

The Metropolitan Theatre

Amongst the archival holdings of the SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection is a small but valuable collection of theatre programmes and press clippings donated by Gwen Harrison, who performed in a wide range of roles in productions of The Metropolitan Theatre in the 1940s and 1950s. Gwen Harrison, well known in Brisbane radio, played for many years with the Brisbane Repertory. In Sydney she played in “Tobacco Road” at the Independent and Mercury. Her favourite roles were Mrs. Alving in “Ghosts” at Bryant’s Playhouse and Mrs. Malaprop in the Metropolitan’s “The Rivals”. She was Talks Executive for the A.B.C. and Secretary of the Playwrights’ Advisory Board.

The origins of the Metropolitan Theatre in Sydney are somewhat obscured by contradictions in the available historical sources. One source states that it had its origins in a little theatre group located in Reiby Place near Circular Quay known as the Metropolitan Players in about 1940 or 1941.¹

But this statement seems to be at odds with an article in the *Metropolitan Theatre Magazine* Souvenir issue marking ten years of the history of the theatre from 1943 to 1953, which states that “the Metropolitan Theatre was founded in 1943 by May Hollinworth, who for 15 years had been producer for S.U.D.S.” Originally known as the Metropolitan Players, the company was formed to take plays to service camps. “On Approval” was the first play to be presented in this way.²

According to the Souvenir issue of *The Metropolitan Theatre Magazine*, two years after its founding in 1943, a room was acquired in a building in Reiby Place, which when fitted out as a small theatre, seated 70 people. During this time companies were still sent to the camps and also to various suburbs. It was this pioneering work of the Metropolitan Theatre which helped to establish both the Kuringai and the Mosman Theatre Guilds. Lindsey Browne, the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* theatre and music critic wrote in March 1946 that

May Hollinworth’s Metropolitan Players, for a long time the bone and fibre of the Kuring-gai Theatre Guild of Killara, came to town to live a few months ago. There was nowhere to play, so Miss Hollinworth set to work on her own studio, had a stage built at one end and the floor graded at the other. Then she watched the For Sale ads., day after day, for the first offer of theatre seats. She bought about 70 seats about two months ago, and her stage is now set for an early performance of “Othello”. It is lucky that there is no evidence in the play to suggest that the Moor suffered from claustrophobia.”³

Another source states that “The Metropolitan Theatre was founded by May Hollinworth in 1945, the first production being “Othello” in February 1946. The activities were then housed in a diminutive theatre in Reiby Place near Circular Quay...”⁴

The *Sydney Morning Herald’s* theatre critic “A.T.”, in a review of the production of Dorothy Blewett’s prize-winning Australian play “The First Joanna”, with which the Reiby Place Metropolitan Theatre opened its 1948 season on the 12th March 1948, concluded the review with the following description of the Metropolitan Theatre at Reiby Place:

May Hollinworth, who has to wrestle with the limitations of a severely cramped stage and a small stuffy room, deserves at least air-conditioning, and at best translation to a more spacious

¹ Unidentified newspaper article dated 1st May 1952 by “Chloe” entitled “Reiby Place, 1940-1941”, Gwen Harrison Papers, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

² “The Story of The Metropolitan Theatre” in *The Metropolitan Theatre Magazine* Souvenir issue, 1943-1953, p.4, Gwen Harrison Papers, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

³ Lindsey Browne, “Little” Theatres Have Their Troubles But They Do A Job, *Sydney Morning Herald* Magazine, 12 March 1946, p.10

⁴ Metropolitan Theatre programme for “Morning’s At Seven” by Paul Osborn, which opened at premises at Christ Church St Laurence, 505 Pitt Street, Sydney on 30th August, 1951.

and sound-proof realm for the working of her magic unhampered by the soporific discomfort of wedged-in humanity.⁵

In 1947 “As You Like It” was presented at Phillip Park Open Air Theatre.⁶ In 1949 a company toured country centres under the auspices of John Clugston’s Regal Productions, opening at Taree on 14th February, 1949.

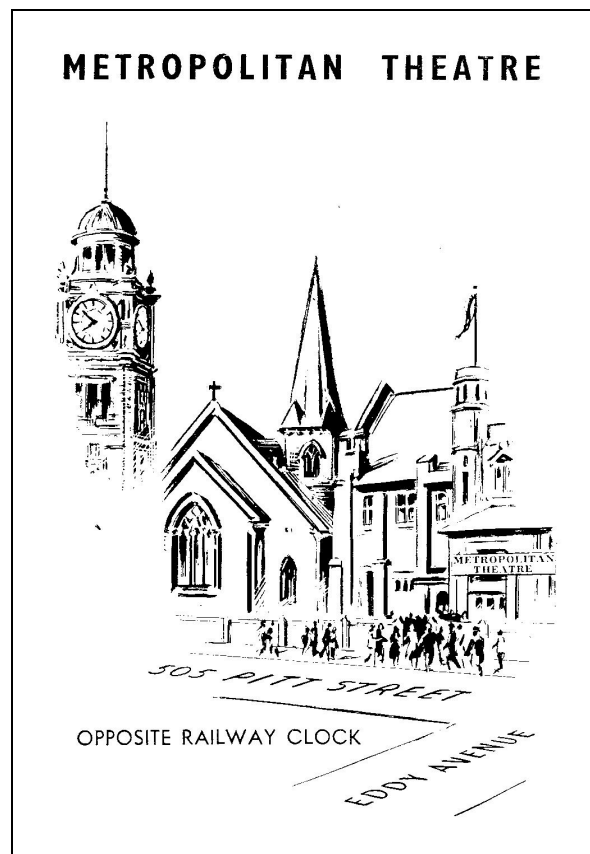
In 1949 the premises in Christ Church St Laurence became available and on the 21st April, 1949, Tyrone Guthrie officially opened the theatre, the first production being “Romeo and Juliet” with Betty Lucas and Owen Weingott

By May 1952, it was reported that this company had “since flourished into one of the biggest “little theatres” in Sydney, producing craftsmanlike plays of high literary and cultural value”, and was known in 1950 as the Metropolitan Theatre Group. The inaugurator of this company was May Hollinworth, a producer of great talent, whose direction of Restoration drama is acknowledged as unexcelled before or since. She was a producer for the Sydney University Dramatic Society before the war, and until her retirement the Metropolitan progressed in her very capable hands.⁷

Amongst the more prominent members of the Metropolitan Theatre Group who distinguished themselves in the professional theatre and in radio work have been Dinah Shearing, Kevin Brennan, Marcia Hatheway, Rosemary Miller, Frank Waters, Nigel Lovell (who produced at the Metropolitan), Michael Pate, Robin Lovejoy, Lynne Murphy and David Netheim.

Sketch of The Metropolitan Theatre at 505 Pitt Street, Sydney, opposite Central Railway Clock.

The premises at Christ Church St Laurence became available early in 1949 and was officially opened on 21st April 1949 by Tyrone Guthrie, with a production of “Romeo and Juliet”. Subsequent productions at this site included “Shipwreck”, “Heartbreak House”, “The Rivals”, “Laburnam Grove”, “She Stoops to Conquer”, “The Chinese Lantern”, “Raymond Lord of Milan”, “You Never Can Tell” and “Happy as Larry”.



Dr Peter Orlovich
Chief Archivist

⁵ Review by “A.T.” of “The First Joanna” by Dorothy Blewett which opened at The Metropolitan Theatre on Friday 12th March, 1948, *Sydney Morning Herald* Saturday 13th March 1948.

⁶ “The Story of The Metropolitan Theatre” in *The Metropolitan Theatre Magazine* Souvenir issue, 1943-1953, p.4,

⁷ Unidentified newspaper article dated 1st May 1952 by “Chloe” entitled “Reiby Place, 1940-1941”.