

## STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES:

### MISS WHITLAM'S CONTRIBUTIONS – SPEECH & DRAMA

Dramatic productions have long been part of life at PLC Sydney. The College Archives holds a newspaper clipping that reports on a performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that was produced in Ashfield Town Hall in November 1900. The *Aurora Australis* records that a Dramatic Society was formed in 1920 that mounted two productions in its first year: *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing* and *Sweet Lavender*.



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But it was under Miss Whitlam's principalship that the role of drama increased in importance in the life of the College. Her idea was that every girl, in her penultimate year (now Year 11), would participate in a dramatic production. The play, either Shakespeare or a work by another classic playwright, would of itself provide intellectual stimulus, but the Principal's idea went further. Having every girl in the year group take part provided opportunities to learn new skills and more importantly, the environment in which the group learned team skills and bonded as a strong class in the year before they became the senior leaders of the school. Both the process and the outcome were important.

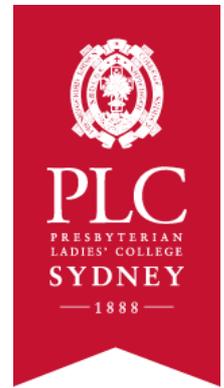
The students could choose to be in the cast, work on scenery or props, costumes, makeup, music or lighting, produce the program, take bookings, sell tickets, or usher at the performance. To meld all of these parts into a unified whole fell to Miss Audrey Keown, who Miss Whitlam appointed as a speech and drama teacher in 1959. The first play staged following this methodology was Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, on 15 August 1959.



Miss Keown and the cast of *Twelfth Night*, 1959



A scene from *The Taming of the Shrew*, 1990



Under Miss Keown's careful eye the girls worked for most of the year preparing for "their" school play, which was generally presented in College Hall in August. The idea of the school play became popular with the pupils and in time a Drama Club was formed to put on something "at the end of the year just for pure entertainment sake".<sup>1</sup> As the College grew it became unwieldy for an entire year group to mount the production and so, in 1991, the "Year 11 play" became the "PLC Production" and senior students chose to participate.<sup>2</sup>

Speech – known as elocution – had been part of the "course of instruction" since the earliest days; in fact it is listed in the prospectus for 1888.<sup>3</sup> But again it was Miss Whitlam who determined that it would grow in importance. Miss Keown's job description also included teaching speech. Girls could elect to take speech as an extra subject and Miss Keown prepared them for the Trinity College of London Speech and Drama exams. At that time the examiners all came from England twice a year to adjudicate the examinees.<sup>4</sup>

Of course today speech includes public speaking and debating and many pupils pass through the doors of Lyons House (Centre for the Spoken Word) to receive instruction from the public speaking and debating staff. Miss Whitlam established the framework that has grown to include our own annual PLC Sydney Public Speaking Festival, as well as the College's repeated successes at such competitions as the AHIGS Festival of Speech, the Australian Debating and Public Speaking Championships, the Rostrum Voice of Youth, Plain English Speaking, Lions Youth of the Year, and the Inner West Eisteddfod.

Debby Cramer, Archivist

All images from PLC Sydney Archives

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Audrey Keown, 2011, transcription, p. 8. Series 33 Oral Histories & Recollections, Box 345.

<sup>2</sup> "The School Play 1959-1990", Audrey Keown, 2002, p. 1. Series 16 Drama Department, Box 169.

<sup>3</sup> Series 3 Prospectus, Box 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, Interview with Audrey Keown, 2011, transcription, p. 8-9.