

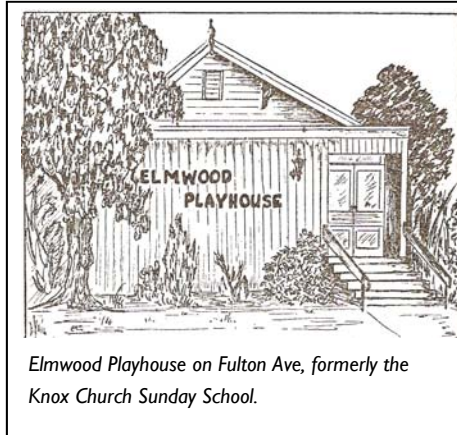
Elmwood Celebrates 60 Years

When eight people on the Elmwood Normal School PTA and school committee formed a group to perform sketches for their own entertainment, none thought that the Elmwood Players, as they became known, would one day open their own theatre — nor, it is likely, that in 2008/2009 they would celebrate their 60th anniversary.

Six decades later, the stalwart Christchurch theatre group has opened two theatres, staged more than 300 productions, entertained thousands of theatre-goers, trained hundreds of enthusiasts in the fine art of stagecraft, and continues to play a pivotal role in supporting and entertaining its local community.

From humble beginnings, it began as a nameless group, led by husband and wife team Alex and Taura Henderson, performing sketches and rehearsed readings for PTA meetings at Elmwood and other schools. The first substantial offering,

The Telephone Never Rings, was a fundraising effort for a new school piano, which raised the then considerable sum of £100.



Elmwood Playhouse on Fulton Ave, formerly the Knox Church Sunday School.

When the Henderson children left Elmwood School, the group named themselves the Elmwood Players and made their first forays into theatrical



President Alex Henderson (rear) assists Mayor George Mannering to plant the cypress tree at the opening of the Elmwood Playhouse in 1967.

officialdom, hiring the Knox Church Sunday School hall on Fulton Avenue to perform one act plays for friends and family. It was a short-lived grandeur, made inconvenient when Elmwood School began to use the hall as a classroom for overflowing Std 2 pupils. Desks had to be numbered and returned to the correct order after use of the room, and tadpoles on the nature table and works of art had to be negotiated with care.

Not to be daunted, in 1953 the Hendersons enterprisingly transformed their garage and wash-house into a makeshift theatre, where, “amid the aroma of paint and fertilizer”, they continued to entertain friends and relations for the next three years, gathering audiences as large as 64 (members had to lend their own chairs for the seating). Rehearsals also took place in the Henderson home — sometimes up to three at once in different rooms. Mrs Henderson lamented,

“Ironically, the only play to make any sort of bang was called A Resounding Tinkle: the other two made rather dull thuds.”

Theatre critic on Elmwood’s one act play season of 1967.

“They were years of pandemonium”, and the arrival of a nonagenarian parent finally put paid to any further activity. “In the interests of the family it was announced that the Elmwood Players would have to seek a home elsewhere,” Mrs Henderson said.

They returned to the Fulton Ave hall (which no longer housed Std 2 pupils but was still a Sunday school) and in 1964 when it came up for sale, made it their permanent home with the financial support of friends and family. Over a period of 15 months — at a cost of 4000 hours of volunteer labour and £1800 worth of materials — they transformed it into “a delightful intimate theatre” with a small stage and tiered seating for 84.

The opening of the theatre heralded great jubilation. The local papers declared the hall “unrecognisable” and a “great asset to the city”. Though the first production in the newly renovated premises was *Gigi* in 1966, the official opening was held in 1967. Christchurch Mayor and Elmwood Players patron Mr George Mannering planted a golden cypress and left his palm prints in concrete for posterity, along with those

of other prominent Elmwood members. This was followed in the evening by the first Christchurch performance of Bruce Mason’s *The Pohutakawa Tree*.

Alex Henderson was president of Elmwood Players for 31 years, and under his tenure the society established a strong foundation and reputation for success out of all proportion to their small size.

Elmwood placed in the top six for the New Zealand Theatre Federation national one act play festival for 13 consecutive years, including three times in second place. By the time of the 50th anniversary, Elmwood had won the national title three times. Ten of the early entries were produced by Mr Henderson, who finally won in 1976 with George MacEwan Green’s *One Season’s King* (“a script so clumsily sentimental and pretentious that most productions [of it] look like triumphs over enormous odds”, according to a local critic).

Mr Henderson’s success was even more notable

Meet ‘Mr Theatre’

A man with winning ways



By PETER GALE

If you wonder what makes a successful producer of plays, Alex Henderson of the Elmwood Players has most of the answers.

Mr Henderson . . . team work the key.

Eight times winner of the A grade cup in the New Zealand Theatre Federation’s Canterbury festival, Mr Henderson attributes his continuing success to team work.

forwards,” said Mr Henderson.

An old tin shed served as headquarters for a period but eventually the Sunday school property was bought

Feature on President Alex Henderson after his eighth win of the A Grade Trophy in the New Zealand Theatre Federation’s Canterbury one act play festival in 1971.

given he only came to the theatre at age 42. Mrs Henderson said the fledgling group had no tutors and learnt all their stagecraft from experience.

Perhaps even more astonishing then is the contribution Elmwood made to encouraging grassroots New Zealand theatre and their reputation for innovation, regularly applauded in the local press. From 1966 to around 1980, they held an annual one act play writing competition for the whole of the South Island, performing the three winning entries in an annual one act play season and frequently taking them to the national festival. To mark their 25th anniversary, Elmwood made the

“Elmwood, builder of its own theatre, conductor of playwriting competitions, a constantly active group in good heart, giving all members chances on stage, training its own producers, engendering loyalty and stimulating ideas, is shown to be achieving quality as well as quantity .”

News clipping on success of two Elmwood productions going into the finals of the 1968 British Drama League Festival.

“...there was an air of apprehension at the Elmwood opening of David Storey’s celebrated nude romp...; [however] that the event fell short of carnal expectations was soon forgotten in the highly controlled energy of one of Hunter Bell’s finest productions.”

Howard McNaughton reviewing *The Changing Room*, 1973.

competition nation-wide and asked for full length plays, performing Craig Harrison’s *Tomorrow Will Be a Lovely Day* to great local reviews.

In the same spirit of encouraging New Zealand theatre, for their 21st birthday, Elmwood commissioned a new play from prominent New Zealand playwright Bruce Mason, supported by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council. Mason saw his play, *Zero Inn*, performed for the first time at the Elmwood Players opening night.

Another area in which Elmwood excelled was the determination of two other noteworthy directors in the Elmwood fold, Hunter Bell and Brian Deavoll, in gaining rights to perform antipodean debuts of the latest US productions. Among these was David Storey’s *The Changing Room*, performed in 1973, featuring a cast of 20 males in various states of undress in a rugby changing room. Bell discreetly omitted the nude scene — except for the performance attended by the judge of the Benson and Hedges full length play festival, who noted some discrepancies in the presentation of their nakedness: “I cannot accept

them coming out from the bath dripping wet and wearing their underpants!!!” (he



Renee Hart as Mrs Withers in *Count Your Blessings*, 1963

recommended towels or some strategically placed steam). Nonetheless, the season enjoyed full houses and had to be extended.

Other innovations were Elmwood’s introduction of restaurant theatre to Christchurch in 1973 with a



Gilbert Wiberg (left) as Wally Sloss and Brian Deavoll as JJ Forbes in *And the Big Men Fly*, 1969.

production of *Ritual for Dolls* (director Alex Henderson) at the Trans Hotel’s Wine Cellar restaurant — an

annual treat that persisted until the late 1970s, rescuing tourists from the inertia of Sundays when New Zealand as a country closed for the day. In 1988, they even introduced breakfast theatre with Neil Simon’s *The Good Doctor* (directors Rozena Hallum and Lin Clark), but this was a one-off special.

There was also the memorable opening night of *Gigi* (director Hunter Bell) in 1966, at which the costumed patrons enjoyed dinner at Riccarton House before being transported to the Elmwood Playhouse by carriage and vintage car.

Bell was even more adventurous with a production of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, adapted by a local writer from Jules Verne’s novel and performed outdoors at Jellie Park in 1974. Half the proceeds from the play went to the Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, and props included a full-scale elephant, a train with two carriages, and six boats (including a passenger steamer). The cast of 100 adults, children and animals had a total of 500 costumes. Sadly, this was Bell’s last great production for Elmwood; he died later the same year.

After Henderson retired as president in 1979, the society continued to flourish, though the playhouse itself went into decline. In the early 1990s, rising maintenance costs and falling memberships finally prompted Elmwood Players to partner with Elmwood School in a new purpose-built auditorium that could be used as gymnasium, indoor sports facility, assembly hall and performing arts venue. With not a little sadness and nostalgia, the Fulton Ave playhouse was bid farewell in 1994, and in 1995 Elmwood Players moved round the corner to their new Aikmans Road premises.

President since 2006, Kris Vavasour has been involved in Elmwood Players on and off for nearly 20 years, taking part in her first production while still at high school. She performed in half a dozen plays at the old Fulton Ave site and vividly recalls some of its quainter aspects. "The acoustics could definitely be challenging. If it was raining you had to yell your lines." Particularly memorable was a production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, where Donna Verrey's line, "Oh

look, it's raining", produced a thunderous downpour right on cue, and the funeral guests running from the outside dressing room



The Elmwood Auditorium at 31 Aikmans Road, home to the Elmwood Players today.

arrived on stage with rain glistening very appropriately on their shoulders.

Vavasour says Elmwood Players "has continued to go from strength to strength" in recent years.

"We're producing an excellent range of plays by New Zealand and overseas writers, and have a loyal audience following. The mailing list has grown exponentially in the past several years through the discount vouchers we offer to audience regulars.

"We're also in good heart financially, which means we're able to maintain our facilities to an excellent standard. Just recently we spent \$12,000 upgrading the auditorium's technical equipment."

Elmwood Players continues

to enjoy a close relationship with the school, working together to make improvements to the auditorium, such as the

recently installed new carpet, supported by Smith's City. It also enjoys the support of a number of local businesses, including Xpress Printing House, who currently sponsor the promotional material for each season.

Vavasour says the Elmwood auditorium has become "very much a community asset", with a variety of groups using the facilities, from Mozarts Performing Arts School to the Canterbury Ballet.

At the time of Elmwood's 21st birthday, Mr Henderson said the primary reason Elmwood Players had survived and progressed since its establishment was the hardworking group of people who had not minded switching from leading actor one season to door-keeper the next. And this continues to be true; Elmwood Players thrives today because of the many members over the past 60 years who have given their passion, enthusiasm and time — in some cases many hundreds of hours — to

"I beg you, implore you, order you to see this show, which surely deserves, as no other this year, an extended season."

*Harold Pointer reviewing
The House of Blue Leaves
by John Guare, directed by
Brian Deavoll, 1976*

producing great theatre and maintaining Elmwood's reputation for excellence.

And we are delighted to count among our membership Renee Hart, Patron of Elmwood Players, who holds the unique distinction of being one of the original eight who began the Elmwood story 60 years ago!

Alex Henderson retired as president in 1979 when he left to operate Cameo Theatre but continued to be involved as patron until his death in 1987. Taura, who was also involved in establishing the Riccarton Players in the early 1960s, the Playbox formula that continues at Riccarton today, and the establishment of the Story Book Theatre at age 70, attended almost every Elmwood opening night up until her death in 1990 aged 83.

"What can one say of Mrs McLeod except that the part was a skin-tight fit and that she never put an eyelash wrong."

Harold Pointer reviewing the performances of Beryl MacLeod and Mervyn Glue in the award-winning The Love Course, 1974.

Elmwood Life Members

Individuals who have given exceptional long-term service to the society:

- Judith Armstrong*
- David Brockett*
- David Cathro*
- Doug Clarke QSM*
- Renee Hart*
- Graham Loader*
- Bill Milliken*
- Marilyn Ollett*
- Nan Sheard*
- Julian Southgate*
- Helen Wise*



Cast of The Changing Room, 1973



Scene from The Playboy of the Western World by J M Synge, performed in 1983. From left: Toni Glue, Angie Simpson, Keith Cook, Mervyn Glue, Ross Gumbley and Tim Allen (front on floor).



Doug Clarke, front right, directs the cast of "Shock Treatment".—Photograph by JULIANNE MYERS-POULS

Prepare to be shocked
...niques, including sh

Preview of Shock Treatment, directed by Doug Clarke (front right), which was performed in 1990. John Boyce is front left.