

ACCOUNT OF VISIT OF REVUE "BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA"
TO CANBERRA DURING THE WAR IN FEB.1943

By Ivan Menzies

As Christmas drew near in 1941, I was sitting in the garden of the lovely home of a lady called Beryl Bryant. She had a Playhouse known as "Bryant's Playhouse" which was always associated with the best plays – Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw etc. The garden of her home near the entrance to Sydney Harbour was a natural open air Theatre and a huge rock about 25 feet long, 5 feet high and with a flat surface made a unique stage with a flat rock behind overhung with growing foliage for a back-cloth. She had just played a season of "Peer Gynt" (Ibsen's) with tremendous success in this garden. As we sipped our cool drinks after a swim in the harbour (Christmas is hot in Sydney!) someone said "I have just heard that in the U.S.A, they have produced a Revue called "You Can Defend America", which American leaders say is playing a vital part in strengthening national morale. Now why don't we do something like that here in this garden?"

Everyone gasped at the idea. Who was going to write it? Who was going to play in it? We all began to think about it and ideas poured out. It would be a short topical, positive Revue. The opening chorus would suggest the underlying ideas ... "We're the arm behind the army" ... "we're the force behind the airforce" ... "we're the V behind the Navy" ... and remember "Unity begins with U" ... The Revue would be called "BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA". There was fear of invasion of Australia, but in one sketch we showed that Australia was already being invaded by the white ants of fear, hate, greed, disunity. The scene was depicted by large "White Ants" planning in a cellar to undermine the national war effort.

Another sketch was a "Home Scene" demonstrating that fathers who know how to unite their families and settle private strikes and lockouts at home, know the way to industrial co-operation. Well, the idea was born and started to be worked out from that minute, and it had its premiere in that Garden on New year's Eve 1941 to a distinguished audience under a brilliant star lit sky. From the Prologue – a wild cave man bounding through the jungle in pursuit of the last two Dynasours on the point of extinction because they would not "change" their way of living to meet the times – to the Finale, The New World in the heart of the Ordinary Man, the show went with a reception I've seldom seen exceeded in Gilbert and Sullivan, and that is saying a lot in Australia, where they don't sit on their hands, but "count you out" if they don't like you!

The Lord Mayor of Sydney saw it and was so enthusiastic that he offered to sponsor further showings of the Revue in the Town Hall and other auditoriums; for he said that he felt it should be seen by everybody and should reach every home, factory and section of the community. M.P's attended these showings, Bishops, Cabinet Ministers, Governors of States. After one showing in the presence of the Governor and Premier of N.S.W., the Canadian Government Trade Commissioner jumped up and said, "I am supremely confident that this historic evening is the beginning of a wide spread moral awakening in Australia and the South Pacific, and undoubtedly gives the spiritual sulphanimamide to create the united essential for our survival."

The Governor of New South Wales was so impressed that he went especially to Newcastle, the industrial heart of N.S.W. to arrange with the Mayor for showings in that city. As a result of one big industrial leader seeing the show, a big industrial dispute was happily and quietly settled.

One night after the curtain fell on "The Sorcerer", a knock came on my dress room door and the manager announced the Australian Prime Minister, Mr. John Curtin, and his wife would like to meet me. He very soon came to the point of his visit which was that he had heard a lot about a new show called "Battle for Australia" which many of his friends urged him to see as it was proving to be a vital part of the Australian war effort. His Private Secretary, Mr. Fred McLaughlin, for whose judgment he had great respect, had also advised him to see me and arrange for him to see it. When could it be? I replied that we would be happy to put on a special showing for him the following Sunday night in "Bryants Playhouse". He was delighted and he and his wife and other invited guests saw it with great relish. He said afterwards, "The Revue "Battle for Australia" which I have had the pleasure of witnessing impressed me very favourably. It is not only entertaining, but conveys a vital message. I believe that the Revue is a valuable contribution towards raising the morale of the nation which is of paramount importance."

We had a long talk afterwards over coffee and he asked me where we were going to show it next. I said, "I am not sure, but what about Canberra?" He nodded his head and replied, Yes, I think that is the place; even some of my own friends in the government need to get this idea. I will let you know when I get back to Canberra what dates will be best for us and which will suit you."

A few days later I received an urgent letter from the Prime Minister giving me certain dates to choose which would be the most convenient to bring the Revue to Canberra. He had got it all worked out at his end! He would have a stage built for us in the Members' dining room at Parliament House, and would see both Houses were adjourned especially for the occasion, so that no Member would have an excuse for not seeing the Revue. He would be glad if I (and Beryl Bryant) would stay with him at the Prime Minister's residence, and he would see that the rest of the cast were accommodated in homes as the Hotels he heard were pretty full. Phew! Here was a problem which the Prime Minister either had not foreseen or more probably felt would find a happy solution. Every one of the cast were in jobs or professions or even in the services, as they were not professional actors; in fact most of them with the exception of Miss Bryant and myself, had never set foot on a stage prior to this Revue, in their lives. Also I was playing the operas every night and two or more matinees a week. It would need something in the nature of a miracle if this venture were to succeed, but after all, though the cast had not much in the way of professional experience, they certainly had a faith in God and in His being able to work miracles, which we had already experienced.

The miracle unfolded. My firm released me for a week in the middle of "The Mikado" – men and women in jobs were released by their bosses who by now were convinced that M.R.A. was a vital part of the war effort and industrial and national survival. Men in the services obtained special leave as the influence of the Revue had been felt in camps, air fields and ships. One young naval officer who had a small part had already started 10 days leave due to him. He spent 8 of these days on the train journey to get to Canberra from his ship in Perth, Western Australia, and the other two days at Canberra in the Revue.

When we arrived in Canberra on the morning of the show, workmen were busy putting up a stage in the Members' dining room at Parliament House; and we proceeded to rehearse new members of the cast, because it meant continually having to train and rehearse new people as we moved around. The Prime Minister was wonderful. He took everything as if it was the normal thing the government should be doing; and to criticism that come from the Opposition or other source he brushed aside with the reply that this

was a uniting force above party, class, race, creeds or points of view.; it was as essential as material armament for winning the war, so they had better reserve their criticism and get behind us and “help” us, as he was doing.

Never shall I forget the scene that night as the audience filed into that dining room – the legislators of the Commonwealth who waited with mild anticipation for the unique show to begin. Present with both Houses were Governor-General Gowrie and Prime Minister Curtin. Having introduced the show I crept to the back of the audience to note the reactions. I marvelled at the miracle being enacted. The opening chorus gave the clue to the cast ... “We’re workers and prospectors ... and company directors ... we’re farmers and we’re nurses ... even income tax collectors ... We believe, don’t you see, that national unity ... is the job that must be done by you and me ...”

I realise that I am quite incapable of describing the scene which might sound as bald and unconvincing narrative. Something tremendous was happening in that dining room beyond the realm of the ordinary theatrical performance. I felt a mighty movement of the Holy Spirit; it was a Pentecostal experience for me. I realised what Pentecost must have felt like.

True, the leader of the Opposition went quickly to the bar when the curtain fell on the first half and swallowed a large whiskey, but the majority of those men looked as though a bomb, and atomic bomb, had dropped on Canberra. Many looked thoughtful, some looked convicted and like an awkward guest at a party that knows not what to say.

At the final curtain the Prime Minister got up in his front seat and after thanking us, repeated with great conviction what he said when he first saw the show, viz, that he felt more than ever after tonight that it was an inestimable contribution towards raising the morale of the nation which was of paramount importance ... cries of “hear, hear!” He wanted the whole of Australia to see it quickly ... more “hear hears”. Well,” he said, “in that case we have got to help make that practicable, and I invite Ivan Menzies and some of his friends to meet with me and members of my cabinet in my room to discuss how best to do that.”

So we trooped along to the Prime Minister’s room and there we discussed the matter with him and his Minister of Information and other Ministers. The Prime Minister said of course we could not go with the cast to every city and town, so obviously the best way of reaching all the people was to make a film. To which everyone agreed. The Prime Minister said, “We have not much in the way of studios and equipment beyond what we have for making Government documentary films, but what we have is at your disposal; but we can certainly give you all the money you need to do this and the services of our own film producer, Charles Chauvel (he directed the famous film the “Rats of Tobruk” amongst other films) if he is willing. In a letter from Mr. Chauvel he said, “I am most grateful for the opportunity which you offered me, and am only too willing and ready to help if my services can be of any use.”

In a person letter from the Prime Minister, he said, “His Excellency Lord Gowrie has commanded me to express to you and the members of the cast that His Excellency was deeply interested in the presentation and regarded it as very good in the promotion of national morale and unity. On my own account I beg you to accept my congratulations and food wishes for future performances.” In a further letter dated 11th March 1943, two weeks after the visit to Canberra I received the following letter –

“Dear Mr. Menzies,

I refer to our conversation at Canberra on the 25thg February 1943, when we discussed the question of the filming of the Moral Re-Armament Revue “Battle for Australia” for public exhibition throughout Australia and the broadcasting of the message by means of the radio, etc. I then intimated to you that the Government was desirous of bringing the message of the Revue to the notice of the greatest number of the people of the Commonwealth as early as practicable. I understand that you are examining the matter and should be glad if you would submit your general proposals to me as soon as convenient. These will receive immediate consideration and, if approved, arrangements will be made for you to communicate with the Department of Information in regard to the working out of details.

Yours sincerely,

John Curtin.”

I replied immediately submitting my plans for a film, also for radio scripts for broadcasting over the national network of the A.B.C. (Australian Broadcasting Commission). By return of post I received the following letter from the Prime Minister dated 19th March, 1943.

“Dear Mr. Menzies,

I acknowledge the receipt of your letter of 15th March, 1943, and thank you for the intimation contained therein that you are willing to assist in the production of films to bring the message of the Revue “Battle for Australia” to the people of Australia and also to arrange for a series of broadcasts.

Generally I approve of your proposals and I am asking Senator Ashley, Minister for Information, to arrange for an appropriate officer of his department to contact you with a view to making detailed plans to carry out the project.

Yours sincerely,

John Curtin, Prime Minister”

Before we left Canberra, the Government entertained us to lunch at Parliament House and many more of the Ministers were enthusiastic in their acclaim of the Revue and gave us permission to quote what they said on our printed programmes.

The Hon. F.M. Forde, M.H.R., Minister for the Army, said –

“I believe that what we have seen tonight is the beginning of entertainment throughout Australia what will uplift and inspire the whole nation.”

The Hon. J. Dedman, M.H.R., Minister for War Organization of Industry, said –

“We recognise what you are trying to do. We have been greatly encouraged by your visit to Canberra and will go along a common path with greater courage and enthusiasm because of it.”

In a personal letter giving me permission to print these remarks, the Hon. Mr. Dedman said, “I am only too pleased to think that you see fit to quote the remarks which I made at

the luncheon in Canberra recently, and hope that, as you say, they will be an inspiration to a great number of people. Kind regards, Yours sincerely, John J. Dedman.”

On March 2nd 1943 the following report appeared in the Parliamentary Hansard of the Government of Victoria –

The Hon. W.H. Edgar “Throughout this debate there has been evinced a desire to arrive at a definite conclusion regarding the needs of Australia for post ear purposes. Sir John Harris has often spoken of the regeneration of mankind.”

Sir John Harris “A change of heart!”

The Hon. W.H. Edgar “Efforts have been made to effect that change, as was demonstrated on Thursday last, when a most remarkable incident occurred at the Commonwealth Parliament, with Mr. Ivan Menzies as the leading figure. The following report appeared in the AGE (leading Melbourne daily newspaper) of yesterday:–

“MORAL REARMAMENT REVUE

“History was made at Canberra when the Members’ dining room at Parliament House was converted into a theatre for the performance of the moral rearmament revue, Battle for Australia.

“The Governor General, and practically the whole of both Houses of Parliament were present. Forty-five members of Moral Rearmament teams travelled from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. One Naval Officer covered 2000 miles from Perth to spend his leave taking part in the Revue.

“The Governor General said he was deeply interested in the presentation and regarded it as an excellent way of promoting national morale and unity, and sent congratulations and good wishes for future performances.”

The report concludes that the Prime Minister, in congratulating the cast, said he hoped that 7,000,000 Australians would be able to see the Revue.

The Hon. C.H.A. Eager (Speaker?) “It would do this House good.”

Sir John Harris “The point is, did it change any hearts?”

The Hon. C.H. Eager “The moral rearmament Revue is a step in the direction of achieving that which Sir John Harris has often proclaimed”

When John Curtin died before the end of the war the Allies lost a great friend and a courageous fighter. Somehow I feel that he has “great treasure in Heaven”. Would to God we had more leaders today who had the courage of their convictions!

*[Transcribed by cbm from a poor photocopy. – 21 June 2004.
Spelling and punctuation copied as is from the original document.]*

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