

Political theatre and the state

Melbourne and Sydney, 1936–1953

Phillip Deery and Lisa Milner

For much of the twentieth century, branches of the New Theatre in Australia presented left-wing theatre within a culture that was resistant to their ideas. A novel mix of conventional theatre forms, experimental performative styles, agitational propaganda and Communist theories of ‘art as a weapon’ produced theatre that was responsive to international issues, infused with social comment, and oppositional in orientation. The larger Melbourne and Sydney branches of the New Theatre, on which this article focuses, attracted the attention of governments and security services anxious about the ‘insidious’ influence of left-wing workers’ theatre. The article explores the various attempts to monitor, censor and silence the Melbourne and Sydney branches of New Theatre from 1936 to 1953, and suggests that the state circumscribed but did not cripple the groups’ contribution to the development of a radical cultural activist tradition in Australia.

This article has been peer reviewed.

Introduction

New Theatre was political theatre. It was oppositional, contrarian theatre. And it was explicitly partisan, socially engaged theatre. New Theatre, therefore, was theatre with a purpose: it sought to challenge hegemonic values and change the status quo, radicalise its predominantly working-class audiences, inspire more ‘progressive’ positions and even political action, and stand outside mainstream repertory by embracing experimentation and eschewing commercialism. The mission of New Theatre, proclaimed one of its early officials in 1939, lay in fulfilling its ‘emotional capacity to stir our conscience, clarify our outlook, and stimulate activity’.¹ Thirteen years later, its newsletter, *Spotlight*, similarly announced that ‘our theatre [is] different from other “Little Theatres”. Where they are confined to problems of “theatre”, we set out to pose or solve problems of life in terms of theatre, to create the illusion of reality’.²

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- 1 Victor Arnold, ‘The New Theatre Movement’, *Australian Left News* (January 1939): 11. For a broader articulation of its philosophy, see *Workers’ Voice*, 20 September 1935, 4.
 - 2 ‘Emotion or Stagecraft?’, *Spotlight* (1952): 1 [‘Xmas Issue’; no issue number or month], New Theatre Archive, Research Centre, Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre,

The genesis of New Theatre in Sydney was the Workers' Arts Club (WAC), formed in 1931. Although visual art and writing featured heavily in the activities of the WAC in its initial period – including the first exhibition of Soviet art in Australia – after a few years the theatre became the main activity and 'the drama took over full control'.³ In Melbourne, the Workers' Theatre Group (WTG), formed in 1935, emerged from both the Pioneer Players, formed in 1921 by Louis and Hilda Esson, and the WAC, which had its inaugural meeting in 1932 under the auspices of the Friends of the Soviet Union at the home of Itzhak Gust, a Russian Jewish immigrant.⁴ In 1937 it affiliated with the American New Theatre and thereafter became the New Theatre. Townsville's branch was established in 1933, and Brisbane, Perth and Newcastle in 1936. In 1936 the Sydney branch became the New Theatre League, with other branches following. Few of these branches survived longer than 40 years – Sydney is the only remaining branch, with an unbroken record of performances from 1932 to today – but they produced over 400 plays, written by Australian and overseas dramatists. The production of overseas plays underscored the transnational connections of New Theatre. As studies of America's New Theatre League and Britain's Unity Theatre have demonstrated, radical theatre sought not only to develop cultural activism locally but also to embody the broader aims and aspirations of an international working-class theatre movement.⁵ New Theatre in Australia was no exception.

The New Theatre was formed with considerable input from members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA),⁶ had formal and informal ties to the party and operated, albeit loosely and intermittently, as a Communist 'front organisation'. 'Fraction' meetings of CPA members met regularly within New Theatre branches, and New Theatre delegates were normally present at party conferences with reports. By the late 1940s, the New Theatre was regarded, at least by one of the leading members of the CPA's cultural committee, as 'the party's main and foremost enterprise in

Melbourne (NTA), 2001.040.784.

- 3 Jean Devanny, *Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny* (St Lucia: University Press, 1986), 163.
- 4 Itzhak Gust, *Such Was Life: A Jumping Narrative from Radom to Melbourne* (Melbourne: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2004), 115.
- 5 See for example Lynn Mally, 'Inside a Communist Front: A Post-Cold War Analysis of the New Theatre League', *American Communist History* 6, no. 1 (2007): 65–95; Don Watson, 'Busmen: Documentary and British Political Theatre in the 1930s', *Media, Culture & Society* 3, no. 4 (1981): 339–50. For synergies between left-wing theatre, art and music, see Andy Croft, *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).
- 6 For most of its existence, from 1920 until 1991, the official name of the party was the Communist Party of Australia, and this title will be used throughout the article (between 1944 and 1951, though, it called itself the Australian Communist Party).

that area of cultural activity'.⁷ But because it was motivated by aesthetic principles as much as by ideological imperatives, New Theatre was more than simply a propaganda arm of the CPA. Artistic liberalism remained as important as political commitment. To that extent, New Theatre was less an expression of CPA policy than, for example, party auxiliaries such as Friends of the Soviet Union or the Movement Against War and Fascism were in the 1930s.⁸ Certainly, Communist influence increased markedly from the late 1940s – reflected in New Theatre's more slavish adoption of socialist realism⁹ – but it was rarely accompanied by financial support or dictation of its theatrical approach.

New Theatre's relationship with the CPA, however, is not the main concern of this paper, which has been extensively discussed in three unpublished theses.¹⁰ Although Sydney and Melbourne New Theatres have often been referred to in memoirs¹¹ and numerous articles,¹² studies dedicated to these organisations are uneven in quality and limited in scope. Mostly, they are overlapping, self-published works, charting the historical trajectories of the two groups, with an emphasis on the individuals involved and the plays produced.¹³ None of these studies has

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- 7 Ray Clarke, personal interview, 20 February 1998.
 - 8 See Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 274, 366–68.
 - 9 For a discussion of artists' embrace of socialist realism, see Jack Beasley, *Red Letter Days: Notes From Inside an Era* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1979), 177–88.
 - 10 See Angela O'Brien, 'The Road Not Taken: Political and Performance Ideologies at Melbourne New Theatre 1935–1960' (PhD thesis, Monash University, 1989); Gabriela Zabala, 'The Politics of Drama: The Relationship between the Communist Party of Australia and New Theatre Writers 1932–1980s' (PhD thesis, University of NSW, 2012); Jan Friedel, 'Left Wing Melbourne Artists and the Communist Party During the Early Cold War Period' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2013), especially ch. 3.
 - 11 See, for example, Mona Brand, *Enough Blue Sky: The Autobiography of Mona Brand, An Unknown Well-known Playwright* (Sydney: Tawny Pipit Press, 1995); Devanny, *Point of Departure*; Betty Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast* (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1979); Betty Roland, *An Improbable Life* (Sydney: Collins, 1989); Oriel Gray, *Exit Left: Memoirs of a Scarlet Woman* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985); Dot Thompson, *My Method and a Little Madness: Stanislavsky Revisited* (Melbourne: New Theatre Publications, 2000); Nancy Wills, *Shades of Red* (Sydney: Communist Arts Group, 1980).
 - 12 Many of these referred to throughout this paper; two relevant articles that are not are by Mona Brand, 'New Theatre Movement Part 1: 1932–1948', *Theatre Australia* (October 1978): 13–15; 'New Theatre Movement Part 2: Cold War and After', *Theatre Australia* (November 1978): 19–20. There are also two further unpublished theses: John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre 1925–1945: Recession and Response* (MA thesis, Monash University, 1979); P. D. Herlinger, 'New Theatre – The Pre-War Years 1932–1939' (MA thesis, University of Sydney, 1982).
 - 13 Angela Hillel, *Against the Stream: Melbourne New Theatre* (Melbourne: Melbourne New Theatre, 1986); New Theatre, *15 Years of Production* (Sydney: New Theatre, 1948); New Theatre, *50 New Years: 1932–1982* (Newtown: Sydney New Theatre, 1982); New Theatre, *10 Years of New Theatre* (Melbourne: New Theatre, 1947); New Theatre, *The New Years, 1932: The Plays, People and Events of 75 Years of Sydney's New Theatre* (Newtown: New Theatre, 2007).

focused on the primary concern of this article: the efforts by the state to censor, silence, monitor and marginalise New Theatre. Similarly, while the Cold War on writers has been the subject of several studies, there has been no corresponding examination of New Theatre.¹⁴ This article, therefore, will both fill a historiographical gap in New Theatre research and contribute to the broader literature that seeks to understand the hostile political environment, especially during the Cold War, in which left-wing artists and organisations operated.

Censorship of New Theatre: *Till the Day I Die*

Australian performances of Clifford Odets' *Till the Day I Die* (1935) had been banned by the federal government under Prime Minister Joseph Lyons in July 1936, ostensibly at the request of the German consul-general, Dr Rudolf Asmis.¹⁵ The play, written to accompany Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), and which ran for one hour, revolved around the experiences of a member of the underground opposition movement in Germany who, after torture by Nazi officials during a brutal interrogation, committed suicide. This already well-known play had 'caused keen discussion in other countries' before New Theatre adopted it in 1936, five years before London's Unity Theatre.¹⁶

Queensland, led by the Forgan Smith Labor government, permitted the Brisbane Unity Theatre to stage *Till The Day I Die* and did not interfere with its production; consequently, 'the trouble anticipated by the Brisbane theatre did not eventuate'. The play was eventually performed in February 1939 at several theatres in both Brisbane and Ipswich.¹⁷

14 See Pauline Armstrong, *Frank Hardy and the Making of Power Without Glory* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), chapters 7, 10; John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 6; David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and their Secrets* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 123–6; Allan Ashbolt, 'The Great Literary Witch-Hunt of 1952', in *Australia's First Cold War Vol 1: Society, Communism and Culture*, ed. Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), ch. 7; Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals 1920 – 1960* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1993); Capp does, however, analyse how the ASIO files portrayed New Theatre.

15 For a comprehensive account, see Robert Darby, 'New Theatre and the State: The Ban on *Till the Day I Die*, 1936–41', *Labour History* no. 80, (May 2001): 1–19. 'Ostensibly', because as Darby argues, the ban was as much, if not more, the product of the authorities' perception of the play as Communist propaganda, and the role of Commonwealth security agencies in fuelling this perception. Darby's focus on this play therefore confirms the findings of this paper – that New Theatre was often forced to operate within constraints imposed by the state.

16 'Anti-Nazi Play: Dramatic and Brutal', *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 2 July 1936, 17.

17 Connie Healy, 'A History of Political Theatre in Brisbane as Part of Working-class Cultural Tradition and Heritage: The Workers Education Dramatic Society and The

South of the border, however, the 22 July 1936 performance in Sydney was illegally presented, with Victor Arnold, the Sydney New Theatre's secretary, producing the play at the Savoy Theatre, contrary to its censorship by the colonial secretary, Frank Chaffey.¹⁸ Whilst fighting the ban, the play was staged every Wednesday night at the New Theatre's regular rooms at 36 Pitt Street and, subsequently, for the next two years.¹⁹ According to the *Australian Quarterly*, attempting to proscribe the play was 'a political error – hundreds have seen it who would otherwise have not heard of it'.²⁰ Similarly, the left-leaning artist, Rod Shaw, who worked with the New Theatre, remarked that because of the ban, 'more people would have seen the play than normally'.²¹ New Theatre member, Eddie Allison, went so far as to claim that the play 'put the New Theatre on the map'.²² The prohibition lasted for five years, until 1941, when the Sydney secretary, Freda Lewis, maintained that the government's decision to remove the ban 'showed the correctness of the theatre's policy' in defying it for so long.²³

The Melbourne experience

Silencing *Till the Day I Die* was far more effective in Melbourne. The situation there is worth recounting because it highlights the obstacles confronting the nascent WTG, and because the Melbourne experience has not previously been detailed.²⁴ After being contacted by the Lyons government, which lacked powers to ban plays, the Country Party premier of Victoria, Albert Dunstan, referred the correspondence to his chief secretary, Henry Bailey, who seized the baton. Bailey read the script, thought it 'undesirable' and prohibited all Melbourne performances.²⁵

Student/Unity/New Theatre (1930–1962)' (MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1994), 174; Connie Healy, *Defiance: Political Theatre in Brisbane 1930–1962* (Mount Nebo: Boombana, 2000), 97–8.

18 'Banned Play: Man Fined £3', *SMH*, 1 September 1936, 9.

19 For its effect on Sydney New Theatre, see Darby, 'New Theatre and the State', 1–19.

20 R. O. McG [sic], 'Till The Day I Die', *Australian Quarterly* 82 (1936).

21 Rod Shaw, interview with Barbara Blackman, February 1985, National Library of Australia, oh-vn712060.

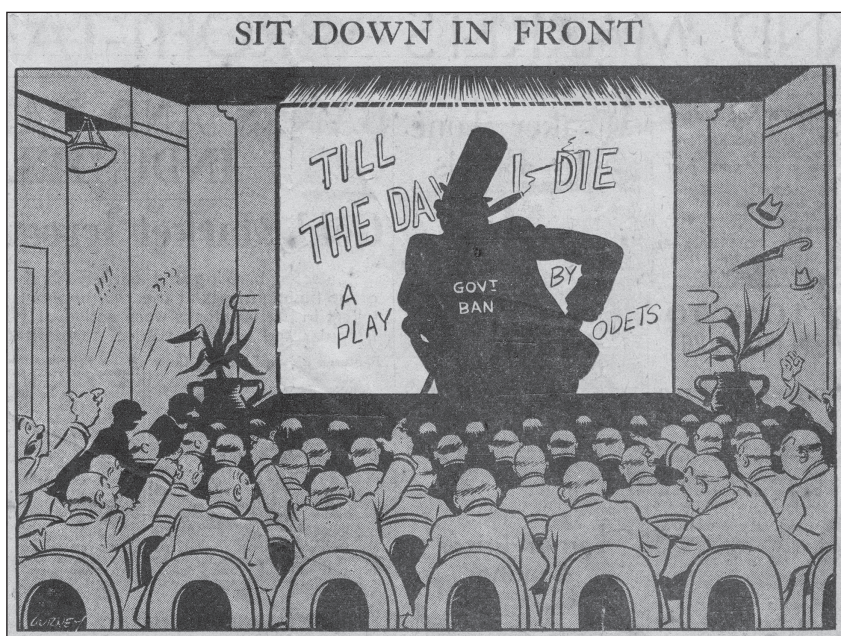
22 Eddie Allison, Personal interview, 4 September 1996.

23 'Ban on Play Lifted', *SMH*, 8 August 1941, 4.

24 The events in Melbourne are referred to only fleetingly in Michelle Arrow, *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002), 163; Hillel, *Against the Stream*, 8; Ken Harper, 'The Useful Theatre: The New Theatre Movement in Sydney and Melbourne 1935–1983', *Meanjin* 43 (1984): 58.

25 'Anti-Nazi Play Banned', *Argus*, 9 October 1936, 11.

The Council for Civil Liberties convened a protest meeting against the ban on 6 November 1936.²⁶ The audience of 200 heard several speakers invoke the right of free speech. L. F. Giblin, Macmahon Ball, and Rev. William Bottomley all voiced their concerns. The resourceful and determined new director, Catherine Duncan, encapsulated the WTG's position – 'We are not pamphleteers merely disseminating propaganda' – and announced that the play would be performed before or on 11 November in an unlicensed hall without charge; she added that the venue would remain secret until the day before.²⁷ Like its Sydney counterpart, the WTG sought to exploit a legal loophole whereby free 'private' performances (albeit with a one shilling donation) seemed permissible.



Source: New Theatre records, 2001.040.496 (courtesy, Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection Research Centre).

Following press reports of this meeting, the chief secretary announced that he would 'use all his powers' to prevent the staging of *Till the Day I Die* in any hall, licenced or unlicensed. He clarified his objection: 'the play offends against good manners' and would cause 'class and national

26 The following is based on *Workers' Voice*, 13 November 1936, 1; *Age*, 6 November 1939; *Argus*, 6 November 1936.

27 Duncan's first play, the pacifist *The Sword Sung*, was performed by New Theatre in July 1939; it was described as 'a work of great promise': Geoffrey Hutton, 'Anti-War Play', *Argus*, 31 July 1939, 7; Michael Keane, *Views From the Balcony: A Biography of Catherine Duncan* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2011), 38–9.

prejudice'.²⁸ It is arguable that Bailey's objection was less concerned with the play's anti-Nazi theme than with Odets and the WTG being pro-Communist.²⁹ The WTG was under surveillance from the Victorian Special Branch at least as early as 16 August 1936.³⁰ Several additional protest meetings were called and the Trades Hall Council pledged its support. The former attorney-general in two State Labor governments, William Slater, offered to lead a deputation. And, significantly, the mayor of Collingwood, Laurence Marshall, agreed to a performance – despite the embargo – under the rubric of a charitable concert to aid the Mayor's Fund for the unemployed.

A stormy meeting of the fractious Collingwood council on 16 November 1936 spelt trouble for this last plan. Several councillors questioned the mayor whether reports about the proposed 'illegal' staging of *Till the Day I Die* on 18 November, or that 1500 invitations had already been issued, were correct. Correspondence from the town clerk to the mayor was tabled confirming that the chief secretary had banned the play, that the booking fee (paid personally by the mayor) for the hire of the main hall had been returned, and that the mayor must 'clearly understand that in no circumstances will [he] be permitted to use the halls of this city' for the production of the play. In defence, Marshall told councillors that 'he was not a Communist' and – thinking, presumably, of the loophole – reassured them that 'as long as I am mayor, the law will not be broken'.³¹

A majority of the councillors was not reassured. The next day, 17 November, 12 wrote to the town clerk authorising him to 'take any action' he considered necessary to prevent the use of the town hall. The stage was set for a showdown. From 6.30pm on Wednesday 18 November, a crowd estimated at 'several thousands' assembled outside Collingwood town hall. It included 'a large number of artists, journalists, lawyers and students'. Twenty uniformed police and several plain-clothes detectives were also in attendance.³² The mayor and his wife arrived at 7pm to find that all doors were locked and bolted.³³ Marshall then tried forcing a window open in order to admit the crowd until stopped by the police,

28 'Minister Claims Play is Offensive', *Argus*, 12 October 1936, 8.

29 Such an argument was advanced by Duncan herself: *Workers' Voice*, 13 November 1936, 1. See also Darby, 'New Theatre and the State', 6.

30 'Extract from Vic. I. Notes. No. 110 of 28.8.36', National Archives of Australia (NAA), A6122, 617, folio 1.

31 *Age*, 18 November 1936, 14; *Argus*, 18 November 1936, 7.

32 Almost certainly, Special Branch officers were also present, although there is no report in the relevant file acquired by ASIO.

33 It later became apparent that the electricity was cut, the telephone lines were disconnected and all chairs were removed from the hall. Claims that Marshall actually broke in, such as those advanced in Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in Flour: An Oral*

with whom he remonstrated: 'I am the Mayor of this city, and you have no ... power to prevent my breaking in to my own town hall'. By now, traffic in Hoddle Street was completely blocked. Also blocked was an attempt to perform the play in a nearby vacant allotment. Two thousand people assembled until cautioned by the police that it was an offence. Catherine Duncan mounted the steps of the town hall and proclaimed to a cheering crowd that that the WTG would never be censored.³⁴ That night, a special meeting of the WTG congratulated Marshall on his 'courageous stand', made him a life member, and denounced Collingwood councillors for their 'violation' of free expression.³⁵

Duncan was undaunted. She told a sympathetic meeting of the Social Science Forum that '[t]he Collingwood Council, the Government and the censors need not think for one moment that we are going to accept their dictum'. Offers of money and services poured in, circulars were sent to various metropolitan councils seeking an available town hall, and a deputation of three miners from Wonthaggi requested a performance in their town. The WTG was now aiming for an audience of 10,000 for the play. 'We will fight for freedom of expression in Australia,' she continued, 'even if it takes till the day we die'.³⁶

Her defiance, and the extensive support the WTG received, withered in the face of resistance. Local councils that included Coburg, Fitzroy, St Kilda, South Melbourne and Wonthaggi all refused permission to stage the play. A plan to present the play on the beach at Inverloch to Christmas holiday-makers never materialised. Even the Melbourne Unitarian Church reneged after it was threatened with prosecution under the *Health Act* if it did not comply with regulations appropriate to 'a place of public entertainment'.³⁷ The only hope lay with the Brunswick City Council. When it received an application from the WTG for the use of its town hall, members of the council requested a private rehearsal performance

Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1978), 200, are apocryphal.

34 At that moment, she told her son, she felt 'empowered and proud': Keane, *Views From the Balcony*, 35.

35 'Doors Bolted Against Mayor', *Argus*, 19 November 1936, 11; 'May Yet Be Staged', *Age*, 20 November 1936, 20. Marshall was strongly rebuked at a subsequent meeting of the council for defying its wishes. 'Banned Play Discussed', *Argus*, 24 November 1939, 11. Marshall served only one term as mayor, in 1936–37. The majority of the councilors were members of the Labor Party, which had little sympathy for actual or alleged pro-Communist organisations.

36 'Producing Banned Play', *Argus*, 23 November 1936, 11. A similar meeting was held on 26 November at Unity Hall attended by 300 people. It was chaired by the Collingwood mayor and favoured an organised campaign to have the ban removed. 'Censored Play Will Be Produced', *Argus*, 27 November 1936, 10.

37 'Banned Play in Church', *Argus*, 1 December 1936, 36.

for municipal officers and councillors. This occurred on 21 December. Reactions were mixed: one councillor believed it was undoubtedly a propaganda play but to suggest it would cause conflict was 'ridiculous'; another that 'there was nothing in it'; while a third remarked: 'If they don't improve on to-night's performance, they won't get an audience for the second performance'. The council then voted 6–3 to permit the use of the hall on 21 February 1937 for the first public performance in Melbourne of *Till the Day I Die*.³⁸ This was more than three months after it was first scheduled.³⁹

Approximately 1200 people attended this performance. According to a press report, the reaction was one of 'enthusiasm'.⁴⁰ In the audience were A. E. Officer and a Mr Bird, who were either State Special Branch or Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB) field officers, and they were not enthusiastic. The first play, *Waiting for Lefty*, was 'practically unintelligible to most of the audience' because the cast failed to project their voices.⁴¹ During interval, it was announced that a loud air-conditioning plant was responsible and efforts would be made to overcome the competing noise in the second play.⁴² Even so, despite the production of *Till the Day I Die* being 'much better', according to the security report, 'it is doubtful if more than half the audience heard a quarter of what was spoken'.⁴³ The officers observed that at least 60 per cent of the 1200-strong audience 'comprised foreigners or persons of alien extraction, jews [sic] predominating'. A leaflet distributed inside the hall relating to the Spanish Civil War was collected by the officers (and attached to the report) and publications sold outside the hall – *Workers' Voice*, *Moscow News* and *Soviet Russia Today* – were noted.⁴⁴ The

38 'Banned Play at Brunswick', *Argus*, 22 December 1936, 36.

39 It was not until November 1937 that *Till the Day I Die* was performed in its own theatre, in Flanigan Lane, a disused loft above a garage, which opened as a 'private' club in order to circumvent the ban and health regulations. By February 1939 it had been performed 'well over one hundred times'. Victor Arnold, 'The Theatre Struggles Against Censorship', *Australian Left News*, February 1939, 10.

40 "'Till The Day I Die' Is Produced", *Argus*, 17 February 1937.

41 Report, Senior Inquiry Officer, A. E. Officer, 17 February 1937, NAA, A6122, 617, folio 2.

42 Dick Diamond maintained, implausibly, that this was 'an attempt to sabotage the play'. Interview with Lil and Dick Diamond, 'Melbourne New Theatre: Early History', Oral History Recordings, 1986–1987, State Library of Victoria, TMS 1105, MS14227. This allegation is repeated in *Views From the Balcony*, 35.

43 Similarly, a reporter from *Table Talk* doubted 'if more than a third' of the audience heard the lines. *Table Talk*, 25 February 1937, 5. This did not dampen subsequent self-congratulation. An internal New Theatre report judged that evening in 1937 to be 'a most exciting and stimulating event'. 'Production Committee Report', New Theatre Annual Conference Minutes, 19 January 1947, [1], NTA, Box H0002581, IRN [Internal Record Number] 63562, Folder 1943. See also *Workers' Voice*, 24 February 1937, 4.

44 Report, Senior Inquiry Officer, A. E. Officer, 17 February 1937, NAA, A6122, 617, folios 2–3.

play was performed for another 18 months every weekend and it meant, in the words of a New Theatre's stalwart, 'we became known'.⁴⁵

Sydney, 1940: The first proscription

It was not until 9 September 1939 – a few days after the outbreak of war – that the foundations for national censorship of the New Theatre were laid with the passage of the *National Security Act*, 1939. An amendment to this legislation introduced in April 1940 'made it an offence for people to print for publication, to publish or to have in their possession any paper that bore in any way on the war'.⁴⁶ The CPA's *Tribune* was banned in the same month. As the amendment also covered possession of material, the New Theatre came within its ambit. The governor-general's speech at the opening of federal parliament on 17 April made the danger clear enough:

My Government ... is reviewing the provisions of the existing law; it has arranged that Communist newspapers and periodicals shall be submitted to rigid censorship; it proposes to introduce special rules regarding the signing and authorisation of certain pamphlets and other printed matter; in appropriate cases prosecutions will be instituted.⁴⁷

On 24 May 1940 Regulation 17B was passed under Statutory Rules 1940 No. 90, which gave the government the power to ban CPA papers by placing a notice to that effect in the Commonwealth government *Gazette*. Initially, nine CPA publications were prohibited. New Theatre did not, then, issue a regular publication that could be proscribed, but it publicised its work through the *Workers' Weekly*, *Daily News*, *Tribune*, union organisations, and the mainstream press. Then, on 15 June 1940 under Statutory Rules 1940 No. 109, the National Security (Subversive Association) Regulations were introduced. Regulation 3 under Statutory Rules 1940 No. 110 outlawed the CPA and nine other organisations.⁴⁸ That very night, police raided the CPA headquarters in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, along with the homes of many members, confiscating paperwork, books, and other property. According to Stuart Macintyre, there had 'never been a police activity of this kind on the same scale'.⁴⁹ It

45 Interview with Dick and Lil Diamond, Melbourne New Theatre, Oral History Recordings, 1986–1987, State Library of Victoria, TMS 1105, MS14227.

46 Roger Douglas, 'Law, War and Liberty: The World War II Subversion Prosecutions', *Melbourne University Law Review* 27 (2003): 77.

47 NAA, A472/1, W807.

48 As published in the Commonwealth of Australia *Gazette*, no. 110, 15 June 1940, 1.

49 Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: the Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 297.

was reported that 'the raids, which were synchronised to begin together, so that organisations in one State could not be warned by those in another, were a sequel to the issue of a proclamation declaring Communist and Fascist organisations to be unlawful'.⁵⁰

The Sydney New Theatre, still at this time performing *Till the Day I Die*, was also raided that night. About 600 play scripts were confiscated, including some Shakespearean classics. Freda Lewis, New Theatre's assistant secretary and publicity officer, recalled that 'they took any books that had a red cover ... they behaved like Fascists'.⁵¹ After the raid, she announced, disingenuously, in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'We have no communists in our organisation, and we are not connected with the Communist Party in any way'.⁵² The raid on a cultural organisation that was not proscribed certainly astonished many in the labour movement not connected with the CPA. One was the editor of the Workers' Educational Association's journal, who wrote that 'the seizure of every kind of book, regardless of its nature or contents, has [produced] amazed indignation that such things could happen in Australia'.⁵³ The story of the raid has often been recalled as a defining moment in the history of the Sydney New Theatre.

Numerous other organisations and individuals were ensnared by these raids, which prompted widespread protests about infringements of civil liberties. Even the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* protested, calling on the Menzies government to define precisely both subversive literature and the limits governing the police powers of seizure, since

[t]here is accumulating evidence that the raids ... have resulted in an indiscriminate clearance of valuable libraries. Policemen naturally cannot be expected to exercise expert judgment, but it is both disturbing and ludicrous that the instructions under which they have acted are apparently so loose or sweeping as to result in the confiscation of purely classical works ... It should be as little the part of the Ministry to emulate Nazi intolerance on this question as it should be the function of the State police to despoil bookshelves of cherished volumes which no person of average intelligence could possibly stigmatise as 'subversive'.⁵⁴

On 3 July 1940, the New Theatre organised a meeting at the Sydney Trades Hall, 'to protest against the raiding of the New Theatre League and

50 'Nation-wide Drive by Police', *Advocate* (Burnie), 17 June 1940, 5.

51 Interview with Robin Hughes, 3 February 1995.

52 Cited in Paul Herlinger, 'A New Direction for the New?' *Australasian Drama Studies* 8 (1986): 102.

53 *Australian Highway* 22, no. 4 (August 1940): 65.

54 'Raided Libraries', *SMH*, 12 August 1940, 6.

the interferences with cultural work'. The speakers were Paul Mortier and Rupert Lockwood from the CPA, Rev. Stuart Watts (recently dismissed as editor of the *Church Standard*), Freda Lewis from New Theatre, and 2KY announcer J. K. Morley. Richard Wilson from the Civil Liberties Committee presided. The police report of the meeting noted that 'the general tenor of the speeches was indignation at the raiding of the League's premises and bitter hostility to the government. A militant note was struck throughout'.⁵⁵

The raid on the theatre also provoked fresh protests against the four year-old ban on *Till the Day I Die*. Freda Lewis formed a deputation from New Theatre to meet the New South Wales (NSW) chief secretary in July 1940. He refused to meet the deputation; his formal response was that the ban would remain because the play 'would have a degrading effect on those who saw it' and 'could do no good'.⁵⁶ Lewis, in response, invited him to the play's next performance.⁵⁷ We can assume the offer was not accepted.

Lewis wrote to Prime Minister Menzies on 8 August seeking that the scripts be returned, or at least preserved. Accordingly, they were returned, along with many other items (reports, leaflets, CPA booklets and eight stage rifle props) on 14 August. A box of detonators, however, was returned instead to its purported owner, the railways. The accompanying letter from a CIB investigator notes that his examination of the confiscated plays, which included works by George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy, 'does not reveal anything which indicate that such plays are used for and on behalf of the CPA, and, therefore, there seems no legal reason why they should not be returned'. This was despite Menzies' confident declaration the previous night that 'the type of material seized fully justified the steps that have been taken'.⁵⁸ The letter also indicated that the confiscated plays by Betty Roland, who had recently left the CPA, 'are ordinary working-class propaganda and cannot be considered as being connected with the Communist Party'.⁵⁹

Although not immune from the impact of the raids and the general antipathy to communism, only one New Theatre activist was charged under the *National Security Act*: Phyllis Johnson served one month in

55 NAA, A467, SF42/81, 13; 'Protests against Raid', *Barrier Miner*, 4 July 1940, 3. According to Lewis, many people were 'horrified at this attack on our civil liberties because there's always been a strong support for civil liberties in Australia'. Interview with Robin Hughes, 3 February 1995.

56 'Anti-Nazi Play Still Banned', *SMH*, 24 July 1940, 12.

57 'Ban on Anti-Nazi Play', *SMH*, 1 August 1940, 9.

58 'Communist Party Declared Illegal', *Examiner*, 17 June 1940, 1.

59 NAA, A467, SF42/81.

Long Bay Women's Penitentiary. She had joined the CPA in 1937 when she was just 19 and was now a member of the central committee. She was charged because of her speech at an anti-conscription meeting, and jailed because she had refused to enter into a recognisance to be of good behaviour.⁶⁰ Inside Long Bay, Johnson proclaimed: 'let there be no surrender'.⁶¹

Yet notwithstanding the raid on the Sydney New Theatre premises, there was no Commonwealth law that declared the New Theatre League illegal. D. R. B. Mitchell, inspector of the Sydney CIB office, made strenuous attempts to include the New Theatre in the list of banned organisations, but failed.⁶² Nevertheless, according to New Theatre's Oriel Gray,

the theatre fraction of the party went underground – enjoying every minute of it! The Sydney committee ordained that no fraction meetings should be held on the premises of any organisation that was openly communist. We crowded into a tiny room in a rabbit-warren building in Hunter Street. We arrived in ones and twos (and met afterwards in a pub or coffee shop, all in one merry group) ... we were warned to be alert for infiltration by security agents.⁶³

The 1940 ban on the CPA was imposed in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, when a great many disillusioned individuals broke from the Communist Party and New Theatre. One was Betty Roland (who previously went to Russia with Guido Baracchi, a founding member of the CPA); she was expelled from the party and her plays were 'excised' from New Theatre.⁶⁴ The Trotskyist Workers' Party/Communist League of Australia was scathing:

Presumably we are supposed to believe that the same plays [by Roland] previously endorsed and performed by the New Theatre League are now anti-working class. The truth is that the New Theatre League is just another 'stooge' outfit of the 'Communist' party whose puppets dance to the tune called by Miles, Dixon and Sharkey.⁶⁵

60 Douglas, 'Law, War and Liberty', 102.

61 'Congress against the National Security Regulations and in Defence of Civil Liberties', *Barrier Daily Truth*, 19 February 1940, 3. The only prominent eastern states' Communist prosecuted was Fred Paterson.

62 See Correspondence, Mitchell to Attorney General's Department, 5 July 1940, NAA, A467, 89/Part2/SF42/81.

63 Gray, *Exit Left*, 51–52. See also Anne Delaney, 'Red Aesthetics: The Establishment and Development of the Workers Art Clubs and New Theatre in Sydney, 1932–1945', *Post Imperfect: The Sydney University Historical Journal* 1 (1987): 48.

64 Jeff Sparrow, *Communism: A Love Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 254.

65 *The Militant* (Sydney), April 1940, 9.

The theatre did not cease its activities once the CPA itself was banned, but efforts to silence it continued. One instance was on 20 September 1940, when Freda Lewis took some New Theatre performers to the suburb of Mortdale. She intended contributing some political sketches to the election meeting of her cousin, Sam Lewis, CPA member, NSW Labor candidate for the federal seat of Barton and, from 1945, president of the Teachers' Federation. The police in attendance stopped the performance and took away their loudspeaker.⁶⁶ On the other hand, New Theatre extended its work to Wollongong, established links with the local Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the newly established Trades Hall, and formed a (short-lived) New Theatre branch. Lewis spoke at several South Coast meetings and began training interested people; and along with Eddie Allison and Jim Hector, he performed a number of sketches for various union meetings.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, the organisation continued to be attacked. The federal attorney-general, W.M. Hughes, now 78, wrote to the minister for information about New Theatre in July 1941. He claimed that it was still 'disseminating defeatist propaganda by means of stage plays at union meetings, street corner meetings of the State ALP (a lorry), and at lunch hour meetings at factories'. After quoting from a letter from Freda Lewis that listed various New Theatre activities at the time, Hughes recommended that 'one way in which the New Theatre's activities could be stopped would be by declaring it an unlawful body under the National Security (Subversive Associations) regulations'.⁶⁸ The position of the director of the CIB, H. E. Jones, on the potential impact of left-wing drama of the sort that the New Theatre was promulgating, typified the attitude of federal and State authorities: 'Propaganda of this nature is more lasting upon the minds of the public and far easier absorbed than the written word'.⁶⁹

Defiantly, the Sydney New Theatre maintained its normal schedule producing, uninterrupted throughout 1940, a mix of Australian, American and British plays on a wide range of topics. These included *No Conscription*, an anti-war play based on the writings of Australian author Rupert Lockwood, adapted by Catherine Duncan and produced by Vic Arnold. This production saw the New Theatre League face the federal

66 'Police Stop Street Entertainment', *SMH*, 21 September 1940, 16.

67 'Bulli-Woonona', *Illawarra Mercury*, 3 May 1940, 9; 'Trades Hall established at Wollongong', *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 September 1940, 9; 'Wollongong ALP', *Wollongong Argus*, 29 November 1940, 2; 'Searchlight', *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 September 1940, 9.

68 W. M. Hughes, letter to Senator H. S. Fell, 25 July 1941, NAA, A467, SF42/149.

69 Cited in Capp, *Writers Defiled*, 156.

government in a legal censorship case. On 16 April the Commonwealth censor had suppressed the play in its entirety, as it was being prepared for broadcast by the ALP on their Sydney radio station 2KY.⁷⁰ J. R. Hughes, the president of the NSW Labor Council, had complained about this act of proscription at an anti-censorship meeting at the Sydney Town Hall attended by 2000 people, where 'his announcement was received with "boos"' (presumably for the censor).⁷¹ Eddie Ward, who was one of the speakers at the Town Hall meeting, later asked in the House of Representatives why the play had been banned; a play which, he claimed, was 'purely historical'. Sir Henry Gullett, the acting minister for information, responded by saying that 'it was not usual to give reasons for censorship'.⁷²

At Christmas 1940 Sydney New Theatre put on its first revue, *I'd Rather be Left*. This satirical production, billed as 'a musical burlesque about people, politics, and parasites of this day and age', advanced a clear interpretation of the war as a capitalist one.⁷³ An internal history recorded that the review 'mercilessly exposed the Fascist leanings and the profiteering of the leaders of the "Phoney War"'.⁷⁴ Sydney New Theatre members believed that this riotous and popular show, which mocked Menzies and Churchill, but not Hitler and Stalin, opened up a completely new medium for performance. James McAuley, one of the writers and later a renowned poet and conservative intellectual, played the piano.⁷⁵ The play was highly successful, and had a sold-out season well into the middle of 1941, with many of its songs entering popular culture. One of the most popular ran 'There'll always be a Menzies while there's a BHP, for they have drawn their dividends since 1883'. Miriam Hampson recalls that 'the show was a counter to all the talk at the time about helping Hitler go into the Soviet Union ... it raised all the political issues of the day, it was funny and beautifully done'.⁷⁶ Marie Armstrong wrote that with this season, 'the ice was broken. The Australian writer of review and drama had become an essential to the development of the Australian theatre'.⁷⁷

70 'Candid Comments', *Australian Worker*, 24 April 1940, 1.

71 'Censorship Opposed', *SMH*, 16 April 1940, 10.

72 'War Measures', *Northern Miner*, 30 May 1940, 3.

73 'NTL', *SMH*, 2 August 1941, 2.

74 Paul Mortier, Pat Bullen and Jerome Levy, *15 years of Production* (Sydney: New Theatre, 1948), n.p.

75 Cassandra Pybus, *The Devil and James McAuley* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

76 Chris Williams, Miriam Hampson and Marie Armstrong, 'New Theatre—Fifty Years Young', *Australian Left Review* 1.77 (1981): 20.

77 Marie Armstrong, *Notes on the History of New Theatre Australia* (Sydney: New Theatre, 1959), 7.

New Theatre activity in Sydney: Second World War to the Cold War

After Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, CPA policy underwent a *volte face* and it enthusiastically supported the war. Sydney New Theatre followed suit, reflected through their work with Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). The establishment of CEMA (later renamed the Arts Council of Australia) in 1943 was modelled on the British organisation of the same name. Its objectives were 'to take the arts to the people – the country people – to encourage amateur groups [and] to provide a field in which artists could support themselves by their art'.⁷⁸ With CEMA's support, New Theatre's mobile work began in earnest: it produced plays under primitive conditions, but sent scripts and advice to soldiers in the fighting line, which assisted morale.⁷⁹

Despite problems with production and performance space and resources expended on CEMA touring work, Sydney New Theatre maintained its regular seasons of plays throughout the 1940s. 1944 was an especially busy year, with 10 separate seasons. These included works by Gray along with Anton Chekhov, the American dramatist Lillian Hellman and Australia's Katharine Susannah Prichard – indicative of the immense versatility of the group. The Sydney branch performed a total of 17 works written by Australian playwrights between 1940 and 1948. In the late 1940s it toured regional NSW with a mobile unit. Fortified by the success of its earlier mobile work through CEMA and encouraged by similar wartime efforts of the London Unity Theatre, Sydney New Theatre purchased a truck that enabled it to connect with the experiences and hopes of new, non-working class audiences.⁸⁰ Mobile theatre represented a revival of the highly politicised, semi-itinerant agitprop (agitation and propaganda) theatre, a style pioneered in post-revolutionary Russia. During the 1949 coal strike a concert party travelled to the Newcastle area to entertain the strikebound workers and their families. In Wollongong it performed for the Port Kembla Workers' Federation Delegates Committee to raise money for the Pensioners' Christmas Dinner Fund.⁸¹ From 1953, *Reedy River*, the most successful of all New Theatre's plays, was performed in factories, regional localities and country towns.

78 Dorothy Helmrich, *The First Twenty Five Years: A Study in the Arts Council of Australia* (Sydney: Southwood Press, 1969), 2. Helmrich was CEMA's inaugural president.

79 Mortier et al., *15 Years*, n.p.

80 'New Theatre's Past Year', *New Theatre Review*, March 1948, 8; Editorial, December 1948, 3.

81 *Ibid.*, 66.

As was the case in the early 1940s, censorship from commercial media organisations plagued the Sydney New Theatre in the late 1940s. While many trade union and Communist papers, such as *Workers' Weekly* and *Tribune*, regularly reviewed and advertised its productions, commercial journals were more capricious. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Wireless Weekly*, *Home* and *Daily Telegraph* had previously publicised and reviewed productions, but this coverage now ceased. One of the most frequently mentioned aspects of the history of the Australian New Theatre is its exclusion from mainstream Australian newspapers during the Cold War. The New Theatre producer, Marie Armstrong, remarked that in 1948

we performed a fantastic production of [Sean O'Casey's] *The Star Turns Red*, and one of the hierarchy in the "Herald" came to see it and saw the politics in it. The first edict that came from him was no more reviews, and then later they would not let us advertise, wouldn't take our money. For 12 years we had to fight the *Herald* for the right to advertise.⁸²

The ending of the ban, on both reviews and advertisements, occurred when the Communist-controlled Waterside Workers Federation pointed out to the 'Herald' editors that their newsprint had to be transported through the Sydney docks.⁸³ It was not until 1960 that the mainstream Sydney press once again reviewed the New Theatre plays; the first was of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.⁸⁴

New Theatre activity in Melbourne, 1943–1953

As we have seen earlier, to sell *Moscow News* outside the Brunswick Town Hall in 1937 aroused the interest of the security services as a sign of disloyalty. But five years later, the Soviet Union was attracting widespread sympathy and support. When the Soviet Union was invaded by Nazi Germany in June 1941, it became a wartime ally, and the local Communist Party and its 'front' organisations, such as the New Theatre, bathed in the reflected glory of the Red Army. After the Russians defeated the Germans at Stalingrad in February 1943, admiration became adulation. Melbournians donated generously to the 'sheepskins for Russia' campaign, joined the Australian–Soviet Friendship League in unprecedented numbers, and eagerly participated in cultural activities

82 Cited in Frank Enright, 'The Illustrious Life of Sydney's New Theatre', *Green Left*, 13 April 1994.

83 Ibid.

84 'Miller Drama Presented', *SMH*, 1 August 1960, 13.

at Australia–Soviet House, opened by the Lord Mayor in 1944. This favourable political climate was the all-important context for the successful expansion of cultural activities conducted by New Theatre during the war years.

When the president of Melbourne's New Theatre, Charles McCormack, wrote that '1943 has been a busy year for New Theatre',⁸⁵ he was probably understating the range of its activities, the energy of its volunteers, the size of its audiences, and the relevance of its plays to contemporary political issues. However, the war itself confronted the New Theatre with new problems to overcome: actors and technicians became soldiers, shift-work and overtime in essential industries impeded schedules, and war-induced shortages of materials necessitated improvisation of stage props. Another 'problem' was the insufficient politicisation of its members. A private letter in March 1944 from Lil Diamond to her Sydney counterpart, Alan Herbert, and obtained by military intelligence, confirmed this impression. Lil Diamond was a Melbourne New Theatre member and editor of *New Theatre Review* during this period. She was married to Dick Diamond, secretary of Melbourne Actors Equity, who is perhaps best known for writing *Reedy River*. She judged the political level of CPA members within New Theatre to be 'very poor' since they were 'too liberal' in outlook – unlike the more sectarian comrades in Sydney. Few attended branch meetings or classes, which meant 'they're not getting any stronger politically'.⁸⁶

Despite this perceived deficiency, the security services continued to conduct extensive surveillance of the members, policies and activities of New Theatre, which, it claimed, disseminated 'insidious propaganda'.⁸⁷ There are dozens of thick Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) files, from 1936 to 1970, on both individuals in, and all the branches of, the New Theatre. These files, which incorporate intelligence reports inherited from its predecessors, contain innumerable New Theatre publications; production committee notes; lists of the members of the cast and crew of productions, gleaned from the programs; newspaper reviews; detailed reports from informants on meetings, especially national conferences and national schools, including the full names of all those who attended or spoke; phone call intercepts; car registration details; and film surveillance footage of New Theatre meetings. The files provide, by

85 'Building a Theatre', *New Theatre Review*, November 1943, 5.

86 NSW Military District, Security Service Report No. 5192, 'Organizations Intended to Further Communist [illegible]', 31 March 1944, NAA, A6122, 417, folio 9.

87 NAA, A467, SF42/149.

default, a parallel history of the New Theatre. Along with several other left cultural organisations 'judged to be subversive to the security of the Commonwealth' (including the Realist Writers, the Australasian Book Society and the Fellowship of Australian Writers), their activities were a source of concern to successive Australian governments and, therefore, of interest to the various security services.⁸⁸ Norma Disher, long associated with the Sydney New Theatre, was convinced ASIO operatives were 'always around'.⁸⁹ It should be noted, however, that ASIO faced 'an immense task' in maintaining surveillance of these organisations, including New Theatre, and relegated its B1 (Counter-Subversion) Branch field officers to conduct 'Research' into rather than direct investigation of the groups.⁹⁰ Section officers in the early 1950s were insufficient in numbers and resources to concentrate their main attention on organisations other than the CPA.⁹¹

The war years and their immediate aftermath, despite shortages and austerity, marked the heyday of Melbourne's New Theatre. With the onset of the Cold War, audiences dwindled, reviews dried up and improvisation and resourcefulness were severely tested. Increasingly perceived as the 'Communist front' that it increasingly became, the New Theatre battled to stay afloat. The forces of anti-Communism were in the ascendant and 'progressive theatre' became synonymous with disloyalty. Yet the casual reader of *New Theatre Review* would have found few signs of impending difficulties in its daily survival or the struggle to maintain its identity as a crucible of social and cultural activism. It is true that by the end of 1948, *New Theatre Review* noted the 'marked decline' in its audiences.⁹² And in July 1949 the *Guardian* newspaper carried an uncharacteristically bleak review of New Theatre's production of Ben Jonson's famous comedy, *Volpone*. While it congratulated the players for not losing 'heart and spirit completely', it bemoaned the 'unnervingly small' audience on opening night, and challenged 'progressive people' to become more actively involved.⁹³ But the 'progressive people' were not immune from the rising tide of anti-Communism. New Theatre was identified, not unjustifiably, with the CPA, and the party was besieged in 1949. When *Volpone* opened in early July, a general coal strike, labelled a Communist conspiracy by

88 NAA, 'ASIO Files on Writers and Literary Groups – Fact Sheet 69'.

89 Cited in Arrow, *Upstaged*, 184.

90 David Horner, *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 201.

91 Ibid., 206–7.

92 'Having a Look at Ourselves', *New Theatre Review*, March 1949, 4.

93 "'Volpone' Opens. Support for New Theatre is Needed Now', *Guardian*, 8 July 1949, 6.

the Chifley Labor government, was crippling the economy; a Victorian royal commission into the Communist Party was hearing damning testimony that appeared to confirm Communist manipulation;⁹⁴ and the party's general secretary, L. L. Sharkey, was on trial after being charged with sedition. These events, and others, contributed to the corrosive political atmosphere which severely tested the allegiance of theatregoers to committed, left-wing theatre. Thus, the more New Theatre became closely connected to the Communist Party, the more it became vulnerable to political attack and the object of community hostility. The closing play for 1949 was a pre-election revue, *Take It As Read*, featuring 'witty, candid comment on current affairs'. With deliberate irony, the program requested: 'Please Do Not Engage in Subversive Activity'. Less ironic was the fact that none of the actors' real names was listed. Only the *Guardian* reviewed it.⁹⁵

By 1950 it was, again, the threat of proscription, not the dove of peace, which was circling around the left.⁹⁶ Talk of 'subversive activity' infected public debate on the *Communist Party Dissolution Bill*, introduced by Menzies to the new House of Representatives in April 1950. It is not the intention here to discuss the controversial events of 1950–51: the passage of the bill, the ambivalence of the Labor Party, the High Court challenge or the defeat of the referendum to ban the CPA. However, it is reasonable to assume that New Theatre felt, at least initially, isolated and on the defensive. In that brief interregnum in October 1950 when the bill became law, police raids were conducted, the Communist Party prepared to go underground, New Theatre was – potentially – a 'declared' organisation which had to prove its 'innocence' of Communist sympathy, and a siege mentality reigned.

Undoubtedly, New Theatre committee members and faithful supporters were influenced by this climate of fear and suspicion. However, as with the CPA records, there are few surviving records of New Theatre for this period to examine responses in any detail.⁹⁷ We do have, from 1951,

94 New Theatre's Dick Diamond appeared before this Royal Commission.

95 NTA, 2001.040.028; 2001.040.554. The play opened on 12 November, less than a month before Robert Menzies won the federal election. The *Guardian* review defended the play's 'political weapon' of ridicule against the criticism that 'this is no time for comedy'.

96 A version of Picasso's famous peace dove (first sketched in Sheffield in November 1950) featured on the front of the program for Leonard Irwin's *The Circling Dove*, a British play, performed by New Theatre in October 1951. NTA, 2001.040.562.

97 One (perhaps prosaic) response was to paste huge numbers of 'gum stickers of Communist Propaganda ... on the lift, walls, windows, lavatories etc.' in the building that housed New Theatre. In the opinion of New Theatre's solicitor, the landlord's complaint over this and other issues could lead to an eviction order. Cedric Ralph to

intermittent issues of *Spotlight*, a roneoed (and, understandably, poorly-produced) newsletter, which to a small extent filled the gap left by the closure of *New Theatre Review* in July 1949. The second issue, published in mid-1951, commented that 'we are now faced with the Referendum proposals of Menzies and partners-in-grime'. If the referendum were passed, *Spotlight* continued, 'an immediate full-stop to all forms of expression which are in any way hostile to the U.S.-liberal [sic] policy' would result. It called on opposition from 'a solid front of genuine democrats and patriots' and, 'if we are to survive', a strengthening of ties with the militant trade union movement.⁹⁸

But New Theatre did survive. Indeed, it managed to produce ten plays in 1950 and 1951, and the repertoire continued to mix Australian with overseas scripts, local with international issues, social comment with political critique. Increasingly, overseas plays were sourced from blacklisted American writers. Three of the most prominent were Albert Maltz, Dalton Trumbo and Howard Fast. Maltz and Trumbo were two of the famed 'Hollywood Ten' who defied the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities and were imprisoned in 1950. Maltz's *Peace On Earth* opened on 19 July 1950. With the Damoclean sword of legal proscription hovering, none of the cast was identified in the program. In an act of solidarity and generosity, Maltz signalled his intention to remit his royalties on *Peace On Earth* back to New Theatre.⁹⁹ New Theatre also produced his *Private Hicks*, an anti-draft play, in May 1951. In these early Cold War years, taking a short-term tactical stand meant longer-term creative expression was sacrificed. In short, aesthetic concerns were a casualty of ideological objectives. This was further demonstrated by the didactic one-act play, *The Nail on the Wall*, written by Frank Hardy when awaiting trial on charges of criminal libel. Reciprocally, New Theatre was harnessing its resources to mobilise opposition to the legal proceedings over Hardy's novel, *Power Without Glory*. The sole review of Hardy's play, in the *Guardian*, assessed it as 'a straight left to Menzies' jaw'. Because its theme (the impact of government legislation that makes a young Communist, Ray Muldoon, an outlaw), paralleled the 'No' case

Secretary, New Theatre, 15 November 1950, NTA, Box H0002581, Folder: Melbourne New Theatre Administration, 1950.

98 *Spotlight*, No. 2 [nd], NTA, 2001.040.784. The defeat of the referendum was proclaimed, in colourful rhetoric closely resembling the CPA's language of fear, a triumph 'in the struggle of the war plans of the Americanberra govt [sic]'. *Spotlight*, No. 4 [nd], NTA, 2001.040.784. *Spotlight* used the Communist Party's printing presses in 16 Corr's Lane, Melbourne.

99 Albert Maltz to Leila Cohen (secretary, Melbourne New Theatre), 15 June 1950, NTA, 2001.040.559.

then being waged in the referendum campaign, New Theatre came close to agitprop minus the mobile trailer.

New Theatre's tactical engagements and political responsiveness had always been there, stretching back to *Waiting for Lefty* in 1936 and its struggle over *Till the Day Die* in 1937. But the theatre – like most Communist-influenced or controlled organisations in these years of 'high Stalinism' – had become insular, inward-looking, polemical and adrift from the 'man in the street' with whom it wished, originally and subsequently, to link.¹⁰⁰ By Christmas 1952 New Theatre was as much, if not more, preoccupied with protesting to the minister for immigration, Harold Holt, against the threatened deportation of a Greek-Cypriot Communist, Jimmy Anastasiou, and protesting to the United States president, Harry Truman, against the death sentence imposed on Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, as they were about bringing theatre to 'the people'.¹⁰¹ It was not until the hugely successful *Reedy River*, which opened in March 1953, drew on Australian bush and ballad traditions and invoked a romantic radical nationalism, that New Theatre was rescued from financial insolvency and political didacticism. This play, the last written by Dick Diamond, not only fulfilled New Theatre's mission to present issues with a radical message, but used broad themes and rousing songs to attract a wide audience.¹⁰² As Hardy observed, *Reedy River* signalled 'a development in our national culture of very great importance', but was also a play 'to which you can take any of your non-Party friends or workmates'.¹⁰³ This was true. For a great many Australians, the play rode the crest of a wave of nationalist interest in folk and bush music, and the incorporation of many popular musical numbers in the play added much to its continuing popularity. If long queues in Flinders Street and 'Full House' signs were the criteria for success, New Theatre in Melbourne – a full sixteen years after its formation – had at last achieved success. This was a work that brought mainstream audiences to the New Theatre all around the country. It also brought much satisfaction to theatre workers: one member felt that 'to work in a theatre like the New

100 See Correspondence, Victor Arnold to Paul Herlinger, 30 June 1980, in which he refers to New Theatre's activities being 'confined to theatre production' when its slogan in the 1930s and 1940s was 'Theatre Belongs to the People'. See NTA, 2001.040.806. For the 'man in the street' reference, see 'New Theatre's 30th Birthday', *Our Woman*, September–December 1962, 27.

101 *Spotlight*, 1952, 2 ['Xmas Issue'], NTA, 2001.040.784.

102 Interview with Lil and Dick Diamond, 'Melbourne New Theatre: Early History', Oral History Recordings, 1986–1987, State Library of Victoria, TMS 1105, MS14227. For a comprehensive discussion of Diamond's creative life and work, see Friedel, 'Left Wing Melbourne Artists', ch. 4.

103 Frank Hardy, 'Reedy River: Step Forward in Working Class Art', *Guardian*, 1 April 1953, 4.

Theatre affords not only great pleasure in the many new friends we meet, but leaves us with the full feeling that it is a job indeed well worth doing and, in the case of *Reedy River*, a job well done'.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Notwithstanding New Theatre's continuing commitment to explicitly political theatre, official suspicion of New Theatre waned. With the rise of the new left and social movements that challenged government policy on conscription and the Vietnam war, ASIO had different and seemingly more threatening targets. A letter from Colonel Charles Spry, the director-general of ASIO, to the Prime Minister's Department, dated 5 November 1969, exemplified the changed position: 'participation in New Theatre activities does not necessarily indicate Communist sympathies and, in view of the current ideological confusion within the CPA, the New Theatre can no longer be accurately described as a Communist "Front" organisation, but it can be said to be under considerable CPA influence'.¹⁰⁵ But as we have argued, for much of the 20-year period examined in this article, New Theatre was burdened by its status as the disseminator of 'insidious propaganda' and its connection, real or perceived, to the Communist Party. The struggle for artistic expression, especially when challenges to dominant cultural and political values were mounted, confronted major difficulties, but New Theatre remained defiant in the face of such obstacles. It either met or sidestepped efforts by governments, security services, local councils and the conservative press to circumscribe its activities. When its performances were overtly propagandist in message or agitprop in style, aesthetic ambitions were subsumed by political imperatives, and New Theatre became more vulnerable to attack. When its plays were more congruent with mainstream (and, thus, less explicitly working-class) concerns, as in the Second World War, or tapped into a radical nationalism that revived folk and bush traditions, as occurred with *Reedy River*, its mission of introducing theatre to 'the masses' was realised, and it was better insulated from opponents' desire to silence it. Irrespective of the extent to which New Theatre echoed the prevailing Communist political line, it remained a significant artistic forum for a generation of writers, directors, performers and countless behind-the-scenes volunteers seeking to refashion society in mid-twentieth century Australia.

104 'Reedy River', *Newcastle Trades Hall Workers Club Journal* 2, no. 2 (1959): 17.

105 NAA, A6122, 2053, folio 26.

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About the authors

Phillip Deery is Professor of History at Victoria University, Melbourne. He has published extensively in the fields of communism, the Cold War and the labour movement. His book publications include *Fighting Against War: Peace Activism in the Twentieth Century* (co-edited with Julie Kimber, Melbourne: Leftbank Press, 2015), *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), and *Spiare e Tradire: Dietro le Quinte della Guerra Fredda* [*Espionage and Betrayal: Behind the Scenes of the Cold War*], (co-authored with Mario Del Pero, Milan: Feltrinelli Press, 2011). He is currently co-authoring (with Ellen Schrecker) *The Age of McCarthyism*, 3rd ed. (Boston: St. Martin's Press).

Correspondence to Phillip Deery: phillip.deery@vu.edu.au

Lisa Milner is a lecturer in the Media program at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour. Her published work includes *Fighting Films: a History of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit* (Pluto Press, 2003). Her current research interests include a comparative study of worker's theatre in Australia and the UK, representations of workers and trade unions on screen, and labour history.

Correspondence to Lisa Milner: Lisa.Milner@scu.edu.au