

## **Drama at the Astor Theatre** (1200)

Alan and I were in Brunswick Street New Farm. We are both lovers of Brisbane, especially the Brisbane of our youth – Brisbane of the sixties. Everything was brighter then; the colours were more intense, more tropical, and the very air that we breathed was laden with the perfume of flowering trees. The future was bright as well and it promised us exciting times to come. I have lived here since my youth and Alan's experience here in the sixties, since he arrived from Melbourne as a young plumber and political agitator, had left him with memories, good and bad, that he treasured for all the subsequent years.

We passed the site of the old Village Twin cinema. That's where I first viewed *2001: A Space Odyssey* while on my first acid trip, a potent conjoining of first time experiences. I mentioned it to Alan. Usually a reference to LSD would encourage the retelling of boring drug stories but Alan had none of those.

"Yes," he said, "it used to be the Astor Theatre. Reminds me of the 1966 Federal election."

Something in the way he said it suggested to me that he might have a story about it so in anticipation of the pleasure to come I became an attentive listener. I have learned that for a yarn to be told successfully the teller needs an appreciative listener who knows when to prompt and when to remain silent.

So I said, "I was overseas for that one, but it was pretty pivotal wasn't it? "

I had read about that election. It was highly charged. The Labor Party under Arthur Calwell fought it on the issue of the war in Vietnam and conscription. The ALP took a principled stand and was against both. The Liberal Party was led by Harold Holt who inherited the Prime Ministership from Bob Menzies. Holt was a rather gormless character but the press tried to invest him with some charisma by making plenty of references to his

surfing and scuba-diving prowess. He wasn't as good a swimmer as he was cracked up to be as it turned out – but that's another story.

“Yes, it was pretty important, for a number of reasons.” Alan said. “Of course the Liberals had been in power since 1949 and they had to consolidate under their new leader. And the war in Vietnam, conscription and the American alliance was an issue. Especially for us on the Left. But not many people were against the war then. As you know it wasn't until the days of the Moratoriums in '70 and '71 that massive opposition had built up. But at the time of that election our mob, the Eureka Youth League and various peace movement people were still starting to get organised.”

I already knew my history and I was keen to hear his reminiscences. “Where does the Astor Theatre come into it?”

“This was part of the Liberal Party getting organised for their campaign. Harold Holt was going to address the party faithful to gee them up for the electoral battle and they were going to use the Astor. This was not for the general public; they wanted a large audience of enthusiastic supporters to provide the media with ample evidence that the Liberals had mass support. So anyone wanting to get in would have to have an invitation”

“So you and your comrades didn't get an invite?”

“No, but one of our people had a family member in the Liberal Party who got a ticket. We used it to make a heap of forgeries. So on the night we came early, we flashed our tickets and made our way to the front. There were about thirty of us, mainly young EYLeers and other radicals. Pat Gill was one of these.”

“No one challenged you?”

“No, not then anyway. When I was seated I had a look around and I saw a familiar bunch of Special Branch coppers – led by Sgt Leo De Lange. I was looking at them and they were looking at me. They knew I was a troublemaker. For my benefit they were

punching their fists into their palms. I got the message and I said to myself, 'I'll get a hiding if I do anything.'

"But it was out of my hands anyway; as soon as Holt appeared on the stage the heckling began. The noise was made worse by the abuse hurled at us by the Holt supporters, yelling at us to shut up. There was general uproar. Apart from our group there would have been another thousand protesters. *Save our Sons* had a banner that when they held it high Liberal Party members tried to tear it down while the SOS people chanted, 'Save our sons. Save our sons'. And others were shouting out, 'One, two, three four we don't want your bloody war.' Holt was flabbergasted. Put off his stride. This was not what was supposed to happen he must've thought. It would have been then when Pat Gill appeared. When he had arrived at the theatre he had slipped into the toilets and dressed himself as a frogman and waited for his cue. When the uproar was loudest he made his entrance. It was very dramatic. He was dressed in wetsuit, mask, goggles, flippers and everything; he was even carrying a spear gun. As he stalked down the aisle the uproar built to pandemonium."

"Must have been quite a do."

"Yes and that's not all. Do you remember Greg O'Dwyer the announcer for 4BC? I think that was his name. Brisbane's own shock-jock at the time. He was coming down the aisle doing an outside broadcast. He was saying something like, 'Well listeners, there seems to be a very rowdy element here tonight made up of well known troublemakers ...' It was then that Pauline jumps up grabs his mike, pushes him away and shouts into the microphone,

' Stop the war in Vi-et-nam, stop the war in Vi-et-nam! End conscript-shun!'

"It was then that the police grabbed me and frogmarched me down the aisle with Pauline coming up behind, hammering on the broad backs of the constabulary with her

closed fists. They raced me through the foyer and with a parting shove sent me down those wide white concrete steps that I still remember so well. I had to run down them to keep on my feet and the momentum took me into the traffic on Brunswick Street.”

“Fortunately the traffic wasn’t as heavy then as it is now.” I said.

“Yes fortunately. And neither me nor Pauline got arrested.”

“Pauline was quite feisty.” I said appreciatively of the young woman whom he was later to marry. “I remember the morning after the second Moratorium seeing a photo of her on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald being arrested.”

“Yes, she wasn’t doing anything, just standing there. She didn’t want to get arrested because she was taking a sickie off work. – Jack Munday’s wife got arrested too. That’s when I first met Jack, both of us waiting to get our wife out of the slammer. I had a good long yarn with Jack talking about cricket and football.”

“That was a good story Alan.” I said, “And you’ll have to tell me about your wedding some time.”

“Anytime, just ask me,” he said.

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