

work for singers. However, he was the first to admit that he also had to create work for himself.

The venture had rocky beginnings. Far from having his idea received enthusiastically, Dad was considered a presumptuous upstart. One would think that his vision would be embraced in supposedly culture-starved Wellington, but it was met with almost universal disapproval: 'Who does he think he is?' was the reaction.

One of the few to offer initial support was Douglas Lilburn, who realised the sacrifices involved in 'creating something out of nothing'.<sup>12</sup> Many years later Dad explained, with uncharacteristic understatement, 'I wasn't getting support from ... quarters where I might have expected it'.<sup>13</sup>

The Wellington branch of the CAS was leery about sponsoring his venture. The ambivalence was not because of a prejudice against opera, but because word had got back that Dad had a blazing row in Auckland with a visiting tenor, Andrew Gold. To put it bluntly, the Wellington CAS wondered whether Dad was a fit and proper person to have on their books.<sup>14</sup> It was fortunate that the Opera Company got the green light. Quite simply, without the support of the CAS the company would not have got off the ground. It would never have been able to routinely tour to the smaller centres, and this was its lifeblood in the early years.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first Opera Company productions were in October 1954 – of Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (with the same cast as the Auckland production of the previous year) and Menotti's *The Telephone*. It came at a critical juncture in New Zealand artistic history. There is the perception that 1950s New Zealand was a cultural wilderness revolving around rugby, beer and racing. Actually, a lot of artistic activity was going on in the major centres, and in some of the regional centres, and there were the YC radio stations for those inclined to classical music. The National Orchestra had been formed in 1946 and the Lindsay String Orchestra in 1948. But apart from these two professional orchestras, it was all amateur endeavour. And then 'the three wise men' came along. That is to say, in 1953, Poul Gnatt founded the New Zealand Ballet, and the following year Dick and Edith Champion started the New Zealand Players and Donald Munro his company. So we had, in short order, three national, professional touring companies in separate disciplines of the arts – ballet, repertory and opera. (In the case of opera, some impetus would have been provided by the 1949 tour of 10 opera productions by J. C. Williamson's Italian company, and the National Opera of Australia's 1954 tour, which brought six productions.)

It sounds better than it actually was. These three companies started from very small beginnings – although the New Zealand Players could rapidly expand, thanks to being bankrolled by the Hannah Shoes empire. But it was different for opera and ballet. Poul Gnatt drove taxis by night to fund his enterprise,<sup>15</sup> and