NEW THEATRE: FIFTY YEARS YOUNG
For almost fifty years Sydney audiences have supported a left wing theatre, New Theatre. Here Chris Williams talks with Secretary, Miriam Hampson and president, Marie Armstrong about this rich experience and they offer some conclusions.

The New Theatre constitution refers to "the progressive aspirations of the Australian people". Could you identify those aspirations?

MH: By that term, we mean the aspirations of people fighting against the use of nuclear weapons. We mean trade unions fighting for better standards of living. We mean people who take up women’s issues, and anything else of great concern – everything, in short, that the ordinary person has to fight for. In particular, there's the big issue of what large monopolies are doing, not only in our country but throughout the world. They are buying our country for a song.

How would you define the New Theatre audience?

MA: The current audience, in my opinion, is more and more made up of people in the habit of theatre-going, young people, intellectuals. But on top of that, we've always retained a basic core of people that has been coming to New Theatre for years. A lot of these people would have come from what we used to define as the “working class” in the days when I first joined the theatre, and I think the sons and daughters of these people are coming now, too.

How would you describe working class culture today? At present, we are faced with the mass communication of TV, radio and Hollywood — mainly (for want of a better term) capitalist propaganda. How effectively can “working class culture” resist this?

MH: Our production of Yobbo Nowt, directed by Marie, was a good example of a play with a working class orientation. On various questions — the role of the family, the attitude of the husband, the way people fight to gain an understanding of their very low position with respect to money — Yobbo Nowt is a play for the moment, and I don't think you could beat it.

MA: I agree with that. We were very excited to get the rights to perform Yobbo Nowt, because it seemed to sum up everything we wanted to say at the time. It’s very difficult for us to obtain the rights to plays we want, because we are no longer the only theatre that would touch this sort of material. By that I mean plays that reflect the lives of ordinary people, as opposed to plays concerned exclusively with intellectual and personal problems, dealt with on a level unrelated to the problems of the working class.

In Britain there is a strong movement in the direction of plays written for people living in industrial areas, instead of for the West End. America has a similar movement, but it’s not as strong, from my reading, as it is in Britain. And many Australian playwrights are interested in work that says something sharper, and is not primarily aimed at middle-class audience. Steve J. Spears, for example. There are others....

MH: Nick Enright.

MA: Yes, Nick Enright — he says some very interesting things for a whole spectrum of people who are not quite the audience that David Williamson writes for.

Of course, it’s terribly difficult to overcome the influence of television and other mass media, and the tastes being developed in the RSL clubs (particularly in NSW). We've got a
battle, but the playwrights are there. The big struggle is to reach people who don’t normally go to the theatre.

MH: There are people today who are very, very poor, and finding things much more difficult than they did a few years ago. So the need for our sort of theatre has become clear right through the theatre world (even if others do not emphasise left wing ideas as much as we would like them to).

How hard is it to maintain a left wing theatre, in the face of the current economic difficulties of our capitalist society?

MH: It’s been hard right from the beginning. You do it on the smell of an oily rag. Other theatres can pay thousands to mount a show, but we average $750 for each production. We bludge, we innovate, we do everything.

MA: We go to Reverse Garbage!

MH: We are a non-professional theatre, with only two paid workers (and they get a very ordinary wage). But because we are used to being without and having to fight, at the end of the year we will become one of the few groups in Australia that owns its own theatre outright. We have reached this position with a great deal of help from ordinary people, from some of the more militant trade unions, from government subsidy, and from some sections of big business.

In Germany between the wars, progressive theatres raised money by selling shares in a production to trade unions. Have you tried that sort of thing?

MH: No. We get block bookings from some trade unions, through left wing political parties, or from people who just like the theatre. Like all theatres we offer a concession for party bookings.

MA: Prior to Roosevelt’s election in America in the thirties, left wing theatre had extremely close ties with the trade unions. At that time, a trade union branch would take a block booking at whatever left wing theatre it was supporting. With a lot of ground-work, it should be possible for New Theatre to re-establish its contacts with the grass roots trade union audience it attracted in the 30’s.

It would be ideal if not only state or national trade union officials came to our shows — we would like an audience of 160 shop stewards from, say, the Metal Workers Union (AMWSU), who could spread the word on the shop floor. This is only a fantasy at present — I work for the AMWSU, and know the problems. But there’s a basis there we just have to find enough energy to go and speak to trade union branches, as we did in the past.

I think this is the sort of thing we should be doing to get these people to come and help us celebrate our fiftieth year.

MH: We still have support from the trade unions and left wing political parties. The Communist Party and socialist parties still come, as well as people from Direct Action. Once upon a time we would perform everywhere — the waterfront, for example. The wharfies used to have to line up for their pay, and we performed for them while they were lining up. We also used to go to Chullora railway workshops, but we need street theatre to do that. From time to time we have a strong street theatre, but at the moment, when we need it most, it’s as dead as a dodo.

MA: Once again, things like street theatre rely on the enthusiasm of groups of people, and we have a very high turnover. Any theatre has this problem. People don’t always get what they expect when they join a theatre, and there’s a lot of discipline and hard work involved in working for the New. There’s a lot of fun too, but we take our work seriously and expect total commitment. Some people think that’s great for a certain amount of time, but then other things interfere.

MH: Still, people in Australia have managed to keep a theatre like ours going non-stop for 49 years. We know a lot of inspiration came from overseas, but the New is really quite unique.

How important is the fact of New Theatre’s survival, in helping to forge a left wing or working class identity?

MH: Very important. It’s also important
that some of Australia’s top theatre people have come from the New. A few old hands I’ve talked to can’t believe that we’re 50 years old, and that, years ago, they were associated with us. We have had an effect not only on actors but also on designers and writers.

MA: If any theatre was going to survive for 50 years, it’s no accident that it turned out to be the New. Part of the reason is political. There was a principle involved in our formation, and we have tried to maintain that principle ever since. That’s been with us all along — the fact that we’ve had these principles allied to plays that reflect the lives of ordinary people. This hasn’t limited us. In fact, our principles have kept us removed from the sort of amateur theatre that becomes art for art’s sake, and depends on the dominance of big personalities, our structure is very democratic.

Could you describe that structure?

MA: Members of New Theatre pay $15 plus $1 joining fee. The only job they have to do is take their share of front-of-house work.

The theatre is run by a management committee and a production committee, both elected at our annual general meeting. There are also quarterly general meetings at which committee members report back on activities they are responsible for (publicity, workshop productions, and so on). With this structure, people have recourse to areas where they can raise objections. They can raise them at general meetings, or talk to the artistic director.

Something like this happened while I was directing Yobbo Nowt. One actor who had never worked with me before didn’t like what I was doing with him, so he went to the artistic director, which I thought was great. “Never had to complain”, he said, “but I want to complain about Marie. I don’t like this, this and this.” The artistic director passed this onto me, and we were able to iron it out.

Sometimes this democratic way of work is a little heavy, and sometimes I would agree with anyone who says: “Oh, but it’s stifling”. It can be stifling but I think you have to pay some dues for having something that is run for everyone, and not just the flaring stars.

Do you try to develop any consistent production or acting method?

MA: This is difficult. We have our own directors on our production committee, but not enough to sustain the productions that we put on every year. So we invite outside directors, and we have people constantly ringing up and saying: “Look, I’m interested in doing a production for the New Theatre.”

We give new directors a brief, but this only covers how the theatre operates, certainly not how we expect them to direct a play. Both internal and external directors have to discuss their casting suggestions with a production committee, but they have the final say on that — after all, the director’s the one who has to work with the cast.

On the other hand, no director can work for us whose work isn’t seen by representatives of our production committee. When we watch the work of a new director, we are interested in whether he/she has brought out the playwright’s intentions. If a director doesn’t have a current production we can go and see, we invite the director to do a workshop production with the theatre so we can observe the methods of work. The internal directors, to some degree or another, base their productions on Stanislavsky’s methods.

In terms of production, our main influences come from Stanislavsky, and this is most apparent in the plays of the thirties that the theatre became extremely well known for.

I’m thinking of American plays like Clifford Odetts’ Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die. These plays came out of the Group Theatre in America, and it was totally influenced by Stanislavsky. Members of the Group Theatre like Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Stella Adler had gone to Moscow when Stanislavsky was still alive. As well as this, some members of the Moscow Art Theatre left the Soviet Union and went to America in the thirties and started to teach, so the influence spread.

One actor from the Group Theatre, whose
A scene from the New Theatre's 1967 production of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude Van Itallie. The performers are Robert Bruning, Dora Hall and John Hargreaves.
name I think was Will Lee, visited Australia during the war as a serviceman, and took some classes at the New.

So you would say one couldn't separate the beginnings of modern workers' theatre from Stanislavsky.

MA: No, I don't think so. Of course, I'm not saying there weren't other European directors.....

MH: Brecht, of course....

Brecht immediately comes to mind, because he criticised Stanislavsky for the naturalistic playing of the Moscow Art Theatre. Where would you place the New Theatre in this socialist realist-naturalist spectrum?

MH: At the time, when Brecht was criticising Stanislavsky, we didn't know very much about Brecht. Although we were the first in Australia to do Brecht (a play called Senora Carrara's Rifles about the war in Spain), we did it in our way then.

MA: Many years ago I saw a film of a stage production of Mother Courage, presented by the Berliner Ensemble with Helen Weigel as Mother Courage. You couldn't help identifying with her performance, it was so fantastic, but we didn't know whether we were seeing in her performance what Brecht talked and wrote about, or whether we were seeing it in some of the other actors that seemed to be acting in a different style. All we knew was that when we came out we were crying and laughing and doing all the things that you do when you're affected by a production.

Turning to current issues, how would you see the role of an organisation like the New Theatre in supporting actions like the 35-hour week campaign?

MA: If we had a strong street theatre group, there would be no doubt that they would handle it. For example, the last active street theatre group did shows on the New South Wales transport system and on uranium. In this way, we've been able to cover current events quickly, and get relevant shows into demonstrations and factories, or wherever they may be needed. But to perform inside factories, you need people who are available during the day for lunch-hour performances.

MH: We can't wave a wand and make people interested in street theatre. It will come again, but you've got to have people who know what they're about.

MA: From time to time, of course, we try to do a revue on a current issue, but we can't always get interested writers. Once again, you can't tell writers what to write about. So it's a long time since we've done a revue on one particular topic. The last one was It's Time to Boil Billy, which we did just before the first Whitlam government was elected. We were very pleased about that, because we set out to get a show to support Whitlam. That doesn't mean we didn't have criticisms of the Labor Party. We felt that, politically, that was the most constructive thing we could do in that historical period, and it was a very successful revue.

At the time of the Viet Nam confrontation (before the Moratorium movement was the very big, broad movement that it became), the theatre realised that this was one of the most significant political things that we should be involved in, and we set out to get a show written. Luckily, we had a very talented writer in our midst, and other people who believed in it very, very much, and we got a show called On Stage Viet Nam which played to packed houses. The show performed a vital role, in that people who were already convinced that the war was something we had to protest against, were able to bring their uncommitted friends.

MH: We were one of the groups who really helped to bring about people's desire to do something about stopping the war.

MA: These things have been highlights. We recognise them when they happen, and when they don't happen we feel sad about it. For example, our revue late last year caused a great deal of controversy. Because I work for the AMWSU, and it was the very early days of the 35-hour week campaign, I kept bringing material on the 35-hour week to the writers.
However, these writers were unknown to me — I had seen their work, but as people I didn’t know them. All I knew was that if ever there was something we needed as a theme for this revue it was the 35 hours campaign. I knew that by the time the show got on the stage the issue would be hot.

The writer of the Viet Nam show had been part of us, but these two writers weren’t in that situation, and we ended up with a revue that was very controversial and put forward some very difficult points of view. We had to support it because we were responsible for the production, but I would have loved to see a show written about all the aspects of the 35-hour week campaign.

Now it didn’t happen then, but it happened with Billy and it happened with Viet Nam, and will happen again with something else.

MH: Of course, the very first revue we did was very important too. It was called *I’d Rather be Left*, and was staged during the time before the Soviet Union came into the war. The show was a counter to all the talk at the time about helping Hitler go into the Soviet Union, and had the same effect as *On Stage Viet Nam*. It raised all the political issues of the day, it was funny and beautifully done. But you’ve got to have the people to do it, as Marie said — you can’t wish it on people.

MA: If we were professional, we would commission things to fit in, but we are not professional, so we rely on the talents available at any given time.

**How do you view the New Theatre’s role in the community?**

MA: We cater for hundreds of people over a twelve month period. “Keeps them off the streets” we say “come in here and gain skills”. And in the process of gaining skills, people are occupying their leisure time, a significant factor if you’re talking about the effect on leisure time of the 35-hour week and new technology. We are not just another theatre. I think we are performing a very good community service. How many other places are there for people to come and be trained in their leisure time? We’ve supplied not only actors, but technical people that are now working at the Opera House and other places. These people started with us, and then discovered that there is a whole world of designing, lighting and sound. It’s a difficult area to get into professionally without experience, so we’re here all the time, offering training through workshops and major productions.

MH: We’re not trying to compete with professional companies — we couldn’t, anyway. It’s in America that most of these fantastic groups that started in the 30’s were professional, but they didn’t last the length of time that we have, although they certainly had a tremendous impact on the capitalist world’s attitude to putting life on the stage, instead of bubbles and squeak and things.

There is also no doubt in my opinion that the New has had a great impact on other theatres.

MA: We did the Australian premieres of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and *All My Sons*, although we were only a small amateur left wing theatre. The content of these plays was too left for Australia at that time, but it would be unheard of today for New Theatre to get an Arthur Miller play ahead of a professional company.

MH: To give you another example, we had the rights to Brecht’s *Arturo Ui*, and we wouldn’t do it at the time. It was such a magnificent play that we were waiting for all the things to gel (like the right director and the right people). We held onto it for about 18 months, and then we had to give up the rights to a professional company.

It’s important for big companies to do militant plays, because more people see them that way than they ever would here. That was the only thing that salved my feelings about losing *Arturo Ui*.

New Theatre is important for what it is and the way it’s run, even though sometimes we’re all very discontented with that. Over our proscenium arch in Melbourne and Sydney we used to have the slogan: “Art is a Weapon”. And that’s as true today as it ever was.