

So Galleon is 40 years old in 2008. A start so many years ago, grown faint with time and records lost along the way. Many faces crowd the stage before my mind, but so few names to attach to them. However, I can vividly remember how Galleon came to be, and what we were trying to achieve, and some of us must have been right to chalk up the years.

Back in 1967 there was a concert party called "The Mirthmakers" operating out of a church hall at Norwood. I was approached by them to build a switchboard suitable for theatre work. My next job was to make lights. A dozen or so new tin cans were acquired from a manufacturer, and these were cut, modified, fitted with vents, reflectors and gel holders until they emerged as workable general floodlights powered with 200 watt globes. Given a paint job and fitted with baffles, they almost looked professional. Some of these floodlights were still in use in the later stages at Pioneer Hall, some thirty years later.

Equipped with a new switchboard and lights, The Mirthmakers decided to abandon their usual song and dance acts and tackle the classic farce "Charlie's Aunt". Heartened by this experience, The Mirthmakers decided they wanted to re-form themselves to become a more conventional theatre group tackling full length plays. With this decision came a complete re-organization. Most of the group members came from the south side of town, and Norwood was not the most convenient location for them, nor was The Mirthmakers the right sort of name for the group to work under. So a short time later a nameless theatre group became resident at the Marino Progress Hall.

When we first moved into Marino the stage facilities were less than basic. Not a great start, so why were we there? Well the rent was right and we virtually had a license to make what we could of it.

So months of busy bees followed. The stage was widened, superstructure was put in place to provide for hanging curtains and a lighting grid. During this time Hills Industries first stepped into our history. One of our members was Bill Jordan, who was employed there, and through him we purchased a number of materials. With much sewing by the ladies, curtains and teasers were created. The proscenium opening was already provided with a set of good velvet curtains, unfortunately only on domestic tracking. All we had to do with these main curtains was to rig a cord operated opening and closing system that worked with a reasonable degree of reliability. This was to become the bane of our lives for a number of years.

A sign that we would be able to swing into production was the construction of a set of flats. As they only had to be ten feet high, they could be lightweight built from 'two by one' pine, covered with calico and sized with wallpaper glue.

Hills Industries came into view again: exhorted by Bill Jordan their advertising/art department came up with a block of ticket blanks, and during the process they also came up with a name and logo for us. Well, we had no definite ideas of our own for a name, except that it should have something to do with the sea. So, Galleon Theatre Group complete with logo sounded just fine to us. Thank you, Hills.

And so at last into production for Galleon's first show, which was always destined to be a disaster. J.P Donleavy's "Fairy Tales of New York", a rather black comedy about a man returning from England to bury his wife, did not sit easy with a cast experienced mostly in song and dance, nor with the limited stage facilities or the taste of the Marino locals( thankfully these good people did not desert us). We learnt a lot from this show especially what not to do. From then on one of the principles to find its way into our constitution was that not every show that was cast should go on, and that before any publicity was released, a formal decision should be made that the show is going to be up to scratch. From this thought evolved one of the group's maxims of the times - the current show is not the most important; it is the one after that because that ensures the future.

Our second show also contributed to the group's outlook. It was a rather standard amateur version of "Bell, Book and Candle", adequate without being outstanding.

Our days of getting a stage ready to mount productions may have been over, but not our need to improvise. Poverty is the spur to improvisation! Back nearly forty years ago there were no computers, no internet, no sound effects records and very little in the way of reasonably priced, reliable recording equipment. So over the years we constructed a range of sound machines, starting with a basic thunder sheet, then a wind machine, and finishing with a rain machine!

In these early days the amateur theatre Eisteddfods were still being conducted, and any group who could hire Bruno Knez (of La Mama Theatre fame) to direct their entry was sure to win. The word was that the victories came at a cost, that at least one cast member would emerge from the experience extremely traumatized. This was not the kind of environment we were looking for.

Right from the very start we had some definite ideas on what we wanted, and these ultimately found their way into the constitution. We wanted a group where there was as much emphasis on recreation as there was on theatre, loyalty was rewarded, there were no stars and unskilled new members were welcome.

The big emphasis was trying to keep a balance between our recreational and not necessarily 'the best cast' approach with our audiences getting value. It must have worked - we kept on keeping on. The balance between group and audience is probably best illustrated by our planned year's offerings. We had settled down to regularly doing four shows a year, one going on every twelve weeks with time off over Christmas/New Year. One year we did do five shows at the urging of members who were at a loose end, with an extra show being rehearsed concurrently with another in a private home, but it was obvious that this sort of workload could not be sustained. Our regular offering each year was a whodunit/suspense and a comedy for them (the audience), something a bit more meaningful with a bit of a challenge (for us) and an end of year pantomime for the kids.

We preferred more serious works to the pantomimes, except that they attracted large audiences and helped pay the costs for the rest of the year. Our pantomimes were nearly all home grown to avoid royalties and license fees. Something we tried to do was involve a group of children from the local community, cubs, scouts, brownies, guides etc.

Our residential, recreational style group was reflected in our membership. Members recruited friends and acquaintances because the group was non-competitive and fun to be in. At one stage we had four members from the same street, and another four working for the same employer, all the result of enthusiastic recruiting.

Amongst those recruited were a number of juniors, coincidentally (and happily) the offspring of members of the local councils. There was Malcolm, the late teenage son of Alderman Newberry of the Marion Council, Phillip and his brother, teenage sons of Councillor Corbett of the Marion Council, and Amanda, teenage daughter of Councillor Pike of the Brighton Council. She was the only member I can recall suggesting that she might be better served by trying some of the other theatre groups. She had aspirations of making a career in theatre: the last time I heard of her she had gone through NIDA and was working professionally in NSW. By the way she remained with us till it was time for her to move on.

Our relationship with the Council was always very good. The Marino Hall was under care of a management committee, of which Galleon was a part. We were always very conscientious about making sure that our representatives turned up to the meetings. When the small hall, which we used for dressing rooms, was in need of re-roofing, Galleon volunteered to provide the labour if the council could provide the new galvanized iron, an offer they happily accepted. Heartened by the success of this venture we again asked the council for assistance with buying us a proper theatre curtain track for the main curtains which we were prepared to install ourselves. Happily they again nodded their heads to this and our trials with the old domestic curtain tracking were over at last.

After we had been at Marino for about ten years or so, the word was about that the gym group that was almost exclusively using Pioneer Hall would be moving into a sports centre being built for them by Marion Council on Oaklands Road, leaving Pioneer Hall up for grabs. So it was time for Galleon to review its needs for future accommodation. A number of options were looked at, but in the end it came down to two possibilities; Pioneer Hall or Mawson High School.

So when our time at Marino came to a close, it was off to Pioneer Hall, former home of The Pioneer Players whose two adjoining double garages at the rear of the hall were inherited by us. Once again it was back to working bees to get the stage back into working order. A complete new set of flats were required, twelve foot ones this time, so the old ten footers were left behind at Marino for whoever might follow us there. Pioneer Hall may not have been as well appointed as Mawson, but at least

there we retained full independence, and the future was ours to make.