Katharine Brisbane: The Doyenne of Australian Theatre

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Abstract

Katharine Brisbane has served as a journalist, reviewer, critic and publisher for over 50 years. She began her career at the *West Australian* and quickly developed a talent for writing about the theatre. After Francis Evers, she became the second national theatre critic in 1967, writing for the *Australian* during a time of expansion and newly acquired subsidy within the theatre. Her previous experience as a journalist and theatre critic for the *West Australian* during the late 1950s and 1960s prepared her for these changes and she was able to provide guidance to the emerging Australian theatre through her weekly columns and presence as national theatre critic.

In 1971, Brisbane launched Currency Press with her husband Philip Parsons. Despite significant setbacks, both financially and personally, Brisbane has continued to foster Currency Press as the publisher of Australian drama. Brisbane has remained an important figure in Australian theatre and continues to inform the theatre, despite retiring from Currency Press in 2001.

This thesis explores the influence and impact of Brisbane on Australian theatre over the past five decades, utilizing her newspaper reviews and articles at the *West Australian*, the *Australian* and at Currency Press as evidence of her overall impact. It identifies key trends as well as problems that Brisbane emphasised as a commentator on Australian theatre, arguing that she was aware very early of the need to develop the theatre to an international standard. It demonstrates the rigour of Brisbane's advocacy and discusses her continual passion for developing Australian theatre. This thesis also presents the personal and professional sacrifices that Brisbane made to ensure that a record of the theatre was preserved in print.

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Introduction

This thesis argues that Katharine Brisbane was of vital importance to the overall development of Australian theatre and that her contributions to both the criticism and publication of Australian plays were pivotal in helping to foster a professional culture. It aims to explore her influence chronologically through the progression of her career in Australian theatre, using her professional articles as evidence of this development.

The overall aim is to explore the impact that Katharine Brisbane had upon Australian theatre, from her beginnings as a cadet journalist at the *West Australian* to her national theatre critic role at the *Australian* and the transition to her work as a publisher and scholar. It argues that Brisbane altered the role of a newspaper reviewer to be more in line with that of a critic, increased the professional status of Australian theatre and as a publisher supported the theatre, both personally and professionally for the whole of her life. She continued to do this as the national theatre critic from 1967-1974, when her critical reviews during the period known as the new wave helped to foster continual growth in the emerging arts. This thesis will argue that Brisbane defined the role of the post-war theatre critic in Australia and due to her extensive experience was able to transition into positions of influence in journalism, criticism and publishing. It will cover the span of Brisbane's career and analyse key points in which Brisbane exerted influence on the theatre and the extent to which her influence forced change. There are clear similarities between Brisbane operating as national theatre critic during the new wave to that of Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson operating in the 1950s.[1] Brisbane helped to put Australian theatre on the international stage and her support for the theatre was unwavering.

[1] Discussed further in Chapter 3.

The new wave in Australian theatre began in 1967, bringing with it rapid expansion that saw massive changes in theatre regulation and performance that in turn provided theatres with the platform for staging new Australian plays. Julian Meyrick states that the new wave was different, 'as the limitless potential of human energy surged up through the text to assert itself as a force beyond the text' (2002, 125). This thesis will cover the duration of Brisbane's professional career, analysing her contribution to the development of Australian theatre, drawing on interviews from those who worked alongside her.[2] This thesis argues that Brisbane was a major contributor to Australian theatre and its transformation over the last 50 years. Her advocacy and activism as the national theatre critic helped to tackle the glaring issues that were plaguing the theatre at the time, as part of the 'new generation of well-trained critics who were in many cases closely associated with universities and academics' (Garde 2007, 111).

Katharine Brisbane was born in Singapore in 1932, the youngest of four children. Her uncle, Sir Hugh Lancelot Brisbane, was a respected businessman and entrepreneur who ran the state's largest clay manufacturing operation. Her father, David William Brisbane (1888-1960), was a well-known civil engineer. Having accepted a position in 1919 as divisional engineer for the Federated Malay States railways, in 1923 he was appointed managing director of Fogden, Brisbane & Co., Singapore. The firm developed a range of major public works throughout Asia and the Middle East for the British Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry. During World War II he was appointed managing director of the Midland Railway Co. of Western Australia Ltd, the State's last privately-owned railway. He also worked with Sir Russell Dumas on the establishment of the Anglo-Iranian oil

[2] Geoffrey Milne, Leonard Radic, John McCallum, Victoria Chance and Brisbane (Interviews are referenced to personal transcripts and are not included in reference lists). Interviews were conducted in accordance with UNE HREC, approval number HE11/171.

refinery at Kwinana, chaired the board of West Australian Newspapers Ltd and was appointed C.B.E. in 1958.

Katharine Brisbane was 10 months old when her family moved back to Perth in 1933, growing up in the middle-class suburb of Peppermint Grove. In reflection upon this time Brisbane stated 'I was almost an only child and a favourite of my parents, because I was something which my father enjoyed in his retirement from active life' (De Berg 1974, 10536). She attended Perth's Presbyterian Ladies College and it was at high school that Brisbane developed a taste for the theatre, recalling that she 'had a very encouraging history teacher at school who taught us to make puppets and to enliven history and current affairs by making plays out of them' (De Berg 1974, 10536). The next step in theatre for Brisbane came at University, directing performances for the University Dramatic Society. Brisbane graduated with a BA in English in 1957 and went on to receive her first professional experience at a newspaper working as a cadet journalist for the *West Australian.* She had wanted to become the newspaper's theatre critic in 1958 but had to wait until the position became available. It was during this time that she spent 18 months on a working holiday in Britain experiencing London theatre at a time of dramatic change: 'I was there at a most fortunate time, when John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* was presented and the whole face of British theatre changed, and I've drawn on that experience ever since' (De Berg 1974, 10539). Brisbane considers this event, and her experience in London as having a profound influence on her work, stating that 'It's helped me a lot in reviewing patterns of society through the theatre, which has been my particular interest in writing about the theatre' (De Berg 1974, 10539). It was also during this time overseas in London that Brisbane saw the travelling production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which won the 1957 *Evening Standard* Award for the best play of the year. No other Australian play had ever done this before and it was a landmark event in Australian

theatre. She considers Lawler's play as one of the main reasons that she decided to come back to Australia, recalling that 'the *Doll* was the future. I booked my passage home' (Brisbane, 2011: 4). After witnessing firsthand the rapid social and theatrical changes that were occurring in Britain, she returned to Australia and was able to take up the position as theatre critic for the *West Australian* in 1959. She recalled one particular incident during the first few weeks of her tenure as a theatre critic at the *West Australian* that nearly cost her career as a theatre critic:

> I remember that I wanted to change the world, as all critics do in the beginning, and my first disaster was after three weeks as a theatre critic and they did a production of an A.A. Milne play called *Michael and Mary*, which I said was the worst play since *Gorbeduc* which is a medieval, boring play, and an account of divorce that might have been written by Christopher Robin. People were amused by this but the Playhouse, of course, was furious and because I was so new at this job they tried to have me removed. Fortunately I went on holidays for a month and so by the time I got back, the whole thing had died down. (De Berg 1974, 10540)

Brisbane remained the only daily theatre critic in Western Australia up until 1965. She married Philip Parsons in 1960 and had two children in 1961 (Nicholas) and 1964 (Harriet). In 1967, she became the second national theatre critic for Rupert Murdoch's bold idea for a national daily, the *Australian*. Brisbane's period at the *West Australian* was invaluable in preparing her for her role as the national theatre critic, teaching her the power that a critic has and the reach their voice has to an audience. Brisbane wrote:

> I soon discovered that because I was the only critic in Perth at that time, there is one morning paper and the afternoon paper didn't carry reviews, that it was very easy for the reader to confuse opinion with fact, so after a while I learnt to tackle the problem by devising a kind of descriptive style of writing which would make it clear to the discerning the kind of production it was and whether they would like to see it or not, without actually saying it was good or bad. (De Berg 1974, 10540)

Brisbane's work at the *West Australian* and experience of theatre in London provided her with an excellent platform for her career as a theatre critic. She brought these skills to her role at the *Australian* and she was able to identify the qualities found in 'good' theatre. Brisbane also faced the challenge of working in the predominately male field in the early

1970s, which can further be identified by the consistent use of the male pronoun in her reviews at the *Australian* which upon reflection 'hit me [Brisbane] between the eyes on first reading' (Brisbane 2005, 7). Brisbane was able to convey her argument to the reader despite being limited to the conventions of the time.

It was during this time as the national critic that Brisbane became one of the most influential people in Australian theatre, targeting areas that were impacting the theatre sector negatively, attacking problems head-on and providing direct solutions for the theatre to adopt. It was also during this period in 1971 that Brisbane founded Currency Press with her husband Philip Parsons. Brisbane and Parsons felt that at the time that Australian plays and literature had been neglected and wanted to do something to redress this with Currency. The venture was seen as a risky one from the beginning, tying up much of Brisbane's and Parsons family money. After 40 years of operation, Currency Press is the oldest active publisher of Australian literature and theatre. Brisbane remained the managing editor and publisher until her retirement in 2001 and still retains those ties to the company with her son, Nick Parsons, being the current chairman of the board of Currency Press. She also set up Currency House with John Golder in 2001. Currency House is a not-for-profit organisation 'dedicated to stimulating, enriching and advancing the quality and enjoyment of the Australian performing arts' (Currency House 2012). Brisbane still remains active with Currency House today, editing their quarterly published paper series *Platform Papers*.

Brisbane retired from her position at the *Australian* in 1974, stating that 'one should change one's life every seven years, I think, and because having been through such an interesting period in Australian theatre, I don't think one person can keep hold on it again' (De Berg 1974, 10560). It is interesting to note Brisbane's words in regards to her retirement as her position was an important one at the time and there have been no attempts to recreate the status of a national theatre critic since 1974. What the *Australian*

did was effectively create the position of the national critic at the time when it was feasible for one person to travel the country and review weekly productions of new Australian material. In contemporary times it would not be possible to recreate this structure, as newspaper budgets and space within the paper itself restricts theatre reviews to that of local and state reviewers. This also may be due to the fact that now many productions 'gain legs' and travel the country, eliminating the need for flying a reviewer around the country (in turn again saving the newspaper money) and restricting the reviewer to their state or surrounding states.

This thesis aims to redress the gap in research and analysis of Brisbane's professional career and to explore her role in the overall development of Australian theatre. As the literature review will show, there is little research into her overall career and output, in spite of her immense work at such an important time in the development of Australian theatre. The research has an intrinsic purpose as it provides an independent view of Brisbane during a time of critical change within Australian theatre. It will add to the knowledge base that exists about Australian theatre and history, provide evidence for Brisbane's contribution to the theatre as well as understanding the reviewing culture that has existed in Australian theatre over the past five decades.

The reason for the enduring nature and quality of Brisbane's work lies in her ability to take on different roles as an advocate, critic, journalist, reviewer and publisher in the effort to provide her audience with her own passionate enthusiasm and interest in Australian theatre. Brisbane is well-known within the Australian theatre community and her output over the past five decades represents this sustained effort to guide and enrich the performing arts generally. The literature review will be divided and ordered chronologically to cover the spectrum of scholarly literature within Australian theatre and that relating to Brisbane's professional career.

Literature Review

Theses

There are two main theses (PhD and MA) in particular that deal directly with the work of Australian theatre criticism: the first to be analysed is John McCallum's 'Some Preoccupations with Australian Theatre Criticism from 1955 to 1978' (1981). McCallum identifies the overall development of theatre since the production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. He emphasises the argument that Brisbane and Kippax should not be seen by the reader as critics, but rather as reviewers, owing to the nature of their work as journalists and the time constraints that they faced between reviewing and writing. [4] Rather than categorizing them as critics he strongly states they should both be considered as 'bridging the gap between a reviewer and a critic' (McCallum 1981, 6). McCallum's argument regarding Brisbane is not found in other texts researched in this literature review. The critic has indefinite time to reflect upon what they have witnessed and provide a scholarly background in analysis. A reviewer, on the other hand, is constrained by the environment in which they operate and the time limits that apply to printing. Brisbane, as national theatre critic, came the closest to merging the two roles in writing her two columns a week for the *Australian* and exhibited qualities of both positions, discussed further in Chapter 3. It is this argument that further supports the aims of this research to examine what made Brisbane different to the other critics who were working in Australian theatre at the time. McCallum's thesis is important to this research as it suggests that Brisbane had the qualities of a critic and a reviewer, but fails to go further in the analysis of these concepts. [5]

[4] Harold Gemmell Kippax was the theatre and music critic for the *SMH* from 1945-1989.
[5] A further analysis of McCallum's critic vs. reviewer argument can be found in Chapter 4.

Preston's 'The Reviewer Reviewed: An Analysis of Patterns in Contemporary Australian Theatre Criticism' (1997) provides a different argument to McCallum's view of Brisbane. He provides a more direct focus on her critical output during her tenure as the national theatre critic at the *Australian.* The argument that Preston presents is related to the overall development of Australian theatre criticism from the period of the new wave up until 1996. Preston's thesis is also important to this research as he develops a model critic in his first chapter for the fabricated newspaper *The Utopian Times*. He goes on to argue that 'a case could be made that Katharine Brisbane demonstrated during her stewardship at the *Australian* that such a model was not altogether beyond the bounds of practical implementation' (Preston, 1997: 7). Preston takes Brisbane's role at the *Australian* one step further and paints her influence in the light of a model critic whose judgment and passion for the theatre must outweigh all other occupations. His discussion of Brisbane in this chapter affirms his belief that she was the closest to his 'model critic' ideal. Later discussion of Brisbane's work is scattered throughout the text but the latter chapters mainly focus on the state of contemporary Australian theatre criticism and the influence of the then active theatre critics (mainly Leonard Radic and Helen Thomson). Preston also takes aim at a contemporary example of negative theatre criticism and the need for critics to be informed and to have absorbed that the 'love of the observed act and of its ideals and aspirations must be the primary impulse' in their profession (Preston, 1997: 147). The five appendices provide rare and valuable newspaper reviews, interviews and commentaries as well as the source information for his research – the original copies of the critical surveys filled in by contemporary theatre critics.

Another relevant academic study and one of the earliest unpublished scholarly examples of work dedicated to Australian theatre history and the new wave is William Levis's PhD thesis entitled 'An Experiment with Identity: Australian Drama from 1969 to 1974' (1977).

Levis maps out the emerging Australian theatre in his early chapters focusing on the changes in culture and identity in early 20th century Australia. Like other texts this deals mainly with the development of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the impact of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Levis argues against the popular norm of the new wave beginning with La Mama and Jane Street in 1967: '1969 was a year in which the forces shaping the theatrical activity of the country were on the verge of a new period of experimentation' (Levis 1977, p.57). This is followed with a critical analysis of *The Legend of King O'Malley* and its cultural influence on Australian theatre. Levis argues that this play caused a revolution within the theatre by encouraging Australians to take a keen interest in their own identity. A discussion of David Williamson (playwright) leads to the introduction of Brisbane as a publisher. Levis identifies both Brisbane and Kippax and their experience in reviewing important plays during the new wave as a way to identify important periods in Australian theatre. Whilst Levis refers to Brisbane as a reviewer, he fails to appreciate the level of influence that Brisbane had on the overall development of Australian theatre.

Major Publications on Australian Theatre

Brisbane's career covers a substantial period (1959-2009) of Australian theatre, so it is important to identify the literature that deals with this period. In reviewing the literature it must be noted that the general history of Australian theatre in contemporary times is an area in need of more scholarly research.

Leslie Rees's *A History of Australian Drama: Vol. 1 - The Making of Australian Drama from the 1930's to the Late 1960s* (1978) shows the beginning of a truly 'national' theatre, bringing together a complete scholarly view of the changes that 'contribute[s] in one way or another to the emergence of an Australian idea' (Rees 1978, p.vi). Rees emphasizes the early pioneer playwrights, the theatre organizations and the actors that helped shape the

direction of Australian theatre so that "we are not only moving steadily towards providing our own original drama for a public that delights in it, but are increasingly contributing to the performed drama of the outer world" (1978, p.viii). Rees offers a historical review of playwriting in Australia, so limited reference to Brisbane is expected. His limited discussion of Brisbane is drawn from an interview she conducted , and in this journalistic capacity Rees mentions her brief comment regarding a critic of Australian drama (Mordecai Gorelik), describing him 'as a pioneering sociologist of the theatre' (Rees 1978, 400). Like other texts, Rees book uses Brisbane's work as source material. He makes no attempt to go further in his use of Brisbane's work than as source material, something which this research aims to expand upon.

One work of importance to this literature review is John McCallum's article 'Studying Australian Drama' (1988). McCallum states that: 'The fragmented nature of drama criticism in Australia reflects the fragmented nature of our theatre' (McCallum 1988, 147). He argues that the field of Australian theatre lacks real critics, with only two regular theatre reviewers (Katharine Brisbane and Barry Oakley) over the then prior two decades of theatre, and that 'neither has yet given us an overview of what they saw and what they understood it all to mean' (McCallum 1988, 147). McCallum outlines the prominent magazines on Australian theatre (*Masque, Theatre Australia, Centrestage* and *New Theatre: Australia*). He follows this up with an in-depth analysis of all major published (and out-of-publication) texts that provide the historical background of Australian theatre. Brisbane's article in *The Literature of Australia* (1976) is mentioned as a solid introduction that was in use in the late 1970s as a historical reference. McCallum pays particular attention to the output of Leslie Rees and attacks the lack of academic research in his book (the previously mentioned *History of Australian Drama)* arguing that this is a 'serious defect in a work which is, by default, a standard text' (McCallum 1988, 152). McCallum is

direct in his literature review and effectively argues for the replacement of Rees' text with Dennis Carroll's *Australian Contemporary Drama 1909-1982, ,* which he sees as a 'clear statement of intent, sound in scholarship and logical pursuit, it is everything which Rees' book is not' (McCallum 1988, 156). He goes on to validate this argument by stating 'at present Carroll's book, in spite of its modest aims, is the best available general critical history of twentieth-century Australian drama' (McCallum 1988, 159). McCallum's article challenged the accepted set of historical texts on the Australian theatre, which included questioning whether Brisbane's work was of importance as she had not yet provided her own overall view of the theatre from the new wave period. McCallum's article argues the need for this research: by analysing her professional output over 50 years, one can identify that Brisbane had already developed her overall view of the theatre in her reviews and at Currency Press.

Since the 1990s, the field of Australian theatre criticism and history had been led by one critic – Leonard Radic (who was *The Age* theatre critic in Melbourne and in direct contest with Brisbane). His book *The State of Play: The Revolution in Australian Theatre since the 1960s* (1991) has remained an authoritative text in relation to the critic's perspective of the new wave. Using his own reviews he writes that he is 'concerned, as academic critics are not, with the full apparatus of play production – not just the text in splendid isolation, but how it stands up before an audience' (Radic 1991, 9). Radic's book is important as it marks for the first time a critic articulating their own perspective on the development of Australian theatre from the 1960s. It relates directly to this study as he refers to Brisbane in the same way as all the other texts mentioned here, that is by drawing on her capacity as national theatre critic and publisher to better inform his arguments (or when he was unable to attend a play and required a critical overview As such, Brisbane is mentioned sparingly in the text and only in relation to plays that Radic hadn't himself seen during the new wave

period. Radic appears to avoid discussing Brisbane, even though she is one of the main theatre critics that worked alongside him. His exclusion of an analysis of Brisbane's career further exhibits the need for this present research. Radic's *The State of Play* was a catalyst for Brisbane to publish her text *Not Wrong: Just Different* (2005) in the effort to add her own perspective on the past decades of Australian theatre. In her introduction she states 'This book began as a collection of recent ruminations, inspired by a growing sense of disillusion with the performing arts, in which I have played a part for over 50 years. Disenchantment with the present led me on a journey to the past' (Brisbane 2005, 1).

Another contemporary text that deals with the development of Australian drama is *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000). Edited by Elizabeth Webby, the book is a collection of scholarly essays based on the emergence of Australian poetry, fiction and theatre from 1788 to the new millennium. Of importance to this study are Richard Fotheringham's chapter 'Theatre from 1788 to the 1960s' and May-Brit Akerholt's chapter 'New Stages: Contemporary Theatre'. Whilst the text is mainly focused on the history of Australian literature, Brisbane is mentioned in the text in relation to her role as a publisher of Australian drama, her efforts to make Australian plays more accessible to the public (in her role at Currency Press), and her support enabling playwriting to become a commercial profession. *The Cambridge Companion* is important as it provides a contemporary reference to Brisbane's work as a publisher but is limited in its scope in discussion of Brisbane's reviewing work as a critic.

Another important theatre critic in Australia for a long time was H.G. Kippax and his book, *A Leader of his Craft: Theatre Reviews in Sydney* (2004) was released posthumously. As the theatre critic for Sydney, he, like Radic, was in direct competition with Brisbane. This book presents the best of his work as a theatre critic throughout the new wave period of Australian theatre. With a career spanning 50 years, writing for *Nation*

and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Kippax is perhaps the best-known theatre critic of the baby boomer generation. Kippax's reviews are important as they provide an insight into the state of Australian theatre before Brisbane's arrival and chronicle a theatre that was just beginning to find its feet on a national level. Kippax's book is important to this study as it presents another critic who arguably set the critical example for Brisbane to follow and challenge. *A Leader of his Craft* is a text that aimed to add to the then limited analysis in the field of Australian theatre criticism.

Julian Meyrick's *See How it Runs: Nimrod and the new wave* (2002) is a contemporary example of a text devoted to the history of a specific theatre during the new wave period of Australian theatre through to the present day. He argues for the Nimrod theatre's importance as a viable part of the development of the new wave period in Australian theatre and traces the history of the Nimrod from its meagre and bleak beginnings into a tiny but creative hotspot in Sydney's lifestyle. Meyrick is focussed on his topic and does not stray too far from it. Brisbane appears in the text in reference to a premiere that took place: Meyrick uses her work at the *Australian* as source material, but does not provide any more reference to her or her contribution to Australian theatre.

Another relevant text to the overall development of Australian theatre is Milne's *Theatre Australia (un)limited: Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (2004). Whilst the text appears today to be slightly dated, it still contains the best reference material on the overall progression of Australian theatre from the 1950s and presents the vast scope of various institutions and organizations that were important in shaping a national theatre. Milne sums up the aim of his text, stating that 'this book starts where many others finish' (Milne 2004, 1). *Australia (un)limited* for the first time provides a complete overview of a national theatre developing in all of the states and territories. He rightly states that 'as a nation, and as a cultural industry dealing in ephemeral performance, we are all too good at

forgetting what has gone before and then re-inventing the wheel' (Milne 2004, 3). Milne's text goes on to redress this issue and adopts a documentary style drawn from personal and professional insight. He argues against the accepted notion of the singular new wave, rather he states clearly that Australia experienced three new waves of varying intensity in the 20th Century. He provides collated data in the effort to prove the output of Australian theatre through the new wave periods. Milne alludes to Brisbane in her critical and publication capacity, stating that 'Brisbane was certainly in a good position to observe the energy and commitment of the new theatre companies' (Milne 2004, 163). It is evident that Milne respects the contribution that Brisbane has made to Australian theatre and references her work throughout the text. Despite these inclusions, Milne's text does not provide any further analysis of Brisbane's career as a whole.

Following on from Brisbane's text *Not Wrong: Just Different* (2005), Radic published another book entitled *Contemporary Australian Drama* (2006). This book of essays is a natural successor to his earlier text *The State of Play* and has a sweeping view of the playwrights of Australian theatre from the 1950s into the new millennium. He argues the book is 'a salute to all those theatre workers – actors, designers, directors and company administrators – who have toiled, often for little financial reward, to bring those plays to life, and in the process, to help create an Australian theatre of our own' (Radic 2006, 11). Radic (like Milne in *Australia (un)limited*) covers the major developments within Australian theatre and the new wave from his own perspective during that time as a theatre critic himself. He breaks down the 'active creation' of playwrights (Peter Kenna, Richard Benyon, David Williamson, Jack Hibberd, John Romeril) individual plays, premieres and performances during this time period to identify what exactly set them apart and made them important within Australian theatre. This text serves as a solid reference to the field

of theatre critics within Australia and shows that Radic is not intimidated by the other publications of Australian theatre critics and that he aspires to be accepted in the same light as a chronicler of the time, similar to Kippax and Brisbane. *Contemporary Australian Drama* acknowledges the work of Brisbane but again neglects to provide an overview of her career and influence, with Radic focussing on her reviewing capacity.

McCallum's *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (2009) is one of the more recent publications on the topic of Australian drama. McCallum addresses the lack of literature relating to the development of Australian playwriting from the nation's federation in 1901. He argues that his book is 'a description of the Australian dramatic repertoire of the 20th Century' but is not 'a history of the theatre' (McCallum 2009, x). He acknowledges the lack of support for the Australian playwright and local material – 'the first seventy years of this book is mostly a tale of small activities in small rooms' (McCallum 2009, 1). *Belonging* references Brisbane much like the other publications on Australian theatre – her professional work as both a critic and as a publisher. McCallum provides further evidence of Brisbane's contribution to theatre criticism by including her in the acknowledgments of the book and for providing him with the idea to write *Belonging* (McCallum 2009, xi). McCallum underlines Brisbane's commitment to improving the state of Australian theatre years after her retirement and the need for further research into her career.

Interviews

The focus of the literature relating to Brisbane that has been published and recorded by other scholars centres on her work as a theatre critic but is narrow in its scope concerning her entire career. This represents the common limitation of all the literature – a lack of specific detail relating to Brisbane's professional work overall. Hazel de Berg's' (1974) interview with Brisbane is perhaps the most important for this research, stored as a part of

the Hazel De Berg Oral History collection at the National Library of Australia. De Berg's interview is the first that directly relates to Brisbane and presents for the first time her limited biography with a glimpse at her career at the *Australian.* The interview presents important details about her life growing up in Perth as 'almost an only child and a favourite of my parents, because I was something which my father enjoyed in his retirement from active life' (De Berg 1974, 10536). This interview presents key moments of her life when important and influential people are brought to light and the journey of becoming a theatre critic is described by Brisbane. An example of this transition can be seen from her warm feelings towards an old university lecturer 'called Gina Tweedie, later Gina Bradley, a woman of great mystique who carried about with her the aroma of the theatre, and she taught me to read a script so that it came alive' (De Berg 1974, 10539). Brisbane became influenced by the Perth theatre of the 1950s, her study at the University of Western Australia, and her work first as a wardrobe mistress and then director for their amateur productions. She also experienced the theatre of Britain and Europe in her travels overseas for the *West Australian* as a journalist. De Berg's transcript reveals the recollections of the critical unpublished period of her youth, the struggle as a writer that she endured, the patience of waiting for the right time in Australian theatre and the finding of that theatre, and the eventual 'guidance of a dramatic nation' from her role at the *Australian*. This interview allows the researcher to better understand Brisbane's beginnings and her own development as a theatre critic to becoming the national theatre critic as she was then known. It provides supporting evidence that further research is required into Brisbane's professional career as the interview is limited in its scope to pre-1974, and only covers basic events in her life and career.

Another key text that includes an interview with Brisbane is *Contemporary Australian Playwrights* (1979) edited by Jennifer Palmer. It would appear strange at first to include

Brisbane in a text directly relating to Australian playwrights but Palmer explains her inclusion in the book because she 'in fact supports a claim for an indigenous Australian theatre about which we still know little' (Palmer 1979, 3). The interview with Brisbane is only the second published since her retirement from her position as the national theatre critic at the *Australian.* The playwrights interviewed include Ray Lawler, Alan Seymour, Peter Kenna, Dorothy Hewett and Jack Hibberd. Palmer's collated interviews present a unique insight into Australian playwrights at a time when their role and experience would otherwise appear to be neglected. She records the personal and professional history of these key people and provides insight into how the playwrights operated. Palmer effectively uses Brisbane's rise to national theatre critic to provide a historical context from which to highlight the various roles that she had developed by 1979 with her work at Currency Press. Brisbane divulges her own recollections of the past and her own views on how the theatre reacted to many of the playwrights who are featured in the text. Palmer uses Brisbane as the conduit that connects all the other playwrights, with many of them having personal experience of Brisbane as the national theatre critic and as the publisher (Brisbane was the publisher of David Williamson and others at the time).

The next recorded interview that Brisbane participated in was with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and is simply called *Philip Parsons: Katharine Brisbane* (1993). Philip Parsons and Katharine Brisbane explore their relationship (both personal and professional) as well as their contribution to Australian theatre. The focus of the interview is a discussion of Currency Press and Brisbane's own personal views on arts funding in Australia. Brisbane stresses the argument that we must break free of subsidy and move on to a new way of funding theatre from the community rather than be controlled by a governmental body. These tapes are an important resource as they provide a rare insight into how Brisbane and Parsons worked together in their professional and

personal life and shows that Brisbane still continued to use her critical eye on the arts and her voice to call for change even later on in her career up until 2011. It is also significant as it is one of the last interviews to include [or that included] Philip Parsons.

In recognition of Brisbane's receiving the Order of Australia (OAM), Helen Musa's article entitled 'A Woman of Words' (1993) aims to give readers an overview of Brisbane's career and pay tribute to the changes she has helped to implement in Australian theatre. Musa presents an interview with Brisbane based on personal knowledge and gives an insight into the woman behind the national theatre critic at the *Australian* in the new wave, and the inspiration behind Currency Press and its fledgling beginnings. She argues that Brisbane throughout her whole life has been 'provocative' and that her name is 'synonymous with Currency Press' (Musa 1993, 20). Musa shows the linear progression in the work of Brisbane who has spent her entire life in theatre as well as the influence of her husband in her work and closes the interview by showing Brisbane's legacy to Australian theatre: 'The 90's hold promise for her as a time for reflection, but also of new directions as Australia becomes more aware of its geographical position in the region. Brisbane will be around to make sure that awareness is reflected in print' (Musa 1993, 20). Despite such comments, Musa's article reflects only shallowly upon Brisbane's career, skimming the surface and offers little in analysing her overall career and showing why she has been so successful in influencing Australian theatre.

Biographical Sources

Angela Bennie's article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Our Theatre's True Believer' (1994) is another article that attempts to cover the career of Brisbane and her influence. Bennie analyses Brisbane's life in this short article to draw out her contribution since her decision 35 years earlier to enter the Australian theatre scene as a critic. Bennie praises her passion, commitment and dedication to improving the theatre. She defines

Brisbane's aesthetic as 'the search for truth in theatre' (Bennie 1994, 12A), with the theatre itself providing a reference for what a society thinks about itself. Included is a discussion of Brisbane moving into publishing and her own thoughts on the struggle to make Currency Press into a viable Australian company. Bennie applauds Brisbane's own unique relationship with Australian theatre. The article is similar in style to Musa's and offers the reader a simple overview of who Brisbane was and her main achievements to date. Bennie's article offers a starting point for this present research in analysing Brisbane's influence on Australian theatre specifically as a publisher and emphasises the fact that Brisbane was a respected member of the theatre community throughout the 1990's.

One of the most important resources in relation to the contribution that Brisbane has made to the development of Australian theatre is the 1995 publication - *Preserving the Ephemeral: Katharine Brisbane and Currency Press* by the friends of the National Library of Australia. This book presents the recollections of influential people within the Australian theatre community from the past 40 years of Brisbane's career, and includes such names as Nick Enright, Dorothy Hewett, Graeme Blundell, Katharine Thomson and John Bell. The text provides insight into Brisbane's career and personal life and shows her dedication, commitment and passion towards Australian theatre from the perspective of her friends and peers. The recollections offer a rare look at Brisbane behind the scenes from the people who know her the best and whilst it offers a personal perspective on Brisbane since the 1970's, the book avoids analysis of her professional output throughout her career.

Ross Honeywill's *Wasted* (2010) is a recent text that includes reference to Brisbane and her work as the national theatre critic for the *Australian*. The book is a biographical account of the life of the career criminal Jim McNeil, and his apparent transformation in

prison from this to a well-respected Australian playwright. Brisbane fits into this story neatly and gains 27 separate mentions in the text – from her reviews of his plays written in prison, to campaigning to have McNeil released from gaol in petitions to the government (Honeywill 2010, 185 and 214). Honeywill also argues that Brisbane's interest in McNeil strayed from the professional into her personal life and that her obsession with the playwright 'nearly caused my divorce' (2010, p.243). *Wasted* presents an exploration of the career of one of Australia's well-known playwrights and the impact that Brisbane had upon his career, and the effort that she made in the attempt to help McNeil become a better playwright. The book supports my argument regarding the tenacity and passion of Brisbane's work: she saw the talent that existed in McNeil, which others had ignored, and risked her career and marriage to help McNeil leave prison. *Wasted* offers the reader a professional and personal insight into Brisbane and is one of the only texts that attempts to understand what Brisbane was achieving through her support of McNeil.

Journalism

The output of Brisbane's newspaper articles from mid-1967 to her retirement from the *Australian* in 1974 is nothing short of prolific, and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. This section of the literature review will only include a sample of journalism at the *Australian* to identify the areas in Australian theatre which Brisbane was attempting to improve and influence, as well as distinguish the changing nature of her role as national theatre critic. Brisbane's first article for the *Australian* is a good example of her practice of tackling problems head on and providing a critique for her readers. In this article, titled 'The role of the drama critic: selectivity must follow satiety', Brisbane outlines in detail the administrative problems within Australian theatre. She argues that there is a greater need in Australia for theatre administrators to consider the needs of their audiences above profit and accept that Australian theatre at the time is a hit and miss venture. Brisbane

shows immediately to her national readership that she has a dominant persona and is willing to target specific areas of the theatre that are languishing or else restricting growth. This article is important as it presents Brisbane from the beginning of her professional career at the *Australian* as a watchdog – a critic who is not intimidated by the scope of her work and one who is passionate about improving Australian theatre one step at a time. Brisbane adopts the tactic of being open and honest with her audience and intends to establish a rapport with her readers early. This article offers evidence that Brisbane had high expectations and goals for the national theatre critic role and was keenly aware of the problems affecting Australian theatre at the time.

A later example of her efforts to provide background on the theatre can be identified in her article for the *Australian* entitled 'Not Wrong - Just Different' (Brisbane 1971). This article was included in Holloway's *Contemporary Australian Drama,* mentioned previously in this review. Brisbane in this article argues for the importance of the emergence of a uniquely Australian drama in comparison to that of overseas: 'But there is much left, thank heaven, in Australia that is neither British nor American. Let's call it – not wrong but different' (1971, 20). She traces the development of our nation via the myths that forged our identity – those of Clancy of the Overflow and Gallipoli. A new nation emerges from this inheritance and Brisbane sees this being reflected in Australian theatre with our acceptance of this identity. She presents the argument that now entering the 1970s 'the theatre is beginning, just beginning, to take a realistic look at what we are; and audiences are responding in recognition of that view' (1971, p.20). With this, Brisbane outlines the major influential plays of the late 1960s and early 1970s that have led to this realistic view: *Norm and Ahmed* (1967), *At Least You Get Something Out Of That* (1968), *The Legend of King O'Malley* (1971) and *The Chapel Perilous* (1971). This article in the *Australian* is important as it furthers the distinction between Brisbane's roles as journalist,

critic and historian of the theatre early in her career. The fact that it was included in the revised edition of *Contemporary Australian Drama* (1987) demonstrates that Brisbane had an important influence even solely from her work as the national theatre critic, with Holloway considering the article worthy of preservation in a historical text on Australian theatre.

As discussed earlier, Brisbane developed her scope as national theatre critic to be inclusive of scholarly work. Her article 'Preserving the Disreputable' (Brisbane, 1971) in Holloway's *Contemporary Australian Drama* (1st ed.) is a good example of her ability to write at a higher level than a critic. The article is based on concurrent performances that were taking place at the time – in Sydney at the Jane Street Theatre was the vaudeville play *The Legend of King O'Malley*[6] and in Melbourne the Pram Factory's *Marvellous Melbourne.*[7] Brisbane had developed her own unique format and tone for her newspaper articles and despite the word restriction imposed she would still include interviews, as well as her own research on Australian theatre. This offers context to the material and shows the reader the distinctions between popular taste in the late 19th century and the changes to this taste during the 20th century. She argues (at the time this would seem pre-emptive) that 'King O'Malley is likely to find a place in Australian history beside *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* as a popular piece of theatre' (Brisbane 1971, p.30) and that it could possibly become a signature export like *The Doll*. *Preserving the Disreputable* is an article of significance as it provides evidence of Brisbane's drive to improve her readers' knowledge, create a scholarly platform for her commentaries, as well as developing a record of changes that were occurring within Australian theatre during that period.

Brisbane was aware of the constant shifts in Australian theatre and used her position as

[6] Written by Bob Ellis and Michael Boddy
[7] Written by Jack Hibberd and John Romeril

national theatre critic to identify for her readers a particular subject that demanded their attention. In her newspaper article in the *Australian* entitled 'Writing in the Nick', Brisbane takes up the argument by one of her readers in this article: 'Are the playwrights behind bars getting a better deal than writers at large?' (Brisbane 1974, 14 Jan). Brisbane uses the example of prison inmate Jim McNeil to show how talented playwrights can be found in any place, including the prison system. Brisbane argues that 'his new play, *How Does Your Garden Grow?* to which, I suspect, the formidable isolation of Bathurst has substantially contributed, places him in my view among the top three playwrights in this country' (Brisbane 1974, 14 Jan). It is rare for Brisbane to make a statement like this regarding a playwright, especially when McNeil is not the type of person that Brisbane would usually associate with as national theatre critic. The article provides evidence that Brisbane was prepared to go above and beyond what was expected of a theatre critic to develop and find new sources of Australian plays. She was even willing to sacrifice her career for McNeil, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Another example of Brisbane's activism can be found in The *National Times,* in an article entitled 'A New Lease on Life' (Brisbane 1976, 14-19 Jun). Brisbane analyses the career of Peter Kenna, as his play *Mates* was revived at the Nimrod Theatre in mid-1976. She insists that Kenna has now hit his stride as a playwright with recent events (his moving off dialysis and transplants) allowing him to experience the world from a different perspective. Brisbane is subjective and personal, speaking from her own experience of reviewing Kenna and his temperament as a playwright. This article exemplifies one of Brisbane's best qualities as a theatre critic in Australia – the ability to single out Australia's playwrights, showing her readers the changes that have occurred for playwrights. The article provides further evidence that Brisbane was continually looking to improve the

opportunities for and output of playwrights, even after her retirement as national theatre critic, by providing positive reinforcement and boosting their public profile.

Reviews and Scholarly Analysis by Brisbane

Brisbane retired from the national theatre critic role in 1974, but continued to publish and write. She used her experience and knowledge to maintain her strong voice within the theatre community. This experience is evident in Brisbane's chapter (entitled 'Australian Drama') in *The Literature of Australia* (1976), edited by Geoffrey Dutton. It is her first text focussed on providing a general overview of the Australian playwright and utilising the historical approach in her research. She provides examples of Australian drama: from the first play thought to be written by an Australian author – David Burn's *The Bush Rangers* (1828) to the recent example provided by Peter Kenna – *A Hard God* (1974). Brisbane traces the development of Australia from the bush to the city as well as the social and political changes that spurred on the nationalist fervour in the early 20th century. She discusses key playwrights of the time – most notable are Edward Geoghegan, George Darrell, Louis Esson, Katharine Susannah Pritchard, Patrick White, Barry Humphries, Alan Seymour and David Williamson. Brisbane links all of the playwrights and their plays, arguing that the 'playwright is a victim of, and the king of, fashion. To succeed he (sic) must keep ahead of his public's thinking, freshly interpreting society to itself down the generations' (Dutton 1976, 248). Brisbane retired from 'active duty' as the national theatre critic and the chapter was produced by a rival publisher (Penguin) to her own company, Currency Press. Brisbane's inclusion in this text underscores the demand for her articles.

One of Brisbane's aims in writing was to explore the past in order to inform the future for her audience. This is clear in her fifteen-page article entitled 'From Williamson to Williamson: Australia's Larrikin Theatre' (Brisbane, 1977), published in *Theatre Quarterly*. As the title suggests, Brisbane breaks down the historical context of the nation's

dramatic development. Her article aims to show that Australian theatre 'has had a long and healthy life over two hundred years' (1977, p.56). Brisbane begins with the entrepreneur J.C. Williamson and traces the lineage of that family's influence within Australian theatre. This transition leads Brisbane to examine the key events and people that were important in the early 20th century: Steele Rudd, Gladys Moncrieff, Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players, the influence of amateur theatre, *Rusty Bugles* (1948), the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) and through to the explosive outburst of Australian theatre during the new wave from 1967 to 1974. Brisbane clearly shows in her article that the theatre has enjoyed a natural progression and at times been the victim of political bias and a lack of subsidy. She also includes analysis of the playwrights who were prevalent in this period: Alexander Buzo, Jack Hibberd, Jim McNeil, Peter Kenna, Dorothy Hewett and David Williamson. Brisbane's article aims to show the reader a fluent progression of Australian theatre, argues against the notion that the theatre only began in 1955, and is evidence of Brisbane's ongoing dedication to chronicling and interpreting the path that Australian theatre has taken.

Brisbane's articles also questioned the stagnant state of theatre. An example of this can be identified in her article 'The Changing Face of Australian Theatre' (Brisbane 1983). In this article she scans the Australian theatre in 1983 for evidence of new directions that the theatre is beginning to take (using New Zealand's theatre as a contemporary comparison). She analyses the decline of the Old Tote, with the emphasis now being on The Nimrod theatre to continue the tradition of staging new Australian theatre in Sydney.[8] Brisbane argues that the creation of the Sydney Theatre Company means that the Nimrod looks to share a similar fate as that of the Old Tote. Brisbane argues that the 1980s is a different

[8] The Australia Council took over control of subsidy, removing the decision making processes off the AETT, which led to the decline of the Old Tote Theatre.

period to the violent 1970s and is a more withdrawn and sensitive theatre scene. This article provides evidence of Brisbane's awareness regarding the changes taking place within Australian theatre as indeed being reflective of changes in the society at large. Her vigilance in attempting to improve the standard of theatre outlines the direction that theatre should be taking and she argues that the theatre should learn from the lessons of the past, rather than repeat them.

Another example of Brisbane's vision for the theatre can be found in the article 'Looking Out from Australia: New Directions in the Australian Theatre' (Brisbane, 1984). Brisbane retraces steps that Australian theatre has taken since 1967, examining why playwrights have changed since the new wave period. She identifies the lineage of Australian playwrights and includes explicit analysis of the generation of 'young lions' (Brisbane 1984, 36). This analysis shows the progression from Jack Hibberd, Barry Oakley, John Romeril and David Williamson in the 1970s to the popular playwrights of the 1980s, such as Michael Gow, Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell. Brisbane argues that these playwrights are different in that the previous generation removed the constraints of the profession so that now 'playwrights themselves in the 1980s are mature, outward looking, thoughtful and are making intellectual demands on the theatre which the decision-makers are finding it hard to meet' (Brisbane 1984, 37). She identifies that the climate within Australian theatre had changed in the 1980s and that the shift in the social and political contexts means that it is viable for the new playwrights to throw out the conventional rules of playwriting for their own commercial gain and dramaturgical innovation. Brisbane recognises this by outlining the groups that are now benefiting from this change and are helping to guide Australian theatre. This argument is further validated by her statement that 'what we need now at this fresh turning point in this ever-changing pattern is a reassessment of what we need to achieve' (Brisbane 1984, 40). This shows that Brisbane

remained in touch with the changes that were occurring in Australian theatre and used her voice to further develop the theatre to an international standard through its playwrights. Brisbane also used her position as national theatre critic to inform new generations about earlier plays and their impact in their time. An example of this is her article '*Don's Party*: The First Production' (Brisbane 1988). She takes a retrospective look at one of Williamson's best known plays and the way in which it is seen as an Australian 'classic'. Whilst applauding the play as a solid piece of Australian theatre and stating that it is an accurate representation of the new wave period, she still believes that the characters remain underdeveloped and for this the play definitely feels dated. The retrospective views of Brisbane are of importance to this study as she was one of the only active reviewers who saw and wrote about the play. As the national theatre critic at the time when *Don's Party* premiered she had the responsibility to either praise or find fault with the play for her readers. Brisbane's revisiting of the earlier plays shows that she is willing to openly re-evaluate her own thoughts on the play, 17 years after it was written. The article presents another example of her enduring passion for the Australian theatre and ability to retrospectively assess her own work as a respected publisher of playwrights.

Brisbane's role as a publisher meant that she had certain rights and privileges to exercise when she believed that one of her playwrights was being targeted. In her article 'Better to Read the Play' (Brisbane 1989) published in the *Age*, she is quite vocal in defence as the publisher of Ron Elisha's play *Two* (a play based on the Holocaust), responding to an article published by audience member Lily Brett a few weeks earlier. This presents an example of the role that Brisbane took as that of a mediator between the artist and the audience (i.e. as the publisher). She outlines that the first focus of critical comment must be to determine what the issue of the work is at heart. Brisbane refutes the original claims of Brett's comments that Elisha is 'blurring the distinction between offender and victim'

(Brisbane 1989, 16) and urges her readers to find their own meaning from the play. This article reveals Brisbane's position in Australian theatre as more than a publisher and provides evidence that she is willing to defend her playwrights in public.

Brisbane's edited book, *Entertaining Australia: an Illustrated History* (1991), sets out to challenge the argument at the time that Australian theatre began with the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and then came to fruition in the new wave period, by presenting a complete illustrated history of the arts. Brisbane argues in the introduction that the book 'puts paid too many perceived ideas about our past, which have their basis in quite short periods of living memory' (Brisbane 1991, 19). Brisbane covers a vast array of material relating to Australia's development as a nation in all areas of the arts, from early colonisation to contemporary times**,** and provides illustrated evidence that this culture existed right from the outset. She brings the book to conclusion in the final chapter where she celebrates the inclusion of a multicultural arts scene, a place where 'hope runs above it all – hope for all of us, for a new Australia' (Brisbane 1991, 340). This text is extremely important to this study as it shows the evolution of Brisbane as journalist to that of a critic, to publisher of the history of Australian drama. It is clear evidence that she still wished to contribute her knowledge to bringing a new generation of Australians the history of their own country.

Another unique part of Australian theatre that Brisbane advocated is the representation of Aborigines and their culture in the arts. Her unpublished, mid 1990s article entitled 'The Future in Black and White: Aboriginality in Recent Australian Drama' is a testament to her continuing interest in indigenous theatre. She chronicles the development of Aboriginal theatre in Australia after citing two relevant examples of how far the indigenous theatre had come – *Bran Nue Day* (1990) and *Corrugation Road* (1996). The argument that she

presents is that the theatre is a medium in which indigenous Australians are able to present their stories uncensored. Brisbane further raises arguments about the irony of Australia's history and the accountability that must inevitably follow from the terrible atrocities committed against Aborigines in the past. She also notes the change in social attitudes towards Aboriginal traditions and characters by non-Aboriginal playwrights. This article is important as it provides evidence that even into the later part of her career Brisbane still retained the same activism, drive and passion (as an advocate for indigenous theatre in Australia) that she had when she was national theatre critic at the *Australian.*

Brisbane published a collection of her own reviews and reflections in the text – *Not Wrong - Just Different*: *Observations on the Rise of Contemporary Australian Theatre* (2005). This text is the main primary source used here when discussing Brisbane's work, from her beginnings as the national theatre critic for the *Australian* in 1967, her tireless efforts (with Philip Parsons) in keeping Currency Press afloat financially, and the development of Australian theatre through the cultural, political and social transformations that occurred in the 1970s. Brisbane provides accompanying commentaries with some of the reviews to provide her own insight into our national theatre and the changes that were taking place. One can see the progression of Brisbane's work from these reviews and commentary based on the salient issues at the time, thereby allowing the reader to understand the complexity of the role she claimed as national theatre critic.[9] Brisbane's aims for the book are to 'give the artist of today some insight into what has been lost by this (changes in theatre), and why the arts in the public arena are no longer influential' (Brisbane 2005, 7). This in turn informs the younger generation of Australians who benefit from this publication which provides an accurate glimpse into the past of the nation's theatre through Brisbane's personal review of her own writings. *Not Wrong – Just Different* emphasizes what

[9] For example: the role of the critic, theatre subsidy and an affirmation of Australian plays and playwrights.

Brisbane was looking for within Australian theatre and provides evidence for argument that her work was influential and provided a national voice for change over the past five decades. It also presents a direct challenge to the work of other influential critics and adds Brisbane's perspective to the literature. Both Kippax and Radic had previously dictated the field of Australian theatre criticism and its history, and this text aims to redress this situation by using Brisbane's articles and reflections upon the past as evidence that she influenced the theatre. *Not Wrong* does fall short of providing a complete view of her entire career as Brisbane had to be selective in publication with the material that was approved for the book. Brisbane further states that the book 'must represent less than a quarter of the output from this period' (Brisbane 2005, 6).

A recent example of Brisbane's work is her chapter in the *Cambridge History of Australian Literature* entitled '*Theatre from 1950*' (2009). She examines the development of a national theatre from the start of the 1950s until contemporary times (the end of 2008). She identifies the major changes within Australian theatre throughout the three new wave periods – the development of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, the National Institute of Dramatic Art, La Mama and Jane Street and provides her own insight into these rapid changes in Australian plays that occurred throughout the 1960s to the 1990s. Brisbane argues that the mid 1950s in Australia was 'served by a round of a high, if not particularly creative, standard' (Brisbane 2009, 391). She then presents the plays that she believes to have influenced Australian theatre, such as *Rusty Bugles* (1948), *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), *The One Day of the Year* (1960) and *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962). She also identifies the Old Vic Tour of 1948-1949 as an important influence on the direction of Australian theatre, owing to the exposure of audiences to Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh. Brisbane goes on to advocate the playwrights of the past five decades, including Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Alex

Buzo, Dorothy Hewett, Steven Sewell, Robert Merritt and David Williamson. Brisbane's chapter aligns her support of Australian theatre from the early 1950s and shows that she was aware that the theatre was maturing and that she played a role in these changes as critic and publisher of Australian drama.

Commentaries, Forewords and Lectures

Brisbane, as publisher at Currency Press, also had the responsibility of providing introductions (commentaries) to plays. To avoid confusion this section will address her introductions and commentaries for the Currency Press Volume series of published plays – from the 1950s through to the 1980s, irrespective of publication dates. All texts are edited by Brisbane: her introductions to the series follow an informative structure, providing first a historical and social context, with the aim of linking the plays. This shifts to an analysis of the play's themes and how the playwright (and their play) fitted into the overall development of Australian theatre. The volumes analysed add further value to this research as they present another perspective on Brisbane's commitment to publishing and historical preservation, further stressing the importance of her contribution to developing Australian theatre.

In Brisbane's introductions to the series it is evident that there is a focus on the future, with greater things to come for Australian theatre. Volume 1 of *Plays of the 60's* (Brisbane 2000) follows on from the excitement of a developing theatre to the reality of an emerging one and covers the first three years of the 1960s. The format is similar for all of the volumes, with four plays being included in the volume – Oriel Gray's *Burst of Summer*, Jack McKinney's *The Well*, Patrick White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla* and Theodore Patrikareas's *The Promised Woman*. She introduces the historical context that led to the 'winds of change' (Brisbane, 2000: v) and includes discussion of certain plays (Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* and Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral*) that signified

change within Australian theatre, and the possibility of making a career for playwrights. Brisbane links the plays by their genre – she deems some as representative of the 'working-class' and a 'fair account of how Australia was in 1960: staid, mono-cultural, showing little evidence of education or travel broadening the mind' (Brisbane 2000, vi). Brisbane's inclusion of *The Ham Funeral* in a collection of Australian plays shows that she was looking at playwrights beyond the subject matter and setting of their plays and focussing on the preservation of the play in print. It is clear from Brisbane's introduction that a revolution was beginning to occur within Australian theatre and that these plays are representations of this change. Brisbane captured the feeling of the period, enabling readers to understand the complex changes that were occurring and where these plays fitted into this change.

Brisbane edited the book *Critical Perspectives: Eight Award-winning Arts Critics* (1997). She provides the foreword to assist the reader to engage with the critics who each provided their own perspective on the state of Australian theatre. Written as an initiative of the Geraldine Pascall Foundation, Brisbane introduces the text from her own standpoint: 'As someone who spent twenty-one years in the newspaper business and who made a career of theatre criticism, I found the account in these essays as revelatory as I might have as a beginner' (Brisbane 1997, ix). She surveys each contributor within their respective field to identify the attributes of a good critic. In the end she states that 'a good critic follows his intuition and finds reasons to explain it. In my experience this is as good a method as any' (Brisbane 1997, xiii). *Critical Perspectives* shows Brisbane using her experience as a critic to inform readers about the nature of criticism itself; it also provides a preliminary picture

of her own beliefs as to what makes a good critic, which is only touched upon in her writing. [10]

Brisbane also published a lecture series on Australian theatre. Her edited book, *The Parsons Lectures: The Philip Parsons Memorial Lectures on the Performing Arts 1993-2003* (2003) is a summation of the past 10 years of these lectures from many important professionals within Australian theatre: Wayne Harrison, John Derum, Richard Wherrett, Neil Armfield, Robyn Nevin and Stephen Page. Her introduction identifies that from these lectures there is 'a lot of anger in these papers, anger and frustration; but also imagination, exploration, competitiveness, and above all a single-minded dedication to the work and a belief in the power of the arts' (Brisbane 2003, xi). Brisbane presented the inaugural paper in 1993, beginning with an introduction outlining the contribution that Parsons had made to Australian theatre. [11] She develops her argument about the state of Australian theatre by presenting a history of the theatre from the J.C. Williamson days of the 1920s and 1930s to the rapid expansion of the new wave, to the relative comfort of subsidy in the late 1980s and 1990s. She argues that now, after all this building up over the past century, 'we have the skills and we understand the issues. It is time to expand the imagination and trust the judgment of our artists; and to allow proper investment in our performing arts. We are ready to expand and export' (Brisbane 2003, 15). Brisbane has collated a rare contemporary resource here from firsthand knowledge of Australian theatre.

Another contemporary example of Brisbane's continual effort to improve the state of Australian theatre can be found in her unpublished lecture entitled, 'Imagining a Creative Nation' (2006). Written especially for the *Elizabeth Jolley Lecture Series* Brisbane discusses the history of arts subsidy in Australia from the early Australian Elizabethan

[10] This 'good critic' argument is discussed further in Chapter 2.
[11] Philip passed away in 1993.

Theatre Trust to the Australia Council for the Arts, to the Keating era's *Creative Nation* report. Brisbane states her own view regarding the shifting field: 'The arts, which I am here to talk about, are about change, about showing us a new way of seeing ourselves, about foreseeing the consequences of present action, and re-examining the past and imagining the future' (Brisbane 2006, 1). Brisbane dwells on her own experience in Australian theatre, the changes that have occurred since the new wave for artists and playwrights alike as well as discussion of what *Not Wrong – Just Different* (2005) meant: 'The invitation to give this lecture was accompanied by the suggestion that I might talk about what I meant, to which I replied that today it would need to be called Once Different, Now Too Much the Same' (Brisbane 2006, 8). Brisbane finishes the lecture by stating how she truly feels towards Australian theatre, leaving an open direction for where Australian theatre should be heading: 'to conclude these ruminations I have no vision to offer, but I do believe we are at a moment of great opportunity, if we have the imagination to grasp it'(Brisbane 2006, 12). Brisbane's lecture is important as it shows her dedication, candour and her constant involvement even in her retirement years in Australian theatre. In 2011, Brisbane was again the keynote speaker for the Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture which follows the Philip Parsons Award that goes to a young playwright under 30. Brisbane's lecture for this event, entitled 'In Praise of Nepotism' (2011) shows her continual connection to the roots of Australian theatre. She discusses this connection in her opening address:

> As an aside at this point I would like to say that much of the thinking behind this address has been initiated by the research, experience and reflection of the many authors whose work I have edited and published over 40 years. Those years have brought repeated challenges, as aspects of our history, our attitudes, our changing way of life have been revealed to me between the lines. And for that I continue to be grateful. (Brisbane 2011, 2)

She recalls the moments in Australian theatre that led to great things happening, such as witnessing *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in London in 1957 and the opening night of

Don's Party in Sydney in 1972. Brisbane praises the Australian arts and its practitioners for their capacity to continue fighting and reassesses the past 40 years of development, saying that 'today, despite these obstacles, we have a huge arts industry. More people attend arts ventures than sport, according to the polls. In forty years it is a record of which we should be deservedly proud' (Brisbane 2011, 16). This lecture provides the most recent example of her activism, passion and influence on the direction of Australian theatre, at the age of 80.

Brisbane has also provided forewords to revised editions of collections of plays published by well-known Australian playwrights. A recent example of this is her commentary in the series *Australian Dramatists: Patrick White Collected Plays Vol. 1* (Brisbane 2008), reprinted by Currency Press. The foreword remains the same as in the original 1985 edition with Brisbane's usual taste for presenting the reader with a timeline of events leading into the prolific writing of Patrick White. Brisbane breaks down the characteristics (symbolism and expressionism) of the plays and presents the historical context in which they fit into Australian theatre during the 1960s and 1970s. Of importance is a biographical note on Patrick White at the end of the book provided by May-Brit Akerholt which further enhances the text's value to a new generation of Australians. This can also be seen as Brisbane's aim for the new edition in her statement that the text shall 'redress the balance: I hope this new edition will help to bring to public attention again the early work of an extraordinary dramatic imagination' (Brisbane 2008, 10). Brisbane's foreword in the *Australian Dramatists* series presents another contemporary example of Brisbane's work within Australian theatre and supports the argument here about the significance of Brisbane as a critic, even after her retirement.

Sources in the *Australian* Newspaper

Brisbane's inclusion in the multimedia set *The Australian: 40 years* (2004) is important in understanding the critical impact of her work during the years from 1967 to 1974. *The Australian: 40 years* is a 13-issue special collection that deals with the past 40 years of the newspaper in reporting Australian news and events. The 6th issue, entitled *Culture,* provides the basis for an examination of the past 40 years of Australian drama and film and the people who were influential through the turbulent years of the new wave. The collection is by no means comprehensive on the topic but Brisbane receives a page for one of her 'nostalgia' pieces, looking back in reference to the preview of the controversial play *America Hurrah!*. The inclusion of her article in this collection demonstrates Brisbane's capacity as a theatre historian and presents some of her best critical work to a contemporary audience.

A definitive study of the *Australian* is Denis Cryle and Christina Hunt's *Murdoch's Flagship: Twenty-five Years of The Australian Newspaper* (2008).They cover the fledgling beginnings of the newspaper and show the metamorphosis of the newspaper into a national daily paper. They look at the emergence of Murdoch into daily publications and the struggle that he went through to turn the *Australian* into a viable business and respectable newspaper. The book includes Katharine Brisbane, who came on board with the newspaper in mid-1967. Cryle and Hunt include Brisbane under the heading 'WOMEN, JOURNALISM & THE ARTS' and she is presented as a leader for women in the male dominated world of journalism at the time She is cited later in regard to reform against censorship and homophobia within the arts and her support for the removal of both from the theatre. Cryle and Hunt present some examples of Brisbane as a journalist, but owing to the breadth of their topic, they fail to go further in the analysis of Brisbane's work.

Main Sources on Currency Press

Over the past five decades of Brisbane's career one can argue that her greatest achievement was the creation of the publishing company Currency Press. Much of the literature that exists regarding Brisbane comments that in general, without her contribution of Australian theatre publishing (Currency Press), Australia would have a very limited written record of its drama. Currency preserved many plays between 1967 and 1974 that may have not received publication elsewhere and their catalogue still provides educators and practitioners with access to these plays. The influence of Brisbane and Parsons on Australian publishing is an undeniable fact. Moreover, Brisbane has published many articles written from her own perspective in relation to the development of Currency.

One of these is Brisbane's article entitled 'Tangible Assets - 10 years of Australian Drama Publishing' (1981). It presents her personal view 10 years after the establishment of Currency Press, using her insight to look back at a decade of Australian drama publishing and to analyse the ups and downs that had occurred. She divulges a large amount of personal information relating to the company, such as financial troubles (with monetary examples such as herself and Parsons not receiving a salary for the first seven years of the company's existence), printing errors, stock burning in fires, and troubles with publication partners as examples of hardship that the company faced whilst struggling to operate. She indicates that as an educational publisher it is more rewarding to plan ahead for the future than to look at the past as evidence of success. Ten years on, Brisbane has the confidence that the company can stand on its own two feet and that their hard work is beginning to pay off. 'Tangible Assets' provides an insider's view of a company that a lot of people expected to fail. It provides the backstory to the company from Brisbane and Parson's perspective and the importance of Currency Press in the publishing of Australian playwrights. After a ten year struggle, Brisbane believes that her publication company is

now returning a solid and rewarding contribution to its industry. *Tangible Assets* develops a snapshot of Currency Press in 1981 and offers a factual account of the difficulties that the company faced in its early operations, further allowing analysis of Brisbane's dedication and personal sacrifices which ensured Currency's continued survival.

A comprehensive study of theatre publications in Australia is Kerry Kilner's *The Publishing of Drama in Australia: 1946-1998* (1998). Kilner traces the small steps of Australian publishing, focusing on plays from the nineteenth century to the development of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and onto the turbulent new wave period. Kilner captures a snapshot of the publishing industry before the arrival of Currency Press, and shows how limited the opportunities were for playwrights to be published.[12] Kilner shows the influence that Currency Press had on Australian publishing (in raw publishing data) and presents a history of the company from its establishment in 1971. This text provides a basis for further research into Currency Press and the sheer volume of Australian playwrights they published. Currency Press created the opportunity for playwrights, with the knowledge that they could make a career out of their work.

Brisbane uses key milestones of Currency Press as her rationale to write about her publishing career. Her article in *Voices* entitled 'Investing in Authors: A History of Currency Press' (1993) is an example of this continual drive to preserve the history, including the struggles that she and Parsons faced both personally and professionally over the past 22 years. Since 1971, her company has been supporting fledgling Australian authors and giving them the opportunity to present their material to a wider Australian and international community. Through the publication of Australian playwrights, Brisbane and

[12] Angus & Robertson led the way with 34 out of 180 titles between 1946 and 1970.

Parsons established a canon of Australian drama, during the periods in which they were actually being performed. In this article she talks with and about many playwrights who were instrumental in this process. 'Investing in Authors' directly relates to Brisbane's work as both a publisher and advocate for Australian theatre and distinguishes that even after a full and distinguished career, she still wants to give more back to the community.

Another publication within the same year by Brisbane is her article in *Australian Author*, titled '*Independent Publishing*' (1993). This article is an edited reprint of a lecture that Brisbane gave to the Sydney Arts Management Advisory Group. Brisbane presents recent examples of how her publishing company stays alive in the market and what it takes to make a profit over a financial year. She gives her insights into the decisions behind judging publication runs and allows the reader to understand the complexity that goes into running a company like Currency Press, with examples of buying print rights to material and securing the loyalty of authors. This article validates the argument that Brisbane and Parsons changed the publication of Australian drama with Currency Press and shows that both were still strong advocates of the theatre in the 1990s.

Brisbane's short book *Currency Press: The Performing Arts Publisher, A Brief History* (1993) is a 10-page study of the development of the idea of forming a publishing company devoted mainly to Australian plays and her efforts with Philip to guide their company in the right direction over the previous twenty three years. She even notes herself in the introduction that the sheer fact the company exists today 'is a tribute to Australian nationalism' (Brisbane 1993, 1). Brisbane discusses the personal and professional decisions that she has faced to keep the company afloat and uses examples of recent playwrights who have benefited from publishing with Currency in the late 1980s and early

1990s, such as Michael Gow, Nick Enright and others. She presents the significance of Currency to the overall development of the Australian drama and presents a brief of the situation over the past 20 years. *A Brief History* is a short introduction to Currency Press and provides for the reader a starting point for understanding the development of Currency Press from the 1970's.

An article that complements the success in the 1990s of Currency Press is Patricia Rolfe's article in *The Bulletin* - 'Uncommon Currency Hits the Right Note' (1994). Rolfe uses the newest publication of David Williamson, *Sanctuary*, as a catalyst to take a look back at Currency Press. She provides an interview with Brisbane, discussing the success of Currency Press as an 'iconic' company. Rolfe argues that as Australians we accept that fact that Currency Press has represented the theatre for the previous 23 years and has aimed to develop a record of theatre's changes through the publication of its playwrights. She further argues that this contemporary publication of the new wave is something that is unique to Australia. This article presents a sample of evidence of the positive influence that Brisbane and Parsons had on Australian theatre with Currency Press.

Another article relating to Currency Press by Brisbane is entitled 'A Backstage Business' (1996). It presents a history of Australian theatre, both pre and post arts subsidy. She begins her introduction about being one of the few who 'remember a time before arts subsidy' (Brisbane 1996, 15) and the challenges that the theatre faced. Brisbane takes a look back in a brief overview of her part in the development of Australian theatre since the introduction of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. She reminds readers that before arts subsidy the theatre in Australia struggled to stay alive. In 1996, and after 25 years of Currency Press, Brisbane challenged politicians to be aware of the links between culture and trade (with reference to both Keating and Howard). Discussed is a brief background of

Currency Press and its subsequent rise through the literary ranks of Australian publishers to be taken seriously as a real arts publisher. This article is an example of Brisbane drawing on her experience in the theatre, writing as a scholar to present a snapshot of the arts before subsidy and still asking questions of the Government regarding the theatre.

Geoffrey Dutton's *A Rare Bird – Penguin Books in Australia 1946-96* (1996) is a text that requires mention in this review and is of importance to this research because of its omission of Brisbane and Currency Press. Dutton had worked with Brisbane previously and it appears strange to include discussion of the other major publisher of Australian drama at the time (Angus & Robertson). It also offers the different perspective on the field of drama publication, showing that Currency Press was not the only publishing company in Australia focussed on Australian theatre. This literature review has aimed to identify the resources that currently exist in the texts which have influenced my research. A clear trend that can be seen is that Brisbane's professional output is used by other researchers to represent a specific play or period of time. Many of the texts referenced a play that Brisbane reviewed and her criticism, positive or negative. By referencing Brisbane in this manner, researchers are using her articles as a historical record to bolster their arguments.

A further trend that this review has identified is the lack of research that exists on Currency Press itself. Much of the literature that exists is written by Brisbane herself. Other accounts or references fail to capture an overall account of the company from 1971, and the personal and professional struggles that Brisbane and Parsons endured in order to keep the company financially viable.

Finally, this review has shown that whilst there are texts that focus on Brisbane as an individual and some of her achievements, none exist that focus on her overall career or explore the impact that she has had on Australian theatre through her different roles as

reviewer, critic, scholar and publisher. One can identify that there is a clear gap in research on this topic, and this thesis aims to rectify this gap by analysing and presenting Brisbane's contribution over the past five decades through her articles, publications, commentaries and interviews.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Australian Theatre in the late 1940s and 1950s

Fitzpatrick states in his introduction to the history of Australian theatre that: 'Australian drama has a long history of disillusion' (1979, i). This can be seen from the beginning of the 20th Century with the slow progress within Australian theatre up until the first production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955. Whilst there were early attempts at developing a new type of theatre that was indigenous to Australia in the 1920's (such as Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players) the preoccupation with performing the classics and the tendency to neglect new Australian material was the preferred choice for many theatre companies. This situation did not encourage experimentation with new Australian plays.

This chapter focusses on three areas of research. The first is the development of Australian theatre criticism immediately after World War 2 (WW2) and the attempt to foster a critical culture that would benefit the theatre. Secondly, there has been limited research into the development of theatre criticism and most contemporary texts are focussed on the development of literary criticism since the 1950s. Thirdly, there has also been limited research into Brisbane's early career at the *West Australian* and the impact that this had on equipping her for her subsequent role as the national theatre critic at the *Australian.* I will identify the influence that Brisbane had on the theatre during the late 1950s and early 1960s by analysing her journalistic and critical writings for direct evidence of her efforts to transform the theatre.

The rapid changes that occurred in the late 1960s Australian theatre echo the changes that were occurring in Britain 10 years previously. Irving Wardle, an English writer and theatre critic who worked with Kenneth Tynan, describes the state of London theatre in the early 1950s:

> Such was the state of affairs in London in the early 1950s, when the West End resembled a select grocery shop, and customers resorted to the entertainment kiosks of St Martin's Lane as if inspecting the shelves of Fortnum and Mason, where the latest Gingold revue of Hugh and Margaret Williams confection would be displayed like Scotch salmon or jars of Oxford Marmalade. (1992, 11)

Wardle argues that a theatre critic was one who was well versed in the world of theatre, who followed artistic traditions and grew up on a mixed diet of Shakespeare and the classics. The early 1950s London critic knew how drama was 'supposed' to be presented and was not used to sampling newer local playwrights without providing heavy criticism. Brisbane witnessed this change in Britain and it put her in the position to realise that Australia was reaching its own cultural revolution.

As discussed, Brisbane travelled to England in 1955 and lived and worked for just under two years there. She recalls her experience of London, saying:

> …I was working as a typist and seeing as much theatre as time would allow. It was a vintage period for theatre critics: Kenneth Tynan in the *Sunday Times* and Harold Hobson in the *Observer* – and Walter Kerr in the *New York Times* – were my mentors; and a scrap book of their writings was a primer in my early years as a reviewer. (Brisbane 2005, 1)

Brisbane's timing was serendipitous, as she witnessed great change in Australia over a decade later. The shift towards focussing on the working people was something that Australian theatre began to do around the same time. The best known example of a working-class play that Australia has produced is Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* which will be discussed further on in this chapter.

Brisbane witnessed important changes in British theatre and the response by the eminent theatre critics of the time in London. This exposure was invaluable in shaping Brisbane's critical and analytical response to the theatre when it would come to her turn as the national theatre critic of Australia, and helped her understand the relationship between the theatre and society itself. To understand Brisbane's development as a critic (with training as a journalist), one must first take a look at how Australian theatre was emerging prior to

and at the stage she was introduced to her role as critic at the *West Australian.* For the purposes of this research, this study will cover the period from the late 1940s.[14]

1.2 Guthrie and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust

The post-war Labor Government headed by Ben Chifley created a committee to explore the development of a national theatre. [15] In 1949, the committee sent an invitation to Tyrone Guthrie, who at the time was a prominent and respected director in Britain, with the express intent of using his advice to begin to develop theatre in Australia. Guthrie visited the six major cities in Australia over a six-week period. In the report, Guthrie's main argument was that the 'standards are very low both of performances and, more importantly, of appreciation−the public, with no standards of comparison, does not know what to expect of theatrical performance' (Parsons and Chance 1995, 255). This is something which Brisbane later addressed as national theatre critic, discussed further in Chapter 5. Guthrie further argued that Australian actors should be sent to London to learn their craft, then return and disseminate their experience. In his view, this would improve the standard of theatre in Australia.

Later, in his memoirs, Guthrie commented on Australian theatre, stating:

> …I attended endless receptions and cocktail parties, met the federal Premier (sic) and the Prime Minister of each state, and saw a great many amateur theatrical performances of widely varying quality. I did not visit a cattle or sheep station – I hardly saw a horse or cow all the time I was there – and I would not dream of claiming I had seen the real Australia, whatever that may be. (Guthrie 1959, 275)

Guthrie was given a whirlwind tour of the nation's theatrical talents and felt as if Australia forced him into 'an impossible position by this almost universal, desperate and transparent desire to impress' (Guthrie 1959, 277). What struck Guthrie most about Australia was that

[14] As earlier periods have been analysed in detail in previous publications such as *Australian Contemporary Drama 1909-1982: A Critical Introduction* (Carroll 1985).
[15] As mentioned in Brisbane's chapter in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009), the interest generated by the Old Vic Theatre Company's 1948 tour helped to spur Chifley's Government to act.

it was constantly trying to impress him by appearing to be classless, unlike Britain. Guthrie saw through this, stating that 'Australian society is no more classless than any other' and he believed that it was beneath the surface similar in areas to that of Britain (Guthrie 1959, 278). But Guthrie was impressed by the ease with which one could move from one social class to another, something that was lacking in Britain. Guthrie was not overly impressed by the theatrical talent that Australia had to offer. As mentioned earlier, Guthrie wanted a national theatre that would have removed actors from Australia for professional training in British theatre, returning them only to form companies in Australia after their training was completed. Ten years later, he still argued that 'before spending great sums on a building, a much more moderate sum should be spent on equipping the human material of a national theatre' (Guthrie 1959, 280). This argument contrasts what Brisbane advocated at the *Australian*, that of developing more theatre infrastructure from resources available, with the actor and audience in mind. Examples of some of the places Brisbane endorsed include Jane Street, La Mama and the Nimrod Street Theatre, discussed further in chapter 5.

Just as the report was finished, the Chifley Government was replaced by the Menzies Government, which took a conservative view of the arts and Guthrie's report was rejected. The problem arose from the fact that the post-war Australian society and politics were shifting. Politically, people were beginning to tire of the Chifley Government's policies. For his part, Guthrie felt as though his report received too much negative criticism and that Australians reacted quite rashly to his words, saying in his memoirs:

> The suggestion, however, that Australian taste might not be entirely perfect and that Australia might, in certain matters, be a decade or two behind certain other communities, aroused a tremendous head of steam. Persons who would not otherwise have given a snap of their fingers to support a national theatre felt a passionate rage against the sneering, bloody Pommy who dared to suggest that the time was not quite yet. This may have been of some small assistance three or four years later in the promotion of The Elizabethan Theatre Trust. (Guthrie 1959, 281)

Despite his suggestions, Guthrie was another catalyst that Australia needed to argue for an investment in the field of theatre. He was right in many areas about the state of the theatre at the time as it lacked any national touring company that was subsidized by the Government and there was no subsidy for playwrights and theatre companies. To add to this, the quality of the theatre appeared to be representative of the time, as most of what Guthrie saw in 1949 was presented by amateur groups and based on classical material with little preference given to Australian playwrights. In comparison to amateur theatre, the commercial theatre was thriving. JC Williamson (Australian based theatre manager) was dominant and had proved successful in importing musical theatre and vaudeville, touring them around the country. [16]

Guthrie managed to stir something within the Australian consciousness with his report. Whilst not active as a journalist during the early 1950s, Brisbane weighed in on the topic in 1973, stating that 'the Chifley Government ignored the advice it asked itself from the late Tyrone Guthrie on setting up a national theatre' and that 'the Chifley Government fell shortly after the *Guthrie Report* was delivered in 1949. The recommendations were poorly received by the public; but it raised debate which led to the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust' (Brisbane 2005, 225-226). Brisbane did not support the British style of theatre and training that Guthrie advocated in the late 1940s but she did agree that the discussion was more important and that it should be done in a way that benefits all parties involved in the process of theatre. Her later comments show the importance of having a theatre run by the people, stating the ACA formula 'looks frighteningly like the bad old days of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust when the performing arts were designed and managed by not

[16] JC Williamson's had been operating in Australia since 1874, with an opening a season at The Theatre Royal, Melbourne. National tours were wholly funded by JC Williamson for the commercial theatre and did not represent a Government supported national touring company in Australia.

the artists but the spectators' (Brisbane 2005, 225). Brisbane effectively refutes Guthrie's model by advocating an informed theatre that support the practitioners via subsidy, local training and national touring, as well as the development and protection of playwrights through such tools as the Australian National Playwrights Conference.

Guthrie managed to stir something within the Australian consciousness with his report. What was evident was that Australians didn't like being told that their work was not up to the British standard. Guthrie's later assessment that Australia was 'a decade or two behind other communities' (Guthrie, 1959: 281) in the late 1940s was contemptuous. Taking the opportunity of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth's visit in 1953, and after considerable lobbying of the Menzies Government, £30, 000 funding was pledged to support the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT). This was a monumental step in itself as nothing like this had existed before in Australia, let alone been subsidised by the Australian Government. The Trust was formed in September 1954 to fill the 'inadequacies' found in the arts. Dr HC Coombs and his committee, including John Douglas Pringle and Sir Charles Moses managed to convince the Menzies Government at the time to provide £1 for every £3 gained in payments from both Australian citizens and businesses. [17] This was instrumental in the Trust gaining around £130,000 in its first budget, as well as the ability to maintain their income over the next few years. According to Geoffrey Milne, 'while the states who were interested in the scheme had apparently agreed to maintain their subsidy on an ongoing basis, the Commonwealth committed itself to ongoing subsidy later. But the important thing is that it did' (Milne 2004, 100).

[17] Pringle was the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Moses the General Manager of the ABC.

Dr HC Coombs was an excellent lobbyist, and as the Trust's founding executive he set out its aims in a manifesto published in *Meanjin* in 1954.

> The aim of the Trust is primarily to assist organisations capable of presenting drama, opera and ballet of the highest artistic standards and especially those which give promise of becoming self-supportive within a reasonable time. Because the Trust is a national trust, preference will always be given to those ventures which are national in character. (Coombs 1954, 283)

The AETT provided a starting point for the development of an Australian theatre, as the Trust's first 'executive director' Hugh Hunt outlines in the Trust's 1957 annual report:

> The ground for the creation of an Australian theatre had been well prepared in advance. Experimental seasons of home-grown opera, ballet and drama had been presented in each of the States and had received the generous support of State Governments and City Councils. In many cases fine artistic results had been achieved, and although costs and receipts had seldom managed to balance, the margin between success and failure was often far narrower than would be the case in Great Britain or America. The commercial theatre organizations, in particular the long-established firm of J. C. Williamson's, had shown a record of opera, ballet and drama importations unsurpassed in the British Commonwealth, and undoubtedly our distinguished visitors had helped to whet the public's taste for a theatre of its own (Hunt, 1957:1).

Hunt was born in Surrey, England, in 1911 and he had been educated at Oxford and the Sorbonne. His directing roles were varied: he became the Director of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin from 1935 to 1938, the Bristol Old Vic from 1938 to 1948 and the London Old Vic from 1950 to 1953. Hunt had an established background as a well-known director and the AETT wanted to use his experience to further develop Australian theatre. He was appointed in 1955 as the Trust's first 'executive director' until 1960. During these five years he focussed on projecting Australian theatre into the international scene and was instrumental in the founding of NIDA.

The AETT was the first official body with power to subsidize theatre to develop these 'experimental seasons' and lay the groundwork for a national theatre, thereby providing funding for the basic infrastructure that a uniquely Australian theatre sorely needed. Local theatre was struggling at the time and was limited to non-commercial, unsubsidized

theatres that were located around capital cities across Australia and in regional towns. Commercial theatre was dominant and JC Williamson's was on top in the Australian theatre scene. The Trust was also to work with the existing bodies already operating in Australia. Its job was to 'supplement and not to replace the various state and national organizations for the development of the theatre, and [will,] wherever practicable, collaborate with them in the presentation of theatrical seasons and [will] hope to be the means of fostering and developing their activities' (Coombs 1954, 285). It was from these unsubsidized theatres that Australian material began to compete with imported theatre, especially that produced by the commercial theatre. It is interesting to note the ambitious nature of Dr Coombs' statement; he essentially promised a self-supportive Australian drama, opera and ballet within a 'reasonable' time frame which was something that had not been achieved before in Australia. In retrospect, it can be seen that this time frame was too ambitious. It eventually expanded to well over a decade, until the rapid expansion of the new wave brought about the ability for theatres to support themselves with a plethora of new Australian playwrights. The Trust played it safe in the first few years of its operation. Ballet and music took preference over drama. In 1955, the Playwrights' Advisory Board (PAB) held a playwriting competition, requesting the nation's playwrights to send in their new material with the promise of the winner receiving a trust-funded production. The PAB selected two winners that year: Oriel Gray's *The Torrents* and Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Hugh Hunt selected *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* for production and it was given the full support of the Trust. Hunt's rejection of *The Torrents* was to deal a decisive blow to the playwright Oriel Gray and her success in Australian theatre. It would not be published until 1988 and did not receive a professional production until 1996 at the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. Hunt instead favoured Lawler's three-act melodrama and he persuaded the Trust to provide financial support for the season

at the Union Theatre Repertory Company (UTRC) in Melbourne. Hunt was still a British director and even though Guthrie's report was rejected, the values Guthrie expressed did come true in part, that Australia would require assistance from Britain to succeed.

1.3 Catalyst for Brisbane's return to Australia

The UTRC began life in 1953 as a subsidised venture by the University of Melbourne and effectively was a department of the University. The UTRC was set up to 'provide for the production, representation and performance of theatrical entertainments which are not generally offered to the public by commercial managements' and to 'encourage playwrights and give them an opportunity to become educated in the work of the theatre and to present their work wherever practicable' (Milne 2004, 83). The company was one of the first to become a full-time professional theatre company with the ability to provide contracts to actors. John Sumner was the UTRC's first director from 1953 to 1954 and was soon invited by Hunt at the AETT to run the newly established Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown in Sydney.[18] Newly joined playwright and actor Ray Lawler was left to run the third season at the UTRC in 1955. The third season featured plays by Tennessee Williams, Coward, Fry, Shaw and a Christmas revue. This season was important, as it featured the inclusion of an Australian play. The play was Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll,* first performed at the Union Theatre on 28 November 1955 with the provision of a £500 special grant by the AETT (Milne 2004, 85). It is evident that Lawler, Sumner and Hunt all played a role in making *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* a major success. Lawler took up one of the main roles as Barney, Sumner directed the play on secondment from the AETT, and Hunt was there to witness the opening night's performance. Hunt picked the play up

[18] Sumner was born in 1924 in England and moved to Australia in 1952. He had trained at the London Opera School before joining the British Navy before WW2. Before moving to Australia in 1952 he was a stage manager/director for H.M. Tennant Theatres.

and took it to Newtown with Sumner directing. The play toured NSW with the Arts Council, then interstate with other companies; it was even promoted as entertainment for those visiting Australia for the 1956 Olympics (Milne 2004, 85).

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was the first AETT-supported production and it proved a major success in Australia. The play was different in that it spoke to the Australian public in a way that other plays hadn't. Australians identified with the production:

> In Melbourne, audiences (myself among them) warmed to the freshness and the sheer Australianness of the play. For all of us, but particularly those who had lived in student digs in Carlton, Anne Fraser's scruffy, brown-toned and scrupulously detailed terrace setting was an added pleasure. Houses just like it could be found by the dozen only a few blocks away. (Radic 1991, 21)

The play was 'uniquely Australian' and the Trust seized the opportunity to support the play further. The plan of the AETT was to subsidize *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and take it on a national tour.[19] As Fitzpatrick notes, it was the first Australian play to be performed at the Trust's theatre, the Elizabethan in Newtown (Fitzpatrick 1979, 1). Supporting the play was a risky move at the time as the Trust had not yet had a major Australian success in the theatre that returned their initial investment. The play went on to tour to national success and the AETT-subsidised production of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was given financial approval to go on a tour of Britain and the United States in 1957 and 1958.[20] It was the first time that an Australian play had achieved international success, impressing the London critics. The critics of the London *Star* wrote positively regarding the production: 'It's taken a long time but the kangaroos must be smiling today' (Fitzpatrick 1979, 2). The story of *Summer* has been covered in detail throughout many Australian theatre history publications and needs no further explanation.

[19] In 1956, the play toured country New South Wales and Queensland (AusStage 2014, para 3)
[20] The AETT-produced play was performed in Edinburgh, Nottingham, London and New York (AusStage 2014, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* search)

Brisbane described the play as a 'breath of fresh air at that time', a 'play about immaturity which could have only be written in the 50's' (Palmer 1979, 21). Identifiable by their propensity for violence and their larrikin behaviour, Barney and Roo became the new face for the Australian working class male in the UK. Brisbane saw the play as the turning point in Australian theatre and it was the catalyst for her return to Australia after seeing the production in London in 1957:

> I had this epiphany with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that had arrived in London. I knew it was coming, people had written to me about its success in Australia and I went up to Nottingham to see the run in that they were doing there and I was just bowled over by the energy of the play and the working class lingo, the Hawaiian shirts (laughs). I'd been watching…I've written about this a number of times, you probably heard this about how the night before I'd been to see... (Pause) the Sheridan play *The Rivals*, with Anna Massey and Daniel Massey and Gielgud. I thought that compared with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that this is just effete, wow, I had been so entranced by this English classical thing, which was so foreign from anything in Australia, anything I'd seen really. And I thought I've just got to go home and see what is going on, so I did and I became very nationalistic. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 2)

Brisbane praises the colour of the production, the energy that it created and the vibrant characters that she was seeing onstage. This was the type of Australian theatre that Brisbane had been waiting for, and the English theatre that she had been exposed to was preventing her from realising this until she saw the less polished *Doll*. This realisation is key to Brisbane's return to Australia and the belief that at last, Australian theatre was emergent and required her immediate attention.

Back in Australia, the success of the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was not the only thing to come out of the UTRC in 1955. The Christmas revue was to feature Barry Humphries and one of his characters Edna Everage, who was yet to become a household name.[21] Within the space of a month, the UTRC had managed to stimulate Australian theatre and generate two important theatrical events that would go on to influence the rapid transformation of the new wave and likewise Brisbane's career. There were few plays

[21] *One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries* (Pender 2010) studies his career in-depth.

before the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that can claim to have had this rapid impact on Australian theatre. Throughout her career, Brisbane has been cognisant that a drama existed prior to the *Doll*, in publishing Australian drama by pioneers such as Edward Geoghegan, George Darrell, Louis Esson, Vance Palmer, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Betty Roland. Unfortunately, these playwrights and their supporters suffered the stigma of being too early for their time, not gaining public acceptance, or simply lacking the finance to be able to advance their endeavours. Brisbane actively identified these plays, and gave them a renewed life in publication in her efforts to create an encompassing Australian repertoire. One play that gained public attention prior to *The Doll* was Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* (1948). He described his play as 'a documentary. It is not strictly a play, it has no plot in the accepted sense' (Elliott 1980, vii). Elliott had a hard life growing up: he was abandoned by his father and never saw his mother, whom he was told was an author. By the age of 12 he had written over a dozen plays and was interested in puppetry. He was drafted into the Army in 1942 but never left Australia, instead being posted in the Northern Territory at Mataranka**,** 400km south of Darwin. He wrote *Rusty Bugles* in 1948 based on his experiences in the Army. He left Australia before the play was performed, and never saw it in the theatre. Elliott had written five full-length plays that were produced by the Independent Theatre in Sydney from 1937 to 1943, productions which the author had openly made fun of in the press (Carroll 1995, 73). His play *Rusty Bugles* mainly deals with the day-to-day boredom that the soldiers experience, their isolation from the rest of the world and the coping strategies that they adopt to keep them going. Sumner Locke Elliott describes in his preface how the troops felt during their stay in Mataranka.

> We were the ordinance clerks, storeman, drivers, and engineers of one of the largest supply depots in the North, during the latter part of the war. We never saw a single Jap plane, we were never bombed, machine-gunned or sniped at like our pals in New Guinea, who were never free of excitement, we thought. We were the backwash. (Elliott 1980, vii)

Rusty Bugles was controversial at the time due to its explicit language and was officially censored by the Chief Secretary of New South Wales. The play took advantage of its notoriety and went on to achieve limited national success, but did not have the same impact internationally as Lawler's play did eight years later. Disappointingly, the play was forgotten as Lawler's play became successful. It was the first play that provoked the issue of language and censorship within Australian theatre, something that Brisbane took up as national theatre critic in her support of the removal of censorship in the new wave. Carroll examined *Rusty Bugles* further, stating that the play:

> …is important for reasons that go way above and beyond the playwright's transcendence of the social realist conventions. For it was the first modern play to win wide theatrical exposure in which the inimitable 'rhythms of action' of a chosen Australian milieu promote a structure well removed from the 'well made;' and it was the first play in which relaxed and truly naturalistic dialogue had a chance to manifest itself. (Carroll 1995, 73-74)

Brisbane also noted the importance of *Rusty Bugles,* by re-publishing a different edition of the play in 1980, complete with an introduction by Doris Fitton who worked with Elliott. The Australian identity was beginning to form onstage. Similar character attributes were to eventually become the framework for Barney and Roo in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Australian characters and censorship were issues that Brisbane did address later in her time as the national theatre critic at the *Australian,* giving precedent for the argument against theatre censorship in the later years in Australian theatre. Brisbane's early public discussion of these issues supported the new wave changes. As had happened in Australian theatre before, *Rusty Bugles* was slightly ahead of its time. Lawler was in the right position with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and it became the production the Trust sorely needed to develop a new Australian drama. Barney and Roo signified the shift in the representation of the Australian character. The play was based on 'working-class themes and characters that became prominent up until 1960' (Akerholt 2000, 209). Just as *Rusty Bugles* had earlier, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* showed the mundaneness of the

average working class Australian. For Locke Elliott, it was the boredom of the troops during World War 2, and for Lawler it was tied in with loss of masculinity and the inability to change. Brisbane recognised the play's importance in the overall development of Australian theatre in publication, but also described the play as an 'elegiac comedy' and that when Locke Elliott left for New York in the 1950's 'Australia lost a budding master of popular comedy' (Brisbane 2009, 391-392).

1.4 Plays of the late 1950's

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll marked a shift in the way that Australians were beginning to view themselves both on and off the stage. Coombs believed that *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was not the true face of Australian theatre, but in reality the Trust had very little input. It was evident that people responded to the characters that were being brought to life, with more plays following the example of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in attempting to capture elements of the Australian character. *The Shifting Heart* (1957) offered a study of the immigrant influx into post-war Australia. The play is set in Collingwood in 1956 and is based around the lower-class immigrant character – in this case the Italian Bianchi family. It explores the problems of Australian society adjusting to the increase in migrant workers and the intolerance of some Australians. The main impetus for Beynon was a personal story. The play is dedicated to a Mr. Leczycki, a polish immigrant who took his own life because his co-workers did not accept him as a part of their group. *The Shifting Heart* is an apt title as it represents what Beynon was trying to provoke by his dramatization. He wanted to create a shift in appreciation of migrants and tackle the issue of intolerance and racism head on. Australian plays were beginning to take on social issues of the time and address the underlying problems that were prevalent in society but not necessarily being discussed in the public forum. Ray Mathew's *The Life of the Party* (1957) and Peter Kenna's *The Slaughter of St Theresa's Day* (1959) are other

examples that followed on from Beynon's play. *The Life of the Party* was also a finalist in the international play competition set up by the London newspaper *The Observer* (Brisbane 2004). Notably, Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* shared third prize in the same competition. Mathew is another example of an Australian playwright in the 1950s who left Australia to pursue his career overseas as there was not yet a place for the playwright to make sufficient money in the theatre.

Whilst Australian plays themselves were beginning to become popular and financially viable in the theatres, the Trust was at work attempting to redress the fact that there were no national touring companies. The Trust launched various initiatives other than to support *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in the efforts to develop an Australian theatre. The establishment of the Australian Drama Company in 1955 was their first attempt to develop a national company that toured Australia. The company only lasted for two years, producing Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sheridan's *The Rivals*, and Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (Milne 2004, 102). The safe choice of performing the classics and the advent of television in Australia did not help bring the tours financial success. Because of this the ADC folded and the AETT had to take a different approach. In 1959, they created a new company, known at the Trust Players. They were based at the AETT's theatre, the Elizabethan, in Newtown, Sydney. What set the Trust players apart was that they were no longer merely focussed on producing the classics for the Australian public. The newly established Trust Players incorporated two Australian plays into their season of five. This shift indicated that maybe it was possible to foster an indigenous drama in Australian theatre that would grow off itself. Milne states that this structure was soon to become one to follow. 'The Trust Players' repertoire closely resembles those of what were later to become the state theatre companies' (2004, 102). The AETT only made these two attempts at developing a national professional theatre. Both the ADC and the Trust Players folded

after just a few years. Whilst the AETT was slow in its steps to establish an Australian drama, it did manage to establish national Opera and Ballet companies that are still in operation to this day.

There were also existing playwriting competitions in Australia that helped to develop the country's playwrights and plays but these competitions also revealed some negative attitudes that Australians felt existed at the time towards producing this new theatre. The Australian novelist Frank Hardy, wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1964:

> Once again dozens, if not hundreds, of entries will be received. Will the best of them receive productions? Unless the Trust and other managements change their attitudes towards Australian drama, the answer will be, No. The Trust has done much to create a theatre-going audience for serious drama; it has done little to help create a national drama. (Holloway 1981, 224)

Whilst this criticism seems heavy handed, the Trust had already staged over sixteen local plays. Hugh Hunt indicated at the time that subsidy and preparation could only help so much in fostering a national drama, as it required a collaborative effort from all participants.

During the time of the Trust's operations another national arts organisation was paving the way for growth in the theatre sector. What was then called the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA) had begun its life in 1968, in an effort to further promote the touring of drama, ballet and music throughout the states. It was mostly successful due to the earlier work of the AETT and found a large support base from independent theatres at the time. The AETT developed Australian theatre by touring productions of important pieces right after their premieres in capital cities, with well-known plays such as Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1957, Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* in 1958 (which played in 72 towns) and Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* in 1961 (Milne 2004, 105). The 1970s saw rapid development and expansion for the ACA, which led to a network of state divisions that operated, as Milne says, 'autonomously with support from the

commonwealth and state Governments' (Milne 2004, 105). In 1975, the Whitlam Government renamed the ACA the Australia Council, which remains in operation today (Parsons and Chance 1995, 69).[22] The ACA was another important national organisation that was instrumental in developing a national theatre and promoting Australian plays and playwrights not just to a city audience but to a country audience as well.

The 1960s saw a new confidence in playwriting that was carried over from the previous decade. An example of this confidence was the play *The One Day of the Year* by Alan Seymour which premiered in 1960. The Returned Services League (RSL) had the play's premiere banned from the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. The reasoning behind the RSL's objection was that they believed that the play denigrated Anzac Day (25th April). The main protagonist of this play is Alf, an Australian World War 2 veteran who is presented as an angry, bitter man who has no respect for others. His best mate is Wacka Dawson (who survived the Gallipoli campaign) and no one else can understand the problems that torment him from his war experience. On the other side is his student son, who is genuinely concerned with his father's behaviour on Anzac Day and the excessive drunkenness that comes from the celebrations. The two major differences in opinion cause an argument and show the generational gaps that exist between pre and post-war Australians. The play engaged two generations effectively in the open forum of the theatre and public interest in the play grew from this rift. Whilst the play was initially banned, *The One Day of the Year* eventually saw life later on that year, being performed by an amateur group. The AETT, seeing the public response to the play, decided to subsidize a production. The play was presented internationally on the stage in London after its varying success in Australia. The reason *The One Day of the Year* is important is that it marked a turning point in what

[22] Milne's chapter in '*Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*' (Fotheringham and Smith, 2013) covers Australia Council subsidy and theatre from the mid-1990s until 2010.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll had started and began to usher in a confidence within the Australian theatre of the 1960s. Playwright Patrick White also began to see his plays produced, stirring up further interest in Australian drama. Brisbane took advantage of this revived interest in her time at the *West Australian* and capitalised on the fervour of the new wave at the *Australian*, discussed further in the later chapters.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Brisbane at the *West Australian*

Brisbane's early career in Australian theatre began with writing as a cadet journalist, then as the theatre critic for the *West Australian*. This chapter will address the way in which Brisbane developed as a critic, rather than as a reviewer during this period and identify her criteria for successful theatre, format and choice of topics. It aims to present the early part of Brisbane's career, before she became the national theatre critic, something that other research on Brisbane has overlooked. It will show a comparison between her earlier reporting of 'journalistic' style theatre criticism, to her role of national theatre critic at the *Australian*. It aims to identify patterns and trends in her work as a critic, as well as to show that she had already begun to develop her critical aesthetic prior to her appointment at the *Australian*, as well as a manifesto for the theatre.

Brisbane completed her BA in 1957, majoring in English at the University of Western Australia (UWA). Her love of the theatre began at an early age and she gained experience at an amateur level by making costumes and eventually directing productions while a student at the UWA. She then went straight into a career in journalism, being picked up by the *West Australian* as a cadet reporter. The *West Australian* had begun its life as a journal in 1833 and in 1879 was officially given the name it still bears today. Brisbane joined the newspaper at a time of relative stability and after the paper had switched from broadsheets to tabloid format in 1947. It was during this time she learnt the art of journalism and the dedication that the job requires.

> When I left university, I went immediately to the *West Australian* newspaper as a cadet journalist and did all the things which young reporters have to do, from the police courts to the weather report and the women's page and all those things, and was thrown very solidly into life at that point. I wanted to become the theatre critic from the start, but I had to wait my turn. (1974, 10539)

Brisbane's start at the newspaper was essentially 'trial by fire'; she began to learn the role of a journalist and this would later shape her interpretation of the role of a critic. Her studies at UWA had shown her that she could write and she was going to put this to good use in reporting the news. In 1957 and 1958 Brisbane spent 18 months overseas working for the newspaper as a foreign correspondent in London. This time in the UK was of utmost importance for her critical and professional development. Brisbane was in a unique position, given her time in the UK witnessing the rapid changes in British theatre and her exposure to eminent British theatre critics such as Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson. Brisbane vicariously learnt her trade as a theatre critic from reading London's best theatre critics. She was there to witness the face of British theatre changing and the impact that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) had in renewing British drama. She recognises this overseas experience as extremely helpful: 'I've drawn on that experience ever since. It's helped me a lot in reviewing patterns of society through the theatre, which has been my particular interest in writing about the theatre' (De Berg 1974, 10539). Because of that experience and her indication that she wanted to become the newspaper's critic, Brisbane was offered the position, taking over the role from Bruce Lawson in 1959. Prior to becoming the theatre critic, she was an active member of the theatre community, directing a production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1959 (Brisbane 1959, 14 Feb).

Brisbane at the *West Australian* was exposed to theatre on a state level. The ability to be in isolation in Western Australia certainly helped to develop her own skills and appreciation for the theatre itself, as well as developing her own state perspective of the theatre. The national perspectives of Australian theatre and its development since the 1960s are heavily based on the Sydney and Melbourne experience and their direct influence on the rest of the nation. Brisbane's journalism at the *West Australian* provides a different perspective to that of Sydney and Melbourne and establishes the state as another stakeholder.

Brisbane described the process of becoming a theatre critic succinctly: 'one simply begins by writing an account of the play' (De Berg, 1974, 10540). This is indeed the case with Brisbane's first review entitled 'The Theatre' (Brisbane 1959, Apr 28). She covers Kalgoorlie's open air production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and makes her readers aware of a revue called *The Laughs On Us* being presented at the Patch Theatre in Victoria Park, Perth. The article also includes a correction to another writers' previously published error: that the actor Edwin Styles was Australian, when in actuality he was English. Brisbane also includes an international perspective with the announcement of Noel Coward's first ballet and the astonishment of German critics at the fact that an Australian play *We Have Our Dreams* (1957) by Dulce Dunlop Ladds had not received a production in its country of origin. This journalistic commentary is basic, it presents the facts and doesn't seek to extend or make great commentary regarding what is happening around Perth. It stands out in comparison to the later work of Brisbane at the *Australian*.

Whilst transitioning into this role seemed an easy task for someone with Brisbane's exposure she learnt quickly that a critic's word can indeed sometimes be final. She recalls one example from her early criticism at the *West Australian*, saying:

> …I remember I wanted to change the world, as all critics do at the beginning, and my first disaster was after three weeks as a theatre critic and they did a production of an A.A. Milne play called "Michael and Mary", which I said was the worst play since "Gorbeduc" which is a medieval, boring play, and an account of a divorce that might have been written by Christopher Robin. People were amused by this but the Playhouse, of course, was furious and because I was so new at this job, they tried to have me removed. Fortunately I went on holidays after that for a month and so by the time I had got back, the whole thing had died down. (De Berg 1974, 10540)

Brisbane was young and had survived her first bump on the long road to becoming a theatre critic. This tenacity set Brisbane apart, even in her beginning as a theatre critic. She had the ability to arouse controversy, as well as to strike honestly into the limitations of Australian theatre. Had this review been at the *Australian*, Brisbane may have experienced something similar to that of her review of O'Shaughnessy's *Othello*. It is a precursor to

this event, and shows that she writes with passion and honesty. The locality of her reviews meant that within the month she was able to return to her position and continue to write for the newspaper without further backlash.

It was around 1959 that Brisbane met Philip Parsons. Parsons was a lecturer in Drama at the University of Western Australia and an eccentric character. Geoffrey Milne recalled that he first met Philip in his undergraduate days at UWA:

> I've known Katharine and Philip (it's difficult for me to be able to separate the two of them actually) since I was an undergraduate at the University of Western Australia (UWA). Philip was quite a lively figure in the University theatre and I accidentally became one as well (laughs). I got thrust into it because there was no surf one day and the only life I could get back from the beach happened to be with a theatre designer that was going to UWA to build a set for some show that's long forgotten which Philip was in. He was quite a distinguished looking fellow with flaming red hair in those days and a very distinguished intimidating look about him, but for some reason he took me seriously as a student and I hadn't even begun. My first involvement with University theatre was in fact before commencement, by accident. Then I came upon Philip several more times during the course of that year and I also met Katharine. (Milne Interview 2012, 1)

Milne spoke about how he met Brisbane and Parsons, remembering them fondly. This is the impact that they had on other people's lives and Katharine's influence has certainly extended to a lot of people in the Australian theatre community as well as locally in Perth. Brisbane married Parsons in 1960 and she recalls her interest in him in an interview:

> He had been through University with me and been in those productions of "*The Duchess of Malfi"* and *"Love for Love*", and he had in the meantime gone to Cambridge. It was only when he had got back, many years afterwards that we took a second look at each other. It hadn't been a teenage romance or anything, at all. But we found we had a very strong interest in common in the theatre and what first endeared me to him was his willingness to come to see all those very bad plays ... to which a critic has to go and see and which I never liked to ask my best friends to endure with me. (De Berg 1974, 10,541)

Even in the earliest of Brisbane's theatre criticism, one can begin to see patterns emerging in her writing. Her article 'Shakespeare Troupe is Revived' (Brisbane 1959, 23 May) is an example of her nascent skill as a theatre critic. Her title is apt and addresses the main topic

of the article. JC Williamson's were reviving the John Alden Shakespeare Company[24] and she explores this further by interviewing one of Perth's leading actors who would seek to gain advantage from the reformed company. This use of interviewing as a means of reporting is a feature throughout many of Brisbane's later articles at the *Australian*, effectively broadcasting the voices of people who are working in the industry to a wider audience. Another feature that stands out in this article is Brisbane's placing plays into context for her readership, such as when she describes the next UWA Dramatic Society's production of *The Queen of the Rebels* (1949). Here Brisbane begins to develop her formal but friendly writing tone and format that would later characterise her articles as national theatre critic. As she describes, 'Despite a title redolent of a Franz Lehar musical, it is an earthy social drama set among refugees at the frontier post of a Communist occupied kingdom. It was first performed in English at London's Haymarket Theatre in December, 1955, with Irene Worth and Leo McKern' (Brisbane 1959, 23 May). By including the stage history of the play in London, she establishes the context for the play in Perth, with the intention of garnering support for the play and informing her readers further, a common feature of her later criticism.

Brisbane took over full-time duties in July 1959 at the *West Australian*. In the meantime the role was divided between several contributors including Bruce Lawson, Jill Crommelin and Peter Holdron. Brisbane's first articles exemplify her taking the role of a newspaper theatre journalist to include a larger scope of theatre. Her writing commonly included a large quarter-page article, focussing on the state of the theatre or a burning issue that she felt needed to be addressed. Brisbane's also utilised pictures to complement her feature story, a trend that continued throughout her career at the *Australian*.

[24] The J.A. Shakespeare Company had been a nationally touring company in the early 1950s, with Alden producing as well as playing major parts.

For the first time at the *West Australian,* Brisbane engages the youth of the day, providing her thoughts on the production of *Antony and Cleopatra.* Brisbane uses the warden's comments first to emphasize her own view of the production's value to the younger generation:

> *Antony and Cleopatra*, says the warden of St. George's College, is for the college not just a public production by a community effort and, for some of the young people, one which may be the only artistic experience of a lifetime. And the virtue of this is perhaps worth a thought, though it has nothing to do with the entertainment. That a group of young adults who might never give a thought to the classical theatre without a group incentive should have the chance to work beside their tutors on an artistic creation can only be a good thing. (Brisbane 1959, 4 July)

The layout allows Brisbane to present several events going on in the West Australian theatre in the same article. An example of this 'journalistic' format is shown in Fig. 1 on page 82. Again, one can see the intense focus of Brisbane on local and community theatre. She understood that the theatre cannot improve without the development of all of its forms and the youth are the perfect platform and represent the next generation coming into the theatre. By providing coverage of their plays Brisbane is firmly supporting and encouraging their growth, and providing a state context into which they fit into.

The feature story in the article presents her lingering connection to the University of Western Australia, as she covers the new production of *The Indian Queen* that is to be taking place in the coming weeks, to be directed by UWA's own music lecturer David Tunley. Brisbane singles the production out by describing the play as a rarity: 'this production is unique because it is not only the first performance in Australia of the work but the only performance to be given of any sample of Restoration tragedy and possibly, the only sample ever likely to be seen here' (Brisbane 1959, 4 Jul). It is evident that Brisbane had taken a liking to the production in her final summation stating that 'it is, virtually, a lavish 17th Century nonstop revue, and we are invited to laugh at the plot

absurdities, enjoy the formal pattern of the spectacle, and listen to what is said to be some of the best music Purcell ever wrote' (Brisbane 1959, 4 Jul). Brisbane's friendly writing style is evident in this article, accentuated by the layout used in many of her reviews of Australian theatre. At first Brisbane was given a lot of space as a theatre critic, writing her review in the magazine section of the *West Australian*. Brisbane used this space to her advantage, spreading her article across several different topics and engaging the reader in each individual matter. Another feature of her writing was the use of bold text as a stylistic feature of her introductions, to identify to the reader the main topic of the article and catching the reader's attention. The use of a large photograph separates another topic from the rest regarding the University of Western Australia. Such features lent an appropriate dramatic edge to her ideas, presumably with the intended purpose of increasing both their attractiveness and their clarity on the page. This 'journalistic' layout and content choices are echoed throughout her later articles at the *West Australian* and are a format that she modified in the role of national theatre critic at the *Australian*.[25]

[25] Fig 1. And Fig 2. Highlight article layout and structure from the *West Australian* to the *Australian.*

MAGAZINE SECTION THE WEST AUSTRALIAN, SATURDAY, JULY 4, 1959.

The THEATRE By Katharine Brisbane

PROPS appropriate to 1910 created a lot of problems for the property-master of "Hotel Paradiso". Among the things needed were button boots, a feather boa and a shooting cap.

A small published request for old-type enamel candlesticks brought the Playhouse about 300 offers, some of which were coming in up to dress-rehearsal day.

Six old-fashioned white honeycomb quilts were located at the Home of Peace.

The frothy, silly but remarkably well-contrived bedroom farces of Georges Feydeau have been having a great vogue in both Paris and London in recent years. Two or three years ago, I remember, the Queen drew many disapproving frowns when Jean-Louis Barrault's company visited London, by bestowing her presence not on Moliere's "Le Misanthrope", but on Feydeau's risque "Occupe Toi D'Amelie."

This year again, the noted Comedie Francaise on tour has roused the ire of the London critics, who demanded that this guardian of French classic theatre occupy itself with something more edifying than Feydeau's shocking little "De Dindon."

* * *

PERTH producer Sidney Davis conducted a drama school at the Boyanup Repertory Club last weekend. It was widely attended by local members and representatives of many South-West drama clubs.

Mr. Davis gave talks and practical demonstrations on production methods, rehearsal schedules, casting, dialects, and make-up.

* * *

"ANTONY and Cleopatra," says the warden of St. George's College, is for the college not just a public production but a community effort and, for some of the young people, one which may be the only artistic experience of a lifetime.

And the value of this is perhaps worth a thought, though it has nothing to do with entertainment.

That a group of young adults who might never give a thought to the classic theatre without a special group incentive should have the chance to work beside their tutors on an artistic creation, can only be a good thing.

* * *

AT the invitation of Dr. J. C. Edwards, three south-of-the-river drama clubs have joined together to form a fund-raising society for the Community Centre Hospital.

The groups are the Park Players, the Applecross Community Theatre and the South Perth Dramatic Club, and the new group is to be called the Hospital Play Society.

Its committee will consist of two delegates from each club and their activity will be one production a year in aid of the hospital.

As a first move the members will present a variety evening in the Collins-street hall next Friday.

The society's yearly effort will not interfere with the normal activities of the clubs. The organisers would like any other drama clubs in the area to join them.

* * *

THEATRE Council officer Dorothy Lyall calls members' attention to some of the new entry conditions for the 1959 drama festival, for which entries will close on July 15.

A section of mime plays is to be introduced—plays without dialogue, with the plot conveyed entirely by action. At present this section is open and the producers will later be invited to meet the council and discuss conditions.

A metropolitan zone elimination round will be held from September 14 to 19. In place of a dress rehearsal the producer will be allowed a lighting rehearsal with his stage crew on September 11 or 12.

"A SORT of West Australian 'Ten Commandments' production" is how University music lecturer David Tunley describes "The Indian Queen" which will be seen in Winthrop Hall for three nights next week.

By this he means that it has not only a big cast but more bands of experts in the credits than any Perth production for many years.

● *Above, producer Jeana Tweedie discusses a point with Tunley over the University's 200-year-old harpsichord.*

The production is unique because it is not only the first performance in Australia of the work but the only performance to be given of any sample of Restoration tragedy—and, possibly, the only sample ever likely to be seen here.

It is being presented in honour of composer Henry Purcell's tricentenary as a joint effort of the music and English departments of the University, with the help of the University A Cappella Choir, orchestral society and dramatic societies.

The original play was written in 1664 by Sir Robert Howard, a minor playwright, with help "on the hard bits" by his father-in-law John Dryden. And no-one today would have given a thought to it but for the intervention of Purcell, who chose to write accompanying music for it.

Although loosely called an opera, it is actually a spectacle with musical interludes which decorate rather than further the plot. The plot, indeed, is too complicated to follow, nor are we expected to follow it.

The hero is the splendid General Montezuma who, like Superman, can conquer countries single-handed. In the traditional fantastic costumes of the court masque, with towering feathered headdresses and trailing cloaks, the kings and queens of the cast declaim their woes in a formal manner more allied to the ballet than the drama. It can best be described by saying that the Victorian melodrama was the death-agony of this tradition.

Mingled with the story is singing, dancing and string orchestral music.

It is, virtually, a lavish 17th-Century non-stop revue, and we are invited to laugh at the plot absurdities, enjoy the formal pattern of the spectacle, and listen to what is said to be some of the best music Purcell ever wrote.—**Katharine Brisbane.**

Fig. 1 Early example of Brisbane's theatre 'journalism' (Brisbane 1959, 4 Jul).

O'Malley, the larrikin-hero

THEATRE
KATHARINE BRISBANE

WHEN a second-year National Institute of Dramatic Art student volunteers to do a fire-eating act, and another allows a six-foot carpet snake to crawl up and down her net stockings, one begins to recognise that our theatrical horizons are extending way beyond what Mrs Worthington's daughter ever imagined and the possibilities are limitless.

What is more, on this occasion these two performances were not even in the play.

They are part of four sideshow acts provided by NIDA students during the interval of The Legend of King O'Malley, at present being given a try-out at the Jane Street Theatre in Sydney. It is the first of three new scripts being aired in the fourth annual Jane Street — Old Tote Australian play season.

The Legend of King O'Malley is a very special achievement, not exactly because it is a total tangible success as it stands; but because, in the search process NIDA has established, it has leapt the first hurdle of recognising what they have been looking for.

For me, it has a particular pleasure because it synthesises so many of the elements which make up the Australian taste which for so long have been begging to be dramatised, and has used them to give us the first genuine larrikin-hero in our drama that I can put my finger on since our colonial theatre.

And the real King O'Malley was, of course, an American.

About 1893 he landed on the coast of North Queensland and was looked after for two years by an aboriginal called Coowonga while he recovered from TB. He then walked from Rockhampton to Adelaide selling insurance, became a member of the South Australian State Parliament, then Tasmanian representative to the first Commonwealth Parliament and stayed in Canberra until 1917 when he resigned after losing out on the conscription issue against Hughes.

He was Minister for Home Affairs 1910-13 and 1915-16; "was said to have founded the Commonwealth Bank and Canberra. He opened the Trans-Continental Railway and was in the forefront of Labor reform and social legislation." He died in 1953 aged 99.

Such a hero is worthy of a country which so admires the outsider and is big enough to make his own rules.

What the co-authors of The Legend of King O'Malley have done — with their director, John Bell, for this is a thorough group creation — is in barely literate terms given us a man who is twice life-size through the ratbag language of the theatre.

Jane Street's little converted church hall, with its gothic windows behind, is at home with the ramsackle revivalist meeting of the Waterlily Rockbound Church which is in progress as one enters the theatre. And it is natural that one should join in the community hymns and that the walls should shake with the music of the organ and tambourines and drums.

King O'Malley (John Paramor) is in the centre conducting the service, assisted by his bad conscience, Brother Nick Angel (Nick Lathouris).

One knows it is all a fraud — and yet it has a truth of its own and one is tempted to put a nickel in the tambourine.

Nick Angel, the Mephistophelian figure whom O'Malley finally leaves on the shores of Queensland, and who becomes later just an ordinary member of Parliament, is a superbly funny idea played with great appetite. Lathouris's work gets better every time I see him and his seemingly endless series of disguises gives him scope in which he delights.

The second half is Roy Rene country, in which the Commonwealth Parliament is presented as a vaudeville.

Andrew Fisher is there dressed as Harry Lauder: "I say I say I say, a funny thing happened to me on the way to the hoose t'nicht . . . I met a constituent." And Billy Hughes is there — the Little Digger, scratching himself inside a lice-ridden uniform.

But what is deeply disappointing about the second half is that when the play goes serious and returns to the word for strength, it has nothing really to say nor the power to say it. The portrait of Hughes is vicious without being considered, and one learns nothing of interest about our fathers of federation — even about O'Malley in his maturity. There is gossip, that's all.

What saves the day are the genuine speeches of Hughes and O'Malley over the conscription question which gives a startling picture of Hughes' shortsightedness and our first real insight into the humanity of O'Malley's liberalism. These speeches are the only moving moments in the play and show how, finally, the spoken word prevails.

The play will be repeated this week and next Thursday to Saturday, and will be followed on July 2 by an improvisation, 10,000 Miles Away.

Polluted by 'progress'

MORE and more people

saved will be spent in an en-

Fig. 2 Theatre criticism at the *Australian* (Brisbane 1970, 20 Jun)

2.2 National Theatre

Brisbane's next article in the *West Australian* covers a topic which she was to get to know increasingly well in her time at the *Australian*, that of supporting the national theatre. Her feature story covered the newly created Adelaide Festival of Arts (1960), and the Festival's commitment to help produce new Australian drama for the stage. She singles the Festival out for their efforts in helping to develop new Australian theatre by introducing a selection panel to award a prize to the best Australian play submitted, with '£1000 going to produce the play and £200 going to the playwright' (Brisbane 1959, 11 Jul). Brisbane applauds the Festival's programming choices and encourages her readership with a tantalising description of what the festival has to offer:

> Adelaide has an ambitious international programme for its first festival, and between March 12 and 26 visitors will have a choice of three operas, four symphony orchestras, a string quartet, a ballet-mime and two or more plays. There will also be art, sculpture and architecture exhibitions. (Brisbane 1959, 11 Jul)

This article is one of the earliest examples of Brisbane's commentaries on developing a national drama. She chose the Adelaide Festival as her central topic point for the article, as the Festival was providing a new forum for the theatre (and the arts in general). The fact that the article appeared eight months before the Festival showed that Brisbane wanted her readership to be kept up to date on the theatre happenings in the near future and to encourage them to attend. It provides an example of her early activism in supporting the new Australian theatre Festival and including Perth's viewpoint into the national event.

2.3 Domestic Theatre

Whilst Brisbane supported theatre domestically in her role at the *West Australian*, she also lauded examples of conventional theatre that were well worth her readers' time to see. One example of this is her review of Noel Coward's *This Happy Breed* at the Patch Theatre in Perth. She firstly explains to her readership her own understanding of the playwright,

stating: 'Noel Coward's conscious knack of anticipating and exploiting fashions of feeling makes a critic super-critical' (Brisbane 1959, 25 Jul). Brisbane then identifies what makes the play worth going to see and what may have made the play fail in the past:

> Patch director Lesley Arthur shows us that his old wartime tear-jerker, "This Happy Breed," is well worth its current revival. The many amateur producers who have been chastised by critics and adjudicators for failure to build up realism could take a lesson from her creation of a Clapham dining room. The detailed set, properties, the lived-in costumes, thoughtful characterisation and lively variety of pace and pause are all evidence of loving care and meticulous rehearsal. (Brisbane 1959, 25 Jul)

Rather than just describe the plot of the play, Brisbane argues what made the play worth going to see visually. For her as a critic it was the thoughtful planning of the play, high production values, set design and believable costume choices that were worthy of notice. Brisbane goes on to address the actors' ability to tackle the task of pauses onstage and applauds Joan Bruce for her proficiency, stating that 'holding a silence is probably an actor's most difficult task, and the play is worth a visit just to see how she does it' (Brisbane 1959, 25 Jul). These statements underline Brisbane's aesthetics and what she is looking for in the theatre to report upon. She wants her readership to see this play above all others, so she presents her review in the way to entice the reader so that they almost have no reason invest in local productions. This passion rubs off in her articles and further acknowledges its value accordingly by making it the feature story in her article.

2.4 Theatre Groups

In Perth, Brisbane was exposed to many new theatre groups and commented upon them when she believed that her readership should support them. One of those groups (that was close to her) was the studio drama group that had begun its life at the University of Western Australia. The aim of the group was to 'promote the production of new experimental plays, the revival of little-known plays and the novel production of better-

known plays' (Brisbane 1960, 23 Apr). There is an underlying purpose to her inclusion of the new group. Brisbane goes on to boast about the situation:

> It will own no money or equipment and will have no subscribing members, but will sponsor regular seasons of high-quality productions using both amateurs and professionals from any source. The group will also find backers, either inside or outside the University; the season will be presented under the Studio Drama seal and all profits will go to the backing organisation. (Brisbane 1960, 23 Apr)

The focus of the article is the studio drama group, and Brisbane's use of bold font highlights to the reader that the UWA will become self-sufficient. Brisbane is also openly advertising to her readers that the season will be successful. This article is an example of Brisbane's deviation from that of a standard theatre reviewer; Brisbane is actively making the effort to support something that she believes will benefit not only the UWA, but also Perth theatre in general, stressing the added bonus of the extra amateur and professional work created.

Brisbane was also an adamant supporter of theatre clubs that she believed to be providing a service to the theatre. One event that she gave particular attention to was a Shakespearian drama and poetry speaking competition which showcased the local Perth talent. In this article she praises the younger female (16 to 18 years old) talent in the competition, saying 'both girls were able to combine strong dramatic emotion with the mental control required to switch from one character to another, and they chose scenes which showed to the best advantage the range of their talents' (Brisbane 1960, 20 Aug). This is high acclaim from Brisbane and is representative of her singling out specific talent when she believes actors deserve praise, a trend which followed in her later writing at the *Australian*. Whilst there were positives that came from this particular competition, she balanced them with tips for actors who participated to improve their performances, citing the:

> Choice by candidates of poems and dramatic scenes [that] were not always the best, as the adjudicators commented in their summing-up. Some pieces contained too little variety; others had too many characters or required too great a command of the whole play for the limited experience of a young performer. (Brisbane 1960, 20 Aug)

These comments from Brisbane are an excellent example of her ability to provide balance to her argument. On the one hand she provides the positive of the new young female actors that she has observed and on the other she echoes the words of the adjudicators so that next year the competition will improve. Not leaving the assessment at that, Brisbane finishes her report of the event by showing her support of the Shakespeare Club:

> The Shakespeare Club is offering our young students a chance to experiment and be criticised in public, and to learn that elocution training should amount to more than speaking words in a small room to pass an examination – it should be a chance to express a personality to the best advantage to other people. (Brisbane 1960, 20 Aug)

Her final sentence indicates the direction she is attempting to draw her young readers towards: joining the Shakespeare Club to improve their own speaking abilities and enhance their value as a young actor. By speaking directly to the younger generation, Brisbane is stressing the inequality that exists in the training of young actors for the stage and challenging them to improve their individual level of education. It is further evidence that Brisbane was cognisant of improving theatre education, beginning at the elementary level of theatre.

Another area in which Brisbane directly engaged the theatre clubs was in relation to the understanding of different theatre stages and how these affect particular productions of period plays. Without the correct understanding, she argues that the style of the production itself can be affected:

> For clubs which are serious about teaching their members sound practical knowledge of a theatrical production, a model theatre is essential. This applies especially to clubs which do not own theatres. To establish the style of a period play it is important to understand how different stages used to be from the modern proscenium stage, and all the problems of seating, lighting and setting which made up the style of performance. (Brisbane 1960, 15 Oct)

Brisbane goes onto recommend the text *Three Model Theatres* by Roy Smith, a book that describes the history and background associated with the Elizabethan, 18th Century and modern stages. By recommending such a text, Brisbane is advocating subtly the improvement of local and community theatre by providing a framework which they can follow so they do not make the same mistakes. Her constant motivation for improvement in theatre education in Perth is a trend that she continues in her writing at the *Australian* on a national level.

2.5 The Classics

Brisbane's effort to further develop the theatre through her position is evident in her support of productions of the classics. An example of this encouragement comes in her reporting of the state of the Goldfields Repertory Club's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the *West Australian* (Brisbane 1960, 30 Jan). Whilst the play is not yet officially being reviewed, Brisbane weighs in with her own thoughts on importing a cast of 32 people from around the country:

> The wardrobe mistress in Perth, who had to hire and make new costumes, has been guessing at the measurements in the last few weeks, and the stage crew in Kalgoorlie have been guessing at the measurements of the Sunken Garden. However, to judge from the glimpse I had of their first rehearsal the pieces are falling rapidly into place and by Tuesday no doubt Bottom and his crew will find the green plot of the Sunken Garden a "marvellous convenient place" for their play. (Brisbane 1960, 30 Jan)

Brisbane knew what the role of wardrobe mistress entails as she was the wardrobe mistress at UWA before she directed productions. Brisbane uses her own experience to engage her readers to support this production and by giving positive feedback regarding the play despite only witnessing a rehearsal. Her support of the classics indicates that Brisbane was aware that these plays continued to have a role in helping to develop a national theatre, as it further educated the Australian audience as to what was 'good' theatre.

2.6 Regulatory Changes

Brisbane was not limited to just reporting on performance in her role as reviewer at the *West Australian.* She took on topics that were directly affecting the theatre in a wider context. An example of this comes from her willingness to include as the feature of her review a story on the abolition of the live-show entertainment tax (Brisbane 1959, 7 Nov). Brisbane provides comment from the people that are directly influenced, such as Eric Edgley, owner of Her Majesty's Theatre in Perth, stating that the 'move would be a welcome relief to patrons of live shows in Perth' (Brisbane 1959, 7 Nov). Her coverage of this story helps provide context for why the tax was being scrapped by the Government in the effort to stem the flow in the competition between live theatre and television. It also provides her readers with reason to support and participate in live theatre in Perth as it will be cheaper following the removal of the state tax. This is evidence of Brisbane expanding the scope of her advocacy of the theatre prior to her work at the *Australian.*

2.7 AETT and NIDA

Another issue that Brisbane saw fit to report on was the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the newly formed National Institute of Dramatic Art. Her first mention of NIDA comes from the article dated August 29, 1959. She reports an interview she had with a young Sydney arts graduate, Lance Bennett, who had received the only Commonwealth scholarship to the newly formed institute and was in Perth attending the ANZAAS conference that week. Brisbane describes the structure of NIDA and offers a small taste of what the students are put through:

> The director is Elizabethan Theatre Trust producer Robert Quentin. Clement McCallum teaches acting technique, Queenslander Peter Wagner is speech teacher, actor Owen Weingott (who may be remembered for some spectacular fight scenes in touring Shakespeare seasons here) is fencing teacher, and American-taught Margaret Barr gives pupils modern rhythmic exercises to improve suppleness. Acting technique is based on the Stanislavsky principle of working from within and it is the first time a comprehensive study of the much-misunderstood "Method" has been made in Australia. Students' work includes

> intensive exercises in concentration and imagination by acting out situations in their own words. (Brisbane 1959, 29 Aug)

Her detailing of NIDA serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides her readers with the understanding of who is behind the institution and the emergent fact that Australia has a National Institute that is dedicated to drama. Secondly, it provides awareness in Perth (which is isolated by distance from the developments on the east coast of Australia) to her readers. It also encourages them to apply for NIDA, by using the young Bennett as an example of the school's early success in its inaugural course. Brisbane later follows up the new NIDA students on their return after their first year at the school. This story is the feature of her article dated November 28th 1959, in which she discusses the new NIDA curriculum with the chair of NIDA, Robert Quentin. This article is an important one for Brisbane, as she would be covering NIDA in further detail during her time at the *Australian*. With her coverage of NIDA from the west, she was aware that NIDA was an important developmental area within Australian theatre and her early support sways readers to invest in what is happening on the other side of the country at the time.

Brisbane was also in the business of making her readers aware of exciting up-and-coming events that the AETT was staging. Brisbane used her column to remark upon the arrival of the AETT's newly formed company, the Trust Players, in October of 1959. She saw the potential future for the life of the company and its overall influence on the development of Australian theatre, stating that 'It augers well for Australia that a permanent company of this calibre has at last been established to bring first-rate productions of notable plays to city and country of all states' *(*Brisbane 1959, 17 Oct). Brisbane's tone conveys her clear view on the direction which Australian theatre should be taking. She had been waiting for the AETT to provide a national touring company (which was part of the AETT's manifesto) and finally she is beginning to see the benefits of having such a company. Whilst she remained optimistic about the Trust Players, Brisbane also includes in the same

article a summary of the AETT's annual report, which indicates heavy losses on all tours undertaken that financial year. The inclusion of the report in itself is ironic. Brisbane praises the Trust Players' touring capability as a national company but underlines that the AETT is struggling with the costs that are associated with making a profit out of touring theatre in Australia. Her constant monitoring of the AETT is a trend that continues into her writing at the *Australian*.

Whilst at times she was rather critical of them, Brisbane did make the effort to praise the AETT openly when credit was due. She focusses on this topic in an article lauding the approval of a £2,250 grant from the trust to pay the salary of an artistic director, explaining that 'This aid towards establishing a directorship at a salary tempting to a producer of standing and experience is the best piece of local theatre news since the Playhouse was built. No-one will deny that a strong organising hand is needed for the many and diverse talents of the Playhouse' (Brisbane 1960, 9 Apr). At the time, the Playhouse theatre in Perth was opened to replace His Majesty's Theatre, and the Playhouse's Repertory Club became a fully professional theatre company from its opening. She continues to further approve the efforts of her local Trust representatives and the board of directors at the Playhouse, stating that they 'deserve our thanks for the "blood, toil and tears" which went into its establishment, as does the trust itself for including Perth in its plan for developing a repertory theatre in each capital' (Brisbane 1960, 9 Apr). This is one of the rarer examples of Brisbane openly welcoming the changes being made in the theatre by the AETT, whom she was usually critical of due to their lack of foresight and her perceived view that they were not implementing their budget appropriately. This article conveys that Brisbane already developed a detailed vision of the changes that should occur in the theatre, as well as a willingness to advocate for this change.

2.8 Readership Engagement

As an effective writer, Brisbane used the *West Australian* as a means to engage with her local readers and to actively involve them in her newspaper columns, to gauge their opinions regarding the theatre. An example of this type of engagement can be found in one of her earlier pieces at the *West Australian,* where Brisbane requests to meet people in country theatre and discusses the differences between the two theatres:

> Knowledge of the lively interest which many country towns take in their local amateur theatre groups is confined to hearsay in the city, except for the annual drama festivals and rare opportunities such as the current Goldfields version of a "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*." As soon as the weather takes the groups indoors again I hope to arrange a trip to some of these country towns to see their clubs and theatres. I would be glad, therefore, to hear from the local secretaries from time to time about their plans, so as to choose an appropriate time to call. (Brisbane 1960, 6 Feb)

Brisbane is directly linking the city and the country theatre together so that she is able to report on them as a whole. As theatre critic for all of Western Australia she sees the importance of including country theatre in the state's overall portfolio, which further enhances its appeal. Brisbane wants to be involved to the point where she will visit the country towns and spend time in their theatre. For a state as vast as Western Australian this is a formidable task but something in which she is willing to invest. This article emphasizes the dedication that Brisbane employed in her work and her efforts to help transform public perception of country theatre in Western Australia. It also raises the portfolio of Western Australia's theatre nationally, as Brisbane is willing to travel to gain further exposure the new playwrights and actors.

Brisbane regularly engaged with her readership on matters that affected local theatre, identifying important events within theatre that they should be a part of. One instance of this comes from her reportage of an Australian playwriting contest: 'News comes this week that the Ipswich Little Theatre Society is offering £50 for an Australian one-act play. A one-act play competition, as its contribution to Ipswich's centenary celebrations will

close on April 23. The winning play will be performed in July at the society's play festival' (Brisbane 1960, 26 Mar). Such an event is included by Brisbane to encourage her readers to get involved in the competition and to stimulate playwrights to produce more Australian plays.

Brisbane frequently took a retrospective view of the year in theatre. By looking at what had taken place, Brisbane could ascertain whether growth was taking place in the theatre and identify areas for improvement. Confirmation of this can be seen from the title of her last review of 1960: 'Looking Back'. Brisbane summarises the year in the last paragraph, saying:

> In retrospect, the theatre for 1960 has offered us very few memorable highlights, and has been, on the whole, pretty unprofitable and unexciting. There have been, however, backstage signs that Perth theatre is growing up and preparing for the future; and what we saw in embryo at the Playhouse, despite some poor attendances during the year, and a new adult professional era has begun with the appointment of a director. The University made its mark in June with the opening of the Dolphin Theatre, which has given a home and new life and purpose to the number of University societies which have been floundering in recent years. (Brisbane 1960, 31 Dec)

Brisbane's comments in this article are direct and to the point. The use of bold text stands out to the reader and conveys her feeling about the then current direction of theatre in Western Australia - one that is boring and requiring something new to revive it. Whilst her perspective initially appears negative for the year**,** she produces small examples of where the theatre has been improving, such as at the Playhouse and Dolphin theatres, which she believes to be doing a 'good service' to drama in WA (Brisbane 1960, 31 Dec). Brisbane's comments provide an honest opinion about the state of the theatre in Western Australia and leaves open the discussion with her readers about what changes should take place over the next year to redress this problem. Brisbane is influencing Western Australia's theatre, expanding her scope as a critic and challenging the theatre to change.

Arguably, Brisbane's vision for Western Australia was ambitious. She wanted Perth to become a leader in Australia for the theatre. This can be seen in her article that largely concerns the director of the Playhouse, in which she comments that: 'the general views on provincial repertory theatre expressed by Playhouse artistic director Raymond Westwell have reinforced our hopes that the board has chosen a sound practical man who will give us theatregoers a new impetus' (Brisbane 1960, 5 Nov). Brisbane continues to describe what is missing from Australian theatre and how to remedy this. She argues that Australian theatre has no distinct performance style that sets it apart internationally, and that this needs to be developed for the theatre to become successful:

> Style is without doubt the most serious lack[ing] of the Australian theatre today. The Elizabethan Theatre Trust is working to develop it in the teamwork of its touring companies and it forms that basic aim of the Institute of Dramatic Art training experiments. So it would set Perth very much in the national eye if, under Mr. Westwell's direction, we could make a standard of our own. Teamwork is, however, the first essential of such a project and if Mr. Westwell has his own way it will mean that the Playhouse will enlarge its group of fulltime actors into a proper repertory team and there will be fewer changes of face. (Brisbane 1960, 5 Nov)

The hope then of Western Australia becoming a national leader lies in the success of the Playhouse Theatre, just as the later success of Jane Street in Sydney and La Mama in Melbourne did during the new wave. Brisbane openly challenges those in Perth to develop this idea. Brisbane identifies that performance style is the issue and supports NIDA and the AETT's direction for the development of Australian theatre. Previously, Australian theatre had been based upon British and American influences, so the performance style of the theatre was expressly imported. Now, Brisbane sees that Perth has the opportunity to be the national leader in developing the new localised performance style, and with support from the AETT and NIDA, this is a possibility for Mr.Westwell at the Playhouse. Brisbane was keenly aware of developing the theatre in her state and advocated for Perth to become the national exemplar. In retrospect, Brisbane advocated that the smaller theatres, such as

the Nimrod and Jane Street, as well as La Mama, all added to the emergence of this new performance style in the new wave (Brisbane 2009, 404).

Brisbane managed also to engage with her readers in all of the arts. When an event was happening in Perth that she saw as important, she devoted sections of her articles to the event. An example of this reporting of the arts comes in her support of the artist Norman Lindsay. Brisbane brings both the artist and the theatre together, showing how one is influencing the other:

> A city window display of most of the 36 amusing water-colour sketches made by Norman Lindsay as working guides for Peter Scriven's puppets has been attracting shoppers' attention this week. The sketches include full-size figures of his character from "The Magic Pudding" and details of the heads, which were modelled by a Sydney sculptor. "The Magic Pudding" opened yesterday at the Playhouse. (Brisbane 1960, 8 Oct)

This connection leads to creating interest in the sketches, sculptures and the puppet show itself that was being staged in Perth, something which Brisbane was intending to do by making it the feature story of the article. She is also advocating a different type of theatre for her readers to engage with (puppetry) and includes reference to HC Coombs and the Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, in relation to their love of the production. The intention is to support interest in the production and to get her readers to the play. This article shows that Brisbane is a campaigner for all forms of the arts, and is willing to write outside of her scope of expertise for the purpose of educating her audience and further develop the profile of the arts in her state.

2.9 New Developments in Australian Theatre

Brisbane continuously explained to her readership new exciting trends and currents that were taking place in local and international theatre. In one article she focussed on the studio drama group's production of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The Lesson*, explaining to her readership what sets Ionesco apart from other playwrights, the *Théâtre de l'Absurde* (Theatre of the Absurd):

> Ionesco, a Rumanian who has lived for many years in Paris, has invented a new approach to drama by putting across a dramatic situation in terms of sound and vision instead of in explanatory realistic terms. The idea came to him about ten years ago when he was listening to language lesson disks repeating phrases. He was struck by the banality of everyday language and its inadequacy in communication. By making nonsense of realism he is attempting to present not the accepted view of life but the way we privately feel about life and other people. (Brisbane 1960, 7 May)

Brisbane is again expanding her range to include the theatre critic as educator. Rather than report that a new type of theatre is being produced in Western Australia, she actively includes a preliminary explanation of Ionesco to further provide context. Her detailed explanation of Ionesco's theatre adds weight to his importance for her readers and we see her determination to keep her readers informed about these radical variations of theatre that differ from the mainstream. To further provide appeal, she concludes the description of Ionesco with a summary of his latest play's accomplishments: *Rhinoceros* (1959) was being presented by Sir Laurence Olivier in London during that month. By expanding her scope, Brisbane further developed her influence over the theatre of Western Australia, reinforcing for the reader the breadth of her knowledge as a critic.

Brisbane also kept her readership informed of when productions were touring WA and its surrounding areas. She reported the original tour of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*:

> The tour arranged by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust is taking *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* to towns between Alice Springs and Darwin. The company held its opening night on Tuesday at Alice Springs. Travelling by car and truck, the cast will go to Tennant Creek, Katherine, Pine Creek and Rum Jungle and after four performances in Darwin they will fly back to Sydney. (Brisbane 1960, 7 May)

Brisbane's earlier trip to the UK had identified the importance of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust's tour. By reporting their visit to WA, she is actively inviting her readership to see the production and support the play. Once again, her keen support of the Australian theatre at a time when it was still developing demonstrates her important influence early on in her career.

2.10 Publications in Australian Theatre

Brisbane also had a keen eye for publications that provided a valuable service to improving the overall state of Australian theatre at any given time. This was the case for her support of a national theatre magazine, which she delved into in an analysis for one of her reviews:

> After a long delay the second issue of the new national theatre magazine "Australian Theatregoer" is on sale. Again it shows us that it is working hard towards becoming an outspoken, readable and authoritative magazine containing a comprehensive collection of short, sharp reviews of professional and amateur productions, a script of an Australian play, technical articles and a well-written leader. The play is "A Fox in the Night" by 21-year old South Australian Parry Pree, who has been appointed the first apprentice playwright for the Elizabethan Theatre Trust in Sydney. (Brisbane 1960, 3 Dec)

Brisbane supports this magazine and wants her readers to get behind it too by purchasing the magazine. It is clear that she wants the magazine to become an Australian authority on the theatre: by presenting this to her readers she is influencing the public perception of the magazine as a witty and interesting read on the theatre. Her last comments however provide the greatest insight into why she promotes *Australian Theatregoer*: 'A useful service the magazine provides is a list of Australian scripts available for hire. This list will be increased each quarter' (Brisbane 1960, 3 Dec). Brisbane indicates her early support for a subscription service of scripts in a national magazine as well as the cataloguing of plays for later use. This was something that Brisbane later actively created with her own publication company, Currency Press. Her comments in 1960 serve as an example of her early support for developing an inventory of Australian drama and preserving new Australian plays.

2.11 Actors and Playwrights

Brisbane identified in her articles new actors and personalities who were visiting Perth. She commonly presented the background of the visitor and explained why they were going to be over in the west. An example of this is an article on the actor Lionel Stevens

(Brisbane 1960, 13 Aug). Her article introduces Stevens, and associates his voice with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and Australian television. Brisbane discusses his previous work to further promote his upcoming role in Perth theatre and to make her readers aware that he is an actor of exceptional talent. She further advocates interest in Stevens in a later article, citing his ability to take up acting roles at short notice: 'Lionel Stevens's first appearance at the Playhouse stage was expectantly premature when he was unceremoniously hurled on, book in hand, to become the only Higgins in the world who had never seen his Eliza until the moment of curtain rise' (Brisbane 1960, 27 Aug). Brisbane reiterates that this is his first formal role onstage and it is taking place the next week at the Playhouse theatre. Brisbane's support of Stevens' acting skills further highlights his new production as one that is worth seeing.

The aim of this chapter has been to identify and detail the history of Australian theatre from the 1940s as well as to analyse Brisbane's career at the *West Australian* from 1957 to 1961 and the development of local and community theatre. By providing evidence of Brisbane's advocacy and activism in Western Australia for all types of the arts, one can see the overall influence in presenting Western Australia to the rest of the nation as a state rich with theatre. Brisbane's work and writing at the *West Australian* clearly shows her effort to transform the local and national theatre by expanding her scope as a journalist and the development of her critical aesthetic. Her work provides a counterpoint to the theatre reporting happening in other states and establishes Perth as a cultural centre.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 Theatre Criticism in Australia

Theatre reviewing and criticism has had a tempestuous past in Australia. The position of national theatre critic has only been appointed twice, at the *Australian*. Brisbane's tenure at the *West Australian* and the *Australian* show that she elevated the standard of theatre criticism in Australia and validated the role of national theatre critic. This can be further seen in a comparison between Brisbane and Francis Evers, who was national critic from 1965-1967. Evers was exposed to the student theatre and attended the annual Intervarsity drama Festival in 1965 and 1966, to 'file substantial reviews upon them' (Milne 2004, 123). Evers reviewed many of the students who would be important in the new wave period. Evers left the position in 1967 and Brisbane was given the opportunity to review theatre nationally. Evers's tenure as national theatre critic was short and had a minimal impact on Australian theatre overall. McCallum further reiterates this distinction, arguing 'she [Brisbane] is one of the major critics of the last 40 years, there is no question about that' (McCallum Interview 2012, 2). This chapter will aim to identify and analyse a sample of theatre critics abroad and in Australia, to ascertain what constitute the qualities of a good critic and how these qualities relate to Brisbane and her critical output. It will also discuss the roles that Brisbane filled as a journalist, critic and publisher and define her work as an amalgamation of these three role.

To understand the role of the critic, a framework can be used to analyse the role and function of a good critic. Many critics have written on the topic of theatre criticism and their own notion of what defines a critic. Theatre and the role of the critic have been evolving since the profession of playwriting began over 2500 years ago. Even the great philosophers attempted to analyse the theatre and create a basis for its criticism.

Whiting argues the case:

> Aristotle, writing in the century following Sophocles, gives us a masterly analysis in his great critical essay, *The Poetics*. Liberally interpreted, this famous work does much to establish a foundation for criticism. Among other things, it defines drama as an imitation of men in action; it divides drama into six elements: plot, character, diction, thought, song, and spectacle; and finally it establishes the drama's purpose, or rather the purpose of the tragedy, as a purgation of the soul through the tragic emotions of pity and terror. (Whiting 1969, 145)

Whiting's argument is persuasive. These fundamentals are an excellent proposition for a framework for criticism of the modern theatre. Brisbane's criticism and reviews borrow from all elements of criticism discussed in this chapter, and will provide evidence in further chapters to validate this argument using her work at the *Australian* as a model.

Whiting also presents an analysis of the role of the modern-day critic in his text as well as the elements that define a good critic. He argues that many critics have too much power which enables them to govern the theatre with dominance and with little regard for the preservation of the playwright:

> Too few of the newspaper critics really know the theatre well enough, and some yield to the pressure to turn out exciting journalism for the sake of editors and readers rather than balanced judgment for the sake of the players. The public itself is mainly to blame, since it enjoys sweeping praise or condemnation, which is clear and simple, rather than balanced judgement, which is often disturbing and confusing. The public is also a victim of the great levelling impulse of democracy: we like to see anyone better than ourselves "get theirs". To some extent they share with the critic a vision of the artist as an egotist who needs to be knocked down occasionally. Unfortunately, most of the really promising young actors, designers, directors and playwrights are essentially shy, insecure, and easily frightened into dark corners. (Whiting 1969, 156-157)

He goes on to ask: 'What can be done? We can hope for more critics with the rare combination of high standards, knowledge of theatre, deep understanding of human nature, and a dedicated desire to improve the theatre, but there is little that a student of theatre can do about this' (Whiting 1969, 157). These are indeed rare qualities that nonetheless a good critic should possess, that 'the best critics, like the best playwrights, know theatre from first-hand contact with it' (Whiting 1969, 156). Brisbane had the ability to directly engage with the theatre practitioners of the 1960s and 1970s and this experience influenced her

later as a publisher. She spent time getting to know them as individuals and providing feedback to them in both a professional and personal capacity. Her reviews promoted actors and playwrights and presented their work as something to be preserved and fostered for the future. When Brisbane did become overtly negative towards a production she attempted to redress the issue by presenting solutions in her reviews to fix the problem. She did not shy away from productions that did not suit her personal tastes and continually stayed in touch with the changes in Australian theatre that were going on around her, which will become evident in the following chapters.

One of the critics that Brisbane mentioned as an influence on her own development as a theatre critic was the young Kenneth Tynan. Born in Birmingham on the 2nd of April 1927, Tynan was gifted with intelligence but also suffered from a stammer from a young age and characterized himself in his teens as 'a caesarean, a bastard and a contemptible object' (Lahr 2001, 7). Much of his close family had nothing to do with his life – his older sister died at birth, his real father Sir Peter Peacock (who had fathered him illegitimately) had another family, and his mother ended her own life in a mental institution when he was a teenager.

This difficult upbringing helped to set Tynan apart from others at the time. He differed from those around him in his unique mannerisms, clothing choices and an outlandish set of opinions (such as on homosexuality) that were well ahead of their time. He obtained a scholarship to Oxford University in 1945 and his tutor during his study was the renaissance scholar and writer, CS Lewis. His time at Oxford helped him develop as a critic and an intellectual. He described the period at Oxford, saying that 'nothing can ever top the sense of privileged exhilaration I felt then' (Lahr 2001, 9). After completing his studies, he went to work in the provinces as the youngest ever professional theatre director in England. Tynan married for the first time in January 1951 and in 1952 he was appointed

as the theatre critic for the London newspaper the *Evening Standard*. This is where Tynan cut his teeth as a theatre critic, leaving that role in 1954 to take up a theatre critic position at *The Observer*. It was during his time at this newspaper that he witnessed the revolutionary changes in British theatre where plays and playwrights began to attack the old style of theatre, pressuring for social change using the medium of theatre as their launching point. Tynan was one of the most influential supporters of the new 'kitchen-sink realism'. This realism shifted away from the traditional idealised protagonists of plays at the time and the heroes in effect became the everyday common man and woman. Tynan saw this new realism and supported it vigorously. His almost lone support of the play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) by John Osborne greatly contributed to this turning point in English theatre and paved the way for new representations of the working-class character. He discusses his outlook on the play in his review for *The Observer*:

> I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it as roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of 20 and 30. And this figure will doubtless be swelled by refugees from other age-groups who are curious to know precisely what the contemporary young pup is thinking and feeling. I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade. (Tynan 1956, 13 May)

Tynan provided a good role model for Brisbane, who was reading his reviews, stating 'the reviewing standard was brilliant at that stage, there was Kenneth Tynan and Michael Billington was going on in those days and Harold Hobson. They were all sort of masters of reviewing, so I collected their reviews and studied them' (Brisbane Interview 2013, 2). Tynan pushed the boundaries of what was possible at a time when English theatre was undergoing revolutionary changes. He had directness, he was authoritative, and could write about the theatre in an entertaining manner and did not just repeat the plot. Most importantly though, he challenged his readers and sometimes went against the popular view, as in the example of *Look Back in Anger*. Tynan perhaps was the most interesting as

he was open to the innovation of the theatre at the time and as a critic was not afraid to speak freely, something which Brisbane imitated as national theatre critic. He was opposed to the theatre censorship of the time and in true oppositional style he was the first person to swear on British television in 1965, causing an uproar in parliament that forced 'separate House of Commons motions, signed by 133 Labour and Tory backbenchers and a letter to the Queen from the morality campaigner Mary Whitehouse, who urged that Tynan "ought to have his bottom smacked"' (Lawson 2004, para 7). Tynan's influence as a critic on Brisbane was extremely important to the development of her own critical values and prepared her for grasping the changes that Australian theatre was about to go through in the late 1960s with the new wave.

Furthermore, Tynan, along with other British and American critics, operated in vastly different post-war environments. John Elsom discusses this difference:

> The investment stakes in the West End productions tend to be smaller than on Broadway, so the need for instant success is less acute. Impresarios can wait for the weeklies to address any unfair impressions left by the dailies, although, if their resources are running out, they may not wish to do so. [Harold Pinter's] *The Birthday Party* in its original production was off before the one realistically enthusiastic review (in the *Sunday Times*) appeared. By contrast a musical like *Charlie Girl*, which had damning reviews, was nursed to a long-running success (Elsom 1981, 1).

One can argue that the British theatre in the 1950s was at a very similar stage to the Australian theatre in the late 1960s. The cultural, social and political attitudes had shifted immensely and these all contributed in their own way to the push of the new wave, starting roughly around 1966-1967.

Elsom further investigates the nature of the post-war critic, and their relationship with all stakeholders in theatre:

> Nevertheless, critics do have considerable power over the commercial success, or otherwise, of productions; and I suspect that, for most people working within the theatre, that is their chief importance. Critics are not to be valued for their opinions but for their impact upon trade; whereas critics like to believe the reverse – that their views are

> respected and the commercial consequences stemming from them are not of great importance. Directors see critics as rather unpredictable pawns in the publicity game; whereas critics see directors as talented students who need the benefit of objective advice Elsom 1981, 1-2).

The statement reflects Brisbane's work as a critic. The strength of Brisbane's criticism lies in the mixing of objective advice, subjective emotion and opinion. She was also assisted by the fact that she was not censored or restricted in any way as to what she could write about the theatre. It is also important to note, that like other British and American critics, Brisbane did not originally set out to become professional critic in the first place. This is similar to many well-known critics, who learnt their trade first as an actor or director.[27] Whilst Brisbane did learn her trade through exposure, she understood that in a developing theatre there have to be successes, and that the critic's role is to help foster new and exciting theatre. She was also passionate and dedicated to the new type of Australian theatre that was emerging during the new wave. It was fortuitous that Brisbane was exposed to the changes happening in British theatre during the 1950s, exposed to exceptional critics such as Tynan , Hobson and Shaw. This certainly assisted her as a critic at the beginning of the new wave of theatre in Australia and she displayed these similar qualities.

The fearless qualities that Tynan showed were essential for a critic, especially in supporting change during that period. In analysing what makes a good critic, Preston (1997) takes a stance that is not found anywhere else in analysing Australian theatre criticism and develops a critical aesthetic in his unpublished thesis. The basis of this context is a critic who works at *The Utopian Times*, a fictional newspaper for a fictional everyman. In terms of Australian theatre, Brisbane fits into this framework better than most critics and in the past five decades is the closest the theatre has come to having a

[27] Tynan was a director first, as was Michael Billington.

'Utopian' critic. Brisbane exemplifies Preston's framework by exhibiting passion, dedication, knowledge and willingness to support innovation in the theatre. Preston further puts forward the argument about the all-encompassing critic, one whom is complete in every way (the use of male pronoun is used for convenience according to the author):

> He is between eighteen and eighty and every age. He has a passionate love of the theatre, (don't they all) which remains undented by the years of dogged theatre going, yet still has the resilience and enthusiasm to be excited by every sort and style of good theatre. He knows all there is to know about the traditions of the past, yet remains open and alert to the newest ideas and movements. He is the first to spot a significant new talent or trend, and the last to distort living art by cramming it into categories. He is able to respond to the Utopian classics, as well as to recent Utopian events in the vein of "performance art". He is a man of convictions; aesthetic, moral, social, political and Zen metaphysical, and yet his is a blank page ready to receive, record and appreciate the views of men and women very different to himself. Thus he is practical and impartial. (Preston 1997, 19)

One can start to see what Preston believes to be the attributes of a perfect critic and the beginning of a framework for identifying these attributes in other critics. He goes on to identify still more characteristics of the Utopian critic:

> He can sleuth out the point or thrust of a play and the purpose of a production, and only after being sure of both, and distinguishing between the two, will he presume a conclusion. In short, he regards it as his business to understand before he judges. His conclusion will be robust, yet humble, assertive yet questioning. He is, as you can see, intellectually very astute. He is also a man of powerful emotions, almost Lawrentian in their intensity. Thus he responds in an integrated manner, with his heart, his head and his stomach. This critic is capable of chilling objectivity and thrilling subjectivity. In other words, he can explain the workings of the engine of any given theatrical spacecraft, whilst allowing it to shoot him into ecstatic orbit. (Preston 1997, 19-20)

Now we can see a fuller picture of the Utopian critic: one who can witness any type of theatre, know its history before commenting upon it, give excellent objective feedback but create subjectively the world of the theatre for the reader. This critic is open to new ideas and has his/her finger on new trends within the theatre. These are all different characteristics that are sometimes in direct opposition to each other. Preston's final paragraph on the critic is perhaps the hardest hitting:

> This man has a great sense of responsibility to the theatre, its health, improvement and its future. He realises that among other things, he is answerable to posterity and accepts that onus. He does not allow regular theatre-going to erode his standards or insidiously make him

> more enthusiastic than he should properly be. Masterpieces are always somewhere in his mind as a touchstone yet he has not lost the common touch. He has a strong sense of responsibility to his readers and an instinctive rapport with them. Somehow he contrives to be a consumer guide for the thousands, and a beacon for the cognoscenti. He sympathises with those who want to go to the theatre to have fun and he eagerly engages with those who wish to open a serious debate. This man is respected by his editor and by directors, actors and writers alike. (Preston 1997, 20)

Here Preston's final vision of his Utopian critic becomes apparent. This critic knows what they owe to the theatre and is able to respond. Regular theatre going does not degrade their understanding yet they have the ability to touch base with the common person. They must be able to write for many, something which Brisbane achieved as national theatre critic at the *Australian.*

One of Australia's longest serving critics, Harry Kippax, had a similar grasp of what was required of a theatre critic and where his duty lay with the audience. He summarises this view in the review 'Hell is Other People', passionately asking an important question:

> Whom does the critic serve? Not, I think, *the theatre* (though if he has no passion for it, and a little charity besides, he will be but as sounding brass). Certainly, not the people in *theatre* (he is not, God save the mark, a teacher). No, his duty is to the discussion, the public debate. The range and intensity of that is an index of the importance of the thing discussed in a particular society. The first criticism of theatre criticism in Australia is not that the critics need to be 'educated'… It is that there are not enough critics. The debate is too narrow. (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 14)

This example shows the core of what Kippax believed to make up a theatre critic. His ideals centred around providing impetus for the public debate on theatre. If a critic was failing to do this in their work then they were failing the public in general. He believed that a greater voice should be given to the theatre by increasing the variety of its criticism. Kippax was indeed correct at the time of writing regarding the lack of critics. In a later paper delivered at an annual UNESCO conference, Kippax expanded his vision of theatre critics' qualities:

> What are the qualities of a critic other than his ability to write? It seems to me that critics can be broadly divided into three classes. First, there is the "Continental critic", the professional judge of the theatre produced by the European tradition of criticism. He is, essentially, a scholar of the theatre, an academic who has progressed from the study of

> humanities to a technical study of the drama and the theatre itself. (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 127)

After discussing the role of the critic, Kippax then defined the role of the professional writer:

> At the opposite pole is the critic – like Shaw or Beerbohm or Mary McCarthy – who is a professional writer, with a reputation as a critic in other fields, and who comes to the theatre as an outsider to judge its offerings by general aesthetic and social and cultural criteria and by the common sense which he applies to life as a whole. He looks beyond the traditions, conventions, sentiment and propaganda of theatre and asks, in effect; what, if anything, is there in this drama and its performance that can appeal to any man of sense and sensibility who is not the dupe of a cult? (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 128)

Lastly, he discusses the position of the regular theatre critic and their interest in the vocation:

> By far the largest class of critic consists of writers who adopt theatre criticism as a profession, steep themselves in tradition, literature and practice of theatre (though not in the academic manner of the "continental critic") and (unlike the outsider) identify themselves with its ideals and interests. They love the theatre – and, when they chastise, do so the more strictly because they love it. (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 128)

Kippax's three defining characteristics of critic outline at the time the state of theatre criticism in Australia. Their ability to write for the theatre was heavily influenced by the type of publication and format that they were required to write for. Kippax and Brisbane both wrote for major newspapers, whilst also contributing to academic journals and publications. This is something that Kippax identifies in his paper and he gives his own standpoint on what would make an 'ideal' critic:

> Is there, then, an ideal critic – one as learned as the "continental critic", yet with a feeling for the audience and its interests; as unprejudiced and penetrating as the "outsider", yet with a feeling for the means as well as the ends of the theatre; as sympathetic as the "insider", yet with a feeling for the necessity of innovation? Probably no such paragon ever existed. But, even if he did, then it is likely that there was no medium which could contain him except his own diary. For the functions of the theatre critic, whatever his temperament, ideals and ability, is at least in part determined by the newspaper or journal for which he writes. (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 129)

Kippax wrote this paper one year before the radical changes that occurred at the beginning of the new wave period became apparent. One can agree with his argument that no actual theatre critic could possess all the qualities of his 'ideal' model; but one could also argue

that Brisbane, as voice of the nation's theatre criticism at the *Australian*, and with her continual involvement in the field through her company Currency Press, comes the closest to reaching Kippax's ideal. Brisbane had experienced the changes that were occurring in English theatre in the 1950s, developing her knowledge of the classics and the "continental". She returned to Australia with the interest of fostering growth in a national theatre. . Her ability to stay in touch with the changes that were occurring and her support of alternative theatre is evidence that she was comfortable being on the 'outside' of the theatre as well as the 'inside'. Kippax further reiterates his argument with his final statement, saying 'In Australia our problem is not that we have too few critics of authority. The problem is that we have too few critics. The debate is too narrow' (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 130).

Australian theatre required a person who could oversee the theatre as a whole and provide feedback to the industry as well as suggest solutions for their problems. Brisbane did exactly that in her time as the national theatre critic which will become further evident in this thesis. Kippax's paper, co-authored with Bruce Grant, dealt with the function of critics to focus on their responsibility. Grant takes a direct approach to his topic:

> So I would like to limit myself to some fairly straight-forward propositions about the responsibility of the critic, at this time and at this place, namely Australia in 1966 or, not to put too fine a point on it, in Australia in the latter half of the 20th century.
>
> 1. That he writes well.
> 2. That he assesses what he sees and hears and feels in the theatre against what he knows of life.
> 3. That he offers a view on what Australia's role in the world should be.
>
> (Conference of Professional Repertory Theatre 1966, 131)

Whilst Grant argues that Australia was not yet a powerful nation, he believes that the nation can still encourage individual writers and practitioners to further develop their culture and to redress the lack of consistent writing that appears in the field. Despite this situation, his three propositions complement what Brisbane was achieving as theatre critic

for the *West Australian,* and at the *Australian* as national theatre critic. She wrote 'well' and had experience to validate her arguments and constantly put Australia in an international context by, amongst other things, encouraging the export of Australian plays. Grant's set of responsibilities are a precursor to the development of the national theatre critic role and show the inadequacies that existed in the field of theatre criticism up to and during the mid-1960s.

Theatre criticism in Australia was a small field, with Kippax, Brisbane and Radic as the most prominent critics operating in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (with Radic operating as critic until the 1990s at the *Age*). Brisbane's emergence as national theatre critic in 1967 later shows the desire to improve the perception of theatre criticism that Kippax mentioned as well as the attempt to centralise criticism of theatre at the *Australian*.

Another prominent Australian theatre critic and journalist, Leonard Radic, had strong views on what makes a good theatre critic. When questioned on this topic in a recent interview, Radic made the following comments:

> I've given talks on this subject a number of times in various countries. Essentially it comes down to what that injunction by Graeme Perkins the editor says: Ultimately the job of the critic is to call the shots as a critic and to stay till the end. The injunctions to call the shots as you see them… that essentially is the responsibility of the critic. It's a subject of exercise; it's my view as a critic of the production and of a series of performances and the critic's job is to adjudicate them fairly and honestly without prejudice and without having to meet certain requirements from editor/outsiders of any kind or description. I haven't been offered money to write a good review but it has happened in other places. Ultimately it's a matter for the individual to adjudicate as best he or she sees a work on that particular night. Kenneth Tynan said once that as a critic you can only review a production as it appeared on a particular night. It would be unfair to say this is absolute rubbish or hopeless or misconceived. You can only judge it as you see it on that particular night given that the fallibility of the theatre (it's a very fallible place) and productions can vary from day to day and night to night so your adjudication has always to take into account that fact – that a judgement is not absolute, it's one's judgement on that particular night in that particular place and recognition of that is one of the factors that makes a good critic. The other is that you have good judgement and good taste. That goes without saying. (Radic Interview 2012, 7)

It is evident that Radic has a different aesthetic to that of Kippax. He requires the critic to take up the role of adjudicator, one whom can only judge a performance on the merits of that one night on which the critic witnessed the production. His qualities are based around the shifting nature of the theatre, for a critic must be able to be flexible and be able to sit through all types of theatre even if it is against the critic's personal taste.

Geoffrey Milne, who died in 2013, worked in the industry for 40 years and had also written texts regarding his work and the work of others, including Brisbane. He has also had the opportunity to write on theatre critically and taught theatre studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne. When queried on what he defined as the qualities of a good theatre critic, he expanded on his own experience of writing for the theatre:

> You have got to pay attention. You have to see an awful lot of plays. You have really got to see an awful lot of plays to establish what is actually going on in the ecology of the space in which you are working. You have to really pay attention to what is happening around you as I was saying before when I saw that play and thought it was awful and the audience loved it, it was a hit, so I felt obliged to say so. There's no point in a critic saying I hated this therefore its crap. I thought of myself as being a reporter first and an analyst second, neither can go without the other. You can report on a traffic accident but they are going to ask you in court what speed you think he was going. That's interpretive. You have got to report actually on what occurred and then have a crack at analysing why it was the way it was and then endeavour to place it in the wider context. If you can do all of that you can get through a few weeks without death threats. (Milne Interview 2012, 11)

Milne brings his interpretation of many of the points that have been discussed by other theatre critics in Australia. An avid love of the theatre is required and is backed up by immersion and extensive theatre going. What Milne states that is different to others is that he willingly listens to his audience regarding the theatre and that this is a defining factor for him in what makes a good theatre critic. Milne's framework for a theatre critic requires openness and honesty, characteristics that Brisbane showed at the *Australian*.

A more recent example of what defines a theatre critic comes from the long-serving *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington. Billington was born on the 16 November 1939 in Warwickshire, England. He graduated from Oxford in 1961, with the express intention

of following Harold Hobson's footsteps and becoming a theatre critic. He began working as an arts critic for the *Liverpool Daily Post & Echo* in 1961 and from 1962 to 1964 he was the public liaison officer and director for the Lincoln Theatre Company. His big break came in 1965 when he began writing as an arts critic for *The Times*, a role which he held until 1971. He left *The Times* in 1971 to write for the *Guardian*. Drawing on his vast experience in reviewing theatre, he describes what he believes to be the outstanding characteristics of a contemporary critic:

> First, the ability to write. It sounds banal, but it's no use having a knowledge of drama from Aeschylus to Zuckmayer unless you can string a sentence together and propel the reader forwards. I'd even hazard that readability matters more than reliability. Shaw proved horribly wrong in condemning Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a mechanical Gilbertian farce, but I would rather read Shaw at his most perverse than any of his prosaically correct contemporaries. Next, a critic needs insatiable curiosity. Hardened pros often like to assume a blasé veneer – yet I don't know one of my colleagues who isn't as anxious as I am to discover what the new Lloyd Webber musical will be like, what Greg Hicks will make of King Lear or what light Laura Wade's Posh will shed on the Bullingdon Tories. Ideally, a critic is someone who lives in the present, but entertains boundless hope for the future. A point of view is also a pre-requisite. A critic is not simply a piece of blotting paper, but someone who brings his or her political, aesthetic and sexual convictions to the job. I had a fascinating correspondence recently with a friend who objected to my intruding, as he saw it, my views of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis into a notice. But how, given that the show was about Gaza, could it be otherwise? This doesn't mean that criticism is an unlicensed ego trip; simply that one's private beliefs are often inseparable from one's artistic judgment. Stamina is also a top priority. Shaw (again) said that an art critic's first - requirement was a strong pair of brogues to cope with galleries parquet floors. Comparably, a theatre critic needs limitless energy, a thick skin and a well-padded bum to counter sometimes punitive seating. (Billington 2010, 17 Feb)

This explanation from Billington serves as a good reference point for identifying the qualities of what makes a good theatre critic: knowledge of drama, burning curiosity, an open standpoint on the theatre and stamina that remains unwavering. These are characteristics that Brisbane has shown throughout her career in Australian theatre, as will be evidenced here by her written record and through interviews with a number of people who have worked with her directly. In more recent times, Lyn Gardner, of the *Guardian* in London, analyses what it means to be a theatre critic:

> The first rule is that there are no rules – you're writing a review to express your thoughts and feelings about a theatre show, not taking an exam. There are as many ways to write a review as there are personal responses to any production. There is no right or wrong. Allow yourself to develop your own distinctive voice, and be honest about what you really think about a production: convey your enthusiasm for it or explain why you disliked it. Don't worry about going out on a limb. A timid theatre review is often a dull read. The hardest reviews to write are not about the shows you passionately loved or hated, but about ones that were just so-so. (Gardner 2012, 4 Oct)

Like Gardner, Brisbane developed her own distinctive voice during a period in which Australian theatre was also developing. She took on difficult briefs (such as removal of censorship and calling for improvement in subsidy, administration and regulation. By doing this, developed her own unique style and voice that attracted the reader. Victoria Chance describes the way in which Brisbane spoke in her reviews:

> I suppose what I love about Katharine's criticism… I should mention that I read a lot of Katharine's criticism since I edited *Not Wrong: Just Different* and I read what was in the book and what was left out of the book. Critics can do a lot of things but for me the strength in Katharine's writing is the voice. It really feels like she is speaking directly to you and telling you things as well as making observations. She is like a friend. Her writing has that feeling − it can be critical and she sometimes changes her mind but you know she is there and reporting what she sees and thinks. It's like having a friend across time because I could never see a lot of those productions and her writing helps to somehow get a sense of the productions. I think this is a thing that often critics can get wrong but Katharine always discussed the work on its own merits. A lot of critics you know already what they think about something but you don't actually know what the work is really about or what it was trying to do. Katharine tries to go to the heart of those questions and judge it on those terms. She would say "they were trying to do this and it didn't quite work" as opposed to "I just don't like this sort of theatre". Sort of like Kippax. Kippax wasn't as open to change in a way but I think that's the really great thing that Katharine did in her writing in a way, she took what was there and talked about it on her own terms and that kind of really brought it alive. (Chance Interview 2012, 3)

Chance echoes the sentiment that reflects much of Brisbane's critical writing and further supports the argument that Brisbane had many of the qualities that make up a good theatre critic.

Cameron Woodhead, writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* also explores what makes a theatre critic in the digital age:

> Not everyone is a critic, but blogs have opened the door to anyone with a passion for art to publish their opinions about it. The old model where artists made art, a handful of newspaper reviewers responded, and that was that, is being complemented by a discursive and, at its best, much more interesting approach. The result for Australian theatre is a diverse, voluble and usually fractious community of online scholars. (Woodhead 2012, 16 Feb)

He argues that both systems are valid in the digital age and that newspaper critics are still of use, even when every person has the opportunity to voice their opinion on the theatre. Woodhead continues in his article to outline the nature of the critic in his review of a notable online bloggist, Jane Simmons:[28]

> All critics have egos, but such pride as we take in our work should stem from the satisfaction we get when our eloquence reflects our judgment as precisely as possible. Simmons' reviews are big on disgust, and small on argument. A good critic should always use how they felt about the art in question as a starting point. The bulk of a critic's task lies in explaining why they felt that way. That requires a thorough knowledge of the work and its context, and the self-control to avoid getting side-tracked or carried away. Obviously, you're not going to be able to do either effectively if the written word fails to obey you. (Woodhead 2012, 16 Feb)

Woodhead outlines the importance of using feelings as a starting point for the critical analysis. This is a quality that Brisbane used in her reviews at the *Australian* and employed to make her articles speak to her readers on a personal level.

Brisbane maintained a career within Australian theatre due to her ability to learn from some of the great international critics, as well as to adapt to the changes that were taking place during the new wave as well as utilizing her experience as a journalist. In discussion of her time at the *West Australian*, Brisbane lamented that she was green in the field of criticism:

> As a critic I had no training but I'd had very good training as a reporter and that was important because we were told that we had to ensure all the basic facts were in there, so you know, someone who'd come from somewhere else could read this report and know all the background that was necessary in each report; and not to assume that the reader already knew the background, as with ongoing stories. That stood me in good stead and so that's how I approached the reviewing. I mean I had to find my way and what I was reviewing was amateur theatre, the Playhouse which was semi-professional, had professional management and some of the actors were paid and others were not (they were sort of

[28] Jane Simmons, a drama school teacher turned bloggiest.

> halfway there). They were doing three-week repertory. Then there was the commercial theatre, there were two commercial theatres which depended on people coming from the East on tour (Brisbane Interview 2013).

The exposure to amateur theatre allowed her to make mistakes as a journalist and as a reporter first before reviewing. She was able to write openly and without editing and in this role she prospered. Brisbane also reviewed the professional theatre and with her UWA degree she was able to apply her knowledge of the theatre to this early reporting. Her initial success at the *Australian* can be directly attributed to her training as a journalist first and her exposure to the Perth theatre scene.

The nature of the theatre in the late 1960s demanded that theatre gain greater attention as the new wave began. In a recent symposium, Brisbane recalled her initial period at the *Australian*:

> My job was to write two columns a week and they were printed on the leader page, and I shared that space, around 1200 words, with Sylvia and with Zoe Thomas (the art critic), and Kenneth Hints from Melbourne (who was the music critic). Anyway, they were very often commented upon in the letters which were also on the leader page, so it was a very collegiate thing and it reinforced a sense that what we had to say had some importance. I very quickly assessed the fact that because we were a national paper, about 2% of my potential audience were ever likely to see this production at the Independent Theatre. So I had to find other ways, and I was a reporter and the columns that I wrote in those early days were clearly reporting. I was looking for news. Where have our playwrights gone? Why are there no playwrights? That sort of thing. I was inventing news because there wasn't much around…and then suddenly there was. This was 1967-1968 and the Vietnam War was on and there were people marching in the streets, Robert Askin [32nd Premier of NSW] was quoted as saying "run over the bastards" to a policemen when they were driving down the main street with LBJ. There was the permissive society that came out of the rivalry with the pill. There were assassinations happening in America regularly, it was a sense of fear and excitement and also this freedom to say what you like and that you could make a difference somehow. I just thought it was marvellous (Brisbane Symposium, 2014, 4.00-6.00).

In the early period at the *Australian*, Brisbane operated as a journalist asking questions and searching for news. She actively sought those in the theatre scene and conducted journalistic interviews with the key members. She was slowly manifesting her skills as a journalist into that of a critic. As discussed in Chapter 5, her reviews move away from a

simple fact recount. She also developed her own set of principles on the theatre, which included not 'deceiving an audience' (Brisbane Symposium, 2014) in the case of Peter O'Shaughnessy. Brisbane comes the closest to Kippax's 'continental critic', with the ability to take into account all stakeholders whilst balancing the needs of the newspaper. In the case of the *Australian,* Brisbane appeared to have free reign on what she wrote up until her article on O'Shaughnessy's *Othello.*

This event was important in her transition from just a journalist to a critic, and is discussed further in Chapter 6. The resulting exposure of the case helped Brisbane stand out as the national theatre critic and gave her voice legitimacy. It also taught her a valuable lesson as to what the critic can say about a production before they have gone too far.

The role of the critic has shifted away from newspaper reporting and fact since Brisbane first took up the position of national theatre critic at the *Australian* to today. No longer is there a need for a national travelling critic, as technology has meant that both amateur and professional critics can voice their opinion through the internet. The need for a background in journalism is no longer an essential requirement. Brisbane elaborated on this point, stating 'that's one of the sad things I feel about how the papers have gone. Nearly all the reviewers are contributors now, they don't have the loyalty to the vision of the newspaper they are working for and they don't have this training to get your grammar straight' (Brisbane Symposium 2014).Brisbane was able to transition easily into the role as national theatre critic as she had fine-tuned her writing at the *West Australian* as a journalist. She was loyal to the *Australian* and in return she was able to operate as the national theatre critic for 7 years and witness firsthand the changes that were taking place.

There is no doubt that today someone could take up the position of national theatre critic again, but the position would arguably hold less prestige owing to the fact that technology

has allowed anyone to voice their opinion. The difference lies in the period of Australian theatre in which Brisbane operated as national theatre critic, the new wave, and the potency of her articles and criticism. Brisbane's work is of importance as it presents the historical record and captures the feeling of being present throughout and engaged with the changes that were taking place. Brisbane was able to make a living as national theatre critic, whereas most theatre reviewers today operate in a part time capacity, as it is not necessarily a profitable venture. Limited recording of productions remains a limitation of the theatre that Brisbane reviewed, making her criticism important as one of the few accessible historical records available and shows that the art of theatre criticism transforms to suit society's needs. This is still the case even today, as few live performances are recorded and available online.

It is obvious that Brisbane operated as a journalist at the *West Australian* and then established herself as a critic at the *Australian*. McCallum argued in his original thesis that Brisbane was the first to blur the distinction between the reviewer and the critic, and he analysed this duality in his publication *Some Preoccupations*. McCallum was questioned about this position in a recent interview and in retrospect agreed with Brisbane operating as a critic:

> I think the distinction originally had a little bit to do with politics, calling someone a reviewer put them down a bit which I certainly never intended. Also there was then (the terminology has changed) certain distinctions that some people wanted to make between people who write for the newspapers and people who write for academic applications, really those people who reviewed journals. The reviewer was the newspaper critic with the daily deadline and the critic was the academic critic. Clearly she comes from a background in journalism and publishing subsequently for the last 40 years which is this year exactly, and not from the academic world. I come from the academic world and I write for the newspapers, you know, if you want to be read (laughs) and she is certainly read. (McCallum 2012, 2-3)

Brisbane, as a journalist first, quickly developed her skills as a critic. She then effectively transitioned from theatre critic to publisher at Currency Press. No other person in

Australian theatre has been able to do this with such ease, and McCallum's comments further support this. Brisbane and Parsons both recognised a clear deficiency in publication of playwrights in Australian theatre and created Currency Press to fill that void (discussed further in Chapter 7). Her transition to publisher was perhaps the most difficult of all as she had to relinquish her position at the *Australian* to avoid a 'conflict of interest' (Brisbane Symposium, 2014). Brisbane and Parsons worked quickly in the early 1970s to establish tangible proof that Australian playwrights existed as well as to provide an outlet for new emerging playwrights to develop. This can be seen in Currency's early play print list, which features heavily with new Australian playwrights. Currency gave Brisbane the freedom to again expand her knowledge on Australian theatre and apply her years of experience for the next generation of theatre practitioners in print. Her move away from criticism to publishing can be further seen in the sheer amount of print articles, lectures, interviews and forewords given on the topic of Australian theatre, still to this day.

Brisbane has evinced these important characteristics, the evidence of which can be found in her reviews and criticism of the theatre throughout her career. Whilst she has shown to have many positive qualities as a critic, she also had shortcomings. She was working in a male dominated field, she at times let her opinion dominate and she believed in people despite their outward appearances. This caused her some trouble later on in her career, discussed further in Chapter 6. Through analysing the accepted qualities and characteristics of a good critic, the framework emerges that reflects many of the qualities that Brisbane brought to her role at the *West Australian* and as the national theatre critic at the *Australian.* As this chapter has discussed, Brisbane has shared the qualities that many of these critics agree make up that of a 'good' critic. Brisbane's aesthetics include the 'energy' of the theatre and the ability to relay this from the stage to the page, her approval of Australian theatre that her upbringing would distance her from (classical vs. larrikin

working class plays) and her overall passion and advocacy for the theatre, at times with great personal and professional sacrifice. Furthermore, the invitation to Brisbane to create the Australian Chapter of the International Association of Theatre Critics in September 1973 shows that she was seen as a respected critic internationally (Brisbane 2013, NLA Collection on Currency Press).

CHAPTER 4

This chapter will address the changes that took place in theatre infrastructure and subsidy during the 1960s and 1970s in Australia. It aims to link the changes with Brisbane's work at the *Australian* and provide critical commentary on whether she held influence towards developing these two issues, which were critical at the time for Australian theatre to further develop nationally. It also shows that Brisbane was willing to invest in these issues heavily as she believed that they were the best indicators that a change was taking place in the theatre. This leads into the early development of Brisbane as a critic at the *Australian* and sets the tone for her later work around several contentious issues that required improvement, discussed in Chapter 5. Brisbane constantly pushed the case as national theatre critic for her industry and persevered to sway those in positions of power to redress poor decisions in the past, and to start listening to those who required it the most.

4.1 Australian Theatre Infrastructure and Subsidy in the 1960s and 1970s

The early 1960s was a turning point in establishing an Australian theatre and for Katharine Brisbane as a critic. Brisbane married Philip Parsons in 1960, and began raising their two children during a time of great change in Australian theatre. Theatre directors were reluctant to give Australian playwrights the chance to have their plays produced. As a result, many preferred to stage classical and well-tried material overall to ensure a stable revenue stream but also included at least one Australian play in their season. Local playwrights came to be taken seriously and the modification in subsidy structure reflected that change. Student theatre was one of the main reasons for the sudden surge in the late 1960s. The 'baby boomers' generation were attending universities and this offered them the opportunity to speak freely and use the theatre as a vehicle for getting their message across. Milne recalled this period, as he was a student in Melbourne at the time:

> During the 1960s theatre in universities reached a high level of activity and prominence, not least due to the establishment of newer universities such as the University of NSW in Sydney, Monash in Melbourne and Flinders in Adelaide. An indication of its importance may be gained from the fact that the *Australian* newspaper sent one of its two drama critics, Francis Evers, to spend a full week of the annual Intervarsity Drama Festivals at Newcastle in 1965 and Brisbane in 1966, and to file substantial reviews upon them. Many of the students Evers saw in action went on to make an important mark in the professional theatre. (Milne 2004, 123)

Student theatre was flourishing with new buildings, designed with performance in mind and productions featuring European plays from playwrights such as Beckett, Ibsen and Moliere. In comparison, the professional scene in the early 1960s was showing signs of life for new Australian playwrights. One of these new theatre companies was the Ensemble, on Sydney's north shore. Started by Hayes Gordon in 1958, the theatre gave its first performance in May of that year and worked out of hired venues until a permanent place was found in 1960. The Ensemble Theatre Company evolved as something different to the Old Tote in Sydney at the time, and offered audiences a mixture between the mainstream and the alternative. The Ensemble theatre followed the trend of shying away from Australian drama at the time, showing in the fact that '75% of the total repertoire on nearly ninety Ensemble productions in the first twenty years was made up of contemporary American or British drama' (Milne 2004, 95). The Ensemble was one of the first professional theatres in Australia to be set in the round. Whilst The Ensemble was not solely focussed on presenting Australian plays, the theatre was important to the development of new actors (with its acting school run by Hayes) operating in Sydney before and after the new wave and the importation of overseas playwrights into the Australian theatre. The Ensemble survived the new wave and changes in Government subsidy and still continues to operate today.

In contrast to The Ensemble in the early 1960s, there was one theatre company that was bold enough to showcase Australian material. Created in an old church in South Melbourne in 1962, the Emerald Hill Theatre was the idea of the young Wal Cherry.

Cherry was known as an ambitious director and university graduate who wanted to create his own theatre to stage a combination of both Australian and international plays, foreshadowing the success of the new wave. Emerald Hill stood out from the other theatres of the time and was known for the high quality of production coupled with bold programme choices. However, it failed to achieve major success in South Melbourne. It shut down, owing to many debts, in late 1966. Disappointingly, the AETT could not subsidise the theatre, as it only supported major regional companies (Chance and Parsons 1995, 204). Cherry's company was bold and innovative, and could have survived with Government subsidies that were introduced in 1968.

Government subsidy was a major influence on change in Australian theatre. In particular, this led to the AETT funding actors and directors to travel domestically and internationally, gaining the important skills, knowledge and experience which improved the local theatre. The University of New South Wales began the initiative by forming the National Institute for Dramatic Art (NIDA), creating a learning institution in which the best arts and drama students could hone their skills to take out into the wider community. The establishment of NIDA can be seen as an important step in developing Australian theatre.

Meanwhile, in Melbourne, the UTRC relocated to the smaller Russell Street Theatre from the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne. Likewise, Perth also experienced a new development with the opening of the Playhouse, managed by the Perth Repertory Company. In Sydney, another important infrastructure development came about in 1962 with the creation of The Old Tote Theatre which formed as an offshoot of NIDA. It became so successful that in 1966 owing to the demand of newly graduated NIDA students, the Jane Street Theatre was purchased for use for experimentation with local material and ideas. Above all, this was an important decision as this small theatre marked

Brisbane's notion of the 'beginning' of the new wave period, as it was the first real attempt at providing a theatre specifically for the production of Australian material and to give the 'try and fail' philosophy of Australian theatre a working blueprint.

More importantly, things were starting to develop in Australian theatre at a pace that had not previously happened in the 1940s and 1950s. Robert Menzies retired from his position as longest serving Prime Minister of Australia in 1966. He had seen Australia through one of the toughest periods of economic growth. He committed Australian troops to the Vietnam War in 1965 and reintroduced conscription, both topics of major concern to the new wave generation of theatre practitioners (students) and to Brisbane herself, which she makes clear in her reviews at the *Australian.* With Menzies' retirement came new challenges for Australian society and ultimately a complete backflip from the government on arts subsidy.

The next few developments in Australian theatre came relatively quickly in comparison to the slow state of affairs in the first half of the 20th Century. Dr Coombs in 1967 (as Governor of the Reserve Bank) urged the government to establish a council supported by the Commonwealth so that it could take a more direct role in the arts, in terms of subsidy and administration. The then Prime Minister, Harold Holt, was persuaded by Coombs' argument and announced in November of that year the establishment of a new body, the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA). This Council would be the main arts advisor to the government as well as cooperate with the existing AETT and other government agencies concerned with the arts. The enigma that comes next is etched into Australian history. Harold Holt disappeared, presumed drowned, whilst swimming on 17 December 1967. Holt's agreement with Coombs for the creation of the ACA was taken up by his successor John Gorton. Gorton was well known as being an advocate for the development of film and television rather than theatre, but despite this he pushed through the creation of the

council. In June 1968, the ACA came into effect, attached to the Prime Minister's department rather than as a separate statutory body (Milne 2004, 153). As a consequence, the AETT lost most of its major share of arts subsidy for the theatre, with the ACA taking over that brief.

Hugh Hunt, in his last lecture as the executive director of the AETT in 1959, mentioned that his vision for Australian theatre was to create a string of professional theatre companies located in each capital city, providing a higher standard of theatre. In contrast, ten years later, when Brisbane was working as the national theatre critic, she argued that Australia needed a balance between local and imported theatre, with the former being the preference. As a result, she went looking for new Australian plays that were exemplary and put them into publication years later at Currency Press (for example, Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles*), as well as publishing plays as they were performed. It can be argued that no other country has had such an important figure who witnessed the development of a nation's playwrights and actors, and then had consistent and direct power in putting them into print.

In the 1920s, when the Pioneer Players set out on the path to develop a national theatre, Louis Esson could not have predicted that it would take almost 40 years to achieve. [29] Indeed, now that there was a Commonwealth funding body for the arts, rapid expansion began to happen within Australian theatre. The ACA managed to work together with state governments in developing new buildings and companies for theatre. In doing this, the Council selected three companies – The Old Tote Theatre Company in Sydney, the Melbourne Theatre Company and the National Theatre Company in Perth, to be officially

[29] The Pioneer Players was an amateur dramatic company, founded in 1922, that included Louis Esson, Vance Palmer and Stewart Macky. The Australian Performing Group cited the Pioneer Players as in important model for their operation in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Chance and Parsons 1995, 442).

recognised as state theatres whilst convincing Adelaide and Brisbane to develop their own legislative bodies to help provide theatre (Brisbane 2009, 396). This was the first time in which nearly every state in Australia had its own professional state theatre company. The new Council also set up regulatory guidelines for subsidies based on a non-profit system that provided (for the first time) base award rates to performers. Whilst the rapid change spelt good news for the established theatres, it also had negative consequences, leading to the restructuring and eventual closure of many smaller amateur companies that were forced out by competition. This in turn led to the downturn of 'community' theatre in Australia. Despite this, new theatres were established in their place that ironically shared the same value structure of growth, education and nationalism. The difference was simply being able to apply for ACA subsidy.

With this new power came the ability to influence what was being performed on the Australian stage. The ACA began to regulate what they perceived to be constructive for developing Australian theatre, having control over a budget of over $1.7 million in 1968-1969 that accounted for an incredible 46% of arts subsidy in Australia that year (Milne 2004, 153). As a result of this influence, the ACA chose to provide funding to theatre companies that presented Australian material. Accordingly, this created an environment in which theatre companies were rewarded for producing Australian plays, thus allowing the material to penetrate into regular seasons and gain exposure from Brisbane operating as national theatre critic.

The flow of subsidy also saw the formation of a counter-theatre in Australia. These 'alternative' theatres were developed in the late 1960s, also benefiting from the creation of the ACA. Moreover, alternative theatre gave practitioners the opportunity to experiment with the stage and scripts, inadvertently providing a gateway for some of these innovations into the mainstream later on, when health and safety regulations led many of these

experimental theatres to close in the 1970s due to lack of adherence to fire and safety requirements of the *Theatre and Public Halls Act* (1908).

4.2 Brisbane and Theatre Subsidy

Brisbane identified the problems that were prevalent within Australian theatre at the time, thus bringing them to the forefront of public attention. To demonstrate this, her articles on theatre funding and subsidy present her view of the role of the two major Commonwealth subsidizing bodies within Australian theatre, the AETT and the ACA. In her article entitled 'Bring us a Diaghilev!' she articulated her disappointment at the newly formed AETT:

> Dr Coombs and his Elizabethan Theatre Trust are disliked and distrusted by members of the performing arts to an extent which is only partly understood by the man who buys their theatre tickets. The reasons include the monopoly of the Government moneys, the domination of performing rights and employment opportunities and the autocratic decisions made in Sydney about subsidised programmes without sympathetic consideration of the local conditions. (Brisbane 1967, 9 Dec)

This illustrates that Brisbane was not afraid to be outspoken against the newly created ACA, giving a better understanding of who was controlling the money and where it was likely to end up. Brisbane adopted a watchdog persona when it came to the ACA, scrutinizing their every decision then reporting them to the public when they failed to do their job correctly or when she believed they made a poor decision.

Furthermore, in her article 'Help for the Top Dogs', Brisbane analysed the Council's first budget which called for the need to establish two companies of national importance located in Melbourne and Sydney:

> It is naturally a disappointment to many theatres which are struggling against poverty that certain others have been selected for comparative riches. But it is only by raising the standard at the top and breaking down the barriers between the theatres that we can give the artistic talents in this country room to express themselves. And [sic] by setting a higher standard than we have had in the past will directly raise the prestige and influence of the whole profession. (Brisbane 1968, 14 Dec)

Specifically, Brisbane is questioning those who directly received the bulk of the Commonwealth money. She asks whether they are indeed worthy recipients of such

funding when other smaller companies are struggling. Accordingly, Brisbane understands that there is a general consensus towards improving the theatre with the outlay of subsidy from the ACA but believes they need to consider both the major and minor players in Australian theatre.

To add to this, Brisbane outlined her own standpoint on improving the theatre, calling upon the better spread of money from the top down and the need for state governments to take more responsibility when it came to their own theatre:

> The bricks and mortar of theatre do not seem to me to be a responsibility of the Commonwealth. I do not see why the taxpayer of Whyalla should pay the debts of a community theatre in Western Australia. But if Western Australia has one actor whose promise is being wasted, then it is a national responsibility because his career might well have a profound effect on the quality of the whole profession. But just as we need long-term goals, so we need short-term practical assistance. (Brisbane 1968, 26 Dec)

In particular, the 'short-term assistance' that Brisbane refers to here is the money provided by state governments to develop smaller community and amateur theatres that were not covered by the scope of the ACA, and that were not receiving funding. These are the theatres that she believes to be the backbone of a developing national theatre.

In addition, Brisbane presented in her reviews a feature article on the status of theatre subsidy at a state and Commonwealth level. An expression of her passion towards shaping theatre subsidy can be seen in the article 'But Drama may Still Die' where she tackles some bigger issues:

> The Commonwealth and the State Governments in NSW are at present immersed in boiling water over this question. The Commonwealth, in its eagerness to sweep aside the old product and make theatre a happening place again has allocated the bulk of its subsidy money to two State theatres and reserved $160,000 for the special projects by the others. This decision was followed hotly by the NSW grants which followed the same pattern, giving the bulk of its money to the same State theatre, the Old Tote, and leaving other smaller Sydney theatres for dead. (Brisbane 1969, 4 Jan)

Again, the same argument is outlined. Smaller theatres are being 'left for dead' in the current grant scheme and made to apply for the $160,000 left in the special projects

scheme. More importantly, Brisbane is supporting the smaller theatres in this article and speaking for them as they have no other voice in this process.

Not content with questioning the Commonwealth, Brisbane calls out the NSW state government for overcomplicating the theatre subsidy process and being ignorant of the greater needs of the theatre community:

> The politicking behind this fight for subsidies has been complex in the extreme and the result of so much fighting for individual interests has been a thorough confusion between long-term goal power politics, and short-term first aid. The real failure and cause of the present chaos must firstly be laid at the feet of the NSW State Government for failing to set down a proper policy and for changing horses in mid-stream without proper notice to the passengers. The three passengers in Sydney are the Independent, the Community and the Ensemble. The first two have been tempted into debt with expansion projects by previous State grants and are now further in the red than they were without the grants. (Brisbane 1969, 4 Jan)

In particular, the state Government of NSW has created a problem and Brisbane is exposing this predicament. Brisbane continued to follow the problem of subsidy and the inadequacy of the NSW Government and the Australia Council over the next three weeks of her reviews (Jan 11th, 18th and the 25th).

The consequence of this subsidy failure by the state Government of NSW is clear. Brisbane argues that if the theatre is not diverse enough, people lose their jobs:

> Now whatever the differing opinions about the quality of the theatres' work may be, they represent a living and a freedom of choice for Sydney actors. Most of those who had expected to work there will now join the Tote, go jackarooing, go back to television, or the theatre restaurants or, if they are lucky, get one of the occasional opportunities in commercial theatre and with it the inconveniences of touring. Theatre can be divided roughly into three categories:
>
> 1. The establishment museum and commercial theatre, which is bound by Government and private backing and its demands of art and commerce.
> 2. The provincial theatres, where the bulk of the industry gets its start, where the policies are inclined to be hit-and-miss and from which anyone with any talent is usually sooner or later discovered.
> 3. The anti-establishment theatre which works in primitive conditions, is dedicated to social comment and new theories and effects, is given to wearing long hair and is where the original young minds of the theatre tend to congregate.
>
> And all of the categories are equally necessary because they offer both employment and freedom of expression. (Brisbane 1969, 4 Jan)

Hence, Brisbane is condoning ‘employment and freedom of expression’ in the theatre by continually questioning the decisions of those in government who provide the subsidy. Again, this is an example of her activism in an ombudsman role, attempting to ensure that all types of theatre are catered for in the new subsidy environment.

Additionally, in the effort to keep the government honest, she argues that all these categories of theatre require some subsidy to keep producing Australian material, thus increasing the value of local theatre available and growing the industry and product. To finish the article, Brisbane’s final statement emphasizes the need to support the theatre and for governments not to merely provide short term solutions to theatre problems:

> But the success of any Commonwealth project will depend on the general health of these theatres and their audiences. Maybe, as my advertising friends say, a theatre deserves to die if its product will not sell. But it will cost a great deal more to start a new one. The Australia Council idealistically hopes to set up the conditions in which a heart transplant is possible but the doctors available have not had much experience beyond appendices. Time and training is needed, and meanwhile medical care for the patient. He has been losing blood for years and may not live to enjoy the new and independent life he has been promised. (Brisbane 1969, 4 Jan)

Here, Brisbane’s overall view of funding policy for Australian theatre is expressed through the metaphor of a blood transplant. This metaphor is apt as it provides the pretext for the changes that helped to support the new wave that was beginning to take off in Sydney and Melbourne at the time. It signals that Brisbane no longer believes that the current system of subsidy works, and that a change in the people who are deciding where the money goes is required, and those with more experience in the area should be promoted to make these decisions (such as herself). She is aware that subsidy has since the inception of the AETT been the driving force for improving the theatre. Brisbane wants Australian theatre to continue to thrive intact and stable without losing many of the smaller theatres that will help in its rise. For this reason, she argues that with good direction and intelligent decisions on subsidy, this is a possibility. In brief, this article is bold and brash, with

Brisbane demanding change on state and Commonwealth subsidizers in her role as the national theatre critic.

Brisbane continues this argument in her article in the next week of publication in the *Australian*. She again calls for the industry to take charge of the subsidy situation in Sydney and force changes for the increase and wider spread of money to the theatres that are struggling. Her article 'Backing a United Front' shows this enthusiasm and direction towards this need for improvement, likening the current state of the theatre industry to that of a wartime environment:

> War is a time many people look back on with nostalgia because it is a time when conflicting self-interests are thrown aside in the face of a common enemy and the mechanics of survival become very clear. For the theatre industry in NSW now, it is a time of war; and already there are signs that in the long term 1969 may be looked back upon as a turning point from which many basic essentials were reassessed. The Sydney theatres which missed out on the State and Commonwealth cultural grants and the actors they have employed have suddenly presented a united front which no amount of persuasion could have accomplished in peaceable times. It seems opportune, therefore, for the industry as a whole to get together and consider the needs of a city of nearly 3,000,000 and its hinterland. (Brisbane 1969, 11 Jan)

The argument presented is clear. Now is the right time for the theatre industry to stand together as one, in a united front for the increased funding and overall development of the Australian arts scene. By standing united against the poor decisions of the state and Commonwealth grant funds, she and the theatre industry are holding them accountable for their decisions and presenting their views clearly about where the funds should be going. Brisbane is aware that now is the time for change to occur and further supports her solidarity with the theatre industry as a whole and her readership by publishing this article. In summary, she is warning that if those in power do not listen, they may find themselves on the outside.

Just as Brisbane was a self-appointed ombudsman for those under the aegis of the ACA, she also kept a keen eye on the deliberations of the AETT. In the late 1960s the Australian

Elizabethan Theatre Trust was still in operation together with the Australia Council in providing subsidy for new Australian material. Brisbane was aware of the responsibility these two bodies held as a stimulant for the overall development of an Australian theatre, and discussed their ongoing contribution in the article 'Big fish in Festival Net'. In this article Brisbane is critical of the time that the Australia Council has been taking to deliver their funding:

> The Australia Council's special projects fund is grinding slowly and, so far, no great rocks have been cracked. Instead, there has been a general chipping away at the mountain of facts and demands, a sobering sifting of the people and the funds available, and a fairly clear realisation that it is going to be a year or two before there are positive signs one way or the other of whether the plan is going to work. (Brisbane 1969, 5 Apr)

Again, Brisbane returns to metaphor to explain the situation. Speed is the key to developing a national theatre and the timing of subsidy is too slow. No great effort seems to be in place, just the slow 'chipping and sifting' by the special projects fund. She continues the article by summarising what the Council's special projects fund is attempting to do within the Australian theatre scene as well as the people who have officially become a part of that subsidy pool. Whilst she speaks positively about the special project fund's aims, Brisbane remains reserved in regards to the contribution of $25,000 from the AETT:

> The fund is the only one of three earmarked for cash grants and has three terms of reference: the commissioning and production of Australian plays; the underwriting for productions of special interest; and the subsidising of means by which children may see theatre of the best quality available. Mr Hall said the sum available would not go far round the whole of Australia and that the more he went into the question of choice, the more complex it became. The Trust would have to choose, for example, between large projected productions of the classics and adventurous experiments in environmental theatre. Some of the applications would call for underwriting to the extent of $10-12,000. So there it is. Those who have been offered help reluctantly admit they are happier than they were, but there is a heavy air of caution all round. (Brisbane 1969, 5 Apr)

In this article she identifies that the Trust is in a tough position; they have limited funds to adequately back any of the production applications that come across their desk for the grant. Despite this, her final comments allude to the fact that she is happy with the current subsidy progress and that some subsidy is better than none: 'The sums are small and the

prospects modest and the largest demands are not likely to be satisfied. But while matters are still so undefined, the way does seem open to those prepared for self-help to help themselves a little – and with enterprise, a little help can go a long way' (Brisbane 1969, 5 Apr). From her review of the special projects fund and the AETTs subsidy, Brisbane is shown to be directly holding these organisations accountable for their decisions in the public light. She is asking for better awareness of subsidy for Australian productions and a greater amount of subsidy to help those smaller 'environmental theatres' who need it the most and have the most to gain from the money.

As a final point, this selection of articles offers evidence of the sustained pressure that Brisbane was able to put on the Commonwealth and state governments at a time when funding for the theatre was not necessarily a priority. It further exemplifies her stalwart position at the *Australian* as more than just a title, and is evidence of the commitment and professionalism that Brisbane brought to the role.

4.3 Jane Street and La Mama

As discussed previously, Brisbane stated that the early ripples of the new wave began around the time of the development of the Jane Street Theatre in Sydney, funded by the Old Tote Theatre in 1966 as a place for experimentation with local material and a teaching space for NIDA graduates (Brisbane 2009, 395). However, Jane Street was originally funded by a strange investor − a $12,000 grant was supplied by the Gulbenkian Foundation and a season of Australian plays was performed**,** featuring some well-known directors such as John Clark, Jim Sharman and Robin Lovejoy. This strange adventure into Australian theatre (only one of the plays – *A Refined Look at Existence* was considered a success) proved to be unfruitful as the season lost quite a large amount of money (Milne 2004, 124). Notwithstanding this heavy loss in the first season at Jane Street, it was clear that something was changing within Australian theatre, in both the process of creation of a

new theatre from an established one and the commissioning of playwrights for theatre who had experience in other areas of the arts. This initial Jane Street project was meant to be a full annual season of Australian plays, but that idea was shelved due to the financial losses from the first plays. Despite this, it continued to be an experimentation point for students of NIDA and produced some original pieces of Australian theatre that Brisbane reviewed.

Melbourne took a vastly different direction in the development of the new wave at around the same time as the changes in Sydney. In 1967, a schoolteacher named Betty Burstall had returned from an overseas holiday in the United States of America. On this trip she had experienced an 'experimental' coffeehouse theatre, which spurred her to bring this concept back to Australia. She purchased a disused factory in Faraday Street, Carlton with the intention of creating a place for experimental poetry, drama, music and film, and for a small fee provided as much coffee as the patron wanted (Milne 2004, 126). Burstall's idea of copying the coffeehouse into the Australian landscape could not have come at a better time as many of the newly graduated students from University were looking for a creative space. As a result, it became a place for those playwrights and actors to grow in the new wave. Furthermore, it became a beacon of light in Australian theatre for Brisbane, as she would constantly review their work and provide insight into the growing movement in Melbourne.

> Burstall named the new space 'La Mama', after the venue she had visited in New York. Unlike the Jane Street Theatre, La Mama held a different view of presenting material, allowing anyone to perform onstage, and featured a much smaller performance space, limited to around 40 people. This was, above all, paramount to the success of La Mama − the immediacy in which the actors and audience were placed was something that had not yet been experienced in Australian theatre (with the exception of the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney). La Mama allowed the breaking down of the fourth wall onstage and

fostered an intimacy with the audience that had not yet been achieved before. The very first production at La Mama was the play *Three Old Friends* (1967), written by Jack Hibberd. At the time, he was a medical student at the University of Melbourne. His second play, *White with Wire Wheels* (1967) was staged there, further exposing him to the world of the theatre. *White with Wire Wheels* featured some founding members of the La Mama and the Australian Performing Group (APG), who later rose to prominence in the new wave period in Melbourne in the 1970s. After its success at the University of Melbourne, Hibberd brought the play to La Mama in February 1970, gaining him further attention as a playwright in Victoria.

Although Hibberd provided a lot of the new Australian content coming through La Mama, many other new playwrights provided local material. Between 1968 and 1970 these playwrights included Alex Buzo, John Romeril and David Williamson. Their plays dealt with issues concerning the Australian male and masculinity, focussing on urbanised lifestyles and attitudes (Milne 2004, 128). As a result, La Mama is considered to have been mainly a theatre for playwrights rather than actors as it provided this platform for experimentation. Arguably Hibberd gained the most from La Mama, as he was the resident playwright of that theatre and went on to become a founding member of the Australian Performing Group.

4.4 The Australian Performing Group

Furthermore, after the early success of La Mama in 1967 and 1968, a group of actors who were associated with many of its early performances decided to set up acting workshops every Sunday to help develop their talent. What set these workshops apart was that they were based upon new theoretical movements − including writings from the *Tulane Drama Review* in the effort to create a physical style of acting (Milne 2004, 127) that suitably

matched the dimensions of the space that they were working in. Known originally as the La Mama Group, they staged new local material throughout 1968, 1969 and 1970 from many Australian playwrights and began to gain a reputation nationally as a distinctive theatre company, leading to them being invited to perform a season of plays at the Festival of Perth in 1970. They managed to attract the specific attention of the national theatre critic Katharine Brisbane, who took the group seriously in her reviews of their new productions and praised the group for their new direction. [30]

It was around this time that a name change was enacted from La Mama Group to the Australian Performing Group. The APG was beginning to feel that La Mama was not an adequate performance space for the increasing scale of their productions. A new location was the only option that seemed viable for the continuation of the APG and for larger productions to take place. A new space was purchased near La Mama in Drummond Street, dubbed The Pram Factory (paying homage to the factory's previous use as a manufacturer of prams). Accordingly, this new performance space provided the APG with a new identity as well as a new style, and they quickly moved to release themselves from financial co-dependence with the New Theatre organisation that originally paid the rent on the property. Furthermore, the APG grew to create a larrikin theatre that was rough around the edges. This was the type of theatre that Brisbane supported, becoming 'a vociferous and enthusiastic champion of Australian plays, and an articulate chronicler of the larrikin theatrical style of the early 1970s, which she saw as distinctly Australian' (Chance and Parsons 1995, 103). Despite this reputation of being among the best within Australian theatre, they experienced troubling issues closer to home. Geoffrey Milne recalls the initial period in which the APG operated:

[30] As discussed in chapter 5.

> The APG was alternative in its company structure as well as in its content and actor-audience relationship, preferring a collective without an orthodox artistic director responsible to a board. All decision making was effected by the full collective, which met monthly and delegated responsibility for individual productions (once approved) to a project group, although day-to-day management was vested in an administrator, John Timlin. At its worst, the system was very cumbersome and a number of worthwhile projects never got up, but at its best the collective produced some remarkable work. (Milne 2004, 132)

More importantly, regardless of the infighting and the dominance of some group figures, the APG still managed to produce many premieres of Australian plays at both La Mama and the Pram Factory. They effectively set the trend for other emerging theatre companies to follow.

In contrast, the difference between success in Melbourne and Sydney can be seen in the example of Williamson's *Don's Party*. It was first staged by the APG at the Pram Factory in 1971 (Varney 2011, 32) to somewhat mixed reviews before it moved to Sydney and underwent a rewrite by Williamson with help from John Clark. The version of the play that exists today owes much to the rewrite, and arguably Clark helped make Williamson's play commercially viable in Sydney and in the rest of Australia. Brisbane reviewed both productions and found them both to be worthy of positive reviews but indicated that she preferred the Sydney version. As a result, she chose the rewrite to be published by Currency Press and this version is the one that is still in print today.

4.5 Formation of the Nimrod

As discussed earlier, the APG were proving a resounding success in Melbourne. In Sydney, such changes were also occurring. After the lacklustre performance of the Jane Street Theatre in its initial 1967 season, the whole project was put on hold. The Old Tote was then brought into the project and took over in 1968, incorporating over half a season specifically tailored for Australian plays. The real breakthrough in Sydney came from the Jane Street theatre in 1970 with the play *The Legend of King O'Malley*, written by NIDA lecturer Michael Boddy and ABC writer Bob Ellis (Milne 2004, 130). The play was a

challenge for a group of third-year NIDA students to perform under the watchful eyes of John Bell as director, who had recently returned from overseas. The play opened in August 1970 and proved to be an instant sell-out at Jane Street. Milne believed it 'blended vaudeville and music hall, fact and fiction, street theatre-style characterisation, simple imagery and songs with social and political satire. [*The Legend of King*] *O'Malley* was larrikin theatre at its best' (Milne 2004: 130). Brisbane too lauded the production and gave it a stellar review, citing the play as one of the best examples of Australian theatre:

> I suppose there was something about it that I was looking for, then I saw the early stuff at la Mama and then I saw some of the *Legend of King O'Malley* and that is the one that defined [it for] me, going into that little Jane Street theatre which only held 100 people and they had all the cast doing circus tricks in the foyer and Kate Fitzpatrick with a snake around her neck. You know, there was all this activity and physical activity going on, and satirical behaviour really. Then the play itself is like a musical, it has got a presentational style, we all thought that Naturalism was the only kind of theatre, the only kind of serious theatre that we had and entertainment with American musicals and English comedies. But in fact vaudeville, struck me, it was a real local entertainment which was original to us because the acts were all original to the performance, the gathering of them together and the presentation. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 13)

This play was a seminal event for Australian theatre and for Brisbane as a critic. It heralded the new, as Australians had a theatre of their own that they could be proud of and show off to the rest of the world on the international stage.

The Legend of King O'Malley was then produced on a larger scale at Kensington's Parade Theatre before embarking upon a national tour of Australia. Despite the strong success of *O'Malley*, Jane Street failed to produce the same result again as the previous years had elicited (McCallum 2009, 137). As a result, the popularity of *O'Malley* spurred the development of a new theatre to capitalize upon its success, that being the 'Nimrod Theatre'. John Bell and Ken Horler were the two minds behind the Nimrod Theatre, located in Kings Cross, and formed shortly after the formation of the APG in Melbourne. The Nimrod initially began as a competitor to The Old Tote, producing similar Australian material to that of the Jane Street Theatre. It had begun its life as a stable and with the help

of some financial backing it was quickly converted into a small theatre seating around 140 people. Meyrick described this theatre as an 'artful piece of compromise', being a place of style and innovation in an era when theatregoers in Sydney began to look for something different (Meyrick 2002: 24). Brisbane reflected upon the theatres that were operating in Australia during the 1970s in a recent interview:

> There was not much else really, the mainstream theatres, well they had the Old Tote and the Melbourne Theatre Company, were doing sort of very domestic plays. The Tote did some kind of advanced things like little European plays and things like that, they were very tentative about doing anything Australian and when they did they didn't get a very good audience so they were reluctant. It took them quite a lot of time until with the arrival of David Williamson things changed, they had suddenly found somebody whom they could patronize and who would make money for them at the same time. The Australian Performing Group in Melbourne and the Nimrod Street Theatre in Sydney – both spinoffs from La Mama and Jane Street – opened their doors in 1970 and became the home of the new wave. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 13)

In reflection, Brisbane states the importance of the period in the theatres wanting to make money from their plays and unwillingness to take a risk on a loss with Australian plays. It also shows the unstated nature of Australian playwrights and the difficulties in getting an Australian play performed. Once Williamson and Hibberd began to gain national and international success, this process became easier and theatres more willing to take a chance on untested plays. The investment from the older theatres also gave Brisbane the impetus to continue to sell Australian plays in her column at the *Australian*.

4.6 Brisbane's influence on Theatre Infrastructure

Brisbane was also aware of the poor state of theatre infrastructure and believed that it was necessary to identify this issue in her reviews, notably in her article 'A Stage too Grand for the Students?' In particular, she argued that no form of theatre could continue to travel around Australia without the support and maintenance of its performing spaces, whether community based or professional:

> By which I mean that our established theatrical organizations without exception are housed in temporary, outdated or badly designed theatres. On the other hand, non-

> theatre groups like educational institutions and RSL clubs have taken the lead in a nationwide fashion for auditorium building. And again without exception they are marred by some glaring practical fault which any stage manager, had he been asked, might have avoided. (Brisbane 1968, 20 Jan)

In this article Brisbane is using her experience attending these theatres to draw attention to the fact that the location and state of infrastructure is also an influential factor in the growth of the theatre nationally. As a result, she argues for a change in infrastructure policies to allow the development of new theatres, built expressly for theatrical organisations, with considerations of stage design to avoid the mistakes of previous theatre infrastructure.

Brisbane provides further direction for updating theatre infrastructure in her article 'Farewell, Sweet Tiv':

> What is planned to rise where the dome of crumpled cupids falls sounds like the most encouraging idea for theatrical real estate for this capital since the olden days when the Opera house was an optimistic dream. And those behind it are not Government officials with a vague sense of responsibility towards nebulous culture but the proper patrons of public entertainment, commercial private enterprise. (Brisbane 1968, 7 Sep)

In particular, Brisbane argued strongly that those older theatres with no perceived value to the theatre anymore should be demolished and replaced with better infrastructure, designed and managed by those who have an understanding of the theatre. The Tivoli was an historic theatre building that Brisbane felt offered nothing more to the theatre, so she did not spare her time to defend the building from demolition. There was limited public opposition and the theatre was demolished in 1969, but disappointingly, no new theatre was rebuilt on its site.

In contrast, Brisbane provided positive support when the theatre sector was taking steps that she believed would improve existing theatre buildings. Her article 'The Invincibility of Major Biggles' shows her support of the newly created Nimrod theatre out of 100 year-old stables:

> Sydney theatres are just now going through one of the worst periods, probably, since the war. All but a handful have burnt down, been pulled down, are being threatened with demolition, or are facing bankruptcy or insubstantial promises of new buildings. But when the burdens seem the heaviest someone usually gets out from under and comes up smiling. In this case a new theatre has opened up in Kings Cross which promises to update the face of Sydney theatre 20 years. It is the Nimrod Theatre Club, handsome 100-year-old former stables, which last week opened its doors with its Biggles show. (Brisbane 1970, 12 Dec)

The Nimrod was the direction that Brisbane believed the theatre should be taking, improving the face of theatre in Sydney and providing hope in a time when many older theatres were being removed. This theatre is an important landmark that requires the *Australian* reader's attention and support to survive the then purge on remaining small theatres in Sydney. Brisbane identifies that the Nimrod theatre is the doing the best in a losing situation, and that it has a legacy to protect in Sydney. This theatre's importance in remaining afloat is key to Brisbane, as she continually revisits the Nimrod theatre in later articles at the *Australian*, discussed further in Chapter 5.

Brisbane also extended her argument to include theatre infrastructure that provided entertainment services, such as the Doncaster Hotel and the Music Hall, both located in Sydney. She justified reviewing the productions that these theatres offered by virtue of the mere fact that they existed, as well as the difference in their offerings compared to those of the 'professional' theatre at the time. Brisbane understood that the theatre restaurants were a different place for people to experience live theatre. She also argued that for this entertainment to be successful, it had to be done well, as the Music Hall has done. She outlines this further in the article 'Where the Villain is Hero':

> But the audience was happy, and it occurred to me that what was distinctive, even unique about this form of entertainment was its egalitarianism and disorganised anti-authoritarianism. What the audience liked was that they could give as good as they got. It takes a strong man to go into such a coliseum and show he never doubts he can beat the lion. Australians like a fighter with the odds against him, and people like Ron Frazer, Ken Lord and Stanley Walsh understand this. The Music Hall show is a very sophisticated incorporation of these characteristics and it relates the genealogy of Sydney's Kings Cross today. The audience understood it. There are not many Australian theatres which can offer fare you cannot get anywhere else but the Music Hall is one of them. (Brisbane 1970, 9 May)

Brisbane acknowledges that this type of theatre appeals to every man and is an opportunity for those who would not usually attend the theatre to partake in a night's entertainment whilst also being a part of the show itself. Both the audience and the actor gain from the theatre experience. For that reason the theatre 'restaurants' are afforded a good review from Brisbane, as in her experience she felt as though they provided a completely different and enjoyable experience of live theatre that accurately reflected the society at the time. Additionally, she offers an overview of what is on offer from both the Doncaster and the Music Hall but makes no attempt in the article to critique the standard of the production as she would in a regular review of a new piece of theatre.

To conclude, this analysis of theatre infrastructure and subsidy in the early 1960s and 1970s has identified the important changes that were occurring in Australian theatre at the same time as Brisbane's rise to the national theatre critic position. It has shown that Brisbane, as the national theatre critic, was the right person at the time to help guide the emerging subsidy policies and theatre infrastructure and provide a voice for those in the industry. Brisbane, through her support of the smaller theatres, showed that she was willing to take the fight directly to the decision makers and force them to adjust quickly to the changes that were taking place during the new wave. This is something that Brisbane continued to do in her time as the national theatre critic up until she retired from the position in 1974. Brisbane was in the unique position at the time of subsidy and infrastructure changes and was one of the few people in the field that had a national readership. She chose these issues as they were important to her at the time and reflect the period's disinterest in investing in the future.

CHAPTER 5

Brisbane at the *Australian*: Patterns in Australian theatre

In mid-1967 Brisbane applied for the position of the national theatre critic at the *Australian* which was just beginning its life as a national daily newspaper. This is a most interesting period in her development as a figure to be reckoned with in Australian theatre**,** but also importantly one in which she developed her own unique style of criticism in reviewing the theatre. From her position, she was able to tackle the big issues that were affecting growth in the theatre, at the same time fostering a growing interest in Australian playwrights, plays and actors. Brisbane became one of the figureheads of the Australian theatre boom throughout the new wave. This chapter aims to identify and analyse what her criticism achieved, the audience she was writing for, and the similarities and trends in her writing at the *West Australian* and the *Australian.* I will focus on a sample of her critical reviews during the period from 1967 to 1974. This chapter also seeks to discern a pattern in Brisbane's writing for the *Australian*: her identification of an issue that affected the theatre; the presentation of various instances of the issue, be they negative or positive; and finally a direction or a path forward to resolving the issue presented. Brisbane aimed to target key problems in Australian theatre and encourage change in the effort to foster growth in theatre and guide the Australian theatre through the new wave period.

5.1 The *Australian*

The brainchild of Rupert Murdoch in 1964, the *Australian* was envisioned to create a position at the top of the publication chain in Australia. Murdoch wanted to provide a national newspaper that 'would not seek to imitate the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Age,* but would eschew state politics and the entrenched provincialism of the established press for a wider, more liberal readership' (Cryle 2007, 51). Murdoch argued that the newspaper

should be published in Canberra 'on the grounds that the capital city was the culminating point of much of the administration and political activity in the nation' (Cryle 2007, 50). Whilst this was a bold decision, it would come to be a weakness of the smaller newspaper as Murdoch found it difficult to circulate the newspaper outside of Canberra in Sydney and Melbourne, being as he was, for such purposes, completely reliant upon air transport. Canberra's weather often prevented Murdoch from delivering the printing matrices (known as mats) of the *Australian* to these major capitals. This in turn led to delays in printing and in some cases prevented the newspaper from publication outside Canberra at all, even with the presence of Murdoch at the airport in his pyjamas urging the pilots to take off in poor weather (Cryle 2007, 53). Murdoch decided to relocate the *Australian* to Sydney in early 1967 to improve productivity and distribution of the newspaper (Cryle 2007, 58). Subsequently, the *Australian* quickly rose in popularity as other newspapers could not match the distribution and daily delivery in major cities that Murdoch had organised. Whilst working at the paper, Brisbane did not appear to have a direct working relationship with Murdoch, rather working directly with her editors.[31]

Among the staff of the relocated newspaper was Brisbane, and in mid-1967 she took over the role of national theatre critic from Francis Evers. Evers, whom Brisbane described as a solid critic, a 'lean Irishman perpetually wrapped in a navy overcoat' (Cryle and Hunt 2008, 91) had been the newspaper's theatre critic since it started in 1964. In his time as national critic, Evers did witness some of the changes that were beginning to occur in Australian theatre – most noticeably the rise in student theatre which he was sent to review, helping in turn to foster the next generation of young practitioners. Evers' presence was seen by them as a positive influence on student theatre being taken seriously in

[31] Brisbane discussed this time further in a recent symposium on her time at the *Australian* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrN-t6FfXc0).

Australia. This demonstrated the power of the national theatre critic role and the ability to shape the field of Australian theatre through reviews.

Brisbane, in her new role, soon discovered that the life of a national theatre critic was one of travel. Brisbane travelled interstate to cover the widespread national theatre landscape as well as create new contacts in the city and country, as she had done at the *West Australian*. She took up the challenge she set herself to 'galvanise the energies of the theatre community across the country', being paid the considerable amount of $75 for two articles a week' (Cryle 2008, 92). Accordingly, Brisbane's position, her reviews and the new wave of theatre that was to come, all played a part in allowing her to achieve this goal.

5.2 The Critic's Role in Australian Theatre

Firstly, Brisbane quickly came to the realisation that if she wished to 'gain national readership, then my columns must be of national interest' (Brisbane 2005: 2). She wasted no time in gaining the attention of a national readership by addressing her own ideals about the role of a critic in her first article for the *Australian.* This was entitled 'The role of the drama critic: selectivity must follow satiety'. More importantly, this article focuses on her critical style for her readership. Brisbane outlines her own perspective on the critic:

> What purpose does a critic serve? What makes him so influential? Let me say at once that although I believe the critic to be a good servant of the theatre, 10 years' experience has shown me that where it hurts most, at the box office, he has very little influence. (Brisbane 1967, 3 Jun)

This statement gives an important insight into the purpose of a critic. Brisbane imagined her role as a critic as a conduit between an audience and a professional interpretation of theatre, rather than as someone who had the power to sway the box office profits or destroy a production with a negative review. It is worthy of note that Brisbane is also

limited to the use of the male pronoun as convention for that time period. Thus, Brisbane comparing her reviews to those of Radic and Kippax at the time, later reflected:

> I went there when I could gather three or four shows to see at once. I would do that so I don't think that my reviews have much impact on the box office, whereas theirs did. Sometimes the play was about to close when I had gone to see it but I would find something to say that added to my general argument about where the theatre was going and, of course, I didn't see everything. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 10)

Specifically, Brisbane was attempting to 'remain remote from the turmoil of creation in order to better judge it' (Brisbane 2005, 3). She used the new wave theatre as a way to gauge what direction the theatre was heading towards, and her reviews complemented what trends and issues that she believed to be driving change. A critic, by providing this service, should be impartial and objective and have a wealth of experience to distinguish what makes theatre attractive to audiences. Furthermore, Brisbane advocated that learned discrimination is the key to a successful theatre critic:

> Whatever their tastes, they must remember that the public is being asked to pay money for certain goods and deserves protection. The critic's personal taste is a yardstick in evaluation but beyond that he has only the standard set by the theatres themselves. (Brisbane 1967, 3 Jun)

Additionally, the critic also shared a bond with their audience in determining the difference between good and popular theatre. Brisbane provided her own point of view on this question, establishing the baseline for her audience to understand her perspective, and the particular importance of timing for Australian theatre:

> Then there is the matter of what is "good" theatre. Why is it for so long there has been a dichotomy between "good" and "popular" theatre? Many critics have come to despise commercial theatre, others aggressively prefer it. It seems to me that box-office success has less to do with quality than opportune timing. If I may be allowed a wild generalization, the theatre which has come down to us as "good" has all been successful with the audience which created it. Much good theatre well done has failed because the time was wrongly chosen. Much ephemeral work has succeeded because the time was right. (Brisbane 1967, 3 Jun)

Moreover, Brisbane examined again this issue of the critic in a later article entitled 'The Critic as Advocate', presenting a comparison of her role as a critic and journalist to that of Oscar Wilde's, as presented by him in *The Critic as Artist* (1890):

> The great weakness of criticism in Australia is that it is not in itself a profession. Journalism is a profession. But to be a critic is to write a column in one's spare time. The amount of irresponsible criticism on current affairs, politics and the arts in Australia in the Press and other media can be laid to the fact that full-time professional skills are not brought to these options. Very few of our critical columnists have taken up the challenge of their changing role or the opportunities that lie behind a simple discussion of work. (Brisbane 1971, 10 Jul)

Once can identify that Brisbane agrees with the struggle of balancing a critic's role with that of the journalist, seeking to validate her role as the national theatre critic. For her, the lack of critical culture that existed per se in Australia was a major problem that needed to be addressed. Moreover, her position at the *Australian* was only part-time, which further adds to the argument to employ full-time critics to redress the 'irresponsible criticism'.

Furthermore, these examples of Brisbane's reviews outline her determination in developing her own position as national theatre critic, and impressing upon her readers the need for and also her commitment to professionalism and impartial judgement in reviewing. Above all, Brisbane identified what she believed to be the qualities of the newspaper critic in the article entitled 'Where the Bigot Outruns Reason':

> A good critic is one who can keep his emotions, as well as his head, intact. If he writes with anger it is because something that is precious to him has been or is being in some way despoiled. A newspaper critic, unlike more sober forms of criticism, has no obligation to be right, only to be honest; and we do sometimes confuse our roles by a guilty feeling that we should be academic. Our primary duty is to lead as wide an audience as possible towards making their own judgements, not to tell them now and forever what they should think. (Brisbane 1968, 18 May)

In particular, Brisbane argued that the critic must use their academic and theatrical background liberally. Reviews must give each production an equal chance, based on the merits and the type of audience that it was intended for. Brisbane attributes this characteristic to Martin Esslin:

> That's right. I think it's important to try and explain what the 'thing' is for the reader to understand, whether it's their kind of thing or not…whether it's important or not or whether it's a disgrace. Martin Esslin said to me one day, he told me a story about when he was writing occasional reviews and he was asked to go and see a play in a basement somewhere. He was a bit miffed that he was asked to do something slightly undignified for a dignified man, but he went and he thought it was awful. He thought that the play was awful, the director was awful and the actors were awful and he went home feeling angry about why he been asked to do this. And then he thought to himself: how did this thing get onstage? Someone must have seen enough good in the play itself, the script; a director must have agreed to direct and the actors must have agreed to play in it. So what was it *that they saw in it*? That's my job to define what this is before I'd tell them that it was a failure and that has stayed with me all my life. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 24-25)

As a result of such fearless reflection, Brisbane's influence as the national theatre critic was to develop profoundly both through her rapport with the practitioners of the industry and her application of what she believed to be the role of the critic herself. For example, this is identified in her article 'The Jet Set Beast on Stage', in which she interviews Stuart Wagstaff. Brisbane receives an interesting introduction:

> "You don't look a bit as I expected," said Stuart Wagstaff. He was settling down at our table after a sure and steady struggle through the autograph hunters. "How did you think I would look?" "Well, I thought you would have dark red hair in elaborate curls – and be much bigger." "I sound pretty formidable." "You write formidably." Touché. (Brisbane 1969, 22 Feb)

Thus, Wagstaff presents all his misconceptions from reading her articles. He expects a large, red-headed fiery lady who would dominate any room that she entered into. Here he finally meets Brisbane and is taken aback by her appearance and demeanour; she is not of his initial expectation and that has caught him off guard. Brisbane is coolly aware of this and includes this banter as the introduction to her review that week regarding Wag staff's involvement in the Doncaster theatre restaurant. More importantly, Brisbane's inclusion of this banter eases the reader into the article and shows that she is not one to shy away from even taking a shot at herself and addressing how her readership might take liberties in what she looks like from what she writes. Brisbane concludes the article with a summation of the duty of a critic to the practitioners in the theatre industry whilst maintaining her sense of humour towards their meeting:

> He (Wagstaff) admitted having been looking for me ever since my bulldozing review and had been puzzled to my note of invitation, so totally uncharacteristic of this legendary creature with red hair. "Most critics, you see, are afraid to tell the bald truth and when you see in print what you most feared would be said you think: Gee…" Well, praise and blame need to be worth something if a critic is to be of any use at all so I hope Mr Wagstaff likes this piece better than the last. Still, that red wig frightens me. It is like seeing in print what I most fear too. Touché. (Brisbane 1969, 22 Feb)

The reaction from Wagstaff perfectly represents the difficulties in establishing boundaries for criticism, as Esslin discussed with Brisbane in the previous quote. The critic has to provide an adjudication of what they are viewing, and sometimes that perspective can be in stark contrast to what other's believe. The critic treads a fine line between the average theatre goer and the well versed. In the three previous quotes, Brisbane shows her different voices as a critic and her ability to adapt accordingly. In the first, she is seen as accepting of Esslin's approach that all theatre has a purpose and deserves an equal chance. In the second, when she meets someone whom she reviewed negatively, she takes it within her stride and accepts responsibility for her words. In the third, Brisbane reacts to the perception that she is somewhat of an enigma, a 'red wig' behind a national newspaper, dispelling those fears. These perceptions indicate the difficulty in establishing parameters for criticism and that even the truth can be taken as 'bulldozing'. Her writing of what she felt was the unabashed truth would later lead her into the controversy with O'Shaughnessy, discussed further in Chapter 6.

In summary, Brisbane's preoccupation with outlining to her readers her core critical values is something that sets her apart from other newspaper reviewers, critics and scholars operating in Australian theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More importantly, her reviews show that she is prepared to put herself in the public sphere and directly engage with her readers and to explain her own style and traits. These are constant themes in her engagement with her readers throughout her writing at the *Australian*, which she also raised during her tenure at the *West Australian.*

5.3 Social Commentary

Meanwhile, Brisbane also engaged in public discussion of the theatre and the position it was in. She argued that the theatre was a 'social scholar' in operation, an open medium that provided a place to analyse and speak out about pertinent issues in society at the time. For instance, her dual review of *On Stage Vietnam* by Sydney's New Theatre and *Marat/Sade* by Canberra's Repertory Society delves into this notion of just how far theatre can go to create a commentary on the outside world:

> Theatre cannot help being social criticism because its success depends on an audience's common appreciation of a mood or a style, and the most ephemeral piece, if it can unite an audience even for a moment, is making a social comment. These two plays are worth comparing because they represent the two extremes – those committed to battle and those who have withdrawn from it. How successful it is (*Marat/Sade)* in Australia will depend on whether we most need to withdraw from our present perplexities or whether, like the members of the New Theatre, we can find a reason for living. (Brisbane 1967, 17 Jun)

Indeed, taking controversial issues in a politically turbulent climate (such as the Vietnam War) and addressing them in theatre enables an audience to unite in brief moments that shape their own understanding of the world around them. Brisbane used these two examples because they perfectly dramatize to the audience the dichotomy that exists between the worlds shown in media as opposed to the worlds that people experience. Even more, this is what she was arguing made the theatre powerful, giving a voice to those who had none and promoting a change in society where needed. Brisbane exposes the idea of social commentary in theatre to the general theatre population. It is a clever piece of writing that directly shows the power that the theatre can have in influencing the everyday person.

Brisbane used this notion in her reviews for the *Australian* on more than one occasion. In particular, her review 'After 10 years, The One Day still stands up' is an excellent example of such social commentary. *The One Day of the Year* caused controversy in 1960 with the RSL requesting the production be banned from the Adelaide Festival for its negative

portrayal of Anzac Day. Here, reviewing the Independent Theatre's production in 1970, Brisbane questions the play's social impact and remarks on the way in which in a short time alliances can change from generation to generation:

> Time passes and allegiances change and today no one would find Alan Seymour's allegations as shocking as they were thought by some in 1960; nor would they question the writer's right to challenge our history, institutions and character in the way they did in 1960. So it is interesting and pleasurable to see how well *The One Day of the Year* survives, and how much the emphasis has changed inside it. We are less convinced about the importance of Anzac than we used to be and this is part of the growing-up process. We are much more aware of the generational gap and of student demonstrations than we used to be. Instead of being a two-generational search for a national identity, the play has become a much more personal study of a family and its problems, for which Anzac Day is the catalyst. (Brisbane 1970, 18 Apr)

Importantly, Brisbane is referring to the impact of the Vietnam War and Australia's involvement in it and comments on the content of *The One Day of the Year*. Specifically, the play no longer has the same controversial effect that it did in 1960. Brisbane is keenly aware that because of this much of the younger generation does not find the play as significant as it was. She presents both generational views of the play and brings her commentary regarding the play up to the present, arguing that now it appears that it is a study of family relationships interspersed with Anzac Day as the catalyst of the family turmoil. Whilst Brisbane analyses the play for the younger generation she does not write the play off, rather arguing the opposite, that it is enduring and that 1970 is a perfect time to revisit the older Australian plays:

> *The One Day of The Year* emerges clearly as a play which should be in the repertoire of any Australian company. Now we are into the 70's it is time to revive it, along with the Patrick White plays, and *The Shifting Heart* (which, in the odd amateur productions I have seen, has seemed a melodrama with great lusty staying power). (Brisbane 1970, 18 Apr)

The article offers the reader an understanding of the context of the play and further develops Brisbane's activism in her enduring task of developing an ongoing interest in Australian drama in spite of the generational change. It successfully captures a snapshot of

theatre and society in early 1970 and argues for the revival of the Australian repertoire with inclusion of some of the best pieces of theatre that the 1960s offered.

5.4 State Theatres

Just as she paid attention to subsidy issues, Brisbane also focused on state theatre development and the role that it played in improving the standard of theatre nationally. Her upbringing had been an influence in this, as she had grown up in the 'isolated' city of Perth. For this reason, she was especially aware of the problems of theatre located in sparsely populated or remote areas like Western Australia, as seen in her article 'Charlie Brown and Snoopy in the West':

> The theatre profession in Perth worries about its isolation and a major part of the worry is brought about by the irregularity of touring commercial theatre to provide a standard of comparison. But even this has its side advantages, the chief of which is that in the fight for performing rights the West Australian theatres have an almost clear field. (Brisbane 1971, 2 Jan)

Brisbane is here evaluating the unique position that theatre in Perth in fact had by being remote from other major state theatre companies, a situation which was setting the state up as a new force within Australian theatre, including leading the way in performance. Whilst she believed theatre in Perth was beginning to flourish, at the same time in Queensland this was not quite the case. As a result, in line with the ACA guidelines on state theatres, the Queensland Government formed the Queensland Theatre Company (QTC). In her article 'A Small Miracle of Efficiency', Brisbane discussed Queensland's reaction to a new state theatre company:

> But the truth is that, so far, Queenslanders are not taking the QTC to heart. This is partly because Brisbane has not before had a civic theatre company, and one, suddenly imposed by law does not equally suddenly impose a taste for theatre upon its citizens. The company has the odds stacked against it because of its artificial beginning, its high maintenance costs at a time when it can least afford it, and the imposition upon it of a too-public theatre building of which the public has had high but undefined expectations. (Brisbane 1970, 15 Jul)

Brisbane argues the difference between the two states in the fact that Perth already had an established theatre company (Perth Repertory Company) with its own history as well as an established theatre following. Together with this, she argues that a state theatre cannot simply be created out of nothing and expect to carry a title it has not yet earned, which she clearly saw as the case in the creation of the QTC. After identifying the issues that face the growth of the QTC, Brisbane goes on to provide encouragement for its development by applauding the attitude of the fledgling institution in being 'undismayed at the task it has taken on and look[ing] more with sorrow rather than anger upon the reactions of some of its audience' (Brisbane 1970, 15 Jul).

In short, the survival and welfare of state theatres is an issue that Brisbane continually discussed in her articles at both the *West Australian* and the *Australian.* Having been a state critic herself, she was keenly aware that improving the standard of theatre must come from the bottom as well as the top, and that state theatres share some of this responsibility.

5.5 Scholarship in the Theatre

The role of scholarship in Australian theatre was another issue that Brisbane pursued in her articles in the effort to draw attention to the need for improvement. Evidence of this is shown in her article *'*A Perfect Bit of Bourgeois Farce', in which she described her own attitudes towards education within the theatre, as well as the need for all involved in theatre to have a basic level of understanding about theatre and academia:

> Members of the profession on the whole believe that academic theatre must be something too difficult to understand. On the contrary. The study of a play in proper historical perspective – and I reference *The Magistrate* as a good example – is first of all necessary before one can interpret it, before one can gain the confidence to innovate, do away with the conventional paraphernalia and find the direct road of contact with the audience. (Brisbane 1968, 23 Mar)

Subsequently, Brisbane defined precisely what makes accurate scholarship within the theatre, portraying the uses or otherwise of academic scholarship for her readers to consider:

> Scholarship which interferes or intrudes in any way between the actor and his audience – a literal historical reconstruction, for example – is bad scholarship. Every old play has been produced and interpreted differently from generation to generation. It retains its popularity so long as a way can be found to make it popular. When it wanes it is put back on the library shelf until a new generation in a new mood discovers a chord of sympathy. The academic mind on the whole is not a creative one, the creative artist relies on instinct. (Brisbane 1968, 23 Mar)

Thus, Brisbane is describing the relationship between the performance and its audience; each play is written for a specific generation and for a play to remain popular it must speak to each successive generation, or a way be found to make it popular. Brisbane, as the national theatre critic and scholar, was inherently an 'enforcer' of this with the power to influence a generation (or more) of theatre practitioners and audience with her reviews. She could help to make a play popular again if it connected with her and she believed it connected with the generation at the time. One example of this is the continued survival of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), coupled with her acquisition of the play rights and the publication of the '*Doll* trilogy' in the early 1970s. In brief, no other critic was as determined in identifying lack of theatre scholarship as a critical problem in the battle to improve Australian theatre's amateur and professional standards. The articles selected here serve to exemplify her deep understanding of the relationship between performance and the texts themselves, and also the challenge she set her readership to support better scholarship in the production of theatre.

5.6 The Opera House

Brisbane also had a part to play in the building of the Sydney Opera House, designed by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon. Utzon had a grand vision for putting Sydney on the international map and the Opera House was his statement to achieve this idea. The

building of the Opera House began in 1959. By mid-1965, only a section of the building had been completed and the project was running behind schedule. The state Government changed hands from Labor to Liberal and the new Minister for Works, Davis Hughes, began to question Utzon's vision, design and running costs for the Opera House. Utzon resigned as the chief architect of the project in February 1966. The outcry against the state Government's decision was well documented in the media. Brisbane and her husband Philip Parsons had just arrived in Sydney and were swept up by the cause:

> I had already learnt that if you can't know nobody then it's better to know everybody. And that's what I did. Living with Philip, of course, dictated that. He loved the theatre and the people in it. And causes. We had been in Sydney only a few months when we were caught up in the row over the resignation of Jørn Utzon, architect of the Opera House. He and Francis Evers, who was then the theatre reviewer of the *Australian*, wrote several articles on the affair and Philip remained in the trenches for some years, attempting with others to engineer reconciliation between Utzon and the new architects. But that's another story. (Brisbane 2005, 3-4)

Philip tried in vain to reunite Utzon with the NSW Government. Katharine remained supportive of her husband's efforts and even visited Utzon in Denmark. She published an account of this meeting in the *Australian* (27th December 1969) in show of support for him. The article presents Utzon's side of the situation and his reasoning behind the design and building of the Opera House several years after he had been dismissed. It was clear from the article that Utzon still had a passion for the development of the Opera House but also how little information he had about the current design changes. Utzon had lost something he valued dearly but now had a new project to engage him, free from the politics of the Australian Government, that of the Zurich Schauspielhaus. Brisbane, in this article, is cleverly reigniting the debate over the Opera House through restating Utzon's position on the whole situation. Her article argues that this is a man who loves Australia and wants to create an icon that Sydney could be proud of and which would stand out internationally.

In contrast, after 36 years, Brisbane recounts the meeting with Utzon in 2005 and her overall thoughts on the situation become clear:

> At that meeting he described his plans for the interior of the Opera House, which by then he had been prevented from completing. He talked about the movement through the building in terms of a symphony: how in the slow opening movement the audience would walk up his grand Mayan staircase, and enter the foyer, how the colour, grey at first, would gradually increase in volume and variation as one entered the hall and conclude triumphantly as one took one's seat facing John Coburn's great curtain of the sun. All I could think of, as he was talking, was: what on earth do we have to put behind that curtain which could possible fulfil these expectations? For nothing in the theatre ensures failure more certainly than too high of an expectation in the audience. (Brisbane 2005, 347)

These comments show Brisbane's caution on the subject of Utzon and the Opera House. She had been wary even then that Utzon's vision may affect the overall shaping of an Australian theatre by providing a stage that was too grand for the work that was being produced at the time. Australian theatre at the end of 1969 was still in its infancy, and Brisbane was reluctant to accept that our theatre could meet the expectations of Utzon's design at the time. Whilst keen to publish the story in the efforts of reconciliation, she had her own agenda regarding the implications for an emerging theatre as well as the nation's opera. Brisbane and Parson's involvement with Utzon shows an unwavering determination: in having first identified a central troublesome issue such as infrastructure in Australia, they will then provide their support to any solutions that benefit Australian theatre. Without their continued interest in Utzon (in spite of their own reservations about some details), he may have shut himself off from all discussion whatsoever and never returned to Australia. It took 30 years from the time of Brisbane's first article for Utzon to have something to do again with the Opera House. He developed a set of design principles for the building to guide any changes that were made in design for the future, published in 2002. Brisbane's article and interest in Utzon captures the nature of the situation in 1969 and is evidence of her further effort to improve the state of Australian theatre infrastructure and further enhance the standard of opera and theatre on the international stage.

5.7 Administration in the Theatre

Correspondingly, Brisbane also stressed the need for improved administrative policies when coupled with infrastructure development. To demonstrate this, she argued that newly created resources such as 'The Octagon', a lecture theatre at The University of Western Australia, are essentially a waste of time if they are not going to have professional management:

> A building of this importance, which in itself is evidence of an original and far-sighted inspiration, deserves a management policy to do it justice. The university is well aware of this, but they have not yet been able to think of one. But to be successful a theatre must have a well-defined image in the public mind. The Perth public looks to the university as a cultural centre and it would make a pattern if the Octagon became a foil for the Perth Playhouse to relieve it of the trying responsibility of presenting serious plays. (Brisbane 1968, 20 Jan)

Brisbane called for a cultural change in the way that theatre infrastructure, policy and administration work within Australia, using Perth as an example to follow. By creating a stable policy, this encourages new infrastructure for theatrical performance whilst not limiting growth. By regulating theatre infrastructure policy, the overall standard of Australian theatre is improved.

In fact, the requirement for creativity and effective administration within Australian theatre in the late 1960s was a continual occurrence in her writing. Her review 'Are our Cultural Cooks Able to Give us a Good Feed?' discussed this issue, and outlines the importance of good theatre administration to her readers:

> But where in the world are those rare people to be found who have both administrative and artistic taste? I am not saying this facetiously. The problem of administration is probably the most serious in the performing arts today. The requirements of an administrator are to be able to see both the financial and artistic side of the question, to deal tactfully with the people concerned and to recognise when it is worth taking a gamble. He must be a wise man, and often an unpopular one, and that is why his kind are rare. If the proposed new Arts Council, The Churchill Memorial Fund or Sir Richard Kirby's new foundation wish to do something practical for our theatre, the finance to produce a few good theatre managers and cultural organizers would return dividends a hundredfold. (Brisbane 1967, 28 Oct)

Brisbane saw the lack of creativity and inspired decision making on the administrative side of theatre in Australia as detrimental to what the theatre should be providing to its audience. Without these dual qualities, she argues administrative decisions are commonly based upon financial stability rather than taking a chance on Australian playwrights and plays. More importantly, she directly states that this is probably the most pressing problem facing the theatre and the tone of her article stresses the need to redress the situation as soon as possible. Brisbane continued to echo the call for improved theatre administration by outlining the specific characteristics of a good administrator in her article 'Art Needs Business':

> A good administrator is a wise and shrewd man with a political tongue and an iron hand on the budget. The artist's business is to speak the unspeakable, like the child who told the truth about the emperor's new clothes, and if you make him responsible he will give you timid theatre and your box office will die. It follows then that the administrative role is the key one; but for some reason in this country the position is almost without status and is often not considered at all. (Brisbane 1967, 16 Dec)

Brisbane spoke out in this article about the lack of emphasis placed on the role of the administrator, when clearly the position is vital to the overall progression and health of that particular theatre's growth. She consistently urged those in positions of power, including the newly formed ACA, to finance positions attached to major theatre companies across the world so that worthwhile experience was fostered in developing theatre administration**,** with these skills to be brought back into the country to improve the standard of theatre in Australia.

In this vein, Brisbane continued her task of improving the state of Australian theatre by providing direction for theatre administration. In a later article, 'Theatre With the Freshness of Dews', she discusses a theatre in Birmingham that smaller Australian theatres could learn a lesson from:

> If a THEATRE [sic] has a personality, it is not that of the bricks and mortar. If it lacks personality, it is because bricks and mortar is all it is. Good, bad or indifferent, every theatre

> is, no matter how indefinably, the man who controls it – be he the director, administrator or the chairman of the board. In the best small theatres where the power is still at a manageable human level, this man is usually the director; and in the English regional companies it is the peculiar synthesis between the man and his community that brews success or failure. (Brisbane 1970, 3 Jan)

This 'synthesis' was especially true of the Australian theatre throughout the new wave period of the late 1960s and early 1970s and Brisbane was aware of this trend. Jane Street in Sydney and La Mama in Melbourne were places where this was happening. In this article, she is encouraging the smaller theatres to use this connection with their community to their advantage. By producing local theatre they are attempting to 'brew success' in the right theatre environment with an audience who is willing to receive it. Brisbane puts forward Birmingham as just one British example that works and that can be modelled into Australian theatre administration.

Lastly, continuities can be identified between Brisbane's commentaries on theatre administration, infrastructure and subsidy. Without these three being connected and improved, the overall theatre standard in Australia could not grow to its full potential and this would affect the overall flow of the development of theatre. Brisbane was aware of this, and has continually shown through the activism and enthusiasm in her articles that these issues were central ones and needed to be addressed.

5.8 Student Theatre and Censorship

Another area of Australian theatre that Brisbane focused on in her criticism for the *Australian* was that of the growing student theatre sector. She constantly discussed material from the major universities and their associated festivals to examine new trends that were appearing in Australian theatre as well as to identify new talent, although then did not give overtly critical feedback to them:

> The justification for student drama is the opportunity it offers for close study of a play or to experiment with a play of one's own before a captive audience. Many professional actors have come from undergraduate societies, and we could do with

> more academic knowledge in the practical theatre. But to choose something outside his range is essential to a student actor's enjoyment, so it is not sensible for newspaper critics to give student productions solemn critical attention, or blame them for not being better end productions than they are. (Brisbane 1967, 29 Jul)

Whilst Brisbane advocated the freedom of the student to try material that was deemed out of their reach, she also recognised that student theatre should never be judged by professional standards. Being a former student herself, she understood that the nature of student theatre is that of experimentation, as well as providing dramaturgical experience for becoming a theatre practitioner. In her article 'Crisis on the Uni Stage', Brisbane delivered her thoughts on the value of student theatre, asking questions about whether the intervarsity drama festival is worth the effort that goes into its development:

> While I should oppose the channelling of any student creative activity into orthodox lines by well-wishing adults, academic departments have the advantage of constancy. Student theatre has its high and low points and at best it is thoughtful, witty and offbeat; but it can never permanently improve because the state of being a student is so fleeting. (Brisbane 1967, 2 Sep)

The renewed focus on student theatre allowed Brisbane to stay abreast of the values of the younger generation, who were now patronising the theatre as audience members. Her dedication to reporting on student theatre helped to establish a rapport with young theatre practitioners in her position as the national theatre critic. In contrast. reviewing student theatre is no longer common place in Australia anymore.

Another issue that Brisbane was determined to bring attention to was her criticism of censorship. It was the theatres and playwrights that suffered at the hands of censorship laws and during the new wave she found that she was stuck in the middle of a battle to have theatre exempted from the censor's grip. Britain had recently abolished the function of theatre censor; after a thirteen year battle the *Theatres Act* (1968) removed the need for scripts to be licenced by the Lord Chamberlain's office before they could be produced in

the United Kingdom. As in the UK, Australian theatre and Brisbane were fighting a battle against censorship. Crawley explains the state of theatre censorship at the time:

> At the close of the 1960s in Australia, the decade's warring forces of social revolution and reactionary conservatism converged on the local theatre. Each State's Chief Secretary had long held the power to ban plays, but this power had been exercised on relatively few occasions until reforms to the national censorship regime shifted the locus of censorship battles to State officials and local vice squads, who eagerly took up the charge of protecting public morals. (Crawley 2010, 250)

Brisbane actively took her fight with the censor and vice squads by both writing her criticism and physically attending plays that had been considered to breach the law in order to show her support for the repeal of the laws that dated back to the early part of the 20th Century. Cryle and Hunt remark upon Brisbane's attitude towards the censor and the restriction of our freedoms onstage:

> As with the film industry, it was the theatre critic's role on the *Australian* and elsewhere to help convince the more sophisticated public that there really might be an Australian drama. At times, this support constituted a form of activism that advocated freedom of expression in defiance of the censor. At a time when the censorship laws were coming under increasing criticism, Brisbane, for example, helped to organise a free performance of Jean Claude Van Itallie's satirical work *America Hurrah*, which concluded provocatively with 'four letter words' spray canned on the wall at the end of the play. (Cryle and Hunt 2008, 93)

An example of her defiance comes from her article 'Motel of 1000 Guffaws'. Brisbane attended the Sydney production of *America Hurrah,* which was banned under a section of the *Theatres and Public Halls Act* (1908) for the frenzied destruction of a hotel room in Act III of the play as well as the use of obscene language:

> But here I was at the Teachers Federation Theatre, Sussex Street, Sydney, having been partly responsible for inciting to riot 2500 Sydney citizens over a play which, but for a grandmother's unusual interest in a few common graffiti, would have passed by unnoticed by all but the hardened theatre voyeurs in the city. (Brisbane 1968, 24 Aug)

Brisbane analysed her own contribution as a critic by taking partial responsibility for gathering such a large crowd to protest against the censorship of the play from her previous criticism of the act. In publicly showing her support for a censored play, she used her position to exemplify the problem of state Governments intervening in the arts, leaving the theatre stuck in what was then a fight against law enforcement officers. The defiance of

the censor is another illustration of the enduring enthusiasm that Brisbane brought to her job, as well as a display of the power and influence that the national theatre critic could exert if necessary.

It is important to note the work that Brisbane had been doing to repeal theatre censorship laws. In a relatively short time, laws regarding censorship in the theatre were removed. The Old Tote Theatre was the place where the first production of Alex Buzo's play *Norm and Ahmed* was staged on the 9th of April 1968. The now famous offending words (fuckin' boong) were changed in the Old Tote performance to 'bloody boong' so that the play did not offend patrons. Brisbane's review of the original play provides her support for this new piece of Australian theatre with no mention of the play's offending elements:

> The Old Tote is a hot-bed of conservative ideas but this Australian play season is a special case. Good hearted members of the public have subscribed, prepared to risk a less-than-satisfactory evening for the sake of encouraging new thought and it is a betrayal to offer them something that is revived at the moment when it is most old-fashioned. Jim Sharman's production of *Norm and Ahmed*, however, is solidly physical and received a much livelier reception from the audience. The action is a midnight encounter in a city street in which a middle-age storeman presses his company and his hoard of conventional Australian attitudes upon a reluctant Pakistani student. The dialogue is sometimes serious, sometimes satirical and Mr Buzo has skill and subtlety in shifting from mood to mood. The weakness, finally, is that Norm is no more than a collection of attitudes seen at one time and while I found it easy to predict the end of the play from quite early on, when it came it seemed no more than an arbitrary ending. Mr Buzo is one to watch, however, and I look forward to his next piece. (Brisbane 1968, 13 Apr)

Whilst Brisbane's direct feeling towards the Old Tote has been evident in articles prior to this, it is clear in this article that she felt that their play choices were far too conservative and offering a limited agenda for Australian theatre. She is also stating that Buzo is a talented playwright, and he utilises his skill and subtlety to manipulate his audience in a positive way. The inclusion of an Australian play season is the reaction to this criticism and Brisbane affords them an honourable mention for bucking their conservative trend and producing a challenging piece of theatre. The review of Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* puts Buzo directly into the position as the playwright to watch in Australian theatre. Also, she

focusses on identifying where the play is weak and areas to improve upon, a common theme in much of Brisbane's reviews and articles. After the production finished its season at the Old Tote the play was picked up in early 1969 and taken north to Brisbane where it was performed at the Twelfth Night Theatre. The only difference between this production and that at the Old Tote was that the script's original language at the finale of the play was reinstated back to 'fuckin' boong'. The actor playing Norm in Brisbane was (ironically) Norman Staines and he was arrested and charged with using obscene language in a public place. A production of *Norm and Ahmed* a month after Staines's arrest by the Cairns Little Theatre Group in Townsville also received some intervention by the local police force, with cuts to the script happening backstage during the production (Crawley 2010, 248). Staines's case made its way to the Supreme Court where he was found guilty and charged $15 for the original offence and $50 for court costs. The police wanted to make an example out of Staines, appealing the 'soft' decision of the Supreme Court to the High Court. The original decision was upheld and the case was closed. This was the first time in Australia that censorship laws had been exercised to convict a theatre practitioner and public outcry led to the removal of the law after this incident. La Mama presented a production of *Norm and Ahmed* in July 1969 and the police reaction was the same: the actor playing Norm (Lindzee Smith) was arrested and the director (Graeme Blundell) was also arrested on the charge of aiding and abetting Smith in the use of offensive language. Just as had happened in Queensland, both actor and director were found guilty and were fined as well as ordered to pay costs. This case was a news event and brought the issue of censorship within the theatre into the living rooms of Australians, with the emphasis not being on the original uproar at the use of obscene language, but rather on the point that the play in fact was depicting a racist Australian.

5.9 Providing for the Future

As discussed previously, Brisbane sought to provide solutions to the problems that she could see in Australian theatre. She presented the ways in which productions could be improved or modified, highlighting plays that deserved praise. Brisbane's role as the national critic was one of guidance. Her review 'Actors of a New Breed' reflects this holistic value of encouraging the development of Australian theatre overall towards a higher standard, whilst discussing the role of the actor with George Ogilvie:

> We need more such directors and actors who are prepared to find out both what our reality and our dreams are and show us not the thing itself but the distillation within the strict form of the theatre – and then we shall find our theatre has something to say. (Brisbane 1968, 15 Jun)

In this article, Brisbane also reviews *Americah Hurrah*. Her final comment above relates directly to *Americah Hurrah* and the willingness of Van Itallie to be creative whilst challenging the conventions of theatre. This article is important as it shows that Brisbane is cognisant that the theatre was on the cusp of something different. The implications of a theatre that has something to say is a theatre that is willing to openly challenge the norms of the time period and rapidly evolve to suit the style of its audience.

To add to this, she gives her own perspective on the position of Australian theatre at the beginning of the new wave as well as the need for 'communal improvement' for any identifiable progress:

> Australian theatre has so far remained almost untouched by the new wave of theatre abroad which is feverishly embroiled in the chaos and trying to drag from it some recognizable truth. The few productions here have been only partly successful because the secret truth lies not in the script but a completely reverse process: the communal work of firstly the actors, then the director and finally the writer. (Brisbane 1968, 15 Jun)

Brisbane named three directors (George Ogilvie, Bryan Syron and John Tasker) who had received their training internationally. She believed that these three were aware of the need for improvement within the theatre itself and that they were the future leaders of

Australian theatre. Drawing attention to specific practitioners was a consistent trend in Brisbane's articles at both the *West Australian* and the *Australian*. Having a national theatre critic provide individual praise to those in the theatre community helped to foster that individual's work to a higher standard.

Brisbane identified the lack of unity between all involved in the process of theatre making and argued for the creation of infrastructure where Australian theatre could grow rather than be resource restricted. She emphasized this need in her review 'An Odd Duty: to Lose Money':

> What is obviously necessary is a workshop centre where producers and authors can work together without involving the public until a much later stage of refinement than a three week rehearsal period. What those involved in the Australian play season gained from it had no bearing on the public, except in providing reactions that could be gained from an invited audience. (Brisbane 1968, 25 May)

To add to this, Brisbane was also keen to use the workshop environment nationally to develop theatre practitioners and allow new ideas to flourish. In her article 'Discoveries in the Workshop', she provides her own experience of being a part of the first Australian National Playwrights Conference (ANPC):

> The playwrights' conference rehearsals were intended to confront the author with both his qualities and his weaknesses in order that the latter might be disposed of quietly. And indeed the most exciting moments in workshop were those at which failure was uncovered. Each time we faced this failure it drew new illumination of both the writing and the theatre itself and produced free admissions of misunderstanding from the actors, the directors and the writers in turn. (Brisbane 1973, 17 Mar)

Importantly, the theme of failure providing illumination is one that mirrors the new wave period. The ANPC allows practitioners a professional environment in which to fail and develop. Young playwrights present their material in an enclosed trial-and-error environment, allowing better understanding of the script from the perspective of the playwright. This is something that has not been done before in Australian theatre and deserves the chance to further develop. Brisbane further explains that the conference

allowed for failure in the theatre that brought to light the problems in translation from the page to the stage but also new pathways of interpretation that left 'seven writers with a new confidence and a group of theatre people with a new enthusiasm for their profession' (Brisbane 1973, 17 Mar). She saw the establishment of the workshop as an annual event, even with all its failures, as a constructive future direction for the overall development of Australian theatre. As national theatre critic, Brisbane consistently gave issues, such as these workshops, attention on a national level in the effort to increase the standard of Australian theatre being produced and further the development of playwrights, actors and directors in a learning environment such as the ANPC.

Furthermore, in the effort to secure a strong future for Australian theatre, Brisbane is drawing attention to the fact that the smaller theatre organizations were companies to be cultivated, rather than be destroyed. Here, she shows the result of a local community coming to a theatre's aid in the review 'The Pocket Plays Again', and she emphasizes the need to support small organizations that are outside of Commonwealth funding: [32]

> If our theatre is to produce more playwrights, it is in little organizations like this that we will find them – where the materials and ideas are still at human level. The Pocket is very closely identified with the western suburbs' taste and spirit, and this is worth studying and preserving. In order to keep its identity, help must come from inside that community, not from outside. (Brisbane 1970, 10 Oct)

Brisbane brought this theatre to her readers' attention to reassure other small community theatres that there was still hope in preserving smaller theatres that have an identity. Her focus was current, as the Pocket Theatre had been shut down in September 1970 and required assistance from the community immediately. Brisbane argues that the community must take an active approach in this preservation or else these smaller unsubsidized theatres would eventually die off, something which would be detrimental to the

[32] The Pocket Playhouse was a post-war and pre-subsidy amateur dramatic group operating in Sydney. The Pocket closed in September 1970, but was saved by the 'Friends of the Pocket' group. It operated for another three years but closed due to lack of funds (Chance and Parsons 1995, 458).

development of theatre in Australia and is therefore worth addressing before it becomes too late. The fight to preserve small community theatres is featured throughout Brisbane's writings both at the *West Australian* and the *Australian***,** and shows that she was not just aware of national problems in theatre but of community issues as well. It is this dual awareness that allowed her as national theatre critic to speak to every person in the theatre community and not to exclude any sectors, helping to further her prestige as a critic who was interested in the growth of theatre across Australia**,** as well as helping to set her apart from the state and local theatre critics and scholars.

Brisbane continued to use her column to gain maximum exposure for people that were visiting from overseas, or for differing perspectives related to theatre. In particular, she was interested in publishing interviews with influential and famous thespians who were visiting Australia at any particular time. Some examples of these international theatre practitioners include Padraic Colum ('A chat with an itinerant Irishman of many talents', *Australian* 1967, 8 Jul) and Sir Tyrone Guthrie ('A fine sense of occasion', *Australian* 1970, 11 Jul). Brisbane also interviewed local theatre practitioners such as Robin Lovejoy ('The right to make a mistake', *Australian* 1970, 8 Aug). As a result, including these interviews in place of her regular reviews aimed to give her audience a different perspective and keep them up to date with international and local talents. These interviews served to show that Australian theatre was changing and provided insight into the local talent that her readers at the *Australian* may not have been aware of, as well as provide further emphasis on a future for the theatre.

Additionally, Brisbane also promoted in her articles regarding the future of Australian theatre the need for further literature to be published (including magazines and plays) for the public. Brisbane showed an example of this in her article 'A Handbook for Australia's Performing Arts' in which she describes the publication of a new magazine – *Masque*:

> It will no doubt be a long time before the magazine will be enough in control of its financial problems to develop an original editorial policy and we must be patient. But there is enough quality in each issue for the reader interested in the performing arts to make it worth the 60 cents. And the view, even if lopsided, is at least national and the outlook from abroad pertinent to our own. (Brisbane 1968, 20 Apr)

Brisbane supported the new magazine for taking a leading role in developing a stance on the theatre that was somewhat nationalistic, despite the fact that the magazine was based 'entirely upon contributions… lacks an overall style, and point of view' (Brisbane 1968, 20 Apr). Brisbane identified that there were problems with the magazine being influenced by overseas writers but believed that future publications would move away from these contributors and that it provided an important service to Australian theatre. Furthermore, she argued that theatres in Australia must also use this measure in bringing important issues to the forefront of public conscience in the article 'The Drama Which Leapt out Into the Street':

> Theatre wise the point I want to make about all this controversy is that the reason theatre is dying in this country is that the theatres themselves are failing in their duty to the public. Just as some churchmen drive away their parishioners by assuming a solemnity which isolates them from the very people they wish to communicate with, so, too, many theatres make solemn claims to art as a way of disguising the fact that they have nothing to say. When a play that does have something urgent to say is taken up by the people who believe in it, then if the issue means something to the public, the public will seek it out. (Brisbane 1968, 30 Mar)

Brisbane argued that it is the responsibility of every theatre in Australia to provide theatre that communicates with their audience and the failure to do this meant that they were lacking in their duty to the public.

In addition, as previously discussed, censorship was an issue that Brisbane addressed, forcefully and ultimately successfully, opposing it. One outcome of the removal of theatre censorship laws in Australia in the early 1970s was the importation of musicals from overseas. Brisbane was in a unique position as the national theatre critic for the *Australian* as she had been overseas in late 1969 in America and witnessed productions of musicals such as *Hair* before they made their way to Australia. This was important to her own

interpretation of the production and allowed comparison between the New York and Australian productions. Brisbane evaluates what makes the Sydney production stand out from the others she has seen in her review of the local production, 'Our *Hair* is Better Than Most':

> Mr Sharman has in this production a freedom which has not been allowed by the promoters in some other countries and there are some strikingly impressive things. In particular is the Claudè played by Wayne Matthews not as a vulnerable young outsider but as an almost abstract, priest-like synthesis of the draft-age man's moral predicament. The Christ imagery which surrounds him, his ritual sacrifice to the war-governed society and the final impassioned plea from the tribe, Let The Sun Shine In, is a remarkable piece of theatre. (Brisbane 1970, 11 Apr)

In particular, Brisbane identifies what makes Australian theatre unique and in this review it is the freedom that director Jim Sharman exercises in his production. She further comments on his ability to use the technology on hand to its best effect, and importantly the use of bodies hedonistically onstage, while also making a social comment about the way Australians see themselves: 'It is also rather a relief to note that Australians are more used to wearing next to nothing than most people' (Brisbane 1970, 11 Apr). In finishing the article, Brisbane presents her own argument as to why the Australian production of *Hair* is serving to foster our own culture:

> The musical is a natural form of expression for the Australian performer. Our variety houses used to be real indigenous theatre and we can do American musicals way better than the British and the Europeans. If we genuinely want to investigate the roots from which an Australian theatrical culture can grow we find them in such ceremonies and forms of musical expression as you find in *Hair*. *Hair* has been so successful because it grew out of a recognisable culture with an attractive modern philosophy, with an appeal wider than the converts to hippiedom. We must find our own communities. I don't mean that we should copy Hair, which in its present form is already going out of fashion. (Brisbane 1970, 11 Apr)

Brisbane is arguing that the Australian version of *Hair* speaks directly to our culture, and is supported by the performance of indigenous theatre being performed at the time. Brisbane is investigating the roots of Australian theatre through the musical and showing that Australia has a rich indigenous theatre culture that dates back many decades before. To add to this, social and political events are shaping public opinion and forcing further

changes. Australia is involved in the Vietnam War and the younger generation is reacting against involvement. The theatre is a part of that community and this is the argument that she is presenting to her readership. Australian theatre has the opportunity to grow its own culture that speaks to the populace and this is something that has been developing since the beginning of the new wave. In summary, by addressing these issues in her columns, Brisbane is presenting the argument that the theatre is indigenous and growing, as well as that Australia can perform to a higher standard than that of Europe or Britain.

5.10 TV and the Classics

Brisbane also commented on the threat of the emerging television medium in relation to the stage. In her article 'Fighting the Plastic Menace', she revealed her own perspective on the dual nature of the TV entertainer and their use within the sphere of Australian theatre:

> The stage revealed most of these people as much more likeable and interesting than they appear on TV. We talk about our natural talent: but these are not natural – they are highly-trained hard-earned skills of which the TV camera can only make part-use. Most of these performers have kept in touch with live audiences – in the clubs and restaurants which are by far the most lucrative source of employment for an entertainer in NSW. It was clear on Sunday which performers were not equipped to face a crowd. (Brisbane 1970, 7 Nov)

Importantly, Brisbane was adamant that if a performer was to remain successful in their TV form, then they must also stay in close touch with their stage audience, otherwise they would become stuck in a medium that is mechanical in nature:

> My hope is that this fight by Australian TV performers – may it thrive – will shake up this arbitrary division between real people and the plastic screen. Already in Melbourne a handful of TV actors have returned to the boards to make quite a contribution. Our TV artists have to face the cruel fact that in a medium where the audience is a piece of machinery they, too, become part of that machinery. (Brisbane 1970, 7 Nov)

Brisbane knew the depth of Australian talent that existed on both the stage and the TV. Therefore, she challenged Australian actors to remain connected to their audiences and bring their talent back to the stage to improve 'live' Australian theatre in general. If an actor could do this then they would escape the vices of the 'plastic menace' and retain their

cultural roots within the theatre and a direct connection to their audience. This was in the interests of the general public as retaining these actors in live performance would help improve the standard of theatre from the top down.

In contrast, whilst Brisbane was energetically supportive of Australian theatre, she felt that on a national level a balance should exist between local and classical material. Evidence of this feeling comes from her call to establish a national classical company to travel around Australia, performing in every state. In her article 'How to Drive Dad Round the Bend', she argued that this must be of importance:

> In retrospect, it is odd that Australia, in its passion for glamour, should have acquired a national opera and ballet company but no Shakespearian company with an annual subscription series. I have never really approved of Government subsidy for the theatre, because of its vagabond quality which creates its life; but if subsidy must be employed then surely the arguments for a classical repertoire are as great for the theatre as they are for ballet. (Brisbane 1968, 6 Jul)

Hers is similar to the argument put forward by Guthrie, albeit updated to fit the new wave period. By establishing a Shakespeare company, Australia could give audiences a classical repertoire. Brisbane saw this as a way to improve training for our actors so that they were more astute in performing the classics and not only Australian material and characters. This in turn would enhance the Australian actor for the international stage, and develop capacity to pass these skills on to the next generation of performers. Brisbane as national theatre critic stood as a conduit between the actor and their medium and encouraged those actors who had success in TV to remain loyal to the theatre. She also aimed to improve the standard of Australian theatre by encouraging training in the classics with the outlook that this would benefit the local theatre as well in the long run. These arguments are a constant that Brisbane retained throughout her articles written during her tenure at the two newspapers and they show that she was continually interested in the further development of an Australian drama and, specifically here, in the human capital it required.

5.11 Actors

Brisbane constantly asked the question of her readers: what makes a good actor? Her experiences overseas had afforded a world perspective on acting and the theatre. It was from this experience that she developed her own ideas about makes a good actor and what makes a good performance and the distinction between the two. Brisbane adds to this argument in the article 'One-Woman Show', based on the play *The Human Voice*:

> It strikes me afresh almost every time I see her on stage what a remarkable actress Leila Blake is. She does not fit easily into a category and there is a weight about her acting which does not always make her fit easily into a cast. But when she finds a vehicle for herself, such as is to be seen at present at the Q lunch-hour theatre in Sydney, her imagination expands to encompass almost any combination of comic or dramatic circumstances. (Brisbane 1970, 27 Jun)

In this example, Blake's work is heavily influenced by the type of production she is involved in. Brisbane hones in on Blake and her unusual ability to transit between acting roles and not to be typecast as a particular actress. She then goes on to analyse her performance:

> Through each of the implications and revelations, Miss Blake's performance has total concentration, showing us in a way that it totally absorbs the audience for a brief 40 minutes both the dramatic tensions of a drowning woman clinging to a failing lifeline, and the limitations of her character which have led to this predicament. It is a play and performance which has the old fashioned qualities of calculation and mental and physical discipline, and it is worth making the effort to pay the *Human Voice* a visit. (Brisbane 1970, 27 Jun)

Brisbane suggests that Blake's performance is a must-see for her readers. In addition, she dedicates the entire article to Blake, including a production shot of the actor. It is evident that Brisbane is using her role as the national theatre critic to encourage the younger generation of female actors in performance and praise them when they deserve recognition, such as Blake does. This is further evident in her article regarding the opening week of the Sydney theatre season in 1970 entitled 'The Ladies Take Over on Stage':

> First, the Kedrova performance. Her work is a kind of acting which is a rare object nowadays. It is like a brilliant flower arrangement, designed by the careful selection of natural elements, some rich, some simple and built up with the skill of experience to create a dazzling piece

> of living beauty, to be admired because it is patently no longer nature but art. (Brisbane 1970, 14 Mar)

These articles are evidence that Brisbane was keen to support the younger generation of women in the theatre. She achieved this through praise and recognition of individual performances as national theatre critic.

5.12 Isolation in Australian theatre

Isolation was another important theme that Brisbane continued to address at the *West Australian* and at the *Australian.* She had grown up in Perth and was uniquely aware of the isolation from the theatre that both Perth and Tasmania experienced: 'Hobart like Perth is a capital neglected by the mainstream of Australia. It has become used to relying more on self-help than upon the natural congregation of people and opportunity which occurs in the larger cities' (Brisbane 1969, 15 Feb). As a result, their isolation created a freedom that allowed their theatres to grow independently from the other major cities. Brisbane explored this notion further in her article regarding the Perth festival entitled 'Grocers on a Cultural Binge', stating:

> While the imported products are welcomed and enjoyed, for without them it would be no festive occasion, there is a comfortable do-it-yourself atmosphere about the events which surprises and sometimes exasperates visitors who see in the riverside gardens and the summer air of the city the opportunity for a great cultural feast. But Perth, isolated by 1700 miles from the nearest capital has been used to doing things itself without intervention or notice and audiences are attracted by the very familiarity of the way things are done. Dr Coombs on his arrival here recently warned Perth that in accordance with the Australia Council for the Arts plan, the grant to the WA opera and ballet companies would be cut off when the national companies were in a position to tour here regularly. While this will not happen for some years, if at all, the statement drew sharp reaction from the groups and local Press. The attitude was: Take back your national opera and ballet; we are more interested in making the most of our own resources than in importing what might be better outside. (Brisbane 1969, 8 Feb)

In particular, Brisbane knew that Perth was in a position to benefit from the ACA, regardless of whether they were to actually act upon Dr Coombs' warning. This can be seen in her summation of the positives and negatives of having the Australia Council take over:

> There is much to be said for this point of view. There is much that could be done to improve the cultural standards in Perth. There is too much playing at the performing arts business. And there is a staidness of attitude which the Australia Council could relieve by the injection of training personnel and exchange facilities to bring a wider outlook and more assured competitive spirit. But there is also an indigenous quality which must at all costs be preserved and the council would do better to build from what there is than to offer what may not yet be welcome. (Brisbane 1969, 8 Feb)

Brisbane offers a simple solution to the problem which allows for both options. She defends the right of the audiences of Western Australia in wanting to retain their own unique ballet and opera companies, but in turn requests that a merge would be the best result for all involved. Combining the two, she argues, would preserve the local quality of Perth's theatres whilst allowing the expansion of the opera and ballet to compete on a national scale. This article features Brisbane's consistency in targeting issues that affect her readers. As national theatre critic, her voice was powerful, speaking for her home state so that her readers were able to understand the developments in national infrastructure that the Australia Council were implementing and also protecting the local talent of Western Australia, providing for a future in the state. It is possible that had she not voiced her argument against the Australia Council in a national forum, the Western Australia opera and ballet may have been superseded (and both are still in operation today).

5.13 Readers Response to Brisbane

Brisbane allowed and even welcomed critical response to her reviews by her readers and by those who attended the productions that she reviewed weekly. When a member of the public felt that what she had written was incorrect, they wrote in and presented their argument. If Brisbane believed that their argument was valid then she would call herself out and publish the correspondence, admitting that she had made a mistake. When a reader wrote in with a criticism of view that Brisbane did not agree with, then she would again present the correspondence, but this time defending her original view, as in the case of her article 'After 10 years, is anything the same?':

> A reader has written reproving me, with feeling, for my curt dismissal of JC Williamson's new production of *My Fair Lady*, which I accused of tawdriness. The letter raises an interesting question relating to critical judgement because it states – and I do not doubt the accuracy of the statement – that the sets are those from the original production, repainted with scrupulous accuracy, that the costumes are either originals or new copies from the Cecil Beaton designs. And that the whole production cost the Firm (JC Williamson's) $100,000. Clearly a production which has had so much love and care and money spent on it and which has a good cast who can sing and act well, cannot be described as tawdry. Something in my judgement is astray. Or can there be a more subtle reason? (Brisbane 1970, 23 May)

A part of Brisbane's aesthetic in relation to Australian theatre can be seen in this article. The very use of the word tawdriness suggests to her readership that the production was indeed showy, cheap and lacking in quality. This is the type of theatre that Brisbane wants to avoid, and her argument is clear. As a consequence, a reader has written in arguing the opposite, that no expense was spared on the production and it was of the highest quality, retaining its original sets and costumes. This argument is valid yet Brisbane is prepared to challenge the reader and validate her original comment. She begins by stating that 10 years down the track it was apparent that 'What *My Fair Lady* had, in its time, was style, such as the American musical had not seen before. It had English style and American guts, and this put the show on a level of sophistication which has not been reached again since. It was a trend setter' (Brisbane 1970, 23 May). Her argument is clear: if a production is going to be revived then it is going to be indicative of the time it was written in if nothing has changed. Furthermore, she argues that 'physically, things may be the same, but inside as well as outside this production must be in a different spirit. Setting a style is a different task to following one' (Brisbane 1970, 23 May). In other words, the tawdriness of the show came from its sense of staleness. Brisbane finishes with an important point:

> I was rapped over the knuckles by a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company one day for anticipating the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale*. "This production is not meant for people like you", I was told. "It is meant for a new audience which has never heard of the statue scene". And I have tried to bear in mind since that it is only to the professional theatregoer that the theatre holds no surprises. But I am not sure for whom a production like this is intended, if not for those who were surprised by it 10 years ago. Are there no new surprises to delight us in a great work like this? For whom would a faithful reproduction of Hair in 10 years' time be intended? (Brisbane 1970, 23 May)

In this statement, Brisbane is further defending her original argument about JC Williamson's 1970 production of *My Fair Lady*, and her use of the word "tawdriness". Had the production departed from the original, provided something different and surprising to the audience, then her comments on the play would have been more positive. It is evident from this review that the type of theatre Brisbane advocates is not just a remake of the past. Brisbane is arguing for a new interpretation of a play that is now 10 years old; without constant change and the element of surprise, the theatre can become tawdry and uninteresting.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed the development of the new wave period in Australian theatre, drawing on analysis of Brisbane's reviews from the *Australian*. A clear pattern emerges in Brisbane's writing: that of identifying problems with infrastructure, subsidy and censorship and that Brisbane presents them as topics for public debate and analysis, then makes suggestions to improve the situation. Brisbane repeatedly applied this pattern, providing astute analysis as national theatre critic, and exhibiting a passion and enthusiasm which was required, and indeed destined, to improve the standard of Australian theatre. She took on engaging and important briefs in her reviews and did not shy away from pointing out flaws that were inherent in the theatre industry. Brisbane was the type of theatre critic that Australia needed during the new wave, she was not shut off from the new theatre. She used her knowledge and passion for the theatre to address the glaring problems whilst also praising innovation and creativity. Brisbane also had the ability to speak directly and with authority on issues that were topical. As national theatre critic she encouraged and celebrated the emerging new wave theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. Her experience overseas in London had prepared her for the social and political changes that drove change in the theatre and she used this to her distinct advantage when reviewing new

and exciting pieces of Australian theatre. Geoffrey Milne described for me this unique ability of Brisbane:

> This would be 1969 when the group at La Mama really began to hit the ground running and again as part of her brief Katharine came down to review this stuff. Graeme had met her also in Perth and I kind of wondered what she would make of this stuff - the rough and never ready stuff that we were doing and she got it. Boing. She got it exactly like that. She knew exactly what it was all about and duly reviewed us. (Milne Interview 2012, 3)

As a final point, Milne's comments further serve the argument here that Brisbane's role at the *Australian* was one of utmost importance for the overall development and improvement in theatre standards during the new wave period of Australian theatre**:** there was nobody as well informed or dedicated that could perform the duties of national theatre critic to the same standard.

CHAPTER 6

Controversies: Peter O'Shaughnessy and Jim McNeil

Brisbane has been involved in many important events that have occurred within Australian theatre over the past five decades. This chapter will analyse two major events with Peter O'Shaughnessy's *Othello* and Brisbane's involvement with the prison playwright Jim McNeil. It will analyse why these events were controversial, how Brisbane handled them as well as if her perspective has changed over towards the controversies. Finally, it will also establish the broader context in which these issues affected Australian theatre culture.

6.1 Peter O'Shaughnessy

Perhaps the greatest controversy Brisbane generated at the *Australian* was as a result of her review of Peter O'Shaughnessy's *Othello* in October 1967. Brisbane had accepted the role of national theatre critic in May 1967 and was relatively unknown outside of Western Australia. She was new to the position, and Robert Drewe recalled that 'on the *Australian* in Sydney years later, a vastly more important, national, figure, she seemed somehow shyer: she always hurried, and sometimes *sidled*, into that eccentric newsroom. But her height and leading-lady bearing, the well-modulated voice, the air of not suffering fools whatsoever, ensured that she'd be noticed' (Brisbane 2005, v). O'Shaughnessy was a well-respected actor, director and producer who had worked in the UK and in Australia. He had introduced Beckett's plays to the country. He directed and played the title character in the production that Brisbane reviewed (19th October 1967).[33] Brisbane began her criticism of the play in her opening statement, arguing that:

> Only too rarely does it come to a critic to make use of superlatives. Peter O'Shaughnessy's much heralded Othello is such an opportunity so let me say at once that of all the Othello's I have seen, from the Royal Shakespeare to the Old Tote, never has so much talent gone into

[33] Brisbane's original printed article 'What a Tragedy' from the *Australian* is included as Figure 2 on pages 184-185.

> a production so out of contact with the audience and so entirely bereft of ideas. Stupidity and lack of talent are forgivable; brave failures are deserving of praise – these are everyday human failings. But the waste and dishonesty of this production, or rather recitation, make me very angry indeed. (Brisbane 1967, 19 Oct)

Her direct criticism of the production did not end there. She further examines O'Shaughnessy's aims and background and ultimately his position in the theatre, stating 'If one can judge a man by the company he keeps then the public in this instance has every right to expect a definitive production' (Brisbane 1967, 19 Oct). At times though, Brisbane agrees with O'Shaughnessy's motives:

> He sees the play, so says the programme note, as a romantic study of evil pitted against innocence, trust and goodness. And this is a perfectly valid view. But what was so infuriating was that the production was never on good enough terms with the audience to present any point of view. The pace is relentless, though relieved intermittently with frantic activity. (Brisbane 1967, 19 Oct)

Brisbane slowly dissects O'Shaughnessy's *Othello,* occasionally praising moments that she felt did live up to her expectation, albeit briefly:

> Occasionally, as in "Most potent, grave and reverend signor's" – his account to the Venetian court of his wooing – and in the moments of poignancy with Desdemona, there were signs of the resources waiting to be exploited. But these moments were few and the barren patches seemed endless. My companion had a point when, in listening to one of the bursts of noise which occur offstage from time to time, she remarked that there was obviously a better play going on backstage. (Brisbane 1967, 19 Oct)

Brisbane recalled the situation in a recent interview, stating that she wrote the article because of the situation that Australian theatre was in and the belief that change was needed:

> He was a great self-publicist and the papers were full of these stories about how the great Shakespearean had come back to Sydney and so forth and he was going to do this revolutionary production. He was quoted as being better than Olivier, you know all that sort of thing. There was a big fanfare and so I thought well gosh, he has got to live up to this! In fact it was a deeply old-fashioned production with about 10 changes of set, you know, it was the curtain dropping between the scenes, can you imagine! That's my memory of it. I'm just thinking in the Conservatorium whether they had a curtain or not, but they must have. So I was disappointed and sort of angry with him for deceiving people, really. And I also invited a woman from Perth who happened to be visiting and I think staying with us who ran the Shakespeare Society (laughs) in Perth, and she was outraged, she was really angry, so I was a bit emotional when I wrote the thing (article on O'Shaughnessy). I called it a dishonest production, you see, which is not an uncommon term in aesthetics. I was naive and I should have been told I couldn't use that word, but I wasn't. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 6-7)

In the context of the late 1960s, Brisbane comments reflect her utmost disbelief that a production with fanfare of O'Shaughnessy's could be sold to the audience as if it was the best production ever made. She felt as though O'Shaughnessy was lying directly to the audience and that this lie needed to be exposed in print. The social and political climate also supported Brisbane:

> You can't say something is better than it is, you have to define what it is and then eliminate that for your reader. So that's the *Othello* case, there was much more that happened and was happening by then. 1968 was an extraordinary year with protests, and I remember The Ensemble, the mild little Ensemble theatre as it is today did a production of a Canadian play called *Fortune in Men's Eyes* which was set in a prison. It was about overt homosexuality and violence and bullying and so forth…this was used by the protestors about our conditions in prison to make public protests (Brisbane Symposium 2014).

Brisbane admitted that the event affected her personally and she let those personal emotions influence her critical writing. Her choice of words to use are important, as they reflected her personal opinion which became the voice of the criticism against the play. O'Shaughnessy's *Othello* reflected the overbearing problem of the Australian media in publishing outlandish stories regarding the production and the over selling of a production.

Her criticism was to come under intense scrutiny for the next two years of Brisbane's career.[34] O'Shaughnessy filed a lawsuit against Brisbane, who was backed by the *Australian* and its team of lawyers.[35] The case went to the Supreme Court of NSW and the result was O'Shaughnessy's lawsuit being dismissed (Cryle and Hunt 2008, 78). It was appealed by O'Shaughnessy and a new trial in the High Court was allowed on the basis that a mistrial had occurred from Justices Barwick, McTiernan, Menzies and Owen:

> This is one of those cases where the critic, in making her evaluation that the production was a disaster—which, of course, she was entitled to do—did not plainly confine herself to commenting upon facts truly stated; she wrote what could, we think, have been regarded as amounting to a defamatory statement of fact, viz. that the producer dishonestly suppressed the roles of other players to highlight his own role. It is not that the writer merely failed to preface what she had to say about the production with some formula such as "it seemed to me"; it is rather that the jury could have found that an imputation of dishonesty was levelled

[34] *The Age* (12 Jun 1968) reported events as they unfolded and printed in favour of O'Shaughnessy.
[35] O'Shaughnessy vs Mirror Newspapers Ltd., (1970), 125 Commonwealth Law Records, 166 at 172.

> against the plaintiff as the writer's explanation of what she asserted to be a waste of talent. If what was written had been no more than comment it only had to be fair, but, if it were fact, it had to be correct to defeat the plaintiff's claim. It was, we think, for the jury to decide whether there were any statements of defamatory fact, and, because the issue was withdrawn from them, we consider that the trial miscarried. (O'Shaughnessy v Mirror Newspaper Ltd, (1970) 125 CLR 166)

Surprisingly, the case did not get to a final decision in the High Court of Australia. Mirror Newspapers Ltd settled out of court with Peter O'Shaughnessy:

> The facts of the court case are that we won the Supreme Court case, which was argued around the word 'dishonest' and the question of whether the man on the Bondi bus would take my use to mean that Peter had committed some felony, like embezzling the box office. The judge concluded that my column was just opinion, and I had a right to my opinion. The verdict was upheld on appeal and Peter took it to the High Court, where the judges concluded that the first judge had misdirected the jury in saying the column was only opinion. That there were facts stated, including the play, the venue, the cast, etc. The *Australian* settled for, I believe, $14,000. O'Shaughnessy continued to write about the case until his death a couple of years ago. He had his own website on the subject. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 7)

Brisbane had been through a two-year court battle, whilst at the time maintaining her output at the *Australian* as national theatre critic. Personally and professionally Brisbane had handled the situation as well as she could with the climate that the review created and the limitations that it presented to her role at the *Australian.* Brisbane recently commented rather wryly upon the impact that the case had on her over the two year period, stating to Rosalie Higson that 'he took us to court, we won the first round and the second round, and it went to the High Court, and it was sent back on a matter of law. So they settled, and we never got a precedent set, which was a bit sad. But after that my columns were read' (Brisbane 2011, 26 Jul). As mentioned, no legal precedent was set for the case and after that Brisbane's articles were submitted to a lawyer at the *Australian* before they were allowed to be published. In reflecting on the situation in 2013, Brisbane felt as though even though she lost the battle with O'Shaughnessy originally, she did win the overall war:

> It was an intemperate review and had the paper's editorial (laughs) section been more on the ball they wouldn't have allowed me to print it the way it was. I mean most of the people were on my side and he'd raised a lot of public money to do this production and made a lot of false advertising about it, which came across. He spent the rest of his life trying to justify himself and I still get e-mails from him, he was in Oxfordshire somewhere and he wanted me to co-author a book on the case presenting both sides, but his side was so libellous and it was such rubbish that, anyway, nobody would have bought the book. So I kept saying no

> and I still hear from him time to time but I think I put him in spam box. I know he sued his mother-in-law for some offence and I just felt very sorry for the whole thing. He was a very fine actor but he couldn't get on with other people. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 7)

It can be argued either way whether Brisbane is correct in her retrospective assessment. O'Shaughnessy did little in terms of performance in Australia again after 1971 and never returned to the success he had had before the production of *Othello* in 1967. In reflection, Brisbane agrees that it consumed O'Shaughnessy, saying that 'it ruined Peter's life sadly, he did go on working but he continued to write to me from the early 1970's until about 2 years ago when he died (Brisbane Symposium, 2014)'.

O'Shaughnessy seldom returned to Australia and the controversy affected his profile as a member of the theatre community. O'Shaughnessy died on the 17th of July 2013 and his death reignited interest in the controversy. [36] In contrast, it is now seen today as a pivotal point in O'Shaughnessy's career and has almost become to define his work in Australia above all his other work. Ken Healey discussed O'Shaughnessy and Brisbane's legal battle in an obituary entitled 'Feisty thespian never shied away from a stoush' stating that 'it was the harbinger of the end of O'Shaughnessy's Australian career (Healey 2013, 17 Aug). The O'Shaughnessy vs. Brisbane case is a landmark example in Australian theatre of the age old critic versus actor argument. Brisbane's anger and poor choice of words left her no room to be able to avoid being sued for libel, and whilst O'Shaughnessy eventually won the case, his Australian career was essentially halted. It defined both those involved and Brisbane learnt a valuable lesson about her critical voice and the parameters in which she could operate. She was never able again to publish directly at the *Australian* without a lawyer reviewing her work and this influenced her ability to write what she believed to be the truth. As a critic, Brisbane reacted to the situation by modifying her writing to better reflect the facts of the production, rather than letting her emotion dictate her choice of

[36] He was awarded the OAM for services to the theatre in 2013.

words. Despite these changes, Brisbane still was opinionated about the problems within Australian theatre but cognisant about the words she wrote to avoid another libel incident. It was also a high profile case that ended up being settled out of court, with no overall precedent set on protecting the national theatre critic or defining guidelines for their criticism. The case is still used today as an example of libel against the individual and is still a talking point for Brisbane.[37]

Fig. 3 –The *Australian* review of Othello – 'What a Tragedy' 19 October 1967

Peter O'Shaughnessy as Othello (in blackface).

[37]See Brisbane's recent interview with the *Australian* on May 24th, 2014 entitled 'A legal saga worthy of the Bard'.

What a tragedy

Theatre by KATHARINE BRISBANE

ONLY TOO rarely does it come to a critic to make use of superlatives. Peter O'Shaughnessy's much-heralded Othello is such an opportunity so let me say at once that of all the Othellos I have seen, from the Royal Shakespeare to the Old Tote, never has so much talent gone into a production so out of contact with the audience and so entirely bereft of ideas.

Stupidity and lack of talent are forgivable; brave failures are deserving of praise — these are every-day human failings. But the waste and dishonesty of this production, or rather recitation, make me very angry indeed.

For the group of actors gathered by the Arts Council of Australia (New South Wales division) this week at the Sydney Conservatorium is as good as anything Australia can offer. And I can think of no one in Australia better equipped to play Othello than Mr O'Shaughnessy.

What makes it a disaster is Mr O'Shaughnessy's role as director.

He has been much on view in the Press lately quoting A. C. Bradley and Stanislavsky. His programme (based on London's National Theatre programme) has essays headed F. R. Leavis on Othello, W. H. Auden on Iago, and O'Shaughnessy on Othello. If one can judge a man by the company he keeps then the public in this instance has every right to expect a definitive production.

He sees the play, so says the programme note, as a romantic study of evil pitted against innocence, trust and goodness. And this is a perfectly valid view. But what was so infuriating was that the production was never on good enough terms with the audience to present any point of view.

The pace is relentless, though relieved intermittently by frantic activity. The main actors each have one note — and that a low-keyed one — and cling to it all night.

The set is operatic and old-fashioned (albeit well-conceived by Desmonde Downing), uncomfortably dimly lit, and full of blackouts I never expected to see in a Shakespearian production again.

Mr O'Shaughnessy's romantic hero is constantly on the simmer of self-expression. Occasionally, — as in "Most potent, grave and reverend signors" — his account to the Venetian court of his wooing — and in moments of poignancy with Desdemona, there were signs of the resources waiting to be exploited. But these moments were few and the barren patches seemed endless.

My companion had a point when, listening to one of the bursts of noise which occur off stage from time to time, she remarked that there was obviously a better play going on backstage.

The whole production seemed to be made up of separate pieces, as though the producer had spent much time on each actor's principal speeches and none on co-ordinating the structure. I suspect the liveliness of John Norman's athletic, romantic Cassio and the lifelessness of Rob Inglis' Iago had something to do with the fact that Othello is seldom on stage with the former and almost always with the latter.

Mr Inglis' Iago is most elaborately boring. Mr O'Shaughnessy in his programme note "flatly rejects" the Leavis view that Iago is "not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism" but that is exactly what he makes of Mr Inglis.

If there is one thing we can be sure about Iago's villainy it is that he enjoys it, but to this Iago his deeds give neither pleasure nor satisfaction. Even his "put money in thy purse" speech seemed quite deliberately colorless.

June Thody's gentle and gracious Desdemona also seemed curiously lacking in a point of view, though again there were sparks to show there was one trying to get out.

The one original contribution to the evening was Peter Whitford's dignified Roderigo who in his final attack upon Iago gave us one of the best moments of the play. Others who sparked into life out of nowhere from time to time were Pat Hill as Emilia, Edward Ogden as Brabantio and Allan Lander whose lusty elegy on the death of Othello lifted the final moments of the play to a level of which we had by that time despaired.

In short the performance is a disaster which has all the makings of a fine production. All it needs is a producer with a little humanity, who understands that the actors on stage are people and the audience are people too. As it was the only fellow-feeling I had with the stage on Tuesday was with Miss Thody's expression at curtain-call. She looked as if she had had enough for one evening, and so had I.

6.2 Brisbane and McNeil – A Concrete Prison for a playwright

Jim McNeil, remembered as the 'prison playwright', played an important part in the changes that were taking place in Australian theatre during the new wave period. His plays, notably *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice*, demonstrate that this violent criminal was a gifted playwright. Katharine Brisbane was one of the many people who believed that McNeil had an exceptional talent for writing, even though he had never set foot inside a theatre until his release from prison. Brisbane supported McNeil's writing, corresponded with him and further supported his bid for release in a media campaign. Brisbane's unwavering support of a convicted felon shows a side of Brisbane that was willing to take risks to provide Australian theatre with a playwright whom possibly should never have had the opportunity to become one. It also reflects the social climate at the time in that Australia was looking for playwrights and plays in every possible environment. Overall, McNeil was a smart man, and put himself in the position to benefit from this climate.

Jim McNeil was born on the 23rd of January, 1935. He grew up in St Kilda in Melbourne, falling into a life of crime at an early age. At school, McNeil was sodomised, a 'childhood experience of an unwelcome, calculated, dastardly, arsehole act perpetrated by a prick of a Jesuit brother—a trusted school teacher—that was the root of Jim McNeil's anger and antisocial behaviour' (Cullen 2010, 138). His father left his family when McNeil was five. Honeywill writes about McNeil in his youth:

> Started reading at a young age: not for the sake of education but for the sake of his spirit. In fact, his education had been nothing but a disappointment to both boy and teachers. Despite a promising start at the convent school in Grey Street, St Kilda, Jim turned the art of truancy into his own personal vocation. By the age of ten he knew the street held more attraction than the classroom, with the Christian Brothers and their stitched leather straps just looking for soft McNeil hands to punish. And what the streets were: full of American soldiers on rest and recreation away from the battles of New Guinea and the Pacific. (Honeywill 2010, 83)

By the age of twelve McNeil had his first friend, Fat Stanley, who beat him up on the first day of school at Sacred Heart. They spent their time hanging around outside the Prince of Wales Hotel, picking fights with drunks. Stanley eventually got arrested and betrayed McNeil. It was to be a lifelong lesson to him, and he said that 'St Kilda taught me about friendship and betrayal' (Honeywill 2010, 86).

McNeil's first acknowledged crime came when he was still a teenager, when he punched a woman and stole her handbag (Honeywill 2010, 88). Jim's uncles wanted him duly punished, but his mother protected him. In retrospect, this defence may have encouraged the idea that a life in crime could be rewarding. At thirteen, McNeil left school. Despite this, he continued to read and developed intellectually without a formal education. At fourteen, he had started an affair with a brothel madam who introduced Jim further to the Melbourne underworld. He married his girlfriend Valerie in 1957 at the age of 22. McNeil began to step up his criminal activity, robbing people at gunpoint. The media dubbed him "The Laughing Bandit", owing to his disbelief at how easy it was to take money from people, laughing whilst committing his crimes. McNeil's luck finally ran out in 1967. After failing to attend a court hearing in Victoria, he decided to rob a hotel in Wentworth Falls, near Sydney. He emptied the safe at gunpoint but the police gave chase. He shot and wounded a police officer, and for this crime he was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

McNeil was sent to Parramatta Gaol, a notorious prison with a brutal reputation. He thrived there, using his intelligence to stand over others, obtain tobacco and other contraband. He even managed to place bets on the Melbourne Cup when he got the chance (Honeywill 2010, 132). But it was Parramatta Gaol's debating group, known as The Resurgents Debating Society, which attracted his attention in the late 1960s. It gave McNeil a creative outlet and the ability to debate visitors to the prison on chosen topics. The society was separate from the rest of the prison and had little interaction with other

inmates. It was in this situation that he began to thrive and put his talents to work. McNeil met those who came to debate the prisoners and was able to make new contacts in the outside world. One of the visitors, Robyn Potter, noticed this talent. She encouraged him to read and brought him countless books, ranging from poetry to German philosophers (Honeywill 2010, 113). In a secret note to Potter, he confided that he was writing a play based on prison life. He had written a few pages of the play, which he called *The Last Cuppa*, and The Resurgents read the beginnings of the play in their meetings. This play would later become *The Old Familiar Juice* and was arguably his best piece of writing, as Brisbane would attest after his death. McNeil managed to retain links to the outside world, reading the *Sydney Morning Herald* and thus keeping in touch with the changes that were occurring in society as well as in the theatre. He read about the *Norm and Ahmed* arrests in 1969 in Queensland and 'even Jim, an avowed racist, saw the irony in the police arresting the actor for using a commonplace swearword rather than the racist slur' (Honeywill 2010, 134). It was also during this time that McNeil decided to study for his matriculation and gain his secondary education certificate.

In the meantime, he set aside the few pages he had and began to write a new play, called *The Chocolate Frog*. The Resurgents encouraged his foray into playwriting and he set out to finish the play. McNeil had managed to convince Governor Jones to allow the Resurgents to stage a reading of the play but not a performance, citing that this was 'Her Majesty's Prison, son, not Her Majesty's Theatre. There will be no plays performed in Parramatta' (Honeywill 2010, 138). In a letter to Robyn Potter in January 1970, McNeil states the importance of the group and the people on the outside to his development as a playwright, recalling a story about a cellmate Ronald Joseph Ryan (known as the last person to be legally executed in Australia): 'And I do owe this much to Ronny: he showed me the futility of running. The Resurgents, and people like you two, take the futility out of

Staying (sic). That's why I've said that your interest and friendship means a great deal' (Honeywill 2010, 141). McNeil at this stage had a new group of friends who were willing to help him succeed and develop his own intellectual pursuits, including the Potters, journalist David Marr and lawyer Michael Eyers.

The day of the reading of *The Chocolate Frog* came. Honeywill described the event thus:

> On the day of the play reading, the sociologists, departmental officers and a few outsiders filed into the small Resurgents room in the bowels of Parramatta gaol. The air was still and stifling. No one expected much, just a bunch of crims reading a few pages of dialogue: a mildly entertaining view of prison life at best and at worst a didactic tirade that would be over pretty soon. Governor Jones sat in the front row, pleased that the departmental officials has deigned to visit, certain the whole event would go well and that soon he would be able to collar them over a cup of tea. (Honeywill 2010, 145)

McNeil got up and gave a short speech on the meaning of *The Chocolate Frog*. He explained that it was rhyming slang for 'being a dog', one who breaks the informal rules inside prison and informs on others. Brilliantly, McNeil stepped away and another prisoner walked over to a large sheet or makeshift curtain and removed it. What appeared was a makeshift set, complete with everything that the prisoners needed to stage the play as a production. McNeil recalled that 'no one could do anything about it because there were people from outside sitting there and under their noses I staged my play. Reading be buggered, we went the whole hog' (Honeywill 2010, 146). Governor Jones was furious but powerless to do anything whilst the prisoners staged their play for the dignitaries. Despite McNeil defying Governor Jones, he was not punished as word had quickly spread that McNeil's play was a remarkable phenomenon. On the contrary, McNeil was asked to stage *The Chocolate Frog* on the weekends for visitors until further notice.

The play also began to cause a stir amongst those outside the prison walls in 1971. NIDA's John Clark had been to see the play and was showing interest in it. Malcolm Robertson (ACA consultant) wanted to do more for The Resurgents and so did McNeil. McNeil took advantage of the situation:

> Jim liked Robertson and recognized in him someone with the potential to take his plays to a larger audience. He knew the Australia Council was a Government initiative and that it was formed to make the arts more accessible to everyday Australians, and he wanted some of that access. As the visitors were asked to leave by prison officers conscious of the noon deadline, Jim followed Robertson to the door and asked him to assist in having the plays performed outside, for the public to see and hear his message. Robertson agreed to see what could be done. (Honeywill 2010, 155)

Robertson managed to arrange theatre workshops in both Parramatta and Silverwater prisons. Dealing with a group of hardened criminals such as The Resurgents was difficult for Robertson at first but he managed to get the best out of McNeil. McNeil continued to rewrite *The Old Familiar Juice* and in the meantime Robertson arranged an outside production of *The Chocolate Frog* by the Q Theatre Company.

The Chocolate Frog opened on the 13th of July 1971 at the AMP theatre in Circular Quay, Sydney (Milne 2004, 114). For the first time, McNeil's work was reviewed by one of Australia's eminent theatre critics, Harry Kippax, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Kippax loved the play and wrote a positive review, stating that 'Mr McNeil preaches with tact, with humour, and with a sensitive feeling for idiosyncrasy, character and humanity in the figures used to dramatize his parable. He has no truck with sentiment' (Honeywill 2010, 160). McNeil continued to have success with *The Chocolate Frog*, and it became the most performed one-act play of 1971. It was at this point that McNeil began to correspond with Katharine Brisbane at the *Australian*. Brisbane had been to see the Q Theatre performance of *The Chocolate Frog* and had written:

> The real quality of the play lies in the character of the two older men, vividly played by Martin Harris and John Clayton. Their language mixes prison slang and radio jargon with literary references from the prison library. To this is added a noticeable Biblical cant and a strong dependence upon Old Testament eye-for-an-eye morality. The conclusion that violence breeds violence is compelling. While outside the new Tom Paine liberalism is running a riot of sentiment and demonstration, inside the hierarchy of the Roman law, disobedience and punishment is preserved with passionate determination. (Brisbane 1971, 17 Jul)

Brisbane finished her review, stating that it 'is a play not to be missed and those who wonder how violence in prison comes about will find the factual evidence brought alive in

it' (Brisbane 1971, 17 Jul). After her review of the play appeared, McNeil wrote to Brisbane and they began corresponding. At the request of McNeil, Brisbane went to the prison to see a performance of *The Chocolate Frog* by The Resurgents. It was completely different from the world that Brisbane had been used to. Brisbane recalled the experience:

> I was just an adventurer, really, to go out to Parramatta Gaol and see the prisoners performing The Chocolate Frog, that was my first connection with Jim and he just seemed to be a natural. He had never seen a play in the theatre; he didn't know what theatre was. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 15)

Robyn Potter was also in the audience with Brisbane that day. She too recalled the event:

> It was staged in a tiny room with two bunks at the end of the room. We all sat on metal stacker chairs and the actors sat on the bunks. It was so close we were literally in the play. Katharine was sitting over to the left and I was in the middle, and then there were Frank Hayes and invited guests of other members of the Resurgents. There were probably four rows of chairs and the Resurgents were sitting and standing amongst us and a couple of prison screws were also present. (Honeywill 2010, 178-179)

Brisbane became an instant supporter of what she saw McNeil was offering Australian theatre as a playwright at that very time of radical change. She thought that *The Chocolate Frog* was well suited for performance but could be improved upon. Brisbane stated that the play was 'a miniature of something that could have been made much bigger. It was like a little epithet, a summary of life' (Honeywill 2010, 179). Brisbane was formally introduced to McNeil by Potter and the two talked over a cup of tea, as she later relayed to Honeywill:

> It was the whole normality of this. They were really nice people; I mean there were a few murderers and other violent people all there sitting with legs crossed and a cup of tea. It was a very domestic and curious scene. Nothing threatening at all in the whole experience, except in my imagination. (Honeywill 2010, 179)

Prior to this meeting, McNeil had managed to convince Malcolm Robertson to take his copy of *The Old Familiar Juice* and perform it outside of prison. Robertson also took over the financial business of both plays on McNeil's behalf, including the rights to perform the plays. *The Old Familiar Juice* was to be performed by the Melbourne Theatre Company with Robertson directing. The play was an immediate success. Brisbane reviewed this production and further supported McNeil in his endeavour as a playwright:

> It is odd and perhaps a tribute to the truth-telling of the new emergent plays that McNeill (sic) has been able, with such apparent ease, to have his name joined with the new stream of writing while not only cut off from his fellow artists but from the very world to which his work is a communique. The setting for the two plays is a three-bed prison cell. In the first the arrival of a young first-offender gives two old lags the chance to explain the stern Old Testament view of justice, the system of honour among thieves and the strong sense of belonging to the prison. The aspect most splendid about McNeill's writing, it's so sane, a balanced assessment of the world he knows. He does not rail against the prison system. He merely points out the absurdities of depending for justice and mercy upon innocent nuns, crusty old-fashioned magistrates and illiterate, underpaid and bullying officers; and in confining convicted criminals to their own company. (Brisbane 1972, 11 Aug)

Brisbane did not shy away from providing McNeil with praise for *The Old Familiar Juice.* She argued that the play 'leaves one in no doubt that McNeill (sic) is a natural dramatist of great wit and charm' as well as the play being '…technically an advance on his first play, but his full capacities will be seen only when he has the same freedom to work as other writers. May that day be hastened' (Brisbane 1972, 11 Aug). In a later article, she reiterated the importance of the play, stating '*The Old Familiar Juice* I found totally enthralling and transparently delicate both in the writing and the performing. The ripples of Jim McNeil's attempts to communicate, as he calls them, are growing wider and wider. An evening not to be missed' (Honeywill 2010, 201). The statement was true, McNeil's 'ripples' were indeed growing wider and he was beginning to attract the attention of people in the outside world who would help to bring about his release in 1974. It can be argued that Brisbane's support of McNeil and her passion about his playwriting was especially influential. As national theatre critic at the *Australian* she had rarely given such high praise to either an actor or a playwright in one of her reviews. It is evidence that Brisbane manifestly saw a future for McNeil in writing for the Australian theatre and wished to provide whatever direction and encouragement she could.

Whilst McNeil was vicariously enjoying success outside prison walls, he was also involved in certain prison activities at the time that influenced his work as a newly found Australian playwright. He had called Robyn Potter and told her about a prison escape plot that he had been forced to become a part of, the revelation of which he felt at the time

might get him killed. Potter documented the entire incident, storing the documentation in an NAB security box (Honeywill 2010, 188). Potter told Brisbane of the existence of the box and instructed her to publish the information in the public domain if anything were to happen to either her or McNeil. Parramatta was not the place for McNeil to stay any longer. He effected his own transfer by stabbing himself repeatedly, as he knew that injured prisoners got directly transferred out of the prison. He got his wish and was swiftly taken to Bathurst prison but suffered the destruction of his new play in transit. Brisbane and McNeil had by this time sparked a personal friendship and were corresponding with each other on a regular basis. Brisbane also made the long trip to visit McNeil in Bathurst Gaol. McNeil called Brisbane his 'queen of theatre critics' (Honeywill 2010, 197). It was also Brisbane who introduced McNeil to Peter Kenna, and these two developed a mutual respect for each other. McNeil began to write his next play in Bathurst, entitled *How Does Your Garden Grow.* He had been inspired by another inmate who had painted a picture with this title and given it to McNeil. McNeil wrote the play in six weeks, with the help of his neighbouring inmate.

It is evident that Brisbane was determined to further develop McNeil's talent and have him successfully published as a playwright. Currency Press signed on to publish both *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice* in 1976. Brisbane spent more time around McNeil and was interested in publishing *How Does Your Garden Grow* once he had finished writing. She continued to visit McNeil despite the long journey from Sydney and the pressures of Currency Press. To further attest to the importance of Brisbane in his development, Honeywill argues that 'he (McNeil) adored Brisbane, and their relationship endured in one way or another for the rest of his life' (2010, 200). McNeil managed to find a way to get his copy of *How Does Your Garden Grow* out, avoiding the prison

censor, and in early 1974 Brisbane had his script. Brisbane liked the play instantly, as Honeywill states:

> Truly gifted architects and composers see the shape of things naturally, without guile of pretence what comes out of the pen is a pure form unsullied by effort. That was how Jim wrote. To his benefit it all happened easily, came from some place he could not identify or explain. But this was also his failing: if he had no idea how it happened, how could he possibly do it again? That anxiety grew in direct proportion to the veneration afforded to his play. While Peter Kenna described *The Old Familiar Juice* as McNeil's masterpiece, Katharine Brisbane thought that accolade belonged to *How Does Your Garden Grow*. When Jim heard this he remarked, "Two masterpieces in one lifetime – not bad. Pity they're such rubbish". (Honeywill 2010, 208)

Two weeks after smuggling out *How Does Your Garden Grow*, Bathurst Gaol erupted into a full-scale riot that lasted for six hours. McNeil was lucky to survive as he opposed the riot, knowing that he was close to parole. He narrowly avoided danger and was kept at the prison to avoid retribution from other inmates. Brisbane stepped up her efforts to build support for McNeil. Brisbane wrote of McNeil's plight in a half-page feature article entitled *Writing in the Nick*:

> Take the case of Jim McNeil. Whatever happened to the man who started the Parramatta school of playwriting? His first two plays, *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice* have become the flags of Parramatta's respectability: they have been performed all over Australia. Last month they travelled as far as Gove and Groote Eylandt. But the author himself is not quite so well remembered. His name is only occasionally spelt correctly. Even the Department of Corrective Services records have never gotten it right. Lately the press have decided to name him O'Neill. Perhaps one day he will be the O'Neill of the Australian theatre. Meanwhile it is unlikely the compliment is intentional. He says he can write nothing further until his release. He has already served seven years: his non-parole period expires later this year when he must face further charges in Victoria. (Brisbane 1974, 14 Jan)

Brisbane, in this article, has made herself the official spokesperson and advocate for Jim McNeil's release. In addition to her personal involvement with him, Brisbane saw the value in having a person such as McNeil outside of the prison world and in this article is arguing for his release so that he can contribute more of his outstanding plays to the Australian theatre community. Having the support of the national theatre critic helped McNeil's case for release and shows that Brisbane was willing to put her own reputation and career on the line in the effort to improve Australian theatre. Things began to move

quickly as McNeil's parole date came closer. McNeil now had a full support group outside Bathurst Gaol campaigning for his release. He remained in close contact with Brisbane and she continued to visit him in gaol regularly. During this time, Brisbane also fought for and successfully gained a $7000 grant for McNeil from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. When McNeil was released, he was to receive the grant and focus on being a playwright. Further to this, McNeil's plays had made him one of Australia's most promising playwrights and were beginning to gain international success. Brisbane and the McNeil support group had created the best circumstances for his release and pressure was growing to release him on parole.

By September 1974, that day was drawing closer. McNeil still had robbery charges hanging over his head from years earlier in Victoria and was worried that once he was paroled in NSW, he would be instantly extradited south to face them. McNeil was paroled on the 12th of October 1974, and his fears were realised. He was rearrested, awaiting extradition to Melbourne to face the old charges. Brisbane's support of McNeil remained, and she was quoted at the time of his release stating 'he was one of the top three contemporary playwrights and was expected to have a successful future as a writer' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1974, 15 Oct). This fervent optimism is a representation that there was still hope in Brisbane for McNeil, despite his forthcomings.

Every person on McNeil's side arranged to support him in court and speak positively about McNeil's transformation into a respectable member of society. Ken Horler and his legal team presented McNeil's case and brought witnesses (including Brisbane) to the stand to argue for his release on bail. Their advocacy was successful and McNeil was released on $500 bail. Without the tireless efforts of Katharine Brisbane, David Marr, Ken Horler and the entire support team, McNeil would almost certainly have ended up back in gaol in Victoria for another long sentence. They had finally got what they wanted, an aspiring

Australian playwright who was no longer confined to the concrete prison walls that he wrote about. Max Cullen recalls an encounter with McNeil as an actor, stating 'Jim was a great raconteur, he talked about his life and crimes, and his was an interesting life. And since most colloquialisms evolve from the nick, listening to boob talk from the horse's mouth was an education for this square head actor in a correct pronunciation of the vernacular' (Cullen 2010, 136).

Disappointingly, McNeil fell back into his old vices. He instantly turned to drinking to cope with being outside in the real world again. Honeywill described the scene on McNeil's first night as a free man and the strain that it put on Brisbane's relationship:

> Brisbane and her husband, the academic Philip Parsons, who was ten years older than Jim and a drama lecturer at the University of New South Wales, were among the diners celebrating Jim's release. He was deeply suspicious of Jim and unhappy about the relationship the criminal enjoyed with his wife. Brisbane was, Jim said at the time, the woman he loved most, the person closest to him. 'Yes, I thought I was at the time too,' she remembers, 'and it put a strain on Philip and the family.' Because of the circumstances, Brisbane had told Jim that he obviously couldn't stay at her house. Brisbane and Parsons' was the ordered life of academics and this potentially scandalous schism rent by a common criminal, no matter how talented, was unacceptable. (Honeywill 2010, 223-224)

McNeil continued to drink and deteriorate into the unstable person he had been before prison. However, he now enjoyed celebrity status and gave radio interviews. He also maintained his connections to the criminal world and found himself struggling to escape his past. McNeil revelled in telling stories of his past, he was 'a man who knew how to push buttons - he had just moved John [Bell] somewhere far outside his life experience. Probably out of sheer devilment - Jim was good at that' (Cullen 2010, 138). A month after his release, his play *How Does Your Garden Grow?* opened at the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney. McNeil was present on the opening night and revelled in the attention. The play was critically acclaimed and further reinforced McNeil's status as an Australian playwright of note.

McNeil moved to transform his life outside of gaol. After a short courtship, he went on to marry the actor Robyn Nevin and move in next door to Brisbane and Parsons on Jersey Road in Woollahra. Brisbane decided not to attend the wedding, despite being invited. Shortly afterwards, McNeil got off his charges in Victoria and things appeared to be working in McNeil's favour, at least on the outside. However, he continued to drink, and when he did he returned to being a violent person. Nevin eventually left McNeil. McNeil barely wrote outside of prison and only managed to write one more play before his death. His final play, *Jack*, was staged at the Nimrod Theatre in 1977. It was mildly successful but failed to achieve the success of his previous plays. In contrast, Meyrick argued that 'when McNeil wrote a play that was not gentle or humorous (*Jack*), it flopped' (2002, 81).

McNeil died on the 16th of May 1982, a shadow of his former self. His years of drinking and drug abuse had finally caught up with him. Despite all of his deficiencies, Brisbane remained friends with McNeil, even organising his funeral with David Marr, and paying some of the costs from Currency Press. Brisbane truly believed that McNeil was a talented playwright and wanted the best for him. Her encouragement was a shining light in McNeil's life and served to foster his rise within Australian theatre. Brisbane authorised his work and that appeared to be enough for others in the theatre community to give him a chance. In retrospect, however, Brisbane feels as though McNeil took advantage of their friendship:

> I think that control was what made him a dramatist. The fact that their [his] life was censored enabled him to distil feeling in a powerful and sometimes oblique way. If you compare the three plays with the second act of *Jack*, the only extant work written after he was released, you will find it very ugly indeed. The fact is that re-entering the outside world did his talent no good. He was no longer the brightest, cleverest person in the room: the skills that prison life had taught him were of little use outside. He was frightened most of the time, took to drink and to making promises he could not keep. He survived seven years and died aged 47. In his time he received more recognition than he deserved and he exploited everyone he got to know. His plays are still remarkable and still have an important message that those inside are people just like us on the outside, with the same feelings and the same domestic needs. But reading them today I find that they are a little thinner than I thought at first sight. (Brisbane 2007, para 5-7)

McNeil owed a lot of his success in Australian theatre to those who supported him inside and outside of gaol and Brisbane was a crucial player in this achievement. Without Brisbane's support of McNeil, amongst others, it can be argued that he is unlikely to have received the attention that he did, and would not have been given the chances that he was outside prison. Cullen describes the mark that McNeil left upon others, stating 'he spread misery to many good, caring people around him, people who loved him' (Cullen 2010, 140). Brisbane sought to help McNeil in developing his creative talent as a playwright and strove to further develop and preserve his work, something which she did at Currency Press by publishing a collection of McNeil's plays. Brisbane was instrumental in helping to make McNeil a recognised playwright and above all preserving his work for the next generation of Australians. McNeil also received great support from the Nimrod Theatre, which staged four of his productions (Milne 2004, 135). McNeil benefited from Horler and Bell's advocacy for staging of Australian plays, with Bell stating that 'the variety of both style and content in those first couple of years was remarkable. Sometimes people, especially journalists and bureaucrats, would try and pin me down with "What is Nimrod's policy?" It seemed flippant to reply, as I did, that it was whatever we felt like doing at the time' (Bell 2002, 106). McNeil happened to appeal to the right audience and was given the chance by these influential people to become a playwright out of being a career criminal. It can be argued that without Brisbane's support and the backing of the national newspaper, McNeil's cause may have been forgotten.

In conclusion, this chapter has identified two key controversies in Brisbane's career as national theatre critic and how these events shaped her professional development. Her involvement with O'Shaughnessy determined the scope of what she could write as a critic and offers further evidence of her ability to adapt as a critic and represents the social and

political climate at the time. Her support of McNeil was critical in his overall development and success as a playwright, and one could argue that without Brisbane's support, McNeil would not have been as easily recognised as a playwright. The evidence shows that Brisbane was the conduit for McNeil's output, and her publication of his plays have left a legacy of McNeil that continues to live on today. His plays certainly do have merit in Australian theatre, and it is clear is that his plays are still popular, highlighted by a recent series of *Taking on The Chocolate Frog* for television, which challenges ex-criminals to perform McNeil's play (Blundell 2014, 31 May).

This chapter both illustrates and confirms the argument that Brisbane's was a powerful and dynamic voice in the development of Australian theatre over the past 50 years. Hers is a voice not cowed, but rather strengthened by the personal and professional sacrifices that she made. From analysis of these controversies, one can identify the provocative nature of her work. Brisbane was a critic first and foremost, and was able to show an independence of judgement of all those involved in the theatre, despite their personal backgrounds or history. She honestly expressed her advocacy for McNeil and belief in him as a playwright when others simply dismissed him as a criminal. Her final comments on McNeil reflect her feeling today:

> Of course I came on the scene and then called him a writer, which he had never been called before and this gave him a great hope for a different world when he got outside. In fact, he just made a mess of things when he got outside, he just got drunk, and we had been warned that he was an alcoholic. I mean I'm not even sure he was one, he was just a drunk … he found the world too difficult. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 15)

Brisbane admits to being naïve in her professional view of others, tending to see the best in a person contrary to what others may have thought or said. By seeing the best, she was also able to draw out the best in others, like McNeil, or identifies the inconsistencies with O'Shaughnessy, in order to further her great passion, that of the Australian theatre.

CHAPTER 7

7.1 The Currency 'Lass' – Currency Press in Australia

As earlier chapters have argued, Katharine Brisbane has had a profoundly positive influence upon Australian theatre over the past 50 years (1959-2009). In this time, Currency Press has been at the forefront of the drive to create a national archive of Australian plays. Currency has largely dictated which plays are published over these decades and established itself as the pre-eminent publisher of Australian plays for the industry whilst remaining an independent company. Brisbane and her husband Philip Parsons were in the driving force for change, using Currency Press as a vehicle to guide the theatre through the turbulent changes of the new wave into the theatre of the modern day in Australia.

This chapter aims to give a brief history of small book publishing in Australia, with the focus on the early stages of Currency Press and its development through the past 40 years of Australian theatre, using interviews with key people involved with Currency. It aims to identify Brisbane's transition from critic to publisher. Furthermore, it will show how Currency influenced Australian theatre by improving the standard of plays being produced for a mass audience. It will explore the content, quality and quantity of the published Australian material, and show that it was Brisbane's intention to preserve this material for later generations and to create a lasting canon. Lastly, it will show that Brisbane was consistent in her choice of Australian material for publication, helping to give local playwrights the chance to become commercially successful by playwriting, a feat which had rarely been achieved in the previous decades.

7.2 Small Book Publishing in Australia – 1940-1970

British influence and a focus on producing books from British writers for the Australian market affected book publishing from the late 19th Century to the mid-20th Century. However, journals such as *Southerly* (1939) and *Meanjin* (1940) began to 'provide fresh avenues for the publication and critical discussion of Australian authors and literary culture' (Carter and Galligan 2007, 36-37). Conversely, some publishers such as AC Rolandson and Angus & Robertson did go against the British influence and chose to publish Australian authors.

In spite of the growth in the post-war years, by 1953 there 'were only three Australian publishers – Angus & Robertson, Melbourne University Press and F.W. Cheshire – who produced more than ten titles per annum' (Carter and Galligan 2007, 37). Things began to change in the latter part of the 1950s. The industry continued to develop and by 1957 the Australian Book Publishers Association had grown to over 29 members (Carter and Galligan, 2007, 37). Overseas companies began to invest in publishing in Australia and competition grew to foster new Australian authors. These companies 'laid the crucial groundwork for the later nationalistic stirrings of the 1960s, the creative output of the 1970s, and the professionalism of the 1980s' (Carter and Galligan, 2007, 37). Angus & Robertson, Penguin, the University of Queensland Press and Heinemann Educational focussed on publishing Australian plays throughout the 1950s and 1960s and collected the better known playwrights into collected anthologies (Denholm 1979, 23). This was the first sign of an effort to preserve the plays produced into print and develop the idea that playwriting was a commercially practical profession in Australia.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Katharine Brisbane had closely observed post-war Australian society and was aware of the changes that were taking place in its theatre. She positioned herself as critic at the *West Australian* in 1959 and developed her skills in Western

Australia in the early 1960s. Australian playwrights began to surface, spurred on by the success of plays such as Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* (1957) and Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1960). As the new national theatre critic for the *Australian* in 1967 Brisbane was well placed to report, record and comment upon the theatre. During the period before establishing Currency Press, Brisbane witnessed productions of new Australian plays, the work of new playwrights. In this period, Brisbane was acutely aware of the lack of consistent publication of Australian playwrights.

7.3 Creating Currency

The lack of consistent publication of new Australian plays deeply troubled Katharine Brisbane and Philip Parsons. It was on a study holiday in 1969 that Katharine Brisbane and Philip Parsons first contemplated the idea of setting up an independent publishing company in Australia. Travelling to theatres and Government institutions around Europe, Canada and the United States, they noticed that there was active publication of playwrights to a level not seen in Australia:

> Trips of this kind serve as much to define what you have left behind as they do to show you what others can offer; and we came home inspired with the idea that the work of our young playwrights should be available in print so that they might in time take over the world. The theatrical world that is. (Brisbane 1993, 40)

Their time overseas gave them a useful perspective on the opportunities of theatre publication in Australia. There was no perceivable repertoire of Australian drama and virtually no record of the plays of the 1950s and 1960s, including the new wave productions. Brisbane and Parsons identified that other countries had a clear record of their drama lineage, while in Australia, it was lacking. In retrospect, a possible reason for this could be the relatively short life of Australia as a nation together with its involvement in both World Wars, thereby stunting the arts in the decades preceding the new wave theatre.

The more likely reason would be that it had not hitherto been financially sound to publish every Australian playwright for the country's limited population, in whom interest in the area was limited anyway.

Brisbane details the issue in the article 'Tangible Assets: 10 years of Australian Drama Publishing', arguing that what Australia had was a hotbed of young writers but no publication of local content to support production of Australian plays:

> Learning about theatre in other countries helped us to define what was unique to Australia; and to realise that we had a young theatre movement – albeit a rough one – with an energy and originality that might well be envied by older countries. We discovered an embarrassing lack of printed matter on the Australian theatre. (Brisbane 1981, 33)

This embarrassing lack of publication spurred the idea to remedy the problem. The fact existed that Australia had been a colony since 1788, but had no regular archival history of plays in print. Brisbane more recently highlighted this issue of the recording of the history of Australia's theatre, stating 'It seems curiously inappropriate that, after 205 years of white settlement, our national archive should be celebrating only 25 years, though it is, of course, only the package, not the contents. But our sense of history, of necessity, is very different from that of older countries' (Brisbane 1993, 39). In particular, the retention of plays in publication after their final production was a principle that hadn't been adopted. This led to plays being simply forgotten or even lost after some time. Brisbane saw this issue from her time at the *Australian*. To add to this was her recognition, and that of Philip Parsons, from their shared overseas experience of what was missing and what was needed: 'through these travels we came to recognise the qualities that were unique to our theatre at home; and we returned determined to push for the publication of work on the Australian theatre' (Brisbane 1993, 2). As a result, Brisbane and her husband Philip Parsons were ideally placed to start publishing. Brisbane had her experience as a well-known critic and scholar of the theatre and Philip was a high profile academic. Together they had the

experience and drive to develop a publishing company based solely on Australian plays and playwrights. It is clear that their venture was risky, as it was seen that no money could be made at the time off Australian playwrights. Her transition to Currency was natural for Brisbane, for as national theatre critic, she grew 'tired of pontificating about it all and wanted, constructively, to be a part of it' (Brisbane 1981, 33). Brisbane and Parsons' decision to create Currency Press was also based on one of demand, they realised that there was a market and that Australian theatre had a long history dating back to colonisation.

At first, Brisbane and Parsons went in search of people who might be able to help them develop their idea. She recalls the initial troubles that they had in getting the idea off the ground when back in Australia and the challenge of trying to find support from anyone who might be sympathetic to their cause:

> We spent eight months doing an intensive investigation of theatres and theatre institutions and schools and whatever in Europe and America and became very much aware of what was unique to Australia and how little written evidence there was of this available, so we came back determined to persuade somebody to do some more publication in this field and everybody thought it was a brilliant idea and this was the time to do it, but nobody would actually do it. And so we said, "Why don't we do it ourselves as a little hobby?" (De Berg 1974, 10549)

Starting a publishing company was a difficult venture, which explains the problems that Brisbane encountered in finding investors. Despite this, Brisbane continued to push for the creation of the company. She explained that the initial idea was further developed at a dinner with the playwright Peter Kenna:

> Currency Press did not start in a pub. But the idea was probably confirmed, in my mind, at least, by meeting Peter Kenna at dinner at Doris Fitton's house, sometime in 1970. Peter had recently returned from Britain and knowing him only by reputation I was astonished that *The Slaughter of St Theresa's Day* had never been published. (Brisbane 1981, 32-33)

As a result, Brisbane took it into her own hands in 1971 to start the process and build a company focussed on publishing Australian dramatic works. This came as a shock to her husband Philip:

> He was a bit shocked at the speed of which things happened sometimes. In fact he was really shocked to discover that Currency Press had started, we had been talking about it for months and months and how to do it and decided how to do it. Then he came home one day, and of course once we started Currency Press he was very much part of that, but anyway he and I had decided that we were going to do something which was starting Currency Press and some of things we decided to do. Philip was really shocked; he was quite angered at the thought of this. He was very good and one of the things he did was the cash flow, which was good, which had to be done by hand in those days and I can't imagine doing that now. (Brisbane 2013, 21)

Brisbane showed bold initiative in creating the company from her initial research and following through. As nobody was willing to take on the project at the time and turn their idea into a reality, they made the important decision and started the process. However, Brisbane and Parsons had limited experience in the publishing industry and neither had any experience of running a company. Currency's first manifesto provides the initial insight into what Brisbane and Parsons wanted to achieve from the new company and highlights their dedication towards publishing Australian drama:

> Try-out houses have sprung up devoted to their resident writers and for the first time Australia has an expanding group of young, developing playwrights, exploring the society we are creating, asking who we are and where we are going. Why this sudden efflorescence? Our interests and values can no longer be identified with those of the great and powerful friends who made yesterday's world so comfortable and undemanding. We are a nation and a culture in search of an individual role in a colder, harder, more isolated world, and a new Australian awareness is in the making in our theatres. . . It is because we believe in the importance of what our new drama (and, in retrospect our older drama) has to say to us today, that we have set up Currency Playtexts – to enable a wider audience to discover them, both through the bookshelf and the theatre. (cited in Brisbane 1981, 34)

The manifesto outlines that Currency was aware of the changes that were taking place in Australian theatre and willing to take the risk to invest in an area which has not been financially successful in the past. It reveals the passion that both Brisbane and Parsons felt towards improving the state of theatre and preserving plays for the wider Australian audience to discover, in both the text form and on the stage The manifesto shows that they

were the right people to be taking on this venture, they were not into Currency Press for the profit, rather the preservation of Australian plays.

Brisbane and Parsons were taking advantage of this overlooked resource. There had been smaller ventures in the early 1950s and 1960s to publish new Australian material, but they hadn't proved sufficiently commercially workable for a publisher to support a larger undertaking. Angus & Robertson had been interested in publishing Australian content but hadn't seen it as a profitable venture. Brisbane describes the state of theatre literature at the time of starting Currency:

> Until the founding of Currency Press in 1971 there had been little drama publication here: a few literary works, mostly unperformed, in the nineteenth century; some collections and single plays in the 30s and 40s which had won playwriting competitions but had been performed only by amateurs. In the 50s and 60s the famous plays of Ray Lawler, Alan Seymour and Patrick White were published and, when we began in 1971, Penguin had a handful of anthologies in print. It was not enough to call a dramatic literature. (Brisbane 1993, 39)

There were also other smaller publishers operating, but none that stood out as a publisher of Australian drama. It was the right time to be getting into the publishing industry and it is an example of the foresight that Brisbane and Parsons had in supporting Australian plays and playwrights when it wasn't identified as commercially viable by the big publishers. Furthermore, it flowed on from the changes that were occurring politically and socially at the time in Australia:

> Our initial enthusiasm was for the new writing. The incentive to start Currency had come from the climate of the times. It was a particularly passionate period, as those who lived through it will remember, leading up to the election of the Whitlam Government in December 1972. We had had 23 years of paternalistic Government and the brash generation of baby-boomers had just reached adulthood. In the late 60s the world belonged to the young and they were determined to change it. (Brisbane 1993, 39)

The change of this period had helped inspire a young playwright who became Currency's best-selling playwright, David Williamson. *Don's Party*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, developed from the ashes of Labor's loss in the 1969 Australian Federal election. Williamson was an emerging talent and Brisbane and Parsons were in the right

position as advocates and observers of the Australian theatre scene to secure his skills as a playwright for Currency. They channelled the younger generation of playwrights into a career in publishing plays and their company was the ideal vehicle for this in the early 1970s. Currency gave new playwrights a chance to let their plays reach an audience Australia wide, from schools to amateur and professional productions. In return, it gave playwrights financial security and a guaranteed print schedule. This was unheard of before in Australia.

Brisbane and Parsons's overseas holiday was a critical factor in getting the idea of Currency Press off the ground and enabling them a wider perspective on the publishing environment that existed in Australia. The beginnings of Currency Press show that Brisbane wanted to conserve the theatre that existed at the time in print, something which hadn't been done before in Australia on such a large scale.

7.4 The Press begins to Publish

Brisbane, as discussed in the earlier chapters, was witnessing first-hand the changes that were taking place in the Australian theatre. As national theatre critic, she knew personally the new playwrights who were thriving in the new wave. Parsons was lecturing at the University of New South Wales and was teaching the new generation of theatre practitioners.

Brisbane and Parsons decided to call their company Currency Press. This was itself a reference to Edward Geoghegan's 1844 play *The Currency Lass*, which was the 'first extant play to be produced professionally in Australia' (Brisbane 1981, 33). It had recently been discovered in Government archives (in the early 1970s). In 1844, the title 'Currency' meant to be born in Australia, so the name was an apt one for the fledgling

company. Brisbane and Parsons began to establish their publishing company from their home at Woollahra in 1971:

> We hit upon the idea of a subscription service. We would undertake to print six plays a year and would advertise for subscribers and disseminate our brochures via theatre programs. Each set of six plays would have a balance of new and older plays, and varying style and subject matter. We knew nothing whatever about the economics or the practicalities of publishing. But we did know a good script when we saw it and that's what saved us. By the time other publishers had begun to take notice we had established ourselves as number one in the field. (Brisbane 1993, 40)

Their home at Woollahra formed the backbone of their publishing for years to come. The largest independent publishing company in Australia began in the spare room of that house, in the spare time of both Brisbane and Parsons. What Brisbane and Parsons had in the early 1970s was a multitude of new Australian playwrights all looking to sustain an income as standalone playwrights. Many new wave playwrights wrote in their spare time: Jack Hibberd was a doctor, David Williamson an engineering student. The early choices of which plays to publish would prove critical to the success of their company in its first years. It was to help, very importantly, to secure business from the Australian education market and more generally spread the Currency Press brand as the Australian drama publisher.

Brisbane and Parsons had to learn the publishing industry. Brisbane describes herself at the beginning as a script assessor rather than a publisher, and admits that in the early days 'as publishers we knew nothing about drawing up contracts, about costing a book, about typesetting and printing, about cash flows' (Brisbane 1993, 41). Printing a book in the early 1970s was expensive and time-consuming and they aimed to save money where they could. Brisbane describes the process:

> To save typesetting costs – and remember this was long before the computer setting, this was old-fashioned monotype – we decided to print from typewriter. We would typeset the introduction and design the play text to look like manuscript. If you looked at one of these editions today the concept would escape you, I'm sure, but that was our idea. We found a young man who had a posh typewriter with proportional spacing. He was a compositor on

> shift work at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and lived at Dover Heights, about three miles from our house in Woollahra. He typed the script, then we would proof it and then paste it by hand onto the boards for offset printing. Every error found had to have the correction pasted on. No such thing as word processors in those days. Philip and I were doing this in our spare time and as deadlines approached I remember many a drive to Dover Heights in the middle of the night to have a line of text retyped (Brisbane 1993, 42).

Brisbane and Parsons only managed to get one play published in that first year: Alexander Buzo's *Macquarie*, which sold around 2000 copies. *Macquarie* proved to be a steep learning curve for Currency Press as they struggled to deal with the problems of publication:

> So much for the setting. Further disasters were to fall. When we received a proof of the book from the printer we found all our careful page calculations had gone for nothing. The heads didn't range. In other words the top and bottom margins were all over the place. So the pages had to be done again. Finally the great day came when our first book was to be delivered. Breathlessly we opened the package. There was our firstborn lying in its nest - with the author's name spelt wrongly on the spine. By now it was Christmas and we had a party announced for January 13 down in one of the old bond stores in the Rocks. Our children didn't get much of a Christmas that year. (Brisbane 1993, 43)

Despite these early setbacks, Brisbane and Parsons quickly learned the basics of the publishing industry. Publication of the first few plays meant tough times for them, challenging them to continue to push themselves, despite some bad luck in their printing runs:

> But we learnt. We lost the stock of *The Lucky Streak*, I remember, when the printery burnt down, and later part of the run of *The Time is Not Yet Ripe* was lost when a second firm had a fire. I remember printing a slip for the cased editions of *The Chapel Perilous* alerting the purchaser to the fact that some of the words in the play might not be suitable for school libraries. A few hundred copies boomeranged. We planned to publish a book every two months but soon found it difficult to keep to our schedule. But we plugged along, learning as we went. Soon we began to receive help from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. (Brisbane 1981, 34)

In 1972, business changed. Currency began to meet their subscription using the laborious and time-consuming process of typeset and offset printing. Brisbane describes that two-year period in the publishing industry and the plays they chose:

> We made not a bad fist of those early choices: … Alex Buzo's *Macquarie*, Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous*, Peter Kenna's *The Slaughter of St Theresa's Day*, David Williamson's *Don's Party* and *The Removalists*, Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination*, Jim McNeil's *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice*, and an early John Romeril, *I Don't Know Who To Feel Sorry For*. From the past we rehabilitated Louis

> Esson's *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe* (1910) and from the 20s Betty Roland's play *The Touch of Silk.* (Brisbane 1993, 40-41)

The initial play choices in this two-year period in fact led to an expanding debt for the company, hidden behind the printing costs and royalties. On the 29th November 1972, Currency was in debt by $6,313 (K Brisbane, NLA MS 8084, Box 56). There were limitations to how Australian plays could perform financially and the demand that existed initially did not outweigh the costs of publication. The decision to publish plays from the early 1910s and 1920s could have also affected Currency's rising debt. The financial troubles continued within Currency throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, and at no point did the company appear to be making a large profit on their publications as they were dealing with a niche market Despite this, Brisbane credits the publication of the earlier plays with the company's continued survival, stating that many of these plays were 'vintage crop, those writers from the 70s, and many of their works from this period still sell steadily today. It is they who have provided the ballast on which Currency has stayed afloat' (Brisbane 1993, 41). The choices that Brisbane and Parsons made of which plays to publish in those early years were of extreme importance for Currency's later years. They represented the period of the new wave and the period leading up to the 1950s and are excellent representative examples of the emerging theatre produced at the time in Australia. Brisbane commented upon the ease with which they could sign up playwrights, arguing that 'in those days there was nowhere else for a playwright to go' (Brisbane 1981, 34). It can be argued that Brisbane and Parsons' status and success within the Australian theatre community helped to attract interest from the major players in the publishing industry. Currency received an offer from Angus & Robertson for distribution of its plays in Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the U.S.A. from 1972 to 1974, which they rejected

(P Parsons 1972, NLA MS 8084, Box 59).

Geoffrey Milne further validates the importance of Currency Press, stating that:

> Currency Press was not only prescient in recognising the worth of the new drama emanating from the fledgling second wave. As national drama critic for the *Australian* newspaper, Katharine Brisbane was certainly in a good position to observe the energy and commitment of the new theatre companies. Currency was actually instrumental in ensuring and creating the durability of a new canon of Australian drama through publication and widespread distribution. (Milne 2004, 163)

As discussed in Chapter 2, Brisbane documented and assessed the new plays produced in Australia. She was aware of the plays and personally knew many of the playwrights. Her establishment of Currency with Philip meant that she had the power to put these plays into print, provide a career for Australian playwrights and give them an audience. Arguably, a career as a published playwright hadn't been possible before the creation of Currency Press. As Milne highlights, Currency made this new canon of Australian drama available within a short time of its being produced onstage, and allowed further distribution of plays across Australia through the use of a subscription system, as well as their encouragement of playwrights to send in scripts. Currency was beginning to thrive, producing published texts of new Australian plays. Brisbane developed the early play texts as she identified that they required a formal introduction. This format introduced the reader to the play and explained the social and political context of the time:

> The need for such an introduction seemed to be apparent at the start. We had ambitions for overseas sales too once we joined Methuen and it seemed important that certain things should be explained to people who aren't familiar with the context of the play. I think we overdid it a bit looking back on some of those books, they've got a glossary at the back which I think we could do away with, I don't know if the current issues still have that. We were a bit earnest at the start about sort of using them as social documents, about how Australia was changing and what Australia was like. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 20)

The formal introduction became a standard for the play texts that Currency produced and provided a further service to the reader. The addition of these introductions exemplifies

Brisbane's interest in instigating transformation in the culture of Australian drama publishing with Currency Press.

In 1973, one play stood out in helping the company with its subscriptions and monetary problems. David Williamson's play, *The Removalists*, came to Currency Press. Brisbane recalled this play as a turning point for the fortunes of Currency in its early years:

> It was following the production in Sydney that was done and Harry Miller brought the production and moved it to the Playbox, which was the Macquarie auditorium that he'd converted. The play was then only an hour-long and so he talked David into writing an extra scene just to make it long enough for an evening. He sold the book in the foyer and in the bar that was there and so it was there that the head of Associated Book Publishers (ABP) found it and thought these people might be something. So that's how our publishing began, they had the books properly polished and all that and then with *Macquarie* we showed it to the education Department and everywhere we could and got onto the HSC list the following year, I think, which again is phenomenal, particularly as it was in this funny type. (Brisbane 2013, 18)

The Removalists was an important choice to publish and it solidified the commercial viability of play text publishing for Currency. It spread their customer base across Australia to include the education department and made Williamson a recognised and popular playwright. Despite this success, the constant focus of the playwright and script also limited Currency's ability to produce material based on Australian theatre until the late 1980s when it had more financial security to do so.

7.5 Currency and Associated Book Publishers

The Removalists brought interest to Currency from other publishing entities such as Angus & Robertson and Associated Book Publishers (ABP). In 1973, ABP offered Currency a merger with the biggest publisher in the western world, and so the birth of the Currency-Methuen relationship began. This bolstered the credibility of the newly formed Currency Methuen Drama, and allowed the acquisition of new playwrights who were attracted to the distribution that Currency could offer. It also took the pressure off the company financially. Brisbane explained this new relationship further:

> We brought to the partnership not only Williamson but *Macquarie*, which had been set on the New South Wales Higher School Certificate list for 1973-74 (despite its grotty appearance). One of the partnership's first orders was a Hong Kong reprint of 20,000 copies at 13c. I think they sold it at $1.50. The book did reasonably well but not brilliantly. Contemporary drama was still a novelty in the education curriculum. A lot of that print run was finally pulped. (Brisbane 1993, 45)

Compared to what Brisbane and Parsons had experienced before, the new partnership offered them the experience of others in the field of publication and a chance to learn from the best in the business:

> Methuen was paradise for us. They had a production department, a finance department, a sales department. And they taught us what we needed to know. We had three happy years with them developing a back list which provided the beginnings of a study in Australian Drama. In publishing terms they were years of solid growth but heavily featherbedded by Methuen and ourselves. (Brisbane 1993, 45)

This partnership was important for the initial success and development of a back list of Australian plays. Brisbane announced that 'the business of Australian playwriting is no longer a cottage industry' (K Brisbane 1973, 24th Aug, NLA MS 8084, Box 59). Slowly, Currency Methuen continued to publish Australian playwrights and to get their work included in the education department's study lists across Australia. Brisbane further lauded ABP in her dinner speech at the launch of Currency Methuen Drama in Sydney:

> ABP are not only offering a highly efficient distribution system throughout Australia and New Zealand but expertise in business accounting, costing and production methods – without which, we would not have been able to continue our rate of publication. Our success to date has in no small way been due to the neglect by other publishers of what is clearly an important field and now that we have reached a point where the market has been demonstrated, we must expect lively competition. (K Brisbane 1973, 24th Aug, NLA MS 8084, Box 59)

It is evident that both Brisbane and Parsons were appreciative of ABP and were promised greater things to come from the new partnership. During this time, Brisbane was working as a script assessor and general editor, with Parsons working to expand their company

further. Brisbane describes her position, the struggles with Currency Methuen, and the direction that she felt Australian theatre was heading in a letter to Frederic Hunter: [38]

> I stopped being a theatre critic at the end of last year in order to concentrate on our publication business, and I've also been doing a great deal of writing myself of the history of the Australian theatre so I've somewhat withdrawn from the traffic of theatre. I still do, however, frequently recommend plays to theatres, but many by letter which is not quite as effective as when I met people directly the way I used to. Also the inflation problem which has hit American theatre as badly as Australian has caused the big theatres to cut back their programmes, and also made them pretty conservative about their choice of work. There's not quite the inducement to doing new and unknown work as there was eighteen months ago in the theatre. Those people who are prepared to take risks prefer to do so on playwrights they have in their own backyard with whom they can work and whose background they know. As Arthur Ballet would tell you – he's been here again recently – the theatre is pretty nationalistic here and feels fairly strongly about creating theatre out of our own environment. This is a passing phase, and the new phase of which we can already see signs is an internationalist one and I hope this may bring you some luck. (K Brisbane 1975, 25 Jul, NLA MS8084, Box 56)

This letter provides direct insight into Brisbane's assessment of the theatre in 1975 and shows clearly her awareness of the rapid changes that were taking place at the time. The theatre was beginning to move away from a nationalistic perspective, but that she also needed to encourage her playwrights to keep faith. In other words, that whilst the theatre might not be ready for them just yet, it appeared that it would be in the near future. This letter offers further evidence of Brisbane's influence as she remained firmly in touch with the developments in Australian theatre and was willing to encourage other playwrights to persist until the theatre was ready for them.

Brisbane and Parsons in the early years took great efforts to read and respond too many of the playwrights who sent in their manuscripts with the hope of being published by Currency Methuen/Currency Press. The National Library of Australia holds a manuscript collection that features the first ten years of Currency Press's rejection letters written to prospective playwrights. Brisbane and Parsons feature personally in many of these

[38] Frederic Hunter was a friend of Brisbane's and had just had his play *Hemingway* produced at Harvard. He had sent Brisbane a copy of his new play *Morning Coffee Afternoon Tea* for review by Currency.

responses. What is important is that in none of the rejection letters is there an attempt to destroy the credibility of the playwright and their play, but rather there is much positive feedback and encouragement. There are many examples of this correspondence, most notably in response to prospective playwright Stephen Kelen:

> On the strength of what these notes say, I am afraid that we must reject it for publication. We are, however, interested in your writing and if there are any other scripts you would like to submit to us, we should be very pleased to read them. One of the criteria we use in our choice of plays is that the work should illuminate some aspect of Australian life and Australian attitudes; that it should present a point of view we can recognise even though it may not necessarily be set in Australia. One of these aspects which we have not yet found a writer to express is the immigrant Australian's view of life here. This seems to us to be potentially a rich field because there are so many absurdities in our conventions, our sense of values, our social and political life; and some virtues too which could well be pointed up by a writer coming from a different background. (K Brisbane 1973, 30 Apr, NLA MS8084, Box 56)

Brisbane identifies the key values that she holds and is instilling as a publisher of Australian theatre. She is looking for plays that engage with and highlight aspects of Australian life, irrespective of where the play is set. It is a litmus test for the plays that were submitted to Currency and many plays were rejected on this principle by Brisbane and Parsons. Notably, Brisbane presents Kelen with encouraging feedback and the hint that writing on the immigrant's view of Australia is the topic that he should be looking to next. This letter also foreshadows the greater success of immigrant playwrights of the 1980s and 1990s, with their particular perspective on Australian life and culture. Effectively, Brisbane's role as a script assessor was a double-edged sword as she had the power to publish but was constrained in this, not only by the amount that Currency could afford to publish, but also by the Whitlam Government's position at the time on funding support for such activities, as well as by the still uncertain broader direction of Australian theatre.

7.6 The ABP split

Despite initial successes and a growing list, the honeymoon period wasn't to last for Currency Methuen Drama. Currency Methuen experienced further financial losses and by the 31st of August 1976 its debt was $13,662 (K Brisbane 1976, NLA MS 8084, Box 56). In 1976, after three years of building an Australian drama list, the company found itself without a financial backer. ABP decided to pull the pin on the venture, citing the company's financial losses as the main reason behind the liquidation. Brisbane and Parsons determined, however, to fight on and ensure that Currency survived. They owned the majority of shares in Currency while ABP owned the bank account that was financing its operation. ABP pulled their funding from Currency, leaving Brisbane and Parsons to fund the company from their own pockets. They then started a campaign for support, writing directly to at least 9 Australian publishing companies, requesting them to buy out ABP shareholding in the company.[39]All the contacted publishing companies indicated that they were either not interested in Currency at the time or were concerned over the previous commercial failure of Currency Methuen, as well as the input that both Brisbane and Parsons would have in the company once a takeover had been initiated. Only Alternative Publishing Cooperative Ltd (APCOL), set up by a group of academics, wrote to Currency with a commitment to help save the company without these reservations. In reality, however, they lacked the money to buy ABP's shareholding.

Fighting to save Currency, Brisbane and Parsons decided to take their battle to the Australian media. The media portrayed it as a David vs. Goliath battle, the small struggling

[39] Sydney University Press, Edward Arnold (Australia) Pty Ltd, Heinemann Educational Australia Pty Ltd, Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, Hodder & Stoughton Australia Pty Ltd, Rigby Ltd, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, The Dominie Group and Granada Publishing Ltd.

Australian publisher against the global conglomerate. Brisbane recalls the events after ABP's withdrawal:

> The Industries Assistance Commission was holding an enquiry into whether overseas-owned companies should receive Government support for their Australian publishing. Philip was to give evidence in favour, as a way of expressing our gratitude for the past three years. He now advised the IAC of a change of heart. He went to them with a story of treachery and betrayal. In the event we managed to embarrass the ABP into settlement. We got the stock and they got the company name and the overdraft - $25,000. Much later we learned that at the heart of the problem was a board decision to rename ABP's Australian holding Methuen Australia – and we were at the time the only Australians entitled to that name. I think if they had confided in us a more friendly agreement might have been reached. (Brisbane 1993, 46)

News began to spread throughout the newspapers. The *Age* reported that 'Currency Methuen, the Sydney publisher which has put the most important Australian drama into print, is facing financial ruin' (The *Age* 1976, 22 Oct). The *Age* followed up with a further article on the plight of David Williamson's new play *A Handful of Friends* (1976), arguing that 'the play is only one of a number of works that is affected by ABP's decision' (The *Age* 1976, 25 Nov). The *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article entitled 'Curtain may fall on drama publishers' with Philip Parsons stating 'It's only in times of affluence that multinationals can afford to be generous and support the arts in Australia the way ABP has for the last four years' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1976, 26 Oct). A follow up letter of support of Dr Parsons from Andrew Fabinyi of Linfield argues that his statement:

> …may well be read in conjunction with Associated Book Publisher's Ltd's (sic) recently announced financial results: in the second half of 1975 pre-tax profit more than doubled at £771,000 against £361,000 in 1974. "The subsidiaries in Australia and Canada" says ABP London's report, "make a material contribution to group profits. . . (and) unaudited results to the 30th June show continued progress." As there is no lack of affluence in ABP quarters, the proposed forced liquidation of Currency-Methuen, at a time when books are rapidly finding their market in the educational stream, is, in the absence of any comment from ABP Australia, a decision which, after 36 years in Australian publishing, I find totally incomprehensible. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1976, 2 Nov)

In reply to this letter, the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed a response from Associated Book Publishers Australia. ABP Australia argued 'We have believed that any discussions about the future of Currency Methuen should be held privately with Dr and Mrs Parsons' as well as that they had made 'certain proposals to Dr Parsons and Mrs Brisbane which we

believe will be thought fair and generous' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1976, 6 Nov). It is worth noting that ABP's response came after weeks of press reports on Currency Methuen's struggle and makes no mention of the bolstered profit margins that Fabinyi reports.

To add to this, despite the public outcry and support for the company to thrive, there was little real monetary financial support as most publishing companies decided that drama publishing was not for them. Currency Methuen printed a circular to its authors advising them of the possible scenarios and the current situation that the company was in and that 'Currency will continue to publish, perhaps with a better partner' (K Brisbane 1976, Oct 20, NLA MS8084, Box 59). Brisbane discussed this from her perspective as the publisher of the playwrights:

> We didn't know, we had been told it is being closed down, foreclosed on everything. It was in the papers so I had notified them all and said this is the way it is. No one offered any help at all, except David's book was due for publication and had been typeset. It was *A Handful of Friends* and he offered to pay the printers bill in order to get it out. I don't think he had to do that, either. None of the authors came rushing round, saying you have done an important thing in trying to get us a publishing company, how can we help? I've always found them a bit passive; with those sorts of issues of any kind, really it's curious. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 20)

It cannot be argued that the authors weren't aware of the situation that Currency faced and Brisbane's comments reflect this sentiment. Some of Currency's playwrights, such as Betty Roland**,** wrote to Katharine and Philip, expressing their support but wishing there was something more practical that they could do (K Brisbane 1976, 16 Nov, NLA MS8084, Box 64). However, Currency did have the support of the media (such as Len Radic at The *Age*) and the many in the public who wrote in on their behalf and offered their condolences to Currency in the tabloids.

Fortunately, considering the stakes in retrospect, the widespread show of support was effective. ABP settled and Currency returned to the control of Katharine and Philip

without the large debt (around $25,000) that Methuen had held. They were free to continue publishing under the name of Currency Press and retained the catalogue of Australian drama that they had helped to develop. After the loss of Methuen, Currency sought a new distributor and received two offers. They accepted the offer from Cambridge University Press and that partnership remains in effect today. During this time of upheaval, Brisbane continued to contribute periodically to the *Australian* as a reviewer and was writing about Australian drama in general. She became part of the advisory board for the nationwide magazine *Theatre Australia*, established in 1976. Brisbane and Parsons contributed 'financially or guaranteed *Theatre Australia'* (Denholm 1991, 231), along with others. In addition to her reviewing, advocacy and publishing work, Brisbane's inclusion, as the Australian drama expert, in the updated version of Geoffrey Dutton's *The Literature of Australia* (1976), speaks definitively of her influence as the 'den mother of Australian theatre' (McCallum Interview 2012, 4).

Despite being on their own again, Currency continued to improve their catalogue of Australian plays and playwrights with help from one part-time employee, Jean Cooney. Another important event happened at this time. After the Currency-Methuen split, Brisbane managed to secure the rights to *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Brisbane and Parsons had sought to develop this partnership with one of the best known of Australian playwrights, Ray Lawler, in the early days of Currency Press. Lawler had written the internationally successful *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* amongst other plays and had returned to Australia in 1975. Lawler then accepted the associate director position at the Melbourne Theatre Company and produced a trilogy of the *Doll* plays. Brisbane encouraged Lawler to bring the trilogy over to Currency for printing, and secured the play's rights at the same time as they were produced. She reflected on this success in a 2013 interview:

> He said it's been out of print for years, there was a funny little Fontana edition that was rather a little rubbish edition that was around at the time, so I thought it's not entirely out of print, what does your contract say? And he said "well I don't think I have a contract, I never signed a contract" and I said "well I don't think that's true" and he said "oh my agent would know". So I wrote to the agent and I got no answer. Then we were going to England for some reason so I went to see him, he was a drunk and he didn't really know much about anything and he said he would look for the contract but we weren't getting anywhere so finally I said I would have to bite the bullet and ask Ray to write to Collins and that would probably be the end of it. Anyway, he did that and he got no reply and so at the end of six months we signed up and it was some years afterwards that I met someone who'd been working at Collins and said we were lucky about that. What happened was that the letter went into someone's in-tray and got forgotten, and when they woke up it was too late so was just pure luck, so we got the three of them in the end. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 18-19)

The sheer luck in gaining *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *Kid Stakes* (1975) and *Other Times* (1976) meant that the company now had a prize-winning playwright with international status. However, their publishing relationship with Lawler remained limited to the *Doll* trilogy and *The Piccadilly Bushman* (1959). Brisbane identified that Lawler was important in developing the power of Currency as a major publisher in the industry. This in turn secured more Australian playwrights for the company and allowed international distribution of Australian plays. It helped preserve these plays for the next generation with the *Doll* trilogy being included on the HSC study list and also available on back-order.

Brisbane didn't limit the search for new Australian plays to what had been released in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One example of her personal passion for earlier material is in the securing of *Rusty Bugles* (1948) as a Currency offering. Brisbane understood the backstory behind the play and its importance in the Australian theatre scene. The play had been published by the University of Queensland Press in the 1960s: [40]

> And the search began for the original. The author, who emigrated [sic] to New York in 1948 and had never seen the play, had no copy. The Independent Theatre had closed, but a cardboard box, uncatalogued, at the Mitchell Library, revealed the prompt copy – all but the first 19 pages. We spent three months researching the text and its stage history, seeking out actors who had been in those early productions. And we located some early photos in private collections. But what was shocking to us was the fact that quite a famous play, at that time

[40] *Rusty Bugles* had previously been printed in the 1960s by the University of Queensland Press but was not the original version that was staged in the late 1940s.

> only 30 years old, had almost disappeared without trace. When our book was published, of course, one of the original cast materialised with a script and records intact. (Brisbane 1993, 47)

Brisbane and Parsons weren't content to accept what previous publishers had printed and they felt that *Rusty Bugles* in its original form required to be preserved in print. They understood that there were many worthwhile plays from the early years that weren't preserved. As a result, Currency was in the position to remedy this, and the original *Rusty Bugles* was published for another generation of Australians to experience.

Currency Press continued to thrive from the late 1970s, despite financial stalling within the educational market. Brisbane recounted these early days of Currency in her article 'Tangible Assets':

> But when I think of the vicissitudes and the anxieties about our day to day survival I remember the words of Nancy McConnan in 1977 after Cambridge University Press had taken over distribution of our books. The year 1976 had been a bad one in the secondary schools market. The December 1975 election had frozen funding during the change-over period just at the time when academic sales were at their peak; and the 1976-77 summer was for Currency not heartening. Concerned that the sales which pay our overheads might be slipping through our fingers, I sought Nancy's advice. She patted me reassuringly and said: "We at Cambridge tend to take the long view of these things. We've survived as educational publishers since 1534". (Brisbane 1981, 32)

Brisbane was assured of Currency's survival, and for good reason. By 1978, there wasn't a tertiary institution in Australia that did not have at least one Currency text in their course (Golder, Cooney and Williams, 1995, 13). Despite this, it wasn't until 1979 that the company began to show a profit for Brisbane and Parsons and alleviate the financial pressures. This was fortunate for the couple, as since Brisbane's retirement from the *Australian*, Currency Press had been funded from Philip's academic work and Brisbane's savings. The financial relief meant that they were now able to focus their attention on growing the business by increasing the catalogue of Australian plays and new playwrights. The years from 1980 to 1985 saw this steady increase, with Currency publishing 67 plays,

from new Australian playwrights such as Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and Nick Enright to the older plays of Dorothy Hewett and Australia's Nobel Prize winner Patrick White.

Brisbane argued that their initiative with Methuen in the 1970s helped to develop Currency, not just as an educational provider, but also as a publisher of all texts relating to Australian drama, which fundamentally ensured the company's financial survival:

> Our most radical list – the one which has saved us from becoming a conservative educational publisher – is our Current Theatre Series. These are simple format theatre programmes in which the whole text of a play is published; and we produce one or two a month for any theatre with a new Australian play that is prepared to buy at cost 1,000 copies. The book becomes part of the theatre's promotion and their programme information is bound in the centre of the book. The text is computer set in house and the author may revise the text up to three weeks before opening night. A small additional run is distributed through bookshops. If at the end of the print run the play has demonstrated a continuing life, then we publish the definitive text in a standard Currency Press edition. *Away* was an example of this kind of publishing. We are not the first publishers to have used this method of promoting a play. We borrowed the idea from Methuen, who have had such an agreement with London's Royal Court Theatre for some years. (Brisbane 1993, 8)

Using this strategy ensured that Currency could do business directly with new playwrights in Australia, printing their plays if they could sustain a continuing life after their production and reprinting if demand required. This was beneficial to new playwrights who would not have had the opportunity to have their plays published for performance, or the degree of freedom to send changes to the play within three weeks of opening night. The Current Theatre Series was a vital step as it created an immediacy to the link between the playwright and the publisher. It developed Currency Press as a forerunner for future publication of new Australian plays in the 1980s and 1990s.

7.7 *The Companion to Theatre*

In 1985, Parsons decided to push the company to challenge itself further by beginning a partnership with the Bicentennial Authority:

> But the steady and solid never suited Philip; 'the cutting edge' was one of his favourite expressions; and in 1985, just when I was beginning to relax into some kind of security, he allowed us to be persuaded into researching and publishing a history of entertainment in Australia. (Brisbane 1993, 48)

The pursuit of the 'cutting edge' brought about one of the biggest challenges for Currency Press in its 14 years of operation. They had been solely focused on printing Australian plays and had finally began to solidify profits for the company. Parsons' idea was to produce an encyclopaedia on Australia's drama, with three reference texts for the theatre, music and dance as well as film, radio and television. To further complicate matters, the final text would incorporate elements from all three texts, and be called *Entertaining Australia*. This was a mammoth task for a small Australian company with no proven success outside of publication of playwrights. Victoria Chance was hired to work with Philip on the project:

> I loved Philip, he was fantastic. I think he was very important. He had this remarkable combination because he really encouraged big ideas. It was sort of a mantra that he had, every time people were discussing about things that we should do his question was always what would you have rather done in 10 years' time? That's sort of still in Currency now and when we're kind of working out whether we should do this short-term thing or the longer-term thing someone nearly always throws out that question (laughs). It's come from Philip and it's still there. At the same time he was always really thorough, often the big picture people aren't very detailed and he was incredibly detailed. It was always a joke that every time a book came back from the printer Philip could open it up seemingly at random and find a mistake (laughs). (Chance Interview 2012, 1)

Chance worked tirelessly with Philip to ensure that *The Companion* would become a comprehensive theatre history and that nothing was left out of the text. Chance recalls Philips' tenacity for inclusion:

> He used to drive me crazy sometimes because when we were working on the Companion we would have these endless lists. He just pulled them out of his pocket. He would have lunch with someone and they would mention someone's name so he would write all these names down on a scrappy piece of paper and months later he would pull this paper out and say look at these names, we've got to find out and see if they need an entry – can you go and find out if there's some information on them? There were always people that you had never heard of, 19th Century or early 20th Century or something. I'd go and try and find out, ask all the experts in the area and do my own research, do whatever I could but sometimes I just could not find any information so I'd go back to Philip and say sorry I could find anything. It just completely drew a blank. I can only assume that they don't need an individual entry because they were supposed to be on people of influence and there is no record of these people anywhere. He would just look at me and say I wonder why I had it on my list then; I should try and figure that out. I had to start all over again (laughs). He was so often right though, you couldn't really hate him for it. (Chance Interview 2012, 2)

While Parsons and Chance continued to spend all their time compiling *The Companion*, Currency began to feel the financial pressure of this ambitious task. The years after the Australian Bicentenary were a financial challenge for the Press. They received $110,000 as initial funding for the project, which wasn't enough to support the research required to fill the texts. The new project required a great deal of financial investment from Currency with the associated risk of investing so heavily. Brisbane and Parsons became attached to the project; they remained 'absorbed by the work' and 'borrowed a large sum of money and, like so many companies by the end of the 80s, were badly caught by interest rates' (Brisbane 1993, 48). Parsons retired from lecturing in 1987 and devoted himself to full-time research for the project. During the worst period of the financial troubles, he used his entire superannuation fund to pay off their outstanding loans to make sure that the project could continue. This was the major limitation of Currency Press, it relied completely on the financial backing of Brisbane and Parsons and could not have relied solely on profit from playwrights and scripts. Their initial choices had restricted their ability to operate with the freedom to publish outside of this area. Despite this, it also shows the extent that they were willing to fight for to ensure that Currency stayed afloat and that *The Companion* would be completed. Both Brisbane and Parsons continued to work on the project, despite Philip being diagnosed with cancer in 1989. They released the first text, *Entertaining Australia*, in September 1991, whilst celebrating Currency's 20th birthday. Their hard work led to more grants to support the project which did relieve the financial pressure from the parent company:

> Our faith in it and the project has been more than justified. The Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission have invested in it. Currency is now secure, prosperous, if not exactly minting money as so many people suggested our name implies. We have come through to calmer waters. (Brisbane 1993, 49)

The calmer waters were a short reprieve for Currency and Brisbane. Parsons died in June 1993. Brisbane recalled the feeling at the time as well as her dedication to finishing what Philip had started:

> Philip died on the 20 June this year from cancer diagnosed in 1989. There is no doubt that the financial stress of the company combined with that of retirement from academia contributed to the onset of the disease. At the time he was given a prognosis of 12 to 18 months and he survived well beyond that; and they were years of achievement, happiness and a radical change in our lives and the lives of those around us. It is a grief to us that he did not live to see his *Companion to Theatre* in print because it is a book remarkable for its size, breadth and wisdom and it will be a lasting legacy to his love for scholarship and the Australian theatre. (Brisbane 1993, 49)

Brisbane had intended to have the book ready for release at the Adelaide Festival in March 1994 but more delays meant that it was not ready for publication until 1995. She argued that the text stands as a 'wealth of investment of time, money, dedication and persistence' (Parsons and Chance 1995, 6). She thanked those involved, particularly Philip for his enduring passion about the project. Although he wasn't responsible for the final printed publication of the text, he did 'provide a powerful framework within which the task was accomplished. The book embodies the broad perspective, high critical standards and deep understanding that he brought to it' (Parsons and Chance 1995, 5). The *Companion to Theatre* played an important part in the success of Currency in the 1990s and solidified Currency Press, Brisbane and especially Parsons as well respected members of the Australian theatre community. To add to this, Veronica Kelly described the *Companion* as 'monumental and historically inclusive' (Kelly 1998, 9). The book solidified their financial position and further developed Currency as publisher of the history of Australian drama rather than just playwrights. It is still to this day an invaluable text for those studying theatre.

7.8 Currency into the 21st Century

By 1995, Currency Press had established itself as one of the standout independent publishing companies in Australia, contributing to both secondary and tertiary institutions and drama courses. Geoffrey Milne profiles Currency at this time:

> But for length, breadth, depth and-above all-quality, Currency stands alone. At present it has upwards of 240 individual plays on its list plus 20 or more anthologies of plays, ranging from the collected plays of mainstream playwrights like David Williamson, Patrick White, Alex Buzo and Dorothy Hewett to fascinating collections of works for and, in some cases, by young people. In addition to the plays, there are more than 30 books *about* Australian drama, dramatists and theatre practice; these include audition manuals and a book about stage lighting, study guides to individual plays and comprehensive critical works on some of the major writers. Also, there are film, radio and television scripts, and books about those media, along with a number of music publications. (Golder, Cooney and Williams 1995, 13)

Currency had published the *Companion to Theatre* and was looking to finish the last two texts on music and television in Australia. At the time, as one of the largest independent publishers in Australia, Currency had a wealth of Australian drama texts and history in its catalogues to further support the education sector, which was one of its largest buyers.

It was also during this period that Brisbane sought to publish a set of drama texts from Australian theatre that were representative of each of the decades in which they were written. These texts became the 'Plays of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s' collection, featuring plays that Brisbane and Chance felt should be preserved:

> It was her idea and one of the impulses behind it was because we were at a stage where a lot of plays began to disappear, it was still in the days where you needed to be able to fill a print run of 1500 or 2000 copies within a couple of years to make a play viable as a publication. Short-run printing has changed that now, but that was the case then. These plays were starting to disappear because they just weren't filling enough to really make, we couldn't keep reprinting them, it was costing too much, studios were complaining about the stock. By collecting them in volumes it was a way of keeping them there and hopefully the sales. Often, those books, there's one play in it that's on a list so it generates sales for the whole volume. It means the people who want the other plays can get access to them and it keeps them in print. It was kind of started a little bit like that, with that little bit in mind. We started with the 70s because that was the plays that were happening at the time and it was the new wave plays that had been in print. We went back to the 60s and the 50s because a lot of those plays hadn't been published properly before so once we had the series it was a good excuse to get more stuff in print. (Chance Interview 2012, 6-7)

To add to the importance of these collections, Brisbane personally wrote the introductions to these plays, explaining the social and political context of when they were written and performed, as well as providing a background on the authors. These introductions are invaluable to the reader and show a real commitment by Brisbane to preserve Australian drama in print for future generations. It also shows the priority that Brisbane gave to Australian theatre and the playwrights that she felt were deserving to be published as a representation of their time. In these collections, there is a tendency to move away from the well-known plays and playwrights and one can identify Brisbane's personal choices for plays that were not given the chance at publication in their time.

Despite the many challenges detailed here, Currency has continued to thrive into the 21st Century. Victoria Chance attributes this success to Brisbane's nature as an outgoing, possibly sometimes rash, publisher, stating:

> I think it's one of the reasons why Currency has gone on, usually when things have got messy in the past Katharine has found a way out. Currency still survives, that's one way of putting it. As a publisher she often published things that I never would have thought we would publish because you know that they're not going to make their money, it's going to be expensive to produce and it's not going to make much but because she's published them they are there and that work/energy hasn't been lost completely. It's a really interesting dynamic, when I think of my time as a publisher I was a lot more cautious than she ever was. (Chance Interview 2012, 3)

Katharine Brisbane made the difficult decision to retire from publishing in 2001, stating that she was 'stuck trying to decide what to do and we thought about selling the company, but we couldn't get a price for it and I just stayed on. The staff, many of them had been there for years, I thought shall we disturb the culture by bringing in someone… and in the end I decided to leave it to the seniors' (Brisbane Interview 2013, 25). Brisbane lasted longer at the company than she had intended, but then went on to establish, with John Golder, Currency House, a non-profit company dedicated to publishing periodicals on the Australian performing arts:

> I kept on going for five years beyond when I said it was going to retire and I just thought we'll see how it goes. Then I wanted to do other things and Currency House really came out of general feelings at the depth of the Howard years and I just thought everyone had gone too quiet and they wouldn't talk, and every actor I knew had this awful despondency about the future. So I said well let's start a discussion club and get them to talk out because one of the things that's always annoyed me is the way that the lifestyle papers and things all have these features on actors and their next show and how great it is going to be and all that stuff but never say I have only taken it on because I'm broke, I have to have a job and I think it's a rotten play but we'll do our best (laughs). Until the public really knows what the theatre is it won't get any better so we started this monthly discussion club which was 'Chatham house rules' where they could not talk about it outside. I managed to get a number of people to talk sensibly about their boggles and I don't know whether it helped them to speak out more frankly in public. Out of that came Platform Papers, the idea that was something a bit more lasting. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 26)

Currency House operates today in conjunction with Currency Press. They are the publishers of Platform Papers, which provides an, 'informed quarterly essay series seeking new directions in music, theatre, dance, arts and entertainment, film, television, cultural policy, advocacy. copyright and defamation, arts training and innovation, the creative economy, race relations, young people's theatre, digital arts' (Currency House, 2015). Platform papers is independent and allows those in the theatre community to present their opinion on all topics in the field. Platform papers has covered issues that may not necessarily be mainstream, relating to arts culture, indigenous performance and arts subsidy. Brisbane is an advocate of Currency House and is still on its board of directors in 2015. She also wrote recently for Platform Papers again on the topic of subsidy in the arts. [41] Brisbane praises Golder and supports the venture, despite admitting that it is not financially viable:

> He took on the editing of it [Platform Papers] and I think it has been quite influential, it doesn't make any money in fact it costs us money all the time but it's amazing who reads it, all the opinion makers read it just in case they have to know about it in case someone asked them something and so that's good so that's doing a bit of good but it's hard slog. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 26)

[41] Brisbane, 2015. The Arts and the Common Good, Issue 43, May, Platform Papers.

It is this dedication that exemplifies Brisbane's overriding aim of advancing all aspects of theatre in Australia. [42]She continues to influence theatre publication as the chairperson of Currency House Board, despite retiring from the Board of Currency Press.

In recent times, Currency has taken advantage of the digital age and begun to release content for the Apple store. [43] Their first digital application, entitled *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, documents the stage history of the play from its original performance to more recent performances. It provides photos, videos of performances and interviews with those who have been involved with the play, including an interview with Ray Lawler for the app. The app won the Secondary Teaching Resource award at the 2013 Australian Publishing Associations' Educational Publishing awards. It adds a further dimension to Currency's involvement within Australian theatre, specifically aimed at a new generation.

Brisbane and Parsons have been recognised for their contribution to the overall development of Australian theatre in the form of various awards throughout their shared career. In 1993, they were both made members of the Order of Australia (AM), for their services towards Australian drama, in particular that of their work at Currency Press. In 1996, Brisbane was awarded the ASAL A.A. Philips Award for her 'work as both writer and publisher in Australian theatre and drama, particularly through Currency Press' (Austlit, 2015). To add to this, Brisbane was also recently awarded the JC Williamson Award at the 2012 Helpmann Awards. Brisbane won on the basis of making an outstanding contribution to the industry with her company Currency Press. These awards go to illustrate the importance and influence that Brisbane and Parsons held within

[42] Veronica Kelly's *The Empire Actors* (2009), published by Currency House and Brisbane shows a commitment to documenting earlier period of theatre history, and a strong sense of the vernacular tradition.
[43] The Apple store allows digital content to be downloaded and viewed on all Apple devices.

Australian theatre, and highlight Currency Press specifically as a key contributor to the overall development and documentation of Australian drama.

7.9 Williamson and Currency Press

Perhaps the most important relationship that Currency fostered as drama publishers was that with David Williamson. Near the beginning of Currency's operations, Williamson was an instant best-seller for the company. His first play, *The Removalists*, was an important catalyst for the young company and secured them a wider audience in Australian drama. It brought them to the attention of Angus & Robertson and Associated Book Publishers, the latter helping them to form Currency Methuen, thus boosting their profile internationally and helping them to secure more Australian playwrights for publication.

Williamson followed up the success of *The Removalists* with the play *Don's Party* in 1973. *Don's Party* tells the story of the 1969 failed Labor federal election campaign and reflected the social and political feelings of the time. It was not only another commercial success for Currency but it was an early sign of the company's trademark self-belief and vigour. Craig Munro, from the University of Queensland Press, recalled his experience with Williamson and Currency:

> Many more titles followed over the years until I tried to sign up David Williamson for one of his first successful plays, *Don's Party*, only to find that Katharine Brisbane from Currency Press had got in ahead of me. I reasoned that if a publishing house had emerged solely to publish drama it was probably time to move on to more neglected areas. (Munro 1998, 51)

Brisbane with Williamson had begun to stamp their name on the theatre publishing industry as Munro's comment shows. *Don's Party* continued to solidify the relationship between Williamson and Currency and allowed him the freedom to focus on playwriting without the financial strain. In contrast, despite their successful commercial dealings, Brisbane found the social relationships with Williamson and other playwrights often rather one-way. She discusses Williamson and other playwrights in a 2013 interview:

> We had a close relationship with them in the earlier days because some of them, I mean, Williamson in particular, always sent the draft to us, you know, first draft, to get our opinion and things. Those early playwrights did, Dorothy Hewett I remember who was a friend of ours anyway and Buzo and Stephen Sewell I suppose. Yes, we used to spend quite some time going through these plays, trying to help but there came a point where they stopped doing that and I remember David particularly he moved from Melbourne to Sydney in about the mid-70s and at first spent quite a lot of time in the office talking about things, then he got an agent and then other advisers, directors and people giving him advice. From that time on we didn't really receive anything until the performance draft. I've never really got to know David, it's funny, and it's just his personality I think. We used to work hard to set up social relations with him, to which he responded in a way but never reciprocated. That's the way with most of them really, it's a kind of mutual respect about it but I can't say that they were friends. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 19)

As a critic, Brisbane took on the role of fostering a new generation of Australian theatre practitioners and playwrights. Moving on as a publisher it can be argued that she found it difficult to maintain more than a professional relationship with her playwrights at Currency. This was a transition that Brisbane admits to and regrets somewhat, but nonetheless became accustomed to, as she moved from being a critic and focussed more on publishing Australian drama.

As of 2011, Currency had published more than 35 of Williamson's plays, more than any other publisher in Australia. As a result, he is the most consistently published playwright from Currency's catalogue. [44] Brisbane and Williamson together raised the quality of Australian theatre, both on and off the stage, as their professional relationship allowed the publishing of some of Australia's best known and most popular plays. Without these in print, Williamson may not have the international reputation he has today and his legacy may have not been recorded for the next generation to see in performance.

7.10 Currency and the Canon of Australian Drama

As this chapter has argued, Brisbane and Parsons with Currency Press have been a prominent and influential part of Australian theatre since the company's inception in 1971. As further evidence of this, the 'Friends of the National Library of Australia' in 1995

[44] See Appendix 1 – Currency publication of plays by year.

released a book entitled *Preserving the Ephemeral*, recognising the work of Brisbane and Parsons and their dedication to the publishing industry from those who knew them best. The book *Small Press Publishing in Australia: the early 1970s*, reflects on the death of smaller publishers and small press printing, but acknowledges that 'important presses like Currency Press continue despite the difficulties some of them have faced' (Denholm 1991, 1). Other important figures in Australian theatre have noted the central role of Currency and what the company has done for their field. John McCallum supports Currency's important place in Australian theatre:

> First and foremost is that they have created a repertoire that is still inadequately done in the theatres (for reasons that we can talk about later) but there is now a repertoire for the last 40 years. What we think of that repertoire and whether or not we should be using the word canon (which is a much stronger word obviously), I'm not sure. For better or for worse, when people are looking to revive an Australian play which they don't do nearly enough in my view, they naturally turn to Currency. Playlab Press has also produced some fabulous plays and there have been some authors who have stuck with Playlab Press. It's nice to think that there's a bit of competition but basically Currency is the repertoire. I've been teaching Australian drama for 30 odd years and naturally enough, we are perpetuating – everybody knows *Touch of Silk*, why? Because Currency published it. There are all sorts of plays from that period which they might have published then they would be the canonical 30's woman play. Of course I do the same, I still set those plays. I don't know whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. (McCallum Interview 2012, 11)

McCallum goes further in his analysis of Currency, bringing into context their work, using his own experience of the printing of his 2009 text *Belonging*:

> I've now read a lot more widely than just the Currency repertoire and I think they chose very well, particularly for the period in which I was writing the book (*Belonging*) that I hadn't known very well which was the 30's and 40's. I tried to expand that uniquely in my book by including non-published plays from that period such as Dorothy Blewitt (not Hewett) *The First Joanna* and all that but that's what Currency did, and at least we have one. When people say "Currency created the canon" I say "Would you rather have no plays?" Of course now everything's changing, you can get almost any play via australianplays.org as a PDF. Most playwrights, I don't know if they have much of an editorial role, just send in your PDF and people buy it. No playwrights going to not do that – to be available forever, digitally. It's almost as if Currency's job is done now, I'm not saying by any means they should stop but it's wonderful to have those plays. (McCallum Interview 2012, 11)

McCallum reiterates Milne's notion of the canon of Australian drama. He adds to this, arguing that the use of the word repertoire appears neutral as a word to describe what Currency has created in its years of operation. McCallum's comments echo those of many

others who have grown up in the Currency era of publishing. Despite the development of a repertoire, from the publisher's point of view it was different. Brisbane argued on the occasion of celebrating 20 years of Currency Press, that the plays should continue to be staged for the next generation:

> Philip and I were deeply moved by the occasion, particularly by the quality of the plays represented; but we were also troubled by the surprise behind their reception. Currency titles had, within a few years, reached into every secondary school and university in Australia; and yet the theatre itself had continued to discard this bookshelf evidence and pursue the new. (Brisbane 2005, 331-332)

This was an issue that was voiced again by Brisbane upon her retirement from Currency Press in 2001, when she stated that 'our lack of historical understanding prevents our trusting our masterpieces' (Brisbane 2005, 332). As a publisher of Australian drama, indeed the creator of a national canon of plays, Brisbane's comments show that she felt more than a responsibility to merely publish. For her, encouragement for the staging of the earlier plays was also her brief. This was so that a new generation could engage with this repertoire of Australian drama and understand that the Australian theatre had its own history, with its own classic plays.

In counterpoint to this commonly voiced praise for Currency's record, some have questioned the way that Currency has operated during the past 40 years. Leonard Radic was a critic in Melbourne for 20 years at *The Age* and was one of the last of Australia's full-time theatre critics. Radic argues that whilst Currency filled the void that existed in Australian publishing, it had put the smaller independent publisher that operated in competition out of business:

> Currency at its time was regarded as being very adventurous, particularly when it produced its first half-a-dozen plays and declared itself an Australian publisher. They very quickly took over the field and made the other publishers redundant. Playwrights were eager to be published by them; their choice was not always a wise one. I think she was rather excessively in favour of Peter Kenna and thought too highly of him. Jim McNeil was an overpraised playwright, very much so. You can forgive a publisher for being fond of or in favour of their writers. At the same time she made it near impossible for other playwrights to have their

> plays published. There were small printing presses like Playlab press in Brisbane which published me on one occasion but they could never compete with Currency. When Currency began its play script series, it made it near impossible for anyone else. Yackandandah had published a whole string of local playwrights and published six of mine, found that they couldn't compete because the theatre companies went over to the play script service and used the play scripts as their programs. (Radic Interview 2012, 11)

Radic's argument represents the sentiment towards Currency from those who were in direct competition, or printed by other publishers. Despite this, he maintains that his relationship with Brisbane was positive overall, stating that '...we had a good working relationship as critics, [although] I was never published by Currency' (Radic Interview 2012, 2). Radic relates that Currency had not been interested in publishing his work and his success with *The State of Play* (1991) was important as it gave a rival publishing company Penguin the spotlight.

To add to this, Radic claims somewhat caustically that Currency was driven by the urge to publish or perish, but to seemingly ephemeral ends:

> Yes, they were very monopolistic and they squeezed out others. They will tell you they have 500 authors on their books but they haven't maintained their list which I think is diabolical. They haven't maintained their list which they could have done online. All those play scripts aren't available unless you look in second hand bookshops. I think the other thing is, inevitably with publishers so with Currency that the authors that they choose are very much at the whim of the publisher. (Radic Interview 2012, 11-12)

Radic is arguing that whilst Currency developed a list of plays and playwrights they have neglected to utilise current technology to make those resources available to the general public (this has been recently remedied). Radic represents the view from outside of Currency about the way in which the company took advantage of the void that existed. Despite this, he maintains that Currency Press has provided an important service to Australian theatre and that its creation of a canon of Australian drama is 'self-evident' (Radic Interview 2012, 11). The inside story presented in this chapter shows far more integrity than Radic seems to give Currency credit for in his argument. This chapter has documented the development of Currency Press from its early years as a small publisher of

Australian drama to the industry leader that it has become in the 21st Century. Throughout this time Brisbane remained involved with the company and remained the head of Currency Press until her retirement from the position in 2001. Her dedication to publishing the works of old and new Australian playwrights is evident in the long list of Australian plays that Currency boasts in its catalogues. Overall, without the work of Brisbane, Parsons and the staff throughout the years of Currency, it could be argued that Australia would not now have such a rich canon of Australian plays available for production. McCallum supports this view:

> The other important issue is the canon, the Currency canon. There is no doubt, of course, that Katharine and Philip had enormous influence on the plays and therefore on the playwrights careers. The principle behind Currency…I once wrote this in *Theatre Australia* a long time ago, that Currency was responsible for the establishment of the Australian repertoire. What they published stays. If they published something, there it is. We all know and we all have favourite examples of terrific plays that didn't get published and so are now forgotten – some of those plays from Beatrix Christian for example that didn't get published. They're fabulous…and she went back off to the film industry and wrote *Jindabyne.* What a loss to the Australian theatre that is. Katharine said to me after this first came out (*Belonging*, McCallum's 2009 book) that she felt a bit intimidated by this idea – she didn't intend to do that, they just wanted to get them out there. (McCallum Interview 2012, 8)

Brisbane may have not intended to create a canon of Australian drama in 1971, but all evidence presented in this chapter points towards the existence and survival of a canon of Australian plays and eventually historical texts. Whilst their initial limitations forced Currency to become solely a publisher of plays, it eventually led them to the financial freedom to expand further. The company's sole reliance on Brisbane and Parsons was still evident into the 1990s and left the company open to financial insolvency if any of their further major publications was a failure. Brisbane and Parsons with Currency fostered an environment in Australian theatre in which playwrights could find commercial success, actors could have their production in print, and theatres could market their plays coupled with their programmes. Before Currency Press, this was a hit and miss affair. In very recent times, Currency has survived by embracing the digital age of the 21st Century, enabling online purchase from their database of Australian plays. Currency has survived

the past 40 years of Australian theatre using the ‘long-view’ approach and today provides access for a new generation to Australian play texts, books and materials. This is nothing but encouraging for the future of Australia drama.

Conclusion

This thesis has documented and analysed the key periods of Katharine Brisbane's career in Australian theatre, journalism and publishing. Brisbane grew from her experience as a cadet journalist and began to develop her own style of theatre reviewing that blurred the distinction between an ordinary reviewer and that of a full-time critic. She developed her skills as a director at UWA and moved into journalism at the *West Australian.* Her tenure at the *West Australian* was formative in shaping her skills as firstly a journalist and then as a critic. She was exposed to the changes that were occurring in the UK and these changes foreshadowed what was to happen in Australia 12 years later. Brisbane took on briefs that were not within her job description and challenged those in positions of power to do more to develop Australian theatre. It is clear that during this period of her career, her aim was to influence the theatre and promote its growth in Western Australia. Later, clearly, she turned her sights to encompassing the development of the theatre nationally. In retrospect, her time at the *West Australian* was of extreme importance to Brisbane as it allowed her the freedom in a state environment to report on the theatre unopposed. Brisbane had a state consciousness and the isolation of Western Australia gave her the ability to stamp her own name on the theatre in the efforts to affect what was happening across Australia, with her columns being evidence of this.

The third chapter provided a comparison between theatre critics and Brisbane to identify the key qualities of a theatre critic in the effort of identifying these qualities in Brisbane. The research showed that Brisbane does indeed share these qualities and in some ways represents Preston's utopian critic framework. The difficulty in writing 'good' criticism is evident in the time it took Brisbane to hone her talents, by the time she was the national theatre critic at the *Australian* she had been writing for 9 years in newspapers, albeit

sporadically. This chapter shows the importance of a critic to learn from the mistakes of others, something in which Brisbane was exposed to when she worked in the UK as a cadet journalist.

Further to this, my thesis has identified and analysed the changes that were taking place in Australian theatre infrastructure and government subsidy arrangements. It presented a description of the state of Australian theatre just before the changes that took place in 1967, prior to Brisbane taking over the role of the national theatre critic at the *Australian*. It establishes a context for the rapid changes of the new wave and shows that Brisbane was fully aware of the infrastructure and subsidy framework put in place in the effort to improve and enrich Australian theatre. It reveals how Brisbane used her new position to question and challenge the judgements of those making decisions regarding public subsidy of the theatre. It further provides evidence that Brisbane was willing to put her own reputation on the line to influence the theatre and stimulate change. It is also a reflection of the social and political changes that were happening at the time and indicative of the Australian sentiment to affect change nationally. A new generation was beginning to gain a foothold, the 'baby boomers', who were tired of the Menzies Government and willing to fight for what they believed in. Brisbane attached and identified with this sentiment and her articles accurately reflect this belief.

Brisbane's passion, advocacy and activism for Australian theatre became further evident in her role as the national theatre critic for the *Australian*. Building on her experience at the *West Australian*, she once again she raised issues that she believed important to the overall development of the theatre – tackling theatre administration, subsidy and funding, theatre infrastructure, theatre practitioners, playwrights, and problems with the theatre in general. She remained positive about the future of Australian theatre, and through her writing at the *Australian*, directly influenced its direction. Brisbane as national theatre critic made the

public aware of the changes that were happening in the theatre during the new wave period. In retrospect, one can argue that the social and political changes also supported Brisbane's regime at the *Australian* and her unwavering support of Australian theatre was definitely not an unpopular topic for the younger generation of Australians. I argue that Brisbane was not part of the 'baby boomer' generation and her role at the *Australian* could have represented the complete opposite to what it has now come to be recognised, had Brisbane not been willing to embrace change. Now, her reviews and criticism serve as a lasting reminder of the turbulent changes of the new wave for the next generation of Australian theatre students. The changes included subsidy, theatre administration and infrastructure, as well as challenging actors and playwrights to be creative and dynamic. The research shows that Brisbane made personal and professional sacrifices as national theatre critic that were outside her job description. She continually attacked problems that she believed prevented the theatre from developing, such as lack of innovation, censorship and a poor record of publishing Australian plays. The articles presented highlight her advocacy and activism as the national theatre critic and public support of theatre practitioners in Australia whilst detailing the social changes as well. [45]

Brisbane's career has not been without controversy and problems. Her legal battle against Peter O'Shaughnessy was a lasting reminder that the critic can be liable to the words that they write on the page and taught her a valuable lesson on writing how she personally felt about the production. It showed the shortcomings of Brisbane's position as the national theatre critic to those of whom she was writing about. In retrospect, one can identify with what Brisbane was attempting to achieve, and in a way, despite losing the legal battle, she will be remembered for her stance against O'Shaughnessy. This is a perfect example of the

[45] The Records of Currency Press (NLA MS8084) also highlight the sheer amount of correspondence that Brisbane had with playwrights and those in the theatre industry. This research included a survey of this correspondence.

enduring nature of Brisbane and her resolve. Time after time she put others needs in front of her own for the betterment of the theatre. Jim McNeil was another example of this desire to improve and capture the ephemeral. Her unwavering support of a convicted criminal turned playwright show that despite the outward appearances, Brisbane could recognise true talent. Brisbane admits upon reflection a certain naivety in supporting McNeil and what he would eventually become but still feels as though she made the right decision in her support. Without Brisbane's support, McNeil's plays would never have made it out of the gaol and into the hands of a new generation of theatre practitioners.

The final chapter explores Brisbane's transition into the role of publisher. It highlights her overall contribution through her experience as national theatre critic and the influence of this experience on her as a publisher at Currency Press. It shows that Brisbane and Parsons took high risks, both personal and financial, to enable Currency Press to survive and continue to publish Australian plays and works of theatre history. These risks still emanate to Brisbane today and serve as reminders that nothing is gained from sitting back. Brisbane, despite being retired from Currency Press in 2001, still maintains a professional relationship with her company, and her son is on the board of directors. She regularly speaks about the theatre, from her perspective as a journalist, critic and publisher. As a continuing example of this, Brisbane is speaking with David Marr in a conversation entitled the same as this thesis - 'Katharine Brisbane: The Doyenne of Australian Theatre', covering all topics of her life in the Australian theatre.[47]

This thesis has covered the span of Brisbane's professional career, analysing her contribution to the development of Australian theatre in her reviews, criticism and publications over the past 50 years. Brisbane was and still is a tireless advocate for the

[47] At the Sydney Writers Festival on the 21st May 2015.

theatre, making the public aware of the rapid changes that were occurring in the theatre as well as being an activist for further change. Her reviews provide evidence of her advocacy for change and show that she was aware that she was in a position of influence over the development of Australian theatre. Currency Press and its body of publications represent Brisbane and Parsons's legacy to Australian theatre and its history. Currency has created a list of Australian theatre publications that is unmatched elsewhere and provides a new generation with access to the national theatre of the 20th and 21st Century. Brisbane continues to influence the theatre today, owing to her enduring presence as a writer, her enormous knowledge of theatre practice, and her passion for enriching the theatre. Today, Brisbane is a widely respected member of the Australian theatre community and remains influential in her commentary on the theatre. Brisbane reflected upon her career in a recent interview:

> I think I saw myself as everything, yes. I suppose I'm still doing the same thing, stirring people up to think differently about... To think again about some of the things that are going right, I still stir by saying some outrageous things. People got very cross with my Parsons lecture because I called it 'In Praise of Nepotism' and I thought, well I remember that word and I still think it's absolutely true. Its people who know each other getting together is where creativity comes…you can't teach it in universities. (Brisbane Interview 2013, 26)

These comments show that Brisbane still enjoys the response (whether positive or negative) that she gets from the public and reiterates her position as a passionate advocate for Australian theatre. Her unwavering enthusiasm and her experience can further be seen with her inclusion in a recently released documentary on Australian theatre entitled *Raising the Curtain*, in which Brisbane is featured as a commentator.[48]As long as there is an Australian theatre, Brisbane will remain a part of it.

[48] And her speech for the Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture 'In Praise of Nepotism' (2011).

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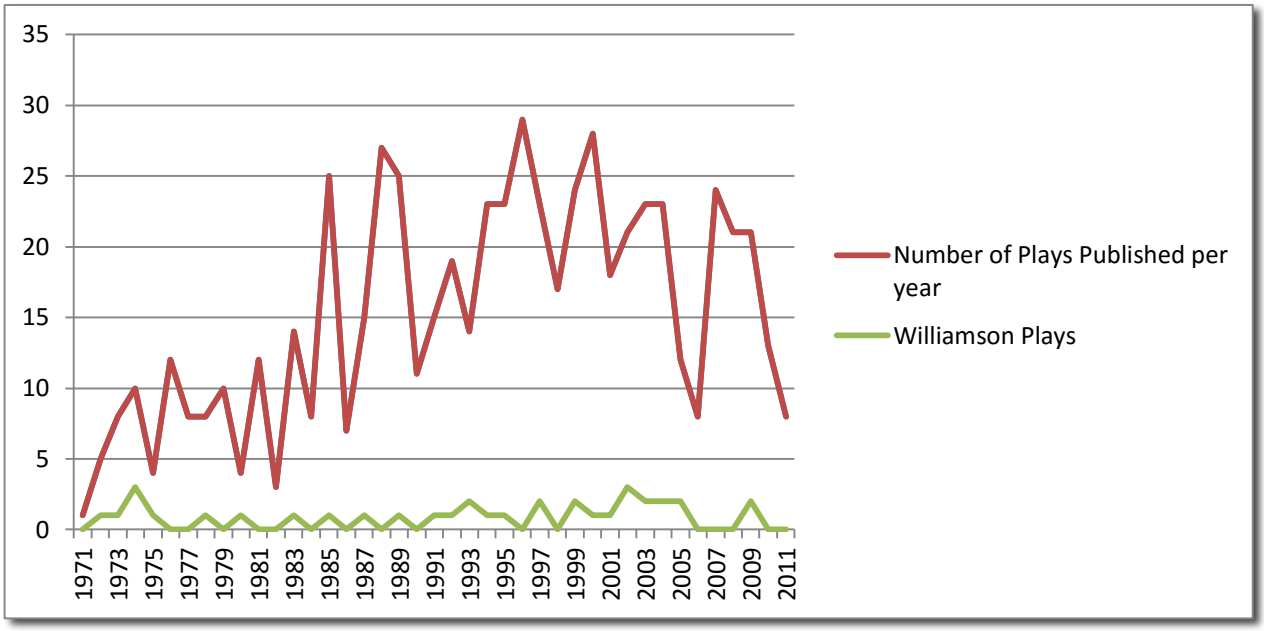
Appendix 1 – David Williamson's Publications with Currency Press

Chart 1.



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Appendix 2 – Interviewee List

1. Katharine Brisbane
2. Victoria Chance
3. John Golder
4. John McCallum
5. Geoffrey Milne
6. Leonard Radic

Contacted for interview

1. Jack Hibberd
2. David Williamson
3. Graeme Blundell

Appendix 3 – Interview with Katharine Brisbane

TC: How influential was growing up in Perth for you as a theatre critic?

Katharine Brisbane: Well, I suppose it was just that I wanted to do something to do with the imagination really, I was a solitary child and I was one of four children but the others were between 10 and 17 years older than me. It was a very easy childhood really, I went to PLC in Perth which happened to be in the same Street and I... We had a big rambling house with a great deal of gardens and orchards and stuff which was in Peppermint Grove, one of the posh suburbs, very built up today and full of Tuscan Manors and that stuff. But this was an old fashioned house, at the start we had horses and a cow in the backyard so you can imagine... I was left to myself, I mean my father was a civil engineer spending much of his working life in Malaysia and so my primary school time was pretty idyllic really, just sort of, living on the resources that were in this large house and garden. We had adventures, I suppose my first encounter with a theatre was with my history teacher who encouraged us to build a puppet theatre and to make up stories and things, which we did. We loved doing that, and there was a team of us who sort of ran it, we usually gave performances to the other children and I suppose that must have alerted us to the possibilities. By the time I was, I mean, we didn't go to the theatre, my parents were not theatregoers, and almost the first theatre I saw was when we got tickets to go to the Lawrence Olivier/Vivien Leigh tour in 1948, which I thought was the most amazing thing I've ever seen really. That was probably my last year at school and so when I went to university I joined the dramatic society and became a wardrobe mistress and those sorts of things. I had no ambitions to be an actor myself but there was something that really attracted me... I did do a little bit of acting in the chorus and things but.

TC: You were never interested in taking that any further?

Katharine Brisbane: No I wasn't, but I did become a director. That was obviously a leadership impetus, but I didn't know what for and I wanted to do things my own way somehow. The other thing that I knew I was good at was writing.

TC: Your BA was an English major?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. But it was not a very good degree, you know. I had to repeat the third year French, I think, before I got it (laughs) because I was too busy doing other things, I think. I did enjoy the English course and that was very influential because we have a lecturer called Jeana Tweedie (later Bradley) who directed plays and it was she who taught me how to read a text —which, you know, is a skill akin to reading a novel and how to bring it to life and to look at the structure of how the plays are made and how a certain sequence will lead to a crisis and would be followed by a sort of a drama, you know, turn and so forth. And that's just stood me in good stead for the rest of my life, really, and I suppose made it possible for me to become a critic. So when I left university I got a

cadetship on the *West Australian* and became a normal reporter for a year or two and then went to England. Everybody had the ambition to go to London as soon as possible and so I had two years in London and I saw a great deal of theatre there. The reviewing standard was brilliant at that stage, there was Kenneth Tynan and Michael Billington was going on in those days and Harold Hobson. They were all sort of masters of reviewing, so I collected their reviews and studied them and then I had this epiphany with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that had arrived in London. I knew it was coming, people had written to me about its success in Australia and I went up to Nottingham to see the run in that they were doing there and I was just bowled over by the energy of the play and the working class lingo, the Hawaiian shirts (laughs). I'd been watching—I've written about this a number of times, you probably heard this about how the night before I'd been to see... (Pause) the Sheridan play *The Rivals*, with Anna Massey and Daniel Massey and Gielgud. I thought that compared with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that this is just effete, wow, I been so entranced by this English classical thing, which was so foreign from anything in Australia, anything I'd seen really. And I thought I've just got to go home and see what is going on, so I did and I became very nationalistic. I started looking for Australian art and painting and music. I remember collecting many ballads and things, there was nothing much on records that you could buy that was Australian, and I remember a Burl Ives record of Australian ballads that he sang in Australian accent, that that was really the nearest I could get at that time. I then had a holiday, came to Melbourne and Sydney and visited a young couple who were starting their own record company so I had some of their records which I took home and used to play at home.

TC: So for you when you are over in England, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was the reason for you to come back?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. I think I'd probably had enough by then but I didn't know it really until I saw this play and I thought, this is extraordinary.

TC: When you are over in England, I mean, you were there during a time of change in the English theatre as well, did that give you any kind of indication of what would happen possibly 10 years later in Australian theatre, or did it kind of prepare you, in a sense?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, I think in hindsight. I didn't see the Osborne play, *Look Back in Anger*, in London. I'd come home before that opened. There was a play called *Luther* with Albert Finney in it and it was much commented on that he'd come from the north and he used this provincial accent which was pretty rare onstage. At that stage and there was a great muscularity about it, or about the character at least. That was an Osborne play too, I think, and I saw that before I left but I didn't see *Look Back in Anger*, and I don't know why. History puts that play as the first one that Osborne made a splash with but anyway I read all about these things, of course, when I got back I ordered the London papers for about six months to read and then I stopped doing that.

TC: That was around 1958? You are still working for the *West Australian* at the time?

Katharine Brisbane: I came back to work for the *West Australian* and then it was 1959 before I got the job of critic which I had been asking for. The previous writer, she was elderly, her name was Dorothy Darlington her claim to fame as a critic was that she was the sister of W. A. Darlington who had written for the London *Daily Telegraph*. She wrote what I used to call dear little reviews, the reviewing was not important enough for them to kill it or just stop doing it.

TC: What sort of training experience did you get at the *West Australian*? Were you thrown in the deep end?

Katharine Brisbane: As a critic I had no training but I'd had very good training as a reporter and that was important because we were told that we had to ensure all the basic facts were in there, so you know, someone who'd come from somewhere else could read this report and know all the background that was necessary in each report; and not to assume that the reader already knew the background, as with ongoing stories. That stood me in good stead and so that's how I approached the reviewing. I mean I had to find my way and what I was reviewing was amateur theatre, the Playhouse which was semi-professional, had professional management and some of the actors were paid and others were not (they were sort of halfway there). They were doing three-week repertory. Then there was the commercial theatre, there were two commercial theatres which depended on people coming from the East on tour.

TC: From what I have been reading, what was going on in Perth in that time was imported English actors.

Katharine Brisbane: That's right, yes. Well, part of the reason for that was the 10 pound pom. They could bring out a director from England for £10. This is cheaper than bringing someone from the eastern states. There was a group of good local actors who worked mainly in radio but there weren't many local directors who could do that job; they were mainly people who were working in other professions and would do productions in their spare time or take time off to do things, so there was really no proper professional theatre except for at the ABC, with radio actors. So, the problem I had (I was also quite well known as a director) was: was it going to be all right for me to review my friends? So I devised a sort of descriptive style which was based on what the aspirations of the production were. There was a kind of university style production that did the classics and really the intention was to get to know the classics, there were the social amateur groups and there was the professional theatre and [the director] Edgar Metcalfe. He was a bit later but these English directors had fairly high aspirations for their theatre at the professional level and they got a bit shirty about me saying that an amateur production was better than theirs. I devised a more descriptive style which made it clear to what level of excellence the production aspired and how far they succeeded...

TC: Just in case you were to offend people?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, and that worked quite well. When I came to write for the *Australian*, I had similar problems, thinking about what I am going to do. The main problem in that case was clear, that perhaps 5% of the people who might read my column would ever see the production. So that's how [I began write more as a news journalist than an arts critic], I had to write two columns a week and I could put anything I wanted to.

TC: That was at the *Australian* or the *West Australian*?

Katharine Brisbane: The *Australian.* The *West Australian* was just overnight reviews and I had to rush in after the play was over and write something in half an hour.

TC: What was your word limit like at the *West Australian*? Were you restricted by word limits?

Katharine Brisbane: No. It was what Harry Kippax used to call ‘filling the hole’ (laughs). I had talked to the sub editor before I went to the theatre and said what I thought the review might be worth, and he would hold that space for me and I'd rush back and write it. If I thought it was so bad that I only wanted to write half that length, I'd tell him. If I thought it was great and surprising I'd ask for more space if I needed it and I might or might not get it but usually not, because they'd set the page by then. Because this is the old linotype days, there was nothing flexible about it. I had to get it to the sub-editor by 11:30pm at the latest.

TC: So you had strict deadlines to adhere to getting your reviews in?

Katharine Brisbane: That was hard but it [the writing] was a facility; people would comment on how it could be possible but it's just like any skill that you learn with practice. When I had my first child and stopped full-time work at the paper and only wrote reviews just about once a week or once a fortnight, I suddenly found it terribly hard.

TC: In terms of transitioning from the *West Australian* to the *Australian*, going from the de Burg interview in 1974, how did you come about the job of National theatre critic?

Katharine Brisbane: I'm sure whatever I said about that was true, I'd just forgotten (laughs). In 1960, I married Philip, then in 1964 he was appointed to Australia's first drama Department at the University of Sydney, so we moved across here and I looked around for reviewing to do. I'd met Roger Covell who was then doing the drama as well as the music reviews at the [Sydney Morning] *Herald* and I'd also met Harry Kippax who'd come over to see a performance in Perth. So, I cultivated their friendship and Roger, fairly soon, decided that he didn't want to do the drama reviews as well as the music, because the music was growing. So I applied for that job and I didn't get it. John Douglas Pringle, the famous editor of the *Herald* at the time, wrote me a letter saying to appoint me would be inappropriate despite my experience because Philip was a work colleague of [Professor] Robert Quentin who had founded the Old Tote and NIDA, so my opinion might be influenced by my husband's [position as a senior lecturer], so that was the end of that. Then, in 1967, Francis Evers decided to go back to Paris. The *Australian* started in 1964 and so he had three years as it's the first drama critic. He was a strange Irishman who lived inside a navy blue overcoat and put up with the really primitive conditions of the [infant] *Australian*, His claim to fame was that he was a friend of Samuel Beckett and he wanted to go back to Paris to take up his career there and befriend Samuel Beckett again, which he did. By that time we had got to know him and he invited Philip to write some articles on the Opera house row, the sacking of Jorn Utzon in 1966. So they wrote three large articles together and in the course of that he more or less arranged for me to meet his editor and take over his columns. So that was kind of easy.

TC: He was happy to do that, and transfer the role over to you?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes.

TC: When Evers was working as the national theatre critic, was that role defined by the *Australian*? Do you think the *Australian* was trying to create a position that was all-encompassing?

Katharine Brisbane: I think so, there wasn't anyone there that knew anything much about theatre criticism, and it [the position] was probably at the bottom of the list of people to appoint.

(Brief pause)

I don't know what happened before I came on board but the business of getting the newspaper printed and distributed daily around Australia was so enormous that they paid very little attention to what journalists were writing. That was quite exciting and certainly they took no notice of me at all. I got the job and I was told to write two columns a week and I could put what I liked in it.

TC: You had freedom?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, until the Peter O'Shaughnessy case, you see, and of course then they appointed a lawyer (laughs) for the first time.

TC: What was your own experience of that situation?

Katharine Brisbane: It was 1967. Were on the cusp of 1968, it was an exciting time and we all felt the change was coming and that we could contribute. I think my writing reflected that. I remember writing a lot about why haven't we got any Australian plays and why are we doing all sort of trash and stuff. Then suddenly La Mama was there and things were beginning, so I was a bit evangelical about everything I reviewed at that time. O'Shaughnessy had been overseas and he'd come back to do this production of *Othello* for the Arts Council and it was performed in the Conservatorium. He was a great self-publicist and the papers were full of news about how the 'great Shakespearean actor ' had come back to Sydney and that he was going to do this revolutionary production; and he was quoted as being 'better than Olivier', you know, all that sort of thing. There was a big fanfare and so I thought well gosh he's got to live up to this! In fact it was a deeply old-fashioned production with about 10 changes of set, with the curtain dropping between the scenes, can you imagine! That's my memory of it. I'm just thinking in the Conservatorium whether they had a curtain or not, but they must have had. So I was disappointed and angry with him for deceiving people, really. And I also invited a friend from Perth who happened to be visiting and I think staying with us who ran the Shakespeare Society in Perth and she was outraged, she was really angry, so I was a bit emotional when I wrote the thing. I called it a dishonest production, you see, which is not an uncommon term in aesthetics. I was naive and I should have been told I couldn't use that word but I wasn't. So he decided to sue us, he was really furious. Unfortunately, as I was to be a witness I wasn't allowed into court. I couldn't see what was going on. But at the end of the day they decided not to call me so I missed out both ways (laughs) which was really irritating. But he had ruined his life really, we won the case in the first instance and went off to Ireland and has only been back to Australia occasionally. He became a sort of a professional litigant and the *Australian* took this case to the High Court. We appealed and we won the appeal. We won the High Court decision but they ordered a retrial. The grounds were that the judge had misdirected the jury in saying it was all opinion because in fact the review had factual information…where the play was held and who wrote it and who was in it and so forth and so that it wasn't all opinion and so we had to have a retrial at which point the *Australian* said that had enough and so they paid him off. We didn't get a precedent.

The facts of the court case are that we won the Supreme Court case, which was argued around the word 'dishonest' and the question of whether the man on the Bondi bus would take my use to mean that Peter had committed some felony, like embezzling the box office. The judge concluded that my column was just opinion, and I had a right to my opinion. The verdict was upheld on appeal and Peter took it to the High Court, where the judges concluded that the first judge had misdirected the jury in saying the column was

only opinion. That there were facts stated, including the play, the venue, the cast, etc. The *Australian* settled for, I believe, $14,000. O'Shaughnessy continued to write about the case until his death a couple of years ago. He had his own website on the subject. (I've never looked at it.)

It was an intemperate review and had the paper's editorial (laughs) section been more on the ball the problem wouldn't have occurred and allowed me to print it the way it was. I mean most of the people were on my side and he had raised a lot of public money to do this production and made a lot of false advertising about it which came across. He spent the rest of his life trying to justify himself and I still get e-mails from him, he was in Oxfordshire somewhere and he kept wanting me to co-author a book on the case presenting both sides, but his side was so libellous and it was such rubbish that, anyway, nobody would have bought the book. I kept saying no and I still hear from him time to time but I think I put him in spam box. I know he sued his mother-in-law for some offence and I just felt very sorry for the whole thing. He was a very fine actor but he couldn't get on with other people, he later returned to Australia with a production of *Diary of a Madman* which was a sterling performance, it went around the country and was very good but I don't know what he did with the rest of his life, he just wore out other people's patience.

TC: Your time at the *Australian* was during a very turbulent period of Australian theatre. Did you feel as though you were participating in this change?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, absolutely. I was a kind of messenger girl for the rest of the country, about what was going on and it became a very powerful position. I was being a reporter as much as a critic and I was able, in my column, to write about the setting up of the Australia Council and the protests there were and the decisions that were made about how the council should be set up. Then as often happens in every revolution, the usual suspects end up changing their names and being on the revolutionary committee (laughs) and sort of taking over the government. That was only natural because there were not many people who were qualified to set up and run the state theatre companies, for example, that were set up as a result of the Council; or to run the committees that decided who was to get money and who wasn't. The whole infrastructure wasn't there and it had to be created.

TC: There's a lot of articles that you write about the *Australian*, where you criticize or comment upon the AETT and the ACA, mainly your criticism of HC Coombs and his running of the AETT and where subsidy was going during the time. Later in hindsight you mention that maybe you are too harsh on him during that period.

Katharine Brisbane: He was a man of his time and I should have realized that in retrospect. What I particularly criticized him for was when I was on an interim committee to decide what was going to happen about drama and he asked us to write down the name of every theatre and theatre company in Australia and we did that and he accepted the amateur theatres but he rejected JC Williamson. I argued with him about that, saying that they were

the employers of the only professional theatre company, the only theatre practitioners that we had and you have to take in the whole picture. He said well they don't need subsidy.

TC: They ended up folding in 1976.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes they did, yes, they lost everything. Well they sold up in 1976 following the Industries Assistance Commission enquiry into the arts. As to whether they should be subsidized, they applied for subsidy on the grounds that all these other groups that were subsidized were now in competition with them and that they were suffering. They were rejected about this and so they sold the theatres and I think it was a very bad decision to allow them to do that, although they were pretty dead on their feet. The people that were running it were old and they were out of touch and exciting new entrepreneurs like Harry Miller were emerging. We sort of didn't miss them terribly much because we had all this new stuff that was happening. Coombs looked, I realized in retrospect, that he was looking at the theatre like most people in business do, from the front stalls and they wanted the product. They wanted the pursuit of excellence, it was his mantra, you see, and he wanted the best ballet we could possibly get and the best opera. But he knew nothing about how to get it. When the Elizabethan Theatre Trust was set up [in the 1950s], that was going to be an opportunity for local talent but the first thing they did was to acquire a theatre in Sydney in Newtown. The old vaudeville theatre in Newtown, which was then out of town – nobody went to Newtown to go to the theatre. Then the first plays they put on were the Terence Rattigan play, *The Sleeping Prince*, [with Sir Ralph Richardson] and *Look Back in Anger*; and so it went on like that. And then of course the *Doll* cut through all of this. The play won a script competition but was turned down by the Trust. John Sumner persuaded them that he wanted to put it on at his Union Theatre Repertory Company and changed their attitude. In the beginning they employed an Irishman called Hugh Hunt to come run the Elizabethan Theatre Trust but he couldn't bear all these working class plays about blues and stouches.

TC: I've read about that.

Katharine Brisbane: He wrote a little book, it was a lecture he gave, yes, that was typical of Hunt. I mean, this is the whole thing that started at the beginning of the colony and I've written... I mean I’m sure you've read my stuff about that. Even I thought that everything was better that came from Britain than what we had here at the time. At the same time I'd made up my mind that we should start being ourselves and settle these young people who agreed. And of course I was supported or driven by the baby-boom, those who were marching in the streets over censorship and the Vietnam War and all sorts of other things that were going on. Of course we then got the Whitlam Government. And so, one after another things began to happen, so there was plenty for me to write on and I became quite influential, there's no question about that at that time. People didn't understand what was happening, what the drama was about, they could see that it was news in a way that sort of nothing could make news, really.

TC: Did you get a lot of feedback at the *Australian*?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, I did. I used to go round, about once a month I'd go on a trip to Melbourne and perhaps Adelaide as well and occasionally to Perth for just 2 to 3 days. I'd see a matinee and an evening performance and I'd collect all the stuff and then I'd trudge over it the next couple of weeks. It gave the impression that I was always on the road, when I wasn't at all. I had two small children at that stage and this was a part-time job when I first started.

TC: Did you find it helped you understand local theatre scene that was happening at the time and make those contacts?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. I also used to go and talk to the actors afterwards. This was, I mean a critic didn't do that, well didn't do it before me and I don't think they do it very much today. I used to go round and find out what's been happening in their world since I last saw them so I got a report on things and they would come to me with worries. I remember actors just coming to me about going on strike and about this or that and the other.

TC: Did you use what they had to say in your columns?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, I did.

TC: As the national theatre critic did you find yourself in competition with the local theatre critics?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. I never thought of being in competition with them and in fact I rarely saw them in the theatre because I was not there on opening night often. I went there when I could gather three or four shows to see it once, I'd do that so I don't think that my reviews have much impact on the box office, whereas theirs did. Sometimes the play was about to close when I'd gone to see it but I'd find something to say that added to my general argument about where the theatre was going and of course I didn't see everything. The reason I left in 1974, apart from the fact that we started Currency Press together, was that I was losing ground. I couldn't get round to all that there was to see and I put a proposal to the *Australian* that my job should be to do an overview and we should have stringers in the States. They thought that was too expensive, so I left. Following that they [appointed an arts editor and] started an arts page, and that's an interesting thing, there was no arts page on the *Australian* when I wrote, my columns were on the leader page and I shared the space of the week with the film critic, the music critic and the art critic. After I left Maria Prerauer became the first arts editor; her way of doing things was to cut the page

up into equals' lots of 500 words and collect reviews from around Australia. I found this unbearable because it didn't tell you what was the most important arts news in Australia today. Something totally unimportant got the same amount of space in the same presentation of the big news of the day.

TC: Did you find the word limits restraining?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. I found 500 words regardless of what it was just too difficult to write about. I did go back temporarily, sometime during the 1970s, late 1970s, I think, to do occasional reviews but I didn't like it so I gave that up.

TC: What were the qualities that you were looking for in Australian theatre at the time during your work as a national theatre critic at the *Australian*? What playwrights impressed you during that period?

Katharine Brisbane: I suppose I was just looking to be surprised, to find something that hadn't been thought of before, and that's the message I remember... Philip went on study leave in the middle of this period at the *Australian* and 1968-1970, when he was finishing his... No... he wasn't finishing his Ph.D., we were just touring the world really. We spent time in America, time in Europe, time in Britain and it was a very educational time. He was following the riots in 1968 and all the theatre was full of nudity and sort of, expletives of those kinds and most of it was, you know, trying to shock people into rethinking. We had a lot to debate on that trip and I remember thinking it gives you perspective when you come home to your own country; and it just seemed to me that we were going the same direction [rethinking]. I could recognize the new and the things that hadn't been done before. The problem I found with Britain that was so perfect in so many things, was that that the audience were people who could go and see *Hamlet* and compare it to the one they saw in 1978 and the one they saw in 1972 and so on. For them it was so much harder to be new. There was nothing new under the sun really, but in Australia we hadn't done before and this is very exciting.

TC: What were the qualities of a playwright that you are looking for?

Katharine Brisbane: Well, I was looking for direction (this is all in the Parsons Lecture I gave last year really), seeing the *Doll* and seeing that we keep the vernacular that was in the *Doll*. The characters who were archetypal Australian men particularly, I think, in analysing it thinking about that the oldest Australia. We thought that this was the beginning of something new, the *Doll*, but in fact it was a kind of mourning at the passing of the old Australia. The old dependent physical strengths and that anti-intellectualism that we were famous for — all those things. It was a kind of turning point. I suppose there was something about that that I was looking for, then I saw the early stuff at La Mama and then

The Legend of Kind O'Malley and that's the one that defined me. Going into that little Jane Street Theatre which only held 100 people, they had all the cast doing circus tricks in the foyer and Kate Fitzpatrick with a snake around her neck. You know, there was all this physical activity going on and satirical behaviour really. Then the play itself is like a musical, it's got a presentational style. We all thought that naturalism was the only kind of theatre, the only kind of serious theatre that we had; otherwise we had entertainment with American musicals and English comedies. But in fact vaudeville, it struck me, it was a real local entertainment which was original to us because the acts were all original to the performance, the gathering of them together and the presentation. Then I began to look at the comedians that we've had and there have always been satirists, from the beginning of the colony, making fun of the aspirations of the upper classes and so forth. Barry Humphries is an example of this although he is a bit ambivalent, he really wants to be taken seriously but that's his problem, his offstage problem. Reg Livermore was another one and Hogan, we've always had them. It seems to me that kind of in-your-face thing was much more Australian than work that theatre companies that were beginning to be set up were doing. So I suppose that's what I was looking for, that's why I keep carrying on about it.

TC: What made you want to tackle issues such as censorship in your columns at the *Australian*? Did you want to bring them to national interest?

Katharine Brisbane: Well I suppose that these are just ways that a journalist looks for to get the attention of people to things that are important, you find ways of doing it. The censorship was a big issue at the time because the theatre itself was challenging and there had been a lot of very silly court cases, there were people being arrested and there was lots of jokes about Arthur Rylah, Chief Secretary in the Victorian government, he was in charge of censorship. His teenage daughter, who was middle-aged by that stage…he wouldn't let his teenage daughter see this play (laughs). In 1969, well first of all, Harry Miller put on *Hair* in 1967-68 and then there was the *The Boys in the Band* (1969). John Krummell, playing the lead, was arrested in Victoria and charged with obscenity for saying fuck onstage or something of that kind. Then there was the *Norm and Ahmed* play, there were two cases, one in Brisbane and one in Melbourne, where the actors were arrested. I think the Brisbane one was for saying 'Fuckin' boong' while beating up an innocent Asian student'... He was just given a caution or something, the Melbourne case was dismissed as too trivial to be taken seriously. The case of *America Hurrah* - the problem was that the New Theatre was given the injunction to take the play off and so we put this protest production on in the Teachers Federation Theatre. It was because you couldn't under law, they were charged under the *Health and Safety Act* or whatever it was called, that the theatre was a danger to the audience in that they didn't have enough toilets or breached fire safety regulations. The problem was that we couldn't get a case argued about obscenity in the courts and so we kept looking for something that could give us a legal precedent. In the end the whole thing faded away and I think, I'm not sure it happened about those health and safety regulations, whether they just fell into disuse or whether they were repealed...

TC: Also the *Theatre and Public Halls Act*.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, the *Public Halls Act*, that's what it was. So, no, it was the theatre itself that was making news and I was just reporting it.

TC: Do you think your work at the *Australian* was an accurate representation of what was happening in the theatre at the time?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, yes. People were quite excited and... The whole political scene reflected this feeling, that the nation wanted change and that we could all be a part of changing it, what you personally did could make a difference because we had had 23 years of the Menzies Government in which people just trusted him, you know, to get on with it and nobody was interested in politics. Then suddenly everybody was.

TC: Do you think the Vietnam War had a lot to do with it?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, certainly, because the arbitrariness of our involvement was really stupid. The ballot they had, I mean only Australians would think of that, you know, it was all the people whose birthdays came up. I mean young men thought it was an adventure to go to war and most of them didn't object, some of them had the sense to object at the time but most of them didn't and some of them got killed. All over... It's ridiculous.

TC: I think what's interesting is a social and political context of the time, the theatre was used as an outlet to explain, it gave a lot of people the chance to get a voice, especially students and student theatre. In remembering that period of time, what would you say was the biggest challenge as the national theatre critic?

Katharine Brisbane: I don't have one, actually. Because I could do what I liked and it was just a day to day thing.

TC: You didn't feel like there were any limitations?

Katharine Brisbane: No, I didn't, you see. That's how people felt at that time and most of them were young and it was really—it was called a ‘youthquake’—… you know at the end of the 1970s things began to change. There was also a freedom in that the buildings were going up and new companies were being formed and there were new entrepreneurs like Harry Miller and the like happening. There was opportunity, and there were young talents like Jim Sharman who was only 22. When he became internationally famous and they talk about the ‘youth quake’ and things. I was talking to Robert Quenton one-time, who sort of

took to Jim in a big way, and he just gave him the responsibility for decisions for which he was really not ready. Robert was just convinced that the young had the answer to things and we elders were going the wrong way.

TC: Did you feel like you were a mediator between the young and what was happening at the time?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, certainly, yes. I think I'd written about it — by taking Jim and Brian Syron and John McGrath from the Ensemble theatre out to one of the leagues clubs to show them that this is where the real audiences were. I mean it was a terrible night, this singer singing her heart out and people with big piles of beer glasses rattling around and everyone talking while she was just trying to sing, but you know the place was absolutely packed in the middle of the week. They said, we have to find a way to capture this and I was thinking when I was writing the Parsons lecture that this was very naive of you Katharine, now you know much more about the upbringing of those people. They knew much more about that world than you did (laughs). We were all looking for new and bigger audiences and ways to do it, I suppose there was a lot of waste of that talent because people like Robert Quentin were not understanding of what they were good at and what they weren't good at. (Brian had spent most of his life in an institution for juveniles. He did a couple of brilliant plays about prison life and others about Aboriginal disadvantage and so forth. That kind of violence was his particular forte but they gave him Shaw and...Oh that's right he was taken on by the Old Tote and the first thing that they gave him was *The Merchant of Venice*, he was practically illiterate, Brian, and I don't think he had ever read Shakespeare. And then, you know, it was a disaster and the people all laughed at him because he was an outsider and had managed so badly and that was very damaging to Brian. And they gave Jim Sharman Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* to direct, which was equally dreadful.

TC: In terms of La Mama and Jane Street, were they the stand out theatres for you during the new wave period? Did you see them as points for the 'birth' of the new Australian theatre?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, yes, because there was not much else really, the mainstream theatres, well they had the Old Tote and the Melbourne Theatre Company, were doing sort of very domestic plays. The Tote did some kind of advanced things like little European plays and things like that, they were very tentative about doing anything Australian and when they did they didn't get a very good audience so they were reluctant. It took them quite a lot of time until with the arrival of David Williamson things changed, they had suddenly found somebody whom they could patronize and who would make money for them at the same time. The Australian Performing Group in Melbourne and the Nimrod Street Theatre in Sydney – both spinoffs from La Mama and Jane Street – opened their doors in 1970 and became the home of the New Wave.

TC: Your opinion was that you felt like they were trying to make money rather than try something new?

Katharine Brisbane: I think that...yes

TC: People were not that interested at the time?

Katharine Brisbane: Not the ordinary theatre goer, not the ones who had been patronising the Old Tote, for instance, and the Melbourne Theatre Company but mainly University educated people, mainly women bringing their husbands along and so forth. There was a lot written about how the audiences were aging and what's going to happen about that. They were quite slow at picking up the New Wave, really, but they did. And of course the Old Tote went broke and then they had the chance to start a new company with different people and things got better from there.

TC: There were some playwrights that you discussed a lot, Buzo, Hibberd, Williamson, Romeril, and McNeil. In that major group of playwrights, who would you say has had the most influence over Australian theatre and lasted the test of time?

Katharine Brisbane: As far as influence is concerned, it's probably Romeril because he is still writing, he has done damage to his own career I think by collaborating with other people. He has also done a lot of educational drama but he has continued to make a living out of it. Hibberd was really important in assaulting the barriers of social life and presenting domestic life as a confrontation and his *Stretch of the Imagination* I think was an important play. There was something in him, a bitterness about his plays, that has been bad for his writing and he was asking the impossible from his audience, I think. The more he was disliked the more he went on doing the same thing; and so in the end he left the theatre and tried other forms of writing. He is still around, being a doctor. Maybe he had only the one thing to say which is quite often the case with any kind of writer. There are a lot of one novel people and there are a lot of one play people. Buzo, I think he will last, he is very out of favour at the moment which I only know because his daughter set up a foundation which has been trying to push his plays. His kind of play is not in favour at the moment but he will be rediscovered in another few years.

TC: Jim McNeil was an interesting character. What's stood out to you as a national theatre critic and wanting to advocate McNeil?

Katharine Brisbane: It was just an adventure, really, to go out to Parramatta Gaol and see the prisoners performing *The Chocolate Frog*, that was my first connection with Jim and he just seemed to be a natural. He had never seen a play in the theatre, he didn't know what

theatre was. His explanation was that he was a member of the Resurgents debating society and law students from Sydney University used to go down on Saturdays and debate this elite group of prisoners, of which Jim was one. He got fed up with arguing with them about what it was like inside and he just got this idea that he would show them instead of trying to be rational about it and so he wrote *The Chocolate Frog*. I learnt that not a lot of what Jim said was ever true, he had a very keen mind and I think he embellished stories about himself. In fact, he said to me one day in the middle of a story about school and an encounter with a nun…he said well I don't know whether that really happened (laughs). He had told the story so often that he couldn't remember now. And so I think that was probably quite true, but that was his reason for writing *The Chocolate Frog* and then he found that that was effective so he started writing more. Of course I came on the scene and then called him a writer which he had never been called before and this gave him a great hope for a different world when he got outside. In fact he just made a mess of things when he got outside, he just got drunk, and we had been warned that he was an alcoholic. I mean I'm not even sure he was one, he was just a drunk and he found the world too difficult.

TC: I found it interesting that there was a lot of campaigning to get Jim out of gaol. I don't think he would have gotten such an early release without your advocating of him, writing in the *Australian* saying that he was a playwright who hasn't had a good run but there was something there.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, well there definitely was. I saw the plays in Melbourne recently, the two short plays (*The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice*). *The Old Familiar Juice* is a very fine piece of writing, *The Chocolate Frog* is a bit clunky. *How Does Your Garden Grow?* is still a fine play but again I think that's all he had to say really. I think the discipline inside prison made him a better writer because the language was restricted (all mail and other writing was subject to censorship) the last play *Jack*, the last part of which he wrote outside prison. (I think the first half was actually written inside prison and taken out by others.) It's just full of obscenities and it really has no quality at all, no dramatic qualities at all. While he was in prison he was not able to express that kind of anger on the page, if he wanted to get it out of prison. He had to work with the education officer and things like that. At his best there is a gentleness about the writing which was able to come out and was very attractive to the audience. What he was trying to say, really, was that people inside have just the same feelings and aspirations as the people outside and they were no different, they just happened to be locked up and they had to make the best of it, so this is how they do it. Of course it's an exotic setting for most of us who haven't had that experience and so theatre always has to be surprising; otherwise it becomes too familiar and we don't bother with it. So he came at the right time and the openness of the period allowed a number of prisoners to become writers and some of them got out and are still writing today. But, there were no real followers after Jim that I know of.

TC: I'd like to move onto Currency Press. What spurred you to develop Currency? I know there was a period overseas which you cite as an influence...

Katharine Brisbane: Well that's right. Also I was coming to the point where I was getting a bit sick of telling people what to do, I wanted to be part of the culture that was happening and so we devised this idea of starting a subscription system which published six plays a year.

TC: Did you get much support from people in Australia?

Katharine Brisbane: Not much at the start. It's never been a profitable venture really, even today. There was a lot of interest but mostly disbelief that we could do this. But we started. To begin with, nationalism was in our favour, it was the right moment to start. We had been going about 18 months when, well, two things happened. One was that suddenly the cost of printing went up by about 40%, a victim of the oil crisis and the state of the economy, which brought down the Whitlam Government in the end. That was the bad happening. Then there was an IAC enquiry into the publishing industry pending. Associated Book Publishers was a conglomerate of British publishers of which Methuen, the world's largest publisher of drama in English, was a part. Methuen came to us expressing interest in taking over the company and the reason for that was that they had to show that they had some interest in supporting Australian talent and not just importing books from Britain to the Australian market. We also had an offer from the long-established Australian company, Angus and Robertson, and another UK publisher, so there was some interest in us...

TC: They (A&R) were realistically the only publisher's pre-1971 of Australian drama.

Katharine Brisbane: That's right and I had talked to them a year or two before saying why don't you start publishing plays and they said no, no…there's no money in it. They now thought that maybe there was and so they came to see us but they just wanted to buy us. The ABP wanted to form a partnership so we did that and we became Currency Methuen and that was a big boost to us because the Methuen was the big name in the English speaking world for drama. Jack Hibberd was one of those who had refused to be published by us because we were not British and they didn't think we would do a good job, he came on board then because we were Currency-Methuen. So they taught us, you know, a bit about the publishing industry of which we knew nothing at all at the time. But again that would have happened at another time in our history I don't think it was part of this ferment that was going on.

TC: Those very early days with Currency-Methuen, it was pretty much out of your own house wasn't it?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, well. The printing was offset then. You will probably have seen an original copy of Buzo's *Macquarie,* our first play: it is in this typewriter font It was a

proportional typewriter that produced something which looked more like real Linotype than a normal typewriter and so we used that to type the plays out, then we had to paste them into pages onto cardboard. We had a chap who was doing the typing, he was actually a Linotype operator at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and was doing this in his spare time (laughs). I think he was looking to his future because he could see that his job wasn't going to last very much longer, the way things were going. If we found mistakes in the typing we had to paste over corrections; and then we found that when photographed for printing it came out in bold because it was that much nearer the camera then the other parts of the page. So we had terrible trouble getting these things right. Anyway, we brought out about four of the six plays that we announced in our subscription before we started getting them professionally printed and then we published David Williamson's *The Removalists* in the middle of that and it was *The Removalists* that brought the Methuen partner to us.

TC: *The Removalists* was your first published David Williamson play.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes.

TC: That was your first partnership with David in terms of publishing?

Katharine Brisbane: It was following the production in Sydney at Nimrod Street. Harry Miller bought the production and moved it to the Playbox, which was the Macquarie auditorium that he'd converted. The play was then only an hour-long and so he talked David into writing an extra scene just to make it long enough for an evening. We sold the book in the foyer and in the bar and so it was there that the head of Associated Book Publishers (APB) found it and thought these people might be something. So that's how our publishing began, they had the books properly published and all that. With *Macquarie*, we showed it to the Education Department and everywhere we could and got it onto the NSW HSC list the following year, I think, which again is phenomenal, particularly as it was in this funny type.

TC: You still have a relationship publishing for the Education Department?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, *Macquarie* was published in 1972, it was probably 1974 when it got on the list, then the Peter Kenna play *A Hard God* got onto the list in 1976. Getting books selected for the public examinations lists takes a lot more effort these days because there is a bigger choice. But they were obviously looking, there were no Australian drama curriculum, so it was the English were trying to interest.

TC: With *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, was it your decision to get the rights for that? I read an article regarding the rights and Currency.

Katharine Brisbane: Well, that came about when Ray Lawler came back to Australia and wrote to more plays which became the *Doll* trilogy. Following the performance of the first play I went to see him and said may we publish this and he said 'oh yes of course, but don't you think you should do the *Doll* too?' I said yes, I would like to do the *Doll* but Collins have the rights to it. He said, it's been out of print for years. There was a funny little Fontana edition around at the time, so I said, it's not entirely out of print, what does your contract say? And he said well I don't think I ever had a contract, I never signed a contract and I said well I don't think that's true and he said that his agent would know. So I wrote to the agent and I got no answer and then we were going to England for some reason so I went to see him. He was a drunk who didn't really know much about anything but he said he would look for the contract; but we weren't getting anywhere so finally I said would have to bite the bullet and ask Ray to write to Collins and give them six months' notice of withdrawal of the publishing rights. and that would probably be the end of it. Anyway he did that and he got no reply and so at the end of six months we signed up and it was some years afterwards that I met someone who'd been working at Collins and they said we were lucky. The letter had gone into someone's in tray and got forgotten and when they woke up it was too late. So it was just pure luck, so we got the three of them in the end.

TC: Did you think in 1971 that Currency would it be as big as it is today?

Katharine Brisbane: I don't know whether we thought much about the future at all, really, we just thought these plays or to get out there, someone should do it, we had the energy in those days. It was like a challenge, you know, I talk myself into things without really thinking much about where were going.

TC: What was your working relationship like with the playwrights?

Katharine Brisbane: It was a fairly reserved relationship really.

TC: It interesting going from reviewing playwrights to being a publisher.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, that's right. We had a close relationship with them in the earlier days because some of them, I mean, Williamson in particular, always sent the draft to us, you know, first draft, to get our opinion and things. Those early playwrights did, Dorothy Hewett I remember who was a friend of ours anyway and Buzo and Stephen Sewell I suppose. Yes, we used to spend quite some time going through these plays, trying to help but there came a point where they stopped doing that and I remember David particularly he moved from Melbourne to Sydney in about the mid-70s and at first spent quite a lot of time in the office talking about things, then he got an agent and then other advisers, directors and people giving him advice. From that time on we didn't really receive

anything until the performance draft. I've never really got to know David, it's funny, and it's just his personality I think. We used to work hard to set up social relations with him, to which he responded in a way but never reciprocated. That's the way with most of them really, it's a kind of mutual respect about it but I can't say that they were friends. We had one point which I think was revealing, when in 1976-77 Methuen decided to foreclose on us; they were getting out and wanted to close us down. We had a letter from the bank saying we had a $25,000 working overdraft which Methuen had guaranteed and sorry we're going to foreclose. I thought, you haven't given us notice about this. Oh well, they said, it's got to be done really. So we said, well if we put some money in will that help... $4000 was all we had and we put that into the bank account and then we went to see them, the bank. The manager was quite frank with us: he said, you're only a little company and Associated Book Publishers have a $7 million overdraft (laughs) so really you're of no account so we have to do as they tell us So that was it. Anyway we did get a great press about this in a way that you would never do today, we were too small to be anybody but we got onto page 3 in the *Herald*. where you could read about this worthy little nationalistic company being bankrupted. And then Lloyd O'Neil, an equally nationalistic publisher from Melbourne came to our door and offered to pay off our overdraft. He didn't have to do that in the end because we settled. We managed to make it so embarrassing for ABP that they paid off the overdraft and we got our stock back so that was good. In the course of that I had to write to some of the authors saying it looks as though we might not be able to publish their contracted work after all. We didn't know, we had been told we were being closed down, foreclosed on everything and it was in the papers so I had notified them all and said this is the way it is. No one offered any help at all, except for David, whose book was due for publication and had been typeset, it was a *Handful of Friends* and he offered to pay the printer's bill in order to get it out. I don't think he had to do that, either. None of the authors came rushing round, saying you have done an important thing in trying to get us a publishing company, how can we help? I've always found them a bit passive, with those sort of issues, really it's curious.

TC: How did you get into editing and writing introductions for the material?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes well that was— the need for such an introduction seemed to be apparent at the start, we had ambitions for an overseas sale too once we joined Methuen and it seemed important that certain things should be explained to people who aren't familiar with the context of the play. I think we overdid it a bit looking back on some of those books, they've got a glossary at the back which I think we could have done away with. We were a bit earnest at the start about sort of using them as social documents, about how Australia was changing and what Australia was like.

TC: In terms of being a theatre student I think they help immensely in understanding what was happening at the time.

Katharine Brisbane: I'm glad about that.

TC: How much of an influence was your husband Philip on your work as a journalist/publisher?

Katharine Brisbane: Quite a lot, you know, just by being there and of course he had a very good mind, we went to the theatre a lot together and we would talk about it. I mean he didn't overtly influence what I was going to write about anything and I think he was often surprised (laughs) by some of the mad things that I wrote but my best ideas were always Philip's, I mean, he was good at analysing things and make me pause to think so we had very good discussions always. When he died, it was one of the thoughts the came to me quite quickly, how am I going to decide anything without Philip to talk about it with? (Laughs), to argue with him about it.

TC: I remember a quote that Philip was an 'ideas man' and you were the one who put those ideas into action.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, that's right. He was a bit shocked at the speed at which things happened sometimes. In fact he was really shocked to discover that Currency Press had started, we been talking about it for months and months and how to do it and decided how to do it and then he came home one day. Jean Cooney was my secretary at the time, we'd hired a part-time secretary when I was working for the *Australian*. We had two kids so she was able to look after the kids when I had to go away and be in the house when she had to meet the plumber and do all those things as well as... And of course once we started Currency Press she was very much part of that. She and I had decided that we were going to do something, which was starting Currency Press and some of things we decided to do really shocked Philip, he was quite angered at the thought of this. But he soon settled to the idea and started a separate classic series of plays beginning with *The Currency Lass* (1844). One thing he was very good at was the cash flow which Lloyd O'Neil taught us how to do and it saved our lives. It had to be done by hand in those days and I can't imagine doing that now.

TC: From your position being a national theatre critic and publisher, being a part of the changes that were going on in Australian theatre, what were the changes that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s that differed from the new wave?

Katharine Brisbane: Well it's a big business now of course, the subsidised theatre, the sector involved in associations with the Australia Council, I'll put it that way. We've got the state theatre companies, we've got a quality of acting and directing which we certainly didn't have in those days and designing, I mean, if a playwright writes today and the play is taken up by the major theatres the playwright can demand anything, really in terms of design. It is only limited by money. But at the same time I think it's tame, I'm not surprised by the theatre in the way that I used to be, I think the high production values have taken some of the sting out, it's all a bit comfortable, the seats are too comfortable. Tyrone Guthrie always said don't make your audience to comfortable in their seats or they will just

become passive and demand more of something but contribute less and I think that's... there's something very exciting even about old stables and warehouses; and you have the mixing of people in the foyers and debates on the footpath.

TC: What would you say is a direction that the theatre could go in now to possibly recapture that experience?

Katharine Brisbane: Well we have to find a better way to support the arts, that's the thing and there is a lot of debate going on about how to do it. Platform Papers is busy carrying on about those aspects because I missed the freedom that people once had— not so much freedom as autonomy and I think that the downside of subsidy is that it's made people passive. It's made people feel they have to do read the guidelines before they have an idea and maybe they have to wait till the money comes in before they get involved. There is a lot of debate at the moment about the language used in application forms and by the people that actually run the arts.

TC: You'd agree it's become rather complicated and technical?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, oh it is. All the applications are lies, I've just done one myself to the Australia Council for Currency House, and another to one of the big foundations and I cannot help admitting in an application form that we have a need for money because this seems to be self-evident. But I also expect them to know what our track record is and what our mission is. They can decide whether they like the look of our mission or not. My board took it away from me and rewrote it into this bureaucratic language with a sort of analysis. It was a masterly piece of work and I have much more confidence that will get the money than from what I wrote. It's not unusual in all this and there are many small organisations and many talented people who just want to be understood by people who have money to give away. I fear that they are not getting the support that they would like and that they need and also of course there's many more of them so it's now highly competitive. I am finding that people are more territorial today. I've seen some good signs about more cooperative ventures than there used to be between the big companies and the smaller ones. Looking back, I blame Nugget (HC Coombs) in a way for part of this by insisting on a non-profit structure for the subsidised industry, that a company must have a board of worthy citizens; and it was mostly people like him who were sought for the original boards of these companies. Not people who are practitioners, who work in the industry, who understand what he didn't understand – the process of making art. So I think that's all having a bad effect and I would like to see more opportunity for the big companies to sell their work to earn money because it is an industry, in fact we call it an industry but then we don't allow them to make money. It was right through the 1970s this sort idea that you were forbidden to do more than one Ayckbourn comedy in a year or Neil Simon or someone like that because you'd get a black mark, literally with the Australia Council if your repertoire looked to be too commercial. A Neil Simon play will employ just as many people as an Ibsen, you know. What is wrong with egalitarianism, really? It's been a bugging thing all through the history of the Australia Council. I think that our natural

tastes are a little lower than what the Opera company would like them to be. But we should not be ashamed of who we are. There's a big push against organisations like the Australian Opera these days, I think we need an Opera company but it's all to do with money and the question of whether in the southern Pacific in 2012-13 we need to have an opera company of the size and quality that we have.

TC: In terms of our Australian theatre critics what would you define to be the characteristics or aesthetics of a good theatre critic? What was your working relationship like with Kippax and Radic?

Katharine Brisbane: Very good, Harry sort of introduced us to Sydney when we first came and we used to go drink with him at Vladim's, you've heard about Vladim's where he had his table until it closed after opening nights and things.

TC: That's talked about a lot in his book.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes and with Len Radic, we were always friendly, he had a different view of theatre from mine and we did have a lot in common but that's just personally I mean he was in Melbourne so we didn't see him all that often. I had good relations with all of them and in your notes you mentioned Helen Coventry which I don't even remember meeting.

TC: Helen Coventry and Garrie Hutchinson.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, Garrie I knew because he was a member of La Mama and things before...

TC: It is interesting because they would write in your place of your reviews when you were able to, to fill in when you couldn't write.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, we didn't communicate about that at all.

TC: We will just go back to that last question, the first part, what would you consider the qualities to be of a good theatre critic?

Katharine Brisbane: Well I think the purpose a review is to illuminate for the reader what happened on that particular night and to make it relevant to the life of the reader if you possibly can. My training as a reporter made that very important to me and I think in recent years there are almost no reviewers who are actually full-time members of journalistic staff. In fact I wasn't, either on the *Australian*. I was a contributor. But at the outset I was able to contribute news.

TC: Do you think that's relevant to the nature of newspaper publishing or that no one wants to employ a full-time theatre critic?

Katharine Brisbane: I think they don't want to employ them in a full-time capacity. This is another story which I will try to make short but when they introduced offset printing, Murdoch had this huge strike in London about getting rid of Linotype operators and bringing in offset printing; and then introduced the computerising of everything which meant that the typesetting process was basically done by the journalists. They got rid of a lot of staff and in the course of that fewer journalists began to do more. They covered a wider field than they used to, everybody used to be specialists. The reviewers dropped away and they ended up gradually being brought back as contributors. It was just a fairly slow process and Harry Kippax and Leonard Radic were probably the last career journalists who were theatre critics I think. With that was lost the loyalty to the newspaper and that kind of reporting and training which puts the information first and the personality second. Opinion is now really up there in most newspapers. In our day of training we were not allowed to express an opinion unless you had a by-line (the sought-after privilege of having your name on the article) and you'd had to get the information in there. The weakness of reviewing today seems to me to be the fact that the opinion of the writer is central to the review and there is a sort of unspoken assumption by the writer that people are waiting to hear their opinion. I don't like that, in fact I don't read the reviews very much these days. Some of the bloggists are much more thoughtful and interesting.

TC: The Internet has given the ability to a lot of people for a lot of people to review and provide their own opinion and it's taken away from the weight the newspaper reviewer has behind them.

Katharine Brisbane: That's right. I think it's important to try and explain what the ‘thing’ is for the reader to understand, whether it's their kind of thing or not, whether it’s important or not or whether it's a disgrace. Martin Esslin said to me one day, he told me a story about when he was writing occasional reviews and he was asked to go and see a play in a basement somewhere. He was a bit miffed that he was asked to do something slightly undignified for a dignified man, but he went and he thought it was awful. He thought that the play was awful, the director was awful and the actors were awful and he went home feeling angry about why he been asked to do this. And then he thought to himself: how did this thing get onstage? Someone must have seen enough good in the play itself, the script; a director must have agreed to direct and the actors must have agreed to play in it. So what

it was *that they saw in it*? That's my job to define what this is before I'd tell them that it was a failure and that has stayed with me all my life.

TC: What critic would you say has been the most influential in terms of your development as a critic?

Katharine Brisbane: The vintage English critics I suppose. They were all different, Kenneth Tynan, Harold Hobson, Penelope Gillard the film critic and Michael Billington. I mean he's still going. I just liked all those styles, I mean, literary styles not just anything and they always had something interesting, I could always agree with them. Walter Kerr, the *New York Times*....he's written many books and yes he was a very wise old man with a very easy journalistic style.

TC: Any final comments?

Katharine Brisbane: I think you worn me out (laughs). I've enjoyed it.

TC: Me too. Just quickly, what was your decision behind retiring in 2001?

Katharine Brisbane: Well I turned 70 and I thought, Philip died in 1993 when I was only 62 and I had intended to retire at 65. It's time to go and do something else. He had retired in 1987 but he got cancer and soon after he died Sandra Gorman, whom we just made a director of the company and was going to be managing director when I retired. I was then stuck trying to decide what to do. We thought about selling the company but we couldn't get a decent price for it so I just stayed on. The staff, many of them had been there for years…I thought, shall we disturb the culture by bringing in someone? In the end I decided to leave it to the seniors. One of them is just retired, Victoria Chance, who was publisher. Debora Franco, the former marketing manager, is in charge now. [In May 2014 Claire Grady, who had been trained as an editor at Currency House, returned after a period of years working with other publishers. She has been appointed Publisher and Deborah Franco CEO]

TC: You were happy to retire in 2001?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes. I kept on going for five years beyond when I said (was going to retire and I just thought we'll see how it goes. I wanted to do other things and Currency House really came out of general feelings of low self-esteem in the arts community at the depth of the Howard years and I just thought everyone had gone too quiet. Every actor I

knew had this awful despondency about the future and so I said well let's start a discussion club and get them to talk it out. One of the things that always annoyed me was the way that the lifestyle papers had these features on actors and their next show and how great it is going to be an all that stuff and they never said. I have only taken it on because I'm broke, I have to have a job and I think it's a rotten play but we will do our best (laughs). Until the public really knows what the theatre is, it won't get any better. So we started this monthly discussion club with 'Chatham house rules' which meant they could say what they liked within the room but never talk about it outside. I managed to get a number of people to talk sensibly about their troubles and I don't know whether it helped them to speak out more frankly in public. Out of that came *Platform Papers*, a quarterly that would investigate these complains and propose a way forward.

TC: I spoke to John Golder about this.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, it was his idea. And I said no, I don't want to do a periodical because I had avoided that at Currency, it was something like a magazine and I couldn't bear the repetitive stress of getting all that together every month. So John took on the editing of it and it has become quite influential. It doesn't make any money, in fact it costs us money all the time, but it's amazing who reads it. All the opinion makers read it just in case they have to know about it in case someone asks them something, and so that's good, it's doing a bit of good but its hard slog.

TC: You still write occasionally and comment upon the theatre. I believe your last entry was in 2009.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, in *Cambridge History of Australian Literature.*

TC: There was also an article on you in the *Australian* last year.

Katharine Brisbane: Yes, that was about my 80th birthday. I do enjoy writing and I enjoy editing, I like that very much and I do more writing if I wasn't so busy doing other tasks for currency house.

TC: Do you agree with my interpretation of your career? Having you in these roles as theatre critic, publisher as a journalist question mark did you ever see yourself as one or as everything?

Katharine Brisbane: I think I saw myself as everything, yes. I suppose I'm still doing the same thing, stirring people up to think differently about... To think again about some of the things that are going right, I still stir by saying some outrageous things. People got very cross with my Parsons lecture because I called it ‘In Praise of Nepotism’ and I thought, well I remember that word and I still think it's absolutely true. Its people who know each other getting together is where creativity comes…you can't teach it in universities. Once the major theatre companies get so large that it becomes an institution, creativity is leaked away I think.

TC: Do you still enjoy getting that response from people?

Katharine Brisbane: Yes I do (laughs). The last thing I edited the book was the history of commercial television and the launch of that and it was quite a big launch. Kim Williams then CEO of News Ltd.) was doing the launch and I thought he might be very cautious about what he said. I wrote a speech which was supposed to be my welcome to him and in going through the book’s contents I referred to Kerry Packer (his setting up of the world cricket series in 1974) as an act like that of Alexander the Great (laughs). The speech was full of things like that. Because it was quite brilliant to think of the *chutspah* Packer had as a young man to upset the whole history of cricket with his own money and to bribe all those original Test cricketers to leave the test series and come and work commercially. The whole outcome changed sport completely and not for the better; but it's a huge industry now. The consequences can be compared to Alexander the Great who made a mess of most the Middle East before he died as well and becoming one of its great heroes. That sort of thing just makes people stop and think. I had a lot of very curious questions after that from people coming up to me - I'd never thought of television as anything creative... Where do you get these ideas? The other thing I said was that it was the greatest social force in Australia since Federation— and it is, it changed people's way of lifelike nothing else. I didn't get any help for that book from the television industry at all, for fear that somebody might mention something of which they were ashamed. It was a very costly book and I won't do anything like that again (laughs).

END OF INTERVIEW