



MRS. OLIVE MEISSNER INTERVIEWED BY LESLEY JACKSON, 1 AUGUST 1983

Mrs. Meissner, you attended the first meeting of C.E.M.A. that was held in the old Town Hall?

Yes, I remember that very well. There was quite a number of people there, including Miss Hogan and Nance Edwards and Mrs. McLeod [...] John Harris and Mr. and Mrs. Moody- Mr Moody was headmaster of the High School [...] I have a feeling that the first Secretary was Miss Joan Beglen.

Oh, yes, that would be right.

And I think John Harris was the first President.

Yes

And Miss Hogan was elected as the musical director and Mrs. McLeod was elected as the Drama representative.

After that meeting...

We had meetings at various places. Once was at the Primary School. Another time we were above a photographer's. We even had a hall: the little, old hall where...It used to be Miss Tulloh's school at one stage.

That's behind Mr. Maling's surgery?

Yes, yes...

Just off Julia Street.

While we were still at the photographer's, it was decided it wasn't a very suitable place for a meeting. We needed somewhere better and somewhere bigger. So, we decided that we'd have a look round and see where we could go. It was thought that we'd buy this little hall that was behind the doctor's place and turn it into a clubroom, but when it came to the point [...] at that sale, they thought that the price was too much, so they decided not to buy it. Well then, I was down the street one day and I met the Baby Health Centre nurse and I said "You don't happen to know where we can get a hall or a big room for C.E.M.A.?" and she said "Well we're vacating the Baby Health Centre soon." She said "If you ask Mr. Anderson, he might let you have it." So we wrote to Mr. Anderson and asked him if he'd consider letting us have the hall, having the Centre after the Baby Health Centre people had left it. He was very agreeable. After we shifted into the Baby Health Centre buildings we stayed there until the new clubroom was opened.

That's the new Arts Centre?

The new Arts Centre, yes.

And where was the Baby Health Centre?

It was in Bentinck Street, next to the Richmond Hotel.



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How long were you Secretary of C.E.M.A.?

Approximately fourteen years. I took over [...] the general Secretaryship during Eric Stephenson's Presidency. In 1962 Pam Gorman was elected as Assistant Secretary

And who were the Presidents when you were Secretary of C.E.M.A.?

Oh, Eric Stephenson. As I said I came in after Eric. Les Harman, Fred Merryweather, Eric Thorpe. I believe – I'm not too sure about that, but I think Eric was – and Collin Woolcock.

What else of significance happened while you were Secretary?

Well, we started a series of – well, we had three, I think it was – festivals. The first one was really started by Lin Fremantle, who was a schoolteacher, who had [...] quite good ideas, it was really his idea. It was quite a success...

And he'd done a festival somewhere else?

He'd done festivals... Helped with a festival at Wangaratta and he knew how to go about it. He helped us tremendously. It took quite a lot of organizing [...] I took charge of the ticket-selling, distribution of the tickets, because I thought at the time the tickets were a bit expensive, because you could buy a season's ticket, and I didn't think too many people would buy a season's ticket- and they did. You could also buy a ticket for the night as well. We had the first performance was *Twelfth Night*. We played the – I wasn't in it, but they played [...] *Twelfth Night* and Harold Baigent was the producer. He used to come up every second week, for the weekend, and work with us. The festival lasted a week – or it might have been ten days, I just can't remember now. Of an evening the local city band- local town band- used to play outside the old Free Library Hall, where we had the festival. We had so many things on hand at the time that they decided that they'd have, perhaps, a supper committee, so that we wouldn't have to worry about it, because it was so ... So much doing, you know [...] I'm pretty sure that when the supper committee was formed, when the festivals started. Three ladies- Mrs. Doodt, Mrs. Dot Miller and Mrs. Budd were the three ladies that managed the supper for it.

And they were a great help to C.E.M.A.

They were a marvellous help, because we didn't have to worry [...] especially for me being General Secretary, all I had to say was, "We're having a do on such-and -such a night, will that be all right with you?" and they'd say, "Yes, we'll fix it, don't worry," and that was that. On the last night of a performance, we always had supper for the audience. We used to have very good audiences. We used to have people come from Hamilton and Warrnambool even and from Port Fairy when we had a play- particularly a play.

And from Heywood?



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And from Heywood, oh yes. We used to have a lot of people from Heywood.

Apart from being General Secretary, you were a member of the choir and a very active member of the Drama Group.

Yes I was in quite a number of plays, both three-acters- a lot more one-acters than three-acters really (chuckles). I was trying to work them out the other day. I think I was in at least about ten, ten or twelve three-act plays.

Goodness. And your first one-act play was at the Grand Concert in 1951

Orange Blossoms

That's right. And the Mrs. Coot in...

Fools Rush In

That was in 1952.

And *Rookery Nook*. They were my earliest plays [...] I was in plays up until about six years ago.

And at the Western District one-act play festival at Camperdown in 1956, you got an award.

Oh, that was the runner- up, yes...

Runner-up best actress.

Yes, best actress, yes. I did meet the adjudicator, Peter O'Shannessy [...] When I was overseas and I went to Ireland and I was at a theatre in Dublin, and Peter O'Shannessy and his wife were performing there. So after the show I thought I would try and see if he remembers me. And I went backstage and he did- fortunately he did- remember me. He made quite a fuss (laughs). He wanted to know however I got to Dublin (laughs) to see him in Dublin. After the show we went out...He introduced me to everybody [...] all his actor friends, which was a great thrill for me. We went to a little pub opposite the theatre and then from there on we went to one of the other actor's flats and spent the evening (laughs), and I got back to the residence where I was staying about five or six o'clock in the morning (laughs) But it was one of the best nights of my life.

And he remembered you?

Yes! He remembered me. He looked up- he wasn't thinking- and looked up and just caught my eye. He really was surprised. "Oh, Shirl," he said, "Come over and see who's here, its Olive Meissner" (laughs)

And he introduced you as the best actress?

Oh, yes and he said, "Olive is the best amateur actress I've seen" he said, "She gave a wonderful performance in a play that I adjudicated for". He said, "I gave her best actress". I said, "No you didn't, you gave me runner-up" (laughs)



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And why didn't he give you best actress?

He said "I gave you best actress" I said "No, you didn't". He said, "Well if I didn't I should have." He said "Oh I remember now. That one, the person who played the leading part, was so good, she could sustain her (English) accent all through." And I said, "Yes, but she'd only been out from England a couple of months." [Laughs]



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