



**MELBOURNE
THEATRE COMPANY
FOUNDATION**

**70
YEARS
ON**

**A legacy of
storytelling**

Celebrating our rich
and vibrant history

**The art(ists)
of stories**

Nikki Shiels, Deidre Rubenstein,
Charles Wu, Alison Bell and Oz Malik

**A new work to
carol about**

Phillip Kavanagh and Elise Esther Hearst

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, create and gather. We pay our respects to all First Peoples, their Elders past and present, and their enduring connections to Country, knowledge and stories.

We accept the invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and support a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

WELCOME



Melbourne Theatre Company has been a vital part of the cultural fabric of Melbourne for 70 years. Our stories have touched the hearts and minds of our community, one performance at a time, and created work for thousands of artists.

Today, through the staging of the very best in local and international theatre, community engagement, education, access and new writing programs, Melbourne Theatre Company is for everyone. Ongoing investment in developing the next generation of artists will ensure compelling stories that reflect our community and challenge the boundaries of theatre making are shared with the broadest possible audience.

To commemorate this special anniversary, and launch our *70 Years On Appeal*, we look back at some of the groundbreaking new Australian works and significant moments in the Company's history that have shaped our cultural landscape.

We also talk to artists from this year's season – Nikki Shiels, Deidre Rubenstein, Charles Wu, Alison Bell and Oz Malik – about their personal connection with the Company and hopes for the future of theatre. Phillip Kavanagh and Elise Esther Hearst share insight into the development process that sparked their collaboration on *A Very Jewish Christmas Carol*, and we highlight an exciting innovation to provide unlimited access to the onstage experience to young Victorians through virtual reality.

To everyone who supports the future of the Company and our artists with a donation, I thank you wholeheartedly for sharing your love of theatre with us. Together we can stage the stories of our time and shape the future of theatre.

Anne-Louise Sarks
Artistic Director & Co-CEO

Over its long and accomplished history, the evolution of Melbourne Theatre Company has been propelled by the generosity of our Donor community. The establishment of the Melbourne Theatre Company Foundation in 2014, and the Foundation Board the year following, represented a landmark change enabling us to pursue our long-term ambitions.

When I joined the Foundation Board in 2021, I was immediately struck by the shared passion and dedication of our supporters to ensure a robust and sustainable future for Melbourne Theatre Company. You are a community that have overwhelmingly supported us through some of our most difficult times, and for that I express my deepest thanks on behalf of everyone at the Company.

As we embark on this exciting new chapter under the creative leadership of Anne-Louise Sarks and newly appointed Executive Director & Co-CEO Sally Noonan, we are ready to build on everything that's special about the Company while firmly looking to the future.

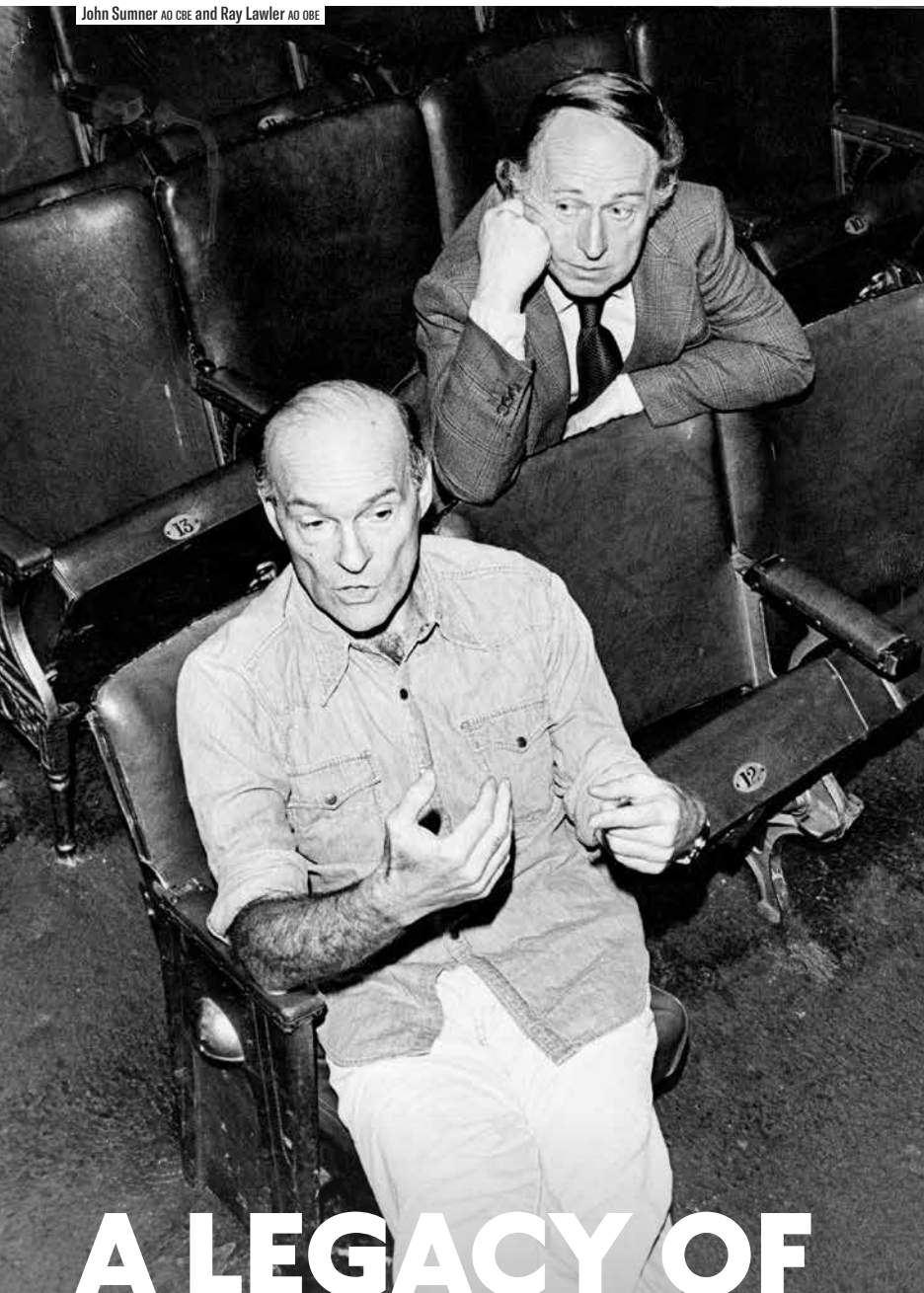
There is no better time for your donation to make a real impact on all that Australian theatre can be. With your help, we look forward to creating engaging theatre that will entertain, surprise and spark bold conversations for everyone.

Your donation today will not only enable world-class storytelling on our stages, but also the development of new Australian works and initiatives that extend opportunities to the next generation of audiences and theatre makers. Please join us in making a difference to our community through the power of storytelling.

Tania Seary
Foundation Board Chair and Board of Management Member

70 YEARS OF STORIES





A LEGACY OF STORYTELLING

Join us as we celebrate significant moments and groundbreaking new Australian works in our rich and vibrant history.

Over 70 years we have staged more than 850 productions, continued to invest in new works and the development of artists, and introduced new generations to the power of theatre.

1953

Our story begins in 1953. The Company's first Artistic Director John Sumner AO CBE founds the Union Theatre Repertory Company based in the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne. In 1955 Sumner hands the Company over to Ray Lawler AO OBE as Artistic Director. Wal Cherry takes up the reins in 1956 to present our fourth season. But in 1959, Sumner returns as Artistic Director, where he will stay until 1987.



Colombe BY Jean Anouilh

The Company's first play opens, starring Zoe Caldwell, George Fairfax and Alex Scott.

1955



Summer of the Seventeenth Doll BY Ray Lawler

Set in working-class Melbourne in 1953, the first Australian play by the Company takes to the stage. Written in the Australian vernacular, it becomes an instant classic, redefining Australian theatre.

In 1960 the Company moves performances to Russell Street Theatre. The following year we extend our seasons to performing year-round. Recognising our strong commitment to education and youth theatre from our earliest years, in 1962 a season of one-act plays for young audiences commences, in conjunction with the Children's Theatre Guild.

1963



***And the Big Men Fly* BY Alan Hopgood**

John Sumner asks playwright Alan Hopgood if he has any new plays. He doesn't but instead writes *And the Big Men Fly* for us in a week.

In 1965 the Company starts a play commissioning program and our last show performs in the Union Theatre. From 1966, Russell Street Theatre serves as the Company's primary venue until 1984 and closes in 1994. Our name becomes Melbourne Theatre Company in 1968, prompted by support from Melbourne City Council. We also move premises to Normanby Road, South Melbourne.

Beginning in 1970 and throughout the decade, we utilise alternative venues including St Martin's, La Mama, Grant Street, Athenaeum, Princess and the Comedy Theatres.

1973



***Don's Party* BY David Williamson**

The fifth play from one of Australia's most prolific playwrights, *Don's Party* is a sell-out hit. We go on to stage more than 20 of Williamson's plays.

1976



***Going Home* BY Alma De Groen**

An early work by Australian feminist playwright Alma De Groen premieres.

In 1977 the Company comes together in new headquarters on Ferrars Street, Southbank. In 1978 we further expand by taking over the refurbished Athenaeum Theatre.

1978



***Breaker Morant* BY Kenneth Ross**

The classic Australian story premieres, directed and designed by John Sumner.

The MTC Society begins in 1980. The Society brings audiences closer to the Company and helps raise money, laying the foundations of today's Donor program.

1984



***Medea* ADAPTED BY Robinson Jeffers**

We make our premiere in the Victorian Arts Centre (now Arts Centre Melbourne) in 1984 with *Medea* starring Zoe Caldwell, the first show to perform in the new purpose-built 850-seat Playhouse Theatre.

After 28 years John Sumner steps down as Artistic Director, with Roger Hodgman taking on the role in 1987.

1991



***Diving for Pearls* BY Katherine Thomson**

Set in a coastal and industrial landscape of a port town in the 1980s, this play is one of the most popular of the 1990s.

1994



In 1994 our home theatre moves from Russell Street Theatre to Fairfax Studio.

2000



***Life After George* BY Hannie Rayson**

A brilliant multi-award winning hit, taking home the Helpmann Award for Best Production, the AWGIE Award for stage and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award.

In 2000 Simon Phillips becomes Artistic Director. In 2002 the new play development program Hard Lines is established. It includes commissions and the public presentation of selections from new plays by our affiliate writers.



In 2006, major fundraising campaign MTC@Home launches to build Southbank Theatre and new HQ facilities for the Company.

2009



Art and Soul BY Matt Cameron, Aidan Fennessy, Joanna Murray-Smith, Tee O'Neill, Melissa Reeves, Glenn Shea AND Tom Wright

Directed by Kate Cherry and Peter Houghton, seven Melbourne writers each write a short play in response to the same painting: *Homage to Rembrandt* by Australian artist Garry Shead.

2004



The Sapphires BY Tony Briggs

The true story premieres at the Playhouse. Directed by Wesley Enoch AM, it travels to Company B, enjoys a tour to London in 2011 and a feature movie release in 2012.

2006



The Female of the Species BY Joanna Murray-Smith

The comic play premieres at Melbourne Theatre Company and then enjoys productions around the country and a London production in 2008.

Poor Boy BY Matt Cameron

Southbank Theatre opens on 27 January 2009 with the new Australian work *Poor Boy* by Matt Cameron.

After 32 years, the Company headquarters moves from Ferrars Street to Sturt Street in 2009, taking over the old Mercedes-Benz showroom. In the same year the annual series of readings of the most exciting and fresh new writing, The Cybec Readings (now Cybec Electric), launches.

2012

Robyn Nevin AO, Pamela Rabe and Aidan Fennessy co-program the 2012 season in the interim year before Brett Sheehy AO commences as Artistic Director.

2013



Rupert BY David Williamson

Directed by Lee Lewis, the production premieres at Melbourne Theatre Company before touring to Washington, DC, in 2014.

2016



Jasper Jones BY Kate Mulvany

Hailed as an Australian *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Kate Mulvany lovingly adapts Craig Silvey's acclaimed, best-selling novel for the stage, directed by Sam Strong.

In 2017 the Company and our Playwrights Giving Circle launch the multi-million dollar NEXT STAGE Writers' Program. It is the most ambitious commissioning and new work initiative in Australia.

2018

In 2018 we partner with London's National Theatre to premiere *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon in Australia. This show sets a Company record for the most tickets sold on the first day of sale with more than 3,000 tickets snapped up in 24 hours.

2019



Golden Shield BY Anchuli Felicia King

Commissioned by our NEXT STAGE Writers' Program and directed by Sarah Goodes, *Golden Shield* is the first NEXT STAGE production to perform on the Summer stage. Written by Anchuli Felicia King, the play explores the personal and political implications of corporate greed with an incisive and disarming humour.

2021

MTC Digital Theatre launches with *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes* and *Berlin*, marking our first digital release of live theatre productions in the Company's history. The digital release of *As You Like It* follows in 2022.

2022

Anne-Louise Saraks becomes Artistic Director in 2022. It is the first time since 2019 that a full season of 11 plays is presented.



The Heartbreak Choir BY Aidan Fennessy

Aidan Fennessy was a dear friend to the Company who passed away in 2020. His final original play *The Heartbreak Choir* premieres to acclaim from audiences and critics alike for its uplifting celebration of music, friendship and community.

2023—



Sunday BY Anthony Weigh

Opening our 2023 season, *Sunday* breaks the record for the highest selling day of a new Australian work post-opening in our history.

As Anne-Louise Saraks's first season premieres, we establish an advisory council of 12 Artistic Associates, which brings the voice of artists into everyday decision making – an industry-first for a state theatre company.

In our 70th year, we are more committed than ever to providing a platform for the stories that define Australia and revel in all the things that only great theatre can do. ■

Help stage the stories of our time

We need your support to make a real and lasting impact.

We want everyone to look back in 70 years' time to the stories we are telling today and reflect on how they shaped Australian culture.

To ensure that we can continue to build on everything that's special about the Company, and make a real and lasting impact on all that Australian theatre can be, we need your support.

Learn more and donate today at mtc.com.au/support

THE ART(ISTS) OF STORIES

Championing, supporting and collaborating with Victoria's community of artists is at the heart of the Company.

Hear from five of the talented artists involved in our 2023 season about their journey with us, and why they have a deep love and connection to the Company and our audiences.

Read more from our artists about their connection to Melbourne Theatre Company at mtc.com.au/the-artists-of-stories



Nikki Shiels

There is a piece of my heart in this Company. At a recent Donor event for *Sunday*, I met a Donor who told me they had been a supporter of Melbourne Theatre Company for 70 years. That is the Company's entire life! I was so inspired by their commitment and how dear they held the theatre. As we chatted about the different shows they had seen over the years, the many Artistic Director tenures they had witnessed, I felt so privileged to be connecting to the long history that came before me and to be a part of a community that values storytelling, culture, generosity, Melbourne and coming together to share in these things.

The response from Melbourne audiences to *Sunday* was overwhelming and a strong reminder of what is possible when we are ambitious to create new Australian work that is complex, rigorous, detailed and celebrates characters, relationships and histories that are our own. Seeing our city come together post-pandemic to celebrate and share in a slice of our own history has been a career highlight for me. ■



Deidre Rubenstein

I joined the Company in 1970 and did back-to-back plays, 16 in a row. We rehearsed by day and performed at night and matinee days. The range of work was thrilling: Shakespeare, Brecht, Ibsen, Restoration comedy, Feydeau, Gogol, and contemporary writing from British, Irish and American playwrights like Christopher Hampton, Paul Zindel and Brian Friel. We worked with a range of marvellous directors: John Sumner, George Ogilvie, Edgar Metcalfe, Rick Billinghurst and the great Sir Tyrone Guthrie who directed *All's Well That Ends Well* for the Company. I consider myself so fortunate to have been given that wondrous opportunity and I look back on those days as being a golden time.

I returned to the Company under Simon Phillips's Artistic Direction in 2001 after living overseas for a couple of years. And from then to now, I have usually done a play a year here. *Escaped Alone* in 2023 will be my 39th production with the Company.

My heart belongs primarily to Melbourne Theatre Company because of my long and prized connection with the Company, in its many incarnations, and because of my deep love for Melbourne. I also feel that I have built a relationship with Melbourne audiences over the many years and that means the world to me. ■



Deidre Rubenstein and Kat Stewart in *Admissions*, 2022



Charles Wu

My first encounter with the Company was in 2008 for a drama tour. I was a husky high school kid with bright red spectacles all the way from WA. We spent a week rolling around on Tarkett floors and making weird shapes. It was magical.

My debut was in 2020 with *Torch the Place*. It was a truly special show with an all-Asian cast celebrating the joy, struggles and complexities of Asian-Australian family life, and a sensitive discussion about mental illness. We closed the show early due to the pandemic, and throughout the months of lockdown that ensued, the offerings of the production continued to inform my life and keep me going: the importance of community, of family, of asking someone if they're okay.

It's truly an honour to take part in Anne-Louise Sarks's first show as Artistic Director in *Bernhardt/Hamlet*. Sarah Bernhardt paved the way for countless women after her, though more progress is needed – especially for women of colour, and those that are differently abled. I couldn't think of a more perfect person to bring this character and story forward than the inimitable Kate Mulvany. ■



Alison Bell

Back in 2004, when I was graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts drama school – just readying myself to step out into the intimidating unknown – I received a call from Melbourne Theatre Company. Simon Phillips was directing *King Lear* for the following year's season and wondered if I'd like to play Cordelia? My legs nearly gave out. Thankfully I managed a 'YES' before they did. And so began my relationship with the Company.

We rely on Melbourne Theatre Company to bring us the best scripts and stories from here and around the world. I believe it has the capacity to build community, raise consciousness, delight and inspire. I'm excited by Anne-Louise Sarks's passion for our art form, her commitment to artists and community, her sense of social and artistic responsibility. I'm excited about the community of artists and audience the Company will build in the coming years. ■



Oz Malik

I am humbled and grateful to be making my debut for Melbourne Theatre Company this year. I feel very fortunate to share the same stage with role models and icons who have gone before me. I can't wait to work with the team we have assembled – we are the future generation of artists and directors.

I Wanna Be Yours is relevant to this very moment; it's for today, the very present. I want students, especially young people from migrant and culturally diverse backgrounds, to see someone like them onstage. A show where the story is deep and authentic while at the same time representing them.

I believe this next chapter in the Company is to bring in new audiences, work with new and diverse storytellers and cast more diversity. I'm excited that Anne-Louise Sarks is leading us in this endeavour, under her leadership we have seen this come to the fore and celebrated. She has supported and upheld these values. I'm grateful that Anne-Louise will create and support the next generation of storytellers, theatre makers and actors that we need. ■



Phillip Kavanagh and Elise Esther Hearst

A NEW WORK TO CAROL ABOUT

Meet Phillip Kavanagh and Elise Esther Hearst – writers of our final show of the year, *A Very Jewish Christmas Carol* – and discover how their idea for a new play formed almost by accident and was further developed through NEXT STAGE.

How did your artistic collaboration begin?

We were lucky enough to both be NEXT STAGE resident writers in 2019 and have the added bonus of getting along swimmingly. After spending a lot of time together in the literary department, we were able to share ideas back and forth, and get to know each other's writing, as well as make each other laugh.

This play came about kind of accidentally. Elise was hosting her first family Christmas and came to Phil for advice. 'Do I hide my menorahs?' 'Do I have to feed them ham?' At the same time, we were coming up with pitches for plays to write for the Company. Phil woke up in the middle of the night and wrote a note on his phone, 'What if Elise's family Christmas, but *A Christmas Carol*?' He texted it to Jennifer Medway, Head of New Work, half as a joke, half hoping she loved it. She loved it! Phil then mentioned it to Elise, and Elise started having ideas for where we could take it. We kept bouncing it around, and the idea grew.

What can you tell us about *A Very Jewish Christmas Carol*?

A Very Jewish Christmas Carol is our wacky adaptation of Charles Dickens's classic tale.

We have our central character, who we've named Elysheva (she's Ebenezer adjacent). She is a control freak and a tyrant (of sorts) who is heavily pregnant, and hosting Christmas for her gentile in-laws and her Jewish parents, who have invited themselves along.

She is visited by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet To Come, along with her infamously bad-tempered grandmother, who died the year before. But, as her Rabbi tells her, while it is technically rabbinically sound to believe in ghosts, a good Jew must NEVER speak to one.

What does being commissioned through NEXT STAGE mean to you?

We're so thrilled to have this opportunity to work together, especially during a time when so many of us had been forced into isolation. It was amazing how quickly we were able to make choices when there's another person there, so you can't just spiral into self-doubt like each of us would on our own. We are excited to bring to the stage a happy, joyful Christmas show, where we can all have a good laugh at ourselves and (respectfully) each other. And, on a personal note, it's really nice for us to get to make this together, working to make each other laugh and then hopefully, eventually, you. ■

A Very Jewish Christmas Carol will be the 11th NEXT STAGE commission to be staged by Melbourne Theatre Company and one of six Australian plays presented in our 2023 season.

NEXT STAGE Writers' Program is supported by the Donors, Foundations and Organisations of the Playwrights Giving Circle.



Students at Swan Hill College exploring the *As You Like It* virtual tour



Jack Green in *As You Like It*, 2021

VIRTUALLY AS YOU LIKE IT

In November 2022, actor and Youth Ambassador alumnus Jack Green visited Swan Hill College in northwest Victoria to lead Year 7 students through a virtual tour of *As You Like It* – the joyous, Shakespearean production where Green made his Company debut in 2021.

Why are you passionate about sharing theatre with young audiences?

The same experiences were shared with me when I was in school, and I was really fortunate to be in a school that put on shows, had a drama department and could connect with programs such as Melbourne Theatre Company's Youth Ambassadors. Theatre in Melbourne, as excellent as it is, doesn't suffuse a lot of the public consciousness in the way that perhaps sport does, so we have to make a concentrated effort to reach out to younger people.

How was the experience of leading students through a virtual tour of *As You Like It*?

It was all very hands-on. We talked upstage, downstage, prompt, off-prompt and moved around these very spots in their theatre. Then we moved into set building, which challenged the students to recreate a set from a drawn bird's-eye plan.

We brought some of *As You Like It*'s fantastic costumes with us – my Jaques de Boys coat and hat – and got to show that off to the students. Then we put the VR headsets on and walked through the rolling green *As You Like It* set in the Sumner, and talked about everything from my water bottles on the instrument table, to the upstage door where I made my flamboyant entrance – 'Let me have audience ...'

What were the students most interested and fascinated in?

Their interests spread out nicely. I think some of the students were really into the coat we brought along (no surprise there, it's an excellent coat), and others were fascinated by how huge the Sumner actually is (I imagine some of them might not have been in such a big theatre before). The aim is that we offer up a lot of knowledge and show off a few things, and hope that something really makes an impact, maybe even with just

one person, and that sets them on a trajectory with theatre.

Why are initiatives like this so important?

My family weren't ever really avid theatre-goers. It wasn't until I was a young adult that I started taking myself to see professional theatre. As a kid, when school is so much of your life, it can often be these sorts of incursions that might flick on a lightbulb. I imagine this distance from staged works is even truer of people growing up in rural or regional areas. So these sorts of initiatives are crucial in illuminating the otherwise foreign world of theatre. VR is really a fun way of viewing something like a set (photos don't capture the use of space), and the tech is only bound to improve. ■

This workshop was supported by The Gailey Lazarus Foundation and The Ian Potter Foundation.

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Help stage the stories of our time



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