

Theatre in Queensland

By Eunice Hanger

In Australia, theatre means for most of us Little Theatre. The commercial variety gives us only rarely what we want, and in Queensland this is even worse than in Sydney or Melbourne. The only productions we see, of classics or of interesting new English, European, American or Australian plays, come from the Little Theatres.

Brisbane is well served for these, and most of the country towns have at least one. A factor that has held up the development of theatre in Queensland has been the difficulty the Little Theatres have experienced in getting hold of a theatre of their own. They work mostly in church halls or school-of-arts halls or R.S.L. halls, paying out great dollops of rent and bills for the carting of sets. It is occasionally possible for the managers of these halls to attempt to censor the plays put on—we had in 1962 the farce of Brisbane's Albert Hall authorities querying the production of *The Ham Funeral* a very profitable farce, as it turned out, for the Little Theatre involved, but that was a by-product. More important is the fact that these halls are not designed primarily as theatres and are inadequately equipped and not proofed against the increasing disadvantage of traffic noises from out-side. Moreover, since the Theatre does not own the hall, rehearsal has to be done elsewhere, and time is wasted in adapting to the production hall—time is no mean factor when those concerned in a production are amateurs that is, people who earn their living at something other than theatre.



Photo: Eunice Hanger

But the pattern is changing. In the far north tremendous activity over the last five years has involved a number of towns Cairns, Innisfail, Herberton, Atherton and others in a busy programme of production, play-competitions for writing and production, support from local business organizations. Money and property have been acquired so that a theatre owned by the combined organization has been built, which constitutes a centre for theatrical activity.

In Brisbane, Brisbane Arts Theatre have for two years now had their own theatre, a converted ex-warehouse, bought out of accumulated revenue and loans, so that as well as putting on some shows in town at Albert Hall (where seating accommodation is greater) they can show at their Petrie Terrace theatre (seating about 140) plays that can run for as long as they are drawing audience, playing three nights a week.

The two other long-established Little Theatre groups in Brisbane, Repertory and Twelfth Night, have for some time aimed at a similar position, but so far have not achieved it, though Twelfth Night puts on

a good many shows as club entertainment for members and friends in a small, converted church, now Gowrie Hall, where their offices and work and rehearsal areas are, and this will perhaps ultimately be their theatre.

Villanova players use a church hall in the suburb of Coorparoo for weekend preliminary runs before bringing their plays into town to the inevitable Albert Hall. University drama had a big lift this year when a local picture theatre came up for sale and was bought by the University for the use of drama groups -the Dramatic Society, the College Opera group, the various language departments, the King's and Women's Colleges, Scoop (the revue organization) and so on. The venture, which involved building a stage and will involve building dressing-rooms and other items, has been very well worthwhile, since the hall has been in use every week since the beginning of first term, and even in third term looks like being used at least for film-showings at weekends by a university organization.

Thus, a theatre is provided at which St. Lucia residents (which includes all the colleges, but one can be fairly sure of seeing some dramatic production on the last nights of every week, or else good films. The parking problem and the added expense of entertainment in town may well result in people of all the nearby suburbs forming the habit of looking to this theatre to save them the trouble of going further afield. To a large extent these residents are the kind of people to whom the kind of play offered by the University groups is likely to appeal: and with audiences to educate them, the standards of the groups should improve. There is already evidence that this is happening

It is time to be more specific about the plays that have been done. Most of the Little Theatres, depending as they do on the subscriptions of members whose interest is mild at the best, and on the extra bit of box-office support that comes from people who like a night out at something that gives them a good laugh and doesn't let them think, build their programmes largely from the most obvious overseas successes, especially from plays that have been filmed. There is therefore an inevitable round of productions of *One Wild Oat*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Reluctant Debutante* and so on. There is also the inevitable round of school set plays, from Shakespeare to Wilde. But most Little Theatres have one or two progressive characters -many of course have more who insist that it is the business of the Little Theatres, and also far more fun to keep abreast of what is new, experimental, or in any way exciting in contemporary theatre, and also to do the rarely done classic.

Having your own theatre makes it easier to risk the play with minority appeal, and Brisbane Arts Theatre have risked and done unexpectedly well in the last two months. With Pinter's *The Caretaker*, splendidly produced and acted, so that they had to extend the run and even then, could not play long enough to let all those see it who wished to. Last year they ran a revue for months, using some borrowed material out with many of their best items locally written and joyfully burlesquing local absurdities from the city fathers down, a slick, professional-looking job. They replaced this, late in 1962, with Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, another difficult assignment which brought them prestige though it was less widely popular.

Their list of recent Australian plays is also impressive. Avoiding the most obvious of these, they have given a showing, with fair success, to three, which sustained short runs: Barbara Vernon's *The Multi-coloured Umbrella*, Chris Gardner's *The Pub at Pelican Creek*, and Pauline Ballinger's *But a Wife is Different*. (think it is mere coincidence that these three are by women.) Moreover, their club activities include one act programmes, and these involve plays by local writers.

The tally of Australian items from the last few years is in fact astonishingly high.

In 1962 Brisbane Repertory Theatre did *The One Day of the Year*, of Alan Seymour; Twelfth Night Theatre did a melodrama-cum-farce written in 1869 by a Sydney lawyer, Walter Cooper *Colonial Experience* and later *The Ham Funeral*, of Patrick White, which over two thousand people saw, owing to the unexpected publicity referred to earlier; they also did two children's plays, *Blackbirders*, by Evan Simpson of Toowoomba, and *The Magic Apron*, by Tony Morphett of the A.B.C. in Brisbane; another play of Morphett's, a farcical comedy called *If There Were Four*, played by King's and Women's Colleges to a University audience, had a hilarious reception; Villanova junior group gave a charming performance of another children's play, *Short Street*, by the writer of this article; 1963 opened the Australian list with C. R. Jury's academic satire, *The Sun in Servitude*, played by the English III students at the University in the Stable Memorial Tree Theatre at St. Lucia, and in June the same setting was used for David Ireland (of Sydney's) *Image in the Clay*, by a mixed group of students and staff for the benefit of Abschol; meanwhile Twelfth Night Theatre was busy rehearsing Ray Mathew's comedy, *We Find the Bunyip*, for production at an Australian drama festival (organized by Adult Education at Lismore, with backing from the Commonwealth Literary Fund).

The last item is worth a little more comment.

The play is to be done as a major item in Twelfth Night Theatre's programme for the year, in October. It was written at least eight years ago, but for some reason, which I do not understand, has lain virtually unproduced for all this time, its first production being for a number of reasons not successful. It has enormous audience appeal. For many readers it makes less appeal, and this applies even to the cast of actors, some of whom were at first rehearsals unenthusiastic. All became much more enthusiastic as rehearsals proceeded, though some were still surprised at audience enthusiasm. There is of course a lesson here, and I want to cap it with another story regarding production of a Mathew play.

In Atherton, N.Q., the producers of the local group were looking for a play, an Australian one if they could find one, when a *Spring Song*, by Mathew, was published. One of them took the book home, hopefully, and was disappointed. Some of the other members came round. He produced the book "Just listen to this stuff, How could you do this?" He read some of it aloud, and presently thought it wasn't so bad; went on reading aloud, converted himself and interested the others, and they ended by doing the play, to the approval of their audiences.

He dropped in on his next visit to Brisbane, to tell me the story.

In Lismore (which is not Queensland, but is nearer to Brisbane than to Sydney), the festival programme last June involved as well as *Bunyip* the production by groups from Lismore, Ballina and Grafton of one-act plays, one of which, *The Bones of My Toe*, by Mathew, stood out as easily the best play of the three. Its producer, who had liked the play at his own first reading of it, and then grown doubtful as rehearsals proceeded, was delighted by the response it drew from the audience. It is not hilarious as *Bunyip* is in many places, being a quietly intimate study, drawing the mask from family faces almost stealthily. The response is one of surprise, followed quickly by recognition and perhaps the appreciative chuckle. But the actors, who had proceeded with their rehearsals in faith rather than in conviction, were rewarded, and deservedly, by realizing as they played that the audience were completely gripped and held by the deceptively simple writing, which needs only faithful stage interpretation to become adequate as theatre.

Some other Australian items are worth recording--Elinor Witcombe's children's play, *Pirates at the Barn*, by Twelfth Night Theatre earlier this year, and some club programmes of revue-type material at the same theatre, where a young writer, Doug Anders, has revealed a gift for comic entertainment, witty burlesques of local seriousness in theatre and out of it, and another, Ron Finney, caught between theatre of the absurd and burlesque of this, shows that however you take it his stuff is entertainment.

There have also been the play-readings at the South Brisbane Library; local theatre groups have cooperated with writers and the Librarian, Mr. Sirovs, to do readings, sometimes very good ones, which are attended by a rather different audience from that which half-fills theatres. That is, these people are the library's readers, and they tend to have a reader's attitude to plays, to analyze a play as one does a novel.

But the readings have given help and encouragement to a number of writers who are experimenting with playwriting. Still, the Australian play is the exception, not the rule. Interest is greatest, among the progressives in any of the theatre groups, in modern European playwrights, and in Pinter particularly of English playwrights. The University Dramatic Society had done some Pinter sketches and one-acts and is preparing Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* for the inter-university festival in August.

Characteristically, some would say, the University staff players have chosen more conservative material doing *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1962, and this year Shaw's *The Apple Cart*. The overall picture, for Queensland, is one of great activity, sometimes sustained with difficulty against the compulsive attraction of the television screen. For the most part, a good play that is reasonably well publicized draws audiences still, and the Little Theatres all seem likely to continue in business. None the less, it was good hearing that the Trust intends to establish a small professional theatre in Brisbane, thus lending the support of its prestige and the influence of a high standard of production to the general theatre movement

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