

The Ignatians Musical Society: A Toowong Parish Initiative

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This vignette into the life and times of The Ignatians Musical Society could well open with ‘Once Upon a Time.’ However, it is not fiction, it was real, and changed forever the lives of those who became its loyal members. So, let’s start at the very beginning. In the early 1970s, there came to the Jesuit community of the parish of Toowong a newly appointed parish priest, Father Leo Flynn SJ. Here was a man who wished to bring his parishioners together both in religious devotion and as a parish community. To this end he quickly created a Social Tennis Club, and then, on to his next project, an Amateur Musical Society based on a successful musical society, The Loyolans he had launched at his previous parish posting in Melbourne.

His quest led him to two parishioners who, in conversation, mentioned an excellent production of Gilbert and Sullivan they had recently enjoyed. As a result they were persuaded to join Fr. Leo’s caravan gathering up parishioners who listened with wonder at his proposal, caught his infection, dropped everything and followed him. Encouraged by this response, and with great enthusiasm, he set about planning an Amateur Musical

Society. By invitation he formed a basic committee charged with producing a show, and by popular vote, it became The Ignatians Musical Society, christened with a Jesuit blessing, and proudly acknowledging its humble birth in the parish of St. Ignatius.

Fr. Leo's advice was that The Gondoliers was an achievable choice for the very first of the G & S operettas. It later became the brief of the committee to perform the complete repertoire. The grand plan was two shows per year one of which should be G. & S. Some members of this early committee were experienced in conducting an orderly productive meeting and those who were not quickly learned. Due to its infancy and being homeless, committee meetings were usually held at the home of the president, and at times extended far into the night. Only in Hollywood can a character say 'Let's put on a show in the old barn' and in two minutes it happens.

It is serious business choosing directors, both musical and stage, then to cast principals and hopefully a number of chorus members who could sing the beautiful but difficult harmonies demanded of Sullivan's music, whilst executing basic choreographed movement, wiggled and costumed. It should be pointed out at this stage that the cast of Gondoliers was made up of school and university students, the gainfully employed and some whose occupation was listed as housewife. Few had the luxury of formal voice training. Few were familiar with stagecraft, and there were those who had performed in school productions and knew a thing or two. We were indeed an amateur society, but we had enthusiasm in abundance, and we were with friends who shared a love

and basic knowledge of how to sing, and we were about to learn how to put on a show.

Some of us, for some time, hadn't been beyond the cover of a *libretto*, a complete music score, or been introduced to performance of choreographed dance steps, either with or without a partner. We were more familiar with The Good Housekeeping Manual and how to feed a large growing family on a budget. Raising one's voice in song happened only as part of the congregation at Sunday Mass. Family mending was the main use for the home sewing machine. "For the sheer fun of it" became our motto however there were times when "terror" could more aptly be substituted for "fun." It's an interesting fact that The Gondoliers was performed accompanied by a full orchestra, gathered by someone who knew a conductor who was able to assemble an ad hoc orchestra whose participation was for the sheer fun of it. Many of the authentic, beautiful costumes, including wigs, were on loan.

History records that, in 1974, The Ignatians took to the stage presenting "The Gondoliers" and the parish hall became our home. The audience paid a modest entry fee and received a "priceless" folded A4 size program. Parishioners packed the entire hall and friends and relations of the cast stood in any remaining nooks and crannies. Some stood outside on the playground benches, looking through windows. The Ignatians Musical Society was officially launched.

During the next twenty years the Society gained invaluable experience on how to run a successful amateur entertainment business. An all-important constitution was

adopted, we became incorporated, and the choice of shows became more adventurous, and in some cases risky, as we spread our wings. In that first 20 years we were blessed with seven extra-ordinary presidents. Presidents and committee members were voted into office at the annual general meeting. Each committee was tasked with selecting shows to attract first of all, directors both stage and musical, pitched at enticing an audience, suited to its membership, controlling the budget, and hopefully achieving a modest profit. Their wisdom, gained sometimes through bitter experience and attention to duty, and the vital control of financial resources, assured our survival. So ‘Another Opening, another Show’. The Ignatians caravan rolled on gathering momentum, and if you were happy to have your life taken over in a most exhilarating way, you joined The Ignatians for its next twenty years. Some of us did!!

Some of the offspring urged the Ignatians to form a youth theatre. In 1984, again using the hall or parts of the school grounds, our Ignatians youth theatre came into being. The parents company included children’s casts in shows such as *The King and I*, *Annie*, *Music Man* and any show that was suitable. Basic theatre skills filled the yearly program.

When that first two decades were over, the company had performed forty-one shows. Producing music theatre was not all we did. A major social event was the Ignatians annual dinner. Here was an opportunity to reprise some of the stand-out pieces from the shows during the year. We learned, after the first dinner, the wisdom of staging the performance segment earlier rather than later in the evening. This ensured a more polished encoring of the

role. We were in licenced premises and we were there for the sheer fun of it. This event was memorable also for awarding “The Ignatian of the Year” ribbon and bestowing life membership on the occasional worthy member, in recognition of long and faithful service. Those first to achieve this pinnacle of all things Ignatian were Fr. Leo Flynn S.J. and Cath Curtis our Wardrobe Mistress. Others were to follow.

The Ignatians, in its own way had inspired latent talents in some whose life needed the spirit-lifting experience of being able to contribute and be part of something wonderful. Whole families became caught up, at first with some hesitation then with a boots-and-all fervour to keep-the-show-on-the-road.

With the well-intentioned desire to offer members the experience of performance in a real theatre, the committee accepted the challenge of travelling shows to places such as Redcliffe and Caloundra. One of the most memorable forays away from home base was to play the Cremorne Theatre during the Brisbane Lyric Theatre season of Pirates of Penzance starring John English. Oh the wonder of it all - sharing the Green Room with such illustrious and experienced actors. Our conduct was most professional.

By now, The Ignatians had gained their rightful place in Brisbane theatrical circles with a reputation for producing musical theatre attractive to all age groups with family concession prices. Much was learned by experience but at all times we remindful of, and loyal to our humble beginning in the parish hall of St Ignatius Toowong, proudly citing Father Leo as our founder.

So, another opening, another show.

Final night of each season was celebrated, with an 'after bump out' party where members were acknowledged for their participation, loyalty, dedication and hard work above and beyond the call of duty, There was much singing, dancing and storytelling reliving some of the triumphs and follies of a performance season. We were bound together through the common love of music and now friendship of a most rare and enduring kind.

With energy and enthusiasm those first members and others who joined them on their performing way presented to the theatre going people of Brisbane all of the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta including rare titles such as Princess Ida, the Grand Duke, The Sorcerer and the Zoo. The Ignatians were the first society either professional or amateur to perform Utopia Limited. Several of the more popular operettas were encored a number of times. The G&S pieces balanced with well-known Broadway productions such as South Pacific and Oliver!

It was also our brief to engage a band to accompany most productions. Over time and with by now an experienced cast of performers, we attracted a regular collection of musicians willing and able to assemble a full orchestra. We had learned too that large casts plus a large orchestra assured an appreciative audience. Through the years the small stage in the parish hall was extended and reshaped to accommodate the more innovate set designers who had joined the company. It is true to say that The Ignatians brought a new life to the parish, but by its very nature a theatrical society with baggage accumulated can be disruptive to other regular groups who shared the space.

The time came when the Society had to find another home. We already had the experience of mounting *Man of La Mancha* which could only be performed in a genuine theatre and we were able to hire the Princess Theatre for a short season. In 1996 when *Jesus Christ Superstar* was released for amateur performance the Ignatians secured the rights. This needed a huge space to stage this show. All Hallows' School was able to provide the area for a season of *Jesus Christ Superstar* – pretty heady stuff.

Brisbane Boys College was rented for a time but without climate control during a bitter winter the cast of *Brigadoon* was diminished by a wave of influenza. The answer to our problem for our now well-known company attempting ambitious shows such as *Cats*, *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon* was the Schonnel Theatre. Those who long ago had been performers through many and varied experiences had become accomplished directors, designers and choreographers, Some members had gone on to perform professionally and had the Ignatians Musical Society to thank for providing this theatrical pad from which their careers had been launched.

In time The Ignatians became a household name, in Toowong in particular, and in Brisbane generally, and we were able to assemble sometimes at short notice a sizeable choir able to sing a program of selected pieces. Invitations came to perform choral music to accompany a number of wedding ceremonies, and the bridal party's choice of songs was at times challenging. Never daunted, we delivered. Then there were times when with tears in our eyes we raised our voices to farewell a much-loved member.

That was not all. Invitations came to perform concert style shows to bring joy to places like Lawson House, Wacol Prison, Wolston House and a number of retirement villages around Brisbane. Always members rallied to the call with the same enthusiasm and good will as displayed for a public performance.

Some Ignatians members were attracted only to choral performance so to accommodate this, committee members in their wisdom set about adding to the promise of two shows per year an end of year Cantata which was performed in the sanctuary at St Ignatius and Holy Spirit churches. Some of these choral concerts with a fifty strong choir travelled to churches of other denominations in Brisbane by invitation.

Our most historically memorable choral performance came by invitation to sing the Vatican national anthem marking the Vatican national day during Expo 88. The late great talented member, Lesley Purvis, was handed the baton and the task of teaching the Ignatians choir to sing in Italian for the day. What a privilege and honour that was.

And so the caravan moved on. We all grew older and hopefully wiser but one thing remains to this day, a group of early performing Ignatians members aptly named “The Fossils” meet frequently “for the sheer fun of it”. If you were to ask a Fossil if they would do it all again, their reply would be “absolutely”.

Modern times and advancing years led to the end of the performing life of the company and so on 1 October 2016 the Ignatians gathered where it had all begun, the parish

hall, to bid farewell to the musical society which had long provided entertainment, frequently to critical acclaim, to the people of Brisbane. We sang, danced and laughed at some of the hilarious incidents experienced, and as a roof-raising finale 'Hail Poetry' was sung lustily in four part harmony, and the candle was extinguished.