

# President's Report of 2021

In a year of difficulty and disruption, Williamstown Little Theatre has gone from cancellations to amazingly finalising and opening of our new facilities and courtyard. There is something distinctive about WLT's determined approach to the challenges of providing community theatre in the time of COVID-19 and a building redevelopment. It is with immeasurable pride and gratitude that we report to you, exemplifying the resilience, innovation, and creativity with which WLT has met the challenges of the past year.

In the face of the pandemic our 75<sup>th</sup> year began in an unusual manner with limits on numbers to attend the AGM and as with this year, online attendees at our AGM.

Due to Covid-19 and the continuation of our building development we had to close our doors for basically the duration of the year in order to complete the building works. The Committee held a number of off-site meetings, "virtual meetings" and finally were able to meet in person in our own space. The process of meeting and gathering together was managed by our Secretary, Shirley Sydenham, who has been incredibly thorough, persistent and diligent in ensuring that all committee processes and needs were met. We are going to miss your efficiency and thoroughness Shirley and personally I'm going to miss your support for the president's role.

It has once again been a difficult and often frustrating year. Difficult decisions had to be made. However, within this context we have been able to develop and implement a plan to ensure WLT is a greener organization- we have only just begun on this journey but have the commitment and wherewithal to achieve environmentally appropriate practices.

## Productions

In other years the president has delighted in praising our previous year's season. As you would all be well aware that was not to be in 2021. We didn't manage to get any of our playbill up and running. *Shirley Valentine* did a sterling effort thank you Brett Turner, cast and crew and Shirley Sydenham Production Coordinator.

The committee would like to thank the production teams and cast members who have contributed hours of hard work and dedication to our theatre in 2021. Although the Committee was deeply saddened by the postponement of our 2021 season, the health and wellbeing of our community was our first priority. It wasn't "just" the Covid-19 restrictions that stymied our productions but also the completion of our building refurbishment. We did manage to have a major fund-raising event which gave us the opportunity to begin to refill the coffers and have a bit of a practice at using the new facilities. We returned tickets to audiences- Brian Christopher continued to ensure we are financially viable despite all the cancellations, building costs and lack of income. We also saw a groundswell of support at the end of the year for the fund-raising event managed and directed by Peter Newling. Thank you, Peter for your foresight and dedication, supported by a range of WLT stalwarts. Together you all managed to bring in much needed cash flow and audiences. It is our highly valued relationship with patrons and members who truly understand the work we do that enables us to achieve great things and you all helped this happen.

The Play Selection Committee showed their flexibility and knowledge of our plans for the year. They rejigged, restructured and found ways that we could honour our commitments to

directors and cast. Thank you particularly to Damian Coffey for being there when we needed him. Janine Evans had the unenviable task of altering posters for changing dates and changing circumstances. Thank you Janine.

We will be having training for Front of House staff thanks to Emma Hunt. She has arranged for us to receive top quality training to ensure a high level of customer satisfaction with all we have to offer in our newly built and fitted out FOH area. She has also organized First Aid training for a number of members to ensure that we can not only provide services but also care for patrons and our workers at the theatre.

### **Refurbishment**

Late in 2020 Shirley Sydenham took on the role of coordination between the committee and the refurbishment of our building. It has been a gift that keeps on giving which Shirley managed not just in a building process but during the pandemic. It's no wonder she needs a rest from committee. As you know from last year's President's report we were fortunate enough to secure a Stronger Communities Grant of \$20,000 from the Commonwealth, specifically through Tim Watts' Office, Federal Member for Gellibrand. Securing this grant allowed us to formally commence the refurbishment. Tim attended the opening and cut the ribbon (when I eventually gave him the scissors!) Melissa Horne: Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly also attended the opening formally representing the MLA Mr Danny Pearson, Minister for Creative Industries. It was important to have the spotlight back on theatre in particular community theatre with the presence of a representative of the Creative Industries portfolio and the Victorian government. Councillor Jonathon Marsden from Strand Ward through Hobsons Bay City Council supported us with its *Make It Happen Grants* program allowing us to reconnect after COVID and recognise and celebrate the reopening of the theatre. Maria Haughey has been incredible in her dogged pursuit of appropriate grants to our benefit. We will miss her capacity for policy development and her humour on committee and wish her well in her travels and future plans.

At the opening of our building, we were fortunate to have Noel Craven provide a welcome to country. Noel is a very well-known and respected name at WLT. Noel is also an elder of the Boonwurrung People and provided us with an Acknowledgement of Country. The formal Acknowledgement of Country was followed by the unveiling of the Acknowledgement of Country plaque which is hung in our foyer. Noel and I took the plaque and hung it where it is today. Thank you to Noel and Robert Harsley who researched and ensured we had an appropriate plaque to hang.

Steve Drumm took on the massive role of Facilities Manager and throughout the refurb process and summer working bees to get all back into good working order gave us wise counsel. He has also introduced much needed work safety practices so that now at working bees we see our workers wearing safety boots and helmets as well as using safer construction processes- like ladders that are stable!

Alex Begg has provided sterling work in implementing and supporting building development teams and coordinating major and minor building processes. He has spent hours at the theatre.

Roger Forsey basically set up camp in the area that has now become the Bio Box. Hours and hours have been spent ensuring we are a theatre that has not only high standards on stage but has high quality resources for lighting and sound.

With the completion of the new foyer and facilities there have been some issues still needing resolution. With the support of Gaetano Santo, we are looking forward and future planning for WLT and its facilities.

## **75<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

Melanie Rowe helped us in developing something to acknowledge our 75<sup>th</sup> birthday through the newsletter itself and also coordinating with Hobsons Bay Library who changed dates due to COVID and then made a date that despite best efforts Melanie couldn't attend. However, Maria and Shirley stepped in and we have a display at Hobsons Bay Library.

## **Health & Safety**

Tony Tartaro has helped us to address the needs and challenges in the times of a pandemic.

### **Some COVID-19 impacts on our theatre in 2021 included**

- productions were deferred to 2022 or postponed to other years
- our building was effectively empty throughout the year
- No income was generated past March 2020
- We effectively sustained our way through the year on accumulated savings
- Only one charity fundraising activity could be held in 2021
- No set builds or meetings could be held in person between March and December

I want to take this opportunity to once again thank each and every committee member for their support and determination during the past year. Thank you Peter, Shirley, Brian, Alex, Steve, Maria, Roger, Robert, Emma, Melanie and Tony.

In these difficult times, we need to be both flexible and resolute as we hurtle into 2022. We need to find ways to drive our culture of delivering outstanding theatre productions but in a COVID-19 safe environment. Will theatre change in the future? Undoubtedly. So we need to remain on course and deliver the high standard of theatre our patrons have come to rely on and respect. On behalf of the Committee, I am proud to present this Report of our achievements in the face of a year of exceptional difficulty.

Celia

CELIA MEEHAN