

Ken Horler (1938-2018)

Ken Horler in late 1970 established the Nimrod Theatre, an establishment that would change the country's theatre history. He juggled his theatrical leanings with the day job as a barrister. He was a natural with a sharp, retentive memory and was 'good on his feet'.

Born in Sydney, Ken Horler attended Scots College on a scholarship. He matriculated at 16 with a maximum pass and enrolled in Arts Law at Sydney University. It was there that he forged friendships that lasted his entire life. After graduation, he practised as a barrister, took silk in 1986, became chairman of the Council of Civil Liberties (1987-92), and, for a time, was an acting judge.

Horler was stage struck. He loved the theatre passionately: the plays, the props, the very space itself. He conducted this passion in the teeth of his parents, who desperately hoped the wretched fad would pass. So did the law firm Dawson Waldron, Nichols and Edwards where he was an articulated clerk. A frantic phone call to locate him would usually draw from a partner the clenched response 'Mr Horler hasn't been sighted in weeks.'

Eventually he would be found in some basement around the university painting flats for a forthcoming production. The plays he directed included *Twelfth Night*, where his younger contemporary John Bell shone as Malvolio. This was followed by productions of *Him* by the American poet E E Cummings and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* – Bell was in these too and, as a direct result, was noticed by the critics for the significant actor he later became.

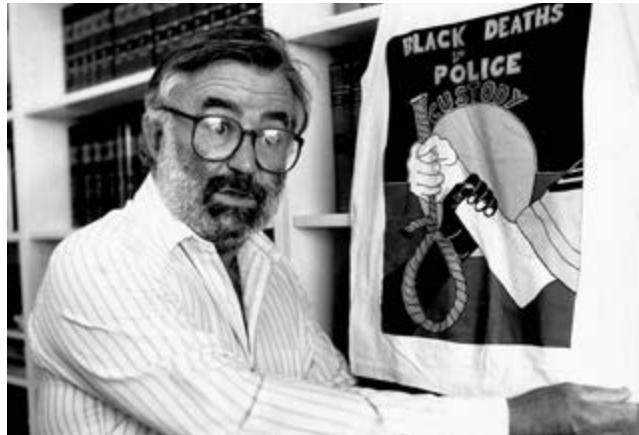
Horler continued to direct plays, including Brecht's *Mother Courage* which starred Germaine Greer. Peter Carroll was also in the cast. His peers graduated and went to England to begin their professional training – the late Richard Wherrett at Stratford East in London and Bell at the Bristol Old Vic and later, the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-on-Avon. The sudden death of his sister Deanne meant he returned home immediately. Then, to his parents' relief, he began to earn his living at the bar.

As a barrister, he was a natural. He absorbed information fast and in court gave no quarter. His colleagues valued his courage in the face of sometimes overbearing judges. They also rated highly his ability to communicate with juries with clarity and humour. His intensely competitive, disputative nature won him admirers.

It was during these years that he made one of his best decisions in his life: he married fellow lawyer Lilian Bodor. She became his helpmeet, collaborator, the mother of his only child

Sacha, and his strong right arm.

When Bell and Wherrett returned from the UK having completed their apprenticeships in the profession, Horler sensed change in the wind. Sydney's Old Tote theatre was approaching its final curtain; there was a palpable hunger for a theatre with fresh interpretations of the classics and new Australian plays. He found a disused shed in Nimrod Street Darlinghurst, and arranged a lease. There, in late 1970, he established a theatre with Bell and Wherrett that would change the country's theatre history. Although his mother had burned



all his university memorabilia, the wretched fad had not passed.

A cross-section of old friends from university and the law were conscripted to repair the Darlinghurst shed. We scraped and painted. Some of his clients worked off their debts to him by labouring on weekends. Horler presided, puffing small cigars and doing some light work with a broom. When the city fathers closed the theatre for its inadequate fire stairs and toilet facilities, Horler got good press space by ridiculing them. He then set to work. He lobbied and fought and raised money. He relished a fight and was in his element in opposition.

When the theatre re-opened, one of his most significant productions was *Basically Black*, a landmark revue he wrote and directed with Aboriginal actors and singers. Brett Whiteley designed a powerful poster for the show. Other work from this time was a revival production of Alex Buzo's *Rooted* and the premiere of another Buzo play, *Coralie Lansdown Says No*. Horler also directed several plays by Jim McNeil, who had written them while in prison.

With Nimrod's growing success, Horler looked around for a bigger space. In 1973 he found the old Cerebos salt factory in Surry Hills and, under what he called 'the Old Mates Act,' negotiated the transfer of the property from its owners to the Nimrod for one dollar – the best deal since John Batman bought Melbourne. Today it lives on as the Belvoir Theatre.

For the new Nimrod he directed Tom Stoppard's West End successes and wrote several plays himself. *Ginger's Last Stand* was his nostalgic treatment of comic strip hero Ginger

Meggs. The other was *Party Wall*, about Egon Kisch, the multi-lingual Hungarian communist the Menzies government bumped out of Australia. These plays reflected two of Horler's passions: a lament for a lost Australia where kids had billy-carts, climbed trees and got up to innocent mischief. The other was a serious and abiding passion for justice. Lilian became the general manager and became vital to the running of the new Nimrod. Wherrett, Bell and Horler, already a formidable triumvirate, created a heady and controversial theatre. Of

its first 18 productions, 15 were new Australian plays and nine of them were written specifically for the Nimrod. The company's parties for launching each new season became famous for their hospitality and exuberance. 'If there is a heaven,' wrote the late British critic Sheridan Morley, 'It is in the bar of the Nimrod.'

Horler, as a benign impresario, was always on the lookout for new talent and new plays, and brought his own taste to bear. His *Kold Komfort Kaffe*, a confection of cabaret with its echoes of Weimar Berlin, was played with great success by

John Gaden and Robyn Archer.

Meanwhile, a cabal was forming against him. Outside opposition he could handle, but not lack of confidence from his peers. He was forced out in a palace coup in 1980. It was an exile he never quite overcame. Even so, the Nimrod's best days were already over. It closed its doors in 1987.

He went back to the law. One Saturday afternoon he went out to Long Bay jail in his weekend clothes (shorts and sandals) to visit a client. While he was inside, there was a change of shift and he had a hard job convincing the new warder on duty that he was a visiting barrister. The theatrical complication of the switch delighted him.

Those of us who have enjoyed lives in the theatre are all deep in Ken Horler's debt. He forced open a door and gave us opportunities to find our own way and our own living. The cockpit of the original Nimrod Street Theatre still stands as The Stables in Darlinghurst where today it is the home of the Griffin Theatre Company. It not only defined an ideal audience-to-stage relationship of the new and larger Nimrod Theatre, it became the prototype for new stages all over Australia.

Ken was admitted to St Vincent's Hospital after a stroke. He died peacefully on September 16.

He is survived by his wife Lilian, daughter Sacha, brother Anthony and two grandchildren.

By Ron Blair