

MS ZOE CALDWELL

Born in Melbourne in 1933 and brought up in suburban Balwyn, Zoe Caldwell was blessed with parents who, from an early age, took her to see everything from vaudeville to opera and signed her up for classes in toe, tap and ballet, eurhythmics and callisthenics, musical appreciation and elocution. These skills formed the basis of a professional theatrical career that began with her appearance at the age of nine in *Peter Pan* at the Tivoli Theatre. By her teens, Caldwell was presenting an afternoon children's show on radio station 3DB. She left school at fifteen and made her living teaching speech and performing in radio serials.

It was on an amateur stage as an eighteen year old that Caldwell was seen by John Sumner, newly arrived from England to manage Melbourne University's Union Theatre Company (later to become Melbourne Theatre Company). She joined his inaugural ensemble in 1953, taking the title role in the Union Theatre Repertory Company's first production *Colombe*. The discipline and professionalism by which Caldwell has long been known was largely created in the forcing house of the system that Sumner imposed, with a new play and role every two weeks.

Caldwell then joined the newly formed Elizabethan Theatre Trust until, in 1958, she received a scholarship to travel to Britain to work at the Stratford Memorial Theatre. In 1962, she returned to Australia at the invitation of the Adelaide Festival to lead a company in Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Impressed by this performance, Patrick White approached her to play Nola Boyle in his new play *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, which she duly performed in Adelaide to enormous acclaim.

She was still in Australia in 1963 when Tyrone Guthrie, who had directed Caldwell in England, approached her from Minneapolis to help launch the regional theatre experiment that was to become the influential Tyrone Guthrie Theatre.

Her Broadway debut came in December 1965 when she briefly took over from Anne Bancroft in John Whiting's *The Devils*. The role of Polly in Tennessee Williams's *Slapstick Tragedy* followed and Caldwell won her first Tony Award for Best Featured Actress.

Her second Tony and Broadway stardom came in 1968 with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, produced by Robert Whitehead whom Caldwell had married that year. It proved to be a long, successful partnership, both privately and professionally.

Although known primarily as a performer, Caldwell has an impressive list of directorial credits on Broadway and elsewhere, including *Richard II* (Stratford, Ontario 1979), the acclaimed James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer in *Othello* (1981), and *Vita and Virginia* (New York, 1994) with Vanessa Redgrave and Eileen Atkins. She appeared regularly on television in the sixties and seventies when classic plays were routinely scheduled, including *Macbeth*, *The Apple Cart*, *The Lady's Not for Burning* and *The Seagull*. On film, she appeared in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*.

Among her many awards and distinctions, she received a OBE in 1970 for Services to the Theatre, the 1998 John Gielgud Award from the Shakespeare Guild and the Folger Library, and the 1998 Linda Wilson Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in the Theatre. She has worked as a teacher and director at many American universities and held the Eminent Scholar Chair at Florida State University, where she also taught.

One of the most distinguished actors Australia has produced, Zoe Caldwell has reached the pinnacle of her profession on three continents. In her years abroad, however, Zoe Caldwell has never lost her connection to Australia and Melbourne. In 1984, she returned here to open the Victorian Arts Centre with her Tony Award-winning portrayal of Medea. This year, she returns again on the occasion of MTC's Fiftieth Anniversary in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*.

