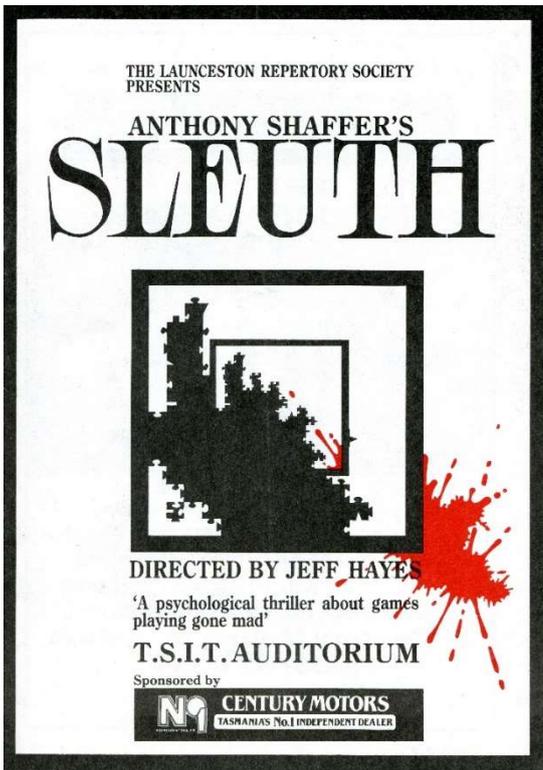


Sleuth 1989



Program cover – Garry Greenwood design

The 1980s was an active decade for the then-*Launceston Repertory Society*.

From 1980 through 1989 it produced no fewer than 29 shows, ranging from “major productions” to one acts, music hall and theatre restaurants. Ten directors had been involved, including: Patsy Mace (8 shows), Noel Dicker (6 shows), Kerry Finch (6 shows), Gerald Hobson (2 shows), and one show each for Ildiko Howlett, Jeff Hockley, Geoff Daw, Richard Taylor, Peter Hammond, Andrew Bruin, and Jeff Hayes.

And all this activity was taking place at a time when there were not a lot of theatre venues in Launceston. The *National Theatre* had been sold to *Foot & Playstead* in 1970, and the *Little Theatre* became the *Design Centre* in 1976. On the other side of the ledger, 1970 saw the *Princess Theatre* returned to its original purpose as a live performance venue after nearly sixty years as a movie theatre, but its near-1000 person capacity made it a bit large for the straight dramas that *The Rep* was producing.

The solution was to think laterally and find other venues, and *The Rep* often made use of the then-TSIT Auditorium. It was there that I had my first involvement with the Company - as an actor in Kerry Finch’s 1986 production of *Twelve Angry Men*.

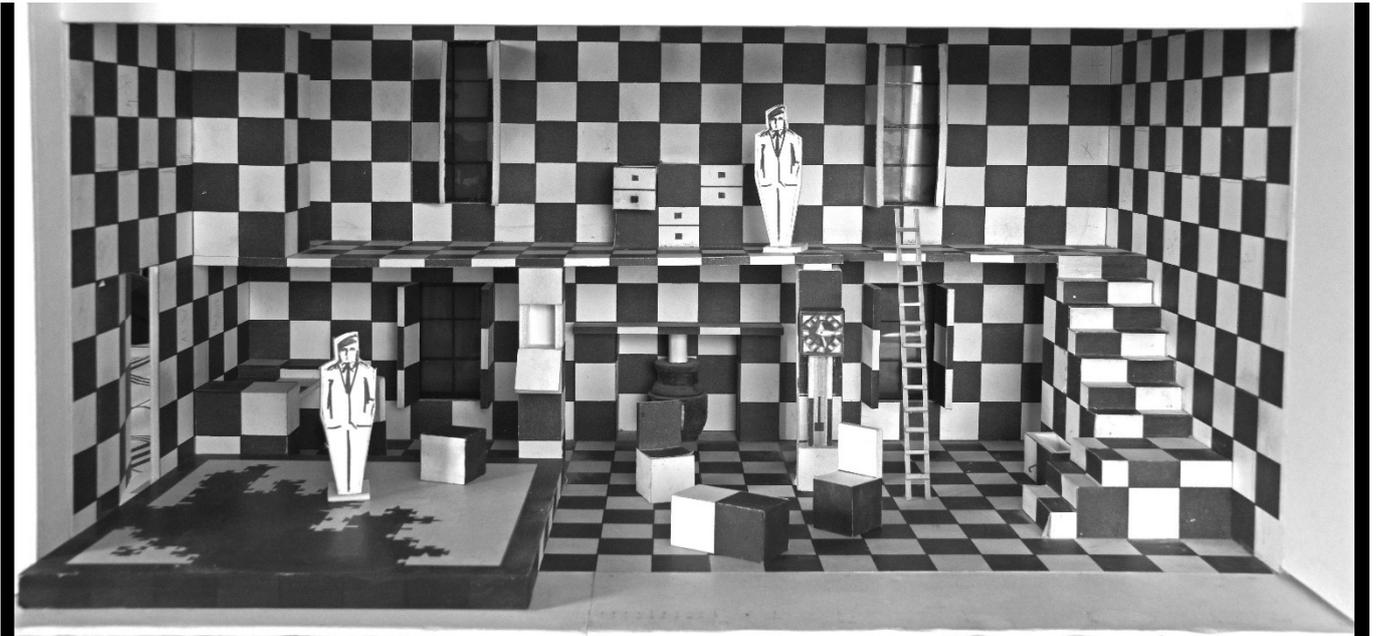
But theatre is a risky business, and, despite the activity, by 1989 the Company’s financial position was precarious. It was then that an opportunity arose; Jeff Hayes and I had become friends when working together in *Twelve Angry Men*, and in 1988, while we were rehearsing for the *Players* production of *The Recruiting Officer*, he happened to mention to me that he had always wanted to do Anthony Schaffer’s *Sleuth*. I figured that maybe the time had come. “After all, how hard could it be?” I said to myself. It was a two-hander with a single location set, and it was well known and entertaining as well as challenging. It sounded like a winner. Jeff and I sat on the veranda one afternoon and read it through, and I was hooked.

My old friend Garry Greenwood loved the “puzzle-box” nature of the set, and agreed to turn his considerable talents to a set design, should we go ahead with the production.

Jeff and I then had the temerity to ask the Committee to support the project, with Jeff as director, the two of us as cast, and Garry designing. But the idea was to refill the coffers, and the Company had to proceed carefully.

Kerry Finch suggested we approached Rob Brown, who at that time ran a used car business in Invermay Road called *Century Motors*. To our amazement he offered us \$1000 if we would produce the show, and stage a special night exclusively for his “gold card” repeat customers. AND - he would make it a donation up front, so we had cash to proceed. “Sure”, we said.

Garry then outdid himself, producing not only a set model we could use as working drawings, but specialty props as well. “Well, it looks easy to fabricate”, I said in my inexperience and ignorance, “After all, it’s all right angles”.



Garry's set model.

Of course the usual production issues arose, including where to perform, where to build, where to rehearse, where to source materials and so on – and we were painfully aware that we were determined to turn a profit somehow. We got permission to use the TSIT Auditorium as a venue – provided we used it during teaching holidays – and the hire costs were reasonable.

At that time, the C. H. Smith Buildings in Charles Street were being demolished, and Jeff somehow managed to get permission for us to use them *gratis* - both to build and to rehearse - while the developer was awaiting permission to continue the demolition.

It was quite a place – a veritable OH&S nightmare; the roof leaked rain, it was freezing cold, there were live electrical wires hanging randomly from the walls, and junk everywhere. Oh, and I found to my dismay that if you left your sandwich out of arm's reach, the rats would get it while you were on your feet rehearsing...but, hey, the price was right...

We scrounged most of the set materials; a friend in the Hydro came up with some scaffolding for nothing, we made the flats out of free cardboard and cheap pine, and so on. A veritable army of volunteers spent hours constructing and painting the unforgiving chequerboard patterns. Another friend, Mike Reynolds, a lecturer in music at the TSIT donated his skills and produced an original sound track.

The set, as Blind Freddy could see, was a whole lot more difficult than I thought. But we managed – building it completely in the C. H. Smith Buildings and then breaking it down for transport to the TSIT for bump-in. It was not completely reconstructed until just before the preview night in front of a student audience - and in the process something had gone awry; there was not quite enough flooring to complete the mezzanine; we still don't know why, it was there at C. H. Smith...In the rush to completion, the mysterious gap, about one metre at the stage-right end of the mezzanine, was simply

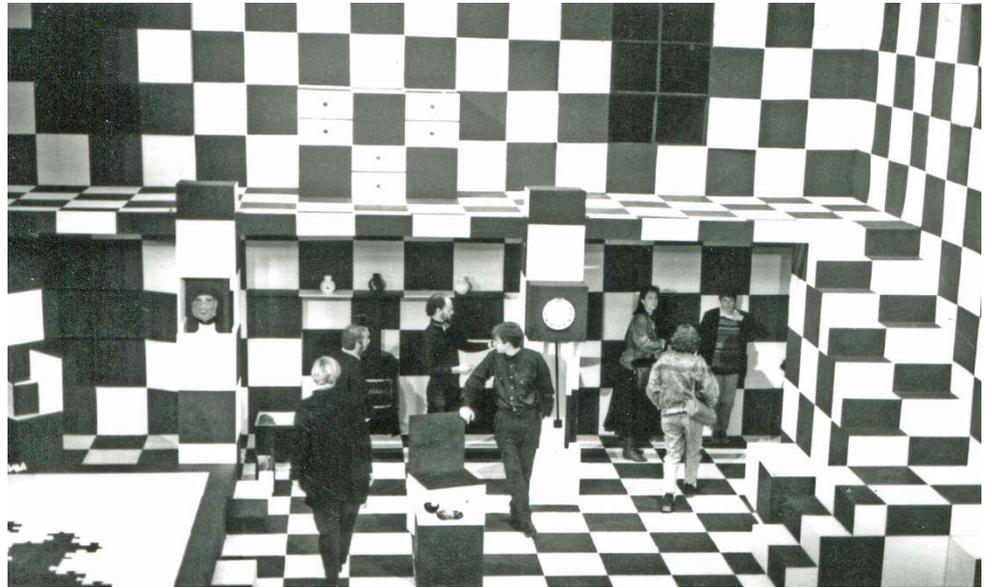


Jeff in rehearsal at the C.H. Smith Buildings

covered over with cardboard (yes, you heard correctly...cardboard), with a message written thereon "Do Not Step Here!".

I was the one who actually was not to step there, as I went behind that wall to gather some clothing which I then would fling from the mezzanine. Not only was I unaware of the gap, but also, on the night, the pile of clothing I had been using had items added, so what I wanted was no longer on top (that will teach me to walk the set and check props before the stage goes live).

No prizes for guessing the outcome. Jeff, seated at the bottom of the stairs on stage left, heard the unmistakable sound of rending cardboard, and saw me appear as I came through the mezzanine floor, my fall somewhat broken by the scaffold poles, to fetch up on top of the desk. Without missing a beat, he *ad libbed*, "Stop pissing about, Milo and get on with it". Which we did.



Garry Greenwood's set, as-built (pre-show)

By opening night things had settled down (although I was a little sore), and the show formally started its season, which turned out to be the hoped-for financial success, and great fun as well. And the special night for *Century Motors* was absolutely full with one of the best audiences we played to...(maybe there's a lesson here...?) The show had served its purpose.

But there was some bizarre good fortune to come. We were not immediately invoiced for the theatre hire; it seems the accounts staff at the TSIT were in an industrial dispute with management and were going slowly on certain tasks in protest. We waited for the bill...time marched on. 1990 saw the TSIT become part of the University of Tasmania, and still...no bill. We held the amount in our account for years, waiting to pay, and when no bill was forthcoming, we figured it as a windfall.



Stan Gottschalk (Milo Tindle) & Jeff Hayes (Andrew Wycke)

The project taught us some valuable lessons – including to budget conservatively, to keep control of all costs, to scrounge and recycle materials where possible, and to take advantage of the talents in the community by casting a wide net to bring in volunteers.

So the Company arrived at the 1990s in good financial shape, with lessons learned that helped us along the road leading to incorporation, and to the Company of today.