

La Mama turns ten

Ten years ago next week the doors of La Mama Theatre at 205 Faraday Street, opened and the first play *Three Old Friends* by Jack Hibberd, was performed.

The theatre was established by Betty Burstall who, after spending two years in New York, felt that Melbourne needed a similar venue to the "off-Broadway" coffee-house theatres of Greenwich Village.

Her idea was that La Mama be a non-profit making workshop theatre — a space for new Australian plays to be produced, an outlet for playwrights, directors and actors to experiment. It was also used for folk music, poetry readings, experimental cinema and events.

La Mama has never been seen as the "property" of one specific group or company. It has always been open to all comers, those wishing to have their play performed, or wishing to direct or act at La Mama, contacting Betty who then went on to make the necessary arrangements if she felt the play or event suitable.

Frequently groups came together for a single production, or maybe a group of productions and disbanded thereafter; however from these groups two semi-permanent companies emerged, a very communally organised group called Tribe, and the La Mama company which became the A.P.G.

In the 1960s among the most prolific playwrights whose works were performed at La Mama were Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Frank Bren, Barry Oakley and Kris Hemensley. And among the directors in this period were Graeme Blundell, Brian Davies, Malcolm Robertson and Doug Anders.

In 1970 David Williamson came to La Mama with his play *The Coming of Stork* and this was followed in July 1971 by *The Removalist*. New Zealand playwright Max Richards was virtually a 'resident playwright' for a period in the 70s among his plays being *Sadie and Neco*, *Nightflowers* and *The Cripple Play*.

La Mama has also been the venue for many theatrical 'events'

Other playwrights up to the present period whose works have been produced at La Mama include Alex Buzo, Roger Pulvers, Louis Nowra, Phil Motherwell, Rivke Hartman, Val Kirway and most recently John Wood.

For eight weeks in 1975 the MTC used La Mama as a 'try-out' venue for an alternative theatre company, Malcolm Robertson directing plays by Jill Dwyer and Bill Reed.

Other directors working at La Mama in the 1970s have included Alan Finney, Bruce Spence, Peter Green, Ian Robinson, Alan Robertson, Sue Neville and Ross Reading. Peter Carmody, Daryl Wilkinson, James McCaughey.

Works by other than Australian playwrights have also been performed at La Mama, although these are usually a second priority to Australian works. Such include works by Beckett, McClure, Brecht and Genet.

— performed in the usual theatre space, the garden and the car park. Artists who have created such 'events' at La Mama over the last ten years include Syd Clayton, Bill Garner, James Clayden and Lloyd Jones.

Bruce Dawe, Kris Hemensley, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Garry Hutcheson and Michael Dugan are among the many poets who have read their works at La Mama. La Mama has also been an outlet for new music, NIAGORA using it as a regular venue for many years, Chris Mann, David Tolley and Dure Dara being among others who have used it regularly in the more recent period. At present Wednesday night is regularly used for the performance of ethnic music — Neo Kyma — organised by the Ioannides Brothers.

From its inception until 1976 Betty Burstall ran La Mama. However, during her lengthy periods overseas in the past three years La Mama was managed by Peter Cummins (1974) and Ann

Eckersley (1975-77). Betty is now resident in Athens, and resigned her formal connections to Ann Eckersley in early 1977. At present La Mama is being jointly managed by Ann Eckersley and Liz Jones, who both believe strongly in La Mama's past and are firmly committed to this small theatre's future.

A celebration, reliving past glories and sampling those of the future, begins on Thursday, August 4, with the Hibberd plays *Three Old Friends* and *Great Cop Time*.

The present production is being directed by Jack with David Kendall (from the 1967 production), Graeme Blundell (also in 1967) and Bill Garner.

There will also be a revival of Max Richard's brilliant play *Sadie and Neco* — this time a totally new production directed by *National Times* theatre critic, Ian Robinson. And there will be a revival of *The Removalist* with the original cast which includes the playwright David Williamson (with the exception unfortunately of Bruce Spence who has a prior engagement).

As well as other revivals there are many new works being directed, created or performed by La Mama's old faces.



Peter King as Richard III and Geoff Street as Lord Hastings make a novel approach to the play *Richard III*, on now at Melbourne Uni's Union Theatre.

Exciting but uneven epic

RICHARD THE THIRD:
Union Theatre Melbourne Uni.

This mammoth production of the life and death of Shakespeare's biggest villain Richard The Third is nothing if not exciting.

Director David Kendall has assembled a cast of epic proportions on the stage and backstage area of the Union Theatre. Every corner and all levels of this irregular space is used by the actors and shared with the audience, who are forced to be constantly on the move if they are to catch all the action.

Peter King, who played Richard, was also the designer. In general, the design is understated and telling — roughly painted white walls picked out with splodges of red to indicate focal points. Many details of the costumes are extremely expressive: instead of swords and traditional weaponry, soldiers confront each other with lengths of metal tubing.

However, there are flaws in the costumes, and the set works in an extremely arbitrary way, for in no way is the space as a whole made to correspond to anything in the play.

The acting is equally uneven — some performances being brilliant, others having brilliant moments, while others are badly cast and indifferently executed.

In this highly physical production the main problem is noise and con-



THEATRE

by

SUZANNE SPUNNER

trol — and individual performances and scenes were ruined by an excess of both.

Jillian Murray as Elizabeth gave the best performance of all — she has an exquisite voice and employs its range fully. Kate Legge's Queen Margaret, like a possessed Katie Hepburn, looked right but was an undifferentiated assault on the ears. Alice Livingstone, Sue Yates and Geoffrey Collins really came into their own.

Tony Rickards was generally under used although his hatchet-faced murderer with a conscience provided one of the truly funny moments.

The production is worth seeing — it was my first experience of watching a War of the Roses play without worrying about who was York and who was Lancaster — a commendable feat in itself.

It also succeeded in creating a fresh and valid relation between the audience and the actors. Unlike some productions which try to move their audiences around without giving them very much reason to do so, *Richard the Third* makes sure that if you don't move, you'll not only get in the way but you will also run the risk of being bowled over by flying actors.

This element of imminent danger to innocent bystanders is something rarely encountered in live theatre.

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WORDS AND MUSIC:
LaMama.

Beckett's *Words and Music* is a delicate piece of writing exploring the sadistically inclined relationships between the three characters.

Two of them, Joe (Jan Friedl) and Croak (Paul Hampton), speak, while the third (Martin Friedl) responds in music.

The play blends cruelty and Beckett's earthy humour with strains of haunting beauty. Cacophony and grace exist

side by side. These aspects were apparent in the words but less so in the music.

Paul Hampton invested his performance with the magic of traditional mime and looked like the inimitable Barrault. Hampton's precise sighs were a delight. Jan Friedl played his put upon foil in a frazzled naturalistic way and his often harsh voice was well suited to the expressive content of the words when set to music.

Unfortunately, the music, both in its writing and execution, did not match the wit and bravura of the performances. It was content to remain at the level of cliché and indelicate playing.

THANKYOU

ON BEHALF of all those involved in the La Mama

theatre's tenth anniversary celebrations we would like to thank the staff of *The Melbourne Times* for their interest and assistance in giving us much needed publicity over that time. We feel the *Melbourne Times* directly contributed to making "the celebration" the success it was. La Mama would also like to thank Sue Spinner, your theatre critic, for her diligence in both attending and reviewing so many performances.

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and Liz Jones,
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