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Comans, Christine A. (2008) La boite Theatre Company: A Distinctive History.
Australasian Drama Studies 52.

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LA BOITE THEATRE COMPANY

A DISTINCTIVE HISTORY

by Christine Comans

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Introduction

The Australian repertory societies and little theatres that flourished between the 1920s and 1960s are acknowledged by Katharine Brisbane as “the parents of our national theatre” and the forces that “created the climate out of which came the demand for an Australia Council”ⁱ. Yet, by the end of the 1970s, many had ceased to exist, unable or unwilling to make the transition from amateur to professionalⁱⁱ. The Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society, later known as La Boite Theatreⁱⁱⁱ was an exception^{iv}. Not only can it claim a still unbroken line of theatrical activity since 1925, but also successful transformations, first into a ‘pro-am’ theatre in 1976, then into a fully professional company in 1993 that is flourishing today and appears well placed to continue to prosper into the foreseeable future. This is a distinctive achievement in Australian theatre history. The oldest theatre company in Queensland and the second oldest in Australia^v, La Boite Theatre Company is acknowledged today as “one of the most financially stable and creatively viable companies in the performing arts sector in Australia”^{vi}. How La Boite managed this remarkable journey, despite numerous set-backs and crises, is the subject of this article. Space necessitates a mere scratching of the surface of the story, but a full account is available in my recently completed doctoral thesis^{vii}.

The genesis of Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society

It was Barbara Sisley's idea to start a repertory theatre society in Brisbane. A professionally trained actor, fresh from a year's study at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, “well-established as a leader in the cultural life of Brisbane” and its leading speech teacher^{viii}, she had the appropriate qualifications and was well placed to enthuse her many students and like-minded colleagues to join her in its realisation. Beyond Sisley's own clique however, the Brisbane community was ready

to welcome and support a major amateur theatre organization. A city that already had a fifty year acquaintance with professional theatre, outstanding or otherwise, from international and national touring theatrical companies (Fotheringham notes that “during the prosperous 1920s there were at least 70 opening nights each year, with a peak of more than 100 in 1923”^{ix}) Brisbane could claim a culturally well-educated, middle-class society ready and available in 1925 to support and participate in an amateur repertory theatre company.

Professor J.J.Stable, Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Queensland and passionate about Australian writing, took little persuading when asked by Sisley for his support in the creation of a repertory theatre company in Brisbane^x. Then President of the Queensland University Dramatic Society (Dramsoc), an organization he co-founded in 1912^{xi}, he was also the inaugural President of the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association and was instrumental in establishing, at Queensland University, Australia’s first university course in Australian Literature^{xii}. With these credentials, it is easy to see why Sisley considered him eminently suitable to co-found Brisbane’s first repertory theatre society. Their next step was to invite members of the public to form the Society’s first Executive Committee. This Committee, instrumental in establishing the Society, is noteworthy because of the upper-echelon of Brisbane society it represented: two archbishops, two university professors, a well known medical doctor and a high profile politician. Indeed, the success and stability of Brisbane Repertory to the 1970s owed a great deal to the ability of its leaders to move comfortably within these social and political circles and to have the support of key influential individuals in times of change and development.

The Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society announced its arrival on Friday 31st July, 1925 with a one night season at the Theatre Royal in Elizabeth Street of A.A.Milne’s comedy *The Dover Road*. The following day, *The Brisbane Courier*^{xiii} greeted this inaugural production with enthusiasm:

Nothing was left to chance. The cast was admirably chosen, and the large audience was held by the splendid acting for two hours and three-quarters. The players, one and all, rose to the occasion, and satisfied the sceptics that the repertory movement in Brisbane has come to stay; it will grow from strength to strength; it will "enlarge the communal mind", and prove a "great and joyous power" in our cultural life.

Brisbane Repertory quickly established itself as a significant cultural entity in Brisbane: true to repertory principles, it produced plays of literary and educational merit not usually seen on the commercial stage; it attracted talented amateur actors and directors such as Rhoda Felgate, Daphne Roemermann, Clare Clarke, Leo Guyatt and Dulcie Scott; it developed a strong audience base of loyal members, crucial for the ongoing viability of an amateur theatre society; and it attracted media interest in its productions, developments and controversies.

One such controversy involved Repertory's inaugural Australian Playwriting Competition of 1931, won by Brisbane playwright George Landen Dann for his play *In Beauty It Is Finished*. Its 'blunt' language and realistic portrayal of a relationship between a young white prostitute and an aboriginal man attracted much media attention. *Smith's Weekly* reviled it as a "Sordid Drama of Miscegenation"^{xiv}, letters to the editor called for its banning, and sermons were preached for and against it. In response, Stable publicly defended both Dann's play as a serious work of art and Repertory's artistic integrity in going ahead with the production. In the end, the publicity ensured full houses for its three night season at His Majesty's Theatre but made the organization very wary of inciting controversy. The playwriting competition folded after two more years.

The encouragement of Australian playwriting and productions was a common ideal in the major Australian repertory societies although real commitment was often elusive. Brisbane Repertory paid at least more than pay lip service to this ideal; in the twenty years to 1945 it managed eleven productions of Australian plays^{xv} and occasionally had one act plays or play readings of new works in the Society rooms. In a not unusual trend in little theatres and repertory societies^{xvi}, it took a keen interest in promoting Dann's work, producing four of his plays in mainhouse seasons between 1931 and 1947. Indeed, it is clear from my archival research that Sisley was friend and mentor to Dann, encouraging him in his writing endeavours and directing all three of his plays programmed during her twenty year involvement.

Described by Dann as "a legend in her own lifetime"^{xvii}, Sisley was Senior Producer and inspiring artistic presence for twenty years until her tragic death in a pedestrian road accident in 1945. Remembered as "a tall and striking woman, with a deep and resonant voice"^{xviii}, she directed fifty-seven productions, performed numerous leading

roles, and always demanded the highest possible artistic standards. Stable was its first and longest-serving Council President. After guiding it through the challenging times of the Great Depression and World War Two, he finally resigned in 1945.

The Babette Stephens era

After the double blow of Sisley's sudden death and Stable's resignation, Brisbane Repertory momentarily faltered under the weight of surviving the difficult post-war years without their former high-profile leaders. However, short bursts of energy from successive Presidents Tom Stephens, Alex Foster, Cecil Carson and Gwen MacMinn and their respective Councils were more than enough to keep the theatre alive and prospering between 1946 and 1956. Yet, in these post-war years nothing really significant happened in terms of change until Babette Stephens emerged as a charismatic, forceful and dynamic artistic presence. English born, connected by marriage to a prominent Brisbane family, and much-admired reigning queen of Brisbane theatre at the time (and later well known for her television and professional theatre work), Stephens served as Council President between 1957 and 1959 before accepting a newly created position of 'Theatre Director' in 1960, a role she held until 1968. It was under her leadership that Brisbane Repertory began, once again, to thrive artistically and to evolve as an organisation.

Sharing direction with Stephens was another 'star' and great personality, Gloria Birdwood-Smith. Although the Australian play almost disappeared during their time, these two experienced directors programmed highly successful, often professional standard, audience-pleasing seasons of popular English and American plays. Together they nurtured into professional careers aspiring actors such as Judith Arthy, Ray Barrett, Barry Creyton, Elaine Cusick, Rosalind Seagrave and Rowena Wallace.

The First 'La Boite'

Stephens is most remembered for her artistic contributions as director and actor, but it was her role in the Council's purchasing of four cottages in and around Hale Street in inner-city Petrie Terrace and the conversion of one of them into a make-shift theatre that led to Brisbane Repertory developing in an unexpected way. From its genesis, it struggled to find a home of its own. At various times it hired or leased all the well known spaces in Brisbane including the Theatre Royal, the original Cremorne

Theatre, His/Her Majesty's Theatre, the Princess Theatre, Rialto Theatre and Albert Hall. Inspired by Hayes Gordon's 'in-the-round' Ensemble Theatre in Sydney - an old boat shed converted into theatre-in-the-round with audience sitting on all four sides of the stage - Council member and real estate businessman Bruce Blocksidge suggested the conversion of one of the four cottages into a similar theatre space. Very economic in design, he realized this idea could translate perfectly onto one of their properties. Initially Stephens opposed this idea seeing it as a retrograde step into rough theatre - her dream was of owning a magnificent place in Queen Street^{xix}. Once convinced of the efficacy of the project, to her credit Stephens "very strongly identified with it"^{xx}, completely embracing the notion and selling it enthusiastically to the membership. So it was that on the 25th June 1967 the first La Boite opened at 57 Hale Street, Petrie Terrace with a production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* directed by Stephens.

At some point in the lead-up to its opening the space was christened 'La Boite'^{xxi}, a name suggested by Bruce Blocksidge. French for 'the box' it was an apt description for the intimate, 70 seat, box-like space. Except that it did not have an unchanging ensemble of actors and no-one was paid, La Boite began its life very much like a professional English repertory company: it played every week including Christmas and Easter from Thursday to Saturday - when one play was in rehearsal another was in production. Stephens joked that with the demise of the famous Windmill Theatre in London, La Boite could with impunity adopt their famous slogan "We Never Close"^{xxii}. During the short span of its life (1967 to 1971), thirty-eight productions were mounted in this first little La Boite. A new, younger audience was attracted to the its intimate, warts and all, feel. By 1968 members numbered 920, the largest membership in the Theatre's history. Very much an actor's space, it attracted talented performers many of whom went on to have successful professional stage careers such as Barry Otto (who took roles in eight plays), John Stanton, Hazel Howson, Judith McGrath, Muriel Watson, Kaye Stevenson, Frank Gallacher, Jennifer Blocksidge, Jane Atkins, Russell Kiefel, and Trevor Smith.

The harshly realistic English drama *Look Back in Anger* which opened La Boite signalled a change in programming that slowly progressed to more non-mainstream and even Australian plays as the influence of Babette Stephens faded and that of new

Theatre Director Jennifer Blocksidge emerged. But it certainly did not change overnight; rather, with each new season, Blocksidge slowly introduced more challenging, contemporary works by playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, as well as the occasional Australian play. In 1970 for example she programmed Hal Porter's *Eden House*, the first three act Australian play to appear in a Brisbane Repertory season since the 1962 production of *The One Day of the Year*.

Radical developments in the 1970s: a new theatre building and new repertoire

New Theatre Director and Council President respectively, married couple at the time Jennifer Blocksidge and Bruce Blocksidge emerged as the change agents^{xxiii} of this period of unprecedented development. Their combined vision for a radical new theatre building and very contemporary programming catapulted La Boite to national attention by the mid-1970s. Yet the Blocksidges (like the Stephens) were very much part of the Brisbane establishment, well known as senior members of the Queensland Liberal Party and of the Brisbane Anglican Church. These connections may well have made the difference when La Boite applied for government funding for their new building and were successful in obtaining a \$40,000 subsidy to be matched dollar for dollar by the theatre. Another paradox would seem to be Jennifer Blocksidge herself. Although trained in the English theatre tradition (she was English born and bred), she was excited both intellectually and artistically by the explosive cultural shift in Australian theatre that was well under way by 1970 with the New Wave generation of playwrights, directors and actors. Taking a tough-minded approach, she imposed a new artistic vision that was aimed at making La Boite a part of this new theatrical territory. That La Boite had outgrown its 70 seat makeshift theatre and a new purpose-built theatre in-the-round was planned gave Blocksidge the opportunity for a fresh beginning.

The new theatre, built on the site of the first La Boite, opened with a Gala Premiere Performance on 10 June 1972 in the presence of the Vice Patron Hayes Gordon^{xxiv}. The opening play was the non-naturalistic Australian play, *A Refined Look at Existence* by Rodney Milgate directed by Jennifer Blocksidge. That her choice was an Australian play (and a challenging one at that) to open the new theatre was a strong indicator of the direction she intended to take La Boite. In her program notes, she

signalled that audiences could expect to see more and more Australian plays in future seasons:

Theatre has been the “orphan” art of Australia. Today there is a growing awareness of the importance of “doing our own Theatrical Thing” rather than relying on the label “It’s good – it’s imported”. Hopefully, Repertory Theatre will be part of this awareness. The atmosphere and size of La Boite should lend itself well to this sort of venture.^{xxv}

In its first season, the new Australian smash-hit from Nimrod Street Theatre, *Biggles* by Michael Boddy, Marcus Cooney and Ron Blair brought to the new La Boite stage a rougher, more larrikin style of theatre that found great favour with younger audiences. The first play to be performed in the thrust in the new theatre, the sexually explicit *The Chapel Perilous* by Dorothy Hewett was so popular that it had an extended season^{xxvi}. After her first visit, Katharine Brisbane commented on what “an interesting space” it was, describing it as:

... literally a ‘box’. The arena is square, with steeply raked seating and gives a satisfying feeling of being enclosed in the same space as the characters and their problems, while at the same time being securely above them. This makes for an excellent play-audience relationship.^{xxvii}

There is no doubt that the opening of Australia’s first purpose-built, 200 seat theatre-in-the round was a most significant accomplishment of the La Boite Council and its Committees of the time. Designed by Brisbane architect Blair Wilson, the award-winning La Boite building in Hale Street soon became an iconic and much-loved Brisbane theatrical landmark^{xxviii}. Hardly had it begun operations however, before two issues surfaced that would worry successive La Boite Councils for several decades. In Brisbane’s words, La Boite soon became ‘the place to go to in order to see the red meat of theatre’^{xxix}. Older members in particular didn’t want to see ‘red meat’ and didn’t much like the new preference for Australian plays many of which they considered crude and outspoken. The second issue was the tension between La Boite’s amateur status and the desire of professional directors and actors to work in this exciting and versatile performance space.

Yet this did not derail Jennifer Blocksidge’s artistic policy to produce challenging plays from contemporary world theatre and the best new Australian plays that she could obtain rights for. She was proud of the fact that six of the ten major plays in her

1974 seasons were Australian^{xxx}. Most controversial was Jack Hibberd's *Captain Midnight V.C.* directed by guest director Lindsay Smith which Blocksidge described as "a production that provoked violently opposed comment – 'shocking waste of good talent' was one, and 'the most exciting theatre in years' was another"^{xxxix}. Just as risky was the demanding, but much praised *A Stretch of the Imagination* by Jack Hibberd, directed by Bruce Knappett with Barry Otto playing Monk^{xxxii}. Yet another 'first' in 1974 was the beginning of a La Boite trend (now company policy) to foster Queensland writing: the production of Jill Shearer's play *The Trouble with Gillian* was the first time a new, full-length work by a Queensland writer had been premiered in the new La Boite . In 1975 Nick Enright's production of Edward Bond's *Saved* "provoked one of the most interesting nights in the theatre's history"^{xxxiii} when dozens of people, led by a group of fifty Lions Club members, walked out during the violent stoning of the baby scene. It was this embracing of innovation, experimentation and risk (alongside enough sure-fire box office successes to keep the theatre economically viable) that contributed to La Boite's growing reputation in Brisbane and nationally as an alternative theatre company.

The historic transition from amateur to a pro-am community theatre

Although La Boite was neither financially nor philosophically ready for professional status, Jennifer Blocksidge's vision was for professionalism in the fullest sense. In fact, the journey towards professionalism began in 1973 with the appointment of an Executive Officer and continued in 1975 with the foundation of La Boite's Early Childhood Drama Project (ECDP), the first professional theatre-in-education team in Queensland. At the beginning of 1976, professionalism came one step closer with Jennifer Blocksidge's decision to resign and the realization of her dream, the appointment of La Boite's first salaried Artistic Director, Rick Billingham, considered at the time as "one of Australia's most talented theatre directors"^{xxxiv}. This event marked La Boite's historic transition from an amateur theatre to a pro-am community theatre. Billingham was committed to innovative theatre and to contemporary Australian works best highlighted in his choice of John Romeril's *The Floating World* for his directorial debut. In 1977 he programmed a groundbreaking season of five plays by Queensland writers Lorna Bol, George Landen Dann and Jill Shearer^{xxxv}. Although not a box-office success, the season picked up a thread

originally spun between Brisbane Repertory and George Landen Dann in the 1930s. In La Boite's first *Newsletter* for 1977^{xxxvi}, Billingham and Blocksidge wrote:

The Queensland Playwright's Season is the beginning of a programme to establish the importance of the Queensland regional writer. Brisbane Repertory's La Boite Theatre has incorporated within its charter, the practical development of the Queensland Playwright in the belief that exciting theatre essentially grows from a primary concern with its surrounding community, and that begins with the local writer.

La Boite plans to include many more things of Queensland in its programmes, to mirror Queensland society including contemporary politics. Queenslanders now realise their state is full of drama, and we predict Queensland theatre will grow, through its popularity with local audiences, over the next year or two.

At Billingham's instigation, John O'Toole (appointed playwright-in-residence in 1978) co-scripted and co-directed with Richard Fotheringham, John Bradley and Lorna Bol, La Boite's first documentary theatre piece, a political play called *Happy Birthday East Timor*^{xxxvii}. Its dramatic content included an interpretation critical of Indonesia's recent invasion of East Timor plus television footage shot by the group of Australian journalists who were later murdered. According to Batchelor "it was hardly theatre of entertainment...nor did Brisbane flock to see it...but it was a tribute to Billingham's social conscience, courage and cool-handedness that the attempt was so significantly made"^{xxxviii}. Just as unpopular with the critics was (then) Brisbane writer Stephen Sewell's new play *The Father We Loved on the Beach by the Sea*, directed by Jeremy Ridgman. Yet not all new Queensland works failed at the box-office during Billingham's time. Notable successes included *Man of Steel* by Simon Denver and Ian Dorricot, *Mr Herod's Christmas Pageant* by John O'Toole, *Irish Stew* by John Bradley, and Denver and Dorricott's *Sheer Luck, Holmes!*

Although practicalities sometimes overcame the plan, the mainhouse play pattern that Billingham strove to implement was:

Play 1: opener that sets the overall mood of the season

Play 2: a hard edge work that is more serious and experimental in intent

Play 3: a 'popular' choice – a chance for party bookers

Play 4: an experimental and possibly local work

Play 5: a popular classic revival.^{xxxix}

Not surprisingly, it was the 'hard edge', 'experimental' and, sometimes, 'local' and Australian works which proved most unreliable at the box-office. The great advantage of a pro-am theatre like La Boite was that, to a certain extent, risks could be taken in the pursuit of experimentation and quality; a small cast, box-office failure like the 1977 production of Louis Nowra's *Inner Voices* could be balanced with huge cast, sure-fire box office successes like *Bullshot Crummond* and *Grease*. By the end of the 1970s, La Boite's determination to showcase Australian works earned it national recognition. Summing up the Queensland scene for 1978 in *Theatre Australia*, Veronica Kelly wrote^{xl}:

One of Brisbane theatres bizarreries is that QTC – *the* state subsidized company – has always implicitly had its artistic pace set by La Boite which, putting aside for the moment the latter's vital professional wing in the early Childhood Drama Project, must be a rarity in Australian theatre in that it is an amateur theatre which most nearly challenges the state company.

Whatever the future holds, confidence is placed in La Boite for sensitivity to what it has done, can do and must do. My prayer for La Boite is that it never cede its perch in cultivating and displaying Australian talent; the adventurous Queensland Playwrights' season of 1977, Steve Sewell's *The Father We Loved on the Beach by the Sea* and the premiere of Spears' *King Richard* this year, shine like spotlights in a naughty world. Without La Boite, the heart sinks to one's thongs.

Staying on as President, Jennifer Blocksidge was able to temper Billingham's purposeful but sometimes alienating leadership style. She supported his great achievement of defining La Boite as a community theatre through his concept of the Energy Wheel^{xli} which impressed funding bodies and significantly contributed to the on-going funding that La Boite enjoyed during the 1970s. By the end of 1979, after four years of professional artistic direction, La Boite had become much more than a 'little' theatre run only for the benefit of its members. The whirl-wind of Billingham's four year tenure ended with President Blocksidge leading a major review of all activities that confirmed La Boite's pro-am status but also opened the door of possibility for La Boite to become Brisbane's professional 'alternative' theatre company in the future.

Funding troubles in the 1980s

Initially, the early 1980s was a buoyant time for La Boite and for the pro-am theatre community in Brisbane. The new artistic director, Malcolm Blaylock, had reason for optimism. In 1980 the Theatre Board of the Australia Council transferred La Boite from a project grant company to a general grant company, a coup (albeit short-lived)

for La Boite making it “the only pro-am Theatre on the list of general grants, which includes professional companies throughout Australia”^{xlii}. Blaylock interpreted this success as “an unqualified endorsement” of La Boite’s “unique role amongst Queensland companies; firstly as a community theatre and, secondly as a company with a policy of supporting new and innovative works”^{xliii}.

Such optimism was short-lived however, as the following year its Australia Council funding was cut^{xliv}. The official reason given was that the Australia Council had had its own funding cut by the Federal Government, and could no longer afford to fund amateur companies like La Boite. Blaylock rejected this label of ‘amateur’ claiming “We are a Professional Community Theatre. Last year we employed nine people full-time and fourteen people part-time. Our professional salary bill for the year was second only to the Queensland Theatre Company”^{xlv}. He believed the sub-text to the cuts was that “innovative and developmental companies are not considered to be an important part of the theatrical life of this country” and “unfortunately the concept of a Community Theatre in which a large number of professionals work with and for the benefit of the community is not acceptable to the Federal funding bodies”^{xlvi}.

Faced with a potential catastrophe, La Boite’s constituency^{xlvii} rallied in the first major test of its support and loyalty. Under Blaylock’s leadership, a tremendously powerful public campaign was mounted, resulting not only in funding restored for La Boite but increased Federal Government funding for the Australia Council. As Blaylock commented^{xlviii}:

The campaign to have La Boite’s funding re-instated was the most successful political exercise that I have ever seen in the theatre. The Chairman of the Australia Council, Timothy Pascoe in a meeting on Friday, 29th January 1982 with Jennifer Blocksidge and myself, stated that the government’s allocation of extra money to the Australia Council was due very largely to the effective campaign run by La Boite Theatre.

The writing was on the wall however - La Boite had to decide to return to a completely amateur theatre or become a fully professional theatre company.

Throughout these dramas, Blaylock pursued his largely successful artistic vision for La Boite by programming innovative, risky Australian and non-Australian plays, many with a clear political and socially critical agenda. Following the trend begun by Billingham, his 1980 season was all-Australian, a first for La Boite, and one that

doubled subscribers^{xlix}. In this period dominated politically by Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's extreme brand of conservatism, productions with strong political messages such as Trevor Griffith's *Occupations* and Stephen Sewell's *Traitors* attracted the attention of the Queensland Police Force Special Branch^l, which at the time, did the bidding of the National Party State Government. Happily for La Boite, Special Branch surveillance never translated into punitive State Government funding cuts, as was the case with Brisbane's far more left-wing Popular Theatre Troupe^{li}.

First abortive attempt to create a professional company

When Andrew Ross was appointed Artistic Director in mid-1982, his brief from La Boite's Council, as he understood it, was to forge La Boite into a professional company. The exciting artistic work that he developed during his short time as AD gave promise to the view that La Boite could become the Nimrod of the North. Ross is credited with its first real foray into professional mainhouse productions, its first production of a commissioned work by a Queensland playwright, and its first season of three professional theatre for young people productions^{lii}. But his intolerance of the entrenched amateur philosophy at La Boite and of existing structures like ECDP, as well as strong membership resistance to this push towards a professional company, made for a volatile situation that became impossible to control. The evidence from this era also suggested financial messiness and a general lack of accountability. Several very troubled years for La Boite culminated in the devastating loss in 1983 of both the State Government and Australia Council Theatre Board grants.

Amazingly, the doors stayed open with a skeleton staff. A massive effort in 1984 and 1985 by the Council and new staff members, the 'resident directors' (as they wished to be called) Mike Bridges and Mary Hickson, administrator Ron Layne, and executive secretary Rosemary Herbert saw the restoration of Theatre Board funding and, incredibly, an ongoing artistic program. A major shake-up of management structures ensued and a high policy priority was given to young people's theatre, an area of funding priority at the time. How La Boite managed its survival through the worst financial and policy crisis in its history - the aftermath of its premature pursuit of professionalization - was another classic example of La Boite's power to rally support from its constituency. In this case it was Mike Bridges and Council President Helen Routh in particular who emerged from that constituency as willing to give

excessive amounts of their time and professional expertise (and in Bridges' case, even substantial amounts of his own money) in the painful operation of re-securing La Boite's standing. However, the enormous benefit of theatre ownership and a property portfolio cannot be overestimated in understanding how this crisis was surmounted; without the asset of the theatre building in particular, where amateur productions and other activities could proceed even without funding, it is doubtful that La Boite would have survived.

A return to pro-am status

On Mike Bridges' departure, the Council created a new position of Managing Artistic Director (M.A.D) appointing Jim Vilé in 1986 to this combined role of artistic director and CEO. Whilst funding imperatives kept theatre by and for young people as the Theatre's major objective during Vilé's artistic directorship, he understood and respected the 'pro-am' nature of La Boite and during his time main-house pro-am theatre flourished. In no small measure this flourishing was due to the active participation of professional artists attracted by the exciting programming and challenging performance space. To boost theatrical activity Vilé adopted a successful 'Open Door' policy at La Boite where "everything and everybody was encouraged to take part"^{liii}. Theatresports was introduced; La Bamba, begun in 1982 as a late night cabaret-style event, was re-vitalized; tutors conducted workshops for every age group; and the space was hired out to appropriate companies. The level of activity that Vilé, staff and volunteers managed to sustain was extraordinary – every day and evening of every month of the Theatre's year was accounted for with a production of some kind. No professional theatre company could have afforded to keep up this level of creative output; this was the great strength of Australian pro-am theatre at its best. By the end of the 1980s La Boite had reached a reasonably secure financial position once again, achieved through pragmatic programming, an increase in the quality of artistic work and conservative financial management.

Industry pressure to professionalize

However, the happy arrangement whereby professional actors practiced their craft for no pay at La Boite in between paid work, turned sour by 1989. At the time, this situation was unique to Queensland, the only state in Australia where Actors Equity of

Australia (later Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance) permitted professional actors to perform in unpaid, amateur productions^{liv}. The year before, Aubrey Mellor had succeeded Alan Edwards as Artistic Director of the Royal Queensland Theatre Company and was moving swiftly to revitalize the company and embrace actors who had previously found professional work mainly with TN! and non-paid work with La Boite. His attention focussed sharply on La Boite when he witnessed three of the five Matilda Awards^{lv} going to professional artists for work undertaken in amateur productions. As Vilé recalled, Mellor soon “started to stir the pot and there were lots of people willing to listen to that and quite rightly”^{lvi}. Vilé felt uncomfortable with his role in perpetuating this situation although pleased that he was able to mount two professional productions^{lvii} which he saw as a bridge towards a much needed decision by La Boite to become a fully professional company.

One of a number of issues that contributed to “a really shattering time” for Patrick Mitchell^{lviii}, who in 1990 succeeded Vilé as Artistic Director, was the same one that had dogged Vilé: industry pressure for La Boite to pay its actors and production staff. Only several days into the job, this simmering issue erupted when three of the five Matilda Awards once again went to professional artists for their work in La Boite productions. He recalled that “the profession was outraged” and he was in the firing line^{lix}. Coming from a professional theatre in education background, Mitchell had neither the experience nor, in the end, the will to cope with the stress of running an extraordinarily busy company: “I walked into a very, very active theatre company ... I was trying to deliver everything Jim [Vilé] had delivered with less experience, less staff, and less support”^{lx} and most significantly with no General Manager. Mounting pressure from the Council led to his resignation, dramatically announced by Mitchell at the gala launch of his 1991 season.

A painful transition via near bankruptcy to a professional company

Mitchell’s sudden resignation provided the catalyst for the Council to decide the time was right to cautiously proceed towards transforming La Boite into a fully professional theatre company. This plan of gradual transformation was soon jeopardized by a Queensland Government change in Arts policy. Having finally defeated the Bjelke-Petersen Government in 1989, the new Queensland Labor

Government pursued a policy of rationalization of Brisbane theatre companies^{lxi}. Part of that rationalization was the cessation of its funding to amateur companies after June 1992. La Boite had no option but to press forward with an urgent plan to professionalize the company.

By the time David Bell was appointed Artistic Director in 1991, he already had a long history with La Boite having directed fourteen main house productions since 1975, including such artistic and box-office successes as *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* and *Bouncers*. Whilst Bell's eighteen months as AD ended traumatically for all concerned, this period was the beginning of La Boite as a professional company and produced some outstanding productions, characterized by highly theatrical, innovative works that crossed artistic boundaries blending dance, circus and opera with theatre^{lxii}. However, the swift change from pro-am to fully professional without appropriate financial planning or a General Manager to support Bell resulted in a first professional season that was artistically successful but financially devastating. La Boite once again found itself close to bankruptcy. These were turbulent times generally for the Brisbane theatre industry and it was a real possibility that La Boite might succumb to the same fate as TN! Theatre Company, which closed its doors in 1991. The lack of cohesion and mutual support between the Artistic Director, the Council and the staff led to a complete breakdown of communication, difficult confrontations and finally, Bell's resignation.

In this time of a national economic recession, and after the frightening financial failure of their first professional season, Council Chair Philip Pike, Treasurer Peter Lawson and Council members did not hesitate to make hard decisions thereafter about the direction La Boite needed to go. Pike's hardnosed leadership and Lawson's tough stance on its financial management eventually got La Boite out of a desperate situation and helped it turn the corner from near bankruptcy to become, within several years, Brisbane's successful alternative professional theatre company. This would not have been achievable however, without the Queensland Government's decision to financially support La Boite with a \$100,000 loan converted to a one-off grant as soon as the conditions insisted upon were in place – the appointment of a new Artistic Director and, significantly, a General Manager capable of setting up a viable professional company. Neither would the Government have been interested, believes

Pike, if La Boite did not have the security of its own theatre building as collateral or a property to sell to supplement Government funding^{lxiii}.

A fully professional company emerges at last

Sue Rider, appointed Artistic Director in 1993, new General Manager Deborah Murphy, Pike and Lawson proved a formidable team at a time when La Boite found itself at a crossroad leading either to success or failure as a professional theatre company. Their strong leadership and a sympathetic and supportive Queensland Arts Ministry were the keys to La Boite's successful and historic transformation into the professional company that Jennifer Blocksidge had dreamed of twenty years before.

From the beginning of her term, Sue Rider guided La Boite into a period of unparalleled growth. By the end of her second year, she had been awarded a prestigious Matilda Award for her strong and visionary creative steering of the company. The quality of her directorship drew to La Boite outstanding Queensland theatre professionals. Her championing of commissioned new works by Queensland playwrights and new Australian plays was unprecedented in the State's cultural history and gave the company a market-enhancing profile that contributed substantially to its success. Rider's determination that Brisbane's second major professional company was to become a hothouse for developing new work resulted in an impressive thirteen productions of new works commissioned by her between 1994 and 2000, the most successful of which were *Long Gone Lonesome Cowgirls* by Philip Dean, *X-Stacy* by Marjory Forde, *A Beautiful Life* by Michael Futcher and Helen Howard, *After January* by Philip Dean, adapted from the novel by Nick Earls, *Georgia* by Jill Shearer, *48 Shades of Brown* by Philip Dean, and *Milo's Wake* by Marjory Forde and Michael Forde. By the end of the final decade of the twentieth century, La Boite's national acclaim rested on Rider's gritty commitment to Queensland artists, development of new Queensland works, State and national tours, and overall support for Australian plays.

In what was to be the final year of Rider's term as artistic director, La Boite was an extraordinarily successful company with an average occupancy of over 80% per season and box office revenue of \$463,700, the highest in its history^{lxiv}. With a turnover of \$1.4 million in 2000, it had employed 100 theatre professionals at a cost

of \$866,000, it had received \$583,000 in Arts Queensland and Australia Council funding and had ended the year with an operating surplus of \$33,550 which the Treasurer called “another fabulous effort”^{lxv}. It was against this background of what seemed like unarguable success for Rider that, in the same year that she received a Special Matilda Award for services to Queensland theatre as La Boite’s Artistic Director since 1993, she was asked to step down from her position by the La Boite Chair Athol Young and the Board.

The Board’s growing sense in the late 1990s was that it was time for a change of artistic leadership, time for fresh energy and a new vision if La Boite was to continue to evolve as a dynamic company. Reluctant to leave and arguing the success of the company in 2000, Sue Rider initially refused to resign but in the end the Board’s determination gave her no option but to accept her dismissal. The indignity of being forced out was an unfortunate way to bring to an end her eight year contribution to an extraordinary period of growth and development.

The new millennium brings the end of an era

On his appointment as Artistic Director in October 2000, Sean Mee interpreted the Board’s call for a new strategic direction to mean “that the theatre company has to be re-located both physically and creatively to a new space”^{lxvi}. The first task, the physical re-location of the Theatre, was presented to Mee as a matter of urgency. Coupled with the increasingly overpowering presence and expansion plans of the neighbouring Lang Park Football Stadium (now Suncorp Stadium), the Theatre’s physical deterioration and outgrowing of its 200 seating capacity, La Boite had to face a very difficult reality: that its iconic building, unique in Australia, might be reaching the end of its life. When the scope and scale of the stadium re-development rendered any future in its present location virtually impossible after 2003, the Board conceded that the company’s days at Hale Street were numbered, and that indeed its days as a theatre company were also numbered if a solution was not found.

The story of its relocation is a long, dramatic and convoluted one! Suffice it to say that a location was found when the Queensland University of Technology agreed to include a theatre building for La Boite in its innovative plans for a Creative Industries Precinct within an ‘urban village’ setting at Kelvin Grove. The Queensland

Government, acknowledging the importance of La Boite to the State's continued cultural vitality, funded the company's move to Kelvin Grove. By the end of 2003, after selling the Hale Street property for \$1 million, La Boite Theatre Company had moved into the \$4.3 million purpose-built 400 seat Roundhouse Theatre complex on a 25 year lease. It was a momentous decision in La Boite's history to sacrifice a much loved Australian theatre building and the security of real estate for another kind of future in a very different environment. But to have stayed at Hale Street may well have handed a death sentence to La Boite Theatre Company. It had long outgrown the facility. It was definitely time to move on.

Mee's other brief from the Board was to re-locate La Boite 'creatively'. If Sue Rider had been found wanting in terms of her vision for the company's artistic future, then the onus was on Mee to articulate a clear way forward artistically and to convincingly action that vision. Post-2000, La Boite has exclusively programmed Australian works, either commissioned new works, Australian works of contemporary currency, or works that fell into the category of "Australian icons". Under Mee's artistic directorship, the company has increasingly embraced the programming of new Queensland works commissioned through La Boite. In fact, since 2004, Mee's seasons have consisted exclusively of new or extant Queensland works, a strategy which has worked extremely well for the company. Since 2004, gross box office has totalled well over \$2 million. For Mee, this is proof that he has found an audience which previously did not go to the theatre and who are relishing seeing their own Queensland stories told on the Roundhouse stage.

Conclusion

La Boite has to date worn its amateur past proudly and the professional company that thrives in Brisbane today remains deeply conscious of that legacy. At the first Season Launch at the new venue in Kelvin Grove, Sean Mee publicly acknowledged that this new beginning for the company was made possible not only through the vision of the state government and QUT, but by "the endeavour of generations of Queensland theatre workers" :

They have borne this Company upon their shoulders for nearly 80 years; nurturing it, changing it, sometimes shaking it up but always with the same intent: to keep the Company creatively viable.

The longevity of this Company is testament not only to their tenacity and passion, but also that each generation has had the foresight and the courage, often against stiff resistance, to take that necessary step, to compel the Company to go beyond in its own comfort zone and make a place for itself in the future. ... The challenge for us now is to live up to this outstanding legacy of achievement.^{lxvii}

ⁱ In Katharine Brisbane's introduction to Connie Healy's *Defiance: Political theatre in Brisbane 1930-1962* (Mount Nebo, Australia: Boombana Publications, 2000) 5.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Originally formed in 1925 as 'Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society', the organization dropped 'Society' in 1945 to become 'Brisbane Repertory Theatre'. With the opening of its first theatre-in-the-round in 1967, it often referred to itself as 'Brisbane Repertory's La Boite Theatre'. In 1977 it began marketing itself as 'La Boite' although it remained, legally, Brisbane Repertory Theatre. Between 1993 and 2003 its official title was 'La Boite Theatre'. On its move to Kelvin Grove in 2004, it became 'La Boite Theatre Company'.

^{iv} Brisbane's Twelfth Night Theatre was also an exception until its demise in the early 1990s. Established as an amateur group in 1936, it successfully transformed into a professional company in 1971, achieving twenty years of professional theatre before losing its funding and ceasing operations in 1991.

^v Adelaide Repertory Theatre which began in 1908 has the distinction of being the oldest still operating, but amateur theatre, in Australia.

^{vi} La Boite Theatre Company 2006 Annual Report, p.7.

^{vii} The thesis title is *La Boite Theatre 1925 to 2003: An Historical Survey of its Transformation from an Amateur Repertory Society to an Established Professional Company*, Queensland University of Technology, 2006.

^{viii} Cook, J.M. *Ponder the path of thy feet: a walk along the paths of the teachers of speech and drama in Brisbane and Queensland, 1916-1990* (Wavell Heights, Queensland, self-published, 1992)21-22.

^{ix} Fotheringham, R. "Brisbane" in P. Parsons (General Editor), *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Currency Press 1995) 100-102.

^x George Landen Dann Collection 1930-1976, Fryer Library, University of Queensland. UQFL65 Box 1 File 6, 1956.

^{xi} Gregory, H. *Vivant Professores – Distinguished members of the University of Queensland, 1910-1940*, (UQ Library, St.Lucia: Fryer Memorial Library, Occasional Publication No.7,1987) 148.

^{xii} J.J.Stable Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, UQFL S135 (Permanent Staff Files). UQ Gazette, June 1953: 2-6.

^{xiii} Brisbane Repertory Theatre Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland. UQFL109 Box 69/1 *The Brisbane Courier*, August 1, 1925.

^{xiv} . UQFL65 Box 3, *Smith's Weekly* 4 July 1931.

^{xv} Between 1925 and 1945, productions of three act plays by Australian playwrights included *A Happy Family* by Vance Palmer (1926), *The Touch of Silk* by Betty Roland (1929 & 1936), *In Beauty It Is Finished* by George Landen Dann (1931), *Madam Will Wait* by Doris Waraker (1931), *Cherry Acres* by Dorothea Tobin (1932), *No Incense Burning* by George Landen Dann (1938), *Men Without Wives* by Henrietta Drake-Brockman (1939), *A Second Moses* by George Landen Dann (1939), *Quiet Night* by Dorothy Blewett (1942), *Foolish Yesterday* by Sumner Locke Elliott, *Sons of the Morning* by Catherine Duncan (1945).

^{xvi} Other examples of such relationships are Canberra Repertory Society and Ric Throssell; Twelfth Night Theatre and Eunice Hanger; The Independent and Sumner Locke Elliott.

^{xvii} In Dann's hand-written notes for his *Caroline Chisholm* program, a 1947 production which he dedicated to her memory. UQFL109 Box 125,File1.

^{xviii} Cook 22.

^{xix} In an interview with Jennifer Blocksidge conducted by Jennifer Radbourne in 1978.

^{xx} Ibid.

^{xxi} It was Bruce Blocksidge who thought of the name. When studying in London, he lived in the Victoria League Student's Club in Bayswater. Close by was 'La Boite', a coffee house, "a little place frequented by well known theatricals – I think Sir Laurence Olivier was one, to drop a name!" Interview with Bruce Blocksidge 31 October, 2002.

^{xxii} Theatre Director's Report 1967, UQFL109, Box 4.11.

^{xxiii} Bruce Blocksidge was La Boite's Council President between 1967 and 1972; Jennifer Blocksidge was Honorary Director between 1969 and 1975 and President 1976 to 1978.

^{xxiv} Other Vice Patrons were Deputy Premier and Treasurer ,Sir Gordon Chalk and the actor John McCallum Who had began his acting career in amateur productions in Brisbane. The building had been officially opened the week before by the Patron, the Governor of Queensland Sir Colin Hannah, in the presence of the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane and various Liberal Party politicians.

^{xxv} From The Director in *A Refined Look at Existence*, Program, 1972.

^{xxvi} AGM Director's Report, 1972.

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- ^{xxvii} *The Australian*, September 8, 1872 in Brisbane, 2005: 212.
- ^{xxviii} For his brick, concrete and timber design of La Boite Theatre, architect Blair Wilson was awarded the 1972 Clay Brick Award. Both he and Bruce Blocksidge were subsequently awarded the Theatre's highest honour of Life Membership for their roles in the planning and realisation of this unique Australian theatre building (Nomination Form, Feb.20, 1973 UQFL109, Box 6.10).
- ^{xxix} Annual Theatre Director's Report, March, 1974. UQFL109 Box 4.
- ^{xxx} Director's Report 1974.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxii} Barry Otto was about to become nationally well known as an actor through his work from 1976 with Nimrod and Old Tote Theatre Companies in Sydney (Brisbane in Parsons [General Editor], *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, 1995: 421).
- ^{xxxiii} Director's Report 1975.
- ^{xxxiv} Hugh Lunn in *The Australian* Feb. 25, 1977.
- ^{xxxv} Funded by The Utah Foundation, the season included a revival of George Landen Dann's *In Beauty It Is Finished* and four premieres of new works: Lorna Bol's *Treadmill* and Jill Shearer's *The Kite*, *Nocturne* and *The Boat*.
- ^{xxxvi} *La Boite Newsletter* 1977, not dated. UQFL109 Box 125.
- ^{xxxvii} It was politically 'suspect' enough for the Special Branch of the Queensland Police to mingle with the opening night crowd in the foyer.
- ^{xxxviii} In *Theatre Australia*, 1979: 14.
- ^{xxxix} Billinghamurst, 1973, *La Boite Theatre is a People Place*, unpublished paper. UQFL109 Box 8.5.
- ^{xl} In *Theatre Australia*, January, 1979.
- ^{xli} The Energy Wheel was a blueprint for wide-ranging community involvement for all age levels in the activities of the theatre.
- ^{xlii} President's AGM Report, March 1, 1981. UQFL109, Box 4.
- ^{xliii} Artistic Director's AGM Report, March 1, 1981. UQFL109, Box 4.
- ^{xliv} AD's AGM Report, Feb. 28, 1982. UQFL109, Box 4.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xlvii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xlviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{lix} The all Australian season included Doreen Clarke's *Roses in Due Season*, Dorothy Hewett's *The Man From Mukinupin*, Stephen Measday's *Blow Fly Blow*, David Williamson's *Handful of Friends*, Rob George's *Let's Twist Again*, Stephen Sewell's *Traitors*, Michael Boddy and Robert Ellis' *The Legend of King O'Malley*, David Allen's *Dickinson*, and Rob George's *Errol Flynn's Great Big Adventure Book for Boys*.
- ^l Interview with Malcolm Blaylock, Sept. 28, 2003.
- ^{li} The Popular Theatre Troupe was refused Queensland Government probably on a directive from Cabinet, and despite regular grants from the Australia Council, Capelin, Ed., *Challenging the Centre: Two Decades of Political Theatre* (Brisbane, Qld: Playlab Press, 1995) 53.
- ^{lii} La Boite's first fully professional production was Alma De Groen's *Vocations* directed by Andrew Ross, designed by David Bell, with Eugene Gilfedder, Ingrid Mason, Richard Moir and Kaye Stevenson. The second and third professional mainhouse productions were Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* directed by Andrew Ross with Errol O'Neill as 'Monk', and *Female Parts* by Franca Rama and Dario Fo directed by Alison Richards with Genevieve Mooy and Kaye Stevenson. The commissioned work was Errol O'Neill's *Faces in the Street* directed by Ross.
- ^{liii} Managing Artistic Director's AGM Report, March 15, 1987. UQFL109.
- ^{liv} Interview with Jim Vilé, June 2, 2003.
- ^{lv} The Matilda Awards were established in 1988, funded from the arts division of the Queensland Premier's Department and worth \$2000 each. Although funding was withdrawn in 1992, the awards continue to be an important event in the Brisbane arts calendar (Chance in Parsons, 1995: 77)
- ^{lvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{lvii} Australia Council project funding supported a professional production of *Crystal Clear*, a devised work directed by Ian Leigh-Cooper. Bicentennial funding enabled a professional production of *The Matilda Women*^{lvii}, based on the stories of early Queensland women, written and directed by Sue Rider.

^{lviii} Interview with Patrick Mitchell, September 2, 2002.

^{lix} Ibid.

^{lx} Ibid.

^{lxi} In Milne, G. *Theatre Australia (Un)limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004) 290.

^{lxii} Bell's professional season comprised *Road* by Jim Cartwright directed by David Berthold, *Bouncers* by John Godber directed by David Bell, *When I was a Girl I Used to Scream and Shout* by Sharman Macdonald directed by David Bell, *Burn This* by Lanford Wilson directed by Jennifer Flowers, and *Briefings for a Descent into Hell* an original dance theatre work directed by Jacqui Carroll.

^{lxiii} Interview with Philip Pike, May 6, 2004.

^{lxiv} La Boite Annual Report & Financial Statement for the Year Ended 31 December 2000, La Boite Archives.

^{lxv} Ibid.

^{lxvi} Interview with Sean Mee, Oct. 15, 2003.

^{lxvii} Mee, S. (2003) *Unpublished Speech at the Launch of Season 2004*.