

Real to Reel

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CONTENTS

News from the Executive – Jill Cassidy	1
Performing Launceston – Barbara Hatley	3
Oral History Workshop	10

NEWS FROM THE EXECUTIVE – Jill Cassidy

Workshop

A reminder that the 2017 Oral History workshop will be held in Hobart on Saturday 27 May. Please alert anyone you know who may be interested. Details and registration form are on page 10.

Oral History Seminar Saturday 5 August

The annual seminar and AGM will be held at the Queen Victoria Museum on 5 August and we have three very interesting speakers lined up.

- Ian Terry of the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery will speak on his recent exhibition, 'One hell of an inferno: oral history and the 1967 Tasmanian bushfires.'
- Dr Nicolás Goc, Lecturer in Journalism, Media and Communications at the University of Tasmania, will talk on 'The Migrant Experience and Oral History'.
- Dr Jen Thompson, online teacher in Education and Health for the University of Tasmania and Charles Sturt University, will speak on 'Secrets of the Shakespeare Ladies', detailing her recent project writing the history of the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club which is the longest continuous operating Shakespearean reading group in the world.

Full details will be sent later, but do put this date in your diary now.

Website

All past issues of *Real to Reel* are now on the website at: <http://www.oralhistorytas.org.au/publications.html>

Oral History Australia National Conference

Keep in mind that the Earlybird registration fees for those wishing to attend the biennial national conference, *Moving Memories: Oral History in a Global World*, close on 30 June. Keep looking at the conference website <http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/oha-biennial-conference.html> for program details and registration fees. There will be two workshops on Wednesday 13 September, including a behind-the-scenes tour of the State Library of NSW, with the conference sessions running from Thursday 14 to Saturday 16.

Conference scholarship

No applications were received for the conference scholarship.

Community Heritage Grants

Applications for the National Library of Australia's Community Heritage Grants for 2017 will close on 8 May. Guidelines and the Application Form are available at nla.gov.au/chg/guidelines

Preserving your audiovisual collection

Find out the best way to preserve your precious interviews, photos etc. The National Film and Sound Archive has a guide on how to care for your audio, film, video and photographs. The guide is on their new website: <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/guide/home/caring-video>

Do you have a project to tell us about?

We are always looking for items for the newsletter, anything from a few sentences to a lengthy article. All members are interested in knowing what is going on in the state, and you may make some good contacts through responses to the article.

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CALLOUT

Did you volunteer for an HIV/AIDS organisation in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s?

Historians at Macquarie University and the University of Adelaide wish to interview individuals who volunteered in HIV/AIDS-related capacities in the 1980s and early 1990s as part of a new nationwide project.

Volunteers played a critical part in Australia's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemics but their contribution is yet to be fully acknowledged. This project is interested in the roles they played, the impact of their involvement on both individuals and HIV/AIDS organisations, and the place of these volunteers in Australian history.

Volunteers came from diverse backgrounds, including gay men and members of the lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, people living with HIV/AIDS, people living with Hepatitis C, people with hemophilia, intravenous drug users, sex workers and members of the broader community.

They made a wide range of contributions from answering telephones, conducting community outreach, caring for and nursing people, providing administrative and business skills to AIDS organisations, publishing newsletters, serving on Boards as officials, and much more.

Project Leader Dr Shirleene Robinson explains, 'It is crucial we acknowledge the role that volunteers played in managing what threatened to become one of the biggest public health crises in this country in the twentieth century.' She adds: 'Many of the men and women who served as volunteers were members of marginalised communities and their role has never properly been recognised.'

The project is being conducted by Dr Shirleene Robinson and Associate Professor Robert Reynolds at Macquarie University, and Associate Professor Paul Sendziuk at the University of Adelaide, with support from the Australian Research Council. The project has ethics approval from both universities.

To learn more about the project and express your interest in being interviewed, visit:

www.hivaidsvolunteers.com.au

For further details, please contact Dr Shirleene Robinson on 0412 308 174 or on

shirleene.robinson@mq.edu.au

www.hivaidsvolunteers.com.au

PERFORMING LAUNCESTON

Barbara Hatley

Observers frequently comment on the liveliness of the Launceston performance scene: the numbers and variety of amateur theatre companies, along with dance groups, community choirs, school and college productions. Statistics likewise show Launceston people attending theatre performances in numbers well above the national average.¹ How can this picture be explained?

One major factor seems to be the size of the city – large enough to produce a significant body of people keen to foster drama and theatre, yet sufficiently compact for them to feel they are performing for Launceston as a whole, and for local residents to follow their activities as part of the overall life of the town. Crucially also, the institutional development of Launceston has brought in people with performing experience and talents who in a small city easily made contact with theatre enthusiasts and became involved in the local performance scene. The interaction between locals and new arrivals, professionally-trained actors and amateurs, took on further dimensions through the fact that some participants also held other prominent social roles. Those involved often speak glowingly of the results. Jeff Hayes, who came to Launceston from a flourishing professional theatre career in Brisbane, initially to teach drama at secondary school, observes, ‘The great thing about working in Launceston is that you are with a group of amazingly talented people that are stuck in this funny little community that we have.’²

The following focuses on local amateur theatre, plays and musicals, and on the stories of some key participants whose activities have shaped its development over the years. A brief overview of the history of theatre groups and trends is followed by stories drawn from interviews with these figures. Their accounts of their own experiences and interactions with others provide rich insights into the dynamics of Launceston theatre life.

Launceston theatre 1926-2015

In the beginning were the Players. Accounts of theatre history in Launceston typically begin with the founding in 1926 of the Launceston Players, the group claiming the distinction of being the longest continuously operating theatre company in Australia. There had been theatre activities in Launceston well before the Players – the first three presidents had all been members of the ‘Muffs’, an amateur dramatic society founded in 1889 – but under the leadership of the Players theatre in the city thrived and expanded. The aims of the group were: ‘to promote the study of dramatic literature and art amongst its members’; ‘to hold readings of plays and to arrange lectures on literary and dramatic subjects’; and ‘to produce plays either publicly or privately.’³

Their first production took place in 1927, after which there were monthly play-readings and several major stage productions each year until the mid-1930s. Activities continued, albeit less frequently, through the war years. Margaret McIntyre, whose husband William, a prominent obstetrician, was also a member of the group, was the organiser of the first production and remained a leading force as a producer and director through the 1940s; she founded the Tasmanian Drama Festival in 1947. Margaret was active also in community organisations such as the Girl Guide movement, and in 1948 became the first woman elected to the Tasmanian parliament. There were other prominent Launceston citizens involved with the Players in the 1930s and 1940s including Raymond Ferrall, later knighted for his services to industry, commerce and the community.

In 1951 educator William Tart founded a second amateur theatre group, The Strolling Players. With a mission of taking drama to northern regional Tasmania, the group travelled to country towns performing in packed community halls. In 1954 the Strolling Players morphed into the Launceston Repertory Society (‘the Rep’) which developed a focus on classic works by playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Ionesco and Joe Orton, while the Players staged a mixture of musicals, comedies and serious drama. Both groups were very active and competed keenly in the drama festivals which were very popular through the 1950s and 1960s, along with

1. Research carried out by Jeff Hockley for a board investigating possible establishment of a new theatre space in Launceston showed the national average for people attending theatre performances as 4–5%, with Launceston as 11–12%. (Interview with Jeff Hockley, 23.3.2015)

2. Interview with Jeff Hayes 18.5.2015.

3. Linda Madill, talk to the Launceston Historical Society 7.12.2013.

speech and drama sections of the Launceston Competitions among school students. A big event of the 1960s was the return to Tasmania of Devonport-born Max Oldaker, star of the London stage and many interstate Australian shows. The end of the 1960s saw another significant arrival – Ray Sangston, who came to Launceston from Victoria to work in radio and became a key performer in local theatre. Later another radio broadcaster, locally-born and returning from interstate work, became a prominent theatre director – community activist and later parliamentarian Kerry Finch.

By the 1970s, with the impact of television, audience numbers and the popularity of theatre competitions had declined, but the theatre restaurant scene was thriving and the musicals continued. Into this picture in 1972 arrived Jeff Hockley to head audio-visual services at the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education (TCAE), later renamed the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology (TSIT). Jeff immediately started performing in Players' musicals, then took on a key role in directing and lighting local shows. The TCAE/TSIT also recruited professional actors and educators to work in its drama and theatre program: Peter Hammond in 1982 and Michael Edgar in 1985, who also contributed enormously to amateur theatre in keeping with the college's community outreach policy.

Then, just as TSIT merged with the University of Tasmania, the drama program established a professional theatre company, CentrStage, aimed at producing small-scale, serious plays which would provide professional practice opportunities for staff, graduates and invited theatre community members. Some university drama graduates also set up small independent theatre companies and others became drama teachers, producing big musicals and other shows in secondary colleges.

Meanwhile Theatre North, an independent government-funded body, was set up in 1995 to foster theatre in Launceston, administering the Princess Theatre and Earl Arts Centre. An off-shoot group of the Players, the Launceston Light Opera Society, later renamed the Launceston Musical Society, has specialised in musicals from the late 1980s onwards, while the Players have recently focused more on straight drama. The Launceston Repertory Society, renamed Three River Theatre in 2003, stages major classics interspersed with lighter, popular shows, and has recently moved into supporting new Tasmanian work. In 2008 came the advent of Encore. Belinda King, a radio broadcaster with extensive experience interstate in theatre performance, marketing and publicity, and who had worked in Launceston commercial radio in 2000–2003, returned in 2008 to join the ABC and set up Encore Theatre Company with friend and collaborator Jamie Hillard. Encore's spectacular musicals, aimed at providing Launceston people with access to big shows of the kind staged commercially interstate, are vigorously promoted, particularly among young people.

Performers' stories

To see how individual stories amplify, enrich and complicate this general picture, let us begin the story with the accounts of their stage lives of two revered elders of the Launceston theatre scene, Barry Olding and Patsy Mace.

Acclaimed as a consummate actor by his fellow performers, Barry Olding has been involved in Launceston Theatre for over 60 years. His first appearance was in a play staged by his high school, Launceston Technical School, in the Youth section of the drama festival in 1951. There were some ructions at rehearsals – the play involved smoking and a shocked teacher who came upon the boys practising in the library sent them off to be disciplined by the headmaster – but Barry loved the experience and participated in a number of school productions in the drama festivals. He then joined The Strolling Players, travelling in their bus to towns like Queenstown and Mt Cameron, performing in community halls that occasionally had no electric light, only lanterns, and participating in all aspects of the show from set construction to make-up application. When the Strolling Players became the Launceston Repertory Society, Barry played the male lead in their first production, *Autumn Crocus*, attended by the Governor of Tasmania.

Over the years Barry has acted in around 70 plays in the different theatre buildings used by amateur theatre groups. He recalls encountering a magical smell as he entered the stage door of the National Theatre for the first time – grease-paint? – and being hooked for life. After school Barry worked and studied at night school, eventually becoming an audiometrist, while performing constantly, sometimes in three plays a year. What he loves about acting, the restrained and gentlemanly Barry reports, is the opportunity to become someone else, to say things you would not normally say in real life.

Patsy Mace didn't get the chance to do plays at school, although her older brothers performed in operettas at Launceston High. She was eighteen, working in an office, when a friend at her tennis club invited Patsy to come along to play readings. Soon she joined the The Strolling Players, going out to perform at little country towns with other young people including Barry Olding; both she and Barry recall those days very fondly. Patsy went to England for two years in the late 1950s, as 'everyone did then'. On return she undertook a diploma in speech training and taught speech in schools and privately, particularly for the Launceston Competitions, as well as acting then directing with the Launceston Repertory Society. Patsy did not direct big productions but took on around 20 one-act plays for festivals and other events. She loved the opportunity they provided to follow one's imagination and create something distinctive. Patsy served twice as president of the Repertory Society; although no longer performing she remains a keen and active member.

While Barry Olding's and Patsy's stories show involvement in theatre developing 'organically' within the flow of life in Launceston, for others moving to the city gave rise to unexpected theatre connections and opportunities. Growing up in Melbourne, Ray Sangston was entranced by the musicals at Her Majesty's Theatre he was taken to by his parents and at fifteen, after a wonderful performance of *My Fair Lady*, decided that he really wanted to become an actor. But with no experience or connections, and facing fierce parental disapproval of acting as a career, he embarked on radio work instead. His first job was in Mildura in country Victoria, then he came to station 7LA in Launceston. Through organising advertising for the radio he encountered Shirley Patterson, advertising manager at Myer's, who was very active in the Launceston Players. Shirley asked him if he'd like to try acting.

He first appeared on stage in a comedy, *Under the Yum Yum Tree*, in 1969 where he met his future wife, Caroline Bertram, who was stage managing, and 'things took off from there'. Ray and Caroline were both very involved in the Players for a number of years before going overseas; Ray returned to radio work in Hobart, then was appointed ABC regional manager in Launceston in 1980. After Caroline sadly passed away after a long illness, Ray again took on prominent acting roles with the Players, including in 1992 his youthful dream part, Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* — wonderful but hugely demanding, with so many complex lines to memorise. There were also many CentrStage productions, another move to Hobart for work, then retirement to Launceston in 2011. Ray became president of the Players and performed in 2012 as Salieri in a memorable production of *Amadeus* directed by Jeff Hockley: again great performance satisfaction mixed with tortuous line-learning. Highly-acclaimed as an actor, Ray admits to hugely enjoying performing, but defines the experience as 'just showing off', going out there and showing you can do a good job.

Like Ray, Frank and Linda Madill also came to Launceston from Victoria in the late 1960s. Frank, a doctor, worked as a general practitioner and they also bought a farm. Although Frank had done a little acting at school they had no thoughts of performing; it was through their younger daughter Katherine that they became involved. Jeff Hayes, Katherine's drama teacher at Scotch Oakburn College, suggested she try auditioning for the Players' 1984 production of *The King and I* as a way of gaining extra acting experience. There was a shortage of men for the chorus so Katherine persuaded her father to join in and recruit some of his friends, and Linda also participated. The next year when the Players staged *Annie*, Frank again auditioned at his daughter's urging and got the main role, that of Daddy Warbucks. Frank had to learn all new skills, he says, how to sing and dance and act. Having to shave his head for the part attracted much interest, with his photo appearing on the front page of *The Examiner*. Shaved heads were quite unusual in those days, let alone on the local doctor! Linda played the part of the housekeeper, and his daughter was also involved.

In 1986, ready for something more serious, Frank auditioned for the Launceston Repertory Society's production of *Twelve Angry Men*. By then he had been elected to the Tasmanian State Parliament. The play was scheduled for a period when parliament was in recess; however, the Premier called a special session and Frank had to pull out only four weeks before the play opened. Wonderfully, Kerry Finch as director was able to reallocate parts, take one himself, and give Frank an ongoing role as the disembodied voice of the judge saying, 'Gentlemen of the jury, you will now retire to consider your verdict'. Frank's acting career ceased at this point, although he did some stand-up comedy and songs for charity as part of his political work. Then it revived almost 30 years on in 2015 with roles as a doctor and a guard in the Three River production *Disclosed*, and again in *Dad's Army* in 2016.

Linda, meanwhile, soon became and has remained a stalwart of the Launceston theatre scene. At the suggestion of Peter Hammond, director of *The King and I*, she joined the Players' committee in 1985 and has been a

member ever since. In 1986 she was asked to be the executive producer of *Evita* and continued to produce many performances over the years. Linda was president of the Players for six years, and has often acted as secretary. She is also responsible for the Players' costumes and looks after documentation of the group's activities and preservation of historical materials.

Another 'doctor and wife' team, John and Caroline Ball, arrived from Britain about a decade later than Frank and Linda. After a stint in Wonthaggi in Victoria, John joined the practice of a Launceston doctor they had met while travelling in Africa. John had performed quite a bit at school and university and indeed in a production of *The Pirates of Penzance* in Wonthaggi. Someone in Launceston heard he was an actor, contacted him, and after that 'it was one thing after another for years and years'. From the early 1980s onwards he performed in plays with Launceston Repertory/Three River Theatre, then CentrStage. He was also in musicals with the Light Opera Company, student-directed festivals and experimental productions. The group of doctors he worked with was very understanding in helping him make time for this very active theatre life by swapping shifts. However, when he was appearing in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*, with its blasphemous, scatological language, the head of the practice did suggest that he need not take every role he was offered.

Caroline studied English and drama at the TCAE when they came to Launceston and became a speech and drama teacher in schools. She also acted, but then more often directed with Repertory, preferring to guide others in implementing her understanding of the play than performing herself. She first directed with Patsy Mace and then Stan Gottschalk, the driving force of 'The Rep' from the early 1990s onwards, with whom she worked on many productions. Stan was the visionary, Caroline suggests, while she focused on the organisational work needed to put Stan's vision into practice.

John and Caroline's son Jeremy took up theatre professionally, studying at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) then appearing in television productions, but he stopped performing on discovering that actors make their core income from advertising work. He moved into political organising for the Greens – like his parents he had strong, long-standing environmental credentials – then joined the Launceston City Council and became Deputy Mayor. Jeremy didn't act much after returning to Launceston, but in a memorable production of *The Enemy of the People* he played the crusading doctor to John's scheming, corrupt mayor, in ironic contrast to John's real-life job as a doctor and Jeremy's as alderman. Responding to the theme of the play and aware of the environmental commitment of both men, audience members burst into spontaneous applause when the pair appeared on stage. Jeremy spoke of writing a play, a comedy based on his own family, shortly before his tragic death in a road accident in 2014. Sadly that play will never happen, yet necessarily the show continues. If a suitable part for a man of his age came along John would be happy to perform, and Caroline remains keenly involved in social activism.

Stan Gottschalk's move to Launceston evolved fortuitously. He had come to Australia from the USA in 1970 to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War, undertaking a PhD at Melbourne University. After a motor cycle trip around Tasmania in 1974, Stan bought a little farm on the West Tamar, took a job as Head of Maths and Science at Oakburn College (now Scotch Oakburn) then lectured in Engineering at the TSIT and the Maritime College, taking early retirement in 2001. In high school and college Stan had enjoyed acting and studied literature, but since coming to Australia he had had no involvement in theatre. Then one day in 1986 he saw a small ad in *The Examiner*.

Stan's debut on the Launceston stage came in *Twelve Angry Men*, the production from which Frank Madill had to withdraw due to parliamentary commitments. Originally cast in a very minor role, Stan moved into the part previously played by Jeff Hayes, who replaced Frank as the villain. And the rest is history. More acting followed, then direction of major shows every few years. In 1991 came another legendary Launceston production, *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Stan with Caroline Ball and starring Jeff Hayes and Barry Olding. It was staged in Chalmers Church, an old church building purchased by the Launceston Players as an alternate theatre space. People still recall the mastery of Jeff's and Barry's performances as the huge, physically strong but mentally disabled Lennie, and George, his caring friend and guardian. The setting of the play was likewise most memorable. In the huge, freezing space audience members were given blankets and hot soup, both to ward off the cold and create the atmosphere of depression-era America.

This production also illustrated Stan's commitment to the idea that 'theatre should say something'. That's why he has gone back to 'the canon', to works like *The Crucible* (2009) and *Waiting for Godot* (2011). Another

directing highlight he mentions, again co-directed with Caroline Ball, is Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* in 1995, where Scotch Oakburn teacher and pupil, Marcus Bower and Stuart Loone, played twin brothers, with Stuart mimicking his teacher faultlessly. Stan revels in the control directing provides over the outcome of production, allowing him to see the big picture and work out how all the pieces fit together. Stan and his wife Rebecca, together with another couple, also perform traditional American folk music in a group called the New Holland Honey Eaters. Their productions combine songs, documentary film footage and constructs of radio programs to reflect on American social history. Along with her musical involvement, Rebecca does much of the organisational work for Three River Theatre, including maintaining an online newsletter and informational email lists.

Several of the preceding narratives share a connection with Scotch Oakburn college – Frank and Linda Madill getting involved in theatre via their daughter's drama teacher, Jeff Hayes; Marcus Bower, Jeff's successor, and his star pupil, Stuart Loone, appearing in a production directed by Stan Gottschalk – reflecting the important relationship between amateur theatre and drama activities in schools. Jeff Hayes taught at Scotch from 1979 to 1989, then left when he found school commitments too demanding and worked at various jobs while appearing on stage in a wide range of roles. Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* is one he remembers particularly fondly. Others are Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Governor Franklin and Governor Bligh in works by local playwright Stella Kent, performed by CentrStage, and a Christmas comedy show at the Royal Oak Hotel with Marcus Bower and several others which ran for over 30 years. Inspired by a semi-retired American magician who had moved to Launceston, he also developed a magic show which became very popular with many invitations to perform, then moved into balloon-twisting which grew even bigger. Now he trains other balloon artists at conventions in the US, travelling there every year, and in Sydney at an event called Ozjam where he has been honoured as a living icon of the balloon entertainment industry.

Marcus Bower started performing while at high school at St Patrick's College, appearing in a charity performance of *South Pacific* at 13 and at 15 in *The Sound of Music* with the Launceston Players. At university in Hobart Marcus got very involved with the Old Nick Uni revue company. On returning to Launceston he taught English and History at Kings Meadows High, then became drama teacher at Scotch Oakburn. Through the 1980s he performed in many big musicals with the Players, served on their committee, including periods as president and vice-president, and was heavily involved in the purchase of Chalmers Church as a theatre space. His wife Susie studied drama at the TCAE and was also active in amateur theatre. After 1990 Marcus did many productions with 'The Rep'/Three Rivers Theatre and CentrStage, and was invited to take up his ongoing role as theatre critic for *The Examiner*. Combining theatre involvements with teaching and family life has been hugely demanding, but there are many rewards. Recently came public recognition for his work; in 2014 Marcus received an award from the Launceston City Council for service to cultural heritage and the arts.

Stuart Loone got very involved in theatre at school but wasn't planning on an acting career. He had been accepted into several mainland universities but decided 'on a whim' to study drama at UTAS. Near the end of their course, a few of his cohort decided that they wanted to do more theatre, making their own work. In 1998 Stuart and five fellow recent graduates founded Second Storey Theatre, named after their studio above the Players' wardrobe quarters. Living on unemployment benefits and incidental income from performing work, they staged plays including Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and David Williamson's *Dead White Males* in collaboration with 'The Rep'.

In 2001 the group disbanded but morphed into Second Story Youth Theatre which provided theatre training for kids, led by Stuart's partner Jane Johnson. There was a weekly pub theatre show about a bogan family, staged like a TV program with Stuart as compere, and some film work in Hobart, direction of musicals at Launceston College and many CentrStage and Three River productions. In 2007 the company Mudlark was born, the name chosen for its dual suggestiveness, allowing for both serious, edgy drama and joyful comedy. With funding from bodies such as Arts Tasmania, Mudlark has been able to employ professional directors, stage new experimental plays and engage in collaborative projects interstate and overseas. Stuart stepped back from the group in 2015, however, when organisational work he had been doing for Opera Australia in Sydney led on to appointment as general manager of the \$50 million Triabunna tourism project.

In all the diverse activities he has been involved in over the years, as actor, director, organiser and now manager, Stuart sees an ongoing community-organisational commitment, a concern to 'get the show up' when there are few others available to do so.

On the issue of mobilising Launceston theatre through directing, the contribution of staff from the university has been vitally important. Jeff Hockley, very experienced in acting in Adelaide, first tried directing for old-time music hall shows staged by the Launceston Players in the 1970s. This proved an easy introduction to something he really loves: working out how play text works, developing a vision, creating a unique interpretation. He moved on to direct big musicals for the Players, hugely popular at the time, went to the US in 1983 to undertake an M. Ed. in audio-visual/communication technology, then returned to direct every production by the Players from 1990 until 2001. After *Les Miserables* in 2001, the one show he had always wanted to do, he took a break to give others a chance to come forward. By then he had moved from the audio-visual area of the university into organising graduations, a job he continues to do part-time in retirement, leading ceremonies in Sydney and China as well as in Tasmania. In 2004 he completed a post-graduate degree in voice studies at NIDA. Meanwhile Jeff remains intensely involved in the local theatre scene, managing lighting as well as directing and performing. For his 30 years of working in community theatre he was awarded the Launceston City Council's Citizen Award in 2000 for outstanding services to the community.

Jeff reports on the huge impact on directing in Launceston of Peter Hammond's work. Peter himself speaks wryly of arriving as an experienced professional actor and Rusden College and NIDA graduate to take up his university teaching position, full of pretentious commitment 'to bring theatre to Launceston'. He immediately began directing musicals for the Players: *The King and I* in 1984, *Annie* in 1985, famously the first-ever amateur production of *Evita* in 1986, *Cabaret*, *Godspell* and *My Fair Lady*. He brought students into the productions staged at the Princess Theatre, giving them experience of big theatre events not available on campus, and provided lighting and technical support along with direction. It was an all-round, win-win situation, supported by the community outreach policy of first the TCAE, then the university.

In the 1990s after CentrStage was formed by his colleagues John Lohrey and Michael Edgar, Peter concentrated his energies there. But community connection continued in CentrStage, with members of the Launceston theatre community invited to participate as performers, along with university staff and recent graduates, and to put forward proposals for productions. John, Peter and Michael did the directing, along with occasional invited directors. Michael had had a long distinguished acting career, first with the National Theatre Company in London, then the Melbourne Theatre Company in Melbourne, and once in Tasmania contributed crucially as both an actor and performance teacher and mentor.

Another major contribution by university staff to theatre in the wider community took the form of two epic, collaborative outdoor performances about local history by Launceston playwright Stella Kent. With a lifelong passion for theatre sparked by her participation as child in productions staged with the Strolling Players by her father, William Tart, Stella had studied drama at university, taught in schools, and in the 1990s was teaching in the TSIT drama and theatre program when John Lohrey and Peter Hammond encouraged her dawning interest in writing plays. In late 2000 she was commissioned to write a play for Theatre North. Stella chose as a theme the creation of a path into Cataract Gorge by the citizens of Launceston at the end of the 19th century and the establishment there of a Victorian pleasure garden. The play's setting just before Federation attracted the attention of Robyn Archer, director of the inaugural Ten Days On The Island arts festival in 2001, the Federation centenary year. So *Our Path* came to be staged in Cataract Gorge itself as the opening event of the festival, with a huge cast of performers drawn from different community groups.

In 2007 came a still more ambitious production, *Tamar Tidings*, depicting the stories of successive settlements along the river Tamar, culminating in the founding of Launceston and the history which unfolded there. The production was staged on a barge moving up the river from George Town to Launceston, docking at pontoons at selected locations to perform; it had a cast of more than a hundred performers, drawn from Tamar-based music, dance and theatre troupes. Peter Hammond, who had conceived the idea of the performance when inspired by a vision of the West Tamar countryside lit by the sunset, organised and directed it and raised the \$100,000 needed for the production. The event celebrated community theatre in multiple ways, with local stories performed and watched by community members in the settings where they had occurred – like Stella's father's productions long ago staging plays for the people in their own familiar environments rather than a remote theatre building.

After the retirement of John, Michael and Peter, university theatre activities and policies changed. In 2014 CentrStage closed down; by 2016 a replacement company had performed only once and an alternate form of community outreach was reportedly still under development. Both academics and theatre practitioners see the

closure of CentrStage as a major loss to the Launceston theatre scene. Michael Edgar notes that this shift in priorities by the University (UTAS) away from community engagement – a major job requirement when he and Peter Hammond joined the TCAE in the 1980s and a highlighted strength of UTAS in a 1990s national audit of universities – has contributed to some decline in serious theatre in Launceston. This is evidenced by its poor representation in recent Theatre Council of Tasmania awards in contrast to glowing success in the musical theatre area.

In musical theatre activity, meanwhile, a new form of ‘community theatre engagement’ can be seen at work, engaging young people and employing electronic media, websites, email lists and Facebook. Belinda King, executive director of the group Encore, speaks of ‘building the vibe’ about coming productions, creating a sense of growing excitement and involvement through extensive publicity including regular updates to the group’s 1700-strong email list. Encore consciously targets senior college students as performers, engaging with a demographic that other theatre groups were missing. Through their spectacular professionally-staged shows Encore gives talented young people opportunities to perform and provides them with audiences. Many will move elsewhere after school; two of their actors have gone on to NIDA, and Matthew Garwood, acclaimed star of *Phantom of the Opera*, is building a successful performing career interstate. But others stay and continue to be involved.

A figure who both illustrates and promotes theatrical talent among young people is Danny Gibson. Danny fell in love with musical theatre at primary school after starring as Daddy Warbucks in his class’s production of *Annie*, and went on to perform in many musicals, both at high school and with community groups. At seventeen, still in year 12, he directed *The Sound of Music* for the Musical Society at the Princess Theatre. At university he studied education with an elective in drama. More directing followed, along with invitations to teach and direct drama in schools, and appointment as marketing manager with the Examiner newspaper. Danny runs his own drama school at the Police Citizens Youth Club, training young people for the Launceston Competitions and staging an annual production involving the whole school. In 2002 he was named Young Tasmanian of the Year and in 2011 was elected to the Launceston City Council. He continues his theatre involvements including directing and stage-managing huge Encore productions; he loves participating in the ‘unique community’ of people brought together by each show. Danny sees his career as having been full of opportunities, often unexpected – who would have thought that theatre activities would have led to election to Council? – which he has seized enthusiastically. And this is what he advises young people: take up chances, have a go.

Concluding thoughts

Through the years a vast cast of people of diverse backgrounds have gathered to create Launceston theatre – locals and new arrivals; radio broadcasters, politicians and local councillors, doctors, academics and teachers, former professional actors. Along with those mentioned above there are many more key names. Some are drawn by the thrill of performing, others by the conceptual and organisational challenges of directing; those willing to propose and produce a show are always in demand. While men generally predominate as performers, women have played vital roles as producers, directors and administrators.

Great changes have taken place over the decades between the performances in rural community halls of the early 1950s to today’s spectacular musicals vigorously promoted on Facebook and the web. Many veteran performers feel apprehensive about the future, as the complexity and mobility of contemporary life impacts on people’s capacity to commit to the performance process and to the theatre group. But other theatre participants, particularly younger people, are more upbeat, seeing new opportunities in the changes. The show goes on....

* * *

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

10.00 am – 4.45 pm, Saturday 27 May 2017. Room 2, Glenorchy LINC, 4 Terry St.

The workshop will be conducted by Jill Cassidy of Oral History Tasmania and will cover all aspects of oral history practice. Topics include: interview technique, possible pitfalls, use of digital recorder, ethics, transcription & publication. Participants will be able to listen to interview excerpts and do practice interviews. Oral History Tasmania's digital recorder, available for members to hire, will be demonstrated.

Numbers are strictly limited and prior registration is essential for catering purposes.

PLEASE BRING A MEANS OF RECORDING (borrowed, not bought). A phone or tablet is acceptable for the purposes of the workshop.



ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA Inc. WORKSHOP REGISTRATION ABN 19264 496 176

For catering purposes registration must be received by **Wednesday 24 May**.

If you are paying electronically or an institution is paying your fee, please ensure that Oral History Tasmania receives a copy of this form.

Name:.....

Address:.....Postcode.....

Email:.....Phone:.....Mobile:.....

Any dietary requirements

Payment of \$_____ is for (please tick):

Registration for workshop \$40 members Oral History Tasmania
(includes lunch) \$50 non-members
\$30 students \$.....

Membership of Oral History Tasmania (for new members) \$.....

Payment options (Paper receipts will be issued on 27 May.)

Electronic transfer to: Commonwealth Bank, BSB 067 003; account number 2803 2783
Payment to 'Oral History Tasmania'.
Please provide your name as a reference. Date transferred: _____

After making electronic payment, email form to president@oralhistorytas.org.au

or

post to The Treasurer, Oral History Tasmania, 276 Brumby St, Longford 7301.

Cheque or money order: made payable to: 'Oral History Tasmania' and sent with completed form to:
The Treasurer, Oral History Tasmania, 276 Brumby St, Longford 7301.

Office use only Cheque/Money Order/Cash/Electronic Receipt No _____ Date _____

WEBSITES

Oral History Tasmania: www.oralhistorytas.org.au

Oral History Australia: www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au

IOHA (International Oral History Association): www.ioha.fgv.br

EQUIPMENT HIRE

A **Fostex digital recorder** is available for hire to members. It comes with its own lapel microphones and *User Guidelines*.

Cost of hire: \$30 a week, plus transport costs if necessary. You will also be required to sign a form agreeing to pay to replace any part that is damaged or lost while you have the recorder, up to a maximum of \$250 for individuals or \$500 for groups or institutions.

To make a booking, contact Jill Cassidy on 0418 178 098 or email president@oralhistorytas.org.au

THE OBJECTIVES OF ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA

- promote the practice and methods of oral history
- educate in the use of oral history methods
- encourage discussion of all problems in oral history
- foster the preservation of oral history records
- pursue common objectives and maintain links with other Australian oral history associations through membership of Oral History Australia Inc.

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Individuals	\$40.00	Households	\$55.00
Student/unemployed/pensioner	\$30.00	Institution	\$65.00

ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA EXECUTIVE

President, and delegate to Oral History Australia:

Jill Cassidy 0418 178 098 Email: president@oralhistorytas.org.au

Secretary: Alison Johnston

Treasurer: Lana Wall

Committee members: Terry Fritsche, Andrew Parsons, Leonie Prevost, Pauline Schindler, Jen Thompson

All correspondence should be directed to Jill Cassidy, Oral History Tasmania, Queen Victoria Museum, PO Box 403, Launceston Tas 7250, or emailed to president@oralhistorytas.org.au

Real to Reel is edited by Jill Cassidy. The next edition is due in August 2017 and contributions should reach the editor no later than 31 July. They can be emailed to president@oralhistorytas.org.au