

## **ANNUAL REPORT 1957**

### **THE AUSTRALIA ELIZABETHAN THEATRE TRUST**

#### **THE BEGINNING**

THE DECISION to commemorate the 1954 visit to Australia of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh by launching an appeal for funds to establish a theatrical Trust might appear to the casual observer as an example of Anglo-Saxon eccentricity in a sun-drenched country.

The object of this appeal was boldly summarised as follows: "Our aim is to provide a theatre of Australians by Australians for Australians."

The casual observer might be tempted to comment that, since Australian interests have been associated rather with sporting and material affairs than with art and literature, the appeal would be unlikely to meet with a wide response. Such misgivings proved groundless and a fund of £90,000 was quickly raised from private persons and institutions throughout Australia, many of whom became sponsoring members by donating £500 or more. To this was added a grant of £30,000 from the Commonwealth Government.

A Board of Directors was appointed representing 1,400 members contributing annual subscriptions of £5 each. The Trust was incorporated under Royal Charter and Her Majesty graciously consented to become its Patron.

In fact, the foundation of the Trust was no sudden eruption of Anglo-Saxon eccentricity. The ground for the creation of an Australian theatre had been well prepared in advance. Experimental seasons of home-grown opera, ballet and drama had been presented in each of the States and had received the generous support of State Governments and City Councils. In many cases fine artistic results had been achieved, and although costs and receipts had seldom managed to balance, the margin between success and failure was often far narrower than would be the case in Great Britain or America. The commercial theatre organizations, in particular the long-established firm of J. C. Williamson's, had shown a record of opera, ballet and drama importations unsurpassed in the British Commonwealth, and undoubtedly our distinguished visitors had helped to whet the public's taste for a theatre of its own.

In 1949 the Commonwealth Government invited Tyrone Guthrie to tour the country and report on the best method of establishing an Australian theatre. Although his views on the state of the home-grown theatre at that time were not entirely flattering to Australian hopes, theatre enthusiasts refused to give up their dream for the speedy creation of and demand for a national theatre. On the artistic side the number of Australian actors, singers and dancers whose services are in demand in London, New York and elsewhere, as well as the wealth of talent in Australia itself, is a proof of the country's ability to provide a worthy contribution to international theatre.

The Trust was, in fact, the natural expression of a deeply felt urge in Australian life. Credit for the success it has so far achieved must be given, not only to those who formed it and to those who direct its policies, but to the many who by their ceaseless efforts, often attended

by considerable personal sacrifices have proved the worthiness of this vast continent to possess a theatrical life of its own.

We decided that the best method of serving Australian theatre would be in the first instance to concentrate on raising the standards of our own theatre, to that of the finest overseas companies. To do this we realised that we must concentrate the best available talent into single units. Such a policy presents inevitable difficulties in a federal country with proud State traditions, where vast distances make a single national theatre building impractical and touring exceedingly costly. Considerable sacrifice by individual organisations was inevitable and some disappointment was bound to be felt that no individual organisation had been selected as a national company. The program we had laid out for the first phase of our work is as follows:-

- An Australian Drama Company.
- An Australian Opera Company.  
(Both of these to tour the country on a nation-wide scale)
- Assistance to promising playwrights.
- Training of young artists.

But before we could begin putting such a programme into practice, we had to satisfy two essential requirements - adequate finance and a certainty of obtaining theatre space.

**FINANCE:** Obviously greater financial security was needed than investments from our capital funds on the one hand and membership subscriptions on the other could provide. In order to secure our ability to present continuing tours of high-standard drama and opera, we determined in the first place to help ourselves by including a percentage of thoroughly popular entertainment in our projects. The highly successful production of *The Boy Friend*, undertaken in conjunction with J. C. Williamson's, is an example of this policy.

In the second place we considered that we should apply to the State Governments and City Councils for assistance over the initial years of our work. Our appeal was generously met by all the States and by the City Councils of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. In all, an annual subsidy of over £40,000 has been voted towards the support of our aims.

**THEATRE SPACE:** Clearly some kind of home theatre was necessary in which productions could be mounted and tried out. On another page will be found the story of how we acquired and equipped the Elizabethan Theatre in Sydney, which, due to the generosity of the State Government of New South Wales and the City Council of Sydney, as well as many private persons and firms is now one of the finest theatres in Australia. In other States, we have sought the co-operation of local theatre managers to provide us with the required playing time. Their co-operation has been abundantly forthcoming and in return we have been able to offer hospitality in our own theatre to the productions of leading theatrical firms.

**ORGANISATION:** Our next move was to decentralise our own organization so as to give flexibility to its administration. In each of the States, Committees have been formed to promote the building of audiences for Trust ventures. Separate Committees have been set up under the Trust Board to handle the affairs of the Elizabethan Theatre, the Australian Opera Company and the Australian Drama Company. General Managers have been appointed to carry through the various projects and these Committees were linked to the central Trust Board through the Executive Director of the Trust.

ACTIVITIES: On other pages will be found details of our activities in the fields of Opera, Drama, Puppetry and Musical Comedy. In addition, mention should be made of the assistance we have provided for the production of Australian plays. The policy of the Trust in this respect has been to offer guarantees against loss to local repertory companies prepared to try out new Australian plays. Our most successful achievement so far has been the discovery and exploitation of Ray Lawler's fine Australian play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.

The one notable omission from our activities has been the promotion of ballet. Ballet companies are not grown in a hurry and in any case the country possesses a first-class Ballet Company in the Borovansky Australian Ballet. It is our hope that in time we may be able to stimulate the development of modern ballet in Australia with special attention to Australian subjects.

TRAINING: We are pursuing the vital task of establishing a school for actors and technicians. This we expect shortly to achieve in conjunction with a University. Our aim is to establish a School of Dramatic Art providing a vocational course for stage aspirants as well as general opportunities for University students to study the theatre.

FUTURE POLICY: The next phase of our policy will, we hope, allay fears of over-centralisation. In this we will concentrate on promoting the development of efficient little theatre organizations in each State in order to assist them to reach fully professional status. A start has already been made in this direction by the provision of a guarantee against loss for an experimental six months period to the Independent Theatre, Sydney. This long-established amateur theatre with a fine tradition of plays and players behind it, will now endeavour to run as a professional repertory company.

This then, is The Beginning – a beginning which is rapidly capturing the warm-hearted response of Australian audiences. Difficulties and dangers lie ahead. It will take time to establish Australian leading artists on a level of popularity with overseas stars; it will take time to develop a repertoire of Australian plays; it will take time to train a sufficiently large number of experienced artists to meet the demands of an increasing stage, television and cinema industry. But the challenge to create a theatre of Australians by Australians for Australians is being met and the dynamic of a pioneering civilisation will not fail in its pursuit.

HUGH HUNT.  
Executive Director of  
**The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust**