

# About BTG

## THE HISTORY OF THE BEENLEIGH THEATRE GROUP

29 MAY 1978 was a red-letter day for Beenleigh Performing Arts. A meeting was called by Dan and Margaret Gregory, to gauge interest in starting a Theatre Group in the town. A great crowd responded and Margaret and Dan's house in Main Street Beenleigh [the site of 'Red Rooster' nowadays] was packed to overflowing.

Enthusiasm ran high and it was decided that evening to form 'Beenleigh Theatre Group' which became known affectionately as BTG and to stage our first production in November of that year. The name chosen, we felt marked the area 'Beenleigh', and 'Theatre' gave us the freedom to support all facets of the Performing Arts, and 'Group' encompassed both these ideals.

The production selected was 'OKLAHOMA!'. The Memorial Hall was the most suitable venue to stage this production but unfortunately, it was booked by the Local Quota Club, who after negotiations kindly allowed us to take one of their booking nights in order to enable us to do a two-night season. There were many who said, "Another group started – it won't last."

Rehearsals were held in the Beenleigh Show Hall and the Memorial Hall dependant upon availability. The Group adopted a constitution, under the guidance of Rick Read a solicitor and member of the group at that time. It was appropriately updated when we became an Incorporated body in 1986. Subsequent amendments to the constitution have been made as the need arose, the most recent being 1999.

Our first show was a huge success and our enthusiastic group used the Memorial Hall as our home for the following thirteen years [until it was destroyed by fire on 13 July 1991]. However, we were very strapped for funds to produce the shows and when we agreed to stage 'Brigadoon' as our second major show we just didn't have the funds to do this. Some of our enthusiastic members put their heads together and we presented a fund-raising 'revue' 'That's Entertainment' a variety of acts, skits, dances, etc. which enabled 'Brigadoon' to go ahead. Whilst this show was also a great success and we proceeded to plan further big stage musicals, we needed funds and so revues became a regular part of our season. These were mostly staged as Theatre Restaurant shows, when a two-course hot meal would be served, including dessert and beverages. We always had a license for these nights so the bar was very popular. Many members helped in the preparation of the food for these productions and were often ably assisted by Mrs. Merle Schultz who was the Proprietor of the Royal Hotel in town at that time. These shows enticed many of the local Service clubs viz., Rotary, Lions, and Apex to 'buy out' the show and therefore became a fund-raiser for them as well as hugely successful for BTG. In 1980 the Lions Club of Beenleigh donated a large amount of funds for the purposes of BTG upgrading its lighting equipment, which was of course up until that time at best very basic and completely inadequate to do the standard of shows we dreamt of. It was necessary during our years in the Memorial Hall to have the technical and mechanical guys go to the hall at midnight (usually Saturdays) when the previous night's booking had checked out and set up the lighting, sound, sets, etc. ready for

the final dress rehearsal on Sunday. Wives would arrive early for rehearsal with 'breakfast' for the guys who had worked all night and were then set for the full day of rehearsal.

During the time we used the Memorial Hall [the site nowadays of the Anzac Memorial Park in front of the local library], we dreamt of one day having our own theatre where we would be able to install our sets, lighting, etc without the recurrent rebuilding in preparation for each show. Prior to the fire, the group had negotiations with Ivan Gibbs M.L.A. [then State member for Albert] and the Albert Shire Council re acquiring facilities to have our own theatre. The Council allocated us a block of land between the railway station and the Pacific Highway [nowadays the site of the Beenleigh Marketplace]. Plans got underway designing a theatre. Ivan Gibbs M.L.A. had secured for us a grant of money towards the project. The plans were for a small tiered theatre. It was decided we could not afford to build a big theatre, and in any case, the patrons of Beenleigh would not support a large theatre. The statistics for our large shows had shown that we averaged no more than 1000 patrons per production. When spread over five performances [the norm in those days] this would be a maximum of 200 per performance. Therefore, it was more viable to design a theatre of around 150-200 seats and do more performances of each production.

In the aftermath of the fire, the group gratefully took up temporary residence in one of the pavilions in the Show Grounds. We had already purchased theatre seats from the old Nambour Picture Theatre in readiness for our own theatre dream. These were taken out of storage and helped turn the 'shed' into a small theatre. The group operated in the Show Grounds Pavilion up until December 1993 when we took up the lease of the Crete Street Theatre.

Our change of plans to build our own theatre came about in negotiations which eventuated after the fire. The Albert Shire Council had to replace their destroyed facility, and as a new Library had been built behind the Memorial Hall, the adjoining land was the obvious location to build the new facility which would comprise a new community hall 'The Events Centre' and a 152 seat Theatre – "The Crete Street Theatre"

Of course, this turned upside down all our building plans and the money we had spent on plans up to this time, unfortunately, was lost. However, we could never have afforded the \$1.3 million theatre [1993] which became our new home, and which the group has continued to use well, and enhanced and improved in every way. One of the conditions of the re-negotiated arrangement was that our State Government Funding, which had been brokered by Mr. Ivan Gibbs – our Patron and State Government Representative – be paid over to the Albert Shire Council together with certain conditions.

Back to the drawing board, it was. The earlier drawings were now obsolete and a new concept in theatre for this area was envisaged. It was still agreed we needed a small tiered auditorium and extra funds which may be available should be used to facilitate other theatre facilities. The final design largely influenced by Derek Redhead, included a fly tower, dressing rooms with shower and toilets, a green room, good bio-box, storage for wardrobe and sets. The design also allowed for easy loading through a side stage loading bay for large items of sets etc.

December 1993 arrived and after an extremely stressful year, we moved into our new home. As well as having 'Oliver' ready for the opening with all the Council VIPS etc. present, we had to set up the theatre, i.e. buy the refrigerators, hang what lights we had, make and hang curtains, legs, backdrops. Move everything we had in storage into the new building. Buy and install the hot water system for Front of House, install our old seats from the show grounds, number them etc.etc. - it was all hands on deck.

To mark the occasion of our moving into our new home, Jean Fornasier one of the Group's foundation members presented us with a special 'house warming gift' in the form of the Masks which hang in the foyer, this special hanging is Jean's own handiwork and takes pride of place above our canteen.

'Oliver' was a great success and we duly impressed the council representatives who attended the opening night. The show continued for a very successful season. Given that the population of the Beenleigh district in 1978 when the Group was formed was approximately 4,000 and by the time we moved into our own Theatre was around 20,000, we felt confident that the community would support our productions and that our operation in this lovely theatre would bring a new standard of theatre to Beenleigh.

A number of other things had changed the character of Beenleigh from the 'farming/small-town community' Beenleigh was in 1978 to a medium-sized town supporting shopping centers and Government and professional offices in 1993. The result of this was that the group found our overheads quite an uphill climb, and support for our productions showed no sizeable increase.

In 1995 we had a change of landlord as the Albert Shire was amalgamated with the Gold Coast. Beenleigh became part of the Gold Coast, so subsequently our new landlord was the Gold Coast City Council.

In 2001, a short history of the group was written in much the same vein as above and buried in a time capsule as part of the celebrations of the hundred years of federation.

Since that time the group has had to make some major decisions and jump into the new technological age. We slowly moved from personal bookings through a manned box office, and returned phone messages, to off-site facilities and finally to online bookings. We had to leap into the world of websites and the one currently in use would be of several generations development. We now have very advanced technical equipment for both the lighting and sound facilities. With the help of grant funds from time to time, we have suitably enhanced the green room and other facilities including the front of house.

In 2007 Beenleigh Theatre Group were awarded the 'Award of Chamber Excellence' by the Beenleigh-Yatala Chamber of Commerce of which the group had been a member for many years and continues to enjoy the Chamber's support.

Also in 2007, a community mural was launched on the Bellew Street side of Coles Shopping Mall, and representatives of BTG were asked to assist in presenting a short history of Beenleigh, to mark the occasion. Community awareness has been high for our group, and this is also evident at the local Railway station where past

students of Beenleigh State High painted a mural, part of which depicts BTG's logo – their challenge was "What does Beenleigh mean to you".

In 2008 we again found ourselves with a different landlord when many Local Councils were amalgamated in Queensland. Beenleigh became part of Logan City and now our landlord is Logan City Council. Our Patron, and Gold Coast Councillor Ray Hackwood [perhaps the last task he was able to help us with before amalgamation], secured for the theatre new seating to the value of \$50,000. This really was a great improvement for the comfort of our patrons. [I might add the old seats no longer complied with Workplace Health and Safety Regulations and as they were bolted down had, therefore, become the property and responsibility of the landlord]. It was a very fitting time to be able to celebrate this wonderful addition to the facility, as it was the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of Beenleigh Theatre Group Inc.

And so the show must go on. Of recent times we have learned of the passing of some of the people mentioned in this account of the group's history, in particular, Ivan Gibbs M.L.A. and others who did so much to help the group establish a performing arts presence in the Beenleigh area.

It has always been an objective of BTG to train people, especially the young ones in all forms of theatre. To this end, the group has almost since inception ran a Theatre School for young people, training them and seeing many of them go on to find careers in the entertainment industry. The JETS [Junior Entertainment Theatre School] as they are now called continue to ensure the future of live theatre in this town.

The Annual Festival of One-Act Plays continues now into its 35th year, providing opportunities for actors to extend their talents, and for budding directors and writer's to reach their goals.

Of recent times more branches of the theatre have evolved, the A-Chord Choir, the Songbyrds Choir, and the Symphony Orchestra to enhance and provide more opportunities for all members and their interests. These many facets of theatre not only provide great training and a group that is constantly evolving, but it ensures the standard of theatre provided in this town is always under review aiming constantly to be the best.

A generation has passed through BTG and many stalwarts have handed over the reins to the younger generation. We wish them well and trust the membership continues with the same intense passion for theatre that we the foundation members had back in 1978 when it all started. If this proves to be the case it will ensure the Beenleigh district will continue to enjoy a live theatre presence and the future for Beenleigh Theatre Group for future generations is assured.

Beenleigh Theatre Group Inc. – a many-faceted community based performing arts group for all.

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