Theatre Buildings: The House

... the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

Gaston Bachelard\(^1\)

In Chapter One I argued that the backstage areas of theatre buildings remain largely overlooked and untheorised in the writings of theatre scholars. Stating my intention to systematically investigate the backstage areas of Sydney theatres as a way of better understanding the ‘place’ of performers, in Chapter Two I outlined a theoretical framework for understanding how humans encounter the built environment and make meaning out of their experience. In concluding Chapter Two I detailed my research design, which has involved documenting built structures, interviewing theatre practitioners, and observing performers’ backstage activities.

In this chapter I focus in detail on the physicality of theatre buildings. First, I introduce the guiding metaphor I have used for my investigation of theatres, that of

\(^1\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.
the theatre as a ‘house,’ and present an argument for why this is more suitable than
the predominant metaphor of a theatre as a ‘frame.’ Then I provide a definition of the
term ‘backstage’ via a discussion of how the space in theatres is commonly divided on
the basis of function and social relations. After outlining the different physical spaces
that are commonly found in theatre buildings I present my documentation of the
backstage spaces of eight Sydney theatres. This documentation comprises what I term
a ‘Topography of Practitioner Space.’

The Theatre as House

Putting to one side the social and cultural meanings that inhere in theatre buildings
and instead focussing on function, theatres can be understood as “places whose main
use is to stage or enact performances.” As McAuley elaborates, such places are a
common feature of many societies: “wherever human societies have developed theatre
as a mode of expression, they have also constructed buildings to house it, or they have
adapted existing buildings or naturally occurring spaces for this purpose.” Theatrical
performance, as opposed to less overtly performative behaviour, “takes place at
special times and in special places.” A variety of different cultures express an
understanding that performance is “an activity somehow ‘set apart’ from that of
everyday life” through the particular places they use for performance and the social
practices that surround those performances.

The discernible characteristics of this spatio-temporal separation, such as the physical
form and use of theatres, are of particular importance to the way in which different
societies create, experience, and ultimately understand theatrical performance.
McAuley has noted that in English the word ‘theatre’ denotes both a building and an

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2 Schechner, Performance Theory, 155.
4 Schechner, Performance Theory, 169.
6 Traditionally, places of performance have been closely associated with places of religious worship.
Ancient Greek theatres developed within temple precincts, and many Indian and East Asian
performance genres either utilise places of religious worship or involve pre-performance rituals that
sanctify the performance space. In these ways, performance is situated as somehow different from or
other than everyday social reality. For further information on Greek theatre, see David Wiles, Tragedy
in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1997).
art form; in so-doing she observes how “popular usage has thus encapsulated for English speakers a perception of the vital connection between physical space and artistic communication.”\(^7\) Seeking to describe the nature of this connection, Marvin Carlson has observed, “the physical surroundings of performance never act as a totally neutral filter or frame.”\(^8\) Carlson elaborates that the geographic position of a theatre, its physical fabric, its history, its internal spatial arrangements, and its decorative features will all affect the way performances enacted in that theatre will be understood.\(^9\) For McAuley, this means that a “theatre building or designated place of performance provides a context of interpretation for spectators and performers alike.”\(^10\)

Carlson, like many theatre scholars, uses the metaphor of ‘framing’ to represent the process by which the characteristics of a particular theatre might impact upon the way spectators and performers experience the performances that take place within it. The popularity of the term ‘frame’ stems in large measure from sociologist Erving Goffman’s influential publication *Frame Analysis*. In this book Goffman employed the concept of a frame as a way of representing individuals’ organisation of experience. Goffman notes that,

> [D]efinitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective experience of them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify.\(^11\)

The ‘frame’ metaphor has proved highly useful in furthering the understanding of social processes, and at one level is useful for understanding the relationship between humans and the built environment. The human propensity to build involves the erection of structures that indeed ‘frame’ the various differentiated activities our societies require; buildings are in one sense physical ‘principles of organization.’ Thomas Markus has observed that the wholesale social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution involved a typological explosion in European building design; it

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\(^9\) Ibid., 2.


is this that has led to the degree of specialisation present in the built environment we inhabit in the West today.¹²

However, understanding buildings as frames is problematic because it implicitly limits consideration of their influence to a cognitive, reflective level of experience. As I have argued already, at the level of everyday bodily experience, buildings are habitually encountered as tools; they are used and the nature of their design affects the potential for their use. A person’s experience of a building may therefore aid in their formulation of a framework for understanding, but the building does not equate with that framework. Theatre scholars’ use of the ‘frame’ metaphor demonstrates their recognition of its limitations. I have already quoted Iain Macintosh’s rejection of the term as simply inadequate; Macintosh argues that, “Theatre architecture is more than the frame to a picture.”¹³ In doing so he argues for an appreciation of the relationship between a building and the life within it as multifaceted and dynamic. Gay McAuley too, in her use of the term frame, endows it with a dynamic quality: “The frame constituted by a particular building or venue is not something fixed and immutable but a dynamic and continually evolving social entity.”¹⁴

In attempting to further the understanding of the relationship between theatre buildings and theatrical performance I would like to employ an alternative metaphor of theatres as ‘houses’ for theatrical performance. Such a metaphor is grounded in the language of theatre practitioners themselves, amongst whom theatres are commonly referred to as ‘houses.’ Frank Rich writes, “If you hang around a theatre long enough, you soon learn to call it “the house.” As in: The house is empty. The house is open. The house is full. The house is closed. The house is dark.”¹⁵

This usage derives from a shortening of the term ‘playhouse,’ which traditionally denoted theatre buildings in their entirety. The term ‘playhouse’ remains in use today,

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¹² Markus lists new types of buildings as including “industrial buildings, railway stations, town halls, baths and wash-houses, highly specialised urban markets; libraries, art galleries and museums; civic universities, schools and secular colleges; vastly expanded prisons and hospitals out of which grew asylums and work-houses, hotels and offices.” Markus, Buildings & Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types, xix.
¹⁴ McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, 41.
but, as Martin Harrison notes in *The Language of Theatre*, an historical slippage has occurred in the use of ‘house’; in the sixteenth century ‘house’ commonly referred to the entirety of a theatre, whereas by the seventeenth century it was predominantly used to refer only to those areas inhabited by spectators.\(^\text{16}\) Today, it retains this denotation, referring to both the space in which spectators gather to experience a performance and to the gathered mass of spectators themselves.\(^\text{17}\) Spectators occupy the ‘front of house’ and indeed comprise ‘the house.’ their presence determining whether it is ‘empty,’ ‘open,’ ‘live,’ ‘full,’ or ‘dark.’\(^\text{18}\) This dual meaning of ‘house’ indicates the degree to which practitioners are focussed outwards, on the areas frequented by spectators, as well as betraying practitioners’ implicit awareness that architectural form and the presence of spectators – built structure and social event – *combine* to form the housing, the formative context in which a performance occurs.

An everyday term such as ‘house’ also indicates strongly the ordinary base function of theatre buildings; however specialised, they are still *just* a house or *just* a room. In utilising the metaphor of a theatre as a house I would like to stress this housing function; theatres act as enduring containers and enclosures for theatrical activity, sanctioned places for such activity, places in which theatrical performance might dwell. In light of my understanding of the human experience of built place, outlined in Chapter Two, the metaphor of a theatre as a house is useful because it allows for a richer understanding of the vital connection between place and performance than the primarily semiotic understanding of a theatre building as a frame. Indeed, to conceive of buildings themselves as mere frames leads to a fragmented and piecemeal

\(^{16}\) Martin Harrison, *The Language of Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 126. Today the term ‘playhouse’ refers mainly to a certain type of stage and auditorium arrangement that is designed for the performance of text-based theatre.

\(^{17}\) Some use, in the form of ‘stage house,’ does denote the support spaces (the wings and fly tower) that may be located immediately around and above the stage area of a theatre. In some cases, the type of machinery involved in flying scenery on and off the stage has been used to distinguish what sort of house a theatre was: theatres might be classified as ‘handworked houses,’ ‘hemphouses,’ or ‘counterweight houses.’ The terms ‘handworked house’ and ‘hemphouse’ denote theatres in which scenery is raised and lowered via ropes (hence ‘hemp,’ from which rope was originally made). Harrison notes that hemp is now a largely anachronistic term. Ibid., 122-23. The term ‘counterweight house’ denotes a theatre in which a system of counterweights and pulleys allows the lifting of heavy pieces of scenery. Terry Hodgson, *The Batsford Dictionary of Drama* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1988), 83.

\(^{18}\) The use of such a basic architectural term as ‘house’ to describe a theatre is also evident in other languages, particularly German, where a theatre is also simply *das haus* (‘the house’), and in French, where it is *la salle* (‘the room’). The French term shares the English inference; *la salle* commonly refers to the auditorium of a theatre.
understanding. Simon Unwin has argued that, “Architecture is more to do with making frames than painting pictures; more a matter of providing an accompaniment to life than the dance itself.” In my understanding architecture is part and parcel of the ‘dance itself.’ What must be avoided is a simplification of the nature of dwelling – and the too ready transferral of a useful sociological metaphor into the realm of spatial experience – and instead allow for an opening up of our understanding through acknowledging how “the life and the built fabric work together, to make a state of mind, a state of human being.”

It is precisely in this sense that theatre buildings are vitally connected with the performances and the people housed within them. For practitioners, a theatre is experienced as “a living organism, inseparable from the plays produced within it. One affects the other in every way imaginable.” While this can be experienced in a variety of ways, practitioners feel it most acutely when they perceive a building as impacting negatively on, or restricting, their creative processes. Julian Meyrick, in his history of Sydney’s Nimrod Theatre Company, notes that in the latter half of 1982 there was “a sense that Nimrod was holding the building responsible for the exhaustion within its walls.” In my own fieldwork, practitioners talked about theatres in ways that endowed them with agency. During the technical rehearsals for the 2001 Sydney Theatre Company production of The Christian Brothers, actor Peter Carroll, preparing for a ninety minute solo performance, was concerned about potential strain on his voice in the concrete surrounds of the Sydney Opera House’s Playhouse. Standing alone onstage he swore at the auditorium, “fucking brute,” and stated “it doesn’t give.” Later he elaborated on his feelings: “Just tonight, we haven’t made friends yet.” By way of contrast, Bianca Esther, Head Stage Manager for Opera Australia, spoke of the way that Her Majesty’s Theatre in Perth, unlike the Sydney Opera House, “seemed to expand” to fit in stage sets. In both these

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23 From this point onwards, the following convention will be adopted: When quoting practitioners, material drawn from recorded interviews will be footnoted with a full citation, whilst material drawn from fieldwork conversations will not be footnoted; practitioners’ names will simply be included in the body of the text. In instances when practitioners have explicitly asked to remain anonymous quotations will remain unattributed.
circumstances practitioners personified the venue as a way of explaining its active participation in the conditions of performance; for many practitioners theatres are experienced as having “different personalities.”

By using the metaphor of a theatre as a house I wish to foreground the always emplaced nature of theatrical performance, and the way in which a given performance is always engaged in a complex dialectic with its immediate situation. This dialectic is more immediate and experienced more holistically and dynamically than is suggested by the metaphor of a frame. The exact effects of this dialectic and how it is experienced will be explored through the coming chapters. First, however, I turn to a consideration of the built form of theatres themselves to distinguish what sort of spaces might be found in theatre buildings and how these spaces relate to each other.

Divisions of Space in Theatre Buildings

Historically, theatres have been constructed around a fundamental division between those who perform and those who gather to watch; any theatre is therefore “a place of employment for some, a place of entertainment and cultural enrichment for others.”

In many senses, the common image of a traditional Western theatre owes much to the developments of the European Baroque style, with its horseshoe shaped auditoriums and proscenium arch stages. A common characteristic of theatre buildings is their centripetal nature, where “everything is sucked into the centre of the building, the stage itself.” This centripetal pull is directly related to their function as places that house performance; Arthur Mitchell has written: “In a well-designed theatre, the stage and artists make up one half of a giant circle, the audience the other. The two should feel they go together, as if they were reaching toward one another.”

Theatre buildings, in their internal spatial arrangement, display both a diverse range of shapes and sizes as well as a striking similarity; most continue to spatially reinforce the

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26 Callow, Being an Actor, 182.
dialectical relationship between performer and spectator.\textsuperscript{28} Taking this dialectic as a constant, Carlson notes that “the location, size, shape, and exact relationship of the actor and audience spaces have naturally changed according to changing ideas about the function of theatre and its relationship to other cultural systems.”\textsuperscript{29}

The twentieth century has seen an explosion in theatre forms, accompanied by a rejection amongst many practitioners of theatre buildings altogether.\textsuperscript{30} For these reasons, a language for speaking about the internal space of theatres is important given the ambiguity now attached to the term ‘backstage.’ Martin Harrison notes that the shifts in theatre design have rendered the term ‘backstage’ less descriptive and more figurative. While once the term referred to “that part of the theatre which lay literally at the back and sides of the stage,” it is now “no longer necessarily a structurally exact term, but refers to all areas which are the province of theatre-workers only.”\textsuperscript{31} The term ‘backstage,’ while derived from the structural specifics of theatre design, is now more accurately a reflection of the structure of social relations.

Gay McAuley’s ‘Taxonomy of Spatial Function’ provides a useful tool when attempting to categorise the spaces present within the variety of forms that theatres now embody.\textsuperscript{32} McAuley entitles the first part of her taxonomy the ‘Social Reality,’ in which she delineates the different social spaces inherent in theatrical performance (an illustration based on this part of McAuley’s taxonomy is included as Figure 3.1 below).\textsuperscript{33} Within this category McAuley begins with what she calls “the first spatial fact […] the building itself.” This ‘Theatre Space’ includes,

The building as it exists within or outside the urban space, in relation to other buildings and the activities associated with them, the connotations of its past history, its architectural design, and the kind of access it invites or denies.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{30} See Pearson and Shanks, \textit{Theatre/Archaeology}, 108-09.
\textsuperscript{31} Harrison, \textit{The Language of Theatre}, 23.
\textsuperscript{33} Figure 3.1 is a reproduction of an original by Russell Emerson. For the original, see Russell Emerson, “Computer Imaging of Theatre Spaces: Representing the Empty Space: Software as Design Tool,” \textit{About Performance: Theatre As Performance} 3 (1997): 60.
\textsuperscript{34} McAuley, \textit{Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre}, 24.
Within ‘Theatre Space’ McAuley identifies a fundamental division between ‘Audience Space’ and ‘Practitioner Space,’ those areas which are the realm of spectators, and those areas which are the realm of performers and other practitioners who ensure the smooth running of a performance. Marvin Carlson denotes these areas as respective “support spaces,” noting that each,

… is off-limits to the inhabitants of the other, and those rare occasions when spectators have been permitted to invade backstage areas or when actors have appeared in lobbies and foyers have usually had about them an aura of transgression and the breaking of normal codes.\(^{35}\)

Within the larger category of ‘Practitioner Space’ McAuley includes ‘Rehearsal Space,’ a reference to those spaces and places in which rehearsals are held. In doing

this, McAuley recognises the importance of rehearsal space despite the fact that rehearsals are often conducted in spaces that are physically separate from theatres.

Finally, mediating ‘Audience Space’ and ‘Practitioner Space’ is what McAuley terms ‘Performance Space.’ This is the raison d’être for any building’s existence as a theatre; it is the actual space in which performances occur, a “divided yet nevertheless unitary space in which the two constitutive groups (performers and spectators) meet and work together to create the performance experience.”\(^{36}\) With the centrality and importance of this space in mind, Iain Mackintosh has asserted that the “true purpose” of theatre architecture is to articulate a link between ‘audience,’ ‘practitioner,’ and ‘performance’ spaces, allowing for “the channelling of energy from actor to audience and back again.”\(^{37}\)

In general terms it is not hard to determine the types of spaces that exist within the ‘practitioner space’ of theatres; a variety of technical manuals exist that advise architects as to the spaces required in theatre buildings.\(^{38}\) Theatres will often possess a separate point of entry for practitioners, a so-called ‘stage door.’ Likewise, specialised spaces in theatres will commonly include dressing rooms, social spaces (a ‘greenroom’), technical spaces (storage rooms, workshops, a laundry, control rooms, wig and makeup rooms), rehearsal rooms, wing spaces, and fly facilities. In addition, spaces that are commonly found in buildings used for other purposes will also be found in theatres; these include general offices, corridors, walkways, stairways and lifts, doorways, toilets, and showers. Finally, theatres often contain irregular spaces that resist easy categorisation; these may be used in a variety of informal ways.

Given the great variation in both performance styles and modern theatre forms, not every building utilised as a theatre will include each of these spaces, and the specific characteristics of these will differ from theatre to theatre. Large-scale theatres possess the widest array of differentiated spaces, whilst the increasingly common practice of adapting other building types – most particularly former industrial buildings – for

\(^{38}\) See Ham, Theatre Planning; and Appleton, Buildings for the Performing Arts: A Design and Development Guide.
theatrical purposes means that some of the functions that may be separated out in a purpose-built theatre are compressed into the same physical space. However, to attempt to speak of theatres in general is of little use, for “it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general.”

In the following section I therefore document the specific physical characteristics of a range of Sydney practitioner spaces.

**Sydney Theatres: A Topography of Practitioner Space**

The city of Sydney contains a diverse range of buildings that are utilised for the production and staging of theatrical performance. In addition to the variety of publicly known theatre buildings there are also the relatively hidden places where technical production and rehearsal occur. Following McAuley’s inclusion of ‘Rehearsal Space’ under the category of ‘Practitioner Space,’ in this section my documentation covers a selection of places utilised for rehearsal as well as those utilised for performance. This documentation amounts to a ‘topography’ of Sydney practitioner space. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term ‘topography’ as both “the science or practice of describing a particular place, city, town, manor, parish, or tract of land” and the product of such practice, “the accurate and detailed delineation and description of any locality.”

Being quite literally “the writing of a place,” the creation of a topography is an exercise in translation. In this section I concentrate on ‘perceived’ space, the observable physical characteristics of the spaces that practitioners are provided with as places to work in. As part of the documentation of these spaces I also include a variety of comments about from interviews and conversations I have had with practitioners; these provide a taste of the way in which practitioners experience these spaces. The following chapters will build upon that which is presented here, taking into account the ‘conceived’ and ‘lived’ aspects of these spaces and thereby adding nuance and depth.

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The practitioner spaces I have chosen to document are representative of the variety of environments that professional performers encounter in the city of Sydney. First, I briefly document a cross-section of rehearsal spaces. I then present my documentation of theatres in order of increasing size and public visibility. The first theatres I address are the Old Fitzroy and the Stables, both of which are well known ‘fringe’ venues.\textsuperscript{42} The Ensemble Theatre is included next; it is a non-state subsidised theatre supported solely by a subscriber base. Next, I document the Belvoir Street Theatre and The Wharf Theatre; both are state subsidised theatre companies that have historically grown from fringe beginnings. The Sydney Theatre is the most recently built of Sydney’s theatres and represents a larger scale touring venue. The Lyric Theatre, Star City, is a large scale commercially owned and operated venue. Finally, the Sydney Opera House, a government owned and operated performing arts centre, is included on the basis of its iconic status and the size and complexity of its operation.

As mentioned earlier, the visual documentation, which serves as an important adjunct to the written text, is supplied in two parts: Appendix A, in the form of a CD-ROM, contains photographic documentation with hyperlinks to respective plans; Appendix B contains paper copies of building plans. The CD-ROM, and specific instructions on how to use it, can be found on page 316. In this section, and in later chapters, references to photographic images and building plans will be made according to the following convention: For photographic images, [\textit{See Image 1.1}], and for building plans, [\textit{See Plan 2.a}]. The numerical reference for each image indicates the appropriate link to follow from the front page of the CD-ROM. The alphanumerical reference for each building plan indicates its position within Appendix B.

Keeping in mind Carlson’s exhortation to consider the location of a theatre in the urban landscape, I first briefly describe the geography of Sydney before describing the positioning of the city’s theatres. Sydney is “a low rise sprawling city”\textsuperscript{43} located on the southeast coast of Australia; its suburbs stretch from the harbour of Port Jackson to the Hawkesbury River in the north, the mountains of the Great Dividing Range in the west and the farmland of the Macarthur region in the south. The harbour, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney Opera House, and the city’s beaches maintain a

\textsuperscript{42} See this chap., p. 68, for a brief discussion of the term ‘fringe.’

\textsuperscript{43} Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, "Sydney (Un)Ltd," \textit{People and Place} 9, no. 2 (2001): 41.
centrality in imaginings and representations of the city as a whole; the harbour is the ‘heart’ of Sydney. The provision of public transport infrastructure and the location of high profile cultural facilities also reflect the historic centrality of this area. In reality, however, the geographic centre of the city lies fifteen to twenty kilometres west of the Central Business District (CBD). Many debates over urban planning and the provision of services in Sydney can be understood in terms of a binary between a perceived ‘centre’ and a corresponding ‘periphery’. The ‘centre’ is socio-economically more advantaged than the west and southwest, which possess the areas of highest disadvantage.

The location of Sydney’s professional theatres (as depicted in Figure 3.2 below) reflects the dominance of the city’s perceived centre; the majority of venues are either within or immediately adjacent to the CBD. Of those venues furthest from the CBD, the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre is located to the west in Penrith, while the Parramatta Riverside Theatre is located in Parramatta; both are large complexes containing a range of performance spaces and are the result of multi-level government funding. To the north of the CBD lie the Marian Street and Glen Street theatres, both smaller venues serving the relatively affluent northern suburbs in which they sit. The Ensemble Theatre is located on the northern shore of the harbour at Kirribilli. On the water’s edge to the north of the CBD, the Sydney Opera House occupies the most ostentatious geographic position. On the western side of the Harbour Bridge, the Wharf Theatre and the Sydney Theatre sit in a gentrified former waterfront industrial area. To the immediate west of the CBD the Lyric Theatre is located in the suburb of Pyrmont, part of the recently constructed Star City Casino.

\[44\] Willis and Fry describe these features as icons that effectively equal the city of Sydney “within the cultural economy of tourism.” Such a cultural economy impacts upon residents’ perceptions as much as it does upon tourists’ perceptions. Ibid., 44.

\[45\] Urban planning in Sydney is seemingly polarised between those who advocate urban consolidation and those who advocate further ‘greenfield’ development, effectively extending the boundaries of the metropolitan area. See Ibid., 41.

\[46\] Amongst the factors that Brendan Gleeson and Nicholas Low mention as contributing to disadvantage are ‘locational disadvantage’ (lack of infrastructure, social facilities and public transport access), unemployment, low income and low educational attainment. See Brendan Gleeson and Nicholas Low, Australian Urban Planning: New Challenges, New Agendas (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 48-50.

\[47\] Ross Thorne notes that Commonwealth, State and Local governments funded the construction of the Riverside Theatres “as a necessary facility for the ever growing western suburbs of Sydney.”

\[49\] "Performing Arts Centres: The Phenomenon, and What Has Influenced Their Being,” 46.

\[50\] The Marian Street Theatre and the resident Northside Theatre Company ceased operating in September 2001 following the financial collapse of their major corporate sponsor, HIH Insurance.
Figure 3.2: Two maps showing the geographic distribution of theatre venues used for professional
theatre production in Sydney

Key to venues (with suburbs listed in brackets):

a. Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre (Penrith)  
b. Parramatta Riverside Theatre (Parramatta)  
c. Marian Street Theatre (Killara)  
d. Glen Street Theatre (Frenchs Forest)  
e. Ensemble Theatre (Kirribilli)  
f. Sydney Opera House (Sydney CBD)  
g. Wharf Theatre (Walsh Bay)  
h. Sydney Theatre (Walsh Bay)  
i. Lyric Theatre (Pyrmont)  
j. Theatre Royal (Sydney CBD)  
k. State Theatre (Sydney CBD)  
l. Capitol Theatre (Sydney CBD)  
m. Seymour Theatre Centre (Chippendale)  
n. Performance Space (Redfern)  
o. Belvoir Street Theatre (Surry Hills)  
p. Stables Theatre (Kings Cross)  
q. Darlinghurst Theatre (Potts Point)  
r. Old Fitzroy Theatre (Woolloomooloo)  
s. Enmore Theatre (Enmore)  
t. Newtown Theatre (Newtown)  
u. New Theatre (Newtown)  
v. Edge Theatre (Newtown)  
w. Sidetrack Theatre (Marrickville)  
x. Parade Theatre (Kensington)
Within the CBD itself, three large commercially operated venues are situated: the Theatre Royal, State Theatre and the Capitol Theatre. To the east of the CBD, near the red light and entertainment district of Kings Cross, the smaller Stables, Darlinghurst, and Old Fitzroy theatres are situated. To the immediate southwest of the CBD, the Seymour Theatre Centre forms part of the University of Sydney. The Performance Space is located in the southern inner city suburb of Redfern, while the Belvoir Street Theatre is situated in the neighbouring suburb of Surry Hills. Further to the southwest of the CBD, the larger Enmore Theatre sits on Enmore Road, Enmore, while the Newtown Theatre, New Theatre, and Edge Theatre line King Street as it strikes south through Newtown. The Sidetrack Theatre is located in the neighbouring suburb of Marrickville. The large Parade Theatre is located in the grounds of the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), to the southeast of the CBD in Kensington.

Observing this range of theatrical venues, two features are worthy of comment. The first is the dominance of ‘found’ or ‘adapted’ spaces; very few of Sydney’s theatres were purpose built to serve as theatres. Of those that were purpose built, a significant proportion have incorporated parts of pre-existing buildings, or have been put to uses that are significantly different to those they were originally designed for. Of the five large commercially operated theatres situated within or adjacent to Sydney’s CBD, only one, The Lyric Theatre, is completely purpose built; the Capitol originally served as a produce market,\(^{49}\) the State Theatre was built as a picture cinema, the Theatre Royal was a late insertion into the footings of a high-rise office tower,\(^{50}\) and the Sydney Theatre incorporates a former Bond Store and public laneway. Similarly, of the numerous venues present in the CBD and surrounds, all bar the Parade Theatre, Seymour Theatre Centre, and Enmore Theatre are ‘found’ spaces. Even the Sydney Opera House is arguably an ‘adapted’ structure as none of its venues are used in the manner for which they were originally designed.\(^{51}\) A second feature of Sydney theatres is the lack of any venues of significant age. The extensive re-development of inner city Sydney during the past fifty years, combined with a decline in commercial

\(^{50}\) A brief account of the events surrounding this is given in Ian Bevan, *The Story of the Theatre Royal* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1993), 191-96.
\(^{51}\) See chap. 7 for an historical account of the Sydney Opera House’s politically fraught design and construction.
Theatre activity, has resulted in the demolition of numerous older theatres. Today no theatre built before the beginning of the twentieth century still stands in Sydney.\textsuperscript{52}

The preponderance of ‘found’ or ‘adapted’ theatre spaces impacts upon the particular logics that are at work in the field of theatrical performance in Sydney. Antoine Vitez has stated that, “At the end of the day there are only two types of theatre: the shelter and the edifice.”\textsuperscript{53} Such a strong statement carries a certain resonance in a city where so many theatres appear to fit within the category of ‘shelter.’ Kate Rossmanith has observed that, in Sydney, the extensive use of adapted spaces “informs a large part of cultural memory as stories circulate about the reinventing of place; theatre practice is grounded in ‘authentic’ setting such as defunct warehouses, factories, pub spaces, club-rooms, cafes.”\textsuperscript{54} However, she also notes that the theatre companies housed in these venues “have institutionalised these found spaces so that what were originally unimposing places of possibility are now places firmly positioned within theatre-making in Sydney.”\textsuperscript{55} She proposes that many of the ‘found’ spaces in Sydney might therefore “be understood as a dialogue between ‘shelter’ and ‘edifice.’”\textsuperscript{56} I wish to broaden Rossmanith’s observation and suggest that all of Sydney’s theatres, both those ostensibly ‘purpose-built’ and those ‘adapted,’ are engaged in a dialogue between ‘shelter’ and ‘edifice.’ This dialogue stems from the desire of practitioners and institutions to establish and maintain suitably advantageous positions for themselves in the wider field.

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the structure of any field of endeavour “is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.”\textsuperscript{57} In Sydney, a series of apparent binary oppositions are perpetuated between different institutions and practitioners. Indeed, practitioners themselves perpetuate these binaries through the position-taking

\textsuperscript{52} The oldest extant theatre, The Capitol, was constructed as a Hippodrome for Wirth Bros. Circus, opening in 1916. Murray, \textit{The Capitol Theatre Restoration,} 8.
\textsuperscript{53} Vitez in McAuley, \textit{Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre,} 38.
\textsuperscript{54} K. A. Rossmanith, ”Making Theatre-Making: Rehearsal Practice and Cultural Production” (Phd Thesis, University of Sydney, 2003), 72.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Bourdieu, ”The Field of Cultural Production, Or: The Economic World Reversed,” 30.
discourses they deploy, whether in public statements and advertising, or in more private workplace interactions. Former literary manager for Sydney’s Company B, Chris Mead, has written of these, citing three examples: ‘STC/Belvoir,’ ‘Mainstream/Alternative,’ and ‘Sydney/Melbourne.’ Setting aside the larger scale cultural rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne, arguably the most dominant differentiation within Sydney is that between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ theatre practice, a differentiation made on a variety of grounds, most particularly ideology, the presence (or absence) of state subsidy, monetary remuneration and working conditions afforded the practitioners involved, and the aesthetic style of performances. A category such as ‘mainstream’ is sufficiently broad to allow room for further positioning; Maria Shevtsova has aptly described the Sydney Theatre Company as positioned within the field as the “establishment mainstream” while Company B sets itself apart as the ‘alternative’ or “radical mainstream.” To this I would add a third category of ‘commercial mainstream’ to include the more pragmatic commercially based activities of local and global entertainment producers (an instance of the latter being the Disney corporation). Practitioners who work in ‘alternative’ theatre, more commonly referred to as ‘fringe’ or ‘independent’ theatre, position themselves in partial opposition to such ‘mainstream’ theatrical production. Alan Flower, an experienced fringe performer, used an arboreal metaphor to describe his conception of where the fringe sits within the wider field. As Flower claimed at a forum on fringe theatre in Sydney in 2003, “The base of theatre is a tree … at the roots is the fringe.” Flower clearly positioned the fringe as an indispensable point of origin for all other theatre practice.

Each of the practitioner spaces I document in this chapter is thoroughly implicated in performers’ demarcation and maintenance of positions within the field of theatrical performance in Sydney. Edward Casey argues that a building “condenses a culture in

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59 Maria Shevtsova, Theatre and Cultural Interaction (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1993), 151.
60 Alan Flower, (paper presented at the Beyond the Fringe Forum, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney, 5 November 2003). From this point onwards, the following convention will be adopted: When transcriptions of spoken text are quoted, square brackets surrounding ellipsis points ‘[…]’ indicate the omission of a portion of text. Alternatively, where speakers have paused for a significant period of time, either within or between sentences, this is indicated solely with ellipsis points ‘…’. To prevent confusion, I also use this convention when quoting published sources.
Applying this principle, McAuley has noted that, through the kinds of performances it houses, a theatre “gains a certain reputation within a cultural community.” For performers, the very built fabric of theatres is meaningful in understanding their own position in the wider field. Stephen Dunne, a theatre critic with the Sydney Morning Herald, has argued that ‘fringe’ in particular is “an imprecise term, but instinctively known by those in the industry.” That such knowing can be experienced as ‘instinctive’ is only because certain spaces have been inscribed as ‘fringe’ spaces, thereby informing the practices of those who work there, and in return being re-inscribed and re-formed by those practices. These practitioner spaces are therefore meaningful “because they connect to a sensibility they join in creating.” The ephemeral nature of performance, coupled with the constant uncertainty of working in the field of theatrical performance, means that the built places in which performance and performance-making are housed serve as significant markers for performers’ understandings of their own practice.

1. Rehearsal Spaces

Rehearsal spaces contain the often hidden work of rehearsing a performance and, similar to theatre buildings, house the creative work of preparation. These spaces are of vital importance to performers in the process of creating a performance, for, as Gay McAuley has observed, “they can have a significant impact on the final production.” McAuley has also observed that practitioners’ understandings of their work process are influenced by the features of rehearsal venues: “The nature of the rehearsal space, its level of comfort or discomfort, cleanliness, warmth, and the facilities provided, are a further dimension of the physical framing of the practitioners’ experience.” In Sydney, the location of rehearsal venues, predominantly clustered in inner city areas, mimics the concentration of theatrical venues in the inner suburbs. That I need to

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61 Casey, Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World, 32.
62 McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, 41.
65 McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, 70.
66 Ibid., 71.
document rehearsal spaces on their own is because, “It is rare in Sydney that a cast
rehearses at the venue.”

In Sydney, rehearsal space is at a premium and productions are often unable to pay
market rates for commercially available spaces. McAuley has observed that with such
a situation, “the law of the market functions as effectively as state censorship in
determining whose voice may be heard in the theatre.” In the face of this, many
practitioners, especially those working on fringe productions, utilise personal and
professional networks in a tactical fashion, making use of a wide range of venues,
sometimes more than one during the same rehearsal process. For a production of
Eugene Ionesco’s Rhinoceros by Flyby Productions in 2003, the space originally
intended to serve as a rehearsal venue became unavailable at short notice. Rehearsals
were instead held in a downstairs room made available in the offices of the Griffin
Theatre Company. Ariane Grabrova, observing the rehearsals, noted of this
emergency rehearsal space: “The most prominent feature is that it is extremely
small.” The spaces used for rehearsals in Sydney are often economically marginal,
and subject to regular change as buildings are bought, sold and redeveloped. The
types of spaces commonly used include practitioners’ own homes, spare rooms above
shops, dance studios, school classrooms, warehouses, and church and community
halls. Although the size of spaces can be a significant problem, lack of ventilation and
extremes of temperature can also hinder, or at least markedly affect, the nature of the
work undertaken. Similarly, the intrusion of outside noise can affect concentration.

Regardless of the economic circumstances of the companies involved, rehearsal
spaces can be characterised by their age, lack of cleanliness, lack of suitable
ventilation and temperature control, the invasion of noises or smells, and a lack of
suitable size. Even in purpose built facilities, the lack of attention to the needs of
practitioners is such that it suggests a lack of value placed on the process of rehearsal.
Simon Callow, writing of his experience of rehearsal spaces, has noted, “they share
the same basic character: worn parquet floors, iron bars at the windows, primitive

Production,” 65.
68 McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, 71.
69 Ariane Grabrova, “Rhinoceros by Flyby Productions” (Honours Casebook for the Department of
Performance Studies, University of Sydney, 2003), 8.
plumbing, no air in summer, no heat in the winter and light at any time.” Likewise, the use of many rehearsal spaces requires practitioners to adapt to accommodate the often significant idiosyncrasies of the spaces available. Even gaining admission can be daunting; practitioners can experience a situation like that of veteran Australian actor Ron Haddrick in Adelaide:

I can’t recall exactly where the rehearsal room was, but it was somewhere in the city and on the second floor of a building in one of the narrow streets or lane ways. To gain entrance you had to tug on a string that dangled from one of the second storey windows. This rang a little handbell and the string would then be pulled up, to be lowered again seconds later with the key to the building attached.71

Church and community halls have had a significant role in Australian theatre, if only because of the ubiquity of their existence and the cheap rent. Halls are also prized for their wooden floors, and their spacious, uncluttered interiors. Amongst practitioners, halls are often associated with romantic notions of rehearsal spaces being ‘free’ and ‘open,’ suggesting a similarly unhindered and explorative creative process. Actor Robert Meldrum, interviewed during rehearsals for the Bell Shakespeare Company’s 2003 production of As You Like It, noted, “I feel like I’m back in one of those wonderful buildings, where, yes, it’s cold, but it’s a great big space and there’s tons of light and there’s the wooden floor and you feel you can move, and do things.”72 Actor Steve Rogers, writing of rehearsals for Pork Chop’s 2003 production of Reg Cribb’s Last Cab to Darwin, emphasised the positive simplicity of his situation; he was simply “trying to make and tell stories with a bunch of other tinkers in a dusty old church hall somewhere in Australia.”73 St Stephen’s Church Hall in the inner city suburb of Newtown is the established rehearsal venue for Company B productions [See Images 1.1 and 1.2].

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70 Callow, Being an Actor, 160.
A great range of Sydney’s established rehearsal venues bear some institutional affiliation, particularly to educational, cultural or arts organisations. These affiliations subsidise the use of rehearsal spaces, ensuring that they remain available. The Middle Eastern Dance Studios in the Sydney suburb of St. Peters [See Images 1.3 and 1.4] are a good example of the types of facility that fringe and co-operative theatre groups use. The PACT Theatre in Erskineville [See Images 1.5 and 1.6], Sidetrack Theatre in Marrickville [See Image 1.7] and the Figtree Theatre, located in the grounds of the University of New South Wales [See Images 1.8 and 1.9], are all theatres that are frequently used as rehearsal spaces.

The Eveleigh CarriageWorks [See Image 1.10] is a former industrial building now managed by Company B and largely used for technical production; it houses some rudimentary spaces for rehearsal [See Images 1.11 and 1.12]. The lack of insulation makes it highly exposed to variations in external temperature. University facilities, such as the dedicated rehearsal spaces of the Webster Building at the University of New South Wales [See Images 1.13 and 1.14] and the Rex Cramphorn Studio at the University of Sydney [See Image 1.15], offer a more comfortable working environment and are consequently in high demand. The Red Box in Lilyfield is a specialised physical theatre rehearsal venue provided by the NSW State Government for the company Legs On The Wall [See Image 1.16].

The Brent Street Studios in Waterloo, a private performing arts school, are frequently used for rehearsals of musical theatre productions [See Images 1.17 and 1.18]. Opera Australia’s premises in a former industrial complex in Surry Hills contain a number of dedicated rehearsal rooms and recital studios [See Image 1.19]. The Bell Shakespeare Company’s 2003 production of Hamlet utilised the Australian Broadcasting Corporation studios in the northern suburb of Gore Hill. The benefit of the physical space provided in such a spacious venue was the ability to spatially differentiate different functions, in the case of Hamlet, allowing for a distinct stage area [See Image 1.20], an area for the storage of props, areas for the directorial staff to sit, and a separate office for stage management and other production staff [See Image 1.21].

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74 Both the PACT and Sidetrack theatres have companies in residence; PACT is home to PACT Youth Theatre, while Sidetrack is home to the Sidetrack Performance Group. The Figtree Theatre, now primarily used for student theatre productions, was the initial venue for the National Institute of Dramatic Art and the Old Tote Theatre Company.

75 At the time of writing, the NSW State Government’s Ministry for the Arts is renovating the Eveleigh CarriageWorks to serve as a new venue for physical theatre and contemporary dance performance.
Only a few of Sydney’s theatres possess dedicated rehearsal spaces. Of those that do, many, like the Belvoir Street Theatre and the Wharf Theatre, have former rehearsal spaces that have been converted for other uses, particularly as additional theatres. The Lyric Theatre maintains a small rehearsal room [See Image 1.22], which unfortunately does not match the size of the Lyric Theatre stage. Of the Lyric’s second rehearsal room, Stephen Wickham, the Lyric’s Technical Director remarked, “Rehearsal room two is pretty much useless for rehearsing in because it’s very small and it’s an odd shape. So I turned it into a visiting company management office.”76 The Wharf Theatre houses two rehearsal spaces, one smaller and one larger, that correspond in size to the Wharf One theatre and the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House, respectively. The Small Rehearsal Room possesses a wooden floor, white walls, a particularly high ceiling and natural light [See Images 1.23 and 1.24]. A particular advantage of both rehearsal spaces at the Wharf is their proximity to the company’s administration, workshop and costume departments. The Richard Wherrett Studio in the Sydney Theatre is particularly atmospheric; it possesses polished wooden floorboards, exposed brickwork and a floor area equal to that of the Sydney Theatre’s stage [See Image 1.25]. Three dedicated rehearsal spaces are situated within the Sydney Opera House.77 The largest [See Images 1.26 and 1.27] is positioned immediately above the Drama Theatre and cannot be used whilst performances are carried out in the theatre below. Added to this, the room is positioned on its own floor level and is only accessible via stairs. All stage properties and items of set must be physically manoeuvred up and down these stairs. The smaller Ensemble Rehearsal Room and Chorus Rehearsal Room are located on the ground floor of the building adjacent to a garbage storage area [See Image 1.28].78

2. Old Fitzroy Theatre

The Old Fitzroy Theatre [See Image 2.1] is located in the inner city suburb of Woollahra and is housed in a formerly disused room of the Old Fitzroy Pub [See Image 2.2], from which it takes its name. The theatre seats sixty spectators in two banks of seating, and was founded in 1997 by the Tamarama Rock Surfers. This

77 In addition to this there are a number of rooms dedicated to opera performers’ vocal preparations.
78 Both of these have been adapted from earlier uses, one as a call centre – a row of telephone sockets still lines the walls.
company states its ethos as being the provision of “the necessary middle ground for the 400 or so performers that graduate from drama schools all over Australia each and every year.”\textsuperscript{79} The Old Fitzroy is, in the words of actor Nicholas Papademetriou, a “well-known fringe space”\textsuperscript{80} amongst both practitioners and spectators in Sydney.

The Old Fitzroy offers the most rudimentary of accommodation to practitioners and spectators alike. The theatre is located in one small rectangular room [\textit{See Plan 2.a}], into which scaffolding has been erected to form two steeply raked banks of seating at the street end, one prompt, the other opposite prompt, split by a fire exit [\textit{See Image 2.3}].\textsuperscript{81} Two points of access to the theatre are available; spectators enter through a door from a restaurant area in the pub itself [\textit{See Image 2.4 and Plan 2.b}], while practitioners will commonly use the door between the seating banks that leads directly onto the street [\textit{See Image 2.1}]. At the upstage end of the theatre, three doors lead to two small rooms and an alcove [\textit{See Images 2.5 and 2.6}]. The two rooms previously served as toilets and have been adapted to serve as both storage areas and practitioner accommodation [\textit{See Images 2.7 and 2.8}]. In each case the toilet facilities remain; actors who have worked in the Old Fitzroy are therefore aware that one of the ‘dressing rooms’ was “a men’s urinal,” particularly because “the urinal is still there, and so is the smell.”\textsuperscript{82} Performers also make use of the space under each of the audience seating scaffolds [\textit{See Images 2.9 and 2.10}]. These informal practitioner spaces bear traces of usage through both the presence of seating and small additions such as fragments of mirror [\textit{See Image 2.11}].

For both practitioners and spectators, the intimacy of the Old Fitzroy is a prime reason for the theatre’s popularity. This intimacy is, however, borne at the cost of practitioner comfort. Given the arrangement and small size of the spaces in which performers must wait for their entrances, they are unable to move from these positions once an

\textsuperscript{80} Nicholas Papademetriou, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 30 May 2003.
\textsuperscript{81} From this point onwards, the terms ‘Prompt’ and ‘Opposite Prompt’ (occasionally abbreviated as ‘P’ and ‘OP’) will be used to denote ‘Stage Left’ and ‘Stage Right’ respectively. Martin Harrison notes that the use of the term ‘prompt’ to denote a stage left position derives from the eighteenth century when it became the standard position for those who performed the role of prompter. ‘Prompt corner’ is now the standard position for stage managers in a proscenium arch theatre, and the convention of P and OP is widely used in modern theatrical practice. See Harrison, \textit{The Language of Theatre}, 208-09.
\textsuperscript{82} Camilla Ah Kin, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 4 October 2001.
audience enters. In the Old Fitzroy performers can often experience extreme discomfort. One actor, Eliza Logan, explained the quite basic conditions experienced in the practitioner spaces of the Old Fitzroy:

You have to be really careful in those backstage spaces … it’s a tight space with not very much room and you can set it up to suit what you need, but generally you are just going to sit back on a milk crate and wait, and carefully, tentatively walk out without bashing your head on something.\(^8^3\)

It is the combination of the intimate and responsive conditions of the theatre’s performance space and the extremely basic conditions endured in the practitioner spaces that led Logan to describe the Old Fitzroy as both “insane” and “fantastic.”\(^8^4\) Another actor, Camilla Ah Kin, has described how such poor conditions “can quite often feed into a play in a terrific way.”\(^8^5\) The experience she related was during a production of Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* that involved thirteen performers crammed into the theatre. In Ah Kin’s experience,

It really served the focus and intensity of the play to have six people sitting in the six chairs that were lined up underneath each bleacher, in perfect quiet, staying inside the play, and making their entrances and exits as economically as humanly possible […] it really reduced the margin for mucking it up, if you like, because you are very exposed.\(^8^6\)

### 3. Stables Theatre

The Stables Theatre [See Image 3.1] is located in Nimrod Street, Kings Cross, only a short distance from the Old Fitzroy, and is home to the Griffin Theatre Company. The founding members of Sydney’s Nimrod Theatre Company converted the former stables into a theatre in 1970. Originally named The Nimrod Theatre, after its address, the theatre was renamed after Nimrod moved to larger premises in 1974. One of Nimrod’s founders, actor and director John Bell, described the building prior to its conversion as, “a small two-storey ruin of bare brick walls and rotting timber built in the shape of a narrow wedge. A rickety staircase gave access to the low room.

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\(^8^3\) Eliza Logan, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 June 2003.
\(^8^4\) Ibid.
\(^8^5\) Ah Kin, interview.
\(^8^6\) Ibid.
upstairs.”87 While the building has been renovated extensively since its initial conversion, it still retains a rough, basic feel; in performers’ experiences, “it reminds you it’s just a room”88 and “it feels like a place where real life happens.”89

Physically, the Stables is a small two-storied triangular building. The ground floor is accessed via two large double doors [See Image 3.2] and houses the foyer, box office, bar, and audience toilets [See Plan 3.a]. The performance space itself is located on the second floor, accessed by wide wooden stairs from the foyer [See Plan 3.b]. The stage is kite-shaped and nestles into the rear corner of the building. On either side, banks of audience seating flank the performance space, accommodating a maximum audience capacity of 120. The theatre’s practitioner spaces are located under the two banks of audience seating. The prompt bank sits atop a technical storage area that is connected to the control box, whilst the theatre’s single dressing room is located under the opposite prompt seating bank. Access to the dressing room is via a small landing at the top of the theatre’s fire exit [See Plan 3.c]. Here, a curtained doorway [See Image 3.3] gives access to a small carpeted corridor [See Image 3.4]. When entering the dressing room, a single toilet is located on the right hand side [See Image 3.5]. Prior to its addition in 1997, the Stables did not possess toilet facilities that were accessible to performers once spectators had gathered in the foyer below. Instead, “people would have to piss out the window, or in a bucket or a bottle.”90 Although the dressing room now contains a toilet, this cannot be flushed whilst a performance is in progress. The dressing room is itself a single small triangular room. Nearest the door are coffee and tea making facilities [See Image 3.6]. A long bench runs down one side of the room providing a space for makeup and personal effects [See Images 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, and 3.10]. A costume rack is located against the opposite wall [See Image 3.11]. Four windows provide views of the street and neighbouring buildings.

90 Ros Horin, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 8 August 2001. John Bell also relates the story of how “John Krummel, playing the title role in Ron Blair’s President Wilson in Paris, used to get an attack of the nervous wee-wees just before his first entrance. He had no recourse but to piss into a paper cup and throw it out the window. One night, inevitably, he drenched two lovers snogging in the lane below.” Bell, The Time of My Life, 101.
A number of factors make working in the Stables a challenge for performers. The small size and prominent triangular tapering of the dressing room means that it is “a bit of a tight squeeze for anything other than a one-person show.”

During the 2003 Griffin season of Brendan Cowell’s *Rabbit*, actor Russell Keifel similarly described the dressing room as “a room for one person inhabited by five.” Many actors have commented that the dressing room is “really inadequate,” “very testing,” and “most uncomfortable.” While the presence of the windows mitigates the sense of crowding, the dressing room is prohibitively small. A related challenge facing performers in this theatre is that they are effectively trapped within the dressing room once spectators enter the performance space. From the audience seating the entrance to the dressing room is visible and therefore anyone entering or exiting the dressing room is visible. The lack of a door between the dressing room and the performance space means that they are acoustically linked. Performers in the dressing room must remain quiet whilst a performance is in progress. For this reason, the dressing room lacks a sense of refuge or privacy. Performer Julia Zemiro explained that the Stables as a venue “feels naked and open […] it feels like everywhere is the stage.”

Actor Deborah Kennedy expressed a similar sentiment: “you’re virtually onstage right from the start.” Actor William Zappa noted, “There’s no hiding place.” The sense that the Stables provides only the most basic of facilities was evident in the comments of Russell Keifel, who stated that “I feel like I’m in my shed,” and actor Cecily Hardy who felt that to be an actor in the Stables is merely to “roost there.” The journey from the dressing room to the stage can also pose a challenge for performers. A performer exiting the dressing room door, whilst visible to members of the audience, is technically not onstage until they reach the top of the stairs. During her approach to the stage a performer gradually enters the view of all the audience members. Entrances can therefore be “muddy.”

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93 Ah Kin, interview.
95 Kiefel, interview.
96 Zemiro, interview.
99 Kiefel, interview.
100 Cecily Hardy, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 3 May 2003.
101 Director Kate Gaul used this term during dress rehearsals for the aforementioned production of *Rabbit*.
and must be timed carefully [See Image 3.12]. In many productions this visible offstage area is used as an extension of the fictional space of the performance.

Although it has only been in use as a theatre for the past thirty-six years, the Stables is regarded as a particularly historic building. The Nimrod Theatre Company, responsible for the conversion of the building into a venue for theatre, was part of a wider 1970s theatrical movement that rejected what they perceived as an overly anglophile cultural environment and attempted to define a specifically Australian theatrical style.102 Historian Julian Meyrick has written of the way the renovation of the building itself proved a catalyst: “In bringing the building to life the company catalysed their own spirits, providing a focus for a restless, seemingly endless dynamism, and drawing in a wide band of like-minded artist-cum-partners-cum-friends eager to act, direct, design and produce.”103 The so-called ‘New Wave’ launched the careers of many who are now successful and established theatre practitioners. In his autobiography John Bell has commented that the Stables “absorbed our joy, as well as our sweat and tears.”104 This absorption of previous inhabitants’ labour and emotional output continues to affect younger performers working in the Stables today.105 Socratis Otto, a graduate of NIDA in 2000, spoke of how, “It’s got such a history. Personally, for me, that’s an added excitement to be in this building because there’s such a history about it … and for me that’s an added comfort.”106

4. Ensemble Theatre

The Ensemble Theatre is located in a converted boatshed in the harbour-side suburb of Kirribilli [See Image 4.1]. The theatre is the home of the Ensemble Theatre Company, founded in 1958 by expatriate American actor Hayes Gordon, along with a number of his former acting students. The company purchased the boatshed for £6,500 in 1959, with Gordon, a number of his acting pupils, and members of the

102 See Meyrick, See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave, 7-15.
103 Ibid., 24.
104 Bell, The Time of My Life, 149.
105 David Berthold, the current Artistic Director of Griffin has written recently of The Stables as “a place for beginnings” that is “seasoned with the sweat and song of history.” David Berthold, "The Griffin Essay: What Can Griffin Be?" The Griffin Guardian, March-June (2004).
fledgling Ensemble Theatre Company, renovating it into a theatre-in-the-round over the following three and a half months. The Ensemble opened as a theatre in January 1960. Although numerous repairs and additions were made during the following years, the theatre remained largely unchanged until it was significantly rebuilt in 1984. This rebuilding saw the performance space converted from an in-the-round to an end stage configuration (seating 216 spectators), as well as a complete change to the internal layout of the building; notably the dressing rooms were relocated to the lower level of the building [See Plan 4.a].

The Ensemble Theatre is arranged on two levels that jut out over the waters of Careening Cove [See Plan 4.b]. The upper level houses the foyer, a bar, company offices and the public entrances to the building. The audience seating is arranged on a rake from the upper level to the lower level [See Plan 4.c]. The lower level houses the stage, and a restaurant at the harbour end; audience toilets, dressing rooms, and a technical storage area at the landward end. Practitioners have a separate point of entry to the building from MacDougall Street [See Images 4.2 and 4.3]. From here, a door opens into the greenroom [See Image 4.4]. An adjacent set of double doors provides access via a corridor to the opposite prompt stage entrance [See Images 4.5 and 4.6]. The greenroom contains a kitchen area [See Image 4.7], two couches, and a wall of photographic memorabilia from past productions [See Image 4.8]. A door provides access from the greenroom to the first of the two dressing rooms [See Image 4.9]. The larger of the two dressing rooms contains bench space and mirrors for seven performers [See Images 4.10 and 4.11], as well as two sinks and a shower [See Image 4.12]. The smaller of the two dressing rooms contains bench space and mirrors for four actors, as well as two sinks and a shower [See Image 4.13]. A support space for the restaurant is accessible from this dressing room. Only one toilet is supplied for performers. The dressing rooms are very clean and well kept, although the ceiling seems low, a perception accentuated by air conditioning ducts and other service conduits that run across the ceiling. Ventilation in the dressing rooms is provided solely by mechanical means.

107 An account of this can be found in Lawrence Durrant, *Hayes Gordon: The Man and His Dream* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1997), 119 - 21.
108 Ibid., 201-02.
Access from the dressing rooms to the stage is through the greenroom and a technical storage area [See Image 4.14] to a crossover corridor that runs under the audience seating banks, connecting the two stage entrances [See Image 4.15]. The prompt stage entrance is approached through a set of double doors [See Image 4.16], which mark the beginning of a darkened wing space [See Image 4.17]. From here, access to the stage is via a short corridor [See Image 4.18]. The opposite prompt stage entrance is almost identical [See Image 4.19], although its approaches are not as secluded [See Image 4.6].

Practitioner spaces at the Ensemble are comfortable but suffer from a lack of outlook, with no windows provided. For actor Sandy Gore, the “backstage is actually pretty cruddy because there is nowhere to escape to.”\textsuperscript{109} While the facilities are not plush, they are clean and laid out in an efficient and functional fashion. At the Ensemble, “there are no ribbons and bows at all, it’s functional.”\textsuperscript{110} Similar to the Stables theatre, the Ensemble has a sense of performance history that resonates in the building. The clearest manifestation of this is in the greenroom photographs, whilst the history is also articulated through the stories of the practitioners and volunteers who work at the Ensemble, and in the continuous residency and production history of the Ensemble Theatre Company. For performers, this history provides a sense of continuity at the Ensemble. It is,

… a living, breathing, organic space, because only forty-eight hours or seventy-two hours before, someone was actually in your space. So you clear away from them and maybe take down the little nametag that still might be left there, leftover […] but then it becomes your space and it is an ongoing thing, so that there is always life there.\textsuperscript{111}

5. Belvoir Street Theatre

The Belvoir Street Theatre is a squat brick building located in Belvoir Street, Surry Hills [See Image 5.1]. Converted in 1974 from its original use as a salt and tomato sauce factory, the Belvoir Street Theatre was the second venue utilised by the Nimrod

\textsuperscript{109} Sandy Gore, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 18 October 2001.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
Theatre Company and was originally named the ‘New Nimrod.’ The building houses two theatres, the Upstairs Theatre, with a capacity of 320 spectators, and the Downstairs Theatre, with a capacity of eighty. The Downstairs Theatre was added in 1976, occupying a room previously used as an onsite rehearsal space.

The Belvoir Street Theatre occupies three different flooring levels. The ground floor houses the foyer, box office, bar, audience toilets, performers’ dressing rooms, company offices, and the Downstairs Theatre [See Plan 5.a]. The public entrance to the building is located at the rear of the building, accessible via a side alley from the street. The middle level supports the stage of the Upstairs Theatre, a subscription office, performers’ greenroom, and technical storage [See Plan 5.b]. The upper level supports the Upstairs Theatre control box, the rear of the audience seating, and the technical production offices [See Plans 5.c, 5.d, and 5.e]. Working conditions within the building are extremely basic for performers and office staff alike. Space is at a premium and the building is in need of a thorough renovation, as is evident from the peeling paint and holes in some sections of flooring. No substantial repairs or renovations have been undertaken since the building’s initial conversion in 1974, although, at the time of writing, a major renovation of the building is underway. Shortly before these renovations began, actor Julie Hamilton remarked, “It’s pretty much the same as when I was here back in the late 70s and 80s.”

The ground floor of the Belvoir Street building houses the majority of practitioner preparation spaces, most particularly the dressing rooms for both the Upstairs and Downstairs theatres. The ground floor access to these spaces is via a set of double doors in the foyer [See Image 5.2]. These doors are often left ajar, but when closed, a security code is required. Once inside these doors the crowded nature of the Belvoir building is evident in the cramped corridors and the utilisation of almost every available surface area for storage [See Image 5.3]. The area of the building

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112 Meyrick, See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave, 93. See chap. 6 of this thesis for a further discussion of the history of the Belvoir Street Theatre.

113 The renovation were initially planned to cost A$8.5 million and result in an extra floor being added to the building to enable rehearsals to be held on site. Lack of approval from Sydney City Council has seen an alternative plan developed. The current Belvoir building will be thoroughly renovated, while extra office space, a rehearsal room, and a costume store will be housed in a leased warehouse a short distance away.

immediately adjacent to the foyer was originally used as office space. The creation of
the Downstairs Theatre required additional dressing room facilities. Half this space is
now used as offices while the other half serves as a dressing room for the Downstairs
Theatre.

The Downstairs Theatre dressing room is divided from the office and access corridor
by plywood partitions [See Image 5.4]. Occupants of both the office and the
dressing room can hear each other’s conversations. A pair of black curtains screens
the entrance to the dressing room itself [See Image 5.5]. On the immediate left-hand
side of the entrance is an open cupboard for the hanging of costumes [See Image 5.6].
A bench with an accompanying mirror occupies the left-hand wall of the room [See
Image 5.7]. A mirror and tannoy hang on the rear partition. Cast notices are often
attached to this wall [See Image 5.8]. Another bench with accompanying mirror
occupies the right-hand wall [See Image 5.9]. Although this dressing room is designed
to accommodate four to five performers, cast sizes can number as many as ten.

The Upstairs Theatre dressing room lies adjacent to the Downstairs Theatre dressing
room and is separated by a masonry wall and single wooden door. It is therefore
acoustically self-contained. The dressing room is open plan, being partially divided
down the centre by a wooden partition comprised of bench space, storage space and
mirrors. In most circumstances male performers occupy one side, with female
performers on the other. Entering from the Downstairs dressing room, a cast
noticeboard is attached to a wall on the left-hand side of the door [See Image 5.10].
Opposite this is another open cupboard for the hanging of costumes [See Image 5.11].
Walking from one side of the partition to the other takes one past benches and mirrors
[See Images 5.12 and 5.13], as well as two shower cubicles and two toilets [See Image
5.14]. Performers working in both theatres share the shower and toilet facilities, but
the location of those showers and toilets in the Upstairs Theatre dressing room
indicates a privileging of those working upstairs as opposed to those working

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315 The photographs of the Downstairs Theatre dressing room supplied on the CD-ROM were taken
316 ‘Tannoy’ is a name commonly given to a backstage speaker through which a performance and stage
management calls are broadcast. The term ‘tannoy’ is derived from an American brand name. Harrison,
The Language of Theatre, 271.
317 The photographs of the Upstairs Theatre dressing room supplied on the CD-ROM were taken during
downstairs. However, the presence of the toilets can result in unpleasant smells and a lack of acoustic privacy. Tea and coffee facilities are provided on a small metal cupboard that sits at the end of the dividing partition [See Image 5.15]. The other side of the dressing room provides a slightly larger space [See Image 5.16]. Hanging space and a small washbasin are also provided in this section [See Image 5.17]. A door by the hanging space provides access to both the Upstairs and Downstairs theatres [See Image 5.18]; the Upstairs Theatre dressing room is also a thoroughfare.

The dour nature of the Upstairs Theatre dressing room has led to complaints that, “the paint is dodgy,” and “it’s grubby. It smells after rain.” Actor Patrick Dickson commented that the practitioner space in Belvoir is “cheap and chatty: cheap carpet and chairs, cheap coffee, cheap biscuits … it’s tragic really.” The décor of the room is comprised of dirty grey carpet and off-white walls. Paint on the doors and cupboards is peeling, and the windows in the room are boarded up, allowing little natural light to enter even during the day; fluorescent tubes provide light and an air conditioning unit provides ventilation. The particular layout of the Belvoir Street dressing room does however encourage a particular sociality. Actor John Bell, making a direct comparison with the Wharf Theatre dressing room, noted that what he called the ‘Belvoir model’ is “infinitely preferable to compartmentalised cubicles.” Patrick Dickson enjoyed the fact that there was “something chatty” about the layout. Actor Deborah Kennedy suggested it encouraged a “lovely camaraderie,” while actor Kerry Walker referred to a great “all in together” feeling. However, for actors who, like Anthony Phelan, prefer a quieter preparatory space, the Belvoir Street dressing room can seem “too crowded.”

Beyond the door that leads from the Upstairs Theatre dressing room towards the two performances spaces is a short corridor [See Image 5.19] that provides access to a stairwell, a photocopying room under the stairs, a laundry room [See Images 5.20 and 5.21], and the Downstairs Theatre. The Downstairs Theatre is a small thrust stage set

318 Zemiro, interview.
321 Dickson, interview.
322 Kennedy, interview.
324 Phelan, interview.
against an internal brick wall and surrounded on three sides by audience seating rostra. Performers’ main access to the Downstairs Theatre is through an alcove located in the upstage opposite prompt corner of the stage area [See Image 5.22]; this is often screened from the audience’s view. To allow for a greater range of possibilities, performers working in the Downstairs Theatre will often use the audience’s point of entry from the foyer as an additional entry point during performances. This requires them to walk from their dressing room through the foyer and into a sound lock that separates the Downstairs Theatre from the foyer. Once inside the theatre, actors may then wait for an entrance behind the audience seating [See Image 5.23]. In this position they are partially exposed to the audience whilst still offstage.

The stairs that link the Upstairs Theatre dressing rooms on the ground floor to the performance space on the first floor serve as an access route from a zone of preparation to a zone of performance. Being both narrow and steep they are a place of travel, not a place of hesitation [See Images 5.24 and 5.25]. Notably, at the head of the stairs, the high ceilings and relative space and light of the dressing rooms are replaced with low ceilings, narrow corridor space and a change in both the colour of the walls and floor covering [See Image 5.26]. This contributes to a sense that “downstairs seems a world away from upstairs.”

A dedicated practitioner entrance to the theatre is located on the first floor [See Image 5.27], close to the top of the stairs and the stage [See Image 5.28]. This gives direct access to an area commonly referred to as ‘the tunnel’ [See Image 5.29]. During performances this area is darkened and serves as a wing space, an immediate offstage area. From the tunnel a corridor winds around under the banks of audience seating towards a second stage entrance [See Image 5.30]. To reach this second entrance means passing through what is commonly referred to as ‘the greenroom’ [See Image 5.31].

The Belvoir ‘greenroom’ is used as a space for the organisation of performers, props and costumes, being close to the performance space as well as a rest area outside the

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125 Phelan, interview.
dressing room [See Images 5.32 and 5.33]. An electronic communication link to the control box above allows this room to be used by stage management during performances [See Image 5.34]. At one end of the greenroom is a small kitchen area with bench space [See Images 5.35 and 5.36]; the whole kitchen area occupies an alcove at one end of the greenroom [See Image 5.37]. At the time of photographing, this space still bore the material traces of former productions [See Image 5.38]. Exposed service conduits across the ceiling of the greenroom contribute to the primitive feel of working conditions [See Image 5.39], as does the provision of a steel ladder [See Image 5.40] to connect the greenroom to the control box above [See Image 5.41].

The corridor that leads under the audience seating also provides access to an electrical storeroom [See Image 5.42] and the theatre’s subscriptions office. The positioning of the subscriptions office indicates a lack of separation between spaces utilised for performances and those that support the day-to-day operation of the theatre company; of this situation production manager Brenna Hobson has stated, “We’ve got eight full-time day staff who theoretically can’t get to their offices when there’s a matinee … of course we all do.” At the time of photographing, a notice pinned to the wall of the subscription office voiced staff concerns over the lack of resources [See Image 5.43]. At the end of the corridor is a small waiting area with hooks for hanging costumes [See Image 5.44]. This tight space connects to the ‘vomitory’ (or ‘vom’), an entrance that allows performers to emerge through the audience and onto the stage [See Images 5.45 and 5.46].

Performers are therefore able to access the Upstairs Theatre stage [See Image 5.47] via the vomitory towards opposite prompt, or the ‘tunnel’ at prompt [See Image 5.48]. The prompt stage entrance allows performers a clear view of a majority of the stage whilst still remaining hidden from the audience [See Image 5.49]. From the audience space, performers entering the stage are gradually revealed [See Image 5.50]. In addition to these two entrances, flats or backdrops that mask the rear walls of the stage can allow for multiple entrances as well as providing additional practitioner.

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[126] A preceding (and bloody) Company B production of Martin McDonagh’s The Lieutenant of Inishmore left fake blood stains and spills throughout the greenroom and stage approaches.
space. A 2001 Company B production of Dallas Winmar’s *Aliwa* utilised a set that allowed performers to squeeze behind it [See Image 5.51].

The presence of material traces from previous performances, particularly in the form of graffiti, contributes to an inhabited, homely feel within the practitioner spaces of the Belvoir building. A significant example of this is a piece of graffiti created by the artistic director of the resident theatre company, Company B. On the wall behind the ladder that connects both greenroom and control box, Neil Armfield has scrawled:

> NB! When climbing ladder don’t swing out or you can smash your head on the concrete slab behind/above as I just did. Neil Armfield 31.5.02 [See Image 5.52]

This comment memorialises a trivial event, but the off-hand manner in which it has been written indicates a certain attitude of both ownership and homely informality towards the building itself. Numerous other examples of graffiti exist from previous performances. When the greenroom was repainted in January 2004, particular pieces of graffiti were actually retained, including a device created by a child performer that enables mugs of coffee and tea to be lifted up into the control box [See Image 5.53] as well as the aforementioned comment by Neil Armfield and a piece of innuendo contributed by actor Noah Taylor [See Image 5.54].

Every centimetre of space within the Belvoir Street building is utilised for some purpose with the result that a high level of wear and tear is evident. This contributes to the sense in which “you feel like you’re walking into a place that’s active and busy,”127 but at the same time there is also simply very little room available, particularly for performance preparation or contemplation. Practitioners have to work within highly uncomfortable spaces: cramped corridors, partitioned rooms, bare brick walls, and unpainted ceilings. Like the Stables and the Ensemble, the Belvoir Street building was not constructed as a place for theatre making, but has been adapted to serve as such.

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127 Zemiro, interview.
6. Wharf Theatre

The Wharf Theatre is located on Hickson Road, Walsh Bay, in a gentrified former industrial area [See Image 6.1]. As the name suggests, the theatre is housed in an old finger wharf, one of four in the immediate area that were built during 1919 [See Image 6.2]. The NSW State Government financed the conversion of the building to house the flagship state theatre company, the Sydney Theatre Company (STC). Architect Vivian Fraser, in consultation with then artistic director of the STC Richard Wherrett, designed the conversion. Opened on the 13th December 1984 the building originally housed one dedicated theatre (seating between 309 and 324 spectators depending on the arrangement of seats), three dedicated rehearsal rooms, 128 wardrobe and workshop facilities, and space for administration on the upper level [See Plan 6.a]. The lower level was left as a largely open space that accommodated additional workshop activities and served as a venue called Wharf Three. Today, a number of arts companies occupy the renovated lower level, including The Sydney Dance Company, Bangarra Dance Theatre, the Australian Theatre for Young People, and the Sydney Philharmonia Choir. Wharf One, the main theatre at The Wharf, can be configured either as a small thrust stage, or with the stage in a corner, a configuration strikingly similar to the layout of the Stables and Belvoir Street theatres [See Plan 6.b]. Shortly after the appointment of Wayne Harrison as artistic director in 1990, one of the three rehearsal rooms was adapted as a second theatre, dubbed ‘Wharf Two.’ It possesses an end-stage configuration with a single bank of seating accommodating 200 spectators.

The main feature of The Wharf is the length of the building itself, jutting out into Sydney Harbour. Architect Vivian Fraser, writing about his design choices, commented that the Wharf building is “strong and bold,” and that he believed “the proper architectural approach [was] to be subordinate to the existing structure.” 129 His design has emphasised these qualities, placing the theatres towards the harbour (or ‘deep’) end of the building and creating a long entrance gallery: “One certainly can’t

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128 These were discussed in the earlier section on rehearsal spaces. See page 73.
be indifferent to that long gallery, and it can be seen as daunting or boring.”

130 The main impression gathered in any experience of the building is its length, and the connection that is felt, throughout the building, to the harbour outside. Actor Anthony Phelan commented that the Wharf is his favourite theatre specifically because “the harbour’s there and you can get outside.”

131 The internal finish of the building provides a reminder of its past use; the original flooring in the long main corridor bears significant scarring from heavy industrial use [See Image 6.3].

The practitioner spaces within the Wharf Theatre are maintained to a high standard of cleanliness. The corridors and spaces used by practitioners are generally efficient, and well maintained. Practitioners entering the building have a choice of three access points. The first two are via the main internal corridors, one being the main public access to the theatre, and the other, a ‘fire tunnel’ that runs parallel to the public access [See Image 6.4]. The third point is via the external stairs and verandah [See Image 6.2], which provide direct access from the external deck to the dressing room. The design of the corridors surrounding the Wharf One theatre allows flexibility for the actors; multiple routes of travel are available from the dressing room to any entry point to the performance space. The ability to access an outside balcony, and fresh air, directly from the dressing room is also helpful – particularly for smokers. The existence of rehearsal rooms that are available for use by performers prior to performances as warm up spaces is also extremely rare in Sydney.

The Wharf One dressing room sits adjacent to the theatre auditorium and is entered from the public areas of the building through a recessed and anonymous door [See Image 6.5 and Plan 6.b]. At one end of the room an open area is used for extra costume facilities and stage management [See Images 6.6, 6.7, and 6.8].

132 Also at this end are shower, laundry and toilet facilities [See Images 6.9 and 6.10]. Notably, the tiled finishes in this area are of the same design and finish as those provided for spectators. The floor area of the dressing room is divided into a series of partitioned cubicles that can be closed off from each other with curtains [See Image 6.11]. These cubicles do not extend to the ceiling [See Image 6.12] and each can accommodate two

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130 Ibid., 66.
131 Phelan, interview.
132 The photographs of Wharf One provided on the CD-ROM were taken during the 2001 Sydney Theatre Company production of Peta Murray’s Salt.
actors [See Image 6.13 and 6.14]. While the Wharf now contains a dedicated greenroom, the dressing room has also been used as a place of rest [See Image 6.15]. At the far end of the dressing room are both kitchen facilities [See Image 6.16] and access to an exterior balcony [See Image 6.17]. Performers using this space have access to natural light, fresh air, and views.

The use of curtained cubicles in the dressing room is a feature unique to the Wharf amongst Sydney theatres. In Walking on Water, a history of the Sydney Theatre Company at the Wharf Theatre, actor Paul Goddard writes that although he first thought “the lack of privacy to be a drawback,” he now sees “this communal set up has proven to be a fertile ground for play where the cast, who might not have seen very much of each other during rehearsal, can really come together.” Similarly, actor Geoff Morrell has written: “A sense of company is assured when the entire cast prepares in the same small room, separated only by curtains.” Other actors, like Deborah Kennedy, feel that, “It’s the closest thing in Sydney to a theatre that feels like it’s been designed with actors in mind.” Despite this, however, there is an underlying feeling that the dressing rooms are “a bit clinical.” Actor Peter Carroll mentioned that without the user-friendly atmosphere of the Wharf it “would otherwise be a fairly sterile physical situation.” This feeling of sterility can be attributed to some design features that are uncommon elsewhere in the building. A concrete floor coated with a non-slip rubber surface, the small cubicles, and the low ceiling are only found in the building’s two dressing rooms. The Wharf One dressing room is also a thoroughfare: “There is no corner, it’s like a hallway.” Indeed, even at the kitchen area in the dressing room, there is no room to stand without having to move aside to allow others to pass. This adds to a sense that the room is slightly cluttered and crowded.

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133 Due to restrictions placed on me by STC management I was not allowed to access or photograph the greenroom.
135 Geoff Morrell quoted in Ibid., 87.
136 Kennedy, interview.
137 Dickson, interview.
139 Kennedy, interview.
A door adjacent to the kitchen area provides access to the Wharf One theatre. Passing through the door, performers find themselves in a crossover corridor [See Image 6.18]. This corridor traverses the rear of the performance space providing access to both sides of the stage. It lies outside the acoustic box in which the theatre sits and therefore it often differs in temperature from other areas of the building and is also open to exterior sources of noise [See Image 6.19]. At prompt, a door provides access to a large space under the audience seating [See Image 6.20]. This is a dark area during performances, used for the organisation of props [See Image 6.21]. There is evidence here of informal practitioner adaptation [See Image 6.22]. A large area is utilised for the storage of technical equipment [See Images 6.23 and 6.24] and a quick-change area is also available when required [See Image 6.25]. Being purely a practitioner area, it remains primarily unpainted. Access to the fire tunnel is available from here [See Image 6.26], and depending on the requirements of set design, wings and additional entrances may add to the available practitioner space [See Images 6.27 and 6.28].

Practitioners working in the Wharf Two theatre are provided with one dressing room, inserted under the theatre’s sole audience seating bank. Given that this space is a later adaptation, and that productions carried out in Wharf One have a higher status, it is not surprising that the facilities are smaller and more utilitarian in appointment.\(^{140}\) Access to this space is solely via the fire tunnel. The Wharf Two dressing room is long, narrow, and equipped with open cubicles [See Images 6.29 and 6.30]. Each actor is supplied with a cubicle that contains storage and desk space and a mirror [See Image 6.31]. Doors at either end of the dressing room provide access to each side of the Wharf Two stage.

7. Sydney Theatre

The Sydney Theatre is located in close proximity to the Wharf Theatre and is operated by the STC. Opened in January 2004, the Sydney Theatre accommodates 850 spectators and provides a venue for both STC and touring productions. As a theatre, it

\(^{140}\) Wharf One is the Sydney Theatre Company’s main venue, whilst Wharf Two is used for educational, experimental, and revue style productions. While Wharf Two also houses productions by other companies, Wharf One is used exclusively for Sydney Theatre Company productions.
Backstage Space: The Place of the Performer

Theatre Buildings: The House

possesses a proscenium arch stage that is of similar dimensions to those found in
playhouses in the other Australian state capitals;\footnote{These include the ‘Playhouse’ theatres in the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (Brisbane), the Victorian Arts Centre (Melbourne), the Canberra Theatre Centre (Canberra), and the Adelaide Festival Centre (Adelaide).} in audience capacity the Sydney Theatre sits between the Sydney Opera House’s Drama Theatre (accommodating 550 spectators) and Sydney’s larger commercially operated venues (all accommodating over a thousand spectators). The Sydney Theatre’s foyer, stage, and auditorium are all
purpose built and line the landward side of Hickson Road, while the dressing rooms
and practitioner spaces are housed in converted bond stores at the rear of the site [See
Image 7.1]. Due to severe restrictions placed on my access by the management of the
Sydney Theatre Company the documentation included here is necessarily
rudimentary.\footnote{When documenting the building I was limited to those areas that were deemed not to be in use at the
time of the visit. I was therefore unable to access the stage or side stage areas, or to access any of the
dressing rooms. The restrictions imposed on me are somewhat baffling in light of the permission
granted during a performance to a photographer from the Sydney weekend tabloid The Sun-Herald not
long after I had visited.}

Practitioner spaces at the Sydney Theatre are arranged over two levels, with the
Richard Wherrett Studio\footnote{This was discussed in the earlier section on rehearsal spaces. See page 73.} and performers’ dressing rooms on the same level as the
stage [See Plan 7.a], while a greenroom and function space are located on the first
floor [See Plan 7.b]. A third level houses administration offices and front of house
change rooms [See Plan 7.c]. Practitioner access to the theatre is obtained via a
loading dock that opens onto Hickson Road behind the stage tower [See Image 7.2
and Plan 7.d]. The loading dock is utilised as an informal social space by practitioners
[See Image 7.3] and houses a secure entrance point to the interior of the building [See
Image 7.4]. Beyond this entrance is a large technical storage area that runs the length
of the building [See Images 7.5 and 7.6]. This area is the main thoroughfare linking
the loading dock, side stage area, rehearsal room, and dressing rooms. Prior to its re-
development, this area was a public laneway that ran between the bond stores and an
exposed sandstone wall.

Performers’ dressing rooms are grouped together on the ground floor of the adapted
bond stores that lie between the theatre and the technical storage area. Each of the
eight dressing rooms is designed to accommodate four performers and each is
carpeted and equipped with a toilet and shower. The construction of these rooms has involved the addition of new elements within the existing fabric of the bond stores, with the predominant colour scheme being a subdued dark blue and grey. Partitions between the dressing rooms stop short of the ceiling, but unlike the Wharf One dressing rooms, sheets of glass separate each room, providing acoustic privacy but also mitigating against a sense of company. The Bond Store’s heritage features have also been retained, including a central line of cast iron supporting pillars [See Image 7.7]; the main flight of stairs in the practitioner space sits adjacent to a wool bale hoist [See Image 7.8]. This documentation was conducted during the theatre’s inaugural season; in addition to the good wishes pinned to the walls on the approaches to the stage, practitioners had also attached informal signage to prevent themselves becoming lost in the unfamiliar building’s largely uniform spaces [See Images 7.9 and 7.10]. The theatre’s greenroom is located in a space that previously served as an office for the bond store operations. Like much of the practitioner space in the building it presents an interplay between the existing heritage features and the new facilities [See Image 7.11]. The greenroom provides a very fashionable modern environment but the furniture does not seem suited to extended periods of rest [See Images 7.12 and 7.13]. It does, however, provide a view of the side stage area through two existing windows [See Image 7.14].

8. Lyric Theatre

The Lyric Theatre is part of the Star City Casino and is located in the inner city suburb of Pyrmont [See Image 8.1]. Opened in 1997, the Lyric Theatre can accommodate up to two thousand spectators and serves as a venue for large-scale commercial musicals. The Lyric is constructed from pre-cast concrete and exhibits the same dimensions and colour scheme as the rest of Star City. Practitioner access to the theatre is via the Stage Door entrance on Edward Street, located at the rear of the casino complex [See Image 8.2]. Edward Street itself is a cul-de-sac, providing one point of access to the casino car park. The street is blocked at one end by a light rail line. The large expanse of bare walls and the empty block of land that lies adjacent to the theatre clearly signal this as the rear of the building [See Image 8.3]. Of this environment, one performer elaborated: “We’re tucked away. We’ve got gates that
are padlocked shut at one end of the road. So, to me, it feels very alienated to any kind of sharing with the general public. I never see the public. I never see them, and I find that quite weird."\(^\text{144}\)

The Lyric Theatre is arranged over four stories, with its verticality being the major organising principle evident within the building.\(^\text{145}\) Practitioners entering the stage door find themselves on the ‘Basement Level’ in a reception area \[\text{See Plan 8.a}.\]^\text{146} Access to the rest of the building is on the basis of being signed in and out or through possessing a pass card. The basement level houses technical staff offices, storage, and orchestra facilities \[\text{See Image 8.4}.\] Access to the upper floors is via a goods lift and two separate sets of fire stairs \[\text{See Image 8.5}.\] Given the slow nature of the lift, the stairs on the prompt side of the stage are the main access between each of the levels in the building. The stairs on the opposite prompt side are also utilised, but mainly by those performers whose dressing rooms are located on the first floor level of the building. Both sets of stairs are of identical dimensions to the other fire stairs throughout the rest of the casino complex.\(^\text{147}\) They have a steep incline, shallow surface, are painted concrete, and potentially dangerous for performers in high heels or unusual footwear.\(^\text{148}\)

The Stage Level is the focus of the building and houses the stage and its support areas, a workshop, props store, lighting, and stage management offices and principals’ dressing rooms \[\text{See Plan 8.b}.\] A truck lift from street level permits vehicular access onto the stage itself. From the prompt side stairwell, or the lift, access through a small lobby area brings one directly into the prompt wing of the stage \[\text{See Image 8.6}.\] Here, both the volume of the space and the colour scheme (a deep blue grey) contrast heavily with the brighter colouring found elsewhere in the building \[\text{See Image 8.7}.\]

\(^{144}\) Nicola Fearn, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 24 January 2004.

\(^{145}\) In this, the Lyric follows the tradition established in European and English theatres during the eighteenth century, and subsequently followed by designers of American theatres, of placing services in a vertical arrangement. Such a vertical arrangement is a way of overcoming the limitations of site boundaries and land costs in inner city areas.

\(^{146}\) The lowest floor is referred to as the ‘Basement Level’ on plans of the theatre. In the theatre’s lift the Basement Level is listed as B1, the Stage Level as 00, Level 1 as 01, and Level 2 (the top floor) as 02. This numerical system locates the stage quite literally as the ‘null’ point from which the rest of the building is measured.

\(^{147}\) Wickham, interview.

\(^{148}\) In interviews held with cast members of \textit{The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe}, the fire stairs and the effort required to climb them were a major source of both comment and complaint.
Under performance conditions, lighting levels are low and closed doors prevent light or sound spillage from other areas. The stage itself is large, with a side stage area on the prompt side measuring just fewer than seventeen metres from the edge of the proscenium arch to the outer wall, by just fewer than fifteen metres across. The opposite prompt side offers much less room than prompt, measuring just over five metres from the edge of the proscenium to the wall [See Image 8.8]. The area to the rear of the stage is slightly larger than the stage itself. The dimensions of the stage and its support spaces are generous, but with a set installed on the stage the sharp upstage corners on both the prompt and opposite prompt sides can result in congestion at those points. In the opposite prompt wing a small recess allows access to the fly tower [See Image 8.9].

Nine principals’ dressing rooms are located adjacent to the prompt wing and are accessed via a single corridor [See Image 8.10]. On the stage level, six of the dressing rooms are designed to accommodate single occupants with the remaining three each designed to accommodate three occupants. The single dressing rooms are small and windowless [See Image 8.11], containing carpet, a couch, dressing table, mirror and cupboard [See Image 8.12], and a separate shower and toilet area. Although these dressing rooms are ideally located, the sheer lack of space is a major drawback.

Level one houses a wardrobe and wigs room, two rehearsal rooms, and six larger chorus dressing rooms, the latter clustered around the opposite prompt stairwell [See Plan 8.c]. The dressing rooms on level one are designed to accommodate between four and fourteen performers. Each individual performer is supplied with the same cubicle arrangement present in the principals’ dressing rooms. Instead of carpet, these dressing rooms are provided with linoleum. Three of the dressing rooms on level one also possess small windows that cannot be opened. The position of these dressing rooms in relation to those at stage level, their appointment, and the number of performers they are designed to house, are all indicators of the hierarchical nature of the productions that this theatre accommodates.

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149 See the earlier section on rehearsal spaces, page 73.
The uppermost level of the theatre houses administrative offices together with a large greenroom and connected balcony [See Plan 8.d]. On this level the corridors are carpeted. The greenroom contains lounges and chairs [See Image 8.13], television monitors, a billiard table, and signed posters from previous productions [See Image 8.14], as well as a kitchen area [See Image 8.15] and vending machine [See Image 8.16]. Six double doors open out onto a large terrace [See Image 8.17], which provides views towards the city and access to fresh air [See Image 8.18]. The terrace also provides the opportunity for individuals to smoke without having to leave the building.

As a commercial venue with only a skeleton technical staff, the Lyric Theatre does not possess the accumulated history or culture of a theatre with a resident production company. Its interior spatial arrangements are utilitarian, and its concrete construction, fluorescent lighting and uniform colour scheme give it a clean and practical, if not industrial, feel. For performers who are used to working on large scale commercial productions it is experienced as simply “the same as many others.” For those used to smaller scale, more intimate theatres, it can feel “quite cold, quite conventional, quite square.”

9. Sydney Opera House

The Sydney Opera House (SOH), opened on 20th October 1973, is one of the world’s most iconic performing arts structures [See Image 9.1]. However, despite its architectural status, the venues housed within it suffer from idiosyncratic and flawed design. In Chapter Seven I outline the history of the SOH’s design and construction and examine performers’ experiences working within it. This section therefore solely concerns the building’s physical condition at the time I documented it. As it stands

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150 Brian Parker, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 14 January 2004.
151 Fearn, interview.
152 The SOH is also subject to almost continual modification. In 1999, architect Jørn Utzon was appointed as a design consultant for the SOH and, in May 2002, produced a set of design principles as a guide to all future work on the SOH. Two recent changes that have stemmed from Utzon’s appointment have been the renovation of what is now called the Utzon Room and the addition of the Western Loggia to the western face of the podium. Future plans include a radical and costly
today, the SOH houses six performance spaces, a 2,679 seat Concert Hall, a 1,547 seat Opera Theatre, a 550 seat Drama Theatre, a 398 seat Playhouse (formerly a cinema), an adjustable Studio (formerly a recording hall) that seats between 220 and 318 spectators, and the Utzon Room, a small reception hall for occasional chamber music and social functions. In the following documentation I have omitted the Concert Hall and the Utzon Room from consideration on the basis that they are venues used almost exclusively for musical performances and private functions and so are beyond the scope of this present study.

Practitioner access to the SOH is via the Stage Door [See Image 9.2] which links to the Central Passage that runs the length of the building [See Image 9.3]. The Stage Door area is located in a position adjacent to the public entrance to the Opera Theatre, “between a scenery bay and the souvenir shop.” A uniformed security guard and a stage door attendant staff this entrance and ensure that only those with security clearance enter the building. A line of cushioned benches forms a waiting area for those who wish to be signed into the building by staff or practitioners. A door at the harbour end of the central passage allows security pass holders access to an outside area dubbed ‘the cleavage’ [See Images 9.4 and 9.5]. This sheltered area is utilised by practitioners for rest breaks, smoking and impromptu games of cricket.

The Central Passage provides the main point of vehicular access for all venues within the SOH as it runs through the centre of the building [See Plan 9.a]. Directly above it, the greenroom forms the social hub of the building, providing an area where SOH staff and practitioners from each of the venues can relax, eat and socialise [See Plans 9.b and 9.c]. A wide flight of stairs just inside the Stage Door provides a direct connection between these two key spaces. A maze of other passageways and stairwells [See Image 9.6] connect venues, dressing rooms, and technical support areas to the central passage and the greenroom. The standard of interior spaces within the SOH varies remarkably, depending on the uses to which they have been put. While some spaces are of an extremely functional, clean and efficient nature, others

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refurbishment of the Opera Theatre. See chap. 7 for further discussion of past and planned alterations to the SOH.

153 The Utzon Room is currently the only venue within the Sydney Opera House to contain an interior designed by Jørn Utzon.

154 McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, 68.
are dirty or inefficient, requiring the adaptive skill of practitioners to enable them to be used.

The Drama Theatre, positioned beneath the Concert Hall in the northwestern corner of the SOH, presents practitioners with a variety of problems [See Plan 9.d]. Access to the Drama Theatre is either via a set of double doors from the Central Passage or a flight of stairs from the greenroom. Dressing rooms are arranged on two levels on the prompt side of the Drama Theatre stage. Performers wishing to travel between the stage and their dressing rooms must use the same passageway as both catering and administration staff, as illustrated in Figure 3.3 below. While this is easily negotiated in most circumstances, performers report that their preparation for an entrance can be unnecessarily interrupted by encounters with strangers in a general access passageway whilst en route to the stage. During matinee performances performers report that this passage can feel like a major traffic thoroughfare.\footnote{For a more detailed account of the issues associated with performers’ use of the Drama Theatre’s practitioner spaces, see chap. 7.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{drama_theatre_plan}
\caption{The Drama Theatre and environs. The dressing rooms are marked with an ‘a’ at the top left of the plan, the stage is marked with a ‘b,’ and the ‘public’ passageways are shaded grey [See also Plan 9.a].}
\end{figure}
Technical practitioners must also endure an oddly inefficient working environment. A description of the load in conditions for the Drama Theatre outlines the complicated conditions set designers must accommodate and technicians handle:

Equipment is brought into the building via Central Passage. The Drama Theatre stage is located one level below (-2.75m). Assistance is available to unload equipment, which is then carried along a curved, carpeted corridor to the venue. There is a 90° turn through a double door (2.25m wide x 2.80m high) onto an electrically operated platform elevator down to stage level. The lift travel limit is approximately 200mm above the stage floor. A portable ramp is used to roll off to stage level. Please discuss your scenery dimensions as early as possible.156

The Studio is also located below the floor level of the Central Passage and is accessed via stairs and a goods lift that also serves the Concert Hall above. A curtained recess [See Images 9.7 and 9.8] lies between the performance space and the dressing rooms. The Studio itself is a flexible space [See Image 9.9], although in many cases the recessed area ends up positioned behind the set [See Image 9.10]. As well as providing access to the two dressing rooms, the curtained recess contains a stage management console [See Images 9.11 and 9.12]. Each of the dressing rooms is designed to accommodate up to six performers and contains bench space, mirrors [See Image 9.13], and lockers [See Image 9.14]. Toilet and shower facilities are located at the far end of each dressing room [See Image 9.15]. Being the newest of the SOH venues, the conditions afforded practitioners in The Studio are among the best in the building.

The Playhouse is an end stage theatre that suits productions with a fixed set as it lacks both wing and fly facilities. Practitioner access to the Playhouse stage is via a loading dock [See Image 9.16]. The Playhouse possesses five dressing rooms, three of which are approached through a foyer area adjacent to the venue [See Image 9.17], while the other two are in a more ideal position immediately behind the upstage prompt corner of the stage [See Image 9.18]. Despite the small size of the Playhouse venue, the two

clusters of dressing rooms physically divide a cast and can create a discernible hierarchy amongst performers. A further quirk of the Playhouse is the positioning of the stage management console in a room that is separate from the performance space [See Image 9.19]. This room was not designed with any intended purpose and was left as a void within the fabric of the building following renovations. It is through this void that performers pass to enter the stage on the prompt side.

The Opera Theatre and its associated practitioner spaces are the busiest within the SOH [See Plan 9.e]. On the Central Passage floor level, a large dock area services the Opera Theatre [See Image 9.20]. This has specific areas for storage [See Image 9.21], as well as an open area in which sets for various operas may be stored [See Images 9.22 and 9.23]. Further work spaces are provided behind a wire fence at one end [See Image 9.24]. Large fire doors separate the scene lift from the scene dock [See Image 9.25]. Columns providing support for the roof shells break up the expanse of the space [See Image 9.26]. To one side of the scene dock, members of the technical staff have created an unofficial rest area. Dubbed ‘Sleepy Hollow,’ this area is situated in a section of the dock where overhead air conditioning ducts have made the clearance too low to store sets [See Image 9.27]. Combined with this adaptation, graffiti is also present in the vicinity [See Image 9.28]. In the northeast corner of the dock a passage leads past the lift [See Image 9.29] to a props workshop [See Image 9.30]. From here, another passage runs north through the building [See Image 9.31], linking up with prop and lighting storage areas [See Image 9.32]. The scene lift, immediately adjacent to the dock, allows items of set to be lifted up to the rear of the Opera Theatre stage [See Images 9.33 and 9.34]. On one side of the lift, a spiral staircase provides pedestrian access to upper levels [See Image 9.35]. The other side is utilised for storage [See Image 9.36].

Lying immediately above a section of the lift area, the Opera Theatre orchestra pit is accessed from the same level as the greenroom [See Plan 9.b]. On the prompt side, a passage from the greenroom [See Image 9.37] leads to a set of stairs and a door to the pit itself [See Image 9.38]. The other entrance is similar [See Image 9.39]. Both are darkened corridors, with concrete finishes and exposed service ducts. The pit itself is cramped and provides very little room for the musicians who must work within it [See
Spread over two levels, the pit has been extended under the stage to accommodate a larger orchestra [See Image 9.41]. Only a small section at the front is open to the auditorium [See Image 9.42]. The alterations to the pit have rendered the Opera Theatre’s large revolve inoperable [See Image 9.43] and resulted in a congestion of sound within the pit causing dangerously high levels of noise. Many members of the orchestra are obliged to wear earplugs to prevent damage to their hearing.

All the dressing room facilities for the Opera Theatre are also located on the same level as the greenroom. Closest to the greenroom, noticeboards for both the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra [See Image 9.44], and Opera Australia [See Image 9.45], line the corridors. The internal finish of the corridors is variable. Some are lined with birch panelling, while others, like a section around the door to the male chorus dressing room, are simply a painted concrete finish [See Image 9.46]. Around the Opera Theatre the corridors are wide and carpeted and, whilst Opera Australia is in residence, are lined with baskets and travelling wardrobes for costumes [See Images 9.47 and 9.48]. Just inside the eastern wall of the SOH, a ‘sign on’ area is provided for opera cast members [See Image 9.49]. The Principals’ dressing rooms cluster around a nearby small foyer that provides access to the opposite prompt stage and pit entrances [See Image 9.50]. A narrow corridor leads to the wig and makeup rooms [See Image 9.51]. Two couches in the foyer allow dressers to sit when not required [See Image 9.52]. The dressing rooms throughout this level are based on the same design, each containing a varying number of wooden cubicles. The male chorus is housed in two interlinked dressing rooms [See Image 9.53], each of which is lined with small cubicles [See Image 9.54]. The female chorus dressing rooms are laid out identically. Principals’ dressing rooms contain only two cubicles, with extra hanging facilities and a private shower and toilet. Positioned along the eastern wall of the SOH, they are among the very few rooms that are provided with windows. The orchestra are supplied with communal locker room facilities nearby [See Images 9.55 and 9.56].

The stairs to the Opera Theatre stage are initially wide [See Image 9.57], but after a turn in each they become narrow and steep [See Image 9.58]. Principals with large
costumes are often required to take the lift to the stage. The narrow nature of the stairs restricts the flow of performers to and from the stage, a situation compounded by the almost complete lack of wing space in the actual theatre [See Image 9.59]. Both sides of the stage provide a metre or two at most [See Images 9.60 and 9.61, and Plans 9.f and 9.g] with the majority of space available at the rear while the stage lifts are locked in an upright position; set designs can, however, incorporate increased wing space for performers and stage crew [See Image 9.62]. Small waiting areas are available in the downstage corners of the stage with a stage management console positioned in the prompt corner [See Image 9.63]. Given the low head height under the ‘perches’ on the opposite prompt side, padding has been added [See Image 9.64].

Stage level equipment storage is provided for both lighting crew [See Image 9.65] and mechanists [See Image 9.66] along the prompt wall of the stage and some storage for stage properties is possible [See Image 9.67]. The restrictions at the sides of the stage are further compounded by the way the fly tower tapers in, following the external curve of the shells that encompass it [See Image 9.68]. In a curious inversion of the situation in many other opera theatres, the Opera Theatre’s auditorium encompasses a greater volume of space than does its stage [See Image 9.69 and 9.70].

Directly above the Opera Theatre stage, the flytower provides cramped working conditions on two levels of galleries [See Image 9.71 and Plan 9.h]. The lower level, G1, is where the flies are operated [See Image 9.72]. This gallery wraps around three sides of the flytower [See Image 9.73]. At the rear, a lighting store is tucked into vacant space under the exterior shell [See Image 9.74]. A further area is used for the storage of lighting gels [See Images 9.75 and 9.76]. The male dominated nature of this working environment is evident in the decorative features [See Image 9.77]. On the opposite prompt side a small rest area, dubbed the ‘Crackpot Flies’ Ward’ has been set up with scrounged furniture [See Image 9.78]. Across the bridge of the proscenium, passages are tight and padding has been added to the underside of low struts [See Image 9.79]. On the adjustable bridge, ‘dead’ markings provide a record of previous shows that have been performed over the years in this theatre [See Images

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157 A ‘perch’ is a small platform attached to the side, inside, or rear of a proscenium arch, from which lights can be hung. Harrison, *The Language of Theatre*, 192.
From the G2 gallery above access is possible to the ‘dome’ rooms (from which spotlights are operated).

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have documented the physical features of a selection of Sydney practitioner spaces, occasionally referring to the observations and comments of practitioners themselves. This focus on ‘perceived’ space reveals that while the features and general standard of practitioner spaces vary considerably from theatre to theatre, practitioner spaces are at best utilitarian and at worst inefficient, dirty, and lacking in facility. Amongst the spaces documented here many lack physical space, simply being small and pokey; many lack windows, denying practitioners easy access to natural light and fresh air; many exhibit strange or idiosyncratic design decisions, failing to separate the different functions carried out within the one building and so impacting negatively on practitioners’ ability to conduct their work efficiently; many are dirty; some lack designated social spaces and any place to which performers might escape. Of the practitioner spaces documented here almost none could be described as physically inspiring environments.

There are significant economic restrictions that partially explain the poor conditions present in the practitioner spaces of theatres. However, such restrictions provide an insufficient explanation for the lack of consideration given to the needs of theatre performers, as evident in the physical environments they are provided with. For instance, the Lyric Theatre, a highly functional, efficient, and expensive purpose built venue, is nevertheless marred by exceedingly small dressing rooms for principal performers as well as steep and shallow fire stairs that comprise the main vertical access in the building. The existence of such features suggests that those involved in the design of the theatre were somewhat unaware of the practical needs of performers.

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158 The term ‘dead’ “signifies a precise, predetermined level to which a piece of scenery [or in the case of the Opera Theatre, the moveable bridge] should be flown.” Ibid., 75.

159 Julian Meyrick has recently drawn attention to the fact that Australian theatre receives a lower level of per capita subsidy compared to other OECD nations (although he warns that “inter-country comparisons are fraught with difficulty”). He has also noted the marked decline, over the last fifteen years, in the number of year-round producing theatre companies in Australia. In 1991 there were 197 (of which 129 were subsidised) whereas by 1999-2000 there were only 103 (of which 67 were subsidised) Julian Meyrick, Trapped by the Past: Why Our Theatre Is Facing Paralysis (Strawberry Hills, N.S.W.: Currency House, 2005), 61, 14.
Of course, there is no such thing as an ideal theatre, but performers themselves are aware that their needs are rarely considered. Actor Deborah Kennedy has complained, “The last people consulted about their requirements are the actors.” Actor Blair Cutting expressed a similar sentiment:

> The perception is that all you really need to do is get on a fucking stage and act, so it doesn’t really matter if you’re changing in a shoebox out the back […] dressing rooms [are] always an afterthought and they are shoved out the back.

However, there is also a disjunction between the impoverished conditions endured and performers’ perceptions of these spaces. Many of the smaller theatres in which conditions are demonstrably the worst are those that performers are most attached to. Despite the Belvoir Street Theatre being “really grotty” and “very cramped,” and despite feeling “like being in a telephone box” when working there, actor Kerry Walker can still declare that the building is “my spiritual home.” Those theatres in which performers encounter clean, modern environments are also seen as somehow lacking. Actor Sandy Gore, speaking of the dressing rooms of the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House, stated, “I find that I arrive and I have to make a mark […] because it doesn’t feel like home, it’s sterile.” Performers seem prepared to sustain the paradox that ‘poor’ conditions, which they acknowledge as substandard and detrimental, are both the norm and feel appropriate, while ‘good’ conditions, which they acknowledge a desire for, feel lacking. This perhaps explains Eliza Logan’s description of the Old Fitzroy as both “insane” and “fantastic.”

In these concluding remarks, I have moved beyond my initial focus on physical features into a consideration of performers’ perceptions and experiences. Indeed, I have begun to address how sociality mediates performers’ experiences of built structure. Indeed, many performers stressed to me the importance of good social relations, stating that a good working environment was attributable to “more than the space,” being rather “a function of the people.” In the next chapter I turn to focus

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160 Kennedy, interview.
161 Blair Cutting, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 30 May 2003.
162 Kerry Walker, interview.
163 Gore, interview.
164 Logan, interview.
165 Alex Sideratos, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5 February 2004.
on the performers whose work involves a profound encounter with the spaces I have just documented. What is their experience of these spaces? How do they inhabit them? If the practitioner spaces provided for them to work in could be better suited to the work they do, then what exactly is it that performers do there?

166 Peter Carroll, interview.