



## MEMBER MEMORIES - BABETTE STEPHENS MBE AM

Babette Stephens was elected charter president of the Zonta Club of Brisbane when it was founded in October 1971. Babette continued in the role until succeeded by Leneen Forde AC in 1976.

Babette was born Phyllis Babette Fergusson on 26 April, 1910 in Knightsbridge, London. Both her parents were singers but the marriage was short-lived and her mother remarried – her step-father Philip James Robin had been badly gassed during World War I and a warmer climate was recommended. So the family emigrated to Townsville in 1925.

Her step-father had worked in London for one of the top manager-producers of the time and knew a lot about theatre. In his new role at the New Zealand Insurance Company in Townsville he involved himself and Babette in theatre by forming an amateur group called the St James' Players. She gives credit to her step-father for the invaluable training - she called it an apprenticeship in theatre where you learned on the job.

In 1928 she joined the Townsville Repertory Theatre and it was through that association that she experienced a life changing event that galvanised her desire to be an actor. Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society brought to Townsville's Theatre Royal a 1929 production of *Dear Brutus*, directed by Barbara Sisley and featuring Rhoda Felgate in the lead role. Babette, 19, knew immediately he wanted to be involved with this dynamic theatre group and when the opportunity came to live and work in Brisbane, she did not hesitate.

A chance meeting on a Brisbane tram in 1930 with Repertory member Cecil Carson encouraged Babette to attend a casting for the English drama *Rutherford and Sons*. Despite Carson's warning that no newcomer ever got a part, she turned up, determined to get the part she wanted. Said Babette:

*I was asked to read a particular role which was the housekeeper in a Scottish household and I said "No, thank you, I don't think that's me!" I don't think anyone had ever said "no" in the history of time! And because of this they offered – I think just to slap me down – they offered me the lead to read. Which I got! And that was my first show with Repertory!<sup>[i]</sup>*

She secured a supporting role but as far as the press was concerned she was the leading lady. *The Daily Mail* reported that "The acting honours go unreservedly to Miss Babette Fergusson".<sup>[ii]</sup> And *Stead's Review* stated, "Hail to a real actress at last among the cohorts of engaging and accomplished amateur players!"<sup>[iii]</sup> A role in Vance Palmer's *Christine* was followed by the lead role of Gloria in Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* in 1931. Playing opposite her was Tom Stephens, a young solicitor. Reportedly disliking each other at the outset, they nevertheless fell in love, married in 1935 and enjoyed a long married life until Tom's death at the age of 97 in 1997.

Throughout the 1930s Babette was much in demand, as theatre critic for *The Courier-Mail*, social reporter for *The Telegraph*, *The Sunday Mail* and *Teleradio*, public relations for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and a sought after actress for ABC Drama broadcasts. Intimately involved with setting up Twelfth Night Theatre in 1936, Babette directed her creative energies there for a number of years. However, as her husband was by this time Brisbane Repertory's Honorary Treasurer, she continued her involvement as Rep's Social Committee convenor.

Soon after the birth of her first child, Wendy, in 1939, she made her professional stage debut with Will Mahoney and Evie Hayes' Production Company in *The Lilies of the Field*. After the birth of her second child Christopher in 1945, she had a short break before her Repertory directorial debut the following year with Emyln Williams' *He Was Born Gay*, described as "an outstanding success".<sup>[iv]</sup> The following year she played the lead in the psychological drama *Black Limelight* to excellent reviews, *The Courier-Mail* critic Te Pana stating that "As far as performances went it was Babette Stephens' night".

In 1957 Babette stepped up to a leadership role as Brisbane Repertory's Council President. Under her astute stewardship the organisation prospered. Membership increased from a healthy 509 to 920; she doubled the number of performances per play from four to eight nights; and by 1959 she and her Council had purchased three adjoining houses in Hale and Sexton Streets, Milton, one of which was converted into a box-like performance space in 1967 to become the first La Boite theatre.

In 1960 she was offered the new role of Theatre Director with an accompanying annual fee of £250. As she chose to interpret it, this position went far beyond artistic matters and for the next eight years she dominated all aspects of Repertory's artistic and organisational life. The plays that she chose were mainly British or American and drew heavily on what was successful in London's West End or New York's Broadway. Sharing direction with Stephens was Gloria Birdwood-Smith. Although the Australian play almost disappeared during their time, these two experienced directors programmed highly successful, often professional standard, mostly contemporary plays—dramas, thrillers, comedies, romances—with a high entertainment value that drew big audiences. Together they nurtured the careers of aspiring actors such as Judith Arthy, Ray Barrett, Barry Creyton, Elaine Cusick, Rosalind Seagrave and Rowena Wallace.

By this time Babette was such a well-known Brisbane personality that and was invited to join Reg Grundy's game show *I've Got a Secret* with Brisbane's Channel 9. The show made her a television star and before long she was celebrated for her acerbic wit and regal presence, earning her the nick-name 'The Queen Mum of Television'.<sup>[v]</sup> Throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s she continued a career in television, appearing on panel shows *Play Your Hunch* and *Funny You Should Ask*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Bailey and the Birds* and playing character roles in *Carson's Law*, *Matlock Police*, *Homicide*, *Consider Your Verdict* and the Brisbane-made *Until Tomorrow*. She took roles in films as well—*Let the Balloon Go* in 1976, *The Irishman* in 1978, and despite undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, a role in *The Settlement* in 1982.

In 1972 Stephens was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) for her services to Queensland theatre, a fitting acknowledgement of her distinctive contribution to Brisbane Repertory's developments during her stewardship. Her final role for Brisbane Repertory Theatre was in the 1973 production of *The Anniversary* playing the domineering matriarch. Thereafter, until her death in 2001, she rarely missed a La Boite opening night.

A member of the inaugural Board for the Queensland Theatre Company, she had a hand in appointing the English-born Alan Edwards as its foundation Artistic Director. It was with QTC that her professional stage career flourished and was appointed an Associate Artist. In 1993 she received a QTC Lifetime Achievement Award. Memorable roles included Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1975 and Hetta ten Dorp in *Deathtrap* in 1979. It was her role in QTC's 1995 production of *The School for Scandal* that unnerved her more than usual as she succumbed to memory problems that had plagued her for some time. At the age of 85 she was finally persuaded that the time had come to retire.

She died aged 90 on 28 February 2001. *The Courier-Mail's* coverage of her funeral, attended by 500 mourners, began: "A sustained round of applause echoed in St John's Cathedral, Brisbane, yesterday as mourners paid their last respects to Babette Stephens, one of the most significant figures in the history of Queensland theatre".<sup>[vi]</sup>

Writer: Christine Comans

Acknowledgements:

Rod Lumer & Marguerite Steffensen's 1991 interview with Babette Stephens

McKee, Jay (2004) *Never Upstaged - Babette Stephens Her Life and Times*, Temple House Pty Ltd, Hartwell, Victoria.

---

<sup>[i]</sup> *Stephens Interview*, March 22, 199.

<sup>[ii]</sup> *The Daily Mail*, Sept. 27, 1930.

[iii] *Stead's Review*, Nov. 1, 1930.

[iv] In *Orpheus*, April, 1947.

[v] McKee, 2004 p.281.

[vi] March 10, 2001.



Babette in her late teens, at home in Townsville in the late 1920s. (Courtesy Jay McKee)



Babette Fergusson (centre) in an early 1930s ABC radio production. (Courtesy Jay McKee)



Babette Stephens, 1935. (Courtesy Jay McKee)



Babette Stephens, c.1968.



Babette's QTC debut as Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1975. (Courtesy Jay McKee)



Babette Stephens c. 1980s. (Courtesy QPAC Museum)



Babette at Zonta Club of Brisbane 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday Dinner, 23 October 1992, aged 82.

# Lights dimmed for grand trouper Babette Stephens

Des Partridge

LIGHTS were dimmed before last night's Queensland Theatre Company performance of *Fred* in memory of theatre pioneer Babette Stephens, who has died in her 91st year.

Actors and the audience in the Cremorne Theatre observed a minute's silence in memory of the theatre pioneer and QTC associate artist who also was a popular game show panellist on Channel 9, and had radio programmes on the ABC and 4BH.

The mark of respect from the QTC – for whom Ms Stephens made her last stage appearance in *School for Scandal* in 1995 – will be duplicated tonight at Milton's La Boite Theatre, a company the trouper helped establish.

"She will be sadly missed," Arts Minister Matt Foley said when told of the veteran performer's death overnight on Tuesday.

"She was a great figure of Queensland theatre much loved by her contemporaries and by young performers who valued her wisdom and wry wit."

Born Babette Ferguson in Knightsbridge, London, on April 26, 1910, she began acting as a child.

When her mother and



THEATRE pioneer Babette Stephens, on the piano, who was a stalwart of repertory theatre.

step-father migrated to north Queensland, the then teenager boarded at St Gabriel's School in Charters Towers.

When she saw the Brisbane Repertory group on stage in Townsville, the young woman decided to pursue an acting career in Brisbane – beginning a long association with Brisbane Repertory. At the first audition she met Brisbane lawyer Tom Stephens whom she married in 1935. Mr Stephens died in 1999, aged 97.

In 1936, Babette and Rhoda Felgate founded the Twelfth Night Theatre company, presenting their first play in a meeting hall in the

Empire Chambers on the corner of Wharf and Creek streets in Brisbane.

She maintained her links with Brisbane Repertory, and helped the company establish a permanent home as La Boite Theatre at Milton in 1972 when the former venue of Albert Hall in Albert St was demolished in 1968.

Ms Stephens, who was awarded an MBE in the New Year's honours in 1972, and an AM in 1994, is survived by her daughter, Wendy Stephens-Cole, of Perth, and son, Lt-Col Christopher Stephens, of Canberra.

Funeral arrangements are yet to be announced.