

Tija Savickis (1919-1993)

Singing teacher & Musical Theatre Producer

Talk by Jan Hunter (also published in A&DHS Bulletin Number 507, October 2010)

Tija Savickis was born in Riga, Latvia. She trained as a pianist and singer, but singing was her great love. She was educated at Riga Conservatorium and Freiburg University in Germany. In the aftermath of WWII Tija and her husband Donats (1911-1982) were classified as displaced persons and migrated to Australia in 1949.

They were at Bonegilla Migrant Centre briefly before shifting into Albury to live. Madame Savickis began teaching voice production from a small room at St David's Church in Olive Street. The minister's wife there, Mrs Armour, was a patron of the arts and took Tija under her wing. By the end of 1950 Tija had enough pupils to put on a concert.

Madame Tija Savickis was a dynamo. Her energy and productivity was amazing. Her manner was emotional and dramatic – she was a theatre in herself. While she could reduce students to tears with her outbursts Tija also engendered loyalty and affection, and she encouraged and cajoled her students to perform beyond their aspirations. She used to say "With my method, you will be able to sing until you die." And that is true.

Her first adult production was "The Bat" in 1952. In the starring roles were Pete Garnsey and Jeanette Crimmens. Those two were among Tija's first pupils as were Noel and Meryl Stephens. John Davis also featured in most of the 1950s productions.

"The Bat" was put on under the auspices of The Savickis Studio Theatre Group and consisted of Tija's pupils only. However, by 1958 two short works by Menotti were produced under the banner of The Tija Savickis Opera School. We are not really sure why there were various name changes to what was essentially the same group.

A mezzo soprano herself, Madame Savickis performed in Albury in 1953 at St Matthew's Church. Dr Favaloro was the violinist and Dr Hogan played the clarinet. She also performed on the wider stage. In 1954 she sang at Australia's earliest church, St James in Sydney. This concert was reported in the *Border Morning Mail (BMM)* but also the Latvian language paper in Australia.

It is interesting to note that the early references to Tija Savickis in the *BMM* refer to her as a "New Australian," or say that she came "from Latvia." Looking back, we see that Albury was coming to grips with the in-flux of people from other countries and in those early years of the Bonegilla Migrant Centre, the occupants stood out from the single culture that was Albury.

Tija Savickis was known as Madame Savickis. The story goes that Mrs Savickis was a bit hard for pupils to say and one of them suggested they call her Madame. That stuck and Madame Savickis it was from then on. Although many of her students called her "Mrs S," "Madame" features in programmes and write ups.

In the mid-1950s Donat and Tija built a house at 479 Thurgoona Street overlooking the Botanic Gardens. This was a very contemporary house with artistic features throughout by Donat. There is a Latvian star on the front gate and the name "Klints" meaning "crag" or "cliff." This home was perfect for dinner parties. Tija loved to cook and entertain friends. Dr Savickis was a GP in Europe but rather than training again in Australia he practiced

homeopathy and iridology from a home office with separate door, as well as keeping up his considerable interest in painting. In 1956 Tija and Donat applied for naturalization.

TIJA SAVICKIS MUSIC ACADEMY
PRESENTS
"Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs"
Civic Theatre, Albury
FRIDAY, 19th OCTOBER, 1973
at 8 p.m.
SATURDAY, 20th OCTOBER, 1973
at 2 p.m.
ADULTS: \$2.00 CHILDREN: \$1.00
BOOKINGS AT BLAKE'S NEWSAGENCY, FROM 24th SEPTEMBER, 1973

TIJA SAVICKIS MUSIC ACADEMY
Opera Cabaret
"THE CEDAR"
SATURDAY, 22nd JUNE, 1974
at 8.00 p.m.
DINNER COSTUME CABARET — PRIZES DOUBLE: \$12.00 SINGLE: \$6.00

TIJA SAVICKIS MUSIC ACADEMY
PRESENTS
"Cinderella"
Civic Theatre, Albury
Friday, 11th October, 1974 — at 8.00 p.m.
Saturday, 12th October, 1974: Morning at 11 a.m., Matinee 3 p.m.
ADULTS: \$2.50 CHILDREN: \$1.30
BOOKINGS AT BLAKE'S NEWSAGENCY FROM 16th SEPTEMBER, 1974

TIJA SAVICKIS MUSIC ACADEMY
Presents
"The Sound of Music"
(By permission of Chappell & Co. Australia Pty. Ltd.)
Civic Theatre, Albury — 1979
Wednesday 21st November, Thursday 22nd, Friday 23rd
— at 8.00 p.m.
Saturday, 24th November, 8.00 p.m. — and Matinee 2.00 p.m.
ADULTS \$4.80 CHILDREN \$2.50
BOOKINGS AT BLAKE'S NEWSAGENCY

TIJA SAVICKIS
M-me Tija Savickis
COACHING, VOICE PRODUCTION,
LIEDER, OPERA, RADIO, T.V.
STUDIOS:
479 THURGOONA ST., ALBURY PHONE: 1793
24 COLLINS ST., MELBOURNE PHONE 63-9784

Musical theatre productions continued one after the other. The 1950s ended with "Oklahoma" and its very large cast. The 1960s began with "Showboat" and there was a farewell concert by John Davis – the first of the Savickis students to study overseas.

In 1961, the annual Studio Quests began. These public concerts were an eisteddfod for Tija's pupils. Included in the programme would be a performance by the Savickis Children's Theatre. An out-of-town adjudicator would give critiques. No doubt a long night! In 1962, the guest adjudicator was Miss Dorothy Penfold, a well-known musical presence from Melbourne.

The ever-energetic Mme Savickis began teaching advanced singing in Melbourne; pupils were competing and winning in eisteddfods in Albury, Wagga, Ballarat and Wangaratta.

By 1963 the Opera School was performing in Melbourne and Albury and the Studio Quest was also put on in Melbourne. By 1963 Madame had a presence in Wagga and a Melbourne Studio committee.

Tija herself had performed in four Australian capital cities by this time, and she, and various pupils had been on ABC radio.

Productions such as "The Boy Friend," "South Pacific" and the children's theatre presentation of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" were first performed in the 1960s and again in the 1970s.

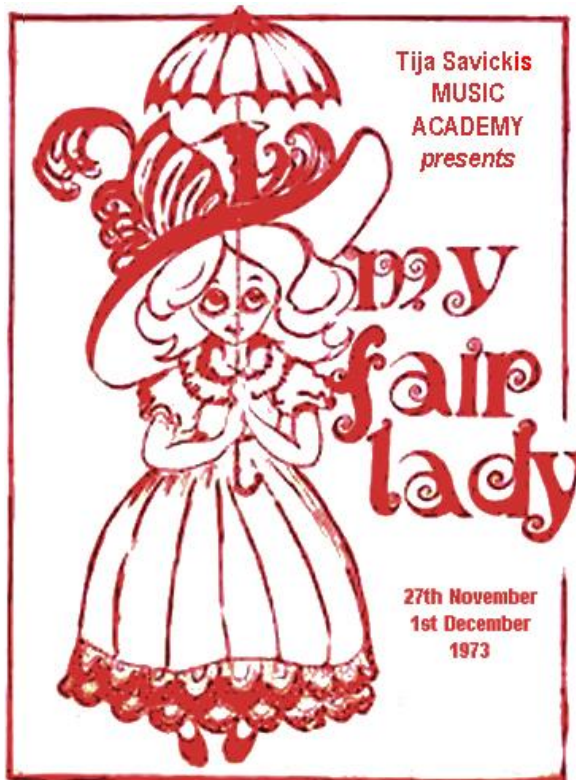
Mrs S was dauntless in her efforts to improve the quality of her productions. She had an astute business sense and cultivated the right people. The Mayor, Cleaver Bunton was the patron of the Studio and she was relentless in her pursuit of publicity – all with the aim of getting the public to buy tickets for the musicals so that they could continue. In the 1950s particularly, Tija 'raided' Bonegilla Migrant Camp for people with theatre, or music experience. Later, for the first

performances of "South Pacific" real soldiers from Bandiana were co-opted into the production. Over the years Tija issued press releases to keep her name in the public eye.

Popular light operas like "Annie Get your Gun," "Brigadoon" and "Sound of Music" continued to be rolled out, with the Children's Theatre also performing twice a year. A highlight was the 1965 production of "The Desert Song" which had a cast of 85 and ran for six nights.

By 1968 financing the productions became a problem. Profits in the past had gone to the Scouts, Freedom from Hunger and the proceeds of the “Merry Widow” performance in Lockhart went to the Lockhart Hospital. The opera school was one of the first donors to the fund for a new Albury concert hall. For three years Tija sponsored a prize for a Modern Opera Aria at the South Street Eisteddfod at Ballarat.

As one can imagine, this relentless round of performances was hard going. So much behind the scenes work! Mrs Savickis was listed in programmes as the publicity director, the producer, and director. But others were needed as well. Permission had to be obtained from the owners of the copyright to the music; bookings needed to be made a year ahead; letters went to and fro about the scores, etc. Mrs Eileen Rodgers’ name began to appear on the programmes, not only as a performer, but as the secretary – honorary of course. As well, venues had to be paid for ahead of time and places found for rehearsals. Over the years the halls at St David’s and St Patrick’s and Albury Public School halls and of course, private homes. Pam Parry and her ballet students were called upon regularly, as were other ballet schools.



Musicians needed to be found. This was often difficult. In the late 1950s, I was the pianist for “The Student Prince” starring Pete Garnsey. Frankly it was beyond my abilities, but Mrs S, persevered. It was an enormous strain. One night, at the Savickis home, I burst into tears with tiredness. I couldn’t go on. Dr Savickis took me aside and quietly administered some drops. ‘Bach Rescue Remedy’ I suppose, and I did go on. When I mentioned this to a few people, they nodded in agreement. It’s a wonder we all didn’t have nervous breakdowns. While the big productions were only produced in Albury, concerts were performed around the district – Cobram, Walla, Holbrook etc.

Tija’s first singing teacher in Latvia was a disaster. Tija ended up with nodules on her vocal chords. She looked back at her study at the Freiberg University and wrote “a new

beginning.” Although popularly known as a singing teacher, Tija really taught voice production. She thought that non singers in the public eye needed voice production lessons so that they would not damage their vocal capabilities.

Her methods of teaching, which included a belt pulled tight around the waist, emphasized the voice coming from the front of the mouth. This was in contrast to most other teachers who emphasized the role of the throat. It was a case of ‘never the twain should meet’ and rivalry about methods never ceased. Of course, the students of these different methods met regularly to compete against each other at the eisteddfods! There were several firsts in the seventies. The production of “Fiddler on the Roof” in Albury is thought to have been the first time it was performed outside a metropolitan area.

Another first was Tija in an Army Dukw in 1974, guiding soldiers through the flood waters and tiger snakes. This expedition was to rescue the sets of the Opera School from a threatened building on the banks of the flooded river near Wodonga. Over the years these sets were made by voluntary local talent and included a revolving stage. Also part of the volunteers for many years was Mrs Amelia Brinkis who made costumes for many of the Academy productions. Students had to organise their own costumes, buying material from the Bruck Mills in Wangaratta and making them up themselves, or getting help from Mrs Brinkis. Eventually Mrs Brinkis was given some remuneration and when a minor rebellion took place among the students, they were compensated for their costumes by being given their scores, or perhaps a few free lessons. Others in the area helped out with sewing on occasions, including Neil Giovanetti. The shows ran because people volunteered their time and talents because they enjoyed singing and performing for Albury audiences.

By 1980 The Tija Savickis Singing and Drama Academy had produced a staggering 52 productions in 30 years.

However, attendance at the musical shows waned in the 1980s. Some have suggested that the rise of clubs gave people a different sort of entertainment. Whatever the reason, the big productions were over, so The Savickis Opera School changed tack. A series of light hearted events in the clubs and other venues began, including the "Old Tyme Music Hall" at the Albury Golf Club. This production, complete with dinner, celebrated 35 years of teaching and musical production by Madame Savickis in Albury and district. Other venues were the Commercial and SS&A Clubs.



Madame Tija Savickis.
Photo taken in Albury in 1990,
three years before her death.

The last production of the Savickis Opera School was in 1986. It was "Kittiwake Island," an experimental modern musical and was held at the Wodonga Civic Theatre.

Over the next years Tija travelled. She gave Master Classes at Stuttgart University. In 1988 she was invited to give Master Classes in London, Paris and Los Angeles. By the early 1990s, Tija's health had deteriorated and she died in 1993 with two of her long term students and good friends with her.

In 2000, International Women's Day was celebrated in Albury with a luncheon and exhibition of memorabilia and costumes made by Mrs Brinkis. It was a fitting occasion honouring a woman who had made a huge contribution to music in Albury. We end our story of Tija Savickis with her own words ... "There is not a more beautiful instrument in the world than the human voice. With singing we can give people words, [and] beauty of sound to help them to forget every day's sorrow."