

Kenneth Hemmens OA

At Geelong Repertory's AGM on Monday 2 March 2015, Ken Hemmens' contribution to Rep was finally recognised when, on behalf on the Rep Committee, I had the pleasure of awarding him a Life Membership. On reflection, such recognition was long overdue. You'll understand when I tell you that Ken first appeared on a Rep stage in the old GAMA (Geelong Association of Music and Art) theatre in March 1958, that's right, over sixty years ago, in a play called "My Sister Eileen".

I first met Ken in Drysdale in 1994 when he directed me in a Peninsula Player (PP) production of "Who Killed Santa Claus". It was an interaction that extended for 16 years in many PP productions and that I cherish today.

In 2015 I had the pleasure of recording a conversation with Ken when I asked him to tell me his story.

He was born in Littlehampton, Sussex on March 25, 1925, a date between the end of World War I and the start of World War II. It was inevitable that World War II would impact upon the life of this 14 year old teenager when war was announced in 1939. Ken was certain that he could pilot a Lancaster bomber for the RAF with more acumen than he ever displayed on the playing field and to achieve that goal he joined the Air Cadets in school and applied to be admitted to pilot training when he left school in 1942. However, his wish to experience the (and I quote Ken) the dead glamorous life of a Lancaster bomber pilot was thwarted by a panel of 3 socially superior RAF pilots at an interview in Oxford when Ken told them his Dad was a baker. Undeterred Ken went off to train as a Lancaster Rear or Tail Gunner in RAF Command.

After training Ken automatically acquired Sergeant and Flight status much to the chagrin of sporting heroes from school who started their

RAF careers as privates. Based in aerodromes throughout England and Scotland Ken flew night time sorties over Europe. A staggering 46% of Bomber Command crews were killed in the conflict with the role of Lancaster tail gunner recognised as the most dangerous.

After the war was over Ken remained in the RAF. He was stationed outside Glasgow when a chance conversation with a serviceman from Wagga Wagga and a discussion of the respective climates of Scotland and Australia, led to Ken's decision to migrate. Shortly thereafter an advertisement placed in the UK Daily Telegraph by the Victorian Education Department for student teachers led to Ken's arrival in Geelong in September 1949 and his attendance at Geelong Teacher's College in North Geelong in 1950.

Ken saw his first Rep production in the old GAMA theatre in September 1957 and appeared on stage in 1958. The latter however was not his first stage appearance. Holiday makers in Littlehampton from 1935 (that's right, Ken was 10 years old) had had the opportunity to see him perform in traditional English summer pantomimes. His long and highly successful association with Geelong Medimime's performances thus brought him full circle.

It was at Rep that Ken met Dulcie Meakin, who had formed the company in 1932. He attended a series of courses run by Dulcie and he credits her with giving him a strong grounding in the art of theatre. He remembers clearly many of Dulcie's admonitions such as "Don't emphasize the obvious" and admits to repeating this advice to numerous students over the subsequent years. On a lighter note and to quote Ken "She ruled the place with a rod of iron, brought her dog to rehearsals and sat in the back of the theatre smoking".

In the 34 years from his first on stage Rep appearance and the 2015 Rep AGM, Ken acted in 21 Rep productions, directed 5 and was on front of house on a further 49 occasions. On the subject of a favourite role, Ken chose Antonio in the Merchant of Venice which

was directed by Dennis Mitchell in 1992. When asked about his favourite play, Ken mulled over his response but finally admitted that he did not have a favourite play, he was simply a Shakespeare fiend.

Ken retired as a teacher in 1990, but later in the year he was asked to join the Institute for Koorie Education at Deakin. And what did he teach? Shakespeare of course, until his retirement in 2002. In 2013 Ken was awarded the Order of Australia for service to the performing arts and to education. He last appeared on stage in Rep's production of "Amadeus" in 2015 and was rehearsal prompt in The Shifting Heart in 2016

Thank you so much Ken for your long and highly valued service to theatre in Geelong.