

Arts Theatre 50th Anniversary Dinner Speech 8th December 2013

That journal of record the St George and Sutherland Shire Leader carried the birth notice in its edition of 23rd October 1963. *Comedy debut for new group* screamed the excited headline. The Cronulla Arts Theatre will open on Saturday 30th November and present a ten week season of the English comedy *Will Any Gentleman*. Mr Ron Martin was to direct and Mr Dick Moss, one of the theatre's three permanent producers was to take the main role. Other names mentioned in the article were Barry Ashton, Ann Roy, Joyce Jacobs and Brian Newell. They emerged from the flimsy sets of this English comedy to become legends of the local arts scene. Ann Roy is with us tonight.

The Arts Theatre did not spring into existence as the result of a theatrical virgin birth. It came from the Cronulla School of Arts Theatre Group and the Arts Theatre was the first permanent live theatre in the Sutherland Shire. At last some culture for the huddled masses of the Shire. The theatre had been renovated, at the cost of 2,500 pounds.

A ten week season. Quite an ambition. Few theatres in Sydney come anywhere near that long for their season. But it worked. We put on a show and the people came. That 10 week season resulted in 20 performances and today we do 23. We spread our wings from Friday and Saturday and we now regularly offer an alternative to the State of Origin football on Wednesday nights and we do three Sunday matinees.

We have our own theatre. This is an enormous benefit that so many others do not have. We can rehearse there rather than in some drafty and expensive scout hall, we can audition there, we can meet and plan there, we can fight and sulk and of course we can put on our shows there. It's truly a one stop shop of artistic effort and reward. Amazingly the shows are directed and the sets are constructed and the entire show supported by people who

seem to know what they are doing, as well as having a great artistic vision. I have acted in quite a few shows and have yet to worry about the collapse of an unsteady set or a door that didn't open, necessitating my hasty exit through an apparently glassed in window.

A few times things have gone wrong entirely because of the evil intent of the instruments themselves. I do recall a real, working, blank firing pistol that was colossally loud, the use of which in a highly dramatic moment finished the first act. I had to fire it twice. The first bang was flawless and served its additional purpose of waking the audience out of a nice pre interval slumber. The second time it would not fire. Fortunately, the intended victim realised that all was not well and fell down dead before I was forced to utter the dreaded word "bang", that would have at least sent the audience out laughing. An indulgent audience assumed a silencer had done the trick. The pistol's fault, not the theatre's and certainly not the actor's.

I do recall, with horror being in Harvey, the play about the invisible rabbit. There were two of us on stage, with a working telephone. Never have a real working prop of any sort, especially a telephone. I had to use it to receive a call at some much later part of the play. In the middle of our dialogue, it rang. The two of us were suddenly frozen with horror and mounting panic. With a sudden deep calm and assurance that I was about to be told that I would not be working in this town any longer, I walked smartly over to the ringing phone, picked it up, said hello and then turned to the other actor and said: It's for you. I shall spare you the words that were exchanged back stage, but at least I made sure it wasn't my problem to solve.

I well remember the novice stage manager, who told to open the curtain twice for the end of show curtain call, decided to open it a third time to expose a swiftly departing audience to the sight of actors scratching themselves, picking their noses and berating each other for flubbed lines. Who can forget the ageing actor, whose inability to remember all his lines was exacerbated when his deafness rendered useless the stage manager's efforts to shout his

lines to him? His desperate but determined attempts to get over to the side of the stage where he knew that he would be closest to those longed for words being shouted at him, baffled and infuriated the other actors.

Just in the last few weeks, in the production of Calendar Girls, there was a spectacular wardrobe malfunction, when the plastic garland of flowers one of the calendar girls wore on stage at one point during the play, fell off, exposing her in all her naked glory, though her back was to the audience. There was a blinding flash as half a dozen pacemakers in the audience went off, producing enough electricity to feed back into the grid. Fortunately audiences rarely notice such problems, though I think they did that night. I once saw Claudette Colbert and Rex Harrison in a play in Sydney. Both were well into their latter years, Claudette was 85 and she had a small radio receiver in her ear. She said that at her age it was hard enough to get on the stage without having to remember all the lines as well. We would never allow such an indulgence at Cronulla. In fact we don't even have a prompter, though the stage manager will come to the rescue, in case of a complete failure of memory.

Actors sometimes amuse themselves by trying to put others in the cast off. Substituting a prop, for an actor about to walk on stage, with something completely inappropriate; attaching clothes pegs to parts of your costume in the hope that they would not be discovered until the actors were on stage, have come within a whisker of causing a disaster on stage. Such japes are now banned with a grim finality.

We have had a few precious directors, who thought their word, their vision was the only one in existence and at least one has flounced out from a rehearsal in high dudgeon, wrapping his directorial scarf around his directorial neck and screaming: "why don't you all just do it yourselves, as you obviously don't need a director", after an actor dared to suggest a change. Obviously they didn't need him, but he came back, without saying a word, the following night.

We have done Shakespeare once, A Midsummer Night's Dream in 2003. During the third week of the show's run, one of the actors, an Irishman, told the director that there was a serious illness in his family in Ireland and he would have to leave the production and return home. He was devastated at the disruption this would cause. Brad Pitt and George Clooney turned down the offer of the part and as I was the next obvious choice, I learnt the part during a couple of all night sessions and had one hasty rehearsal and went on to finish the season. Curiously, the Irishman's family illness cleared up in record time and he was seen walking around town just a couple of days after, supposedly, flying home. He'll probably not get cast in another play for some time.

Backstage romances are notorious in theatre and there have been a few in Cronulla. Sometimes they have ended less than happily. A few years ago a play was interrupted at interval by an angry wife, who stormed into the dressing room accusing her husband, correctly it turned out, of having an affair with one of the other actors in the play. She gave him an ultimatum, come home with me right now or it's all over. Reluctantly he submitted, reckoning he had no alternative. The problem for the play, however, was that it was interval and there was still the second act to go and the now departed actor's part was large. St Genesius, the patron saint of actors must have been alert that night, as one of the technicians had seen a few performances of the play and was able to go on, with the help of the script secreted about his person. I still don't know if any of the audience noticed anything.

One female actor, called Natalia, developed a bit of a thing for Anthony LaPaglia, when they were both in a play in the early 1980s. She ended her fascination, however, when she soberly realised that permanent attachment to him would result in her being known as Natalia LaPaglia, which would look funny in lights.

Our theatre has developed over the years. The auditorium has been expanded and re-floored and a major rebuilding of it with the addition of some

more seats is in the pipeline. It's a pretty long pipeline, but the big lump of that work is slowly working its way to the end.

In 2011-12 major work was carried out to the front of the theatre. There was a new foyer and a lift was put in. Most of the money for this came from the theatre, from those who have worked so hard and had so much fun doing what they love here. We also received a grant of \$50,000 from the state government to help with the cost of that rebuilding.

We really love our audiences, who are all so different. Before the show starts we, the actors and technicians in a show watch them come in and we try to estimate what they will be like, the audience-that great big monster in the dark. It is always so interesting to note how audiences react in different ways at each performance. A joke or funny bit of business that will break one audience up and cause a run on adult nappies, will leave nothing but the sound of crickets chirping in the wilderness, with the next night's audience.

There was a joke that came quite early in act one in the last play I did. The audience reaction to that joke never failed to predict the audience reaction to the rest of the play. That joke became the comedy success marker. The play *The Popular Mechanicals* was put on in the early 1990s. It had a farting scene in one part that either broke up or appalled the audience and we could never predict which. The same play also contained a vomiting scene. The actor carried a mouthful of canned vegetables until the required moment. The recoil from the audience was huge and it took a lot of effort to restore their equilibrium after that. There were several angry letters to the committee about that play from outraged of Caringbah, offended of Gymea and never darken your door again of Miranda. An earlier play this year *Wrong Turn At Lungfish* was criticised by one audience member, just one, because the main female character's attachment to a hot tempered boyfriend showed that we tolerated domestic violence.

Putting on good, well directed, well acted plays has been the theatre's strength and has allowed us to prosper and build our reputation. Our theatre is full for most performances. We have, however, in recent years attempted to extend its appeal and to explore some other avenues of performing. Bare boards has done some shorter plays for seasons of just a few days. Crash test theatre is where aspiring playwrights present their 10 minute plays using actors who have just turned up on the day and have had only an hour to prepare an acted reading of the play. Stern judges award prizes for best actors and best plays and the audience votes for their favourite. The last crash test afternoon attracted a lot of would be actors and the house was nearly full for the performances.

The Arts Theatre Cronulla would be nothing without some people who have brought their wonderful talent to running the place and getting the plays on. They are our royalty. Pat and John Keyworth, Joyce Jacobs, so recently passed away, but here tonight in the form of her son, Lawrence Hinwood, Shirley Oberg, Doreen and Sid Grant, Jim and Joyce Cover, Dick Moss, Ron Martin, Denis Ramsbottom, Jo Peters, Dick Hyde, Marjorie Chamberlain and Joy Baker. Ann Roy, whom I mentioned earlier. There are others who also have the touch of royalty.

If you look at photos of our productions from 1983, you will see a young Anthony LaPaglia, whom I mentioned earlier, in our production of "I Am A Camera", the play on which the musical "Cabaret" is based. Look what his Cronulla training has done for him.

A young, Cronulla born and bred actor who has gained fame as an actor, director and playwright and who used to hang around the theatre, waiting for his sister, as a young boy is Brendan Cowell. If you saw "The Outlaw Michael Howe" on ABC TV last Sunday night, or the film "Beneath Hill 60", you have seen his work. He has sent us this message:

To the Cronulla Arts Theatre. Congratulations on an amazing half century of arts in the Shire. It's so difficult to keep small theatres alive, so it's testament to your tenacity and your quality that you're still going strong.

I am currently abroad so cannot be there to celebrate but here's to another fifty years of theatre by the sea.

Perhaps the emperor of the Arts Theatre is James Bruce, who has been a part of the theatre from the word go. In fact he was there before the Arts Theatre, he's really one of our ancestors. He has acted and directed but mostly designed and built. He brings a superb artistic vision to all our shows. One of the greatest pieces of theatre is his preparation and reaction to getting it all ready. James' reluctance to use bad language is legendary and he will go to extraordinary lengths to hide his mild impatience and slight dissatisfaction at the pace of progress. He is convinced each show is his last, he knows that what the director wants is completely absurd and beyond the bounds of possibility, he is certain that the set can never be constructed. James is convinced that everyone else is just mucking around, ruining everything by clucking on about all and sundry, certain that the trucking will not get the scenery here on time, utterly knowledgeable about the sucking jobs that the actors are doing and sure that we will all soon be ducking public criticism in the face of the inevitable disaster that he has so clearly foreseen for the latest effort. He finally grudgingly agrees to help a little bit as long as we all realise how getting his co-operation means there will be no more mucking, trucking or clucking about, other than his own of course.

Tonight we celebrate 50 years of theatrical effort, 50 years of hard work, 50 years of presenting theatre in all its wonderful fun, works, sufferings and sheer joy to our community. A love of this place beats inside each of us like a second heart. One obscure playwright once wrote of actors strutting and fretting their time upon the stage and being heard no more. There is something about our Arts Theatre that makes actors not strut but stride, not fret, but fire. We shall continue to be heard, our centennial celebrations await us.

Players, playwrights, set designers and builders, stage managers, costume artists, technicians, front of house people and of course our lovely, loyal and waiting to be entertained audience, I give you the Arts Theatre of Cronulla at the end of its first 50 years.