

PLOD ESSAY: 1982 “A Quite Unexpected Success” by Gill Heal

IN April 1980 the Union Theatre, then home of the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group, went up in flames only a short time after WTG Member, Gwen Derrick, received an anonymous phone call: “If you want to save your costumes, get them out.”

*The loss of the theatre and the way it was lost was a bitter pill for WTG to swallow and the grief was real and deep. What saved them was the opportunity to do what they did best – to put on a show at the Grand Opening of the new art’s centre that had been built to replace the old Union. What follows is a slightly condensed chapter from Gill Heal’s wonderful history of the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group called, **We Can Do That!***

1982: A QUITE UNEXPECTED SUCCESS

Originally, the program was to consist of two parts: a short play telling the story of Wonthaggi and a “best of” Gilbert & Sullivan from the Group’s repertoire. The program, however, took on a life of its own. By March the hunt is on for a scriptwriter who will tell the story of Wonthaggi. The countdown to the grand opening is tracked by Yvonne McRae in the group’s newsletter:

Letters have gone out to notable playwrights and storytellers. Should have some really big news soon. In April The Committee convened to meet a prospective writer/director already interviewed by Kirk Skinner in Melbourne.

The prospective writer is Ken Harper a postgraduate Student at VCA recommended by the Dean Eugene Schlusser. The Committee is delighted: *Everything we could ask for, friendly, personable, excited by the whole idea behind a production based on Wonthaggi as it had been, is and could be.* Harper is a perfect fit for Wonthaggi.

In talking to the young writer, it becomes obvious to the committee that the production *incorporating music, singing, dancing drama, a veritable cast of thousands would use the entire two-and-a-half hours of show time. Last week we were saying, What if we haven’t enough for the opening of the Arts Centre?? Now, with G&S, our group has enough material to take us into 1983. Needless to say all members of the group are going to be busy. There are going to be*

parts for all, masses of jobs backstage, front of house, etc.

The production will be entirely collaborative. Meticulous research via a widely distributed questionnaire, interviews and documentary sources will ensure the play is true to Wonthaggi. Harper will direct, Gwen Derrick, will be assistant director. The play will be entitled: *The Wonthaggi Celebration.*

...The script grows fatter by the week.

By July 82 everything is snowballing towards *The Wonthaggi Celebration* as the new production is to be called. Ken Harper has spent hundreds of hours interviewing, researching, writing up; he is now well into the script.

The emerging script consists of short scenes – small vignettes that suggest rather than tell, are representative rather than realistic – the cast having multiple roles.

The concept is new to the Group.

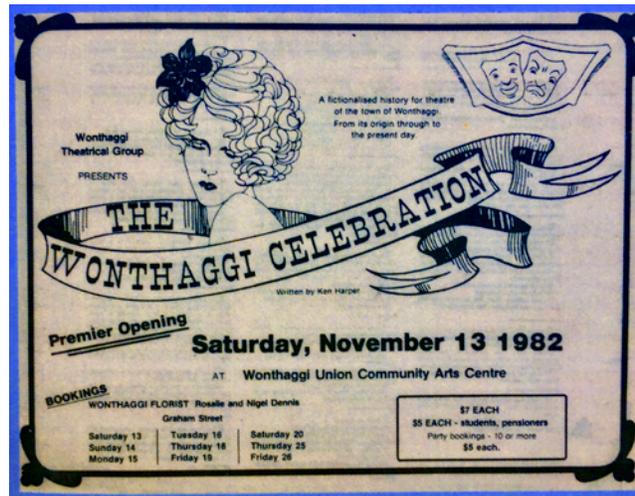
A production team of local artists and technicians is formed. There is the challenge

of new technology and uncertainty about the facilities and equipment in the new arts centre. The fly tower is only half the height the result of a budgetary measure. When fully raised, half the backdrop will remain visible to the audience. The committee’s July minutes record a request to Kim Harrison and Ken Harper to investigate use of scrim and back projection.

Never has there been a production where so much direction is needed to explain what or how. Appeals are made; answers are found: “Who knows about costume design?” a desperate wardrobe mistress might cry. “Bernadette Lucas does!” comes the response.

“Bernadette did some beautiful sketches for us,” recalls Gwen.

Music has to be composed, traditional tunes arranged. Young Kirk Skinner, now a 22-year-old music student at VCA, is to be musical director. “It was great fun! A very exciting thing, going back to the Group that had given me a start. It seemed important that I do my bit. I was really proud to be a part of it.”



Kim says a scene need special lighting – “Come down to the pub,” Yvonne tells hi, “ and we’ll meet with Ken over a counter tea.”

Audition dates are set for August: there is an appeal for old clothes; costume production gets underway. Rehearsals begin, but before that, for the past six weeks or so, Gwen, choreographer Chris Miles and others have been instructing the youth of the district in old-time dances. *Last week everything seemed to come together... suddenly everybody seemed to remember the steps... some of the girls tried on ball gowns from earlier years. They danced in these and immediately held their heads erect and moved more gracefully. Lovely!*

Young Lyric members join the cast to help boost numbers. A carload of young people drives over from Leongatha for rehearsals. Michael Giles is among them, “It was a tremendously interesting process. The production was quite innovative: there were projected images, action happening out in the auditorium, interesting sound effects... we had a lot of fun. We’d do a bit of warm-up in the car.”

Scenes start to take shape. In one, David Sims and Jenny Churchill play an Italian migrant couple, Bruno and Rosina, arriving by train, dropping their cases and spilling clothes everywhere. “We still joke about it to this day,” says David. “A lot of vignettes just worked, but it is the full dress-rehearsal that everyone remembers.”

All the cast knows there’s an enormous amount of material in the play. It’s when they call a halt to the (unfinished) dress-rehearsal at 1:30 am that the Celebration Committee concedes that the script is, at four-and-a-half hours, impossibly long. The cast leaves knowing that that evening – opening night – ten scenes will be cut.

According to David Sims, “On opening night – the night the dignitaries came – we had running sheets indicating what lines were left in, what were out. We were convinced it was all going to be disaster. We’d come off and check the running sheet to see if we were required for the next scene. It was chaos! Just crazy!”

The play was still two-and-a-half hours long after the cuts but somehow they got through. “I had things written all over my body,” confessed Val McDonald, “ – on my hand, my sleeve, everywhere.”

People pulled together,” says Gwen. “Val worked a way out for herself: Don’t panic. Keep your head and all will be well.”

The impact of the show was extraordinary. Yvonne McRae says it set up the arts centre. “My school

principal who cared naught for theatre could not get over the production. He kept raving on about it: the scene at the mine gate where they sang the workingman’s song; the big siren—it was the first time it had been used. Scene after scene: the gunny sack parade, 20 Shaft, the barber’s chair...aspects of Wonthaggi coming to life for old and new residents.”

The *Wonthaggi Celebration* was the first group production Carmel Liddle saw. She felt deeply connected to the show. Her grandfather that been a miner – “Dog tag number 28,” she tells us – and a farmer.

Jenny Churchill was awed by the impact of the Thirteen Dead scene. First the mine whistle, then the cry, “20-Shaft’s blown up!” out of the dimness, a funeral dirge, thirteen names intoned, thirteen empty chairs laid on their sides. The silence in the audience was palpable, save for, from somewhere, an audible intake of breath. People in the audience were crying, recalls Michael Giles. I think there was a standing ovation. It was quite an unexpected success. An absolute gem.”

Yvonne McRae writes in her newsletter, December 1982: *One of the most successful shows we have ever presented... Ken Harper’s magnificent script was brought to life by a most dedicated cast... Gwen D. lived and breathed this production and saw it rise from despair to the pinnacles reached.*

In capturing a series of small and great events, some factional, some fictitious, the play formed a coherent and moving narrative that, in Ken Harper’s words, “defined and celebrated the distinctive story of the town...”

In its constitution, the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group defined its purpose in simple terms: It is a club for persons interested in the amateur performing arts and theatre in particular. But in securing the future of the new arts centre and fixing its flag to the grand opening, the group became so much more.

In the oxygen generated by this event, the Wonthaggi Theatrical Group breathed deep and stepped up. It became a defender and explainer of community culture and a shaper of new life from Wonthaggi and the arts.

Buy **WE CAN DO THAT!** by Gill Heal at Wrench’s & The Workmen’s Club @ \$35 or the library.