



**MRS. DOROTHY WOOLCOCK INTERVIEWED BY LESLEY JACKSON
4 AUGUST 1983.**

**(THE FIRST PART OF THIS INTERVIEW WAS TRANSCRIBED IN THE 1980s but
WAS NO LONGER ON THE OLD RECORDINGS)**

Dorothy, what was your first involvement with C.E.M.A.?

Well, I became interested in the choir, because several of the choir members, I played golf with them, and I had enjoyed singing – not that I had anything much in the way of a voice, but I liked part singing [...] For years we had a lot of fun in the choir doing shows – several shows that were put on by Margaret MacDougall, as she was then, Margaret Luers now – and they were great fun: *The Mikado*; *Brigadoon*...I have a feeling there might be one or two others, but I can't remember [...] They were very popular and very well done. And, of course, the festivals and so on. We used to go up to Hamilton and join in with other choirs from the district, around about three hundred singers on the night. Gradually...Well, nearly every year, I think, the choir had concerts, often in aid of a town charity, and any surplus, of course, would just gravitate toward the building fund (smiles), small as it was. Gradually my interest changed more into dram and I became involved with Bobby Blake's group. At the same time Margaret Flynn was doing very good work with the C.E.M.A. Drama Group, and both of them left we had quite a large...Everyone collected into the one group in C.E.M.A. and for many years quite a large number of productions were done in the town. One of the biggest, probably, to start with, would be the production of *Twelfth Night* at the first festival in 1959 (*first festival was in 1960) and in that we were extremely lucky to have the experience of Harold Baigent, the Drama officer from C.A.E. (*Council for Adult Education) It must have been quite an enormous task for him to come down and train a group of amateurs into doing a full Shakespearian production, but apparently it succeeded and we took that one up to Hamilton, where it was also enjoyed. The following year we had, for the second festival, we had another Melbourne producer and she did quite an exciting play *Tonight in Samarkand*. From then on, we had a production each year, for the festival, retuning in the end to local producers. And after a few years I produced – I think it could have been for the fifth festival – *Someone Waiting* by Emlyn Williams, which was quite an exciting play and it appeared to go over extremely well. Later on, by about the sixth- seventh festival, things were getting just a little bit grim in the line of being able to put on shows, because in the interval and the last two or three years before that, we ran into T.V. in the country and ten o'clock closing, which

(THE REMAINING RECORDING DIGITISED IN 2025 BEGINS HERE.)

cut our audiences way, way back. It became more and more difficult year by year. In fact, it affected the C.A.E. productions so much that in the end they would send out a production with, perhaps one or two players – a whole play with just two players – and they found that they couldn't afford to send them round the country. And the same factor hit the local productions for several years until finally interest started to build up again. Perhaps T.V. lost a little of the first impact, and the ten o'clock closing hadn't quite reached the stage of the lavish spectaculars they put on



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these days to attract them. However, we continued and held the gap, managed to hold the gap, anyway for the festivals, for two or three years in between and then finally with the establishment of the Victorian Arts Council, which enabled us to include those in the festivals and carry them through.

Could you tell me what the concept of the festival was?

Well, we just appeared to have so many groups who were able to do things, we thought it would be a good idea to put them all together [...] And apart from the stage shows and the choirs, we also had an active art group and it was at a time when the interest was just developing in having art shows and art competitions. With quite a lot of writing around and looking at things we managed to get the art competition quite well established – and it was well supported from all through Victoria and often from some of the other states, too. It meant quite a lot of work, because we had very few places in Portland where we could successfully exhibit all the entries, but with a lot of hard work and ingenuity we managed to carry them very successfully for quite a large number of years. And I think altogether we ran to, oh, twelve, thirteen, thirteen art competitions and finally, with ... I think it must have been something to do with the rise of inflation during the '70s, and the popularity and spread of art competitions right through the whole countryside, that we found it far too expensive to continue in that field, and finally had to reduce and just have the odd private exhibition or showing at the new C.E.M.A. Arts Centre. Incidentally, the art competitions did a whole lot to establish the quite extensive range of pictures which belong to the gallery and are always there on display. The town is very fortunate in having such a very sound group of paintings – perhaps not in the really, you know, top class artists' group, but all the same it included works by a number of people who are very well known in their own fields. People from...who've lectured at the University, people who've had private exhibitions of their own. In the early years they all helped considerably, and it was further helped by having as judges very well known people. For example, John Ashworth from the Hamilton Gallery. He was very helpful; he came down and judged three competitions I think altogether. We had Clifford Last, who's a first-rate artist, and he came down. Another, Christine Alder, and quite a number of other well-known people in the art field, who came and acted as judges in the competition and, of course, enabled us to keep up the standards of our collection.

When did the first art competition start?

It started in 1960. (* records indicate 1961) It was during the second festival that the idea came up, having the art competition and it was continued on then for quite a long time. Naturally, it was difficult to establish, because we had very little in the way of money and required some donations and a lot of hard work by the organisers to offer just moderate prizemoney for the pictures which were acquired for the collection.



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And you personally donated a prize one year. How did you do that?

Oh, and a little bit of sewing and selling a few little dresses and children's frocks and things like that – brought in enough money to cover the prize effort. Gradually, over the years, we managed to persuade a few donations from various firms and people in the town to boost our own efforts.

The last few were held at the Arts Centre, but before the Arts Centre was built, where did you hold the art competitions?

Well with the lack of space available in the town for quite a large competition – normally there were a great number of paintings sent- we moved from one building to another. First of all, from the Attic, which was a very old, historic building in Portland, and had a lovely upstairs gallery. When that became unavailable we moved on to all sorts of other venues: part of the Old London before it was rebuilt; Paddy's Market, before that went to some other firm; an old shed that was used simply for storage, just a little further out of the town, but still large enough to take the painting collection and ...Well, just any building that became suitable for the purpose. Finally ending up, of course, in the grand, new Arts Centre (chuckles), but by that stage things were getting more difficult, because the idea had spread to so many other country centres – right through the whole of the state, really. We found, with inflation, that the prizemoney was becoming far beyond our means and gradually the art competitions was closed down.

What other things were held at the festivals?

Well over the years I should imagine that almost every type of artist took part in one or other of the festivals. We had singers, ballet, actors, small groups of musicians – several times we had people providing chamber music. One or two trios came, and the Arts Council, too, helped at times by providing an artist during the festival period. I should think, altogether, we would have covered just about every field possible in the sort of cultural...

And you had a book fair?

Yes. After two or three festivals the idea came up that we should have a book fair and include it, more or less, with the art competition. Actually, it added quite a bit to the art competition, with painting displayed all-round the walls, we had tables right down the centre with books. Most of them loaned from the local booksellers and newsagents. Often, we had a speaker coming from Melbourne, an established



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writer. One year George Turner who was a very well-known critic in *The Age* Literature section, he was down and very interesting to hear his comments.

What other groups from the town took part in the festivals?

Apart from all the C.E.M.A. groups and the people who came from Melbourne – imported artists of standing – all the festivals were very well supported by local groups such as C.W.A., the Floral Art Group, the local Camera Club...And groups such as that all took part and joined in with their displays which added to the colour and the popularity of the festivals.

Another group you were involved in was the Current Affairs Group.

Yes. That was formed, probably towards the end of the '50s, it seemed to us that it required a group that could discuss things that were happening right through the world, and in those days, there were no current affairs groups such as we have these days of T.V. It was rather an empty field which seemed to require filling up. So, a group was formed and it continued for a period of about ten years, I think, until finally C.A.E., which helped enormously by getting books that suit our needs, found it very difficult to keep up to date. It was impossible to get things that were related, more or less disbanded. But it did attract quite a number of, well, prominent men in the town who wanted to have a discussion group where they could just look at a few of the world's problems and discuss them and just think about them and work it out.

Can you say who some of the people were who belonged to the group over the years?

Well over the years the schools and high schools were well represented; headmasters and senior staff, bank managers, lawyers, and it covered quite a wide range of professional people, mostly the people who were anxious to keep up with the present day... Well, the world of the time.

Did it have any political bias at all?

Er, no...Tried to keep it as free as possible, because in a group like that you, of course, get various shades of opinion, but the emphasis was not on the political side, it was more on the problems that were occurring in various parts of the world.

Another group that you were vitally involved with was the Arts Council Group.



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Yes, we were interested, right from the time that the Arts Council was established and building up in Victoria – there had been a gap of a few years. C.A.E. had found it far too expensive to tour the country with shows and for two or three years, due, mainly to the advent of T.V. in the country and also of ten o'clock closing in the pubs which, in a country town is important... We found that the Arts Council was very anxious to establish connections right through the whole country, and with our organization already well established, we felt that we would be in a position to help them where possible. From the very beginning, we accepted the shows that they were putting out. The very first one, of course, that they had on tour was Anna Russell, followed by many other people a little later. Barry Ingham, from the Royal Shakespeare Company... Various trios of musicians. The Vidiam Trio – rather later, but still a number of years ago not – and just the other night to show the standard of artists that they provided, Bill Hennessy, one of the members of that trio, has just been invited to audition for concert master position in the Berlin Philharmonic, and he is also concert master in the Tasmanian Orchestra. Well, artists of that standard were brought right through the country and we were very grateful to have the opportunities through the Arts Council... And for a number of years, it was a matter of answering their questions on what stage we could provide, and how big was the stage, and how many we thought could support the various shows. We found later that we rated very well with the numbers attending performances right through the stage, comparing favourably with bigger – much bigger – cities.

You were Secretary [of the Arts Council – Portland Branch] for how long?

I was secretary for about five or six years.

And that involved answering about three or four letters a week, I think.

It involved quite a bit of writing here and there and answering requests, but all the same it was very good fun [...] In those days many of the artists were billeted with their hosts through the country and we've enjoyed meeting so many people who've been sent around by the Arts Council over the years. It was interesting, really how I started off as Secretary of Arts Council. With my husband as President of C.E.M.A., I felt that it was far too much family to be Secretary of that organization... When finally, he retired and Don Chalmers became President, his wife had been Secretary of C.E.M.A. and found herself in the like position. So, we did a swap and she became Secretary of Arts Council and I went in as Secretary of C.E.M.A.