

HISTORY OF NEW PLYMOUTH LITTLE THEATRE SOCIETY INC

In the early 1930's there was little entertainment for young people in New Plymouth. The newly formed YWCA and YMCA organisations were attempting to fill this void. The occasional travelling theatrical troops met enthusiastic responses but visits were few and far between. In 1933, with the help of the YWCA and YMCA a drama circle was formed; the aim being to provide an interest for young single people in the way of play readings and theatrical performances. A small but keen group was soon meeting and held regular play readings. Within six months the drama circle began to plan its first production and it became necessary to officially name the group. The title New Plymouth Little Theatre Players was decided upon. The first production took place in the YWCA Hall in Powderham Street on July 25th 1933. It comprised of two one-act plays Mollie and the Milliner by M Stayton and Poached Eggs and Pearls by G M Jennings. Both were produced by Mac Robertson. The Hall was filled to capacity, such was the support of friends, relatives and theatrical enthusiasts. The event was so successful that, over the next few years, future productions were held in St Mary's Hall which could cope with a larger audience. Little Theatre continued to hold play readings in one of the smaller rooms within the St Mary's Hall complex.

The Little Theatre Players second production was a set of three one-act plays which opened a two night season on July 18th 1934. The following year saw a great step forward when the first three act play was presented to a full house in St Mary's Hall. The Roundabout by J B Priestley was produced by John Ledgerwood, then Director of the YMCA.

For these first few years expenses were few which was just as well for the country was in the depths of the depression. As far as can be ascertained there was no annual subscription but instead each member contributed 6d per meeting.

The club moved to premises in St Aubyn Street and by the mid 1940's had become an incorporated society. They dropped 'Players' from the titled and became known as the New Plymouth Little Theatre society Inc.

The outbreak of the Second World War disrupted thespian activity. Male membership was sadly depleted and the society had to vacate its St Aubyn Street rooms which were needed for war purposes. During the war years the Society performed for the troops, play-readings continued and funds were raised for patriotic purposes. At the cessation of hostilities the society was in the position to donate £500 to the Patriotic Fund while also holding a healthy building fund. In 1949 the Society took an adventurous step in attempting a production 'on a full sized stage'. The Opera House was booked and the cast of nine began their six week rehearsal schedule in the club rooms on Petty Lane. Bookings opened at Colliers and on October 10th, before a full house, the curtains went up on Dear Ruth produced by Eva Cartwright. The show was a great success and the Society began holding annual productions in the Opera House. The following year the Society presented The Shop at Sly Corner produced by Mavis Sheat. The elaborate set was brought to New Zealand by a travelling show and the Opera House took possession of the set when it was no longer required. The third Opera House production was another first for the Society. Portrait of an Author produced by Vera Curtis was the Australasian Première.

In the early days, each play had a season of only two or three nights. By the time the curtains rose on The Haxtons (1953) the seasons had been extended to six performances. The society had out-grown the rooms on Petty Lane (behind Corrigals) and held their meetings and performances in Roland Hall, Devon Street. Over the years the Society had performed and practiced in a variety of halls and with the ever increasing building fund, the 1933 committee began to look for a permanent home. After inspecting numerous buildings and building sites, P Kristianson & Son's furniture factory in Aubrey Street was purchased. It was the society's 21st Jubilee. The building required extensive alterations, and while these were in the planning stage, rehearsal for Loves a Luxury produced by -

Cydie Strang were held in preparation for a season in the Opera House. After months of toil, the factory began to take the shape of a theatre. One year after purchase, the Aubrey Street Theatre was officially opened. In his address, the Society's Patron, Mr Joe Sheat, paid tribute to the untiring efforts of Theatre members. With a temporary stage, patchwork curtains and rudimentary footlights Little Theatre began operating from a home base.

Over the following years a permanent stage was set up and lighting arrangements were improved. There was much work to be done such as re-roofing the auditorium. By the time the Society was celebrating its Silver Jubilee (1957) membership had grown to almost 300 with an additional 90 junior members. The juniors also gave frequent performances and provided the senior section of the Theatre with a continuing supply of experienced theatrical personnel.

In 1960, the New Plymouth City Council approached the Society and asked for a short performance to officially open the new War Memorial Hall. Little Theatre society agreed and joined other organisations in celebrating the opening of the new complex. Nine years later, the society again performed outside its usual venues. In the newly constructed Whiteley Memorial Church, Little Theatre presented Murder in the Cathedral directed by Brian Hannam. Not being bound by conformity the Little Theatre has experimented with many forms of theatre. The first step into the avant-garde was made by World Theatre (1958) which was staged without scenery and a bare minimum of props. It incorporated excerpts from 15 famous plays all linked together by a polished commentary. This was followed two years later by Our Town (1960 C Strang). The only props for this play were two tables, each with three chairs and no scenery. In comparison to these, our backstage crews, and set construction teams, have at times had plenty of opportunity to extend themselves. As funds became available extensive alterations were made to the buildings internal structure. A kitchen was installed along with the foyer, sound and lighting box, and bar facilities. The stage was lowered and a pit was dug out to form the start of a graded auditorium. with an increase in the height of

the proscenium arch, technicians were able to improve lighting angles. Looking to the future, the Society has commenced stage one of its' re-development programme. A \$45,000.00 extension has laid foundations for a new auditorium and reception area.

Over the past years there have been many theatre members who have excelled in their parts whether onstage, back stage or front of house. Such expertise has enabled the Theatre to present many excellent shows. Some such as the homosexual play Boys in the Band (1975) and A Day in the Death of Joe Egg (1976) have broken social boundaries. There has been a long line of 'firsts' for the society. A Man for all Seasons (1971) was the Society's first production to travel. Our first pantomime, Aladdin (1972) marked our return to the Opera House and began the tradition of an annual panto. The Real Inspector Hound (1974) was produced by our first professional director; sponsored by Rothmans Roy Hope, coached members in all aspects of theatrical productions. West Side Story was our first musical and Kennedy's Children was marked the beginning of Theatre/Restaurant. We will all remember the first amateur production of Greg McGee's contraversial Foreskins Lament (1982).

Over the past 50 years the New Plymouth Little Theatre Society Inc has grown from a handful of enthusiasts with no permanent home to an effective organisation who contribute to the culture of this city. It is our hope that in the years to come, we will continue to provide an avenue for local talent, and cater for the ever increasing theatre audiences.

This brief history has been made possible by archives collected by Evie Atkinson, which cover a span of thirty years, also be reminiscences from Mrs R Martin, and Mrs Dinmiss (the Gentle sisters) of Wellington, and Honorary Life Members C Greatbatch and C Strang.

M.E.R.

L I F E M E M B E R S H I P:

Little Theatre has by tradition not bestowed Honorary Life Membership lightly. We would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the past, and present Life Members for their long service and dedication to our Theatre:

Evie Atkinson
Theodora Bird
Phylis Upton
Ken Mells

Cicely Greatbatch
Mavis sheat
Cydie Strang

We also have great pleasure in recognising the contribution of five club members by announcing their Honorary Life Membership:

Brian Smith
Margaret hannam
Alison Girling Butcher

Brian Hannam
Lance Girling Butcher
