

2019 HTG PRESIDENTS REPORT

Highlands Theatre Group has operated in the Southern Highlands under that name since 1986. This date however did not signify any particular new beginning for the group which had been in existence under Mittagong Repertory with similar personnel for many years prior. A recently discovered document reveals a 1968 grant of \$810 from the Elizabethan Trust to the Mittagong Musical and Dramatic Society, and long term HTG member Roma Dix (involved with the group well prior to the name change) has advised that she attended performances by the Mittagong Company in the Memorial Hall in the late 1950's. Such a history deserves both respect and nurturing - respect for the vast number of people who have worked and cared for the Group over 60+ years, and the nurturing of that work to develop it further and into the future.

In recent years HTGs long tradition of performing large cast musical productions at Clubbe Hall has become financially and practically unviable. The Shire's only public theatre, the Mittagong Playhouse, has seemed inadequate to cope with anything other than small cast shows, primarily plays. A small number of committed long term members have borne the weight of keeping Highlands Theatre Group alive and functioning over this time, and we owe a great debt to those who remained faithful and committed to the HTG cause. With insufficient numbers of members to share the workload and the fragmenting of the Highlands Theatrical Community into many small groups, this made the task for these few very difficult indeed, and the groups future has looked uncertain in recent times. In October last year, as a member of the Sound of Music cast, I discovered that there were only 11 of around 30 HTG members eligible to stand for committee, and only 4 of those interested in doing so. This prompted my decision to return to the group, hopeful that amongst those stalwarts and former members could be found the desire and determination to take Highlands Theatre Group confidently into the future. Further, that amongst the broader community we could discover many like-minded individuals who could help us do so with fresh enthusiasm if encouraged and welcomed. With delight, we can report just 13 months later that this has proven to be exactly the case and the future for HTG is bright.

2019 has been a year of great renewal for HTG. The pendulum has swung and the local community have rallied behind the Group. The numbers tell the story, and they are impressive;

- Over 80 members (and former) attended our 'Reunion' in February, many reconnecting after years
- Memberships have increased from around 30 to 130

- Full (Committee eligible) memberships have increased from 11 to 30

- Committee numbers have increased to 13

- Facebook page 'followers' have increased from just over 300 to almost 1200.

- The Mailing List has grown from around 400 to over 1750,

- The Groups public profile has been raised immensely through the interest of local and regional media.

- And as indicated by the Treasurers report, the group's financial position is extremely healthy, with the 2018/19 financial year yielding possibly the best results ever.

Since the 2018 Annual General Meeting HTG has performed three musicals – the first since 2015. All three have delighted audiences and were a credit to the creative teams that led them. The sell-out season of around 1500 for a wonderful production of 'The Sound of Music' last November proved that it was possible to produce musicals in the Mittagong Playhouse that were intended for a larger stage. With that knowledge and a renewed and refreshed committee followed an even greater patronised season (over 1600) of the new Australian musical 'Ladies in Black' – a tricky show that with a talented and determined cast and creative team ended in triumph. And last month's delightful 'Anne of Green Gables' also proved to be a resounding success, despite a severe set-back in the closure of the Playhouse, resulting in a solid audience of 1150 instead of a likely 1400.

The cumulative impact of these three successful productions cannot be understated. My prediction is that there are quite a few more people than last year's AGM attendance of 5 sitting in this room tonight. We have audiences eagerly anticipating future shows, cast eager to return for more and others keen to try their hand on stage, and just as importantly signs of a growing number of people willing to do the hard yards behind the scenes. All these factors are the essential ingredients to success and the assured future of HTG. These three productions have proved that the Southern Highlands will support quality musicals and theatre in large numbers if the production is of a good standard and marketed to the local demographic, the largest of which is

family style entertainment. Other local productions staged in the last year, also of high quality, have failed to attract these house sizes, likely because they have been pitched to a narrower demographic. There is of course a place for a wide variety of styles of theatre in the Highlands, but these numbers should be considered carefully in the selection of future productions. We forget at our peril that first and foremost HTG must cater to those who fund our activities – the paying audience.

There have been other significant achievements for HTG in 2019;

- Mark Davidson has led a small team of committed members who have done amazing work culling and organising our resources in the three storage facilities. More lies ahead as we attempt to merge these into a purpose-built facility, and we are grateful for the members involved generosity in undertaking this work.
- New sponsors have been attracted, including the incredibly generous support of Gibraltar Park for at least 3 years. There is much more scope for growth within the sponsorship and fundraising field.
- A stylish new logo has been adopted to reposition our image in the local community.
- Several social occasions have been enthusiastically embraced by the casts and expanded membership.
- Important company documents have been revised and improved upon.
- Allocated positions within the Committee have been discerned and will be now implemented to ensure that the workload is distributed and as little as possible left unattended. I add at this point that the effort and dedication shown by the 2019 committee has been nothing short of extraordinary. The fruits of your labour are there for all to see, and on behalf of the entire Southern Highlands Community, thank you.

That said, our work of renewal is still in its early stages and the challenges are clear for 2020. Specifically;

- We will continue to build HTGs on and off-stage talent base to increase the quality and number of shows.
- We will implement further measures to ensure effective communication amongst our creative teams.
- We will build a reputation as a welcoming and safe place for people to give expression to their creativity.
- We will progress the building of a storage shed to centralise and care for our resources.
- We will pull together our digital assets to pass on to future committees.
- We will revise and improve our constitution.
- We will continue to grow our Full Membership to expand and share the work of the Group.
- We will archive and preserve our history for the enrichment of the entire Southern Highlands Community.
- We will provide broader opportunities for members to extend and develop their theatrical skills.
- We will form Set, Publicity and Wardrobe Teams with the goal of expanding HTG activities.
- We will actively engage with Council to help return the Mittagong Playhouse to operational as soon as possible, and in the longer term to improve its facilities and comfort for both theatre creators and audiences.

Securing the rights for 'Jesus Christ Superstar' next July and the Chevalier College PAC to perform it in provides another significant opportunity for the Group to grow in all facets. The absence of the Mittagong Playhouse as a venue option for the foreseeable future provides a challenge, but one which we must not be despondent about. We must rather see it as an opportunity to experiment and try different approaches to theatre. Announcements regarding other shows for 2020 and 2021 will follow soon, and we hope these will enthuse and inspire more people to engage. We plan to take theatre to unusual and unexpected venues in the Highlands and seek to impress audiences further with creativity and quality.

In conclusion, I refer to a conversation Geralyn and I had the week prior to the 2018 Annual General Meeting. We discussed whether we again had room in our busy lives for theatrical pursuits. We reflected on the fact that so many of the friends we made over 20 years ago when we moved to the Highlands and got involved with local theatre still remain as the most enduring and deep friendships we have made in the Highlands. We projected that there were many more kindred spirits and fine people waiting to be met that would become part of our lives should we engage with HTG again. And we were right. It has been an absolute privilege in just over 12 months to have re-connected with or met for the first time so many fine people - to forge new friendships that will inevitably last into the future. And though a couple of unexpected challenges this year involving our little theatre have meant that the position of President has at times commanded more attention than my full-time job, it has been an absolute honour to tackle these for and with such a generous and community minded team.

Steve Cheers. 3/12/19