



# Inside and Out: The Sydney Opera House

I think it's a real shame because here you had an opportunity for a beautifully purpose built opera building that could aspire to a real height of performance expectation and perfection [...] and it was compromised.

*James Payne*<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter I focussed on the experiences of performers working at the Belvoir Street Theatre, considering how performers inhabit Belvoir and how the very poverty of the working conditions there have contributed significantly to what it means to be an actor at Belvoir. Likewise, I argued that the difference in conditions between the Upstairs and Downstairs theatres is a factor in the way performers understand their position within the larger field of theatrical performance. Through the previous chapter I argued that performers' identities *as performers* are formed through their more or less habitual inhabitational practices, their various embodied interactions with the specific places in which they make performance.

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<sup>1</sup> James Payne, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 11 February 2003.

In this chapter I present a case study of the design, construction, and subsequent inhabitation of the Sydney Opera House (SOH), examining practitioners' experiences within this most iconic of performing arts centres.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, rather than being the antithesis of Belvoir Street, the SOH has much in common with it. Both buildings are beset by inadequacies that necessitate significant compromise and adaptation amongst the range of practitioners who make use of them. The primary difference between them is the internationally iconic status of the SOH and the way it has been discursively positioned as a paradigmatic representation of Australia's cultural sophistication. Observing the profound impact of the SOH's idiosyncratic internal environment on practitioners, in this chapter I argue that the presence of fundamental inadequacies in a structure as symbolically potent as the SOH is evidence of a prevailing attitude of *ambivalence* amongst Australians towards theatre practitioners and the performing arts. Furthermore, I argue that practitioners' somewhat paradoxical expressions of both fondness and dislike for the SOH are evidence of the degree to which they habitually adapt to, and accommodate, the backstage working conditions they encounter.

My use of the term 'practitioner' in these opening paragraphs is intentional. In the previous chapters I have dealt almost exclusively with performers' experiences in backstage spaces. In this chapter, I broaden that focus to include aspects of technical practitioners' experiences as well. This reflects the degree of contact I had with technical practitioners during the fieldwork I carried out at the SOH as well as providing a greater sense of the extent to which technical practitioners share many of the same conditions that performers endure. In this chapter I first underline the importance of the SOH in Australia's cultural development before discussing the fraught conditions under which the SOH was designed and constructed. I subsequently utilise Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* and Marvin Carlson's concept of 'haunting' to understand how the building's past might continue to impact upon the work of practitioners today. Following this I examine three key areas of practitioner experience; firstly, the contrast between the exterior and the interior of the SOH; next, practitioners' concern over blurred boundaries and the territorial practices

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<sup>2</sup> For my documentation of the Sydney Opera House, including photographic images and building plans, see chap. 3, p. 95.

they engage in; and finally, I describe the need for practitioners working at the SOH to adapt and compromise in order to make the building function.

By any reckoning, the SOH is one of the foremost architectural icons of the twentieth century and one of the busiest performing arts centres in the world. On average, 1,459 performances take place each year in the SOH's six internal performance spaces.<sup>3</sup> As a tourist attraction, over four million people visit the SOH annually, with just over a million annually attending performances.<sup>4</sup> During the 2004/2005 financial year, over 200,000 people took part in paid guided tours of the SOH site. These guided tours now form the second largest source of the Sydney Opera House Trust's (SOHT) commercial revenue.<sup>5</sup> As a work of modernist architecture, the striking appearance of the SOH's rising white shells and heavy podium on Sydney's Bennelong Point are able to generate a palpable sense of excitement amongst those who visit it: "[I]t is breathtaking in the most literal sense of the word, a physical shock, like being pushed in the chest."<sup>6</sup> Architect Jørn Utzon has frequently been complimented on the unique suitability of the SOH to the topography of its harbour-side site. Architectural critic Phillip Drew described it as "a building equipped to express its very site."<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Jørn Utzon was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize for his design work. The citation from the Jury stated in part:

There is no doubt that the Sydney Opera House is his masterpiece. It is one of the great iconic buildings of the twentieth century, an image of great beauty that has become known throughout the world – a symbol for not only a city, but a whole country and a continent.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As listed in chap. 3, these are the Concert Hall, Opera Theatre, Drama Theatre, Playhouse, The Studio and the newly renovated and renamed 'Utzon Room' (the former Reception Hall). Performances are also held in the external space of the Opera House Forecourt. In addition to public performances the SOH also houses a variety of conferences and other corporate and private functions.

<sup>4</sup> Sydney Opera House Trust, "From Inspiration to Execution: Sydney Opera House Trust Annual Report 2005" (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 2005), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 25. The Sydney Opera House Trust is a body formed in 1961 to manage the Sydney Opera House. It is charged with "the administration, care, control, management and maintenance of the Opera House" and "the management and administration of the Sydney Opera House as a theatre, concert hall and place of assembly to be used as a place for the presentation of any of the branches of the musical, operatic, dramatic, terpsichorean, visual or auditory arts or as a meeting place in respect of matters of international, national or local significance." *Sydney Opera House Trust Act 1961* (NSW) [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol\\_act/sohta1961313/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/sohta1961313/) (accessed 14 November 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Apthorp, "Facing up to the Past," *Opera*, July 2002, 794.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Drew, *Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 24.

<sup>8</sup> "Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate 2003 - Jørn Utzon," *The Pritzker Architecture Prize*, The Hyatt Foundation, 2003, <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/main.htm> (accessed 23 June 2003).

As a symbol, the SOH not only represents Sydney and Australia, but also is symbolic of the profound changes that took place in Australian society following the end of World War Two. Large performing arts centres are most often understood as “symbolic statement[s] of the importance of the arts to the community,”<sup>9</sup> and in the immediate post-war period, the desire to provide Sydney with an ‘Opera House’ was popularly perceived as a spur to Australian creativity. John Joseph Cahill, former premier of New South Wales and the prime political instigator of the SOH, stated that he wished to provide “an Opera House in which the best singers, actors and dancers might aspire to perform.”<sup>10</sup> Philip Drew quotes a letter writer to an Australian newspaper in the 1950s who regarded the planned SOH as “an immortal piece of architecture to arouse the latent talent of Australian people.”<sup>11</sup> The programme issued to commemorate the commencement of the SOH’s construction likewise contains descriptions of the planned complex by various high profile political and cultural figures as, “a symbol that our cultural thought is keeping pace with national expansion,” as “essential to the State’s cultural growth,” and as “a great step forward in the cultural development of Australia.”<sup>12</sup> From its inception the SOH has been discursively implicated in the development of Australia’s cultural identity.

At the same time that the proposal to build an ‘Opera House’ gathered momentum, government subsidy for the performing arts in Australia began.<sup>13</sup> The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT), established in 1954, was Australia’s first public

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<sup>9</sup> Harold R. Snedcof, *Cultural Facilities in Mixed-Use Development* (Washington D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1985), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Emerson Curtis, *A Vision Takes Form: A Graphic Record of the Building of the Sydney Opera House During Stages One and Two* (Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1967), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Drew, *The Masterpiece: Jørn Utzon: A Secret Life* (South Yarra: Hardie Grant Books, 1999), 143.

<sup>12</sup> New South Wales Premier's Dept., *Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, Sydney, 2nd March, 1959* (Sydney: Govt. Pr., 1959). The first quote is by Davis Hughes, then leader of the NSW Country Party, who in 1966, as NSW Minister for Public Works, oversaw Utzon’s resignation as architect and departure from the project. The second is by Charles Moses, then General Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. The third is by soprano Gladys Moncrieff.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Fotheringham writes that the decision to build an ‘opera house’ was “taken by the New South Wales state government independently of, but simultaneously with, the beginnings of the formalisation of federal government arts patronage.” Fotheringham, “Boundary Riders and Claim Jumpers: The Australian Theatre Industry,” 21.

funding body for the performing arts.<sup>14</sup> Aiming to counter an underlying ‘cultural cringe’, a national perception that Australian culture was inferior to that of Britain and Europe, the AETT was responsible for establishing arts training institutions, providing funding for Australian theatrical productions and founding national ballet and opera companies.<sup>15</sup> The very idea of a landmark performing arts venue for Sydney therefore arose out of a more general post-war desire for the greater development of ‘native’ Australian culture. Recently, in announcing the addition of the SOH to the National Heritage List, the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator Ian Campbell, reiterated the dominant understanding that the SOH’s construction “marked the end of Australia’s cultural cringe and put us on the world stage, revealing a confidence in the international standing of our own heritage and culture.”<sup>16</sup> Given the widespread understanding of the SOH as symbolically important to the development of Australian culture in general, and to the arts in particular, it is pertinent to analyse how the SOH’s built fabric (within the context of its design, construction, and ongoing development), might embody the cultural priorities, aspirations, and debates of Australians.

### *Constructing an Opera House for Sydney*

As a built structure the SOH took sixteen years to design and construct, and while it has now been in continuous use for over thirty years, the controversies that marred its creation continue to affect its use. In this section I briefly discuss the historical factors that have led to the creation of the structure that is in use today.<sup>17</sup> An historical

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Parsons and Victoria Chance, eds., *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Paddington: Currency Press, 1997), 31. Before this time there were only examples of ad hoc funding arrangements and in-kind support from government.

<sup>15</sup> Critic A.A. Phillips coined the term ‘cultural cringe’. See A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture* (Melbourne: F.W. Chesire, 1958), 89-95.

<sup>16</sup> Senator the Hon. Ian Campbell, "National Heritage Listing for Sydney Opera House," Media Release C187/05 (Canberra: Department of Environment and Heritage, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> An ever-growing literature exists that documents and analyses the design and construction of the Sydney Opera House. For accounts written at the time, see Michael Baume, *The Sydney Opera House Affair* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Limited, 1967) and John Yeomans, *The Other Taj Mahal: What Happened to the Sydney Opera House* (Camberwell: Longmans Australia, 1968). More recent publications include three works by Philip Drew: *Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon* (London: Phaidon, 1995); *Utzon and the Sydney Opera House* (Sydney: Morgan Publications, 1999); and *The Masterpiece: Jørn Utzon: A Secret Life*. Other recent and noteworthy publications include: Francoise Fromonot, *Jørn Utzon: The Sydney Opera House*, trans. Christopher Thompson (Corte Madera: Electra/Ginkgo, 1998); Yuzo Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built* (Tokyo: Shokokusha Publishing Co., 2001); and Peter Murray, *The Saga of the Sydney Opera*

treatment of the SOH is necessary because it recognises that built structures are not solid unchanging entities; rather, all buildings change and “grow” with the passage of time.<sup>18</sup> The particulars of such growth provide key indications of the practices, priorities and intentions of those who use them. To really understand a building is to study it temporally, not just spatially.<sup>19</sup>

Within the context of an increased national cultural awareness, and the advent of government subsidy for the arts, the specific decision to build an ‘opera house’ for Sydney arose out of the growing success experienced by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Established as a “fully professional and permanent body” in 1946, by the early 1950s the Sydney Symphony possessed an annual public subscription that had markedly outgrown their regular concert venue, the Sydney Town Hall.<sup>20</sup> Faced with this situation the then conductor of the Symphony, British expatriate Sir Eugene Goossens, began to publicly state the need for a purpose-built concert venue in Sydney. Goossens’ proposal for an ‘opera house’ gained political support following a New South Wales state government election in 1952.<sup>21</sup> The newly elected Labor premier, John Joseph Cahill, voiced his support for the idea and established a committee to oversee its planning. Following their deliberations, an international architectural competition was held during 1956, which called for designs for what was termed a ‘National Opera House.’ In January 1957, the design submitted by the young Danish architect, Jørn Utzon, was announced the winner. The panel of judges, Ingham Ashworth, Cobden Parkes, Dr Leslie Martin, and Eero Saarinen, approved of Utzon’s decision to situate the Major and Minor Halls (both required in the competition brief)

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*House: The Dramatic Story of the Design and Construction of the Icon of Modern Australia* (London: Spon Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> In the July/August 2005 edition of *Architecture Australia*, editor Justine Clark comments that the “phenomenon of the always new” that seems a feature of architectural periodicals “is not simply a construct of the world of publication or architectural photography, it is an effect of the way buildings are commonly understood in architectural culture.” She adds that it “is not easy to shift the paradigm.” Justine Clark, “Reflection: Time,” *Architecture Australia* 94, no. 4 (2005): 10.

<sup>20</sup> Curtis, *A Vision Takes Form: A Graphic Record of the Building of the Sydney Opera House During Stages One and Two*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Eugene Goossens appears to have been the first person to refer to the proposed venue as an ‘opera house.’ This is despite the fact that he clearly intended the venue to be a ‘fine hall’ for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, with the possibility of it serving as a dual use venue like the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House. Goossens’ term ‘opera house’ has stuck to the building despite the fact that opera is performed only in the smaller of its two main performance space. Eugene Goossens quoted in Paul Bentley, “The Sydney Opera House: A Chronology 1606-2009,” in *The Wolanski Foundation*, <http://www.twf.org.au/search/sohstory1.html> (accessed 8 January 2003).

side by side.<sup>22</sup> The groundbreaking nature of Utzon's organic design saw its construction divided into three separate stages. Stage I involved the construction of the podium, Stage II the shells, and Stage III the interiors.<sup>23</sup>

The political support that was a necessity in realising the construction of the SOH was also a singularly problematic influence from the beginning. At Premier Cahill's insistence construction commenced in March 1959, shortly before another state election.<sup>24</sup> This politically expedient decision resulted in the podium of the building being constructed before Utzon had finalised his designs for the roof structure. Construction, therefore, ran ahead of design decisions, proving "a disastrous handicap to the building program."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, when the roof structure proved significantly heavier than first thought, the podium had to have sections blasted out of it and extra reinforcing added. Philip Drew has claimed that, "many of the Opera House's later problems can be traced to Cahill's precipitous decision to begin construction before

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<sup>22</sup> Amongst the conditions of the competition, the venue requirements read:

"1. There shall be two halls – one large and one small hall. The large hall should seat between 3,000-3,500 persons. The small hall should seat approximately 1,200 persons.

The large hall to be designed for use for the following purposes: –

- a) Symphony Concerts (including organ music and soloists).
- b) Large-scale Opera.
- c) Ballet and Dance.
- d) Choral.
- e) Pageants and Mass Meetings.

2. The small hall to be designed for use for the following purposes:

- a) Dramatic Presentations
- b) Intimate Opera.
- c) Chamber Music.
- d) Concerts and Recitals.
- e) Lectures.

The requirements under 1 and 2 above, have been listed in order of priority with respect to the attention which should be given to their specialised building needs."

Quoted in James Semple Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: An Interim Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site* (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 1993), 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Yeomans, *The Other Taj Mahal: What Happened to the Sydney Opera House*, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg cites former New South Wales premier Bob Carr's account of Cahill's orders: "I want you to go down to Bennelong Point and make such progress that no one who succeeds me can stop this going through to completion." Bent Flyvbjerg, "Design by Deception: The Politics of Megaproject Approval," *Harvard Design Magazine* Spring/Summer, no. 22 (2005): 54. Cahill may also have had personal reasons for speeding the commencement of construction. He died of cancer on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1959. Drew, *Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: An Interim Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site*, 18. Following Utzon's resignation in 1966, Roger Covell wrote that, "this compromise between architectural idealism and political expediency added to the structural difficulties that would normally be expected in a building of so unprecedented a style and shape." Covell in Curtis, *A Vision Takes Form: A Graphic Record of the Building of the Sydney Opera House During Stages One and Two*, 18.

the building was fully planned.”<sup>26</sup> The confusion of design and construction timetables resulted in rapidly escalating expenditure during the 1960s along with a growing public perception that money was being wasted. These perceptions were exacerbated by the degree to which the originally publicised budget had been intentionally underestimated by the Cahill Labor government.<sup>27</sup> In addition to this was the indecision of the various advisory committees, whose changes of opinion resulted in re-designs of various internal spaces, as well as Utzon’s own rigorous determination for conceptual purity in design. The delay and perception of money wasting led to tighter controls being placed on Utzon’s investigative design process and political problems for the Labor government. These political problems came to a head in the 1965 state election that saw the Liberal/Country Party coalition win power with a policy of putting “some business common sense into what is happening on Bennelong Point.”<sup>28</sup>

The increasingly tight control exercised by his new political masters frustrated Utzon to such an extent that in February 1966, after numerous protests, he considered his position untenable and offered his resignation; the government accepted, and Utzon left the SOH project and Australia. Despite an international campaign to ‘Bring Utzon Back,’ within two months of his departure the government appointed a panel of Australian architects to complete the as yet unbuilt Stage III. In June 1966, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which administered the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, produced a belated list of demands, concerned that Utzon’s planned scheme did not provide either the audience capacity or the acoustics it desired for orchestral performances. Faced with the threat that the SOH would lose its major commercial hirer, the panel of architects re-considered the interior layout of the building. In January 1967, under considerable political pressure and public scrutiny, the new panel of architects instituted what they referred to as the ‘First Review of Programme.’ This resulted in a complete rearrangement of the functions of the

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<sup>26</sup> Drew, *The Masterpiece: Jørn Utzon: A Secret Life*, 166. However, without Cahill’s political determination (and manoeuvring) the project itself may never have been realised.

<sup>27</sup> Originally estimated in 1957 to cost A\$7.2 million and take six years to complete, by the time it opened in 1973, the SOH had cost A\$102 million to build and taken sixteen years to build. Peter Hall, *Great Planning Disasters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 142. Bent Flyvbjerg estimates the cost overrun at 1,400%, second only to that experienced during the building of the Suez Canal. Bent Flyvbjerg, Nils Bruzelius, and Werner Rothengatter, *Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Yeomans, *The Other Taj Mahal: What Happened to the Sydney Opera House*, 120.

internal venues, a rearrangement that contravened the original competition design brief and led to the greatest escalations in cost. The Major Hall, conceived by Utzon as a dual-purpose hall for both concerts and opera, was now designated as a single-purpose concert venue. The Minor Hall, conceived by Utzon as an intimate venue for drama and chamber opera, now became the *main* venue for opera and ballet. This rearrangement meant that the areas beneath the Major Hall, originally intended for the changing and storage of opera sets, were now left stripped of their function; the multi-million dollar custom-built stage machinery for these areas was therefore discarded. In its place the panel inserted a drama theatre, a recording hall for the orchestra, and a chamber music hall. Architect Yuzo Mikami, a former employee of Utzon, has written that he felt evidence of “strong political pressure” in the way the panel “did everything they could to increase the total number of seats available in the building.”<sup>29</sup> Mikami has also heavily criticised the removal of the stage tower from the Major Hall; he refers to the now empty Major Hall shell as “a skull without a brain.”<sup>30</sup>

The SOH was officially opened on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1973. James Semple Kerr has noted that even after this date, a continuous process of adaptation and alteration has occurred: “Right from the beginning the Sydney Opera House Trust started to adapt spaces, fabric and equipment.”<sup>31</sup> At one level such adaptations are necessary in any performing arts centre if it is to continue to function effectively over any length of time. The removal of construction defects, the installation of new performance technology, maintenance and managing the increasing age of the building, a changing regulatory environment, and changes in the policy direction of the SOHT (particularly its increasing role as a cultural producer) have all necessitated, or been reflected in, structural alterations. However, what the continued alterations to the SOH’s internal performance spaces demonstrate most clearly, particularly those affecting the Opera Theatre, are ongoing concerns over their very functionality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*, 136. John Yeomans estimates that the panel of architects increased the audience capacity of the Opera House from approximately 3,554 under Utzon’s scheme, to 6,550 under the ‘First Review of Programme.’ Yeomans, *The Other Taj Mahal: What Happened to the Sydney Opera House*, 191.

<sup>30</sup> Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*, 136.

<sup>31</sup> James Semple Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: A Revised Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site* (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 2003), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Compared to the numerous accounts of the controversies surrounding the Opera House’s design and construction, there are few that deal with changes made to the building since its official opening. Of those that do, Hubble (1983) and Sykes (1993) offer somewhat celebratory accounts and it is useful to

While the SOH was hailed at the time of opening as a brilliant piece of architecture – Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “This, without question, must be the most daring, the most dramatic and in many ways the most beautiful home constructed for the lyric and related muses in modern times”<sup>33</sup> – and the artists whose fortune it was to be involved in the first season reported terrific excitement, disquiet was also evident in a number of quarters. Ava Hubble’s description of preparations for the opening production in the Opera Theatre demonstrates one of a number of limitations that quickly became apparent; because of a lack of space in the wings, “The 60-strong chorus for the performance of *War and Peace* [...] lined up for rehearsals in a crocodile that stretched from the wings, down a passageway and flight of steps into the green room.”<sup>34</sup> After the opening season Hubble reported that, “artists, producers and designers continued to complain backstage.”<sup>35</sup> The Opera Theatre itself is housed in a structure designed to accommodate spoken word theatre, lacking both adequate wings and space in the orchestra pit to actually physically fit a full orchestra.<sup>36</sup> While the wings in the Opera Theatre are unable to be extended due to the dimensions of the shell in which it is housed, the orchestra pit has been significantly remodelled twice, initially in 1978 (increasing its accommodation from about 56 to 66 musicians) and more recently when its further extension rendered the revolve and two of the Opera Theatre stage lifts permanently inoperable.<sup>37</sup> Backstage access to the Drama Theatre remains inadequate.<sup>38</sup> The Chamber Music Hall was converted first into a cinema in 1979 and then into a small theatre in 1984. A loading

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note that both these publications were produced for the Sydney Opera House Trust. James Semple Kerr’s 1993 and 2003 conservation reports offers a more straightforward account of the difficulties faced. Ava Hubble’s *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales From the Opera House* (1988) draws on her fifteen years experience as the Press Officer for the SOH and focuses more on the personalities of administrators and visiting artists. Most recently, the re-engagement of Jørn Utzon as a consultant architect has led to two publications intended to guide future maintenance and alterations to the building. These are Sydney Opera House Trust, *Venue Improvement Plan* (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 2002); and Jørn Utzon, *Sydney Opera House Utzon Design Principles* (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Martin Bernheimer quoted in Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: A Revised Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Ava Hubble quoted in Murray, *The Saga of the Sydney Opera House: The Dramatic Story of the Design and Construction of the Icon of Modern Australia*, 133.

<sup>35</sup> Ava Hubble, *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House* (Sydney: Collins Publishers, 1988), 261.

<sup>36</sup> See chap. 3, p. 99 for a description and images of the Opera Theatre orchestra pit.

<sup>37</sup> Hubble, *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House*, 261.

<sup>38</sup> See chap. 3, p 97 for a description and images of the Drama Theatre’s backstage access. See also, this chap., pp. 270-71.

dock and extra dressing rooms were added to facilitate its altered function. The Rehearsal and Recording Room inserted below the Concert Hall was converted first into the Broadwalk Studio in 1986, then into a performing arts library in 1989, and finally into a performance space named The Studio in late 1998-1999. More generally, following a programme instigated by the NSW Public Works Department in 1988, extra space has been created within the SOH by excavating below the podium.<sup>39</sup>

As the nature of the alterations indicate, the fundamental issue affecting the operation of the SOH remains the sheer lack of backstage space within the building. Secondly, the backstage spaces in existence are haphazard and inefficient in layout and often poorly or inappropriately appointed.<sup>40</sup> In an attempt to manage the process of future alteration to the building, the SOHT, on behalf of the NSW State Government, re-engaged Jørn Utzon as a design consultant in 1999 to provide a set of guiding ‘design principles.’<sup>41</sup> In an address concerning these principles, and the development of an accompanying Venue Improvement Plan, Richard Johnson, an Australian architect appointed to liaise with Utzon, noted that in Utzon’s original plans for the SOH the ratio of performance and public space to backstage space was 1:3. The Hall, Todd and Littlemore ‘First Review of Programme’ resulted in a ratio of 1:1.9. As a result, stated Johnson, “the building is internally haemorrhaging.”<sup>42</sup> Johnson’s evaluation is particularly striking, suggesting a built structure suffering the effects of trauma. How such trauma might in turn impact upon those who work within the building is the subject of the following sections.

### *Memory and Haunting*

Gay McAuley has identified that theatre buildings, in the very fabric of their physical existence, are “a very potent means of transmitting practical knowledge and

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<sup>39</sup> Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: A Revised Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, as mentioned in chap. 3, the load-in area for the Drama Theatre is carpeted.

<sup>41</sup> These have been published as Utzon, *Sydney Opera House Utzon Design Principles*.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Johnson, "Sydney Opera House: Utzon's Future Vision" (paper presented at the Faculty of Architecture Thursday Night Lecture Series, University of Sydney, 9 October 2003).

performance traditions.”<sup>43</sup> This is because they “incorporate within themselves indications of the practices which they are designed to house.”<sup>44</sup> McAuley suggests that practitioners can experience problems when “there is too great a distance between the practice of theatre as predicated by the building and the practices deemed appropriate to the present by the artists.”<sup>45</sup> With the SOH, the performance practices predicated by the building are substantially more labour intensive and require more discipline and compromise on the part of practitioners than those required in other large Australian performing arts centres.

Beyond the practical ramifications of the building’s spatial articulation the individual and collective memories of practitioners and organisations ensure that the building’s history remains present in a potent fashion. Even during the early days of the building’s design the processes of memory – both remembering and forgetting – were important. Kerr quotes electrical consultant Frank Matthews who highlighted the difference in approach between Utzon and the Australian architectural panel who replaced him:

Utzon was the sort of person who carried a great deal of the design in his head and didn’t always record his ideas in formal ways, so Hall, Todd and Littlemore often had to rely on people like ourselves who remained on the site to fill in detail and help them fit the pieces of the puzzle together.<sup>46</sup>

Today, a number of individuals working at the SOH have been employed there since before its official opening. As one dresser working for Opera Australia remarked, “You get that here; people with memories that go way back.” These memories are also experienced and expressed collectively. The modern Australian opera *The Eighth Wonder*, commissioned by Opera Australia, was written about the SOH and first performed in the Opera Theatre in 1995. Its creators, Alan John and Dennis Watkins, interpreted the controversy surrounding Utzon’s departure as a battle between ideals and pragmatics.<sup>47</sup> In one exchange a character simply called The Maestro states, “The

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<sup>43</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: A Revised Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> The final chorus of the libretto demonstrates this tension:

building works/ And the public love it.” To this the young opera singer Alexandra replies, “But it’s not what it could have been.”<sup>48</sup> Within Opera Australia there is a palpable institutional memory that the SOH is not what it *should* have been.

According to Edward Casey, memories are “kept in place.”<sup>49</sup> Places – for instance, the SOH – are able to both gather and keep “such unbodylike entities as thoughts and memories.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the SOH might best be considered a *lieu de mémoire*, a site upon which memory is fixed. Pierre Nora, in voicing his concern over the disruption between past and present, a disruption stemming from the lack of memory, states that in modern western societies memory is only found in *lieux de mémoire*, ‘memory places,’ “in which a residual sense of continuity exists.”<sup>51</sup> Nora describes *lieux de mémoire* as “places, sites, causes” that are “material, symbolic, and functional.”<sup>52</sup> The SOH is such a place. The building’s past is constantly re-evoked and remembered through the medium of practitioners’ “gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes.”<sup>53</sup>

As is apparent from my account of the SOH, a memory of the traumatic events in its past is very much present in the building today. Marvin Carlson’s concept of ‘haunting’ suggests how this might be further understood. In *The Haunted Stage*, Carlson outlines how theatre, as a cultural activity, is “deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.”<sup>54</sup> Approaching theatre from a phenomenological perspective, Carlson uses the overlapping terms ‘haunting’ and ‘ghosting’ to explain the operations of memory, repetition and re-enactment that form a basis for theatrical

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“Between earth and sky  
It’s here we live and here we die  
And the spirit of man  
Is torn between  
Is torn between  
The earth we know  
And the sky we’ve seen”

Alan John and Dennis Watkins, *The Eighth Wonder: An Opera by Alan John and Dennis Watkins, The Opera Australasia Libretto Series* (Sydney: Pellinor, 1995), 70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time,” 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Nora, *Arthur Goldhammer*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 11.

activity. Carlson asserts that theatre buildings themselves are also ‘haunted’ or ‘ghosted’: “everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilised, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted.”<sup>55</sup> Theatre buildings are never phenomenologically empty, but are “made out of something else.”<sup>56</sup> It is this ‘something else,’ be it the theatrical history of a building, or a previous non-theatrical use of its structure or its site, that “has the potential, often realized, of ‘bleeding through’” into the present.<sup>57</sup> Practitioners who work in the SOH find that their inhabitation takes place in a structure where the remembrance of past traumas is materially present.

### *Inhabiting the House*

The various internal spaces housed within the SOH provide a range of different working conditions for performers and technical practitioners. The SOH is an incredibly busy place, with approximately six hundred staff directly employed by the Sydney Opera House Trust alone, in addition to which are numerous performers and technical practitioners brought in by hiring companies. Despite the building’s limitations, those who work within it have a special regard for the SOH, a genuine fondness for it that stems from the building’s unique exterior design and from an awareness that the building has afforded an increased level of recognition and respect to the performing arts in Australia [See *Image 9.1*]. Actor Kate Fitzpatrick visited the SOH construction site during her time as an acting student at NIDA:

Even at that time, undressed and empty, the Opera House was an extraordinary sight. It had already come to symbolise our dreams. Anything – greatness – could happen in a place like this [...] For most of us, the Opera House represented a great leap forward into the sophisticated world of big time art and culture.<sup>58</sup>

Fitzpatrick has written that even today, “Whenever I visit I always experience a great sense of excitement, as if I am embarking on a voyage.”<sup>59</sup> One member of the Opera

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Fitzpatrick, "The Opera House - Two Decades Back," 104.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 109.

Australia crew described the building to me as “vibrant,” while another suggested that the excitement the SOH generates in people “encourages people to bring out their best.” “I feel grateful to be working here,” stated Amelia Farrugia, “there’s something very special about this place.”<sup>60</sup> Some of the facilities receive special comment because of their apparent luxury. The dressing rooms provided to principal performers in the Opera Theatre offer unimpeded views of Sydney Harbour. Opera principal Natalie Jones described the views as “pretty special,”<sup>61</sup> while another principal, Michael Lewis, evaluated them as “the best dressing rooms in the world” purely because of the view.<sup>62</sup>

However, this fondness is tempered by a certain distaste amongst practitioners towards the SOH. Michael Lewis expressed the mix of affection and distaste clearly: “It’s a great place to work,” he stated, “but it’s a dog of an opera theatre.”<sup>63</sup> In this section I explore the reasons for this attitude, examining practitioners’ inhabitation of the SOH in three parts; the first deals with the prominent contrast that exists between the brilliant exterior of the SOH and its utilitarian interior; the second sets out the concerns over boundaries within the SOH and the territorial practices that practitioners engage in; finally, the third section focuses on the overriding need for both performers and technical practitioners to compromise and adapt their work practices in order to make the SOH function. The observations that form the basis of this section are drawn from fieldwork carried out with Opera Australia during their 2003 Summer Season, as well as brief time spent with the Australian Ballet and the Bell Shakespeare Company.

### **1. Exterior and Interior**

The qualitative difference between the exterior of the SOH and its interior is noticed by almost all practitioners, and is a feature of the building that has been written about since before its opening. Stemming from Utzon’s original designs, his subsequent resignation, and the completion of the building by Hall, Todd and Littlemore, the

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<sup>60</sup> Farrugia, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Jones, interview.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Lewis, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 1 March 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Lewis, interview.

contrast is an “historic” feature of the SOH.<sup>64</sup> The distinction between the exterior and the interior is evident in the differing articulations of space, the presence and quality of the decorative elements used in these spaces, and the atmosphere that can be discerned. The exterior of the building is the defining factor in the excitement that is generated in those who visit or work at the SOH. In conversations, practitioners have described it as “unmistakeable,” it “looks great,” is “awesome,” and “exciting.” In her memoirs, veteran Australian actor Ruth Cracknell wrote:

As a performer, the joy of arriving at the Sydney Opera House, with its bustle and excitement and steady magnificence, is only surpassed by leaving at night and taking time to wander by the sea wall. On a moonlit night one could die of excess.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, the interior of the SOH is a source of almost universal complaint amongst practitioners, being described as, “damn functional,” “deadening,” and “not conducive to any sort of creativity” [See *Image 9.46*]. One opera principal spoke about how beautiful it appears on the outside, “But,” he added, “Step inside and it’s just shit.” Even those who appreciate the interior point out its utilitarian appearance: “The most beautiful factory in the world,” commented one technical practitioner with a sly smile. “It’s the irony of the building,” stated opera principal Grant Smith in a newspaper interview, “It really is one of the icons of the world and yet internally the sense is of a mundane place.”<sup>66</sup> That the interior appears utilitarian is, however, but one aspect. What is of greater concern is that while the interior of the building appears merely functional, it is actually inefficient in operation. Patrick Dickson noted that, “It seems very poorly designed backstage.”<sup>67</sup> The major concern is a simple lack of physical space in which to accommodate the supporting work that is required to keep performances, especially repertory opera, happening. The Opera Theatre in particular is a “pressure cooker” in which the crew “have no space to move anything or do anything.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Meldrum, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Cracknell, *A Biased Memoir*, 241.

<sup>66</sup> Grant Smith quoted in Shawn Donnan, “Life and Times of an Australian Icon,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 August 2000, <http://www.csmonitor.com/atcsmonitor/specials/oly2000/stories/operahouse.html> (accessed 25 March 2003).

<sup>67</sup> Dickson, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, interview.

Practitioners report a common perception that the interior of the SOH lacks an appropriately theatrical atmosphere; it doesn't feel like a theatre should. Interestingly, this is a perception shared by practitioners with diametrically opposed opinions about the building. Both those who express a love for the building and others, who state that they hate it, link these opinions to the building's 'industrial' feel. Those who view the interior favourably enjoy its lack of pretension; it simply feels "like a workspace."<sup>69</sup> Those who dislike the interior perceive that it "saps your energy,"<sup>70</sup> is "depressing," and dampens creativity. These differing perceptions are responses to the loading dock appearance of the stage door area, the predominance of bare concrete floors and walls, and the exposed service conduits and air conditioning vents that snake across many ceilings. Even in the plusher areas of the SOH, the quality of finishes is poor and frequently haphazard. One Opera Australia chorus member remarked that it would be preferable if "there was some contrast between the areas that have to be functional and areas like the greenroom that could be a bit nicer."<sup>71</sup>

While the dressing rooms provided for principal performers in the Opera Theatre possess windows, the majority of the practitioner spaces within the SOH lack any access to natural light. SOHT staff offices and function areas occupy the prime positions immediately behind the great expanses of glass along the northern face of the podium. Along the western face of the podium, small windows provide light to catering kitchens, and Utzon's recent addition of a squat portico has opened up the audience foyers in this part of the building to a view across Circular Quay. However, for most theatre practitioners, the only access to natural light, other than by actually exiting the building, is either through a narrow band of windows in a corridor adjacent to the dressing rooms provided for principal performers in the Opera Theatre, or through a sole window in the SOH's large greenroom.<sup>72</sup> The lack of backstage windows leads to uncanny perceptions of being underground whilst within the SOH. Walking through the corridors one evening I overheard a dancer comment into his mobile phone, "I'm underground at the Opera House, so reception's a bit funny." In

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<sup>69</sup> David Hobson, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 March 2003.

<sup>70</sup> John Brunato, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 1 March 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Payne, interview.

<sup>72</sup> The area of the greenroom immediately adjacent to the window is a highly sought after position, for the views across the harbour it affords, the sense of connection to the outside world it provides and the mobile phone coverage it enables.

fact, he was standing on a floor some thirty metres *above* sea level. Of course, some of the performance spaces do in fact involve working underground: “In the Drama Theatre there you’re in the bowels of the earth,” commented Dennis Olsen.<sup>73</sup>

The sense of enclosure felt by many practitioners working within the SOH is exacerbated by the long seasons and heavy performance schedules that many companies, especially Opera Australia and the Australian Ballet, keep whilst in Sydney. The lack of access to natural light corresponds with a lack of access to fresh air and many performers perceive the building as contributing to the spread of sickness and the experience of depressed moods. Rumours about the poor quality of the internal air supply abound. While I was observing the operations of the Australian Ballet a physiotherapist remarked to me, “I don’t know if it’s a myth but I’ve been told that it takes nine days to recycle the air.” To this a nearby dancer replied, “I’ve heard that too.” Low lighting and particularly bland internal finishes make many smaller rooms within the SOH particularly dreary. That these poor interiors are located in an internationally renowned architectural icon, on one of the most prestigious sites in Sydney, only makes them seem worse.

The perception of a marked contrast between exterior and interior can be traced directly to decisions made during the building’s construction. In his original designs for the SOH Utzon established a definite vertical hierarchy within the building, implying a certain set of social relationships between producers and consumers. Phillip Drew explains:

For Utzon, the Opera House would always be the ‘house of festivals’; he distinguished between, on the one hand, activities taking place in the base, the mechanical parts of the theatre, the singers and musicians, stage hands and costumers, as well as the large workshops where all the sets and props were made; and, on the other, the patrons’ areas, the festival side of things where people would move freely without encountering, or even being aware of these activities.<sup>74</sup>

Utzon, however, also sought to establish what Yuzo Mikami has termed an “integrity” between the exterior and the interior of the building and the audience and practitioner

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<sup>73</sup> Dennis Olsen, Interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 16 January 2004.

<sup>74</sup> Drew, *Sydney Opera House*, *Jørn Utzon*, 12.

spaces, whereby each internal space, whether a public foyer, a workshop or a toilet cubicle, would feel distinctively part of the overall design concept.<sup>75</sup> Utzon's resignation in early 1966 came at a time when Stage II of construction was approaching completion and Stage III was yet to be undertaken. The panel of Australian architects assembled to design and construct Stage III of the building was instructed to minimise any additional cost increases. To comply with this directive, they established a "hierarchy of treatment."<sup>76</sup> This ranked the importance of design and finish in areas of the building thus:

1. exterior and external works;
2. main auditoria;
3. other public areas;
4. administration and artists' areas;
5. service areas.<sup>77</sup>

This ranking is still perceived today by practitioners who are unaware of its existence other than from what their own experiences within the building suggest. Indeed, many perceive that the building was never finished. One of the dressers working for Opera Australia expressed such an opinion by indicating with her outstretched arm a whitewashed concrete wall that runs parallel to the Opera Theatre principals' dressing rooms: "It's never been finished," she remarked, "all this Tutankhamen's tomb here."<sup>78</sup> In this way, practitioners are haunted by a past prioritisation of building finishes, the result of "political expediency and architectural compromises" that have led to the SOH being "a curious mixture of magnificent architecture and ordinary utilitarian building."<sup>79</sup> That the magnificent architecture is limited to the public areas of the building contributes to the perception that the SOH was "designed for the audience, not the performers,"<sup>80</sup> a perception compounded by the large sums of

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<sup>75</sup> Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*, 145.

<sup>76</sup> Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: An Interim Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Hall quoted in *Ibid.*, 24. See also Public Works Department, *Sydney Opera House: Anatomy of Stage Three, Construction and Completion: A General Index* (Sydney: Public Works Department, 1973).

<sup>78</sup> Sheila Beames, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 25 February 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*, 145.

<sup>80</sup> Sandra Oldis, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 1 March 2003.

money that continue to be directed towards the maintenance and improvement of exterior and public areas.<sup>81</sup>

In the previous chapter I reported that most of the problems and foibles that performers encounter in practitioner spaces are simply dealt with; complaint is voiced, but at the same time shortcomings are expected. Indeed, performers generally express a pride in their ability to overcome problems and get their work done. In the SOH, the opposite is the case. Precisely because the outside appears so carefully designed, such a work of sculptural excellence, the inside is bemoaned, appearing worse by comparison. This attitude was evident in one young stage manager who showed me around the Playhouse. Pointing out some scratches and gaffer tape on the stage that might be viewed as signs of character in other less prestigious Sydney theatres, she remarked, "In a normal theatre I wouldn't mind. But this is the Sydney Opera House!"

## **2. Concern over Boundaries and Territorial Practices**

In addition to the strong contrast that exists between the exterior and interior of the SOH, as well as the sheer lack of space, the general inefficiency of the structure can be attributed to the lack of clearly established boundaries between the different functions that are housed within it. The very permeability of the internal spaces in the SOH is reflected in the differing degrees of social demarcation that practitioners engage in. Here I examine the experiences of technical practitioners, before considering how the lack of clear boundaries between artistic and non-artistic areas impacts on performers.

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<sup>81</sup> Shirley Apthorp reports that in the ten-year period between 1988 and 1998, A\$100 million was spent on exterior maintenance, particularly on the replacement of roof tiles. Apthorp, "Facing up to the Past," 796. More recently, the reinstatement of Utzon as a consultant architect has led to the development of a Venue Improvement Plan to which the New South Wales state government has contributed A\$69 million. *From Inspiration to Execution: Sydney Opera House Trust Annual Report 2005*, 36. Notably, the two most extensive alterations to date have been the renovation of the Reception Hall (now the Utzon Room) and the addition of the Western Loggia along the western wall of the podium. Both these renovations are to exterior or public areas of the SOH. The reluctance to deal with the interior is a combination of the sheer cost of renovations (estimated at A\$700 million) and the amount of disruption that such work would cause to the continued operation of the building. Arguably, the fact that the results of any interior renovation would remain largely invisible to the general public is another contributing factor. The figure of A\$700 million is cited in Anne Davies, "It's a World Treasure, but Who Pays to Save It?" *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-22 January 2006. Renovations to the Opera Theatre alone are estimated at over A\$300 million. See Valerie Lawson, "Bond Plan to Finance Opera Rebuilding," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 2004; and Valerie Lawson, "Opera Floor Job through the Roof," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 2004.

The SOH is a large and complicated building that occupies 1.82 hectares and houses 800 separate spaces within it. In spatial syntax terms, the SOH offers a number of contrasts. The stage door entrance is the major point of control within the building. Manned by uniformed security guards, only those possessing security passes or who are vouched for by SOH staff are allowed to pass through the stage door. However, once beyond this, practitioners find themselves in a building that is surprisingly shallow and highly permeable. As documented in Chapter Three, the ground floor Central Passage and the first floor greenroom form centrally located circulatory spines running the length of the building [*See Plans 9.a and 9.b*]. In spatial syntax terms these two spaces possess greater ‘control’ than most others; many areas of the building are most easily accessed via these two spaces. However, the network of corridors and stairwells within the SOH comprise a considerably ‘ringy’ configuration that offers multiple points of access to most areas of the building; only in some areas, around the Drama Theatre in particular, is the configuration of spaces distinctly ‘linear.’ The predominance of a ‘ringy’ configuration explains the lived experiences of many practitioners with the SOH, experiences that are characterised by a diverse range of encounters between individuals engaged in very different functions. The greenroom is positively experienced as the heart of the building, a place of colour, mixing and social interaction. Opera chorus member James Payne described the greenroom as a place in which “[you feel] like you are part of a greater theatre experience.”<sup>82</sup> It is a space shared by performers, technical practitioners, administration and front of house staff. Unfortunately, this is also the case in the corridor that separates the Drama Theatre stage from performers’ dressing rooms, creating a distinctly problematic space. Negatively, the permeability of the building, combined with the large numbers of people working within it, enables the possibility of theft. Prior to conducting my fieldwork, one performer remarked that the SOH was “notorious for thieving.”<sup>83</sup> During the three months I spent in the building a number of technical practitioners’ bags were rifled and valuables stolen.

The permeability of the SOH is largely managed through both the official and unofficial division of the building into various areas of responsibility. Officially,

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<sup>82</sup> Payne, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Carroll, interview.

individuals employed at the SOH fulfil certain functions that entail frequenting set locations with the building. The locations and the conditions shared by particular groups leads to the development of a strong solidarity amongst groups of administrative staff, front of house staff, catering staff, and technical staff (further divided into stage management, stage mechanists (MX), stage electricians (LX) and fly operators) as well as different companies of performers. The boundaries between these groups, both geographic and social, are not maliciously policed, but can create an air of competitiveness. James Payne commented that between opera principals and the opera chorus the divide is not that great, but “the divide between chorus, orchestra and technical staff is huge,” a situation he put down to “different gossip and different aims.”<sup>84</sup> Michael Lewis, too, suggested that shared time was a major factor in cultivating group solidarity: “You tend to talk to similar people in similar groups because you finish at the same time.”<sup>85</sup> Amongst the crew in the Opera Theatre I observed the most pronounced rivalries between different groupings, especially between the MX, LX, and flies. “It’s like Sydney versus Melbourne,” commented one electrician, “MX hate LX, prompt-side MX hate off-prompt MX, upstage hate downstage MX [...] flies hate everybody.” One lighting board operator spoke about the “definite demarcation” that exists, which “can be a bit frustrating at times.” Speaking of the MX he added that there existed a “mentality that they own the stage and we’re just here to make it look pretty.” He also added that there is a “strange relationship between the tech staff and the admin staff” in that “neither really knows what the other is doing.” Similarly, he reported a gap between the artistic staff working for the opera company and the technical practitioners. Within the environs of the Opera Theatre there is a competitive aggressiveness between different groupings of technical practitioners.

The ‘hierarchy of treatment’ that was formulated during the ‘First Review of Programme’ is most acutely reflected in the lack of spaces provided for technical practitioners, especially those employed by the SOHT. While some technical practitioners have lockers and rest areas allocated to them, the MX have only been officially provided with the greenroom and a smaller ‘quiet room.’ Technical practitioners complain that the spaces allocated to them are located in impractical

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<sup>84</sup> Payne, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Lewis, interview.

areas of the building, or are simply depressing. The room dedicated for rest, the ‘quiet room’, described as “a box” by one MX, is small, lacks any windows, possesses blank uniformly beige walls and, when I visited, had unused furniture stored in it. The work undertaken by the MX is physically strenuous and usually conducted in short bursts at a frenetic pace. They are required to spend many hours of their long shifts ‘on call,’ waiting until they are next needed. For these reasons they require spaces in which rest can be obtained. In response to the lack of suitable official rest areas, technical practitioners at the SOH adapt various spaces for their own use through naming and/or rearranging spaces to suit their needs. Most explicitly, the Opera Theatre MX have converted an area in the Opera Theatre dock that lies beneath air conditioning ducts into a permanent crew room dubbed ‘Sleepy Hollow’ [See Image 9.27]. Other areas are minimally adapted. I witnessed LX stashing bags in small spaces behind the thick structural columns that project through the greenroom; unfortunately, it was from these that wallets were stolen. In the rear stage right corner of the flytower a room serves as a rest area for the fly operators; a small piece of tape near the door dubs it the ‘Crackpot Flies’ Ward.’ In the greenroom a long centrally located table is unofficially dubbed ‘Table Ten.’ While I could find no one who could explain to me the reason for this name, a number were able to explain that “the MX don’t sit here.” Instead, it is a table used by LX and Opera Australia props crew.

In the ‘deeper,’ more remote areas of the SOH, technical practitioners mark their spaces with graffitied names, dates and comments. This graffiti reflects the ownership that the in-house technical practitioners feel towards various areas of the backstage; hirers and performers might come and go, but it is they who ‘own’ the venue by virtue of their constant contact with it and intimate knowledge of it. Graffiti is particularly prominent in those places that are frequented only by the crew; one particularly graffitied patch is a bare concrete support beam below the rear of the Opera Theatre stage. This support beam is obscured when the stage lift is in its raised position, and only people standing on the lift while it is in operation (or when it has been stopped just below the level of the stage) have the opportunity to mark the concrete. Another graffitied patch is on a black wall behind the manual fly lines; one has to stretch between the fly lines to reach it. The graffiti here features names and dates, recording an unofficial history of past personalities. Scrawled comments also provide cues for

practitioners to recall past events and practices. When I asked a fly operator why someone had scrawled, “Don’t piss in here” near a door on the fly gallery he told me a story about how the lack of toilets on the fly floor meant that past fly operators had made use of bottles instead. Some graffiti takes the form of safety notices; on one of the electric lifters someone had scrawled, “fingers here will disappear.” The ‘dome room,’ from which spotlights are operated, is also particularly graffitied, reflecting the lack of attention it receives from all but the ‘dome’ (spotlight) and surtitle operators who use it. Here the graffiti is humorous (“Sean sleeps with management”), with many of the pieces reflecting the boredom technical practitioners experience as a prominent part of their employment. One poem reads:

“Life”

Why do beds lie so flat?  
Why do policemen wear a hat?  
Why do fish swim so deep?  
And why do dome operators fall asleep?

Stan Marshall

The lack of clear boundaries between artistic and non-artistic areas of the building is a significant aspect of practitioners’ experiences within the SOH, and is particularly problematic for performers. Before performances in the Opera Theatre and Concert Hall members of the audience use certain areas of the practitioner space. The Stage Door and Central Passage are used for the entry of elderly patrons and those in wheelchairs who are unable to climb the stairs; lifts from the central corridor take them to the appropriate level above. In a similar vein, the various control rooms for the Opera Theatre can only be reached through the northern foyer areas. Before performances, at interval, and following performances crew must walk through the gathered audience. As one of the lighting desk operators, Ian, told me, “Sometimes I’m not dressed too well and I stick out like a sore thumb.”

The Drama Theatre, The Studio and Playhouse spaces are nestled within the western side of the SOH podium, amongst foyer, bar and administration areas. These venues (or their forerunners) were inserted into the existing fabric of the SOH as part of the

‘First Review of Programme.’ Actor Peter Carroll has described in detail his experience of working within these spaces. While Carroll perceives the practitioner areas of these spaces as generally “very poorly designed,”<sup>86</sup> he has detailed this view in relation to the Drama Theatre, which he describes as a theatre that has been “shoved into another form and ... allowed to stay there.”<sup>87</sup> Carroll’s description of working on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Drama Theatre provides an insight into the way the lack of boundaries in the support spaces surrounding this venue are experienced during performance. In particular, Carroll described the two complicated routes on offer to him when, at one point during a performance, he needed to quickly exit the stage from the prompt side, change costume, and re-enter the stage from the opposite prompt side, encountering administration and catering areas in the process:

In *Romeo and Juliet* I remember ... going up to the quick-change, through the door, down the stairs to stage level, keep going, down another flight of stairs to go under the stage. Go under the stage. Go up the stairs to stage level. Keep going up two flights of stairs, out into the central passage on the other side. Through there, past - make sure the bar staff behind the bar, are working, shut their door if they are - take a few paces to the other [door]. Open the door; go down the steps to stage level. But that took too long! So, instead, I had to go out of the dressing room, turn right, go down the central passage, turn left, at the second door on your right, go into there – that’s the administration – go through the office, avoiding all the paperwork, and all that stuff, through another series of publicity offices, all the way through, to the central passage. Then you are in the bar. Shut the bar door. Open the other door, go down the other stairs, and you’ve just made it.<sup>88</sup>

In the vicinity of the Drama Theatre this situation is exacerbated by the fact that performers wishing to travel between the stage and their dressing rooms must use the same passage as both catering and administration staff. Jonathan Biggins has described the situation as feeling “like a case of the tail wagging the dog.”<sup>89</sup> “You want to feel you and your cast are the only ones populating that space,” he stated, but “on matinee days you are trying to concentrate while people in security tags walk to

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<sup>86</sup> Carroll, interview.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Carroll, (paper presented at the Making Theatre Everyday Life Forum, Customs House, Sydney, 25 September 2002).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Biggins, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 March 2003.

and fro.” He recalled instances of hearing “caterers throwing bottles in the recycling bin” while preparing to enter a performance.<sup>90</sup> While this is easily negotiated in most circumstances, performers report that their preparation for an entrance can be unnecessarily interrupted by having to encounter strangers in a general access passageway whilst *en route* to the stage. Performers have stated that during matinee performances this passage can feel like a major traffic thoroughfare.<sup>91</sup>

### 3. Compromise

To work within the SOH practitioners must adapt to accommodate the specific idiosyncrasies of the building, making compromises in order to use the building successfully. All theatrical performance does, of course, entail a certain level of compromise, as there is no ‘ideal’ theatre in existence. However, the degree to which compromise is required from performers and technical practitioners is important. In the Opera Theatre there is a blurring of the semantic distinction between *making* compromises to enable a performance to occur, and experiencing that performance as *compromised*. For the practitioners who work within the Opera Theatre, significant compromises are required to perform a ballet or an opera in a theatre originally conceived for intimate dramatic presentations.

Annually, only three companies use the Opera Theatre; Opera Australia is in residence for nine months each year, the Australian Ballet for two months, and the Sydney Dance Company for the remaining month. For both the ballet and opera companies the lack of wing space within the theatre significantly restricts onstage performances. The severe lack of wing space and cramped working environment found within the Opera Theatre impacts upon both performers and technicians alike by forcing a greater level of discipline into some of their work practices and precluding others.<sup>92</sup> In particular, all sets for both ballet and opera have to be designed

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<sup>90</sup> Biggins, interview.

<sup>91</sup> More than one performer has referred to this passageway as resembling ‘Pitt Street.’ The actual Pitt Street is a busy pedestrian shopping mall in Sydney’s Central Business District.

<sup>92</sup> In effect, the Opera Theatre has no wings; performers and crew can walk along both sides of the stage unseen, but all set changes are effected from the rear of the stage area. Similarly, as head of the Opera Australia props department, Gerard Foley, explained to me one evening, the discipline required by the Opera Theatre is that “everything has to be set down to the last ...” Here he pointed to a

with the size restrictions of the Opera Theatre in mind; some are subsequently redesigned or modified when toured to Melbourne and other locations.

Dancers using the Opera Theatre stage encounter the greatest physical restrictions. For dancers, there is the essential problem that “you can’t do anything sidestage.”<sup>93</sup> Physical preparation for performance is limited to areas elsewhere in the building. More seriously than this, however, the lack of wing space impacts directly upon the nature of the performance. With no room to decelerate in the wings, dancers must do so whilst still onstage. One former dancer expressed this situation by drawing an analogy with aeroplanes: “Instead of being able to ... sail through the air like a great big Boeing, they [the dancers] look more like a DC3. So they are pulling back all the time.”<sup>94</sup> Principal dancer Lucinda Dunn commented that the lack of space in the wings,

[A]ffects everything; it affects the mechanists, it affects the dancers, it affects how you exit the stage. You can’t run off and keep going into the wings, and if you are in a lift you have to be brought down because of the [lack of] headroom [*See Image 9.64*].

Another dancer, Timothy Farrar explained, “You have to adapt – you literally have to change what you do and how you do it.”

A similar compromise affects opera performances where, as one performer reported, many artistic decisions are taken solely “due to the physical limitations of the building.”<sup>95</sup> The lack of wing space increases the amount of time it takes to get an opera chorus on and off the stage and limits the ability for performers to execute quick changes of costume. This can result in more than the usual amount of intervals being scheduled into operas. For instance, Opera Australia’s 2003 production of Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld* contained three acts rather than two because the lack of room in the theatre’s wings meant that members of the chorus had to return to their downstairs dressing rooms to change costume; no side stage quick-changes

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carefully placed silk scarf laid over the door of a nearby props cupboard. Gerard enjoys this discipline, because, “It makes doing a props check a lot easier.”

<sup>93</sup> Rachel Rawlins, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 December 2002.

<sup>94</sup> Colin Peasley, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 December 2002.

<sup>95</sup> Biggins, interview.

are possible for more than single performers.<sup>96</sup> The care that performers must exercise while negotiating narrow stage entrances and exits, often whilst moving at speed, and dressed in expansive costumes can result in more physically restricted or cautious onstage performances.

The Opera Theatre's inadequate orchestra pit is the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra's (AOBO's) primary place of performance [See Image 9.41]. The sheer lack of room in the pit, its inappropriate design for housing an orchestra, and its associated acoustical problems restricts programming choices and forces orchestral performers to make significant compromises. Within the confines of the pit noise levels can reach well above eighty-five decibels, which, under NSW Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, constitutes an unsafe working environment. To ameliorate this, Opera Australia and the AOBO have adopted a 'Hearing Conservation Policy' that institutes a variety of noise control measures. Given that any structural changes to the pit itself would require substantial engineering work, the measures that have been adopted include changes to rostering, seating rotation amongst musicians, the separation of players, the erection of perspex sheeting to isolate the brass section, and the supply of earplugs to orchestra members sitting in particularly poor positions. The artistic impact of these measures is admitted in the policy: "It is recognised that hearing protection measures make playing in tune and with the correct attention to balance and ensemble more difficult."<sup>97</sup> By way of contrast, while members of the orchestra are seeking to avoid damage to their hearing because of the high noise levels in the pit, the Opera Theatre's dry acoustic has been criticised from a variety of individuals, describing it as sounding "as if everything has been packed in damp cotton wool"<sup>98</sup> and "like an expensive stereo system being played in a 44-gallon drum."<sup>99</sup>

For technical practitioners, the compromises and adaptations needed to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of many of the SOH's performance spaces means that it is only

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> *Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra Certified Agreement 2002-2005*, (Sydney: Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2005), 85.  
[http://www.alliance.org.au/docman/task\\_cat\\_view/gid.105/dir.DESC/order\\_name/limit.5/limitstart.5/](http://www.alliance.org.au/docman/task_cat_view/gid.105/dir.DESC/order_name/limit.5/limitstart.5/)  
(accessed 19 December 2005).

<sup>98</sup> Apthorp, "Facing up to the Past," 795.

<sup>99</sup> Mark Summerbell quoted in Lawson, "Bond Plan to Finance Opera Rebuilding."

because of practitioners' accumulated embodied knowledge that performances can be successfully mounted within them. "I think this building was designed more for its exterior than its interior functionality" mentioned one practitioner casually, "but we work within it." Stage mechanist Ian Spence commented that, "there is a body of accumulated knowledge" that "isn't written down" that enables the Opera Theatre to be used. In his opinion, "If you emptied the theatre out and got a company to put on a show like that [here Spence made reference to the production of *Orpheus in the Underworld*] from scratch, they couldn't do it." Spence's comments demonstrate the importance of practitioners' experience, knowledge and adaptability in getting theatres with essentially substandard support spaces to operate efficiently. Interestingly, the degree to which local knowledge is needed also adds a level of interest to the work that can be absent when working in other theatres. One stage supervisor commented that the local knowledge required in working at the SOH provided him with "greater satisfaction." "You have to relate to people on a deeper level," he stated, adding that his role involves more active problem solving than in other theatres. This, for both technical practitioners and performers, is another source of the fondness they feel towards the SOH.

The necessity for adaptation that performers encounter within the SOH significantly informs their understandings of what it is to be a performer there. In the same interview that Michael Lewis, an internationally experienced tenor with Opera Australia, described the SOH as "really, really limiting," "a dog of an opera theatre. It's the worst theatre in the world," the nature of his attachment to the building was also strikingly apparent. With the experience of many seasons performing there, Lewis admitted feeling comfortable with the building. Using the metaphor of clothing, Lewis described the building as fitting "like a glove." Performing there was "a bit like putting on your favourite jacket, or wearing your favourite shoes or something, a glove; this place fits after a while."<sup>100</sup> That the building 'fits,' that it can simultaneously be both the worst opera theatre in the world and yet feel like a favourite item of clothing suggests that rather than the building fitting Lewis, Lewis now 'fits' the building. Many of the SOH's shortcomings have become accepted amongst practitioners because they have unconsciously undertaken a multitude of

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<sup>100</sup> Michael Lewis, interview.

adjustments – encompassing attitude and embodiment – so as to be able to successfully work within it. Their use of the building has become largely *habitualised*; it is now simply an essential part of what they must do to create performances there. “Because ‘the show must go on’ as the old saying goes,” stated Lewis, “we are very adept at performing in just about any conditions.”<sup>101</sup> As I will elaborate in the next, and final, chapter, the frequent adaptations performers must undertake to make work in a variety of theatres largely inform their dominant discourses of professionalism and worth.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Unlike the Belvoir Street Theatre, a building adapted to serve as a theatre, the dominant discourse surrounding the creation of the SOH was that it would be a venue to inspire performers. “What the Opera House demands, remorselessly, is greatness,” wrote critic Katherine Brisbane following its opening in 1973.<sup>102</sup> However, what I have demonstrated in this chapter is that what this most prestigious of theatrical venues demands is compromise, sustained and pervasive compromise on the part of the practitioners who must make it work. Indeed, for practitioners, the SOH is a highly ambiguous building, visually stunning on the outside, and yet, when compared to many other performing arts centres, so ill conceived and neglected on the inside. Even its very site on Bennelong Point can be read in contrasting terms as both prestigious and as marginal. “This site has been a double-edge sword,” commented opera chorus member Robert Mitchell, “It’s out on a point and it continues to marginalise the arts. [...] In Australia, all these theatres are on the margins.”<sup>103</sup>

For performers, the SOH is a constant reminder that their place as performers is contingent, situated, as it were, between artistic ideals and hard economic reality.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Katherine Brisbane quoted in Raymond Omodei, “The Drama Theatre,” *Theatre Australia* 1976, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Mitchell, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 1 March 2003.

<sup>104</sup> The enduring irony of the SOH is that despite its idiosyncrasies, inefficiencies and inadequacies, the building itself is so iconic, and so greatly *loved* by theatre practitioners, Sydney residents and tourists alike that many of the hiring companies who use it are economically tied to it. Opera Australia is a case in point. Approximately thirty to forty percent of Opera Australia’s audience is generated by the SOH; “Tourists come to see OA perform as they want to experience something in the Sydney Opera House.” Liz Nield quoted in Christopher Wainwright, “Opera Australia - Where to in 2004?” *Arts Hub Australia*, 3 November 2003,

The SOH is paradoxically regarded by many as a clear marker of the arrival of Australian cultural maturity, and by others as “the stone around the neck of Australian theatre.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the SOH is a paradigmatic example of Australian ambivalence towards the performing arts and the position of performers, and an example of a corresponding interest in artistic product to the neglect of artistic process. Despite the genuine love felt by many practitioners towards the SOH, at an embodied level of experience its workspaces exhibit a curiously ambiguous attitude towards their practical requirements. Working within the famous exterior of the SOH, theatre practitioners constantly experience a haunting reminder that while their work and effort is valued, it is only valued to a limited extent.

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<http://www.artshub.com.au/ahau1/news/News.asp?cc=0&Id=50801&ct=feature&SText=opera+australia&whichpage=1&pagesize=20> (accessed 22 May 2006). According to former artistic director of Opera Australia, Simone Young, “This building is one of the biggest attractions for opera in the world, and it remains our spiritual as well as our natural home.” Simone Young quoted in Apthorp, “Facing up to the Past,” 797. Other flagship arts companies, including the Sydney Theatre Company and the Bell Shakespeare Company, are in a similar position. The government subsidy received by the former stipulates that it use the Drama Theatre, while in the case of the latter, corporate sponsorship all but requires the use of the iconic venue because it is a place to which sponsors can bring their clients. Added to this is the vast amount of government investment that the SOH has received since it was first publicly proposed in 1954, and continues to receive today.

<sup>105</sup> Derek Nicholson quoted in Martin Thomas and James Waites, “Our Living Arts Centres or Notes on the Breeding of White Elephants,” *New Theatre Australia*, July-August 1989, 7.