



The men behind the Queensland Theatre Company: Des Adams (executive staff); Alan Edwards (Artistic Director); Gillian Coar (secretary); Sir David Muir, (chairman of the company's board of directors). In the background is the auditorium of the SGIO Theatre.

By BARBARA KIMBER

BRISBANE

WHERE TO SEE THE BOOMING THEATRE

EVEN TWO YEARS AGO the City of Theatres would have been an unlikely title for Brisbane, the one time anti-culture capital of Australia. But today, at the rate new theatres are sprouting, this city could well earn the name if its present rate of spectacular development in theatrical activity continues.

In two years three new sophisticated theatres — the SGIO Theatre, Twelfth Night and the Schonell Theatre — have been built. They seat from 400-600, are technically well equipped and auditorium and foyer design are audience orientated for both comfort and eye appeal.

In addition, an amateur repertory company of professional standard intends to build a new theatre shortly and another repertory company plans extensions to its building.

Already southern and overseas companies are looking to Brisbane for

theatre bookings because of the sad lack of theatre accommodation down south, particularly in Sydney.

The Queensland Government is receiving laurels from interstate cultural experts, including Dr Jean Battersby, executive officer of the Australian Council for the Arts, for its visionary promotion and financial support of the performing arts.

Queensland is the only State with professional theatre, opera and ballet companies supported by State and Federal funds, and co-ordinated at a regional level.

This is an about-face for a Government which some years ago castigated a Brisbane television actor, then a primary school teacher, for wasting time teaching drama to his pupils.

It was the first State to appoint a Minister for Cultural Activities (Mr

Fletcher, who also holds the Education portfolio) and a full-time Director of Cultural Activities, Mr Arthur Creedy, a former university lecturer in English language and literature.

To Mr Fletcher goes a very large share of the credit for the Queensland Theatre Company, a State regional theatre, with all the advantages of statutory recognition by Act of Parliament.

With the appointment of Sir David Muir, Director of the Department of Industrial Development, as Chairman of the Company's Board — that personality plus man to whom few can say "no" — the State's first fully professional drama company launched into its first year just over 12 months ago with dazzling success.

The new company lives at the SGIO Theatre, a 619-seat theatre built by the State Government Insurance Office for \$1,750,000 two years ago — a theatre

so much talent awaiting an opportunity

which Brisbane has taken to its heart with its impressive, wrap-around interior design, colourful decor and three-level foyers (one with bar), lit by brilliantly designed 20th-century versions of the chandelier.

"Too pretty," say some theatrical professionals; others differ on its acoustic merits, but it can't be denied the physical appeal of the theatre has done much to endear it to the public.

Director of the Queensland Theatre Company is English-born Alan Edwards, a man whose mind works at electronic speed, and a former director of NIDA in Sydney.

Without denigrating the local talent which found new opportunities with the formation of this theatre, it is Alan Edwards' professionalism which has been responsible for the outstanding quality of the company's productions.

The company has well earned the honour it received with its first production, "A Rum Do," which Queen Elizabeth attended during her visit to Australia last year.

"Theatre," Alan Edwards says emphatically, "is for the people."

"That is the message we want to get over. It is fine to dress up for first nights — they ARE an occasion — as long as it doesn't stop the boys and girls in jeans coming along too."

At 250 words a minute (pity his secretary!) he gave me an anecdotal run-down on being a new company's first director — finding himself without even a sheet of paper or a paper clip — a few succinct thoughts on theatre in Australia and how Australian actors could benefit from the tough one-week-stand school of English repertory and why he, an Englishman with West End, film and television roles under his belt, likes Australia.

"There is so much talent waiting for an opportunity. And then — beaches, and fresh pineapple for breakfast. Need I say more?"

He wound up the Company's first Brisbane season this year with that popular old comedy, "The Ghost Train," following a magnificent production of "Hadrian VII," in which he played the title role of Hadrian, the Pope That Never Was. Quite a feat, because while he was producing the first show of the season, "Oh What A Lovely War," he was rehearsing for Hadrian. While playing the demanding role of Hadrian, he was producing "The Ghost Train." All this



Alan Edwards, Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, as Hadrian VII. Noel Fox played the would-be pope's youth.

while he carried on the company's formidable administrative work.

The Queensland Theatre Company would never have become a reality without the dedicated work of all the people in Brisbane's little theatre groups.

One of these groups, Twelfth Night, now well on its way to becoming fully professional, is responsible for building one of the city's three new major theatres.

Its director is Joan Whalley, one of the outstanding people in Brisbane theatre. Blonde, idealistic but practical, she is single-minded in her determination to develop theatre in this city.

"We like to feel we are adventurous," she says crisply. Which is something of an understatement.

She has taken box office risks on avant-garde plays, survived a number of crises in finding a home for her theatre, tackled the training of new talent with a speech and drama school and encouraged children's appreciation of drama with her Sunday story-telling and visits to schools.

Now she and her company, with a small core of six professionals which she says "will grow," are ensconced in their brand new \$350,000 theatre complex in Bowen Hills — a complex which she says is unique in Australia.

It comprises a theatre with a seating capacity of just over 400, a stage 40 feet across, and an orchestra pit for musicals. In the same building is a spacious licensed club for theatregoers, actors and journalists; a licensed restaurant; a tavern-style bar for audiences and a speech and

drama school.

This whole complex grew from a modest concept formed about four years ago to build a 200-seat, \$20,000 new theatre on Twelfth Night's old Wickham Terrace site. There is still a hint of wonder in Joan's voice as she explains how the theatre's plans just mushroomed, including one new feature after another — and how the money came to do it.

As early as 1962 the company's members were involved in fund-raising activities for their hoped-for permanent home. Then they learned that the Wilbur Smith plan for Brisbane's development included a Turbot Street extension which would absorb land along Wickham Terrace, including the site occupied by Twelfth Night.

Undefeated, Joan went looking for new land and found an old tennis court adjoining the Johnstone Gallery in Cintra Road, Bowen Hills.

In the initial planning stages, Government support — which resulted in a \$100,000 subsidy on a dollar-for-dollar basis — was not foreseen and the theatre's fund-raising was well on the way before the grant was received.

The first Twelfth Night performance was given 35 years ago by the newly formed group founded by Rhoda Felgate. It was an overflow from the Brisbane Repertory Theatre (founded 1927) which was bursting at the seams with members who wanted to act.

The other overflow group formed from Brisbane Repertory was the still-

years of hard work and far-sightedness

flourishing Brisbane Arts Theatre, founded by Jean Trundle.

Rhoda Felgate asked Joan Whalley to join the theatre in 1951 after seeing her play *Rosalind* in an outdoor performance of Shakespeare's "As You Like It."

Her early life with Twelfth Night included "doing everything" — acting, taking classes in speech and movement, production, props. She had two years studying drama in England, then returned to Australia to lecture at NIDA in Sydney.

In 1962 she returned to Brisbane and took over as Director of Twelfth Night when Rhoda Felgate retired. She is also a member of the board of the Queensland Theatre Company.

Two other little theatres with expansion plans are the Brisbane Repertory Company and the Brisbane Arts Theatre.

The Repertory Company's present theatre, La Boite, is Brisbane's only theatre-in-the-round. The company's director, Mrs Jennifer Blocksidge, says plans to demolish the old theatre should be put into operation soon and a new, intimate, specialised theatre, also in-the-round, will be erected in its place, seating 150.

The Brisbane Arts Theatre, which rebuilt about five years ago after a fire destroyed its old theatre, is planning extensions and further facilities.

Drama is not the only performing art increasing in strength and popularity.

Queensland's State Ballet Company and the "baby" of the State companies, the Opera, although recently able to expand through State support, are basically the result of years of hard work and far-sightedness by their founders.

The Queensland Ballet Company, Brisbane's senior theatre company, is the result of an 18-year-old dream of its director, Charles Lisner.

Charles Lisner was born in Paris, and came to Australia at the age of nine.

He began his career with Borovansky (whom he says does not get enough credit for pioneering ballet in this country), studied music and dancing in London and appeared with the Sadlers Wells Ballet.

In 1953 he came to Brisbane to open a ballet school and, he hoped, in much less time than it eventually took, a State ballet company.

In 1960 the Lisner Ballet, as it was then known, gave its first performance, on a part-time basis. The following year Lisner was able to offer full-time work to his dancers.

His dancers soon became known for



In the art-gallery-foyer of the Schonell Theatre Len Sorbello, Theatre Committee chairman; John Hartman, manager; Bob Wensley, Vice-Chancellor's Assistant.

their youthful zest and sound technique in the ballets he created especially for them. Often he wrote the music as well as the choreography.

In 1961 the Lisner Ballet toured 9,000 miles of Queensland and NSW for the Australian Arts Council. The following year it became known as the Queensland Ballet Company but it was not until 1967 that it received its first State subsidy.

In 1966 Lisner was forced to disband the company because he and his wife Valerie, a Brisbane-born ballet dancer, could not continue indefinitely to produce ballet at their own expense.

But Peggy van Praagh, artistic director of the Australian Ballet, came to the rescue. She recommended that the company receive a subsidy which resulted in the Queensland Government's grant of \$7,000 which enabled the company to be reborn.

Since then subsidies of \$30,000 in 1968 and 1969 and \$37,000 in 1970 have put the company in a position to show its director's unquestioned ability as a choreographer and producer, and its dancers' artistic style and professionalism.

Charles is constantly adding new works to the repertoire. His "Danses Sacrees et

Profanes" and his modern ballet on drug addicts, "The Cataclysm," were acclaimed as outstanding choreographic achievements.

Last year the company visited Tasmania and this year toured Queensland and northern NSW. As Brisbane is the "gateway to the East," Lisner plans a modest tour of Asia in 1973.

Soon he expects to be able to pay his dancers and choreographers the same rates as the Australian Ballet. "This will give me a better chance of recruiting the best young dancers, choreographers and composers for the company," he says. "We must continue to create something new and to do this I want to be able to employ the best talent available."

Charles Lisner is doing for Queensland ballet what he claims Borovansky did for ballet in Australia.

Both the Queensland Ballet Company and the Queensland Opera Company hope to get statutory recognition like the Queensland Theatre Company.

But the Opera Company, says its new young administrator and artistic director, Richard Divall, will inevitably take second place to the ballet.



Director of the Queensland Ballet Company, Charles Lisner, with his wife Valerie, and their children, Peter (11) and Antoinette (9).



The production crew of "Dear Delinquent" take the spotlight at the Schonell Theatre, with the cast for once in the background.

The Opera is the youngest and least financial of the State companies but it is motivated by such energy and enthusiasm, combined with real talent, that its future seems assured.

Richard Divall, 25, possibly the youngest opera company administrator in history, was music features producer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Sydney before taking up the post this year.

With a grant of only \$3,000, the company relies on dedication from its members, not financial ambition.

I met the high-voltage Richard in the company's new studio in George Street, where he told me he took the position because he loves opera and was thrilled at the challenge of helping to build a new company.

He rushed me around the long studio, pointing out posters of the company's productions, exuding excitement.

He indicated a poster for an opera which was a great success last year. "I'm not an avant-garde man myself . . . I'm strictly Verdi — pom-pom-de-pom — but it's great to see this going over in Brisbane.

"Do you know Queensland is the only State with a permanent opera company?

We are too small to do grand opera yet — we have to tackle 'chamber' opera, which limits our choice. I feel opera is entertainment . . . we aim to provide good music — but also good entertainment.

"Generally speaking, I think operas should be sung in English. You see, it is the obligation of the artist and any entertainer to connect with his audience at all time."

He is full of praise for the company's founders, Colin and Marissa Brumby, an extraordinarily talented couple who generated an opera company in a way which is probably unique world-wide.

They started as a group of six promising young adult singers called the Vocal Arts Ensemble, which introduced operas to schools under the auspices of the Arts Council.

The Ensemble's success with schools led to the production of adult operas.

When the Queensland Government decided to support a State opera company the Brumby group was the obvious choice as a foundation stone for a professional adult opera company.

Colin and Marissa are off on an overseas study tour next year, so that the appointment of an administrative and

artistic director became imperative. The company's first season under Richard Divall opened at the Twelfth Night Theatre in May this year with the comic opera, "The Triumph Of Honour," by Italian composer, Alessandro Scarlatti.

Brisbane has Queensland University students to thank for its third new theatre, the Schonell Theatre, situated at the university.

It was built by the Students' Union, members of which voted for an increase in fees both to cover the cost of other rising expenses and the price of the \$600,000 theatre.

Resident at the theatre is Uni Que, the major dramatic society at the university, but numerous other university drama groups use the theatre which has provided another first-rate venue for local and visiting companies to lease.

The man with his finger on all the theatrical growth in Queensland is Arthur Creedy, Director of Cultural Activities.

In the popular view, he claims, drama is the heart of culture and Brisbane's leap forward in this field is an important cultural advance.

But Mr Creedy is also impressed with the healthy competition between theatre groups here. Each group has its own "spirit" and there is quite an interchange of players and producers and a well-developed sense of social responsibility in all companies about fostering drama appreciation among children, and providing cut prices for children, young people and pensioners.

It is impossible to mention here all the groups which are an integral part of Brisbane's fertile growth in the performing arts. As an indication, Mr Creedy says there are 83 little theatre groups in the State, receiving Government support. Many others will receive grants in the future when money becomes available.

Mr Creedy has imaginative plans for a Queensland Arts Festival which could eventually challenge Adelaide's.

In September, at the Warana Festival, four cultural groups — the Queensland Theatre, Ballet and Opera companies and the Symphony Orchestra — will combine to present a masque. Written by Australian playwright, actor and author Michael Boddy (co-author of "The Legend of King O'Malley"), it will have music composed by Colin Brumby and choreography by Charles Lisner.

Which, on past performance, sounds like an unbeatable combination.

Walkabout

SEPTEMBER 50 CENTS

AUSTRALIA'S TRAVEL AND LEISURE MAGAZINE

IN SEARCH OF
A
SECRET POOL

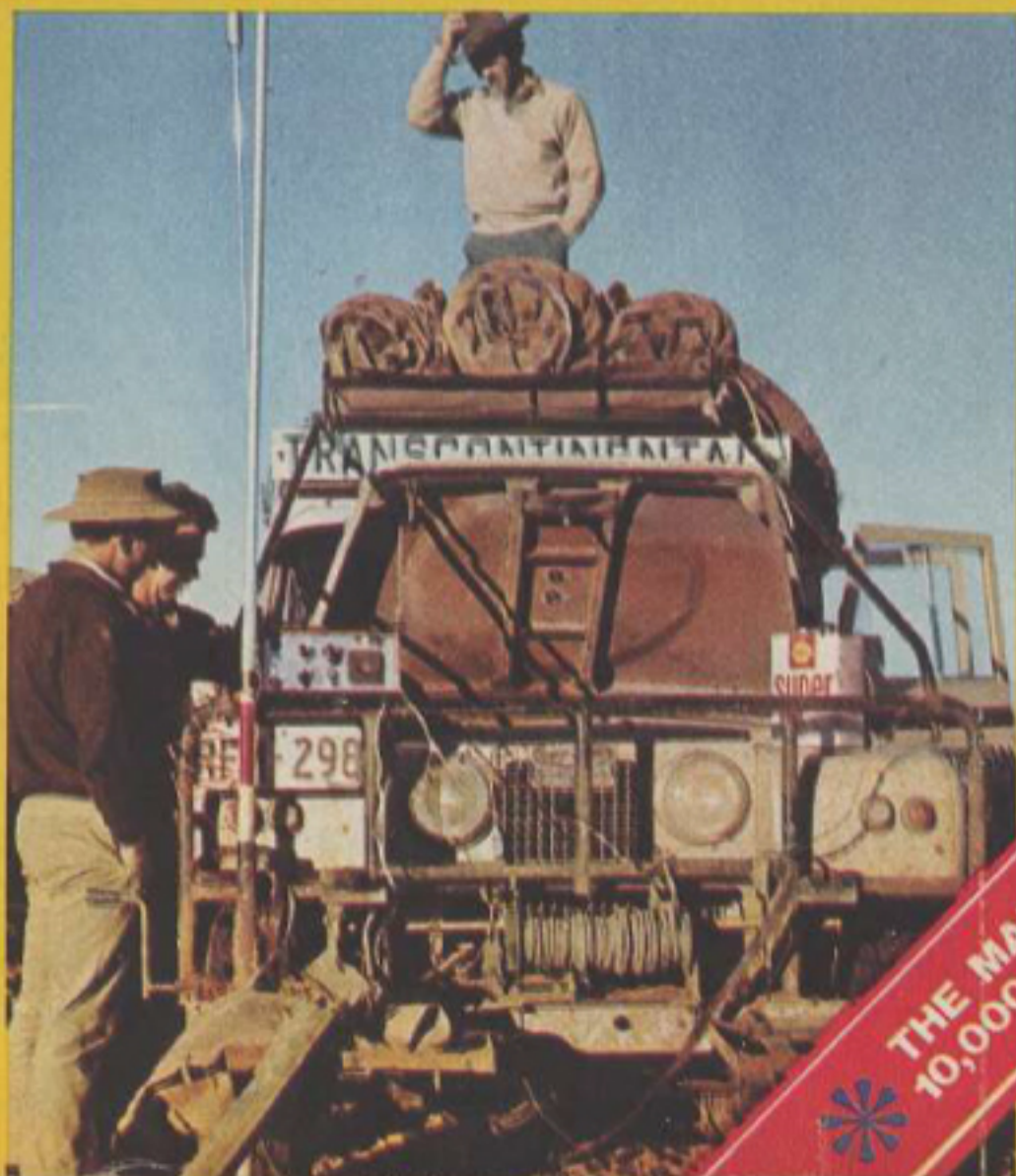


IN SEARCH OF
PLEASURE IN
THE SKY

ADVENTURE

ACROSS THE
SIMPSON
DESERT-FOR
THE FIRST
TIME

PLUS FREE
LIFT-OUT
TOP
PACKAGE
DEALS



THE MAN WHO IS HOST TO
10,000 U.S. TRAVEL SCOUTS