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# Melodrama in the Snowy Mountains: the Cooma Little Theatre Production of *Only an Orphan Girl* (1962)

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*Melodrama was prolific in Australia from the mid-nineteenth century until the First World War when it was replaced by cinema as a form of mass entertainment. It was resurrected in a caricature version in the 1950s and became hugely popular in capital cities as well as in a number of country centres. This article examines the revival of melodrama in the New South Wales town of Cooma in the context of the impact of the Australian government's post-war mass immigration policies, and the significant social and demographic changes that occurred in Cooma following commencement of work on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme in 1949. It focuses on the early activities of Cooma Little Theatre, with specific reference to the Theatre's 1962 production of Only an Orphan Girl. It considers the role of melodrama during a time of major upheaval and its longer term influence on the theatrical life of the town. Janet McGaw is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney. She is researching Australian amateur theatre in regional New South Wales communities between 1945 and 1970. Cooma's Little Theatre is one of three case studies that form part of her research.*

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## ***Introduction***

In his *Concise History of Australia*, Stuart Macintyre describes the period between 1946 and 1974 as a "golden age," an era characterised by economic prosperity, full employment, increased leisure and more choices.<sup>1</sup> It was also a period of mass immigration when old certainties came under threat. Between 1947 and 1961, the number of new migrants was the largest of any 15-year period in Australian history to date, accounting for 50% of population growth.<sup>2</sup> Of greater significance, however, was that their country of origin altered substantially. Just over half of the 721,800 men and women who arrived in the country between 1945 and December 1952 were from continental Europe;

of these, 170,400 were displaced persons from refugee camps who were indentured to work for two years as directed by the Australian government, regardless of their skills and qualifications.<sup>3</sup> Many were assigned to the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, a massive nation-building infrastructure project involving the construction of dams, pipelines and electricity generators in some of the toughest, least accessible terrain in the country.<sup>4</sup> Identifiably different, these so-called “new Australians” faced hostility, prejudice and racial intolerance from an Anglo-centric population that was reluctant to relinquish its ties to Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Changes were also occurring in the nation’s cultural life: governments at both Federal and State level began to fund the arts, and theatre took on a more serious sense of purpose, encouraged by the Arts Council and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, established in 1943 and 1954 respectively. The Arts Council embarked on a mission to take the arts to the people, particularly to country towns that were considered to be culturally arid.<sup>6</sup> The Elizabethan Theatre Trust aimed to set up national drama, opera and ballet companies and “to make the theatre in Australia the same vigorous and significant force in our national life that it was in the reign of the first Elizabeth.”<sup>7</sup> The Trust also provided the seed money for the establishment of the actor-training academy, the National Institute of Dramatic Art in 1959, located in Sydney.

The social and cultural upheavals that began in the late 1940s converged in Cooma, a relatively isolated boom town servicing the Snowy Mountains Scheme, home to a massive influx of migrant labour and a largely Anglo-Saxon managerial and professional population. As such, Cooma provides a valuable case study for an examination of the delivery of live theatre in a rural community in the context of the transition of an Australian society overwhelmingly vested in Britain to a multicultural nation.

### *Cooma—A Case Study*

The town of Cooma lies in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, 400 kilometres south-west of Sydney and 115 kilometres south of Australia’s capital Canberra. In the census year of 1947, it was a small pastoral community with a population of just over 2,000, the majority of whom were Australian-born and of British descent.<sup>8</sup> Civic amenities and communications were limited, and most roads in and out of the town were unsealed. Farming families came into town once a week to do their shopping. Entertainment was provided by travelling shows, films and the occasional amateur dramatic performance.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Cooma was a typical Australian country town of the day, with little to distinguish it from any other. However, this bucolic way of life changed dramatically after 1949 with the commencement of work on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and the transfer from Sydney to Cooma of the headquarters of the Snowy Mountains Authority, the statutory body that administered the Scheme.<sup>10</sup> The impact of the Snowy Mountains Scheme on Australia in general, and on Cooma in particular, was profound and far-reaching. A country founded on stolid British stock became one of the world’s great pancultures,<sup>11</sup> and Cooma was

transformed from a quiet, rural service town into a vibrant cosmopolitan community.<sup>12</sup> Cooma Little Theatre was a product of that transformation.

### ***The Snowy People***

The Snowy Mountains Authority (“the Authority”) employed an estimated 100,000 Australians and overseas migrants in Cooma and the surrounding regions between 1949 and 1974. By the 1954 census, almost two-thirds of the population had been born outside Australia. Half of the professional staff employed by the Authority and 80% of the tradespeople were migrants.<sup>13</sup> A social hierarchy developed within the Authority according to occupational status, with a strict demarcation between professional salaried staff and unskilled wage earners.<sup>14</sup> The newcomers were segregated from the townspeople in two new suburbs built by the Authority—Cooma North for the professional and administrative staff, and East Cooma for the construction workers. Collectively, they were referred to by the long-standing residents of Cooma as “the Snowy people.”

The new suburbs were located two kilometres from the existing township and bisected by the railway line. Cooma North, known colloquially as “Snobs Hill” had its own shops, schools and the best houses.<sup>15</sup> Within that community was a sub-hierarchy headed by managerial staff and their wives.<sup>16</sup> Cooma East was a temporary camp where construction workers, many of whom were displaced persons, were accommodated in primitive barrack accommodation. The railway line in effect created a geographical and class divide and the barrier between the two was inviolate.<sup>17</sup> The two suburbs rarely mixed socially. According to Thelma Hosking, interviewed by Siobhan McHugh for her social history of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, this was because of different interests, tastes and levels of education. Hosking was an English migrant, the wife of a Snowy engineer and an active member of Cooma Little Theatre from its early days to the 1970s. She described the residents of Cooma North as “people of culture and with a background in all sorts of achievements,” and made the dubious claim that “it wasn’t a matter of *snobbery*—not a class thing, like in England.”<sup>18</sup>

Almost without warning, a quiet rural community had been forced to accept the brunt of the Snowy workforce, many of whom were traumatised by war and unable to speak English. Rapid change brought with it enormous social problems in the early years of the Scheme. Pressure on housing and other basic commodities led to tensions between Cooma locals and the migrants, both labourers and professionals. The attitude towards the newcomers was one of suspicion bordering on hostility,<sup>19</sup> though opinions are divided about the extent of the animosity. One aggrieved resident blamed the newcomers for wrecking what he described as a “nice little society” and never mixed with them.<sup>20</sup> This was an extreme view that was not shared by many, but there were simmering tensions that took several years to dissipate.<sup>21</sup> Michael Bender, who moved to Cooma from Sydney in 1954 to work as a relief bank clerk, has recalled how local shopkeepers would not serve Snowy people until after they had dealt with the locals. In Bender’s opinion, this was “a stupid, stupid attitude.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the friction, there is no doubt that the Snowy Mountains Authority brought tangible benefits to Cooma. It funded the construction of roads and houses, as well as contributing to community services and sporting and recreational facilities.<sup>23</sup> The Authority's commissioner, William Hudson, wanted to foster a spirit of teamwork among the workforce.<sup>24</sup> In November 1950, Hudson issued a directive in which he stated:

The Authority regards the provision of recreation and entertainment facilities in the Townships and Construction Camps as important in contributing to the greater contentment of officers, employees and their dependents [sic].<sup>25</sup>

This philosophy underpinned much of the social and cultural life of Cooma in the 1950s and 1960s. A range of activities became available to cater for the tastes of a vastly increased and more ethnically diverse population, not only those living in Cooma, but in regional townships and construction camps that accommodated men working on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. Some of these communities were temporary, built to serve one phase of the construction, then relocated to the next site. Others were permanent, with accommodation for families, schools, shops and community halls.<sup>26</sup>

There were two strands to Cooma's expanded recreational life. On the one hand, the town developed a colourful night scene following a liberalisation of the liquor licensing laws in 1954. This featured a busy hotel and restaurant trade and several 24-hour night clubs offering twice-nightly floor shows. Performers included musicians, jugglers, sword swallowers, fire-eaters and striptease artists.<sup>27</sup> These amusements catered mainly for construction camp workers who came into town on their day off to relax and have a good time, but once the word spread, they attracted custom from as far away as Canberra.<sup>28</sup>

At the other extreme was a life of high culture and Cooma became, in the words of Siobhan McHugh, "a temporary repository of the sort of artistic excellence and cultural activity usually found only in great cities."<sup>29</sup> Much of this activity was driven by the local branch of the Arts Council, established in 1953. The branch sponsored tours to Cooma and the regions by opera and ballet companies, musicians and metropolitan theatre organisations. Its founders did not envisage any difficulties in attracting patrons for these performances because they believed that most newcomers to the town had an appetite for artistic experience, and this proved to be the case in the early years.<sup>30</sup> A performance by pianist Isadore Goodman in March 1955, for example, was fully booked within days of tickets going on sale.<sup>31</sup> As far as theatre was concerned, there was a certain degree of pragmatism in choosing the annual programme, based on a recognition that "highly cultured" shows lacking elements of popular appeal were unlikely to attract large audiences.<sup>32</sup> The branch faced a constant struggle to assuage the notion that productions deemed by the Arts Council to be of a high artistic standard were "necessarily boring and strictly for highbrows only."<sup>33</sup>

The two ends of the cultural spectrum were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but given the nature of the social structure of Cooma and the hierarchy that existed within the Authority's workforce, they were unlikely to have shared common patronage.

### ***Cooma Little Theatre***

It was in this social and cultural environment that Cooma Little Theatre was established at the end of 1954. There had been an amateur dramatic society in Cooma in the past, but its activities had been sporadic and it had ceased to exist by 1940. When English-speaking migrants with an interest in theatre started to flood into Cooma to work on the Snowy Mountains Scheme in the early 1950s, it was only a matter of time before a permanent dramatic society came into being. The origins of Cooma Little Theatre are obscure, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it grew out of an informal play reading group initiated by two English migrants, Doris and Dennis Walsh, who had been involved in amateur theatre in England.<sup>34</sup> The group's first official public performance—three one-act plays—took place at the Parish Hall on 11 November 1954.<sup>35</sup> The choice of name for the new society, Cooma Little Theatre, rather than the more common term "amateur dramatic society," suggests that it was intended to mirror the serious theatrical repertory groups that had proliferated in Australian capital cities since the 1920s, and in England where many of the members originated. This is borne out by an early review which observed that the group was "deeply interested in drama and acting."<sup>36</sup>

Membership of the Little Theatre in the 1950s and 1960s consisted largely of the Authority's professional and administrative staff and their wives, school teachers posted to Cooma by the Department of Education, and local business people.<sup>37</sup> One member from this period has described the membership in the following terms:

They were Anglo people I suppose ... and there were quite a few people from the UK who joined up, but they were mostly Snowy people, and I think that they were mainly educated people looking to maybe get into a bit of culture.<sup>38</sup>

The local townspeople also joined, but in far fewer numbers during the foundation years.<sup>39</sup>

The Little Theatre developed an active and varied programme. Between 1955 and 1970, they staged 40 full-length works, comprising 21 comedies, 14 dramas, four melodramas and one fantasy, as well 20 one-act plays and approximately 50 public play readings. With the assistance of the Snowy Mountains Authority, which provided transport, drivers, meals and accommodation, the group took several of their full-length productions to regional townships and construction camps where access to live theatre was limited. The Little Theatre also hosted drama training schools in Cooma, sponsored selected members to attend courses in Sydney during the summer, and entered regional and State drama festivals in an attempt to lift standards.

The main criterion for play selection was audience appeal and this is reflected in the heavy emphasis on the British comedies and dramas that were popular with country dramatic societies in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the Little Theatre often struggled for patronage in its early years. It is impossible to be definitive about audience numbers. No archival records survive from the period before 1980 and reviews in the local newspaper, the *Cooma-Monaro Express*, rarely cite precise figures, but they do suggest that during the theatre's early years attendances were inconsistent. For example, in August 1955, a performance of *The Poltergeist*, entered in the inaugural Arts Council Drama Festival, was attended by only 100 people in a theatre that had a seating capacity of between 300 and 400, but the first night of the following year's entry, Christopher Fry's adaptation *Ring Round the Moon*, played to a full house.<sup>41</sup> When the group entered the National Eisteddfod in Canberra in 1959, the *Express* reviewer described the Little Theatre as "a repertory group in the top country bracket" but added: "The pity is that such a small core of the public appreciates this and participates in presentations here."<sup>42</sup> This comment suggests that audience numbers were low and that the same people attended each production.

We can only speculate about why people stayed away. Standards were certainly patchy, depending on the degree of difficulty of the piece and the experience of the available actors, producers and technical crew, and not all plays in the repertoire would have been known to Cooma audiences.<sup>43</sup> Poor reviews didn't help. In 1959, when the Little Theatre staged Jack Kirkland's drama *Tobacco Road*, a complex tale of the decline of a farming family in Georgia in the 1920s, they were criticised for attempting to portray scenes, people and events that were completely unfamiliar to them. According to the reviewer:

The group went right out of its depth into water where only a brilliant company could succeed. ... and although Cooma's Little Theatre group is good, it is not that brilliant.<sup>44</sup>

There was also a perception among the long-standing residents of Cooma that the Little Theatre was an elite club for the Snowy people, and this may have discouraged them from supporting the group.<sup>45</sup> More significantly, the Little Theatre made no attempt to tap into the audience potential of the non-English speaking migrants in the town or in the regions, for whom the repertoire would have been inaccessible.

The Little Theatre survived from year to year, but there was always an element of insecurity. The fact that audiences were unpredictable meant that box office takings could not be relied upon and the group was not able to build up sufficient reserves to sustain it against major losses. This situation began to change towards the end of 1961 when the Little Theatre had its first major financial success with Philip King and Falkland Cary's comedy *Sailor Beware!* A cumulative audience of 900 people attended the two performances in Cooma at a time when the population was around 8700.<sup>46</sup> The production then toured to the township of Berridale and the construction camp at Island Bend in response to

requests from those communities.<sup>47</sup> Profits from the show enabled the Little Theatre to add to its library collection, stage settings, workshop materials and equipment. It was also able to extend the scope of the repertoire because it was no longer prevented from presenting plays with high royalty costs or those involving expensive costumes and elaborate sets.<sup>48</sup> What was more significant was a growing acceptance of the group by the people of Cooma and the regions,<sup>49</sup> an acceptance that was consolidated the following year when the Little Theatre decided to produce a melodrama.

### ***Melodrama in Australia***

Melodrama was performed prolifically in Australia from the mid-nineteenth century until the First World War. Much of it was imported from Britain and America, with plots based on the principle of rewarding virtue and punishing villainy.<sup>50</sup> From the 1880s, the standard scenarios were localised by Australian actor-managers and the presentation became more sensational and spectacular. Stories revolving around convicts, bushrangers and the gold rushes were popular with all levels of society until the coming of the cinematograph in the early twentieth century,<sup>51</sup> when it began to replace stage melodrama as a form of mass entertainment and drew working-class audiences away from live theatre.<sup>52</sup>

Melodrama underwent something of a renaissance in Australia in the 1950s, initially among metropolitan repertory societies,<sup>53</sup> and from the early 1960s, in theatre-restaurants in capital cities established specifically for the production of these shows.<sup>54</sup> But this was not the traditional melodrama of the nineteenth century; rather, it was presented in a caricature version that was deliberately over-acted. Patrons were encouraged to participate in the proceedings by hissing and throwing missiles at the villain and cheering the heroine. This irreverent form of entertainment was hugely popular and shows ran for months at a time.<sup>55</sup> The revival of melodrama in the form of music-hall entertainment was not confined to the cities; from 1962, its popularity spread to a number of country towns, including Cooma.

### ***Only an Orphan Girl***

Melodrama was an unlikely choice for Cooma Little Theatre. The theatre had been founded with a policy of limiting productions to the spoken word, and for many years, any suggestion of including music was vigorously resisted by a few stalwarts who insisted on abiding by the letter of its constitution.<sup>56</sup> The idea of staging a melodrama was first mooted in February 1962. It is not clear how this came about, but it has been suggested that it was inspired by members who had enjoyed a production of *East Lynne* at the recently-opened Neutral Bay Music Hall in Sydney during the previous Christmas holidays.<sup>57</sup> Members of the Little Theatre believed they had the resources necessary to produce something similar and they welcomed the opportunity to widen their experience and showcase their talents. They also felt that Cooma audiences would enjoy the participatory aspect of the presentation.<sup>58</sup> The play selected, *Only an Orphan Girl* was to be a curtain raiser for the annual Festival of the Snows, a week-long event that raised

money for local community projects. Written in 1944 by American Henning Nelms, the piece drew on nineteenth-century melodrama characters and incidents: a sweet and virtuous heroine, a nasty villain, a home-spun hero, a *femme fatale* and a number of other well-defined and action-provoking characters, and in keeping with tradition, the play was set to musical accompaniment.

News of the planned production first appeared in the *Cooma-Monaro Express* on July 20, 1962, three months ahead of the scheduled opening date. Public reaction was immediate. Within a week of this first announcement, the Little Theatre received invitations to take the production to a number of regional townships.<sup>59</sup> Over the coming weeks there was extensive pre-show coverage in the *Express* and around town, with regular updates on progress of rehearsals, as well as information about the history of melodrama and its recent revival in Australia.<sup>60</sup> The amount of newspaper space given over to this show far exceeded that for any previous Little Theatre production. The most important aspect of the publicity was that audiences were primed well in advance on how they were expected to behave during the performance.

A talented and experienced production team was assembled. The show was produced by Constance Harvey, who worked as a draughtswoman in the drawing office of the electrical and mechanical group at the Authority's headquarters in Cooma North. Harvey was an accomplished artist who painted the backdrops and scenery, as well as designing the performance programme. Many of the cast and backstage crew were migrants who had had theatrical experience in dramatic societies elsewhere before coming to Cooma, including the director, Charles Hall, who had played leading roles in amateur theatre productions in London.<sup>61</sup> Others with technical expertise and artistic skills ensured a high standard of set and costume design, lighting and musical accompaniment.<sup>62</sup>

The melodrama was presented in Cooma at the Snowy Hall rather than the Civic Hall, the venue of the Little Theatre's full-length productions since April 1958. The Civic Hall was a converted cinema in the town centre with seating for 600 patrons, but it was too large and functional to capture the ambience of the music hall setting.<sup>63</sup> No effort was spared to replicate the lighting and décor of the Victorian era and to ensure that every detail of the production was authentic. The pianist chose songs that were typical of the period as signature tunes for each character, as well as mood music and interval entertainment, while the advertisements in the programme were presented in Victorian graphic style. The audience, limited to 150 a night, was seated at tables of four and served jugs of beer and other refreshments by waiters dressed in Victorian costume. A team of cigarette girls wearing false moustaches dispensed bags of peanuts to patrons, who could either eat them or hurl them at the villain. During the interval, eight male singers lined up and sang in barber-shop style to the accompaniment of the pianist, and patrons were invited to sing along.<sup>64</sup>

The audience played its part as enthusiastically as the actors. They threw peanuts and streamers, either in condemnation or congratulation, as the

occasion demanded, and they joined in the community singing without restraint. The local reviewer described the production as:

... the best two hours of fun that has hit Cooma—or most places—for a long time. It was so different that it has to be seen to be fully appreciated. It was well acted by being over acted in a delightfully impossible manner to this sophisticated decade.<sup>65</sup>

What the reviewer was implying was that theatre had become far too serious, and that the melodrama presented by the Little Theatre fulfilled a need among the people of Cooma for a simpler, more inclusive form of entertainment.

The success of *Only an Orphan Girl* was phenomenal and took the Little Theatre by surprise. The scheduled five-night run in Cooma had to be extended by two nights and there were requests for more.<sup>66</sup> The Little Theatre then took the show to the regions, with performances in the townships of Berridale and Bombala, and at Snowy construction camps in Island Bend and Cabramurra. It was not the first show the group had taken on tour, but it proved to be by far the most popular, with a full house at every venue. The results speak for themselves. At the conclusion of the season, the melodrama had broken all box office records, with a cumulative audience of 2300.<sup>67</sup>

The significance of *Only an Orphan Girl* was threefold. First, it gave audiences an opportunity to let their hair down; second, it acted as a social leveller and in the process stimulated interest in live theatre in Cooma; and third, it gave the group financial security.

#### *'A vast uncorsetting of audiences'*

In her entry on theatre-restaurants in Philip Parsons' *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Katharine Brisbane observed:

At a time when middle-class 'polite' theatre was only occasionally disturbed by works like Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* in 1961 and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1964, theatre-restaurants offered rumbustious, deeply impolite theatrical entertainment that caused a vast uncorsetting of audiences.<sup>68</sup>

The metropolitan experience was replicated in country towns. In Cooma, one of the chief attractions of *Only an Orphan Girl* was that audiences were in effect given permission to act outrageously without fear of being judged. They didn't have to be theatre-conscious to appreciate melodrama. If they had never been to a live production before, they could still sit back and enjoy the ludicrous situations and the exaggerated emotional drama. Melodrama was entertainment, pure and simple. Even the local theatre critic joined in, reporting in a review of the opening night: "This reviewer has not let go and laughed and uninhibitedly cheered so much for years."<sup>69</sup>

The pre-production publicity was essential to the loosening up of the audience, assisted by the cabaret-style seating and the serving of alcohol. Where audiences were *not* given advance instructions on how to behave, and where melodrama was presented in more a formal theatre setting, audiences were not nearly as responsive. Ray McDermott, who played Arthur Rutherford, the villain of the piece, has recalled the performance at the small rural community of Berridale where audience reaction threw the cast into some confusion.

Berridale is a village on the road between Cooma and Jindabyne. It's quite a cute little place. And of course it was a melodrama and overacted. They took it seriously. You'd do a scene and come backstage and say, "God, what's happening here?" And I remember Charles [Hall] said: "They think it's for real. Play it straight, play it straight." So from then on we played it straight. Berridale did not get the idea of the melodrama. That was the most amazing experience. The boisterous audience in Cooma were yelling out at us and throwing peanuts and making comments and I'd answer them back, you know. Berridale all sat there, quiet.<sup>70</sup>

It was not only audiences that threw caution to the wind. Ray McDermott relished the idea of having the licence to "ham it up" as much as he liked.<sup>71</sup> McDermott was a showman who loved being on-stage, but contemporary evidence suggests that he was an exception. Male acting parts were difficult to cast in Cooma Little Theatre. Men were less likely to show up for auditions and to engage in club night activities, and this was attributed to their shyness.<sup>72</sup> Arguably, melodrama provided the men who were self-conscious a safe place to lose their inhibitions.

### ***Bridging the gap***

Melodrama had particular significance in a town where there was no middle ground between the raucous night club scene that revolved around heavy drinking and risqué entertainment on the one hand, and the world of concerts, opera, ballet and drama on the other. It brought men and women from all sections of the community together in a shared experience of theatre, rather than segregating them into "highbrow" and "lowbrow" audiences. *Only an Orphan Girl* involved the residents of Cooma in the preparation of the show in a way that no other production had done in the past. It was beyond the capacity of the group alone to present the show in music-hall style and many non-members gave their time and assistance to the production.<sup>73</sup> They loaned props and costumes, placed advertisements in the programme and provided ticket sales services. Family and friends acted as "cuers-in" during rehearsals.<sup>74</sup> Cooma locals came forward to take on the roles of waiters and waitresses. In this way, melodrama transcended the divisions of class and ethnicity that had been a feature of life in Cooma since the early 1950s and helped to break down the barriers between the Snowy people and the long-term residents of Cooma. In the construction townships, where a predominantly male population with a limited command of English lived in barrack accommodation, the exaggerated gestures of the performers spoke a universal language. Everyone, regardless of nationality, knew they could hiss the villain and applaud the heroine.<sup>75</sup> This enthusiastic response from the regions

was an unexpected outcome. There is no evidence to suggest that the Little Theatre had the potential language restrictions of their audiences in mind when the melodrama was selected for production.

This coming together of disparate audiences stimulated interest in live theatre in Cooma. In the month following the production, membership rose to an all-time high of 65, with the inclusion of more Cooma locals.<sup>76</sup> This was important for the theatre's long-term viability because when the Snowy people started to leave Cooma on completion of the Scheme, the Little Theatre had a solid membership base on which to build.

### ***Looking to the future***

Finally, the success of *Only an Orphan Girl* gave Cooma Little Theatre financial security. It was by far their most successful production to date in terms of box office. Takings from the show, after the distribution of donations to charity, made a substantial boost to their bank account, giving them more freedom to determine their future programme and the ability to sustain some losses. The following year, members of the Little Theatre established a sub-committee to investigate the possibility of building its own theatre.<sup>77</sup> This proved to be beyond their means at that stage, but it did give them the confidence to have ambitious plans for the future. The group went on to produce a further three successful melodramas in the 1960s—*Murder in the Red Barn* in 1964, *Sweeney Todd* in 1967 and *Love Rides the Rails* in 1969—though none had quite the same impact as the first. The Little Theatre extended their programme in the 1970s and 1980s, taking music-hall melodramas and revues written by members to hotels downtown.<sup>78</sup> In more recent times, musicals have entered the repertoire. These forms of theatrical entertainment have been hugely popular with Cooma audiences and have contributed financially to the Little Theatre's long-term survival.

### ***Conclusion***

Cooma's Little Theatre was one of a number of country dramatic societies that introduced melodrama into the repertoire from 1962 with hugely successful results. It had a particular relevance in Cooma, a town that had had to grapple with massive social and demographic change for over a decade. Melodrama in its music-hall incarnation continues to be popular in Australian country towns. Many country dramatic societies started out with ambitions of bringing serious plays to their local communities but they were unable to survive by presenting drama alone. Melodrama has helped save some of them from extinction by uniting audiences in much the same way that the traditional form of melodrama did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In regional Australia, where theatrical choices are circumscribed by isolation, thinly scattered and often transient populations, and limited access to funding, melodrama has played an important role in bringing all sections of the community together for a good night out and ensuring that country audiences continue to have access to live theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *A concise history of Australia* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199.

<sup>2</sup> Reginald T Appleyard, "The population," in *Australian society: a sociological introduction*, ed. Alan F. Davies and Sol Encel (New York: Atherton Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>3</sup> W. D. Barrie, "New and old Australians," in *Taking stock: aspects of mid-century life in Australia*, ed. W. V. Aughterson (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1953), 172.

<sup>4</sup> The Snowy Mountains form the highest mountain range in Australia and are part of the south-east Australian Great Dividing Range.

<sup>5</sup> Jock Collins, *Migrant hands in a distant land: Australia's post-war immigration* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Leichhardt: Pluto Press, 1991), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Pamphlet, *Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts* (Sydney, c.1943).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Helen Musa, "Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust," in *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons with Victoria Chance (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Records. In the 1947 census, the population was 2249 of whom 2159 were born in Australia, 61 in the United Kingdom and 29 elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Laurie Neal, *Cooma Country* (Cooma: Cooma Historical Society, 1976), 243-244, 261.

<sup>10</sup> The Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme provided for the diversion of the waters of the Snowy River to the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers to generate electricity for the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Victoria, and to supply water for the irrigation of the Riverina. The project was established by an act of the Australian Parliament in 1949 and was completed in 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Brad Collis *Snowy*, *The making of modern Australia* (4<sup>th</sup> edition revised) (Canberra: Tabletop Press, July 2002), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Wolfe, "Foreword" in Alison Howell, *Cooma 1950-1960: A decade of change* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Cooma: Cooma Monaro Historical Society, 1999), 3. Wolfe recalls that Cooma in the 1950s was more like a progressive city suburb than a country town.

<sup>13</sup> Kirsty McGoldrick, *Snowfraus: The women of the Snowy Mountains Scheme* (East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Collis, *Snowy*, 113. Salaried staff were paid monthly and wage earners daily or weekly.

<sup>15</sup> Collis, *Snowy*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Siobhan McHugh, *The Snowy—the people behind the power* (Port Melbourne: Heinemann, 1989), 196-197.

<sup>17</sup> Collis, *Snowy*, 204.

<sup>18</sup> Thelma Hosking, cited in McHugh, *The Snowy*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> McHugh, *The Snowy*, 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> Rod Bridges, cited in McHugh, *The Snowy*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Leslie Hain, cited in Margaret Unger, *Voices from the Snowy* (Kensington: NSW University Press, 1989), 92; interview with Ray McDermott, member of Cooma Little Theatre, 1960-1965. McDermott recalled "undercurrents" of tension in the town.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Michael Bender, member of Cooma Little Theatre 1955-1958, March 22, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> "Figures point to the value of SMA here," *Cooma-Monaro Express (CME)*, (May 10, 1963), 1. These were set out in some detail in an attempt to refute allegations in a letter to the editor that the Snowy Mountains Authority had placed a "crushing burden" on the town.

<sup>24</sup> *SMA Magazine* 2:1 (August 1951), 1. William Hudson headed the Snowy Mountains Authority from its establishment in 1949 until his retirement in 1967.

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- <sup>25</sup> William Hudson, Direction no. 58, Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority Amenities Services, 13 November 1950, A2915/1, Snowy Hydro Records, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.
- <sup>26</sup> The main townships were Cabramurra, Khancoban, Island Bend and Talbingo for Snowy Mountains Authority staff and families; Happy Jacks and Sue City, run by the American Kaiser Group, and Bella Vista and Thiess Village operated by Australian contractors. Their populations ranged from 50 at the construction camp at Junction Shaft to 3,000 at the township of Cabramurra.
- <sup>27</sup> Howell, *Cooma 1950-1960*, 27-28. Closing time was extended from 6.00 pm to 10.00 pm with a shut-down from 7.00-8.00 pm to allow patrons to go home for dinner.
- <sup>28</sup> McHugh, *The Snowy*, 189.
- <sup>29</sup> McHugh, *The Snowy*, 204.
- <sup>30</sup> "Keen support displayed for Cooma Arts Council," *CME*, October 13, 1953, 1.
- <sup>31</sup> "Master of piano Isadore Goodman in Cooma," *CME*, April 1, 1955, 2.
- <sup>32</sup> "Cooma Arts Council full and successful year," *CME*, November 1, 1955, 1.
- <sup>33</sup> "Highly artistic shows are 'not for highbrows only,'" *CME*, February 17, 1964, 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Pamela Mertens, with contributions from many members, *Little Theatre Big Shows: The Story of Cooma Little Theatre's First 50 Years* (Cooma: Cooma Little Theatre, September 2005), 4. Mertens interviewed the Walshes when she was researching this history.
- <sup>35</sup> "Play night proves popular," *CME*, November 23, 1954, 6.
- <sup>36</sup> "Dangerous corner a good beginning," *CME*, May 11, 1956, 8.
- <sup>37</sup> *Snowy Review*, Christmas 1958, 12; D. Olsson, *Snowy Sketches* (Brisbane: Boolorong Press), 1999), 53; interviews with R. McDermott, March 4, 2013 and M. Bender, March 22, 2013; letter from Roland Beech, member of Cooma Little Theatre 1958-1962, to the author, April 16, 2013.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with Ray McDermott, March 4, 2013.
- <sup>39</sup> Judy Beadle, *Memories of Cooma Little Theatre* (Bangalow: unpublished, 2013), 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Interviews with R. McDermott, March 4, 2013 and M. Bender, March 22, 2013. Of the 40 full-length productions between 1955 and 1970, 28 were British or Irish.
- <sup>41</sup> "Arts Council adjudicator praised Cooma artists," *CME*, August 5, 1955, 1; "Ring Round the Moon was delightful play," *CME*, August 2, 1956, 3. The low attendance for *The Poltergeist* might be explained by the fact that the Little Theatre had already given a performance of the play earlier in the year.
- <sup>42</sup> "Third place to Little Theatre," *CME*, May 4, 1959, 1.
- <sup>43</sup> For example, *Waiting for Gillian* by Ronald Millar in February 1959, *Tobacco Road* by Jack Kirkland in August 1959, and *People of nowhere*, a play written for International Refugee Year by Jack Brabazon in July 1960.
- <sup>44</sup> "Little Theatre presents torrid *Tobacco Road*," *CME*, August 26, 1959, 11. The play was banned in Britain in 1949.
- <sup>45</sup> Judy Beadle, *Memories of Cooma Little Theatre* (Bangalow, unpublished, 2013), 3.
- <sup>46</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, October 27, 1961, 2. 350 attended on the first night and 550 on the second. The population of Cooma at the 1961 census was 8,716 [Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Records].
- <sup>47</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, November 10, 1961, 6.
- <sup>48</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, October 27, 1961, 2.
- <sup>49</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, November 10, 1961, 6.
- <sup>50</sup> Richard Fotheringham, "Melodrama" in Parsons, *Companion*, 360-361.
- <sup>51</sup> See Eric Irvin, *Australian melodrama: eighty years of popular theatre* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), 43-50.
- <sup>52</sup> "European film epics oust stage melodrama," in *The performing arts as cultural history*, ed. Katharine Brisbane (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 172.
- <sup>53</sup> For example: [www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/70146 - Only an Orphan Girl](http://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/70146 - Only an Orphan Girl), Canberra Repertory Society, 18 November-10 December 1955, Riverside Theatre; [www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/72824 - Only an Orphan Girl](http://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/72824 - Only an Orphan Girl), Adelaide Repertory Theatre, 2-6 December 1958, Unley Town Hall, Adelaide. Early theatre-restaurants included the Bowl Music Hall in Melbourne and Neutral Bay Music Hall in Sydney.
- <sup>54</sup> Katharine Brisbane, "Theatre-restaurants," in Parsons, *Companion*, 587.
- <sup>55</sup> Brisbane in Parsons, *Companion*, 587.
- <sup>56</sup> Interview with R. McDermott, March 4, 2013.

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- <sup>57</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, July 27, 1962, 2. *East Lynne* ran from November 8, 1961 to November 17, 1962.
- <sup>58</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, July 17, 1962, 2 and September 10, 1962, 4.
- <sup>59</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, July 27, 1962, 2.
- <sup>60</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, September 10, 1962, 4.
- <sup>61</sup> "Londoner has produced new play," *CME*, February 11, 1959, 1.
- <sup>62</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, August 3, 1962, 2.
- <sup>63</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, July 20, 1962, 2.
- <sup>64</sup> "Festival play will be lots of fun," *CME*, August 17, 1962, 1-2; "You owe it to yourself," *CME*, October 8, 1962, 1.
- <sup>65</sup> "You owe it to yourself," *CME*, October 8, 1962, 1.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with R. McDermott, March 4, 2013.
- <sup>67</sup> This figure is based on the seating capacity of the Snowy Hall and figures cited in the *CME* for the other performances.
- <sup>68</sup> Brisbane in Parsons, *Companion*, 587.
- <sup>69</sup> "You owe it to yourself," *CME*, October 8, 1962, 1.
- <sup>70</sup> Interview with R. McDermott, March 2, 2013.
- <sup>71</sup> Interview with R. McDermott, March 4, 2013.
- <sup>72</sup> For example, "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, August 11, 1961, 2 and May 29, 1964, 6; "Girls are winning the 'Battle of the Sexes'—Theatre group short of men," *CME*, January 22, 1964, 4. The writer of the latter observed that: "shyness on behalf of the boys is about the only problem the Little Theatre has."
- <sup>73</sup> *Snowy Review*, Christmas 1962, 13.
- <sup>74</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, August 3, 1962, 2.
- <sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Mattner AM with contributions by P. Foley, *Construction camp capers: living in camps on the Snowy Scheme*, (Cooma: Betty Mattner, 1999), 74.
- <sup>76</sup> "Backstage with Cooma Little Theatre," *CME*, November 2, 1962, 2.
- <sup>77</sup> "Girls are winning the 'Battle of the Sexes,'" *CME*, January 22, 1964, 4.
- <sup>78</sup> Mertens, *Little Theatre Big Shows*, 15.