

Connie Healy

Women In Radical Theatre In Brisbane

Firstly, I must introduce myself. I was interviewed five years ago by a reporter from the Courier-Mail (our local Brisbane newspaper) after my book *Defiance*, dealing with the history of radical/political theatre from 1930 to 1962 in Brisbane, was published. She described me in lurid terms. 'An atheist at 15, a socialist by 16, a communist by 17, widowed at 19. Adolescent angst, Connie Healy had it by the truckload.' Aimed at a reading public eagerly pursuing the private lives and antics of film stars and so-called celebrities, these bare facts fail to explain how I, and many of my generation, became interested in radical theatre and socialist ideas. The effect of war on my father and his generation and the death of my first husband in the Second World War left indelible marks. A fear of unemployment and poverty and the need for a peaceful and just society has never left me.

We were the children of the depression of the 1930s that had its impact on every aspect of Australian life. It was a period of intense cultural activity and amateur theatre groups flourished in all major towns many producing serious dramas focussing on contemporary social problems. The New Theatre movement was very much a product of these times. My two sisters joined Unity Theatre and after I left school I worked in the Commonwealth bank and acted in Unity Theatre in my spare time.

Women led the way, writing books, poetry and plays of some distinction. Half the novels in Australia between 1928 and 1939 were written by women and were recognised as the best in this field. Literary historians confirm that at least four women - Mona Brand, Dymphna Cusack, Catherine Duncan and Betty Roland - were also writing plays of impressive quality. All wrote for the left theatres.

Queensland has long had a thriving tradition of radical theatre. Unemployed workers from the bagman's camp at Victoria Park formed a dramatic group the Roving Reds Revue Company in the early 30s. It later became the Proletarian Players and their best known work *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropist* was staged in the Albert Hall in 1936. It proposed socialism as the remedy for unemployment and poverty - important issues in this Depression era.

The Student Theatre formed in 1936 was an offshoot of the University of Queensland Radical Club, forerunner of Unity theatre, emerging as New Theatre after the war's end. This was a new type of theatre full of young people who loved theatre, believed in popular culture, and was serious about changing the world. Left theatres were about and for the working class, supporting workers' struggles, welcoming strikers into their theatres and taking sketches to jobs and picket lines. In 1938 Unity theatre presented Clifford Odets' famous strike play *Waiting for Lefty* at a protest meeting organised by the Trades and Labour Council at the Ritz Theatre (formerly Bohemia Stadium) in South Brisbane. Two women, Marjorie Bulcock (later Puregger) and Mabel Pound, later a Secretary in the national office of the Waterside Workers' union, were in the cast.

Occasionally, the working class audience targeted by Unity theatre reacted in an unexpected fashion to the serious message that the players were presenting. During the Spanish Civil War, the one-act play *Remember Pedrocito* was taken around Brisbane suburbs. Once it was done in a very run-down working class area over at South Brisbane. They had a rather tough sort of audience there at the time. In the play the Spanish loyalists captured a girl from the fascist side - they were dealing with other captives - and they pulled her over and one of them said: 'What are we going to do with her?' Well, they were told in no uncertain terms by the audience just what they should do with her. It just about closed the play.

Another example of the how the group took theatre to the people. In 1954 the local newspaper the Courier-Mail used its columns to launch vicious attacks on Brisbane wharfies, depicting them in cartoon and prose as overweight, overpaid, underworked and far too militant. A skit, 'The Courier-Mail Wharfie' written by Jim Crawford, lampooning the Courier-Mail's depiction was always a popular drawcard for workers at any open-air worker's gathering.

The flourishing Unity/New theatres introduced workers to left-wing issues, Irish plays, American protest plays and plays discussing Aboriginal and women's rights and racial tolerance. They urged worker solidarity and a fighting spirit. The slogan 'Art is a Weapon' defined their aims. Women participated in every aspect of radical theatre contributing as playwrights, actors, musicians,

dancers, singers, artists and administrators. Janet Gentle (later Henderson), a ballet student at the time, obtained her first experience of teaching dancing and choreography with the cast of *Cannibal Carnival*. This irreverent and hilarious musical satire, presented by Unity in 1940, was very left wing, anti-capitalist, and anti-religious. A policeman, a parson and a capitalist got stranded on a Pacific island and they decided to turn it into a capitalist enterprise and make all the natives work for them after fencing off the breadfruit trees. Of course, the natives won in the end and we boiled them in a pot. Played with enthusiasm and enjoyment by the cast, it was dismissed by critics as 'a vulgar spectacle', but Brisbane audiences flocked to see it on all six nights. The bank manager called me in, he had the script and photographs of people in the play and he'd obviously got them from security. He was incensed that a 17-year-old should have been in such a disgusting play (offending both politically and morally) and said 'you'll be sacked if you don't pull out.' The play's leading man, Neville Thiele (a fellow employee) (brother of the well-known Leonard Thiele) was also threatened with the sack by the bank. . In a time of unemployment, Neville had to withdraw and I accepted an option of a trade union position shortly after.

The many women actors in New Theatre cannot be enumerated and one play produced in 1940 *Angels of War* had an all women cast. The theatre was able to call on many competently trained professional artists. Helen Collings, a professional music teacher, trained the singers for Dick Diamonds' *Reedy River*, produced in Brisbane in 1954 to capacity audiences. It was a new type of musical comedy, which aimed to highlight Australian democratic traditions.

Marlene Stewart (later Davis) wrote the overture for Dick Diamond's 'Under the Coolibah Tree, a rollicking musical set in the 1880s and composed a tune for 'Donohoe's song', (the words reputedly written by Donohoe) that featured in another great Australian musical, John Meredith and Joan Clarke's 'The Wild Colonial Boy'. This play was based on the life of John Donohoe, a convict-runaway turned bushranger.

Miya Studio artists used New Theatre rooms in Fortitude Valley in exchange for making props and painting backdrops. Miya Studio eventually became New Theatre Club Artists Group. Pamela Crawford (née Seeman)'s work was featured in the groups many successful art exhibitions at the Albert Galleries, Ann Street. One exhibition advertised 'original paintings for sale at a people's price.' Pamela also devised and drew costumes for *Bushland Picnic*, a 1952 children's play.

Gwen McKay joined New Theatre in 1955. As a trained commercial artist she assisted Ossie Nash (a professional signwriter and creative artist) paint backdrops and later painted sets for *All My Sons*, *Tinker's Wedding* and *the Painter*. She was a fine actress, acting in about thirteen plays, often in leading roles and directed several plays.

Playwrights Mona Brand, Oriel Gray, Dymphna Cusack and Nance Macmillan wrote plays specifically for Unity and New Theatre. Following the growing tide of migrants who fled Europe after the war, New Theatre presented plays that drew attention to often conflictual ethnic relationships, as well as turning to the long-neglected plight of Aborigines and their treatment by the white community.

Mona Brand worked in Sydney as a copywriter and research officer. An early play, *Here Under Heaven* (Unity 1948) dealt with colour prejudice. The play won first and second prizes in Ballarat's South Street competitions. Its Melbourne New Theatre production in May 1948 was praised by local papers, including the Melbourne Herald, as worthy of production by some commercial theatre. But it was ultimately rejected as unworthy of large commercial production on the grounds that 'there is no colour problem in Australia' and it would be irrelevant to Australian's experience. It was only after she won first prize in the New South Wales Arts Council drama festival for her play *Our 'Dear' Relations* in 1963 that she found a wide audience,

Sydney playwright Oriel Gray joined New Theatre in 1937 aged 17 years. She wrote at least fourteen plays for stage, radio and television. Her political interests are reflected in her stage plays, nearly all of which deal with oppression, exploitation and discrimination. She began writing about feminism 'long before feminism became a big subject.' Her play *Had We But World Enough*, is a tragic tale in which racial hatred is directed against a twelve-year-old Aboriginal girl. Of topical interest at the time, it had a ten-weeks' season in Brisbane in 1950. New Theatre's program notes reminded the audience that 'at this very moment, in Brisbane, coloured people living at Moorooka have had their huts burnt down with all their possessions and left to find shelter wherever they may'.

Latent anti-semitism flared up briefly in Australia in the 1930s with the limited entry to Australia of European Jews fleeing Hitler's terror and it again emerged in the late 1940s as thousands of displaced persons sought refuge overseas. Oriel Gray's 1952 Brisbane production *Sky Without Birds*, dealt with this question. Her 1955 play *The Torrents* won major critical acclaim. It was awarded equal first prize

with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, but unlike Lawler's much acclaimed play, it was left to gather dust. It was not until 1996 that she earned a place in the sun when it was produced in the commercial theatre. Gray would have been an unpalatable political choice in the conservative 1950s due to her strong connection with New Theatre.

Brisbane playwright Nance Macmillan (later Nancy Wills) acted with a little theatre in 1939. In Melbourne she joined a Realist Writers' Group and in 1944 joined the Communist Party of Australia. She attended the World Peace Conference in Paris in 1949 and met Paul Robeson, the famous black singer, who was an ardent campaigner for workers' rights, peace and equality. This meeting provided the inspiration for her play *Land of Morning Calm* written in the following year and presented in 1952 by Brisbane New Theatre. It was a plea for peace in the midst of the Korean war. It had a successful six and a half-weeks' season in 1952 with London Unity Theatre, and was played in Melbourne, Sydney, and Adelaide and at the Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship in Sydney.

Nance Macmillan's 1961 play *The Painter*, based on the life of Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, raised the issue of civil rights for Aborigines. It played to packed houses for four nights in Brisbane's All Saints Hall. It exposed the federal authorities' lack of encouragement of this fine artist who refused to abandon his people's customs and culture, resulting in his jailing and early death. Nance said that her interest in writing the play was prompted after reading Namatjira's passionate plea, his cry from the heart, during his imprisonment: 'Better they shoot us all, get rid of us and save all this trouble if we are not allowed to live like men'. Two Aborigines, Bob Anderson, now a well-known elder of his people and his cousin then known as Pene Thrower, now Dr Penny Tripcony, former Deputy Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, were in the cast. Penny was recently honoured with a medal in the General division (OAM) by the Australian government.

In 1962 Nance collaborated with well-known poet and academic Dorothy Hewitt to write the *Ballad for Women*. A one-act play, it celebrated the role of women in Australia. She also wrote a very successful musical play *Deep Bells Ring* dealing with the life and work of Paul Robeson, Directed by well-known playwright Errol O'Neill, it premiered in Brisbane in 1987 at the Princess Theatre and toured Australia in commercial theatres.

1956 will be particularly remembered in Australia as the year of major atom tests. Britain exploded an atomic device on the Monte Bellow Islands off the northwest coast and the United States dropped the infamous H-bomb over Bikini atoll. After a second atomic explosion at Monte Bello, radioactive clouds were detected in Cloncurry in Queensland. Australians were very disturbed and Queenslanders feared that the milk supply from Malanda could have been contaminated. Dymphna Cusack's timely play *Pacific Paradise* about the dangers of atomic testing was staged by Brisbane New Theatre in 1956 for a three months' season and also at Ipswich Town Hall, Booval, at the Silkstone Methodist Hall and Enoggera Memorial Hall, Brisbane.

Runner-up to *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in a national competition in 1955 it was broadcast by the ABC and commercial radio and produced by many amateur theatres in Australia and in New Zealand with Pacific Islanders in the cast. Dymphna Cusack was born in 1902 and died in 1981. She was an Australian writer of international reputation. She never belonged to a political party but was preoccupied with social injustice in all her writing.

The radical theatre gave real opportunities to women in all aspects of theatre life. Their many fine women playwrights wrote plays of real significance. But in a climate hostile to minority views, newspapers, other than the trade union and socialist press, were guilty of censorship by omission. Brisbane local papers failed to review *Reedy River*, one of the most successful musical productions of New Theatre to reach the stage in Australia. It promoted Australia's national cultural traditions with bush bands and folk music and attracted more than 5,700 people to its Brisbane performances. Unofficial but very effective censorship had devastating effects on the careers of talented playwrights like Mona Brand, Oriel Gray and Nancy Macmillan, who never obtained, or obtained only partially and belatedly, the recognition they deserved.

Boycotted by the daily press that frequently denied them publicity and reviews, further marginalised by its dependence on the trade union and socialist press, Brisbane New Theatre folded in 1962/3. In a hostile political climate, without government subsidies, New Theatre depended entirely for financial support on its members and supporters. No permanent radical working class theatre exists in Brisbane today. Over the period of their existence from 1930, radical theatres answered a need when nothing in the commercial theatre reflected Australian life or opened its audience's mind to changing thought abroad.