

Robin Lovejoy

DREW FORSYTHE chasing chooks was not enough. I vividly remembered those moments at the Parade Theatre in 1972. To anchor a scene in rural Australia, the director had given two lordly roosters a brief strut on stage, and Drew was only just managing to keep their strut to the desired brevity. I needed, however, to remember more. The play was *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the setting, quite radically for the time, was Padua via Mudgee. Hence the chooks. John Bell, if memory served me correctly, did the taming, and Drew certainly did the chasing, but was Robin Lovejoy the director? The taxi was rapidly nearing the Mosman home of Lovejoy's widow, Patricia, who had offered his paintings, photographs and papers to the National Library. Graeme Powell, the National Library's Manuscript Librarian, and I were to assess the collection, and at such moments context is important. I had consulted the Library's biography files and found information on Lovejoy's career as one of Australia's leading directors of theatre and opera from the 1950s to the 1970s, but had not found any mention of a production of the *Shrew*.

Patricia Lovejoy and her daughter Kate gave us a sparkling welcome. One of the pleasures of hunting and collecting for the National Library is encountering people such as Patricia and Kate. Over lunch, they entertained us with affectionate anecdotes from Robin Lovejoy's life.

One of Patricia's stories concerned Robin's début as a theatre director. He had been on an island in the Torres Strait, where he served with a radar unit in World War II. To entertain the men, he directed Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Resourcefully, he painted the backdrops with his shaving brush, and cast a burly sergeant as Eliza. That must certainly count as the requisite Humble Beginning to a stellar career.

After lunch, Graeme and I moved into the dining room, walking softly but carrying big notebooks. The dining table and chairs were covered with piles of programmes, cuttings, letters, scripts, posters, paintings and photographs. We settled into several hours of happy sifting.

Among the piles of material that we examined were many folders of press cuttings. They told a story of a remarkable life. Robin Lovejoy was only in his early twenties when he was asked to design the costumes for the ballet *Corroboree*. He moved on to directing and designing plays for the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and formed the Trust Players with Hugh Hunt in 1958. In 1965 he was appointed co-director of the Old Tote Theatre Company, and, in this capacity, directed *Richard II*, the opening theatre production at the Sydney

Opera House, in 1973. After retiring from the Old Tote in 1974, his reputation ensured that he had a steady stream of work as a freelance director. In 1974 he was awarded an OBE for services to theatre. From 1982 he was head of design and directing at NIDA. His outstanding contribution to Australian theatre ended far too soon, when he died from cancer in 1985, at the age of sixty-one.

Among the piles on the dining room table, I found photographs from a galaxy of significant productions, including Anthony Coburn's *The Bastard Country*, Jean Anouilh's *Time Remembered*, Rodney Milgate's *A Refined Look at Existence*, and David Williamson's *What If You Died Tomorrow*. There was a good selection of portraits, which are the bread and butter of biographical research. There were beautiful costume and set designs, for Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Mozart's *Idomeneo* and several other productions. The drawings often bore hurried inscriptions, which showed that they were also Lovejoy's working tools. On the back of a painting of a seemingly dashing character called Mosca, Lovejoy had written: 'This man will need to wear padding under his tights — legs are thin.'

But what of the chooks? I found part of the answer among

the hundreds of photographs at Patricia Lovejoy's house. One included Drew Forsythe. The caption identified it as *The Taming of the Shrew*, produced by Robin Lovejoy, for the Old Tote Theatre Company, at the Parade Theatre, in 1972. I was delighted to find that it had been a Lovejoy production. It seemed fitting that part of the legacy of such a director were scenes that could be recalled thirty years later. I was just a little disappointed, however, that the photographs contained no evidence of any avian actors.

The Robin Lovejoy collection is now safely in the National Library, where it joins and complements the papers of David Williamson and John Antill, the photographic record of the J.C. Williamson Company and

thousands of theatre programmes in the Prompt Collection. And it was in the Prompt Collection that I finally tracked down the roosters. In the very fine print for the programme for that 1972 production of the *Shrew*, there is a line 'Scampa and Box trained and owned by Gwyne Brookes'. Impressive names for chooks, but it was an impressive scene, in an impressive production, in a career that left Australia a richer place.

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Robin Lovejoy designing costumes for *Corroboree*, 1950