

Taking Australia's Oldest Theatre into the Twentyfirst Century

D. C. IRVING

For Australians, restoration of theatres is not a frequent occurrence, and restoration of old theatres is even rarer, due to the lack of such buildings still extant, with the notable exception of Her Majesty's Theatre Perth which was fully restored some years ago. The topic of this piece is another, older and smaller theatre which is the oldest in Australia, being foundation stoned in late 1834, and in which the first public performance was March 1837. This is the Theatre Royal Hobart, a building of great interest to theatre building historians as it has undergone numerous re-constructions and changes in its 150 years, reaching its present auditorium form in 1911/12 from a redesign by William Pitt of Melbourne, followed by re-furbishment and the addition of 4 boxes in 1952 by Yuncken Freeman Architects, and later, a workshop/dressing room/office block was added behind the main stage rear wall.

These changes were all to the good, but the stage house remained constructed of stone walls, covered by a wooden truss supported hipped roof which allowed only

limited flying by unassisted maritime techniques, using snatch blocks tied to handy beams between trusses. The fire curtain when raised, nearly touched the inside of the roof cladding and even then its installation at some unknown date had necessitated a rather ugly rigid infill to the top of the nearly square proscenium. The added problems of restricted wing space bounded by historic bluestone walls and stage access from the rear only, produced a continual mumbling about bringing the stage more in line with other theatres, to facilitate touring as well as local productions.

Funds were allocated to the redecoration of the house in time for the 150th anniversary, but not for any improvement to technical areas. Whether or not the resident ghost had a hand in it or not will never be known, but on 18th June 1984 a fire started in the stage area of the empty theatre which quickly burned out the whole centre section of the building, causing smoke and heat damage to the newly painted auditorium before the fire curtain came in. Insurance companies and bureaucratic systems moved

fast—a temporary corrugated iron wall filled in the proscenium, more galvanised sheeting at truss lower chord level kept the weather off the gutted stage, and the painters and upholsterers brought back to re-do the auditorium. But, what of the vital stage area? A harder problem this, the subject of several visits and reports by various persons (this scribe included) and much debate over briefs, requirements and of course, funding.

Happily, although a special appeal contributed reasonably, Government funding eventually ensured the continued existence of the building, and, with the architects, Forward Consultants of Hobart we were retained to advise on the modernized stage and associated works. As can be seen from the photograph, the area was not left in a good state, hence the whole roof, gallery system and floor had to be replaced. It was therefore decided to incorporate a grid at 16m above stage with working height above, and a single purchase counterweight system. To achieve maximum usable wing space, without being able (or even wanting)

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