

## THESE WERE MY 'SALAD DAYS'

As a new graduate from the University of WA and Secondary Teachers College with an Honours degree in History and English, a Diploma in Education, and a Teachers Certificate, I was posted to my first teaching appointment at Kent Street Senior High School to commence in February 1973.

When I arrived at the school at the start of the year, to receive my teaching timetable and attend my first staff meeting, I realised I was the only graduate teacher (and probably at least ten years younger than anyone else on the staff). It was unusual to receive an appointment to a city school. Many of my friends from university and teachers college were sent to country schools for at least two years before they could apply to the Education Department for a transfer to a city school.



Some of the Salad Days Cast in 1974

**Photo: Warren Grellier**

During my first year of teaching, I did what most graduate teachers did - survive! I had not really understood from all my teaching practices at college how much work was required to teach 32 forty-minute periods a week plus a form class, write programs, prepare lessons for five different classes, mark student work, write reports, meet with parents, establish discipline in my classes, deal with countless other administrative tasks, and do additional regular relief classes when other teachers were absent.

Having said that, I was well supported by the Senior Masters (most were in fact men) and other more experienced members of the staff who helped me to gain confidence and to improve my teaching.

During that first year at Kent Street, I learned that the school did not offer drama classes to students and that there had been no whole-school production at the school for some years.

There were in fact no Senior School Drama or Theatre Arts courses Statewide as there are now, and the only way in which I could do any drama was in my English classes.

This was disappointing as I was extremely interested in drama, and had performed in many plays during my own school years, including Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. While at university and teachers college for five years, I was a member of (and sometime president of) the Secondary Teachers College Drama Society. I had roles in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, Moliere's *The Precious Damsels*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, and Brandon Thomas' *Charley's Aunt*.

I valued the fond memories of the amazing people with whom I had been in these productions, the lasting friendships we made, the work of learning lines and attending multiple rehearsals, and the sheer joy of performing for an audience.

Of course, as well as performing in plays, I was also having to keep up with my own course lectures, tutorials, reading, assignments, and exams at university.

While I was a cast member of these plays, I had never directed a play (though I had watched my lecturers and student colleagues directing). I did have a little experience doing the production side: collecting props, organising the finance, helping with makeup and costumes, rehearsal venues and times, and so on.

I was now in my second year of teaching and, feeling more confident, I thought it would be a good idea to put on a whole school production.

During the previous year, I had spoken to several of my teaching colleagues and many were incredibly supportive in thinking that it would be a good but challenging thing to do given there was no recent history of a whole school production at Kent Street.

However, one person I spoke to on the staff was adamant that I was not going to be able to do one with the students at this school. That was like the proverbial 'red rag to a bull' and I had a lot more faith in the ability and willingness of the students I taught to give it a go. So, I was even more determined to put on a production.

Then I realised why some of the staff had used the word 'challenging,' when I started to think about a suitable play that would involve a large cast of students from different years and also get as many students involved as possible.

Doing so would mean starting from scratch, lots of rehearsals at lunchtime, after school and on weekends, the competing demands of students' homework and sport, and the logistics of getting students to attend after-school rehearsals, and also asking parents to deliver their children to, and collect from, these rehearsals (especially on weekends).

It would also mean that I would need a lot of help from other members of the staff for collecting, making, and sewing costumes, organising and undertaking the stage lighting, building and painting sets, front-of-house, printing programs, collecting money, and the myriad other things that would go into making a production happen successfully.

I was browsing Samuel French's catalogue of plays for large casts when I came across a play called *Salad Days*. It was written by Dorothy Reynolds and Julian Slade as 'an end of year romp' for the Bristol Old Vic Company in England.

It was so successful in its first production that it was transferred to the West End Vaudeville Theatre in London and ran for over 2000 performances; becoming, for a time, one of the longest-running productions in London.

There was something else that resonated with me in the name, as I remembered from my studies of English at university that the name *Salad Days* had come from Shakespeare's play *Anthony and Cleopatra*:

*Cleopatra: My salad days,  
When I was green in judgement: cold in blood.  
To say as I said then!*

Here in the play Cleopatra is describing a time of youthful idealism and inexperience in her life and reminiscing about past events. She admits, in her relations with Caesar in the past, that she was naïve and lacking in maturity. It was for her a time of carefree innocence.

So much of that I could relate to as I had only finished university fairly recently and had enjoyed a carefree and fun-filled six weeks of vacation without any study to do before I started on my teaching career.

Perhaps too I was innocent of, and inexperienced about, the demands of directing a play while also teaching full-time in only my second year!

The cast list showed that all the parts could be performed by just nine actors. However, I wanted to involve as many students as possible, so I was prepared to cast all 27 main parts and the 16 small walk-on parts individually, giving a total of forty-three roles.

It was then I realised that *Salad Days* was in fact a musical with four solos by the main female lead, Jane: four duets, six trios, one quartet, and five ensemble pieces. Now, I knew a little about music, but I had never directed, produced, or been involved in a musical. I certainly couldn't teach the students the songs in the play.

I discussed this with my good friend and music teacher Anne Roberton, and she willingly agreed to be the musical director. She was a fabulous pianist and agreed to teach the songs to students, most of whom had no experience, and to accompany them in all the rehearsals and performances.

When the musical score we ordered arrived, we also realised that it called for two pianos to be played!

The plot of *Salad Days* is all about two university graduates who, attempting to find a niche in their lives, find themselves temporary owners of a magic piano that makes people dance and sing. It was then that Goldie Cannon, another friend on the staff (and a wonderful pianist) also agreed to play the second piano parts in rehearsals and performances.

The next step was to find a choreographer to teach the students the dance routines. Physical Education teacher, Denise Passmore, kindly agreed to be involved and teach the students the dance routines.



Ken McLeod as Manager of Cleopatra's.  
**Photo: Warren Grellier**

Auditions for the play were conducted in the Utility Room. This was a larger than a normal classroom with a piano and a small proscenium stage in the line of demountable classrooms (affectionately called the 'Bristols') at the bottom of the school buildings nearest the oval.

I was impressed by the large number of students (both boys and girls from Years 8 to 12) who attended the auditions. I did have to do some 'gentle persuasion' on some of the older male students in my classes who initially were reluctant to be involved in a play, especially a musical, as their interests were more attuned to science, mathematics, and sport.

Ironically, those same male students (with no previous musical or theatre experience) who agreed to be involved turned out to be some of the most successful actors, singers and even dancers!

After a few weeks we had allocated the principal roles to those who had to sing as well as act. Then we cast all the others. However, there were two roles that we couldn't fill - a small part (Ambrose, a Dress Designer) and a larger role (the Manager of the Cleopatra Nightclub).

I then persuaded Ken McLeod from the Physical Education Department to take on the Cleopatra Nightclub Manager role, to which he agreed, and I took on the smaller part of Ambrose.

Now we were ready to begin rehearsals. I had managed to find a vinyl record of the Bristol Old Vic original cast recording which I was able to play to the students in the cast to give them a flavour of the production and how light-hearted and how much fun it was going to be to put this on.

Over the many weeks of rehearsals, I received enormous amounts of help and support from other members of the staff.

I mention in particular the then Principal, Bill Gibbney, who provided the funds to mount the production; Denis Zlatnik, the Head of the Art Department, who as Artistic Director

organised the design and painting of the sets; Roger Smith who with the Year 10 Manual Arts students constructed the sets; George Brown and Miles Harrison who did the lighting; Ted Parker, the Senior Master of English who supported me throughout the productions and helped with stage management; Lyn Southam for Front-of-House; student Yvonne Cox, as stage manager; Liz Scott from the Home Economics Department for costumes and makeup; and the many other students and teachers who helped out.

I'm especially thankful to the parents who supported their children by getting them to and from rehearsals and the performances, and for being part of the appreciative audiences for the show.

We also acquired props, costumes and furniture from the Playhouse Theatre, the Roleystone Theatre and Secondary Teachers College. The school's office staff typed and produced the programs and tickets.

It was indeed a whole school production and without the help and support of the staff and students it would not have been possible to mount such an ambitious project.

I don't recall the dates we actually put on *Salad Days* but one of the more exciting moments was that we were able to put on the production in the newly built and opened Kent Street Senior High School Hall/Gymnasium in 1974.

However, this venue presented a problem in itself as we had done almost all the rehearsals in the Utility Room or classrooms. In addition, when we moved into the Hall for rehearsals, I realised that the acoustics were limited as essentially the space was a gym with wooden floors and brick walls that were not conducive to good speech or music projection.

The solution was to hire pink insulation batts and hang them on the walls of the gym to act as baffles and thus improve the sound for the audience. It worked!

Yes, the musical play was an enormous success and we played to full audiences each night that show ran.

As I write this article fifty years on from *Salad Days* in 1974, I reflect on what was achieved with this large group of students. For many it was the most memorable part of their school life and something they remember fondly.

They spent hours of their out-of-class time but received no academic credit for their involvement. I would say, though, that they learned more in this school production than they had done in some of their classes.

They had learned about teamwork and how important it was to attend and not let others down. They had learned discipline, commitment, and self-motivation. They had learned that hard work and attention to detail were important.

They had learned about cooperation and how to resolve conflicts and problems, how to take responsibility for their own actions, to respect others and do the best possible to perform in front of a live paying audience. They also had fun, lots of laughs and formed some important and long-lasting friendships. What more could you ask for students to learn in addition to their academic subjects?

For me, it was indeed challenging but a lot of fun and I had a great sense of satisfaction that we had all done so well to achieve the first drama production at the school for some years. I also learned a lot about the students themselves outside of their normal classes. I got to know their personalities, their interests, and foibles, a little about their home backgrounds and what their hopes and aspirations were for the future.

*Salad Days* was also the first of many school productions in other schools that I produced with my colleagues over the ensuing years. I firmly believe in the role that school plays and drama play in the development of adolescent students. I admire the diligence and hard work that the Kent Street students had done to learn their roles and perform the songs and dances so expertly.

Without knowing it at the beginning, they were indeed incredibly talented and convincing and received the approval they richly deserved from their parents and teachers and the audiences for whom they performed.

Just recently, I re-discovered many photographs I had taken of the 1974 production of *Salad Days* and that had been stored away for 50 years. I was able to load a few of these to the Kentian Society's Facebook page, and I know they rekindled some people's fond memories of the production.

It would be great if these photos, along with this article, help lead to a reunion of the cast and crew of *Salad Days*. I also hope that current students see the benefit of, and continue to participate in, school productions and drama courses whenever they can.

Warren Grellier

*[See Cast List on next two pages.]*

*[The Kentian Society would like to track down all of these people. Can you help?]*

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C A S T

(in order of appearance)

roduction

Warren Grellier

CT I:

THE TRAMP	Clelia Tedeschi
JANE	Lesley O'Neill
TIMOTHY	Malcolm Hare
MR. DAWES (TIMOTHY'S FATHER)	Robert Carman
MRS. DAWES (TIMOTHY'S MOTHER)	Gillian Ellison
AUNT PRUE	Karen Turley
LADY RAEBURN (JANE'S MOTHER)	Margaret Halliday
HELOISE	Jenny Simpson
ASSISTANT	Karen Turley
MANICURIST	Tobyn Tutton
P. C. BOOT	Kurt Weir
ROWENA	Kelly Kean
A BISHOP	Herbert Carman
TROPPO	George Chalkiadis
UNCLE CLAM	Lawrence Monti
FORSDYKE	Robert Carman
INSPECTOR	Lindsay Johnson
NIGEL	Stephen Cohen

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C A S T

ACT II:

MANAGER (OF THE CLEOPATRA Night Club)	Ken McLeod
SLAVE	Nicola Elton
FIONA	Judy McDangall
TOM SMITH	Robert Carman
WAITRESS	Marita Ottey
ARMS DANCEERS	(Debbie Lynas (Jenny Simpson)
WILLIAMS	Herbert Carman
ASPHYNXIA	Gae Thompson
AMBROSE (A DRESS DESIGNER)	Warren Grellier
MARGUERITE (A MODEL)	Robin Leschen
ANTHEA (A MODEL)	Kerry Bubb
ELECTRODE	Herbert Carman
PROFESSOR ZEBEDIAH DAWES (UNCLE ZED)	Lawrence Monti

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Dons; Passers-by; Patrons; Pressmen; Ladies, Crowds, etc  
Played by the company: Katie Bradley, Susan Brand,  
Kerry Bubb, Roslyn Drysdale, Nicola Elton, Maria Fasolo,  
Beronica Gill, Christine Lawrence, Robin Leschen, Karen  
Lusted, Debbie Lynass, Michelle Mitchell, Marita Ottey,  
Catherine Ramsay, Linley Robinson, Kathy Robson, Robyn  
Tutton, Rhys Williams, Debbie Witherington.

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