

# The Independent Theatre, North Sydney



In 1988 I was aware of the problems the Trust was facing and the many attempts to save it, one of which was taking on the Independent Theatre and refurbishing it. I became involved having developed a strong relationship with Martin Benge, a senior audio executive from *EMI*. Previously, head engineer at *EMI Studios*, Sydney, he worked in London. When he returned to Australia, we agreed there was a need for a sound recording studio in the mid-1980s. The film industry had folded up, so sound stages had not developed. By late 1989 I was looking for a place to record large orchestral sounds and maybe even some film soundtracks.

Next-door to the Independent there was a big warehouse owned by *Australia Post*, previously a sorting area, then a warehouse and truck parking area. It was a perfect site for a recording studio. At the same time, the Trust was looking at the development project for the Independent and had entered into an agreement with *Roncord Pty Ltd*, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Trust,

to refurbish. They had advice from Australia's foremost heritage architect, Clive Lucas, about building a second floor and were going to take over the squash courts next door on the opposite side to *Australia Post* and turn it into a five star hotel training centre for the hospitality industry, plus a five star residence on top of the Independent Theatre. It was to be financed by a developer and the Trust would have access rights to the theatre. Adam Saltzer saw this as a way to lead the Trust out of its financial problems. Had it succeeded, it had the potential to return good revenue to the Trust. Martin agreed the warehouse could be a studio and thought *EMI* would be interested in collaborating to build it. In the adjoining wall of the theatre we could connect electronically to the proposed studio and record events in the Independent. *EMI* and the Trust could use the studio and share revenue. There was an in-principle agreement to proceed on that basis. We had agreement with *EMI* London with the potential to create a major sound stage, but the detail and legal issues involved considerable negotiation.

The deal with the developers involved restoration of the Independent Theatre in return for the air space over the top for the hotel. The Trust would refurbish it acoustically correctly to be a recording venue for large and small groups and next door would be a big sound stage for film. *EMI* would probably put most of their equipment there as they were looking to move from Pitt Street. The timing was right. Unfortunately, as developers, *Roncord* were entirely dependent on North Sydney Council approving the right to build the necessary height above the theatre (the air space we were selling), and the access to the squash courts next door. The Council refused approval and the project, along with *Roncord*, died. They went into liquidation. We could not proceed with *EMI* because there was no possibility the Trust could fund anything like this. There was no further discussion and soon *Australia Post* sold the building which was turned into apartments. Ironically, *Australia Post* was prepared to give it to us at a peppercorn rate so it would not have cost very much. In the end it became a commercial property. At that time, when we were in Regent Street, Adam was looking at a lot of things like that.

**General Manager: *AETT Management Pty Ltd* and *Independent (Sydney) Pty Ltd***

In 2001, concurrent with my position as General Manager of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, I became General Manager of *AETT Management Pty Ltd*. In 2004 I was appointed the General Manager of the *Independent (Sydney) Pty Ltd*. Remembering well the results of the Kathleen Norris administration and what had happened to the Trust financially, we did not want to jeopardize the wonderful scholarship program. We did not know what directions we might take but were concerned that if we did anything in the public domain it should be separate from the Trust so any losses incurred would not impact on the Trust's ability to run the scholarship program. We established *AETT Management Pty Ltd* as a commercial company to put on concerts

and promotional events, including those presented by Trust scholars. Within about a year after the Trust took up the office at the Independent, Rodney Seaborn decided not to continue its management and gave it to the **Ensemble Theatre** at Milsons Point. Established by Hayes Gordon in 1958, it is Australia's longest continuously running professional theatre company. In 1999, the then director, Sandra Bates, undertook to present productions at the Independent without paying rent in return for managing and maintaining the theatre appropriately. None of the eight plays presented there in 2000 were commercially successful. Although the Ensemble had the benefit of a rent free venue, they had their own theatre at Milsons Point and the Independent was attractive if they made a profit and built new audiences. They did not continue there, but during their time of residence the building was painted a depressing combination of colours. They wanted blackouts in the theatre so painted it dark. Rodney was faced with the difficulty of managing it. By then we had presented a Chalwin concert and the theatre seemed to be suitable for music. We were building the scholarship program with the likelihood of scholars wanting to perform before they went to study. This was a condition of the program; if we asked them to, they would give a concert and we paid them a negotiated fee before they went. It seemed the Independent would be the venue for this, albeit very moderate in terms of acoustic quality. It would mean we would not have to pay a huge hire fee for the Sydney Town Hall or Opera House, neither of which the Trust could afford.

### **Working with the Corporate World**

So we took over management of the theatre and negotiated with Rodney to have access to the entire venue and to do maintenance. The condition was that if Rodney wanted to sell it, we had the right to make the first offer. We started to develop activities in the theatre as income was needed to help support the huge running costs which were not forthcoming from elsewhere. We set up a management company to negotiate with

The Independent stage set for a corporate video presentation.



the corporate sector for the use of the theatre. Gloria Scott, a former dancer who had worked in real estate and marketing, was employed to work with me. She knew the theatre and business worlds, particularly in North Sydney, having worked for a marketing firm there. She was employed to recommend what we could do. The end result was a business plan we put together, focussing on at least a couple of hundred corporate clients close by who could, and probably would, use the theatre if it was presented to them in the right way. As it turned out, by the time we finished this activity there were 350 corporate clients who used the theatre for activities between 2001 and 2013. When we started we had no track record, we did not know what they would want or what we could offer, so it was a matter of learning as we went. We had no capital to invest in advisers, particularly in the business world where it is expensive, so we decided to have a crack at it ourselves.

Our reasonably good business plan was put to the directors and we started AETT Management running the theatre, for theatrical, musical and corporate use. We found a room on the first floor and named it the Rodney Seaborn Room. It overlooked Miller Street through the trees, into the fascia of the Stanton Library across the road. It had a wonderful atmosphere and was very light. With blinds we could control the light and run video presentations in semi or complete dark and then let in the light for an event. It was suitable for corporate training and we found a couple of insurance companies who became core clients and undertook training modules there for their staff, four or five times a year.

When we began, the very first client had met in the room downstairs, which had been organized by our predecessors. They had access to what was then a small coffee shop, in the annex to the front foyer. It was a pretty good deal for them but it provided no commercial outcome as the hire fee was too low. The going rate for a room like that was \$500 to \$1000 for a three or four hour session or a half a day. We realized there was probably a market there which we had to find. Gloria was employed to develop this business and she stayed until we sold the building in 2013. She developed relationships with over 300 corporate clients and brought in around \$150,000 to \$250,000 gross income a year from the corporate sector. While the Seaborn Room worked for training, we found if we put audio-visual into the theatre we could have seminars and conventions and attract a wide range of clients. We had advertising executives, product launches, seminars, and campaigns. The National Broadband Network (NBN)<sup>1</sup> started there with quarterly meetings for two or three years until their program got up. When we began to get on top of electronic and digital aspects, we did a computer link for AGMs to include other states of Australia, which was quite new for most people. We had a two-way interface so they could talk

<sup>1</sup> National Broadband Network (NBN), first proposed/announced in 2007 as an Australian national wholesale open-access data network project. Included wired and radio communication components rolled out and operated by NBN Co Ltd and the systematic replacement of existing copper cable telephone networks. The largest infrastructure project in Australian history, fraught with problems and aiming for completion in 2020.

and we could talk to them, and all through a screen on the stage with the presentation in front of it and the executives talking from the theatre to everywhere in the state, taking questions and answers from the floor.

During that time, my learning curve was again enhanced with an understanding of audio-visual presentation and we moved from a very basic, simple camera projecting onto a screen from the front to a back projection, *Barco* projector and camera, with a screen that was 5.8 by 3.6 metres. It covered the entire proscenium arch and we could back project onto it. We got it to a stage eventually where we could do medical presentations with the most intricate charts and graphs; where 300 people in the room could see with ease what was going on. That was quite an investment and a big learning curve in terms of running it technically. I designed it, purchased the equipment and engaged theatre technician, Robin Morgan, to run it. Apart from his theatre sound and light skills, he was also good with computers and could take a client's computer with inadequacies for the presentation they were designing and reprogram it within five minutes to make it work. Robin prevented a lot of disasters from happening with his superb ability. Over those eleven years we had quite a successful outcome, generating revenue not possible from the arts sector. There were peaks and troughs.

We thought we should run a coffee shop for the benefit of corporate clients and have our own in-house catering. We went into a new area of service provision. An Italian friend, who had been putting together coffee shops with Italian coffee, helped set it up. We bought equipment and coffee urns and he stayed a few months, running it for us, while we got it going. We tried it

Renovated foyer area used for corporate events.



for about 18 months, getting the skills together to present high standard, good quality, food and coffee. At that point in North Sydney there was no passing trade; it is a very dead end of town. We were competitive price-wise and in terms of quality. It was not so much a public venture but supplied the corporates. We found we understood and could deliver corporate catering when needed for the events Gloria brought in. At the end of the day we used outside professional catering staff but Gloria would design a menu, sell it to the corporate organizer, and we could cater finger food and alcohol for 300 people from a small kitchen at the side of the theatre. The theatre had a liquor licence and it became very fashionable for the corporates to have networking occasions after their convention. We could spread 300 people throughout the front foyers of the theatre quite comfortably and they could all network.

Clients like *Telstra* brought people into Sydney from remote areas to network with each other. It was positive for them and we made reasonable revenue. Some were very lucrative functions which helped cover the enormous cost of the theatre. We developed this between 2001 and 2004. At the time we took on the theatre, the chairman had negotiated with Rodney Seaborn a right to make the first offer to purchase the theatre should it be for sale. Rodney agreed that whatever price was on the table would be offered to the Trust with the first right of refusal. This happened in 2004, by which time the Trust had spent over \$600,000 on running the venue. By then we had seemingly growing corporate activity, having built the client base to over 150. The Trust decided to purchase the theatre.

My feeling that it would be a great place for music was becoming even stronger. We were doing sophisticated things with music and audio-visual in the theatre and the results were proving this was a path worth taking. Although it was electronic, it was showing it could work well. The foyer areas were pleasant. Feedback from clients was that they did not want to leave when they finished their business convention, which is quite unusual. With one client who came several times a year, the CEO was usually the last person to leave, networking amongst his colleagues and employees until the last minute. Once purchased, I was given the task of advising the directors on what we might do with the Independent in a positive sense. We did not want to leave it as was. None of us liked the colour scheme but could see there was potential for development in the corporate area and music and our scholarship program was well underway. We had some twenty or thirty scholars by then, many coming back and wanting to give concerts, so it looked as if there would be a market there. Once we took over the management, we moved upstairs with space for Gloria Scott to work. Two of us were employed full time. The rest were casual staff. We built a good team of loyal casual employees with whom we negotiated directly and even those from a very good hospitality agency we engaged by name. We offered regular work; probably two or three dates a week, and had a good relationship with staff.

### **The Pursuit of Excellence**

The core value of the scholarship program is excellence. We are looking for excellent players seeking excellence, who want to attend excellent teaching establishments. It would be inconsistent and hypocritical to offer a less than excellent venue for concerts. I recommended investigation into refurbishing the theatre as an acoustically interesting space for music. I had presented enough Chalwin concerts for audiences of around 150 to realize this could be a great 300 seat chamber music room. We had seen what the corporates could do with sophisticated electronic presentations. The Board approved engaging an appropriate consultant to identify issues and come up with a plan. Another huge learning curve. I had taken the approach that

it was not the audience I was concerned about, it was putting musicians into a superb playing environment. I had experience playing there and knew enough about acoustics from my audio training to understand it was about the design of the room and the stage area.

I found the Conservatorium had successfully finished two small studios using a consultant acoustician, Barry McGregor. I approached him, asking what might be possible. He identified we needed to deal with the stage end as well as the general acoustic of the room but major structural changes would not be necessary. The work would be internal. This was encouraging.

The directors decided to approach Clive Lucas and his company, *Clive Lucas, Stapleton and Partners*<sup>2</sup>. Involved when Rodney owned the theatre, Lucas was the ideal person to approach having prepared the heritage plan for North Sydney Council, commissioned by the state government for the area, including the theatre. He had done an investigation some years earlier of the theatre and when the Trust had been looking to develop it with the five star hotel, had drawn up draft plans, so he had an understanding of the building. This was a heritage building; it had been a tram shed in 1885 then used as an ammunition dump. It was not until 1911, when the façade was built, that it functioned as a theatre. It had not been classified at that time as a heritage building, but for North Sydney Council it was a building 'of significant historical interest'.

Our problem, when looking at the big picture, was the large proscenium arch and high stage which had been raked for vaudeville. There were no seats close to the stage; the audience stood and could see the vaudeville actors anywhere on the stage. That in itself would have been an aspect worth keeping if it had been under a heritage ruling. Heritage buildings were just beginning to be of interest in New South Wales and there was an initiative by the state and federal governments to provide restoration funds. We were not interested in the heritage issues but did not want to do anything to destroy what was there. The big problem was the stage which was completely unsuitable for performance; its height and big proscenium arch created a cavernous trap for sound.

Clive Lucas stood in the auditorium, looked at the arch and made a very simple statement about keeping the façade and the turret dome, a cupola on the front of the building over the Seaborn Room, and gutting the rest. He suggested sealing off the stage from the rest of the building and working everything

Independent Theatre auditorium



<sup>2</sup> Clive Lucas, OBE (b. 1943), founding partner of *Clive Lucas, Stapleton and Partners* established in 1970 and now known as *Lucas, Stapleton and Johnson*, specializing in architectural restoration. Lucas was chair of the Historic Houses Trust NSW 1988-1992 and a member of the National Trust (NSW) Board 1992-1998 and 2013-to present.

in front. There had been raked seats but in front of those seats were about four rows of flat seats where you could put a stage from wall to wall. He identified the façade to be of historical interest and needing to be preserved. As an acoustician, I knew we could have the perfect cube in which to build an acoustics sphere. There would only be standard acoustic issues any acoustician has to cover in developing a room. We did not have to be drawn down by the stage, so the concept changed.

Clive was invited to run this as a restoration of the theatre. He costed it and we put work out to tender. The first stage involved painting the theatre and foyer areas, capitalizing on features that were staying and making them part of the venue's ambiance. There were little columns with flutes that went up to the ceiling like Greek columns. At the ceiling corners there were curved continuations of those columns. Clive specified the flutes be painted in gold and the rest an off white heritage colour, and that the rest of the column and the wall around it should be a light, pale heritage colour. We started with the painting, progressing slowly because we did not want to make any mistakes. There was a lot of money on the table for this. We started in 2006 by painting the Seaborn Room and the foyers. As you can imagine, mine was no longer a 9 to 5 job.

It was a great time consumer and I had no staff. I was doing all the paperwork and follow up, with the assistance of the architect. The corporate activity continued so we needed to do renovations in a time when we would have downtime to a minimum. I rented a flat next door and had two minutes' walk to get to work. I was at the theatre from 6am to 11pm most days; particularly if there were corporate events. The painting was approved after Clive had given us a colour spec to instantly transform the front of the building. There was a psychological hit there and we could also see what it would look like eventually. The only time we could do this was during the Christmas holiday in 2006. We found a painter prepared to work on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day, who worked through to New Year's Eve, came back after New Year's Day and finished it within a week. I had to be there all that time to let them in.

The front of the building looked fantastic and when the corporates saw it they went crazy; it was everything they wanted. They wanted something different than a five star hotel or the modern and predictable office. This was old but in good condition, clean and very atmospheric. There was a bar in the middle of the area we had done up which was a great place, so we had an uptake in our usage, which encouraged us to move forward.

### **Project Manager**

The long term plan was a full internal renovation in the theatre, so we did more planning and more tendering. I took responsibility for this activity, by default becoming project manager, something I had never done before. Another big learning curve, but I was guided well by a



Board of Directors with personal experience of such projects who knew what was involved. Their role was to ensure it was done properly given the large amount of money being spent. With Clive Lucas was Sean Johnson, the project manager for our job, responsible for the drawings, submissions to Council, development application and getting the paperwork together. I did the legwork in delivering the Development Application (DA) to Council and dealing with questions and responses. Sean dealt with technical issues and once the DA was finally approved, became responsible for turning the plans into tenders for the work to be done. It moved reasonably quickly. When we drafted the DA, Sean knew exactly what North Sydney Council would want to see, so we avoided revisions on apparent minor points which could have delayed decisions. He did thorough document preparation, which he talked through with me, and applied his knowledge of Council procedures. It was like going into a court action with a barrow full of paper on a trolley. The plans had to be of different colours and sizes with multiple copies for different services such as the Water Board. Clive's company knew exactly what was required. When I trundled into Council with the application, it was a voluminous document but everything required was there.

### **Fire Protection Plan**

Council was concerned about fire safety for 300 people in an old building predominantly made of wood and had responsibility to protect the community from harm. We engaged an expensive consultant who did a Fire Modelling Program on the building. We had an old building not compliant with current building codes but allowed to stand because it had been there for a long time. A Fire Protection Plan must show the building will comply with minimum requirements for getting people off site if there is a fire. There is a timetable for that: a certain distance they can walk from their seat to a street access door; all timing issues. Smoke is also an issue. This beautiful rectangular acoustic box was a perfect container for smoke which causes damage in a major fire. Smoke inhalation results in humans collapsing and being trampled on the way out. Without control over smoke extraction, there is a serious problem. This old building had none of that in place. The consultant took measurements, looked at the egress points, at natural windows, where air could get in and out, where smoke could be trapped. He put it into a computer program which gave percentages of times it would take to fill the space with smoke and reduce visibility to zero. He could calculate precisely how long it would take to become very dangerous for those trying to get out. It is only a few minutes. He calculated how long it took for a person from the furthest seat to get to the nearest door, and within that time-frame where they would be when they collapsed from smoke inhalation. With that, he could do a computer analogy of corrective issues to be addressed.

We were committed to preserving the culture of the building and its design so we had to add rather than change. He proposed putting a huge grille on either side of the proscenium arch to suck smoke from the auditorium at a rate commensurate with the speed needed to clear the smoke to get 300 people out. From the grille high on the proscenium arch there had to be ducting half a metre to a metre wide which went up into the ceiling with an extractor to the outside. There had to be a fan on top of the ceiling outside on the roof to pull this air out. This was a minor aspect of his fire modelling recommendation. There were also recommendations about the seating. The fire modelling document became part of the DA submission to Council.

When Rodney Seaborn bought the theatre he acquired second hand heavily padded fabric seats. The only non-fabric substance was the metal arm between seats. We contacted the *CSIRO* in Canberra to do a fire test on the seats and sent a block of three seats and two individual seats. They were placed in a controlled area, one was ignited and the time was measured as to how quickly it would smoulder, burn and the fire move to other seats depending on where it started. It was an eye-opener to realize how quickly fire would take hold on those seats. Since you cannot predict circumstances of a fire starting, you have to plan for the worst case scenario. The Trust had experience of two major fires in its lifetime: Her Majesty's Theatre and the Botany storage facility and was very aware of the dangers of inappropriate fire protection. There was to be no compromise on the fire issue. From an acoustic point of view, the immediate removal of the seats was good as they were absorbing too much sound.

After our first development application, Sean and I were obliged to meet with the fire officer. There was good communication and understanding of technical requirements and we were confident we would cope with requirements since the DA would be conditional on these. After work is completed and before the public can use it, the work has to be checked and certified. We nominated the Council as the certifying party; a recommendation from the architects and born out of experience. North Sydney Council has a reputation for being difficult with developments, particularly in the commercial area. The bottom line was that we did not have much trouble with the application, nor did it take long. We were ready to go within two or three months of its lodgment. We had a lot of meetings. I went back to the acousticians and we designed a seat with an acoustic wooden back. The floor carpet was removed and the sound bouncing off the floor and backs of the seats made an instant and obvious change; it was a good thing to do. We put in American designed fire resistant seats. We sent some to *CSIRO* to do the same tests. It took eleven minutes for them to start to burn from smouldering. It was reassuring to have good fire retardant seats that were comfortable and good acoustically.

Everything we did needed careful scrutiny and an expert's view before we did it. I made constant reference back to the architects before action was taken. The budget did not blow out



New fire retardant seats *in situ*.

as we made sure the tenders were based on fixed quotes, which kept the tenderers focussed. We kept payments scheduled so that the last one was substantial when everything was completed. We relied heavily on our architects who had enormous experience with all the areas of concern. They knew many of the tenderers and their track records. They could identify the cowboys among them and who was likely to do the job they said they would do. They were able to help us substantially in making the right decisions in selecting tenderers. We prepared the budget on the basis of what the tenders came in at. There were a couple of things we extended. When we wanted to change something, we went back to the architects for options. We instructed tenderers not to put themselves in a position of not being able to fulfil their contract because they had under-quoted. When we had the final quotes, given the vast experience of Lucas and his team, we had a good understanding of the cost which went to the Board for decisions

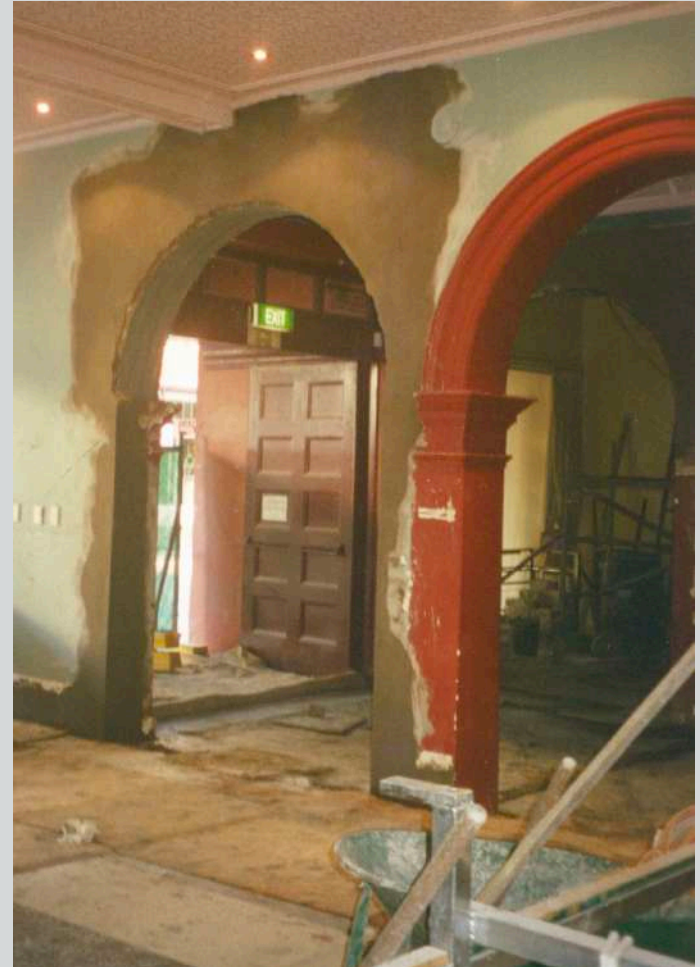
on spending. It cost about \$1.5 million. Once approval came from the directors, there was no question of the budget blowing out unless we moved the goalposts.

In the front foyer we were planning to take two walls down and put in big arches to open it up. There had been two shops, one our former office, with a wall separating it from the entrance. The other shop, the coffee shop, had one arch with a wall on either side of it, leaving a narrow corridor and dingy entrance coming off the street through two old thick wooden heritage doors. We wanted to open it up with glass doors and a double door cavity to limit outside noise. It became obvious the walls had to be taken down. Clive designed a pillar and an arch appropriate to the period (1910) for the space. This was budgeted for, but the foundations revealed the wall was supporting the Seaborn Room above; it was a structural support in the building. We had to underpin the foundations before we took the wall down. Initially an unbudgeted amount, it was something we had to wear.

We did not proceed on the basis we only had a certain amount of money to spend; there was enough contingency for such things. The integrity of the building was essential. The process was successful, the arches were put in, and the foyer was very light and open. We also installed large mirrors on the side walls and when standing in that foyer there is a sense it is bigger than it really is. The mirrors were the full length of the wall and fitted within the arched cavities Clive had designed. The wall had an architecturally balanced view to it. Clive was very aware of keeping the style of the building and he put small architrave trims on the wall which balanced the arches.

In those architrave trims we put mirrors which were quoted at \$20,000 to \$30,000. I found five mirrors for \$3,500 and they are still there with superb effect. At the point of being ready to go, we approved the winning tender. This particular firm had an experienced young foreman, Mick, who was always on site and in control of subcontractors. He was a good communicator and supervised the general quality control of the work on site, whether it came from his team or subcontractors. We had everything timetabled so each trade could follow on without getting in the way of, or impacting on, work underway or completed. My job was to work out the sequence of events.

In January 2007, the auditorium closed, the seats and carpet were removed so the hole in the floor for the stage could be made and the structural work to underpin the new stage area completed. *Jands* were supplying the stage, custom designed for us, which needed to be installed by the end of January. We had built corporate interest with bookings from February. Not wanting to lose income, we needed to be operational in February, so we had a month. This meant careful organization on the part of the builder, good control by his foreman over subcontractors, subcontractors coming on site at the appropriate time in sequence, doing their job and finishing it as scheduled. It felt like we became policemen, making sure materials were to hand and the work was done to timetable. The unknown was an old building; what would be found when a wall or floor was taken away. The builders were generally successful; I do not think they ever let us down, but I had to be there all the time to let tradespeople in with deliveries and to start work. Getting access to the place was not easy. We had an easement right across the property next door but to bring in big trucks with building materials needed careful planning. Early mornings were the best time, so I was often there at 5am. We had concurrent activities involving several trades, electrical, building, painting, and they were accessing different parts of the building at the same time. They also needed advice on access to facilities, water, light switches, which were very well hidden. The electrical panel was complex; with thirty or forty unmarked switches, which I had to know.



Work underway on the foyer arches.

With the foreman I planned how we could reopen the theatre for use in early February. Much of the work was done concurrently which cut the timetable down substantially. They had finished structural work in the foyer, the seats and body carpet were out of the theatre.

Body carpet used to be made and laid in strips of about 600 mm wide and joined together. This is before wide broadloom carpet was made in the 1950s. Body carpet had been put under the seats in long strips. I asked for it be taken out carefully in case of re-use. There were large, long strips from the theatre and we needed to carpet the foyer entrance wooden floor. The carpet was dark red and blue, with a small pattern similar to spearheads which needed to be lined up otherwise it would look silly. For the foyer we needed a 12 metre stretch by 6 metre depth. There was a small corner area in the front foyer where the old theatre bar had been. Underneath was sealed off plumbing pipes, cemented over the top. The young, but experienced, carpet layer, who commuted every day from Bathurst, managed to match the pattern perfectly and no joins could be seen. Within three days he had finished the work except for the corner where it was difficult to match the carpet. We put a small stage there for a piano, creating a performance area. When finished, it looked as if new carpet had been laid. He was a very impressive young tradesman who knew how to make things work with second-hand materials. He was used to fixing things with whatever was in the 'shed' since the hardware store was a long drive away!

Happily, we finished the structural work and painting within the timetable although the last few weeks were hectic. A hardwood floor was laid for the stage and all the electrics, including lighting in the theatre, were renewed. This was done early in the process. There were thirty or forty lamps above the old stage on an old wiring system, there probably since the 1920s, and a potential fire hazard. For the theatre lighting we wanted a system with a room dedicated to the lighting patch points where plugs and therefore lamps could be changed quickly. *Jands* provided this lighting system, but it had to be installed. Rather than try to salvage anything, we removed everything and started again. Previously, lighting rigs needed a ladder or cherry-picker, to change a lamp over the stage.

New lighting grid.



We wanted lighting in front of the proscenium arch, where our main performing area for music would be. We did not want angled theatrical lighting but mostly down-lights to avoid shadows on music stands. We wanted theatrical use for the stage to be possible, so the rig had to have stage lighting. A grid was designed to be winched up and down with flexibility to add to it later. On the grid we put seventy-five lamps, with another sixty-five possible for behind the proscenium arch. I wanted 140 points to finish in this room where we could move the cable and manage

each light. The electrician engaged had been working on heritage buildings and the work he did was astounding. He organized 150-odd circuits from the stage, laid cables along the floor of the ceiling, through the back wall and into a dedicated room behind the theatre control box. All the lamps were in an orange-coloured conduit and laid perfectly row upon row so they were all accessible and labelled. The electric's box was on top of the theatre roof. Everything was perfect; the moment we switched one on, it worked.

We were ready to go by February except for some minor things like the smoke extractor. We had Council approval to operate, but the electrician engaged to deal with the smoke extractor was not experienced enough. The electrical system has an essential component monitored by the fire brigade. If there is a fire or an alarm, the system shuts down all mechanical equipment, like air-conditioners, lifts, that might feed a fire or start another and pulls the power away from them. The smoke extractor has to do the opposite and turn on automatically when it goes into fire mode. The electrician had to rewire the panel to accommodate this, but we could not get it to work properly. It was very old and complex technology. We finally found someone who went back to the original plans for the electrics, and they found that over the years, minor modifications and changes had been made which were not documented. This became a big problem, preventing us from getting a fire safety certificate to operate. It became the last thing we had to manage and it took over our lives. We had a serious discussion with the builder; the electrician was paid out and some thousands of dollars later, it was fixed, including the problems inherent in the old system. Knowledge of the way electrics had been set up in the past was necessary as we were imposing new technology on old technology and that does not always work. It all worked eventually and we received certification to operate.

In three months we had undertaken a major renovation. I did not know what was involved until it was underway; I came to understand the key to this was communication. I had to talk to workmen to encourage their understanding and preparedness to undertake the work to the best of their ability and within the time-frame. At the back of the auditorium there was a fascia wall forming the front of the balcony with a stucco effect on the front. Clive Lucas wanted the points of it gilded, an intricate task. There was a team of four ladies who specialized in this and they treated it as a work of art - it was like watching Picasso working and they loved it. The result is evidence of a labour of love and commitment. There was all manner of people working on the site, with diverse interests, responsibilities and agendas. Many thought the building very beautiful and were proud of their work. The plasterers were very proud of the arches, for which they used plaster moulds, and they are quite stunning, not the sort of thing you would expect in a modern building and it looks like a late Victorian, early Edwardian, design.



Detailed work on the auditorium arches.

I learnt to be firm and strong with argument supporting my overview. It was a great satisfaction that it was done and on budget: \$1.5 million. We had to make the building suitable for 'dignified access' for the disabled. Until the renovation, a wheelchair could get into the foyer but needed help to negotiate stairs into the auditorium and seating levels. A wheelchair could not remain in the auditorium, so the occupant had to get into a seat. We could not put a lift in to provide access to the second floor but we replaced steps into the theatre with a ramp from the foyer, taking advantage of the opportunity to put in a wooden floor; a reflective surface, to enhance the acoustic. For the blind we put tactile indicators, dots and stripes in the floor, along the side passage so that someone with a stick could feel them. We installed two disabled toilets just outside the main auditorium doors at stage level. For those unable to get out of their wheelchair into a seat, we removed seats at both ends of the front row which gave four places for wheelchairs with easy access and compliance with fire regulations. We had a dedicated usher looking after a wheelchair patron when they came in and out. At the front door we had tactile indicators in Braille on the wall, and a special buzzer for blind people, which was wired to the box office who could provide help when the theatre was open.



The Independent auditorium and stage post-renovation.

### **Maintaining the Cupola**

One of the most exciting things we did in the renovation was to maintain the design nature of the cupola above the Seaborn Room. It had been built, with sloping walls, around 1910. One wall faced onto Miller Street with walls on either side of it. The back wall faced the back of the theatre roof with a door for access into the cupola. The walls had dormers with fake window casements as seen in manses and religious domiciles next to churches in England, often made of stained glass. These dormers had rotted over the years and had not been maintained. The cladding was an aluminium substance made by *Wunderlich* in 1910. The architects, with their experience and understanding, had found out exactly when it was made, what it was made from and that it was not repairable. When it rained, water came pouring into the Seaborn Room, having leaked down the insides of those slopes and gathered in the ceiling before running down the wall. The first problem was to close off the ceiling which was done reasonably quickly but was not a permanent solution. Around this, what they call a box gutter, was a flat walkway to get onto the roof and enter the cupola. The pigeon population has taken over North Sydney for centuries, and their contribution to the theatre was well and truly evident when we bought it. The box gutter was encased in pigeon excrement, hard like cement, which had covered up the drainage points. This raised the whole issue of what to do with the cupola. It came to a pyramid-like point with a ten metre high flagpole on top. Getting to the top end of it would have been a nightmare because you could not build anything substantial on the gutter. We did not have a heritage order on us so we could have saved a lot of money by pulling it out, but that was not the feeling of the Board of Directors or my chosen direction since this was something fundamental to the theatre look and its heritage. We found a place in Adelaide prepared to make appropriate sheeting against weather and commissioned them to undertake the work. We had a wonderful maintenance person who had been with us for all the time we were at the theatre and was someone who did home renovations. He was very good at old buildings with a 'can do' attitude. He designed a way in which he could get scaffolding up to clean it but he could not get up to the flagpole. We decided to leave the flagpole there and just paint it. The way he painted it was quite innovative. He got onto the top of the scaffolding, which was the base of the flagpole. With a big broom and his paintbrush on the end of it, he went to the top of the flagpole and painted from the top down.

The dormers were a major restoration job and we decided not to put them back, but kept them on site in a container at the back of the theatre in case someone in the future chose to have a go and do them up. I went into the cupola and was astounded. Inside there was a wooden structure of four huge oak beams, nearly a foot square, in old measurements, and 2 to 3 metres long. The four of them went from the corner at an angle, and met at the top and were dovetailed into each other. As a piece of masonry it was astounding; apparently this would have been what



they used on the hull of a sailing ship. They were intact and undamaged. They had crossbeams joining them, again thick pieces of oak, and structurally they were standing on their own with the design of the pyramid supporting each one and tongue and grooved at the top and then they were joined across with these structures. This would have been put up between 1905 and 1910. Each one would have weighed a great deal. They could only be removed with a crane. We decided this structure must be kept intact as it was intended to be.

There was a financial issue to do this which led to Rodney Seaborn donating \$100,000 towards a \$200,000 bill, which was incredibly generous. He remained supportive all his life of things the Trust was doing and theatres were his love. We finished the major renovation in accordance with the DA in February 2007. When we finished I realized there was still one unsolved problem. All the way through we had been doing acoustic tests of the room with an acoustic firm advising us. I made suggestions of what I hoped to achieve musically and they came up with the detail.

### **Acoustics, Finding the Right Sound**

**The Wigmore Hall** in London was our benchmark because our acousticians had worked installing the air-conditioning there and they dealt with acoustic issues arising from the installation. In comparison to the Wigmore, our only difference was reverberation time. At the Wigmore it was a little longer; we could not get it as long which meant we had a dry sound but there were other ways to deal with that. In addressing reverb you need cavity; the only way is to raise the roof or move the walls out or move the back wall to get bigger air mass in the room, which was impractical. We had to live with the existing reverb time but it is important for music. To the audience it is acceptable, it feels good, but to the musician it is a fraction dry; you would like a little bit more life around you. The way to get that was to do something to give an early reflection time. When a sound hits a substance it bounces back and the speed with which it takes to decay once it is bounced off that substance is a measurement called the early decay of the initial sound. If you can extend early decay it is like reverb. Add it to the existing reverb and it will give the psycho-impression of long reverb time. This did not happen by default; we knew we were after the Wigmore Hall sound. When we got to that point and considering materials for the floor, we factored in a long early response decay time and used wood in thickness to deliver that. When we put the hole in the floor to put in the movable stage, in front of it was another couple of metres of floor which we filled in but we



Work in preparation for the new raised pit.

made that a mass. We needed a mass of substance, so placed three different layers of floor of 25 mm each packed together. Normally, a floor is about 25 mm. We had a 75 mm thickness which gave us a great solid mass to deal with the base end of the sound spectrum; it also ended up reflecting longer, creating an early reverb time. We started to increase our early decay time but it still was not there. We had a measurable figure on the table of what we had to achieve, and we had finished the renovation and still had that problem to solve. We also had an open proscenium arch with a cloth curtain which was potentially absorbing sound and doing all the things we did not want to happen there. We could not take Clive Lucas's original suggestion of building a brick wall in front of it. I started to research and thought of one big shell across the proscenium arch. I brought into it the new factor of the standing wave, and knew we were now looking at multiple shells. I found sources around the world where shell technology had been used to enhance a particular room in different ways with different types of shells.

Clive prepared a plan to dig a hole in the floor of the theatre where the seats had been in front of the old stage. We would leave the old stage there and put a platform over the hole. The width of the building was 12 metres, the platform was about 8 metres. It had 2 metres on either side of the wall to this platform which would be mechanically operated so it could go up and down, sink down to the level of the floor where it would become a small pit, 4.8 metres deep. It was the size of a small Mozart orchestra pit. You could do Bach or a *Messiah* with a small orchestra which was attractive. That came by virtue of one of our directors seeing an original plan where there was no mechanism to raise it. It was going to be 600 mm above the floor because that was the perfect level for sight anywhere in the theatre if you wanted to see a player on the stage. He suggested a lift to drop the platform down to create a small orchestra pit. That is how it is used now. On either side there was a platform 600 mm high and this raised pit would come from floor level up to 600 mm and then down the front of it were panels designed to fit into each other which came off. Behind it, in front of the existing stage, were other panels put on to match the wood flow of the floor. The front of the existing stage was clad with a hardwood which was the same wood as the raising platform. All this wood was designed acoustically to have certain properties to enhance the acoustic environment on stage.

We found we had a great acoustic sound. There was one thing that concerned me, in relation to the concept of an area where the musicians would feel comfortable to play: one of the big problems every building suffers from is ground bound noise, vibration coming through the ground and through the building. A truck or bus rolls by or if near a train line, the ground shakes, the building foundations absorb that energy, pass it through the walls and into any floor that is attached to those walls. We had a situation with buses going by in Miller Street all the time. Our side walls were hard on the ground. Buses were only about 20 metres away so vibration was

coming into the theatre. You do not hear it or feel it but it is there and creates mud in the acoustic which I wanted to eliminate. The demountable sinking stage, and the two bits on the side, were designed and made to float free of the building, like a standard recording studio floor. It was not attached to the walls and floated on little rubber pads. With the floor finished and floating free of the building, from the first moment you played, it was fabulous, an effortless sound. Musicians did not have to push their instruments and could play very lightly and the sound would boom out across the floor.

The acoustic was better than most recording studios. This meant players could play as if in a studio recording room without extra effort. The sound of the instrument will be what the musician does without forcing it. No fighting with airborne noise coming in because we had attenuated that with the design of the wall. No fighting with ground bound vibration because the floor floats free. All the musician had to worry about was the natural acoustics across the room and they are the easiest thing to tune. **We had created a space to play which was near perfect for a player** and all we had to do was cover the walls. We then had the room itself to deal with. Along the southern brick wall, adjoining the flats next door, was the old warehouse turned into an apartment building. There was a double cavity wall there giving us a gap between our wall and the next one with the exception of close to the stage. I visited the resident of the flat next to that and listened to sound happening on stage to see if there was noise transfer. There was not, so there was something like a double cavity shell on that side. On the northern side, it was not so easy, as it was a freestanding wall with a laneway, and the wall had been designed with eight or nine half-moon windows along the top. They are architecturally important heritage windows but they were letting sound in and out. We needed that sound controlled and reflected into the room. The windows were inoperable and sheets of tin had been put over the outside and painted. Behind the tin we found glass. That was great because we could apply the basic acoustic design of having layered gaps and substance. Potentially we could build three layers with gaps of air in between each layer. On the inside, designed to reflect, and on the outside to absorb, we put acoustic panels. So the outside ones absorbed the sound coming in but if it got through it hit the glass and attenuated by over half. By the time sound got through to the final inside panel it was gone; the second attenuation through the glass would have taken it away completely. On the inside we had panels which were reflected and we were able to tune them to the same outcome acoustically as the wall. There was also a big double door in the middle of the wall opening outwards. We bricked it up and had a double shell again. We returned that to the same density and acoustic outcome as the walls. We then had a wall that was as good as possible acoustically in stopping the outside noise from coming in but dealing with the inside noise in a clever, controlled and acoustic manner. It was fine for the audience; wherever you sat in a 300

seat room of that size you are going to hear very well. The trick was to get the playing area, and the musicians to a place where they were not overplaying and were completely relaxed to give their best performance.

### **The Standing Wave**

In the stage area the biggest concern was the standing wave. A standing wave is when a low frequency note is played and it goes to a wall parallel with the wall opposite it. It hits the wall and returns to the other wall and as it does it crosses itself and causes little nodes of imperfection. Low frequency includes the bottom end of the double bass and other bass instruments. A sign wave, which has a rise and a dip comes across a centre level, goes up, comes down across the centre, down below and dips and comes back up again. That is what is called a full sign wave, which is the full length, or one revolution, of a note. The width of this wall is 3.65 metres. One sign wave on the bottom end of a double bass is 9.75 metres long so it gets a third of its way before it hits the wall and then starts coming back and by the time it has done that two or three hundred times, which it can do in an instant, there is 'mud' all over the place as it crosses itself. Only figuratively, but it makes the bottom end sound boomy.



The stage set with the acoustic shells and a *Stuart & Sons* piano.

At a rock concert, sometimes, that is what is happening if you hear this real boom coming out of the speaker stack. In rooms where jazz musicians play in a corner and put the bass player in a corner, it is going vertically across the corner, backwards and forwards and this big boomy bass sound comes out. Okay if you like that sort of sound but it is not clean and does not help ensemble playing. Other players who have to play with it, like a flute player or a wispy top end of a violin, find it difficult and it can kill their performance. Psychologically they will give up because you cannot fight it. We had a wonderful floor floating free but two walls with right angled corners. The natural thing for a bass sound is to collect in the corner and stay there, and it builds up as more sound comes in and becomes a real mess of disorganized sound. We had two problems: the standing wave with its nodes in the middle and those nodes where the wave crosses each other is like a little deep point every now and then. You do not hear it, but you can feel it in the cleanliness if the bottom end of that group is not good, and then in the corner the bass builds up, enhancing that.

To remove the problem we needed to put a convex curve in the corner from wall to wall, so the sound cannot hit a parallel wall. It has to hit a curve. If we had it concave and then convex, we would have tremendous control of a sound hitting there. We were looking for a shell to go into each corner of that room. That sector of the stage is in front of the proscenium arch. There had been two doors on either side to get backstage which we bricked up. The idea was to have that shell standing across the right angle corner in front of where the doors once were, but there was the stage between those two ends and that we could not do anything with. We thought, with several more shells across the proscenium arch, we could manipulate them and turn them to tune the direction of the sound that hits them. If they were from floor to ceiling in front of the proscenium arch, we would stop the sound disappearing into the stage cavity. It would also mean we had built a sound shell in which to place the musicians. It gives them a near perfect environment on the sides and the back of their playing, and that is what we came up with in the design. I had not seen anything like it in Australia, although sound shells existed and *Musica Viva* used them behind small groups. I had not seen anything as big as 2.5 metres high and about 1.5 metres wide.

### **The Experience of Other Venues**

The stage and the walls of the building were finished in 2007 and were ready to open except for fine tuning of the sound. It was a lot better than it had been and was going to work well but we needed to find a solution. I travelled to places where sound shell technology had been used with success, starting with the Hollywood Bowl in America, then the new *Disney Centre*,

Los Angeles, where there is a fabulous hall using sound shell technology to enhance the sound. The Kennedy Centre in Washington has about the worst acoustic imaginable. The Amsterdam Concertgebouw has the small Kleine Zaal, which sits underneath the main hall, and is similar to the area at the Independent; they use circles and semi-circles to create an acoustic environment and keep good control of chamber music by the use of shells.

The Salle Pleyel in Paris, where the *Pleyel* piano was developed, has huge moveable sound shells, probably 5 or 6 metres high. It was interesting to see an operatic production using those; a tremendous sound. It was becoming obvious that if shells are used, large volumes of sound can be brought under control very easily. Different shapes, some convex, some concave, they are all different shapes, all different reasons. The Wigmore Hall has that concept but misses out because it is dead under the seating overhang at the back of the hall and is carpeted, but the sound shell on stage works very well. The King's Place, a new hall in London, is very similar to the Independent Theatre. It is a rectangle, a box with a stage at the end, behind which is a series of convex shells. We had the opportunity to take all this technology on board and develop it reasonably easily for the benefit of the Independent. I attended a Mozart concert in **Carnegie Hall**, sitting at the very back, third level up, just to see. I could understand why such dedication and attention had been given to this 3,000 seater Hall. I heard a small Mozartian orchestra of about 20 or 30 people playing and it was as though I was 2 metres from them and that is the technology of circles and shells.

This quest was exciting and an absorbing experience. The object of my trip was to see the halls, talk to managers and any acoustic or technical people willing to talk and to ask them relevant questions. At the Kleine Zaal I asked about positioning musicians in relation to audience seating. They were very forthcoming and open about the issues and the views were strongly held. When you are committed to a building and it is your life, you get to know it very well and to know what can or cannot be done and if there is someone genuinely interested in knowing, they were prepared to enlighten you. On each visit I went to a concert and afterwards met with staff and inspected the hall with no audience. I spent a fair bit of time in each place, sitting in the foyer and observing the audience.

The Wigmore Hall audience was not anywhere near as satisfied as the King's Place audience and yet Wigmore has the history and reputation. There is nothing wrong with the performances, but there is a difference. The new technology in the King's Place hall attracts a certain audience and they like it; as does the Aurora Orchestra, resident there. Both audiences and musicians are taking ownership of the venue. The foyers are set out in a very artistic way. When I went there they had a foyer art exhibition. Acoustically in the room it was nice and as you came out to the foyer it was a relaxed feeling which enhanced the music you were listening to. At Wigmore, there

is a small narrow lobby at the exit, full of people and then you move straight out onto the street. No ambiance, maybe not essential but a completely different concert experience.

I could see shells are used in different ways but if used properly and cleverly, you can get a very good acoustic. The trick was how we should do it. These were not available 'off the shelf'. They had to be workable and fit our needs. Further investigation led me to a group in America, the **Wenger Corporation**. They have developed separate shells up to 10 metres high and about 1.5 metres wide. We needed about 1.5 metres wide but only about 2 or 2.5 metres high. If we could get individual shells they could be positioned at different angles and different levels, giving control over the sound. *Wenger* is a supplier of music equipment for schools, such as music stands. I made contact and learnt the founder had a son, a tuba player. He was frustrated with his son's practice, given he could not find anywhere in the house that did not disturb the family while giving him the proper environment to advance his tuba studies. He invented an acoustic room within a room, which was like a container he wheeled into the lounge room. His son went into that room to play. It worked, and he went into manufacturing these. Schools and conservatoria in America started to use them. They were sometimes as big as a half size container, with a small window on a double door outside so you could see someone was in occupation but could not hear a thing. Inside was a near perfect acoustic because of this design. I went to *Wenger* in Minneapolis and met their engineers and designers and discussed what I had seen of sound shells around the world. I showed them what we wanted to achieve at the Independent, and they came up with a concept to make seven shells the height we wanted. They showed me on our floor plan how to use the seven shells. We contracted and raised money. Our supporters contributed about \$124,000 for the seven, with some donating the cost of a shell.

The shells were built and shipped to Australia with someone to erect them. They had to be careful because we had a raked floor so we needed to be able to move it from the top to the bottom, up the rake, without changing the gap on the floor and without the shell tipping over. We also needed to be mobile so that one person could move it. They are very heavy. The construction of the shell itself had to do the acoustic job. One shell could do several things: it could reflect the top end and take the bass end through or reflect the bass. We had to compromise so they invented a honeycomb behind the fascia of the shell and behind the honeycomb they put steel. The honeycomb was mounted on a steel base at the back, which was affixed to the structure which had wheels and a handle to pull the shell. They are about 10 metres high, all moveable on a trolley. In front of the honeycomb was the reflective surface which would be tuned to the frequency we wanted. It is like plywood, a light wood. We had taken measurements of the sound in the room and gave them an acoustic specification of what we wanted to deal with at what frequencies and the shells were made accordingly. They arrived in pieces and were put together by the team from America. They looked fantastic.

At about the same time we were working on the Independent's interior and acoustics, the Llewellyn Hall at the Australian National University in Canberra was being renovated (it re-opened in 2008). In seeking the best possible acoustics for chamber music events there, it became another venue in Australia to find movable acoustic shells provided ideal conditions for musicians.

The first concert at the Independent Theatre was a recital by Yvonne Kenny for the Hunter's Hill Music Club in 2007. I could not believe the sound in the audience. It was so clean and beautiful and no matter how soft, wherever you were you could hear it absolutely precisely. Yvonne is a superb artist and singer who can adjust to whatever environment she is in. She came out to sing her first aria and presented it as she would on any stage, projecting to the back. By the time she was halfway through I saw her dynamic diminish and she dropped everything back because she could feel she had full control over her voice. Her dynamic range improved immensely. The hall put her in a position where she could confidently go as soft or as loud as she wanted without having to force, knowing she was getting the effect across. This was vindication of a long road travelled after we finished the renovation. Later, when I played on the stage with an ensemble, everyone realized we were overplaying. We started lightening it up. It took a while to appreciate how to play very softly and still be heard. Rarely have I found a concert hall of that nature anywhere. Studios provide this all the time because they are designed to do so. The capacity to play on stage very quietly with large sounding instruments around you doing the same, and still have an immense impact on the other players and hear the last descant of the first violins, clearly and cleanly, is rare. When we were playing one of those concerts I had some people present who understand these things. They sat up the back and everything was crystal clear and clean right across the spectrum in every instrument.

We found with one shell in each corner we could stop the standing wave and the bass build up. We have been able to change and move the shells for different circumstances. For a recording with the Parramatta City Band, thirty players were on the front area of the stage, and the big percussion and timpani section were on the upper stage with the shells around them. This resulted in a lovely balance with very little effort. In doing this, we found we could move the shells to different optimum levels and improve aspects of the sound. We recorded the Chopin piano concerti arranged for string quartet and piano with the Sydney String Quartet. The piano was in front of the shell with the lid up, facing the shells on the stage so there was reflection off the shells and at an angle. The quartet was at the end of the piano, again at an angle, with the first violinist, Ronald Thomas, closest to the shell and the cellist on the outside. The bottom notes of the lower instruments are long notes, long sign waves, so best to get them out of corners. We brought the side shells in about half a metre to enhance the bass. We found in the recording



Yvonne Kenny



we were losing the crispness and edge of the first violin, so we moved the shells and put about 300-400 mm of gap between each edge of the shells so as to let some of the sound through. Then we angled the shells so they were like a concertina, and we had them opening slowly like a concertina or piano accordion, with a big end and then a little end. At the little end we had the violin. We had the rest set nicely and as we were recording we turned the shell and changed the prominence of the violin sound on the recording. We got it to a point where the balance was good, but suddenly there was presence in the first violin over the top of this huge piano sound at the same time. If you experiment and know what you are doing with those shells and are prepared to take a few experimental moves, the outcome is fantastic. The recording was superb as a result of the shells and the room.

The whole experience of a concert is to do with the performance and the chosen environment in which the performance takes place. We are giving money to musicians to improve their performance, the last thing you want them to do is to go into an area where the performance is negated by the environment. So many times that has been the case in Australia with our theatres and the quality, the best we can do, has been negated by a poor environment. I was determined the Independent would not be like that. I wanted to make sure it was up there in the first ten chamber music rooms in the world. You can change it because you can move the shells and put them anywhere and you can invite some of those problems back again by so doing, but it does not matter, they can always be moved back.

In the way we had set it up, I think it is one of the top ten chamber music rooms and its greatest feature, apart from the acoustic matters, is its size. Chamber music is generally for an audience of up to 300 people. Initially, it was written to be performed in salons, lounge rooms and small environments for eighty or less people. In the case of Schubert, maybe a few more for his vocal programs, but basically small numbers of people. In the Independent, with its raked seating and now its acoustic capability, you can sit at the back of the gallery and have the experience I had in Carnegie Hall. You can hear everything on stage cleanly and easily and if you can do that up there on stage, the musicians can do it even more and when they know to do it, they give superb performances. Dene Olding, leader of the *Goldner Quartet*, after having been there two or three times to play, commented, as he unpacked his violin, that he really liked the room and considered it a great place to play in. As a player myself, it inspired me to do a little bit more musical

The recording team—John Ducan, Warwick Ross, Michael Stavrov, Tom Ford, Andrei Popa and Trevor Dodderidge.





The Sydney String Quartet, leader Ronald Thomas with Gregory Kinda, piano. (Photo: Michael Stavrou)

work. When my management job was finished, I felt the need to practice more, and seek the opportunity to play there. I have played in a number of concerts at the Independent which I have found very rewarding.

I have memories of activities that were really satisfying, such as putting together a freelance orchestra for the Royal Ballet's *The Rite of Spring*<sup>3</sup>. To hear that come together at such a high standard, it was like listening at Covent Garden, or better. Another was the Fonteyn tours. I was not playing in Leeds but stood at the back of the theatre. Fabulous dancers we had revered all of our lives participated: Maina Gielgud doing solo work; Lyn Seymour, the dancer of the day; Robert North, the contemporary dancer of the day; and David Wall, principal dancer with the Royal Ballet. There were two Russians, Andre Prokovsky and Galina Samsova. Fonteyn did the *Romeo and Juliet* love scene with David Wall, not much dancing but tremendous stage presence and acting through her movement. By then she was really beyond doing any difficult things like *Swan Lake* but the sound of the orchestra and the performance on stage, brought tears to my eyes. Later, the curtain rose again and Maina did her contemporary piece with percussion, which was fabulous, riveting.<sup>4</sup> That experience was a highlight along with the Independent Theatre:

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Seven.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Four.



Ronald Thomas and Warwick Ross, Seaborn Room, Independent Theatre 1999.

after the process of addressing the acoustic and hearing the resultant sound, knowing it is significant and a great enhancer of the experience for both musicians and audiences, is very thrilling.

When it reopened, I was exhausted. I had no staff; I did everything. Gloria Scott was there looking after the corporate activities and was flat-out marketing. They were demanding of management and insistent they wanted immediate answers. I had been project managing, then trying to build interest in the theatre from the musical fraternity. I could not take on the role of theatre manager and build an audience, although I knew that must happen. Previously, there would have been a VIP opening reception and champagne flowing with the Governor-General as special guest. That was the way the Trust originally worked but now we were more concerned with events than appearances. The

sound shells were installed and by 2008 the venue was working. There was a finished product, on which a lot of money had been spent. I decided to use the network of people I knew and encourage them to use the theatre on a self-promotion basis. The cost of somewhere like the Opera House is prohibitive for a self-promoter unless you are Oscar Peterson or similar.

We had one of the best chamber rooms in the world and it needed to be used. I began making contacts and people started calling. In the Seaborn Room there were a large variety of activities from spiritual meetings to yoga classes. *Weight Watchers* were regulars on Tuesday nights. I was approached by a City Christian Church pastor who wanted a place to meet on Sunday mornings. Their approach was the application of Christian values in the community rather than the adoration of Christian systems, so they did not need a formal church. Many of the group, including young families, lived locally. The pastor had heard of the venue through North Sydney Council. They wanted space for children to play under supervision while their parents attended services in the theatre and talked together. We negotiated a fee covering all our costs including a technician who helped in relation to the musical aspect of the service. The pastor played the guitar and they sang religious inspired songs. We provided tea and coffee and a person to serve it. They loved the sound of the room which was so natural. Even though they were using electronic instruments they could communicate without amplification. I kept an eye on what was going on by standing up the back and listening. There was a great deal of group support when individuals were dealing with tragedy in their lives. Microphones were not necessary and it was a supportive environment. They used the theatre for four years, staying until we sold it. Buildings often take on the nature of the people in them. They were happy. The children were always happy and well

looked after. Younger members of their congregation, teenagers, were rostered to look after the children and they played and ran videos upstairs.

Peter Cousens approached us when he started his musical theatre company, *Kookaburra*.<sup>5</sup> They wanted rehearsal and performance space, and we gave them a week or so there. We had a set rate of hire but with every event I negotiated to the capacity of the hirer and by and large we struck a suitable deal allowing them to do what they wanted to do. Some things I solicited, other things came by word of mouth or by accident. I was standing outside one day and two people were looking at the building with more than just passing curiosity. They wanted to hold a funeral on a particular day and the nearby Catholic Church was not available. They were committed to a date with little time to find a venue and decided the theatre would be suitable. *White Lady Funeral Services* brought the coffin onto the stage, people sat in the auditorium and a celebrant conducted the service. Later we had a memorial service for someone associated with the theatre during their career. Some 200 attended. Older members of the acting profession had lessons, performed or attended performances at the Independent and many audience members attended from school age; a lot of people remember the Independent as a theatrical venue. We did not allow rock concerts which seem to have a high damage potential. The theatre seats, for example, cost \$430 each and we had 300. I was not interested in commercial gain, but rather having the theatre known as a place for successful events, mostly classical or jazz.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Cousens (b.1955), Australian actor, musical theatre performer, producer, founded *Kookaburra* in 2006 as a not for profit theatre company dedicated to musical theatre. During its short career the company produced seven musicals, some concerts and cabaret events but was unable to sustain its work and closed in March 2009.

