

# A Standing Ovation

Gary Ireland

In 1965 people in rural areas were much more isolated than today. Electronic communications were comparatively primitive, ownership of motor vehicles was far from universal and air travel an extraordinary luxury. In West Wyalong, where I had commenced my teaching career two years earlier, there were many adults who had never ventured to Sydney or Melbourne and some who had not been even as far as Wagga. Live entertainment other than that supplied by local bands or the town's amateur dramatic society was a rarity, and this would usually take the form of an occasional performance by a jazz band at the golf club or some country singers or rock 'n' rollers in the local picture theatre.

Rural students were at a distinct disadvantage when studying the dramas set as texts for public examinations compared with city students, who almost certainly would have seen a live performance of the set play and also had access to a special screening of a film version, if one existed.

In an attempt to reduce the degree of disadvantage in the country the Arts Council organised for troupes consisting of three or four very young actors, led by a more experienced actor, to visit rural schools such as the one at which I taught. Even this only slightly decreased the disadvantage: whereas city students would see a full performance of the play set, the Arts Council troupes would perform a pastiche of individual scenes from texts prescribed for the next three years, as they would visit country towns only on a three year cycle.

The performance area allocated for the staging at West Wyalong High was extraordinarily inadequate. Schools which did not have an assembly hall, had a so-called 'hall' consisting of a small stage and three class rooms divided by fold-back partitions which, when opened, provided an area into which about two hundred students could be jammed. Having both performed in and produced plays for the West Wyalong Amateur Dramatic Society, I was well aware of its limitations, the worst of which being that each partition had a low hanging beam which bounced the actors' voices back onto the stage and rendered it almost impossible for them to be heard in the third classroom.

I suspect that by the time they reached West Wyalong the actors were jaded by bad experiences in some of the schools they had visited and the rigors of travelling from town to town, because they commenced their performance with a tired rendition of some scenes from *Macbeth*, and followed these up with an equally lacklustre presentation of the balcony and the tomb scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*. However, as a kind of entre act before proceeding to some segments from two more set plays, they then performed the scene in which Petruchio bullies Katherina into submission from *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was not a set text, nor likely to become one.

I cannot say whether it was the freedom of performing something not on the syllabus, or merely that the broad, physical comedy of the scene overcame to a larger degree the physical limitations of the hall, but the young actors engaged the scene much more vigorously than they had the two early sequences. The audience gasped and laughed as they were caught up in the drama, and when the scene ended with Petruchio throwing Katherina to the floor and then bending to bring her to her feet with a kiss, first three or four students stood to their feet, and then the entire audience of unsophisticated country kids rose as one, applauding wildly.

The demeanour of the actors changed instantly, a minute before they had been perfunctorily working through some set scenes for a group of sweaty school-children but now they had the thing that actors treasure most, a responsive audience. And the students experienced that magic which takes place when actors and an appreciative audience come together. For the remainder of the performance those young thespians acted their hearts out and the audience watched in stunned silence the murder of Desdemona and then laughed uproariously at the antics of the rude mechanicals performing *Pyramis and Thisbe*, while that poor little hall became first intrigue-riven Cyprus and then enchanted Athens.

At the end of it all, the audience gave the cast a second standing ovation and trooped from the hall, aglow with the wonder of theatre and its power to lift them to another world.

### Contributor details

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Gary spent most of his career teaching in rural New South Wales in either the Riverina or Far North Coast, and was Principal of Camden High from 1995 to 2005. Since retiring he has been an active volunteer in his Rotary Club, his church, a Japan friendship organization and Meals on Wheels. He has eleven grandchildren scattered around the state, and this keeps him on the move. Two of his children are school Principals, and thus he is kept in touch with education matters.