

A HISTORY OF GEELONG REPERTORY SOCIETY (THEATRE COMPANY)

by Richard Critchlow

‘Repertory’ means an index or catalogue; a storehouse or repository where something may be found; a repertoire. A store of dramatic or musical pieces; one’s stock of parts, tunes and songs. (Oxford Dictionary) A company of players or a theatre to which is attached a permanent company of actors who perform plays belonging to a certain repertoire or of the same class. (Macquarie Dictionary)

The so-called English ‘repertory’ theatre thrived in the 1920’s with over 250 places of performance in England and Scotland, but by 1966 they had shrunk to about 20, primarily due to the ‘deadly competition’ of television. In the provincial areas, they survived, but they really had no right to the title because they did not keep a repertoire of plays ready for production as did the continental ‘repertoire’ theatres, which gave performances of several plays from their repertoire each week. English repertory theatre groups put on a play for a short continuous run: a week, or in the bigger cities, three weeks or a month. ‘Weekly rep’ as it was called, gave actors an excellent training by casting leading members of the company in minor roles for a week or two when they had a major part ahead of them. The London theatre owes much to provincial repertory, both because it provided actors accustomed to taking a wide range of parts (most West End actors graduated from ‘weekly rep’ and because many successful plays were first produced by the repertory theatres. (adapted from Encyclopedia Britannica).

English repertory or ‘community’ theatre, called ‘little theatres’ were established in the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century and were very common. They were called ‘Repertory Societies’ because the social interaction and camaraderie was much more important than the actual staging of the plays. In this regard most plays were staged for one performance only. These ‘societies’ were very popular in the 1920’s and 30’s performing serious plays and Australian drama, whilst the professional theatre mostly specialised in variety and vaudeville productions. The oldest surviving repertory theatre company in Australia is the Adelaide Repertory Theatre which was founded in 1908 and is still functioning despite very familiar vicissitudes. The oldest surviving ‘community theatre group’ in Melbourne is the Hartwell Players which was founded in 1938. Accordingly, we can boast that Geelong Rep is the oldest surviving community theatre company in Victoria.

In its Australian context repertory or community theatre has come to mean 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. In this sense it is true ‘amateur’ theatre in the sense that all who are involved are there ‘for the love of it’ rather than for pecuniary or other reasons.

According to the official histories of Geelong Rep three prominent Geelong identities met in early 1932 to establish a community theatre troupe. They were Dulcie Meakin (1899-1989), John McCabe Doyle (1869-1941) and John (Jack) Wilson. From the surviving records it is clear that Dulcie Meakin was the principal architect of the new

company which was called 'Geelong Repertory Society' and from the first production staged on April 6, 1932 of *Pygmalion* it displayed the familiar logo still used today. Dulcie Meakin directed or 'produced' *Pygmalion* and thirteen of the next sixteen productions, with John Doyle and John Wilson directing others. It is interesting that the Society staged 36 productions during the years 1932-1941 and of these 27 were directed by women. On the other hand there was no female Presidents of the Society until 1974. Dulcie Meakin continued to direct, produce or act in the Society's plays for the next 38 years. Her last appearance was as assistant producer with John Backhouse in *Boeing Boeing* in 1970.

The Society staged its first five plays in the Commun na Feinne Hall in Bellarine/ Kilgour street probably where the hotel now stands or attached to it. Interestingly, it was here in that Marjorie Lawrence made her public singing debut. In 1933 the Society began performing in the Hall of Honour in Yarra Street (now the YMCA building) and rented premises nearby for the storage of props etc. They performed 33 plays here until the coming of war in 1941 obliged the Society to go into recess until 1946.

In 1945 a group of prominent Geelong men gathered to try to create a organisation which would revitalise the arts and music in Geelong after the terrible war. Led by Cedric Hirst, the group created the Geelong Association of Music and Art (G.A.M.A.) which was to act as an umbrella organisation for several 'Sections' involved in the cultural arts of the Geelong District. Primarily concerned with musical productions, GAMA initially consisted of a Choral Society, Musical Society and Orchestral Society. An Art Society, Madrigal Choir and Film Society joined later, and Dulcie Meakin was instrumental in reviving the Repertory Society by joining GAMA in May 1946. Repertory remains a Section of GAMA today. The new GAMA Section staged *The Blue Goose*, directed by Pat Trotter at the Hall of Honour in May 1946 to be followed by *Richard of Bordeaux* directed by Dulcie Meakin for four performances in July. On October 1946 the Society staged *Gaslight* for two performances, and interestingly the same play was staged in July 2014 at the Woodbin Theatre, 68 years later and with ten performances.

In March 1947 GAMA decided to find a 'home' and leased the 'Band of Hope' building in Ryrie Street. This was the former Presbyterian Church known as the 'Ryrie Street Church' or 'The Steeple Church'. It was built in 1857 as the first Presbyterian Church in Geelong. In 1914 it was decided to build a new Church in Aphrasia Street Newtown and the 'Steeple Church' was abandoned. Its steeple was demolished and the remainder was purchased by the 'Band of Hope' temperance society which built a new façade with shops along Ryrie Street. This refurbished façade still stands. The old church became known as the 'GAMA Theatre' and in October/November 1947 the Repertory Society staged five performances of *Caesar's Friend* in the theatre, directed by Dulcie Meakin. Repertory continued to perform in the GAMA Theatre for the next thirty years (1947-1977) and to produce no less than 175 plays during these years.

Adjacent to the GAMA Theatre was the Geelong Mechanics Institute building which was built in 1856. By 1867 the Institute had added a second storey and a concert hall. At one time it was lauded as the largest Mechanics Institute in Australia and it hosted some of the most famous performers of the period; actors and singers like Charles and Ellen Kean,

General Tom Thumb and his party of dwarfs, Maggie Moore and J. C. Williamson; lecturers like Michael Davitt (Irish nationalist), Mark Twain (novelist), Alfred Lord Tennyson (poet), Henry Stanley (explorer) and Annie Besant (women's rights). Heavyweight boxing champion John L Sullivan gave an exhibition there. In 1926 it burned down, but was rebuilt as a single-storey building. The façade of the building still remains today next to the 'Band of Hope' façade. Both of these are now part of the GPAC.

During the 1930's the Mechanics' Institute concert hall was renamed the Plaza Theatre and it became a picture theatre up to the war. During the 1950's it was severely neglected and the rise of television saw its eventual demise. In 1954 the Mechanics' Institute was dissolved and replaced by a statutory body called the Geelong and District Cultural Institute with a brief to revive the sagging cultural and intellectual fortunes of the region. During the next twenty years, the Plaza became the home of musical theatre groups such as the Geelong Light Opera Company, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society, and GSODA (Geelong Society of Operatic and Dramatic Arts) and it was used by musical groups such as the GAMA Choral Society (today Geelong Chorale), Madrigal Society, and the Geelong Musical Society etc.

The physical state of the two old decrepit buildings was quite dreadful and increasingly vocal complaints prompted the Cultural Institute to promote the concept of a new centre for the performing arts in Geelong. It purchased the lease of the GAMA Theatre and eventually decided to demolish both buildings and construct what is now known as GPAC (The Geelong Performing Arts Centre). The Act was passed and in December 1977 the GAMA Theatre was demolished and the Plaza Theatre incorporated into the new structure.

The last Repertory performance in the GAMA Theatre was the Revue '*Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about Geelong but Were Afraid to Ask*' (Nov-Dec.1977). It was hoped that the assurances received that the new GPAC would adequately compensate Repertory for the loss of its home, and that it would be the new home of community as well as professional theatre in Geelong, were sincere. Many were very dubious. Even today many of the 'old Reppies' are still very bitter that they worked so hard to raise funds for the new Centre only to be effectively excluded from the place.

For the next three years (1978-80) Repertory was thrown out into the metaphorical 'wilderness'. Without a permanent venue and no home, sixteen plays were performed in a variety of venues, notably the East Geelong Library, the Historical Record Centre Hall, an abandoned mill at the end of Pakington Street, Geelong Racing Club, Gordon Theatrette, Geelong Art Gallery, and Deakin University. Repertory was obliged to find temporary premises for its sets and props, and stories abound of these places with spiders as big as dinner plates and abundant vermin as well as dangerous working conditions for those constructing sets etc.

GPAC finally opened in early 1981 and Keith Smith directed *Confusions* there in and for the next nine years (1981-90) 37 plays were performed in the Blakiston or Ford Theatres. However, it soon became apparent that the use of the GPAC was becoming economically

untenable. Increasing rental costs, the spiraling cost of using GPAC technicians and personnel, lack of resources meaning that productions were starved of funds, falling audience numbers and the unfair competition with professional and imported shows, together with inflexibility of the GPAC management meant that there were soon headlines in the Geelong Advertiser that Repertory was gradually dying, and very few seemed to care. Depression spread through the Society and GAMA was unable to assist. Repertory went back to the 'wilderness' again, with plays being performed in the Ceres Temperance Hall, St Paul's Church, Geelong Racing Club and the Historical Record Centre Hall once again. Repertory reached its lowest ebb during 1988 and 1989 and seemed to be doomed to extinction.

In 1981 GAMA received a bequest from Lilian Stott, a member of the Musical Society, and it was decided to use the money to purchase a rehearsal and storage space for GAMA. The Geelong Joinery in Villamanta Place, Geelong West was scaling down its operations and wanted to sell a hardware annex which they had called the 'Woodbin'. Fronting on to Coronation St Geelong West, it had operated as a hardware store for many years and included a timber store at the rear. It was purchased and was known as the Lilian Stott Memorial GAMA Centre, which is still its proper name today.

Over the next eight years, the financial situation of GAMA also reached alarming proportions, and renting the new Centre to various groups only resulted in vandalism and further costs. Ultimately GAMA was close to bankruptcy, and in 1989 Dennis Mitchell (1932-2014) President of Repertory proposed that the Centre could be converted into a small theatre with space allocated for a foyer, back stage facilities and a workshop/storeroom at the rear. With the belated agreement of GAMA Council, Dennis, a retired engineer, approached Geelong West Council with a proposal to convert the Centre into a 'place of assembly', and after remarkable efforts by him and his wife Elaine, raised the ceiling/roof of the building, rearranged the walls within and purchased theatre seats. In due course, the eminently versatile Woodbin Theatre opened on September 27, 1989 with the performance of two plays, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, and Dennis' own play *Behind the Arras*. Repertory had a home again, and the troops rallied behind Dennis and Elaine. Soon the Woodbin Theatre developed a reputation for quality theatre and the standard has been maintained ever since. Seating just over 80 people, the theatre is small, but actors and audiences have come to relish the intimacy and immediacy of the performing space, whilst set constructors like me are very pleased to be able to construct a set four weeks before the play opens. There have been 125 plays performed at the Woodbin Theatre up to early 2015. GAMA retains ownership of the Centre and Repertory now pays a 'usage charge' (rental) to GAMA in compensation for virtually monopolising the use of the Centre.

Confusion in the community's mind as to the real meaning of 'Repertory' led to a decision to change the name of the company to 'Geelong Repertory Theatre Company' in 1989. Elaine Mitchell relates a story that when an actors' children were recruited to write invitations to a Repertory production, they wrote 'Reperroty' on the invitations, and no-one seemed to notice!