

History of Hartwell Players

“Melbourne’s Oldest Theatre Company” is a title not easily earned, but in 2018 it is the emphasis of 80 years of the Hartwell Players Theatre Company of Ashwood. This year the Players are celebrating their milestone by hosting a “Spectacularly Trivial Trivia Night” event at the Notting Hill Community Hall on April 21st.

Starting in 1938 under the quaint moniker of “Presbyterian Merry Makers” the fledgling group had no idea they would evolve to be the most inclusive and enduring theatre company in town. Initially stage productions were restricted to married women members of the Hartwell Presbyterian Church, but after they admitted men in 1952 the name was changed to “The Hartwell Players” and it’s possible they will outlive the defunct suburb of Hartwell from which they take their name. The church is now gone, the suburb has been subsumed, but the theatre company thrives.

This feat has attracted much attention as Melbourne historian Volkhard Wehner wrote “... there are a few rare moments when one realizes that one has come across something quite exceptional. This amateur dramatic society, is a case in point.... the Hartwell Players proves that any group of people is capable of generating remarkable talents and outcomes.” (From ‘Old Hartwell – The Life and Times of the Village That Lost Its Name’)

So 2018 celebrates a company steadfast to its modest self, despite many challenges faced. Amongst the productions, awards, friendships formed, marriages, innovations and travels there have also been barren bank accounts, fires, attempted take-overs, deaths and loss of venue. Yet each time the group has rebounded. That spirit filters through generations for a company that can point to having grandparents, parents and children from one family in the same show.

After its church origins, the company developed to become known for its willingness to “give things a go”. Productions may not be chosen just for mass appeal, but for the challenge and opportunities they present to in-house writers (as young as 14), crew internships, youth productions, selection of scripts, beginner directors and actors have all been part of the Hartwell playbill. They have a well deserved reputation as a great producer of Shakespeare’s plays, often being the main attraction at the Shakespeare Festival in the Gippsland town of Stratford. Travelling with shows has long been a staple of Hartwell activities (and once by air to Norfolk Island). Appearances at regional one act play festivals are long standing and often award-winning.

The trivia event in April promises to kick-start the year on a high note. Affiliated theatre groups, members and the public are invited to book a table, choose a costume theme and share a night of theatrical frivolity and merriment in true style of the Players’ ancestral moniker. For more details visit www.hartwellplayers.org.au