for Moomba were The Dresser, and Whose Life is It Anyway? at Monash University, attended by many students which helped the company financially.
Peridot won the Moomba awards for Best Production, Best Set and Best Director. ‘People got interested in us after we won the awards’, said Edna. ‘Moomba was the catalyst, and it all started with a chance conversation at a party’.

Co-Founder of Peridot Theatre Edna Bartlett and her husband Gordon. Image by courtesy of Vivien Gunn.

The company’s early productions, including Moving by Stanley Price, were presented at the Monash High School Theatrette in Clayton. In November 1986, Peridot moved to its current home, the Unicorn Theatre, situated at Mount Waverley Secondary College, where the first show was Patrick Pearse Hotel by Hugh Leonard. Edna also directed the school’s Years Eleven and Twelve musical The Boyfriend in 1988. Edna’s simple but effective method of promoting her company was an agreement with all auditionees to put flyers in letterboxes if they were cast in a show.

David explained that these days, four full-size productions and a short One-Act Play season are presented annually. ‘We also host the Monash One Act Play Festival’, said David, ‘and a lot of One-Act Play Festival people say ours is the best in Victoria!’ The company newsletter titled Gems, includes Edna’s motto: ‘Good entertainment must succeed’. Peridot does not charge members show fees, and David says the actors ‘give
enough as it is’. As most companies need membership and show fees to survive financially, the question was asked how Peridot can manage not to charge these fees. David explained that Peridot Theatre sends out a brochure in September advertising the following year’s performance and people can book in advance and get four plays for the price of three. This then becomes Peridot’s funding for the whole year, and the first performance of each show is always for charity. Edna said when selecting plays for performance they need to consider their older audiences and give them good comedy, drama or murder. ‘With four plays per year we tend to do three plays that will go down well and one to challenge our audience’, said Edna. ‘The company always enjoys good audience attendances’.


Gordon was not involved in amateur theatre until meeting Edna, then Edna Jones, at Sadie’s Ballroom. ‘Come in, Spinner’ laughed Edna, and Gordon’s engineering skills came in handy for designing sets. In the 1990s, Gaye Gay and her husband Grant joined Edna in developing Peridot Theatre and Gaye became President when Edna started the Jacaranda Theatre Company.58

Edna’s determination to offer audiences hospitality shines through at each Peridot performance. A free program and parking, pre-show sherries in the evening, with complimentary refreshments at interval, and sandwiches and post-show drinks served while meeting the cast. Scones, jam and cream are served at matinees, ensuring Peridot Theatre’s audiences leave the theatre having enjoyed a good show and lovely goodwill hospitality.
Sadly, seven months after this interview, I received an email from Edna’s daughter Vivien advising her mother had passed away from cancer on 15th September, 2016.59 Thankfully, following the interview I wrote a profile story about Edna for publication in the Melbourne Observer. Vivien wrote in appreciation of the interview and story: ‘I am so thankful to you for taking your time and care to ensure that mum's love of theatre was expressed in print to your readers. In her words, ‘I am so lucky! I have the largest family in the world!’.

Edna has left a fine legacy to Victorian amateur theatre, and Peridot Theatre’s dedicated members will ensure her fine work continues into the future. In 2018, Peridot Theatre’s President is actor, director, playwright and novelist, Alison Knight.

[Image: Peridot Theatre’s 2018 President, Alison Knight. Photo by courtesy of Alison Knight.]

BATS Theatre Company (Berwick)

At one time, when drama students from Berwick Secondary College in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs turned eighteen, they had to leave the Gunns Road Theatre Company. A solution was found when an amateur theatre company formed to accommodate these students. The Berwick Amateur Theatre Society was established and registered as an incorporated association in 1989, with the name changing to BATS Theatre Company Incorporated in 2004.60 During an interview, Vice President and Life Member of BATS Theatre Company, Susan Bergman, explained that after the company closed due to lack of numbers, it was re-started in 1994 by Sharon Maine and Kerry Hamill. Susan suggested the name BATS because of observing companies like CLOC (formerly Cheltenham Light Opera Company) changing to acronyms to allow more
flexibility for productions, and avoiding the word ‘amateur’ which implied BATS’ productions were sub-standard.

Initially the company rehearsed in a small portable building at the Holy Trinity Church in Hampton Park. When the Church renovated, the theatre company went to the Oakgrove Community Centre in Narre Warren South for two years. No storage space was available at these venues, so directors and cast took props and costumes to rehearsals and home again. ‘When the primary school was built, it was a palace to us’, said Susan. ‘We were able to use the school gym and we had onsite storage at the Casey Indoor Leisure Centre’. Susan said the Berwick Performing Arts Centre, built on the site of Berwick Secondary College with one hundred and seventy seats, was great for presenting shows like *Dimboola* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The Cranbourne Community Theatre was built in 2002, and the company performs in this two hundred and sixty-seat venue, which is part of the Cranbourne Secondary College. The City of Casey leased the Pickle Factory to BATS, which allowed the new luxury of building flats that could be stored on return. In 2006, The Factory Rehearsal Centre for the Arts was opened by actor Bud Tingwell, and the company now uses this rehearsal space. The concept was Susan’s idea, built mainly from a community campaign to obtain performing arts groups a ‘home’. Along with a member from Windmill Theatre Company and a visual arts representative, Susan was flown to see the Logan Centre in Brisbane. ‘We insisted it would have a proper stage, and it is now a one hundred and twenty-five million dollar complex for everyone in Victoria’, said Susan. Thanks to the efforts of Susan and others, this wonderful facility now has three rehearsal rooms, four practice rooms, a loud band room, recording studio and a community workshop, with pianos or electric keyboards in the dance rooms.

Shows presented by BATS each year include one adult show, a comedy or drama, and another one or two shows for youth, performed in the first week of the Terms One and Three school holidays. Some adult shows have been on the VCE English booklist, which encourages students to travel from other suburbs to see the plays performed live. ‘Recently we had a teacher who travelled for four hours to see a show she had taught performed live’. Costumes, scenery and props are now stored at The Belfry, located next
door to The Factory Rehearsal Centre for the Arts, and items are hired out at very reasonable prices.

Susan said the company values youth involvement and takes pride in welcoming all children who audition to be part of a youth show, no matter their ability. ‘If local theatre groups such as ours don’t give everyone ‘a go’, then we believe some children will miss out. If there are too many people to fit onstage, shows can always be double-cast’. Susan believes local theatre is transformative because the performing arts helps individuals become part of the team and gain self-confidence. ‘It also gives them the ability to acquire skills that they may not have had the opportunity of gaining previously’.

The company now has first class rehearsal facilities, ‘and the best set construction and storage in Victoria, if not Australia’. At the time of the interview, the City of Casey was building Bunjil Place which, scheduled to open in October, 2017, would be exciting for the Arts community.61 ‘BATS will not perform there as the theatre’s eight hundred seat capacity is too huge for the company’, said Susan. ‘However, we will continue helping with council events such as Mayoral Concerts and People in the Parks’.

When invited to tell her personal story, Susan revealed she is a secondary school Drama teacher, who started with the theatre company in 1991 as Cinderella’s Stepmother, ending up on the committee when encouraged by her neighbour, Kerry Hammill. As well as undertaking most production roles, Susan instigated obtaining the company’s storage and successfully created the idea of The Factory Rehearsal Centre for the Arts, working with Casey Council on funding. Susan Bergman’s fine work has been acknowledged by her induction into the Lyrebird Awards Hall of Fame, and a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) Award in January, 2019.

Other companies formed in the 1980s and operating today include the Rosebud Astral Theatre Society, Panorama Theatre Company, Players Theatre Company, Bright Alpine Actors, BuSt Co., Track Youth Theatre, Cathouse Players, Gemco Players and the Mansfield Musical and Dramatic Society.

26th January, 1988, marked two hundred years since the arrival of the First Fleet, and Bi-Centennial events and celebrations were held across the nation.62 Whatever new
experiences were encountered in this decade, the amateur theatrical arts sector across Victoria was just as enthusiastic to create theatre for their communities as were the convicts, officers and free settlers who arrived more than two centuries ago.
Chapter Six

1990s

Personal Reflections

Stepping back into the story to reflect on my own theatrical life in the 1990s, it was great to return to active involvement in amateur theatre and once again share the associated positive energies, creativity, friendships and collaboration. I became Publicity Officer for the Mordialloc Light Opera Company and continued for twenty-six years, earning Life Membership of the company now known as MLOC Productions. Creative participation included directing, writing and choreographing shows, compering events, as well as working front-of-house and on the committee. In 1997, I directed Jack Hibberd’s wedding play ‘Dimboola’ for MLOC, in Black Rock, Hampton and Cheltenham. Initially aghast at parts of Father O’Shea’s dialogue, I wrote to Hibberd’s agent representative requesting permission to delete potentially offensive material. The swift reply advised ‘leave the script alone’, which of course was correct to respect Hibberd’s vision.
Theatre organist and pianist David Johnston shared his fabulous keyboard skills as Lionel Driftwood, and the Piledriver band, and with a saxophonist and drummer, created terrific old-time-style dance music for patrons participating as wedding guests.

Ours was the first Melbourne ‘Dimboola’ production to be invited to visit the town of Dimboola in western Victoria, where two sell-out performances were presented as a fundraiser for the Dimboola Football Club in November, 1997. The cast and crew slept in the Girl Guide camp on the banks of the Wimmera River, and the visit was a fun, memorable experience. Following our visit, the townspeople of Dimboola started presenting their own productions of their special namesake play.


Returning to performing in 1995, I played the lead role of Mavis in Richard Harris’s play about adult tap-dancing, ‘Stepping Out’, presented by Southern Cross Theatre in Hampton, followed by cabaret variety shows presented by the Mentone Old-Time Theatre Society, known as MOTTS.

I missed theatrical involvement but have no regrets having delayed returning until our children were older. Participation is demanding of personal and family time, whether attending rehearsals and performances, answering telephone calls at home about
committee matters, often at dinner time, learning dialogue for a show, or sewing costumes. Family benefits from involvement included opportunities for the children to participate in shows such as ‘The Sound of Music’ and social events. Personally, there was the joy of self-expression when performing, creative satisfaction from writing, choreographing and directing, using and improving secretarial skills, the buzz when successfully promoting a show, meeting new people with similar interests, being part of a team achieving a unified goal, and sharing invigorating energies with onstage performers, either as fellow thespian, crew or audience member.

The final decade of the twentieth century started with a recession, but new amateur theatre companies continued forming in regional and urban areas of Victoria. The introduction of the DVD in the late 1990s, so efficient to store digital data, would supersede videotape as a mode of visual recording and replay. Recording licensed musical or dramatic stage productions is restricted nowadays, with the occasional exception being if the recording is for study purposes.

By the 1990s, organizations existed to support both musical and non-musical amateur theatre companies, and recognise artistic excellence. Nowadays, many theatre companies also conduct their own in-house annual award ceremonies, where members can dress up, sparkle and share fellowship with like-minded people.

**Victorian Drama League**

The Victorian Drama League (VDL) has unswervingly supported the non-musical amateur theatrical arts sector through the decades since its formation in 1952. A comprehensive library of plays, a play-reading group, One-Act Play Festivals, summer workshops for youth and a team of honorary judges who attend and review productions across the state are just some of the membership benefits. Membership is by subscription and the Theatrecraft magazine distributed monthly to members contains news of shows, auditions and reviews. The VDL’s annual Awards night in early December celebrates winners of various categories as selected by a panel of honorary judges. Patron of the VDL during this decade was actor Charles ‘Bud’ Tingwall, who was succeeded after his death in 2009 by playwright Hannie Rayson.
Music Theatre Guild of Victoria

The Music Theatre Guild of Victoria, formed in 1986, facilitates annual Awards for Excellence in all aspects of amateur musical theatre. Known as ‘The Bruce Awards’ in honor of the organisation’s founder, the late Bruce McBrien OAM, they are hosted each year by a different musical theatre company. Bruce cited a purpose of creating the Guild was to ‘help correct the media bias against ‘amateur theatre’.  

Each year, honorary judges travel thousands of kilometres around Victoria to attend school and Open Section productions, to decide the winners of various categories. Patrons include Nancy Hayes OAM, Jill Perryman AM, MBE, Jerry Herman, Marina Prior, John Michael-Howson OAM and Matt Hetherington. The Bruce Awards are always a glittering occasion for Victoria’s amateur musical theatre scene, and performances selected from shows during the year provide first-class entertainment between presentations.

Gippsland Associated Theatre Incorporated

Gippsland-based amateur theatre groups have Gippsland Associated Theatre Incorporated, established in 1992, which aims ‘to develop and encourage theatre groups within the Gippsland area’. Judges work in a voluntary capacity to attend shows during the year, and theatre companies in Gippsland alternate to host an end-of-year Awards night.

Lyrebird Awards

Victoria’s outer-eastern metropolitan theatre companies also have an additional opportunity to achieve awards and gain recognition, with annual Lyrebird Awards judged throughout the year. The Lyrebird Awards were established in 1994 to recognize artistic merit in theatre and encourage participation in amateur theatre in the outer-eastern metropolitan region of Victoria. These awards particularly ‘pay tribute to the many, many people who volunteer their time and energy to entertain audiences throughout the Dandenong Ranges and the Yarra Valley’. The Lyrebird Youth Awards were later introduced in 2006 to celebrate outstanding achievements in Youth Performing Arts. The
Lyrebird Award ceremonies are held annually in the Karralyka Centre, Mines Road, Ringwood.\textsuperscript{70}

**Here There and Everywhere Theatre Company (Traralgon)**

As related previously in this story, theatre companies may form for various reasons, usually inspired by a passion for performing. In the case of the Here There and Everywhere Theatre Company, founder Phillip A. Mayer returned home to Gippsland from Melbourne to form a company after performing and qualifying as a teacher of performance at Rusden College.

I interviewed Phillip Mayer in Traralgon, Gippsland, to learn about this theatre company with the intriguing name. Established in 1993, the company is named after the Beatles’ song ‘Here There and Everywhere’, and travels to perform in regional areas and in Melbourne.\textsuperscript{71} This mode of operation differs from most amateur theatre companies which remain based in their communities. When returning to Gippsland, Phillip talked to friends who formed a core group, then wrote a play and presented it to an audience. ‘Everything we do is original’, says Philip. In the beginning the company was based in a kindergarten rented cheaply, then in Council buildings. ‘Now we use the Senior Citizens hall in Morwell and perform at the Latrobe Performing Arts Centre in the ‘little theatre’, which is more intimate for our productions’.

Phillip A Mayer, founder of the Here, There and Everywhere theatre company, in the *Speaking Alone Monologues* in September, 2017. Image by courtesy of Phillip Mayer.
The company presents two major shows each year and tours for four or five months, rehearsing each show for at least four months. As with most amateur performers, the cast members work in paid jobs as well as performing with the company. Costumes and sets are stored in a studio shared with other creative people at the Artists’ Resource Collective in Yinnar. One criteria for selecting shows for performance is to use material important to the company that the actors will enjoy, but which will also appeal to an audience. Local audiences preview shows before they go to Melbourne. Phillip said when they toured the One-Act Play Festivals with Couples, the judges said it ‘had legs’, ‘so in 2016 we did a mini tour including La Mama and the Melbourne International Comedy Festival’. Some performers commute from Gippsland while in the city, or stay in accommodation.

He explained the company’s social awareness in presenting shows covering topics such as the environment, equality of sexes, bullying, relationships and religion. ‘We don’t shy away from anything and there is something for everyone. I believe comedy is a great catalyst for change, and people are more prepared if you get them laughing to talk about issues’. Phillip says one of the strengths of the Here, There and Everywhere theatre company is being autonomous. ‘We can do whatever we want to do and are not guided by a political agenda’. He pointed out a company is only as successful as their last show, and his company is financially vulnerable. ‘It is risky, but also empowering, as you have to be presenting A Grade all the time’. Philip said company members focus on enjoying themselves and attracting audiences.

Theatre of the Winged Unicorn (Ceres, Geelong)

Moving from Gippsland to Ceres, nestled in the Barrabool Hills, eight kilometres south-west of Geelong, this is where Elaine Mitchell and her now late husband, singer and musician Dennis Mitchell, decided to form an amateur fringe arts theatre company in 1993. Elaine’s visitors are greeted by a delightful cottage-style garden, and her studio is used for rehearsals, some performances, and displaying Elaine’s superb artworks.72 When moving to Ceres in 1986, Elaine and Dennis discovered a sandstone heritage Temperance Hall, circa 1862, in McCann Street.73 Having already co-founded the Woodbin Theatre in West Geelong, Elaine and Dennis knew they could transform the little hall in Ceres, which was ‘empty, dark and cold’. In 1989, during refurbishment of the Woodbin
Theatre, Elaine directed *Moby Dick Rehearsed*, then *Worzel Gummidge* in the Ceres Hall for the Geelong Repertory Theatre Company.

Elaine’s husband Dennis was interested in writers of short stories and adapted some of American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne’s works into stage plays for the first production presented by Theatre of the Winged Unicorn, titled *Spellbound*. Elaine explained: ‘I think one of the major factors in deciding to do this was because among Hawthorne’s allegorical and symbolic works was a short story called ‘Feathertop’, about a scarecrow and a character called Old Mother Rigby, who created it’. Elaine and Dennis had already presented a production by Waterhouse and Hall about the iconic English scarecrow in 1989, Elaine had been presenting workshops in scarecrow-making in schools and the community, and also called her studio The Scarecrow Patch. Another story by Hawthorne adapted for stage was ‘The Artist of the Beautiful’, and in 1993, Elaine and Dennis began to develop their own production and theatre company.

Elaine Mitchell, co-founder of Theatre of the Winged Unicorn in Ceres.
Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.

Amateur theatre is often a family tradition, and Elaine’s mother was involved with the arts sector back in 1897. ‘She performed in Ballarat South Street competitions and scooped the pools with individual solos and duologues’, said Elaine. Today, Elaine is delighted to be creating theatre in the Temperance Hall in Ceres, and the company has bought computerized lighting with a portable console. ‘We are a company with very little
resources, but a fantastic lighting system which we see as having a palette of wonderful colours, and the music is a very emotive art form’. Elaine described how she likes to reach the heart of audiences: ‘There is an empty space, like an empty canvas, and we put our own work on it’. She believes theatre is transformative because it is actual face to face communication. ‘In our digital age it is virtual reality, but theatre is a real experience. You feel the energy of the actors and can look into their eyes’. Cast members are mostly from the Geelong area. ‘We love the locals and don’t import talent’, says Elaine. Audiences come from Geelong, the Peninsula and Melbourne.

Elaine is proud of Geelong theatrically, and what they do in a small way locally. ‘We reach the world from here’. She explained it is about having a sense of purpose, and nothing to do with money, or celebrity. ‘The best lessons are the mistakes we make’. Elaine believes she learnt through the harder situations. ‘You have no money, no direction, but you work it out’. I noted after our interview that it had been a privilege to meet such a talented, vibrant and energetic arts practitioner, who through courage and hard work continues to achieve her goal of presenting theatre with a difference’.

**Heidelberg Allstars**

Victorian amateur theatre attracts all ages, and the Heidelberg Allstars, formed in 1995, is specifically for performers aged fifty-five and over. The variety group evolved from the Life Activities Club Heidelberg (LACH), a support group covering various matters for retirees. Member Jean Freeman set up the entertainment group under the banner of LACH Incorporated. I have personally enjoyed the variety shows presented by the Heidelberg Allstars and was delighted to interview members Doreen and Richard Sargentson. Richard joined the group with his first wife in the mid-1990s, and Doreen, a versatile singer, dancer and actor, joined in 2002. Doreen knew Richard’s wife before she died, and later she and Richard married.

The Heidelberg Allstars present a show each year at the Banyule Theatre, Heidelberg, where they have been performing for over twenty years. This well-run group rehearses in the Uniting Church hall in Arden Street, Rosanna, every Monday, and members each pay fifteen dollars per week for hall hire and the choreographer. The committee brings tea and coffee purchased from petty cash, and members work hard to learn and polish the
routines. The intense weekly schedule squeezed into one day would challenge much younger performers. It includes tap dancing from 9.30am to 10.30am, choreography between 10.30am and 1.00pm, then a short lunch break. Rehearsing the men’s items, the big production items, and the show’s opening number, then 2.30pm to 3.45pm, rehearsing the vocal numbers.

Doreen said selecting musical content for each show is a collaborative process, and the company’s mature age audience is considered when selecting songs. ‘The committee decides on a theme, and Camille Edwards the choreographer devises the routines’. Doreen believes that audiences are often surprised to see older people up on stage singing and dancing. The company also performs during the year at concerts such as the Seniors’ Lunch in Coburg, but providing a good audio system can be a problem. Doreen explained that concert party work is expensive for the company if not receiving a fee, because they still need to cover costs such as hiring the rehearsal hall. Like many other amateur theatre companies, the Heidelberg Allstars group survives financially on grants, ticket takings and fundraisers such as sausage sizzles at Bunnings. When asked about strengths of the group, Doreen replied ‘professionalism and pride in performing’. Helpful videos of the dance routines are available for cast members on the company website to assist with home rehearsals.
Now over eighty, Doreen still works part-time as a book-keeper. She trained as a dancer from an early age, and has performed with various musical theatre companies, including Crown Casino with Todd McKenney. ‘I’d be lost without the Heidelberg Allstars’, she said. ‘I have good friends and love performing and dancing’. Doreen likes how the Heidelberg Allstars are welcoming and friendly, ‘but the best thing ever about the company is, I met my beautiful husband, Richard’.

Two months after this interview, Doreen emailed the sad news that Richard had passed away suddenly in hospital that day. I was so pleased to have researched their story and written a profile story about Doreen and Richard for the Melbourne Observer. Doreen wrote: ‘I will miss him terribly. Thank you for the lovely article you wrote for us. I will treasure it always’.

**Encore Theatre Company Incorporated (Clayton)**

A theatre company can form when two companies decide to merge, and this was the case in 1997 when the City of Oakleigh Repertory Company (CORC) merged with Elwood Theatre Company to become the Encore Theatre Company Incorporated. The Encore Theatre Company now performs in the Clayton Community Centre Theatrette, and it was in Clayton where an interview took place with Life Members Kevin Trask and Bill Rendall. Kevin was formerly a member of the Elwood Theatre Company based at St Columbus Hall, Elwood, when the Church had other plans for the hall. ‘We thought of winding up the company, then it was suggested we take it to Clayton because CORC was short of manpower’, said Kevin. Bill was President of CORC, and Debbie Ball was President of Elwood Theatre Company when the merger was instigated. In 1997, a decision was made by Elwood Theatre Company to merge with CORC.

Before merging, Elwood Theatre company presented *A Time in Tuscany* in Clayton, CORC presented *Hobson’s Choice*, then the companies merged for *Caravan*, the first Encore production, directed by Fran McGrath. Bill said they formed a new committee out of the two companies, and members not included on the new committee helped in other areas. The mix worked well for sharing talents, because Elwood Theatre Company was strong in acting, whereas CORC was strong on the technical side of things. Jeff Hood was the first President of the Encore Theatre company, and Brenda Miller, founder of
CORC, was a stalwart in the merge between the two groups. The two companies combined assets such as lighting, sound equipment and sets. Bill said, ‘We are now a very healthy company with what we have’.

These days, the company rehearses in Fleigner Hall, Oakleigh East, where they also build sets and store costumes, although according to Bill, space is running out. In another example of collaboration between theatre companies, the former school is leased at reasonable cost from Monash Council by five theatre groups for set building, rehearsals and storage. It is difficult to recruit volunteers for set building because, as Bill pointed out, ‘we share the Fleigner Hall venue with Babirra Music Theatre and Players Theatre and they need space for set-building at weekends. We retirees go in during the week, but it is harder to get people then and most of us are in our eighties’. Kevin praised Monash Council for their great work in renovating Fleigner Hall.

Encore Theatre Company presents three shows annually, plus a pantomime in January. Recorded music is used because there is no orchestra pit in the Clayton Community Centre Theatrette. The content of plays varies, ranging from high dramas such as *Wit*, which, with its topic of terminal cancer and a powerful experience for all involved, did not sell many tickets, to plays written by local writers such as Cenarth Fox and Horrie Leek. Bill said most of their audiences are retired people, including Probus Clubs. ‘Comedies such as *Cash on Delivery* go well, but companies need a challenge sometimes too’. Bill has also observed that matinees are popular because mature-aged patrons do not want to drive at night. ‘If we could just do matinees, we would be sold out all the time’.
The theatrette is a rental venue from Council, and Kevin said when they receive a financial grant, it is a great help. According to Bill, ‘Each year the grant goes down and the rent goes up!’

Encore Theatre also provides an educational tool for schools and students by presenting plays set on the school VCE syllabus, giving busloads of students the chance to see the plays performed. ‘Young people turning off technology to listen to a live theatre production - culturally that is doing something’, observed Bill. Ageing of members is becoming a problem. ‘Everyone gets older and the future is a bit shaky’, said Kevin. Whilst Bill doesn’t believe young people have yet developed sufficient love for the theatre to be committed, I think the reality for this age group is that younger people are busy working, studying, or raising families, and will most likely return to theatre when older. Although Kevin is busy with other activities, he still finds time to write the company newsletter, *Echoes*, helps at bump-ins, directs, and assists front of house. Bill supervises set building, edits and prints the newsletter, markets shows to members and subscribers, and has been Secretary for ten years, having previously been company President. Bill enjoyed the theatre transition from work to retirement because ‘It gave me lots to do’. Kevin is adamant that ‘Without Bill, there would be no Encore Theatre Company’.
Aspect Theatre Company

In Aspendale Gardens, twenty-seven kilometres south-east of Melbourne, another musical theatre company, this time Aspect Incorporated, evolved from the local church choir in 1998. The Aspect theatre company welcomes experienced and inexperienced performers into their shows to enjoy fun, friendship and to present enjoyable shows for audiences. This contrasts with the modern-day companies who selectively cast shows to maintain an ever-increasing high standard. During an interview with President Trish Angliss and company co-founder John Egan, they discussed how the company formed. John and his wife Chris, and friends Trish, Steve and Maryanne Coultas, were members of the choir at St Louis de Montfort Catholic Church and School in Aspendale. They planned to present a concert, but theatre director Fred Pezzimenti, another St Louis member, said ‘No, don’t do a concert, let’s do a show!’ They chose Jesus Christ Superstar.

With no money, they learned they would have to pay three thousand dollars in rights, but the School Principal and Church Pastoral Leader were very supportive. ‘They thought it awesome for the community to present a religious-themed production at the Church, and pastoral leader Terry kindly loaned us the money’, said John. ‘We of course wondered how we would sell tickets to pay it back’. Permission was granted to present the show inside the Church, so that eliminated venue hiring costs. They printed their own tickets, and advertised through the Church newsletter. A school member arranged for scaffolding to be erected around the walls inside the Church, and a cross was mounted. ‘Someone made scenery and people offered all kinds of talents’, said John. ‘The only problem was, we had to pull it down between Masses and then put it all up again!’

John’s two boys were in the show, which was cast mainly through the choir and parish, with Chris Dickinson, the school Principal playing Herod. ‘A fellow parent, Fred Pezzimenti, did a phenomenal job directing, and arranged a band to play for nothing. We barely had any expenses’. John and Trish recalled there was a lot of learning at the start, but tickets sold out, they made money and paid back their loan. ‘We had people interested, and although it was hard work, we said ‘Let’s do it again!’

The next show, ‘St Louis in Cabaret’. was presented at Kilbreda College, Mentone, still as a church group, with Trish directing the music. In 2000, after the name Aspect evolved
(the letters representing Aspendale Entertainment Community Troupe), the company became incorporated to protect committee members. The first show was presented at the Shirley Burke Theatre, 64 Parkers Road, Parkdale in 2000, while still rehearsing at St Louis, and that venue has been used ever since. The only exception was *Man of La Mancha* presented at Mentone Girls’ Secondary College when Shirley Burke Theatre was being renovated. The company currently rehearses at the Aspendale Gardens Community Centre, and obtained Council permission for a shipping container to be positioned outside for storing scenery and props. Performers are charged ten dollars membership fee, and a show fee of one hundred dollars which covers music, lollies, nibbles, and cakes purchased for birthdays.

Trish said they prefer large casts which gives more people an opportunity, and also brings more audiences. When selecting productions, Trish said, ‘We think of known shows that were popular in the past’. Members’ ages range from young to ninety. ‘They are not just performing in the show, as we also provide people in technical areas, and some have gone on to work professionally’, said John. Trish and John actively contribute their talent and expertise to the company. Trish has been with the company from the beginning as pianist, performer, props person, President, producer and other roles. John has also been there from day one, mostly as Treasurer and Ticket Secretary before the Trybooking online ticketing system came in, which is now used by most amateur theatre companies.
Trish believes the strengths of Aspect are: ‘community, friendliness and being prepared to give everyone a go’. She concedes that presenting only one annual show can prevent an ongoing profile, and the long rehearsal period could deter potential auditionees, so they hope to eventually present two shows a year. ‘Building sets is a big problem because we have nowhere to build them because other groups use the hall’, said John. Trish loves the good friendships and learning new skills. John agreed about friendships, meeting the various audiences, and the gratification of seeing a show on the stage after months of hard work. In John’s words: ‘A cast becomes family’.

**Warragul Theatre Company Incorporated**

The town of Warragul in Gippsland, situated one hundred and four kilometres east-south-east of Melbourne, has also enjoyed local entertainment, first from the West Gippsland Performing Arts Society performing out of the Drouin High School. This company moved to the newly built West Gippsland Arts Centre in 1982, performing *My Fair Lady*. The company continued presenting musicals until 1993, then changed its name to The Green Shed Theatre Company, performing *Annie* in 1995 as their last performance using
this company name. In 1998, Greg McGrath, Manager of the West Gippsland Arts Centre, collaborated with musical director Sue Arnts and Neil Goodwin to present *Pirates of Penzance* at the Arts Centre. As a result of this evolution of the town’s performing arts talents, the Warragul Theatre Company Incorporated was formed in 1999.

The Warragul Theatre Company presents one major show per year, and an interview with Life Member Graeme Patterson, the company pianist since 1998, revealed he has never seen a show. Graeme responded to an advertisement for a pianist for *The Pirates of Penzance* and says the rest is history. ‘I find it a stress relief from the rigours of teaching Maths and Chemistry’, said Graeme. ‘I always feel when I come into the theatre that I’m one of the crew, without the pressure of being the head of a school’.

After the West Gippsland Arts Centre presented *Jesus Christ Superstar*, they were surprised to obtain the rights to *Les Miserables*. Graeme believes that country towns often miss out on priority for new shows. ‘The bigger companies have more money and backing with the licensing agents’. The Warragul Theatre Company Incorporated was formed in 1999, and a committee was established ready for the 2000 production of *Les Miserables*, which Graeme says was most successful.

Until about 2005, the company rehearsed rent free in the Fountain Room at the Performing Arts Centre, and held a key to the centre. Then, when outside users, such as schools, wished to present more shows at the centre, it became harder to access facilities. Graeme was able to arrange rehearsal space on a one-year trial basis in the factory around the corner, just purchased by St Paul’s College, where he taught. The company still uses the St Paul’s Year Nine Centre, and have also taken over the storage shed the Green Shed company used, including their costumes. ‘We negotiated with the Baw Baw Shire Council to lease the Shed for one dollar per year for nine years until 2015, and are now in negotiation’.

Warragul Youth Theatre was formed in 2003 and operates separately as a volunteer organisation, performing shows during school holidays in the West Gippsland Performing Arts Centre. Young people often progress from the Youth group to the Warragul Theatre Company. The audience demographic is considered by the committee
when selecting shows. ‘We have a core group of older performers and we look for shows that will involve them, but also take care not to disenfranchise young people, and look for ways to keep them happy’, said Graeme, who admitted, ‘We need bums on seats and it is a conundrum’. The Centre holds about four hundred and eighty people, and for big shows, the company has enjoyed full houses, presenting approximately eight performances over two weekends.

Graeme pointed out many shows are available now for theatregoers to choose from, including professional productions. ‘There is only so much money, and people have to choose between paying sixty dollars for a professional show, or fifty dollars for the local amateur company’. Graeme said their expenses are high, and hiring the West Gippsland Arts Centre had cost forty-five thousand dollars the previous year. ‘Directors get paid, musicians don’t, and we need money for royalties’. The Warragul Theatre Company is family friendly, and Graeme’s wife and daughter have performed in a show with him, and ‘At other times my wife helps behind the scenes’. Graeme said there are no ‘divas’ in the casts and young people are encouraged to play in the orchestra. ‘So long as there are a couple of experienced musicians, the young ones can learn from them’. He believes everyone needs to be given the chance. As has been observed by other theatre-makers, Graeme also pointed out that theatre is a leveller in society:

No matter your profession, we are all the same in theatre, and nobody cares about social strata in life. We have a doctor in the current cast who feels very welcome, and teachers have played big parts in theatre. You move to a country town and the best way to be part of the community is to join the theatre group.

Graeme loves being involved with theatre and meeting people, as well as the excitement of auditions when hearing new voices and experiencing the first orchestra rehearsal. ‘Up until then the cast only hear me on the piano. I still get a buzz, even after all these years’.

MOaRTZ (Moe, Gippsland)

Another theatre company in Gippsland was established in 1999 because arts-loving residents wanted an organisation that combined visual and performing arts. The vision for MOaRTZ Incorporated was to introduce arts and cultural activities into the area,
including amateur theatre. Company Secretary Jeanette Teague said that after the Moe Arts Council was formed, the Mo Town Carnival was held from 2002 to 2003, featuring music, street performers and visual arts exhibitions. Between 2008 and 2009, MOaRTZ approached Moe Life Skills, a local community-based disability service provider, proposing a partnership to acquire the old church and hall in Langford Street, Moe, to create an Arts Centre. The centre was purchased, with MOaRTZ and the Moe Life Skills organisations as co-owners, but unfortunately, the partnership failed and the church and hall are now sold.

Rehearsals are currently held in the Uniting Church hall in Newborough and storage is at Yallourn North, a former Narracan Shire Depot provided for MOaRTZ by the local shire (Latrobe City) at a generous peppercorn rental. This new acquisition means sets are now built under cover, rather than in volunteers’ driveways or sheds, and conducting play rehearsals at the church saves venue hiring fees. A ‘Take a Bow’ Writing Competition was also held in 2009 and 2010, with MOaRTZ actors presenting writers’ works on Gippsland radio station 104.7FM.

Selecting shows for performance in MOaRTZ starts with prospective directors submitting a proposal for a play they would like to direct. The committee then reviews the director and play, considers if the play is suitable for the venue, its likely appeal to the company’s typical audience, and whether it could be successfully cast. Jeanette said that in addition to set guidelines, they do consider their audiences who like comedies, and have learnt not to shift too far one way or the other regarding production content. ‘For example, we did Cosi and some patrons were offended and unhappy at the coarse language content, but young people loved it’. They then followed with Fool’s Paradise, which was dated. ‘We had lost the oldies and some never came back, and the younger audience hated the new show’. Predominantly, audiences attending MOaRTZ shows are from Newborough, Moe and Yallourn North.

The company’s best audience statistics were nine hundred and ninety-six patrons in 2002 for Secret Bridesmaids Business. ‘Now we average about five hundred’. Jeanette said they survey their audiences who give positive feedback. ‘They ring us all the time about donating costumes, resulting in a wonderful collection of ballgowns which we will have to cull one day. Some are exquisite’. Jeanette said a survey form slipped into the program
helps the company to get to know their audience, and constructed platforms for tiered seating are a result of listening to their audiences.

Jeanette agrees that amateur theatre is transformative, citing one example when the company first started performing in the Moe Town Hal: ‘People would say ‘this is wonderful – we don’t have to drive to Warragul’. She believes theatre is a glue that holds the community together. ‘Yallourn loves us bringing people to their community, and people enjoy seeing their family onstage’. Similar to Aspect, MOaRTZ plays a vital theatrical role by giving first timers a go, who are then transformed to perform in other theatre companies. ‘We encourage all people and it transforms their lives, and we are proud of presenting quality shows’, said Jeanette. ‘They gain confidence and move on to other theatre companies, some may even obtain professional work, and work backstage too, and in front of house hospitality’.

MOaRTZ supports youth in theatre by annually donating prizes to the local secondary school for top VCE students in Music, Dance and Drama, and Visual Arts and Literature. There is a fifty-dollar prize for the top VCE student in each of these areas. ‘We also sponsored a young person to attend the Victorian Drama League’s Summer School’. The company tries to keep ticket prices down so that theatre is accessible. ‘We have loyalty to our sponsors who are loyal to us too, and they are invited to opening night’.

Jeanette said their volunteerism is ‘fantastic’, although people do have time constraints. Concerns expressed by Jeanette included limited available space in affordable venues for large casts and being priced out of larger venues because they are too expensive. ‘In the Moe Town Hall we have to use their technicians and then costs rise’. Like many other companies, the company does not have understudies, so if there is cast illness or accident, a show could be cancelled at short notice, and there would still be the costs without any income. Jeanette said she is proud of MOaRTZ and of others in the company. ‘We are all on the same page and thinking’.

Reflecting on the twentieth century, from a cultural perspective, people were now more liberated in their outlook regarding content of stage shows than one hundred years earlier, and it was acceptable for women to be involved in all fields of the arts. There had been many technological changes in this century and it was hard to imagine what further
advancement could possibly be achieved in the next century. Developments that would impact on amateur theatre in the next century included technology, telecommunication, transport, computers, fax machines, photocopiers, electricity, microwave ovens, refrigerators, air-conditioners, laser technology, global networking, the Internet, radio, television, landline telephones and the mobile phone.

As the 1990s decade neared its end, an air of excitement filled the air. Bring on the ‘noughties’!

2000-2018

Personal Reflections

It is most satisfying to create and direct theatre from history, as was my first experience in 2003 when writing and directing Beaumaris Theatre’s fiftieth anniversary Christmas Panto-Revue. The company’s history was presented from 1953 through the decades by actors in era-authentic settings. A pantomime set in the North Pole featuring Santa and his Elves, interacted with the main narrative in a fun and informative two and a half-hour musical production with original lyrics.

Program cover and first page for Christmas Panto-Revue, presented by Beaumaris Theatre at 82 Wells Road, Beaumaris in November, 2003. Written and directed by Cheryl Threadgold.
I again merged history with theatre for the ninety-minute production ‘The Jewel by the Sea’, a creative interpretation based on documented history between 1854 and 1861. Presented by the Friends of Black Rock House, the play celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Black Rock House, seaside holiday residence of Victoria’s first Auditor-General, politician and pastoralist, Charles Hotson Ebden. The production won Bayside Council’s 2007 ‘Best Community Event’ award and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

‘Outstanding Volunteer Award’ from Murray Thompson MP, Member for Sandringham, Parliament of Victoria for the research, writing and direction of The Jewel by the Sea.

Directorial/choreographic projects in this new century included ‘Stepping Out’ by Richard Harris for MLOC Productions, and again for MOTTS Variety Theatre in 2002. I also directed the musical ‘Gold Rush’ written by local writer Gordon Gribbin in 2001 for MOTTS and continued performing in music-hall style shows presented by the theatre.
company until 2005. Theatrical activities remained as close to home as possible to eliminate distance car travel.

In 2005, the Short and Sweet Festival at Arts Centre Melbourne introduced the ten-minute play concept. I was cast in two plays, the first in the Black Box theatre space at Arts Centre Melbourne, and in 2006 in the George Fairfax Studio. Ten-minute play festivals have since become popular in Melbourne, and I judged the ‘Ten Minute Quickies’ at Eltham Little Theatre in 2011 and 2012, and ‘ARKfest’ in Lilydale in 2018.

The brevity, minimal rehearsal, staging and prop requirements for ten-minute plays appeal to busy twenty-first century writers, performers and directors, while audiences enjoy a variety of stories requiring a short concentration span. In 2006, I also played Clairee, former town Mayoress, in Beaumaris Theatre’s ‘Steel Magnolias’.

For six and a half years from 2005, I presented the ‘non-professional theatre’ segment on 3AW in the late Keith McGowan’s ‘Overnighters’ program at 0045 hours on Wednesday mornings. When the show began broadcasting nationally in 2012, local Victorian segments were axed. This was unfortunate for theatre companies across the state as ticket sales were boosted by this weekly segment. I also became honorary theatre writer and reviewer for the community-based ‘Melbourne Observer’ newspaper in 2005,
and today have a team of twelve honorary reviewers who cover reviewing the many Melbourne shows. In 2007 I joined the Golden Tappers and continue to perform at charity fundraising events.

In 2009 I accepted the challenge from (the now late) Janine Chugg, then President of Beaumaris Theatre, to direct ‘Dimboola’ as Anonymous Theatre. This quirky project involved the cast not knowing the identity of their fellow actors until opening night. Fourteen individual one-hour weekly rehearsals were conducted for each cast member in secret, with only Stage Manager Fiona Williams and I present at each rehearsal. There was a tense atmosphere on opening night as our organised strategies kept cast separated until their first entrances. After that, the show continued as a normal theatre season and also performed at the Mentone and Mornington Returned Servicemen’s League Clubs.

We had entered the new millennium, and the world was fast becoming more dependent on technology and changing the way information flowed through our society. One benefit for amateur theatre in this new ‘hi-tech’ world was the introduction of Facebook, which provides a free, effective means of communicating news of auditions and shows. Theatre company websites are also popular, but not always affordable for theatre companies. Online ticketing agencies such as Trybooking are now widely used by theatre companies, where patrons can directly purchase seats online, print out their emailed tickets and pay a fee of approximately sixty cents per ticket. As a result, the volunteer Ticket Secretary who was once kept busy taking telephone bookings at home and posting tickets to patrons, is becoming a rarity.

Like its professional counterpart, amateur theatre is embracing digital technology to visually transform productions, with video designers becoming familiar credits in theatre programs. Computerised projections onto video screens or scenery flats are effective, and save time from the perspectives of backstage crews changing sets, and scenic artistry. However, criticism of the use of sophisticated technology in theatre productions includes a warning that technology could ‘replace the power of the imagination’. For the present, audience expectations are increasing in line with theatrical technological and artistic advancement, including high standard school productions. Amateur theatre companies with small budgets are challenged to afford an appropriate venue with suitable facilities to compete for the audience dollar, particularly in country towns. Hopefully these theatre companies will find a means to continue presenting theatre to their communities during this century.

**Harrow Sound and Light Show (Harrow, Western District)**

The tiny town of Harrow in Victoria’s Western District, population one hundred, also merged history with theatre as they welcomed in the new century with their innovative theatrical project, the *Harrow Sound and Light Show*. Launched in 1997 and using volunteer performers with no previous acting experience, this successful project based on the history of Harrow, has been introduced as an educational and tourism opportunity to promote the town.
When Harrow resident Angela Newton first asked townspeople for a few ‘troopers’ to help promote the town in 1997, the responses were mostly ‘Sorry, I don’t act’. Original cast member, Ron Penrose, a retired sheep farmer and now visual artist, said at first the project started with a meal in the hotel. Guests then toured the town on a bus, listening to a story written by Angela, with costumed volunteer actors enacting scenes outside in the streets. The bus was expensive to hire from Edenhope, so nowadays all the action after the meal takes place outside in the streets, and a licensed armorer controls gunpowder to ensure realistic sounds from the guns. During the meal at the hotel, varied characters such as bushrangers, prostitutes, a doctor, preacher and judge, enter and introduce themselves. In 2015, Ron painted the cast, including himself as the undertaker wearing a black hat. He has also been the judge, preacher and night-man, and reckons his current character is a ‘terrible guy … creepy’.

The Harrow Promotional and Development Group is the overseeing body of the Sound and Light Show, managed by a committee. The show was once presented thirty times a year, but now there are six annual performances, with none during winter. The actors work freely around a basic storyline, generally improvising with dialogue. Ron believes this works well for the longevity of the project, making it easier for replacement actors to pick up on lines, guided by regular actors. Ron prefers adlibbing, while some actors prefer the comfort of using the same lines. There are no rehearsals. ‘We tried, but it didn’t work’.
Ron joked that alcohol helps when portraying characters, and if a good crowd throws lines to the actors, that helps too. Costumes are stored by the organisers, if not owned by the actors. The cast of twenty-five includes ten Harrow residents and others from outlying districts, and with only seventy to eighty tickets available to audiences, the shows book out quickly. Ron said the project is fun to be part of: ‘And we are supporting and advertising Harrow’.

**Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group (Queenscliff)**

Another tight-knit community that enjoys presenting shows, scripted in this case, is Queenscliff, situated on Victoria’s Bellarine Peninsula. Here residents are proud of their locally-based theatre company, the Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group.\(^{88}\) I interviewed company members Lyn Houldcroft and Nicole Hickman in a park outside a Council-owned building, on a beautiful sunny day.\(^{89}\) A working-bee was underway with members unloading trailers and cars to return props to a space shared with another community organisation. The props had been temporarily stored in the home of Nicole and her husband Dan during refurbishing of the storage space floor, and Nicole expressed her pleasure at seeing them gone and returned to official storage.

The Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group was formed in 2001, thanks to the efforts of eight female founding members who each contributed fifty dollars. Today the company impressively has over one hundred and fifty volunteer members, drawn from a variety of places and experiences. At first the company rehearsed and performed in the Queenscliff Senior Citizens Hall, which became the Queenscliff Community Centre after renovations, including adding a stage. As well as presenting theatre restaurant shows in the Queenscliff Bowling Club, recent productions have been held in the Queenscliff Uniting Church. The company has rehearsed in several places, including the Point Lonsdale School hall, Queenscliff Uniting Church and the Queenscliff RSL.

The company’s first major musical was *Annie* in 2006, then *The Sound of Music* in 2009, leading up to their big 2016 show, *Calendar Girls*. The cast for *Calendar Girls* was drawn from across the Bellarine Peninsula and greater Geelong region. When selecting shows, Nicole said they look at what people will enjoy. Lyn said initially they targeted local audiences, but with bigger shows they had to look at what would pay an outside
Director’s fee. ‘Nobody else gets paid except the orchestra. It’s all for the love of it’. The company prefers local cast members, and for Calendar Girls, most were local except an actor from Moolap, a Geelong suburb. According to Nicole, the reason for having over one hundred volunteers offering to help at shows can be attributed to everyone feeling welcome. Involvement is a lot about family and friends, and always about the community. ‘We get people who get the bug, and one thing leads to another. They come and go, but that is like family’. The company usually rehearses for three months, two nights per week, with more rehearsals closer to the show.

Nicole and Lyn told of transformative benefits from being involved with the theatre company: ‘It has done a lot for me. I was new in town, but through this company I have made so many wonderful friends’, said Nicole. When Lyn and her husband Tom travelled from Melbourne to build their house in Queenscliff, Lyn didn’t know anybody either. She has now also made great friends through the theatre company and community groups such as the Red Cross. ‘It has also given me a lot more confidence in lots of things, not just stage stuff’.

Lyn pointed out there is an existing problem with the original founders ageing and a need for young people. Nicole, from a younger generation, believes things are changing. ‘My generation of people don’t put their hands up to help, it’s the same for the Red Cross - the younger people are working’. It is also becoming more difficult to find rehearsal and performing space. ‘Things have also changed with more companies around’, said Nicole. ‘There are now twenty-three companies in the area and nineteen men to go round! Audiences can only afford to go to theatre so many times per year, so with every show we do, we try to find the appropriate venue’.

Nicole became involved with the theatre company while working as a chef at the Bowling Club. She read a sign about a new theatre company seeking singers and dancers and says she has never looked back. Now working in insurance, Nicole also sings at ANZAC Day services. Lyn’s versatility in the company includes being secretary for nine years, performing onstage, and doing the minutes and inventory. Lyn and Nicole agreed that the town feels a sense of ownership of the theatre company. Even though she had only been living in the area for a couple of years, after performing with the company, Nicole sensed the community felt they owned her. They refer with pride to, ‘our Nicole
who sings’, or ‘That’s our Lyn’ - that’s how they talk’. Both Nicole and Lyn agreed that for the Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group, ‘it’s all about the community’.

**Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe (Colac)**

Another theatre company focussed on their community is the Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe, a disability performing arts group based in Elliminyt, a suburb of Colac in western Victoria. During an interview in their sound-proofed studio space, co-founders Cherise Jettner and Lorraine Henkel explained the troupe formed in 2002, after discussion at the St Laurence Community Service in Colac about what people with disabilities could do with art.³⁰ ‘It came down to them saying they enjoyed music and drama’, said Cherise. After brainstorming, they decided to create the Antz Pantz drama troupe and the band Thumbs Up, and voted on the names. Because some members work, the group needs to operate after hours. When initial funding to operate the group after 3.00pm stopped, Cherise and Lorraine, both with Disability Services backgrounds, sought ways to make their project work.

‘Everyone was getting so disappointed’, said Lorraine. ‘We had seen skills developing and thought we couldn’t let it go’. Lorraine was coordinating a drop-in place for people with disabilities, and asked if the Antz Pantz Troupe could be taken on board. For five years this worked, with the drama group and band becoming part of the drop-in centre. Forty people attended every night, and with a structured program, others could come and watch what the Troupe was doing. For another project titled ’It’s OK to Complain’, the group obtained funding from the Office of the Disabilities Services Commissioner. When the group obtained a Shire community bus, they travelled for five years, including performing at the Having a Say National Disability Conference, and Deakin University and Costa Hall in Geelong. ‘They loved us’, said Cherise.

The group’s partnership at the drop-in centre eventually came to an end. ‘We were becoming too successful as an ensemble, and it was considered not individualistic enough’, said Cherise. ‘We were knocked back by the Colac Players and then the Neighbourhood House’. Cherise, who also runs a private music business, bought a red van cheaply, but they needed a good central location. For a while they rehearsed in Cherise’s home thirty minutes out of town. ‘I live out in the bush, and it is dangerous
with kangaroos, but we didn’t have to pay (a hiring fee’), said Cherise. The group had always dreamed of having their own space, and in 2014, Cherise bought the premises in Elliminyt, renting the front house to pay off the loan, and creating the studio she has clad and soundproofed.

The transformative benefits of live performance are very clear when hearing stories of this group’s achievements. For example, Cherise told of members learning to stand up for their rights through performing. Some romances developed, but if in care, room doors are meant to be left open, with no privacy. ‘By presenting concerns through drama, our plays transform people’s lives’. All material is original, with group input. Cherise said once they get ideas, ‘we go home and make the ideas concrete’. ‘Scripts need not be written, because not everyone is literate’, said Lorraine. ‘They learn by repetition, rehearsal and improvised work’. Cherise said they accepted that results can be variable and are not going to be perfect. Themes include bullying, with people’s rights not to be slaves symbolized by a bird in a cage. ‘A percussionist played in the background, and slavery was represented by a laundry with a man cracking a whip, real slaves, then the bird in the cage is free’, said Cherise. With Shire support they also presented a drama about water education titled H20 Oh No!, for Barwon Water and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, in Ballarat.

There are no auditions to join the group. ‘They just have to be committed, get on with the rest of the team, no pulling out, and be prepared to get up and have a go’, said Cherise. All performances are multi-media, including projection and video. ‘We videoed the guys in the Emergency Services and the Police drove an actor in the van for the video, and we went to the fire station. For Ned Kelly, we went to the Melbourne Jail’. It has become too expensive now for the group to perform at the Colac Otway Performing Arts and Cultural Centre (COPACC), but the Red Rock Regional Theatre and Gallery at Cororooke, north of Colac, offers a better deal, and The Colac Players are supportive, too.

The troupe tours to different venues and functions, including schools, and Disability Services organizations. ‘It is hard to get people to come and see our shows, but once people see what we do, they love it. We perform at the National Conference, Having a Say, and hope to take the plays about bullying to schools in this area’. Storage of costumes and scenery is in Main Street, or at Cherise’s house out of town. Cherise
believes the local disability community feels a sense of ownership of the Troupe, particularly where the actors live semi-independently in group homes. ‘They are very supportive and come along and watch our plays. The parents are always rapt to see the skill development and fun for their children, and the confidence it has given them’.

Cherise and Lorraine are passionate about their work in using theatre to help improve and change the lives of their team members aged between nineteen and sixty. Lorraine loves seeing the power the actors feel at the performance, and in public. Cherise puts it down to a team thing, being part of something which is bigger than them. Nevertheless, finance remains the big problem, and Cherise is mostly self-funding the Troupe. ‘It is a tricky thing, I am doing this on my own, and if I get sick it would be great to have parents on board’, said Cherise. There are also challenges in obtaining insurance cover as a drama troupe. ‘Mention ‘disability’ and it doesn’t happen. I am now insured as a music teacher and have Public Liability’. Cherise said they are flexible and open to anything in the future such as partnerships with other organizations. ‘We would love to go overseas, but that depends on partnerships and money. We are safe here and keep doing what we do’.

**Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC) (Pakenham)**

Another theatre company formed to fulfil a community need was the Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC) Incorporated, established in 2002. Administrator Lee Geraghty recognised the need for more artistic outlets in the Cardinia Shire, situated between Westernport and the Yarra Ranges. CPAC is another all-inclusive theatre company, encouraging everyone to be involved, regardless of theatre experience. During an interview, Lee said the Manager of the new Cardinia Cultural Centre in Pakenham had discussed the Centre having a resident theatre company, so Lee and her sister Kim Thomsen formed CPAC in time for the opening of the well-appointed complex in 2003. Lee, a teacher, had previously directed for Panorama and Windmill Theatre Companies, and directed over thirty school musicals.

Setting up a new theatre company can be challenging. First, a well-attended fund-raising cabaret night was presented at the local hall. ‘We asked for volunteers and about six people volunteered’, said Lee. The Cardinia Council supported Lee starting up the company, with rehearsals held for a couple of years in the old school hall in Henry Street,
Pakenham. When Council renovated the hall to become Link Employment, CPAC moved into the old football club change-rooms. ‘We cleaned them out and have been there ever since in what is called The Lions’ Den’. Lee would love a fly tower in the theatre to facilitate quick scenery changes, but is committed to perform at the Cardinia Cultural Centre. ‘We have been able to work around it and have been creative’, said Lee. We have ‘fix-it’ people and we do the best we can with the people we have got’.

Mitchell Stewart (Clyde) and Emily Hansford (Bonnie) in *Bonnie and Clyde*, presented by the Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC) in 2017. Image by courtesy of the Cardinia Performing Arts Company.

CPAC presents two shows per year, always musicals, including a children’s musical every second or third show. Lee has mostly worked with the same people in her creative team, including choreographer Robert Mulholland, one of Lee’s former students, and her husband Frank operates sound and builds sets. Auditions are publicly advertised for shows, which rehearse for ten weeks. Lee encourages everyone to audition and works around varied talents, with the aim of giving many the opportunity to participate. ‘You don’t have to be able to sing and dance, we can put you in and teach you’. Lee said it was more about giving people something to do in their spare time. ‘It gives people self-confidence and we are inclusive of everyone’. The company has seen good friendships and even marriages. The Lion’s Den is used for singing rehearsals, and Lee is grateful for support received from the Salvation Army and Pakenham Dance Studios for using their venues for auditions and dance rehearsals. Sets are stored in a farm shed belonging to a company member.
Lee said the age demographic of the local community needs to be considered when selecting shows. ‘Most of our audiences are of an older age, but we do get a lot of youngies coming to see their friends in shows. We have regular group bookings from Rotary, Probus and similar clubs, which often book thirty seats for each show’. Some performers who started with CPAC at age ten are still performing there in their twenties. Loyalty for Lee and her company is also evident when cast members travel to Pakenham from Ballarat, Collingwood and Maribyrnong. Lee is proud of her achievements with the company and says several performers are now involved in professional shows. She enjoys hearing comments from patrons such as ‘Why would we bother going to the city?’.

The population of Cardinia is growing, and Lee believes this will create more opportunities. ‘We once did twelve performances, but now do only six. When we first started there were not that many companies around to compete for audiences, but now there are lots’. Lee said shows with children in the cast sell well. ‘I believe the increased housing will give opportunity for more performances and I would love to do pantos in the holidays when I retire’. There is no guarantee the company can use the Lions’ Den forever, with gaming machines operating there until 2020. ‘I would like the whole building for everything – storage and rehearsal’, said Lee.

A burglary in 2013 caused damage, and Lee has not been able to afford to replace the equipment destroyed or taken. ‘We were only covered for very basic insurance then, but now we are fully insured’. A sheltered area outside the Lions’ Den can store sets to protect against graffiti and vandalism. ‘Two homeless men lived there for a while and were very good in tidying up when they left, and this deterred vandalism. Since the burglary I am more security conscious when working there at night’. As well as administering the company, Lee directs shows and her sister Gaynor does the tickets. There is also a ‘Friends of CPAC’ site on Facebook.
Lee Geraghty, Co-founder and Administrator of the Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC). Image by courtesy of Lee Geraghty.

‘I would love to see the Cardinia Performing Arts Company go on forever’. said Lee.
‘There is a family feel about our company’.

Torquay Theatre Troupe (Torquay)

Yet another example of a theatre group forming to fulfil a need in the community occurred in Torquay, Victoria, in 2002. Well, it was not actually known there was a need for a theatre company in the town until local resident Joe Fairhurst wrote a play and his friend suggested starting a drama group. A notice in the supermarket attracted residents to attend a meeting and the Torquay Theatre Troupe was formed.92

During an interview with Torquay Theatre Troupe President Maryanne Doolan and member Michael Baker in Torquay, they described how notices went up in the supermarket about the potential drama group. Maryanne attended the meeting held on a Saturday afternoon, and says three of the original members are still involved with the theatre company.

In an impressive mode of operation, the members were prepared to study the craft of theatre to ensure their new company presented good productions. In the first year, they undertook drama activities and learnt skills, and when Joe left, a drama teacher took over. Later in the year, the company performed at a member’s house for families and friends.
In the second year, a director arrived, and with members now more experienced, they presented their first play in the Anglesea One Act Play Festival. Maryanne undertook the monthly Casuarina Shire Project Management Course to learn useful skills, such as how to run meetings and obtain grants.

The company first rehearsed in the Scout Hall, then the Spring Creek Community House, before moving to the Senior Citizens’ Hall, where they currently rehearse and perform. They also perform in One Act Play Festivals and retirement villages. Problems with sharing multi-purpose community facilities with other groups is also applicable to other Victorian theatre companies as well as in Torquay. Michael explained that the Senior Citizens’ Hall is set up for Seniors. ‘There is a small stage and we are only allowed to put things up on a temporary basis, then take them down after every show, because other groups use the space’. The Troupe spent one season presenting plays in Bellbrae Hall, ten minutes out of town. ‘It suited us for what we needed to do, but comprises a building with a stage at one end, bad acoustics and no lighting facilities’. Michael said they had to cross the street to the Tennis Club to change, and wait there before going on. Pressure was put on Council regarding a performance venue, which caused conflict with the Seniors. ‘As a community asset, we came in and imposed our will on a system that had been up and running, but there is still no other theatre space in town’, said Michael.

The good news is there is now a compromise between the community organisations, and the Troupe sets the bingo board up to help the Seniors. Maryanne said when they presented Arsenic and Old Lace, which required an extensive set, the Seniors began to understand what they were trying to do. ‘We try to do the right thing, Karate needed the whole space, but we had to set up and finally, there was a compromise’. Michael and Maryanne both agreed that the term ‘Senior Citizens’ Hall’ is a deterrent to younger members. ‘If only we had a theatre with lights, bells and whistles’, pondered Maryanne. ‘The school has a great Drama room and young people get their Drama at the school, but I know kids in this town who are artistic and would love to get up on stage, but not in a Senior Citizens’ Hall’.

Having started with one act plays and English farces, the company now attempts higher quality theatrical pieces, but lack of space prevents staging musicals which require a large cast and orchestra. Michael said if presenting confronting or challenging plays, they
are often surprised by their audience response. ‘We are reminded our audience is older, but have lived, and that doesn’t mean they can’t cope with confronting storylines. There are ‘sea change’ people who go to the city and see shows’. Maryanne described their audiences as ‘sophisticated’. The theatre companies in Anglesea and Torquay support each other and have co-presented shows. While most cast members are based in Torquay, directors and some actors come from Geelong, and supporters from Geelong and Melbourne will join local audiences to see shows.

The company has no youth group, but tries to get youth involved. ‘We don’t pick plays that involve young people, but are not going to pick a play because we can’t get young people, and around it goes’, said Michael. The Troupe has many volunteers who help front of house, particularly older people who like to be involved and feel part of the group. ‘Members of the Senior Citizens Group are not that interested, but we always give them six free tickets’, said Maryanne. Maryanne pointed out that retired people keep growing older and the theatre group will not continue if young people do not join.

From a personal perspective, Maryanne is an original company member who has directed, performed, produced and worked in publicity. Originally from Los Angeles, Michael and his wife arrived in Australia some years ago, and bought a house and opened a Mexican Restaurant in Torquay. Michael saw an ad for the local theatre group in the paper and found them welcoming and keen to take on the skills he brought from working in American film and television. ‘It quenches my artistic thirst and allows me to express myself in the way that only live theatre can’, he said. For Maryanne, ‘the Troupe is my tribe, my community group and work’. Michael’s view? ‘Performance is necessary for the human spirit to soar’.

**Footlight Productions (Geelong)**

Founder of Footlight Productions in Geelong, Peter Wills, also believed in the importance of performance in his life, and after many years’ involvement with amateur theatre companies, decided to form his own company in 2003. Footlight Productions differs from other companies because their annual musical theatre production is presented in January each year. Peter explained that rehearsals start at the end of October for an early January performance. This suits university students at home for the
summer break, school teachers such as Peter’s wife Margaret, and the Geelong Performing Arts Centre venue because they have a black hole in bookings at that time of the year. ‘People know when they audition they have to be available for this time, except for a two-week break over Christmas’, said Peter.

Peter chose his company’s name because of a lifelong fondness of old-fashioned footlights. Our interview took place in Geelong, yet the word ‘Geelong’ is noticeably missing from the company’s title. Peter says that these days the word ‘Geelong’ is not used because a name not prefixed with ‘Geelong’ is preferable for sponsorship and marketing purposes. With several theatre companies already existing in Geelong, Peter was asked why he founded another one: ‘I established Footlight Productions in 2003 to streamline the administration process for a production, and to maintain a standard I believe is pertinent to our wonderful performance venue, the Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC)’. The company rehearse out of school hours at the Sacred Heart College in Newtown, and at St Bernard’s Church in Belmont. A shed out of North Geelong is hired to store scenery and props, and costumes are stored at the Church where they rehearse.

Peter co-directs the company with his wife Margaret, and there is no committee of management. When selecting productions, Peter said he and Margaret use a three-prong ‘attack’, including considering if the show will market in Geelong, ensuring the show will interest the performers, and considering if they can stage it. ‘For example, the theatre company cannot technically cope with some shows, like Phantom of the Opera, because lack of preparatory time in theatre could mean not doing the show justice’. Peter believes that although Geelong ‘is more industry and sport’, there is still a demand for the arts. A postcode analysis undertaken by GPAC reveals just over ninety percent of their audiences come from Geelong.
Peter and Margaret Wills, Footlight Theatre Productions, Geelong. Image by courtesy of Peter Wills.

There is community interest in Footlight Productions, with Peter receiving phone offers of donated clothes or items for the company. ‘There are a lot of people who come and see our show only because there is only so much disposable income. I insist on a high-quality production standard and believe in quality over quantity. There is no churning out production after production’. Peter is proud of the talent in his shows. ‘At the last show, Mary Poppins, people asked if we had imported the dancers from Melbourne, but they were all local people who had worked very hard’. Peter insists on good organisation for Footlight Productions, having learnt from his involvement with other theatre companies. ‘Disorganisation can lead to poor standards’. He also believes in a commitment to excellence and treating everyone well. ‘We offer a good experience to performers and backstage crew. It’s fun and they are learning’. Peter commented on how technology has changed communication. ‘We once didn’t even have a telephone in the rehearsal venue and had to go out and find a phone box’.

Things are going well for Footlight Productions, except for the growing problem of increased venue hiring costs and reluctance to increase ticket prices because of audience disposable income restrictions. Peter also pointed out the large expense of rights, with new shows now requesting eighteen percent of ticket sales. ‘We shared resources with Ballarat for Mary Poppins, and other shows. Royalties for Mary Poppins were forty-eight
thousand dollars for twelve full shows’. Peter would like to explore opportunities to save money and avoid increasing ticket prices. Care is also needed when selecting shows. ‘Geelong will not support new shows. They like what they know. On the other hand, young performers don’t want to go in classic shows like *The Pajama Game*.’

Peter describes theatre as being like a community sport, on the other side. ‘It brings a diverse group of people together – different creeds and nationalities and varying ages’. Peter’s extensive experience in Geelong-based theatre includes the GSODA Junior Players, starting at age eleven then progressing to the company’s senior section to perform in musicals, becoming interested in offstage work including marketing and props, then Secretary of the company at eighteen. Peter says he has been on a committee for a theatre company ever since. Other companies Peter has helped produce shows for include Lyric Theatre and Geelong Repertory Theatre. Establishing Footlight Productions was a natural progression for Peter. ‘It has brought me in touch with great friends who are an important part of my life. I love meeting people with a passion for learning and for excellence in theatre’.

**Friends of Black Rock House Incorporated (Black Rock)**

Creating theatre for the community was also the reason why I wrote and directed the Friends of Black Rock House Inc. project *The Jewel by the Sea*, with the specific purpose to pay tribute to the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of historic Black Rock House. The site-specific ninety-minute production was first presented in October, 2006, to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Black Rock House, the seaside holiday residence of Victoria’s first auditor-general, Charles Ebden, situated at 34 Ebden Avenue, Black Rock. Local actors portrayed historical characters such as William Wills, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Caroline Chisholm, Georgiana McCrae, Charles Ebden, and Mrs Ebden, and fictitious characters such as Cook Brogan, Henry the Market Gardener and Stella the Parlour-Maid.

As a Friends of Black Rock House volunteer, I offered to merge heritage with theatre and research, write and direct a tribute production to be presented on-site in the ballroom in intimate theatre style for audiences of fifty-five people. Fourteen local actors, who mostly had never heard of Black Rock House, were booked before the script was
completed. The final product was a creative interpretation based on documented history between 1854 and 1861, commencing with Mr Ebden purchasing one hundred and twenty-two acres of land twelve miles south of Melbourne. Friends of Black Rock House volunteers who mostly had no previous theatrical experience, became props coordinators, ticket secretary, program designer, costume coordinator, front of house ushers and organised catering. The wonderful enthusiasm from volunteers and their newly learned skills culminated in fine results.

Poster promoting The Jewel by the Sea, presented by the Friends of Black Rock House in October, 2016 at Black Rock House. Written by Cheryl Threadgold, directed by Debbie Keyt. Artwork: Anna Johnston.
At the time, the Friends of Black Rock House group had minimal funds, so theatre companies kindly loaned costumes, and props were borrowed from various sources. Ticket sales were vital to pay for expensive professional lighting, and all tickets sold out for the eight performances. Lighting expenses were covered, donations paid to groups who had loaned items, and the Friends of Black Rock House group enjoyed a healthy bank balance. The Auditor-General of Victoria, Mr Des Pearson, attended and returned for another two seasons, and the production won Bayside Council’s 2007 Community Event of the Year award.

After the third season in 2011, I handed the directorial role over to Debbie Keyt, a younger director, to ensure perpetuity of the show, and it was again successfully presented in 2016. The production will be presented every five years, successfully merging theatre with heritage, bringing historic Black Rock House alive, and providing audiences with a window into life in nineteenth century Melbourne.

CenterStage Geelong (Geelong)

The City of Geelong boasts an abundance of theatrical talent, and another group started in recent years by an individual, is CenterStage Geelong, established by David Greenwood in 2010.96 ‘We wanted to create a company that respected all cast and production team members equally, and create a theatre company that really embraces Geelong’, said David. This is endorsed by the company website which speaks of the pride in being a Geelong musical theatre company.97 I interviewed David in CenterStage’s well-appointed headquarters in North Geelong. David, 26, attributes his father Keith as being a sounding board and key inspiration for his project. The company rehearses and performs onsite, or at the Geelong Performing Arts Centre. ‘I enjoy we are able to market against other companies by creating an alternative space that is a theatre’, said David. ‘We charge two hundred and fifty dollars a day hiring fee for companies to rehearse and perform here but are not out to make money, we just want to put on a good show’. The company’s Board of Management comprises twelve volunteers, and one hundred and twenty-five to one hundred and seventy members pay twenty-five dollars annually. ‘They just come to us’, said David. ‘We create consistent shows and good standards’.
CenterStage Geelong presents four musical shows annually, auditions are advertised on social media and the company website, and the average rehearsal time is eight to twelve weeks. Although having onsite storage, David also uses shipping containers as they prefer to keep everything. When selecting shows, the committee considers the suitability of an accessible venue, available resources such as people and technicians, whether everyone will enjoy doing the show and, to ensure the long-term life of CenterStage, if it will sell. Production team and orchestra members are paid, but cast are not. Weekly dance classes are held free of charge for the cast in appreciation of their efforts. The company’s high standard is endorsed by winning several Music Theatre Guild of Victoria Awards and about ten Virtual Oscars, Geelong Arts Awards. Performers do not have to live in Geelong, as David’s view is ‘whoever is the best, gets the role’.

David’s method of sourcing volunteers is to partner with Volunteering Geelong and hopefully with the Working for the Dole Program. He feels the local community does not yet have a one hundred percent sense of ownership towards CenterStage. ‘We are still relatively young in the eyes of Geelong, and there is still old school in Geelong theatre traditions. We are still the new kids on the block and adapt to the theatre market’. Initially, David put his personal money into the company, but would be claiming for petrol when driving to Adelaide to collect the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang car for a forthcoming show.

David agrees amateur theatre is transformative. ‘There are changes – more technology is coming into amateur theatre and people have greater expectations’. CenterStage supports charities, including the Arts and the Geelong Gaol. ‘We get all our costumes made in Bali, and give back to the Balinese community, having donated eighty thousand dollars for an ambulance’, said David. ‘Over five years we have donated one hundred and forty-five thousand dollars to the community’. When a company member needs to fly to Bali regarding the costumes, airfares and accommodation are covered by the company, and ‘One of our sponsors owns a hotel there, so accommodation is virtually free’. David feels everyone loves the company’s space, with volunteers often working there until 3.00am sewing costumes. ‘We call it the CenterStage family’. Memories are locked in at the first rehearsal when cast write their names on a lock which hangs on a wall in the kitchen.
CenterStage presents one youth show annually, plus theatre workshops and training. Members’ ages range from four and a half to the head of costumes in her seventies. David believes in his members and acknowledges that without them and the committee, there would be no CenterStage. ‘I am the figurehead and founder, and need others to run a company reputed to do a good show’. The building is eight hundred square metres, but David would like to buy the building next door to expand. He no longer sits in on rehearsals as he now wants the committee to be the front people. ‘I am trying to stay in the background. I want it to be more like a team thing’. David spoke of Geelong being a large country town and less progressive in how it feels about the arts, which influences what shows they pick. ‘That’s why we did *Oklahoma!* It is a hard juggling act with rising costs’, said David, who obviously juggles his business exceptionally well to have won Victoria’s Most Innovative Company Award for their business structure and performance.

David spoke of their next step being a travelling theatre company. ‘We want to take a Geelong show on tour, for example to the Malthouse and Chapel off Chapel in Melbourne’. The company has been paying their venue mortgage and would own it four and a half weeks after our interview. They then plan more construction at the rear of the complex and would like a second mezzanine level for storage and workshop. The first mezzanine level stores costumes.

Shining the personal spotlight on David, Geelong born, he achieved a Bachelor of Arts (Theatre and Marketing) at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, which helped him launch CenterStage. He has performed in many shows with other companies and at high school, recounting that his teachers are thrilled with his success. David’s successful formula is: ‘The committee runs the show, David Greenwood runs the venue, and CenterStage owns the whole venue’.

**Off the Leash Theatre Company (Warragul)**

Just as live theatre sparkles in Geelong, it also glitters in Gippsland in south-eastern Victoria. When theatre-makers Jeannie Haughton and Steve Wiegerink realised contemporary theatre was lacking in their area, they formed Off the Leash Theatre Incorporated in 2010 in Warragul.98 Jeannie explained the name ‘Off the Leash’ was
chosen because Warragul is the Kurnai word for ‘wild dog’, and the company motto is ‘Theatre with Teeth’. Retaining the canine theme, the company newsletter is called ‘Throw a Bone’. Jeannie felt if only presenting popular shows, there was no opportunity for writers to improve, so Off the Leash Theatre encourages the creation of new works and aims to meet community needs in a theatrical way. ‘We set out to find a niche that was contemporary, gritty and very relevant, and to present what other theatre companies were not doing’. Jeannie acknowledged that since then, things had changed in the region, with a different person now managing the Warragul Arts Centre, and more gritty works being presented.

‘Theatre audiences are becoming more educated and savvy. There are people who love theatre but also people who would never step into the place’, said Jeannie, who pointed out that football and theatre do cross over. ‘Programming shows that attract audiences and return enough money for the next show can be difficult’. The company now has one hundred subscribers, some passive, some active, and a committee of about nine. ‘There is always a balancing act running a business and being creative’. Initially, the company set out to target a younger demographic. ‘We wanted to be a bit outrageous, do contemporary issues that others weren’t doing’. However, Jeannie discovered that their audience tends to be an older demographic, so this needs to be considered: ‘If we remove families and friends, there is a theatre-going audience of older people’. The committee’s job is to keep an overview, set the balance and keep the tone for the year. ‘If we present a dark work like The Boys, we keep the next one lighter’, said Jeannie, who explained that they also present one new work every two years.

![Jeannie Haughton, co-founder and Artistic Director of Off the Leash Theatre, East Gippsland. Image by courtesy of Jeannie Haughton.]
To select a performance work, the Artistic Director first talks to interested directors, there is an official Proposal Form, and a set criteria to meet before the committee decides. ‘It helps if directors have a verifiable background, or have worked with us before, and their budget is within our league, said Jeannie. ‘If they are a self-contained package such as bringing their own publicity, administrative people and production team, then they are ready to go. Getting the actors is the easy part’. Jeannie said they are always looking for contemporary Australian works, or high-profile works. Directors must conduct public, advertised auditions.

The company rehearses in a room called the Dog Box, above the Warragul Municipal Band rehearsal venue near the West Gippsland Arts Centre. ‘We are creating our own little cultural hub in that area’, said Jeannie. ‘We are now brought in by the Arts Centre to perform and have one of the best Performing Arts Centre’s in Victoria’. Jeannie believes the company has the capacity to be theatrically exciting: ‘It’s about lifting skills, not just trotting out plays’. Commercial storage is hired in Drouin for re-usable basic sets, and two shows are presented each year plus an event such as a play-reading. ‘Presenting an original work every two years defines us from other groups’, said Jeannie.

Jeannie was pleased when one of their productions achieved a purpose beyond theatrical entertainment. Members of welfare and service organisations saw the drama The Boys and picked it up for their own professional development. ‘They had attended the show as a sense of duty to cast members, and now the compassionate story ended up being a powerful tool for them to use’. According to Jeannie, audiences know they will get challenging theatre and it’s not going to be ‘frothy’. ‘They know we look at social justice and the human condition and I think there is an audience for that’. Once the company combined with the Warragul Chorale and Warragul Municipal Band to write and present a funded work for the Centenary of ANZAC. ‘This was an extraordinary collaboration and we now see each other in a different light’.

Jeannie regards the company as ‘risk-takers’. There is never a state of reaching perfection. The drawback to this ideology is the company being financially vulnerable because of not doing popular shows and risking incurring a loss. ‘At one time, we were in debt and people had to put their hand in their pockets to keep us going’. Jeannie said there is a sadness over this weakness, but integrity is important to them. ‘Also, we train
young people who then go to the city and we lose their skills. Sometimes they come back years later and we are very proud of the things many of them achieve’.

Another concern was competition from visiting professional shows. ‘The Gippsland Theatre Network is an alliance of performing art centres which brings in professional touring companies’. Jeannie agreed this was a good thing, but ‘we don’t have the flashy brochures and big budgets of the larger companies’. A lot of the company’s self-marketing is done through Facebook, the regional television network WIN TV is supportive, sometimes including segments at the end of the News, and newspaper items bring good publicity. Jeannie, a writer herself, is very proud of her new company’s achievements and says it’s a significant part of her own identity: ‘A road less travelled has lots of bumps’.
LOTS Theatre (Moorabbin)

At Moorabbin Airport, another site-specific amateur theatre company, LOTS Theatre Incorporated, was formed to acknowledge a need in the community to learn about Australian aviation legends. In 2018, the company presented its sixth production at the Australian National Aviation Museum.

In 2012, Artistic Director Maggie Morrison invited writer/director, Jim Williams and I to collaborate with her to write and co-direct performance segments for a promenade theatre style production in the aviation museum.99 The partnership was successful and with more writers now contributing plays, the company continues to present annual productions.

LOTS Theatre Incorporated was officially established as a theatre company in 2015, formed to celebrate the adventurous spirit and courage of heroes associated with the Australian National Aviation Museum at Moorabbin Airport. Audiences move between performance locations in the professionally lit, atmospheric aircraft museum hangar.

Maggie’s interest in presenting aviation-themed plays began some years ago when reading a story in her local paper about the headstone missing on the grave of aviatrix and former Mayor of Mordialloc, Gertrude McKenzie. ‘I have always been interested in
the achievements of women’, said Maggie, ‘and when talking to aviation historian Neil Follett, it was rather special to discover I was living on land that once belonged to Gertrude McKenzie’. Maggie, a Drama teacher, thought of having an International Women’s Day lunch with her friends at the Aviation Museum, but then decided to think wider. ‘I have always loved in situ theatre, so started researching local characters who linked in with women who should be remembered. Then it became a celebration of the Museum itself’.

Designing lighting and sound in an aircraft hangar is challenging, and skilled technical director Alan Crispin achieved great results. ‘Our plays have kept with the history of aviation and successful adventures’, said Maggie. ‘For example, we celebrated Maurice Guillaux, who flew the first airmail from Essendon to Sydney’. Maggie explained this was significant one hundred years ago, but his actual plane isn’t there. ‘We look for threads of connection, but always link back to the Moorabbin Aviation Museum because part of our role is to promote the Museum and the Airport’. The planes displayed in the museum are restored by volunteers, and Maggie feels it is a joy to be able to celebrate this.


Costumes and props are stored in Maggie’s wardrobe, with some borrowed from other companies. Performers by invitation are mostly from the Kingston and surrounding areas, but have also travelled from North Melbourne, Balwyn, Drouin, and one even from England. Refreshments are served pre-show, during interval and post-show, so front-of-
house management is important. Maggie said audiences enjoy being there and seeing the machines – ‘being able to knock on the tin’, and love to see and hear the stories coming alive. ‘People can relate to emotion. There are stories that connect with every plane, and we want to present these ideas from the past and people can go home and look it up further’.

LOTS Theatre encourages youth involvement, and after Maggie contacted local schools, the cast has included students from Mordialloc Secondary College, St Bede’s College and Stella Maris Primary School, Beaumaris and Parktone Primary School in Parkdale. ‘LOTS Theatre has transformed people’s way of looking at entertainment when they walk past Gertrude McKenzie’s grave, and now they know about the Museum’, said Maggie. ‘I would like to think we want to be part of things from the past and respect it. They are pioneer stories, adventure and stories of men and women against the odds’.

Youth Theatre

It is wonderful to see opportunities for youth performance as well as at school productions, and judging by the enthusiastic membership of youth theatre groups, amateur theatre’s future is assured. As well as roles for youth in companies such as LOTS Theatre, there are youth groups, such as the ACTion Theatre Group, which form part of a larger theatre company. Another splendid opportunity for youth performers is the Melbourne Gang Show, established in 1951. I also had the pleasure of interviewing the leaders of two different, but successful, amateur youth theatre companies.

Impact Theatre (Warragul)

Founder Stephanie Clark said Impact Theatre was trialled in 2013 because Warragul in Gippsland does not have a theatre group that considers ‘straight dark theatre for teenagers’. Stephanie explained in an interview that her theatre friends felt limited to pantomimes or children’s shows, so decided on forming Impact Theatre. Stephanie did the ‘hard yards’ work to get it going, and writes, performs and directs, including for Impact’s Melbourne Fringe Festival performance in 2015.
Performance venues are chosen according to shows. ‘We have rehearsed at the Victorian Railway Institute in Warragul and now have a new home at the Dog Box, which we share with Off the Leash Theatre’, said Stephanie. As well as performing in Warragul, the company tours to various locations across the state, including Stratford, Forster, Yinnar, Traralgon, Abbotsford and Northcote. The company is careful managing money, and Stephanie explains, ‘We only spend money we have and never go into debt’. Another independent group, the Warragul Youth Theatre Company, is temporarily overseeing Impact Theatre, including being paid to cover insurance. Stephanie emphasised that while Impact Theatre prefers to present dark shows, they support Warragul Youth Theatre presenting children’s shows.

Impact Theatre works with youth members from fourteen to twenty-five, but has had a director aged twenty-six. ‘We do encourage them then to move on to Off the Leash Theatre, or if interested to do musicals, there are plenty of companies to choose from’. Stephanie has the final say about shows selected for performance and says, ‘if the work captures us, then it will be ‘the one’ and we will go ahead with it’. She believes that when audiences see a show presented by Impact Theatre, the youth culture experienced is an ‘unapologetic passion’ that young people have for what they are doing. Stephanie hopes patrons understand that young people are more capable than what they are given credit for. ‘We did one show that was put on by performers under nineteen years, and people were shocked at what they could do’.

Stephanie would like Impact Theatre to continue when she turns twenty-five, but admits it will need someone to run the company. When asked about the transformative benefits of theatre, Stephanie replied, ‘People thrive when they can do things they are excelling in. It can only promote health and wellbeing, and that can only benefit the community’.

**GSODA Junior Players (Geelong)**

The GSODA Junior Players is a musical theatre group formed in Geelong in 1965 for young people aged between ten and seventeen years. It is believed to be the oldest youth theatre group of its type in Australia. Among the GSODA Junior Players who successfully pursued professional careers are Guy Pearce, Cindy Lee, Peter Coleman-Wright, Debbie Fraser and Martin Croft.
The need for a youth group to learn and perform theatrical skills was recognised by two members of the Geelong Musical Comedy Company, Dorothy Squire and Noeline Jennings. The first production, *Red Riding Hood*, staged in the GAMA Theatre in 1965, was so successful, that by 1967 the GSODA Junior Players had eighty-five members. President Debbie Fraser explained during an interview that the newly-formed Junior Players joined three other companies, the Geelong Musical Comedy Company, Geelong Gilbert and Sullivan, and The Play Goers, all governed by GSODA, the Geelong Society of Operatic and Dramatic Arts. Debbie believes the Junior Players are unique in various ways: ‘As far as we can determine, there is no other theatre company that offers to its members the same training or opportunities that GSODA does’. Older members mentor and nurture the younger children, which Debbie says creates a safe and nurturing atmosphere. ‘We like to have sixty-five members, who join at eleven and stay until they turn seventeen’. The company has now started a Theatre Collective, designed for young people aged sixteen to twenty-six years who wish to continue their theatre training. ‘We run Theatre Collective masterclasses with industry professionals, and at the completion of the rehearsal process they perform a production at the Shenton Performing Arts Centre in Geelong’, said Debbie. There are ten performances in each season presented at GPAC, including five daytime shows for schools. ‘We had a one hundred thousand dollar budget for *Peter Pan*’, said Debbie. ‘There were lots of Occupational Health Safety issues re the flying sequences and equipment’.

A selection of the productions presented annually by the GSODA Junior Players includes *Rock You*, *Disney’s High School Musical*, *Boogie Fever*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Once Upon a Mattress* and *Dick Whittington*. Debbie said the children do workshops on Saturday afternoons and present a play. Debbie spoke of past members returning: ‘Sometimes members now employed in the entertainment industry return to pass on the skills they have learnt, and continue the legacy that is GSODA Junior Players’.

In a fiftieth anniversary tribute book covering the history of the GSODA Junior Players from 2005 to 2015, Debbie acknowledges the vital contributions to the company from parents, past parents, friends and former members. These include: ‘attending meetings,
sewing, painting, hammering, gluing, typing, making tea and coffee, fundraising and just being there’.

Through her various roles, Debbie has given opportunities to hundreds of performers to perform in the limelight, so now it is her turn. She joined the GSODA Junior players at ten and 'retired' at seventeen. Debbie directed her first show at nineteen and graduated from university with a degree in Performance Arts. As well as being the mother of four children, Debbie still finds time to work freelance as a director, and at the time of our interview had just returned from directing *Mary Poppins* in Ballarat. Debbie’s wish for her future work with the GSODA Junior Players is to ‘continue with love and honour to the people who started it’.

**University of Melbourne**

Young theatre-makers are fortunate to have operational theatre companies in their tertiary institutions. One of these is the University of Melbourne with its ‘living history that extends over one hundred and thirty years’. The University of Melbourne Student Union theatre group, Union House Theatre, presents plays, musicals, dance, comedy and masterclasses. Students are supported to experience all areas of theatre-making, including performing, writing, and as technicians, backstage crew, designers, directors, producers and choreographers. There are two operational performance venues in Union House.

**Deakin University**

Burwood University Student Theatre Company, BuST Co., is one of the groups offered in the Deakin University Student Association’s (DUSA) activities. BuST Co. provides opportunity for student theatrical participation, and presents two or three major productions throughout the year, including plays and musicals.
Monash University

A department of the Monash Student Union (MSA) is Monash Uni Student Theatre (MUST) which, mentored by MUST Artistic Director Yvonne Virsik, presents innovative theatre by, with and for Monash students and the wider community. Productions and events are staged annually in the Clayton campus and students fulfil almost all the roles associated with these events, both on and onstage.

Ark Theatre

Youth performers are the future of all genres of theatre, but in the meantime, mainstream theatre companies continue to form. Victorian amateur theatre groups have been discussed in this story starting in 1842, so it is appropriate to close with one of the state’s most recent theatre companies. ARK Theatre, based in Lilydale, was launched in 2013 in a one-act play performance in Foster in the One Act Play Festival. President Rosemary Cullinan explained that a group of theatre friends got together to discuss the types of theatre they would like to see produced in their local area of Lilydale. They felt there was potential for a company that offered a variety of theatre genres and formats, and to present their shows in the well-equipped Lilydale Heights Secondary College auditorium.

Rosemary sees the company’s ‘warmth and inclusiveness’ as a strength, and also their short performance seasons of six or seven shows, which recognises the time-poor issue for many amateur theatre participants these days. The company is also proud of its youth membership in the group YouthARK Theatre, which has produced several shows. When asked about the transformative nature of amateur theatre, Rosemary replied ‘it is community building and spirit building’. She spoke of the bonds and friendships formed, relationships tested, then strengthened, and the challenges set which may or may not be met, which all culminate in a transformative experience for the individual or group.

Bunjil Place

Moving from one of Victoria’s most recent theatre companies to the state’s most recently built major performance venue. The beautiful eight-hundred-seat theatre Bunjil Place is part of an entertainment precinct located in Narre Warren, architecturally inspired by the
wedge-tailed eagle known as Bunjil. According to parable-like stories of the First Nation People, Bunjil ‘floated above the earth and brought the world and life into existence’.

While this large theatre will be challenging for amateur theatre companies to fill, it is splendid that theatre-makers and patrons can enjoy live theatre in this state-of-the-art venue.

Victoria’s newest state-of-the-art community performance venue, Bunjil Place, located at 2 Patrick Drive, Narre Warren, Victoria. Photography: Duncan Threadgold.

Other companies formed from 2000 to 2018, include Tangled Web Productions, Moonlite Theatre, Dionysus Theatre, Bottled Snail Productions, Class Act Productions Youth Theatre, Lightbox Productions, PEP Productions, Purely Pensive Productions, Fab Nobs Theatre, Skin Of Our Teeth Productions, Seymour Performers’ Workshop, Old Carey Performing Arts Club (OCPAC), OsMaD (Old Scotch Music and Drama), Oxagen Productions, Three’s a Crowd, University of Melbourne Music Theatre Association and Western Arts Theatre.
Conclusion

Researching and writing this story brings great satisfaction to be giving something back to the Victorian amateur theatrical arts sector in exchange for the joy experienced by so many participants. Coincidentally, it is now sixty years since I first trod the boards in J. Beresford Fowler’s ‘A Must for Dolly’ at the Arrow Theatre.

The sequestered treasure-trove of history, culture and personal recollections has now been revealed and documented for others to build on in the future. As researcher and story-teller, I have the utmost admiration for Victoria’s amateur theatre practitioners who dedicate large parts of their lives to create the magic of theatre for local audiences. In doing so, they too personally benefit by enjoying creative expression, sharing and strengthening talents and skills in a collaborative team environment, and achieving goals regardless of social or professional status. These multi-faceted strands associated with amateur theatre entwine within the creative heart and soul fabric of Victorian towns and cities to enhance the cultural experiences, sociability, health and physical well-being of many hundreds of residents.

The stories shared by theatre-makers in Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria have confirmed amateur theatre to be a transformative arts sector. It is part of a continuum which, having already survived two world wars and the Great Depression, will hopefully be everlasting. A life force phenomenon which is truly a sparkling component of Bertolt Brecht’s whole ‘living organism’ of theatre.109

Amatorem – theatre-making ‘for the love of it’.
List of Plates

Front Cover


Chapter One

*The Scarborough.* Voyage from New South Wales to Canton in the year 1788, with views of the islands discovered. By Thomas Gilbert London, 1789.
Image by courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales.


Theatre Playbill. For the Benefit of J. Butler and W. Bryant: at the Theatre, Sydney on July 30, 1796, will be performed ‘Jane Shore’ … after the play ‘The Wapping Landlady’ and ‘The Miraculous Cure’.
George Hughes, nla.obj- RBRS N 686.2099441 F692.
Image by courtesy of National Library of Australia.


Modern-day interior of the Athenaeum Theatre, 188 Collins Street, Melbourne. Image by courtesy of the Athenaeum Theatre.


Advertisement in the Bairnsdale Courier newspaper, August 1874, promoting *The Area Belle*. By courtesy of the East Gippsland Historical Society Collection.

**Chapter Two**


World War One soldiers at a Broadmeadows camp being entertained by enlisted Salvation Army Bandsmen, with supporting Salvation Army officers looking on, c.1916. Image by courtesy of the Salvation Army, Territorial Archivist, Lindsay Cox.

Girls and Salvation Army Officers from the Glenroy Girls Home at the Broadmeadows Military Camp (with unidentified Military Officer) to present a concert to World War One troops in training in 1915. Image by courtesy of the Salvation Army, Territorial Archivist Lindsay Cox.

Informal group portrait of Prisoners of War POW artists and committee members of the Gustrow Bing Boys at Gustrow Prisoner of War Camp, North Germany, 8 September, 1918. Collection No.PO1981.038. Image by courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.


The Hut Theatre. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

The Hut Gallery. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

The Lysterfield Progress Hall, before renovation. Rented from Sherbrooke Shire Council in 1965, opened as The 1812 in 1966. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

The 1812 Theatre in Lysterfield after a fire in June, 1971. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

The Festival Theatre, Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

The 1812 Theatre, Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully. Image by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

Chris Procter of The 1812 Theatre. Photograph by courtesy of The 1812 Theatre.

Brett Randall ca 1950, brochure by Bernard Kearns, State Library Victoria Manuscripts.

Program cover and Foreword of the 1937 production *The Girl from Kay’s*, celebrating the Myer Silver Anniversary. Images by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.

**Chapter Three**

*Hiawatha* Cast, Melbourne, 1939. Royal Exhibition Building (REB), Melbourne City Council (MCC) (Organiser of Event). Royal Exhibition Building Collection. HT 35085. Image by courtesy of Museums Victoria Collections.

The Courthouse Theatre, Ballarat (former Ballarat Supreme Court House), Image by courtesy of the Ballarat National Theatre. Photography: Liana Skewes.

Swan Hill Memorial Theatre, 47 McCrae Street, Swan Hill. Image by courtesy of David Quayle, Swan Hill Theatre Group.

Interior of Swan Hill Memorial Theatre. Image by courtesy of David Quayle, Swan Hill Theatre Group.

Twelve-mirror make-up area backstage of Swan Hill Memorial Theatre. Image by courtesy of David Quayle.

David Quayle, Swan Hill Theatre Company.

Lorraine Madsen and Graham Hunter in Mordialloc Theatre Company’s production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* presented in 1965.
Image by courtesy of the Mordialloc Theatre Company.

Lorraine Madsen, Image by courtesy of the Mordialloc Theatre Company.

Juliet Hayday, President, Mordialloc Theatre Company in 2018.
Image by courtesy of Juliet Hayday.


Image by courtesy of MLOC Productions.


Ellis Ebell, Life Member of Williamstown Little Theatre. Image by courtesy of Williamstown Little Theatre.


Stained glass inserts over front entrance to the Foster War Memorial Arts Centre, representing all genres of the performing arts. Created by Catherine Blamey Wheeler. Photography: Robert Paragreen. Image by courtesy of Foster Arts, Music and Drama Association.

Jennifer Paragreen, Life Member, Foster Arts, Music and Drama Association. Image by courtesy of Jennifer Paragreen.

Chapter Four

Theatre writer, director, stage manager and performer Jack Beresford Fowler, 1966.
Photographer unknown.

Cover of theatre program for *A Must For Dolly* written and directed by J. Beresford Fowler at the Arrow Theatre, 31st October, 1958.

Program for *A Must for Dolly*, 31st October, 1958, written and directed by J. Beresford Fowler.
Commemorative plaque for The Arrow Theatre, 1-3 Armstrong Street, Middle Park. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.


Entrance to the new Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo, formerly the Sandhurst Gaol. Images by courtesy of Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo. Copyright: Peter Clark Photography.

Interior view of the Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo, one of the largest regional theatres in Australia. Photo by courtesy of the Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo. Copyright: Peter Clark Photography.


Period costume display on mezzanine floor of Heidelberg Theatre, 36 Turnham Avenue, Rosanna. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.

Beaumaris Players present *An Evening in the Garden* in 1957 as the final production at the home of Angela and Bill Martin, Talbot House, 34 Cromer Road, Beaumaris before moving to the new theatre. Photograph by courtesy of Beaumaris Theatre Archives.

Beaumaris Theatre: *Table Manners* (by Alan Ayckbourn) presented in 1996 at 82 Wells Road, Beaumaris. Performers: Derek Curd (Norman) and Debbie Keyt (Ruth). Director: Graham Eddie. Image by courtesy of Beaumaris Theatre.

Strathmore Community Hall, Loeman Street, Strathmore. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.

Mary Little, co-founder of the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG). Photograph by courtesy of Cenarth Fox.


Program cover of the musical comedy *The Red Sombrero*, presented by Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions at Brunswick Town Hall in October, 1956. Photo by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.
Program Content for *The Red Sombrero*, presented by Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions at the Brunswick Town Hall in October, 1956. Image by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.

President of BLOC Music Theatre Jason Muller with his father Jim Muller, backstage with Greased Lightning for the company’s 2009 production of *Grease*. Image by courtesy of Jason Muller.

A scene from Malvern Theatre Company’s sixtieth anniversary production of *Twentieth Century*, presented in 2017 at 29 Burke Road, East Malvern. Cast (from left): Maree Barnett (Lily Garland), Andrew Ferguson (Dr. Lockwood), Julie Arnold (Ida Webb), Andrew Walker (Owen O’Malley), Lindsay Fletcher (Oscar Jaffe) and Simon Cooper (The Conductor). Photography: Lorraine Bell. Image by courtesy of Malvern Theatre Company.


The cast of the Shell Dramatic Club’s production of *Castle in the Air*, including a screening of ‘Now or Never’ on 29th April, 1958, presented at Shell Corner. Image by courtesy of Frank Van Straten AM.


Michael Mace, founder of the Adelphi Theatre Company, with Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) at Government House, Melbourne, in the 2018 Australia Day Honours List. Image by courtesy of Michael Mace.

Grant Alley OAM joined CLOC Musical Theatre in 1969. Image by courtesy of Grant Alley.

The National Theatre, 20 Carlisle Street, St Kilda. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.


Elspeth and Tony Baisman of the Windmill Theatre Company. Image by courtesy of Tony Baisman.

Performance venue for the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group at the State Coal Mine, Wonthaggi, with a new foyer in the front. Image by courtesy of David Wall, Wonthaggi Theatrical Group.
Chapter Five


Michael Bula, co-founder of Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated. Image by courtesy of Michael Bula.


Steven Edwards (Ko Ko), Jenny Wakefield (Katisha) and Nick Durbridge (The Mikado) rehearse for the Diamond Valley Singers’ 2017 production of *The Mikado*. Image by courtesy of Dr Ian Lowe, The Diamond Valley Singers.

Dr Ian Lowe, Co-Founder of The Diamond Valley Singers. Image by courtesy of The Diamond Valley Singers.

Co-Founder of Peridot Theatre Edna Bartlett and her husband Gordon. Image by courtesy of Vivien Gunn.


Peridot Theatre’s 2018 President, Alison Knight. Photo by courtesy of Alison Knight.

Program cover for *Dimboola*, April, 1997.


Phillip A. Mayer, founder of the Here, There and Everywhere theatre company, in the *Speaking Alone Monologues* in September, 2017. Image by courtesy of Phillip A. Mayer.


Doreen Jamieson-Sargentson prepares for a performance with the Heidelberg Allstars. Image by courtesy of Doreen Jamieson-Sargentson.

Bill Rendall of Encore Theatre Company. Image by courtesy of Bill Rendall.

Kevin Trask of Encore Theatre Company. Image by courtesy of Kevin Trask.
John Davidson in the principle role of Corny Collins in Aspect’s 2013 production of *Hairspray* at the Shirley Burke Theatre, Parkdale. Image by courtesy of Aspect Theatre Company.

**Chapter Six**

Program cover and first page for *Christmas Panto-Revue*, presented by Beaumaris Theatre at 82 Wells Road, Beaumaris in November, 2003. Written and directed by Cheryl Threadgold.

‘Outstanding Volunteer Award’ from Murray Thompson MP, Member for Sandringham, Parliament of Victoria for the research, writing and direction of *The Jewel by the Sea*.

‘Everything’s Coming Up Roses’. Cheryl Threadgold in a segment from *Gypsy* in a MOTTS Variety Theatre show in Hampton in 2004.


Cast of the *Harrow Sound and Light Show*, painted by Ron Penrose. Image by courtesy of Ron Penrose.

Mitchell Stewart (Clyde) and Emily Hansford (Bonnie) in *Bonnie and Clyde*, presented by the Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC) in 2017. Photo by courtesy of the Cardinia Performing Arts Company.

Lee Geraghty, Co-founder and Administrator of the Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC). Photo by courtesy of Lee Geraghty.

Peter and Margaret Wills, Footlight Theatre Productions, Geelong. Image by courtesy of Peter Wills.


Jeannie Haughton, co-founder and Artistic Director of Off the Leash Theatre, East Gippsland. Image by courtesy of Jeannie Haughton.


Co-founders of LOTS Theatre Incorporated, Cheryl Threadgold (left), Jim Williams and Artistic Director, Maggie Morrison. Photography: Malcolm Threadgold.

Victoria’s newest state-of-the-art community performance venue, Bunjil Place, located at 2 Patrick Drive, Narre Warren, Victoria. Photography: Duncan Threadgold.
Reference List

**Introduction**


2 Ibid.


**Chapter One**


5 Irvin, E 1971, *Theatre Comes to Australia*, University of Queensland Press, Queensland, p. vi.


15 Love, p. 11.


18 Love, p. 7.


21 Irvin 1971, p. 203.


25 Brisbane, p. 38.

26 Her Majesty’s Ballarat 2018, ‘Her Majesty’s Presents’.

27 Culture Victoria 2016, ‘Lola Montez and Her Notorious Spider Dance’.


29 Scott, W 2000, p. 310.


32 Kuch, p. 109.

33 Peters, HC 1856-1859, Manuscript containing a scrapbook of newspaper reviews of amateur shows presented on the goldfields, 1 vol. MS 12229, MS Box 2825/7 (a), Heritage Collections Room, State Library of Victoria, n.p.


36 Collins English Dictionary 2017, Definition of ‘mosh pit’.

37 Peters, HC, Ibid.


39 Peters, HC, Ibid.


42 *Stage Whispers* 2013, ‘Reviews’.


44 Bradfield, RA 1976, *They Trod the Boards, How the Dramatic Arts Burgeoned on Forest Creek in 1857*, Bradfield, Castlemaine, Victoria, pp. 1, 2, 6, 11.

45 Castlemaine Theatre Company 2017, ‘History’.

46 Stones, K & McLeod, K 2016, Field research interview with Kate Stones and Ken McLeod for Castlemaine Theatre Company, on Saturday, 19 November, 2016 at 2.00pm in Castlemaine.


50 Tarnagulla.com 2000, ‘Dedicated to the History of Tarnagulla’.
51 Gordon, D 2012, Ibid.


54 Tarnagulla 2014, ‘Tarnagulla and Surrounds’.


59 Adams, pp. 60, 78.


61 Parsons, Ibid.


65 Bradfield, p. 12.


71 South Gippsland 2018, ‘Mount Best’.


73 The Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company 2017, ‘About the Theatre’.


75 Baragwanath & James, pp. 369-373.

76 Moreland City Council 2017, ‘Mechanics Institute Performing Arts Centre’.


78 Athenaeum Theatre 2018, ‘About the Athenaeum’.


82 Kirby-Smith, pp. 11-12.


84 Melbourne Theatre History 2019, ‘Royal Pavilion Saloon - also known as The Pavilion Theatre - Theatre Royal - Royal Victoria Theatre’ (n.p.).

85 Colligan, M 2008, ‘Queen’s Theatre’, produced and published by the School of Historical & Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, (n.p.).


89 The Garrick Club 2017, ‘About the Garrick Club’.

90 Adams 1987, p. 146.


97 British Musical Theatre 2016, Chilpéric.


99 Adams 1987, pp. 93, 94, 146.

100 Porter, H 1977, Portrait of an Australian Country Town, John Ferguson, St Ives, New South Wales, pp. 151, 152, 200, 226, 231.


102 Gibson, S 2016, History of the re-formed Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company.

103 Gottschalk, H & Gibson, S 2016, Field Research interview with Helen Gottschalk and Susan Gibson for Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company on Thursday, 24 March, 2016 at 9.30am in Bairnsdale.


Gilbert and Sullivan Archive 2015, 'The Mikado'.


Litchfield, N 2013, Stage Whispers, ‘Our Early Amateurs’.


Williams, 1983, pp. 57, 60, 76.

Kirby-Smith, V 1969, pp. 49, 82.

Rees 1978, p. 20.


Kirby-Smith 199, pp. 98-99.

Chapter Two


3 The Salvation Army 2017, ‘Australia’s First Film Studio’, The Salvation Army, Australian Southern Territory.


6 Fogarty, 2003, Ibid.


17 Rees, p. 114.

18 Fitzpatrick, pp. 84, 91, 92, 96, 97.


22 Fitzpatrick, p. 91.

23 Brighton Theatre Company 2017, ‘Season Two – Hats Off!’

25 Ashbolt, ‘McMahon’.

26 Walker, pp. 24, 25.


31 McNair, A & Walsh, C 2016, Field research interview Alison McNair and Carolyn Walsh for the Maffra Dramatic Society on Saturday, 14 May, 2016 in Sale.


33 Trove 2017, ‘For auld lang syne! Australia will be there’, National Library of Australia.

34 Walsh 2018, Email received from Carolyn Walsh 22 March, 2018.


38 Cox, L 2017, Field research interview with Lindsay Cox, Territorial Archivist, The Salvation Army.


41 Arts Centre Melbourne, Research Centre 2017, Research undertaken on 18 April, 2017, with Assistant Curator, Nicole Bowller.

43 Kirby-Smith, pp. 160, 97.


46 Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past & the Institute of Historical Research 2007, ‘Performance and performativity’, The bi-centenary of the slave trade is commemorated in Britain, Arts and Humanities Council, the University of York.


53 Arts Centre Melbourne 2018, ‘Our History’.


55 Rees, pp. 122, 123.

56 Fitzpatrick, p.187.


58 Fitzpatrick, pp. 187-188.

59 Kirby-Smith, pp. 161, 164, 165, 178, 182, 188.


63 Fitzpatrick, pp. 236, 253.

Rees, p. 127.

Fitzpatrick, p. 253.

Ashbolt, 1986.


Parsons, pp. 350, 351.


Parsons, p. 350.


Pendock, S & Webb, C 2016, Field research interview with Susanne Pendock and Cheryl Webb for Red Cliffs Players.


Rees, p. 155.


Bridges, N 1980, *Curtain Call*, as told to Frank Crook, Cassell Australia Ltd., New South Wales and Victoria, p. 52.

Richardson, J 2015, Theatre memorabilia from Mr. John Richardson.


Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC) 2018, ‘Ryrie Street Redevelopment’.
86 Eaton, B 2016, Field research interview with Bryan Eaton for Geelong Repertory Theatre Company.


88 Donald, C 2016, Field research interview with Colin Donald for The Hartwell Players.

89 Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Victoria 2017, ‘Welcome to the Archive’.


94 The 1812 Theatre 2016, ‘History of 1812’.

95 1812 Theatre 2016, Field research interview with Chris Procter for The 1812 Theatre.

96 Hickling, A 2015, ‘The Ghost Train- all aboard the world’s scariest play’, *The Guardian*.

97 Richardson, J 2015, Ibid.


99 Library Thing 2017, *The Queen’s Husband*.

100 Dean, J F 2017, *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in 20th Century Ireland*, Google Books, p. 120.


Love, Hall of Fame.

107 Kirby-Smith, pp. 64, 65, 245.

108 Richardson 2015.

109 Coalstad, G 1950, Theatre in Victoria (for the Council of Adult Education), Cheshire,
Melbourne 1950, p. 34.


111 Parsons, p. 395.

112 Miller, G 1998, Record Crowds! Many Standing! The Fabulous History of Red Cliffs

113 Bradley, P, Gittins, R & Wood, C 2016, Field research interview with Pamela
Bradley, Russell Gittins and Cyndy Wood for the Red Cliffs Musical Society
Incorporated on Thursday, 31 March, 2016 at 2.30pm at the Powerhouse Rehearsal Space
Club Rooms, Mildura.

114 Harper, K 1984, ‘The Useful Theatre: The new Theatre Movement in Sydney and
Melbourne 1935–1983’, Meanjin, vol. 43, no. 1, University of Melbourne, Parkville,

115 AusStage 2017, ‘Till the Day I Die’, an anti-fascist play by Clifford Odets presented
by the Melbourne Workers Theatre Group in 1936.

116 Glass, p. 6.

117 Ibid.

cover and Foreword.


120 McGuire et al. 1948, p. 178.

121 Gamble, B 2011, ‘On this Day: Australia at War’, Australian Geographic.

Chapter Three

1 Australian War Memorial 2017, ‘Guide to the Entertainment for the Troops Collection’.

2 Cox, L 2017, Field research interview with Lindsay Cox, Territorial Archivist, The
Salvation Army.


10 Reserve Bank of Australia 2019, ‘Pre-Decimal Inflation Calculator’.


16 Ashmore, R 2016, Field research interview with Robyn Ashmore for Ballarat National Theatre.


18 Quayle, D 2016, Field research interview with David Quayle for Swan Hill Theatre Group.

19 Heidelberg Theatre Company 2016, Scrapbook Number 1, City of Heidelberg National Theatre Branch.


22 Melbourne Theatre History 2018, ‘Melbourne Little Theatre: Little Theatre Laboratory of Dramatic Art, St Chad’s Church, St Martin’s Theatre, St Martin’s Youth Theatre.


25 Mahoney, R & Henkel, L 2016, Field research interview with Rhonda Mahoney and Lorraine Henkel for The Colac Players.


28 Dupleix, T 2016, Field research interview with Tony Dupleix for Camperdown Theatre Company.


30 Copeland, D & McCall, C 2016, Field research interview with David Copeland and Carol McCall for Frankston Theatre Group.


33 Kingston Arts 2018, ‘Allan Mclean Hall’.

34 Mordialloc Theatre Company 2017.


36 Marriott, G 2016, Field research interview with Graeme Marriott for MLOC Productions.

38 Lyons, N, Celegon, C & Broadfoot, J 2016, Field research interview with Naomi Lyons, Chris Celegon and Jane Broadfoot for Mildura Theatre Company.


40 Colliver, J & R 2016, Field research interview with Jan and Ron Colliver for Portland CEMA Theatre Group.

41 Tuck, H 2016, Email from Heather Tuck dated 25 August, 2016, regarding research in the Warrnambool Heritage Centre.


43 Stonehouse, A, Johnson, M & Tuck, H 2016, Field research interview regarding the Warrnambool Theatre Company.


46 Ebell, E 2016, Field research interview with Ellis Ebell for Williamstown Little Theatre.


49 Paragreen, J 2016, Field research interview with Jennifer Paragreen for FAMDA (Foster Art, Music and Drama Association).


51 Paragreen, Ibid.


Chapter Four


2 Australian War Memorial 2017, ‘Deaths as a Result of Service with Australian Units’.


5 City of Port Philip, ‘The Arrow Theatre’, Heritage Recognition Program.


7 Film Reference 2017, ‘Zoe Caldwell Biography (1933- )’.


9 Parsons 1995, Ibid.


Drowley, W 2016, Interview with Wendy Drowley for the Heidelberg Theatre Company.

Keyt, D 2016, Interview with Debbie Keyt on Friday, 15 January 2016 at Beaumaris Theatre, Beaumaris.


Armstrong, G 2016, Field research interview with Gail Armstrong for the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG).


Coalstad, G 1950, p. 33.

Melbourne Theatre History 2018, ‘Melbourne Little Theatre: The Laboratory of Dramatic Art – St Chad’s Church – St Martin’s Theatre – St Martin’s Youth Theatre.

Babirra Music Theatre 2017, ‘History’,

Davies, O 2016, Field research interview with Owen Davies for Babirra Music Theatre.


Music Theatre Guild of Victoria 2018, ‘Edith Harrhy Award’.


Muller, J 2016, Field research interview with Jason Muller for BLOC Music Theatre.

Parr, B 2009, ‘How It All Began’, the history of Malvern Theatre Company.
Bell, L 2016, Field research interview with Lorraine Bell for Malvern Theatre Company.


Owen, C & Rothwell, B 2016, Interview with Bonnie Rothwell and Carol Owen for Eltham Little Theatre.


La Mama Theatre 2017, ‘About La Mama’.


Mace, M 2016, Field research interview with Michael Mace for the Adelphi Theatre Company.


Horwood, B & Treveney, A 2016, Field research interview with Beverley Horwood and Alison Treveney on 20 November, 2016 in Ballarat.

58 Russell, L 2015, City Kid, Creative Text Solutions, Australia, pp. 1, 91.


60 CLOC Musical Theatre 2016, ‘About’.

61 Alley, G 2015, Interview with Grant Alley OAM on 15 December, 2015 at CLOCworks, 230 Kingston Road, Heatherton, Victoria.


64 Ingles, D & Tomkins, W 2016, field research interview for Geelong Lyric Theatre Society, on Friday, 20 May, 2016 at 1.30pm at the Woodbin Theatre, 15 Coronation St., Geelong.

65 Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC) 2017, ‘Live Theatre, It’s Personal’.

66 Tattersall, D 2016, Field research interview on Friday, 26 February, 2016 at 10.00am at the Leongatha Lyric Theatre Clubrooms, 13 Watsons Road, Leongatha, Victoria.

67 Baisman, T & E 2016, Field Research interview for Windmill Theatre Company at The Depot, Henry St., Pakenham on Saturday, 27 February, 2016 at 2.00pm.


69 Thompson, A 2016, Field research interview with Alan Thompson for Wyndham Theatre Company.

70 Wonthaggi Theatrical Group 2016, ‘About’.

71 Wall, D 2016, Field Research interview with David Wall for the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group.

Chapter Five


5 Higgs, J 2015, Stranger Than We Can Imagine: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century, Hachette, United Kingdom, p. 284.


7 Hair 2014, ‘Welcome to the Official Hair Website! New York City!’, the American tribal love-rock musical.


10 Samuel French Incorporated 2019, ‘Calendar Girls’.

11 StageAgent 2019, ‘Rock of Ages’.

12 State Library Victoria 2017, ‘Germaine Greer & The Female Eunuch’.


14 Australian Government 2007, ‘Highlights in Australian Theatre History’.

15 La Mama Theatre 2017, ‘About La Mama’.


18 Australian Government 2007, Ibid.


20 La Mama Theatre 2017, ‘La Mama Turns 50’.


23 Andrews, S 2016, Email on behalf of Sunshine Community Theatre Incorporated, received 12 January, 2016.


26 Williamson, A 2016, Field research interview with Adrienne Williamson about Altona City Theatre (ACT).


28 Kennedy, B 2013, ‘As It Happened 30 Years On After the Ash Wednesday Bushfires in Macedon and Mt Macedon’, Herald Sun, February 19, 2013.


31 Medimime Productions Incorporated 2014, Theatre program for Cinderella, 40th anniversary show.

32 Lester, L 2016, Email interview, Medimime Productions Incorporated.


39 Hinrichsen, D 2016, Field research interview for Essendon Theatre Company.

40 Bula, M 2016, Field research interview for Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated.

41 Sedgley, G 2016, Field research interview with Gail Sedgley for the Port Fairy Theatre Group.

42 Travel Victoria 2017, ‘Port Fairy: General Information’.

43 Monument Australia 2017, ‘S.S. Casino’.


Travel Victoria 2017, ‘Creswick’.


Cole, C B 2016, Field research interview with Carol Cole for Creswick Theatre Company.


Diamond Valley Singers 2016, ‘About the Diamond Valley Singers’.


Peridot Theatre Incorporated 2017, ‘Who We Are’.

Bartlett, E, Bartlett, G & Briggs, D 2016, Field research interview for Peridot Theatre.

Crawford 2016, Email received from Barbara Crawford, 29 November, 2018.

Gunn, V 2016, Email from Vivien Gunn received 1 October, 2016, advising the death of her mother, Edna Bartlett.

Bergman, S 2016, Field research interview with Susan Bergman regarding BATS Theatre Company.

Bunjil Place 2017, ‘Find Out More’.


The Victorian Drama League 2019, ‘Home’.


67 Music Theatre Guild of Victoria 2017, Program for 31st annual ‘Bruce Awards’ Presentation at the Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo on 9 December, 2017, p. 3.


70 Lyrebird Youth Award 2017, ‘2015 Lyrebird Youth Awards’.

71 Mayer, PA, Field research interview with Phillip Mayer for the Here, There and Everywhere Theatre Company.


74 Heidelberg Allstars 2017, ‘About Us’.

75 Sargentson D & Sargentson, R 2016, Field research interview with Doreen and Richard Sargentson for Heidelberg Allstars.

76 Sargentson, D 2016, Email received 4 April, 2016 advising of the death of Richard Sargentson.

77 Trask, K & Rendall, B, Field research interview with Kevin Trask and Bill Rendall for Encore Theatre Company Incorporated.


79 Angliss, T & Egan, J 2016, Field research interview with Trish Angliss and John Egan for Aspect Theatre.

80 Patterson, G 2016, Field research interview with Graeme Patterson regarding Warragul Theatre Company.


84 Teague, J 2016, Field research interview with Jeanette Teague for MOARTZ.

86 Harrow, Victoria, Australia 2017, ‘Harrow by Night – Sound & Light Show’.

87 Penrose, R 2017, Telephone interview with Ron Penrose regarding the Harrow Sound and Light Show.


89 Houldcroft, L & Hickman, N 2016, Field research interview with Lyn Houldcroft and Nicole Hickman for Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group.

90 Jettner, C & Henkel, L 2016, Field research interview with Cherise Jettner and Lorraine Henkel for Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe.

91 Geraghty, L 2016, Field research interview for Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC).

92 Doolan, M & Baker, M 2016, Field research interview with Maryanne Doolan and Michael Baker for the Torquay Theatre Troupe.

93 Wills, P 2016, Field research interview with Peter Wills for Footlight Productions.


95 Friends of Black Rock House Incorporated 2017, ‘Welcome to the Friends of Black Rock House Website’.

96 CenterStage Geelong 2017, ‘An Ethical Community Theatre Company’.

97 Greenwood, D 2016, Field Research interview with David Greenwood for CenterStage Geelong.

98 Haughton, J 2016, Field research interview with Jeannie Haughton for Off the Leash Theatre Company Incorporated.

99 Morrison, M 2016, Field research interview with Maggie Morrison for LOTS Theatre Incorporated.


101 Clark, S 2016, Field research interview with Stephanie Clark for Impact Youth Theatre on Saturday.


103 Fraser, D 2016, Field research interview with Debbie Fraser regarding G.S.O.D.A. Incorporated.

105 University of Melbourne Student Union 2018, ‘Union House Theatre, Semester2 Program’.

106 Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) 2018, Burwood Student Theatre Company (BuST Co.).

107 Monash Student Association 2018, Monash Uni Student Theatre (MUST).


Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria

Exegesis

By Cheryl Threadgold

Submitted in fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swinburne University of Technology, 2019.
# Exegesis

## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Concept and Background</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur Theatre</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Title</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Theatre</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School and Youth Theatre Productions</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefact and Exegesis</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefact and Exegesis ‘Speak’ to Each Other</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Exegesis</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writerly Voices</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Nonfiction Writing Practice</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autofiction</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journal</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents of the Exegesis</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section One: The Amateur Theatre</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Amateur Theatre</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of English Theatre to the Australian Scene</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Colonial Theatre in Australia</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convict Era</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Recruiting Officer</em> Production (1789)*</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre as a Cultural Message</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Melbourne Amateur Theatre and Children’s Performance Classes...</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Pantomime, Melodrama, Vaudeville and Variety Theatre ......</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nineteenth Century Colonial Australian Playwrights</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mechanics’ Institutes ................................................................. 356
Neglect of Amateur Theatre Research .................................... 358
British Research Project: ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in
Time and Space’ .................................................................. 362
Cultural Heritage .................................................................. 363
Funding for Amateur Theatre .................................................. 365
Positive Acknowledgement for Amateur Theatre ...................... 368
Regional Theatre .................................................................. 371
From Amateur to Professional Theatre .................................... 374

Section Two: Positioning Amateur Theatre in Victoria’s Theatrical
Scene ................................................................................... 376
  Commercial Theatre .............................................................. 376
  Independent Theatre ............................................................ 377
    Alternate Theatre ................................................................ 377
    Experimental Theatre ....................................................... 378
    Community Theatre ......................................................... 379
    Indigenous Theatre .......................................................... 380
    Multicultural Theatre ....................................................... 382
  Amateur Theatre ................................................................. 383
    Cultural Economics and Sociability ................................... 383
    Materialities .................................................................... 386
    Community Health and Wellbeing .................................... 388
    Transformative Benefits ................................................... 389

Seeking an Accurate Name for Volunteer Theatre ..................... 390
  ‘Little Theatre’ ................................................................. 391
  ‘Repertory Theatre’ ............................................................ 393
  ‘Art Theatre’ ..................................................................... 394
  ‘Non-Professional Theatre’ .................................................. 394
  ‘Local Theatre’ ................................................................. 395
  ‘Am Dram’ ....................................................................... 395
  ‘Social Theatre’ ................................................................. 395
  ‘Community Theatre’ ........................................................ 395
  ‘Amateur Theatre’ ............................................................ 395

Section Three: Project Method and Methodology .................... 398
  Theatre History Research ..................................................... 398
  Practice Led Research (PLR) ................................................. 400
    Ethnography ..................................................................... 401
    Autoethnography ............................................................. 403
    Quantitative and Qualitative Research ................................. 405
    Field Research Interviews ................................................. 406
Appendix 4: Analysed Research Data: ‘Weaknesses’ ........................................518
Appendix 5: Detailed Legend of Graph Two: ‘Weaknesses’ .........................519
Appendix 6: Analysed Research Data: ‘Threats’ ........................................520
Appendix 7: Detailed Legend of Graph Three: ‘Threats’ ............................521
Appendix 8: Analysed Research Data: ‘Transformative Benefits’ ..............525
Appendix 9: Legend of Graph: ‘Transformative Benefits’ ........................526
Appendix 10: Analysed Research Data: ‘Show Selection Criteria’ ..........528
Appendix 11: Legend of Graph: Show Selection Criteria ........................529
Appendix 12: Theatre Companies Interviewed for this Project ..................533
Appendix 13: Currently Operating Theatre Companies Not Interviewed for this Project ..................................................................................................................535
Appendix 14: Past Amateur Theatre Companies in Victoria .................537

Front Cover Image: Bunjil Place, Victoria’s newest state-of-the-art community theatrical venue, located at 2 Patrick Drive, Narre Warren, Victoria.
Photography: Duncan Threadgold.
Acknowledgements

I have been most fortunate to undertake this research project at Swinburne University of Technology with a first-class supervisory team. Sincere thanks to my Principal Supervisor, Professor Josie Arnold for her wonderful skilled mentoring, patience and encouragement. Many thanks also to Associate Supervisors Dr Catherine Farrell and Dr Julia Prendergast, for their splendid input and motivation.

Grateful appreciation is also extended to Dr Rosemary Dub, Dr Carolyn Beasley, Associate Professor Dominique Hecq, Dr Catherine Glover and Dr Rachael Hains-Wesson for their earlier inspiration and advice.

This project could not have happened without the support of Malcolm Threadgold, particularly when travelling to regional areas in Victoria for field research interviews. Thanks to Malcolm and our family and friends for understanding the many hours of involvement required to work on this research project.

The executive committee and members of the Victorian Drama League, the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria and Theatre Heritage Australia have kindly endorsed this project with their support. I regard this as a big honour and hope they are pleased with the final result.

Hats off to the dedicated, passionate members of Victoria’s amateur theatrical arts sector. In particular, thanks so much to those who re-arranged their daily schedules to attend interviews, or shared personal memorabilia and knowledge.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed in any way to establish this first-known historical and cultural lineage of amateur theatre in Victoria.
Declaration

I declare that the content of the examinable outcome for this PhD by artefact and exegesis contains no material which has been accepted for an award to the candidate by any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; and, where work is based on joint research or publications, discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

The content of this artefact and exegesis was proof-read by Camilla Klesman, undertaken in accordance with current Australian Standards for Editing Practice. The work undertaken was restricted to Standard D (Language and Illustrations) and Standard E (Completeness and Consistency). No advice was given on Standard C (Substance and Structure).

Signed: 

Introduction

This PhD research project has investigated and established the first known historical and cultural lineage of amateur theatre in Victoria, from Australian early colonial settlement in 1788 through to 2018. The project also addresses an existing gap in the literature.

Using Practice Led Research (PLR) as the principal research mode, the artefact presents the project’s researched knowledge in the form of a publishable creative nonfiction book titled Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria. In partnership with the artefact, the exegesis establishes a scholarly, evaluative framework for the artefact content, using a more formal, academic tone of voice.

This project adds new and significant knowledge through asking and addressing the principal research question: Amateur theatre is a transformative arts sector which strengthens communities and benefits participants. To what extent did nineteenth and twentieth century amateur theatre exist in Victoria, and what unique, individual histories and cultures are inherent to musical and non-musical amateur theatre companies operating in Victoria today?

Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo (2004) believe the research question mediates a divide between theory and practice ‘that tugs at research in the creative and media arts’ (p. 12). Just as the working journal is regarded as the ‘connective link’ between the creative artefact and explanatory exegesis, the research question has been the mediating influence and inspiration to undertake a practical and theoretical investigation into the history and culture of amateur theatre in Victoria (Arnold 2012, p. 14).

To assist with answering the research line of enquiry, I have interviewed representatives from seventy amateur theatre companies in regional and urban Victoria. Existing operational Victorian theatre companies exceed one hundred, but impracticalities regarding interviewing every company for this project include geographical and temporal considerations, as well as abiding by word limits in university guidelines.
I am confident that research data from interviews with representatives from these musical and non-musical amateur theatre companies, of various sizes and locations, presents a satisfactory overall historical and cultural insight into the volunteer theatrical arts sector in this state. Analysed research data from these interviews, as documented in Section Three of the exegesis, indicates similarities in many of the respondents’ answers regarding strengths, weaknesses, threats, criteria for show selection and the transformative benefits of amateur theatre. This, I believe, reinforces the view that while individual amateur theatrical company histories remain unique, their attitudes, achievements, concerns and issues bear a common similarity.

All currently operational theatre companies in Victoria are acknowledged in the artefact under the era of their formation. The analysed research data in the form of graphs and explanatory graph legends is presented in the Appendix to this project. Also attached is a list of known past theatre companies to pay tribute to their existence.

Not included in this Victorian-based amateur theatre research are the school productions which increase in number and standard every year. In 2018, the Junior Panel judges of the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria attended a record number of fifty-six junior productions (Crawshaw 2018). This fast-developing school musical theatre arts sector in Victoria is becoming worthy of its own independent research study.

Until recently, the amateur theatrical arts sector has long been a neglected area of research in Australia and overseas countries such as England and Canada. In 2013, the British Government recognised the importance of researching amateur theatre in Britain and instigated a research program titled Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space (Nicholson et al. 2017). It is hoped this Victorian-based project may inspire a similar research investigation of amateur theatre on a national basis by the Australian Government.
**Project Concept and Background**

The initial concept for this project was to research the history of amateur theatre in Victoria, commencing in 1952 when the Victorian Drama League was formed. This was a pivotal milestone because, from that point, this organisation’s overarching support and guidance for amateur theatre groups saw the arts sector develop rapidly in Victoria. However, as Victoria’s amateur theatrical sector had already commenced more than one hundred years earlier, it was decided to commence the project in 1788 when convicts, free settlers and officers arrived in the then Colony of New South Wales and presented live performances.

Professional theatre did not exist in Australia at that time, and amateur theatre was the only form of entertainment for participants and spectators. It was a natural flow-on of English, Irish and other cultural influences from the various homelands of the free settlers, convicts and officers to permeate aspects of theatrical activity in that era. The cultural and artistic influences from these performative styles and choice of plays then carried through into Victoria’s fledgling amateur theatre arts sector in the nineteenth century.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of amateur theatre companies have been established in regional and metropolitan areas. While some may have experienced diminished life-spans, others are proud of their company’s longevity. Closure of these companies may have been influenced by lack of finances and/or volunteers. On the other hand, using a more merit-based analysis as per Nicholas Ridout’s terminology, these closures could represent ‘unreflective professionalism’ or ‘conditioned amateurism of the recreational hobby’ (Ridout 2013, p. 11).

A regenerative cycle has seen many new theatre companies form in Victoria, predominantly since the end of World War Two, and today these companies are joined by the increasingly strong presence of school and university theatrical productions. Four amateur theatre companies established during the 1930s and still operating today are The Gilbert and Sullivan Society (1935), The Hartwell Players (1938), The 1812 Theatre (1938) and Victoria’s oldest, the Geelong Repertory Theatre Company, established in

Amateur Theatre

In introducing the amateur theatrical arts sector to this exegesis, it was thought that the term ‘amateur theatre’ may conjure an image of incompetency. This is in keeping with Lisa Warrington’s (2013) reference to amateur theatre’s ‘derogatory’ undertone in her essay about the development of amateur theatre in Dunedin, New Zealand between 1862 and 1868 (p. 101). It is the negative connotations of ‘amateur’ that leads Warrington to suggest a perverse side to friends, acquaintances and reviewers who attend amateur shows in the hope the amateurs will ‘break down’ during a performance or get stuck or muddled in their parts (p. 106).

Fortunately, this is not the situation in Victoria today. From the perspective of the modern-day audience, amateur theatre usually provides a quality show in the local community at reasonable cost, often including free parking, a program and sometimes complimentary refreshments.

Project Title

An appropriate, accurate name for volunteer theatre has so far eluded linguists, but an innovative alternative is offered as part of this project title. The Latin-derived word Amatorem with its definition ‘to love’, represents the powerful driving force behind amateur theatre participation. Gail Burnaford (2012) researched American choral director Robert Shaw’s approach to amateur singers and discusses the origin of the term ‘amateur’ from the Latin word ‘amatorem’ or French word ‘amare’, which both mean ‘to love’, or ‘amator’, meaning ‘one who has a taste for something’ (p. 149). Robert Shaw believed in his amateur singers who loved to sing, just as thousands of amateur participants throughout Australia today love to act or sing and make theatre. The investigatory study for this project relates specifically to Victoria’s vibrant volunteer musical and non-musical theatrical arts sector, which involves theatre-making for the love of it.
A similar view of amateur theatre involvement is shared by Nadine Holdsworth et al. (2017), who point out from their English theatre research that a passion for this arts sector can be long-lasting and passed down through generations (p. 5).

While the term ‘amateur’ may be understood to have negative connotations of ‘incompetence’, it is historically accurate to describe unpaid theatrical participation. Use of the word ‘amatorem’ in the project title *Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria* is intended to capture the motivation of participants and detract from any negativity associated with the term ‘amateur’. Amateur theatre is defined in this project as an arts sector operated by unpaid volunteers, with the only exception arising if a production requires the specialised creative professional services of a director, musical director, choreographer, lighting director or musicians.

It is interesting to note that the British research team also encountered a dilemma when naming their project to investigate amateur theatre in England. After recognising the potential risk of offending theatre-makers by using the word ‘amateur’, and that some may regard the word ‘dramatics’ as old-fashioned, the project was titled ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’ (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 4). The researchers believe a focus on the word ‘amateur’ opens questions about why volunteer theatre-makers make theatre for the love of it.

For this project, it was decided to use the term ‘amateur’ after recognising its historical use over centuries to describe theatre involving unpaid participants. It is hoped this project’s principle title of *Amatorem*, meaning ‘to love’, will please volunteer theatre companies and supporters. At the same time, the term accurately represents an arts sector where unpaid participants make theatre for ‘the love of it’.

**Indigenous Theatre**

Live performances by Aboriginal Australians have been acknowledged at the beginning of this project as being the first known performances by communities for communities in Australia. This wonderful theatrescape of so many years ago would have provided Indigenous peoples with the opportunity to hear and view the culture, stories, songs and
cultural practices presented by two hundred and fifty different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations (Ilbijerri 2013, p. 9). Indigenous participation in Melbourne amateur theatre appears to have been minimal, but is discussed in Section Two of this project, as well as views from scholar Maryanne Casey. A more focused study is called for, but is not within the scope of this project.

_School and Youth Theatre Productions_

While school productions are not researched in this project, their varying effects on amateur theatre became apparent during field interviews. These effects include firstly the invaluable experience and training for students while performing in school productions. This also provides an opportunity for a smooth transition to join their local theatre company if continuing with theatre after school graduation.

The school theatres also offer well-equipped venues for hire to amateur groups, with proposed show dates scheduled around the school’s use of the theatre. This project’s research shows that the flow-on effects from school performances which currently impact on non-funded amateur theatre companies include an increased audience expectation for amateur theatre to do ‘better’, or at least have the same production values. Amateur theatre audience attendances are also affected, particularly in country towns, when the ‘ready-made’ school production audience comprising family members and friends, may not have sufficient disposable income to also attend their local amateur show.

The high standard of school productions is acknowledged by the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria through presenting Junior Awards in various categories, and segments are selected from several shows staged during the year to be performed in the Annual Awards Ceremony (Music Theatre Guild of Victoria 2016). The Victorian Drama League encourages youth performance by presenting annual youth workshops and programs (Victorian Drama League 2019). Youth Theatre is discussed in this project through interviews with representatives from two companies of varying size and style. Some youth groups, such as Altona City Theatre’s ACTion Youth Group, are integrated into a ‘parent’ theatre company in the same locality (Altona City Theatre 2017). Again, a more focused study is called for, but is not within the scope of this project.
Artefact and Exegesis

Artefact and Exegesis ‘Speak’ to Each Other

The artefact and exegesis ‘speak’ to each other throughout this project, which results in the occasional, unavoidable, repetition of information. For example, the exegesis responds to knowledge about Mechanics’ Institutes presented in the artefact by opening up scholarly discussion about Donald Barker’s (2002) reference to their being ‘an imported cultural institution’ (p. 247). Using a creative non-fiction writing practice and Practice Led Research (PLR) as the principle research mode, the artefact as knowledge presents the history and culture of amateur theatre in Victoria, commencing with early colonial theatre in Australia in 1788. Nigel Krauth (2011) suggests the entwined exegesis and artefact could be regarded as ‘plaited text’ (n.p.). According to Krauth, this idea of a ‘plaited text’ combining the product and an explanation of its content and process, affirms the author’s presence, and this exegetical affirmation retains ownership of the work for the author.

In another example, the artefact tells of the comedy The Recruiting Officer being presented in Sydney Cove in 1789. Thomas Keneally’s novel The Playmaker (1987) and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s (1991) play Our Country’s Good, both based on The Recruiting Officer, suggest the play was organised by officers and performed by convicts. The exegesis points out, however, that historian Robert Jordan’s (2002) research reveals theatre performance in that era was motivated instead by the convicts (p. 6). Praise from various scholars about the accuracy of Jordan’s research is included in the exegesis (Schafer 2005, p. 103; Webby 2002, p. 83).

Purpose of the Exegesis

The purpose of the exegesis is not to present a scholarly justification of the artefact, but to provide a framework that situates the artefact within a scholarly discourse (Arnold 2016, p. 152). Milech and Schilo (2004) support Josie Arnold’s view of the complementary role shared between the exegesis and artefact, by describing the two components as being ‘substantially integrated’ and forming a ‘whole’ (p. 9). When appraising the cultural artefact as a meme or cultural replicator, Estelle Barrett (2004)
believes that while the artefact itself is not a meme, it can be regarded as a vehicle for an idea to be externalised and processed (p. 2). The exegesis would then be viewed as a re-versioning of the creative artefact, providing the scholarly framework as discussed by Arnold. In this project, an example of such a framework is the gap in Australian amateur theatre literature identified in the exegesis, which is discussed more fully in Sections One and Two. In scholarly partnership, the artefact has responded within the academic framework to address this gap in the literature, focusing on Victorian amateur theatre, through research, data analysis and documentation.

**Writerly Voices**

Samuel Beckett recognises the flexibility required by writers to create voices in a text in his words ‘The writer is like a foetus trying to do gymnastics’ (Kroll 2004, n.p.). For this project, a formal tone has been used to accentuate the scholarly content of the exegesis, which contrasts with the less formal writing practice used to create a narrative for the artefact. Paul Williams (2016) questions why the exegesis cannot be written in a similar voice to the artefact, suggesting creative language would enhance research by adding a performative quality (n.p.). Williams does, however, concede there is already a fictive element in the authorial persona used by the writer to achieve the formal tone of an exegesis.

Williams observes that the language used for conventional discourse in this exegesis differs from an everyday non-academic language style. Jeri Kroll (2004) attributes the multiple voices of writers to their ‘functioning split personalities’ (p. 6). Examples of writers unthinkingly adopting different tones of voice to suit various everyday purposes are when recording the minutes of a committee meeting, writing a letter of complaint, a note of appreciation, a character reference, or in this case the exegetical interpretative framework for a creative artefact.

The occasional subjective viewpoint in the exegetical evaluation is to be avoided by writers confident in their knowledge presented in the artefact. Williams (2016) is concerned that when a writer claims authority of knowledge in their own creative
artefact, they risk eisegesis, which is ‘the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one’s own ideas’ (n.p.).

Another risk for writers to avoid is ‘pomposity’ in exegeses as described by Robert Nelson (2004). Nelson’s examples include explaining the creative work in a way that denies the spectator their own opinion, or mystifying the reader with obscure explanations. Yet scholarship does have an authoritative voice to represent knowledge, which is important for conveying credibility and effective scholarly communication.

**Literature Review**

The literature review for this project is incorporated throughout the exegesis. This integration of the literature itself presents a new and significant contribution to knowledge, considering that amateur theatre has been largely neglected by theatre historians. Incorporating a review of the literature with discussion on relevant facets of theatre is more effective than a separate section to identify the lack of existing literature on amateur theatre. Jen Webb (2015) quotes Richard Andrews as suggesting the research question can emerge from the literature review (p. 31). In the case of this project, the line of enquiry was established before commencing investigation, knowing there was minimal available research of amateur theatre in Victoria.

After completing this literature review, it was a surprise to discover that the scope of neglect of amateur theatre extends beyond Australia to countries such as Britain (Cochrane 2001, pp. 233-234), Wales (Cochrane 2003, pp. 169-170) and Canada (Whittaker 2011, pp. 52-53). A lack of historical documentation of amateur theatre in any country is detrimental to accomplishing an accurate cultural national history, regardless of any given reasons for neglect. This project has identified and addressed this gap in literature regarding amateur theatre in the state of Victoria, and may inspire interest for others to research the arts sector in other Australian states.
Creative Nonfiction Writing Practice

The most effective and engaging means of presenting an historical narrative for the artefact in this project is to use a creative nonfiction writing practice. Creative nonfiction gives the writer flexibility to creatively interpret historical facts and to ensure the ongoing interest and engagement of the reader. I have found creative nonfiction useful to accurately present occurrences, people and places whilst employing varied literary techniques such as changing points of view, shifts in tone, fragmentation and experimental representations of time.

The benefits of using a creative writing practice are summed up by Dominique Hecq (2015) who writes: ‘Creative writing is a way of apprehending, knowing and being in the world, and more specifically, that it functions simultaneously as a perspective, an epistemology, and an ontology specific to writing’ (p. 155). An example relating to this project is the creative nonfiction writing style used at the beginning of Chapter One in the artefact. The historical element of the story describes the date in January, 1788 when convicts entertained passengers at sea aboard the Scarborough, but the creative elements of the text describe the site and warm weather to enhance understanding and imagery for the reader.

Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (2013) believe creative writing involves ‘imagination, practice and critical engagement working together, questioning and supporting each other’ (p. 3). They point out that creative writing research is ‘concerned with actions as well as outcomes’ (p. 2).

Creative nonfiction writing practice aims to merge ‘language’, ‘line’ and ‘story’ together to present the historical narrative (Webb 2015, p. 116). The artefact achieves the three elements of creative writing research suggested by Hecq, in the following ways (2015, p. 25). Firstly, ‘linguistic articulation’, which includes the way words are used productively in both theory and practice, then secondly, the voice style and implied values of the writing, and thirdly, emotional engagement with the writing topic. Hecq (2012) suggests the artefact’s creative non-fiction writing process can be considered research in its own right, because creative writing triangulates two discourses, encompassing both tacit and explicit knowledge (p. 1).
The artefact for this project merges historical facts within a creative writing practice, and I have been concerned that the number of necessary citations, particularly in the early chapters, may hinder the reader’s engagement with the narrative. Mary Hedengren (2016) writes of the tension between originality and influence (p. 220). She points out that ‘citations have a variety of communicative and social consequences for those who write them and read them’. The citations within creative writing function as ethical sign-posts for declaring information sources, while Hedengren refers to them as ‘a key to understanding disciplinary requirements’ (p. 221).

**Autofiction**

In addition, personal involvement with the subject matter of this project has inspired using a changed tone of writerly voice when recollecting theatrical activities during various decades represented in the artefact. With its combination of autobiography and fiction presented through an ethnographic lens, this new writerly voice can be regarded by the reader as autofiction. Serge Doubrovsky who created the term says, ‘As soon as I write myself, I invent myself’ (Grell 2018, Foreword in Dix et al. 2018, p. vii). The author of autofiction is also described as being ‘outside himself’, and being ‘where life is played out’.

Hywel Dix (2018) believes it is difficult to clearly define the meaning of ‘autofiction’ (p. 4). One consideration is from a sociological perspective where the reader is influenced by the perceived social status of the writer, which in turn invokes different types of experiences for the reader and writer. In the case of this project, the writer steps inside the narrative to become part of the story about amateur theatre in Victoria, as well as being the storyteller. These reflections then become shared theatrical experiences for both the reader and writer.

Arnaud Schmitt (2010) describes the three requirements for autofiction as comprising a literary style, a connection between author, narrator and main character, and a psychoanalytical angle (p. 126). In personal reminiscences in the artefact, I become immersed in the story using a different writerly voice, but at the same time remain connected to the reader and narrator. To recollect past theatrical events, the conscious mind has drawn on the subconscious to recall autobiographical theatrical involvement since 1958. Schmitt believes that depicting oneself in a story does not mean that facts
cannot be altered. He questions the flaws in a life narrative such as the author forgetting, using their imagination, lying or repressing their memory (p. 129).

The writerly voice varies marginally in this project to ensure my lived experiences are shared with the reader. It is also hoped the reader will absorb the underlying passion for the subject matter which underpins the voice that binds the broader narrative. I have endeavoured to truthfully yet creatively present my recollections of the past from 1958 to modern-day, to contribute to existing recorded theatrical history and to inform and engage the reader.

**The Journal**

My journal for this project has provided a framework for the exegesis and artefact as a creative studio workplace which stores what Arnold (2012) refers to as ‘data collection in the traditional sense’ (p. 14). Within this framework of varied, at times messy, ‘studio’ activity is primary data consisting of researched academic and non-academic material, selected quotes, titles of books and academic journals to be sourced, names of research contacts, notes recorded at literary conferences, records of meetings with supervisors, commentary of the moment including personal thoughts, all recorded for future reference. Short story writer Eugen Bacon (2014) points out that to establish knowledge in creative research, ‘the practitioner must document’ (n.p.). As Arnold (2012) suggests, the journal has become the ‘connective link’ between the artefact and journal for this project and has also assumed the role of writerly companion (p. 14).

I was initially concerned about mislaying the journal when travelling on public transport to undertake research at venues. It seemed less risky to write on loose sheets of paper, and either paste into the journal, transcribe by typing directly into the artefact, or file in a plastic sleeve. This was similar to Bacon (2014) experiencing ‘expeditions and explorations’ as a writer and needing to collate the kept ‘scraps’ of information into a workable journal (n.p.).

Over time, I became confident to take the master journal on travels to source research material, and this direct contact with my ‘writerly companion’ proved more reliable than using loose sheets of paper. When creating the artefact and exegesis, there has been a
sense of security knowing resource material is centrally located within the framework offered by the journal.

According to Nike Bourke and Philip Neilsen (2004) there is a risk in First Order Journal Writing of ‘noting the mundanities of life’ (p. 14). In the artefact from the 1950s decade onwards, I have used autofiction relevant to each decade in order to capture lived experience within the broader context of an overarching analysis of amateur theatre in Victoria. In contrast, Second Order Journal work is reflected in the use of my own voice to discuss lived experience and interview material in order to chart the history of the amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria.

The working journal shared an equally important role with the research question in this project. While the research question initially motivated exploration of the project’s line of enquiry, the working journal inspired and assisted this writer throughout the research process. This occurred not just when documenting information or sourcing material, but also during reflective moments of the research process.

**Contents of the Exegesis**

A review of the literature itself regarding amateur theatre is integrated throughout this exegesis and presents a new and significant contribution to knowledge. As Cochrane (2001) suggests, it raises the question as to whether past personal artistic value judgements have collided with the historian’s responsibility to use evidence to construct narratives of Victorian amateur theatre history (p. 233).

**Section One** titled ‘The Amateur Theatre’ shows that English theatre history is relevant to the Australian scene as presented in the artefact. I also identify the lack of scholarly and non-academic research on amateur theatre by historians in Britain, Wales, Canada and Australia. I discuss the social and cultural importance of amateur theatre, viewed from the times of early Australian colonial theatre to the present day, and survey Australian Pantomime, Melodrama, Vaudeville and Variety Theatre. The connection between Mechanics’ Institutes and amateur theatre is explored, as well as the works of 19th century Australian playwrights.
There is also discussion about the British Government’s implementation of the research project ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’ (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 4). The contribution of amateur theatre to cultural heritage is explored, as are the effects of funding, or lack thereof, for amateur theatre. Amateur theatre’s positioning in Regional Theatre is discussed, and the transitioning of some companies from amateur to professional theatrical status. Overall, I aim to identify, address and redress the lack of interest in Australian amateur theatre by theatre historians.

Titled ‘Positioning Amateur Theatre in Victoria’s Theatrical Scene’, Section Two considers the cultural and social importance of amateur theatre in context with the professional and independent theatrical arts sectors in Victoria. The cultural economics, materialities, sociability, community health and wellbeing benefits and the transformative nature of amateur theatre are discussed, as are early press reviews of theatre shows in Melbourne and New Zealand. Selection of an accurate title to describe the non-professional theatrical arts sector is reviewed, with consideration given to nine possible titles and reasons for their elimination.

In Section Three titled ‘Project Method and Methodology’, I commence by discussing the importance of theatre history research and include views from other theatre historians. I also clarify the method and methodology of using Practice Led Research (PLR) for this project, also quantitative and qualitative research and ethnographic, autoethnographic and amateur theatre history scholarly discourse. The creative nonfiction writing practice used for this project is also discussed.

I concur with Michael Quinn Patton’s (2002) view that the data for qualitative analysis typically comes from fieldwork (p. 4). The processes are described for technology-free recording of interviews with representatives from seventy amateur theatre companies across regional and metropolitan Victoria, followed by the critical and analytical process. The research data transcribed and analysed from these interviews collectively provides an insightful overview of the history, culture and operations associated with contemporary amateur theatre in Victoria.
Section Three also discusses and reviews the literature regarding the autoethnographic perspective in the artefact where I include highlights from my own personal involvement in Victorian amateur theatre as a performer, publicist, director, producer, committee member, choreographer and writer. This commenced in 1958 and continued intermittently through the decades. In presenting an autoethnographic perspective, I have heeded the advice of Harold Goodall to use relational language to ensure purposeful dialogue between the reader and author (Goodall 1998 in Spry 2001, p. 713). As a result of involvement in amateur theatre in various capacities and other areas of the community, I was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2010 for ‘Services to the Performing Arts [ … ] and the Community’.

Section Four of the exegesis explores essential elements associated with theatre productions as described in the artefact. Firstly, people and groups and societies., personal and social identities, social categorisation in groups, self-categorisation and stereotyping. A basic diagram of group structure in an amateur theatre company is also presented. The vital theatrical components of ‘performance’ and ‘theatre’ are discussed, followed by ‘audience’ and associated financial matters, theatre critics as audience, immersive theatre and understanding audience experiences. This process aims to encourage scholarly discussion and articulate a deeper understanding of these elements which are essential to the practice of making theatre.

Section Five concludes this exegesis by presenting contributions to new knowledge as discovered in this research project. These include identifying the lack of previous research by theatre historians into the amateur theatrical arts sector both in Victoria and on an international level. Another discovery of new knowledge is the fluctuating public image of the amateur actor between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, and the significant role played by amateur actors in the early twentieth century to help establish a sense of Nation by performing locally written works.

New knowledge is also presented regarding the field research interview technology-free recording process for this project. Analysed data from field research interviews presents new knowledge in the form of a collective overview of cultural elements of contemporary amateur theatre. This includes strengths, weaknesses, perceived threats, criteria for selection of productions and the transformative benefits of amateur theatre.
A personal reflection of the research process for this project is also included in Section Five.

The research findings for this project address the principal line of enquiry regarding nineteenth and twentieth century amateur theatre in Victoria and the unique, individual histories and cultures inherent to contemporary Victorian amateur theatre companies today.

The Appendix contains a sample schedule of field research interviews and graphs with explanatory legends to depict research analysis data on various interview topics. Also included in the Appendix is a list of the seventy theatre companies interviewed, those not interviewed, and a list of known past theatre companies to honour their existence.
Section One: The Amateur Theatre

I commence this section by exploring the relevance of English amateur theatre to the Australian theatre scene and in doing so identify a lack of published academic and non-academic researched literature on amateur theatre in England and Australia.

English Amateur Theatre

In England, the amateur player and local theatre have had a long and interesting cultural and social influence. English amateur theatre in the form of folk drama and seasonal ritual has been traced back to between the years 1200 and 1500 by Muriel Bradbrook (1962, p. 20). Bradbrook’s findings reveal that the ‘common player’ was eventually socially accepted by the end of the sixteenth century (p. 283). Today, amateur theatre is accepted as an arts sector, but a cultural elitism still seems to exist due to ignorance of the high-quality amateur productions being presented. Combined with the demeaning alternate dictionary meaning of the term ‘amateur’, implying incompetence, this can result in a low regard of the amateur theatrical arts sector by historians, some members of the public and the professional theatre sector. Holdsworth et al. (2017) refer to the scholarly academy’s opinion of amateur theatre as having ‘lowly cultural status’, in contrast to the interest in large-scale projects associated with the professional theatrical sector (p. 10).

Sybil Rosenfeld (1978) describes the amateur theatrical plays presented in English aristocratic homes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and points out the importance of documenting this style of theatre to reflect lifestyles at the time (p. 7). If Rosenfeld’s recognition of the importance of documenting early amateur theatre can be adopted by modern-day Australian theatre historians, then new knowledge may emerge about era-related cultural lifestyles. Research into private theatres and theatricals in England and Wales between 1700 and 1820 has led Rosenfeld to conclude that amateur actors have made a greater contribution to the development of English drama than the professionals (p. 8).
Rosenfeld’s conclusion is influenced by her findings that there was an absence of professional actors in early English theatre, which indicates a strong presence of amateur performers. This reinforces the importance of amateur theatre research, and inequality of representation in historical records. The lack of documentation today regarding the arts sector’s history in that country reflects an issue also relevant to Australia.

**Relevance of English Theatre to the Australian Scene**

Theatre and religion are bound together in English history, and such historical information pertains to this project because it formed the roots of cultural background and knowledge which English convicts, officers and free settlers brought with them to the colony of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land. The passing on of this cultural knowledge to others over time is recognised in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) theory that embodied cultural capital from previous generations incarnates in familiar models (pp. 70-71).

An example of this was when British researchers discovered that amateur theatre heritage is passed down through generations of theatre-makers and companies (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 6). This ‘embodied cultural capital’, as recognised by Bourdieu, enables newcomers, such as the next generation of theatre-makers, to acquire on an unconscious level the ‘basic elements of the legitimate culture’ (Bourdieu Ibid.). This reinforces my decision to commence researching the history and culture of amateur theatre in Victoria from its colonial roots in 1788, because English and Irish theatrical cultures from early European settlement would have permeated through to influence early amateur theatre in Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century.

Eric Irvin (1971) agrees that English theatre is important to Australian theatre history, even warning that ‘the writer on the theatre in Australia who ignores the history of the English theatre is foolhardy’ (p. v). When pointing out that we had ‘the English theatre’ for more than one hundred years, Irvin is referring to the English performative styles and productions which influenced colonial and Australian performances from the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century.
The popularity of English plays in Australia until the mid-twentieth century is described by Ross Thorne (1970) in one of the few research papers to investigate Australian amateur theatre (pp. 25-26). Thorne refers to ‘de-mothballed’ drawing-room comedies featuring the English upper class being presented for years by amateur groups in Australia.

Understandably, writers in Australia were frustrated at these imported works being favoured for performance, and from the late nineteenth century began seeking to establish a national identity through written works, particularly plays. Ironically, in 2018 the plays selected for performance by amateur theatrical groups remain predominantly written by overseas-located playwrights. However, it is splendid to observe the increased presence of Australian-written plays in amateur theatrical performance seasons being well supported by audiences.

Ireland’s first theatre, the Theatre Royal, had been built in Dublin in 1637, and Smock Alley in 1662, and prior to the emergence of Irish actors, plays were presented by touring English companies (Banham 1995, p. 539). The Irish aristocracy enjoyed staging amateur theatre plays, and Irish convicts may have seen plays presented in barns, a long tradition in rural areas (Morash 2002, p. 193).

Amateur activity in London was also enjoyed by the lower classes, including the eighteenth century craze for the Spouting Clubs, located around London and throughout the British Isles (Jordan 2002, p. 24). Formed by groups of dramatic enthusiasts, Spouting Club members pooled funds to hire venues for meetings, and invited family, friends, and the public free of charge to see their individual onstage performances (pp. 24-25). The Church was also regarded as Theatre, and amateur performances included priests miming the story of the Marys at the Tomb (Rosenfeld 1978, p. 8).

Regardless of social status, the convicts, free settlers and officers would have been exposed to the Church as well as professional theatre and the amateur theatrical activity in England and Ireland before sailing for the colonies in what was to become Australia. It is understandable that early convicts and settlers enjoyed performing, and why theatre remains popular today. For example, Jill Dolan (2008) points out that live performance brings people together, ‘embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning,
making and imagination that describe or capture fleeting moments of a better world’ (p. 2). While live performance may capture a different world, as opposed to Dolan’s ‘better’ world, it would have provided much needed escapism for homesick convicts, free settlers and officers.

This view of the benefits of theatre is endorsed in a first-hand account of the performance of The Recruiting Officer in Port Jackson in 1789: ‘The exhilarating effect of a splendid theatre is well known’ (Tench 1998, p. 23).

The benefits of live performance are shown throughout the artefact and remain the basis for amateur theatrical participation to bring theatre productions to communities.

**Early Colonial Theatre in Australia**

**Convict Era**

As previously discussed, the convicts, free settlers and officers from various countries brought their cultural knowledge and personal experiences of theatre to their new homeland. Participants in the improvised or scripted live performances were unpaid, so these activities fit the criteria of ‘amateur’, but most likely at the time would have been regarded simply as ‘theatre’. Robert Jordan (2002) refers to these live performances as ‘convict theatre’ in his book Convict Theatres of Early Australia. This title avoids using the term ‘amateur’, and describes the era of convict settlement, rather than acknowledging the wider involvement of free settlers and officers in amateur theatrical activity (p. 2).

Jordan’s book is highly praised in referred academic journal reviews, and includes descriptions of convict theatre in Sydney, Norfolk Island, Emu Plains and Port Macquarie. An example of scholarly praise for Jordan is Jim Davis’s (2004) admiration of the accuracy of Jordan’s research, believing he succeeds in his aim to tell the story of convict theatre and to explore the social and power relations within this environment (p. 82). On the basis of Jordan’s research, Davis reasons that, as there is no known date of
origin for Sydney’s first playhouse: Norfolk Island could have instead been the location for Australia’s first European-style theatre company (p. 83).

Harold Love (1984) disputes the idea of convicts presenting their own plays because he believes that transportees from rural areas or poor classes would not have encountered professional theatre (p. 11). However, Love only mentions professional theatre as a cultural experience for the convicts and fails to acknowledge the Church or amateur theatre. According to Dobson (2011), there were amateur productions being performed in various locations across England which were accessible to people living in rural areas (pp. 1-2).

‘The Recruiting Officer’ Production (1789)


According to Timberlake Wertenbaker’s (1991) play Our Country’s Good, based on Thomas Keneally’s novel The Playmaker (1987), Governor Arthur Phillip was supportive of convicts presenting theatre (p. 21). The character of Governor Phillip in Wertenbaker’s play refers to theatre offering an expression of civilisation to the convicts, encouraging a more refined way of speaking, and providing temporary escapism from the image of ‘despised prisoners’ (Ibid.).

Wertenbaker’s play and Keneally’s novel have influenced public opinion regarding the first recorded amateur theatrical performance presented in colonial Australia in 1789. It is alleged that George Farquhar’s comedy The Recruiting Officer, was initiated and led by officers. In contrast, Jordan (2002) points out that theatre in that era was mostly
motivated by convicts, many bringing with them to Australia an existing cultural knowledge and ability to present their own theatre productions (pp. 2, 6).

Jordan (2002) emphasises he is not criticising Keneally and Wertenbaker’s researched fictional works, and acknowledges that the relevant section in Harold Love’s Introduction to his book *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History*, seems to suggest the same premise (pp. 6, 7). However, Jordan’s research has revealed that these views disseminating a popular image of the cultural environment in early colonial Australia, may not be entirely accurate. Peter Kuch (2010) points out that the effort and time spent in staging *The Recruiting Officer* in a new settlement with a small population and limited resources, indicates the importance of theatre to the convicts, free settlers and officers (p. 106).

The artefact discusses the influence of Irish theatre in early colonial Australia, including an Irish playwright’s comedy chosen as the new nation’s first theatrical production. Described as one of the most successful of eighteenth-century comedies, *The Recruiting Officer* is set in 1704 at the time of Marlborough’s victory at Blenheim over the allied forces of Louis XIV (Gardiner 2001).

Kuch (2010) presents two theories about *The Recruiting Officer*. The first, which differs to Jordan’s view, suggests that Captain Arthur Phillip may have engaged in ‘social engineering’ by agreeing to present a comedy which, as described by Kevin J Gardiner (2001), combines traditional comical romance with ‘an amiable satire on military life’ (p. 107). Alternately, Kuch suggests that as it seems the convicts requested the performance, they may have enjoyed the prospect of satirizing societal power structures within their new environment.

**Theatre as a Cultural Message**

Bruce Elliott, David Gerber and Suzanne Sinke (2006) believe few immigrants can fully separate from the core elements of their individual past and will draw on these to help the transition into their new environment (p. 2). Data research for this project shows that modern-day families of ethnic origin are now booking to see local amateur theatre shows,
which helps connection with their new communities, and an improved command of the English language. McGrath (2002) writes of the benefit of theatre in new communities: ‘Theatre, of all art, surely works at the interface between the creative and the political, calling together audiences of citizens to contemplate their society or its ways’ (pp. 137-138).

This is still relevant today, particularly in the independent theatrical arts sector where experiential theatre can present satirical thought-provoking shows with a social or political message. Amateur theatre companies nearly always present mainstream plays or musical theatre productions. Although mostly fictive, the scripts may contain moral or social commentary which can be related to everyday life. For example, in the musical production *Legally Blonde* presented by PLOS Musical Productions in Frankston in 2015, layered beneath the show’s pink ‘froth and bubble’ content, is a moral message when protagonist Elle discovers that being true to oneself and one’s personal values can achieve success and find true love (Petereit 2015).

**Early Melbourne Amateur Theatre and Children’s Performance Classes**

Amateur theatre was not however confined to convict performances, as entertainment was a central event in colonial Australia. Amateur actors from Adelaide performed in early 1842 in Melbourne’s first theatre, The Pavilion (later known as the Theatre Royal), for a charity fundraiser for the Melbourne Hospital Fund (Love 1984, pp. 6). Children’s formal performance training classes in singing, dancing and acting were conducted from 1880 in Melbourne and Sydney (Arrighi 2016, pp. 17-18). Commitment to this dedicated stagecraft training may have been influenced by enjoyment derived from theatrical appreciation, parental approval of theatre as a career for their children, or ongoing parental involvement in theatre (pp. 17-18, 24).

Gillian Arrighi (2016) quotes an *Argus* 1881 article describing children training at Melbourne’s Bijou Theatre for four days per week, allowable because the education law only required half-time attendance at school (p. 23). Joan Maslen (1995) points out the contradiction of training children to perform, when in real life they were expected to be seen but not heard (p. 143). These popular stagecraft courses for children indicate public
confidence in the future of theatrical performance in Victoria, whether professional or amateur.

**Australian Pantomime, Melodrama, Vaudeville and Variety Theatre**

Another nineteenth century theatrical performance genre was the popular stage in the form of locally-flavoured comedy, pantomime and melodrama. Margaret Williams (1983) believes these productions ‘showed Australians their own country’ (p. vii). Some performers write reminiscences or autobiographies which add rich, personal narratives to the history of theatre. For example, in his autobiography variety performer Charles Norman (1984) describes his professional career in vaudeville from the early 1920s in Australia and London. According to the findings of Queensland researcher Clay Djubal (2011), there has been a lack of research into the history of Australian Variety Theatre, which correlates with the lack of research on Australian amateur theatre history as discovered in this project.

Djubal undertook Doctoral research to explore the life and work of his great-great-great-uncle, vaudeville entrepreneur Harry Clay. This neglect of documentation of Australian Variety Theatre is attributed by Djubal to popular culture entertainment being the poor cousin of ‘legitimate’ drama and literature. In view of this lack of research on Australian Variety Theatre, Norman’s recollections of his life in Vaudeville are particularly valuable to this section of Australia’s theatre history.

Further vaudeville history can be found in the book *Curtain Call* by Nancye Bridges (1980), who talks to Frank Crook about working in Australian professional theatre during the twentieth century. Yet another splendid contribution to the history of Variety Theatre is Val Jellay’s (1994) autobiographical book, *Stagestruck*. Jellay reflects on her sixty years in variety entertainment, commencing as a dance student at the Alice Uren School of Stage Dancing in Flinders Street, Melbourne. These personal reminiscences expressed by Bridges, Norman and Jellay help fill the gap in Australian Variety Theatre research as discovered by Djubal. Jellay’s story also provides insight into the transitional process for Australian professional stage performers such as herself and husband Maurie Fields in the 1960s when adapting to work in the new medium of television (p. 133).
In my professional behind-the-scenes work in ABC Television during the 1960s and early 1970s, I observed amateur performers obtaining membership of the theatrical union Actors’ Equity. They then acquired a theatrical agent to make the transition from stage to television as professional Extras. One production regularly requiring background personnel known as ‘Extras’ was the weekly drama series *Bellbird*, set in a small rural town of the same name, and produced in the ABC-TV Ripponlea studios.

As early as the nineteenth century, Australian writers recognised the importance of presenting plays with a local flavour to create a national identity, and some of these are described in the next section, followed by discussion about Mechanics’ Institutes, often the only performance venues available for presenting shows performed by amateur theatre groups.

**Nineteenth Century Colonial Australian Playwrights**

Among the nineteenth century performances of shows written by local writers were William Akhurst’s *The House that Jack Built*, presented in Melbourne in 1869, described as ‘the love's laughs, laments and labors of Jack Melbourne, and Little Victoria: a fairy extravaganza opening to pantomime’ (Trove 2018). Australian author Garnet Walch’s *Australia Felix; or Harlequin Laughing Jackass and the Magic Bat*, described as ‘an original extravaganza’, was first performed in the Prince of Wales Opera House in Bourke Street in December, 1873 (Fotheringham 2006, p. v; Maslen 1995, p. 143; Trove 2018).

Alfred Dampier’s *Marvellous Melbourne* and an adaptation of *Robbery Under Arms* by Rolf Boldrewood, co-written with Garnet Walch, were presented at the Alexandra Theatre (later known as Her Majesty’s Theatre) between 1888 and 1893 (Maslen 1995, p. 145). These examples indicate the importance of local material in theatre as both social and historical commentary, and to showcase an emerging new nation to the Australian people. Unfortunately, earlier literary efforts to promote a fledgling nation by nineteenth century playwrights remain unrecognised.
For example, Henry Melville’s *The Bushrangers; or, Norwood Vale* presented in Hobart in 1834, was the first written, published and performed play presented by an Australian colonist (Williams 1983, pp. 8, 9). In 1826, Scottish journalist David Burns had written a play with a similar title after witnessing the hanging of convict turned bushranger Matthew Brady in the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land. *The Bushrangers* was performed in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1829, but not in Australia until presented by high school history students in Sydney in 1971 (p. 3). Margaret Williams believes Burns’ heroic portrayal of the criminal protagonist may have prevented an earlier performance of the play being accepted in Australia, whereas Melville’s bushranger character is villainous and was approved by authorities (pp. 3, 9).

**Mechanics’ Institutes**

In this section I further explore Mechanics’ Institutes in Victoria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as described in the artefact. As well as being places of educational and cultural value, Mechanics’ Institutes provided a venue for amateur theatre performances.

In his paper discussing financial difficulties for Mechanics’ Institutes in Victoria, Donald Barker (2002) refers to the Mechanics’ Institutes as ‘an imported cultural institution planted in a foreign environment, in a reassuring transfer of cultural baggage’ (p. 247). Barker makes the valid point that early white settlers would have welcomed the opportunity to continue pursuing cultural activities upon arrival in their new homeland, particularly if now living in isolated country towns. However, the term ‘cultural baggage’ has a negative tone, whereas ‘cultural activities’ would better reflect the positive nature and purpose of Mechanics’ Institutes. Barker even dismisses cultural, educational or recreational needs as being the main reason for the growth of Mechanics’ Institutes. Rather, he believes their development was due to increased settlement, particularly after the Gold Rush (p. 248).

In contrast to Barker’s opinion, David Jones (2006) believes that the Mechanics’ Institutes were originally established ‘mainly as places of learning for working-class people’ (p.369). Focusing on the cultural benefits, Jones emphasises that throughout
Australia, the Mechanics’ Institute was ‘a popular cultural venue for people growing up in the early twentieth century’. *These Walls Speak Volumes*, co-authored by Pamela Baragwanath and Ken James (2015), is an excellent reference source regarding the existence and important role of more than one thousand Mechanics’ Institutes in Victorian communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Barker (2002) refers to the growth of Mechanics’ Institutes in Victoria as ‘phenomenal’, with one built in almost every country town (p. 247).

A trilogy of books written by Anthony McAleer (2005) and titled *The Lilydale Icon* celebrate the history of Lilydale’s Athenaeum Building. The books are relevant to this project because this Mechanics’ Institute eventually became the beautifully renovated home of the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company. Attractively bound with maroon covers and gold lettering, these volumes tell the story of this now iconic Mechanics’ Institute from the late nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century.

Volume One covers the years 1888 to 1919, featuring the names of visiting performers, while Volume Two, ‘Between the Wars’, presents the Lilydale Athenaeum Building’s story from 1920 to 1959, including a list of performances and visiting performers between 1888 and 1975. Volume Three, subtitled ‘Fade to Black’, covers the period 1960–2002, during which time in 1975, Lilydale businessmen Russell Johnson and Geoff Page established the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company (pp. 13-17).

The formerly run-down Mechanics’ Institute was lovingly transformed by volunteer members of the Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company and the Lilydale community into a twenty-first century splendid, history-rich theatrical venue. McAleer notes in Volume Three that the survival and development of the Lilydale Athenaeum not only led it to become the ‘jewel in Lilydale’s crown’ but introduced ‘a new era in the social and cultural life of the people of Lilydale’ (p. 17). This also indicates a cultural need for amateur theatre, and a willingness to work towards achieving it.

Donald Barker (2002) writes of the financial difficulties encountered in sustaining the presence of Mechanics’ Institutes. He points out that if the public had paid membership subscriptions, this would have provided income to cover expenses for the building, salaries, maintenance and library acquisitions (p. 249). While the Mechanics’ Institutes
were mostly dependent on grants from the colonial and municipal governments, some income was derived from social functions and other paying events. These would have included amateur theatrical productions, as Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria mentions performances being presented as fundraisers for local Mechanics’ Institutes.

McAleer’s observation of the community benefits of the Lilydale Mechanics’ Institute would be replicated in descriptions of the roles played by the many hundreds of Mechanics’ Institutes throughout Victorian communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The artefact tells of several Mechanics’ Institutes renovated and still operating today as venues for amateur theatre performances.

There is much scholarly debate about the lack of interest in English and Australian amateur theatre by theatre historians and I now present some views from scholars to strengthen this concern.

**Neglect of Amateur Theatre Research**

Claire Cochrane (2001) has established an unexplored narrative of amateur theatre within British theatre history, which appears to have favoured professional theatre (p. 233). Cochrane points out the importance of the arts sector in England in that a significant proportion of the population has been involved in amateur theatre. She also observes the irony that state-funded theatre is often known to criticise amateur theatre, yet it, too, originated from early twentieth century amateur/professional theatre collaborations. Cochrane questions ‘socially constructed judgements of taste’ which have influenced the cultural value of performance for historians and their exploration of amateur theatre in the past.

In a similar vein, Judith Hawley (2015) would like to see a revaluation of the term ‘amateur’ to ‘disrupt the current obsession with the professional and the profitable’. In Canada, Robin Whittaker (2011) believes historians and practice-based scholars dismiss the ‘negative and murky’ term ‘amateur’ to avoid personal tainting by association with the word and its negative connotations (p. 53). In his book Shakespeare and Amateur
Performance, Michael Dobson (2011) also complains of a lack of researched documentation and literature about amateur theatre in England, despite the country’s long and rich amateur theatre history (p. 8).

In discussing the situation in Britain, Cochrane’s (2003) views regarding the neglect of amateur theatre research also suggest an existing public assumption that the amateur theatre arts sector is ‘not theatre’, because it fulfils a different kind of cultural need (p. 170). This implies the mistaken belief that presenting quality theatre is not possible if participants enjoy benefits such as sociability, friendship and psychological wellbeing from theatre activity during collaboration to create theatre (Walcon & Nicholson 2017, p. 19).

This assumption, suggests Cochrane, has led to the silencing of half a century of extensive theatrical activity until the 1960s, when state-funded attempts stabilised theatre activities in Great Britain. Cochrane (2003) suggests that researchers should release the scholarly perspective of ‘fit and congruence’ and accept the ‘contamination of context’ with all its flaws, such as imperfections in amateur theatre performances (p. 169). Such a research process, as Rosenfeld (1978) also suggests, could reveal valuable historical information about ‘the human process’ (p. 7). This project addresses this gap in the research literature as well as presenting historical knowledge in the artefact.

Cochrane (2003) also suggests that historians recording twentieth century theatre may have been selective in their narratives due to influence from their own cultural and critical preferences (p. 170). Cochrane’s opinion concurs with similar views unearthed in this project’s research, namely that a notion of cultural elitism may have influenced historians to neglect recording twentieth century amateur theatre. In contrast, an example of an amateur theatre company held in high respect in Australia by researchers and their community, can be found in Jonathan Bollen and Murray Couch’s (2014) essay on The Broken Hill Repertory Society in New South Wales between 1945 and the 1960s (p. 257).

Bollen and Couch discovered this theatre company was regarded as ‘a pillar of the civic infrastructure’, and that activities in the Repertory Society formed an integral component of the city’s social structure (pp. 257-258). Holdsworth et al. (2017) reveal similar
findings that amateur theatre companies are founded from ‘communities of interest’ by like-minded people with a shared love of theatre and a desire to create theatre for their communities (p. 10). It is hard to understand how research of an arts sector so well supported by the community has been neglected for so long.

One possible reason could be the huge size of the British amateur arts sector. Cochrane (2001) acknowledges this may have been problematic for researchers because documenting such a large arts sector could be regarded as daunting (p. 236). A 1991 report commissioned by the Policy Studies Institute confirms the magnitude of the British amateur arts sector with just under 1.8 million individuals regularly involved in amateur music and drama across the United Kingdom. Perhaps the large, widespread size of Australian amateur theatre, albeit on a smaller scale than its British counterpart, has contributed to the existing lack of research.

Geoffrey Milne (2004) alludes to this when explaining his selection of only four amateur theatre companies to discuss in his book Theatre Australia (Un)limited. These include university, political and Little Theatre companies. Milne explains that ‘space prohibits the inclusion of the hundreds of recreational amateur theatre companies and light opera societies that continue to flourish in practically every suburb and country town in Australia’ (p. 75).

It is understandable that limited space prevents discussing the hundreds of Milne’s so-called ‘recreational’ amateur theatre companies. However, inclusion of at least one volunteer-operated company representing the broader community involved in regional and metropolitan amateur theatre-making is surely pertinent to a publication titled Theatre Australia (Un)limited. Unfortunately, too often larger amateur theatre companies are used as examples of the amateur arts sector, and may differ from the smaller, local companies. As I discuss in the exegesis and illustrate in the artefact, there are over one hundred currently operating amateur theatre companies in Victoria alone, and recognition is essential to ensure accurate representation of Australia’s theatre scene.

In his examples of amateur theatre, Milne first refers to the ‘Little Theatres’ or ‘repertory clubs and societies’ in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane. In contrast to mainstream amateur theatre, some of these companies later turned professional, such as
the La Boite Theatre, Brisbane (Comans 2006, p. 157) and St Martin’s Theatre, Melbourne (Graham 2015, n.p.) transformed into semi-professional or professional theatre companies at various times after 1950.

Bernard Kearns (c.1950) describes the Melbourne Little Theatre founders Brett Randall and Hal Percy as aiming to use both amateur and professional talent when establishing their theatre company in 1931 (p. 7). Milne refers to amateur theatre groups associated with the New Theatre League being formed during the early 1930s, inspired by the growth of Soviet influence (p. 78). It is disappointing that Milne does not mention the many apolitical amateur theatrical groups operating in Victoria intent on entertaining communities.

The final branch of amateur theatre discussed by Milne is University Theatre, including the Tin Alley Players, an amateur theatre company founded in 1939 by Keith Macartney and Maurice Belz at Melbourne University (pp. 75, 76). University theatre is a valuable component of the amateur theatrical arts sector, but also carries the status of connection with an educational institution. Milne appears to have been selective regarding which amateur organisations are referred to in his book when highlighting Little Theatres, repertory theatre, the New Theatre League and university theatre.

In his Foreword to Theatre in Australia, John West (1978) presents his book as a ‘panoramic history of Australia’s theatre’ but admits that ‘much of the background’ is lightly represented (p. 7). West explains his book is about theatre in capital cities ‘because information on theatre outside them is apt to be difficult to find’. Contradicting West’s statement are records indicating that non-professional theatre actively operated in Victorian regional areas from the nineteenth century. Despite the term ‘amateur theatre’ being mentioned several times in West’s book, it is not listed in the Index. However, a separate publication titled Index to Theatre in Australia, compiled by Janet D. Hine (1987), published nine years later, lists ‘Amateur Theatre in Melbourne’ as appearing only once, on page twenty-seven of West’s publication (p. 3). This omission to fully index reference to amateur theatre implies reluctance to be associated with an arts sector where participants are unpaid. Records show that amateur theatre has been active in Australia since the late eighteenth century and surely deserves better recognition in a publication titled Theatre in Australia.
The Arts in Australia, published in 1948 and edited by Norman MacGeorge, contains various Australian theatre-related stories, including two articles of historical interest to this project about amateur theatre. Firstly, the story written by Keith Macartney tells of Melbourne University’s theatrical activities, which are on an amateur basis, and the opening of the Union Theatre in 1938 (Macartney in MacGeorge, pp. 75-81). The second relevant article is written by journalist Jean Campbell (1948), who believes all art should be ‘amateur’, as most people don’t appreciate the definition of the word in the French dictionary, meaning ‘love’ (Campbell in MacGeorge, p. 83). Campbell suggests that only amateurs make art for ‘love’, but this is disputable because while professional artists may work for money, they risk the uncertain career of theatre to follow a love for their craft. The word ‘amatorem’, meaning ‘to love’ and used in this project’s title, is not intended to suggest that professional performers do not have a passion for their work. Instead, the Latin word means ‘to love’ and the term refers to theatre-makers who work ‘for the love of’, without financial reimbursement.

Since 2013, a welcome amateur theatre research initiative has been undertaken in Britain to address the research issue raised by Cochrane (2001) and other scholars concerning the exclusion of amateur theatre from the narrative of twentieth century British theatre (p. 233).

**British Research Project: ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’**

In an inaugural research project, the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain funded research for five academic theatre historians to investigate amateur theatre in Britain and its relationship between community and creative space (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 1). The British project is titled ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’, and it is hoped Australia’s Arts organisations may also undertake similar research in the future (Nicholson et al. 2017).

The researchers investigated various English amateur theatre companies, aiming to address ‘a cultural re-evaluation of the processes, practices and repertoires of amateur theatre companies in England’ (Holdsworth et al. 2017, p. 10). In contrast to the amateur
theatre’s poor image over the years, the researchers noted that participants take their craft seriously, and enjoy combining the creativity of making theatre within a socially collaborative environment (Walco at al. 2017, p. 18). This is also indicated in my project, which discusses the dedicated commitment of amateur practitioners who, as well as creating theatre for their communities, benefit from the social and health wellbeing aspects of amateur theatre activity.

The British research team points out that ‘amateur theatre is about making and doing as well as talking’, and to capture this they used ethnographic research, conventional interview processes and creative research methods (p. 5). By comparison, for Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria, representatives from seventy amateur musical and non-musical theatre companies were interviewed across Victoria, to research oral histories and stories of company culture and operation. Performances were not viewed as field research, but continue to be observed in my role as newspaper theatre reviewer. Instead of ethnographic research, the artefact contains autoethnographic accounts to contribute personal experiences. This accords with Norman Denzin’s (2006) suggestion of bringing the past into the autobiographical present by embodying the past to re-experience it, before re-writing one’s personal story (p. 423).

**Cultural Heritage**

In the British research project, amateur theatre was found to be embedded in cultural heritage (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 6). On a global basis, amateur theatre is part of local and national heritage as well as having its own unique heritage, which can be passed down through generations. The tangible nature of this heritage includes buildings and other physical objects, such as artefacts, archives, memorabilia, websites, props and costumes, which contribute to celebrating a theatre company’s heritage. Intangible heritage includes a passion for theatre, recollections, anecdotes, traditions and rituals unique to each company.

Amateur theatre groups can also contribute to cultural heritage through guardianship of historic buildings such as Mechanics’ Institutes, creating and presenting performances of a locally historic nature, charity fund-raising, and participation in community events.
such as festivals (p. 13). The exegesis identifies a lack of research and published literature on amateur theatre in Victoria, but the artefact addresses this issue and, in collaboration with the exegesis, presents *Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria*. In doing so, it brings to scholarship an exploration of this neglected area of research which highlights the value and values of theatre in communities and its significant contribution to contemporary cultural life (pp. 5, 14).

The British research team discovered their investigatory work inspired new ways of thinking about archiving amateur theatre. As with Victorian amateur theatre companies, the researchers found the groups themselves are ‘archival spaces’ (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 5). An example of this is that many amateur theatre-makers have cultural memories and personal archives stored at home as keepsakes of happy memories and ephemera associated with past shows. These mementoes could include scrapbooks containing memorabilia associated with a production such as the theatre program, promotional flyer and ticket. There could also be photograph albums and greeting cards with well wishes from fellow cast members or friends and family. The audience also creates new archives by writing informal reviews or comments on social media.

I now present two examples of personal amateur theatre archives prepared by Victorian amateur theatre participants, as described in the artefact. The articles and programs contained in these archives present a good source of derivative literature to provide an insight into suburban and regional non-professional theatre being presented at the time (Belcher 2009, p. 142). These articles and programs also indicate that, in contrast to Hilda Esson’s negative view of amateur performers as described in the artefact, many amateur performers were dedicated to their theatrical craft, even travelling to country towns to help worthy fundraising causes (Fitzpatrick 1995, p. 236).

Firstly, Mr. H. Peters of the Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Club had the foresight to preserve history by maintaining a scrapbook containing show review press cuttings from his company’s performances (Peters 1856–1859). Today, these press reviews open a window into the popularity and culture of amateur theatre in that era and remain safely archived in the Heritage Collections Room in the State Library of Victoria. Over sixty years later, Melbourne actor and director John Richardson compiled a scrapbook of
newspaper articles and theatre programs from 1927, and his family kindly offered the scrapbook for perusal for this project (Richardson 2015).

In an admirable collaboration between a city educational institution and country schools, pupils from Kew Trinity Grammar School linked theatre with education to visit rural areas in September, 1927. They raised funds for the Echuca District Hospital Wireless Appeal by presenting the British farce *Tons of Money* at the Paramount Theatre, Echuca, under the auspices of Echuca High School, Echuca Technical School, State School No. 208, Echuca, and the Public School, Moama. In another fundraising effort in August, 1928, The Dramatic Society presented the comedy *Captain X* at Trinity Grammar School, with proceeds going to the Boy Scouts’ Committee at Federal Hall, Beechworth, Wagga Wagga, and Tumut, New South Wales.

There are many more of these wonderful theatrical mementoes, so relevant to recording local history, to be found in Australian communities. The current British research project does not focus on documenting the history of the country’s vast amateur theatre arts sector, whereas this project does present an historical lineage of amateur theatre in Victoria. It is wonderful for the British amateur theatrical arts sector that the Government supported research project is ongoing, with a website presented by the Arts and Humanities Research Council titled ‘Amateur Drama Research’ (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2018). This website invites contributions from British amateur theatre-makers and will continue to enhance research of the arts sector in that country.

In Australia, my Victorian-based project’s exploration into the culture and history of Victorian amateur theatre indicates that, similar to the identified neglect of British amateur theatre research, there is a noticeable lack of recorded local amateur theatre history. This gap in the literature is addressed in both the artefact and exegesis.

**Funding for Amateur Theatre**

Katharine Brisbane (1995) believes the lack of arts funding for amateur theatre in Australia has impacted adversely on the arts sector (p. 45). She compares the negative image of amateur theatre in Australia to countries such as Ireland, where modestly
funded amateur theatre is respectfully regarded as integral to the nation’s high-quality theatre scene. Richard Fotheringham (1997) believes the decision by the Theatre Board of the Australia Council in 1981 to only support fully professional companies entrenched a clear division between the professional and amateur theatrical sectors (Fotheringham in Webb 1997, pp. 41-42). One exception was the Darwin Theatre Company, which continued to receive funding, presumably due to the company’s geographical isolation.

It is little wonder that funding organisations have been reluctant to support amateur theatre if considering comments such as those written by English director and actor David Goddard. In an article titled ‘The Art of Amateur Acting’, published in a 1976 edition of Theatre-Australia, Goddard (1976) describes early amateur theatre as ‘makeshift’ drama consisting of village bickering, sandwiches, sponges and cups of tea (p. 43). Goddard believes amateur theatre with its ‘pastime’ image became despised by professional theatre after World War Two, when the professional sector began to develop as a business. In my work on Victorian theatres, there is a still noticeable resentment from some professionals towards the ‘amateurs’, from both a snobbish point of view and resentment that audiences spend money to see shows where theatre-makers are not depending on ticket sales for a living. The amateur theatre company itself does, however, depend on box office sales for survival. It is not uncommon nowadays to see a professional performer play a role in a quality show presented by a large amateur theatre company when between professional productions. This is a good way to maintain theatrical skills and enjoy participating in a show they possibly have always wanted to perform in.

Associating the neglect of amateur theatre with the arts sector’s lack of funding, Taryn Storey (2017) writes of a crisis for amateur theatre happening in 1945 after false hopes of assistance had come from the newly formed Arts Council of Great Britain (pp. 77, 85). Drama subsidies excluded amateur theatre, and priority for funding was channelled to professional theatre. A clear line had been drawn between professional and amateur, and the Arts Council’s director John Moody questionably declared that ‘village hall work can never be ‘theatre’, it can only be ‘entertainment’ (p. 87).

Claire Cochrane (2001) does not link lack of funding to amateur theatre’s poor image but blames another area of finance: capitalism, and the emphasis on professionalism, for the
perception that the unpaid amateur is incompetent, compared to the paid professional (p. 233). This is relevant to this project because societal attitudes can influence people’s ways of thinking. If theatre historians have an image of a theatrical arts sector as ‘incompetent’, then they may prefer to selectively record the professional sector regarded as superior. The result, however, will be an incomplete and therefore inaccurate documentation of theatre history in their respective country.

The good news for the amateur theatrical arts sector today is that important changes were made in 2015 by the Australia Council for the Arts to their grants model. According to email received from Grants Officer Sophie Byrne (2018), there are no longer art sector boards and the grants model is now ‘more accessible and simple’. Sophie explained there are fewer eligibility restrictions, ‘and the model is designed to be adaptive and responsive to new trends and forms of arts practice’. This now means that amateur theatre practitioners can join those from other theatrical arts sectors to apply for funding for projects. As Sophie pointed out, on the Australia Arts Council’s website, amateur theatre is listed as being part of the ‘broad church’ of Australia’s theatre sector. This positive news means that amateur theatre is now on equal footing with other theatrical sectors for applying for funding.

It seems that attitudes are also changing in England. Lyn Gardner (2013) writes in her online article in The Guardian that in the early 1980s, a proposal to the United Kingdom Arts Council to fund a project involving four hundred and fifty local people was refused because they were amateurs. Gardner points out that today, the word ‘celebration’ is a buzz word used by the Arts Council, and she believes this may even lead to professional and amateurs working side by side in the future.

During an interview for this project, former president of CLOC (formerly the Cheltenham Light Opera Company) Musical Theatre, Grant Alley, discussed the need for amateur theatre to be a business as well as art (Alley 2015). In Alley’s words: ‘If you can’t get a paying audience, then the show shouldn’t be put on’. CLOC is a fine example of the effectiveness of a good business plan for successfully operating as one of Victoria’s premier theatre companies, performing in Melbourne’s National Theatre.
Research data from interviews revealed ongoing financial survival to be a problem for many smaller theatre companies. Instigating business management workshops for regional and metropolitan amateur companies through overarching bodies such as the Victorian Drama League or Music Theatre Guild of Victoria could greatly assist their ongoing financial survival. Efficient business management could also eliminate the need to apply for funding.

Current analysis of the project’s exploration into the culture and history of Victorian amateur theatre indicates that, similar to the identified neglect of British amateur theatre research, there is a noticeable lack of recorded local amateur theatre history. This gap in the literature is addressed in both the artefact and exegesis.

I now show that not all publications have ignored this arts sector, even whilst they may only record its importance in passing.

**Positive Acknowledgement for Amateur Theatre**

Paul McGuire et al. (1948) apologise in the Prologue of their book *The Australian Theatre* for ‘not having had more room for the amateur and Little Theatre movements which kept the drama alive in Australia during the doldrums of the professional stage’ (p. xi). These authors recognise the significant role amateur theatre has played in the Australian theatre scene over the years, but I still put forward that publishing a book with such a theatrically encompassing title is questionable when omitting an active arts sector within the Australian theatre scene.

Similarly, the title of Harold Love’s (1984) book *The Australian Stage: a documentary history*, suggests all-inclusive content of Australian theatre history, but presents minimal recognition of the amateur theatre arts sector. Love expresses regret in his Introduction that the amateur movement and educational theatre are ‘only touched upon lightly’ but explains that such restrictions are unavoidable if presenting a coherent picture of the legitimate stage in Australia (p. xix).
I reject Love’s use of the term ‘legitimate’ to describe the professional arts sector because it suggests that amateur theatre and educational theatre are ‘illegitimate’. The omission of an operative arts sector in a history book about Australian theatre cannot be justified by not regarding it as ‘legitimate’. These theatre companies join their professional counterparts in operating lawfully and presenting theatre of a legitimate nature to their communities.

Until now much of the history of amateur dramatics has been written from the perspective of historians, journalists and practitioners who want to maintain what Judith Hawley (2015) calls ‘the prestige of the professional stage’ (n.p.). Referring to amateur dramatics as ‘am dram’, Hawley points out in her online blog that when the question is asked if ‘am dram’ is ‘any good’, there is an assumption that professional theatre will be better. Hawley suggests querying amateur theatre from a positive perspective, such as what am dram is good at, what it is good for, and what benefits it brings to its participants and audiences. Such quite recent discussions of amateur theatre indicate an ongoing tension between amateur theatre and professional theatre, and differing understandings of amateur theatre’s strengths and roles in society.

Positive steps taken to help bridge the professional and amateur theatrical arts sectors in Britain include the professional arts sector taking a renewed interest in the amateur today. Nicholson et al. (2017) suggest one reason is because amateur bakers, knitters and gardeners are becoming TV celebrities, while others are becoming involved in other public activities or politicism (p. 6). Another example is the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Open Stages programme, a collaboration with one hundred amateur theatre companies across the United Kingdom who produce their own Shakespeare or Shakespeare-inspired productions (Royal Shakespeare Company 2019 n.p.).

Workshops, training and mentoring with professionals from the Royal Shakespeare Company are offered and in Spring, 2015, the Open Stages companies showcased their productions at nine regional showcases at partner theatres. In Autumn, 2015, nine Open Stages companies performed their work in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at a national showcase, with ninety percent of the amateur performers participating reporting that Open Stages had made a significant difference to their work.
Other examples of positive bridging between the professional and amateur theatrical sectors is the professional sector hiring amateur-run buildings for touring show performances, or professional playwrights earning more from amateur performance rights than those of professional productions (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 7).

A difference noticed between amateur and commercial or subsidised theatre is the rising use by amateur theatrical companies of multimedia devices for special effects, particularly in musicals, which were once only seen in productions presented by commercial or independent companies. For example, in *The Little Mermaid*, a musical theatre production presented by the amateur theatre company PLOS (formerly the Peninsula Light Opera Society) Musical Productions at the Frankston Arts Centre in January 2018, the projected images and effects believably transported patrons to the narrative beneath the ocean.

Fortunately, modern-day attitudes to amateur theatre are improving, and Gardner (2013) points out that ‘amateur theatre should be celebrated, not derided’ and it would be good to lose some of the snobbishness surrounding amateur theatre activity (n.p.). Gardner even suggests professional theatre may benefit from paying closer attention to voluntary or amateur arts groups, ‘which are often highly motivated, highly organised, and self-supporting’. Gardner’s views support one of the underlying arguments in this thesis, that amateur theatre has been neglected in the past with a view that it is ‘second-rate’. It seems somewhat hypocritical that use of a buzz word in modern-day jargon such as ‘participatory’ can suddenly elevate amateur theatre to a new level of esteem, but does show the cultural power of descriptive terms.

In his review of *A Companion to Theatre in Australia*, an encyclopedia of the historiography of Australian theatre compiled by Philip Parsons (1995), Bruce Williams (1995) praises positive acknowledgement of amateur theatre in a section written about the arts sector by Katharine Brisbane (1995) (Brisbane in Parsons pp. 38-45; p. 44). Williams refers to Brisbane’s article as an ‘overdue’ representation of amateur theatre, which treats the arts sector not just as a ‘poor relation’ but ‘as a site where important work has been done’.
This project presents the artefact of knowledge and the explanatory exegesis speaking to one another to help strengthen recognition of the value of amateur theatre in communities, and to fill the existing gap in the literature.

The qualities of amateur theatre are emphasised in the artefact in this project. Baigent’s words also strengthen the value of amateur theatre regarding worthiness for research by historians. Adding dimension to the lack of research of Australian amateur theatre is the sense of marginalisation of regional theatre.

**Regional Theatre**

‘Regional theatre’ is interpreted as including both amateur theatre, and resident or visiting community theatre or commercial theatre companies. In the introduction to her book *Re-siting Theatre: approaches to regional theatre development* Webb (1997) writes of regional theatre being considered as inferior to urban theatre (p. 1). She says that as well as being regarded as deficient to its city counterpart, regional theatre is often regarded as ‘less differentiated’, ‘less experimental’ and ‘less complex’ (Ibid.). When visiting theatre companies in Victorian regional areas for field research interviews for this project, in all cases I found the theatre representatives to be earnestly dedicated to their practice of creating theatre in, and for, their communities. Membership of the regional companies varied, often according to the transient nature of the town’s population.

Some theatre companies experience a diminished presence of young adults when they move to Melbourne after completing their secondary education. In contrast, productions presented in Swan Hill, such as *Grease*, are selected on their appeal to young people, who await the well-attended show auditions with much enthusiasm and excitement (Quayle 2016). There are also opportunities for performers of all ages who reside in regional areas to hone their skills by participation in One Act Play Festivals.

These One Act Play Festivals, often held annually, have grown in popularity over recent years among the amateur theatrical arts sector and are presented in regional and metropolitan Victoria. These Festivals provide a wonderful opportunity for urban and
regional theatre companies to unite while engaging in a friendly, competitive atmosphere. In 2018, One Act Play Festivals have been staged in Ararat, Mansfield, Seymour, Foster, Anglesea, Kyneton and South Gippsland (Victorian Drama League 2017). A major benefit of rehearsing and staging one-act plays is that they are less demanding on the personal time of participants than a full-length, three-act play.

There is also benefit from urban and regional theatre companies combining to perform together as it creates camaraderie, an awareness of the standard of other companies, and inspiration for new creative ideas. The host town also benefits from being showcased from a tourism perspective, and the local economy is boosted by visitors from various parts of Victoria, particularly in accommodation and food.

It appears that in the case of amateur theatre in regional Victoria, Webb’s view of regional theatre being regarded as inferior is no longer applicable. Today, the geographical separation between urban and regional theatre companies is also bridged by honorary judges from the Victorian Drama League and Music Theatre Guild of Victoria travelling to regional areas to assess many performances.

End-of-year awards are presented at the gala presentation evenings conducted by both organisations, and it is not uncommon for regional groups to win a major prize at these award ceremonies, which indicates an exceptionally high standard of production. In one regional town the nearest capital city was four hours away and this sense of isolation encouraged both sports-loving and arts-loving residents to connect with each other and contribute their talents and skills to achieve good results. They agreed that participating in One Act Play Festivals provides great opportunity to discuss issues with fellow theatre companies, as well as share creativity.

From another perspective, Des Davis (1997) believes regional theatre is essential if our national identity is to be shaped through regional and city-based culture (Davis in Webb, p. 21). Davis’s view is particularly important regarding community theatre presenting plays that tell stories about regional communities. Also, viewed from the amateur theatrical perspective, my research shows that amateur theatre companies in regional areas play a significant role in bringing cultural knowledge to their communities, usually
in the form of English, Irish, Australian or American-written plays, or musical theatre productions. While the actual content of these mainstream theatrical productions may not shape a sense of national identity, it makes a significant contribution to crafting cultural knowledge and attitudes in regional areas, which in turn influences our national identity.

At the same time, multicultural and Aboriginal Australians appear to be ignored. However, this is not the case because the Government organisation Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) promotes the ‘discovery, development and promotion of culturally and linguistically diverse contemporary art, heritage and cultural expression’ (Multicultural Arts Victoria 2015). Over one million participants are engaged in this program from five hundred communities from ‘diverse and emerging backgrounds’. Meanwhile, Aboriginal Australians continue to perform for their own communities from which dancers, actors and musicians have emerged to form various theatre companies, working on a professional basis (Creative Spirits 2016).

There is positive acknowledgement by Milne of amateur theatre in his paper written in 2003, where it is explained that although he does not include amateur theatre dramatic groups which have ‘flourished in every town and suburb’, their work is worthy of a separate article (p. 270). This observation by Milne of the worthiness of amateur theatre for a separate article follows his investigation into the residency of professional theatre companies in Australian regional cities, their growth during the 1970s and 1980s, and decline during the 1990s (Introduction). There is also praise in another form for amateur theatre groups from Kim Travers (1997), whose article ‘Amateurs on the Festival Circuit’ suggests regional professional theatre development could benefit from the ‘disciplined enthusiasm and expertise of amateur practitioners’ (p. 98).

In contrast, Webb (1997) suggests that amateur theatre groups in regional centres would welcome professional theatre practitioners to visit and share talents and skills in areas where extension is required, such as design, lighting, acting, direction and production (p. 11). Webb well-intentionally advises the visiting professional practitioners to avoid a superior attitude. She also reassures them that, although this work lacks high profile and may seem demeaning, the professional would be well received and make a long-term contribution to the Australian performing arts. This advice could influence a professional
practitioner to adopt an elitist attitude towards amateur theatre-makers when presenting workshops, which would create a form of class distinction between the professional and amateur arts sectors. Also, the concept of some professionals considering it demeaning to share their knowledge with amateurs is disappointing. It raises the question about whether these individuals, like their amateur counterparts, possess a genuine passion and interest for the wellbeing and future of theatre, or are merely ego-driven, salaried operatives.

Interestingly, the transformation from amateur theatre to professional theatre is a common theme in the literature and will now be discussed.

**From Amateur to Professional Theatre**

In 2006, Christine Comans investigated the history of the Brisbane-based La Boite Theatre from 1925–2003 for a PhD thesis. This included the company’s transformation from existing as an amateur group for fifty years, evolving to operating as a ‘pro-am’ group where professionals worked with amateur members, before they became fully professional (p. 1). This is a unique and interesting outcome for an amateur theatre company to transform into a professional operation over time. As previously noted, my research of Victorian amateur theatre has discovered two theatrical movements established in the 1930s, which also evolved into professional operations. These were the Melbourne Little Theatre, founded by Brett Randall and Hal Percy, which later changed its name to St Martin’s Theatre, and Gertrude Johnson’s Melbourne National Theatre (Graham 2016, n.p.; Van Straten 1994, p. 129).

Geoffrey Hutton (1975) tells of amateur theatre involvement in the remarkable success of the professionally operated Union Theatre Repertory Company, which opened at the University of Melbourne’s Union Theatre on 31st August, 1953 (Preface). Until then, student productions at Melbourne University had been presented on an amateur basis, but now a repertory company would be established under the direction of Englishman John Sumner, and wages would be paid to the actors. Sumner recognised the value of amateur actors by calling on them to reinforce his new professional company when the plays required larger casts (p. 3).
In Sumner’s words: ‘The amateur theatre which was reigning supreme had gone as far as it could, and the time was ripe for another step to be taken for the development of drama in this country’ (Ibid.). Actors who transitioned from amateur theatre to the Union Theatre Repertory Company and became well-known professional theatre performers included four-time Tony Award winner Zoe Caldwell OBE, Australian and British TV and film actor Alex Scott, and international film, television and stage star, Frank Thring. The Union Theatre Repertory Company succeeded and in 1968 became the Melbourne Theatre Company (p. 66).

According to the Melbourne Theatre Company website, the ‘MTC’ is the oldest professional theatre company in Australia today, and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world (Melbourne Theatre Company 2017). This achievement is thanks to Sumner’s astute vision for the theatre company, and also his recognition that amateur actors had potential to develop careers, and contribute to Victoria’s professional theatrical arts sector.
Section Two: Positioning Amateur Theatre in Victoria’s Theatrical Scene

In Section Two, I further consider the cultural and social importance of amateur theatre in the context of commercial, independent and community theatre. I also emphasise the academic literature regarding scholarly debates on this topic emerging from the artefact. I explore intangible cultural values of amateur theatre such as the benefits to participants of collaborative sociability while creating theatre for their communities. Also discussed is the importance of materialistic contributions to amateur theatre productions such as scenery, props and costumes, and in some cases the historic significance of some performance venues.

As already noted, amateur theatre serves various purposes in the community and examples include the arts sector’s contribution to community health and wellbeing. I investigate the most appropriate and accurate title to describe the volunteer theatrical arts sector and consider and explore nine possible titles. A review of the literature is interspersed throughout, rather than being presented as a separate section. This contributes new knowledge about the historical value of the amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria and its value as a worthy research topic.

The artefact for this project titled Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria, tells of the rich and colourful history of non-professional theatre in Victoria. I now position amateur theatre within the three principal theatrical arts sectors operating in Victoria today: commercial, independent and amateur.

Commercial Theatre

Commercial theatre establishes a benchmark for high production standards to which other arts sectors, including amateur theatre, can aspire. This arts sector also contributes financially to Victoria’s economy. Entrepreneur George Coppin who arrived in Melbourne in 1845, is credited for pioneering Melbourne’s professional theatrical entertainments, followed by J. C. Williamson, who eventually controlled the commercial
theatre industry in Australia and New Zealand (Maslen 1995, p. 139). In 2018, Melbourne’s six major commercial theatres are The Princess, Her Majesty’s, The Regent, Comedy, The Forum and The Athenaeum Theatres.

Independent Theatre

The Independent theatrical arts sector in Victoria can include the fields of Alternate Theatre, Circus, Burlesque, Cabaret, Experimental Theatre, Community Theatre, Multicultural Theatre, Indigenous Theatre, Educational Theatre, Street Theatre, LGBT Theatre, Disability Theatre, Youth Theatre, Women’s Theatre, and Stand-up Comedy. Usually subsidised by grants, sponsorship, or self-funded by participants, performance venues for this arts sector can range from innovative spaces including art galleries, wine bars, outdoors or empty warehouses, to site-specific locations such as historical buildings, or conventional theatrical venues of varying styles. For the purpose of this project, the Independent theatrical arts sector will be represented by discussion about Alternative, Experimental, Community, Aboriginal and Multicultural Theatre.

Alternate Theatre

Alternate theatre in Melbourne developed in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by radical theatrical activity within and around the Australian Performing Group (APG), located in Carlton (Watt 1993, p. 1). The artefact for this project describes the early twentieth century valiant efforts of Louis Esson and his colleagues to strengthen an Australian national identity through presenting locally written plays. Fifty years later, a new wave of writers would be more successful in their attempts to promote locally written works. Playwright John Romeril describes having been part of ‘a contemporary group on an historic mission’ to achieve ‘the retrieval and reconstruction and revival [ … ] of an Australian theatre that was fairly nationalistic’ (Romeril in Watt, p. 2).

Leonard Radic (1991) supports Romeril’s view of the important contribution made to Australian theatre by the alternate theatres formed in the late 1960s. Radic also acknowledges the earlier courageous efforts of Louis Esson’s Pioneer Players, formed in 1922, whose writers and amateur actors could not compete with commercial theatre while performing Irish-influenced Australian folk drama in makeshift halls (p.16).
Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria describes Esson’s concern at the lack of a national drama in the early twentieth century, but it is recorded in Section One of this exegesis that Australian plays had already been written and performed during the nineteenth century.

Experimental Theatre

When secure with financial subsidy, modern-day independent theatrical groups can take risks to develop new, unknown works. Some of these works may inform or protest about social issues, and may or may not attract audiences. John McGrath (2002) refers to this mode of performance as vital in the process of socialisation, particularly when combining the creative and political in order to challenge societal norms (p. 136). McGrath criticises theatre without a social message and talks of citizens ‘seeking not recognisable relevant hubris, but a fawning, flattering escape from reality’ (p. 138). McGrath seems to overlook the fact that entertaining audiences is also an important role for theatre companies. In the words of Bertolt Brecht (1948): ‘From the first it has been the theatre’s business to entertain people’ (p. 2).

Victoria’s most iconic independent theatre, La Mama Theatre in Carlton, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2017 and continues to develop Australian theatre by presenting new, experiential works (La Mama 2017). Sadly, on 18th May, 2018, La Mama Theatre located at 205 Faraday Street, Carlton was extensively damaged by an electrical fire (La Mama 2018). In a media release, Chief Executive Officer and Artistic Director of La Mama, Elizabeth Jones AO, reflected the courage and strong spirit of La Mama Theatre in a statement for the press three days after the fire: ‘Together with our artists, staff and community we will move with strength into the next fifty years and beyond’ (La Mama Theatre 2018).

Despite the fire occurring on 18th May, 2018, mid-season during a production, the show admirably continued at another venue, borrowing costumes. Future productions were re-located at venues such as the Mechanics’ Institute Performing Arts Centre in Brunswick, the Trades Hall in Carlton and La Mama’s alternate venue, the La Mama Courthouse, located at 349 Drummond Street, Carlton.
Community Theatre

George Lauri (1960) writes of the important connection between community and theatre: ‘Theatre is the constant awareness of the importance of the community spirit within the theatre, and the participation of the audience in every production’ (p. 124). Lauri’s view is particularly relevant to amateur theatre which involves members of the community as both participants and spectators.

However, while the term ‘community theatre’ is sometimes still used as a means of avoiding using the term ‘amateur’ with its negative alternate meaning, it is not an accurate description of theatre presented by unpaid participants. Shows may be presented in communities, by communities and for communities, but they cannot be called ‘community theatre’ unless a professional arts practitioner is involved in a project with members of a community, to tell a story about the community. The term ‘community theatre’ relates to projects within communities where arts practitioners are employed to work with volunteer actors to present a production about that particular community.

This is confirmed by Richard Fotheringham (1992) in his book Community Theatre in Australia, where he describes community theatre as a group of professional theatre workers devising a performance project with members of a community, with the intention of entertaining and ‘saying something about the community’s life experiences, memories of the past, and hopes and fears for the future’ (Fotheringham 1992, p. 20).

According to Shulamith Lev-Aladgen (2010), theatre is ‘essentially always communal’, but she agrees that the term ‘community theatre’ has developed its own distinctive form (p.369). Lev-Aladgen describes community theatre as evolving in Israel during the early 1970s in disenfranchised neighbourhoods, where it was recognised that theatre could be used with social participation as a form of social action to generate change. In Israel today, Lev-Aladgen sees community-based theatre operating ‘on the margins of theatre and social work’ as professional practitioners work with community members on projects in the areas of theatre, education and social work.

This differs from the more traditional mainstream productions presented by amateur theatre. The community theatre arts sector is also described by Philip Parsons (1995): ‘In community theatre, a piece is tailored to the needs, expectations and cultural experiences
of a specific community, which is assumed to have a distinctive culture’ (p. 155). While amateur theatre companies tailor the selection of shows to please local audiences, the show itself is not usually about the local community.

**Indigenous Theatre**

Live performances by Indigenous Australians are acknowledged at the beginning of this project as the first known performances by communities for communities in their many Nations. This wonderful theatrescape of over sixty thousand years ago would have provided opportunity for Indigenous Australians to hear and view the culture, stories, songs and cultural practices presented by two hundred and fifty different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations (Ilbijerri 2018, p. 9).

Maryrose Casey (2011) believes, however, that since colonisation a misunderstanding of the meanings and intentions of Indigenous performances has created tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia (p. 53). Casey points out that Aboriginal cultures are highly performance-based, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were ‘a focal point of cross-cultural exchange and engagement’ (Ibid., p. 66). Public regard for these performances was, according to Casey, a way of ‘containing and colonising Indigenous cultures and the land’. Fortunately, more respect appears to have evolved for Indigenous performances since the 1970s, with hundreds of productions having since been written by Indigenous writers (Casey & Craigie 2011, p. 3). However, Casey (2000) feels there was an automatic assumption of English cultural ownership of the form and content of Australian cultural works at that time (p. 23).

Casey (2000) also believes there has been exclusion of Aboriginal Theatre in the ‘history of beginnings’ in Australian theatre, as well as some inclusion (p. 19). This could help explain why there is no known available documentation which specifically refers to an association between Aboriginal Theatre in Victoria and the amateur theatrical arts sector. It seems research of both Aboriginal Theatre and the amateur theatrical arts sector has been neglected in the past. However, Casey’s observation that there were no professional or trained Indigenous actors up to the 1990s does suggest some amateur activity outside of Indigenous cultural performances (Casey 2000, p. 24).
Melbourne’s radical New Theatre, which commenced on an amateur basis in the 1930s, was reinvented in the late 1960s by Koori actor Jack Charles (Casey 2000, p. 25). The New Theatre collaborated with Melbourne’s Pram Factory to present socially relevant theatre and the operations of alternate theatres such as this and La Mama in Carlton, were subsidised by grants and Government funding.

In the twenty-first century, independent and professional performance companies have been formed to showcase the talents of Indigenous performers locally and globally. The Nindethana Theatre is said to be Australia’s first Aboriginal theatre company, founded by Jack Charles and Bob Maza in Melbourne in 1972 (Creative Spirits 2016, n.p.). This company’s production of *The Cherry Pickers*, written by Kevin Gilbert, is recognised as the first Aboriginal play within a European/British context. The only Aboriginal Theatre Company currently based in Victoria is the Ilbijerri Theatre Company, which explores a range of controversial issues from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. The company’s history includes six seasons of *Stolen* in 1992, with national and international tours. The Bangarra Dance Theatre, formed in 1989, fuses Aboriginal culture with contemporary dance, and presents an annual national, regional and international tour of a world premiere work to maintain their world-wide reputation for excellence (Bangarra 2017, n.p.).

Significantly, the plays and performance texts produced over the last fifty years have changed and improved the broader communities’ understanding of Aboriginal Australians and their cultures (Casey & Craigie 2011, p. 6). In another performance genre, Circus Oz has been committed to Indigenous issues since the company’s inception in 1978, and in 2011 introduced the new Indigenous program BLAKflip and Beyond (Circus Oz 2015, n.p.). The program gives opportunity to talented Indigenous circus performers to be identified, mentored and supported as members of the company ensemble.

These theatrical companies are not part of the amateur arts sector, but it is important to respectfully acknowledge Indigenous Theatre in this project, because as stated in the Introduction to the artefact, Aboriginal Australians presented the first known live performance for communities in this country.
A quote from Anne Marshall sums up a unique and beautiful aspect of Indigenous Theatre: ‘Embodied narrative and performed discourse connects people with their own and each other’s lived lives, directly and immediately, and allows the external expression of ‘the human condition’ and its interrelations’ (Marshall 2000, p. 10).

**Multicultural Theatre**

In many cases, multicultural theatre is financially subsidised, placing this arts sector in the category of ‘Independent theatre’. Christopher C. Sonn et al. (2014) write of the benefits of oral history theatre to assist young people to reconnect with their personal histories, particularly Aboriginal youth (p. 551). An oral history theatre production presented by Footscray-based Western Edge Youth Arts, *Chronicles: Searching for Song Line* sought to foster ‘intercultural and intergenerational dialogue’ to facilitate understanding across ‘cultural and generational divides’, and gave young people opportunity to share their stories of growing up in Melbourne’s multicultural suburbs (pp. 552, 560). Sonn et al. point out the benefits of community arts practices engaging young people in ‘matters of identity, belonging and social change’ (p. 555).

According to Veronica Kelly (2001), since the 1970s and 1980s, Australia and New Zealand have recognised the benefit of live performance to help articulate a sense of personal identity and home for the two countries’ indigenous races of Aboriginal Australians and Maoris, immigrants and international refugees (p. 8). An Asian presence in both countries has, as Kelly observes, ‘produced fruitful mergings of performance styles and writing practices’ (p. 9).

As an example of theatre being used to convey messages by people of various nationalities living in Australia, in 2014 I had the pleasure of reviewing a production titled *Iago*. It was presented by the Edge Ensemble from Western Edge Youth Arts in the atmospheric c.1869 Bluestone Church Artspace in Hyde Street, Footscray. The production was a locally-written, clever re-imagining of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, set in a rat-infested contemporary boxing training gymnasium.

*Iago* not only gave prominence to the antagonist in Shakespeare’s original tragic tale, but broadened the original themes of deception and jealousy by using various cultural
perspectives to explore male violence and misogyny. At the time I wrote, ‘Iago has all the ingredients for a successful theatre journey’, and was later pleased to see this production, featuring talented young performers from diverse backgrounds, had been further workshopped, presented in schools and then for a season in the Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne (Malthouse Theatre 2019).

Amateur Theatre

The third principal theatrical arts sector in Victoria, amateur theatre, today comprises more than one hundred volunteer-operated musical and non-musical theatre companies. Thousands of patrons in urban and regional areas of Victoria enjoy productions presented annually by these volunteer-operated theatre companies. Data from field research interviews for this project reveals amateur theatre companies prefer to present popular shows which will reliably attract their audience demographic and ensure financial survival. Some companies may include in their annual season a relatively unknown show to challenge their audiences, and the works of Australian playwrights are becoming increasingly popular in local theatre.

Amateur theatre companies often support charitable organisations by presenting a fundraising performance, perhaps at the final dress rehearsal. The singing and performing group The Diamond Valley Singers donates all proceeds to charity, with almost one hundred and twenty thousand dollars having been raised for local and international charities since 1985 (Lowe 2016). In addition to generating box office ticket sales for ongoing company survival or donating funds to charitable causes, amateur theatre can also make an intangible contribution to the community.

Cultural Economics and Sociability

The amateur theatre arts sector in Victoria is unable to emulate commercial theatre’s financial contribution to the state’s economy. However, in a form of ‘cultural goodwill,’ amateur theatre makes a strong, non-financial contribution of intangible value to Victoria by creatively, culturally and socially benefitting the lives of thousands of participants and patrons (Bourdieu 1984, p. 321). Researchers for the British amateur theatre-related research project ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’ refer to
the ‘cultural economies of amateur theatre,’ comprising the cultural performances curated and created by groups, as well as the ‘hard’ economics which include buildings and box-office takings (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 7). The researchers also refer to amateur groups benefitting the local community by ‘a gift of cultural labour engaged in for pleasure’. This includes amateur theatre companies contributing to refurbishing performance spaces such as community halls and raising funds for charity.

The amateur theatre environment can be described as an effective social leveller, where professional or social status does not matter because priority is placed on theatrical talent, skills and teamwork. Grant Alley (2015) from CLOC Musical Theatre endorses this view, saying ‘It (amateur theatre) turns society upside down’. During an interview, Alley gave the hypothetical example of a business mogul passionate about theatre who wants to participate in theatre-making, but is unable to wield a hammer or sing. In contrast, a worker of low job status might have a strong tenor voice and be cast as the show’s star in the lead role.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) grew up in a family active in amateur theatre, or in his words, ‘social drama’, and regards the theatre experience for participants and spectators as a ‘ritual’. Turner’s view of ‘social drama’ conflicts with Alley’s view of theatre being a social leveller. Turner refers to social drama groups revealing ‘taxonomic’ relations among actors, such as relationships, social class or political status, contemporary friendships or opposition, and personal networks (p. 9). While these social matters might be discussed privately between theatre company members, they are, as Alley suggests, irrelevant to the shared goal of creating the best show possible by utilising members’ skills and talents, regardless of social class or political status.

Erin Walcon and Helen Nicholson (2017) analysed the everyday creative and social practices of amateur theatre participants because, while these theatre activities may be part of the participants’ everyday lives, they differ from the realities of ‘normal’ living (p. 19). They found that sociability is ‘plaited inextricably with the sense of a common creative purpose’ (p. 32). This concurs with findings shown in the artefact and explained in this exegesis that field research interview data reveals the importance to participants of friendships in amateur theatre groups and the feel of being in a ‘second family’ (p. 33).
There is a difference between theatre and reality. Bert States (1985) agrees: ‘The return from the play world is like the awakening of the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile’ (States in Dolan 2008, p. 18). Creativity is part of everyday life, and social creativity is a performative part of the experience of ‘doing’ (Crouch 2010, pp. 130-132). Peter Brook (1968) concurs with Walcon and Nicholson, and describes theatre as resembling a reducing lens where the special world can easily be divorced from life, because it is different from life (p.110). Brook refers to Bertolt Brecht’s theoretical writing separating the real from the unreal and believes this causes Brecht’s theatre to maintain two positions, ‘public and private, official and unofficial, theoretical and practical’ (p. 86).

In terms of this project, the focus on the history and culture of amateur theatre can be regarded as Brecht’s ‘public’ position, and the personal element behind the scenes where camaraderie and sociability are enjoyed becomes the ‘private’ position. Mixing with others while creating theatre requires discipline and the knowledge to differentiate between the appropriate times for serious work and sociability. Georg Simmel (1949) positions sociability in the amateur theatre-making sphere as ‘the art or play form of association’ in a symbolic reality without a serious reality (p. 255). Walcon and Nicholson (2017) believe this observation determines sociability as a form of cultural practice (p. 20). From personal experience, the cultural practice of sociability in amateur theatre can range from rituals such coffee-mug ownership during the rehearsal supper break, or pre-rehearsal or pre-performance vocal warm-ups in a group, conducted by the musical or choral director.

I agree with the ontological viewpoints of States, Brecht and Simmel that amateur theatre participation is both a real and unreal experience and can relate to Brecht’s reference of ‘public and private’. I personally recall experiencing the buzz of a sense of the surreal or escapism when collaborating with fellow theatre-makers, whether as writer, director or performer, to create the magic of theatre.

This contrasted markedly with the reality of everyday routine and ‘normal’ life outside the theatre. In private life when socialising with family or friends, they often did not understand the theatre world, or were uninterested, yet enjoyed attending the performances. Theatre and real life definitely comprised two different worlds. Walcon
and Nicholson (2017) conclude that the balance between art and sociability ‘infuses’ the amateur theatre companies (p. 33).

The various elements of sociability mentioned by Walcon and Nicholson, including enjoying tea breaks and networking, teamwork at working bees such as set-building or costume-making, camaraderie during rehearsals and performances, or the more serious nature of being part of a technical crew, are also all relevant to Victorian amateur theatre.

While sociability may have its benefits for amateur theatre participants, it may also have influenced the public assumption that the amateur theatre arts sector is ‘not theatre’, because it fulfils a different kind of cultural need (Cochrane, 2003 p. 170). Presumably this means participants enjoying social benefits from amateur theatre activity are viewed by some as having devalued their credibility as theatre-makers. This is significant to my data collection as it offers a possible explanation for the neglect of twentieth century amateur theatre by historians.

The materialities of amateur theatre are now discussed, and their importance to the performative and historical nature of amateur theatre.

**Materialities**

A fully staged theatrical production, whether amateur or professional, requires visual aesthetics such as sets and costumes to complement onstage performances. These aesthetics are created by dedicated, skilled craftspeople using available materials, based on a budget. In shows such as the 2018 production of CLOC Musical Theatre’s *Jekyll & Hyde: The Musical*, presented in Melbourne’s National Theatre, materialities assumed equal importance to the story-telling as did the characters, lyrics and music. These included the huge, menacing rotating set, visually striking costumes and the technical elements of impressive lighting and sound designs.

English researchers Sara Penny and Cara Gray (2017) investigated what materialities reveal about the sociocultural aspects of amateur theatre companies (p. 104). They discovered that items such as sets, props, costumes and buildings have more than an aesthetic value and use, and can be ‘companions to our emotional lives or provocations
of thought’ (Turkle 2007, p. 5). Following her many Sunday mornings working in set-building with the Settlement Players in Letchworth Garden City, Gray (2017) recognised the importance of the unseen processes of ‘crafting, sewing, building, making, caring,’ not only to sustain the current amateur theatre production, but for the long-term future benefit of the companies (pp. 104, 106). While positioned in the theatre-making environment, Gray also became interested in the importance of invisible and creative spaces used by amateur theatre-makers, such as the car park space for set-building, accessed through the backstage fire door, and a dressing-room space hidden behind the stage (p. 108).

Penny and Gray undertook a guided tour of the Barn Theatre in Welwyn Garden City, where a nail from The Barn led to a story about the history of the seventeenth century former cow barn which is now transformed into a one hundred and thirty-nine-seat theatre (pp. 116-117). This reaffirmed to the researchers the importance of the materiality of amateur theatrical buildings to the companies’ stories.

The materiality of amateur theatre performance venues in Victoria also generates historical interest regarding their origin. Examples are the former bus depot in Rosanna which became Heidelberg Theatre Company’s performance venue, the bakery in Albert Street, Williamstown was transformed into the Williamstown Little Theatre, and Geelong Repertory Theatre’s Woodbin Theatre started as a wood and timber store (Drowley 2015; Ebell 2016; Eaton 2016). The Ulumbarra Theatre in Bendigo, formerly Sandhurst Gaol and used by the Bendigo Theatre Company, has retained the cells and gallows areas which have now become part of the materiality of the modern-day performance venue (Ulumbarra Theatre 2018, n.p.).

The volunteer teamwork in English amateur theatre companies to create sets and costumes as described by Gray and Penny, is mirrored in Australian amateur theatre. These ‘making’ processes have been part of amateur theatre on various scales since its inception, relying on skilled, dedicated volunteers to meet and work regularly as a team, using given materials. Research data for this project concurs with Gray and Penny’s findings regarding the community teamwork enjoyed in set-building and costume-making workshops. Concern arose, however, in several instances during interviews for
this project, regarding the operational need to replace long-term volunteers, some now well into their eighties, with similarly skilled, enthusiastic and available crafts-people.

The relationship between the material aspects of amateur theatre operation and the cultural economy in terms of buildings, assets and box-office takings, as well as the performances presented by these companies is important to investigatory studies of amateur theatre such as in this project (Nicholson et al. 2017, p. 7). The English researchers note that amateur groups can contribute to refurbishing performance spaces such as community halls, raise funds for charity, receive box-office takings from audiences and money from sponsors and advertisers. This then benefits the local community by ‘a gift of cultural labour engaged in for pleasure’.

The artefact for this project describes amateur performances regularly being presented as fund-raisers to help maintain Mechanics’ Institutes and other worthwhile charitable causes. Craft is at the heart of amateur theatre, and the learning and sharing of various crafts, both on and offstage, is part of the satisfaction of amateur theatre participation (p. 9).

**Community Health and Wellbeing**

This section shows how involvement in amateur theatre, including the various elements of sociability and the creative satisfaction from theatre-making, benefits the participants’ mental and physical health wellbeing. VicHealth Chief Executive Officer Jerril Rechter confirms this, describing the benefits of arts in the community as ‘bringing people together, fostering a sense of community, supporting mental wellbeing by building confidence and self-esteem, and inspiring us to get moving’ (VicHealth 2014, n.p.). The Australian Federal Government recognises that participation in social and other community activities promotes individual and community wellbeing. Benefits include ‘the building of social networks that provide formal and informal support for members of the community’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, p. 251).

Recognising the physical and mental health benefits from theatrical participation, Dawn Joseph and Jane Southcott initiated a joint research project in Melbourne between Monash and Deakin Universities to explore health benefits for the global aging
population when undertaking active community engagement through music participation (Joseph & Southcott 2014). Joseph and Southcott followed the activities of a Melbourne amateur four-part choir called The Skylarkers, which formed in 1999 and changed direction in 2009 to become a small amateur entertainment troupe presenting musical theatre repertoire for fellow citizens in retirement villages and nursing homes.

When Joseph and Southcott undertook qualitative research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to process data from interviews with The Skylarkers, two themes emerged. These included musical self-identity and gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment. The researchers also observed that voluntary engagement by older people in arts programs such as music and theatrical groups assists personal growth.

**Transformative Benefits**

Research for this project shows that participation in the amateur arts sector can transform people’s lives through such elements as gaining confidence, learning new skills, youth discovering a sense of purpose and career direction, and an opportunity for actors of all abilities to voice personal concerns through performance. Webb (1997) concurs that amateur theatre is transformative and believes that the arts sector can ‘increase morale, self-esteem and sense of shared achievement’ (pp. 11-12). Tina Pyman and Sue Rugg (2006) interviewed amateur theatre participants in England about benefits they experienced, and these included increased awareness of community identity, a feeling of being valued, learning new skills and the opportunity to be someone else (p. 562).

In the interviews I undertook for this project, the data reveals many transformative benefits for participants arising from amateur theatre. These include:

- Instills confidence, combats shyness, develops friendships between members and visiting actors, offers a welcoming environment to gay and other communities, provides a sense of being part of an extended family and an opportunity to connect with people in the local community without social barriers, creates an intellectual, cultural and social outlet, offers the opportunity to fundraise for charitable organisations, encourages learning and commitment, provides a focus
in life, develops personal growth through leadership and learning new and varied skills, resulting in a sense of self-fulfilment.

Research data also reveals these overall benefits of amateur theatre to participants and the community:

Has a positive influence on youth development through offering a constructive pastime. This is confidence building, and provides an outlet for talents and the opportunity to learn new skills in a collaborative and social environment. Amateur theatre also benefits health and wellbeing, offers respite from daily commitments such as being a carer for a relative, can help inspire a career choice, offers a good ‘fill-in’ for those hoping for a professional performing career, or for the professional performer between shows, detracts from using digital media, and is a real, actual face-to-face communication. Audiences can be transformed by watching productions, particularly in regional areas where accessing city theatre is geographically difficult. Amateur theatre makes live theatre accessible and affordable to audiences, and young people may be experiencing live theatre for the first time. More ethnic groups are now booking tickets to see shows, which will assist familiarity with the English language and raises awareness of Western culture.

**Seeking an Accurate Name for Volunteer Theatre**

Before deciding to use the term ‘amateur theatre’ for this project, various options were explored for an appropriate name which would avoid the negative connotation of ‘amateur’, but still accurately describe the volunteer arts sector. Options included ‘little theatre’, ‘repertory theatre’, ‘art (or arts) theatre’, ‘non-professional theatre’, ‘social theatre’, ‘am dram’, ‘local theatre’, ‘community theatre’ and ‘amateur theatre’. I discuss these options here and explain why it was finally decided to use the term ‘amateur’.
‘Little Theatre’

The Little Theatre Movement developed in America as non-professional theatre in the early twentieth century, introducing new artistic principles and experimental techniques (Baker 1968, p. 241). Louise Burleigh Powell (1917) wrote about the independence of the American small theatres from commercial theatre, and their enthusiasm which ‘is like the spirit which initiates the pageant and the community masque, evidence of the awakening of the American audience to active participation in the art of the theatre’ (p. 55). The Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain was established in 1946, and today focuses on the operations and regulatory requirements of independent amateur theatre companies in Britain (Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain 2018, n.p.).

A similarity between the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain and the Victorian Drama League is that both are umbrella organisations to support the development and operation of amateur theatre in their respective countries. However, a difference is that membership of the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain is limited to amateur theatres that own or lease their performance venues. On the other hand, membership of the Victorian Drama League is open to all amateur theatre companies, regardless of whether they own, lease or hire their performance venues.

Another reason why ‘Little Theatre’ is not technically correct for describing volunteer-operated theatre is the term’s association with professional theatre. An example is when Melbourne Little Theatre founders Brett Randall and Hal Percy were casting their productions in 1931, they hoped for the best available amateur and professional talent, to encourage Australian writers and present quality plays (Kearns 1950, p. 6). Eventually in 1962, the Melbourne Little Theatre’s name was changed to the St Martin’s Theatre Company and achieved its aim of operating on a professional basis (p. 7). Jean Campbell (1948) describes the Little Theatre as ‘a laboratory of the theatre’, but states Little Theatre is not a true apellation unless having a home of its own (pp. 85, 86).

In a Master of Arts thesis titled ‘Little Theatre: Its Development Since World War Two in Australia with Particular Reference to Queensland’, Jennifer Radbourne (1978) researches non-professional theatre from World War Two to 1978. Radbourne’s recognition forty years ago of the need to create an historical account of the role non-professional theatre has played in the development of Australian theatre and drama is
most commendable (Preface). My concern forty years later is that because this thesis is available publicly online, it is, arguably, confusing with regards to the term ‘little theatre’ being used to describe all non-professional theatre companies. Radbourne concedes ‘essentially it is amateur theatre’ discussed in her thesis, but also acknowledges there are negative connotations associated with the term ‘amateur’ (p. 1). Radbourne explains that because amateur and professional theatre are associated with ‘monetary gains for performance’, the ‘philosophical’ term ‘Little Theatre’ has been chosen for her thesis (p. 2).

I agree with Radbourne that unfortunately an accurate term to describe the non-professional theatrical arts sector has escaped linguists, which is the reason why this project has reluctantly used the term ‘amateur’ in view of its historic long-term use.

If defining all amateur theatre as ‘little theatre’, it is not correct to describe the arts sector in Australia as beginning in Adelaide in 1908 (p. 10). Theatre companies were established in Victoria alone during the nineteenth century include the Melbourne Garrick Club, formed in 1855 by ‘upper-class’ literary gentlemen, and various groups formed in regional areas as described in this project (De Serville 2008, n p.).

Radbourne refers to the ‘four strongest little theatres in Melbourne’ at the time of writing, as Heidelberg Repertory Company, Malvern Theatre Company, the Pumpkin Players and Clayton Theatre Company (p. 65). There is no supportive data validating why these four theatre companies should be stronger than other groups operating at the time. For example, do these four companies attract stronger audience attendances, or are their productions of stronger quality compared to other theatre groups?

Once again, Radbourne is to be congratulated on aiming to record the history of non-professional theatre in Australia, and I hope other students will also accept her invitation to add to this record (Preface). My concern remains, however, that the publicly available reference to all non-professional theatre as ‘little theatre’ could cause confusion for some readers.
In Victoria today, Williamstown Little Theatre and Eltham Little Theatre qualify for Campbell’s criteria as permanent residents in their performance venues (Eltham Little Theatre 2017; Williamstown Little Theatre 2015). In contrast, Euroa Little Theatre, founded in 1956, has never acquired a residential performance space, and therefore was probably named a ‘Little Theatre’ because of the company’s amateur status (Watters 2018).

In regard to seeking an appropriate term for volunteer theatre, I believe the criteria factors of requiring residency in a performance venue, presenting experiential productions and association with professional performers such as in the Melbourne Little Theatre, eliminates the term ‘little theatre’ as an optional title for volunteer theatre in Victoria.

‘Repertory Theatre’
Key issues with using the term ‘Repertory Theatre’ as an overarching term for volunteer theatre in Victoria are firstly, a repertory company traditionally has a resident cast of actors, and a repertory (as in ‘repertoire’) of plays that perform a rotating repertoire of shows (Bell 2014, n.p.). Secondly, a repertory theatre company often presents a different play each night while rehearsing and preparing other plays to supplement the repertoire.

If the term ‘Repertory Theatre’ was used to describe the volunteer-operated theatrical arts sector, then abiding by the traditional repertory theatre requirements would be impractical for most of today’s volunteer theatre companies. Reasons include a lack of availability of volunteer personnel to maintain ongoing repertory performances, and also some modern-day performers prefer flexibility to perform with various companies and move on after a show’s season. Other factors indicating unsuitability include ongoing rehearsal periods requiring additional personnel and venue hiring costs, and expensive licensing fees for continually presenting shows.

From another perspective, Richard Critchlow from Geelong Repertory Theatre Company believes that the Australian context of ‘repertory or community theatre’ means ‘a company of players which offers the opportunity to any member of the community to
join a team of fellow volunteers in achieving a distinct and individual product which seeks to entertain and intrigue audiences’ (Critchlow 2018, p. 1.).

This interpretation of ‘repertory theatre’ does not represent the specific traditional meaning of the term, nor does ‘community theatre’ which since the 1970s has involved a professional theatre arts-practitioner working with members of a community. Originally formed in 1932 as the Geelong Repertory Society, in 1989 the company changed its name to Geelong Repertory Theatre Company to avoid public confusion regarding the term ‘repertory’ (p. 4). Geelong Repertory Theatre Company is regarded as Victoria’s oldest theatre company.

‘Art Theatre’
‘Art’ theatres reflected the new art of the theatre as it was known in France, Germany and Russia, while another type of Art Little Theatre might be subsidised by a patron (Powell 2017, p. 59). ‘Art’ theatre is also a term used to describe theatres such as the Moscow Art Theatre or Ireland’s national theatre, The Abbey, in Dublin, which produced plays of literary quality (Abbey Theatre 2017, n.p.). When Melbourne actor J. Beresford Fowler (1962) returned from World War One, he formed the Arts Theatre Company and presented plays of diverse styles, ranging from Shakespeare to his own original works (p. 164).

In 1964, I performed at the Arts Theatre, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne in the musical play Listen to the Wind, and an original musical adaptation of Little Women. This Arts Theatre was well-patronised by the public, but there was never mention of any historical affiliation with the ‘Arts Theatre’ name. Considering that patrons might be confused with the visual arts, ‘Art Theatre’ or ‘Arts Theatre’ are not sensible options for identifying Victoria’s volunteer-operated theatrical arts sector.

‘Non-Professional Theatre’
The term ‘non-professional’ could be the most appropriate choice, as it accurately reflects non-payment for theatre company participants. However, if using the term ‘non-professional’, it can imply the work is of sub-standard quality to ‘professional’.
‘Local Theatre’
This term could also be a suitable choice, but the word ‘local’ is geographically restrictive. Participants and patrons supporting amateur theatre shows sometimes travel long distances to see or perform in shows, particularly in country areas. These people would not agree with the term ‘local theatre’ in relation to the geographical location of their own homes.

‘Am Dram’
This is an abbreviated title for ‘amateur dramatics,’ which is suitable in one sense to describe the non-professional theatrical arts sector but is not accurate to describe Victorian non-professional theatre which involves musical theatre as well as drama.

‘Social Theatre’
Victor Turner (1982) calls amateur theatre ‘social theatre’. He says it made him aware of ‘the power of symbols in human communication [ … ] each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages: manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures [ … ] tears [ … ] dance patterns’ (p. 9). Today’s volunteer theatre practitioners socially collaborate with colleagues to achieve creative theatre-making, but the prime aim is to present theatre. As Cochrane (2003) points out, this arts sector can be viewed by some as not real theatre if fulfilling the cultural needs of participants (p. 170). It would therefore be unwise to have the word ‘social’ form part of the arts sector title.

‘Community Theatre’
As already noted in this project, the term ‘Community Theatre’ is defined as professional arts practitioners working with members of a community to present a production specifically about that community. The term ‘Community Theatre’ is therefore not technically correct to describe Victoria’s volunteer theatrical arts sector.

‘Amateur Theatre’
The term ‘Amateur Theatre’ accurately describes the non-professional theatrical arts sector because participants are unpaid for sharing their time, talent and expertise. As
mentioned previously in this project, unfortunately the negative connotation in the term ‘amateur’ demeans the modern-day high standard of volunteer theatrical productions.

Today’s audiences expect to see quality theatre in their local communities at reasonable prices with free parking, program, and often complimentary refreshments. In many cases, today’s amateur theatre companies deliver this high standard of audience expectation.

However, this was not always the case according to newspaper reviewers of amateur productions. Lisa Warrington (2013) believes the customary attitude for newspaper journalists when attending early twentieth century amateur shows was to ‘expect little, seek out, record anticipated shortcomings, and then be pleasantly surprised at any evidence of ability’ (p. 101). She compares a negatively reviewed performance by Melbourne’s Lyceum Amateur Dramatic Club at the Theatre Royal, published in the Melbourne Argus in 1862, with a more favourably reviewed show presented in Dunedin, New Zealand, around the same time. The reader is left to question the balanced content of Warrington’s amateur theatre review resources, and whether there was a selective process to favour the writer’s homeland production.

For example, an amateur show reviewed favourably in Victoria during Warrington’s researched time span of 1862-1868 was the comedy Used Up, presented in May, 1865 by the ‘Avoca Amateurs’ in aid of the Maryborough Hospital (Trove 2017). The review appeared in the Avoca area’s local newspaper, The Avoca Mail and Landsborough, Moonambel, Redbank and St Arnaud Advertiser on 27th May, 1865. This reviewer’s predetermined attitude towards amateur theatre concurs with Warrington’s view, as in the following words there is an admittance of initial foreboding before pleasant surprise: ‘the idea of failure mostly predominated, because, we suppose, of the doubt attending all new experiments at the present day in Victoria’ (p. 101).

The review of the ‘Avoca amateurs’ concludes with praise: ‘Those who prognosticated failure, however, were as it turned out, supremely in the wrong … for a more unqualified success whether … the number of the audience or the performance itself, never attended any effort of the kind in this part of the colony, by any amateur club, old or new’ (Trove 2017).
This flattering praise by the Australian reviewer was hopefully deserved because, as Warrington quotes from the *Lyttelton Times*, ‘indiscreet flattery […] wrongs the careful student and true genius’ (pp. 103-104). Warrington believes the arrival of amateur theatre in Dunedin, in the form of the Dunedin Garrick Club formed in late March, 1862, was an immediate consequence of the introduction of professional theatre, which had opened at the Royal Princess Theatre earlier that month (p. 104). By contrast, amateur actors performed before professionals in Melbourne’s first theatre, The Pavilion, which opened in February, 1842 (Colligan & Van Straten 2008, n.p.).
Section Three: Project Method and Methodology

The following advice from Lou Bellamy rang a chord with me as the researcher of this project: ‘To stage it, to page it, requires that we know it. But we must know it without endeavouring to change it. Rather, let it change us, the seekers’ (Bellamy 2008, p. 5). Firstly, regarding to ‘page it’, I qualify for Bellamy’s requirement by thoroughly understanding the topic, meaning and purpose of the research data. However, as Bellamy states, that does not give entitlement to make any alterations. He points out that instead of changing knowledge learned from research, we the ‘seekers’ should allow the data to change us. Concurring with Bellamy’s view, there is no doubt that my knowledge and understanding of the research topic of Victorian amateur theatre has deepened and been enriched since exploring the history and culture of this arts sector.

This section of the exegesis presents an insight into the research enquiry process for this project. According to Webb (2015), a scholarly research project requires an explicit research question or hypothesis (p. 25). As previously noted, the principal line of enquiry for this project is:

This project adds new and significant knowledge through asking and addressing the principal research question: Amateur theatre is a transformative arts sector which strengthens communities and benefits participants. To what extent did nineteenth and twentieth century amateur theatre exist in Victoria, and what unique, individual histories and cultures are inherent to musical and non-musical amateur theatre companies operating in Victoria today?

Theatre History Research

The goal for researching this history-based project is similar to Oscar Brockett’s (1967) perspective on the purpose of theatre history: to ‘describe and explain the theatre as it has existed at specific times and places and to trace its successive changes’ (p. 267). The scope of this project is the history and culture of amateur theatre in Victoria, commencing with European settlement in 1788, and investigating history, changes and development of this theatrical arts sector through to 2018. Using Practice Led Research
(PLR) as the principal research mode, this project has followed Virginia Scott’s (2004) view that the historian should accumulate and evaluate evidence, construct an interpretative framework, and include ‘the marshalling of persuasive arguments’ (p. 192).

Brockett (1967) points out that when a theatrical performance finishes, there is nothing left for a researcher to work with to investigate the performance except ‘accounts which are partial and personal’ (p. 269). He describes a diverse range of primary and secondary source research materials of use for the theatre historian, but not all are applicable to this project. For example, scripts, prompt books, musical scores and deeds of property would be useful for a project specialising in the history of one, or just a few theatre companies. This project covering Victorian amateur theatre’s historical lineage over two hundred and thirty-eight years, including profiling seventy theatre companies, has not included investigation of items such as scripts and prompt books for each company.

Photographs, reviews of performances, advertisements promoting productions, playbills, programs and their covers have instead been useful primary source research materials (p. 270). Amateur theatre venues with historical significance are included in this research, such as Mechanics’ Institutes, or theatres of unique origin such as Heidelberg Theatre which evolved from a renovated bus depot, and Williamstown Little Theatre which was formerly a bakery (Drowley 2016; Ebell 2016).

Secondary research sources have included personal recollections, histories of amateur theatre, cultural and social issues as conveyed by interview respondents, general histories of theatre, and accounts of events and periods of time (Brockett, p. 270). Brockett emphasises the importance of authenticating and then interpreting evidence within its relevant context (p. 272). He believes objectivity is difficult, perhaps impossible, for an historian to achieve, but there should be an awareness of personal prejudices (p. 273).

If considering this factor, my prejudices regarding amateur theatre research would be inclined to favour the arts sector by limiting inclusion to positive reports only. This would not result in truthful research, and to create a realistic and accurate balance negative comments about amateur theatre and performers are also included in this project.
Virginia Scott (2004) would like to see more theatre historians exploring archives to find ‘unknown treasures’ (p. 191). This project has benefited from researching archival boxes in the Heritage Collections Reading Room in State Library Victoria. One example is the discovery of a scrapbook compiled by H. S. Peters of the Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Society between 1856 and 1859. This scrapbook was certainly an ‘unknown treasure’, and contains press reviews of the company’s productions, giving valuable insight into cultural life at that time (Peters 1856-1859).

Brockett (1967) describes the theatre as ‘one of man’s significant creations’, and therefore its history is ‘an important humanistic study’ (p. 268). As previously noted, the principal mode of enquiry for this project is Practice Led Research (PLR), which offers a hybrid of research methods for a multi-disciplinary approach to research Victoria’s amateur theatrical arts sector.

**Practice Led Research (PLR)**

Carole Gray and Julian Malins (2016) refer to the hybrid research methods pertinent to Practice Led Research (PLR) as ‘modes of transport’ (p. 14). Indeed, these methods have operated effectively as conveyors to investigate various aspects of this project’s research subject to create new knowledge about amateur theatre in Victoria.

In D. Soyini Madison’s words, ‘Art helps us see and realize the unrealized’ (Madison, p. 481 in Lincoln & Denzin 2003). PLR, with its various investigatory methods, also helps the realisation of knowledge from the unrealized, or unknown, such as when interviewing a respondent and not pre-knowing the answers. Graeme Sullivan argues that Practice Led Research uses methods which move from ‘the unknown to the known’, rather than the more traditional methodologies which move from ‘the known to the unknown’ (Sullivan in Smith & Dean 2009, p. 28).

Sullivan’s view correlates with my experience of using PLR, having commenced this project basically equipped with a research question and the knowledge of a gap in the literature regarding the history of amateur theatre in Victoria. For example, as the ‘unknown’ moved towards the ‘known’ it became apparent that neglect of amateur
theatre research was more widespread than in Victoria and Australia, as it has also been the case in England and Canada.

Research and Writing Professors Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009) state that although having initial goals, Practice Led Research will engage with processes along the way, allowing for emergence, and permitting content flexibility (p. 23). For this project, Smith and Dean’s view is also pertinent, because while the PLR commenced with an initial goal, unexpected processes were encountered along the way that required flexibility. An instance of this is deciding to broaden the scope of research enquiry from history-based to include the cultural elements of amateur theatre, meant additional new research data.

This included exploring the theatre companies’ strengths, threats, weaknesses, operational aspects, criteria for selecting productions, and the transformative nature of the amateur theatrical arts sector. The flexibility of PLR allowed this additional new content to share equal importance with the project’s historical component, after the project changed direction from the original traditional history-only concept. A similar thing happened to artist researcher Bronwyn Fredericks (2014), who says, ‘As with many Practice Led projects, the art that emerged was nothing like what was originally imagined’ (p. 99).

Simon Biggs supports Smith and Dean’s views regarding the benefits of hybridity when using PLR and being able to use methods from other research domains (Biggs in Smith & Dean 2009, p. 67). One example of hybridity relating to this project has been the opportunity offered by PLR to include ethnographic and personal recollections in the creative artefact. This had not been initially planned, but the personal recollections throughout the decades from the 1950s add additional new knowledge to the artefact regarding each era. Over time it also became apparent that some images relating to stories in the artefact would add visual interest to the project, and appropriate photographic release forms have been issued where applicable and available.

**Ethnography**

My personal involvement in the amateur performing arts sector led to the theatrical theme being viewed through an ethnographic lens during the interview process. Benefits
included instant recognition and interpretation of theatrical terminology used by interviewees, which helped establish an early rapport, a knowledge of, and respect for, their theatrical venues, and an understanding of various issues. Judith Okley (2007) refers to the field worker as an ‘instrument’ with a ‘cultural, biographical construction’, which deconstructs through ‘a lived and interactive encounter with others’ (p. 77). As field researcher, my personal cultural and biographical knowledge could be regarded as the ‘construction’ referred to by Okley. This cultural and biographical knowledge was then deconstructed during the interview to assist understanding and a connection with interviewees, their theatre companies and issues.

Ilja Maso points out that the ethnographer’s knowledge of cultural practices, common values and beliefs can help both the insiders (cultural members including the interviewer and theatre company members) and outsiders (cultural strangers with no existing knowledge of the amateur theatrical arts sector) understand the culture (Maso 2001 in Ellis 2011, p. 3). This is relevant to this project because the knowledge of amateur theatrical cultural practices, values and beliefs shared between me as interviewer and the participants were an instant ‘ice-breaker’. This comfortable atmosphere created through mutual understanding, enabled the interview between, in most cases, two former strangers, to proceed productively without delay.

The ‘outsiders’ mentioned by Maso, in this case referring to individuals without knowledge of amateur theatre, have been assisted in their understanding of the culture through my discussions about this project. Confidentiality of interview content is of paramount importance of course, but when such individuals ask questions such as ‘Are you still doing that project? What’s it about?’ I explain the vibrant existence of amateur theatre and suggest they look up their own local theatre company, and offer suggestions for their involvement, whether as active participant or spectator.

Paul Atkinson comments on the ‘terrible danger’ of an ethnographer ‘collapsing the social world into one’s own lifeworld’ (Atkinson 2004, p. 110). In the case of this project, ethnographical experience from one’s own lifeworld was used to enhance knowledge and understanding in the social context of a face to face interview, but not as part of the social world. By this I mean the intention to engage in a pleasant, sociable manner with the interlocutor while pre-equipped with ethnographic knowledge of the
interview topic did not mean using this knowledge to place myself in the interviewee’s social world. Pierre Bourdieu (1996) recognises the social context in the interview by referring to it as a ‘social relation’ (p. 18).

I believe that while endeavouring to adopt a neutral and separate stance during the interview, the interviewee needs to have some degree of social connection with the respondents. This can help relax the interviewees, develop a pleasant rapport and encourage productive interaction during the interview process. Three interviewees from my field research interviews have sadly passed away since our sessions. A good ‘social relation’ must have been established between interviewer and interviewee because in the case of each death, the deceased’s colleague or family member has contacted me to advise the sad news. By invitation, I also attended one of the funerals. The fact that a relationship formed during a one-hour interview between two former strangers, is evidence of the enormous impact of an interview on the interviewee, their colleagues and family.

**Autoethnography**

Tami Spry (2001) describes autoethnography as ‘a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context’ (p. 710). This is applicable to my autoethnographic accounts in the artefact regarding stories of personal involvement in amateur theatre during the decades since 1958. These accounts also fit Carolyn Ellis and Stacy Holman Jones’ description of the autoethnographic practice (Ellis 2004 & Holman Jones 2005 in Ellis et al. 2011). Ellis and Holman Jones describe autoethnography as the systematic analysis of personal experiences which aims to understand cultural experiences. My autoethnography is systematic in that it progresses in order through the decades in this project’s artefact. This timeline is only one aspect of autoethnography in this project, as I also reflect on my personal place in ‘a social setting, a social group, or a social problem’ (Denzin 2006, p. 421).

I have attempted to avoid autobiographical storytelling or ‘contrived poetics of the self’ in these personal additions to the researched narrative (Madison 2006, p. 320). D. Soyini Madison believes the term ‘autoethnography’ risks self-embellishment diminishing the ‘encompassing terrain’ (p. 321). Care has been taken to recollect personal historic
happenings in my autobiographical pieces in the artefact, rather than trying to ‘upstage’ the researched content. In her controversial paper which argues against autoethnography, Sara Delamont (2006) suggests ‘we are not interesting enough to write about in journals [...] or [...] to be the subject matter of sociology’ (p. 7). The reality is that history has taken place and, whether interesting to the reader or otherwise, the auto-ethnographer was positioned in the historical event.

Among Delamont’s (2006) critical concern with autoethnography is her belief that autoethnographers are literally and intellectually ‘lazy’ (p. 2). The autoethnographic accounts in this project’s artefact introduce an additional perspective in the form of a personal voice and will hopefully be of interest to the reader. It is my personal experience and expertise that has enabled designing meaningful interviews and conducting them with rigour, empathy and integrity. I have, however, avoided using the self-claimed phenomena of epiphanies when relating my experiences over the decades because, as Arthur Bochner points out, such experiences may be considered transformative by one person, but not by another (Bochner 1984, p. 595 in Ellis 2011).

For example, in the artefact I briefly recount experiencing my first amateur theatre play in 1958 at the Arrow Theatre. Titled A Must For Dolly, this play was written and directed by J. Beresford Fowler as a sequel to George Bernard Shaw’s Man and Superman. Concurring with Bochner’s (1984) opinion that self-claimed ‘epiphanies’ may not appeal to everyone, the following is an example of autoethnographic information which was omitted from the artefact for this reason: ‘JB’ as Mr Fowler was affectionately known, lived in a one-room bedsitter in Graham Street, Albert Park, with shelves stacked atmospherically with dusty scrapbooks and photograph albums. These seemed extra special to a young girl, and I loved perusing these books at rehearsals, even imagining that one day I might be part of his photographic collection.

It was therefore a wonderful ‘epiphany’ for me to see J. Beresford Fowler’s name appear during research of this project, including reference to his own amateur theatre company, The Art Theatre Players, formed in 1925 (Jones & O’Shaughnessy 1996). This discovery merged personal memories with history, creating a sense of pride that Mr Fowler’s earlier contribution to theatre was now part of this project. I do not consider, however, that these personal thoughts and ‘epiphany’ would be of interest to all readers if included
in the artefact. As a point of interest, with regards to the final destination of Mr Fowler’s wonderful theatrical memorabilia, Barry Jones and Peter O’Shaughnessy (1996) write: ‘His impressive collection of autographed letters, documents and photographs were sold off to help him survive’ (n.p.).

The research methods of ethnography and autoethnography have helped strengthen this project with personal theatrical knowledge and experiences. Quantitative and Qualitative research methods have also played an important role within the context of the PLR paradigm.

**Quantitative and Qualitative Research**

‘Many research designs use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods at different stages of the research cycle’ (Bamberger 2000, p. 3).

Michael Bamberger’s view is pertinent to this project because both quantitative and qualitative research methods are unique in their purpose and contributions. Quantitative research presents verifiable information regarding geographical locations of the researched theatre companies, and analytical data from field research interviews. This is complemented by qualitative methods to explain and understand the ‘cultural, social, political and institutional context’ (p. ix).

Quantitatively sourced data assisted the organisation of face to face interviews in regional and urban Victoria, and this statistical information complemented qualitative research to design case studies in preparation for the interviews. The qualitative research method was used for this project to source historical research about Victorian amateur theatre from in-house publications, non-academic and academic texts, scrapbooks, websites and archives.
Assisted by the quantitatively sourced details of geographical location and contact information, qualitative research was also used to design seventy case studies of currently operational Victorian non-professional theatre groups, in preparation for face-to-face interviews, and a telephone and e-interview.

Roger Schank and Robert Abelson (1995) write: ‘Knowledge is experiences and stories, and intelligence is the apt use of experience, and the creation and telling of stories’ (n.p.). This view represents good advice to achieve a successful research project through intelligent use of knowledge and experiences to create and convey a story. Adding to this discussion, Oscar Brockett (1967) points out that although the gathering of evidence is important, the historian’s principal task is ‘the intelligent use of the evidence’ (p. 271). Accordingly, this reflective exegesis now documents knowledge gained from my interview experiences of hearing stories shared by amateur theatre practitioners in regional and urban Victoria.

Field Research Interviews

Planning

The field research interview is shared face-to-face human communication, described by Webb (2015) as ‘a highly engaged research tool’ (p. 143). It was the engagement with a shared mutual interest of theatre-making that helped create an instant rapport when I first contacted theatre company representatives. These representatives then recommended suitable interviewees for the project. The proposed respondents belonged to Webb’s category of ‘key informants’, because they had specific knowledge of, and appropriate connection with, the project topic (p. 137).
According to Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2001), the interviewer’s preparatory work includes making initial contact with the interview participant, scheduling a date and time for the event, deciding on a location and setting out the ‘ground rules’ (p. 2). In my case, these ‘ground rules’ included ethics-related tasks such as consent forms for signature prior to the interview and ensuring familiarisation of the participant with a guideline list of questions.

The quantitatively researched geographical locations, websites and contact details of seventy theatre companies in various parts of Victoria, were recorded in a two-centimetre thick workbook. Divided into Victorian geographical areas, this book has a separate page allocated to each theatre company to document communications and interview arrangements.

The seventy selected amateur theatre companies are of varying sizes and situated across Victoria. Some present musical or non-musical productions, and together they collectively represent a good cross-section of urban and regional amateur theatre. Destinations for field research trips in regional areas included Mildura in northern Victoria, eastern Gippsland, Western District towns such as Hamilton, the former gold-mining towns of Ballarat and Bendigo, and coastal towns such as Queenscliff, Torquay, and the city of Geelong.

The first contact with companies usually took place via telephone contact with Presidents or Secretaries, inviting their company to participate in the project, and requesting an interview with a long-term company member. These initial contacts had the responsibility of recommending knowledgeable and reliable interviewees (sometimes themselves), and this worked well every time. In cases where elderly members were interviewed for their historical knowledge and recollections, a younger member joined the interview to give a contemporary overview.

**Interview Locations**

Gubrium and Holstein refer to the interviewer as ‘deciding on a location’. For this project, in view of the interviewee’s knowledge of their local area, they were asked to recommend a suitable and convenient interview location.
Many theatre companies do not have everyday access to their own performance venues between shows, so there were mixed styles of interview venues. These included private homes, theatres, the Sale Library, a community centre in Werribee, a work-shed in Pakenham, Arts Shed in Bendigo, rehearsal spaces, conference room in Traralgon, a wardrobe department in Ballarat, halls, a park outside a storage shed, cafes, and two private clubs, the Warrnambool Club and RACV Club in Melbourne.

Scheduling Interviews
To avoid risking the bushfire season in country areas, interviews focused on suburban theatre companies during the 2015-2016 summer months until March. The logistics of scheduling interviews with theatre company representatives to ensure efficient travelling through country areas depended on the kind co-operation and availability of participants. Fortunately, this worked well, and I remain most grateful to participants for rearranging their personal schedules to fit in with this project.

Examples of three of the field research trips are presented in Appendix ‘1’ of this project.

Ethics Requirements
Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba emphasise the importance of researchers not misleading participants about the purpose of the proposed research (Lincoln & Guba 2003 in Lincoln & Denzin 2003, p. 228). To avoid any misunderstanding about this project, and to ensure all respondents felt familiar and comfortable with their participation, five ethics-related documents were prepared under the guidance of Swinburne University of Technology ethical requirements.

These ethics-based documents are as follows:

(a) **Letter of Invitation:** The invitation to the theatre company and a representative to participate in the project, which was emailed after establishing initial contact.

(b) **Project Information Statement:** This form contains full details of the project and contact details for the Principal Investigator and Student Investigator at Swinburne University of Technology. Interviewees were advised that the
emailed forms were for their information only, and hard copies would be brought to the interview for signature.

(c) **Project Consent Form for Theatre Companies** was signed on behalf of the theatre company at the interview by a committee member or representative.

(d) **Project Consent Form for Participants** was signed by the interviewee(s). (The above four forms have since been reprinted twice, due to modifications to the project title and change of academic supervisors).

(e) **A Guideline List of Interview Questions** was sent before the interview to ensure familiarity for respondents with the research questions. An accompanying message assured participants that these were guidelines only, allowing flexibility for the interview to proceed in other directions.

(f) **A Photographic Release Form** has since been created for photographic clearance to use images provided by theatre companies or individuals in the artefact. A stamped addressed envelope was sent with every Consent Form and Project Information Statement for signature and return.

Jeff Malpas (2012) acknowledge the importance of ethics in contemporary culture, and the increased attention to questions regarding ethical conduct within the public and private domains (Malpas in Schwartz & Harris Eds., p. 29). He refers to ‘accountability’, ‘ethical responsibility’ and ‘transparency’ as being the ‘watchwords of the time’, but also question the reality of ethical practice and commitment (p. 30). From a business perspective, Malpas believes the ‘watchwords’ are now seen as justification to implement and expand ‘homogenising and bureaucratised systems’ which could be regarded as preserving institutional and personal privilege and power (p. 32). He suggests ethics could therefore contribute to unethical behaviour in business organisations, and a breakdown of ethics (p. 33).

In contrast to Malpas’s concerns about ethics, I found the practice of using ethics-based documents to be a wonderful means of ensuring each interviewee and theatre company was well-informed and comfortable with my visit. The signed forms, handwritten records of interviews and typed transcriptions for this project are filed in individual manila folders allocated to each theatre group, stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. I sensed the interview participants for this project appreciated the ethical requirements of providing them with information and respected the need for a consent form to be signed.
I would have preferred to include more images of onstage performances in the artefact, but this would mean locating multiple participants and forwarding forms for their signature and return in stamped addressed envelopes. In view of privacy regulations regarding the addresses of photo participants, in some instances I forwarded several Photographic Release forms, each with a stamped addressed envelope, to a company representative who had an address list for performers, for forwarding on to photo participants.

**Interview Questions**

Michael Quinn Patton (2002) believes an interview guide ensures respondents are questioned using similar basic lines of enquiry (p. 343). Patton’s view partly relates to the grounded theatrical themes associated with this project’s interview questions. However, questions needed to vary sometimes with regards to companies presenting musical or non-musical theatrical productions, and whether located in a country town or city.

My interview guide included broadly based questions about the theatre company’s history, operations, rehearsal and performance locations, props, scenery and costume storage arrangements, criteria for selecting shows, committee, performers, audiences, the company’s unique culture and ethos, volunteerism, connection with the local community, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and the transformative nature of amateur theatre. The interviewees’ personal involvement with the company usually contributed interesting knowledge, and finally, any additional information not covered in the questions was welcomed.

Webb (2015) points out that asking interviewees similar questions could risk supposition of an existing agreement about a problem (p. 131). Victorian amateur theatre is an existing real-life body of volunteer theatre-makers and theatre companies, and questions for this project were tailored to investigate elements of this arts sector, including members’ concerns. It is therefore a factual requirement to ask similar questions on this topic, while at the same time allowing the interviewee flexibility to contribute their own views.
For example, if the first goal is to establish history of the arts sector, it is appropriate to ask about the known history of each theatre company. Oral history provided by interviewees was always later verified from company websites and any other available research sources. Questions asked about strengths, weaknesses, threats and each company’s criteria for selecting productions, were not ideological assumptions, but real situations. Interviewees for this project were all invited to add any further information about the company not already covered.

**Memory Recall During Interviews**

Webb (2015) warns that data from a set of questions may prove biased or flawed if research relies on questions only (pp. 130-131). While my treatment of this project as interviewer and data analyst strives towards unbiased data collection, it is realistic that flaws could arise because of a reliance on human memory and perception. Julie Dockrell (2004) points out the need for awareness of the fallibility of memory, and the risk of distortion of information after the passing of time and events (p. 161).

When discussing the problem of consciousness and its relation to knowledge, Hecq (2015) discusses Jean-Paul Sartre’s view about the accuracy of memory recollections (pp. 122-123). Sartre refers to memory as ‘the crossroads of the real and the imaginary’, which suggests that memories could be embellished by imagination or influenced by a modern-day perspective (Sartre, 1973:1526, cited in Hecq p. 123). Hecq points out that different people might remember the same event differently, perhaps aware of ‘needs of the moment’ (p. 123).

Sara Broaders and Susan Goldin-Meadow (2010) suggest accurate and complete results from interviews are not possible unless researchers monitor gestures, because each gesture conveys information (p. 624). They believe there is no complete, accurate record of an interview if the positive and negative influences of gestures are not recorded (p. 628). For this project, people’s voices told the story while recollecting the past, and as the listener I documented their narratives. Rather than interpreting the respondents’ hand gestures as signals, Schank and Abelson (1995) believe the listener should send out the right signals that encourage the required stories to be told.
There is no guarantee nor possibility that this project’s researched data represents flawless historical truth. William Dunning (1914) recognises the cynical judgement faced by the history researcher regarding factuality: ‘The historian may crush the pearl and bring to light the grain of sand; but he cannot persuade us that the sand made all the intervening history’ (p. 220). Dunning concedes that what people believe to be true for a certain age, is true for that time (p. 227).

In 2018, public belief in ‘truth’ is complicated by the term ‘fake news’, deemed by Collins Dictionary to be the most-used expression in 2017 (Flood 2017). The term has now inspired modern-day scholarly discussion in Britain about how historians know if their sources are credible, whether deliberately lying or genuinely forgetful, and the impact of incredible historical voices on historical research (University of Oxford 2018).

The historical knowledge shared by nominated interviewees for this project was confidently presented and appears to have been reliable. It has been, after all, in the interests of theatre companies to provide participants who would represent their company history and culture as accurately as possible.

**The Interview Process**

Care was taken when attending all interviews to dress appropriately, arrive punctually at the pre-arranged venue, and to bring the appropriate ethics-related forms, blank paper and pens for hand-recording interviews. As pointed out by Webb (2015), the interviewer is the host, so I paid for coffees and any meals if interviews took place in cafés (p. 144). For interviews conducted in other locations, a boxed apple tea-cake purchased from Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses was offered in goodwill to participant(s) to enjoy after my departure from the one-hour long interview.

Twice on arrival, respondents handed over pre-typed answers to their questions as a replacement for verbal answers. They felt this would ensure accuracy for the answers, and certainly this was helpful regarding correct spelling of names during the transcription process. However, from the interviewer’s perspective, momentum was disrupted. Rather than commencing verbal interaction, I needed to stop and read through each typed
answer for discussion. In both cases, although well-intended, the pre-typed answers appeared to restrict the interview from evolving beyond the guideline questions.

I ensured my respondents and I were facing each other while situated within comfortable proximity of each other, often separated by a table. The respondents knew the interview could be stopped at any time, and that data would be recorded using hand-written notes.

**Recording the Interviews**

The Dacomb method of shorthand studied in High School has been invaluable throughout my life for different purposes, including recording interviews for this project. Today this hand-written note-taking comprises more of a hybrid style combining shorthand symbols and long-hand writing, which may look messy but achieves the required result. Advantages include having more control over the recording process rather than depending on operating unpredictable technology, and noticing the interviewees instantly relax when hearing they are not being recorded electronically.

Patton (2002) believes an electronic recording of an interview can complement hand-written records and allow the interviewer to concentrate on recording strategic points, rather than attempting verbatim notes (p. 383). Patton’s view makes sense, but in this case, using hand-written interview records without using electronic equipment has worked well for this project, and enabled a quick and efficient typed transcription of the interview records.

In support of non-technological recording of interviews, newspaper editor Graham Dudman says the immediacy of handwritten notes about what someone is saying and then reading them back is essential for meeting deadlines in his industry (Dudman cited in Dyson 2015). ‘Smartphones are wonderful devices […] but listening to and transcribing an interview takes way longer than reading a shorthand note’.

Editor of the *Kentish Gazette*, Leo Whitlock agrees with Dudman’s view: ‘You know you can send a reporter with 100wpm shorthand, armed with a pen and notebook to […] an all-important interview, and be certain they will come back with the story’ (Whitlock cited in Dyson 2015).
Tiredness or lack of concentration would have been detrimental to this handwritten recording process, so preventative steps included limiting interviews to four per day, eating a meal before the final interview, and having mobile phone audio recording facilities on standby as a back-up, although never required.

**Interview Style**

I aimed to use strong energy, contrasting voice dynamics and a moderate pace when asking questions, to maintain interest and engage respondents throughout the interview. After all, interviewing is known as ‘role-playing’ and needs to be well-staged to engage the participants (Webb 2015, p. 145). To avoid slowing down momentum while the interviewee waited for me to complete handwritten notes, I would quickly memorise the remaining few words of the interviewee’s verbal answer, then glance ahead and read the next interview question aloud. This allowed a few seconds to finish writing the current answer from memory, while the respondent considered the next question.

**Critical and Analytical Process**

The next stage required the field research questions to be analysed to extract useful data for this project. Carole Gray (1996) describes this process as when ‘questions, problems and challenges are identified and reflected upon, and the outcome that results is shaped by the practice and research’ (p. 3). At this point, my principle research mode transformed into Research Led Practice, as the research data led to my practice of writing the artefact and exegesis. No longer was the creative practice of a book on amateur theatre leading investigative methods to explore a line of enquiry. The research mode had now transformed into the data itself leading the practice of creating the project. This concurs with Smith and Dean’s (2009) view that ‘both Practice Led Research and Research Led Practice are often carried out collaboratively’ (p. 8).

Inductive content analysis was the strategy used to study the research data, and patterns and significant themes were recognised from each interview (Paton 2002, pp. 41, 55). The emerging themes were listed under column headings in a spreadsheet format. To achieve an overall perspective of the cultural aspects of Victorian amateur theatre using column graphs, it was decided to focus on themes generic to every group, to establish differences. So, rather than including the unique and varied characteristics pertaining to
all the companies in the graph charts, the comparative data includes strengths, weaknesses, threats, individual criteria for show selection, which impacts on every company’s ongoing survival, and comments regarding the transformative nature of amateur theatre.

**Graph Interpretation and Data Analysis**

Graphs attached in the Appendix for this project relate to five selected categories. The legend for Graph One (‘Strengths’) is explanatory, but Graphs Two to Five (‘Weaknesses’, ‘Threats’, ‘Transformative Benefits’ and ‘Criteria for Show Selection’) are each followed by a separate detailed legend. These legends summarise the various answers given by respondents to the interview questions, and provide a more detailed overview to complement the graph charts.

It is interesting to note that the greatest ‘Strength’ reported by the interviewed theatre companies was ‘Volunteerism’, with its sociological associated benefits. Surprisingly, ‘Volunteers’ also account for the highest rated ‘Weakness’. The problems in this case included lack of volunteer members and actors, and personality issues. The volunteer-related ageing problem for committee and general members, rates as a fourth-highest Weakness. The strongest ‘Threat’ is building-related, with the ongoing future of theatre companies threatened by the risk of losing theatres, buildings, rehearsal spaces and storage. This building-related concern, accessibility problems or increasing hiring costs is also rated third as a Weakness for theatre companies. ‘Finance’ issues form the second highest concerns as a Weakness and Threat for theatre companies.

Interview data from the questions asked during field research has benefitted the project’s outcome by giving an insight into the problems and concerns experienced by each theatre company. The information provided by this project’s data analysis and the graphs should collectively be of interest to theatre companies for creating awareness of problems in fellow companies. It would also be a fine research outcome if the project data alerts authorities such as Local Councils to concerns of amateur theatre companies, including the risk of possible closure of these groups in communities due to lack of accessible and affordable performance, rehearsal and storage spaces.
Section Four: People (Identity), Performance, Theatre, Audiences

This section explores four key components integral to all theatrical arts sectors: People, Performance, Theatre, and Audience. As the scope of this project focuses on amateur theatre, discussion about these four key components will be applicable to this arts sector.

The first component discusses personal and social identity, both individually and in groups. This is relevant to this project because field research interview data has established the significance of people to amateur theatre in their volunteer roles, both as the highest graded ‘strength’ and also the highest graded ‘weakness’.

People (Identity)

Groups and Societies

Group membership involves both cultural hierarchies and personal choice. According to Victor Turner (1982), all cultures identify their people as belonging to certain groups, particularly ‘institutionalised’ groups such as family, age-related, school and professional groups (p. 69). As well as belonging to everyday groups, a sense of self-identity motivates people to join groups for recreational, social or health-related purposes, such as in the fields of sport or the creative arts.

Andrew Weigert et al. (1986) acknowledge that sociocultural factors ‘shape the structure and content of the human self-definition’ (p. 2). A person’s sociocultural background may influence their choice of group membership and assist recognition of a personal talent or interest for participation in the arts or a sporting activity.

Belonging to a group by choice means that the group member is both aware of the scope of the group and has evaluated joining it as being worthwhile. It also involves positive and negative group interactions with other group members. Henri Tajfel (1978) describes a group as containing up to three components (p. 28). These include a cognitive component, in the form of having an awareness of one’s membership of the group, an
evaluative component which anticipates that group membership may involve positive or negative value connotations, and an emotional component.

The evaluative component is particularly relevant for a performer when joining a theatre company, knowing from a negative perspective that auditions for roles may not always be successful, or they may prefer another role to their own in a show. This would be balanced positively by anticipating the elation of being cast in a preferred role and receiving audience applause.

The emotional component is used to express ‘love or hatred, like or dislike’ towards the group or individual members, and would accompany the cognitive and evaluative components. In an amateur theatre company, negative emotions could include resentment felt towards a performer cast in a sought-after role, or happy emotions when sharing theatrically gushy sentiments with fellow thespians. Controlled emotions are also required of performers when portraying roles ranging from the comedic to dramatic.

Groups of people conform together to become societies, and Zygmunt Bauman (2001) refers to all human societies as the valuable ‘nurseries’ of a meaningful life (p. 2). Bauman’s view certainly applies to amateur theatre companies with their meaningful benefits for participants, including creative satisfaction, sociability and mental and physical health and wellbeing. Each participant in amateur theatre companies will be aware of self-definition with regards to fellow members, and their own positioning in the group’s structure.

Groups may also be identified by people observing and labelling them. John Turner (1987) points out that when we, as outsiders view a group or team, we see a ‘unitary individual entity’, with group members not perceived individualistically, but as members of the whole group, behaving in ‘one mind’ (pp. 3-4). Turner also argues that individual relationships are formed between members of the group because of their membership in the whole entity (pp. 23).

To explore Turner’s view further in applying it to this project, if the outside group or members of the public view promotional material for a theatre production, they would see the whole company as Turner’s ‘unitary individual entity’ (pp. 3-4). The inside group
comprising the show’s cast and crew members would be perceived as participating in ‘one mind’ to present the advertised show. An exception to this could be if a cast or crew member associated with the production is already known by a member of the public group. This public group member would then change their view of the company as a united group and focus on identifying the company through the known cast or crew member.

This changing view is pointed out by Gregory P Stone, who says that changes happen in identity because ‘it is intrinsically associated with all the joinings and departures of social life’ (Stone 1962, p. 94 in Weigert et al. 1986, p. 14). I have personally heard of members of the public referring to a theatre company as ‘Kerry’s theatre group’, because, as Stone points out, this is a personal connection associated with the joinings of their own social life, and to them the name of the theatre company is irrelevant.

Tajfel (1981) believes it is an impossibility for a group consensually ‘superior’ to have a completely secure social identity (p. 278). Tajfel’s view could be applied to small groups, because imagined superiority may not be the actual reality. But this view is not applicable to all amateur theatre companies because, as with other team-based groups such as football clubs, a sense of pride and believing one’s group or club is the best is necessary to sustain membership morale.

It is important for all Victorian amateur theatre companies to each have a unique culture, history and a strong public image. In discussing the evaluation of group and other cultures, Tajfel explains this attributes to intergroup differentiation (p. 157). This intergroup differentiation is important for all theatre companies to retain a unique image, particularly for attracting new members and patrons.
Diagram of Group Structure in an Amateur Theatre Company

This visual representation of group structure of an amateur theatre company aims to assist further discussion about identity theories in relation to aspects of amateur theatre companies.

These groups can then be divided into sub-groups with in-group members as follows:

**Committee of Management:** Office-bearers, General Committee, Administration, Publicity.

**Cast:** Principal and Ensemble Performers; Actors, Dancers and Singers.

**Crew:** Production team (Director, Musical Director, Choreographer, Producer), Technical Teams (Lighting, Sound and Special Effects Designers), Set and Costume Designers, Backstage Crew, including Set Construction and Painting, Front-of-house Team.

**Musicians:** Conductor, Orchestra Convenor, Woodwind, Brass, Strings and Percussion instrumentalists.

**General Members:** Non-active and active financial members, Unsuccessful auditionees wanting to help in a behind-the-scenes capacity.

**Audience:** Friends, family, company supporters, general public, critics.

The importance of presenting this group structure is to define and create understanding of the membership of an amateur theatre company for discussion within this project. This visual representation of the varied skills and talents involved in a theatrical production also shows the potential for forming small groups of people with similar interests within the overall larger group.
Identity

Some sociologists question suitability of the term ‘identity’ to adequately convey its meaning. For example, Weigert et al. (1986) refer to the term as a ‘widespread social label’ and ‘cultural buzzword’ that has evolved since the 1940s, pointing out that the word was unknown in its current context as a form of social analysis before that time (p. 5). Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) also question the term’s suitability for social analysis since being introduced in America in the 1960s (pp. 2, 3). Brubaker and Cooper’s doubts include ambiguity of the term’s meaning, and its limitation to encompass various concepts affiliated with its meaning, such as ‘Belonging, experiences of commonality, connectedness, cohesion, self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of ‘identity’”.

Despite their dissatisfaction, Brubaker and Cooper are unable to substitute another suitable term for ‘identity’ (p. 14). In this project, the term ‘identity’ is a means of establishing who a person or group is, who members of a group are, and their sense of self and purpose. ‘Identity’ is also used from a national perspective when establishing a sense of Australianness through the work of local writers.

Interestingly, in theatre productions, the word ‘identity’ is not used when actors assume different identities temporarily to portray and embody the fictitious or true identities of other people. Instead, the term ‘character’ is used to describe each theatrical identity. Bauman (2001) does suggest a replacement term and believes ‘identification’ to be more relevant to the realities of the globalizing world than ‘identity’, because the term remains unfinished, or incomplete (p. 152). Bauman’s suggested alternate term of ‘identification’, with its concept of an ongoing recognition process, has an open-endedness which could solve Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) concern about limitations of the term ‘identity’ (pp. 2, 3).

Weigert et al. (1986) define the term ‘identity’ as ‘transforming a biological individual into a human person’ (p. 31). Presumably Weigert et al. are referring to the meaningful attributes of identity acquired by the ‘human person’, as discussed by Brubaker and Cooper (2000), which complement the person’s basic biological presence (pp. 2, 3). James Fearon argues that the term ‘identity’ has two different but connected meanings,
comprising ‘social’ and ‘personal’ identity, and this accords with the views of other scholars under discussion in this section (Fearon 1999, p. 10).

**Identity Theory**

According to Bauman (2001), searching for an identity ‘divides and separates’ (p. 151). This is understandable because, when seeking individual identity, people aim to achieve a uniqueness and difference from their fellow human beings, as well as to establish their own place in society. Changing identity by reinventing oneself also has the capacity to divide and separate confused friends and family, who may feel unfamiliar with the person’s new, reinvented image. Researching the identities of characters to be portrayed in a production will temporarily separate actors from fellow performers and company members because of the individually acquired researched knowledge. This knowledge will be later shared with everyone by the actor at rehearsals and during the performance.

Jan Stets and Peter Burke (2000) define identity theory as categorisation of the self in a certain role (p. 225). Michael Hogg, Deborah Terry and Katherine White (1995) share a similar view to Stets and Burke, and view identity theory as a ‘microsociological’ theory that presents the role-related behaviours of individuals (p. 255). These scholars agree that although identity theory has similarities to social identity theory, both have different characteristics.

**Social Identity Theory**

Hogg et al. (1995) present a description of ‘social identity theory’ as a ‘social psychological’ theory based on group operations and interaction with other groups (p. 255). Stets and Burke (2000) also view social identity theory as a psychologically based theory regarding ‘intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self’ (p. 259). They maintain that social and identity theories have similarities which, when overlapped, can present a combined view of the self (pp. 224, 225). These similarities include sharing ‘person’ identity issues as experienced in identity theory, and issues relating to groups or categories in social identity theory (p. 224). Issues concerning identity theory could include Bauman’s view that seeking an identity causes division and separation from others, and issues relating to groups or categories in social identity theory can include
prejudice, discrimination and intergroup behaviour such as conflict and cooperation (Hogg & Reid 2006, p. 9; Bauman 2001, p. 151).

Membership of an amateur theatre company can create troublesome issues, particularly if performing. For example, assuming the identity of a performer for the first time could create division between the person and their family and friends, who may regard performing in the theatre with disdain, or who may resent the time-consuming nature of the individual’s active theatrical involvement.

Also, I have occasionally personally observed intragroup issues such as directorial prejudice against a performer, influenced by the director’s private friendship with another performer. In another instance, intergroup conflict, albeit isolated and temporary, has occurred when a company poached a performer from another company’s rehearsals to join their show. Mostly however, wonderful intergroup cooperation exists between amateur theatre companies, particularly with regards to loaning or hiring costumes, technical equipment and sets.

Hogg et al. (1995) believe that while identity theory and social identity theory have similarities, they do not share any ‘systematic communication’, which creates a difference between the two theories (p. 255). This may be because, as Henri Tajfel and John Turner point out, a social identity does not develop until the individual joins a group (Tajfel & Turner 1978, 1986 in Turner et al. 1987, p. 29). Tajfel and Turner base this idea on known psychological characteristics such as the individual’s gender and race, and their self-concept in relation to their social group or ‘category memberships’ (Ibid.).

Tajfel and Turner define social identity as having ‘limited aspects of the concept of self which are relevant to certain aspects of social behaviour’ (p. 63). When a performer joins a theatre group and shares their talent and sociability relevant to that group’s dynamics, the ‘systematic communication’ between identity theory and social identity theory described as lacking by Hogg et al., could then develop (Hogg et al. 1995, p. 255).

Presenting another point of view, Weigert et al. (1986) believe that a social identity is formed from just a few personal identities or could represent the culmination of ‘many personal and group identities and positions in the social structure’ (p. 84). The variability
in the number of identities required to form a social identity as expressed in Weigert et
al.’s view is realistic. For example, when two people realise they share a commonality of
interests and mutual likeability and decide to become ‘best friends’, a social identity has
been formed, despite the small number of people involved.

On the other hand, the forming of a social identity within a large group such as a theatre
company, involves the ‘many personal and group identities and positions in the social
structure’, as defined by Weigert et al. According to Stets and Burke (2000), people are
connected to their groups ‘organically’ through social identities, and ‘mechanically’
through the identities of their roles within groups (p. 228). Stets and Burke’s view is
relevant to a theatre company when ‘organic’ sociability is enjoyed by members within
the group, and a ‘mechanical’ connection occurs when the person is identified in a role
and implements the work involved.

**Social Categorisation in Groups**

The structural diagram of groups in an amateur theatre company demonstrates how the
personal identities and varied skills of smaller group members such as actors and
dancers, become part of the larger group of ‘cast’, which belongs to the whole theatre
company group. Henri Tajfel (1978) describes social categorization as the bringing
together of ‘social objects or events in groups which are equivalent with regards to an
individual’s actions, intentions and system of beliefs’ (p. 62). As pointed out by Tajfel,
these have been brought together by social categorisation, in this case with individuals
allocated to groups according to their personal talent or skills.

Matthew Hornsey (2008) believes categorisation changes the way people see themselves
because it affects a different level of their self-concept (p. 206). This statement does not
always apply to a theatre company because people are mostly pre-aware of their own
abilities before categorisation into their group. However, it can happen that people’s self-
perception is enhanced by a sense of achievement if they are categorised into an
unfamiliar group to broaden personal knowledge and expertise. Fearon (1999) believes
that membership of a social category does not automatically guarantee the person will
wish to participate in accordance with norms associated with the category (p. 10).
Some people join a theatre company as ‘financial’ members only and are not interested in being actively involved with the norms of the company, which involve theatre-making. Also, a person could be rostered to fulfil a task in a front-of-house category such as ushering the audience to their seats but may decline this role on health-related grounds such as poor eyesight for reading ticket numbers, or a mobility issue for showing patrons to their seats.

**Self-Categorization Theory**

Most people will have a pre-set concept of self-categorization when auditioning or becoming part of the team for an amateur theatre show. Hogg et al. (1995) believe the self-categorization process involves a person perceiving similarities between themselves and other people or objects, and perceived differences between people from different groups or categories (p. 260). Some individuals avoid appearing onstage, such as Michael Mace OAM, who, when interviewed for this project, said he has administered the Adelphi Players Theatre Company (2016) for fifty-six years, but never appeared onstage. In contrast, some people move from company to company in a transient mode, to audition for various shows, without committing to helping behind the scenes or joining a committee.

Michael Hogg and Scott Reid (2006) point out that social cognitive processes and social categorization provide a basis for the self-categorization theory (p. 9). An example of this in an amateur theatre company takes place in the dance ensemble group. Cognitive processes influence the performers’ self-categorization to audition as dancers in the first place. In rehearsals, the choreographer uses cognitive processes to create a routine, and social categorization to position the dancers in routines according to their dance ability, and height.

Social categorization is used to appoint a Dance Captain from the ensemble, who will use cognitive processes to lead the dancers under the choreographer’s direction. The dancers use cognitive processes to learn the routines, and as a result of being socially categorised as an ensemble member, each has developed a sense of self-categorization to understand their place in the group and subordination to the Dance Captain and choreographer.
**Stereotyping**

The show’s director will have what may be called a stereotyped creative vision of the type of performer he or she would like to be cast in each role. A categorization process of elimination is then required by the production team, headed by the director, during the audition process, to narrow down the performers to be called back for final auditions.

Henri Tajfel (1981) defines stereotyping in groups as ‘certain generalizations reached by individuals’, consciously derived from a categorizing process (p. 145). Stereotyping can occur in a theatre company when committees or production personnel make judgement that certain people should be allocated to help behind the scenes in various areas. As an example, these could include costume making or operating a spotlight.

In years gone by, categorization of such roles would be gender specific, with the female assigned to sewing and the male to spotlight operation. Today this is not the case, so stereotyping regarding suitability for these roles would tend to rely on specific knowledge of the individual and characteristics of their class membership (p. 133).

The importance of the presence of an audience is considered by theatre-makers from the beginning when selecting a production, through to the final dress rehearsal. All theatre companies are aware of the necessity to present a good show that will attract patrons to return. The audience is after all the financial life-blood of each theatre company to ensure ongoing survival.

The theatre company group structure as outlined earlier in this section shows the audience positioned below the various group categorizations as their goal to who the final product, the show, is presented. Theatre patrons are imperative to the box-office survival of a theatre company, and an overview of these important participants occurs later in this section within the context of a discussion about ‘audience’.
Performance and Theatre

Contributions from theatre-makers, whether working onstage or behind the scenes, are all equally important. However, it is the onstage performers who, under direction, transform a show’s narrative and characters into reality and attract the main focus of a theatre audience. ‘Theatre’ has derived from the word ‘theatron’, meaning a place for ‘seeing’, whereas the object of ‘seeing’ in a theatre involves performance and performativity (Wilshire 1982, p. 30).

‘Performance’ and ‘theatre’ are discussed together as both share similar features, although technically have different meanings. A performance can be described as ‘a species of social communicative action’, or a culturally enriching experience for the audience (Cashell 2012, p.326). The word ‘theatre’ can also be used to describe a performance, or as the venue in its own socio-cultural environment for spectating and presenting a performance. This section discusses ‘performance’ and ‘theatre’, as both share similar features, although technically have different meanings.

Performance

‘When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations) between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique’ (Diamond 1996, p. 5).

Elin Diamond’s words suggest that performance is ‘a doing and a thing done’, which correlates with Wilshire’s action-defined meaning of ‘drama’ as a transliteration of a Greek word meaning ‘action or a thing done’ (Diamond, p. 1; Wilshire 1982, p. 30). Diamond also includes performativity, describing it as physically expressed acts which incorporate the performative action of ‘doing’, presented in specific locations and observed by others (p. 1).

In the case of amateur theatre, such locations where audiences can enjoy performances can be found across Australia and internationally in regional towns, metropolitan suburbs
and cities. Diamond describes performance as a completed event, which is ‘framed in time and space and remembered, misremembered, (and) interpreted’ (p. 1).

Wilshire (1982) believes that a theatrical production has two time-related dimensions (p. 21). Firstly, a show must be able to repeat for the next performance, and secondly, each performance runs for a set amount of time. Wilshire’s view that performances run to a set duration is not completely accurate. Firstly, performances can start later than the scheduled time, or could be interrupted by a cast, technical or audience mishap. The overall running time of each performance can also differ with the varying pace of actors’ dialogue and action, often influenced by different durations of audience applause.

Richard Schechner (1988) also points out the time-related shared factor between theatre and play, games, sport and ritual because a special order of time is associated with each activity (pp. 6-8). Also, rules apply to each activity and there is a special value attached to objects such as props and costumes for theatre, which are of more value in their context than in the market-place (pp. 8-10). Another similarity is that special places are either constructed or allocated for the performance of these activities (p. 11).

‘In the theatre, every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it. In this case the theatre is relativity’ (Brook 1968, p. 19).

Director Peter Brook’s insightful observation also expresses the transitory nature of theatre as performance, such as the temporary creation of characters by the actors for the duration of a show, the dialogue, the director’s plot of actors’ movements, the process of construction and dismantling the sets, lighting, sound and costume designs, the setting up and then emptying of dressing-rooms, and the memorable but short-lived, audience applause. Brook’s words also acknowledge the cultural influences and repetitiveness discussed earlier about the recycling of performance, and relevance of the theatre to its environment.

Diamond’s reference to the completed performative event being framed in time and space also relates to performers. Whether professional or amateur, artists regard onstage performing as a significant life event, requiring physical, emotional and cognitive
embodiment of their role, and immersion in the show’s narrative. For the artist, a production’s framed time and space starts with the audition process, continues during rehearsals, and finishes with the last performance.

Friendships between some cast and crew members might be ongoing privately, but usually cast and crew in non-professional theatre celebrate and farewell colleagues at a post-show cast party and then repeat the cycle of joining a new show. When theatre performers catch up with past fellow cast members socially, or are cast together in another show, it is not unusual to reminisce and include conversations such as, ‘Do you remember when we did (name of show) together in (time frame)?’ Verbal recollections may continue to be exchanged about happenings during previous shows or discussing fellow cast members.

Recollections about previous shows could, as Diamond suggests, be misremembered or misinterpreted with the passing of time, and this could also apply to audience members who associate attending performances with certain time-frames in their own lives. Thus, as memories of the show blur over time, details can become misremembered, or the narrative misinterpreted. Marvin Carlson (2003) suggests a reason for this is that theatre is a ‘repository of cultural memory,’ influenced by previous experiences and associations, which can modify during the recycling and recollection processes (p. 2). In contrast, the theatre performer needs good memory during a pre-rehearsed performance requiring dialogue, dramatic movements, choreographed dance routines, song lyrics and music. Mieke Bal (2000) also suggests that skilled performance in the form of a production is ‘unthinkable’ without memory (p. 102).

My interviewees for this project represented seventy theatre companies, some founded as early as the 1930s or 1940s. In two cases, an elderly long-term company member was joined at the interview by a modern-day member to share and verify each other’s stories. Some interviewees combined their individual memories from the past with history already documented by other members, while others were confident to rely on their own recollections. The interviewees selected by my initial company contacts all appeared to be reliable in their recollections, but authors such as David Rieff (2016) raise questions about the possibility of an interviewee forgetting sections of the past and creating new history.
Rieff quotes French historian Jacques Le Goff as remarking: ‘memory only seeks to rescue the past in order to serve the present and the future’ (p. 22). While I cannot be sure that individual memory is not being transformed from the past, I aim to be faithful to the interviewee’s story, and trust their individual or collective memory is as accurate as possible.

On the other hand, performativity taking place in the immediate present, can be open to memory playing its ‘tricks’, as described by Bal (2000) (Ibid.). This could apply to an actor forgetting their lines during a performance, experiencing a blank moment during improvisation, or the audience misinterpreting or not recalling the action afterwards. These tricks of memory acquired during the immediacy of a theatre production as suggested by Bal, concur with Diamond’s reference to misremembering correct details of a show, and Carlson’s notion of later modification of recollections (Carlson 2003, p. 2; Diamond 1996, p. 1).

Helen Nicholson (2012) describes memory itself as having ‘performative qualities’, which as well as being vital in drama, assist us to identify with the past and the future (p. 63). Bal’s view agrees with Nicholson on the importance of memory in drama performance, but rather than describing memory itself as ‘performative’, Bal (2000) emphasises the unreliability of memory during performativity within a performance (p. 102). In my artefact I present creative non-fiction stories in the context of the history of amateur theatre in Victoria. By achieving its aim to fill a gap in the market, the artefact may also be helpful to long-established theatre-makers to revive and consolidate memories of the past.

Carlson (2003) refers to ghosts returning when describing the memory involved in many cultures, such as founding myths and legends which, through theatrical repetition, survive and continue (p. 3). He believes audiences understand new plays because we recognise components recycled from other works previously seen (p. 4). In a review of Carlson’s book, The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine, Thomas Postlewait (2002) concurs with Carlson’s description of ‘ghosting’, and believes that all associated elements of theatre-making have a ghostly connection, because they are repeated from the past (p. 271).
Postlewait’s examples of theatre-related ‘ghosts of the past’ include the retelling of stories such as myths or historical recollections, re-using quotes from past plays and intertextual references, traditions and rules, training actors, re-enacting plays and roles, reviving productions, re-using costumes, props and scenery, defining period styles and repeating usage of theatre spaces and buildings. I found in my interviews that if more than one participant was present from the same company, they sometimes shared recollections about past company members and events between themselves before collating their thoughts to answer the interview question.

My interviewees’ references to past company members, many now deceased, could be referred to as discussing ‘ghosts of the past’. However, while recognising the repetitiveness of theatrical elements and cultural traditions described by Carlson and Postlewait, I believe their choice of ghost-related terminology gives an inaccurate representation. The word ‘ghost’ is associated with death, which implies incorrectly that these theatrical elements and traditions once died but have now returned in a spiritual, apparition-like presence. On the other hand, Brook (1968) refers to theatre as being ‘different from life’, which does not refer to ‘ghosting’, but to the escapist nature of the theatre experience (p. 110).

There is nothing ‘ghostly’ about any of Postlewait’s theatrical examples in his review of Carlson’s book. Rather, they represent valuable cultural, theatrical and historical traditions which strengthen various aspects of theatre-making with their presence. While Carlson refers to theatre as a ‘repository of cultural memory’, Nicholson (2012) suggests the body acts as an archive for storing memory, believing it to be a ‘layered and sedimented repository of the past, which articulates with the present’ (pp. 70, 72; Carlson 2003, p. 2). For these reasons and others I discuss in the course of this exegesis, I believe the term ‘archive’ to be a more realistic description of memory from the past than ‘ghost’.

Diamond (2008) presents another performative perspective of the archive stored in its ‘silent vault’, suggesting it becomes a performance site when interacting with its reader in the role of spectator (p. 22). Diamond recognises the archive as transformative and believes the researcher’s touch and interpretation transforms the archive into knowledge (Ibid.).
I recognise Diamond’s view of the archive as a performance site, having researched this project through boxes of documents in the State Library of Victoria’s Heritage Reading Room, or in the Victorian Drama League’s archival boxes. The nervous trepidation when opening each file resembles the curtain rising on a production, then the archival content as the performer evokes emotions of elation or disappointment from its scrutinising audience. Library protocols and systems are also part of the performance, such as pre-booking with the archives’ librarian or ‘gate-keeper’ to research the required material. Also, protocol in the Heritage Reading Room requires using a pencil only for writing, bags to be stored in a locker, and no mobile phones.

Comparing this Library protocol with a live theatre experience, an audience member adheres to the theatre’s protocol when pre-booking and acquiring a ticket, then respects theatre rules to sit in a designated seat, not to venture onto the stage uninvited, to turn off mobile phones, and no photography. This protocol of accessing archives can represent a theatrical ritual, similar to those described by anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) in his book *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (p. 106).

**Theatre**

‘All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players’.

These words from William Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It* correlate with Turner’s (1982) view about the performative nature of everyday life. An example of role-playing in everyday life for this project occurred when I assumed the role of interviewer for this project with a friendly yet authoritative tone to ensure momentum and direction of each interview.

A. Theodore Kachel (1983) who has reviewed Turner’s book (1982), and Bruce Wilshire’s (1982) book *Role playing and identity: the limits of theatre as a metaphor*, suggests that both authors use theatre as a metaphor ‘for constructing a model of social life’ (p. 386). Wilshire (1982) refers to life offstage as a ‘multileveled performance’ with the ‘self’ behind various social roles being comparable to actors in a show (p. 278). Turner (1982) refers to ‘social dramas,’ whether happening on a local or national level, or as conflict in wars between nations (pp. 9, 10).
Turner believes theatre has originated from social drama, and in its developed form has become ‘a process of converting particular values and ends, distributed over a range of actors into a system (always temporary and provisional) of shared or consensual meaning’ (pp. 11, 12). Turner’s reference to the temporality of theatre accords with Diamond’s view of theatre being framed in time (Diamond 1996, p. 1). Turner (1982) believes social drama expresses the value of theatre for demonstrating social, cultural or political concern, and assessing our known ‘world’ (p. 11).

Today, this form of ‘social drama’ applies more to subsidised alternative or independent theatre, which can afford to risk financial loss if presenting original, unknown works. This is relevant to my project, because amateur theatre is a mostly non-subsidised arts sector, founded on communities of interest (Holdsworth et al. 2017, p. 10). Amateur theatre companies cannot financially risk presenting shows which voice political, social or cultural concerns which may attract only a small audience.

Selecting the right show for a performance season is paramount to the company’s ongoing survival. Data from field research interviews reveals the number one criteria for amateur theatre groups is to select a production to please their audience. The second main criteria, ‘style of show’, again needed to satisfy the company’s audience demographic, appeal to a potential cast and crew, and be within the company’s available cast, venue and financial limitations. John O’Toole emphasises the importance of performance considering expectations of the audience or they may reject it ‘because they feel a contract has been broken’ (O’Toole in Beck et al. 2011, p. 6).

Dramatist and director Antonin Artaud believed that the real purpose for theatre was to create myths as a universal form of translating life, through which audiences would experience self-discovery and liberation (Allet 2007, p. 145). In line with Artaud’s view, myths are described by Marvin Carlson (2003) as surviving through theatrical repetition (p. 3). This project has referred to theatre-makers creating the magic of theatre, and Artaud also has defined theatre as ‘an act of magic’, believing that conflict diminishes, and passion is eradicated through the skilled use of staging (p. 146). Bertolt Brecht sums up theatre as a human and universal art, both on the stage and in everyday life (Brecht in Willett 1974, p. 152).
Theorising Theatre

Julian Meyrick (2003) observes that before the late 1970s, theatre theory referred to theories of theatre, influenced by key theatre practitioners (p. 232). Brook was a theatre practitioner during this time, and his imagery embodying the phenomenon of theatre speaks of theatre, not about it (Brook 1968, p. 19; Barrault 1968, p. 110).

Meyrick (2003) believes that since the late 1970s, theatre theory is now mostly about theatre and largely written by academics, a practice which he believes to be unnatural, ‘composed’ and ‘authoritative’ (pp. 231, 232). Jaime L. Beck, George Belliveau, Graham W. Lea and Amanda Waget (2011) also question the goals of theatrical investigation by researchers or scholars, and the difference between their goals and those of the theatre-maker (2011, p. 687). Meyrick (2003) asks a similar question, having noticed that over the past twenty years, theoretical approaches to theatre do not consider what the artists themselves think (p. 230).

Lou Bellamy (2008) discusses the risk of ‘misinterpreting, mis-representing, or morphing the very thing we seek to investigate’ (p. 2). While a scholarly lack of practical knowledge or personal experience could jeopardise a well-informed ethnographic investigation into theatre, theatrical research as viewed through the lens of the spectator is equally valuable. Therefore, the importance of the scholar’s role as spectator, and their ability to effectively articulate theatrical observations and research, should be respected and not underestimated.

In the case of this project, the author is an apt spectator due to insider knowledge, including personal experience in various creative and practical areas of amateur theatre, and thirteen years as an honorary theatre writer for the Melbourne Observer newspaper.

Benefits to this project from possessing knowledge and understanding of Victorian amateur theatre have included effective communication with companies and individuals when arranging and conducting interviews, and an instant recognition of theatrically-related situations and issues during the research process. For this project’s exploration of theatre, my goals are shared with all amateur theatre-makers in wanting to create public awareness and establish overdue recognition of the amateur theatrical arts sector, particularly in Victoria.
Marco De Marinis (2011, p. 65) uses the term ‘theatrology’ which, in accordance with Meyrick’s observation of changes in the late 1970s, was introduced in that decade as a scholarly research practice for theatre history (Meyrick 2003, p. 232). Marinis refers to this as ‘the twentieth century revolution’, describing it as ‘ethical’, because for the first time since the sixteenth century, theatre was no longer regarded in its original state of providing entertainment, recreation and escapism (pp. 65, 66). Instead, it became a place where theatre-related questions were asked about ‘political, cognitive, spiritual and therapeutic’ ethical issues (p. 66).

Marinis also questions how a craft can be understood and recorded by someone who uses historical or theoretical knowledge, without any practical experience in the craft (p. 67). He acknowledges a difference between passive competence (knowledge without use) and active competence (knowledge plus use). It is reassuring to read comments by scholars such as Marinis that my ‘active competence’ as in knowledge plus vast experience in theatre over past years, will benefit the historical and theoretical research for this project.

Marinis particularly mentions theatre director Eugenio Barba, whom he regards as a ‘real artist-theorist’ in twentieth century theatre. Barba (1995) strongly expresses his view that those investigating theory and practice, and theory and history, should have personal experience: ‘The non-expert in history and the non-expert in practice involuntarily unite their strengths to defile the theatre’ (p. 11). I do believe however that Barba’s comment that non-theatrical researchers would ‘defile the theatre’ is mere assumption. While these historians and practitioners may lack theatrical knowledge and personal theatre experience, they can still offer opinions and suggestions viewed through a new audience lens and perspective.

Meyrick (2003) identifies four relevant points relating to ‘theatre theory’ (p. 231). The first includes theory in the form of instructional published manuals, providing advice on the practicalities of theatre-craft. Next are publications by well-known theatre practitioners that mix ‘know-how, personal anecdote and cultural analysis’. Meyrick’s third example of theatre theory applies to views on theatre by non-theatrical practitioners, for example academic scholars, and the fourth is the ‘body of interdisciplinary scholarship’ which will influence ‘new analytic strategies’ (p. 232).
In 1978, English actor and director John McCallum (1978) supported the theory of theatre in his article titled ‘The importance of theorising’ (p. 49). McCallum quotes Australian playwright Dorothy Hewett as describing the existence of a stronger cult of ‘doing’ by people in Australian theatre, rather than theorising. McCallum believes Australians have a ‘horror of the intellect’, in that people feel if they stop to talk about what they are doing, then others might think they can’t do it, because their approach is academic. McCallum believes the relationship between actor and audience is barely explored.

McCallum (1978) suggests a sensible compromise between theory and practice for theatre practitioners would be to adopt the following: a mix of theorist Antonin Artaud’s ‘sense of total involvement’, Bertolt Brecht’s ‘more intellectual, educative approach’, and director/researcher Peter Brook’s ‘search for creative partnership’. In this project I hope to have included these elements of Artaud’s ‘sense of total involvement’ by linking theory and practice together through the creative artefact and scholarly framing of this exegesis. The creative partnership described by Brook is contained within the creative, non-fiction artefact of knowledge, while this project’s exegesis represents Brecht’s ‘more intellectual, educative approach’.

Scholars use varied terms for theorising theatre, for example Beck et al. (2011) refer to ‘research-based theatre’ when representing the traditions of general audience theatre practitioners and those investigating theatre for scholarly research (p. 687). McCallum might be pleased to know that modern-day researchers such as Beck et al. (2011) are investigating how ‘research, purpose, performance and audience’ can combine to present various types of research-based theatre (p. 689). Beck et al. describe research-based theatre as representing a ‘spectrum of interrelated practices’. This bears similarity to Practice Led Research with its mixed methods approach, as used for this research project.

Barba (1995) is concerned that documenting theatre not personally experienced risks translation into permanent sentences, on pages ‘that cannot be penetrated’ (p. 11). Peter Brook (1968) also compares theatre with a book, using the following words to describe
the permanency of a book, but theatre’s opportunity for ongoing survival (p. 157):

‘Unlike a book, the theatre has one special characteristic. It is always possible to start again. In life this is a myth; we ourselves can never go back on anything. New leaves never turn, clocks never go back, we can never have a second chance. In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time.’

A similarity shared by a book and live theatre performance is the need for someone to appreciate the creative work, whether in the form of a reader or an audience.

**Audience**

Live theatrical productions need audiences for box office survival, and amateur theatre is no exception. Jill Dolan (2008) describes an audience:

‘The audience is a group of people who have elected to spend an evening or an afternoon not only with a set of performers enacting a certain narrative arc or aesthetic trajectory, but with a group of other people, sometimes familiar, sometimes strange’ (p.10).

Peter Brook (1968) points out that the audience is always the challenge, ‘without which a performance would be a sham’ (p. 70). Brook is referring to the important role of spectators at a live performance as team players, hopefully responding positively to performers. Another challenge that is central to all theatre companies is the uncertainty of audience bookings from a financial perspective. Organisations such as Probus or Rotary Clubs often have ongoing group bookings with their local theatre company for twenty or thirty seats for each show season, and these advance bookings are most helpful to companies.

If the selected show being performed does not appeal to audiences early in the season, word-of-mouth criticism can adversely affect ticket sales. A show and its audience are a partnership, just as the artefact and exegesis are in tandem for this project. The audience will not have influenced how the show is staged, but can now exhibit power of choice whether or not to applaud the performance, and to praise or criticise the production post-show on social media.
Over years of involvement with the amateur theatrical arts sector, I have noticed various reasons why audiences attend shows. Firstly, a cast member’s family, friends, or work and theatre colleagues may feel a sense of duty to attend, or wish to offer personal support. Kim Travers (1997) points out that amateur companies provide affordable and accessible theatre for audiences, and the opportunity to see friends, family and acquaintances onstage (Travers in Webb 1997, p. 98).

The discretionary theatregoer selects shows with personal appeal, while others, including financial subscribers to theatre companies, will loyally attend every show regardless of title or cast. Interestingly, a clear message during interviews for this project was that while regular patrons may accept an unknown or personally disliked show if well-presented, they might never return if that, or any production, is sub-standard.

These days, some high standard non-professional theatre productions equate with professional shows in all aspects except that the cast and crew perform ‘for the love of it’, without financial payment. Such quality theatre experiences offer good value for audiences who enjoy a fine production for approximately one third of the purchase price of a ticket to see a professional production. Of course the audience is important to live theatre other than financially. Jill Dolan (2008) refers to the audience’s presence as necessary to ‘complete a loop of meaning’ (p. 96), and I show this throughout the artefact as well as this exegesis.

**Financial Matters**

The affordability of theatre tickets as mentioned by Travers is important because many theatregoers budget using their disposable income. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) comments that ‘cultural consumption’ has an economic cost, and therefore theatregoing depends on financial income as well as ‘education’, presumably meaning the audience’s appreciation of cultural aspects of the production (p.116).

Bourdieu’s view is correct, as it is not just the purchase price of the ticket that contributes to the expense of theatregoing, but there is also transport to the theatre. If travelling by car, street parking is becomingly increasingly difficult in permit-parking-only areas. Fees payable in Car Parks can be expensive, and in addition the cost of a theatre program,
snacks and possibly baby-sitting fees, can result in an expensive outing. Suburban amateur theatre shows are less expensive to attend as free car parking is often available, many companies offer a free program, pre-show sherries, tea, coffee or biscuits during interval, and light supper post-show with the cast.

Unquestionably, limited finances can prevent the theatregoing experience, which may be the reason for Robert Hewison’s (2014) concern about young people lacking cultural capital if not attending theatre (p. 199). Hewison believes that many young people today no longer find theatre ‘a natural part of the tribal self-definition and cultural reinforcement which drives leisure choices’.

Nearly all amateur theatre companies charge a Membership Fee to belong to the company and a Show Fee to participate in a production. These fees vary per company and amounts mentioned during field research interviews for this project ranged from eighteen dollars per family and twelve dollars for singles, to fifty dollars full price and thirty-seven dollars fifty cents concession, and thirty-five dollars Show Fee. These fees include insurance costs for the performer, hire of scripts, and in the case of musical theatre productions, the hire of librettos, and contribute towards show costs.

The fees are paid to the company when show rehearsals start and are helpful to cover ongoing costs such as hire of rehearsal venue and a rehearsal pianist if a musical show. Money will already have been spent on purchasing rights to present the show and, in the case of musical productions, this can be expensive. The audience benefits by revenue from these fees covering overhead costs which would otherwise have to be incorporated into the theatre ticket price.

These costs can be burdensome for young people even with a discounted fee, and I have personally observed difficulty for young theatre-lovers buying tickets, and as performers needing to pay show fees while struggling financially as students. Some companies also have a fundraiser such as requiring members to sell chocolates to friends and families, and cast and crew may be encouraged to purchase windcheaters promoting the show.
The young performer’s earning capacity is diminished when involved in a production and missing part-time work shifts to attend show rehearsals or performances. From the company perspective, concerns were expressed during interviews for this project about the difficult juggling act of coping with rising costs such as venue and equipment hire to satisfy audience expectations, while trying to keep ticket prices affordable.

**Theatre Critics as Audience**

As described in the artefact, amateur theatre audiences sometimes involve the presence of theatre critics, who publish their show reviews in hard copy and digital media genres, or for discussion on community radio. Frances Kelly (1997), theatre critic for *The Australian* newspaper, compares a critic with an actor, describing the critic’s journal as the stage, and revealing how both the critic and actor need to entertain a given audience (p. 14).

I understand Kelly’s notion of the critic’s need to entertain because, while maintaining truth, the review should be written in the voice of the publication with dynamics to sustain interest for the reading audience. American critic G J Nathan is quoted in a *Theatre Australia* article as referring to theatre reviews as a partnership between the artist and the art-critic: ‘The former creates, and the latter re-creates’ (Nathan in Page 1977, p. 15).

This is relevant to audiences as firstly the critic is a member of the audience, but also the artist and the audience are in a traditional partnership throughout the show. One cannot exist without the other. All audience members become unofficial critics also, as after the show they will spread word of their opinions to family and friends. Today’s use of social media gives audiences even more power to unofficially critique a production for global readers.

During thirteen years of reviewing theatre shows for the *Melbourne Observer* newspaper, I have observed the arrival and popularity of digitally published theatre reviews. The instant advantage of this modern mode of communication is challenging for a newspaper which is published in hard copy format with copies for sale in newsagencies on
Wednesdays and simultaneously published online. Publishing reviews earlier for shows seen at the weekend risks devaluing currency of the not-yet-published newspaper’s content on Wednesday, and breaches etiquette concerning reviews remaining unseen until published.

Theatre companies benefit from published show reviews by a heightened public company profile, advice contained in the review, and find quotes from the review article handy for future promotional use.

**Immersive Theatre**

Audience interpretation of a performance is unique to each individual and will be shared later by word of mouth or social media. I personally think all audience views should be considered regarding participation, because many of us purchase a ticket and prefer to sit back and be entertained by trained performers and not have to participate. In saying that, ‘immersive theatre’ has become popular in the twenty-first century, giving audiences the opportunity to share the stage with performers (Heim 2016).

Arguing that audience members are ‘extremely versatile and adaptable performers’, Caroline Heim discusses the emerging audience as performers, particularly over the past decade (p.1). Heim points out that in 1971 when audience members were invited to join performers onstage for *Godspell*, six people tentatively volunteered. In the twenty-first century play *The Testament of Mary*, when the audience is invited to go onstage and take photos of actor Fiona Shaw, they ‘bolt out of their seats’ (Testament from usher in Heim, 2016, p. 1).

Similarly, audiences enjoy dancing with the cast onstage in the musical *Once*. Heim’s research reveals immersive theatre is not a new innovation. For example, she cites London audience members performing in 1756 at a performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when seated onstage displaying their latest fashions (p. 3). Heim also suggests wearing themed t-shirts to a show such as *Cats* is a form of audience performance, and interactive responses during a production such as ‘enough, enough!’ during an explicit rape scene.
Melbourne independent theatre companies are known to present immersive theatre, and on an amateur basis, Monash University Student Theatre (MUST) located in Clayton, Victoria, includes immersive theatre in their performance seasons (Monash Student Association 2018). Their 2018 immersive production, *End Transmission*, was created and performed by MUST contributors, under the artistic direction of Yvonne Virsik. Cast in character guided patrons through an induction process to prepare for the viewing and help to solve the problem of a reclaimed space ship with which contact had previously been lost (Monash Student Association 2018).

**Understanding Audience Theatre Experiences**

Peter Brook’s (1968) description of the audience theatre experience was written fifty years ago, before scholars began to recognise various forms of audience participation such as ‘immersive’ theatre: ‘The theatre is the arena where a living confrontation can take place. The focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity’ (p. 112).

If relating Brook’s reference to a focus of ‘unique intensity’ to an audience, this is reflected in Caroline Heim’s (2016) belief that ‘the audience member stages themselves through a role: the role of ‘audience’’ (p. 4). Jill Dolan (1993) describes patrons attending the theatre with their own agenda to seek self-reassurance of gender and personal identification, ensuring ‘that what they see is what they are’ (p. 435).

Concurring in part with Dolan’s words, I believe that individuals who exclusively see professional theatre and avoid amateur shows, are reinforcing a sense of personal status and identification.

In another angle to the audience experience, Dolan quotes American playwright Maria Irene Fornes as saying audiences derive ‘narcissistic pleasure’ from attending theatre shows and seeing themselves onstage (Fornes 1992 in Dolan, p. 435). This means that the audience recognises aspects of a perceived self in the performance, then mirrors these characteristics in everyday life. If these thoughts of ‘narcissistic pleasure’ remain privately cocooned in the minds of the audience, then it is difficult to establish whether they are an extension of appreciation and admiration of the performers, or the prime motive for attendance.
As a possible solution, Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson (2013) have explored what audiences are ‘thinking, feeling and doing as a product of their engagement with arts practices’ (p. xiv). This research responds to the growing recognition by major contemporary arts industry and funding bodies of the significance of audience engagement at live performances (p. 4). Motivating factors include recognition of the importance of audiences to the ongoing survival of the performing arts, and modern-day audiences having indicated a desire to be more actively engaged in their theatre experience.

Findings from research about audience encounters at live performances include the need for performing arts institutions to find ways to ‘enter the consciousness’ of potential audiences (Radbourne et al. 2013, pp. 69–79). It was also felt the institutions should consider accessibility for audiences, including psychological (non-threatening) and physical (a convenient time, location and aesthetic values). Finally, the research concluded that performing arts institutions should assist audience members to fully understand their arts experiences and connect these meaningfully with their everyday lives.

Theatre audiences comprise people from all walks of life, of various ages, gender, religious and political beliefs and with varying degrees of knowledge of the production they are about to see, and different emotional reactions. Jill Dolan (2008) suggests audiences attend theatre to seek something better in life, ‘for new ideas about how to be, and how to be with each other to articulate a common, different future’ (p. 36). Discussing the psychological traits of audiences, American theatre critic Clayton Hamilton (1910) believes a crowd is less intellectual and more emotional than the individuals who comprise it (pp. 33-34).

Hamilton is suggesting that as an audience we lose part of our normal self, and our emotions are evoked more easily. Such emotion is described by Dolan (2008) when an audience forms a community around a shared feeling of love towards a particularly talented or charismatic performer (p. 31). Dolan emphasises this emotion is not a desire to be close to the performer but is expressed through that artist to reach a ‘comfortable, more intimate proximity to each other’. Sarah Kaufman et al. (2017) believe that we...
express more emotions, such as crying and laughing, at a live theatre performance with others than when at home watching television (n.p.).

It is certainly easy to laugh along with others or to applaud spontaneously when in an audience, before consciously considering why. One example is the modern-day trend for audience members to stand and applaud the cast at the end of a show. While a standing ovation offers splendid acknowledgement for the artists, it can be annoying for those remaining seated, unable to see the stage.

For this reason, I never conform with audience cohort to stand and applaud, so perhaps one’s diminished individuality within a crowd, as described by Hamilton, returns when the show finishes. Dolan (2008) believes that participating in standing ovations of expressed public feeling completes the time spent together in the theatre (p. 19). Unfortunately, those remaining seated are overlooked in this view.

Action on stage is the central point of taking a performance to an audience. Hamilton (1910) maintains that actions speak louder than words in theatre. Therefore, a crowd’s eyes are more receptive than its ears and Hamilton believes a crowd nearly always believes what it sees over what it hears (pp. 38, 39). He cites the example that ghost disbelievers in an audience will accept the Ghost in Hamlet as fact, because they have collectively seen him. It is possible of course that the ghost disbelievers interpret the ghost in Hamlet merely as a stage character, and in their everyday lives still do not believe in ghosts.

The emerging popularity of immersive theatre, when audience become part of the performance, could challenge Hamilton’s view that an audience mostly believes what it sees and hears. Another audience participatory experience, described as ‘empowerment’ by Linda Park-Fuller (2003), is when audiences tell their own stories in improvised performances, such as at Playback Theatre in America (p. 292). Park-Fuller believes that by telling these personal stories, the audience members develop a sense of ‘shared human community’.

In focussing on this project, I found audiences appreciate their value for money when seeing amateur shows, and some feel a proud sense of ownership towards their local
theatre company and performers. This was discussed during a field research interview for the Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group, when company members Lyn Houldcroft and Nicole Hickman (2016) spoke of townspeople referring to them as ‘Our Lyn’ and ‘Our Nicole’ in recognition of their theatrical performing.

Audiences can be discerning about content in productions, and Janelle Reinelt (2011) defends censorship and ‘political correctness’, and their place in the arts (p.134). She would prefer the term ‘political correctness’ used in the arts in a positive way, rather than currently being ‘ideologically invisible’. While the term ‘political correctness’ may not be widely used, most theatre companies are aware of a responsibility not to present shows of an offensive nature to audiences, which risks losing their patronage and may lead to the demise of the company.

A story is included in the artefact about FAMDA (Foster Arts Music and Drama Association) located in Foster. FAMDA is one amateur company that has successfully presented plays with more controversial content than plays and musicals predominantly presented by other amateur theatre companies in regional Victoria (Paragreen 2016). For example, in 2017, FAMDA presented *The Vagina Monologues*, which is rarely presented by Melbourne and regional amateur theatre companies. Other shows presented that could be regarded as risk-taking include *Heroes, Oedipus Rex* and *Shadowlands*.

During a field research interview, FAMDA Life Member Jennifer Paragreen acknowledged they like to challenge their audiences and do plays that have ‘meat’ in them. ‘We have our audience well-trained to be expecting us to do something a little bit different’, said Jennifer. She explained that one reason for this is residents who recently moved to Foster from Melbourne for a ‘tree change’ lifestyle, have already seen city productions with more controversial content. However, while introducing plays with coarse language or nudity, the FAMDA committee would take care to remain within the boundaries of social acceptability when selecting shows.

According to Hiem (2016), the audience is influenced by the actor’s performance, and their response influences the actors (p. 2). Clearly there is not a performance without an audience, which Allan Aldous (1947) refers to as ‘the essence of the theatre’ (p. 15). An
indication of the importance of the audience to a performance is the need for performers and the production team to rehearse in front of an audience before Opening Night. In the professional theatrical sector, these final dress-reharsals are known as ‘preview performances’. Amateur theatre companies may offer their final dress-rehearsal to a charity organisation for fundraising purposes, and invite front-of-house volunteers to see the show before the season commences.

From the directorial and performers’ perspective, it is helpful to run the show before an audience with regards to timing dialogue delivery when pausing for laughter or a dramatic moment, for recognising that emphasising certain words will draw greater audience response, and for timing the overall show including interval and applause. The production and technical teams also have an opportunity to fine tune their specialist areas under performance conditions. The performance is now hopefully ready for the paying audience, and all involved with the show await their arrival to complete the theatre experience.

The modern science field of neuroaesthetics could provide answers to the effect of performance on audiences with new investigations taking place into the relationship between art and the brain (Kaufman et al. 2017 n.p.). Concurring with the view of Maria Fornes that audiences see themselves on stage, scientists are discovering that, by mapping other people’s actions into our somatosensory system as audience members, we absorb personal ownership of the emotions of others (Fornes 1992 in Dolan 1993, p. 435). Kaufman et al. (2017) explain that scientists are just starting to understand how that object of mystery, the brain, perceives and produces art, and why.

Results from this scientific research will be invaluable for future research on ‘Audience’. In the meantime, Margaret Wilkerson (1991) sums up the relationship between theatre and audience, not scientifically, but clearly articulated: ‘Theatre provides an opportunity for a community to come together and reflect on itself […] it is not only the mirror through which a society can reflect upon itself, it also helps to shape the perceptions of that culture through the power of its imaging’ (Wilkerson in Case, SE & Reinelt J (ed), p. 239).
Section Five: Conclusion

Contribution of New Knowledge to Scholarship

Simon Biggs (2009) describes research as ‘original investigations, seeking to create new knowledge’ which I believe is an apt description of research undertaken for this project (p. 66). There is no known previous scholarly research into the historical lineage of amateur theatre in Victoria from 1788. Therefore, using creative non-fiction and this complementary scholarly exegesis to tell the story, this original investigation presents new knowledge.

A significant discovery whilst researching this project was the lack of previous research by theatre historians into the amateur theatrical arts sector on an international level. The neglect of amateur theatrical history is not just applicable to Victoria, but extends internationally to countries such as England (Cochrane 2001, pp. 233-234), Wales (Cochrane 2003, pp. 169-170) and Canada (Whittaker 2011, pp. 52-53). I was initially motivated to undertake research for this project in the knowledge that a gap existed in the academic and non-academic literature of Victorian-based amateur theatre in Victoria. It was, however, surprising to discover the broad scope of this neglect.

Various theories suggested by scholars for the neglect of amateur theatre research have been presented in this exegesis. A summation for their concern is expressed in Claire Cochrane’s (2003) view that true representation of nationhood and national identity should not be influenced by the historian’s own ‘cultural and critical preferences’ (p. 170). Cochrane believes the documentation of twentieth century theatre has been dictated by historians’ ‘highly selective narratives’. Bertolt Brecht also acknowledges the importance of discussing amateur theatre: ‘The theatre of a given people or a given time must be judged as a whole, as a living organism which isn’t healthy unless it is healthy in every limb. That is another reason why it is worth speaking about the amateur theatre’ (Willett (ed)1974, p. 152).

This project has identified, addressed and redressed the gap in the academic literature regarding the amateur theatre in Victoria as revealed in the literature that is reviewed
throughout. The project aims to motivate theatre historians in other Australian states to document the history and culture of amateur theatre in their respective state. Perhaps the Australian Government will one day follow the lead of the British Government which has realised the importance of researching amateur theatre by funding a research program into amateur theatre in their country (Nicholson 2017, p. 4).

Another discovery of new knowledge in this field is the fluctuating public image of the amateur actor in Australia between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. By contrast, historically when the title ‘amateur’ is applied to sportsmen and women, they are consistently held in high regard. For example, in 1896, the Olympic Games were initially created exclusively for amateur sportsmen and women to compete at an international level, and to be admired and revered by global audiences (Golden 2018). At times, the amateur actor has also enjoyed a respectable image, but this has been inconsistent. For example, in early to mid-nineteenth century theatre programs, the names of amateur actors were respectably prefixed with ‘Mr’, ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’. They also enjoyed a highly regarded reputation associated with fundraising for charitable causes.

This presented a marked contrast to the image of early nineteenth century professional performers who were said to attract bawdy, rowdy audiences (Love 1984, p. 6). Press reviews of amateur theatre shows in the mid-nineteenth century are also positive regarding the image of the amateur performer (Peters 1856-1859). Another example is when Melbourne’s literary-loving gentlemen formed the Melbourne Garrick Club, their patron was the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly (The Garrick Club 2017). In 1910, director of the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company, Gregan McMahon used well-rehearsed amateur actors in his shows, which were socially regarded highly and well-attended by Melbourne’s elite (Rees 1978, pp. 119-120; Ashbolt 1978, p. 329).

The decline in image for the Melbourne amateur actor appears to have started in the early 1920s, following Gregan McMahon’s departure to Sydney in 1918 (Ashbolt 1986, n.p.). Perhaps without McMahon’s strict discipline and guidance during rehearsals, the new generation of amateur actors lacked the competency of their predecessors. They were blamed for the demise of the Pioneer Players in 1925, an amateur company formed by Louis Esson and Vance Palmer to promote locally-written plays. Hilda Esson referred to the amateur as a ‘dud’, and when Gregan McMahon returned to Melbourne, he too was
annoyed with the amateur’s ‘dilletantism, exhibitionism and sloppy discipline’ (Fitzpatrick 1995, p. 236; Ashbolt 1978, p. 333). After World War Two finished, amateur theatre was flourishing across Victoria to the extent that in 1948, reviewer F. Keith Manzie was critical of theatre groups springing up ‘like mushrooms’ (Love 1984, p. 196). Manzie felt the large number of groups forming across the state was causing the name ‘amateur theatre’ to be regarded negatively because of their unsatisfactory attitude and work.

The formation of the Victorian Drama League in 1952 brought structure and guidance to the amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria (Glass 2002). A positive result from this new structure of the arts sector was in 1953 when Englishman John Sumner recognised the value of amateur actors, some of whom were invited to join his professional shows presented by the Union Theatre Repertory Company at Melbourne University (Hutton 1975, p. 3).

I believe the absence of funding for amateur theatre today reinforces a divide between the professional and amateur theatrical arts sectors and contributes to a lowered public perception of the amateur actor. Also, the lack of published academic and non-academic literature diminishes the presence of the amateur theatrical arts sector.

However, regardless of image of the amateur actor, modern day standards of productions are impressively high and can equal or even surpass a professional production. New knowledge is therefore presented to the scholarly academy that the term ‘amateur’ when applied to actors in Australia has fluctuated in status and meaning according to public perception and circumstances at the time.

This project’s research has also discovered the significant role played by amateur actors in the early twentieth century to establish an independent Australian identity through performing locally-written works (Kirby-Smith 1969, pp. 140-141). This enabled local writers to present their unknown works to theatregoers in venues around Melbourne and contributed towards creating an Australian Drama. Experienced amateur actors also performed in Gregan McMahon’s Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company from 1910 – 1918, and during this time presented thirteen Australian plays rejected by commercial theatre as well as imported works (Ashbolt 1986; Fitzpatrick 1995, p. 85).
When the Pioneer Players formed in 1922, once again amateur actors were used to present Australian plays until the company closed in 1925 (Walker 1976, p. 134). Amateur actors were also active during this time in regional and urban areas of Victoria creating theatre productions for their local communities, but mostly performing imported works which would more reliably attract a paying audience.

New knowledge is also presented regarding the field research interview technology-free recording process. As noted in Section Three of this exegesis, interviews were recorded by hand-written documentation using a hybrid of Dacomb shorthand and longhand writing. By not using technology, I felt in full control while operating the interview, and when lowering the head to write, the respondents could reflect on their answers without anyone looking at them. This technology-free process prevented participants feeling daunted or nervous by having to speak into a microphone, and was an efficient means of transcribing the interviews. It also eliminated concern regarding potentially malfunctioning equipment.

In addition, research data sourced from interviews with representatives from seventy Victorian amateur theatre companies contributes new knowledge regarding an overview of cultural elements of contemporary amateur theatre. These include the strengths, weaknesses and perceived threats related to amateur theatrical companies, their criteria for selecting productions and the transformative benefits of amateur theatre. Graph charts and explanatory details of the graph legends are attached in the Appendix of this project. Research for this project has not uncovered any gender issues which have affected the development of theatre companies, except for the commonly shared issue of shortage of males for roles. This was particularly noticeable when men in country towns were absent for several years in the 1940s while assigned to the theatre of war. Sixty females were interviewed for this project and thirty-eight males, representing seventy amateur theatre companies in Victoria. Behind the scenes roles in theatre appear to be equally shared between males and females, although there was no reference by any companies to female set-builders. In most companies, regardless of male or female presence on committees, criteria for show selection was according to the known audience demographic in the theatre locality.
On the other hand, ageing of members is becoming a problem for many of the smaller companies because younger people are too busy with work and private commitments to join a committee of management. Alternately, some prefer to move between companies depending on the show, and do not have a loyalty to one particular company. Ageing members in one company expressed difficulty in lifting heavy teapots and pouring hot drinks when helping front-of-house. Others mentioned not wishing to drive at night, which restricted their presence at the theatre. There was a clear message on several occasions that unless younger people step up to take on managerial roles, some theatre companies will soon have to close. Larger companies such as CLOC Musical Theatre are prepared for this issue and have structured business strategies to ensure a succession plan of volunteer personnel. This is not always possible for smaller companies, particularly when isolated in country towns.

Each theatre company interviewed appeared to be culturally autonomous, operated by a committee who oversaw the selection of shows depending on the audience demographic unique to that theatre company. There were noticeable cultural differences between locations of theatres that influenced their choice of productions. For example, in Foster, Gippsland, the theatre company known as FAMDA which has already been discussed in Section Four of this exegesis, recognises their ‘tree change’ audience theatregoers from Melbourne have already seen various styles of city theatre and will accept seeing a show containing harsh language or adult themes (Paragreen 2016). While FAMDA chooses shows to challenge their audience within reason, the Leongatha Lyric Theatre, also located in Gippsland, recognises their audience is conservative and would never select a potentially confronting production such as God of Carnage (Tattersall 2016).

The popularity of amateur theatre appeared to be strong in most towns where companies operated, regardless of whether the town was an arts strong area such as Castlemaine. This town has a long and rich theatrical history, but in 2016 when interviewing the Castlemaine Theatre Company, they did not have a permanent performance venue due to the expensive hiring fees. Fortunately, an update two years later reveals a good working relationship with new members of the local Council and thanks to a sustained campaign by local theatre-makers, a more reasonable rate is now being charged for the performance venue (Stones & McLeod 2016). On the other hand, in Hamilton in the Western District, the DRAMUS theatre company, whose name resulted from a merger between the drama
and musical groups, is self-contained with its own theatre situated near the railway station (Littlechild & Cameron 2016).

The various reasons for forming amateur theatre companies include people recognising their local area needed a drama group and sitting in someone’s loungeroom to start a company. Many amateur theatre companies have originated from church, choral, or senior school productions, or such as when the road between Wonthaggi and Leongatha was in disrepair and theatregoers decided to start their own company in Wonthaggi.

The main criteria for the success of a theatre company anywhere appears to be having sufficient volunteers to manage the organisation and to participate in productions. Theatre companies in country towns commented on losing the membership of professionals working temporarily in the town such as in the bank or schools. The Sale Theatre Group has noticed a difference in available volunteers since the closure of organisations in the town such as the RAAF Base and Esso (Paterson 2016). Interestingly, two years after the interview with Sale Theatre, an update reveals a new wave of enthusiastic members in the company who are busy presenting several annual shows. Many theatre companies located in country towns lamented the lack of school-teachers in amateur theatre now.

Once, to join the local theatre company was a most effective way for a school-teacher to familiarise with his or her community, but now teachers are kept busy with involvement in their own school productions. As mentioned earlier in this exegesis, school productions pose a threat to amateur theatre companies, particularly in country towns. Firstly, the audience disposable dollar may not extend to seeing two productions and out of loyalty to a family member or friend, the school show could be preferred. Also, teenagers who would once audition for their local theatre company are now busy with their school productions.

There is also pressure on amateur companies from audiences who expect to see a show of an equal, if not better, standard than a school production, presented by their local amateur company. These audience expectations do not take into consideration that the amateur company may be struggling for funds to hire well equipped venues to stage blockbuster musicals such as *Mary Poppins*, while the school may have financial arrangements to
ensure high production values in their shows, and can always be reassured that they have a ready-made audience.

The historical lineage researched for this project presents the development of the amateur theatrical arts sector in Victoria from 1842 to 2018, commencing in 1788 with the arrival of the first European settlers. These research findings address the principal line of enquiry regarding the extent of nineteenth and twentieth century amateur theatre in Victoria, and the unique, individual histories and cultures inherent to musical and non-musical theatre companies operating in Victoria today.

**Personal Reflection**

It has been a privilege to research and create this project by artefact and exegesis to record the history and culture of amateur theatre in Victoria. From a personal perspective, I view the project as a gift of appreciation to a theatre-making practice which has provided much enjoyment at different times of my life since 1958. Also of course, the project pays tribute to the hard-working, talented and dedicated individuals who have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to this arts sector.

As previously noted, I was honoured in 2010 to have been confidentially nominated and awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for ‘Service to the performing arts, particularly the Mordialloc Light Opera Company, and the community’. When visiting theatre companies to interview representatives, I have met several theatre-makers who have gone beyond the normal expectations of their volunteer work and deserve to be nominated for a similar award. Nomination for these awards will only happen if instigated in strict confidence by ordinary individuals, not officialdom.

Through theatre contacts I was able to collate sufficient personal information to confidentially and successfully nominate an interviewee for this project for their fine contribution to amateur theatre. This person received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), for Services to the Performing Arts and I regard this as another positive outcome associated with this project. Hopefully this Award will encourage further nominations of deserving volunteer theatre-makers by their colleagues.
During the researching and creating of this project, I am glad to have continued my honorary work as theatre writer and review coordinator with the *Melbourne Observer* newspaper. Although time-consuming, with sometimes over twenty show preview stories requiring writing and submission for publication each week, the inter-connective benefits for this project with performers and theatre companies has been mutually beneficial. Writing these stories for the *Melbourne Observer* has also provided valuable weekly writing practice, while the theatre companies benefit from free publicity.

The field research interviews provided an opportunity to meet new people in Victoria’s amateur theatrical arts sector and to hear their stories. I was also able to offer a written profile article in the *Melbourne Observer* about the interviewee’s theatrical life and contribution to theatre. Not everybody accepted this opportunity, but the twenty-three published articles included a photo of each person and received positive and appreciative feedback.

The wonderful co-operation of theatre company representatives during the research process was vital to recording the interviews, particularly in country towns. The interview participants gave of their time and worked around daily schedules to be interviewed at a time compliant to my travels through their town or suburb. These one-hour interviews in various locations reinforced and extended my existing knowledge of the vibrant, active and much-loved phenomena of theatre presented by volunteers, which plays such a significant role in the lives of many people and communities. Four interviewees have sadly passed away since commencing this project, but I felt honoured that family or colleagues advised news of their passing, and in each case commented how much the person had enjoyed their interview.

In 2016 I reluctantly joined the social media site Facebook to contact smaller theatre companies without a website. This new experience, although initially daunting, has resulted in ongoing efficient connection with some theatre companies and individuals. Without exception, all interview participants have been most enthusiastic about this project, with the general view that such a project is long overdue. They also share my hope for a book about the history of Amateur Theatre in Victoria, which would be a not-for-profit publication with profits donated to the Victorian Drama League and Music Theatre Guild of Victoria.
To learn more about Australian theatre history, in 2016 I joined Theatre Heritage Australia, a voluntary Melbourne-based organisation. It was awesome to personally meet established theatre historians such as Frank Van Straten AM and Dr Mimi Colligan, whose research into Melbourne’s early theatrical scene such as the development of the National Theatre Movement, has been admired and sourced for this project.

On 17th November, 2018, a big honour with regards to this project was the invitation to speak at a Theatre Heritage Australia event in The Channel at Arts Centre Melbourne, on the topic of ‘The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria’. The free event booked out within two weeks of bookings opening.

Here are two ‘thank-you’ messages received by personal email:

What a thoroughly illuminating and enjoyable afternoon listening to Cheryl Threadgold deliver a talk on the History and Culture of Theatre in Victoria!! So well researched, entertaining and educational. I feel energised to learn about how theatre started in our State and has thrived and changed to today. We thespians are part of an important artistic continuum. Cheryl, thank you for all your PhD work, it is so vital to record the contributions and journey of so many people and companies (quite a staggering number!). You are such an advocate for us amateurs and so glad to attend your special presentation. Hope the book deal comes soon!! Fascinating stuff that every worthwhile theatre maker should read! Quote from Theatre History Australia MC ‘we don't know where we are going until we know where we have been’

(Natasha Boyd, 2018).

Congratulations and thank you very much for an extremely enjoyable and informative afternoon at the Channel yesterday. Edna would have been thrilled about the fantastic contribution you’ve made to her beloved world of theatre.

Your research and the level of rigorous study is impressive - an enormous task to undertake given, as I understand it, the project subject matter has not previously received formal documentation, that is, in any structured academic sense.

Also, if you don’t mind me saying, reporting back quantitative data and qualitative findings to constituent groups is challenging at any time. I suspect more so, when your
audience spans such diverse experiences of their individual participation in amateur theatre including their interests in the role of and their own role in community theatrical production. I well know the process of project research and how much work it takes to get to the point of presenting the analysis of complex data to your audience in a respectful and useful way and you made the whole process appear effortless, carrying it off with such joy and ease – great work!

(Vivien Gunn, 2018).

The talk was well received, and Theatre Heritage Australia has since requested an article for their website based on snapshots of my research into Australian early colonial amateur theatre up until 1842. Most importantly, this research project has provided an opportunity for amateur theatre history to be acknowledged in Theatre History Australia archives alongside professional theatre. On 27th February, 2019, I was invited to once again talk about the History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria at Arts Centre Melbourne, this time to the Member Conversation Group in the Theatres Building, Hamer Hall.

Theatre companies may close for various reasons, but the cycle suggests they will be replaced by others. Modern-day lifestyles will challenge theatre-makers regarding time availability and personal finances to participate in amateur theatre. But a passion for live performance which is inherent to human beings, determination and hard work will, I predict, see amateur theatre continue throughout and beyond this century.

This project discusses the importance of more than one hundred amateur theatre groups in Victoria alone as being evidence of today’s popularity and modern-day involvement in the volunteer theatrical arts sector. Whether as participants involved onstage, technically, creatively, using skills such as set-building or sewing costumes, musically, administratively; or as audience members who support their local theatre group and look forward to new cultural experiences with every performance, there is no doubt that amateur theatre remains a strong area of interest and recreational activity for Victorian residents.
The artefact in this project has elucidated the history and culture of theatre presented in Victorian communities for love and creative satisfaction, but not for financial reimbursement. This role of the exegesis has been ‘the written component that speaks to the production of knowledge’ (Bacon 2017, p.389).
Together as one, the artefact and exegesis have presented *Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria* in scholarship.

The outcome of this project will help preserve the history of Victorian amateur theatre’s past and present, for the future.

Theatre survives as it always has,
To bind us together,
To remind us that we are indispensable to each other,
And to help bestow value and meaning to being alive.
And always The Show Goes On! (Cousens 2006, p. 6).
Reference List


The Adelphi Theatre Company 2016, Field research interview with Michael Mace on Friday, 22 January, 2016 at 2.00pm in Ormond.


Alley, G 2015, Interview with Grant Alley OAM about CLOC Musical Theatre on 15 December, 2015 at CLOCworks, 230 Kingston Road, Heatherton, Victoria.


Angliss, T & Egan, J 2016, Field research interview with Trish Angliss and John Egan for Aspect Theatre Incorporated on Thursday, 28 January, 2016 at 7.30pm in Aspendale.


Armstrong, G 2016, Field research interview with Gail Armstrong for the Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG) on 5 February, 2016 at 1.00pm at the Strathmore Community Theatre, Corner Loeman and Napier Streets, Strathmore.


Arts Centre Melbourne 2017, Research at Arts Centre Melbourne Research Centre on 18 April, 2017, at 9.30am, supervised by Assistant Curator Nicole Bowller.


Ashmore, R 2016, Interview with Robyn Ashmore for Ballarat National Theatre on Sunday, 20 November, 2016 at 10.30am in Ballarat.


Ballarat National Theatre 2016, Interview with Robyn Ashmore on Sunday, 20 November, 2016 at 10.30am at the Turret Café, 802 Sturt Street, Ballarat.


Bell, L 2016, Field research interview with Lorraine Bell for Malvern Theatre Company on Friday, 22 April, 2016 at 2.00pm at Malvern Theatre, 29a Burke Rd., Malvern.


Bergman, S 2016, Field research interview with Susan Bergman for BATS Theatre Company on Friday, 2 September, 2016 in Beaumaris.


Bradfield, RA 1976, They Trod the Boards, How the Dramatic Arts Burgeoned on Forest Creek in 1857, Bradfield, Castlemaine, Victoria.


Bridges, N 1980, Curtain Call, as told to Frank Crook, Cassell Australia Ltd., New South Wales and Victoria.


Bula, M 2016, Field research interview with Michael Bula for Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated, on Tuesday, 27 September at 6.00pm in Carlton.


Burrows, A, Garside, C 2016, Field research interview with Alan Burrows and Catherine Garside for Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company in Lilydale, on Sunday, 10 April, 2016 at 12.30pm.

Cameron, M, Cameron, A, Vandervalk, L & Garner, P 2016, Field research interview with Marg and Allan Cameron, Leo Vandervalk and Pauline Garner for the Mount Players on Friday, 18 November, 2016 in Macedon.


Clark, S 2016, Field research interview with Stephanie Clark for Impact Theatre on Saturday, 28 May, 2016 at 4.30pm in Box Hill.


Cole, C 2016, Field research interview with Carol Cole for Creswick Theatre Company on Saturday, 19 November, 2016 in Creswick.


Colliver, J & R 2016, Field research interview with Jan and Ron Colliver for Portland CEMA on Saturday, 6 August, 2016 at 9.30am in Portland.


Copeland, D & McCall, C 2016, Field research interview with Carol McCall and David Copeland for Frankston Theatre Group at ‘The Shed’ Corner Overport and Somerset Rds., Frankston.


Cox, L 2017, Field research interview with Lindsay Cox, Territorial Archivist, The Salvation Army, on Friday, 17 March, 2017 at 69 Bourke Street, Melbourne.


Davies, O 2016, Field research interview with Owen Davies for Babirra Music Theatre on Monday, 19 September, 2016 at 10.30am in Mulgrave.


Donald, C 2016, Field research interview with Colin Donald for the Hartwell Players on Thursday, 11 February, 2016 at 2.00pm in Mount Waverley.

Doolan, M & Baker, M 2016, Field research interview with Maryann Doolan and Michael Baker for the Torquay Theatre Troupe on Sunday, 14 August, 2016 at 10.00am in Torquay.

Drowley, W 2015, Field research interview with Wendy Drowley for Heidelberg Theatre Company on Friday, 26 November 2015 at 2.00pm at Heidelberg Theatre, 36 Turnham Avenue, Rosanna.


Dupleix, T 2016, Field research interview with Tony Dupleix for the Camperdown Theatre Company on Friday, 5 August, 2016 in Camperdown.


Eaton, B 2016, Geelong Repertory Theatre, Field research interview Friday, 20 May, 2016 at 11.00am, at the Woodbin Theatre, 15 Coronation Street, West Geelong.

Ebell, E 2016, Field research interview for Williamstown Little Theatre, Tuesday, 5 January, 2016 at 5.00pm at Williamstown Little Theatre, 2-4 Albert Street, Williamstown.


The 1812 Theatre 2016, Interview with Chris Proctor on 12 February, 2016 at 3 Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully, Victoria.


Emond, G & Wall, VJ 2016, Field research interview with Gael Emond and Vernon Wall for Bendigo Theatre Company on Saturday, 19 November, 2016 at the Arts Shed, 15–17 Allingham St., Golden Square, Bendigo.


Fowler, JB 1962, Stars In My Backyard, Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd., Ilfracombe, Devon, Great Britain.

Fowler, JB 1962, On Our Selection theatre program, presented in St David’s Hall, Latrobe Street, Melbourne in 1962.


Fraser, D 2016, Field research interview with Debbie Fraser regarding GSODA Incorporated on 20 May, 2016 in Geelong.


Geraghty, L 2016, Field research interview with Lee Geraghty for Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CP.AC), on Tuesday, 26 January, 2016 at 9.00am in Aspendale.


Gottschalk, H & Gibson, S 2016, Field research interview with Helen Gottschalk and Susan Gibson regarding Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company, on Thursday, 24 March at 9.30am in Bairnsdale.


Greenwood, D 2016, Field research interview with David Greenwood for Centerstage Geelong on Friday, 20 May, 2016 at 4.30pm at 26 Rodney Road, North Geelong.


Haughton, J 2016, Field research interview with Jeannie Haughton for Off the Leash Theatre Company Incorporated on Tuesday, 22 March, 2016 at 10.30am in Drouin.


Heidelberg Theatre Company 2016, Scrapbook Number 1, City of Heidelberg National Theatre Branch, viewed 17 February, 2016.


Hinrichsen, D 2016, Field research interview with Dawn Hinrichsen on Saturday, 13 February, 2016 at 1.00pm at the Bradshaw Street Community Hall, Bradshaw Street, Essendon.

Higgs, J 2015, Stranger Than We Can Imagine: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century, Hachette, United Kingdom.


Horwood, B & Trevenen, A 2016, Interview with Beverley Horwood and Alison Trevenen on 20 November, 2016 at 3.15pm at the Golden City Hotel, Corner Sturt and Dawson Streets, Ballarat.

Houldcroft, L & Hickman, N 2016, Field research interview with Lyn Houldcroft and Nicole Hickman for Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group on Sunday, 7 August, 2016 at 11.30am at storage shed, corner Symonds Street. and Hygeia Drive, Queenscliff.

Hutton, G 1975, It Won't Last a Week! The First Twenty Years of the Melbourne Theatre Company, Sun Books, Melbourne.


Ingles, D & Tomkins, W 2016, Field Research interview with Derek Ingles and Wendy Tomkins for Geelong Lyric Theatre on Friday, 20 May at 1.30pm at the Woodbin Theatre, 15 Coronation Street, West Geelong.

Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past and the Institute of Historical Research 2007, ‘Performance and performativity’, The bi-centenary of the slave trade is commemorated in Britain, Arts and Humanities Council, the University of York, viewed 29 December, 2016, <www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/media/methods/performance.html>.


Jackson, IV 2004, ‘Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG)’, written for STAG’s 50th anniversary.


Jettner, C & Henkel, L 2016, Field research interview with Cherise Jettner and Lorraine Henkel for Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe on Friday, 5 August, 2016 at 11.00am in Elliminyt, Colac.


Keyt, D 2016, Interview with Debbie Keyt for Beaumaris Theatre on Friday, 15 January 2016 at 2.00pm at Beaumaris Theatre in Beaumaris.


Littlechild, A & Cameron, E 2016, Field Research Interview with Anne Littlechild and Ewen Cameron for DRAMUS Theatre Incorporated, Hamilton on Friday, 5 August, 2016 at 5.00pm in Hamilton.


Lowe, I 2016, Field Research interview with Dr Ian Lowe for Diamond Valley Singers on Saturday, 11 June, 2016 at 2.00pm in Greensborough.


Lyons, N, Celegon, C & Broadfoot, J 2016, Field Research Interview with Naomi Lyons, Chris Celegon and Jane Broadfoot for Mildura Theatre Company on Thursday, 31 March, 2016 at 7.00pm at the Powerhouse, Mildura.


Mace, M 2016, Field research interview with Michael Mace about The Adelphi Theatre Company on Friday, 22 January, 2016 at 2.00pm in Ormond.


Madsen, L & Hayday, J 2016, Field Research Interview with Lorraine Madsen and Juliet Hayday for Mordialloc Theatre Company on Wednesday, 27 January, 2016 at 1.30pm in Beaumaris, Victoria.

Mahoney, R & Henkel, L 2016, Field research interview with Rhonda Mahoney and Lorraine Henkel for The Colac Players on Friday, 5 August at 9.00am in Colac.


Malthouse Theatre 2019, ‘Iago’, viewed 6 January, 2019,

Marriott, G 2016, Field research interview with Graeme Marriott for MLOC Productions on Wednesday, 6 January, 2016 at 12.00noon in Warragul.


Mayer, PA 2016, Field research interview with Phillip A. Mayer for the Here, There and Everywhere Theatre Company on Wednesday, 23 March, 2016 at 2.00pm at the La Trobe Performing Arts Centre, Corner Breed and Gray Streets, Traralgon.


McNair, A & Walsh, C 2016, Field research interview with Alison McNair and Carolyn Walsh for the Maffra Dramatic Society on Saturday, 14 May, 2016 in Sale.


Mitchell, E 2016, Field research interview with Elaine Mitchell for Theatre of the Winged Unicorn on Saturday, 12 August, 2016 at 2.00pm in Ceres, Geelong.


MOaRTZ 2010, MOaRTZ: 10 Years of Art in Moe, 2000-2010, Newborough, Victoria.


Mordialloc Theatre Company 2016, Interview with Lorraine Madsen and President Juliet Hayday on Wednesday, 27 January, 2016 at 1.30pm in Beaumaris.


Morrison, M 2016, Field research interview with Maggie Morrison for LOTS Theatre Incorporated on Wednesday, 20 July, 2016 at 12 noon in Beaumaris.


Muller, J 2016, Field research interview with Jason Muller for BLOC Music Theatre on Sunday, 20 November, 2016 at 1.30pm in Ballarat.


Owen, C, Rothwell, B 2016, Field research interview with Carol Owen and Bonnie Rothwell for Eltham Little Theatre, on Saturday, 2 October, 2016 at 9.30am in Eltham.


Paragreen, J 2016, Field research interview with Jennifer Paragreen for FAMDA (Foster Art, Music and Drama Association) on Thursday, 26 February, 2016 in Foster.


Paterson, J 2016, Field research interview with Jocelyn Paterson for Sale Theatre company on Wednesday, 23 March in the Sale Library.

Patterson, G 2016, Field research interview with Graeme Patterson for Warragul Theatre Company Incorporated on Tuesday, 22 March, 2016 at 2.00pm in the West Gippsland Performing Arts Centre.
Patton, MQ 2002, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, Sage Publications, United States of America, United Kingdom, India.

Pendock, S & Webb, C 2016, Field research interview with Susanne Pendock and Cheryl Webb for the Red Cliffs Players on Thursday, 31 March, 2016 at 4.15pm at the Cardross Hall, Cardross.


Penrose, R 2017, Telephone interview with Ron Penrose regarding the Harrow Sound and Light Show, on Tuesday, 22 August, 2017 at 5.40pm.


Peters, H 1856-1859, Manuscript containing a scrapbook of newspaper reviews of amateur shows presented on the goldfields, 1 vol. MS 12229, MS Box 2825/7 (a), Heritage Collections Room, State Library Victoria.


Procter, C 2016, Field research interview with Chris Procter for The 1812 Theatre on 2.30pm on 12 February, 2016 at 3 Rose Street, Upper Ferntree Gully, Victoria.


Quayle, D 2016, Field research interview with David Quayle for the Swan Hill Theatre Group at 10.00am on 31 March, 2016, at the Swan Hill Memorial Theatre, McCrae St., Swan Hill.


Radbourne, J 1978, ‘Little Theatre: Its Development Since World War Two in Australia with Particular Reference to Queensland’, a Thesis Prepared in Accordance with the Degree of Master of Arts in the University of Queensland, viewed 22 October, 2017, <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_190020/the1888.pdf?Expires=1546811177&S ignature=ajQQKwS72kf~x0A~5jWjrs31f9whL7XLWH7vqVgOro3VUOBbwycyEeJuRhAGE7MLQ4qtauybC0EcvDweT8M2x4elmrZP5720XHW DjnE-AjNBJ1DtAG9BCX4zExrWFsYaW-KMZ-Mwr3eNiqNLq5N2NB5s9240K~qL6O-VNC4PPRVEjC6ZasT6wdl5fVN1AuPdxJa3OvzGt1Vx7hjHMvOyfBXbKtgSglPxGBPBL3LpzSK~favSPjCSsldrcDwPcp05tHovmFw~tE0cu3bd1WEUGi5uzYkPxFCsiWaG00DU0~2u4fRlhXfZ-E1sBe1nDX6c1hwqCjZByFsaY36FOwA__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNBJ4MJBJNC6NLQ>.


Richardson J, 2015, 1920–1970s theatre memorabilia from Mr. John Richardson, sourced from son and daughter-in-law, Dr. Bill and Jayne Richardson.


Russell, L 2015, *City Kid*, Creative Text Solutions, Australia.


Sargentson, D & R 2016, Field research interview with Doreen and Richard Sargentson for Heidelberg Allstars on Friday, 5 February, 2016 in Gowanbrae.


Sedgley, G 2016, Field research interview with Gail Sedgley for the Port Fairy Theatre Group on Saturday, 6 August, 2016 in Warrnambool.


States, BO 1985, Great Reckoning in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, London, Google Books, viewed 6 January, 2019, <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=86wwDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA203&lpg=PA203&dq=bert+states+the+return+from+the+play+world+is+like+the+awakening+of+the+dream&source=bl&ots=vhadTxu8jTJ&sig=WHnjLvr6PZIubXTHQXfUR_LcVw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiE3rjA7NffAhUNFYgKHXgMDv0Q6AEwCHoECAcQAQ#v=onepage&q=bert%20states%20the%20return%20from%20the%20play%20world%20is%20like%20the%20awakening%20of%20the%20dream&f=false>.


Stones, K & McLeod, K 2016, Field research interview with Kate Stones and Ken McLeod for Castlemaine Theatre Company on Saturday, 19 November, 2016 at 2.00pm in Castlemaine.

Stonehouse, A, Johnson, M & Tuck, H 2016, Field research interview with Annemarie Stonehouse, Margot Johnson and Heather Tuck for the Warrnambool Theatre Company on Saturday, 13 August, 2016 at 4.00pm in Warrnambool.


Tattersall, D 2016, Field research interview on Friday, 26 February, 2016 at 10.00am at the Leongatha Lyric Theatre Clubrooms, 13 Watson Road, Leongatha.


Teague, J 2016, Field research interview with Jeanette Teague for MOARTZ on Saturday, 14 May, 2016 at 12.15pm in Moe.


Theatrecraft 2017, vol. 41, no. 9, October 2017, ISSN 0311-7138, Victorian Drama League Incorporated.


The 1812 Theatre 2016, Interview with Chris Proctor, Friday, 12 February, 2016 at The 1812 Theatre, 3 Rose St., Upper Ferntree Gully.


Thompson, A 2016, Field research with Wyndham Theatre Company on Saturday, 13 August, 2016, at 10.00am at the Kelly Park Community centre, Werribee.


Trask K & Rendall, B 2016, Field research interview with Kevin Trask and Bill Rendall for Encore Theatre Company Incorporated on Friday, 30 September, 2016 at 2.00pm in Plaza Arcade, Clayton.


Wall, D 2016, Field research interview with David Wall for Wonthaggi Theatrical Group on Friday, February 26 at 2.00pm at the Bass Coast Community Foundation Office in Wonthaggi.


Webb, J (ed) 1997, Re-Siting Theatre, Approaches to regional theatre development. The proceedings of a conference held in Central Queensland University, Rockhampton on 6 and 7 February, 1996, Central Queensland University.


Williamson, A 2016, Field research interview about Altona City Theatre (ACT), on Sunday, 13 March, 2016 at 2.00pm at Altona Theatre. 115 Civic Parade, Altona.


Wills, P 2016, Field research interview with Peter Wills for Footlight Productions on Saturday, 21 May, 2016 at 9.30am in Belmont, Geelong.


Appendix

Appendix 1: Ethics Clearance

From: Astrid Nordmann <anordmann@swin.edu.au>
Sent: Monday, 12 October 2015 1:26 PM
To: Dominique Hecq <dhecq@swin.edu.au>
Cc: RES Ethics <resethics@swin.edu.au>; CHERYL THREADGOLD (9612475@student.swin.edu.au) <9612475@student.swin.edu.au>
Subject: SHR Project 2015/245 - Ethics clearance

To: Dr Dominique Hecq, FHAD

Dear Dominique,

SHR Project 2015/245 – The history of Victorian Community Theatre: a transformative arts sector

Dr Dominique Hecq, Ms Cheryl Threadgold (Student) - FHAD

Approved duration: 12-10-2015 to 20-09-2016 [adjusted]

I refer to the ethical review of the above project by a Subcommittee (SHESC1) of Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Your responses to the review as emailed on 09 October 2015 were put to the Subcommittee delegate for consideration.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, ethics clearance has been given for the above project to proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions outlined below.

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and
any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project. Information on project monitoring and variations/additions, self-audits and progress reports can be found on the Research Intranet pages.

- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.

Please contact the Research Ethics Office if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance, citing the Swinburne project number. A copy of this email should be retained as part of project record-keeping.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely,
Astrid Nordmann
SHESC1 Secretary

Dr Astrid Nordmann
Research Ethics Officer
Swinburne Research (H68)
Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218, Hawthorn, VIC 3122
Tel: +613 9214 3845
Fax: +613 9214 5267
Email: anordmann@swin.edu.au

-----------------------------------------------------------------------
-----Original Message-----
From: resethics@swin.edu.au <resethics@swin.edu.au>
Sent: Friday, 4 January 2019 11:09 AM
To: Josie Arnold <jarnold@swin.edu.au>
Cc: RES Ethics <resethics@swin.edu.au>
Subject: Acknowledgement of Report for SUHREC Project - 2015/245

Dear Josie,

Re: Final Report for the project 2015/245


The Final report for the above project has been processed and satisfies the reporting requirements set under the terms of ethics clearance.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Regards
Research Ethics Team

Swinburne Research (H68)
Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218
HAWTHORN VIC 3122
Tel: 03 9214 3845
Fax: 03 9214 5267
Email: resethics@swin.edu.au
Appendix 2: Sample Schedule of Field Research Interview Appointments

1. A field research trip to visit theatre companies in North-Western Victoria

_Overnight stay in Swan Hill._

**Thursday, 31 March, 2016**

9.30am _Swan Hill_. Interview with David Quayle from the Swan Hill Theatre Group at the Swan Hill Memorial Theatre in McCrae Street, Swan Hill.

2.30pm _Mildura_. Interview with Pamela Bradley, Cyndy Wood and Russell Gittins for the Red Cliffs Musical Society at the Powerhouse rehearsal space and club rooms, Mildura.

4.15pm _Cardross_. Interview with Susanne Pendock and Cheryl Webb for the Red Cliffs Players at the Cardross Hall, Cardross.

7.00pm _Mildura_. Interview with Naomi Lyons, Chris Celegon and Jane Broadfoot for the Mildura Theatre Company at Powerhouse on the riverfront at Mildura.

_Overnight stay in Mildura before driving home._

2. _A field research trip to visit theatre companies in South-Western Victoria_

_Overnight stay in Colac._

**Friday, 5 August, 2016**

9.00am _Colac_. Interview with Rhonda Mahoney and Lorraine Henkel from the Colac Players in Colac.

11.00am _Elliminyte, Colac_. Interview with Cherise Jettner and Lorraine Henkel from the all-abilities company Antz Pantz Theatre Troupe at their theatre in Elliminyte.

1.00pm _Camperdown_. Interview with Tony Dupleix from the Camperdown Theatre Company in Camperdown.

5.00pm _Hamilton_. Interview with Anne Littlechild and Ewen Cameron from DRAMUS Theatre, Hamilton, in Hamilton.

_Overnight stay in Hamilton._

**Saturday, 6 August, 2016**

9.30am _Portland_. Interview with Jan and Ron Colliver from the Portland Theatre Group CEMA in Portland.

1.30pm _Port Fairy (interview in Warrnambool due to participant’s farm residence’s proximity rather than in Port Fairy)_ Interview with Gail Sedgley from the Port Fairy Theatre Group in Warrnambool.

4.00pm _Warrnambool_. Interview with Annemaree Stonehouse, Margot Johnson and Heather Tuck from the Warrnambool Theatre Company in Warrnambool.

_Overnight stay in Warrnambool._

**Sunday, 7 August, 2016**

11.30am _Queenscliff_. Interview with Lyn Houldcroft and Nicole Hickman from the Queenscliffe Lighthouse Theatre Group at a working bee in Queenscliff. This later interview time was preferred by the company because of undertaking a working bee that
day at their Council owned storage shed located in a park. I was of course grateful to the members who stopped work for the interview.

Drive home.

3. A field research trip to visit theatre companies in North-Western and West Central Victoria

Overnight stay in Mount Macedon.

Friday, 18 November, 2016
10.30am  Macedon. Interview with Marg and Allan Cameron, Leon Vandervalk and Pauline Garner for The Mount Players at The Mountview Theatre, 86 Smith Street, Macedon.

Unfortunately, other theatre company members in this region were not available for interviews for the remainder of this day, so time was utilised transcribing data from last interview.

Overnight stay in Bendigo.

Saturday, 19 November, 2016
10.30am  Bendigo. Interview with Gael Emond for the Bendigo Theatre Company at the company’s Arts Shed, 15–17 Allingham Street, Golden Square, Bendigo.
2.00pm  Castlemaine. Interview with Kate Stones and Ken McLeod for the Castlemaine Theatre Company in Campbell’s Creek.
4.00pm  Creswick. Interview with Carol Cole for the Creswick Theatre Company in Creswick.

Overnight stay in Creswick.

Sunday, 20th November, 2016
10.00am  Ballarat. Interview with Robyn Ashmore for the Ballarat National Theatre in Ballarat.
1.30pm  Ballarat. Interview with Jason Muller for BLOC Music Theatre at the company headquarters at 605 Peel Street, Black Hill, Ballarat.
3.15pm  Ballarat. Interview with Beverley Horwood and Alison Trevenen for Ballarat Lyric Theatre in, Ballarat.

Drive home.
Appendix 3: Analysed Research Data: 'Strengths'

Legend for 'Strengths'

1. (Value: 48) **Volunteerism:** Dedicated commitment of members, friendliness, welcoming, everyone gets a go, good culture within company, loyalty from members, everyone has a say, a sense of community, like a second family, 'family-ness', 'the people' - their time, skills and members' energy, talents, creativity, passion, theatre is a social leveller

2. (Value: 19) **High standard of shows; well selected shows; good reputation of company; innovative, creative, risk-taking when selecting shows.**

3. (Value: 14) **Longevity, history** (company members are custodians), **tradition.**

4. (Value: 14) **Assets: Buildings, costumes and equipment,** Access to good rehearsal facilities and storage.

5. (Value: 11) **Dedicated committee/leader.**

6. (Value: 10) **Business plan, good organisation, planning ahead, financial control, loyalty to sponsors, Production Information booklet given to all cast members.**

7. (Value 8) **Good mentoring scheme, training ground,** avenue for school leavers to continue love of the performing arts.

8. (Value: 5) **Focus on Youth.**

9. (Value: 3) **Good audiences.**

10. (Value: 2) **Good relations with local Council.**

11. (Value: 2) **Good directors and technical teams.**

12. (Value: 2) **Donating to Charity.**
Appendix 4 : Analysed Research Data: 'Weaknesses'

(Full details of legend for 'Weaknesses' are on next page)

1. (Value: 34) Volunteers.

2. (Value: 17) Finances.

3. (Value: 14) Buildings: venues, storage, rehearsal spaces, space limitations.


5. (Value: 7) Marketing could be improved.

6. (Value: 6) No succession plan/lack of structure.

7. (Value: 5) Shortage of males.


9. (Value: 4) Shortage of set-builders.

10. (Value: 4) Local Council issues.

11. (Value: 4) Shortage of directors.

12. (Value: 2) Shows.
Appendix 5: Detailed Legend of Graph Two: ‘Weaknesses’

Data Analysis of Interviews with Victorian Amateur Theatre Companies,
November, 2015 to February, 2017

1. Volunteers
Lack of helpers at working bees. Need more members and actors. Time constraints of volunteers. If work left to a few they risk burnout. Difficulty in replacing quality, experienced people when they leave. Some can be ‘territorial’ of the group, unwelcoming to youth. Country towns no longer have potential performers in transient professionals from banks and big organisations like SEC and RAAF. Arrogation of authority by some. Complaints at AGM. No continuity of membership. People get disheartened and leave if standard of dancing is too high. Young people are not as available because supermarkets open later, and they need to work for money. Retired people now busy babysitting. Disagreement between members. Need more proactive members who can work unsupervised. Limited casts in country towns. Less people volunteering.

2. Finance
Need to fundraise to survive. Increasing hiring costs of venues. Reluctant to increase ticket prices. Financially vulnerable. Problem accessing grants. Young cast members have limited funds. Getting people to work within budgets. Cannot attract sponsors. Audiences have limited disposable income, particularly in country towns. Venue technicians expensive. Lost income from refreshment sales when using council venues. No supportive funding. Fully self-funded. Fundraising includes annual Deb Balls. Rely on a large audience to survive. What happens in country town if pool of money dries up?

3. Buildings: venues, storage, rehearsal spaces, space limitations
Companies want their own theatre. Wish for a bigger theatre, a fly tower, an orchestra pit, storage, rehearsal space. Company has limited space, would like another 25 seats per performance, but unable to extend, meaning theatregoers annoyed when shows sell out quickly. Problems sharing a performance venue with other groups. At school, students get on stage with sets during day. Country towns struggle to find performance/rehearsal venues.

4. Ageing Committee, Actors and Audiences
It is hard to attract 30–50 age group. Young people get trained, but then leave to go to city or university.

5. Marketing
Could be improved. Need more communication with the public.

6. No Succession Plan, and more Structure needed in company management.

7. Shortage of Males

8. Country Town Associated Problems
Isolation, youth leave; hard attracting new people, lack of recognition for regional theatre.

9. Shortage of Set-Builders

10. Local Council Issues
Local council gives part-rate concession on venue hiring fee, good relationship. Councils are more business-like now and bureaucrats do not understand or value the arts. Staff turnovers prevent any personal relationship. Council needs to understand the heartbeat of the arts.

11. Shortage of Directors
There is a need to develop confidence for people to become directors. Mentoring is essential.

12. Shows
Limited to one or two per year. Long rehearsal season deters actors. ‘We try not to get too big as large shows can cause company to lose its community theatre values. Prefer to do smaller shows and focus on passing down folklore stories to preserve the company’s intent and values’.
Appendix 6: *Analysed Research Data: 'Threats'*

(A detailed legend for 'Threats' is on next page)

1. (Value: 24) Threats regarding usage of theatres, buildings, rehearsal spaces, storage.
2. (Value: 20) Financial threats.
3. (Value: 13) Threats from volunteer issues.
4. (Value: 12) Choice of shows and threats from schools and other companies.
5. (Value: 11) Threat from lack of audiences.
6. (Value: 6) Ageing members.
7. (Value: 5) Committee issues.
8. (Value: 5) Floods and fires.
9. (Value: 3) Burglary threats.
10. (Value: 3) Director problems.
11. (Value: 2) No set-builders.
12. (Value: 1) Insurance issue for all-abilities group threatening their touring shows.
Appendix 7: Detailed Legend of Graph Three: ‘Threats’

Data Analysis of Interviews with Victorian Amateur Theatre Companies, November, 2015 to February, 2017

(Please Note: Emboldened sections are to assist differentiation, and not for any other purpose)

1. Threats: Theatres, Buildings, Rehearsal Spaces and Storage

Rehearsal hall and rehearsal space are threatened with demolition for development.

Council may want theatre.

Council plans to refurbish theatre and no performance venue for company for two years.

Rehearsal venue not guaranteed forever.

Lack of venues and rehearsal space in country town.

Unstable market for venue hire and costs (income for company owning performance venue).

Unsure about lease situation with storage shed originally located in an industrial area now zoned as suburban, with car parking problems.

Council owns performance and rehearsal space and although currently on good terms, it depends on who is running the hall bookings. There is a staff turnover, and if they stay in the job for a while it gives a chance to develop a rapport.

If having own theatre, the company could work to another level.

Company members fundraised to help Council build new local Arts Centre and collaborated regarding plans for a suitable sized auditorium. They suggested a model theatre and took Councillors to inspect this theatre, but Council opted for a grander theatre with too large a seating capacity for the theatre company to fill, and hiring is now unaffordable.

A threat of losing space if there is a change of school policy regarding hiring the theatre.

Although good income for the school, it is possibly seen as an intrusion into time and space by outside bodies and groups.

School Principals change and vary with commitment. We could be seen to be competing for space in the theatre with the school.

Losing exclusive use of theatre. ‘We are ongoing during the eight weeks between shows. We pull sets down, hold rehearsals here and build sets for our next show’.

‘If our shows diminished to one or two shows per year, Council could say that other groups wanted to use the theatre too’.

Losing rehearsal and performance space for a development.

Change of guard in Council could be a threat.

Development a worry. Our rehearsal/storage/performance space could disappear.

Costumes are falling to bits because of poor storage in heritage listed building.

A threat is if Council wanted to shut us down in our multi-purpose Council-owned community hall.

We feel threatened by a lack of understanding of the arts by those in charge of buildings.

Losing our work-shed could be the end of our company.

There is a lack of ongoing support from Council. If we don’t get somewhere to perform, we will close down. They need to develop facilities for the Arts.

2. Financial Threats

The cost of presenting shows in larger venues is becoming unaffordable. This poses a threat that we might have to do fewer shows in a smaller venue. Just presenting three or four performances is not only a waste of many hours of time (rehearsing, learning lines, set-building, costumes etc. for all involved, but undervalues the hard work of many people.

If Councils gave equal financial support to the Arts as paying for drains, it would benefit the community equally. Every sporting club is subsidised, but when money gets tight, the bean counters take away money from the Arts.

The professional shows in town are usually subsidised, but too many of these could affect our audiences because there is only so much disposable income in the community.

Threat of the dollar and trying to keep costs down.

If unable to present affordable shows, we will be unable to continue.

It is a hard juggling act with rising costs.

Financial threats are incurred from increasing production costs.

Threat from increasingly high costs to hire local Performing Arts Centre to present shows. If we withdraw one of our bookings, another company will snap up our dates.
We are reluctant to increase ticket prices to help cover the increasing venue hire costs.

We feel financially vulnerable.

We only spend money we have, not money we are waiting on, to avoid going into debt. This can limit our expenditure capacity.

It is hard to increase ticket prices in country towns because of limited disposable income.

Licensing rights to shows can be prohibitive financially, and also the associated technical equipment requirements for effects to do the big shows well.

We prefer to hire lighting and sound equipment because they date quickly.

Rising costs are a threat.

The costs are larger than in previous years.

Keeping ticket prices affordable is challenging.

It is a threat not having secured funding for cash flow, particularly when nomadic without own theatre.

Rising costs are a threat to the company.

There is a user-pay push from Council which will mean increased hiring charges.

A cinema company has arrived in town and given a deal by Council to trial showing movies in the arts centre from Friday to Sunday. ‘We now have limited use and less availability of space. Now there is no set-building on weekends because of this. The picture theatre has been trialled in another country town too. People can only afford to go to the theatre so many times per year and we see the arrival of the cinema company as a financial threat’.

Schools are a threat. They have a ready audience. ‘We need to work harder to promote ourselves’.

Adverse reporting in the newspaper can threaten ticket sales and revenue.

‘We are a not-for-profit group and need to make sufficient money to continue presenting shows’.

Country townsfolk now need to decide whether to spend $60 on a brought-in professional show, or pay $40 - $50 to see their local amateur group.

3. Threats: Volunteer Issues

(Please Note: Emboldened text is to assist differentiation of threats, not for any significant purpose)

Burning out of volunteers is a threat if there are not enough people to share the workload.

People moving out of the area, particularly in country towns, threaten our numbers of available volunteers.

People’s lives can change, or they lose interest in theatre. This affects membership numbers, particularly for small companies in country towns.

Lack of depth of personal resources in some areas. This can be a threat, but nobody is irreplaceable.

Lack of volunteers.

School teachers used to be heavily involved in theatre, especially in country towns, but they are now too busy with their own school productions. This threatens membership numbers.

A lack of cast availability in town affects what shows we can present. For example, we could not present a production like Into the Woods.

‘We do not have understudies, so if something happens to a principal cast member we would have to cancel the show. We would then have no income but still the same costs’.

Threats from within the company: complacency, slackness, and not doing a job properly.

A lack of manpower threatens existence, particularly at working-bees.

‘A lack of performers threatens what shows we can present. Casting availability is especially limited in country towns’.

Working with volunteers can be challenging, and negativity can threaten group dynamics.

4. Threats: Show Selection, Other Companies and Schools

Choosing one poor show could have a detrimental effect on the company’s future (audience would lose faith in company and not attend future shows).

‘We would be threatened if a theatre company opened nearby’.

‘We must take care with choice of shows. It is a problem - the town will not support new shows, but young people are not interested to perform in classics such as The Pajama Game’.

There is an increase of professional theatre in the suburbs. This was not the case back in 1995, and this professional presence competes for our audience dollar.

Present a few bad shows and you are out.

‘We always have to do ‘bums on seats’ shows (meaning popular comedies or musicals) to ensure attendances’.
‘We tried a lesser known, more challenging show to extend our performers, but while the show won an award, audiences were down and it lost $25,000’.

‘We need to present five shows per year to survive’.

There is increased competition now to secure casts, with companies doing more diverse works such as Phantom of the Opera, and people will prefer to audition for that production.

‘We compete for auditions in Melbourne, but not so much regionally’.

‘In our town we have a loyal following, so the professional shows do not affect us’.

Threat from other groups in region: there are 23 companies and 19 men available to share, all competing for auditions and casts.

The Council has an Arts Director bringing in touring shows. No communication re dates clashing.

A picture theatre has opened in town. It is well supported and there is limited disposable income.

Well-funded school shows have a ready audience, this diminishes local theatre attendances and increases audience expectation for similar high-tech shows from their local amateur company.

5. Threats: Lack of Audiences

It is unknown how many people will attend the shows. Makes it difficult to budget costs.

‘Our audiences are aged 60-70 and we need to stay relevant for our audiences, or our survival is threatened’.

The town is less progressive about the arts and we must ensure the right shows are selected to attract paying audiences to ensure ticket sales.

Audience numbers keep companies afloat. If they drop, the company will collapse.

There is no point in presenting a show if nobody comes. Once we brought people from a nursing home to see a show because audience numbers were down.

A lack of audience members aged 30, 40 and 50 means we need to choose shows wisely to cater for the other demographics and ensure box office takings.

A small audience means not being able to cover costs, which then threatens survival of the company.

‘If we cannot maintain audience sizes and stop shrinking, there will be a threat to continuation of theatre companies’.

If not getting audience numbers there will be problems.

‘It is always a risk that audiences may not like a show we do and that doesn’t just affect that season, it can affect the next year too and threaten box office takings. They might not come back’.

6. Threats: Ageing Members

The future of the company is threatened when the active core age is 50 – 70 years.

If youth return to a country town they usually come back as teachers and are busy with their own theatre productions in schools. All schools have theatre programmes these days.

Everyone is getting older and the future is a bit shaky.

The committee is ageing, they need to be replaced soon or the company is threatened.

The town is full of retirees, but the young people leave after Year 12. Just a few young people are replacing the older ones.

Retired people keep growing in the company.

If young people do not join, there will be no theatre company one day.

7. Threats: Committee Issues

Keeping everyone together on the committee can be challenging because people are busy with their private lives.

A take-over of the committee by a person or group of people is a threat, and companies are becoming more aware of this. By organising elections and limited terms of office they try to avoid this happening.

Government regulations are a threat because they can frighten people from joining a committee and having responsibility. Laws include Occupational Health and Safety, Working with Children and Food Safety laws. These regulations keep changing but have to be known and obligations met.

Loss of experienced Board members is a threat, particularly if they are replaced by less experienced and less knowledgeable people.

8. Threats: Floods and Fire

Our storage shed has been flooded and waterlogged – this was a threat to our assets.

A threat from bushfires. Have already been burnt out once from Ash Wednesday fires and rebuilt.

The Country Fire Authority regularly checks fire extinguishers, we undergo regular drills, and some of our members belong to the CFA.
Theatre and rehearsal space were flooded by a rainstorm and the whole town was flooded out. The weather in future is a threat in case this happens again.

‘If history repeats itself and our theatre (in a town) is burnt down again, there is no way we could rebuild and refurbish another theatre to our standards. Insurance reimbursement would not be enough. Could mean the end of the company’.

9. Threats: Burglaries

‘Burglaries have been a threat to our survival. When our storage shed/rehearsal space was burgled we only had basic insurance, and still have not been able to afford to replace all the stolen or damaged equipment and costumes Our security feels threatened and we are far more conscious of being alert when working there at night in small numbers or alone’.

‘Some burglaries have happened at our theatre and now we do not keep any cash on site’.

10. Threats: Directors

Problems can arise with directors, such as demands for equipment, extra rehearsals, insisting on certain cast members, or personality conflict. This can threaten a show because the director is the mainstay of the production.

It can be hard to find a director, and this can threaten a show going ahead.

A lack of directors means mentored training for directors is vital for the future of amateur theatre in Victoria.

11. Threats: Lack of Set-Builders

It is difficult to find volunteers prepared to do or learn set-building. Most shows require sets, and this lack of set-builders threatens the aesthetics of amateur theatre shows.

‘Our set-builders are aged between 80 and 85 and love coming each week to build sets for our shows. However, there are no younger people interested to commit to learning the skills and knowledge these set-builders can offer. This is a threat to our future shows’.

12. Threats: Insurance for All-Abilities Group

Difficulty in finding insurance for all-abilities group to tour performances to nearby towns.
Appendix 8: Analysed Research Data: 'Transformative Benefits'

Data Analysis from Interviews with Victorian Amateur Theatre Companies

November, 2015 to February, 2017

Graph Four

(A detailed Legend for 'Transformative Benefits' is on next page)

1. (Value: 13) Develops Confidence for all Ages.
2. (Value: 13) Friendships, Marriages, Family.
3. (Value: 10) Transforms the Community.
4. (Value: 9) A Social Leveller; All Part of Team
5. (Value: 8) Learn New and Varied Skills.
6. (Value: 8) Youth Development.
7. (Value: 5) Benefits Health and Wellbeing.
8. (Value: 4) Actor Development.
10. (Value: 3) Detracts from Using Digital Media
11. (Value: 3) Gives many audiences their first theatre experience.
12. (Value: 1) Different ethnic groups are now booking tickets to see amateur shows.
13. (Value: 1) Not transformative for some actors.
Appendix 9: Legend of Graph: ‘Transformative Benefits’

1. Helps Develop Confidence for All Ages
Theatre particularly helps to give children confidence to do things they never dreamt of doing before.
helps combat shyness.
Amateur theatre gives confidence to do other things apart from the stage.
gives confidence to people of all ages.

2. Friendships, Marriages and Family
Amateur theatre encourages friendships between members and visiting actors.
it is not uncommon for people to meet their life partner in an amateur theatre company, and get married.
The gay and other communities are welcome in amateur theatre companies.
parents often get involved with productions if their children are in the cast.
Members often catch up socially outside the theatre.
theatre is an extended family.
‘The theatre is the family I like to be with’.
amateur theatre is a great way to get to know people in the local community, particularly country towns.
People are treated in theatre as one big family.
in the theatre ‘I have the biggest family in the whole wide world’.

3. Transforms the Community
Amateur theatre offers an intellectual, cultural and social outlet to transform the community.
Fundraising for charitable organisations helps transform the community.
amateur theatre company would like to establish a community arts precinct.
theatre changes the way members of the community speak to each other.
The public looks at performance venues differently if a site-specific location such as a museum. They may revisit to learn more about the venue.
amateur theatre gives a sense of connection to communities.
People living in isolated country towns can enjoy making theatre for fun and something to do.
theatre is a community within a community.

4. A Social Leveller, Part of the Team.
There are no social barriers. Amateur theatre is a great social leveller.
it is something bigger than the individual.
People learn to make a commitment to be part of a team.
people are involved from all walks of life.
Gives a focus in life.
working in a team has a levelling effect and can transform people's lives.

5. Learn New and Varied Skills
Personal growth through leadership.
Mentoring new directors.
Working with volunteers is a skill that can be carried on outside the theatre.
Skills learned in amateur theatre can include set-building, set painting, costume making, lighting, sound, stage management, business management, publicity, front-of-house, as well as performative skills such as acting, singing and dancing.
A sense of self-fulfilment.

6. Youth Development
Shy kids see their siblings rehearse and then get up and have a go too. They are transformed because before that, they doubted their own ability.
theatre is a constructive pastime for youth, compared to frequenting the local pub.
Changes have been seen in young people who did bad things. They come to the theatre with an adult and realise they can do it too. It changes them. The theatre transforms them for the better.
theatre helps young people grow.
7. **Benefits Health and Well Being**

Theatre helped me cope with the transition from work to retirement. **It keeps the brain ticking over.**

Offers a respite while caring for invalid wife. **Promotes health and wellbeing which benefits the community.**

8. **Actor Development**

Amateur theatre provides an outlet for talents. **Performing is a collaborative, bonding experience for all.**

Lesser experienced actors can learn from experienced performers.

9. **Helps or Inspires a Career Choice**

Amateur theatre helps some people decide they would like to work in the performing arts. **A young man came to watch his friends audition, ended up auditioning himself, got a lead role in one of the company’s musical productions and went on to study music at tertiary level.**

A troubled teen begrudgingly came to a working bee with his parents and loved it so much he was the last to leave. Eventually he became enrolled at the Victorian College of the Arts. **Amateur theatre can be a good ‘fill in’ for those hoping for a professional performing career, or between shows. It helps sustain performance momentum and stagecraft skills.**

10. **Detracts from Using Digital Media**

Theatre is a real experience. **An actual face to face communication.**

Watching a theatre show means a break from using digital media, particularly for youth.

11. **Gives Many Audiences Their First Theatre Experience**

Audiences can be transformed by watching some productions. **Amateur theatre makes live theatre accessible and affordable and often people, in particular young people, are seeing live theatre for the first time.**

12. **Different Ethnic Groups Now Booking Tickets to see Amateur Shows**

More ethnic groups are booking seats to shows, particularly pantomimes. This helps familiarise with the English language and raise awareness of Western culture.

13. **Not Transformative for Some Actors**

‘People who come here to perform in plays are already competent actors and will not be ‘transformed’. It ‘supports’ their lives, but doesn’t change them’.
Appendix 10: Analysed Research Data: 'Show Selection Criteria'

Data Analysis from Interviews with Victorian Amateur Theatre Companies
November, 2015 to February, 2017

Graph Five

(A detailed legend of 'Criteria for Show Selection' is on next page)

1. (Value: 41) Audiences
2. (Value: 19) Style of Show
3. (Value: 19) Cast Requirements
4. (Value: 14) Director
5. (Value: 7) Production Committee
6. (Value: 7) Will It Sell?
7. (Value: 7) Cost of Show
8. (Value: 5) Staging Requirements
9. (Value: 3) Licensing Rights
10. (Value: 2) Production Team Availability
11. (Value: 1) Band size
Appendix 11: Legend of Graph: Show Selection Criteria

Detailed Legend of Graph Five

1. Audiences

‘We think of the audience when selecting a show’.
‘Would we get an audience for this show?’
Younger tastes need to be considered.
‘Would our audience enjoy this play?’
‘Our demographic likes comedies not dramas’.
‘Our audiences like light plays’.
Country audiences are getting more sophisticated. Once there were complaints about words not much naughtier than ’damn’. Nudity on country stages is not on the agenda - who would want to see their Doctor naked?
‘We need to put bums on seats and think of our audiences’.
‘What works in one town may not work in our more conservative country town’.
‘We have trained our audiences to keep up with theatre’.
‘We like to appeal to all sectors of society, young and old’.
‘We think of our audiences and aim for a three-year plan to cover all demographics’.
‘We do not get big audiences in regional areas’.
‘We knew Grease would fill seats, but not shows like Sweeney Todd, so we get shows our audience likes’.
‘A lot of our audiences are oldies, but the young ones come to see their friends in the shows’.
A company cannot afford to be self-indulgent and must think of its audience demographic.
Audiences will be forgiving if not liking a show, but not if the show was not done well. It would take some time to repair the company’s reputation for quality theatre.
‘We look at the demographics of our audience. If choosing an unknown play we would have to push it. We need to do something to ensure full houses every time’.
‘Most audiences are older, but we hope to attract younger people’.
Audiences have changed. Once they came in big buses to see shows. Now young people have big mortgages and are not interested in theatre.
Some audiences still spend big money on seeing city shows.
‘Partly we consider the culture and age of the audience demographic. Most of our audiences are retired people, including Probus Clubs’.
‘We take into consideration that many of our audience members prefer light-hearted shows’.
‘We try to do something for young people each year. If not a pantomime, then a workshop’.
‘We think about our audience demographic’.
‘We have our audience well trained to expect us to do something different’.
‘Our audience demographic may not be truly representative of the community itself, but they are middle to older aged. The youth in the cast will bring young people to the show’.
If the company does not do well-known shows, the audience won’t come.
‘We consider what our audiences want to see’.
‘We think of our audience when choosing songs. We are catering for a mature age’.
The show must appeal to audiences. There is no point in doing shows regionally if they are going to alienate audiences. Burn them once, and we will not see them for years.
‘We consider our audience as we have to fill a 200-seat theatre. Our audience is not an artistic audience, more general public’.
‘Our audiences are aged in their 60s, 70s and 80s and we consider that’.
‘We look at our audiences and what will work’.
Some shows are aimed at an older audience, such as Are You Being Served?
‘We have done shows in nursing homes and out in the community’.
‘We need to find shows that are potentially good audience attractors’.
‘We think of our audiences and that’s why we present comedies because our audience responds to them best. Also, we avoid bad language’.
Audience cultures vary in different areas, as do ages.
‘It is a thorough process – we look at the audience and cultural needs of our community’.
You cannot sell comedy or drama to an audience, you have to offer both.
Audiences like to be entertained and laugh.
‘We look at what people tell us they enjoy’.
‘We have to think of age and culture. ‘Can we pull an audience with … ?’
The town is becoming more arts conscious – it used to be a sporting town – but young people are at school
and are all doing their own concerts there.
‘We do not want to offend audiences’.
‘We think more of the audience than the area. We do get a reasonable number of local people attending,
but people also come from the other side of town’.
‘We like to challenge the audience and occasionally throw in a show that makes them think’.
Audiences trust the company and shows book out quickly, which angers some theatregoers, but with
limited seating is unavoidable.

2. Style of Show
‘We must always remember who we are as a company, and present a show classy in style, such as the
musicals Mary Poppins or Thoroughly Modern Millie’.
‘We must do what we love’.
‘It is unscientific – we alternate between ‘bums on seats’ shows and the more adventurous’.
‘It has to be a nice play. We offer family entertainment and prefer no bad language
Shows have gone in cycles – from heavier to lighter, to operetta.
‘In a country town we must wait for the director to put their hand up to direct the show’.
‘It needs to be a show we will enjoy doing’.
Risks are sometimes consciously taken to present a lesser known, less demanding show to avoid
burnout of crews working between two big blockbuster shows. A financial loss may be incurred from
the lesser known show, but this is not regarded as a loss because the process of lighter work for the
crew has achieved its goal.
‘We try to present shows in the vein of our theatre’.
‘We are family theatre and community’.
Present a farce like Cash on Delivery and we sell out, but you need a challenge also.
Shows featuring children mean lots of ticket sales.
‘We don’t do silly farces, we prefer shows with ‘meat’ in them’.
‘It used to be about membership and what good shows we could do, but now it is about ‘bums on
seats’, and we need to know what else is on, so as not to vie for the same show’.
The Wizard of Oz goes down well with audiences and always makes money.
‘We try to do daytime shows for schools’.
The show being selected has to capture us.
It is a collaborative thing – the committee decides the theme of the (musical) show.
‘We try to do two shows a year which are challenging in style – confronting language/content’.
‘We structure to enter VDL Awards with one year a comedy, and one year a drama’.
If working in a site-specific performance space, the play must have a connection with the venue.
‘We aim to present comedy/drama and comedy/drama, unless a director wants to do something
different’.
Show selection is a balance between popular, fun and interest of the committee.

3. Cast Requirements
If specific roles require specific types of performers.
‘We need to consider the number of roles in the cast’.
‘We do not present shows with small casts as we like to give everyone a go’.
Large casts bring larger audiences.
‘Our ages range from young to 90. We look at who is available for the casting. We think of the ability of
our actors and work with them to develop their skill and stagecraft’.
Availability of actors is part of the show selection criteria.
Availability of people resources is important. For example, if men are hard to get then don’t do Paint Your
Wagon. Then again, women will be alienated if doing a show with too many men. These are considerations
that need careful attention.
Actors need something to get their teeth into.
‘We consider ‘will the show interest the performers?’’
Kids these days want to dance, sing and do the occasional straight role.
‘We are female oriented so there are not many males for roles.’
‘We have fabulous young performers who finish Year 12 and then move to Melbourne to get on with
their lives’.
'We consider what performing members would like to do'.
'We think about our cast first, then the audience will follow'.
'We like to cast shows with a number of female actors, and unlike other companies, prefer a younger cast'.
The performers have to enjoy what we are doing.
'We leave to cast youth in our productions'.
'We tend to do shows with four to eight roles. We could double-role of course'.
'Sometimes we are looking for youth involvement'.
'We like to consider gender balance'.
Gilbert and Sullivan productions have more gender balance, but when branching out to do Broadway musicals, there is a gender imbalance.
'We try to encourage casts of young people in our town. Shows include Grease. We have so many anxious kids wanting to perform. Some stay in the town later, while some go to Melbourne. There is a Youth Group and sometimes they present their own show, with the kids producing it'.

4. Director
'Ve advertise for directors, who usually bring a play they would like to do. This way the director will have their heart in the show'.
It is the director’s job to choose the play and the committee approves it.
'The committee advertises for directors to submit scripts. We will now only work with directors who have worked with us previously, either as director or in another capacity'.
It depends on what the director puts forward. The director also has to present a budget.
'We leave it to the director to choose the show'.
'We find a director, ask them to direct a show, then request them to choose plays for shortlisting by the committee, and then to gauge their vision for the chosen show'.
The director’s preferences decide the show to be presented.
'We don’t like telling a director what play to choose'.
'We program a year ahead and invite submissions from directors’.
'We wait for a director to come to us to ask to present a show’. 
A director needs to have passion for the show he or she is directing.
'We select a director and ask for two or three shows he or she would like to direct. Then the director and play are reviewed together'.
It is good for a director to work on a show they can ‘get their teeth into’. 
'We ask directors to submit three plays. We do not want to offend audiences’.

5. Production Committee
It is the Production Committee’s job to read the plays collectively and is sometimes considered as the most important committee in the company.
They invite directors to submit plays for shortlisting, then the directors gauge their vision for the chosen shows.
'We program a year ahead. A panel will read submissions from the directors. Nobody can be on the panel if applying to be a director’. 
'We have a Play Selection Committee who shortlist shows, and the decision comes before the main committee for final approval. It is that committee’s job to keep an overview, set the balance and ensure keeping the tone for the year'.
A Play Selection Committee of five people work to select a varied season.

6. Will It Sell?
If you cannot sell it through marketing, can you sell it yourselves effectively?
Think of the customer base.
'Will the show sell in our town?’
Is the playwright marketable and known?

7. Cost of Show
'We think about what has made money in the past’.
'Can we afford it?'
It needs to be a low-risk show. Newer, lesser known shows can be a risk.
'Cost is major for a little company like us. We have to think of cast numbers, copyright and royalty costs and possibly a professional musician. When we do big shows we get sponsors who get free tickets and program advertising. Local businesses are good to us too. Reciprocal loyalty'.
'We do commercially viable shows to bring the money in'.
‘We need to get back what a show costs to put on’.

8. Staging Requirements
Staging requirements of the production are taken into consideration when selecting shows.
‘We need to know the production costs and this includes staging’.
‘We consider how much work is entailed in the production’.
The suitability of the theatre for staging a show needs to be considered.
‘We must consider if we have the resources to commit to the show’.
‘Can we stage it due to lack of technical preparation time in theatre. Some shows cannot be done justice’.

9. Licensing Rights
If applying for rights, you cannot announce the show until 12 months beforehand.
The rights to a new show might pop up unexpectedly and we might have to change shows.
Rights to a show might pop up that we want to do, but cannot, and it might come back again.
‘I stay up late ready to click the button when rights to a new show become available at midnight.
Sometimes others are quicker’.
Country towns often miss out on priority over rights to new shows. ‘We tried desperately to get Chicago,
but the bigger companies have more money and the backing with the licensing agents. We were surprised
get the rights to Les Miserables’.
‘Being regional we were surprised to be the first amateur company to get the rights to Rock of Ages’.

10. Production Team Availability
‘Can we get a production team?’
The availability of a director, choreographer and musical director needs to be taken into account
when selecting musical theatre shows.

11. Band Size
The size of a band or orchestra can dictate which musical show we do.
Appendix 12: Theatre Companies Interviewed for this Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Company Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ark Theatre Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Altona City Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anglesea Performing Arts Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Antz Pantz (all abilities group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ASPECT Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Babirra Music Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bairnsdale Production Line Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ballarat Lyric Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ballarat National Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>BATS Theatre Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Beaumaris Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bendigo Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>BLOC Music Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Camperdown Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cardinia Performing Arts Company (CPAC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Castlemaine Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>CentreStage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>CLOC Musical Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Colac Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Creswick Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Diamond Valley Singers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>DRAMUS Theatre, Hamilton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Eltham Little Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Encore Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Essendon Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>FAMDA (Foster Art, Music &amp; Drama Association)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Footlight Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Frankston Theatre Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Friends of Black Rock House Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>G.S.O.D.A. (Geelong youth theatre company)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Geelong Lyric Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Geelong Repertory Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Gilbert and Sullivan Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Hartwell Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Heidelberg Allstars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Heidelberg Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Here, There and Everywhere Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Impact Youth Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Leongatha Lyric Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Lilydale Athenaeum Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>LOTS Theatre Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Maffra Dramatic Society Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Malvern Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Medimime Productions Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Melbourne French Theatre Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Mildura Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>MLOC Productions Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>MOaRTZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Mordialloc Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Off the Leash Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Peridot Theatre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Port Fairy Theatre Group
Portland Theatre Company
Queenscliff Lighthouse Theatre
Red Cliffs Musical Society Inc.
Red Cliffs Players
Sale Theatre Company
Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group (STAG)
Swan Hill Theatre Group
The 1812 Theatre
The Adelphi Players
The Mount Players
Theatre of the Winged Unicorn
Torquay Theatre Troupe
Warrigal Theatre Company
Warrnambool Theatre Company
Williamstown Little Theatre
Windmill Theatre Company
Wonthaggi Theatre Group
Wyndham Theatre Company
Appendix 13: *Currently Operating Theatre Companies Not Interviewed for this Project*

**Non-Musical Theatre Companies**

- Allegro Theatre Company
- Ararat Theatre Company
- Moonlite Theatre (Bacchus Marsh Players)
- Bright Alpine Actors
- Brighton Theatre Company
- BustCo (Burwood Student Theatre Co)
- Cathouse Players, Kyneton (now Kyneton Katz)
- Croydon Parish Players
- Dionysus Theatre
- Gemco Players
- Horsham Arts Council
- Mansfield Musical and Dramatic Society
- Mooroolbark Theatre
- Mornington Players Theatre Company
- PEP Productions
- Phillip Island Offshore Theatre
- Players Theatre Company
- Purely Pensive Productions
- Seymour Performers Workshop
- Skin of Our Teeth Productions
- Southern Peninsula Players
- Tangled Web Productions
- The Basin Theatre Group
- Track Youth Theatre
- Wangaratta Players
- Warrandyte Theatre Company

**Musical Theatre Companies**

- Albury Wodonga Theatre Company
- Bottled Snail Productions
Class Act Productions Youth Theatre, Gippsland
Echuca Moama Theatre Company
Fab Nobs Theatre Inc.
Holiday Actors Warrnambool Youth Theatre
Horsham Arts Council Inc.
Latrobe Theatre Company
Lightbox Productions
Monash University Student Theatre
Mountain District Musical Society
Nova Music Theatre
Old Carey Performing Arts Club (OCPAC)
Old Scotch Music & Drama (OsMaD)
Oxagen Productions
Panorama Theatre Company
Peoples Playhouse  Kidz 4 Kidz
PLOS Musical Productions
Rosebud Astral Theatre Society Inc
Seymour Performers Workshop
Shepparton Theatre Arts Group Inc.
SLAMS Music Theatre Company
SPX Waterdale/Waterdale Theatre
Three’s a Crowd
UMMTA (University of Melbourne Musical Theatre Association)
Western Arts Theatre Inc.
Williamstown Musical Theatre Company
Appendix 14: Past Amateur Theatre Companies in Victoria

Ace Theatre Company
Advent Players, Hartwell 1959/60
Adult Education Association Drama Group
Aero-chem Drama Group, Mount Beauty
Alexandra Drama Group
Altona Drama Group
Amateur Dramatic Company
AMP Drama Group
Apollo Bay Dramatic Society
Aquarius Theatre Company
Ararat Drama Group
Arc Theatre Company
Area Theatre Club, Puckapunyal
Arena Theatre Company
Arts Theatre Company
Arts Theatre Group, Richmond
Austral Dramatic Club
Australian National Theatre Movement, Eastern Hill
Babirra Players
Bairnsdale Amateur Dramatic Society
Bairnsdale and Drama Society
Bairnsdale Players
Ballarat B & P Club
Ballarat Light Opera Company
Ballarat Branch of the National Theatre Movement
Balmoral Drama Group
Balwyn Drama Group (or Players)
Balwyn Women’s Club
The Barnstormers
Barn Theatre
Bayside Little Theatre
Beaufort Group
Beaufort Merrymakers
Belgrave Group Theatre
Bellarine Jongaleurs (Youth Theatre)
Benalla Drama Club
Benalla Musician and Dramatic Society
Benalla Theatre Company
Benalla VRO Players
Bendigo Glee Club
Bendigo Liedertalk
Bendigo Literary and Drama Society
Bendigo Operatic Society
Bendigo Repertory Society
Bendigo Shakespearian Society
Bendigo Training Prison
Berwick Amateur Theatre
Beulah Amateur Dramatic Society
Birchip Drama Group
The Bluebirds, Warragul
Boilerhouse Theatre Company
Boolarra Drama Club
Bordertown Drama Group
Box Hill City Drama Group
Box Hill Light Opera Company
Break a Leg Theatre
Bright Alpine Actors
Bright Dramatic Group
Brighton Drama Group
Broadway Players
Brunswick Coburg Theatre Company
Camberwell Drama Group
Camberwell Grammar School Dramatic Group
Camberwell High School Drama Group
Camerata Opera Group
Camperdown Repertory Society
Carousel Music Theatre
Castlemaine Drama Group
Catchment Players of Darebin
Central Victorian Performing Arts Group Inc.
Centre Theatre Company
Centre Theatre Company, Warragul
Chelsea Little Theatre
City of Heidelberg Repertory Group
Chookahs (Lilydale Youth Group)
Clarendon Players, Toorak
Clayton Theatre Group, Camberwell
Clematis Play Reading Group
Cobram Drama Group
Coburg Charity Players
Coburg Branch of the National Theatre Movement
Cohuna Players
Colac Players
Colac Theatre Company
Coles Dramatic Players, Bairnsdale 1923
The Collegians
Commonwealth Bank Drama Society Melbourne
CORC Theatre Company
Corryong Dramatic Club
Croydon Arts Society Drama Group
Croydon Methodist Players
Croydon Musical Society
CSIRO Players, South Melbourne
Cueless Group, Elsternwick
The Dan Barry Dramatic Company
Dandenong Dramatic Club
Dandenong Theatre Company
Daylesford Players
Daytime Players
Deer Park Drama Group
Delphic Productions
Deniliquin Drama Club
Department of Social Services Drama Group, Melbourne
Diamond Valley Players
Dick’s Reading Circle, Balwyn
Dimboola Drama Group
Dizzy Theatre Productions
Dolia Ribush Players
Donald Drama Group
Donvale Play-reading Group
Dramatic Company
Dramatic Pause Theatre
The Dramatic Society
Dunkeld Players
Dunnolly Dramatic Society
Eagle-eyed Productions
East Ringwood Play-reading Group
Eastern Metropolitan Opera (EMO)
Echuca Drama Group
Electric Light Theatre (Youth) ??
Elwood Theatre Company
Essendon Dramatic Society
Essendon Society of Arts
Cid Ellwood Operatic Productions
Essendon and Flemington Amateur Dramatic Club
Everidge Theatre Group
Favourite Tales Theatre
Ferntree Gully Arts Society Repertory Players
Festival Theatre Company Inc.
Festival Light Opera Company
Fish Creek Arts and Music Society
Foote Street Theatre Company
Foote Street Youth Theatre
Forest Creek Amateur Dramatic Society  
Fox Hoyts Radio Dramatic Club  
Frontline Theatre Company  
Fullers’ Dramatic Players  
Gaiety Theatre Company  
Galaxy Youth Theatre  
Garrick Repertory Theatre Company  
Garrick Drama Club, Bairnsdale  
Geelong Amateur Operatic Society  
Geelong Gilbert & Sullivan Light Opera Company  
Geelong Musical Comedy Company  
Geelong Playreading Group  
Geelong Repertory Society  
Geelong Teachers’ College Drama Club  
Geelong Therry Society  
Geelong West CWA  
Genesia Theatre Group  
George Edwards Dramatic Company, Sandringham (1918)  
Gisborne and District Dramatic Society  
Glenhuntly Little Theatre  
Glennifer Dramatic Club  
Globe Club, Camberwell  
Gormandale Drama Club  
Goroke Playreading  
Goulburn Valley Drama Association  
Grassmere Play-reading Group  
Green Shed Theatre, Warragul  
The Gregan McMahon Players  
Gunns Road Theatre Company  
Habimah Players  
Hailebury College Drama Club  
Hamilton Theatre Players  
Hartwell Presbyterian Merrymakers  
Hasenah (Cohuna)  
HATS  
Hawthorn Theatre Group  
Haymaker Theatre Company, Bendigo  
Healesville Amateur Dramatic Society  
Heidelberg High School Drama Group  
Heidelberg National Theatre  
Heritage Theatre Company  
Heyfield Drama Group  
Hillbilly Productions  
Hobo Playhouse  
Horsham CWA Drama Group  
Horsham Dramatic Society  
Hut Players  
Ivanhoe Old Grammarians’ Association  
Ivanhoe Dramatic Club  
Jacaranda Theatre Group  
The Jacobians, Essendon  
Jewish Cultural Group, North Melbourne  
Jika Jika Players  
The John Knox Players, Swan Hill  
The Judean Players, St Kilda  
Keilor Play-reading Group  
Kenwood Studios, Essendon  
Kenwood Theatre Studio, Maryborough  
Kew Light Opera Company  
Kew Philharmonic Society  
Kew Repertory Players  
Kiewa Area Drama Group  
Kilmore Amateur Performance Arts Society  
Knox Gateway Productions  
Knox Community Theatre  
Kodak Dramatic Club  
Kooweerup Theatre Group  
Korumburra Play-reading Group
KPR Revue (Keysborough Parish of the Resurrection)
Kyabram Drama Society
Kyabram Repertory and Revue Company
Lady Scorpio Productions
Lake Bolac Music Club
Lakes Entrance Play-reading Group
Latimer Players
Latrobe Light Opera Society
Latrobe Theatre Company
Laurellites, East Melbourne
The Lavender Players
Leading Dramatic Society
Leongatha Drama Group
Lilydale Amateur Dramatic Club
Lilydale Theatre Club
Limelight Productions
Limelighters
Linton Amateur Dramatic Club
Living Theatre Company
Loyola Musical Society
Lyceum Club Drama Circle, Melbourne
Lyric Theatre Company (formerly Lyric Light Opera Society)
Macedon Little Theatre
Macleod High School Drama Group
Maffra Strolling Players
Malet Productions
Mansfield Arts Group
Marlowe Society
Maroondah Players
Marrilac Younger Set
Marrilac Theatre Company
Maryborough CAE Drama Group
Maryborough Arts Society
McDonald Hamilton Social Club Melbourne
McKinnon High School Dramatic Club
Meeniyan Music Group
Meland Theatre Company
Melbourne CEGGS Dramatic Club
Melbourne Drama Guild
Melbourne Junior Theatre
Melbourne Little Theatre
Melbourne Little Theatre Guild
Melbourne Lutheran Drama Club
Melbourne Music Theatre
Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company
Melbourne Shakespearian Society
Melbourne University Drama Group
Melbourne Writers’ Theatre
Mercer House Drama Group, Armadale
Mercury Players
Mermaid Theatre
The Merrymakers, Hartwell
META Musicals
Middle Park Repertory
Mildura Little Theatre
Mildura Little Theatre
Mildura Musical Society
The Mill Community Theatre
Minnie Everett Musical Comedy Company
Mirboo North Dramatic Club
Mitcham Players
Mitcham Repertory Theatre Company
The Modernaires
Moe Theatrical Society
Monash Graduated Players
Monash Players
Monsanto Drama Club
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mordialloc Philharmonic Society</th>
<th>Oddfellows Dramatic Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mordialloc Choral Society</td>
<td>OGRE (Ocean Grove Repertory Ensemble)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordialloc Musical Society</td>
<td>Old Scotch Collegians Drama Society Brighton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordialloc Light Opera Company</td>
<td>Omega Club, Mt Albert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mornington C of E Fellowship Players</td>
<td>Orbost Drama Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortlake Drama Group</td>
<td>Ouyen Theatre Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morwell Junior Players</td>
<td>Oxford Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morwell Players</td>
<td>Page to Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTTS (Mentone Old Time Theatre Society)</td>
<td>Pakuppa Dramatic Club, Pakenham Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Beauty Drama Group</td>
<td>Parlington Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountjoy Theatre Group</td>
<td>Patchwork Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murtoa Play-reading Club</td>
<td>Pelican Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Comedy Society of Swan Hill</td>
<td>Pen Players, Drysdale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myer Dramatic Society</td>
<td>Pentridge Mess Hall Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myrtleford Theatre Lovers’ Club</td>
<td>Peppercorn Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagambie Little Theatre</td>
<td>Philador Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naracoorte Drama Club</td>
<td>The Philanthropic Dramatic Club (Bendigo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Bank Drama Club</td>
<td>Pickle Theatre Company (formerly the Pickle Players)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Theatre Movement</td>
<td>Pickwick Club (Bendigo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neerim South Players</td>
<td>Pilgrim Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Theatre</td>
<td>The Pioneer Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Theatre Daytime</td>
<td>The Players and Playgoers Repertory Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman College Dramatic Society</td>
<td>Playgoers Geelong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhill Music and Drama Society</td>
<td>Playlovers’ Club, Toorak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noorong Dramatic Society</td>
<td>Playup Youth Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northcote Dramatic Society</td>
<td>Pointside Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Light Opera Company</td>
<td>Port Phillip Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Theatre Company, Essendon</td>
<td>Portland CEMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuworks Theatre</td>
<td>Postal Institute Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palermo Play-reading Society</td>
<td>Prahran Operatic Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Passers By (late 1920s in Frankston)</td>
<td>The Proscenium Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Players and Playgoers’ Association</td>
<td>Prosperity Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oatlands Drama Club</td>
<td>Pumpkin Players (or Pumpkin Theatre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean Grove Play-reading Group</td>
<td>Puppets ‘n Stuff Players</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘Q’ Theatre Guild (Kew)
The Railway Players
Railway and Tramways Musical Society
Rainbow Theatre
Rangers Music Theatre Inc.
The Ravens Players
Red Cliffs Musical Comedy Society
Red Hill Playreading Group
Regent Dramatic Society
Repertory Players, Ferntree Gully
The Research Players
Rochester Music and Drama Circle
Rochester Repertory Society
Rosanna Methodist Ladies’ Fellowship Drama Group
Rosebud Astral Theatre Society
Rye Amateur Drama Club
S and D Drama Group
Sale Little Theatre
Sale Repertory Group
Sale Repertory Group
Salon Readers, Melbourne
Saltpillar Theatre
Samaritan Theatre
Sandhurst Garrick Club
San Remo and Newhaven CWA
San Remo and Newhaven CWA Drama Group
Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Club
Sandringham Light Opera Company
Sarsfield Drama Club
Savoy Opera Company
Sea Lake Little Theatre
SEC Drama Group, Melbourne
Seymour Dramatic Club
Shelford Girls Grammar School Drama Group
Shell Amateur Drama Club
Shepparton Dramatic Society
Shepparton Light Music Company
Shepparton Players
Sherbrooke Theatre Company
Shoestring Theatre, Traralgon
Skipton Music and Dramatic Club
South Side Theatre Inc.
Southern Cross Theatre Company
Southern Peninsula Players
Spectrum Theatre Company Inc.
Spellbound Theatre Productions Inc.
Springboard Players
Springvale Dramatic Club
St Agnes Players, South Caulfield
St Albans Little Theatre
St Andrew’s Players (now Brighton Theatre Company)
St David’s Play Readers, Geelong
St Dunstan’s Dramatic Society
St Dunstan’s Dramatic Society, Hartwell
St Helen’s Drama Group, Geelong
St John’s Youth Club, Blackburn
St John’s Dramatic Club
St Judes Drama Group
St Keiran Players
St Kilda Drama Club
St Margarets School of Drama Club, Berwick
St Matthews ADS, Oak Park
St Matthews Musical Society
St Paul’s Anglican Fellowship, Mt Waverley
St Stephens Presbyterian Church Dramatic Society, Caulfield
Stage and Studio Group
Stage Struck Productions Inc.
Standard Players Society
Starlight Musical Society
Stawell Drama Group
Strathmore Presbyterian Players
Strezelecki Players
Sunraysia Little Theatre
Sunshine Community Theatre
Sunshine High School Drama Group
Swan Hill Branch of the National Theatre Movement
Tabor Lutheran Society, Penshurst
Tallangatta Group
Tarnagulla Amateur Dramatic Club
Tatura Theatre Group
Tecoma Players
Templestowe Players
Terang Dramatic Society
Thalian Players
Thalian Players’ Junior Group
Theatre Arts Productions
The Theatre Company
Theatrical Section, Shell Club
Therry Society
Thespians Incorporated, Langwarrin
Thespian Society, Yallourn
Thistle Players, Glen Iris
Thorpdale Drama Group
Tin Alley Players, Caulfield
Toora Drama Group
Toora Music Lovers
Toorak Players
Traralgon Repertory Group
Tri Hard Productions
Trinity College Drama Society
Trinity College Music Theatre Society
U25 Theatre Group, Melbourne
UMMTA University of Melbourne Music Theatre Association
University Dramatic Club
Unnamed Players (Mai Hoban 1930s)
The Vermontees
Viaduct Theatre
Victorian Youth Theatre Association
Viola Theatre Group
Wangaratta Junior Drama Group
Wangaratta Players
Wangaratta Music Theatre
Warburton Arts Company
Warracknabeal Dramatic Society
Warragul Drama Group
Warrandyte Arts Association Drama Group
Warrandyte OWA Drama Group
Warrnambool Amateur Dramatic Society
Warrnambool and District Dramatic Society
Warrnambool and District Musical and Dramatic Society
Waverley Players
Werribee Play-reading Group
Werribee Theatre Company
West Gippsland Performing Arts Society
Westernport Light Opera Company
Westernport Theatre Company
Wheatley Junior Drama Group
White Oak Theatre Company
Whitefriars Theatrical Players
Whitehorse Musical Theatre Inc.
Williamstown Light Opera Company Inc.
Wodonga Drama Group
Wonthaggi Drama Group
Woodstaff Players
Woodstock Drama Club
Woorinen North Drama Group
The Workers Theatre Group
Yackandandah Theatre Company
Yallourn Little Theatre
Yallourn Play-reading Group
Yallourn Thespians
Yarram Players
Yarraville Drama Group
YWCA Drama Group