

Review: The New Theatre

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Book Review: Lisa Milner (ed), *The New Theatre: The people, plays and politics behind Australia's radical theatre* (Interventions: Melbourne, 2022). pp. 618. \$40. Paper.

Edited by Lisa Milner, *The New Theatre* is an impressive book: 618 pages, over 100 illustrations, an index laid out in a reader-user friendly way, and affordably priced. There are no footnotes, but for researchers who want to follow things up, some sources are mentioned in the text, and at the end of chapters, there are useful 'Further Reading' lists.

Inspired by radical theatre initiatives in the UK and the USA, New Theatre (NT) ventures formed in Sydney and Melbourne, initially as Workers Arts' Clubs in 1931, but soon rebranding as theatre became the 'art' of focus. Similar ventures formed in other Australian metropolitan and regional centres during the decade. This theatre movement mainly staged works 'with a highly conscious, explicit, democratic working-class orientation' but also mounted classical and experimental productions.

Volunteer labour powered productions, and nonprofessional actors were the mainstay. Over time these ventures variously disbanded and reformed, with the New Theatre in Sydney today the only outfit 'with an unbroken record of performances'. Thus New Theatre has claim to be one of Australia's 'oldest continuously performing theatres'.

Historical writings about New Theatre are, as Milner explains, 'scattered, incomplete and disparate'. The result is that it is confined to the inconsequential margins of Australian cultural and theatrical histories, a sort of eccentric and by-passable enterprise, not warranting serious attention.

Milner has gathered 18 essay contributions from 12 contributors. Eight of the essays have previously been published in books and journals, the remainder specifically commissioned. While there are some overlaps in this material, these do not detract. The mix of published material from disparate sources, along with new material, has a magnifying focus, intensifying the sense and awareness of New Theatre as a serious and robust theatrical, artistic, political presence in Australian cultural history. There is a refreshing energy in the material overall, coming as it does from what Milner describes as an array of 'theatre practitioners, historians, academics and political ratbags'.

In keeping with the theatrical subject, Milner has organised the book on the classic structure of the 3- Act Play. Following her Introduction, Act 1 comprises two significant essays which place the New Theatre project in the context of the international leftist theatre projects of the first half of the twentieth century, and detail the relationship it had with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA).

Communists had vigorous and vital roles in New Theatre. At the height of the Cold War one leading CPA apparatchik considered it the party's main and foremost cultural activity.

However, as Milner's book makes clear, this relationship was 'complex and contradictory', at times tense and problematic. As for ASIO, it regarded New Theatre as 'insidious' and it was high on the organisation's surveillance agenda.

The six essays comprising Act 2 deal with the people involved in, and the activities and fortunes/fates of the New Theatre branches in Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth. Rather than a single entity, New Theatre is shown as a network of political theatrical enterprises, variously linked and working off each other, engaged in a common social, political, cultural purpose. In these chapters, the branches are self-managing outfits shaped by local conditions and issues, their work affected by factors like the availability of theatre spaces, the pools of talent available, local financial support, the natures and strengths of local leftist political organisations and their cultures, and the enthusiasms or otherwise of local leftists with power and influence.

Act 3 covers a lot of territory. Ten chapters detail the extraordinary array of themes and issues dealt with by New Theatre as it variously programmed works opposing fascism, war, and discriminations, marginalisations and inequalities of all kinds. They show too how NT explored ways of getting satire, politics, and industrial relations onto the stage in ways that were educational and entertaining; how it challenged moral and political censorship laws in times when it was fraught to do so; and how it took political theatre to metropolitan and regional audiences and publics beyond traditional venues, in streets, parks, on the flatbeds of trucks, in work places, at beaches, in community halls, at strikes.

Clear also in Act 3 is that women provided a great deal of the energy and dynamism of New Theatre, particularly in the 1930s through to the 1960s. In it they found spaces denied elsewhere to take leadership and prominent roles – to act, produce, direct, sing, dance, design, build sets, and administer. It also provided literary spaces for women to write, some of them later becoming significant Australian literary identities.

The book concludes with an illustrated tribute to *Reedy River* (1953). Centred on the Great Strike of 1891 this folk musical played to enthusiastic audiences across Australia during the Cold War and is the most successful production mounted by New Theatre. Over the years, with revivals, some 500,000 people have seen the play.

Overall, Milner's book contests the historiographical perversity which dismissively relegates New Theatre to the margins of history. It convincingly demonstrates the manifold ways it was a flourishing artistic enterprise and part of Australian cultural and theatrical histories. Milner has done this sort of historical redress and restitution before. Her study of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit (WWFFU) *Fighting Films* (2003) ended the invisibility of this pioneering and robust Cold War documentary film venture in discussions of Australian documentary film history.

It is fitting that Milner dedicates New Theatre to Norma Disher Hawkins, the surviving member of the WWFFU, a founding member of New Theatre, whom Milner acknowledges as inspiring her research and writing on Australian left cultural history.