

CHAPTER 7 - FROM CHARITY TO CULTURAL PATRONAGE: LADY GORDON AND THE LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT, 1929- 1939

Repertory theatre in Sydney, though keenly promoted during the 1920s by a handful of zealous advocates, had failed by the early 1930s to acquire a permanent place in the city's cultural life. Personalities, differing political stances, and lack of support by the general public afflicted the various movements that appeared prior to and during the 1920s in Sydney, such as the Drama League, the Playbox Society, the Burdekin House Players, and the Turret Theatre. Even the Sydney Repertory Theatre Society, led by Gregan McMahon, which, in 1920, obtained the backing of the commercial theatre management firm, J. and N. Tait, folded before the end of the decade. A new generation of female actor managers who obtained their training during this period under the auspices of the various Little Theatres in Sydney, such as Carrie Tennant, Therese Desmond, Beryl Bryant, Enid Lorimer and Doris Fitton, subsequently launched other small theatrical organisations in the early 1930s. Many of these initiatives also foundered, or struggled for many years before becoming stable and permanent institutions. To an extent, this reflected the deliberately non-professional stance of American and Australian Little Theatre, the general title given to the type of intellectual, author-driven theatrical activity typified by the above organisations. The Little Theatre movement suffered particularly badly at the onset of the Depression, which saw the introduction of the New South Wales Amusement Tax, the subsequent closure of most of the city's theatrical venues, and the advent of films with sound.¹ The struggle of amateur theatres for permanence, and the gathering forces of

¹ See Annette Bain, 'Brighter Days? Challenges to live theatre in the thirties', in Jill Roe (ed), *Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in urban and social history*, (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1980), pp.34-35.

theatrical patronage which enabled some of them and the Little Theatre movement in general to attain greater recognition and prosperity forms the focus of this discussion.

Amateur theatre also denotes the type of entertainments that derived from the nineteenth century British practice in which middle class women staged plays as a pastime or for fund-raising purposes.² Ethel Kelly did much to popularise amateur theatre through her fund-raising activities in early twentieth century Sydney. To ensure the success of fund-raising ventures organised by women's committees in Sydney during the 1920s and '30s spoken plays such as *Berkeley Square* that had met with success on the commercial stage in London or New York were produced. That is, in order to raise money for charity women's committees tended to import plays known for their entertainment value, just as local commercial theatre managers had done since the post-Gold Rush boom.³ Instead of receiving coverage in theatrical magazines, critical columns, or later surveys of the stage in Australia, social columns and personal reminiscences such as *My Grandfather's House* by Helen Rutledge⁴, comprise the extent of contemporary and historical discussion of most of these amateur dramatic forays. Assumptions concerning the middle-class pursuit of amusement appear to have limited, in most cases, their cultural impact. Some amateur actors as well as some fund-raising productions, however, did demonstrate talent in this context and received positive critical attention. Anne Gordon, the daughter of the former actress and charity woman Lady (Margaret) Gordon, and the Divorce Law Judge, Sir Alexander Gordon, in particular seemed to both charm Society audiences and attract favourable reviews. Critics also deemed Lady Gordon's role as organiser or producer of a

² Philip Parsons (gen. ed.), with Victoria Chance, *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), p.38; and Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society Etiquette and the Season*, (London: Croom Helm, 1973), p.56.

³ Geoffrey Serle, *From the Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia, 1788-1972*, (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973), pp.108-9; and Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama: A Historical and Critical Survey from the 1830s to the 1970s*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), p.115.

⁴ Helen Rutledge, *My Grandfather's House*, (Sydney: Doubleday, 1986).

series of such shows, as instrumental in endowing them with artistic integrity and certainly with financial success. For both mother and daughter, their achievements led to further involvement in the activities of the Community Theatre, Bryants' Playhouse, and the Independent Theatre, respectively, as the 1930s progressed. This in turn allowed Lady Gordon to render valuable services to the cause of the Little Theatre movement in Sydney itself.

Discussions of concepts of high and low culture, particularly in relation to the theatre, provide only a rough guide for this subject. Lawrence Levine has suggested that American Society leaders in the nineteenth and early twentieth century appropriated Shakespeare and opera, among other practices, in order to create a more intellectual, moralistic and civilised cultural antithesis to vaudeville. Their use of terms with Social Darwinian resonance such as 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' was certainly consistent with an old liberal seriousness insistent on proving the civility of bourgeois culture. From the 1930s British literary critics, such as F.R. and Queenie Leavis, gave theoretical shape to this tendency. Recoiling from the signs of mass culture, they advocated a strict education in literary standards. Similar anxieties did not afflict Sydney society as a whole. Indeed, the mass of Sydney's middle class did not favour serious theatre over light entertainment. Professional actors and producers turned 'amateur' in protest at the mediocrity, supported and encouraged by the tastes of the middle classes, of the commercial stage in the 1920s.⁵ Repeated cries for support of Little Theatres from well-trained actor-managers who, like the Melbourne-based nationalist playwright Louis Esson, sought to raise intellectual and artistic standards had failed to arouse sufficient enthusiasm among the theatre-going public to enable them to stay open. The majority of Sydney's ruling elite failed to show

⁵ Parsons and Chance, *Companion*, p.173; and Pamela Heckenberg and Philip Parsons, 'The Struggle for an Australian Theatre (1901-1950) and the decline of the Chains', in Harold Love (ed.), *The Australian Stage: a Documentary History*, (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1984), p.123.

themselves as connoisseurs of the dramatic arts. As previously demonstrated the same cultural apathy had forced the musical community, with the patronage of only a few interested members of the social elite, to draw on its own strengths in an effort to raise musical appreciation.

Historical attention has taken note of the Little Theatre movement as an attempt at expression of a fledgling Australian drama. The story of women such as Lady Gordon, who harboured a taste for serious theatre but whose social status, according to generalisations concerning middle class feminine frivolity, precluded her from cultural agency, has received much less.⁶ Lady Gordon did not confine her interest to Little Theatre. She initially approached it as a philanthropist. She also engaged in a variety of other activities aimed at raising the musical tastes and interests of the city. It is possible that she acted first as a member of the city's custodial class, and that she held to the notion that culture was meant to uplift and refine. It is probable that as cheap, popular entertainment alternatives emerged, the intellectual and personal integrity of the Little Theatre appealed to her. She was not completely alone. Other men and women of social influence shared her interest and centred their efforts on the Little Theatre. Increasing numbers of their peers joined the cause as the 1930s progressed. Indifference may have greeted the Little Theatre in the 1920s, but as with music, its importance in the city's cultural life seemed to become more widely accepted in the following decade. Considering Levine's thesis concerning the fluidity of cultural definitions, the change suggests a social impetus. The possibility will be considered later. It is with Lady Gordon's entry into the world of charity-driven women's committees on her arrival in Sydney in 1929, that this story begins.

⁶ William Moore actually mentions Lady Gordon involvement in the British Drama League, but the subject will be taken up later in the chapter. See William Moore, 'The development of Australian Drama', in

Using the Arts for Charity's sake

Few would have imagined, when Margaret Thomas (later Gordon) was born in the tiny harbour-side village of New Quay, South Wales, in 1880, that half a century later she would be part of the small nucleus of Australians that called themselves 'Sydney society'.⁷ The mischievous daughter of an archetypal sea captain, Thomas Thomas, who traded in the East, owned a swearing parrot and ordered his family as if still on board his ship, 'Maggie' showed musical promise at a young age. In one of her earliest memories she was lifted onto a table at the Methodist Sunday school so that people could hear her sing. Health problems of both natural and accidental origin afflicted her in early adolescence and resulted in the loss of hearing in one ear. It did not retard her musical progress, and after completion of a basic education she obtained voice training at Cardiff under Clara Novello Davies, daughter of the highly esteemed organist and prolific composer Vincent Novello.⁸ Maggie later sang as contralto in Davies' well-known Welsh Ladies Choir. As her future son-in-law remarked, this 'set in train her escape from New Quay', a feat rarely achieved by the many members of the Thomas family that peopled the steep streets of the tiny village.⁹

At the age of twenty, the Welsh singer entered the Royal Academy of Music, winning prizes but earning little income from her early concert career. Through the kindness of the highly esteemed teacher Alberto Randegger, who sometimes taught her without charge, Thomas completed three years of study. With the patronage of the

William Moore and T.I. Moore (ed.s), *Best Australian one-act plays*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1937), p.xxvii.

⁷ Anne Lloyd, interview with Jane Hunt, at 'Riverside House', Axford, Wiltshire, England, 24 and 25 Feb. 1998.

⁸ For further information on Vincent Novello, see R.H.L., 'Novello, Vincent', *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XLI, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1895), pp.241-3.

⁹ Roger Lloyd, 'Thomas – First rough', no date, in private papers held by Anne Lloyd, daughter of Lady Gordon, at her home in Axford, Wiltshire, England (ALPP).

Princess of Wales she also eventually made successful performances at St James' Hall, London.¹⁰ George Edwards, the Gaiety Theatre manager, then offered her the lead role in 'the original London production of "The Cingalee"'. Horrified at the thought of comic opera, Thomas refused. Instead she accepted a contract to tour Australia for the concert manager J.C. Williamson with the American soprano Elizabeth Parkina, and the 'Paginini of the violincello', Herr Foldesley. The company arrived in Australia in late 1904, touring the nation's main cities and towns and finishing with a season in Sydney that commenced on 14 February 1905. Thomas won the praise of critics as well as the admiration and, it seems, the hearts of many people in her Sydney audiences.¹¹

Following the successful tour, Thomas and her close friend, fellow academy student and chaperone, Blanche Morgan, travelled to Fremantle by train with the intention of sailing back to England. While still in Sydney, J.C. Williamson had offered the singer the part of Nanoya in the up-coming production of *The Cingalee*. True to her strict upbringing and her own deeply ingrained Welsh standards of propriety, Maggie Thomas refused the offer, just as she had when George Edwards approached her in London. When her train reached Melbourne another representative of J.C. Williamson spoke to her about *The Cingalee*. As before, she said no. After repeated offers, and just days before their ship was due to depart from Fremantle, Thomas agreed. The papers were delighted, speculated on the family's reaction, and published interviews in which the star equivocated about the

¹⁰ Colin Humphries to Mr N.B. Nairn, 21 April 1982, in 'Gordon, Margaret Jane', Australian Dictionary of Biography file, Australian National University; and Martha Rutledge, 'Gordon, Margaret Jane' *ADB*, vol.9, p.55. The *ADB* entry describes her as a mezzo-soprano, while various cuttings record her as a contralto. Suffice to say that as a singer she was more comfortable and possessed the richest vocal quality in the middle range.

¹¹ 'Society in London. By a Lady Correspondent'. *South Wales* [?], 24 March 1904, cutting in ALPP; 'St James' Hall, no source cited, in ALPP; and other untitled cuttings, no sources cited, ALPP. Amongst these, a cutting referring to George Edwards' offer to perform in the *Cingalee*, is presumably from a London, or British publication. Articles in Sydney-based papers reported that Edwards had offered her the lead in *Veronique*. See also 'Musical Notes' *The Player*, vol.II, no.2, 15 Feb. 1905, p.19; and vol.II, no.3, 15 March 1905, p.19; and 'Companies' Movements', William A. Crawley (ed.), *Australasian Stage Annual; an Annual Devoted to the Interests of the Theatrical and Musical Professions*, vol.7, 1906, p.34.

merits of musical comedy as opposed to concert work.¹² The decision, however, was probably fortuitous for both Gordon and the city of Sydney. For her performances in both *The Cingalee*, which opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney on 6 May 1905 and her subsequent performance in *Veronique*, which played first in Melbourne before opening in Sydney in early 1906, she won further admiration.¹³ A well-known middle-aged barrister committed, people thought, to bachelordom, regularly watched the show during the Sydney season. Eventually, through a mutual contact, that man invited Maggie Thomas to ride in his sulky. Ever the conscientious Methodist, Thomas agreed on the condition that Blanche Morgan accompanied her.¹⁴ Before long Maggie Thomas and Alexander Gordon were engaged. The pair returned to Derlwyn, the Thomas home in New Quay, for a family wedding in September that year. By the end of 1906 the couple had settled in Sydney's Eastern suburbs, where the new Mrs Gordon entered the social, civic and culture-conscious milieu of the city's wealthy, professional, and governing circles.

Decades later, Margaret Gordon travelled with her children, Anne and Alexander, born 1908 and 1912 respectively, to England to place them in schools there. She remained in London from 1924 to 1929. A year after her return, her husband, Alexander Gordon was knighted. By then an experienced committee woman and cultural enthusiast, with fresh memories of visits to London's West End, Gordon fixed her eyes on Sydney's philanthropic causes. One of these, Karitane, the Australian Mothercraft Society centre for training nurses in the Plunkett System of pre-natal, maternal and infant care, immediately attracted her attention.¹⁵ By mid-1930, Karitane felt the need to supplement its funds. As was the usual practise, a committee of women with vice-regal patronage was assembled.

¹² cutting, no source cited, in ALPP.

¹³ Royal Comic Opera Company, *The Cingalee*, Her Majesty's Theatre, program, 6 May 1905; and Pippa, 'Society Doings in Sydney', *The Australasian*, 10 Feb. 1906, p.345.

¹⁴ Lloyd, interview.

¹⁵ *ibid.*; and *Berkeley Square*, program, Palace Theatre, 26, 27, 28 June 1930, in ALPP.

Lady (Alicia) King, wife of the successful businessman Sir Kelso King, was President, and Lady Gordon and Dorothy Stephen, whose marriage in 1899 to Colin Stephen had joined the influential Knox and Stephen families, were Honorary Secretaries. The large committee comprised of women (sometimes two generations) from the Fairfax, Street, Hyland, Allen, Owen, Grace and other families.¹⁶

Amateur theatricals, *tableau vivants* and similar entertainments had grown increasingly popular in London since the First World War,¹⁷ while *Berkeley Square* written by John Balderston in collaboration with J.C. Squire, had had a successful season during Gordon's stay there. Memorable amateur plays and revues had also been held in Sydney at odd moments during the 1920s. The idea of staging a play was therefore neither foreign nor completely beyond the experience of the body of women assembled in 1930 to raise funds for Karitane. *Berkeley Square*, a drawing room romance with flashbacks to the eighteenth century, met their needs, tastes and limitations. The committee thus decided on *Berkeley Square* and staged it at the Palace Theatre, courtesy of JC Williamson, on 26, 27, 28 June that year. That Lady Gordon was a chief motivating force in the choice of fundraising project and the subsequent production is confirmed by press reports and the testimony of Anne Lloyd (nee Gordon).¹⁸

According to Helen Rutledge's vivid personal account of the production of *Berkeley Square*, 'Lady Gordon looked after the acting'.¹⁹ Indeed, she engaged the services of visiting English producer, Mr H. W. Varna, explained the plot in a promotional broadcast on 2BL, assembled the cast, and assisted at rehearsals. Proper auditions arranged

¹⁶ See Hazel King, 'King, Sir George Eccles Kelso', *ADB*, vol.9, pp.593-4; Martha Rutledge, 'Stephen, Sir Colin Campbell', *ADB*, vol. 12, p.63; and Martha Rutledge, 'Allen, Arthur Denis Wigram', *ADB*, vol.13, pp.30-1.

¹⁷ *Sydney Mail*, 30 July 1930, p.23.

¹⁸ Lloyd, interview; *Berkeley Square* program, ALPP; *SMH*, 14 June 1930, p.8; and numerous other cuttings in *SMH*, *SM*, *DP* during June 1930, particularly 27-30 June.

¹⁹ Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.183.

by Gordon determined the allocation of parts. It was thus through her own merits, Anne Lloyd claimed, and not through the pivotal role of her mother, that she landed the principal part, Helen Pettigrew. Helen Stephen and Harry Dangar won the remaining leading parts of Kate Pettigrew and Peter Standish respectively. The supporting cast assembled by Gordon included, among others, Mrs H.O. Sheller, Mr K.E. Winchcombe, Mrs Roy Buckland, Miss Molly Street, Miss Margaret Fairfax, Mrs George Vivers, Joshua Reynolds, Mr V.G. Wesche, and Mr E. W. Street. The son of the pastoralist, Rodney Dangar, of Sutton Forest, Harry Dangar to all accounts became emotionally attached to his co-star, Anne Gordon. Helen Stephen was the daughter of the other committee secretary, Dorothy Stephen (nee Knox) and Colin Stephen. Her father was a grandson of Sir Alfred Stephen, and head of various family enterprises including the law firm Stephen, Jacques and Stephen and Abermain Collieries. Father and daughter Ernest and Molly Street acted beside each other in the show. Ernest Street, son of chief justice, Sir Philip Street, also practised law. Kenneth Winchcombe was the son of the politician and wool broker, Frederick Winchcombe, and director of his father's firm. Margaret Fairfax was the daughter of Dr Edward Fairfax, youngest son of Sir James Reading Fairfax of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, while Mr V.G. Wesche directed the P&O shipping company, and Roy Buckland was probably one of the sons of Sir Thomas Buckland, a wealthy goldmine manager with a large estate at Hunters Hill. Arthur Allen, who also inherited a family law tradition and *Merioola*, the Woollahra mansion with a full ballroom, offered his home for *Berkeley Square* rehearsals.²⁰

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ADB entries for Sir Thomas Buckland, vol.7; and Frederick Winchcombe, vol.12; *Who's Who in Australia, 1935*, (Melbourne: Melbourne Herald, 1935), pp.34, 142, 175, 437, and 443; Valerie Lawson, 'We're having a ball', from SMH website, 1998; Fairfax family, John Fairfax, family tree, ML DOC 3357; and Sally White, *A Patchwork Heritage: Thirteen Australian Families*, (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986), pp.127-136.

A pattern emerges here: *Berkeley Square* was a Society event. Not only were these people from highly respected and influential families that resided mostly in sprawling harbourside properties in Sydney's eastern suburbs, the members of these families were educated together, worshipped together, worked together or in co-operation with each other, founded or served on civic committees and cultural trusts together, holidayed together and socialised together. Many of the men, if not already endowed with British orders, were later knighted, and the titles 'Sir' and 'Lady' subsequently applied to them and their wives' names. As Anne Lloyd remarked, '*Berkeley Square* was absolutely solid' with such people. Rutledge explained that charity-driven women's committees did not automatically expect them to enjoy the amateur theatricals, so it was 'necessary to involve as many people as possible' in the production. It was not just as cast members that they became involved: program and sweet sellers, with 'matrons' to supervise; ticket sellers; costume designers and makers; musicians; set designers and painters; and donors of furniture and other miscellaneous 'props' were also needed.²¹ The other reason that so many Society people, particularly women, threw themselves into the project related simply to the amount of leisure time at their disposal. Lady Gordon and many of the other 'wives' employed domestic servants and were not engaged in paid work. They filled their time with charity work, and for amusement, according to the women's pages, amateur theatre had replaced dances and bridge parties. Theatricals provided an open forum through which all the usual personal challenges, triumphs and intrigues of life were played out: fun, romance, and friendly (or not so friendly) rivalry. In the case of *Berkeley Square*, all 'the pretty debs and matrons from Darling Point and Elizabeth Bay, and their friends came to purr in public over them, even if the claw of criticism was unsheathed later on in

²¹ Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.177; Lloyd, interview; and *SMH*, 14 June 1930, p.8.

private'.²² Indeed, *Berkeley Square* was a Society event and Anne Lloyd had no need to equivocate 'you can say that there was a foregone conclusion you would have good audiences'.

As a fund-raiser, *Berkeley Square* proved highly successful. In the *Daily Pictorial*'s apt words, 'Society's play-acting' had raised £746.²³ What seemed more surprising was the success of *Berkeley Square* as a production in itself. The *SMH* drama critic thought it was 'admirably staged' for an amateur production. The social pages concurred. Most also applauded the interpretations of the actors playing the principal parts, particularly Anne Gordon. Helen Pettigrew, the premonition-inclined, eighteenth century woman played by Gordon, was the love-interest of the modern American hero, who mysteriously found himself transported into the past on entering a house in Berkeley Square, England.²⁴ Comments on Gordon's deportment, her clear voice, her charming or appealing manner, and her clothing dominated accounts in the social columns. Critical appraisals also mentioned the effectiveness of her speech in conveying the emotion attending particularly moving moments in the play, and the gentle, wistful, ethereal qualities she evoked in her version of Helen Pettigrew. Harry Dangar, as the hero Peter Standish, demonstrated an 'assured sense of the stage', while the acting of Helen Stephen and others was more succinctly declared successful.²⁵ As Helen Rutledge (nee Stephen) observed:

If the performance proves to be less of an ordeal to sit through than had been feared, that is a bonus and if a daughter appears, nicely made up, to be prettier than could be hoped, that is another one. As a rule, everyone goes home congratulating themselves on a successful effort, relieved that it is over, but ready to do something of the sort again.²⁶

²² *Sydney Mail*, 4 June 1930, p.21; and *Daily Pictorial*, 2 July 1930, p.39.

²³ *Daily Pictorial*, 13 Aug. 1930, p.39.

²⁴ Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.183.

²⁵ *SMH*, 27 June 1930, p.16.

²⁶ Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.178.

It appears that *Berkeley Square* was one of those events where most were pleasantly surprised, and the very large amount of money raised through it for Karitane another bonus.

Lady Gordon's high profile as an organiser of the event, meant that its success was soon attached to her name. She remained single-minded about the show. As her daughter explained, she was enthusiastic and strong-willed, and 'if she went to do something, she did it absolutely to the hilt'. The announcement of her husband's knighthood, for example, did not prevent Lady Gordon from attending rehearsals, where she seemed to maintained an air of calm dignity.²⁷ The *Bulletin*, not the publication most likely to praise a Society woman, was seduced by her:

Any committee that secures her help finds itself moving surely to success along the smooth lines of amiability. She has ideas – a quick brain full of them – and she infuses with her enthusiasm even the blasé press-woman; so that publicity is ready to attend whatever task her hands find to do.²⁸

Even miserly businessmen gave in to Gordon when approached in the name of whichever charity she supported at the time. 'Charming' was a word persistently applied to her manner, as well as 'pretty', 'lively' and 'amusing'. These attributes may have contributed in part to her success. Lloyd again explained:

She went to see hundreds of people, and she always got money. She could charm money out of them, ... out of the most dreadful people. If they wanted someone who was very tight-fisted, they'd send Mum.²⁹

In addition, she was keenly aware of what she felt was her duty to do 'public work' as the wife of a member of the bar, and worked for almost any charity that approached her, invariably to the benefit of that particular cause.

²⁷ Did she see the rehearsal as an opportunity for early congratulation? *Daily Pictorial*, 3 June 1930, p.23.

²⁸ *Bulletin*, 11 June 1930, p.14.

²⁹ Lloyd, interview.

Over the ensuing years Gordon reapplied the winning *Berkeley Square* formula in the name of other charities. For the Industrial Blind Institution she produced A.A. Milne's *The Romantic Age*, which opened at the Savoy Theatre on 28 November 1930 and resulted in a £600 contribution to the cause. In the course of the cheque-presenting ceremony the concert manager Sir Benjamin Fuller remarked that he hoped that Lady Gordon would arrange other shows, as he had not seen a better amateur entertainment than *The Romantic Age*.³⁰ In March 1932, Gordon acted as publicity officer for a production of *Daddy Long-legs*, an adaptation of a serial by an American writer, Jean Webster, in aid of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In that role, she organised for a short film to be made as an advertisement.³¹ Lady Gordon also convened the Snappy Sydney Revue staged in mid-October 1933 for the Crown Street Women's Hospital, and organised *The Rose Without a Thorn*, staged to benefit the Twilight Homes on 31 August 1934. Private theatricals for the sake of charity may have formed part of the British social calendar half a century earlier, but for Sydney-siders, the *Berkeley Square* phenomenon set new standards and inspired a new generation of organisers. By the mid-1930s, the papers were full of reports of amateur theatricals arranged for both charity and entertainment by other women and their respective social circles.

Each theatrical event organised by Gordon displayed a number of common characteristics. The charities did not directly assist the poor and homeless. As Drew Cottle observed, Sydney's wealthiest families did not identify with the general suffering of the poorer working class during the Depression. Instead they aided animals or the 'deserving poor', and the institutions founded to care for them.³² The plays consistently involved

³⁰ *SMH*, 16 Dec. 1930, p.4; and *Daily Pictorial*, 24 Dec. 1930, p.34.

³¹ *SMH*, 20 Feb. 1932, p.7; and *SMH*, 3 March 1932, p.3.

³² See Drew Cottle, 'The Sydney Rich in the Great Depression', *Bowyang: Work on changing Australia*, vol.1, no.2 (Sept.-Oct. 1979), pp.67-102; and Cottle in *Life can be oh so sweet on the sunny side*

people from the same influential social circles and cast them in similar roles. Anne Gordon took lead roles in each of the above plays, and starred in a highly amusing skit by Jim Bancks, the creator of Ginger Meggs, which proved one of the highlights of the Snappy Sydney Revue. Harry Dangar frequently starred opposite her, leading to speculation about the possibility of a real-life romantic liaison, and to Dangar's own ambitions to engage in a professional acting career. Likewise Helen Stephens, Mrs George Vivers, Mary Adams, and Margaret Fairfax, among others, made further appearances. Women of the Street, Stephen, Knox, Buckland, and Allen families dominated the committees.

The choice of play hinged primarily on entertainment value. That is, the organisers did not seek to offer political commentary, intellectual discussion or direct contributions to Australian drama. Nevertheless, their use of drama for charitable purposes may have had an impact on the theatre itself. The visiting actor, George Thirwell, as guest speaker at a luncheon in 1934, referred to some of the problems arising from 'amateur dramatic work'. He noted that professional actors often saw amateurs as vainglorious menaces depriving them of work. He expressed the alternate view that in reality they helped to make drama more popular and enabled those with the desire or ability to consider a full-time career in the footlights to gain valuable training.³³ In fact, Gordon's amateur theatricals appear to have generated numerous smaller-scaled campaigns of the *Berkeley Square*-type by schools, city businesses, and eastern and northern suburb interest groups. Further, interest in the art of acting had increased, and in 1936 social columns cited it as a popular hobby, with Noreen Dangar, Anne Gordon, Jane Connolly, and Alix Lamb setting conspicuous examples.³⁴ For many of these young women, acting constituted a serious interest, Lamb,

of the street: A Study Of The Rich Of Woollahra During the Great Depression, 1928-1934, (London: Minerva Press, 1998).

³³ Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.177; and *SMH*, 26 July 1934, p.3.

³⁴ *SMH*, 28 May 1936, p.20.

for example, studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and Gordon and Connolly performed professionally on occasion. Indirectly, then, the charity-oriented amateur theatricals arranged by Lady Gordon and women of the eastern suburbs of Sydney may have contributed to an increased interest in drama in general, despite their intrinsically conventional social function.

The tendency to use amateur dabblings in the arts as a tool in aid of philanthropic causes manifested itself in another large project undertaken by Lady Gordon in 1933. The 'Ladder to Fame' exhibition held to assist St John's Ambulance opened in the Grace Building on 11 October. It included two sections: amateurs, and established artists. Known as 'Painters Courageous', the first section featured artwork by the same group of people who had starred in and organised the amateur theatricals, as well as Sir Philip and Lady Game, and members of diplomatic circles. As the exhibition included in excess of 650 separate items, it is evident that the same principle of universal participation was used to guarantee its success. Aside from a general admission charge for exhibitors and non-exhibitors alike, the sale of 'votes', and a gift shop run by Patrick White's mother, Ruth White, ensured a healthy collection towards the St John's Ambulance fund. Causing much amusement, Lady Game spoke in mock-serious tones about her own artistic endeavours in opening the exhibition.³⁵ Her speech exemplified the light-hearted engagement with the arts that characterised such philanthropic activities. The majority of the philanthropists remained separate from the world of the professional arts. The exhibition did provide scope for those with some talent to explore them and expose their efforts to public scrutiny, but as with the theatre, no expectations of artistry attended the participants' endeavours.

Arts for the Artist's sake

In the course of arranging the plethora of philanthropy-driven amateur theatricals, Lady Gordon gave 'the benefit of her experience' to a 'young group of amateur players'.³⁶ As mentioned, some of those players considered a theatrical career as a result of their amateur experiences. Having made commendable stage appearances in 1930 (*Berkeley Square* in June, and *The Romantic Age* in November), Anne Gordon received an offer to star as Lady Rowena in A.A. Milne's *When Knights were Bold*, staged by J.C. Williamson in September 1931. Once more, on her appearance in that show, she drew praise for her 'distinctive enunciation' and the strength of her voice, along with assurances of her aptitude for 'dramatic work'.³⁷ Despite her success, Anne Gordon thought the experience 'ghastly', and the 'company' awful. This first experience of professional work made her more ambivalent about a full-time acting career. After the Snappy Sydney Revue, she received more offers of professional acting work, most of which she refused. She did record a few radio programs, the first, *Westward-Ho*, with an American couple she thought quite strange, and the other a series of brief skits based on conversations between an uncle and his niece.³⁸ Dropping the idea of a commercial career, Anne Gordon engaged instead in numerous amateur, but non-philanthropic, shows. She appeared in an American one-act play, *Set a Thief* at the opening night of Bryants' Playhouse on 16 July 1932; with the Pickwick Theatre Group at the Savoy in *The Lilies of the Field* by John Hastings Turner, which opened on 27 July 1932; and in the lead role of the very successful Independent Theatre production of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* in December 1933.

³⁵ *SMH*, 12 Oct. 1933, p.4.

³⁶ 'Amateurs to Palace. "Daddy Longlegs" for RSPCA', cutting, source not cited, in ALPP.

³⁷ *SMH*, 14 Sept. 1931, p.4; and *Sun*, 28 Aug. 1931, p.12.

³⁸ Lloyd, interview; and 'Over the Tea-cups', *First Nights*, Dec. 1933, p.47.

Essentially, she had made the transition from amateur to repertory theatre, which sought to bring professional standards and greater intellectual content to the non-commercial stage.

Anne Gordon nevertheless did not completely give up the idea of working on the commercial stage, and her mother and other women from her mother's circle supported those aspirations. In September 1937, after performing in an Independent Theatre production of Chekov's *The Three Sisters* with Prudence Vanbrugh, daughter of Violet Vanbrugh, a well-known English actress, Anne Gordon departed for London.³⁹ There she approached Violet Vanbrugh with an introduction from Prudence. With the assistance of Lady Gordon's 'old friends' Sir Louis and Lady Knutssen, she also made appointments to meet Stephen Mitchell and Ronald Adams, the managers of the Phoenix and Embassy Theatres, respectively.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, none of these efforts resulted in a professional engagement. At that point Sir Philip and Lady Game, well known to the Gordon family from their sojourn at Sydney Government House earlier in the decade, stepped in to help. They invited Beverley Nichols, the author of *Mesmer*, which Tavistock Little Theatre had agreed to stage, to meet Anne Gordon at dinner. Lady Game suggested to Nichols that the young Australian should be cast in the show. As rehearsals had already begun, Anne could only join the chorus as an understudy to the lead female characters. As before Anne did not enjoy the professional experience, although possibly disappointment as much as distaste for the commercial stage infused her sentiments. One of the theatre managers recommended that she undertake studies in the dramatic arts, but she decided not to immediately pursue that option. War soon broke out, and while working for the Red Cross, she met the injured sub-lieutenant, Roger Lloyd, grandson of the first General manager of Lloyd's Bank, whom she married in 1941.⁴¹

³⁹ Lloyd, interview; and 'Personal and Social', in *Home*, Oct. 1937, p.6.

⁴⁰ Cutting, source not cited, in ALPP.

⁴¹ Lloyd, interview; and cuttings, no source cited, in ALPP.

Networking among influential acquaintances to create opportunities for her daughter represented only one aspect of the patronage offered by Lady Gordon. She also supported Anne Gordon on a more personal level. As proud parents, the Gordons attended Anne's performances with non-philanthropic amateur theatre groups, sometimes to her detriment. On one occasion, in a very small theatre, she was so conscious of her father's presence in the front row and the distracting sight of his 'great moustache' that for five minutes she could not concentrate on her lines. The support was revealed privately and potentially offered a source of bonding between mother and daughter. Lady Gordon, for example, coached Anne in her roles. A Mrs Hunter, who had applied make-up to the young Margaret Thomas when she joined JC Williamson's Royal Comic Opera Company in 1905, also did Anne's for *Berkeley Square* and other shows.⁴² Problems experienced when trying to match a bright red wig to Anne's hair colour in preparation for *The Romantic Age*, saw Lady Gordon endorsing the idea that her daughter should dye her hair the same bright shade. When Lady Gordon gave a Mother's Day address to the Red Cross Younger Set in 1934, she exhorted them, 'girls, be pals to your mothers and mothers be pals to your girls'.⁴³ If she lived by that advice, it may be surmised that she and Anne Gordon shared their feelings about their theatrical experiences, and that Lady Gordon empathised with her daughter's ambitions. Indeed, Anne affirmed that her mother 'never stood in [her] way about acting at all'.⁴⁴

Harry Dangar appears to have been a personal favourite with Lady Gordon, although she encouraged his aspirations not as an actor, but as an artist. Following the last performance of *Berkeley Square*, Harry Dangar had drawn Lady Gordon onto the stage 'amid a round of applause'. Perhaps a little overwhelmed by the success of the show, she

⁴² Rutledge, *Grandfather's House*, p.184; Lloyd, interview; and *Daily Pictorial*, 30 June 1930, p.19.

⁴³ *SMH*, 10 May 1934, p.3.

⁴⁴ Lloyd, interview.

experienced some nervousness, and, while thanking the audience for its support, she 'clung tenaciously' to Dangar's hand.⁴⁵ No direct evidence of personal encouragement of Dangar's plans to act for J.C. Williamson appears to exist, and, in fact, Lady Gordon did not give the star role in *The Romantic Age*, to Dangar. She could be forgiven for the omission, though, as instead she cast the handsome English actor George Blackwood as Gervase Mallory, and Dangar in a supporting role.⁴⁶ Dangar, however, had other talents, and later held an exhibition of his paintings at Sydney's Grosvenor Galleries. It was Lady Gordon who officially opened the exhibition. Not the only foray into the art world on behalf of a member of Sydney's social elite, Lady Gordon also approached the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, concerning the possible purchase of the most popular entry in the 'Ladder to Fame' exhibition, a watercolour portrait entitled *Mick*, by Sir Philip Game. The trustees declined the offer for unstated reasons.⁴⁷

Although the spirit of patronage is manifest in Lady Gordon's support of her own daughter and Dangar's acting and artistic aspirations, these examples hardly compare to her endeavours between 1933 and 1938 on behalf of a number of musical protégés. Through well-documented campaigns, similar in method and personnel to the charity theatricals, Gordon was instrumental in sending the singers Elsa Corry and Joan Hammond, pianists Eunice Gardiner and Valda Aveling, and violinists Susan Davies and George Farrell to Europe for tuition and performance opportunities. While Gordon remained pivotal in each case, she replayed a form of collective patronage practiced in Australia at least from the late nineteenth century. Her campaigns happened to coincide

⁴⁵ *Daily Pictorial*, 30 June 1930, p.19.

⁴⁶ Dangar in fact participated in the same professional production as Anne Gordon, *When Knights were Bold*, handwritten note with cuttings, no sources cited, in ALPP; and *Bulletin*, 1 Oct. 1930, p.39.

⁴⁷ National Art Gallery of New South Wales, Minutes of Monthly Meetings, 27 Oct. 1933, p.1349.

with rising anxiety in the musical community over the need to educate Australians. Both social and musical elites looked to established British and European institutions to guarantee the standard of the education that their schemes offered, and for symbols of the city's cultural maturity. For some, this was a response to the British musical 'renaissance' of the past two decades led by, among others, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst. They believed that the Royal College of Music deserved credit for 'creating a British school of composition'.⁴⁸ Whether tastes were contemporaneous or nostalgic, two things were certain: the models advocated by music-lovers were not Australian, and they were increasingly placed in contradistinction to the commercial, the technological, and most importantly, the anti-intellectual.

The first of these campaigns began in 1933, when an unnamed 'prominent Sydney man', heard the soprano Elsa Corry sing at the Good Friday service at St Judes' church, Bowral. The daughter of a fatally wounded soldier, she studied for five years at the Conservatorium under Ruth Ladd courtesy of the Repatriation Department, and surpassed the efforts of twelve other candidates to win the Royal College of Music L.A.B. for singing and harmony. Following the confirmatory judgements of Sydney musicians John Brownlee and Peter Dawson, Corry's unnamed champion enlisted Gordon's assistance in a campaign to raise sufficient funds to support Corry through three years of study in Europe. A committee of influential people formed and made plans for a testimonial concert. It was Gordon that contributed most significantly to the outstanding success of the campaign. Perhaps recalling her own struggles while still a music student in London Gordon personally wrote and posted seven hundred letters concerning the importance of

⁴⁸ Cyril Monk, 'Music Renaissance. The British Movement', *The Australian Musical News*, 1 Jan. 1927, p.13.

the fund.⁴⁹ The testimonial concert was eventually held at Sydney Town Hall on 11 April 1934. In June Gordon presented the Soldier's Children Education Board with cheques totalling a substantial sum, for the Repatriation Committee to administer on Corry's behalf. A series of *musicales* and farewells followed, with further donations pushing the total up to a remarkable £1589.⁵⁰ Interest in Corry's career did not end with her departure from Australian shores. Gordon received regular updates from Lady Game, which she passed onto Corry's supporters through the press.

The ensuing campaigns varied considerably in the range of effort and scale of success. The sixteen-year-old pianist, Eunice Gardiner, was forced to defer her departure by three months, with the disappointing total of £291 to her credit when she left.⁵¹ The George Farrell testimonial concert, though well supported by Sydney's committeewomen remained relatively low-key, as did the 1938 campaign for Valda Aveling. The violinist Susan Davies, the daughter of an Archdeacon and recipient of a three year scholarship for the Royal Academy of Music, London, attracted more press coverage and wider support. No doubt this resulted from her own position in relation to Sydney's social elite. Though not wealthy, her late father's office brought her surrogate membership of those circles. She and Anne Gordon for example shopped together for a suitable dress for her farewell concert.⁵² By far the most prominent campaign, and the farthest reaching in terms of its outcome, was that in support of the soprano Joan Hammond. It resulted from the dual

⁴⁹ 'At Home with Lady Gordon', *SMH* Women's Supplement, 19 April 1934, p.12; and *SMH*, 9 Sept. 1933, p.8.

⁵⁰ The Musical Advancement Society, formed in early 1935 with a long list of patrons that included Gordon, aimed to offer scholarships for students from families earning an annual income of less than £250. The organisation handed its first cheque to the Conservatorium in May 1936. See 'Musical Advancement Society – Cheque for Scholarship', *SMH*, 20 May 1936, p. 9; and correspondence, J.L. Walters to Registrar, Conservatorium of Music, on Music Advancement Society letterhead, 19 September 1936, in Conservatorium Archives, Conservatorium Library, 'Correspondence re Scholarship, 1929-1938' folder. Also see *SMH*, 9 June 1934, p.10; *SMH*, 4 July 1934, p.7; *Home*, vol.15, no.8, 1 Aug. 1934, p.6.

⁵¹ *SMH*, 11 Sept. 1935, p.7.

⁵² *SMH*, 9 Oct. 1935, p.7.

patronage of Lady Gowrie, the wife of the new State Governor, and Lady Gordon, with the usual committee to sell tickets. Hammond, who enjoyed a comfortable childhood in a sprawling North Shore home, recorded details of the campaign to send her abroad, the subsequent difficult years she experienced in Europe, and the patronage offered her by Australians in London.⁵³ Those musical protégés with class connections such as Hammond and Davies, or sympathy-evoking stories like Elsa Corry, thus appear to have received more attention and more strenuous support from their Society patrons.

Inevitably some committee members, concert ticket sellers and ticket buyers participated in the name of fashion and the social calendar. For some patrons, if Lady Gordon is to be taken as an example, the musical cause really did matter. Displaying a greater breadth of interest in the welfare of musicians Lady Gordon became involved in Music Week, the Musical Association, and the Music Advancement Society during the same period. In her role as patron Lady Gordon endorsed the Music Advancement Society aim to provide scholarships for music tuition to children from families earning an annual income of less than £250.⁵⁴ Her association with these organisations also shows a concern for the greater state of the art in Sydney, and an interest in the city's cultural life rather than a utilitarian engagement with it. It suggests that her involvement with the theatre represented the linking of personal interest with altruistic habit.

Arts for Art's sake

Aside from 'society's play-acting' for charity, the amateur, repertory, and legitimate theatres all marched under the banner of the Little Theatre. Repertory theatre derived from turn-of-the-century British developments, which, through J.T. Grein, Henrik

⁵³ Joan Hammond, *A Voice, A Life*, (London: Gollancz, 1970)

⁵⁴ Information from Music Advancement Society of New South Wales letterhead, various correspondence, J.L. Walters to Conservatorium Registrar, 1936, Conservatorium Archives,

Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Harley Granville-Barker, turned the theatrical focus from entertainment to artistic seriousness. Australian responses dated from early in the twentieth century, but relied on amateur rather than professional organisations for expression. Little Theatre was also the name used for an American amateur movement that saw professionally trained actors protesting against Broadway's theatrical monopoly. Following the British repertory tradition, they presented a large and diverse range of plays in short seasons or single readings, focusing more on the playwright than the actor, on the intellectual rather than the entertainer, on the artistic as opposed to the showy. Australia thus followed the American example, ensuring an ongoing apparently contradictory association of amateur and serious theatre. It was this paradoxical combination that in Sydney separated amateur repertory theatre from the more light-hearted philanthropic or self-entertaining dramatics staged by Society women.⁵⁵ While not all charity plays were poorly produced drawing room romances, and repertory theatres sometimes held shows for charity, A.G. Stephens provides a simple and useful rule: the 'popular theatre [commercial or otherwise] acts; the Repertory theatre thinks and acts'.⁵⁶

In their search for a more realistic reflection of Australian life and an opening for Australian playwrights it was inevitable that nationalist dramatists looked hopefully to the Little Theatre movement. Of these, the most notable, William Moore's Australian Drama Nights, first held in 1909, and the Pioneer Players inaugurated in 1921 by Louis Esson, Vance Palmer, and Stewart Macky were both Melbourne ventures. Gegan McMahon's semi-professional Sydney Repertory Theatre represented Sydney's first attempt at serious and occasionally local drama. Collaboration between the commercial theatre managers J. and N. Tait and McMahon led to the foundation of the Sydney Repertory Theatre Society

⁵⁵ 'Correspondence re scholarship, 1929-1938' folder.

⁵⁵ Parsons and Chance, *Companion*, pp.39-40.

⁵⁶ A.G. Stephens, 'The Repertory Theatre in Australia – An Interview With Gegan McMahon', *The*

in 1920 for 'those interested in the presentation of Literary and Intellectual Plays'. It also established a 'free library of modern drama' and staged plays by Shaw, Ibsen, Granville-Barker, Arnold Bennett, W.B. Yeats, and three by Australian playwrights including Marguerite Dale.⁵⁷ Conditional on a minimum subscription of seven hundred, the concert managers accepted financial responsibility for the Society. Although original figures were encouraging, insufficient support led the Repertory Theatre's managers to propose that it become 'fully professional', which the Society resisted in the name of artistic integrity. The tenuous arrangement lapsed in 1928.⁵⁸ Out of the decade-long experiment, however, emerged the influential figures of Doris Fitton, and Beatrice Tildesley, both of whom later won decisive victories for repertory theatre in Sydney.

At the same time, a series of small theatrical organisations appeared in rapid succession in Sydney, most driven by the desire to stage the modern dramas being produced in England, Europe and America. Only the Player Club and Turret Theatre dared to produce an Australian play, and then only one each.⁵⁹ Originally envisaged as open, deliberately amateur 'friendly' bodies, the new groups emphasised the intrinsic artistry of the theatre, and directly opposed the isolation of playwrights, actors, set designers, and costume-makers fostered in commercial productions. This movement began in 1923 with the foundation of the Drama League. A former New York Barn Theatre producer, Duncan Macdougall founded the League with the support of his wife, Pakie Macdougall, and the assistance of the ambitious Victorian set designer, Don Finley. Duncan Macdougall's hope for an 'art theatre' reflected his experience with repertory theatre in Britain and America.

Home, 1 June 1923, p.31.

⁵⁷ J and N Tait Repertory Company, 'A Meeting', Palace Theatre, Sydney, 18 Oct. 1920, flier; and 'The Sydney Repertory Theatre Society', [1924], flier. See also Audrey Tate, 'Marguerite Ludovia Dale', *ADB*, vol. 13, pp.561-2.

⁵⁸ Rees, *Making of Australian Drama*, pp.120-8; Roger Covell, 'The Role of the Little Theatre', *Hemisphere*, vol.8, no.12, Dec. 1964, p.5; Parsons and Chance, *Companion*, pp.39-40.

⁵⁹ William Moore, 'The Community Playhouse', handwritten draft, in Papers of William Moore, NLA MS 7647, addition 23 March 1992, folder 19.

According to Connie Stephens (later Robertson) who observed this movement at close range, personalities clashed. The Shakespearean, Francis Jackson, left the League shortly after its inception. Macdougall and Finley then founded the Playbox Society. After the Playbox's first production, *The Hairy Ape*, Finley became disgruntled, and assembled the Burdekin Players, with Carrie Tennant, E. Howell, Kathleen Robinson, and Grace Hart, all future leaders in the theatrical community, in its ranks. The group soon became 'The Understudies' under Tennant's leadership. Finley meanwhile moved on to establish the short-lived Turret Theatre. Out of the Turret's remnants grew the Independent Theatre with Doris Fitton, originally of the Sydney Repertory Theatre, at its head, and Beatrice Tildesley closely involved. Carrie Tennant drew enthusiasts from the Players' Club, the defunct Repertory Theatre, the Turret and the Playbox to form the Community Theatre in 1930, the same year that the Independent was founded.⁶⁰ One of Macdougall's pupils, Therese Desmond who became known through the Playbox and Community Theatre, joined Eric Howell in founding the Experimental Theatre and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in the early 1930s.⁶¹

Most of the new theatrical organisations actually enjoyed the patronage of influential figures. The Burdekin Players had vice-regal patronage, and the papers reported Lady de Chair's attendance at its first production, a Miracle play, in 1925. Connie Stephens, Dorothea Mackellar, Mrs Sydney Jamieson, Ernest Watt, and others graced the Playbox 'Advisory List'. Richard Windeyer, K.C. supported both the Players' Club and

⁶⁰ Connie Robertson, untitled handwritten draft, and 'Robertson, 'Destiny and Don Finley. An Interview by Constance Stephens', both in Robertson, Constance, Mrs William Kinneard, Papers, ML MSS 1105, box 2, item 2; See also Parson and Chance, *Companion*, pp.39-40.

⁶¹ The Playbox, *Morality?*, program, St James' Hall, Sydney, 18-20 November [1924], in Robertson Papers, box 3, item 5; and 'The Feminist Club. Plays by Students of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art', in Noel Marienthal (ed.), *The Little Theatre Magazine*, 15 Sept. 1933, p.14.

the Turret from their inception.⁶² Marion Mahony Griffin, draughtswoman, and her husband, Walter Burley Griffin, maintained links with Pakie Macdougall and patronised the bohemian Club she built on the remnants of the Playbox Society.⁶³

A combination of factors meant that while the succession of Little Theatre societies appeared and disappeared, the entrenched concert managers J and N Tait, who had merged with J.C. Williamson in 1920, enjoyed a monopoly over theatrical activities in Australia. They maintained easy profits throughout the 1920s through the production of humorous and mildly - if ever - intellectual plays that attracted the middle class and consequently resisted the challenge of the cinema. This situation persisted until the end of the decade, when talking movies heightened the competition and diminishing recreational expenditure and the imposition of the Entertainment Tax at the onset of the Depression ruined the theatre's commercial viability. The 'Big Theatre' in Australia soon fell to the challenge of the cinema.⁶⁴ Theatre after theatre closed: dramatists naturally saw it as a black period, while visiting actors were appalled that only two appropriate venues existed in Sydney throughout the 1930s.⁶⁵ Perhaps because of this dearth of commercial dramatic activity, the amateur theatre, both philanthropic and repertory, seemed to become more appealing as the decade progressed.

The first direct interaction between Lady Gordon and Sydney repertory circles took place in February 1932 when she adjudicated an Australian Play competition arranged by Carrie Tennant's Community Theatre. It is uncertain how or why this came about. By that

⁶² 'The Club', *The Play: The Official Organ of The Sydney Players' Club*, vol.1, no.1, Aug.ust 1935, n.p. See also *The Playbox*, *The Adding Machine*, program, St James' Hall, 20, 21 June 1924, in Robertson Papers, box 3, item 5.

⁶³ See Peter Kirkpatrick, 'Macdougall, Augusta ('Pakie')', *ADB*, vol. 15, pp.198-200; and Jill Roe, 'The magical world of Marion Mahony Griffin: culture and community at Castlecrag in the interwar years', in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (ed.s), *Minorities: cultural diversity in Sydney*, (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 1995), p.88.

⁶⁴ *SMH*, 23 July 1930, p.18; and Bain, 'Brighter days?', p.143.

⁶⁵ See *SMH* 9 May 1934, p.7; 11 May 1935, p.10; 12 Oct. 1935, p.10; 16 Oct. 1935, p.7; and 31 Oct. 1934, p.7.

stage, Lady Gordon had organised *Berkeley Square*, and *The Romantic Age*, and was involved in preparations for *Daddy Longlegs*. Anne Gordon had also performed professionally. The Community Theatre with the advice and interest of William Moore had opened in the basement of St Peter's, on Forbes Street, Darlinghurst, in late 1929. It presented thirty one-act plays during its first year, and in December 1930 held its first tournament for Australian playwrights. On that occasion awards were made for 'Best Acting Group', 'Best Produced Play', 'Best Australian Play', and 'Best Humorous Play', according to the judgement of Ruth Bedford, S.R. Irving, Francis Jackson, Arthur Giles, H. Bertie and Dr Raymond Firth.⁶⁶ Aside from Bedford, most of these people had experience in commercial theatre management. Possibly Ruth Bedford, a resident of the eastern suburbs, and close friend of Dorothea Mackellar, made the link between Lady Gordon and the Community theatre. The May 1931 issue of the *Community Magazine* was its last. Later that year the theatre moved to the Aeolian Hall in Pitt Street. It seems likely that financial difficulties might have caused the deferment of the second drama tournament until March 1932, although Bedford doubted that Tennant's organisational ability could sustain her ambitious enterprise.⁶⁷ It was as a member of both the one-act and three-act play reading committees for this tournament, that Gordon made the leap from successful producer of middle class entertainments with philanthropic overtones, to dramatic connoisseur. Other readers included on the committees came from commercial theatre backgrounds, as well as the Sydney University English department.⁶⁸ Another committeewoman, Mrs Belle Allen, also judged the competition. In addition, while the reading committee ploughed through more than a hundred entries in early March, the cast

⁶⁶ 'The Play Competition', *The Community Magazine*, vol.1, no.3, 1 Feb. 1931, p.5; and Rees, *Making of Australian Drama*, p.127.

⁶⁷ Ruth Bedford to Dorothea Mackellar, 4 Jan. 1930, Mackellar Family, Dorothea Mackellar Papers, ML.MSS 1959, vol. 8.

⁶⁸ *SMH*, 4 March 1932, p.4.

of the fund-raising theatrical, *Daddy Longlegs*, rehearsed at the Community Playhouse. The two streams of amateur theatre, it seems, had made contact.

Not long after the Community Theatre vacated the ‘tiny, tiny’ theatre in the St Peter’s hall basement the professional actor George Bryant and his daughter, Beryl, reopened it as Bryants’ Playhouse. Beryl Bryant already had a long list of professional engagements to her credit, having performed for J.C. Williamsons and their rival, Benjamin Fuller, for many years. She had also acted in films. She hoped to use the Playhouse as a ‘training ground for young actors and actresses – and for dramatists’.⁶⁹ Fortunately the Bryants succeeded where Tennant had failed, and within a few years students fostered by the Playhouse had gained renown, and the tradition of play tournaments started by the Community Theatre was firmly re-established.⁷⁰

Lady Gordon’s connection with the Bryants stemmed from the same period as her involvement with the Community Theatre. George Bryant in fact was seconded to produce *Daddy Longlegs* for the RSPCA on 17 and 18 March 1932, while his daughter was in the cast. When Bryants’ Playhouse opened on 16 July 1932, the program featured four modern one-act plays. Anne Gordon played the lead in one of them, an American play, *Set a Thief*. As ‘an amateur newspaper reporter’ Anne broke into the home of ‘a dishonest financier’ played in turn by George Bryant. Lady Gordon also featured in the program. She formally opened the theatre, referring to its previous use as the Community Playhouse, and explaining the Bryants’ plans to train young actors. Anne had the impression that her mother was first drawn into the activities of various repertory theatres through her own acting engagements. The fact that Lady Gordon had met the Bryants’ in the context of the earlier production of *Daddy Longlegs* as well as the Community Theatre tournament

⁶⁹ Lloyd, interview; Bryants’ Playhouse, *The Enchanted Cottage* by Arthur Pinero, program, not dated; and *SMH*, 18 July 1932, p.4.

⁷⁰ *SMH*, 9 March 1935, p.10.

suggests that personal and dramatic interests combined in her involvement with Bryants' Playhouse. As it was, the connection persisted. Over the ensuing years Beryl Bryant frequently co-operated with Gordon in the production of further plays for charity. For the Snappy Sydney Revue held at the Savoy in mid-October 1933, Gordon, Beryl Bryant and Enid Baumberg as a trio instigated and arranged the production.⁷¹ When Gordon first convened a meeting to discuss the idea of a revue in aid of the Crown Street Women's Hospital, she made Bryants' Playhouse the venue. A number of people named as probable participants in the sketches studied under Beryl Bryant over the ensuing years, including Audrey Nicholson, who later starred in the Australian film *The Squatter's Daughter*, and Suzanne White, sister of Patrick White and daughter of prominent committeewoman, Mrs Victor White.⁷² Though very much still a philanthropy-driven light-hearted entertainment, the cooperation of Gordon and Bryant in arranging the revue enabled repertorians to cast their net a little further into the city's philanthropic ranks.

This mingling of Gordon's personal and wider theatrical interests emerged in connection with another production by the Playhouse. *The Home* reported in January 1935:

The many friends of Patrick White, Mr and Mrs Victor White's clever son, who is now studying at Oxford, will be interested to hear that his first completed effort at play-writing has been sent out to Miss Beryl Bryant, who intends to produce it at her Playhouse in Darlinghurst early in January. Mr White's sister, Miss Suzanne White, who is noted for her keenness for amateur acting, will take part in the play, which has the intriguing title of *Bread-and-butter-Women*.⁷³

The *B.P. Magazine*, a glossy publication for passengers on Burns, Philp and Co. ocean liners, explained that Suzanne White was a member of Bryants' Playhouse and had appeared in many of their productions. It noted that her mother was also 'a keen supporter

⁷¹ *Sydney Mail*, 18 Oct. 1933, p.7.

⁷² *SMH*, 19 Aug. 1933, p.7.

⁷³ *The Home*, 2 Jan. 1935, p.6.

of “little theatre” activities’ who ‘render[ed] valuable assistance in committee organisation’.⁷⁴ In his biography of Patrick White, David Marr showed clearly the closeness of the White and Gordon families. They holidayed in Tasmania and the Swiss Alps together, and Lady Gordon repaired to the Whites’ Mt Wilson home for rest during particularly exhaustive campaigns. If Gordon ‘was more than ever a force on charity committees’ during the 1930s, Ruth White was ‘her lieutenant’.⁷⁵ It is no wonder that Patrick White’s first play was produced by Bryants’ Playhouse, of which his sister was a member, and his mother’s close friend an influential patron.

While Lady Gordon agreed to help any cause, it appears that the Little Theatre, along with the Comodorian Society, and St John’s Ambulance, constituted a sentimental favourite. She promoted the theatre as if it was a charitable cause, but also saw it as a cultural pastime that she appreciated on a personal level. For example, she took her family and sister-in-law, Mrs Eardley Lushington, to the first night of *Death Takes a Holiday*, at the short-lived Impressionist Theatre, a repertory archetype.⁷⁶ Unlike her schemes for charity, Lady Gordon did not organise large-scale, isolated events to further the cause of Little Theatre. Instead she used profile-raising, committee-styled techniques to launch ongoing campaigns in support of individual theatres and the movement as a whole. The difference, perhaps, was that she had begun to promote art for art’s sake.

This new dimension to Lady Gordon’s patronage is most evident in her support of the Independent Theatre. Founded by former Sydney Repertory Theatre player Doris Fitton on the ashes of the Turret Theatre on 30 May 1930, the Independent aimed at ‘presenting the world’s best plays with a high standard of production and for the

⁷⁴ Photograph and caption, *The B.P. Magazine*, vol.VII, no.4, 1 Sept. 1935, p.20.

⁷⁵ David Marr, *Patrick White: a life*, (Sydney: Random House, 1991), pp.44, 73, 101.

⁷⁶ *SMH*, 20 June 1934, p.7.

development of Australian talent in all phases of theatre'.⁷⁷ Fitton drew inspiration from Moscow Art Theatre director, Constantin Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art*, in which he expounded ideals placing paramount importance on the play. For many years the Independent suffered for the want of a permanent home. Yet it survived those difficult times and became one of the most prominent and influential of all the Little Theatres in Sydney, responsible for staging a wide variety of plays from the mainstream to Shakespeare to modern literary works and Australian dramas. It also trained actors that later became famous and influential figures even to present times, such as Peter Finch and Ruth Cracknell.

This time, Anne Gordon played a clear role in bringing Lady Gordon into contact with the Independent Theatre. A stroke of genius led Fitton to offer the young actress the role of Peter Pan in J.M. Barrie's play by the same name. It was staged in December 1933 to much acclaim. Gordon's slight form, melodious voice, and mannerisms seemed to suit her to the part. The play proved so successful it was repeated each year, sometimes in the name of charity, until she departed for England in 1937. As Anne later explained, the British tradition of holding plays for children, particularly in the weeks prior to Christmas had not taken root in Australia. *Peter Pan* thus filled a niche, played to full houses, and remained fixed in the memories of some children for many years. Anne Gordon performed in many other plays for the Independent Theatre over the next four years, including *The Rose Without a Thorn* in August 1934, *Richard of Bordeaux* and *Hamlet* in 1935, and *Touchwood* and Chekov's *The Three Sisters* in 1936.⁷⁸ Knowing Lady Gordon's willingness to assist charitable and theatrical causes, and in view of Anne's prolific

⁷⁷ 'History of the Independent Theatre, North Sydney, May, 1930 to May, 1970', *it: 40th Birthday*, booklet, 1970, n.p.; and Rex Rienits, 'Doris Fitton: First Woman of Our Theatre', in *Digest of World Reading*, 1 Oct. 1948, p.48.

⁷⁸ Lloyd, interview; and untitled list of plays, ALPP. Anne Lloyd told the story of a return visit to Sydney made decades after she starred in *Peter Pan*, when a woman approached her while at lunch one day,

amateur career, it is no wonder that the influential committeewoman became involved in a campaign to promote the interests of the Independent Theatre.

It is likely that Anne Gordon acted as a link between the Independent Theatre and Lady Gordon. Doris Fitton's account confirms that 'the charming wife of Sir Alexander Gordon ... became very interested in our theatre when her daughter, Anne, played in a number of our shows'.⁷⁹ Lady Gordon first acted as 'patron' to the theatre, that is, as a figurehead with non-committee obligations in a manner common to many voluntary organisations of the period. It all began after she coordinated with the Independent Players to revive *Peter Pan* for Karitane in April 1934, and again to stage *The Rose Without a Thorn* for the Twilight Homes in August 1934. By October Doris Fitton had announced that the Independent planned to increase the number of their productions in 1935 to twice a week, to be held on Saturdays and Wednesdays, and by 14 December Gordon had opened the Independent Theatre's new city clubrooms. Wearing a silver fox fur, Lady Gordon explained the necessity for larger clubrooms, and pointed to the growth in the Independent Theatre membership to a total of seven hundred.⁸⁰ The Independent's plans for 1935 met only moderate success, but in 1936 it seemed to become more confident. On 1 September, it held an exhibition of stage settings in its clubrooms, where Lady Gordon and Doris Fitton 'received the guests and entertained them at tea'.⁸¹

Yet Lady Gordon, her daughter was adamant, was not simply a committee patron. She enjoyed working, 'she was always more, she was much more than a patron, because she always worked'. This was true in relation to the Independent Theatre. Lady Gordon was not content to remain a figurehead, particularly as the Theatre still had no permanent

telling her that she remembered seeing her play *Peter Pan*.

⁷⁹ Doris Fitton, *Not Without Dust and Heat: my life in theatre*, (Sydney: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), p.39; and Lloyd, interview.

⁸⁰ *SMH*, 15 Dec. 1934; and *Bulletin*, 19 Dec. 1934.

⁸¹ *SMH*, 2 Sept. 1936, p.7.

home. Gordon thus formed an Advisory Committee in early 1936 in support of Fitton and the Board of Directors, 'with the purpose of placing [the Independent] theatre on a still firmer basis'. In order to do that, Gordon first planned to raise its membership from 700 to 2000. Addressing '[a]ll those people really interested in the cultural development of a city [who] must deplore the present scarcity of theatrical entertainment in Sydney' in February 1936 she pointed to the Independent's important contributions to the theatrical life of the city, and urged the '[l]overs of the living theatre' to support its 'splendid work'.⁸² The press obligingly reiterated the urgent appeal. In promoting the Independent's next production, a sixteenth century Jewish play by S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk*, in April, the papers again publicised the campaign:

The Independent Theatre's drive for new members is meeting with success. Lady Gordon has thrown herself heart and soul into this work; and when Lady Gordon undertakes a task, she does it thoroughly... Last month, 80 new members enrolled themselves. That seems an excellent start.⁸³

Another dimension to Gordon's campaign concerned the need for a permanent theatre for Independent and other repertory theatre performances. Sydney still possessed only two theatres, and one them, the Tivoli, favoured vaudeville. The Savoy, in which the Independent had performed for many years, closed down in 1937. For a year or so, the Independent played at the Conservatorium. Raising membership numbers constituted only the first part of Gordon's plan, 'the ultimate purpose being the founding of a repertory theatre building which will be at the service not only of the Independent Theatre, but of other similar companies operating in Sydney'. She pictured a 'theatre of some size, with a good stage and lighting, and plenty of dressing-rooms'. It would seat 800 and afford

⁸² Independent Theatre flier, no date, in ALPP.

⁸³ SMH, 18 April 1936, p.12.

greater opportunities to 'local writers, producers and artistic talent'.⁸⁴ The scheme became absorbed in other campaigns in the name of Sydney's Little Theatre. Richard Windeyer, K.C., the President of the Sydney Players' Club, who upheld a 'family tradition of interest in the Theatre', was also 'anxious to foster Drama in [the] community'. He saw 'the genuine Little Theatre organisations' as the source of 'the true spirit, the living flame, of the great art we love'. The Players' Club magazine hinted, in November 1935, that 'a theatrical Knight' had plans for the realisation of 'the Amateurs' dream of a new theatre'. It was a hope held by many of the founding members of the Club, Windeyer among them.⁸⁵ Windeyer had in fact enabled the founding of the Turret Theatre in 1928, by acting as a trustee for the Company, and co-signing contracts for the Theatre situated in North Sydney. It is likely that when the Turret folded, and the Independent emerged, Windeyer retained his allegiance. The timing of the scarcely veiled hint in November 1935 only months prior to the initiation of Gordon's campaign hardly seems coincidental.

Aside from the usual social events that involved the city's wealthy and influential circles, it is likely that the two repertory theatre patrons came into closer collaboration in the process of organising a week of dramatic activities in December, 1935. Known simply as Drama Week, and no doubt planned with the hope of emulating the success of the annual Music Week activities, most events during the week took place at Emerson Hall in Liverpool Street. The program culminated with a Saturday afternoon matinee 'Pageant of Drama Through the Ages' held at *Elaine*, the Double Bay home of Mr and Mrs Hubert Fairfax. Windeyer, along with Doris Fitton, Beryl Bryant, Alice Gould, William Moore and numerous other actor-managers and playwrights, served on the Drama Week Committee. Lady Gordon was the Drama Week Committee President. Officiated by the

⁸⁴ Independent Theatre flier, in ALPP; *SMH*, 18 April 1936, p.36; and 'The Legitimate Theatre. Plenty of Them in Sydney', *Harmony*, vol.3, no.30, 25 June 1936, p.19.

⁸⁵ 'The Club', in *The Play*, vol.1, no.1, Aug. 1935, n.p; *The Play*, vol.1, no.2, Nov. 1935, p.8, in

Minister for Education, D.H. Drummond, it opened with a program featuring four Australian one-act plays on 2 December 1935. Over the ensuing week, the evening programs featured European dramatic classics, four one-act productions by the Chelsea, Junior and Independent Theatres, contributions by the Dickens Fellowship and Clement Hosking's Folk Song singers and the Pageant matinee. Arranged to give some chronological sense to the changing nature of drama, the pageant presented plays from medieval, Elizabethan, eighteenth century and Victorian and modern periods, as well as sketches, dances, and orchestral interludes. In addition the Drama Week printed program included information on the theatres involved and some well-known theatrical people. The Sydney playwrights, Nora Kelly, Dulcie Deamer, and Sumner Locke-Elliott were mentioned, as well as the Junior Theatre League and its founder Fay Hornby Evans, the Sydney Players' Club, Doris Fitton and the Independent Theatre, the Leonardo group, the Chelsea Theatre Group, Bryants' Playhouse, the Australian College of Physical Education, and the Workers' Educational Association Drama Club. A photograph with caption of Anne Gordon as Peter Pan also graced the program.⁸⁶

The significance of this collaborative effort is evident. Alone the Little Theatre Movement was fragmented and individual theatres possibly thought of as rivals, but Drama Week lined the troops on the same side of the fence. Lady Gordon's renown for helping 'good causes' made her an appropriate choice for President of the committee for two reasons, she was not exclusively aligned with one theatre and she brought with her the support and interest of influential committeewomen. With the Minister for Education opening the first night, and Lady Gordon as president, it was evident that recognition was sought for the whole movement and not a specific theatre. The two arms of the city's

Tildesley, Evelyn Mary and Beatrice, Papers, ML MSS 3361, K1331; and *SMH*, 15 Aug. 1934, p.7.

⁸⁶ Drama Week, program, Emerson Hall and *Elaine*, 2 – 5, and 7 December 1935, in Tildesley Papers, K1331.

amateur theatrical community merged in Drama Week, and they brought their respective practices: repertory and philanthropy together. A greater awareness of the Little Theatre's potential to contribute to the cultural life of Sydney and of the afflictions that had so far limited its impact, thus emerged as a result of the Week. A few months later Gordon launched the campaign for a permanent theatre, a move designed to benefit both the Independent and Little Theatres in general, under the auspices of an advisory committee. Little Theatre, it appears, had become the charitable cause. Committeewomen had begun to use its crafts and their methods to raise its profile.

That is not to say that all of Sydney's upper middle class spontaneously enjoyed and exclusively patronised repertory theatre instead of musical comedy or the cinema. Plays that did not provide the entertainment value preferred by most, met distinctly bored responses. When the Independent staged *The Dybbuk*, the slow-moving Jewish play with supernatural themes, 'the impatient shufflings of the audience became oppressively perceptible'.⁸⁷ It seems that Lady Gordon, however, was more receptive to plays that did not fall into the category of 'entertainment'. It was Gordon who commented to Doris Fitton that it 'would be interesting if we did a Chekov play'.⁸⁸ As a result of that suggestion, the Independent produced *The Three Sisters*. Press reports deplored the play, finding it 'dreary', and 'helplessly introspective'. They did, however, applaud Fitton's courage, and the actresses playing the three sisters, Anne Gordon, Prudence Vanbrugh, and Elizabeth Ripley. No mention of the audience response was made.⁸⁹ No record exists, however, to suggest that Gordon also recommended the production of an Australian play.

The tendency to foster Little Theatre as a movement through an independent committee re-emerged in June 1937. A meeting was held at the Australia Hotel on 30 June

⁸⁷ SMH, 27 April 1936, p.4.

⁸⁸ Fitton, *Dust and Heat*, p.39.

⁸⁹ *Sydney Mail*, 9 Sept. 1936, p.33; and 'Some First Nights', *The Bulletin*, 9 Sept. 1936, p.40.

with the intention of forming a New South Wales branch of the British Drama League.⁹⁰ The British Drama League had emerged in London in 1919, with Harley Granville Barker as its first chairman. Significantly, the League was not a 'play-producing organisation'. Instead it sought to coordinate, promote and support theatrical enterprises, whether initiated by 'amateur bodies', 'professional enterprises' or 'isolated experimenters'.⁹¹ No direct indication as to who initiated the New South Wales branch meeting could be located. Minutes of the public meeting record that Richard Windeyer took the chair, when ill health prevented Sir Henry Braddon from attending. He read Braddon's speech in which the latter:

stress[ed] the need for a body in New South Wales which would have the general aim of the British Drama League, 'to assist the development of the art of the theatre and to promote a right relation between drama and the life of the community'.⁹²

Lady Gordon participated in the public meeting by following Windeyer with an appeal 'to all who wished to see the art of the theatre flourish in our midst' to form a branch of the League in New South Wales. Others who spoke in support of the scheme at that meeting were John Gould, the ABC Chairman W.J. Cleary, and Alderman Harding. The people assembled at the meeting, through a unanimous vote, founded the branch with just a few modifications to the original League's constitution. Lady Gordon became its first president. Mrs Victor White, Mrs David Cohen and Harry Dangar joined professors, knights, judges, businessmen, and the ABC chairman as Vice-Presidents. Various theatrical people including, of course, Doris Fitton and Beryl Bryant, as well as Society

⁹⁰ *SMH*, 26 June 1937, p.12. A draft speech on 'The Repertory Movement in England', dated 10 June 1924, in the Tildesley Papers expands further on the aims of the parent British Drama League. See Tildesley, Evelyn Mary and Beatrice, Papers, ML MSS 3361, K1330.

⁹¹ *ibid.* See also 'Birthday', in The British Drama League, *Brief Chronicles*, no. 7, issued with *Drama*, no. 53, Summer 1959, in Tildesley Papers, K1331.

⁹² British Drama League (BDL), Minutes of Public Meeting, 30 June 1937, in BDL of Australia, Records, c.1937-1973 (BDLR), ML MSS 3019, box 1.

women known for their cultural and theatrical interests, such as Barbara Knox and Jeannie Rankin, were members of the council. Evelyn Mary Tildesley and Mrs A.G. Thomas, President of the Sydney Lyceum Club, became its first Honorary Secretaries.⁹³

Despite the apparently central role Gordon played in the founding of the League, she did not seem to actively contribute to the regular functioning of the institution. She remained, however, a source of inspiration. Her next appearance in the minute book marked her speech at the first Annual General Meeting. On that occasion, Lady Gordon, 'to whom [the] movement owe[d] so much', expressed her 'satisfaction' with the League's progress. Indeed, it had acquired 200 members, including 60 societies, 138 individuals, and two honorary memberships. Lady Gordon, the minutes noted, had lent 'furniture and office equipment', and made donations to the League's funds, as had Ruth White.⁹⁴ At the second annual meeting held on 24 August 1939, Gordon urged 'those who believed that the theatre was an essential part of the community life' to 'go on working for a dramatic revival in Sydney' despite 'these dark days'. She also repeated the hope expressed during the campaign of 1936, that 'at no distant time Sydney would have a theatre where the dramatic arts could flourish'.⁹⁵ The League *Bulletin* took up the 'Carry On' theme in Gordon's speech and repeatedly reminded the members throughout the war of her 'exhortation to ... keep the theatre, which is a national necessity, alive'.⁹⁶ In 1940 Gordon represented the League on a panel of adjudicators for the formerly Theosophical radio station 2GB's play competition.⁹⁷ Over the next few years, she continued to make donations, but sent her apologies to the annual meetings. In 1941, she officially became

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ BDL, NSW branch, 'Minutes of the first Annual General Meeting', 10 Aug. 1938, in BDLR, box 1.

⁹⁵ BDL, 'Minutes of the Second Annual General Meeting', 24 Aug 1939, in BDLR, box 1.

⁹⁶ 'President's Message', [BDL] *Bulletin*, no.22, no date; and 'War and the League', insert in *Bulletin*, no.24, no date, in BDLR, box 1.

⁹⁷ BDL *Bulletin*, no. 30, June 1940, BDLR, box 1. See also Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939*, (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1986), p.315 concerning

the League's 'Patroness'. At the 1941 annual meeting, Judge Nicholson, the new President, 'paid a tribute to the energy, perseverance and charm which had made Lady Gordon an inspiration to the League'. He continued on to cite 'the steady improvement of amateur societies', which, by that stage, were 'giving performances to professional standard of plays which the professional theatre would not present'.⁹⁸

In an official capacity, Lady Gordon continued to make appearances on behalf of the League, and on occasion adjudicated play competitions organised by radio stations, but the League had become more established by the 1940s, its various activities gained momentum, and the need for social patronage seemed to diminish. The first Australian Drama Month, a month-long series of performances held citywide in May 1939, was repeated every year for many years thereafter. The League established a library, and held an annual one-act play competition in connection with Drama Month. Other members of the BDL council, who had been instrumental in the founding of the NSW branch, themselves actively promoted its aims. Evelyn Mary Tildesley, in particular, repeatedly spoke about the League and about drama at literary society and women's association meetings, as well as on radio. Tildesley had initially encountered the British Drama League when in England in 1923 and seen its work at first hand. She knew well the repertory principle of 'the play's the thing'. She and her sister, Beatrice, understood the issues that confronted the Little Theatre, such as the perceived need to educate the public with 'good plays', so as to create audiences for future productions, as well as the need for a permanent venue in which to present repertory theatre.⁹⁹ With people of such experience and commitment, the need for an influential committeewoman who possessed a partly

2GB's early high cultural bias, and pp.371-3 regarding the messy 2GB settlement of 1936, which at least 'retained links with "forward movements" in Sydney' (p.373).

⁹⁸ BDL, 'Minutes of Fourth Annual General Meeting', 19 Aug. 1941, in BDLR, box 1.

⁹⁹ Beatrice Tildesley, 'Fifty Years of the Theatre in Australia', printed pamphlet, in Tildesley Papers, K1331; 'Problems of the Little Theatres', typescript speech, W.E.A., Newport, 2 Oct. 1955, in Tildesley

personal interest in the theatre appears to have decreased. The Little Theatre movement no longer needed charitable aid.

The various projects undertaken by Lady Gordon during the 1930s derived from a modern, Australian version of Victorian philanthropy. Using established definitions of the roles of patrons, officers, and committee members, Gordon initially wielded theatre as a tool for exacting contributions for charity. Out of these theatricals two facts had emerged: that her daughter, Anne Gordon, possessed a flair for acting; and that a need existed for the patronage of Sydney's Little Theatres. The first fact encouraged an interest in individual artists in the musical and dramatic disciplines, in whose names Lady Gordon convened committees and made extraordinary efforts to raise contributions towards their further education. The second factor turned Lady Gordon's attention towards a series of theatres whose activities she endeavoured to assist by acting as patron, and by drawing on her committee and social networks. Eventually she became aware of the greater need of the Little Theatre Movement in Sydney, and became a link between charity and repertory theatre circles. From the 1936 campaign for a new theatre, the repertory movement had become the object of her charity. Lady Gordon was instrumental in, though not solely responsible for founding, two independently coordinated schemes both aimed at raising the profile and increasing the base of support for the movement: the 1935 Drama Week, and the NSW branch of the British Drama League. Through them the movement acquired greater permanency and was able to guarantee the myriads of small Sydney theatres and struggling playwrights ongoing if still not adequate support. Other members of upper middle class Society in Sydney, such as Richard Windeyer and the Tildesley sisters, likewise combined an interest in the theatre with their own approaches to the promotion of its needs. Thus, almost simultaneously, a convergence of Gordon's theatrical and

charitable interests, of people like the Tildesley sisters, Windeyer and a number of devoted actor-managers, that is, of amateur and repertory theatrical streams, occurred. Considering their combined efforts in terms of broader cultural movements, it becomes clear that Lady Gordon, with Lilian Frost and Mary Gilmore before her participated in a process of cultural consolidation with two main aims: to create consumers through education, and to create permanent institutions for the sake of practicing culturists.

Gordon thus played a dynamic role in the dual tasks undertaken by Sydney's cultural community in the 1930s. Her role is further confirmed in the story of the formative years of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. As with Lady Gordon, so too a combination of early training, performance experience, and leisured middle age led the former touring pianist Beatrice Swinson to initiate a number of campaigns in support of instrumental music. In the course of her endeavours, Swinson enlisted the aid of Lady Gordon and Mrs Hubert (Ruth) Fairfax, along with vice-regal patronage. The evolution of the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee demonstrates further the gathering forces of cultural bifurcation, and the increasing application of the dichotomous American concepts of highbrow and lowbrow. It also demonstrates the way in which women challenged the previously peripheral cultural role that social traditions allowed for them, and the manner in which they struggled to play a more pragmatic and decisive one.



MISS MARGARET THOMAS,
Who is to appear in *The Cingalee*.



ANNE GORDON

Top left: Margaret Thomas
(later Gordon), *The Player*,
15 April 1905, p.13.

Top right: Anne Gordon,
First Nights, Dec. 1933, p.47.

Bottom left: Anne and
Alexander Gordon, *Society*,
Nov. 1922, p.6.



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MISS DORIS FITTON.
... teaching commercial theatres a
lesson.



MISS BERYL BRYANT
Judith Fletcher photo.



MISS CARRIE TENNANT.
... a champion of the intimate theatre

Top left: Doris Fitton, *To-Day*, 28 Nov. 1931, p.14.

Top middle: Beryl Bryant, *First Nights*, Sept. 1933, p.20.

Top right: Carrie Tennant, *To-Day*, 28 Nov. 1931, p.14.

Bottom right: Sketch of Richard Windeyer, *First Nights*, Sept. 1933, p.4.

Bottom left: Therese Desmond, *First Nights*, Sept. 1933, p.2.



THERESE DESMOND
a prominent art theatre
actress



MR. R. WINDEYER, K.C.
President
Sydney Players' Club

crayon study by Appleton