

# HISTORY OF THEATRE OF THE DEAF (QUEENSLAND)

The Theatre of the Deaf was first proposed by the late Mr. Leslie Abnett, Superintendent of the Queensland Deaf Society. He arranged through the Australian Elizabethan Trust to have the National Theatre of the Deaf from U.S.A. perform "Candide" in Brisbane in 1974.

The first night of this production was a charity night, the profits from which were used to purchase theatrical equipment for the new auditorium on the grounds of present Queensland Deaf Society. The D.M. Chadwick Hall and administration buildings were designed by architects Mr. Colin Trapp & Associates Pty. Ltd. The complex was completed in March 1975.

Mr. Abnett also arranged with some theatre people and school teachers for the Deaf who were interested in establishing a proper Deaf theatre. The first theatre workshop was held at the La Boite Theatre as an experiment in October 1974. The Director of Arts & Culture from the Queensland Government attended and decided to approve a grant to help establish the theatre. The Director has helped our theatre ever since.

The first meeting was held at the Old Queensland Deaf Society in City on the 5th of February 1975. The founding members of the committee were:

President.....Mr Kerry Prior  
 Administrator.....Ms Mary Gibbs  
 Hon. Treasurer.....Mr John O'Donnell  
 Liaison Officer....Mr Leslie Abnett  
 Artistic Director..Mr Llyod Nickson  
 Technical Director..Mr Keith Puddlefoot  
 Committee Members..Ms N. Bricknell, Mr R. Hilsdon,  
                                   Mr K. Donnell, Ms M. Bergman,  
                                   Ms P. Arnold, Mr A. Lynch,  
                                   Mr D. Villis.

The Founding members of the company were:

Pamela Arnold, Dawn Casey, Valerie Julin, Roy Julin, Charles Bergman, Coleen Farnham, Elizabeth Hanifax, Tressa Obah, Vicki Woods, Gavin Ferguson, Lesley Bell, Elanor Davis, Pamela Trace, Ken Donnell, Damian Lee, Martha Follent, Maria Hanifax, Narelle Robinson, Bruce Blaker, Peter Williams, Mary Bergman, Cathie Foster, Peter Adams, Sam Gibson, Alana Casey, Karen Gotthe, Shelley Hensdale, Kelie Shaw, Laurie Cornwall, Sue Blackwell, Mary Hanifax, Lorraine Olney-Wilkins, Ray Hilsdon, John Worthington, Terrie-Anne Bills, Maree Holley, Julie Southerland, Sam Cranston.

Artistic Directors:

Llyod Nickson....1975 - 1977,  
 Nicky Bricknell..1977 - 1979,  
 Ken Donnell.....1979 -

Dr. G.S. Briggs, Mr. A. Edwards and Mr. L.A. Vidler were invited to be our first Vice Patrons. The meeting decided on the name "Queensland Theatre of the Deaf" and this was later changed to "Theatre of the Deaf"(Queensland). Our first Director, Mr L. Nickson, conducted workshops at the School for



the Deaf. Ms. N. Bricknell and Mr. J. O'Donnell were acting Artistic Directors while Llyod was studying theatre of the Deaf overseas. He brought many ideas back from his overseas trip, he and Nicky Bricknell directed our first major production.

The new D.M. Chadwick Hall at the Queensland Deaf Society at Newmarket was ready for rehearsals. A core group of over thirty Deaf and hearing adults and a junior group from the Queensland School for the Deaf worked towards a production designed to coincide with the Official opening of the complex. Excerpts from the program were presented at the opening ceremony on the 26 th July 1975 and the Inaugural production AN EVENING WITH THE THEATRE OF THE DEAF officially opened the Theatre on the 29th July 1975, playing to a capacity audience. The planned season was cut short by a power strike. However, the theatre had started its career, the first of many excellent productions. Our first production in December 1975 was "Snow White & Company" directed by Llyod Nickson and Nicky Bricknell. This was the beginning of Deaf Theatre in Queensland.

The first hearing actress in a leading role was Martha Follent. The first Deaf person in a leading role was Breda Carty in "Ondine" directed by Llyod Nickson. This Production was very important to Deaf theatre in Queensland as the hard work put in by Llyod and the cast established a tradition that has remained ever since.

In 1977 the job of artistic director was taken over by Nicky Bricknell with Ken Donnell "Churchill Fellow" as the assistant artistic director. Nicky retired from the theatre in 1979 and Ken became the new artistic director.

The company toured many schools in the metropolitan area giving performances especially during the International year of the Disabled persons. The theatre performed in hearing impaired units in Brisbane, Ipswich, and Toowoomba. The theatre has entered plays in various local drama festivals winning many awards for Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Decor, Best Play, Best Direction and many Adjudicator's Choice Awards.

The idea of having both Deaf and hearing members participating side by side in the theatre gives us an ideal setting for our plays. Without hearing members our theatre could only be called "Theatre for the Deaf". The company has always been determined to be involved in the Artistic world so we see it as very important to carry on a tradition of "Theatre of the Deaf".

Q.8. { Our Technique is a combination of Visual Language, Sign-Mime (visual vernacular), Mime and the Spoken Word - a blending of hearing actors and conventional acting ideals with imaginative mime, expression and manual language of the Deaf.

Five of our actors entered the U.S.A.'s National Theatre of the Deaf Summer School and a further two joined the Queensland Theatre Company and toured schools throughout Queensland.



The First National Visual Theatre Arts Conference was held in Sydney in June 1978. Both Nicky Bricknell and Ken Donnell attended this conference along with other theatre representatives from around Australia. The conference included seminars and workshops given by the attendees. In 1979 the Conference was held in Brisbane and then in 1982-83 the Conference was held in Melbourne. These Conferences presented wonderful experiences for all those who attended.

In 1979 we hired Judith Anderson, a professional guest director through a grant from the government. She did a tremendous job and made the production "Seasons" one of the highest quality. The production, held in December 1979 was very successful. There has been three unsuccessful attempt to get a grant from the government to employ a full time director but we have managed the productions with guest or resident directors without the grant. This has given us a great deal of personal satisfaction and a feeling of great achievement.

Just two years later, in September 1981, some members of the theatre group, travelled to Townsville to give workshops and performances after receiving a grant from the Schools Commission Innovations Program. In the same year the theatre group also went to Maryborough to give workshops and performances.

The Theatre has grown from strength to strength as both cast members and directors gained experience through workshops and productions. We continued to enter festivals and collected many awards. As old members left the Theatre to pursue other activities, new members joined and contributed fresh ideas and in turn learned about how the Theatre works and about our unique acting style.

In 1986 we presented "Our Eyes are Your Ears" which has been re-written. This production was a big success for Deaf audience as it was a comedy about a Deaf world and how popular heroes could function in a Deaf world. We continued being involved in Workshops for Hearing Impaired Youth in conjunction with The Performing Arts Centre. The Theatre by now has much recognition in Queensland through our productions and workshops. 1987 was a very busy year and it was decided after discussion that no production would be staged that year and no festivals would be entered. A seven week "Crash Course" workshop on all aspects of theatre was held for the new young Deaf Theatre members. The workshop was conducted by Ken Donnell. More work went into Medieval Mime for the performance at the Brisbane Deaf Games in December.

In January 1988 we again performed "Medieval Mime" - a series of skits in the D.M.Chadwick Hall at the Queensland Deaf Society. Half of the proceeds from this production went to the Miss Deaf Queensland Fund. We also performed mime skits at Indooroopilly Shoppingtown for Deafness Awareness week. Some Theatre members attended a 9 week workshop conducted by the Expression Dancing Company at Performing Arts Centre.



1988 was a big year for the Theatre and for Brisbane. The Theatre was asked to perform some skits for EXPO '88 outside the Australian Pavillion in May, June and August. This was a great opportunity to show people from all over the world the professional abilities of Deaf Theatre in Queensland. It was a great experience to perform at EXPO '88 and all the staff of the Pavillion were very helpful to us. Our performances at EXPO '88 meant that no new productions were done this year but we invented 11 new skits/mimes which were used later at T.A.F.E., the Lutheran School's Fete and for Disability Awareness.

The Theatre has been very lucky to have performers and helpers who through their tireless work have succeeded in making the Theatre of the Deaf a more recognised part of the Artistic World. This has come about through work both on- and off-stage, the design of posters and T-shirts advertising our Theatre and through the growing reputation of the Theatre both in the Deaf community and in the hearing world.

By 1989 Theatre members numbered about 25 and it was decided to have two plays for our production. "Impulse" was written by Elisa Lydiard who had joined the Theatre in 1986 and who had accepted the position of Assistant Artistic Director in 1988. Elisa learnt her skills of mime, movement and expression through the Theatre. She has also gained experience in managing and organising the cast to compete in festivals and perform in special events. Elisa spends most of her time as an actress on stage and says that although she enjoys working with the Theatre, it is at times a very demanding job.

In 1990, our fifteenth anniversary, the Theatre put on two plays. "Wolf Boy" and "the Happy Prince" showed the scope of experience that is now in the Theatre. Both plays required a lot of hard work and rehearsals. The production played to almost full houses for the six nights they were on. "Wolf Boy" was entered in two festivals and came away with many prizes. For first time in the Theatre's history, we were asked to perform at the T.A.F.E. College of Tourism and Hospitality Restaurant at South Brisbane. The performances were very well received and we have been asked to perform again in 1991. This year also saw the Theatre put on skits on behalf of Access Arts, Brisbane City FREEPS and National Arts Week. The Theatre also had a visit from a group of about 20 hearing students from Moura State High School to watch and be a part of our workshops. For the future, the Theatre hopes to start touring various Schools throughout Queensland to give performances and workshops to young people who may not otherwise have a chance of watching this type of Theatre in action. The Queensland Performing Arts Trust (QPAT) has been closely involved with the Theatre in giving workshops for Hearing Impaired people.

Theatre is nothing without two types of people. Those people that perform on the stage either as actors or helpers, bring to Theatre its life force and its momentum. Competent direction guides these people to give their best for the production. The other type that is absolutely essential for Theatre to survive, are the people who occupy seats at any of our performances. Without these people, the actors, the directors or the helpers and all the hard work that is put into each production, would mean nothing. This year has seen the Theatre gain greater standing in the Artistic World through the efforts of both those on stage and those watching.



By continuing in this way, the Queensland Theatre of the Deaf has received many examples of the high regard in which we are held- prizes through the festivals we have competed in, media coverage, excellent attendances at our productions and involvement with other art and theatrical groups.

The future of Deaf Theatre in Queensland is assured through the works of its members, committee and all those people who have helped in promoting our efforts. Each year that is added to the fifteen years we celebrate in 1990, is sure to increase public awareness both of the accomplishments of the Theatre of the Deaf and of the strength of the Deaf community in Queensland.

CONTRIBUTIONS BY: Ken Donnell, Nicky Bricknell, Elisa Lydiard & Charles Farrugia.

### THE THEATRE OF THE DEAF (QUEENSLAND) AIMS:

1. To Involve both Deaf and hearing persons in all aspects of dramatic art via the media of visual language, spoken language and mime and to promote and encourage enjoyment in the art of theatre.
2. To give public performances of stage plays and other such activities which shall, from time to time, be decided upon by the Committee.
3. To develop an unique area of entertainment for the people of Queensland.

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*Stella*  
Artistic Director