

History of BPI

Last Updated Saturday, 23 January 2016

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In 1950, Mr. George English, Director of the Queensland State Opera Scheme, visited Bundaberg in pursuit of the Government's intention of encouraging local societies to engage in the production of light opera and other musicals.Â Under the scheme, scores, libretti and scenery were to be provided from the parent body, and in addition any local society formed under the scheme would receive an initial grant of Â£75 for production expenses.Â As a result of Mr. English's visit, the Bundaberg Amateur Players was formed, the then Mayor, Mr. F.H. Buss became president, Mrs. Helen Cattermull was producer, Miss Essie Hefferan, musical director and Mr. W.M. Millar, secretary.Â

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Miss Hook of Holland, the society's first production under this scheme was presented at the Wintergarden Theatre on December 4, 1951, and was well received by a large audience.Â Although the State scheme was discontinued due to lack of finance, the Amateur Players maintained its activities, presenting several Gilbert and Sullivan works and operas, and in 1957 introduced the annual series of 'straight' plays.Â

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Rehearsals for many years were conducted in the Girl Guide Hall, Austral Hall, and a room at the back of the School of Arts building. Productions were presented in the Parish Hall and the Wintergarden Theatre (now Blockbuster Video & Improvements Fitness Centre) corner of Woongarra and Maryborough Streets.Â It became increasingly evident that if progress was to be made, a theatre solely for the use of the Players would have to be obtained.Â In 1962, land was purchased and in 1964 the first stage of construction by the Amateur Players on the present Steffensen Street site was completed at a cost of almost Â£2000. This building provided the society with a practice hall (present Clubrooms) and storage area for costumes, paint and props (present Kitchen), all under one roof.Â The Playhouse as it became known was the first building built by an organisation of this kind in the city.Â

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A 'workshop' was then institutedÂ for the provision of aspiring stage performers.Â The continual construction and transporting of scenery to other performance venues necessitated the construction of further storage at the Playhouse site, and a shed was built at the back of the block in 1965.Â When the Embassy Theatre in Maryborough closed down in 1966, the Bundaberg Amateur Players purchased seats with the intention of installing them in their own theatre when the funds became available to build a stage area onto the existing Clubroom.Â

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Bundaberg's own little theatre really came into its own, when on Monday, April 29, 1968, the Bundaberg Amateur Players staged their first performance on the 'biggest theatre stage inÂ Bundaberg' which they had constructed onto their existing building at a cost of Â£7800.Â The practice hall became the auditorium and the audience faced west to the stage. The auditorium seated 175.Â The Youth Theatre building was built in 1974 and at a very reasonable cost provided much needed workshop space for the large and very active Youth Theatre section of the group.Â Â

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The next major construction provided the organisation with a tiered auditorium seating 254 patrons. What was once the back wall of the stage area became the new Proscenium Arch and the audience now faced east. The official opening of the new auditorium was held on Saturday, March 20, 1976. Cost of this was \$27, 500.Â Small scale expansion commenced in 1977 with the pouring of a slab on the car park side of the club rooms which would be a bar and committee room. However, this was not completed until September 1979.Â The steel-framed walls of the new committee room were at one time the walls of the Federal Hotel which had undergone renovations not long before. The old committee room on the Youth Theatre building then became a storage area for the fast growing costume department.Â

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The Bundaberg Amateur Players in September 1987, became The Bundaberg Players Incorporated, and with the name change came a new motivation to upgrade the facility.Â Plans were conceived, drawn, rethought and drawn again, sent to the Government, returned to the organisation for improvement, and sent to the Government again.Â The Government approved the project in principle and agreed to a "dollar for dollar" subsidy, and on April 24, 1990, 49 members of the organisation decided to go ahead with the new foyer at a total cost of \$209,000.Â The Gordon Dick Memorial Foyer, named in the honour of the former president whose dream it was, was officially opened on February 22, 1991 by the

Justice and Corrective Services Minister, Glen Milliner. The entrance begins at the footpath giving patrons overhead cover as they enter the foyer. A large open area has been provided for additional rehearsal space, with room to mark out a full size stage, which will be of great assistance in the training of youth theatre members. While the foyer has been named after Gordon Dick, the auditorium itself has been dedicated to Skip and Helen Cattermull, foundation vice-president and director of the original Players organisation.

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More recently the Playhouse has undergone some minor refurbishment with the painting of the auditorium, and recovering and updating of the seating. A new bar and kitchen has been constructed on the upstairs foyer, and in the not too distant future, improved access for the disabled will be provided. As the Playhouse Theatre continues to grow, so too does its importance in the cultural history of Bundaberg.

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Bundaberg Players Incorporated celebrated 50 years of existence on December 2, 2000 at the Moncrieff Theatre.

The shed constructed in 1965 was recently demolished to make way for a much larger, modern block, with showers and amenities for cast members and a much larger area for the construction and storage of scenery.