The 'National Theatre'/'National Theatre Movement'

The National Theatre Movement was founded in Melbourne in 1935 by Australian opera singer Gertrude Johnson on her return to Australia from England, where she had enjoyed a modest operatic career for some years. Despite the lofty ideals of its founders (Johnson and a number of leading figures in Melbourne's then largely amateur music, opera, ballet, and theatre world, many of whom served on its board for many years) the National was rarely a genuinely serious professional theatre organisation and it never took off as a national movement, although a South Australian entity bearing the name of 'South Australian National Theatre Movement' flourished for a time in the early 1950s, while a Sydney rival – Clarice Lorenz – registered the name 'The National Opera of Australia' in 1953. The National's heyday as a professional producer was arguably in the years between World War II and about 1954, during which years it mounted a high-profile series of eight annual three-arts festivals at the Princess Theatre, featuring its professional off-shoots: a National Theatre Ballet Company, a National Theatre Opera Company and a National Theatre Drama Company. Its significance as a would-be 'national', professional performing arts organisation was gradually lost following the development, after 1954, of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and its growing network of what were to become the 'state theatres', the Australian Ballet and the Australian Opera. Vestiges of the National's ambitions were still to be seen in various briefer 'professional' opera, ballet and music theatre seasons between 1960 and 1964 in various venues; a major drama season, in association with Garnett H. Carroll, at the Princess in 1967; a final attempt at a three-arts festival at the Princess in 1969; and a brief, one-off opera season in 1971 under the rubric of 'The Melbourne Opera'. The National was also Melbourne's first state-subsidised theatre, receiving Victorian Government subsidy from an early stage of its life, probably the late 1940s. After about 1971, the National ceased mounting productions as a professional production/presenting company and concentrated solely on its role as a training institution.

While few of its most ambitious ideals were met, the National was a serious training ground for countless aspiring actors, singers, dancers and other people interested in a career in the theatre – not only via its various production programmes, but mainly through its three training schools: the National Theatre Opera School, the National Theatre Ballet School and the National Theatre Drama School, which were founded from the beginning of the organisation's life, two of them continuing to the present day (as at 2010). The Opera School was amalgamated with/ceded to the Victorian College of the Arts in 1980.

'National Theatre' ORGANISATIONS represented in AusStage

The 'National' (as it has always been colloquially known) has undergone several name-changes over its lifetime. Its first production was launched in 1936 under the name of 'National Theatre Movement, Victoria'. In April 1940, the organisation changed its name to 'The National Theatre Movement of Australia' and, in November 1961, to 'Australian National Theatre Limited'. In 1970, it was re-named 'Australian National Memorial Theatre', its official name today – although it is still generally known simply as 'The National'.

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Since there are no Events listed at the moment in AusStage under the Organisation 'National Theatre Movement, Victoria', there are just three entities related at present to the organisation:

The National Theatre Movement of Australia: Organisation ID 8200.
This contains the vast bulk of the National's production output: 1940 – 1961.

Australian National Theatre Limited: Organisation ID 9189.
This contains a thin listing of National productions 1961–1970.

Australian National Memorial Theatre: Organisation ID 33602.
This contains a few listings of events produced by the National Theatre's schools since 1970.

RESEARCHERS SEEKING INFORMATION ABOUT THIS ORGANISATION ARE ADVISED to search via these three entities.

Within these three broad chronological records, entries will also be found for productions mounted by the subsidiary production entities – the National Theatre Opera, Ballet and Drama Companies and the National Theatre Ballet, Opera and Drama Schools. Information about which arm of the National was the production company (where known) is in all cases listed within the Description field.

'National Theatre' VENUES represented in AusStage

The National has also occupied various different venues over its lifetime. (At least two of the theatres it purchased at different times as its proposed administrative and production bases burned down before they could ever be used. A third was used for some years before succumbing to the same fate!) However – with the exception of the various theatres it hired for its mainstage professional productions, notably the Princess and the Palais – these are again narrowed to three:

Saint Peters Hall (from 1938 – 1961) Venue ID 2807 (Also colloquially known as 'The National')

The National Theatrette (1961 – 1968) Venue ID 4108

The National Theatre, St Kilda (since 1974) Venue ID 700. (Mainly a hired venue for community and other outside groups, but also used as a home base for the Ballet and Drama Schools and – occasionally – for their productions).
The national also occupied premises for brief periods (as administrative bases and/or as homes for the Schools) at Carlton St, Prahran, at Jackson St, South Yarra, and at Toorak Rd, Toorak. These addresses are sometimes noted within individual records for 'National Theatre' events.

Sources:

National Theatre Website: www.nationaltheatre.org.au


Geoffrey Milne

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Notes

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i This 'National Theatre', located in Melbourne, has nothing to do with – and is no relation to – the entities in Perth known as the National Theatre Inc (AusStage Organisation ID 4037) or the National Theatre Company (essentially the same company; Organisation ID 8233) or the National Theatre of Western Australia (same company again; Organisation ID 9704).

ii Again, no relation to a much newer entity trading by that name in Melbourne in the later 2000s.