

History of BPI

Last Updated Thursday, 17 June 2021

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. 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 £75 for production expenses. 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.

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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. 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.

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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. 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. 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 £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. The Playhouse as it became known was the first building built by an organisation of this kind in the city.

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A 'workshop' was then instituted for the provision of aspiring stage performers. 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. 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.

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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 in Bundaberg' which they had constructed onto their existing building at a cost of £7800. The practice hall became the auditorium and the audience faced west to the stage. The auditorium seated 175. 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.

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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. 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. 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.

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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. Plans were conceived, drawn, rethought and drawn again, sent to the Government, returned to the organisation for improvement, and sent to the Government again. 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.

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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.Â 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.Â 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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During the 1990s only small-scale improvements were made around the theatre as committees of the day built up bank account balances and made plans for impending 50thÂ Anniversary celebrations which were nearing.Â A major change occurred in 2000 when auditorium seating was refurbished and the auditorium painted at a cost of \$46 000 (\$15 000 in funding was received).Â The Tim Kimber "Full House Bar"™ was also constructed in the upstairs foyer at a cost of \$28 000. Bundaberg Players Incorporated celebrated 50 years of existence on December 2, 2000 with a concert at the Moncrieff Theatre featuring former members invited back to perform alongside current members of the day.

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In 2003, the storage shed constructed in 1965 was demolished to make way for a much larger, modern block with showers and amenities, and a much larger area for the construction and storage of scenery.Â A shade-sail was installed in 2014 joining the storage shed to the rear of the main building creating a shaded courtyard area for members to enjoy.

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Funding to the value of \$26 950 was received in 2009 for the encapsulation of the main auditorium and foyer rooves, and a new ticketing system SEAT ADVISOR was installed and ticketing went electronic for the first time, allowing patrons to book and pay for tickets on-line.Â In 2010, funding totalling \$27 000 was received from the Jupiter's Community Benefit Fund for the purchase of chairs, music stands, instruments and sundry items for the orchestra pit.Â A major re-configuring of the orchestra pit was then undertaken in 2011 " it was deepened and made longer and wider, so that more scope was created for live orchestras to play more comfortably.Â This project cost \$46 000 and was paid for solely by theatre funds.Â In 2012, a major upgrade to the electrical backbone of the theatre was made possible with the infusion of \$34 960 from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund.Â An access ramp alongside the northern wall of the auditorium was constructed at a cost of \$26 500 (\$10 000 was donated by Subscriber Peter Collins in memory of his wife Dawn)

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Although funding was sought on a number of occasions, it was not until 2018, that funding totalling \$35 000 was received to renovate and upgrade the aging toilet facilities in the Gordon Dick Memorial Foyer.Â At a total cost of \$86 000, the project increased the number of toilets available to patrons and also created an easily accessible disabled toilet.Â At the same time, the foyer interior was repainted and new carpet installed to the stairwell and the upstairs foyer (\$8 000).Â The driveway and rear courtyard were re-surfaced with hot mix in 2018, and guttering was replaced to the front section of the building at a cost of \$7 500.

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2019 was also a year of high expenditure on capital improvements.Â The auditorium was air-conditioned with 6 units at a cost of \$25 000 (Installation was done free of charge by a theatre supporter).Â A new fridge was purchased for the foyer kitchen (\$2 500), and a further \$23 700 was spent on a starcloth, 3 backdrops, 2 data projectors, 2 scrims, and other staging items, including the installation of a steel girder above the stage area specifically for the purpose of "flying"™ the character of Mary Poppins.Â Another \$27 000 was spent in 2020 for the purchase of 9 Acme Moving Lights.Â New speakers and a Digital Sound desk were also installed.

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External painting of the main building occurred in 2021 at a cost of \$33 000 after funding was received.Â The committee room was airconditioned at a cost of \$2 000 and planter pots and pebbles were also added alongside the access ramp to improve the theatre's aesthetic upon arrival.Â Â