

TV's first lady grabbed chance

Producing, presenting — and placating Eartha Kitt — were among the many talents of the 'first lady' of WA television.



Before television erupted in all its glorious opportunity, Coralie Condon was a ledger processor working for the Federal Government. She'd had some theatre experience and foresaw that television could have something to offer her. To make the most of her chances, she headed to Sydney, to stay with her actor brother, James, and seek work in the fledgling industry there.

After all, she realised, rightly, experience in the medium was not exactly thick on the ground in Perth and anyone who knew which end of the camera to look at had a head start.

She snagged three weeks work writing a children's pirate show and did some guest appearances on shows in Sydney, before heading back to Perth.

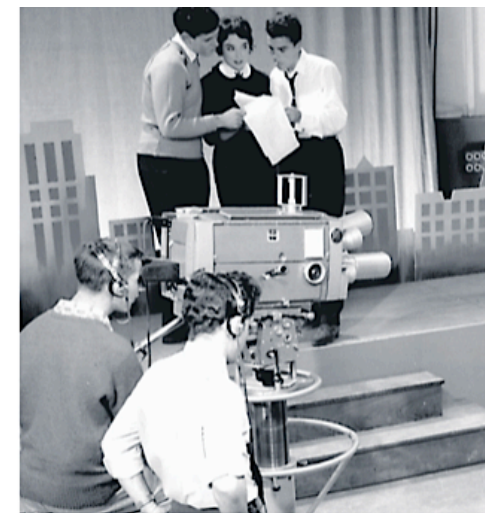
"I was walking down St Georges Terrace one day when I ran into Brian Treasure," she said. "You know a bit about TV don't you," he asked her, and naturally she assured him she was a full bottle. And so she became the first woman to appear on TV in WA.

"I was a dogsbody," the 94-year-old says cheerfully at her home in South Perth. "When I first walked into the place there were gaps in the floor." She stayed for 10 years, seven of them in a permanent capacity and in a variety of roles, earning herself the title "the first lady of WA television".

With Beverley Gledhill, Lloyd Lawson and Penny Hoes, she helped select the first on-air staff for the channel and later hosted the afternoon series *Televisit*, a women's program. She also produced programs for children and women and also nightly variety programs.

One of her projects, however, combined television with that other great love of her life, theatre.

In 1958 she had written a musical comedy called *The Good Oil* — inspired by the discovery of oil in WA in 1953 and the unfounded excitement that it would lead



the country to untold riches — which was performed at the Playhouse. In 1962, she produced it for television, filmed live at Channel 7, with Jill Perryman in the lead and Perryman's husband Kevan Johnstone the choreographer and male lead. The director was Max Bostock, another legend in the early days of Channel 7.

"It was well received," Ms Condon said modestly.

She had assumed that, like many other relics of the past, the original score had been lost or destroyed. But happily, it has turned up and now is back in her possession, perhaps with a chance of being reproduced in the future.

Throughout her television days, she maintained contact with the theatre, eventually succumbing to an offer by Frank Baden-Powell to join her in opening first *The Old Time Music Hall* and later the *Civic Theatre* restaurant (later *Diamond Lil's* and then the *Island Trader*). In 1970 they opened *Dirty Dick's Elizabethan Room*.

This lifelong devotion to performance in all its forms she puts down to her Irish background, on both sides. Her mother and aunt sang semi-professionally and she had an uncle, she said archly, who was devoted to good e-l-o-c-u-t-i-o-n.

One of her favourite memories illustrates how far TV in Perth still had to travel. She happened to be at the channel one Saturday and ran into a somewhat frazzled news editor Darcy Farrell.

'Eartha's temperature started to heat up and Coralie kept her occupied while we scouted around for someone to help out ... Eartha eventually blossomed into her famous smile ...' Darcy Farrell
