Amatorem: The History and Culture of Amateur Theatre in Victoria

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Street Hall. There may not be the formal tone of some companies, but Essendon Theatre Company has a very down to earth atmosphere, which obviously appeals to members and local residents. A great example of theatre by the community, in the community, for the community.

Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated

This story tells us of theatre companies forming for various reasons, and the Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated was co-founded in 1977 by Michael Bula and David Gorrie when they were students at Melbourne University.[40] The University French Department had presented plays 'for about one hundred years', said Michael, 'but lost the funding under Malcolm Fraser's Razor Gang'. Michael said the French Theatre could have dissipated when they left university, or continued with other people. 'We packed it in a suitcase post university', he said. 'I had registered the name, and we took it with us and we have never had a year since without any production'. Michael said he has run the company as a cultural business from the outset: 'Because without that, it would have collapsed. You need the combination of creativity and structure'.

Michael Bula, co-founder of Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated. Image by courtesy of Michael Bula.

I interviewed Michael, a lawyer, in his office in Canning Street, Carlton, formerly known as the Princess Hill Gallery. Michael said that 1999 was a watershed year as audiences

were slipping, so to solve the problem, bi-lingual theatre was introduced. ‘You create the collage’, said Michael. ‘The rule is two thirds French and one third English, a sort of join-the-dots so you have enough English distributed through the text for the non-French speaker to understand’. Michael explained this sounds easy, but can take six months to organise. Initially the company started with thirty-five slides in 1999 and developed a prototype of English SURtitles, which are a capsulized translation of dialogue or libretto projected onto a screen during a live performance, originally developed by the Canadian Opera Company. Today’s plays would have five to six hundred slides, and the company has an agreement with Monash University, whereby Masters students supply the company with SURtitles. ‘This is a practicum for them’, said Michael. ‘Melbourne French Theatre is not just an inward-looking theatre, it is far greater reaching’.

In 2014, Melbourne French Theatre signed a memorandum of understanding with the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne – the company’s place of foundation in 1977. ‘This agreement is historic’, said Michael, ‘because we can access Melbourne University for student prices, which is a great help, and it also means we are participating in Melbourne University and assisting their teaching’. Michael pointed out they have done the full circle, which is now official. ‘Some of the lecturers at Melbourne University participate and act in our plays, and they also work with SURtitles along with Monash’.

In 2016, some statistics for Melbourne French Theatre Incorporated were: thirty-nine years of presenting ninety-eight productions, fifty-two different playwrights, seven hundred and fifteen actors, sixty-five directors, forty-six hundred members of the production teams, and exceeding sixty-six thousand five hundred spectators (including twenty-four thousand schools, university students and teaching staff). Interestingly, the record attendance was in 2005 for *Boeing Boeing*, when fifteen hundred and thirty-five tickets were sold for seven shows.

Poster promoting Melbourne French Theatre's *Love is Better in the Afternoon*, September, 2018. Image by courtesy of Melbourne French Theatre.

Michael said they always employ professional directors and never have an 'L' plate director, which also happens to be common practice in larger companies, particularly musical theatre. 'They are rarely French', says Michael. 'Professionalism is more important than language, and they will have a native French assistant to the Director'. 'We also pay our creative team but there is no payment to actors, although sometimes honorariums are paid for school tours because actors are often performing in their normal working hours'. Since the 1990s, the *Le Petit Nicolas* student workshop format tour has been performed in secondary schools and sometimes primary schools, and students perform in front of their peers in some of the scenes. Some students join the French Theatre afterwards. 'The real reason behind it all is that when I was a student there was no French Theatre, and I wanted to repair that', said Michael.

Regarding funding for shows, Michael said the Victorian Multicultural Council is the only state Government body to provide a grant of a few thousand dollars, and where once

the French Government supported culture, there have been dramatic cuts. ‘We survive by raffles to fundraise at performances, sponsorships and ticketing’, said Michael. For many years the company used the Collingwood College Theatrette for performances and carried paying four thousand dollars a week for performances and rehearsals for several years. ‘Then we got to perform at the University of Melbourne on their Open Stage, a beautiful Black Box stage’, said Michael. ‘We are in the community, and our second show is in our building across the road which can fit sixty people’. The company presents two weeks there and one week at Open Stage. Michael says audience ages range from eight to ninety-three, from all walks of life, and mostly from Victoria but sometimes from interstate. They include French speaking and non-French speaking people, and as one third of the audience are primary and secondary school students, appropriate content and language needs to be considered.

Port Fairy Theatre Group

Two hundred and ninety kilometres south west from Carlton is the historic fishing town of Port Fairy, located on the Moyne River, with its very own theatre company called the Port Fairy Theatre Group Incorporated. Committee member Gail Sedgley runs a dairy farm situated between Port Fairy and Warrnambool, and we met for an interview in Warrnambool.[41] Gail explained that the Port Fairy Theatre Group was originally a 1950s church group which met for Ecumenical Services and to present shows in their own church halls.[42] In 1977, it was the parish of St. Patrick’s turn to present a concert, and the lady organising the event worked in the local bakery and knew the people in the pizza shop next door were talented, as were others. They all met in the Reardon Theatre, a picture theatre, where the band which had used old egg cartons tied around the stage to help acoustics, was relocated to the RSL.

The Port Fairy Theatre Group started by presenting musical revues and skits. The piano purchased by the theatre group for the hall came from the *SS Casino*, an iron steamship which tragically sank on 10th July, 1932, near Apollo Bay pier.[43] Originally there was nowhere for props and costume storage, but Moyne Shire provided a shed which unfortunately flooded and irreplaceable items were lost. Members worked together and member Di Piery, a seamstress from Myer, made costumes from old curtains and black paper, and people were organised to write material for a revue. The company took over