

Bille was artist in residence at QPAC from March to September 2005 and, during this time, was able to research and develop the script for his play. QPAC's Residency Program, which began in 2003 to establish dynamic, collaborative processes between Queensland artists, companies and QPAC, is an ongoing commitment by this organization. The program provides artists with access to QPAC expertise and facilities, and develops skills which help create a strong and vibrant performing arts industry.

### SHAKESPEARE ON WHEELS

As the population of Australia was relatively small and widely spread, companies needed to keep on the move to reach the maximum audience. From the 1920s, the spread of film and, later, television threatened the viability of such companies. But an audience for live performance was still out there. Australia's Arts Councils continued the

aims of Schools of Arts and Mechanics' Institutes with their support of the arts as a civilising influence on working men and women. And companies led by enthusiasts such as John Bell and Bryan Nason helped to reinvent the traditions of touring theatre for today's audiences.

In 1969 The College Players, founded by Bryan Nason, toured their production of *The Merchant of Venice* interstate and, with the assistance of Queensland Rail, to North Queensland. Film maker, and train enthusiast, Brian Witte travelled with the Company. The documentary *Shakespeare on Wheels*, offering a unique glimpse into the life of a modern travelling player, was the result.

This tour, and the documentary that recorded it, helped inspire Bille Brown's play *The School of Arts* with its homage to the theatrical troupes who braved the challenges of the road – and rail.



L to R: Robby Nason, Geoffrey Rush, Robert Arthur, Bryan Nason  
The College Players,  
*Shakespeare on Wheels*, 1969  
Courtesy Brian Witte

The College Players,  
*Shakespeare on Wheels*, 1969  
Courtesy Brian Witte



Leonie Amiel and Hilary Furlong.  
*The Merchant of Venice*,  
The College Players 1969  
Grin and Tonic Theatre Troupe Archive

### The School of Arts: Making the Play Exhibition

Tony Gould Gallery, QPAC  
South Bank  
19 May – 12 September 2009  
Tuesday – Saturday 10am to 4pm

Further information  
can be obtained from:  
Collections Manager  
QPAC Museum  
PO Box 3567,  
South Brisbane, Qld, 4101  
T: (07) 3840 7362  
F: (07) 3840 7560  
E: [collections@qpac.com.au](mailto:collections@qpac.com.au)  
W: [www.qpac.com.au](http://www.qpac.com.au)



QPAC PRESENTS

# THE SCHOOL OF ARTS MAKING THE PLAY

### BILLE BROWN

William Gerard Brown was born in Biloela in 1952, to parents Bill and Maureen Brown. He attended the Biloela State High School, and pursued his interests in music, art and rugby. Bill headed to Brisbane in 1969 to study at the University of Queensland planning to become a teacher.

By the end of the year, Bill, or Bille as he became, had auditioned, and been cast, as the lead in *Aladdin* at the Toombul

Shopping Town. His first professional performance. Bille continued to study, write and perform. In 1970 he was a founding member of student theatre group UNI QUE, and in 1971 was invited to audition for the Queensland Theatre Company.

In 1975 Bille was part of the QTC company performing *The Taming of the Shrew*. The production starred Diane Cilento, and she became a supportive friend when he decided to seek his

fortune in the UK. At first, writing prospects looked more promising than acting until Bille received an unexpected offer to play Sir Peter Teazle in a musical version of *The School for Scandal* in Dublin.

On returning to London in late 1976, Bille auditioned for the Royal Shakespeare Company and was offered a contract.



Bille Brown as Malvolio, *Twelfth Night*, QTC 1992  
Bille Brown Collection, QPAC Museum



Bille and mother, UQ graduation, 1973  
Bille Brown Collection, QPAC Museum



Over the next five years, in London and in Stratford-on-Avon, Bille worked his way up to leading roles.

He continued his writing career as well. His play *tuff* was produced at the Royal Court, and in 1980 he was commissioned to write a pantomime for the RSC. *The Swan Down Gloves* premiered at Stratford in January 1981. Touring opportunities took Bille to Europe and America, where he established a base for much of the 1980s.

A rich variety of work followed. In 1986, under the name Sullivan Brown – there was already a Bille Brown in Equity – he played on Broadway in a successful season of *Wild Honey* starring Ian McKellen.

Bille also returned to Brisbane to play leading roles for the Queensland Theatre Company, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*, *The Real Thing*, *Cheapside* and a memorable Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, directed by Geoffrey Rush.

While in Brisbane in 1987 to play Falstaff, he received a call from London. It was an offer to play the Wicked Witch of the West in the RSC's *The Wizard of Oz*. Bille was nominated for an Olivier award for Best Actor in a Musical for the role.

During the 1990s Bille managed to fulfil a long held desire to spend more time in Australia. Despite success in London and New York, Bille was relatively unknown 'down south'. But that was changing. Bille was becoming more widely recognised at home.

When Belvoir Street's production of *The Judas Kiss* with Bille playing Oscar Wilde premiered at the Sydney Festival in 1999 his performance was a sensation, widely acclaimed as it toured the country.

Now Brisbane-based, Bille remains as busy as ever. In 2004 he wrote a new version of *Aladdin*, starring Ian McKellen as Widow Twankey for a London production, toured to Edinburgh with the 2006 Brisbane Festival cabaret *Feasting on Flesh*, was part of the 2007 company, again with Geoffrey Rush, in *Exit the King*, and played King Arthur in the recent Monty Python musical extravaganza *Spamalot*.

*The School of Arts* brings Bille back full circle. It allows him to recall the traditions and experiences of his childhood in rural Queensland, and to pay homage to the spirit of the country towns, and the performers who made the journey to entertain them.

## THE SCHOOL OF ARTS MOVEMENT

The Mechanics Institute or School of Arts movement played a significant role in early technical education in Queensland. Today the surviving buildings serve as a reminder of an earlier generation who aimed to sustain social harmony through education and community activity. Over time their original philosophy of providing formal education was replaced by a move towards popular lectures and activities with a more recreational focus, as well as providing a venue for local and touring performers

## THE 1967 REFERENDUM

The 1901 Constitution stopped the federal government from making laws for Indigenous Australians living in the various States, so the control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs remained the States' responsibility. Across the

country the laws differed from state to state. Also, from the time of Federation persons with more than 50% Aboriginal 'blood' were excluded from official population figures.

On 27 May 1967 a Federal referendum was held. The first question was an attempt to alter the balance of numbers in the Senate and the House of Representatives. The second question was to determine whether two references in the Australian Constitution, which discriminated against Aboriginal people, should be removed. On the day over 90 per cent of all Australian voters and a large majority in every State voted "yes". It was without doubt a vote for change.

For more information go to the Fryer Library on line exhibition

[http://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/1967\\_referendum/index.html](http://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/1967_referendum/index.html)

## THE SCHOOL OF ARTS by Bille Brown

As the 1967 referendum to include Australia's Indigenous population in the national census is about to take place, a touring theatre troupe is preparing to perform *Hamlet* at the local School of Arts. *The School of Arts* is an evocation of small-town country life and the unintentional chaos caused by this motley band of travelling players.

Bille Brown's new play *The School of Arts*, set on the eve of the 1967 referendum, is a tribute to an extraordinary time in Queensland's cultural life that inspired many of our State's leading artists, including the playwright himself. This important new work will be presented by the Queensland Theatre Company and QPAC in July this year as part of the State's Q150 celebrations.



Bryan nason and Bille Brown, *Henry V*, QTC 1984  
Bille Brown Collection, QPAC Museum

Bille Brown as King Arthur, *Spamalot*, 2008  
Bille Brown Collection, QPAC Museum



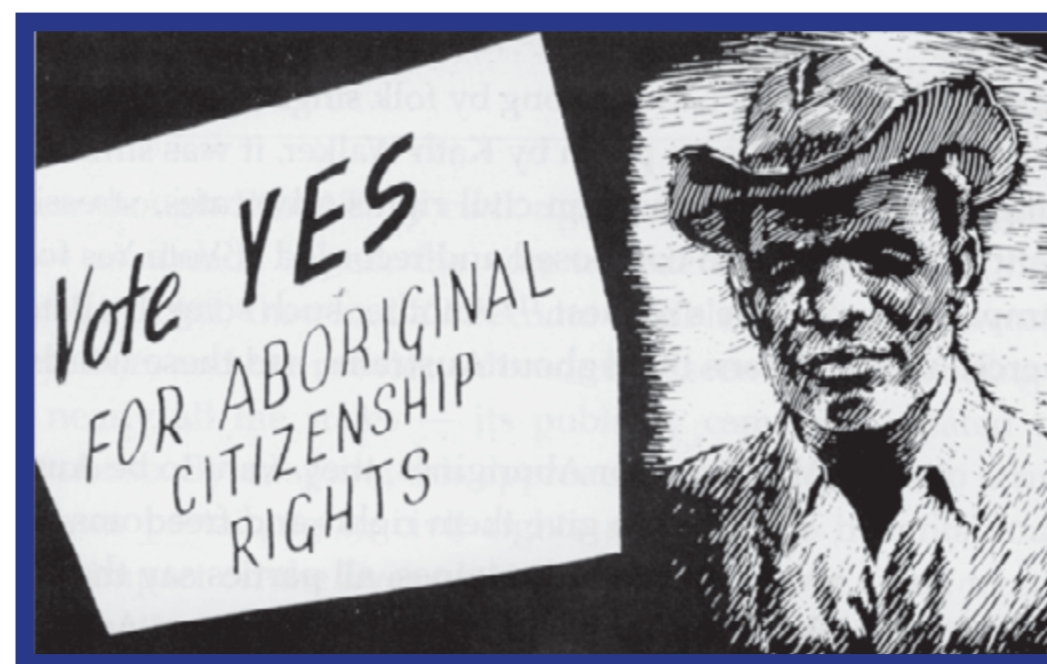
Bille Brown (far right), *Coriolanus*, RSC 1977  
Bille Brown Collection, QPAC Museum



School of Arts, Ayr  
Burdekin Library



May Day parade, 1966  
Fryer Library, UQ, Graham Garner Collection



Herbert McClintock drawing,  
Common Cause, 20 May 1967  
Fryer Library Collection, UQ