



COVER SHEET

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LA BOITE THEATRE: A BRIEF HISTORY

This brief history was commissioned by La Boite Theatre Company and completed in February 2007. As a series of printed panels with accompanying photographs this history is available to the public in the foyer area of The Roundhouse Theatre, Kelvin Grove, home to La Boite. The author, Dr Christine Comans, is the Company's official historian.

The Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society announced its arrival on Friday 31st July, 1925 with a one night season at the Theatre Royal in Elizabeth Street of A.A.Milne's comedy *The Dover Road*. The following day, *The Brisbane Courier* greeted this inaugural production with much enthusiasm:

Nothing was left to chance. The cast was admirably chosen, and the large audience was held by the splendid acting for two hours and three-quarters. The players, one and all, rose to the occasion, and satisfied the sceptics that the repertory movement in Brisbane has come to stay; it will grow from strength to strength; it will "enlarge the communal mind", and prove a "great and joyous power" in our cultural life.

It was Barbara Sisley's idea to start a repertory theatre group in Brisbane. Professor J.J.Stable, Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Queensland and passionate about Australian writing, took little persuading to become involved. Together they co-founded the Society in 1925.

Sisley, a professionally trained actress and leading speech and drama teacher, was Senior Producer and dominant artistic presence for twenty years until her tragic death in a road accident in 1945. She directed fifty-seven productions, performed numerous leading roles, and always demanded the highest possible artistic standards. Stable was its first and longest-serving Council President. After guiding it through the challenging times of the Great Depression and World War Two, he finally resigned in 1945.

Under their combined influences, Brisbane Repertory Theatre quickly established itself as a significant cultural entity in Brisbane: true to Repertory principles, it produced plays – some Australian - of literary and educational merit not usually seen on the commercial stage; it attracted talented amateur actors and directors such as Rhoda Felgate, Daphne Roemermann, Clare Clarke, Leo Guyatt and Dulcie Scott; it developed a strong audience base of loyal members; and it attracted media interest in its productions, developments and controversies.

One such controversy involved Repertory's inaugural Australian Playwriting Competition of 1931, won by Brisbane playwright George Landen Dann for his play *In Beauty It Is Finished*. Its 'blunt' language and realistic portrayal of a relationship between a young white prostitute and an aboriginal man attracted much media attention. Smith's Weekly (4 July 1931) reviled it as a 'Sordid Drama of Miscegenation', letters to the editor called for its banning, and sermons were preached

for and against it. In response, Stable publicly defended Dann's play as a serious work of art and Repertory's artistic integrity in going ahead with the production. In the end, the publicity ensured full houses for its three night season at His Majesty's in Queen Street!

After the double blow of Sisley's sudden death and Stable's resignation, the Theatre momentarily faltered under the weight of surviving the difficult post-war years without their former high-profile leaders. However, short bursts of energy from Presidents Tom Stephens, Alex Foster, Cecil Carson and Gwen MacMinn and their respective Councils were more than enough to keep the Theatre alive and prospering between 1946 and 1956.

Yet, in these post-war years nothing really significant happened in terms of change until Babette Stephens emerged as a forceful and dynamic presence, first as Council President between 1957 and 1959 then as Theatre Director from 1960 to 1968. It was under her leadership that Brisbane Repertory began, once again, to thrive artistically and to evolve as an organisation.

Sharing direction with Stephens was another 'star' and great personality, Gloria Birdwood-Smith. Although the Australian play almost disappeared during their time, these two experienced directors programmed highly successful, audience-pleasing seasons of popular English and American plays. Together, they nurtured into professional careers aspiring actors such as Judith Arthy, Ray Barrett, Barry Creyton, Elaine Cusick, Rosalind Seagrave and Rowena Wallace.

Perhaps Babette Stephens' greatest legacy was her role in the purchasing of four cottages in and around Hale Street in Milton and the creation of the first 'La Boite'. From its genesis, Brisbane Repertory struggled to find a home of its own. At various times it hired or leased all the well known spaces in Brisbane including the Theatre Royal, the original Cremorne Theatre, His/Her Majesty's Theatre, the Princess Theatre, Rialto Theatre and Albert Hall.

Inspired by Hayes Gordon's 'in-the-round' Ensemble Theatre in Sydney, Council member Bruce Blocksidge suggested the conversion of one of the cottages into a similar theatre space. So it was that on the 25th June 1967 the first Brisbane Repertory's La Boite opened at 57 Hale Street with a production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.

French for 'the box', 'La Boite' was an apt description for this intimate, 70 seat, box-like space which attracted a new, younger audience and a new group of directors and actors, including Jane Atkins, Eileen Beatson, Rikki Burke, Gary O'Neil, Barry Otto, Lesley Ricketts, John Stanton, Kaye Stevenson and Muriel Watson. Soon, the repertoire changed to include more radical, non-mainstream and even Australian plays, better suited to the 'experimental' feel of La Boite's little space and to the explosive cultural shift in Australian theatre that was well under way by 1970.

Leading the Theatre into a period of unprecedented change and development was Bruce Blocksidge, Council President 1967 to 1972, and Jennifer Blocksidge, Honorary Director between 1969 and 1975 and President 1976 to 1978.

The most significant accomplishment of their time was the opening of Australia's first purpose-built, 200 seat theatre-in-the round. Designed by architect Blair Wilson, the

award-winning La Boite building in Hale Street soon became an iconic and much-loved Brisbane theatrical landmark. Such an ambitious project was made possible by a \$40,000 Queensland Government subsidy, followed by an annual grant to support operations. The new La Boite officially opened on Sunday 4th June 1972 with a production of *A Refined Look at Existence* by Australian playwright Rodney Milgate.

Hardly had it begun operations before two issues surfaced that would worry the Theatre for several decades. In critic Katharine Brisbane's words, La Boite soon became 'the place to go to in order to see the red meat of theatre'. Older members in particular didn't want to see 'red meat' and didn't much like the new preference for Australian plays many of which they considered crude and outspoken. The second issue was the tension between La Boite's amateur status and the desire of professional directors and actors to work in this exciting and versatile performance space.

Although La Boite was neither financially nor philosophically ready for professional status, Jennifer Blocksidge made it clear that 'our eventual aim must be professionalism in the fullest sense'. In fact, the journey began in 1973 with the appointment of an Executive Officer, and continued in 1975 with the foundation of the Early Childhood Drama Project (ECDP), the first professional theatre-in-education team in Queensland.

At the beginning of 1976, professionalism came one step closer with the appointment of La Boite's first salaried Artistic Director, Rick Billingham. This event marked its historic transition from an amateur theatre to a pro-am community theatre. Billingham was committed to innovative theatre and to contemporary Australian works best highlighted in his choice of John Romeril's *The Floating World* for his directorial debut. Supportive of Queensland writers, in 1977 he programmed a groundbreaking season of plays by writers Lorna Bol, George Landen Dann and Jill Shearer.

By 1978, after three years of professional artistic direction, La Boite had become much more than a 'little' theatre run only for the benefit of its members. Funded federally as well by the State Government and thanks to media coverage from *The Australian*, *The National Times* and *Theatre Australia*, it could now claim national significance.

Malcolm Blaylock was appointed Artistic Director in 1979. This was a buoyant time for La Boite and for the pro-am theatre community in Brisbane. With the support of a staff of nine, he took La Boite to new heights of achievement and consolidated its growing reputation for alternative, risky, and often overtly political theatre. Following the trend begun by Billingham, in 1980 Blaylock programmed La Boite's first-ever all-Australian season. Trouble was looming however. The Australia Council's Theatre Board was changing its funding criteria. La Boite had to decide to return to a completely amateur theatre or become a fully professional theatre company.

When Andrew Ross was appointed Artistic Director in 1982, he understood that the theatre's goal was for a professional theatre. The exciting artistic work that he developed during his short time at La Boite gave promise to the view that La Boite could become the Nimrod of the North. However, resistance to change led to several very troubled years for La Boite, culminating in the devastating loss in 1983 of both the State Government and Australia Council Theatre Board grants.

Amazingly, the doors stayed open with a skeleton staff including new part-time staff member Rosemary Herbert. A massive effort in 1984 by the Council, new administrator Ron Layne and new resident directors Mike Bridges and Mary Hickson, saw the restoration of Theatre Board funding and, to the end of 1985, some memorable artistic successes. In this period of upheaval, it was a brave Helen Routh who took on the President's job in 1985. A major shake-up of management structures ensued and a high policy priority was given to young people's theatre.

On Mike Bridges' departure, the Council created a new position of Managing Artistic Director (M.A.D) appointing Jim Vilé in 1986 to this combined role of artistic director and CEO. Whilst funding imperatives kept theatre by and for young people as the Theatre's major objective during Vilé's artistic directorship, he understood and respected the 'pro-am' nature of La Boite and during his time main house pro-am theatre flourished. By 1988/89, La Boite had reached a reasonably secure financial position once again, achieved through pragmatic programming, an increase in the quality of artistic work and conservative financial management.

Patrick Mitchell succeeded Jim Vilé in 1990. The widely held perception that La Boite was an 'experimental' theatre company had attracted Patrick. But in reality, he inherited what he considered a middle of the road company and his plans for his own 1991 season caused significant tension between himself and the Council. Brightening an otherwise difficult and frustrating year was the 1990 celebration that marked the 65th Anniversary of Brisbane Repertory Theatre.

By the time David Bell was appointed Artistic Director in 1991, he already had a long history with La Boite having directed approximately fourteen main house productions since 1975, including such artistic and box-office successes as *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* and *Bouncers*. Whilst his eighteen months as AD was the beginning of La Boite as a professional Theatre and produced some outstanding productions, under-funding due to changes in the Queensland State Government funding policies created a financially stressful time for the company. These were turbulent times generally for the Brisbane theatre industry and it was a real possibility that La Boite might succumb to the same fate as TN! Theatre Company, which closed its doors in 1991.

Sue Rider, appointed Artistic Director in 1993, new General Manager Deborah Murphy, and Council Chair Philip Pike and Treasurer Peter Lawson proved a formidable team at a time when La Boite found itself at a crossroad leading either to success or failure as a professional theatre company. Their strong leadership and a sympathetic and supportive Queensland Arts Ministry were the keys to La Boite's successful and historic transformation into the professional company that Jennifer Blockside had dreamed of twenty years before.

From the beginning of her term, Sue Rider guided La Boite into a period of unparalleled growth. By the end of her second year, she had been awarded a prestigious Matilda Award for her strong and visionary creative steering of the company. The quality of her directorship drew to La Boite outstanding Queensland theatre professionals. Her championing of commissioned new works by Queensland playwrights and new Australian plays was unprecedented in the State's cultural history and gave the company a market-enhancing profile that contributed

substantially to its success. By the end of the final decade of the twentieth century, La Boite's national acclaim rested on Rider's gritty commitment to Queensland artists, development of new Queensland works, State and national tours, and overall support for Australian plays.

Three highly effective and hard-working Board Chairs, Philip Pike, Peter Lawson and Athol Young supported the realisation of La Boite's artistic vision throughout the '90s. All was not plain sailing however. Coupled with the increasingly overpowering presence and expansion plans of the Lang Park Stadium and the Theatre's outgrowing of its 200 seating capacity, La Boite in the mid-'90s had to face a very difficult reality: that this iconic building, unique in Australia, might be reaching the end of its life.

Aligned with this issue was the Board's growing sense in the late 1990s that it was time for a change of artistic leadership, time for fresh energy and a new vision if La Boite was to continue to evolve as a dynamic company. Reluctant to leave and despite the unarguable success of the company in 2000, Sue Rider was asked by the Board to step down from her position. Thus ended her eight year contribution to an extraordinary period of growth and development. To date, she has the distinction of being the longest serving professional director in the Theatre's history.

When Sean Mee succeeded Sue Rider as Artistic Director in 2001, he inherited not only Queensland's second largest professional theatre company but also a theatre building that was physically deteriorating and increasingly over-whelmed by the Suncorp Stadium development. The Queensland Government, acknowledging the importance of La Boite to the State's continued cultural vitality, pledged to fund the Theatre's move from Hale Street to the Queensland University of Technology's new Creative Industries Precinct at Kelvin Grove. By the end of 2003, after selling the Hale Street property, La Boite Theatre Company had moved into the \$4.3 million purpose-built 400 seat Roundhouse Theatre complex on a 25 year lease.

Fittingly, the final play of the final season in the Hale Street venue was David Williamson's *The Removalists*. Before the doors were closed for the last time, the past was honoured in a theatrical 'goodbye' to all the memories associated with the Hale Street theatre. Produced by long-serving Public Relations Manager Rosemary Herbert, *The Final Bow* was a joyous celebration of each decade of theatrical activity since the 1960s.

It was a momentous decision in the Theatre's history to sacrifice a much loved, iconic Australian theatre building and the security of real estate for another kind of future in a very different environment. But to have stayed at Hale Street may well have handed a death sentence to La Boite. It had long outgrown the facility. It was definitely time to move on.

Under Sean Mee's artistic directorship, the company has increasingly embraced the programming of new Queensland works commissioned through La Boite. Post-2003, La Boite continues to program exclusively Australian works and Brisbane and Queensland audiences continue to delight in seeing their stories on La Boite's stage or in touring venues. State-wide and national touring has been central to La Boite's creative agenda since 1993. In 2007, La Boite fulfils a long-held ambition to tour internationally with a reprise of its successful 2006 co-production with the UK's

Derby Playhouse of David Malouf's *Johnno*, adapted for the stage by Stephen Edwards.

So, to date, this is La Boite's remarkable story of survival and transformation. For over 80 years, and despite numerous set-backs and crises, this organization has survived, changed and developed in an unbroken line of theatrical activity, a distinctive achievement in Australia's theatre history.

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