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***La Boite: The Story of an Australian Theatre Company.* By Christine Comans.**

Brisbane: Playlab Press, 2009. Pp. 352 + illus. \$55 Pb.

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Drawing on a comprehensive range of archival material and interviews, Christine Comans has produced an eminently readable account of one of Australia's most significant theatre companies, Brisbane's La Boite. From its beginnings as the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society (BRTS) to its most recent incarnation as a contemporary company devoted to producing exclusively Australian works, La Boite has been a major player in the development of Australian Theatre. Comans's book traces the vicissitudes in La Boite's fortunes over the last eighty or so years, providing evocative sketches of the personalities and events that have shaped the organization's artistic and political agenda along the way.

The book also functions as an index of how Australian society, and the city of Brisbane, dramatically transformed itself from having a somewhat insular colonial culture to being a self-assured, cosmopolitan city confident of its own creative abilities. La Boite has its roots in the British repertory movement, which positioned itself in opposition to the dominant commercial theatre that eschewed aesthetic merit in favour of profit. By contrast, the founders of the BRTS, Barbara Sisley and Professor J. J. Stable, made a major contribution to the cultural life of Brisbane in the period between the two world wars by choosing plays for their literary and pedagogical qualities. However, artistic innovation is not without its pitfalls as these stalwart promoters of theatrical excellence discovered in 1931 when they awarded their inaugural prize for Australian playwriting to George Landen Dann for his work *In Beauty It Is Finished*. Dann's play

generated considerable controversy for depicting a relationship between an Aboriginal man and a young white prostitute. Coman's archival research uncovers contemporary reviews and commentaries that are startling for their overt and endemic racism. The incident stands as a testament to the bravery of La Boite's founders, and their defiant spirit manifests throughout the company's subsequent history, which is characterized by a penchant for risk and innovation.

La Boite is perhaps best known for its unique Hale Street premises, Australia's first purpose-built two-hundred-seat theatre in the round. This iconic venue was the centre of the much-heralded Australian new wave in Brisbane, and hosted a long list of luminaries in the Australian theatre scene, including actors such as Barry Otto and Rowena Wallace. The company currently resides in the creative-arts department of the Queensland University of Technology, where it continues to function as a champion of new Australian theatre.

Supplemented by a variety of production stills, posters and 'mugshots', Coman's book makes a worthy addition to the existing literature on Australia's theatre history.