

Mrs Stuchbery, you have a theory about when Portland people first became interested in forming some sort of arts organisation.

Yes. I remember in ... it must have been in the late 30's or early 40's, when Mr and Mrs Greenwood were living in Portland. That there was a festival, sponsored by the Council for the Encouragement of the Arts. That was held here and there were various sections; music, recitations and I think writing in the form of poetry and also choral competitions. And Saint Stephen's Choir, of which I was a member at the time, was trained by the late Canon Coupe and also by the choirmaster, the late Mr Robert Salmon and we were successful in winning the ... I think it may have been the junior choral section. We all had to sing a set piece, which was *Brahms' Lullaby* (sings "sleep now my princess, oh sleep") and our own choice was the hymn '*Fierce Was the Wild Billow*' and we were all terribly excited at winning the prize and we received a certificate, which we hung in the Sunday School, or the choir stalls for a long time. That's my earliest recollection and I think from that, they became interested in joining C.E.M.A, which was formed. Mrs Jackson says, just after the war in England, the British Isles.

Who else was in the choir? Do you remember?

Well, I remember, well Mr Harold Salmon was sure to have been in it and I think Miss Carthew. Miss Leila Carthew and Edna Stanford (Harold's sister), she would sure to have been, but I cannot remember any of the old ladies. I would only have been perhaps twelve, thirteen at the time.

Then you left Portland?

Yes

To study?

Yes. I went to school in Ballarat for two years and then I came back to Portland for two years, for my first two years apprenticeship for pharmacy and then I went to Melbourne to do the last two years.

Then when you came back, Portland had C.E.M.A?

Oh, definitely yes. Yes. We, Bob and I were married in 1950 and when I came back here, you'd already been acting in the plays, under the guidance of Mr Moody, hadn't you?

Yes, *Mrs Moody*.

Mr and Mrs Moody? Well, Mrs Moody.

And you were Business Manager in one of the very early plays?

Oh, I think I was, just a title to give me something to do, or to get my name in the, on the thing really. The Business Manger didn't do much, perhaps did a bit of publicity. I certainly didn't concoct the designs of the programmes, but probably had something to do with the advertising of them. 'Leave it to Psmith' of course, was one of the early ones, but not the earliest. The earliest one that I can remember being involved with was one called 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', which was the Hay and Wodehouse play. That had Peter Gunnin it, who was a bank boy. A lot of these people of course, have moved on to other places. In 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' for example, Peter Gunn was a banker. Audrey Kidman was a teacher and she married a Portland boy, Geoff Allan and they're living in Melbourne. Arthur Loh of course was a teacher. Marjorie Brown married Harold Salmon, the next to Sadie McCombe. What happened to Sadie?

She went to New Zealand.

Eric Thorpe of course, who's still performing, still acting in plays. Donalda Shilladay was ... belonged to the Shilladay family in Mildura. The well-known store people and you know, they had ...

A big department store.

And she married a man who has a block up at Mildura, who lives there. Fraser MacDonald was a partner of Eric Thorpe's at one stage and he decided to study for teaching, to study to become a teacher and subsequently left Portland and I haven't heard anything of Fraser for many years. Geoff Allan we've already mentioned. He was a local and he worked in the bank. He's now the manager of a branch of the State Savings Bank. Fred Arnold was Captain Arnold, an ex-army man. Gwenneth Hodge of course is a member of the Hodge family. She married Brian Butler, who's since died and Gwenneth's a widow and living in Sydney. Phyl Martin was the wife of a banker. Leila Carthew of course is still with us, very much with us in the Portland community.

That was in?

That was 19th September 1947. Probably one of the first of the three act plays. We had ... We played around with comedy. As time went on and we became more

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experienced, we got interested in Emlyn Williams and some other playwrights and experimented and played around with them. Who wrote 'The Late Christopher Bean'? Can't remember. 'A Quiet Weekend', 'Leave it to Psmith'.

Oh, that was a hilarious comedy.

'A Murder Has Been Arranged'. There were a lot of other plays of course. They were only a few of the early ones.

The C.E.M.A. play was something that nobody would miss, every year. It was the big thing and then after a while, of course, the Music Group sort of started putting on musicals.

Hmm C.E.M.A. plays are still very popular.

Oh, absolutely, yes.

I'll put it another way. The old library. When we used the old library hall, we used to consider ourselves fortunate if we could make £100. The absolute capacity of the place was 330 and we used to pack the place out, there's no doubt about that! We had some wonderful times in the old library hall, but it was well past its useful life when it was demolished. Some of the windows were busted and you know ...

One always sat in a draught.

The plaster didn't look too good. The Apex Club, I think had one of the last, held one of the last functions in the old hall and they decorated it appropriately, but that's another story. But since the Civic Hall has been built, that has the capacity of 600 people and of course, when you have a function there, you can confidently expect to make a profit of \$2,000. It's an entirely different story. You've got the facilities there, you can charge and the people go because it's so comfortable.

Also, since the Civic Hall has been opened, we've been able to have the ballet. You see, they found it very difficult before. They couldn't perform on the smaller scale stage and it was so inconvenient. There were no proper dressing rooms. It was hideous, it really was. I'm sure it was a health hazard (laughs). Even if we did have a lot of fun there.

Do you remember the time that somebody was on stage and there was a bird up on the roof? Do you know that story?

No, I don't remember.

It apparently deposited something right in the middle of one of the performances.

Oh, good Lord!

But I'm not supposed to be talking, anyway.

No, I don't remember that one. I remember a lot of funny things.

Can you?

Well, I'll say a lot of funny things happened, but (leave it at that). So 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' and 'Leave it to Psmith' were very, very early efforts under the C.E.M.A. banner. In the 40's, I can't remember when, but somebody undoubtedly will be able to put a correct date on it, the Moodys conducted play readings every Sunday night and they were well attended. Plenty of boys and girls, mixed company. A play would be chosen, probably by Mrs Moody and she'd cast it and we'd read the plays. They were very happy and enjoyable evenings.

And she had a little dog called Boxer (laughs).

Oh yes, we didn't think much of Boxer. The Moodys didn't have any children and ...

Boxer was their baby, of course.

But the Moodys were wonderful people. They were gregarious, outgoing, friendly people. Harry Moody was a very (he was known as John to his wife), he was a very successful headmaster and Mrs Moody made friend everywhere she went, with everybody and of course, she was most interested in drama. The musical side of affairs at that time was looked after by Miss Hogan, I supposed and she dealt with the concerts and the musical parts of programmes and as time went on, we got involved in musical plays and musical comedies. Fairly simple.

'The Rebel Maid' was.

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Yes, fairly simple by modern standards.

Was probably the most ambitious things that we tried in those early days. That was when Mr Bellis was alive and he had a lot to do with that. You were Stage Manager for that.

Yes. 'The Rebel Maid' had 22 songs and they trimmed it down to 17. Mr Bellis, Mrs Bellis of course, Marion Bellis, would have been the musical director really for that one. And Frank (Bellis) was the, well he was a sort of genius behind all of it. He had a real understanding of stagecraft and of stage. Well, Frank was quite a performer in all.

He had a lovely voice too, himself.

In all departments; musical comedy and drama, he could act, he could make props out of anything. He used to be most, what shall I say? Scathing – not so much scathing in his comments about, but didn't have much time for people who spent money on props for stage plays. He could make anything.

And he could too.

But poor old Mrs Bellis you know, would have her lounge floor covered with great sheets of cardboard which had been, great cartons had been cut up and made into big sheets and Frank would paint backdrops and do all sorts of things.

They had the shop, which has recently been, oh just deserted by Blake's Motor. They had a little shop there, you know, a mixed business sort of thing and downstairs was a cellar sort of place. And that's where all the C.E.M.A. girls used to gather to make costumes, didn't they?

Yes. Was it for 'The Rebel Maid' that you made the wigs?

Oh yes! We made, all the cast, most of the cast had magnificent wigs. So, they were made out of plumber's hemp, is it? And sort of crimped onto netting. Then Geoff Smith at Reynold's, he sprayed them all different colours. And I was sitting in the audience and there were people sitting behind me and they said "of course they

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must have got the wigs from Melbourne” and I thought, ha-ha! If only you knew how many stitches went into it. But they looked magnificent.

You experimented with steel wool and found that unsatisfactory.

That was no good, so we got this plumber’s hemp and sort of crimped it in waves onto the net and then they just put it on and he sprayed it and it sort of looked shiny. It looked as if they’d had lovely shampooed hair. But it was fantastic. But what the girls made the costumes out of, you know was just incredible.

Frank had the ability to make wonderful props and backgrounds and even costumes out of nothing. He had that ability to put anything to hand to good use. He was good at lighting, he knew ...

Yes he did.

He knew about all these things and Frank’s death was great loss to us. He was a wonderful fellow, he really was.

Just a little man too, just a tiny little ... he really was, wasn’t he? Very small made man.

Yes

But he had a terrific personality and a lovely singing voice.

Well, Mrs Bellis of course, has carried on the tradition. She, they worked as a team and she’s continued. She’s made a tremendous contribution to Portland’s musical life over the last twenty years I suppose.

Well, she still plays for the orchestra and they are lovely. I love the orchestra. I love the Sunday afternoon concerts, I think they’re fantastic. It’s a really lovely way to have a pleasant Sunday afternoon. I think they’ve done wonderfully well, in the short time.

And they're playing for the new show, this orchestra ... for the 'Boyfriend'.

Oh, that's nice. Oh, that's very good.

Tell me about the one act play, 'The Playgoer'.

Ummm.

Why do you call it "the famous play"?

Oh, because we had so much fun, because we enjoyed it so tremendously. I suppose you always enjoy acting in plays, but this one was particularly good. It was a short little play, about how the master and mistress of the house had decided had decided to give staff ...

A treat.

Reward the staff's loyalty, by taking them out taking then out to a play. And of course, the staff treated the whole business with great suspicion and there were arguments about who had seniority over who. The cook went with the butler and the only person who showed any enthusiasm was the man who hadn't been considered and that was the gardener.

Who was played by Bob.

Who was ... what was he, the odd job man?

He was the odd job man.

His name was Gale. Think of wind.

Think of wind (laughs).

Well, anyway it was a hilarious play and it was ... it must have been well done, because it was very well received and the people, you know, still laugh about it. A few years later we repeated the thing and ...

Down at the High School.

At the High School. And Harold and I changed places.

Yes

And I became the master and Harold became ...

Gale. Think of wind (laughs).

Sadie McCombe was in it. Thelma Dipalo, Marge of course. Marge ...

Was Leila in it? I don't remember.

I can't remember. I really can't remember, I'm sorry, I can't.

Was Eric in it?

Can't remember that either. I remember Sadie being squeezed out by Thelma and Marcia Kennett.

Marcia Kennet, she was in it.

Marcia and Thelma. Between them, squeezed Sadie clean out of the ... out of proceedings, you know. They were all sitting on a sofa with Sadie in the middle and these two girls just came in together and Sadie went further and further back until she disappeared. All you could see was her knees (laughs). But it was just fun and that was the only reason I said "famous", or whatever I said. But we did enjoy that.

Tell me about some of the people you've worked with through the years, like Eric Thorpe.

Eric Thorpe. Well Eric Thorpe can speak for himself, of course. He's still here and still being involved in plays from time to time. George Barnard, who died. George

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worked at the needle factory. Fred Merryweather was involved in many plays. He left town many years ago, opened a shop called "Yvette's" in Fairfield, a florist... Or who is now working, I think for Woolworths. Geoff Allen, we've mentioned, he's a banker. A lot of the girls of course, that we ... who'd come had been school teachers. A number of them stayed. Ivy McKenzie was one of them. She married a local man, married Colin and stayed.

Dora, Dora Murrell. She was in plays, wasn't she?

Dora Rankin.

In the early days.

Yes, she was in plays. I remember her in a play in Scot's Hall with on Bower and oh, probably the Pattersons.

I'd say so, yes.

Can't remember what year that would be, but Dora would probably remember.

There was Phil Martin.

Oh yes, well Phil. Phil used to really turn it on, didn't she. So did Olive Meissner.

Oh yes.

And Olive would claim it and so would Phil. There are photographs of Phil somewhere with her hat turned up on one side.

Yes. Another one with a bandana tied around her head.

Yes, she sort of did the ... played housemaid parts.

Yes and charwoman sort of.

Funny stuff, generally. Captain Arnold.

Yes, he was a very fine-looking man.

His son-in-law Morris.

Oh yes, I was going to ask you about him. Then there was John Allen. You know "that's a nice piece of material, when are you going to have it made up?" (laughs).

That's right, John was in among the ...

Or "that's a nice tie. Fitzroy State, I see" (laughs.) He was a school teacher.

Donalda Shilladay, mentioned. Donalda, Marjorie Cram and somebody else sang 'Three Little Maids', I can remember that. That was a long time ago.

Yes

Form, er, what's that from? The Mikado?

Yes

Donalda, Marge ... who was the third?

Don't know.

We used to spend hours and hours working on the flats and working on the scenery at the old hall. There was an iron rail, iron framework, under which they used to be hung. I wished that we could have had a cattle hook around there and more facilities

for scene change and set setting and so on, but we weren't able to. We didn't ever get round to it.

No

But the new hall of course, has many, a lot of those things that were lacking in the old hall. But we used to spend a lot of time working on sets and making them up.

Who did you work with on the sets?

Oh, well, it was a case of all hands of course. All those who were active in the plays worked on the sets and lighting and ... The only thing we didn't do was take the money out the door and then race around to the back and do the play, we didn't do that. We did everything else, I think. Another one of the old-timers was Ern Salmon and he was in a number of plays. Harold's uncle.

Mrs Stuchbery, you've been connected with the St. Stephen's Choir right through until quite recently. Can you tell me about some of the C.E.M.A. musicals you can remember?

Well, I can remember, well '*The Rebel Maid*' is one we mentioned earlier. Then I can remember them, the C.E.M.A. Choir, performing '*Merry England*' and Pat Smale was the leading soprano, the soloist and Lorenzo Nolan came up from Melbourne and performed as a soloist with the choir. What else was there?

Can you remember anything about Neil Baudinette's connection with the C.E.M.A. Choir?

Oh yes, Neil was musical director for several Gilbert & Sullivan performances. I suppose, including '*Box and Cox*'. Was he associated with '*The Mikado*'?

Don't remember.

Fred Malcolm was in that, I remember that. Well, Fred was in that. I remember him singing that '*Tit Willow*' song, you know.

In Indonesian?

Oh no, no, in English.

And I've seen you on stage Mrs Stuchbery. In some of Bill Collett's reviews.

Yes

Tell us what you would do in those.

I have been favoured to play Her Majesty The Queen (chuckles) on both occasions, complete with the dress, the Order of the Garter, my two corgis, my long white gloves and my knuckles white underneath, holding on to the corgis.

