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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of women in the Sydney branch of the New Theatre, from 1936 to 1969. In contrast to other gendered spaces found in the theatrical, industrial and political spheres, women held together the New Theatre. Not only did the theatre give opportunities to women as performers, but women embraced roles as directors, stage managers, writers, designers as well as holding elected offices. Drawing on oral histories and archival research, this study presents new scholarship on Australian women's leadership in the theatre, arguing that their pattern of involvement was shaped by the voluntary nature of the work, the longevity of involvement, their political commitment and the theatre's democratic structure. The blending of organisational and creative leadership created spaces for women's voices in ways that were crucial to the long-term success of the Theatre, at a time when women were generally expected to focus on the domestic sphere.

Introduction

Three decades apart, two reports told a worryingly similar story about the representation of women in Australian theatre. Commissioned in 1983 and in 2012, they both pointed to the importance of women's contribution to creative leadership but identified (ongoing) absence and (persistent) barriers.¹ Commenting on the 2012 report to which she contributed, Susan Miller sets out an overview in 'Women and Leadership: Theatre' (in the *Encyclopaedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth Century Australia*). Curiously absent is any mention of the women of the New Theatre.² This is striking because the role of women playwrights in cultural production through their New Theatre works has been documented.³ The playwrights are but one group of women who, through the New Theatre, contributed to theatre leadership.

The New Theatre was first formed in the 1930s as a working-class, progressive theatre in Melbourne and Sydney and then in other cities. Women provided both creative and organisational leadership to the various New Theatre branches, and they were integral to the branches' development and sustenance. In contrast to other gendered spaces found in the theatrical, industrial and political spheres, women held the theatres together as directors, producers, performers, writers and designers as well as being committee members and holding key elected offices. The distinction between creative and

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organisational leadership drawn by Miller—in which ‘artistic leadership [is] clearly differentiated from the management and production roles in which women are often well represented, typically as general managers or producers’—was decidedly blurred in the New Theatre.⁴ In common with other amateur theatres, the New Theatre primarily relied on volunteers both front and back of stage, with few paid roles. What is significant, however, is how the women combined roles across this artistic/creative and management divide. These multiple, or what we will call compound roles, distinguished the profile of the New Theatre women. Although the ‘all-hands on deck’ approach is typical in amateur companies, less common was the crossing of the artistic/creative/management divide. For example, the Independent Theatre, which Doris Fitton established in 1932 as a Limited Company, had a company contract stating that ‘Doris Fitton has free and unfettered control of all productions’.⁵ Rather than focusing on a particular aspect of theatre work, such as performing or directing or writing, numerous women combined performing *and* directing, script writing *and* performing or producing *and* performing plus committee work.

In this article, we investigate the ways in which women carved out this compound role profile in the New Theatre. With the Sydney branch as our illustrative case, it is noted that this was not a pattern limited to the Sydney women. Selecting the 1930s until the late 1960s as the focal period means the study includes the theatre’s inception through to when the influence of the women’s movement began to affect women’s participation more generally, alongside a new period of volunteerism influenced by the new radical social, political and cultural movements.

The women introduced in this paper worked in a variety of roles in the Sydney branch, combining artistically and managerial creative roles, adding to the New Theatre’s theatrical output and organisational strength in many ways. The longevity of their contribution is also notable. For many decades, the theatre dominated their leisure hours, as they juggled their theatre work with home and family life, as well as paid employment. All the women shared a vision of the aims and outcomes of the New Theatre. Both the organisation and the individual women developed from this work, with the women infusing the organisation with values of community and commitment. Enabling this participation were three factors: degree of family/partner support, capacity to juggle paid and volunteer work, and scope for development of personal and political identity.

Our focus is on selected women with this compound profile in a particular period of the New Theatre’s life, rather than providing a broader overview of women’s contribution: we do of course recognise that there were many women who primarily contributed in one area while also engaged in the voluntary work that all members were expected to carry out. We pose three questions: what volunteer roles did the women take on, how did the women sustain these roles, and what were the organisational gender dynamics? To answer these questions, we primarily used document analysis⁶ of the Sydney branch’s archival records, chiefly held at the Mitchell Library in the State Library of NSW; theses; and auto/biographical and other documents. We also undertook a series of interviews with some of the oldest members of the New Theatre, mainly women, in late 2015. The literature on women in Australian cultural history will form one analytical lens, while another lens will draw on the labour history literature on volunteers, given the predominance of voluntary work undertaken by the women. What we found was a distinctive participation pattern shaping women’s experiences arising from the intersection of gender dynamics

with volunteering, political and personal activism, and leisure, which provides a contrary picture to the 1983 and 2012 reports.

Literature

Many canonical texts of traditionally androcentric Australian theatre history pay scant attention to women, apart from the most well-known performers and writers (and in that order).⁷ In his revised 1978 edition of 'The Making of Australian Drama', Rees added a short chapter on the work of Australian women playwrights of the 1930s to the 1950s, writing patronisingly that 'for the first time in our emerging literature of drama, some such equal treatment [of men and women playwrights] is possible ... in Australia women showed quite as much talent as men'.⁸

From the mid-1990s, Australian theatre historians began to include the contributions of women more fully. One of the pioneers of this more detailed research was Susan Pfisterer, whose analysis of Australian women's theatre in her 1997 doctoral thesis (focused on the careers of two playwrights, Inez Bensusan [also an actor] and Stella Miles Franklin) built on what she had earlier identified as Australia's 'meagre contribution' to women's theatre studies.⁹ While that literature opened up the configuration of Australian theatre history with regards to its female contributors, it continued to focus on performers and writers. The work of women in mainstream theatres has attracted more attention than those working in the margins: it is recognised by some that 'mainstream theatre *is* gendered cultural production' (original emphasis).¹⁰ Heckenberg does acknowledge that women ran a large proportion of smaller Australian theatres in the twentieth century while Hunt has discussed the changing place of women in Australian cultural history, noting that the emerging trend is to 'recover unknown women cultural producers, outline policies of exclusion, or identify feminine aesthetics'.¹¹

Whilst a very small number of (female) Australian researchers have highlighted the place of female performers¹² and writers¹³ in Australian theatre, there are few, if any, studies which examine the breadth of women's contribution, in this case their compound roles. These newer theatre histories also overlook women's achievements in other areas of theatre, and in 'theatres of low status and informal organisation, such as travelling players performing often without script on makeshift stages in the open street, [rather] than in the high status theatres equipped with permanent buildings and [official] patronage'.¹⁴ In addition, this literature focuses primarily on paid work, with little attention given to women undertaking voluntary labour, as seen in the New Theatre.¹⁵

Here, debates within labour history about the definition of 'work' and its broadening to include voluntary labour are helpful. Shaping these debates about recognising voluntary action as work, and the implications for labour history was the transformative push begun by Melanie Oppenheimer and Joanne Scott from the late 1990s. Oppenheimer's work in particular has transformed the scholarly and public debate about volunteering and volunteers,¹⁶ successfully challenging the prevailing definition of work as paid labour and presumption of volunteer work as the province of middle-class women. Locating voluntary work squarely within the academic study of labour history, a new appreciation has developed of its parameters and impact. With the traditional discipline focus on trade unions and political parties, it is timely to remember that they all started through voluntary action and depended on activists volunteering their time and energy to the

cause.¹⁷ As Oppenheimer reminds us, of those organisations ‘involving people coming together around a specific need or interest for mutual gain’, trade unions are ‘perhaps one of the largest, original self-help organisations’.¹⁸

Scott identifies definitional problems around voluntary work as arising from the intersections between voluntary work and activism, and with leisure. Distinguishing between voluntary work and activism, she posits that these differences were ‘often difficult, if not impossible to sustain’, with an example highlighting the intersection of voluntary work and leisure, combining charitable work and social engagements.¹⁹ Scott also invokes West and Blumberg’s argument that ‘women’s participation in voluntary organisations should be integrated into theories and analyses of social protest’.²⁰ This lens of social protest is a useful one through which to examine the parameters of women’s voluntarism. West and Blumberg argue that the structure of voluntarism provides a central means of mobilisation and exertion of political pressures. Three common patterns are evident: one, the types of protest in which women engaged; two, their experiences in the organisations undertaking the protest action both over the life of an organisation and in terms of the degree of in/visibility; and three, at what junctures participation shifts between the symbolic and the actual.²¹

Women’s volunteer work often takes place in women’s organisations, which are among the most commonly studied when women’s volunteer experiences are being examined. In mixed-sex organisations, women’s participation was often directed to women’s committees or sections. This was the case in the Australian Labor Party (A.L.P.) while the Communist Party of Australia’s (C.P.A.) often contested relationship with its women members also included sex-specific activities. Some male-dominated unions sought to include women relatives in women’s auxiliaries.²²

In the leisure literature, research on the intersection of volunteer work with leisure led Stebbins to focus on developing this conceptual space.²³ As he has asked:

Is volunteering unpaid, productive work or is it leisure? These two seemingly incompatible conceptualisations figure prominently in the modern debate on the nature of volunteering. Yet, it is possible to see volunteering as both unpaid work and attractive leisure.²⁴

Stebbins’ particular contribution is what he characterises as the ‘serious leisure perspective’ in which there are three forms of leisure: serious, casual and project-based leisure. Serious leisure is defined as ‘systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience’.²⁵ Stebbins lists six characteristics of serious leisure—career, perseverance, effort, benefits, peculiar ethos and social world and distinctive identity. As detailed below, our study has found decades-long instances of these characteristics among the New Theatre volunteers. Extending Stebbins’ discussion of volunteering, it is evident that these women (and men) engaged in ‘political’ volunteering, where ideological commitment and conviction drives the nature, frequency and longevity of volunteering. This was often (although not always) motivated by the values that included a commitment to socialist ideology (associated with membership of the C.P.A.) and the aims of other progressive organisations.

Moving from the conceptual space to the physical place of the New Theatre, Teather has advanced the study of volunteer organisations and the development of personal

identity.²⁶ Writing that organisations like the New Theatre can provide a place where 'individual identity, place, community and organisation are bonded together',²⁷ Teather highlights the values of place-based communities and the long-term development of a collective memory of an organisation creating a community of interests. In summary, set against the cultural history literature highlighting absence of women's experiences and contributions, labour history debates have broadened the concept of 'work' to encompass volunteering, an activity in turn explored through the concept of serious leisure. As we will show, the sense that New Theatre women were very much part of a community of interests was important to their social worth.

Methods

To construct the story of the Sydney New Theatre women, archival records were examined and interviews undertaken. Most of the archival records were included in the State Library of NSW's New Theatre collection.²⁸ The scant organisational records remaining from the 1930s and 1940s made identifying women in the early years of the Sydney New Theatre more difficult. An album of newspaper clippings provided much-needed information about activities and key members. New Theatre playwright Oriel Gray's autobiography gave insights into theatre life. More substantial archival records were available from the early 1950s, including minutes of the Management committee, general members' meetings and annual general meetings (however, still not complete), and assorted inward and outward correspondence. On the basis of these combined sources, we focus on the period 1936 to 1969.

In addition, to build our appreciation of the roles undertaken by and experiences of the women, we undertook six semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with nine participants.²⁹ Seven women and two men were interviewed including two married couples. The couple interviews included both partners, which enabled us to collect complementary and divergent memories and explore how family dynamics shaped the nature and degree of participation.³⁰ Apart from one interview undertaken by just one of us, we interviewed together and the interviews ranged from one to three hours. Participants were primarily identified through referrals. Among the interviewees were three life members, with experiences dating back to the late 1940s. Most retained some ongoing connection with the theatre, attending performances and, in one case, still volunteering regularly and performing occasionally.

We then examined the patterns of women's involvement to determine how many women were active in taking on both organisational and creative roles. Our criterion for inclusion was whether they were active in two or more roles: elected committee work, back of house, teaching/workshop, performing, contact work (performances taken out to audiences, see below), writing. On this basis, we estimated that twenty-one women took on compound roles (see Table 1). Four of these women—Marie Armstrong, Norma Disher, Betty Millis and Silvia Salisbury—were among our interview participants.

The New Theatre

In the 1920s, two forms of protest, political activism and artistic activism, fed into each other in Australia through the newly formed C.P.A. From its inception, the organisation

Table 1. Women in the Sydney New Theatre, 1936–1969.

Focus woman	Partner/ husband also in N.T.; Other family links	Paid occupation	New Theatre roles	Years of Membership
Audrey Grant [Audrey Ward nee Hill]	Len Grant	Typist C.P.A.	Actor, Assistant Secretary, Management committee	1960–1966
Betty Milliss nee Cole	David Milliss	Clerk and floorwalker at Coles; office work at Bonds factory	Actor, Vice-President, Contact committee, Management committee	1952–current. Life Member
Betty Spink		Secretary to Eddie Allison (N.T. member) at Quality Films	Actor, Stage Manager, Management committee, Contact committee	1954–1958
Edith (Edie) McLaren		Wigmaker	Actor, Committee, Social Secretary	1956–1965
Eileen Allison nee Bullen	Eddie Allison sister: Pat Bullen	Sales	Actor, Director, Assistant to director, President, Vice-President, Management committee, British Drama League Festival Adjudicator	1949–1966
Elsie Dayne		Hairdresser/wigmaker	Actor, Dancer, Singer, Choreographer, Wardrobe, Costume and wig designer	1942–1992 Life Member
Evelyn Docker nee Thomson	Norm Docker brother: Bert, son: Alan, grandson: Einar	Actor	Actor, Stage Manager, Assistant secretary	1952–2003 Life Member
Freda Brown nee Lewis	Bill Brown	C.P.A. functionary	Actor, Director, Publicity officer/Assistant secretary, Secretary, Contact committee	1936–1944
Jean Blue		Actor, nurse	Actor, President, Director, Workshop committee	1936–1984 Life Member
Joan Clarke nee Willmott		Playwright	Playwright, Management committee	1952–1958
Kip (Mary Marguerite) Lambert nee McDonald	John Lambert daughter: Jan		Actor, Front of house, Management committee	1958–1980
Marie Armstrong nee Stonehouse	John Armstrong	Typist, administrative work for Produce Importers' Committee, Newsletter Printery, Metalworkers Union	Actor, Singer, Dancer, Director, Assistant director, Stage Manager, Choreographer, Management committee, Contact committee, Secretary of National Federation	1946–current Life Member
Miriam Hampson nee Aarons	Stan Hampson (W.A.C.) niece: June Worth	Biochemist; munitions factory in W.W.II; Secretary of N.T.	Secretary, Assistant secretary, President, Management committee, Contact committee, Production committee, National Federation President	1937–1993 Life Member
Mona Brand	Len Fox	Playwright	Playwright; Assistant Secretary, Contact committee, publicity, play judge	1953–2007 Life Member
Muriel Horton nee Small	Bill Horton	Radio performer	Actor, Treasurer	1947–1955
Oriel Gray nee Bennett	John Gray	Writer	Actor, Playwright	1938–1949
Nan Gow/Vernon nee Davies	Keith Gow; then Howard Vernon	Actor, shearers' cook, window dresser, petrol station attendant	Actor, Costume designer, Contact committee, Workshop leader, Assistant secretary, Director, Assistant director	1949–1991

Norma Disher	Bruce Hawkins	Music librarian at Radio 2SM, Clerk at Miscellaneous Workers Union, clerk at Trade Union Club	Wardrobe, Music, Sound designer, Director, Production committee, Workshop committee	1948–current Life Member
Pat Flower nee Bullen	Bruce Jiffkins; then Cedric Flower sister: Eileen Allison	Writer	Actor, Secretary, Writer	1944–1977 Life Member
Shirley Keane nee Robertson	Kim Keane (Melbourne N.T.) brothers: Grahame and Johnny Robertson	Technical librarian	Actor, Director, Teacher	1949–1970
Silvia Salisbury nee Meech	Tom Salisbury	Clerk in the Department of Air	Actor, Singer, Treasurer, Management committee	1951–current Life Member

attracted and encouraged the energies of creative people, with culture in its broadest sense a topic that engendered much debate. One of the earliest manifestations of the C.P.A.'s involvement in artistic work was the establishment of Workers' Art Clubs (W.A.C.) first in Melbourne in 1931 and then in Sydney.³¹ In both cities, women were central to their formation, with Jean Devanny and Nelle Rickie two of the key activists in Sydney. Jean Devanny, a writer, was one of the W.A.C.'s founders in August 1932, being inspired by experiences in Berlin and the Soviet Union in 1931 to establish an art and theatre section in the Australian Workers International Relief. She remembered she had 'no difficulty in collecting around me a sufficient number of suitable types: the artistic fraternity, equally with the industrial workers, were sunk in the doldrums of the crises of that time.'³² Jean also set up a W.A.C. drama group, which she invited Nelle Rickie (a union leader in the Theatrical Employees Union, actor, socialist and communist) to lead in 1933. Taking on both creative and production roles, Nelle's combining of acting, writing, producing and directing was a practice followed by subsequent women.

In line with the American group, from which they took much inspiration, in 1936 the Sydney W.A.C. changed its name to the New Theatre League, as did the Melbourne W.A.C. In other cities, theatres with a similar political orientation were forming, such as the Left Book Club Theatre in Adelaide, and the Workers' Art Guild in Perth and Brisbane. A number of branches had interrupted lives, with the war the common factor creating difficulties in keeping male members. In 1947–49, branches in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane were revived. The Perth branch ran from 1948 to 1956 with Adelaide (1947–60) and Brisbane (1949–62/63) closing in the early 1960s. The Newcastle New Theatre performed from 1954 to 1979. With the Melbourne struggling and failing to survive in the early 1990s, today the Sydney branch of the New Theatre is the only surviving Australian branch.

In its early decades of activity, the New Theatre had a highly conscious democratic and explicit working-class orientation. The theatre's strong tradition of performing socially and politically relevant work attracted a predominantly working-class following, both artists and audiences. Inspired by current industrial and political situations, either local or international, anti-war and anti-oppression themes were common. The theatre combined stage-based productions as well as taking performances out to audiences. These performances, described as 'mobile' or 'contact' work, included specifically written and produced works as well as topical revues. Contact work's significance was its reach into workplaces and working-class communities, to audiences who might otherwise not attend the theatre, due to cost, distance or lack of familiarity. With the theatre's class-based messages, bringing performances to the people for whom they were written, in a public space and for free, was important.³³

The New Theatre operated as a community of interest for its members and patrons.³⁴ Shared values of the membership and the audience extended to sister organisations in the U.S.A., the U.K. and New Zealand. The founding of the National Federation in 1948 as an Australian umbrella organisation further recognised these shared values. Members' identification with these values was, we argue, distinctive within Australia theatre of its time. In its 1936 constitution, the New Theatre's objects were outlined as:

1. To express through drama, based on the Australian tradition of freedom and democracy, the progressive aspirations of the Australian people.

2. To cultivate a theatre free from commercialism, capable of developing a native drama, and of educating all sections of the people to appreciate a high standard of contemporary and classical drama.
3. To secure the widest possible co-operation with all associations aiming at social justice.³⁵

These objectives, especially those concerning freedom, democracy and social justice, created an organisation that differed from other contemporary amateur theatres. For many members, working to meet the objectives of the New Theatre, which flowed naturally into the choice of plays and the methods of the theatre's operation, was a key reason for their participation. Norma Disher said that:

the inspiration, for me, and I'm sure for many of the members, was the Constitution. It could be described as idealistic, or political, but it was a humanity-orientated social democratic approach to theatre, which I found had purpose. And it was something that I wanted to be part of.³⁶

Miriam Hampson was of the view that 'in fact, our principles have kept us removed from the sort of amateur theatre that becomes art for art's sake, and depends on the dominance of big personalities; our structure is very democratic'.³⁷

Given its links to the C.P.A., the New Theatre also operated in a charged political environment. In security circles, it was regarded as a Communist front. When the C.P.A. was banned in 1940, the Theatre's office was raided by police, along with other organisations suspected of posing security risks. Among items confiscated were the membership file and hundreds of play scripts.³⁸ Increased surveillance by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (A.S.I.O.), after it was established in 1949, was assumed at the time and confirmed subsequently. Norma's response about her Production committee work—'Yes, I was. And you can get ASIO to prove it, too!'—was supported by Marie's confirmation that 'we always suspected there were always people spying on us. We know ASIO was bugging our phones.' While stage names were common in the professional theatre, in the branch their adoption was to protect people's identities. As Norma recollected, there were 'no names on the program for ['Out of Commission', Mona Brand's play about the Petrov Commission]. Because the Commission was in operation ... we didn't have any names, because it would have been stupid ... they were sending ASIO [to the theatre]'. Indeed many of New Theatre activities can be found in theatre members' A.S.I.O. files, the release of which revealed the extent of surveillance.³⁹

During the war years in response to the fight against fascism and the entry of the U.S.S.R., C.P.A. membership increased. This was reflected among theatre members, as illustrated with five of our interviewees being party members. In the post-war years, especially once the Cold War had begun and anti-communism was actively pursued politically and industrially, such political volunteering came under increased scrutiny. Although it is clear from the available written records in the 1950s that the C.P.A. exercised little direct control over the plays and the messages contained within, there nevertheless was a C.P.A. presence, to which interviewees alluded. This added a further dimension to theatre members' volunteering, as it broadened their political volunteering to the party and for others, also included their trade union. In terms of organisational structure and practice, all New Theatre branches adopted the standard forms of

parliamentary procedure with its elected Management committee, specialist committees and office bearers. At its heart was the monthly general meeting of members. Together with the elected office bearers who comprised the executive (president, vice-president, secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer), and the monthly Management committee were three production-related committees (led by an executive member): the Production committee, Workshop committee and Contact committee. Annual elections were held at the June Annual General Meeting. Silvia Salisbury explains the structure's democratic nature, which she enjoyed 'because of us having the [monthly] General Membership of the theatre being the sort of highest body':

Everything that flowed from that was answerable to the General Membership. They made the decisions, or they suggested things to be done. They divided it up into the Management committee, who looked after the paying of the bills and all that sort of thing. And then there was the Production committee, that read the plays, and worked out who was going to be the next director, and what the plays were going to be. A sub-committee of that was play readers. And they were all elected positions, elected from the general membership as who ought to be good.⁴⁰

The Workshop committee was a practical training group. There:

people who were interested in directing could choose a [one-act] play ... We would read the play, the same as the big people on the Production committee would read the play, and see if it was related to the Constitution.⁴¹

Not everyone appreciated the commitment to democratic process but it was regarded as important in ensuring inclusive decision-making. As Miriam Hampson observed:

sometimes this democratic way of work is a little heavy, and sometimes I would agree with anyone who says: 'Oh, but it's stifling.' It can be stifling but I think you have to pay some dues for having something that is run for everyone, and not just the flaring stars.⁴²

Hierarchical structures in volunteer organisations have been cast as a barrier to women's involvement.⁴³ In this case, however, democracy was the overriding feature promoting participation. Commenting on the Sydney New Theatre's establishment in the early 1930s alongside other 'Little Theatres', John Craig wrote that 'looking at the theatrical scene in those days it is interesting to see the amount of artistic production and organising done by women'.⁴⁴ The participation of women as elected office bearers was obvious to new members. Tom Salisbury joined the New Theatre in 1947, and remembers that:

I suppose one of the most impressive things I've thought about New Theatre, when I first joined, was that the Secretary, Pat Bullen, the President, Jean Blue, and the [Treasurer], Muriel Small, they were all women. They were all in charge, and they were elected.⁴⁵

Leading members of the Sydney branch of the New Theatre were instrumental in forming the National Federation. They called delegates of the Melbourne branch to a Sydney conference in 1948 and formed New Theatre Australia; other branches soon joined the Federation. The governing body, the National Conference, was held twice yearly, and the Management committee included branch representatives plus officers. Here too, women took on key leadership roles with Miriam Hampson and Marie Armstrong elected President and Secretary in 1957.

An important element of New Theatre activity was education and training in stagecraft, fostered by the Federation and supported by the branches. The Theatre's educative arm,

enshrined in its first constitution as an important aim, was a legacy of the various schools and teach-ins of the C.P.A. and some left-wing trade unions, such as the Waterside Workers Federation. In the pre- and post-World War Two period, when adult arts education outside of the conventional university sector was almost completely absent in Australia, workshops, many led by these women, provided important education for New Theatre members. Along with the annual National Drama Schools, they brought together education and collective creativity, and discussion about the art and craft of theatre.

As indicated earlier, the theatre's commitment to broadly socialist ideas extended to their performative style. Activities were not limited to theatre spaces, with engagement with workers extending into workplaces as well as public spaces through 'Contact' work.⁴⁶ At the forefront of organising, writing and performing contact work were Freda Lewis, Betty Spink, Miriam Hampson, Nan Gow, Mona Brand and Marie Armstrong. Plays and short sketches were produced for unions, C.P.A. branches and other left organisations, on current industrial or political issues, for performances at workplaces, parks and beaches, next to dole queues, and from trucks. For example, Betty Roland's short play, 'War on the Waterfront' (about the Port Kembla wharfies' refusal to load pig iron destined for Japan), was performed at the Watson's Bay beach (after an initial attempt at the Sydney Domain).⁴⁷ In 1959, a Mona Brand song, 'Arthur Murray taught me dancing in a hurry', was performed at the picket line of the dance instructors locked out by Arthur Murray's Sydney dance studio.⁴⁸

Focus women

For the theatre to not only survive but to flourish, the work of women was critical. As seen from the outset, women were shaping the theatre's direction. By contributing their skills and labour in diverse ways, performances were regularly scheduled and messages spread. Testimony to their contribution is that ten of the twenty-one performing compound roles were made life members. For many of these women, alongside their male comrades, their commitment to the New Theatre lasted for decades. They were, to use Stebbins' term, 'career volunteers', or more specifically 'career *political* volunteers'. Through brief sketches of their involvement to identify their compound roles, a selection of women will now be introduced, including some of our interviewees. We begin with women active in the late 1930s and 1940s. Despite fewer records documenting women's roles in the 1940s, the available records reveal these 'compound roles'.

One of the few professional actors, Jean Blue joined the Sydney branch in 1936 and combined acting with directing and organisational leadership. Playing in both stage-based and contact productions, Jean was perhaps best remembered for her parts in Oriel Gray's play 'Western Limit' and in the award-winning 'Lawson'. President from 1942 until 1948, Jean was a member of the Workshop committee, and worked in the Contact unit in the 1930s and 1940s.

In 1936, Freda Lewis, having just turned seventeen, first attended a performance of Clifford Odet's anti-Nazi resistance play 'Till the Day I Die'. Immediately joining the theatre, Freda began selling tickets, and calling for donations, a front of house job commonly done after performances. In 1937 she made her stage debut, the following year she began directing performances and then became a member of the New Theatre Writers Group. Freda was Publicity Officer/Assistant Secretary in 1940 and Secretary in 1941 and 1942.

She also engaged in contact work: for example, throughout July 1941, Freda along with Jean Blue and Hughla Hurley presented sketches of political issues from a woman's viewpoint at street corners or from the back of trucks. Hughla was a Management committee member in 1940 who was then working for the New Theatre full-time concentrating on lunch-hour meetings and 'agitprop' [agitation/al propaganda].⁴⁹

Miriam Hampson's arrival in Sydney brought experience from interstate, as she had been the Melbourne branch's Secretary. She joined the Sydney leadership group as Assistant Secretary in 1943 and was elected Secretary in mid-1950, a position she would retain until 1982. Miriam's role differed from the other women as she held the only ongoing paid role.⁵⁰ A private income supplemented her small salary. However, her contribution to the theatre stretched well beyond her secretarial position, as she took on multiple roles in the branch and nationally. Many New Theatre members remember Miriam as the Theatre's backbone for decades, with one member describing her 'very strong personality'.⁵¹

Norma Disher joined in 1949, soon after a member who was a co-worker at Sydney radio station 2SM realised that Norma was a talented dressmaker. When Norma went to the theatre:

they grabbed me straight away. So I discovered, then, that there was something there that I could do. I didn't want to act, but I could be helpful.⁵²

Until 1985, Norma was more than just 'helpful', as the theatre's chief costume-designer and maker, later eloquently calling it 'my complete vocation'. While she primarily worked on wardrobe, Norma turned her hand to directing and was a member of the Workshop and then the Production committee:

the other thing that interested me was Workshop. So shortly after I joined the theatre, I was somehow got to be leading Workshop ... and then shortly after that, I was elected to the Production committee, so that meant I was involved, all the time I was there I was involved in the Production, choice of plays, discussions.⁵³

Marie Armstrong described how Norma's compound role developed: 'Norma never acted, she was always the wardrobe, but she was always on committee, she was a prominent member, she then directed, she moved into directing through that ... It was multi-skilling stuff.'⁵⁴

Like others, Marie Armstrong initially came to New Theatre performances and then became more broadly involved. However, like Norma, performing was not her initial motivation. At first she drew on her office skills, in particular typing scripts, before being asked to be the Education Sub-committee's minutes secretary. For over fifty years, she provided organisational leadership, as a Management committee member and as Federation President for a decade, together with directing, contact work, choreography, teaching and acting, as well as some writing. Marie was on a committee of one type or another from 1951 to 1963. She wrote much of the national *Spotlight* magazine, and many versions of the New Theatre's history through pamphlets and articles. And in 2016, she was still performing, in the annual May Day event.

As with many of the women, Mona Brand's association with the New Theatre spanned decades. Starting in 1948, she is often referred to as the theatre's 'major dramatist' or 'almost the house playwright', but was also a key member of the Contact committee and a performer. Yet she remains still relatively unknown in Australia: as Pfisterer has

pointed out, 'Australian communist women playwrights have a higher profile elsewhere in the world than they enjoy in Australia'.⁵⁵ Joining the Melbourne Realist Writers Group and the C.P.A. in 1946 to 1947, Mona attended a New Theatre performance the next year. Between 1948 and 1984, the New Theatre produced seventeen of her plays, in addition to dozens of revue sketches. As well as writing, in 1954 Mona became Assistant secretary, by that time a paid position. Alongside Milton Moore, she ran the Contact shows in 1954 and 1955, writing and performing a great deal of the material. Although resigning as Assistant secretary in 1955, when she married Len Fox, Mona continued writing for the theatre, teaching classes, giving lectures in scriptwriting, and occasionally working in the office.

Betty Milliss joined the New Theatre in 1952 after her brother introduced her to a neighbour who was a New Theatre member. She combined acting and leadership roles, joining the Management committee 'fairly soon ... I was always on Management committee'. Elected Vice-President in 1956 and on the Contact committee in 1960, Betty recalls that 'most of the people on Management were also involved in some aspect of production, acting, or behind stage'.⁵⁶

Silvia Salisbury's father first took her to see a New Theatre play when she was a teenager. Her love of the works she saw there evolved into a long commitment for her: 'the thing that struck me even as a child was the enthusiasm and commitment they had to plays that were saying something ... there was nothing much for working-class people in 1947'.⁵⁷ When Silvia joined, it was to perform, both acting and singing, but she too moved into leadership roles, being elected treasurer in 1956. Her key contribution was to the Production committee: 'I was Secretary of the Production committee for a long time because they thought it was a good way to learn'.⁵⁸

Factors enabling the women's compound roles

With a focus on women's compound roles, we now examine three factors, emerging from the interviews that enabled, encouraged and facilitated this degree and type of participation: degree of family support; capacity to juggle paid employment and theatre work, and scope for development of personal and political identity. For the women undertaking these compound roles, it became apparent that some barriers found in other volunteer settings were either surmountable or absent. Studies of women's participation in trade unions have found that the most common barriers have been lack of family support, either benign or more overt opposition, and family responsibilities, timing of meetings and personal confidence.⁵⁹ In this case, family arrangements often created a supportive environment for their involvement, especially when spouses were also involved in the theatre.

First, these women had a high degree of support from family and partners. Couples with shared values found ways around the demands posed by the theatre schedule. The shared experience of the theatre became the backdrop to many romantic and sexual liaisons, as personal relationships developed between members. Silvia married Tom Salisbury in 1955, and after sixty years of marriage, commented on the relationships that were forged, and sometimes faltered, in the New Theatre:

That was another thing they used to have, all the different marriages in the theatre. We used to call it 'Miriam's Matrimonial Club', because we'd say that Miriam would organise all these

things. Well, she didn't, but we all used to call it that, matchmaking ... But it was just because you were in contact with each other for so long.⁶⁰

Betty Milliss confirms Silvia's memories: 'There was a point there where we used to call the New Theatre "Miriam's Happiness Club", because so many people had met in the theatre, and were either living together, or married.'⁶¹ As Table 1 indicates, sixteen of our focus women met their partners (sometimes more than one) at the Theatre. Among those whose spouse was also a New Theatre member were Mona Brand and Len Fox, Betty Cole and David Milliss, Nan Davies and Keith Gow, Freda Lewis and Bill Brown, Norma Disher and Bruce Hawkins. Others included Eileen and Eddie Allison, Audrey Ward and Len Grant, Oriel Gray (nee Bennett) and John Gray, Pat Bullen and Cedric Flower, Kip and John Lambert.⁶²

For many of these women, their individual involvement became a shared activity with their partner in both creative and organisational areas. Theatre couples who raised a family faced the challenge of both partners needing to attend rehearsals, meetings and performances. Caring for children required accommodation: when the Management committee was advised in 1960 that Pippa Hood needed childcare, there was a suggested babysitter.⁶³ For Betty and David Milliss, it affected how much they could do: their joint involvement 'all changed, of course, when we had kids. It was always one or the other of us doing things.' Betty described how she and David worked this out:

we lived in a very old house [with fellow New Theatre volunteers Barbara and Trevor Finch] ... we lived in one flat, and they lived in the other ... With a door in between. And we could open or shut this door. So the four of us, at any time, three of us could be in the theatre, and one person was left at home, looking after all four kids.⁶⁴

Silvia and Tom Salisbury also took turns, with one parent looking after their three children when the other was at the theatre:

I was lucky Tom being in the theatre, and we would take turns in doing shows ... I had to do this play every Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and I'd be leaving early, and Tom would have to look after this newborn baby, and feed him, and look after these ... little girls as well. Get them bathed, and into bed, and I don't know how he did it. ... I remember that was hard going, but Tom was really good.⁶⁵

Second, was the capacity to juggle paid employment and theatre work. As working-class women, all of our focus women (bar Miriam, as previously mentioned) needed to work full time to sustain themselves and their households. The demands of full-time, paid employment were then an ever-present consideration for these women. Proximity to the theatre allowed lunch-time volunteering, while others had sympathetic employers. Working for employers and organisations also with shared values like trade unions and other progressive organisations, further assisted, with the starkest example being that of Marie and her boss, union leader Laurie Carmichael. Marie explains some of her organising strategies:

I was doing [Contact work] in lunch hours, I was in charge of it for some time ... luckily, the job I had, I was able to use the phone to ring people. That's been a very big advantage with me, that I haven't been in a factory where I didn't [have a phone]. When I was with the metal workers' union, it was understood ... Laurie knew it, and other people did ... I was on the phone, organising ... it was just as well I had a job that I could, because it was really quite a job, all of that ... mine was the 'get in the back of a truck, and out there in the lunch break'.⁶⁶

Physical proximity also helped Marie: 'So I was there, down in Sussex Street, for ten years. And that's when I used to go up to New Theatre at lunchtime, I was central, [near] Market and Sussex [Streets].'

That is not to suggest that juggling jobs and theatre work was not a constant struggle, as three of the women recounted. Marie explained how, in another job, she managed to take part in the performance 250 km away:

I had a full-time job ... Everybody else seemed to have a full-time job ... Had to take a day off, wouldn't I? Would I be 'sick'? If they rang Mum to say, how is she? Or, do I tell Mum? ... So I had to cover myself at work, and cover myself at home. Can't remember how I swung that so nobody would ring anybody else about me. Nobody knew what I was doing in the family, or at work.⁶⁷

Both Betty and Silvia talked about the effect of after-work rehearsals. Betty recalled what she called the rehearsal 'madness':

You'd rehearse four nights a week, and Sunday ... And you would have rehearsals begin at seven ... And depending on the director, sometimes, you wouldn't get out of there till nearly midnight ... I was living with my brother and sister-in-law in Mosman, and I used to travel by ferry. And I can remember running down Pitt Street to get the last ferry to Mosman at midnight.⁶⁸

Silvia Salisbury remarked on the fatigue:

I worked in the public service ... night after night, and long rehearsals, you know, and I'd have to really concentrate on what I was doing. ... it was tough at times, because I'd be having to really keep my eyes open and concentrate ... And by about 3.30 in the afternoon, I'd start to come really to and I could do a whole lot of work really quickly. And come five o'clock ... and then I'd be all fresh for the rehearsal.⁶⁹

Third, scope for development of personal and political identity through volunteer work was articulated by our interviewees as a strong reason for joining and staying with the New Theatre for many years. It was clear that, for many members, personal identity became bound up in loyalty to the organisation and its aims. The distinction between theatre work, political activism/volunteering and leisure was not always clear cut and subject to blurring, with volunteer labour taking place in settings and organisations that could and did combine two or all of these elements.⁷⁰ There were few distinctions drawn between work, leisure, political activity and creative activity. Norma Disher's recollection was 'everybody volunteered completely'. The Workshop committee contributed to Norma's personal development:

It was a really, really fascinating little episode in my life, and I took it extremely seriously ... they needed somebody to lead it, and I finished up leading it for a while. And apart from making costumes and things, it was my first feeling of having an important job to do, you know? ... So it was just a memorable sort of situation for me that I'd learnt to open my mouth and say what I thought. I'm still doing it!⁷¹

The women brought particular skills with them, bolstering confidence in carving out initial roles. As Marie recounted, although typing scripts was her initial contribution, once she was heard singing, 'the next thing, I'm being asked to be in the revue. And they found out I could dance' and her performing career began.⁷² Betty had acted in England, but was then encouraged to learn the skills as a committee secretary.

Intersecting with this personal development was the political dimension of their theatre work. As already indicated, the women, a number of whom were teenagers when they joined, did so attracted by the theatre's political purpose and messages. This could not be replicated by volunteering for other theatres. Moreover, the political commitment made by membership brought with it dangers and risk also not experienced elsewhere: performances stopped, security surveillance putting jobs and livelihoods at risk. The particular nature of the volunteering means we can describe them as 'career political volunteers'.

The demands of volunteering did take their toll on some. For two of the scriptwriters, it was ensuring sufficient time for their primary contributions to the theatre. Joan Clarke resigned in 1958 because she felt she was not being given sufficient time to write. She advised, 'When you find a promising writer, get them writing plays and don't expect them to do too many of the many numerous tasks in theatre organisation'.⁷³ The response was that 'active participation' was needed from all members 'but that time for creative [sic] will always be granted'.⁷⁴ Despite the theatre's reliance on her scriptwriting, Mona Brand was pushed to ask if she could have one day off for writing 'preferably Thursday' in 1955. When she married that year, she resigned as Assistant secretary, prompting the observation that 'the sharing of the typing work, etc. would need to be discussed'.⁷⁵

Contact work brought its own challenges, as Marie recalled:

things like street theatre rely on the enthusiasm of groups of people, and we have a very high turnover. Any theatre has this problem. People don't always get what they expect when they join a theatre, and there's a lot of discipline and hard work involved in working for the New. There's a lot of fun too, but we take our work seriously and expect total commitment.⁷⁶

Even for someone as committed as Norma, there were limits to her ability to go from one production to another:

It's amazing, you know, what you can do when you're reasonably young. I was in my thirties then. But you're needed. ... And so many times working in the theatre, I would, on the Production committee, I'd say, 'well, who's doing the costumes?' and they'd just go [you] ... you had to do all the sewing at weekends and night time, you had to work during the day. After I'd finished I would be exhausted, and I wouldn't do the next show ... I'd go to other plays, and I'd go to the cinema, and I'd build up my own need, you know, for [stimulation outside the New Theatre].⁷⁷

Gender dynamics

In mixed-sex organisations, gender dynamics frequently reflected gender stereotypes with women relegated to 'caring' duties, those that were extensions of their domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning, or segregated into women's committees or auxiliaries. In studies of women and the C.P.A., the intersection of class and gender was a common debate and shaped organisational dynamics.⁷⁸ The historical period examined here encompasses World War II and the post-war period in Australia, which was a high point in volunteering.⁷⁹ One effect of the wartime years was that women were more visible in public life. However, after the war, as the political environment grew more conservative, women were expected to return to the home and contribute to post-war reconstruction by focusing on family and household responsibilities.⁸⁰

In contrast, those gender dynamics embedded in the broader society were not reproduced in the New Theatre. This was evident in how the female interviewees spoke about their experiences as women in the theatre. There was consensus that there were no differences between the women and the men, with this view often being expressed very forcefully. For example, Norma was adamant that:

there was no differentiation between the role of women in the New Theatre as far as I was concerned. I was never, ever, aware, of all those years in the theatre, of any differentiation of gender at all. I never ever was conscious of that, from the point of view of the theatre, or the members themselves. And I think it was due to the fact that people were contributing in a group, and only their ability to contribute was what was needed.⁸¹

Silvia had the same view although she had anticipated more traditional gender dynamics:

the other thing that I liked was they seemed to be so equal, the genders. I mean, you were all just working to get the play on. I can't ever remember there being [any sexism]—and it was good for me, because coming into my teenage years, I expected every organisation to be like that. There was no discrimination because you all had a part.

Marie appreciated the unconscious feeling of gender equality:

I wasn't conscious of women being LET have a go, it was just they were there already ... all I can say was that I fell into an area where I was working with women who were stage managers, and women who had power in the theatre. And it wasn't that I was made aware, 'we're women and we've got this'; they were just there. Because that's what theatre is. It's a mixture of talent, and it doesn't matter what sex, well, if you're lucky it doesn't matter.⁸²

It is important to note, however, that all was not perfect. On occasion, stereotypical gender roles were reaffirmed, as certain tasks did appear to be the province of men, such as back of house. In 1958, for example, Betty Milliss commented that 'women should be able to help on backstage'.⁸³ Presumptions that the women would clean up and make the coffee were also challenged. A 1955 Management committee discussion about sharing the clearing up when functions were held at people's homes, included who should be doing this work: 'All agreed—also that it was not a job for the women only.' At a 1959 General Meeting, it was minuted that it was '[n]ot necessary to always be a woman' in charge of the coffee.⁸⁴ Women were neither typically relegated to minor roles nor kept out of decision-making. This was then a notable exception to Joanne Scott's observation that, during the interwar period in Australia, 'many voluntary organisations with a mixed sex membership restricted women's opportunities to participate fully through, for example, limiting their involvement to "ladies" committees'.⁸⁵

Discussion and conclusion

From the earliest times of the Sydney New Theatre's history, women carved out space in organisational pathways of the theatre. Women's presence in decision-making forums was at times starkly different, with a much higher proportion taking on executive roles than ever seen in the C.P.A., the A.L.P. or in many mixed-sex trade unions. They actively engaged in sustaining the democratic structure of the theatre, sought office bearing roles, were nominated and elected by their peers. While not all elections were contested, what was evident was support for women's greater management responsibility from both male and female members.

The women carried out creative and organisational leadership at a time when their independence was still challenging societal norms. This was especially the case in the post-war years when women were being actively encouraged to return to the home. Unlike women in a number of women-only organisations or committees of mixed-sex organisations, the New Theatre women were valued for their creative contributions in roles more typically undertaken by men: director, producer, writer, as well as the range of organisational leadership roles.

Our focus women's experiences identified three factors supported their career volunteering: the degree of family support, capacity to juggle paid employment and theatre work, and scope for development of personal and political identity. Following Teather's work on the agency of voluntary organisations, it is clear from our interviews and research that, for decades, the Sydney New Theatre provided opportunities for its members on a number of levels. First, it provided opportunities for personal development and a heightened sense of personal identity. Second it was a place of creative and political activism for like-minded people. Third, it provided a sense of belonging to an organisation that provided 'affective bonds that grow out of shared ideals and aims, affirmed through years of cooperative activities'.⁸⁶ And perhaps most importantly for our argument, it provided opportunities to combine creative and organisational leadership.

When looking at the barriers previously identified in the literature as inhibiting women's participation in organisations and management, such as confidence and recognition of women's skills and capabilities, degree of partner support and family responsibilities, many of these were absent or nullified. Although family responsibilities were still concerns and needed to be managed, these were countered by partner support. The involvement of partners in the New Theatre for a number of the women, including many of those interviewed, sustained ongoing participation.

In contrast to middle-class women volunteers who may have not been in the paid workforce, for this group of working-class volunteers, there were also the demands of paid employment. While middle-class women may have juggled caring responsibilities and volunteer work, working-class women also juggled full-time paid work. As our interviews indicated, for some, their paid employment enabled participation, while for others it was not an insurmountable barrier. Engaged in serious leisure, these women fit Stebbins' definition of career volunteers. They clearly demonstrated labour and perseverance, deriving a range of benefits and a sense of career, plus experiencing and contributing to the ethos and distinctive identity of their theatre.

In terms of the nature of the volunteer work undertaken, it was decidedly a blend of work, activism and leisure, as Oppenheimer and Scott proposed could be characteristic of volunteer work. The Sydney branch generally had only one paid worker plus a multitude of volunteers, was a politically motivated organisation and included activities otherwise seen as constituting leisure or a hobby when undertaken in the guise of amateur dramatics. The women were visible, their participation was substantial, and they also participated in broadening the nature of protest through art, reflecting West and Blumberg's patterns of volunteering and protest.

In their quest to fulfil the New Theatre's objectives, our focus women organised the theatre, developing innovative and resourceful approaches to the institutional norms of theatre of their time, adapting formal and informal strategies and creating new ones. Their leadership and activism were vital to sustaining the success and longevity of this

small organisation. Whilst their left-wing origins and their aims led the New Theatre to move away from presenting bourgeois ideas on stage, turning a profit, or pandering to the demands of high-billing stars, they still had conventional problems any theatre troupe had to solve: organising themselves and their work, publicity, staging, and attracting audiences. Sarah Miller recognises the longstanding historical oblivion to which such women theatre workers are often consigned:

[it] can be read in gendered terms to represent women's skills and habits of organisation as performing the function of handmaiden to the arts, rather than artist and creator of cultural meaning and value per se. It may also be a matter of deep cultural conditioning that women in these roles (as well as others) deny or downplay their leadership.⁸⁷

Contrary to the 'handmaiden to the arts' concept that Miller describes, women were at the forefront of the Theatre's leadership.

Rachel Fensham's study of feminist practice within twenty-first-century Australian theatre revealed that 'in spite of thirty years of active feminism in Australia, as well as feminist theatre criticism and practice, the mainstream has only partially absorbed the influence of feminist ideas'.⁸⁸ The New Theatre was well ahead of its time, for the reasons detailed here. Our research indicates that, for our focus women, their gender did not constrain them crafting their successful volunteering careers in the New Theatre's first four decades. Women and men worked co-operatively together, generally, towards the shared goal of enacting the New Theatre's constitution and aims, on the stage, behind it and in communities.

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87. Miller, 'Women and Leadership', p. 7.

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