

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

FOR YEAR ENDING 31 DECEMBER 2024

Welcome to the 16th Annual General Meeting of Theatre Heritage Australia.

2024 was another busy and exciting year for the organisation. We embarked on an extensive program of public events and continued our work on a range of publishing and digitisation projects.

The aim of THA is to promote and encourage greater understanding and appreciation of Australia's rich performing arts history. Much of our work falls into three broad areas, namely: our **Events** program; our **Special Projects**; and **Publishing** our original research.

EVENTS

In 2024, we continued to host a full program of public events both here in Melbourne and in Sydney. As in previous years, our line-up of special guest speakers included a range of award-winning artists and creatives, senior authors and academics, and major cultural leaders.

MELBOURNE EVENTS

In Melbourne, our regular guest speaker events are held at The Channel, within the Arts Centre Melbourne, and we were pleased to announce the continuation of our agreement with ACM, albeit with some modifications to the contract.

Under our agreement, the Arts Centre Melbourne is co-presenter for all of our events held at The Channel, and consequently the Arts Centre assigns us a Producer, and provides Front of House and Technical staff for all of our events; in addition, the Arts Centre handle ticketing, and include our events in their online marketing.

In previous years, this has been provided at no cost to THA or our audience, meaning, we were able to offer these events completely free. Under the new arrangement, the Arts Centre continue to provide all staff as well as ticketing and marketing support, at no cost to THA itself. However, they have now introduced a fee for patrons who attend our events. As of 1 July 2024, patrons unaffiliated with THA are charged a fee of \$25 per ticket. For THA members and newsletter subscribers, we were able to negotiate a reduced fee of \$10 per ticket, provided they book through a special booking link – which we publish on our website and through our event emails. As a consequence, events held at the Arts Centre in the first half of 2024 were free to attend, while events presented after July 1, were subject to the new agreement and incurred a cost per ticket.

I should point out that none of the booking fee goes to THA. It is a charge levied by, and on behalf of, the Arts Centre Melbourne. Our current agreement with the Arts

Centre continues until 30 June 2025, and we are assessing the impact of the booking fee on attendances.

In 2024, there were initially five events scheduled for The Channel, however one event was cancelled at the last minute.

- ***An Afternoon with Gideon Haigh – Saturday 16 March***

Gideon Haigh has been a journalist for 40 years, has contributed to more than a hundred newspapers and magazines, and published fifty-two books, on subjects from cricket and crime to asbestos and abortion. Gideon was due to speak about his new book, *The Girl in Cabin 350*, a true crime novel set in the mid-twentieth century, with some intriguing links to the theatre world at the time. Unfortunately Gideon had to cancel the event at the last minute due to a family emergency.

- ***AGM – 14 April 2024***

Our AGM last year was held at the Arts Centre Melbourne. Our special guest speaker for the day was Sandra Bruce, Director of Collections and Exhibitions at Arts Centre Melbourne. Sandra spoke about her own career as well as the re-opening of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, the largest performing arts collection in the country. After Sandra's presentation, approximately thirty lucky attendees were treated to a guided tour of the new facilities.

- ***An Afternoon with Jo Gilbert – 29 June 2024***

Jo Gilbert is the granddaughter of Australian musical legend, Jack O'Hagan. As manager of the Jack O'Hagan Estate and the family collection of music, photographs and memorabilia, Jo found herself in a unique position to tell the story of both the man and the artist, who was a huge celebrity in his time and whose songs are recognised as being of cultural, historical and aesthetic significance by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). We were thrilled to present an exclusive, one hour visual and musical journey through the life of Jack O'Hagan.

- ***An Afternoon with Virginia Lovett – 10 August 2024***

Virginia Lovett is a highly experienced and well-respected cultural leader, who has played major roles at University of Melbourne, Melbourne Theatre Company, Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney Theatre Company and the National Gallery of Victoria, amongst many more. She has worked as an advisor for State Ministers in both Victoria and New South Wales. In this exclusive and intimate presentation, Virginia spoke about her extensive career in the arts and cultural sector and what it takes to be a leader in today's creative industries.

- ***In Conversation with Richard Roberts – 7 December 2024***

Richard Roberts is one of Australia's most revered theatrical designers. From *Don Quixote* to *La Rondine*, Roberts' work has graced major stages around the world. For THA, Richard spoke about his four-decade career, spanning his time as resident

designer at State Theatre Company of South Australia, to his current role as Head of Design and Production at the Victorian College of the Arts.

In addition to the four regular events at the Arts Centre Melbourne, we presented a special one-off event as part of the 2024 Australian Heritage Festival.

- ***Mr Coppin's Tour of Civil War America – 3 May 2024***

'*Entertaining Mr Coppin*' is a major new book due to be published by Theatre Heritage Australia later this year. As a preview of things to come, THA hosted this special one-off event, presented by the book's author, Simon Plant, who introduced many of the characters represented in George Coppin's American Album of Photographs – a photo album compiled by Coppin on his tour of America in the 1860s, and which was the inspiration for *Entertaining Mr Coppin*.

The event was held in the club lounge of the extraordinary Savage Club, situated in the heart of Melbourne's central business district. Formed in 1894, the Melbourne Savage Club is classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). As well as previewing some of the characters that will feature in our forthcoming book, the event was a rare opportunity for guests to see behind the front doors of one of Australia's oldest private members' clubs.

SYDNEY EVENTS

In Sydney, our guest speaker events are held at the SB&W Foundation's headquarters in Neutral Bay. We were thrilled to be able to continue our partnership with the SB&W Foundation, begun in 2023, and with whom we share a common vision to promote and encourage greater understanding and appreciation for the performing arts in Australia.

In 2024, we presented three special guest speaker events in Sydney.

- ***Lynn Rainbow AM – 23 June 2024***

Lynn Rainbow is the fourth-generation member of her family to tread the boards. Wanting to please both sides of the family, she decided early in life to be a judge by day, and dance Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* at night. A 33-year career on stage, film, TV and radio followed, in England, the US and of course, Australia. She was a student at the Independent Theatre and is still most widely remembered for her part as Sonia, the Chemist, in *Number 96*.

- ***Emeritus Professor Richard Fotheringham – 28 July 2024***

Richard Fotheringham is Emeritus Professor of Theatre History at the University of Queensland and one of Australia's pre-eminent theatre historians. Richard's presentation concerned two Australian performers – the vaudeville singer Jenny Howard (1902-1996) who was a huge star for the Australian Tivoli circuit during World War Two and for decades after. And Joy Nichols, a child star in Sydney in the War years who went on to become a spectacular success on stage and radio in the

UK in the decade after – but who seemed to have been almost completely forgotten since.

- *Dr Mark St Leon – 15 September 2024*

Dr Mark St Leon is a retired university lecturer and a recognised expert on the history of circus in Australia. Born in Sydney in 1952, he is descended from Australia's earliest family of professional entertainers, the St Leon circus family. He is the author of *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne Books, 2011) and other books and articles that examine the history of circus in Australia, a previously unexplored chapter in the nation's history since European settlement.

I am pleased to announce that our partnership with the SB&W Foundation continues again this year. Our Sydney events are typically held in the winter months, and as such we have another series of exciting speakers, due to begin very soon.

You can find current details for all of our events at the website – theatreheritage.org.au

SPECIAL PROJECTS

In addition to our events program, THA is currently working on a number of Special Projects. I wanted to take this opportunity to update Members regarding a number of projects currently underway.

BOOKS

- *Entertaining Mr Coppin by Simon Plant*

I am thrilled to announce that this fantastic new book, written by Simon Plant, and published by THA, is due to be released in August of this year. Indeed, we are now in the final stages of laying out the book, and we are scheduled to go to the printers in early July 2025.

To that end, we have a major book launch planned for August 11. At this moment we are still waiting on confirmation, but we expect the launch to take place at The Comedy Theatre in Melbourne, which was the original site of Coppin's Olympic Theatre – and you are all invited! Indeed, we are counting on you! The book has been many years in the making and has been a major undertaking by THA. We are genuinely thrilled with the way the book has turned out. We believe it represents an important contribution to our understanding of one of the most significant figures in Australian theatre history, George Coppin. We cannot wait for you to read it!

As with the *Falk Studios*, the book we produced a few years ago, we are inviting THA members to help support the production of *Entertaining Mr Coppin* by becoming a subscriber. For just \$90, you will be listed in the book and on the website as a Proud Supporter, and you'll also receive a signed copy of the book once it becomes available in August. If you're not interested in becoming a subscriber, you

can right now pre-purchase the book for \$45, which is a 10% discount off the normal price. Once the book is launched in August, it will revert to \$50 (which I should add includes postage with Australia). We will be sending out more details shortly, but in the mean time, you can learn more about the project at <https://www.theatreheritage.org.au/entertaining-mr-coppin>

- *Dear Mr Smith by Lex Marinos*

At last year's AGM we announced that THA was working with Lex Marinos to publish his work on James Smith, who was a leading theatre and arts critic in Melbourne during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Many of you will know, Lex sadly passed away at the end of last year. But before he died, he submitted a final draft of the manuscript along with a mountain of supporting material, and as soon as we are able to complete the Coppin project, we are committed to finishing Lex's book. There is, as yet, no date set for publication, but we will provide more information as it becomes available.

PUBLISHING

The main THA website (theatreheritage.org.au) is the primary outlet for publishing our original research and, indeed, the most common way for members of the public to discover the work of THA. Elisabeth Kumm, the editor of our OnStage Magazine, and indeed our wonderful Secretary, continues to do an outstanding job, curating more articles, from an ever expanding network of contributors, than ever before. In 2024, the site received more than 18K visitors, an almost 40% increase over the 13K visitors we received the previous year. In addition, the number of subscribers to our newsletter grew by almost 25% for the year, with an increasing number of subscribers from outside Victoria (our traditional audience base), and from across the globe. The upshot of all that is that there are now more people than ever reading our content and receiving our newsletter.

We are always interested in hearing from people who may have a story to share. If you have an article, or an *idea* for an article, that you would like to submit, please contact us via the website.

In fact, THA runs two websites – the first one is the one mentioned above, that we refer to as our 'main website', and is where all new articles are posted. The other is our digital archive site (digital.theatreheritage.org.au), where we upload our digitised content, such as the JCW Scene Books, the Falk Album, the theatre programs etc. Last year we announced plans to upgrade our digital archive website, having completely upgraded the main website the previous year. The upgrade of the digital site has begun, but is not yet complete. This upgrade is necessary to ensure we are able to maintain and grow the site into the future, and should be completed later this year.

OTHER

In addition to the three main areas above, there were a number of other significant developments in 2024 worth mentioning.

Oral History program

The Oral History program continues to grow – in the past 12 months, the team have added two new interviews – including JC Williamson historian Kevin Coxhead (who, incidentally, has since joined the THA Committee), and; singer, actor, writer and composer, Hilary Henshaw. The team have further interviews planned for later this year.

Relocation of the Theatre Royal Plaque

In 1937, Lucy Coppin, the daughter of George Coppin, unveiled a plaque to commemorate the location of the original Theatre Royal in Bourke Street Melbourne. One of the most significant of Melbourne's early theatres, the Theatre Royal had been demolished four years earlier. In subsequent years, the site changed hands a number of times, before eventually being taken over by Coles. Today, the site is now occupied by Kmart. Somehow, through all the changes of management, the historic plaque had gone missing, and it was feared lost for good.

Greg Sampson, whose great great grandfather was the scenic artist William Pitt, after accepting a challenge from our former President Mimi Colligan, went looking for the whereabouts of the original plaque, and thanks to some tenacious investigation and many emails, finally discovered it hidden behind the door in the Kmart staff tea room.

Greg negotiated with the owners of the building to have the plaque reinstated, where, we are thrilled to say, it is now mounted in the Kmart arcade on the very site where the Theatre Royal was originally located. We send our thanks and huge congratulations to Greg for all his hard work, ensuring that once again the plaque is available for all Melbournians and visitors to see. While this was not a THA project as such, we were very pleased to offer our support and assistance where we could. If you manage to visit the site, you will see that THA has produced another smaller plaque which now hangs just below the original plaque, and which describes the timeline of the Theatre Royal in greater detail.

Passing of Frank Van Straten

Finally, it is with tremendous sadness, we note that on 19 April last year, just a few days after our last AGM, one of the most significant figures in the history of this organisation, Frank Van Straten AM, passed away.

Frank's achievements extend way beyond his work with THA and are way too numerous to mention them all here. As many of you will know, he established the Performing Arts Collection at the Arts Centre Melbourne – the largest collection in

the country – which is this year celebrating its 50th anniversary. He wrote at least eight books and countless articles on Australian theatre history, for many publications including our own OnStage Magazine.

Indeed, Frank was co-editor of OnStage, with David Cullinane, back when it was a printed, physical magazine. For more than a decade, the two of them were responsible for researching, writing, commissioning articles, editing, designing and producing four print editions per year. The magazines would then need to be stuffed into envelopes and mailed out individually to the many hundreds of subscribers. Adrian Turley assisted Frank with this task, and to save on postage they would hand-deliver to addresses nearby, though there's every chance any savings went into the cost of petrol. As soon as one edition was finished, they were working on the next.

Even after he retired from the committee, Frank remained an active member of THA and a generous contributor to our 'brains trust'. Whenever we received a tricky enquiry from a researcher looking for some specific information, or a member of the public doing some family research, Frank was quick to respond, often with a mountain of information, or at the very least, a list of promising leads to follow up.

As well as lending us his formidable intellect and unequalled knowledge of the field, Frank has been a regular and generous financial supporter of THA. We were somewhat stunned then, a few weeks after Frank passed away, to receive a call from the executor of Frank's estate, informing us that Frank had left us an incredibly generous donation. By the time the money was released, and with interest earned, the donation amounted to more than \$30,000. For a small volunteer organisation like ours, that is, not only the largest financial gift we have received by far, but a major vote of confidence in the work we are doing, by someone who was a giant in the field.

Mahler, the great Viennese composer, once said "*tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.*" We study history not as a dry record of the deeds of the past, but rather we study history because it tells us something about ourselves, in the present. An understanding of history allows us to better distinguish between those things that are temporary and superficial, and the things that last – the things that really matter.

THA is but one of the many organisations that have benefitted from Frank's kindness and generosity. For more than fifty years, Frank has 'preserved the fire' of history for us. We are still working out how best to use the money that Frank has left us, but we plan to use it to honour the incredible legacy of Frank's work, and to pass the flame to the next generation of theatre historians.

We send our deepest condolences to Frank's family and his partner Adrian. We are truly grateful.

COMMITTEE CHANGES

There have been two changes to the committee in the past twelve months. We are thrilled to welcome Kevin Coxhead and Simon Dwyer.

Kevin Coxhead is a J C Williamson historian, historic costume collector/restorer, and author, having written a biography of Betty Pounder to celebrate her centenary in 2021. Last year he wrote a book covering notable JCW theatre managers, musical directors, choreographers, scenery and costume designers, stage managers and the JCW owned theatres throughout Australia and New Zealand.

Simon Dwyer has worked in and around theatres in Australia and New Zealand for over thirty years. He researches, writes and presents on a wide range of topics including architecture, education, facilities management, literature and the performing arts.

Kevin and Simon replace Dr Sue-Anne Wallace and Dr Jenny Fewster. Dr Sue-Anne Wallace you will recall passed away unexpectedly early last year; and Dr Jenny Fewster decided not to renominate. Dr Fewster had been a valued member of the committee for a number of years. We thank for her contribution to the organisation, and wish her all the very best into the future.

I'm sure I mention this every year but it bears repeating. All of the contributors to the OnStage Magazine, the interviewees for the Oral History program, and the guest speakers at our events, donate their time and expertise for free. In addition, we are fortunate to receive both financial donations as well as donations of historic materials, such as theatre programs and books, from the theatre community and indeed the wider public. On behalf of the committee, I'd sincerely like to thank all of our contributors, our donors, our event partners – Arts Centre Melbourne and the SB&W Foundation in Sydney – along with all of the past contributors and committee members who remain a part of the extended family of the organisation, for their generous and ongoing support.

I can't finish without acknowledging the amazing contribution of the committee themselves. THA is a volunteer-run organisation. It requires an enormous commitment of time and energy on the part of many people. I'd very much like to thank – our Vice President Diana Burleigh, our Secretary Elisabeth Kumm, our Treasurer David Williams, Kevin Coxhead, Simon Dwyer, Peter Johnson, Judy Leech, Rob Morrison, Matthew Peckham, Robert Ray and Dr. Cheryl Threadgold OAM.

I hereby present this report to the members.

Simon Piening

President, Theatre Heritage Australia

1 June 2025