

Robb College Plays 1963-85

By Peter Hall
(with Mick Sinclair-Wilson
and Mike Knowling)

Over the years Robb College has firmly placed itself at the forefront of College theatre in Armidale. An annual major production is usually one of the highlights of the Robb social calendar and has attracted not only members of the student and staff body but also people from all walks of life in town and district.

1963 marked the first production put on by Robb, although all of the earlier (1963-1970) productions were played under the auspices of the New England University Dramatic Society (NEUDS). It was therefore not until 1970 that the first Robb College Play as such was produced. Nonetheless, Robb students and staff have had a major role in the development of amateur theatre in Armidale.

An early history of Robb theatre written by the then Master, Mick Sinclair-Wilson, called "Facing the Bright Lights" was included in the Robb Magazine in 1978. I include the report in its entirety and will then continue with more recent history (1978-1985).

1963:

Caligula by Albert Camus was produced and directed by Robb Fellow David Bancroft under the auspices of NEUDS and the entire male cast was recruited and auditioned from members of the College. In the same year Ben Meredith organised and, together with five others from Robb, participated in a series of rehearsed play-readings in the name of The University Players.

1964:

The play-reading series led by Ben was continued and, beyond that effort, eight Robb members took part in an Armidale production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*.

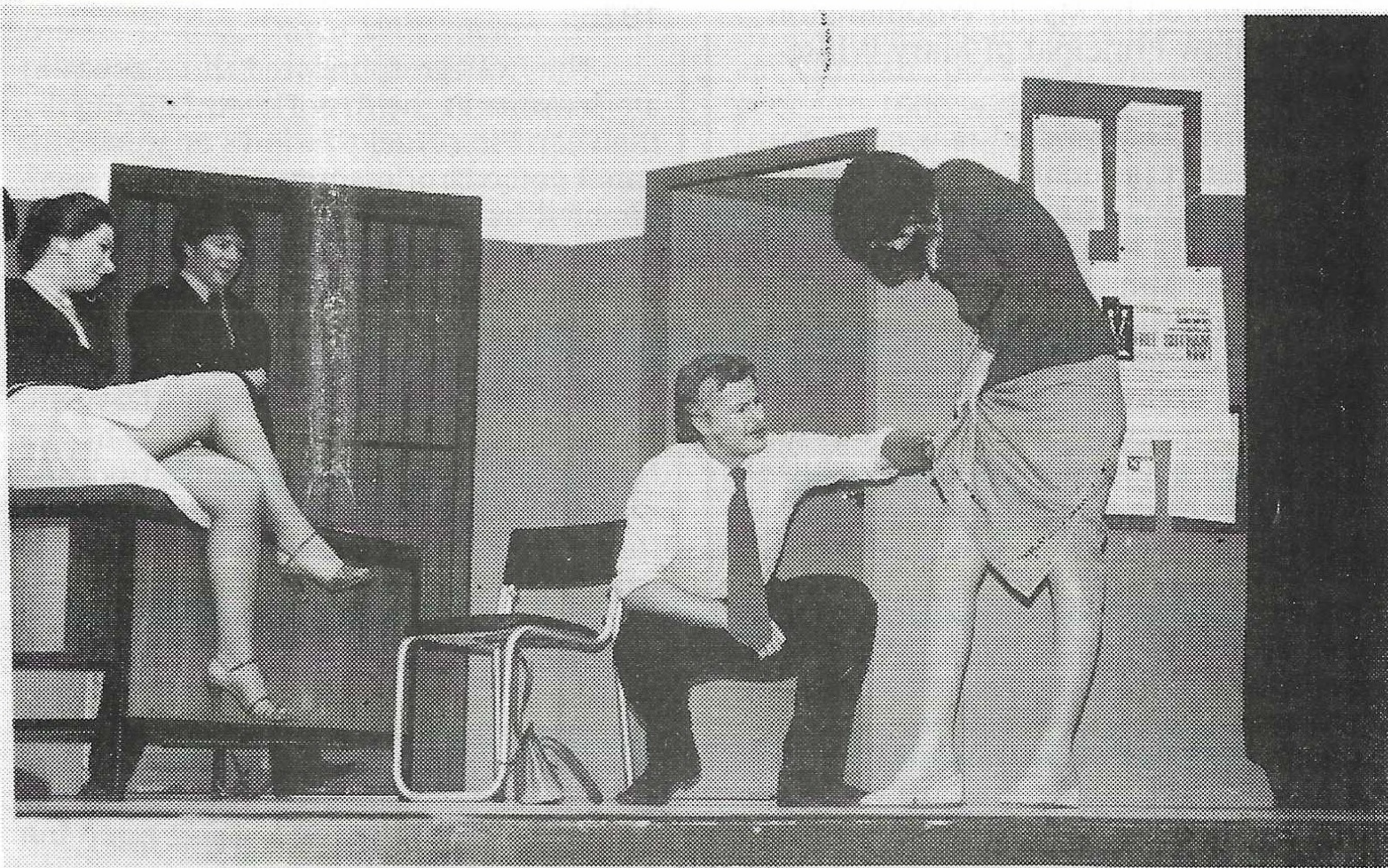
That trend continued, the identities of the leading players in various productions changing in accordance with the changes of Robb College enrolments.

1966:

Several members of the College, including notably Richard Fisher and Karl McPhee, participated in Martin Wooley's production of *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller.



The cast and crew from Robb's 1983 production of the comedy 'The Male Animal', directed by Mike Knowling and produced by Peter Hall. Pictured during a break in rehearsals are: (back row) John Temperley, Rod McInnes, Sally Sholl, Katie Keen, Angus Witherby, Allan Connah; (front row) Chrissy Beddoe, Peter Hall, Cate Lemann, Lisa Middleton, John Nash and Rex Ward.



Peter Hall, as the Sergeant, carries out some detailed police investigations of his own during the 1978 production of David Williamson's 'The Removalist'. The victim being examined is Debra Wood, while looking on are Julie Fitzgerald and Rod McInnes.

1967:

For NEUDS, Richard Fisher was producer (as distinct from director) of the morality play *Everyman* in which North Court resident Nigel Sabine scored a personal triumph in the title role and other Robb members dominated the supporting cast. This year was one of interregnum for the College between its Masters Meredith and Sinclair-Wilson. Ian Heywood as Student President of the year then raised for discussion the possibility of Robb launching its own permanent drama club or society.

1968:

At the then newly built Arts Theatre, and again sponsored by NEUDS, a season of three one-act plays was presented under the title 'Clash of Generations'. The programme directed and produced by Mick Sinclair-Wilson with sets and lighting by Mark Randell of Robb, comprised *The Young and The Guilty* by Ted Willis, *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee and *The Two Executioners* by Fernando Arrabal. The cast of fourteen included Miss Cheryl Tilly (Robb Association) plus nine students from Robb, one from Wright and three girls from the then segregated Duval.

In August of that year the whole programme was repeated as an entrant in the Drama Festival convened at the Alexander Theatre, Monash University,

where the performance by Robb members John Turnbull and Tim Ward were each awarded High Commendation, Clive Salzer and Cheryl Tilly a Commendation and Mark Randell's staging won a Creditable Mention.

1969:

The newly revived University Players engaged Mrs. Gwen Foggon from Brisbane who directed a superb production of Oliver Goldsmith's Restoration comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. It played to packed houses for an extended season at the Arts Theatre. One of the four females in the cast was Cheryl Tilly and of the sixteen male actors, fifteen were from Robb; the other male player, from Wright, was Tony Llewellyn-Jones who has since achieved professional success on stage and screen. In addition to Tony, the principal male roles were played by Mick S-W., Tony Cartwright, Phil Kitley and John Turnbull. Four other Robb members of the cast also played in the Rugby Union 1sts. Team which that year had an outright win in the New England Premiership.

1970:

Yet again six members of the College, including as principals Robert Walker and Mick S-W., took part in a University Players production which, on this occasion, was the Victorian Melodrama *East*

Lynne directed by Ms. Jo Woolmington (who is now Principal of Mary White College).

Clearly the time had now come for Robb to start launching its own productions and the first such vehicle was Ann Jellicoe's sexy comedy *The Knack*. Directed by Mick its cast of four comprised Terry Hogan, James Crase-Smith, Nanda Fraser and Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson. With Mark Randall again responsible for sets and lighting it was an undoubted success and a new Robb tradition was thus established.

1971:

To reinforce the establishment of that tradition, Robb adopted a suggestion by Professor John Hainsworth and next presented *Little Malcolm and His Struggle Against the Eunuchs* by David Halliwell. It was directed by Bob Herbert who had newly arrived on the campus after several professional years with J.C. Williamsons and its cast featured James Crase-Smith in the title role together with Tim Ward, Robert Walker and Paul Sherlock.

1972:

Yet more ambitiously the College next staged Tom Stoppard's fascinating play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, based on Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', interspersed with modern idiom and dubious innuendo. Directed by Mick S-W., the very demanding roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carried by Robert Walker and Tim Ward respectively and The Player, as the lead to provide continuity of plot was performed by Dr. Ian McIntosh of the S.C.R. The remainder of the relatively large cast included James Crase-Smith, Terry Hogan and Greg Tallents.

1973:

Harold Pinter's prize-winning play *The Homecoming*, directed by Sinclair-Wilson, achieved excellent reviews and attendances. Its thoroughly competent cast comprised Fellows Gwyn James and Ian McIntosh, Tutor Bob Cummings, students Rob Onus and Greg Tallents and Mrs. Marjorie Coventry of the Robb Association.

1974:

Bob Herbert directed the farcical comedy *There's A Girl in My Soup* by Terence Frisby, with performers Marjorie Coventry and Mick S-W, Richard Noske, Kevin King and Paul Sherlock.

1975:

The College sponsored three separate seasons at the Arts Theatre during the year. First Noel Coward's sophisticated comedy of manners *Private Lives*, directed by Bob Herbert and rehearsed throughout the long vacation, was staged for four nights in March. Its experienced cast of four were Cheryl Tilly and Marjorie Coventry, Mick Sinclair-Wilson and Ian McIntosh with Francoise Davies as the French maid. A press review by David Rummery lavished praise upon this 'thoroughly professional production' the 'stylish ensemble playing of the whole cast' and Coward's 'enduring wit and polish'. It played a popular return season in May. In September of the same year Bob Herbert and Mick S-W jointly directed a finely detailed production of the tragicomedy *Waiting For Godot* by Samuel Beckett with an all student cast of Kevin King and Stephen Sherlock, Peter Hall, Geoff Perry and Ross Hordern.

1977:

The same two directors again collaborated successfully; this time each of them directed one of the two short plays which together comprise Terence Rattigan's "Playbill". Bob's production was of *The Browning Version* in which David Phillipps gave a telling performance as the disillusioned husband and school-teacher and the very able supporting players included Rob McInnes, Mike Knowling, Prof. John Hainsworth, Julie Fitzgerald and Andrew Semple. By way of contrast the other half of the programme was Mick's production of *Harlequinade*, an hilarious version of "Romeo and Juliet" on provincial tour. With Ian McIntosh again carrying the continuity and setting the pace, Peter Hall and Marjorie Coventry in the principal roles were extremely funny and some entertaining cameos were provided by members of the relatively large supporting cast, especially Geoff Dyce, Ross Wilson, Diana Jones and Geoff Perry. From Robb Association Julie Fuad and Helen Sinclair-Wilson each contributed major performances to the success of Rattigan's "Playbill".

1978:

"The Removalist" was an overwhelming success and the cast led by Peter Hall as the sergeant, Rod McInnes as the constable, Mike Knowling as a 'Scottish' Kenny with Geoff Dyce as the removalist worked extremely hard at this topical

Aussie Drama. David Williamson, the playwright, had visited Armidale a year earlier and perhaps this had steered director David Phillipps towards *"The Removalist"*. Unfortunately, the play was the last production David was associated with and he deserves thanks and credit for his contribution to Robb Theatre. This play will live forever in the minds of the cast for the immortal line: "What are you really leaving me?"

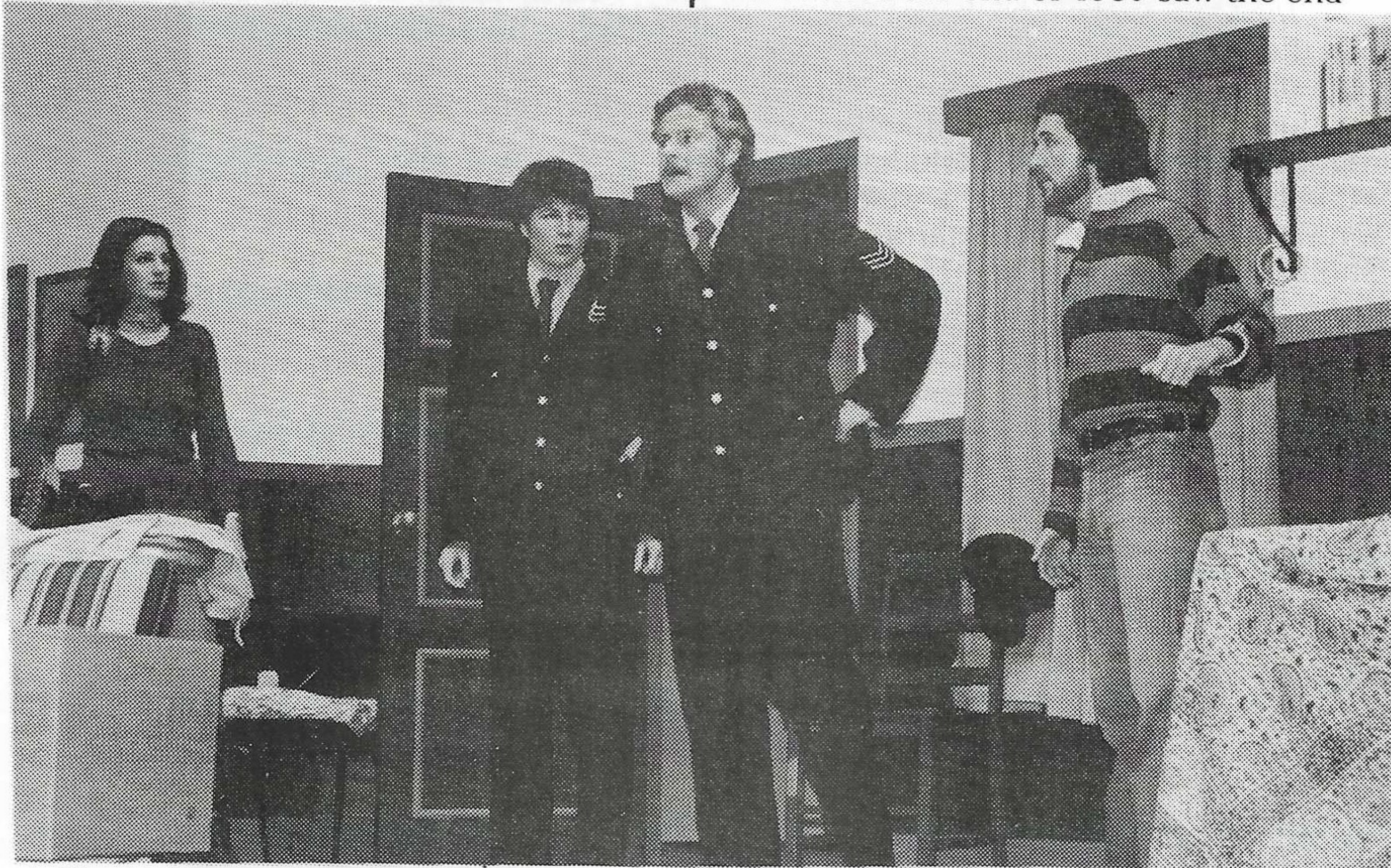
1979:

A re-run of 1975's successful *"Waiting For Godot"* was begun in 1979, however due to some technical problems, the production was unable to continue. It was then decided to produce a number of small dramatic pieces pertaining to the general theme of "love". Mick Sinclair-Wilson directed amongst others, Mike Knowling, Peter Hall, Tineke de Boer and Brian "Rattler" Alston in a 2-

by a strong cast led by Mike Knowling as 'Norman', produced the necessary goods in 1980 with his season of one of the three *"Norman Conquests"* by Alan Ayckbourn. This one was called *"Living Together"* and the cast was Mike Knowling, Anne Snell, Rod McInnes, Anna Turnsek, Kathy Dougall and Peter Poulsen. Bob Herbert designed the set and the lighting. The review, by a member of the Arts Theatre staff, which appeared in the Robb Magazine at the time stated: "I saw the television version; undoubtedly the Robb production was more enjoyable and, in my humble opinion, a better performance. Good on you, Robb! If ever there was an example of why the colleges should be encouraged to perform in the Arts Theatre, you gave it."

1981:

The retirement of Mick Sinclair-Wilson at the end of 1980 saw the end



Kenny Carter, played by Mike Knowling (right), is handcuffed to a shelf while the Sergeant (Peter Hall) and the Constable (Rod McInnes) take a look around his home. Debra Wood (left) played Carter's wife.

night season, played in the large J.C.R. to appreciative audiences. This marked to second occasion in four years that a major production had not been put on in the Arts Theatre. The nature of College and University life being what it is, it is difficult to maintain a tradition due to the high turnover of students so it was essential that 1980 set Robb Theatre back on its rightful path.

1980:

Mick Sinclair-Wilson, ably supported

of an era for Robb Theatre. Mick had been the driving force behind much of the drama produced since 1967 and his contribution must never be forgotten. Certainly from me and I'm sure many others, Thanks Mick!

In 1981 Robb entered the cultural wilderness and a play never got off the ground and it therefore became vital, as in 1980, to produce a major production in 1982.

1982:

In 1982, I 'took over' as producer of the annual play and it became quite a challenge to once again show that a major production was possible. The play chosen, "*This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*", the first major play written by Dorothy Hewitt, required a cast of sixteen - first challenge! Previous plays were chosen for their small casts, so a production could go ahead. With only minor blackmail, the cast was assembled, myself as novice director organised, and "*This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*" became a reality. The play, an Australian Drama set in Redfern, Sydney, in the 1950's provided a perfect vehicle for Anna Turnsek, John Temperley, Lisa Middleton, Scott Martin, Andrew Rodgers, Jill McCormack, Sally Sholl, John Nash, Chrissie Beddoe, Peter Davies and others.

1983:

"*The Male Animal*", by James Thurber, the American cartoonist and sometime playwright, became the 1983 production. It was directed by Mike Knowling with a cast of twelve including Lisa Middleton, Rex Ward (after a welcome return to Armidale), Scott Martin, Sally Sholl, Chrissy Beddoe, Andrew Rodgers, John Nash, Cate Lemann, Katie Keen, John Temperley and myself. Some 800 turned up to the production, and stayed! A play set on a Uni campus in 1939, old, but in fact extremely topical.

1984:

Time for a change in continent - a British play "*Outside Edge*" - a cricketing comedy with a cast of nine. The problem was becoming one of finding a play with a big enough cast! With myself directing and taking the role of Roger, it became of paramount importance that the cast

could do much of the organising themselves. Vanessa Stephen, Rex Ward, Mary Pirrie, Geoff Perry (another welcome return after last appearing in 1977), Lisa Middleton, Scott Martin, Andrew Rodgers and Jenny Taylor were certainly able to do this and an extremely successful season ensued. This year marked the first award of the Robb College Drama Scholarship, given to the 1st Year/s who have contributed most to the year's production. In 1984 the award went to Nicky Alexander and Margaret Badman, both of whom had worked untiringly behind the scenes.

1985:

What to do in the 25th Year? With more and more interested actors and actresses, it was decided to go "Musical" in '85. A new Senior Common Room member, Jim Graham, from T.A.S., was keen to direct "*Guys and Dolls*" the musical set on Broadway in the early '50's. A cast of 36, an orchestra of 17, a crew of 12 and a front of the house staff of 6 was found, not quite all from Robb, but a very high percentage. With Jim and Errol Russell, our musical director, we moved, a little slowly at times, toward opening night. With the leads Geoff Perry, Julie Hancock, Pilar Helmers and myself working over the mid-year break it became an 'every-night' affair in the final few weeks. Our season was incredibly successful with a full house on the final night, telling us that we could have gone on perhaps longer. However, best to leave people eager for more - they might come back again!

So, where in 1986? A musical was great fun and involved more people than previously possible, but should we set a precedent? Next year will be just as important as it is the first year of the second 25 years!

"I don't say many things that are quotable quotes" - Joco.



1977 "Harlequinade" by Terence Rattigan. Directed by Mick Sinclair-Wilson

TOP: Peter Hall & Geoff Dyce

BOTTOM: Cast including Alice Coventry, Helen Sinclair-Wilson, Ian McIntosh, Ross Wilson, Jeff Polley, James Holmes, Diana Jones, Mike Knowling, Dave Ipkendanz, Sarah Lisle, Geoff Perry

Robb Drama Plays and Cabarets



1984 – a cricket comedy “Outside Edge”.
Directed by Peter Hall

1985 – the first College musical - “Guys & Dolls”

Co-directed by Peter Hall & Jim Graham with Errol Russell as musical director. A cast of 36, crew of 12, front-of-house of 6. Culminated with a full-house on the final night.



1986 – a musical comedy “Aunty”
Written & directed by Jim Graham

1987 – a comedy “Dimboola”
Directed by Jim Graham



1989- Musical “South Pacific” - Directed by Jim Graham with musical director Bill Gleeson
1990 – Old time Music Hall – Written & directed by Jim Graham

*Robb balls and cabarets have a proud tradition of top-quality
made for the 1975 Cabaret by Robb's David Burgess. Photo: Courtesy of Brian
Gloucester.*



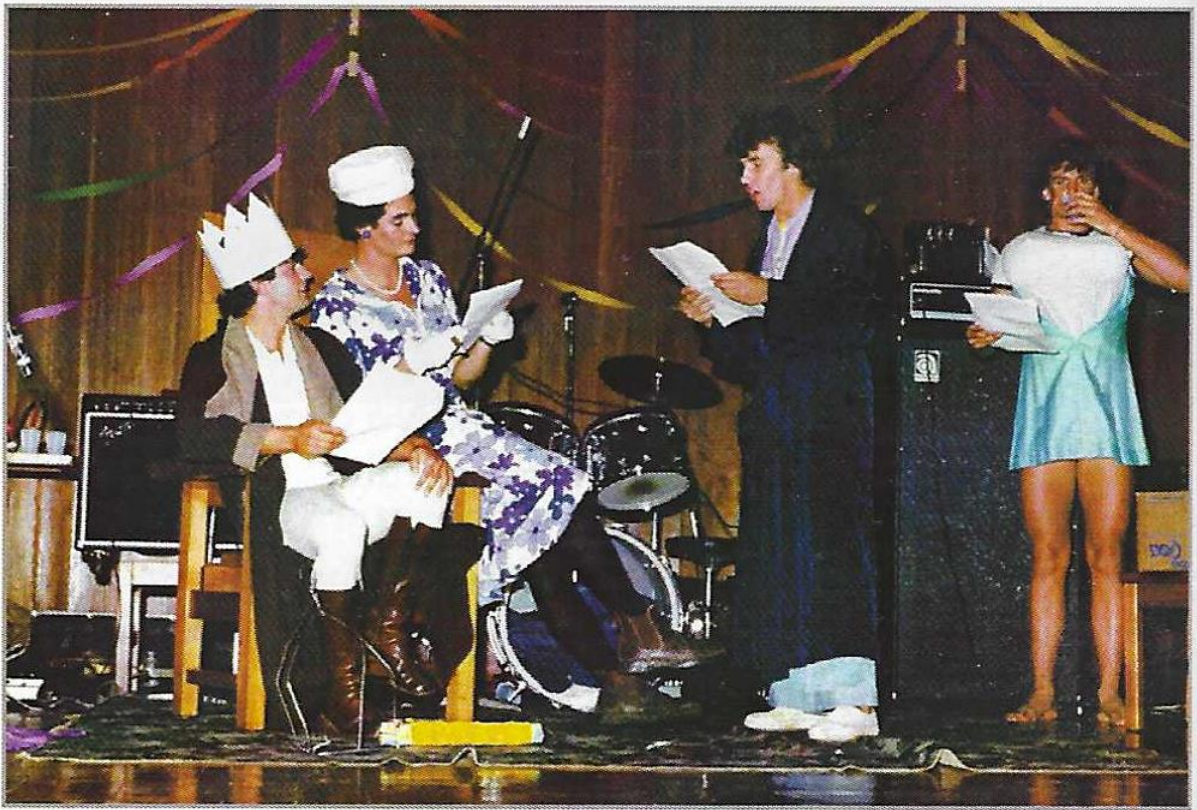
*"Shit, I just punched myself in the
face!" - Joco.*



**1977 Robb Cabaret performance of "You Sleeping Bewdy"
TOP: Andrew Gilkes, "Hooky", David Pring, Steve Bowie,
Angus Robertson. BOTTOM: Geoff Perry & Peter Hall**

Robb Plays, Drama and Cabarets....

“You Sleeping Bewdy” being performed again at a later Robb Cabaret.....1983...?



Performers are Scott Hill, Andrew Pearson, Craig Duly and Peter Cozens.