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Introduced by John Thom, Dr Lowry OAM received her doctorate from Sydney University in 2007, her thesis focussed on Doris Fitton (founder and long-term artistic director of the Independent) and re-examined Miss Fitton’s contribution to Sydney theatre during the first half of the 20th century. Dr Lowry is presently collecting material for a book on the life and 50 year career of Dame Doris Fitton. Dr Lowry became involved with the Independent in 1993 when she and her husband Peter were appointed by the theatre’s new owner, Dr Rodney Seaborn, to set up and run the Friends of the Independent Theatre.

Dr Lowry’s passion for the work of Dame Doris Fitton, her tenacity in building a renowned theatre and company of players including the well known characters passing through the Independent was very clear from the moment she commenced her presentation. Reciting how she and her husband became involved, Dr Lowry paid tribute to the many volunteers who during the 1990s gave of their time to repair and restore the Independent to its former glory and allowed it to again be a place for aspiring young actors and playwrights to learn their trade.

The Independent at 269 Miller St North Sydney started life as a tram depot and was opened in 1886. With the rapid expansion of the tram network a bigger depot was needed and one was opened in 1909 in Military Road. From 1909 the Miller Street site had a chequered history and a variety of uses until taken over by Doris Fitton and the Independent Theatre Company in 1939. Some of these uses included a picture theatre, a vaudevillian theatre, a munitions factory during WW1, a skating rink and an amusement parlour. Well known artists such as Roy Rene Moe and Gladys Moncreif performed at the site prior to it being acquired by Doris Fitton.

Such were the earlier times but it was Doris and her Independent Theatre Company who came to the building in 1939 that gave it its identity. She spruced it up, renamed it the Independent, and opened it on 2 September with Rattigan’s French Without Tears. Virtually simultaneously, Australia went to war. Patrons’ initial reluctance to cross the Harbour Bridge disappeared with the success of Wilder’s Our Town in February 1940. For the next 38 years the Independent – and Fitton – provided Sydney with a steady supply of quality productions – everything from Shakespeare to Strindberg, Coward to Capote, as well as productions for students and children. Children’s Theatre and School’s programmes were an important feature of the Independent and these many productions attracted great numbers of children and families from all over Sydney. There were many Australian premieres. Among the local plays that debuted there the most notable was Sumner Locke Elliott’s controversial Rusty
Bugles in 1948, with its famously robust language and subsequent national tour for Ken Brodziak’s Aztec Services. “Morning Becomes Electra” was another well-known production from Doris, performed in 1945 and which later toured. In 1944 Fitton formed Theatre Freeholds Ltd and raised enough money for it to acquire the building. She got it for only £7,000. In 1949 she went to London where she directed an Australian play, Bill Gates’ *The Earth Remains*, for a short season at the little Q Theatre at Richmond. Another overseas trip, in 1965, included a visit to the Moscow Art Theatre.

Fitton directed frequently, expertly and somewhat dictatorially. Her casts constituted a true ‘who’s who’ of Australian theatre: John Bluthal, Gordon Chater, Ruth Cracknell, Carmen Duncan, John Ewart, Neva Carr Glyn, Ron Haddrick, Reg Livermore, Garry McDonald, John Mellon, Helen Morse, Michael Pate, Diana Perryman, Gwen Plumb, Leonard Teale, Charles Tingwell, Tony Ward, Jacki Weaver, – to name, alphabetically, only a few. Throughout her presentation Dr Lowry showed us numerous slides of the actors and activities of the Independent. N.B. These slides can be viewed on the club website. In the late 1940’s the Oliviers visited the Theatre and Doris put on a production for them.

All through its nearly five decades’ existence, Fitton’s brave enterprise was never really financially secure. Though it operated initially on an amateur basis, for most of its life it was a pro-am operation. An attempt to turn totally professional in 1967 was financially disastrous. At that time Fitton hoped that the Independent would become the state’s theatre company, but it was the better-funded Old Tote that won the day. Then the Australia Council failed to renew the theatre’s annual grant, and the National Institute of Dramatic Art started to draw potential students away from the Independent’s school. Despite the efforts of many devoted supporters, especially established actors and writers, Fitton, then 80, finally accepted that, after 47 years, her beloved theatre would have to close.

Appropriately, she brought down the curtain in May 1977 with a new production of *Our Town*, the play that had been so successful for her in 1940. After the Independent ceased production, its theatre has had a chequered history. There were various short-term occupants, including Hayes Gordon, who conducted acting classes there. In 1988 it was acquired, first, by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and later, on the initiative if Dr Rodney Seaborn AO CBE, by the SBW Foundation. The Independent opened its doors again on 26 March 1998 with the production of “Curtains Up”, under the management of the Australian Elizabethan Trust.

Comments from members reflected their personal experience and recollections of the Independent.

Ray Hyslop’s gave the vote of thanks to Dr Lowry and recognised the work she had put into the Theatre and that its history should not be forgotten but preserved and augmented with oral history obtained from individuals such as those members who had given us their recollections of their time and experience with the Independent.