Australia’s Oldest Theatre

The Hobart Theatre Royal

Hobart’s Theatre Royal is Australia’s oldest working theatre and among the most respected. Noel Coward called it “a dream of a theatre”, Sir Laurence Olivier said its acoustics were perfect and Dame Sybil Thorndike rated it as the finest theatre she had played outside of London. Ruth Cracknell, Barry Humphries, Marcel Marceau, Michael Redgrave, Hugo Weaving and recently Cate Blanchett have all performed at the Royal. Yet its history has been chequered and it is only by good fortune and the determination of its supporters that it has survived the ravages of time.

The Story of the oldest theatre in Australia begins on the 4 April 1834. Amid calls that Hobart was too small and too poor to justify a theatre, a group of the colony’s leading citizens met to establish one. After careful planning by Peter Degraves, founder of Hobart’s Cascade Brewery, and colonial architect John Lee Archer, the first stone was laid later in the same year.

Unfortunately, the land they had bought for £280 was in the dock-side suburb of Wapping. Built near an abattoir, a soap factory, tanneries and the refuse and offal-choked Hobart Rivulet, the area must have literally reeked. The locals were not much better; poor workers, criminals and prostitutes crowded into Wapping, and were regularly visited by sailors on leave. With little to recommend the site other than availability and price, it hardly seemed the location for a grand theatre!

The economic downturn of the late 1830s very nearly brought construction to a halt as shareholders withdrew their funds. One of the few left was Degraves, who effectively took over ownership of the theatre and ensured its completion.

The theatre held its first public meeting even before it was completed, when it hosted a retirement meeting for the lieutenant governor, Colonel Kenneth Snodgrass, in January 1837. Officially, it opened in March, giving performances of Speed the Plough and the Spoiled Child, lit by whale oil lamps. In June it was grandly named the Royal Victoria Theatre to celebrate the coronation of the new Queen.

Originally, the theatre had three entries. The grand main entrance was for the gentry, while the rank and file entered via a door off a laneway that runs parallel with the theatre’s west wall. A third entrance was through a public house, built into the basement of the theatre, through which theatre-goers were able to access directly the cheap seats, the pit. Though the name above the door was ‘The Shakespeare’, it was referred by one and all as ‘The Shades’. Rowdy, drunken behaviour was a common practice.

An actor’s-eye view of the interior of the Hobart Theatre Royal. Photo courtesy of Theatre Royal.
source of irritation to theatre patrons until The Shades was closed. Perhaps it is not surprising that given such a dubious reputation, plays and concert productions were more usually staged in the town hall!

In the 1850s a gallery was added to increase the audience capacity of the theatre, now known as the Theatre Royal. However, this did not appreciably increase the number of bookings for performances. During this period, the theatre hosted almost as many cockfights, boxing matches, concerts, religious meetings and political rallies as comedies and dramas.

On Degraves’ death in 1883, the theatre was sold to Richard Lewis for £3222. The new owner set the tone for the next 40 years or so, remodelling the theatre to improve conditions for actors and patrons and to meet changing fashion. When it was sold again, it was closed for a year while the stage was rebuilt and extended, and an orchestra pit added. The most extensive modifications were started in 1911. Tiers were added, front entrance enlarged, the side entrance closed and the theatre was ornately decorated with red velvet upholstery, paintings and a beautiful crystal chandelier.

This continual remodelling was unable to fend off the effects of time. The low point came in the 1940s. Though externally the theatre still looked impressive enough, performers had to be careful not to trip in the holes in the rotting stage, and had to change in dressing rooms that were cramped, unheated, and crawling with cockroaches. The old and dangerous wiring raised the threat of fire; with no fire escapes, a blaze would have been disastrous. Unsurprisingly, the end of Theatre Royal seemed imminent. During the height of the war it was suggested that the theatre be turned into a wool store; in the post-war rush for modernity, plans were made to demolish it altogether.

The theatre’s salvation came in 1948, when the Old Vic Company gave a performance of The School for Scandal as part of its Australia and New Zealand tour. The stars, Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were enchanted by the gently decaying theatre. On the opening night curtain call, Oliver lent his considerable kudos to the theatre’s fight for survival.

We appreciate playing in it not only because it is a beautiful little theatre; it is more than that. Your parents and grandparents have sat here as audience. Our parents have acted on this stage. In the one hundred and eleven years it has been played in it has built up atmosphere and the secret of atmosphere is antiquity. Don’t let it go.

Olivier’s appeal to people of Tasmania worked. The state government purchased the theatre for £12,000 and promised to fund its restoration if an equal amount was raised by the National Theatre and Fine Arts Society. Fred, the Theatre Royal’s resident ghost, was used as a mascot for the restoration appeal.

The theatre was promised a highpoint when Princess Elizabeth announced that she would attend a performance in 1952. The renovations, including the hasty construction of Royal boxes, were completed on time but were never used for the intended purpose. King George VI died while Princess Elizabeth was in Kenya, and she cut her tour short to return to England.

In spite of this, Hobart now owned a splendid theatre that hosted world ranking performances and attracted impressive audiences. When a fire destroyed the stage and the front of the auditorium in 1984, another public appeal raised $1 million, and the theatre was fully restored in 1986.

The Theatre Royal is a rare example of a colonial building that continues to act the part for which it was originally cast. Its 175-year history of continued remodelling has left it a patchwork of old and new. Convict-carved sandstone lies alongside utilitarian 1970s metalwork and brick. The modern stage and red velvet seats rest above the remains of The Shades, smelling of earth, moisture and stone. A portrait of Wagner, dating from the 1911 renovations, which somehow fell into the royal box during the 1984 fire and was left completely intact, now looks over visitors entering the foyer. Without doubt it will continue to do so for many years to come.

Tours of the theatre are conducted by the Friends of the Theatre Royal each Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Phone 03 6233 2026. Thanks to Greg Clarke for his assistance with this article.