



IRA DENE BARNETT

1917-1997

Dene Barnett was born in Mittagong, New South Wales, on 18th July 1917 into a family of blacksmiths and craftsmen which traces its ancestry to a convict made good. As the boy's health was delicate, he was sent as a 6-year-old to live with a family in the Hunter Valley where food was so basic and shoes such a luxury that in later life Barnett made a fetish of food and footwear.

Dene rejoined his parents and younger brother Gordon in Sydney where their father had begun his long career with the NSW Railways Workshop. The boy's fragile health prevented regular schooling, so that he could not sit for the Intermediate Examination, nor did he attend university or gain any formal educational qualifications. After leaving school Barnett developed an interest in things electrical and in radio which led him in the early 1940s to the Postmaster General's Department which was then responsible for the broadcasting of ABC programs. In due course, as technician in charge of all broadcasts and recordings of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Barnett developed considerable expertise in acoustics, which led *inter alia* to his being consulted in the design of the Sydney Opera House. His work with the orchestra brought Barnett into close contact with Australian and visiting conductors and performers, a foretaste of things to come.

Also in the 1940s Barnett developed an interest in mathematical logic, corresponded with several American universities, read Bertrand Russell, and reviewed two of Russell's books for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Perhaps this is the origin of the story that when Russell visited Australia in 1950 one of the people he particularly wanted to meet was Dene Barnett.

Barnett's love of Baroque music developed while he was working with the ABC. He formed his own groups, tried to obtain original instruments or replicas, and by 1950 had acquired sufficient German to study relevant German texts concerned with the designing, crafting, and building of a harpsichord. With support from BHP for some costly research into the acoustics of piano wire, Dene Barnett then built the first ever harpsichord manufactured in Australia. As leader of the Elizabethan Players of Sydney Barnett performed and recorded baroque music played in the original style with original instruments. Some of these recordings are now with the National Film and Sound Archive.

But Barnett did not neglect his philosophical interests. In 1967 he spent a

year as a temporary lecturer in New Zealand and on his return joined the Philosophy department at the newly founded Flinders University of South Australia where he remained, a somewhat solitary traditionalist among a group of more revolutionary colleagues, until his retirement.

In 1968 Barnett began working on the project which was to bring him international recognition: Acting techniques used in 18th-century tragedy and serious opera, based entirely on contemporaneous sources. For the next twelve years he scoured some forty European and American libraries and archives, establishing an exhaustive bibliography of primary sources. The first fruits of this research appeared on the stage of the 1972 Adelaide Festival of Arts with an 'authentic' production of Rameau's *Pygmalion*. This was followed by performances at Versailles, Covent Garden, The Royal Theatre at The Hague, the Castle Hill Festival at Boston, USA, and the Schola Cantorum in Basel, besides other major venues in Britain, Europe, America and Australia. These performances have been widely praised as authentic revivals of original productions of baroque opera in the original style, with period instruments or replicas. Barnett himself trained the performers in appropriate techniques of movement and gestures.

The result of these prodigious labours was his *magnum opus*, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting*, a richly illustrated and fully documented volume of over 500 pages, published in 1987 by Carl Winter Universitätsverlag in Heidelberg. On many occasions I remember being summoned to the telephone to unravel some intricate German instruction about the movements of fingers or hands or feet in a moment of dramatic terror or welcome. The book was hailed by experts in many countries as 'a revolutionary account of 18th-century acting' and as 'a truly seminal piece of research'.

There followed further work in philosophy, including Barnett's substantial contribution to *The Collected Works of S. Lesniewski* (1991), and resumed research into classical and post-classical rhetoric which grew out of Part VI, 'The Connection Between Word and Gesture', of *The Art of Gesture*. On this work he was engaged at the time of his death on 11 October 1997 in Adelaide. His final year was clouded by cancer and increasing dementia. Dene Barnett never married, nor did he ever register as a voter apparently, although he volunteered for service during the Second World War but was rejected as being in a Reserved Occupation despite being found medically fit.

Dene was a very private person, a man of somewhat unorthodox manners and of fastidious taste in dress, speech, and personal deportment. He strongly disliked untidy students (and, for that matter, colleagues). His brother Gordon remembers Dene taking him and his wife to a high class restaurant in Adelaide and being left for half the meal while Dene talked to a woman at the next table. On a similar occasion my wife and I were invited

by Dene for dinner at a restaurant, from which he departed leaving us to pay the bill. I also recall his wholehearted approval at being refused admission to a well-known Adelaide club because he was not wearing a tie. His gesture of approbation remains unforgettable.

Dene Barnett was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Academy in 1992.

Ralph Elliott