

A MAGICAL PLACE

By Dale Vagg

Dale Margaret Vagg, née Ewart, is a niece of Percy Laidler's second wife, Caroline (Dolly) Laidler, née Bradford. Her memories of her aunt and uncle and the Play Shop are presented here with her kind permission.

As a child Saturday was my favourite day of the week. In the morning I would go to a ballet lesson at The Borovansky School in Elizabeth Street. When this finished I would make my way up Bourke Street to Number 201. This was for me a magical place.

The ground floor was occupied by a bookshop and run by a couple whose names I can't remember, but who were the aunt and uncle of Gough Whitlam. As I climbed the long narrow staircase to the first floor I entered another world – *The Play Shop*. This was the place where my love of the theatre and politics began. As you turned at the top of the stairs, there was a heavy brown wooden counter at the far end of the room, which ran across the width of the room. Behind it were shelves and shelves up to the ceiling filled with heavy brown cardboard boxes. They overflowed with items such as colourful silk scarves, large silver rings, packs of playing cards, sticks of greasepaint and plaits of crepe hair of every hue used to make false wigs, beards and moustaches. A lingering smell of greasepaint mixed with the freshly ground coffee which was always brewing. Piles and piles of books, magazines, monologues and drama scripts lay alongside pamphlets and articles on political

issues and covered every flat surface. Photos of magicians, actors and politicians which were pinned up in a haphazard fashion, adorned the walls.



*The Play Shop in the 1940s
(Harold Paynting Collection,
State Library of Victoria, H2009.95/28)*

Best of all were the large wooden ventriloquist dolls, which I was sometimes allowed to play with. As I grew older I learnt to operate the wire strings, which opened the

garishly painted lips and move my own lips in sync with the patter I created. The dolls were my uncle's tools of trade. He was a ventriloquist and a magician. His name was Percy Laidler. He ran *The Play Shop* from 1929 until his death in 1958. I was born in 1938 so spent a great deal of time there in the 1940's and 50's. Percy was not only a magician and a ventriloquist, but also a political activist. As a child I was completely captivated by both his interest in the stage and in politics and they became lifetime pursuits for me.

At 12 o'clock on a Saturday as the shop was closing the most amazing collection of people would gather – people from the stage, people interested in magic, homosexuals and those interested in politics. There were heated discussions going on in one corner, others were practising sleight of hand, there was talk about the best stage make-up or people just reading poetry aloud. It was an incredible experience for a child. Then when everyone left I would go upstairs to their living quarters on the 2nd floor, where Aunty Carol would grind coffee beans (unusual in those days) and produce continental pastries. It was so different from my normal life, which was very suburban.

Recently I came across a web site for a magic magazine. The following was part of a eulogy for Lindsey Rietschel (another magician of the time) by Graham Etherington in 2002.

My early recollections of Lindsey started in 1954 when we would meet in Percy Laidler's Shop in Bourke Street at 12 noon, later proceed to the Royal Hotel where we took over the bar entertaining all and sundry. Next stop was the Greek restaurant in Russell Street, before heading off to the Tivoli Theatre where for about 3/6d

we could climb to the topmost balcony (The Gods) where we witnessed the latest variety show to hit town.

This would seem to bear out my own recollections. I didn't get to go to the hotel, but I did get to go to *The Tivoli* where I remember the commissionaire who stood outside in the most magnificent uniform.



*Percy Laidler demonstrating a trick in the Play Shop
(from personal collection of Verity Burgmann)*

Perhaps I should explain my relationship with Percy. My Aunt Carol (known as Dolly) was my mother's sister and went to work at *Andrade's* in the 1920's. Her speciality was stage make up and false wigs (I remember yards of crepe hair). There she met Percy and for all the time I knew them while Percy was alive they lived together on the 3rd floor at 201 Bourke Street. I was somewhat surprised to learn just recently that they had actually married in 1947, as

I had always understood that they just lived together, which was considered rather risqué in those days. Percy had been married previously.

But my relationship with Percy was also strengthened by the fact that he was a great friend of my father and actually introduced my father to my mother. My father, his father, brother and sisters had migrated from Scotland where my research indicates they had lived in great poverty, so they were very interested in the sort of politics that Percy was espousing. Probably the two greatest influences in my life were my father and Uncle Percy. I loved and admired both of them dearly. Looking back they were both years ahead of their time and probably the most understanding, tolerant people I have ever known. As a child I was always encouraged to discuss, argue, debate and embrace change and new ideas - perhaps a bit unusual for a child in those times, especially a girl. They were both totally self educated and instilled in me a life long love of learning.

A quote from Ralph Gibson,

Percy regarded all men as human beings and quite a few underworld characters including Squizzy Taylor used to call into The Play Shop to learn card tricks. He was closely associated with the aborigines living in Fitzroy and had a sympathetic ear for workers born in other lands. Friend to all in need – women came to consult him about abortions, men about their troubles with the police and people looking for references or introductions to politicians.

During the 1950's Menzies attempted a purge of Communists, throwing them into jail. I know that Percy and Carol sheltered known communist members in their

living quarters. In fact I remember in 1953 when I had a leading role in a school play and was very keen for him to attend, Percy decided that it would not be good for me to be seen to be connected to him. It is hard to believe this today, but I think there was a lot of paranoia at the time.

Percy continued to be in great demand as a public speaker and always seemed to be giving the eulogy at someone's funeral. I remember him often standing at the top of the stairs and quoting great slabs of Shakespeare – especially the speech "*Friends Romans Countrymen*" from Julius Caesar.

An extract from Punch Magazine of 1909

Percy...is the best mob orator that has struck Melbourne for many years... Laidler is a very persuasive and powerful personality when addressing a mob.

Sadly Percy was giving an after dinner speech when he had a stroke in 1956 and that brilliant mind was never the same again. He died in 1958. My aunt never got over his death and lived another 20 years as a virtual recluse. On her death she left me the collection of Percy's books and papers.

This article is hosted on
www.solidarityforeverbook.com,
a website about the life and
times of Percy Laidler.