

The Cue Theatre in Inglewood has begun its 50-year celebrations with the play *Private Lives*. Among those with more to celebrate than most is Cue veteran Derek Treeby. He talks to KATH BROWN about his own half-century of stagecraft.

Derek Treeby at Cue Theatre in Inglewood.  
Photo: Mike Scott

# Cue -

**B**EFORE there was Cue Theatre there was Derek Treeby.

Actor, director, playwright and set-builder extraordinaire, and the man who knows just about everything there is to know about stagecraft, Treeby has been associated with amateur theatre in Taranaki for more than 50 years.

Nowadays a sprightly gentleman with a laughter-lined face, Treeby appears to be a 30-year-old trapped in the body of a 65-year-old. Actually, he will be 75 next birthday, which probably accounts for the white hair and beard.

Treeby came to New Plymouth from Wanganui aged around 19 or 20. Soon after arriving he went to the library to look for a play.

"I'd never read a play. Some chap tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was interested in plays. I said yes. And that's how I went to a new members' tea at Little Theatre.

"And then I met Cydie Strang."

As he says her name, Treeby's voice deepens. Here is a woman whom he holds in great esteem. "She helped me immensely. She was great. She became my mentor for the rest of her life." (Strang died in 1999).

Treeby believes that what Strang didn't

# Derek Treeby

know about theatre was not worth knowing.

"Cydie taught me things when I didn't even know what she was talking about. She would say (and his voice drops into school-teacher mode), 'There's 12 inches and there's 24 of them on the Opera House stage'. She was talking about the gaps between each drop you could drop. And another one she taught me was 'Up on your long and down on your short'. These were the ropes used for the drops and she meant let your long rope up a bit and your short rope down until you get it right.

"Then Dorne Arthur took me over and I went on the stage. The first one I did was dreadful! By about 1970 I came right, I got the hang of it."

The latter statement was obviously dramatic licence because a theatre critic wrote in 1967: Derek Treeby's performance as Shylock in the Merchant of Venice was particularly penetrating.

And again in 1968 of his performance in Under Milkwood: Derek Treeby's eccentric clock-mad Lord Cut Glass was quite outstanding.

As an actor and director, Treeby's preference has always been for more serious plays.

"One of the first productions I did was Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. It was lovely, it was great. It really went like a rocket.

"We had Shell BP Todd here with the methanol plants in those days and I got all the executives, who were ... bright. And I could do plays like T.S. Eliot's Cocktail Party. I really enjoyed that."

That is not to say that Treeby has not done musicals. In fact, he claims Oklahoma as the most embarrassing production of his theatre life.

"It was in the early days and we went with those short skirts that were fashionable those days. It was ghastly. In the end I said to the cast, 'Look, do whatever you like. Jump all over the theatre. Try to find that energy.'

"That was an absolute disaster. The crit was very, very kind."

But criticism shouldn't be kind, Treeby says.

"Those days, critics didn't pussyfoot around. If something didn't work, they told you. That's the kind of constructive thing you can take away and learn from."

Two plays he rates as his greatest success. One is The Lion in Winter, which he first directed in 1973. However, he believes the production of this same play earlier this year was one of the best things he has ever done. His other memorable success was Equus in 1980.

"Equus had that magic thing when at the

end of the play the audience just sat there and didn't do anything. And I would think: 'It worked: If they clapped you knew it didn't get to them.

"There was full frontal nudity in that play. The girl who got the part was leaving town so she didn't mind. It was very courageous of her to do it.

"Everyone took it very seriously. There was no giggling, no mucking around. I was really quite pleased about that."

It would be hard to imagine that anyone mucked around while Treeby was in charge. His two rules for directors are discipline and punctuality.

"Never be late for a rehearsal," he states. "People stand around chatting and what you get is a tired group of actors."

Treeby could also never be accused of being tired. In his more than 50 years in theatre, he has acted in and produced more than 90 plays (and the occasional musical). And as Cydie Strang was to Derek Treeby, so he is to others. Actor, director and fellow member of TET Cue Theatre Christine King says everything she has learnt, she has learnt from him.

"He knows so much and is so willing and able to pass it on."

It sounds familiar. ■