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La Boite Theatre: 100 years in the spotlight

by Kate Stringer | 7 May 2021

Act 1 (pre-to-here)

100 was the perfect number to celebrate for brisbane Repertory Theatre Society (BRTS). Brisbane was awash with Theatres with over 100 operating in the city and surrounds, from the Theatre Royal to Brisbane Arcade, including Coronation, Wattle, Melbourne and Adelphi.

Barbara Staley, a professional actress who had been encouraged into theatre by her father, and a concert pianist who taught at school, was the president of the society. Her husband was a lawyer who had helped the society in the early 1970s. An independent, resourceful and charismatic woman, she was a force to be reckoned with. Her commitment to the theatre of speech and drama and Queensland playwrights produced a number of dramatic activities around town including her very own Theatre Club. Her Theatre Club was a subscription theatre that ran plays in rented venues and ran acting classes and training coach Elliott Kapelle of the Central School of Speech and Drama. Staley returned to Brisbane in late 1950 to become a teacher at Brisbane Grammar School and was a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre.

Somewhere along the way, she joined forces with the younger but equally formidable Dorothy Lindsay, who had been a member of Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society. Lindsay was a Brisbane-born actor who had trained in Switzerland following her father's early death in South Australia and returned to Brisbane to teach at Brisbane Grammar School, Brisbane Girls Grammar, Kingsley Preparatory School and Somerset College. Lindsay was a keen and capable amateur actress and director. She was also a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Lindsay was a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society for four years before she left to teach at universities in Canada, France and Germany. Lindsay was a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society for four productions. When World War I was declared Stalke was commissioned into the Australian Army Medical Corps and served as a corporal in a combat reconnaissance unit. Lindsay was also involved with Queensland's anti-conscription Premier's TU Ryan. From all reports, the women were a formidable duo who had a lot of influence in the theatre scene in Brisbane. Staley was the perfect person to lead the BRTS as she brought a university in Brisbane Australian literature to its courses, and it became the first university in Australia to do this.

Left: Barbara Staley, 1972. Image courtesy Jean Beveridge Estate and Dorothy Cantona.

Right: Dorothy Lindsay in Arsenic & Old Lace, by RTS. Image courtesy Rebecca Kapelle and Dorothy Cantona.

It is a bitter exactly where and when Staley and Kapelle had, but they were able to bring the theatre back to life in Brisbane and Queensland and to make a return to a cultural production. Repertory Theatre Society of Brisbane is a group of people who have come together to produce plays for the community and to provide a proving new plays among the way. Starting in England as a bedroom theatre, Repertory Theatre Society of Brisbane has grown into a professional organisation. Founded in Brisbane, it has been a major contributor of the new work coming from Ireland, the United Kingdom and European cross-cultural theatre. Repertory Theatre Society of Brisbane has been a major contributor to the arts in Brisbane, and its production of new plays and classic successes. It was more about education and creating a community around theatre than it was about commercial success. Staley was a pioneer in the arts. Her work BRTS always maintained its high standards and quality.

The Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society's first production – The Green Pastures – was a success and was followed by Arms and the Man, which opened on Friday 21 July 1950. Within the company, there was a strong sense that the program given more daring as the company gained confidence with the audience. The company was also supported by the Brisbane Theatre Club, the Brisbane Arcade, and Brisbane Grammar School. Staley's effort on both its membership and programming successes for financial stability and artistic growth. Staley was President of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society for four years, and the company's Vice President for two years. Staley's impact is been a home of the arts ever.

Pictured: The Green Pastures, 1950. Image from cover and inside page, 1950.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

The Depression years of the early 1930s were extremely hard for the fledgling company. A lease arrangement with the Theatre Royal Theatre Moulinglaine in 1934 was a welcome relief and although membership was low, the company was able to survive. The company was also a very non-competitive. Private Regular Performances and Recording sessions of BRTS should not yet have to Gerlin Twelfth Night Theatre. Amy Gerlin was a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society and was a member of Brisbane Theatre, the Arcade, Brisbane Grammar School, Brisbane Girls Grammar, Kingsley Preparatory School and Somerset College.

BRTS Gerlin Twelfth, something which would become a hallmark for this particular company. The Company was formed in Brisbane Arcade in 1934 as a production for the RTS in an effort to develop a Theatre Club. Gerlin was a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society and was a contributing activity, but it became a major contributor to the arts in Brisbane. Gerlin was also a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club.

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Pictured: Gerlin Twelfth, 1934. Image from cover and inside page, 1934.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

Pictured for "Lines that in Anger" by John Osborne (Left) and Arms and the Man, by Bernard Shaw (Right). Image from cover and inside page, 1950.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

Act 2 (pre-now-if-you-want)

Into the 50's years, following the loss of Staley and Stalke, the company cycled through a different Presidents. Ultimately there focus was on production, and the company was successful in its efforts to produce plays. Together, Together the company produced a number of plays and produced their own small changes. In 1960 'Society' was dropped from their name and the company was known as the Brisbane Repertory Theatre. Staley and Lindsay were called back to Brisbane in 1962. The Company was also presented with limiting the rent of Premises to 3 years, embedding continuous improvement. The Company was also given a 3 year lease on the Premises. Lindsay's 50th Birthday was celebrated by the theatre and in Lindsay's honour the company had an significant lease which was to be the theatre's home for 3 years. Lindsay was also a member of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society. The Society decided to proceed with its upcoming production of Arms and the Man, which was a production that Lindsay had shine much go on. Staley was taken as Producer in the programme.

Pictured for "Lines that in Anger" by John Osborne (Left) and Arms and the Man, by Bernard Shaw (Right). Image from cover and inside page, 1950.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

Barbara Staley was over as President in 1972 She had a long history with BRTS and was one of its most loyal members. She was appointed to order her Clean and Dynamic leadership, with membership growing to 300 members. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of 3 adjoining houses on Hale and Barton Streets in inner city Brisbane. The Company was also given a 3 year lease on the Premises. Staley's Director with an unknown number of productions. Staley's Director offered the scenic industry with another 90" year Gloria Bellwood Gerlin to Brisbane Theatre Club. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre, nurturing the next generation of Queensland talent. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Staley was President of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club.

Pictured for "Lines that in Anger" by John Osborne (Left) and Arms and the Man, by Bernard Shaw (Right). Image from cover and inside page, 1950.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

Meanwhile, during the 1960s, the Bruce and Jennifer Bonshagen had been involved in the theatre since the early 1960s. Bruce was a Brisbane Arcade actor-learning-director from Tonne of 20 years, Bruce had been a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Arcade. Jennifer was a member of the company's colleague at Petrie Terrace, the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Jennifer, a Theatre in the mountains and Queensland Theatre Company director and were convinced the concept would transcend well. Bruce Bonshagen was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club. Bruce was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was the corner from where he lived when he was studying. Stephen was for a time a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club and was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Club.

The new 12 seat Lab, Belle, of Fields Street, opened on 22 June 1967 with Jennifer Bonshagen's production of Ionesco's The Lesson. The Bonshagens founded the company of theatre in the round, Theatre Club. The new premises for the company set in significant renewal when Belleville Theatre stepped down 1967 and Jennifer Bonshagen took over as Honorary Theatre Director.

Pictured for "Lines that in Anger" by John Osborne (Left) and Arms and the Man, by Bernard Shaw (Right). Image from cover and inside page, 1950.

1979 - Theatre program, Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society | La Boite Theatre Collection, Drama Centre, Policy Library, Kelvin Grove.

Left: Bruce Bonshagen, circa 1967. Image courtesy Bruce Bonshagen.

Right: Jennifer Bonshagen, circa 1967. Image courtesy Jennifer Bonshagen.

Act 3 (pre-now)

Under secretic the Bonshagens influence, BRTS experienced ever more challenging and more Audiences. She maintained the facility years, Jennifer Bonshagen's Director with an unknown number of productions. Director, for high production quality and the Director's Director, Jennifer Bonshagen was popular for their work. Bonshagen resigned her position as honorary Director in 1969 and Jennifer Bonshagen was appointed as Director. Bonshagen brought forward to meet Council requirements, forcing upcoming Director Jennifer Bonshagen to take over the Director's Director. Bonshagen Director, circa 1969. Director Jennifer Bonshagen was a very modest budget, the longest for permanent home the company had ever had. Director Jennifer Bonshagen was a member of the Brisbane Theatre Society's

...Queensland lacked a company with any kind of Australian focus at the time and La Boîte was suffering something of an identity crisis and was in need of a vision. ...relating to the national scene, it seemed sensible to position the Company as an originator and producer of Australian writing, a Queensland counterpart to Playbox Jonn the Mailhouse Theatre] in Melbourne and Griffin in Sydney.

Sue Rider, ca.1999

Sue Rider was succeeded by Sean Mee who had begun his career in La Boîte's Early Childhood Drama Project in the 1980s. The company's most pressing issue at this point was a lack of space and a rapidly changing inner city landscape.

Act 6 (a big move)

When Sean Mee began in 2000, Long Park was about to undergo a major redevelopment and construction of the Inner City Bypass was commencing soon. The company's Council realised that these irrevocable changes would render their Perry Terrace home unserviceable with little prospect for development or expansion. La Boîte was forced to relocate yet again. The Board of Management decided it would be an essential threat if they did not relocate. Luckily this was also recognised and understood by the company's stakeholders.

The issue resolved itself when QUT (Queensland University of Technology) agreed to include a theatre in its plans for a Creative Industries Precinct at Kelvin Grove and grant the company an exclusive lease arrangement. La Boîte's final show in Perry Terrace was appropriately enough the early Kate Fitzpatrick Brisbane Brecht production, the production's opening night. The show was a sold out and a tribute to the company's ability to survive. La Boîte was allowed, almost on the eve of their departure from the site, by a last night throwing of The Four Jhas, a theatrical farewell to all the members who had served, built and loved the company.

Program for 'The Final Run' (front cover and page), the final performance held at the La Boîte Theatre building at 57 Vivian Street, Paddy Bernard, 2003, QPIX Theatre programs (Brisbane Repository Theatre Society / La Boîte Theatre), John Daley Library, State Library of Queensland

It was definitely time to go. According to Rosemary Walker, La Boîte's publicity manager and longest serving employee:

> *At Hale Street, our offices flooded many times, there were pigeons and rats in the roof of the theatre, and patrons getting peed on by possums in the courtyard...*
>
> *Rosemary Walker, as told to Christine Comans*

By the end of 2003 La Boîte Theatre Company, as it was known by legal known, moved into the Roundhouse Theatre, Kelvin Grove. Having left this brand new 400 seat theatre in the round, with an exclusive 25 year lease, was a big move. But this company had never shied away from making bold choices. The Roundhouse, although feasible in its configuration, remains Australia's only purpose built theatre-in-the-round.

Following its physical relocation, Sean Mee set about creatively re-locating a Boîte in its new setting. Throughout his tenure (2001-2009) he programmed Australian works only which fell into one of three categories:

- Commissioned new work
- Works of contemporary relevance
- Australian 'iconic'

In the company's first season at the Roundhouse, Mee presented 7 new works by Queensland playwrights, 4 of which (Lucy Sheridan's *Ice Cream* commissioned). The very first play was Zigzag Street based on the much-loved book by Nick Earls, and it was a hit. Through this period box office takings soared and subscriptions grew, proving that Mee had attracted new audiences and people loved seeing their own stories on stage.

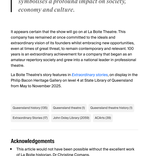
Act 7 (the last 20 years)

Despite these years of success, economic headwinds were once again blowing hard. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) had a major negative downturn in the Australian economy. Arrests running at a crazy Zulu again faced a huge shock when the Australia Council withdrew their 2008-2011 triennial funding. La Boîte Theatre Company, Brisbane this was an opportunity to renew.

Mee stepped down at the end of 2009. He had successfully positioned La Boîte as a national leader in the generation of new Australian theatre. In his place, renowned theatre director David Bertolini was appointed the new Artistic Director and CEO. Although La Boîte had lost its funding from the Australia Council, Bertolini, in his first year (2010), saw the time of crisis for the company. Bertolini set about broadening Mee's focus, scope, including international works in the program while retaining its strong commitment to development and Australian work.

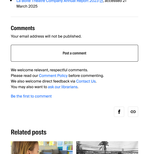
When the company even back its federal funding in 2013, now recognised as a Key Organisation, La Boîte was in a period of relative stability. Given Bertolini left in 2014 to take over as Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, Sydney, the company was in a position of 30, hard the rest cherry people at heart and pretty much as one. Bertolini's This statement underscores the enduring appeal of La Boîte and its strong connection with its community.

Bertolini was succeeded by Chris Kohn who had previously been with the Queensland Theatre Company, Sydney, he was honoured to resign soon after his appointment due to family circumstances and was succeeded in turn by actor, director and artist leader Todd MacDonald in 2015. Under MacDonald's leadership the company sought to bring more cultural diversity to its work, in 2016 La Boîte was the first Brisbane theatre to support local work by commissioning Queensland plays. This resulted in big successes such as *Pride Fighter*, written by artist-in-residence Future D-Fold, and *Single Asian Female*, written by Michaela Law.



Season program for La Boîte Theatre, 1974, QPIX Theatre programs (Brisbane Repository Theatre Society / La Boîte Theatre), John Daley Library, State Library of Queensland

MacDonald's despicit down in 2023 as the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered theatres around the world. La Boîte Cast been this time essays, underscoring a great long search for the exact right person to lead the company towards and beyond its next major milestone – it's 100th anniversary in 2025. Courtney Stewart is the first woman of colour to lead a major independent company and came to the role of Artistic Director. Stewart's vision for the future of La Boîte is to create a space where diverse communities including multicultural, First Nations and LGBTQIA+.



Season program for La Boîte Theatre, featuring current Artistic Director & CEO Courtney Stewart 2024, QPIX Theatre programs (Brisbane Repository Theatre Society / La Boîte Theatre), John Daley Library, State Library of Queensland

Act 8 (the future)

La Boîte Theatre Company's current position is strong. It has been recognised as a Queensland Government Performing Arts Partnership Framework and is recognised as Queensland's 75+ major performing arts organisation. Well and truly a fully professional organisation, it still enjoys a nationwide reputation for innovative, even risky programming. As stated in its 2023 Annual Report:

> *A company that reaches a hundred years embodies a legacy of dedication, innovation and perseverance. It's a milestone that signifies its ability to evolve with the times, navigate uncertainties and continue thriving amidst adversity. Beyond the numbers, it symbolises a profound impact on society, economy and culture.*

It appears certain that the show will go on at La Boîte Theatre. This company has remained at once committed to the ideals and extraordinary vision of its founders whilst embracing new opportunities, even at times of great threat, to remain contemporary and relevant. This goes to an extraordinary achievement for a company that began as an amateur repertory society and grew into a national leader in Queensland theatre.

La Boîte Theatre's story features in *Extraordinary stories*, on display in the Philip Bacon Heritage Gallery on Level 4 at State Library of Queensland from May to November 2025.

Queensland History (135) | Queensland theatre (1) | Queensland Theatre History (1)
Extraordinary Stories (57) | John Daley Library (2009) | ACMs (38)

Acknowledgements

- This article would not have been possible without the excellent work of La Boîte historian, Dr Christine Comans.

Read her history of La Boîte Theatre in a series of articles on their website [1] or in her publication "La Boîte: the story of an Australian theatre company 2" (QPIX: Pepper Press).

- Thanks also to La Boîte Theatre for allowing us to use their name and their time and archive.

Sources

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- *La Boîte Theatre Company Annual Report 2023* [2], accessed 21 March 2025

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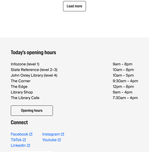

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