Speech given by Elisabeth Kumm at the launch of Viola Tait’s memoirs

Thank you everyone for joining us to celebrate the launch of Viola Tait’s memoirs, *I Have a Song to Sing*.

Viola began working on this book in the late 1960s, but the manuscript was filed away for almost forty years. It was following the publication of her pantomime book in 2001, when she asked me to help her with another book. Sadly, Viola died before the work on this new book was completed, but Sally and I set about finishing the task. Unfortunately this work was also set aside – until a year ago when I suggested it could be a relevant project for Theatre Heritage Australia. We had just completed the J.C. Williamson Scene Books project and were after something new to work on, and Viola’s memoirs was an ideal opportunity for the group.

When we contacted Isla, Ann and Sally they were delighted and almost a year later, here we are! And what an amazing Book and an amazing place to hold the launch! Thank you so much Sally and Lew for allowing the launch of this Book to be at your home.

I would like to thank some of the people who helped realising this Book about Viola’s incredible life – beginning with Isla, Ann and Sally, without your generous support, guidance and assistance, this book would not have been fully developed and published. Thank you so much.

Secondly, I would like to thank the core team from THA that progressed this Book, Simon Piening and Judy Leech, with whom I worked closely. Simon, who is also the President of THA, is gifted at layout and design, and has done a beautiful job on the graphics, preparing the images and setting out the pages. Judy has been editorial assistant on the project, she has been my “right hand’. Judy’s support has been
invaluable, helping with the sourcing of the images of which there are more than one hundred and seventy, an enormous task. Her keen eye for detail, both from a graphic and proofing perspective, has been priceless. I must also thank Peter Johnson, Mimi Colligan and Diana Burleigh, all THA Committee Members. Peter for his organisational skills, and Mimi and Diana, whose knowledge of the theatre has been critical to the accuracy of the Book. Mimi has the most amazing capacity for facts and knows so much about Australian theatre, while Diana is the go-to person for Gilbert & Sullivan. Thanks to you all.

Also, Frank Van Straten, theatre historian extraordinaire, who found time to read through the first draft of the manuscript and provide many important and needed corrections – at a time when he was immersed in the production of his own book on Her Majesty’s Theatre, which was launched last December. Frank’s book has proved so successful, that it’s heading for a second edition! Well done, Frank! Frank also added some gravitas by supplying a quotable quote for the back cover!!

I must also acknowledge Meredith Sherlock of Here’s Proof, who copy edited the 2001 text and helped to get this Book ready for publication, a thankless task that required great patience, care and precision. Meredith also assisted with the index.

Another person who I would like to acknowledge is Belinda Hayball, a graphic designer and friend of Viola’s, who provided the inspiration for the cover design.

There were many people who helped with the pictures. While most of the images were sourced from the Tait family archives, many also came from the Australian Performing Arts Collection at Arts Centre Melbourne, from the State Library of Victoria, and from the National Library in Canberra. Judy and I really enjoyed working with Claudia Funder from the Australian Performing Arts Collection, who has
been an enthusiastic supporter of the project. We hope to be able to work with Claudia on many future projects. Gerard Hayes from the State Library of Victoria has also been supportive in providing access to the Jean Stewart collection of photographs, something of a challenge as the collection has not yet been catalogued. Jean was an amateur photographer who captured images of many Gilbert & Sullivan productions in Melbourne during the 1940s.

Other people who have helped with images and scanning include Angus Forbes, Tony Knight, Jeremy Vinogradov, Raymond Walker, and my husband Mark O'Dwyer. Also, David Stone, a private collector of Gilbert & Sullivan in the United States, who kindly provided the cover image.

I would also like to thank Bambara Press for their patience and professionalism and for locally printing such a high quality Book for a very reasonable price.

Thanks also to Chris Redfern of the Avenue Bookshop for taking on the task of retailing the book. In addition, the Tait Memorial Trust, of which Isla is the Chairman, which has already launched the book in London at a special event at Australia House last December, who will sell the book in England.

Finally, I must thank the legendary Richard Bonynge, a great friend of Viola’s, who graciously agreed to write the preface and has provided some beautiful heart-felt words.

Last but not least, the biggest thanks of all must go to Viola. I am so proud to have been involved in this project and am delighted to launch this Book.

I would like to propose a toast to Viola and I Have a Song to Sing. So, if everyone charge their glasses as we give toast to … VIOLA, an amazing, talented and generous woman that many of us had the privilege of knowing!!