



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Bro. RONAL JACKSON. Opera Singer.

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On 2nd May 2002 one of the Australian Opera's leading baritones during the 1950s and 1970s, Ronal Jackson, died.

Ronald Francis Jackson, later to be known professionally as Ronal Jackson, was born in November 1920 at Bathurst in New South Wales into a musical family. His mother played the piano and two of the boys played violin and trombone. Ronal was a boy chorister at the Church of England and apparently his voice did not go through the usual breaking period but simply dropped into a baritone. He was educated at the Canterbury Boys High School with interests in natural science and dramatics. At the age of 16 he had a bout of osteomyelitis in his right arm which was cured after six months in hospital and a long convalescence.

On leaving school he went into the real estate business for a short time before joining the Army Medical Corps on the outbreak of World War 2. He had previously entertained thoughts of becoming a doctor but the illness with osteomyelitis had thwarted this. During the war he sang at Australian and American army concerts with the ABC Military and Dance Bands.

At the end of the war he studied singing at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music under Sir Eugene Goossens. 1948 saw him win the ABC Vocal and Concerto Competition and in 1949 he won the first Mobil Quest and also married Gwenda who was to be his wife for 52 years until his death in 2002. The M.C. at their wedding was Wor. Bro. James Brunton Gibb. In third place in the 1949 Mobil Quest was Joan Sutherland and it is also worth noting that the third Mobil Quest was won by another baritone named Noel Melvin.

With the prize money from the Mobil Quest Ronal and his wife went to London to join the Carla Rosa Opera Company touring the United Kingdom singing many leading operatic baritone roles. During this time he won the Richard Tauber Scholarship enabling him to go to Vienna to study at the Academy of Music for two years. While at the Academy of Music he took a short break to sing with Sir John Babirolli and a Covent Garden Company in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and London. While there he sang the role of Marcello in "La Boheme". In 1953 he joined the Welsh National Opera and the London Opera Company to sing the role of Nabucco. After this he was offered a contract with the Covent Garden Company but instead preferred to return to Vienna to join the Kiel and the Wuppertal Opera Companies. During this time he sang at many major centres including Hamburg, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Cologne and others. During ten years in Europe he increased his repertoire to include such operas as "The Marriage of Figaro", "Don Giovanni", "Rigoletto", "Falstaff", "Tosca", "Faust", "Pagliacci" singing most of the baritone roles. After ten years in Europe and because of a recurrent health problem, Ronal and his family returned to Australia in 1960 and he then joined the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, now Opera Australia, and sang in "La Traviata", "Il Pagliacci", "The Marriage of Figaro", "The Magic Flute", "Don Giovanni" and "Rigoletto".

He had now settled in Sydney and gave many performances in opera, concerts and television in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Perth. The Australian soprano Glenda Raymond particularly remembers his open air performances in Melbourne with her husband, Hector Crawford, in Music for the People and Opera for the People.

Ronal Jackson then sang in the early 1960s in ABC TV operas including "Samson and Delilah", "The Pearlfishers", "Madame Butterfly", "La Rondine" and "Tosca" which was to be his last opera. The Australian critic Roger Covell described his performance of Scarpia saying, "That Ronal Jackson's contribution to the Sydney production of "Tosca" must take its place among the finest operatic contributions given in this country." During this time he also sang in Brother Garnett Carrol's production of the musical, "The Most Happy Fella".

He then turned his attention to teaching and was appointed Principal of the Opera School at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music. At the age of 47 he took up the post as the foundation principal of the first official opera school at the NSW Conservatorium of Music on the invitation of Sir Bernard Heinze and Joseph Post, the director of the Conservatorium at the time. During his time as principal he won a Churchill Scholarship which enabled him to travel overseas and study opera schools.

While principal he staged many operas including "La Boheme", "Tales of Hoffman", "The Marriage of Figaro", "Madame Butterfly", "Carmen" and others. He also guided singers such as Yvonne Kenny, Amanda Thane and many others. Ronal Jackson also tutored Wor. Bro. Colin Gill, a well known member of the Masonic Ensemble.

Ronal Jackson retired as head of the Opera School at the State Conservatorium in 1980 and continued to direct operas. He took up farming, skied and played tennis regularly and continued to travel until his sudden death on 2nd May 2002. He was survived by his wife, Gwenda. two daughters and four granddaughters.

Ronald Francis Jackson joined Freemasonry on 3rd December 1947 in Lodge Harmony, No. 5 was passed to the Second Degree on 3rd March 1948 and raised on 7th April 1948. He called off on 16th October 1954 whilst overseas. Ronal Jackson then affiliated with Lodge Oxford, No. 85 on 14th February 1977 and called off on 21st July 1983. At the time of his death he was still a member of The Australia Lodge No. 6505, English Constitution.

Footnote: The Mobil Quest

The Mobil Quest was presented in Sydney from 1949 to 1957 and was designed to find the best singing voice in Australia. It was produced by Hector Crawford and sponsored by the Vacuum Oil Company The Mobil Quest was a very lavish and prestigious presentation with full orchestral accompaniment. All those on the show wore dinner jackets or full evening dress in all the heats and finals. The first prize was 1,000 pounds with further assistance if the winner travelled overseas. The first few winners were 1949: Ronal Jackson, 1950: Joan Sutherland, 1951: Noel Melvin and 1952: Donald Smith.

Ref: Eulogy by Bro. John Germain, Sydney Morning Herald.
Singers of Australia, Barbara and Fibdlay Mackenzie (1967).
Oxford Companion to Australian Music, Ed. Warren Bebbington (1997).
Out of the Bakelite Box, Jacqueline Kent (1983).
I am also grateful to Mrs Gwenda Jackson and Ms Tina Jackson, his wife and daughter respectively, for assistance and advice by telephone.

Ronal Jackson as the Troubadour in // *Trovatore*... always ready to give assistance to singers new to the profession.

