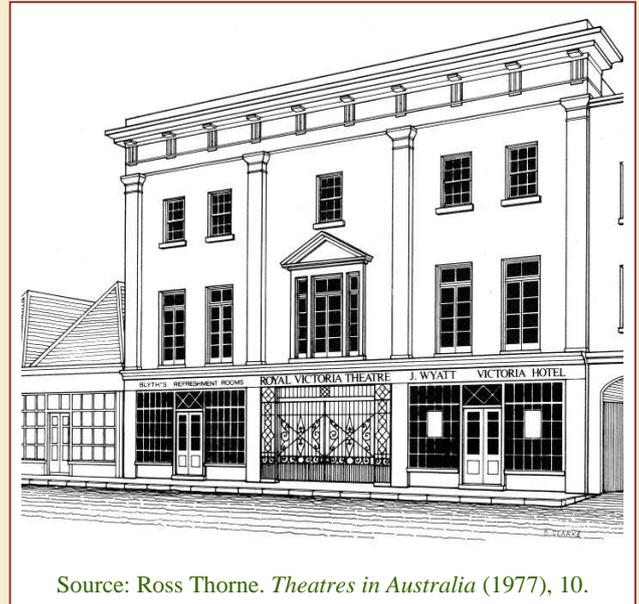


ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRE (Sydney)

For many years Sydney's largest and most important theatrical venue, the Royal Victoria Theatre opened in 1838 and for the next 42 years played host to opera, comic opera, dramas, burlesques, pantomimes, minstrelsy, circus and other amusements. Among the best known lessees/managers associated with the theatre were Andrew Tarning, Joseph Raynor, Samuel Coleville, Ralph Tolano, Richard Younge, George Coppin, John Bennett, and Williams S. Lyster. Variety companies to play there included the Backus Minstrels, Christy's Minstrels and Harry Rickards' Star Comique Co. The theatre was destroyed by fire in 1880.

Pioneering theatre builder Joseph Wyatt conceived the idea of building a theatre in Pitt Street Sydney as early as 1836, shortly after he became sole lessee of Barnett Levy's Theatre Royal. With hotelier William Knight as silent partner,¹ Wyatt put his plans into action. A foundation stone was laid on 7 September that year and designs were later drawn up by architect Henry Robertson. Situated between King and Market Streets, Robertson's plans were for a 1,900 seat venue constructed in colonial style. The front section of the building included a hotel and a shop.

The Royal Victoria's design called for a "three story facade with pilasters above the ground floor topped by an entablature and modest cornice... Entry to the more expensive seats was between the hotel bar and the shop, while patrons reached the cheaper seats from a side alleyway." Ross Thorne notes that "the interior broke with the Georgian tradition and heralded the Regency style of theatre design." He points out, too, that the Royal Victoria was also the first theatre in Australia to have the ground-floor pit extend beneath a dress circle raised above stage level. Above the dress circle were a family circle and a gallery - four tiers in all." In so far as the stage was concerned 'the Georgian scene-changing system of wing flats and shutters sliding in grooves was also installed.' The theatre initially included Georgian proscenium doors (for actors' entry), but these were replaced in 1854 with proscenium boxes (CTTA: 1995, 512).



Source: Ross Thorne. *Theatres in Australia* (1977), 10.

After being advertised as opening on various dates, the theatre's debut performance eventually took place under Wyatt's management on Monday 26 March 1838 with a production of 'Shakespeare's celebrated Tragedy, *Othello*' and William Bayle Bernard's 'popular Farce, *The Middy Ashore*.' In reporting on the opening night the *Sydney Monitor* records that the building was "truly elegant" and the house "spacious and lofty." "From the pit," it continued, "you would suppose you were in a large provincial theatre in England" (28 Mar. 1838, n. pag). The theatre's large capacity proved to be somewhat of a disadvantage, however. H. L. Oppenheim writes in this respect that "Sydney's audience potential was too small to allow the building up of a proper repertoire; [and as a consequence] there was need for constant change of programme which led to badly rehearsed and shoddily produced performances' (n. pag.).

*To the Ladies' and Gentlemen of the
Dramatic Profession, and Others
connected with the business
of the Stage.*

NOTICE is hereby given, that **MR. JOSEPH WYATT**, the Proprietor of the New Theatre Royal, Pitt-street, will be in attendance in the Green Room of that Establishment from 10 till 4 daily, for the purpose of entering into Engagements and making the necessary arrangements for the Opening of the Theatre on Saturday, the 24th instant, where all Persons desirous of Engagements will please to attend.

JOSEPH WYATT,
Proprietor.

New Theatre Royal,
Pitt-street,
14th March, 1838. }

According to reports in the *Sydney Gazette* (3 Feb. 1838) Wyatt initially engaged actors from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). He also placed a notice in the *Sydney Gazette* (17 Mar. 1838) asking those 'desirous of engagements' to attend the Green Room of the new theatre. After the closure of the Theatre Royal, Sydney Wyatt employed many of the actors formerly associated with that venue. One of these was John Lazar who in the late-1830s and early 1840 acted as director/manager of the theatre.

In March 1841 Wyatt travelled to England to recruit actors for his theatre, returning to Sydney in January 1843. During his absence William Knight managed the theatre. The importation of these actors caused ill-feeling among the actors already working in the colony. The Sydney press criticised the weak acting of members of the Wyatt's company and he was eventually forced to sack some of them, including Eliza Winstanley.

Sydney Gazette 17 Mar. (1838), 1.

¹ Knight was possibly one of the six partners, including Wyatt, who took over the lease of the Theatre Royal in 1835.

Actor and entrepreneur George Selth Coppin made his Australian debut in the Royal Victoria Theatre in 1843. In September the following year Wyatt sold the land on which the theatre stood. Between 1849 and 1854 he leased back the theatre, with the hotel part being leased to Andrew Torning in 1851. Torning took over the lease of the theatre in 1854 when Wyatt failed to renew his lease on favourable terms. Around this same period the theatre was purchased by Mr (later Judge) Josephson and Messrs Abraham Moses and Son, and Moses Joseph for the sum of £25,000 (SMH: 24 July 1880, 6). They retained ownership until the uninsured theatre burned to the ground on 22 July 1880. James Bennett had been the lessee for most of the 1870s and relinquished his association with the theatre shortly before the fire. At the time of its destruction the lessees were Coppin, Hennings and Greville.

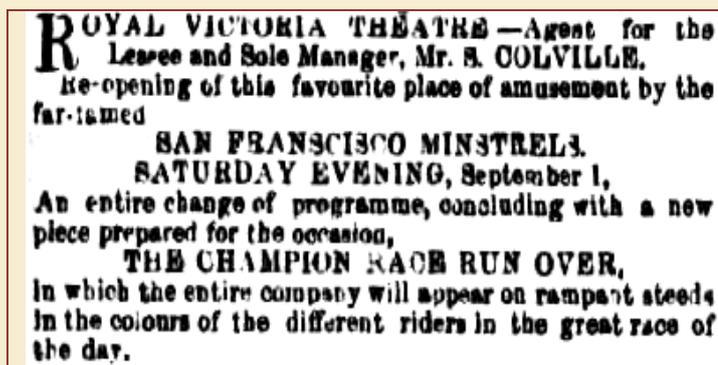
Among the managers and entrepreneurs known to have leased the theatre in later years were Sam Howard and James Simmonds (1857-59), Samuel Coleville (1859-), Raphael Tolano (1865-), and George Coppin for six months in 1867. Others linked to the Royal Victoria as directors or managers included Joseph Rayner (ca. 1861), W. Dind (ca. 1863), and John Bennett (ca. 1871-80).

Many local and touring stars of the theatre appeared the Royal Victoria during its 42 years, including Lola Montez (1855), John and Frank Howson (1857), G.V. Brooke (1857), Anna Bishop (1857), J. P. Hydes (1858), Mary Provost (1860-61), the Leopold Bros and Frauline Fannie (1860), Frank Howson (1862), Kate Arden (1866), Charles Barlow (1867), George Darrell (ca. 1871), William Creswick (1877-78) and J. L. Hall (1880). According to John West "the Lyster opera companies were probably the Royal Vic's most worthy occupants in the 1870s" (58). Lyster's association with the theatre dates back to as early as 1862, however.



Sydney Morning Herald 24 Nov. (1955), 1.

One of the earliest minstrel companies to appear at the theatre was the Backus Minstrels in 1855. Other variety and comedy companies to play the Royal Victoria included: The San Francisco Minstrels (1860), The Empire Minstrels (1861), Buckley Minstrels (1862), The Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Comedians (1863), Christy's Minstrels (1864-66),² Burton's National Circus (1867), The American Excelsior Minstrels (1871), Rainford and Kelly's Minstrels (1872), and Harry Rickards' London Star Comique Combination (1874),



Sydney Morning Herald 1 Sept. (1860), 1.



Sydney Morning Herald 18 Apr. (1864), 1.

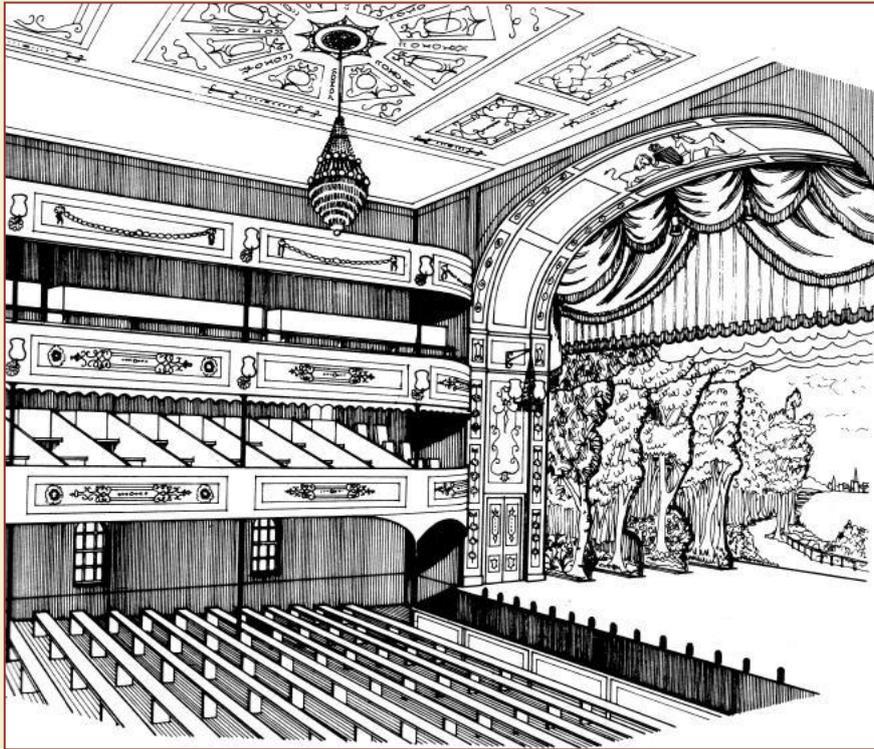
HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia*, notes that the Royal Victoria was frequently upgraded and redecored' by its various lessees."

² The Christy Minstrels in 1865 included Thomas Rainford and W. Horace bent.

SEE ALSO

- [Joseph Wyatt](#)
- [Wyatt and Knight](#)
- [George Coppin](#)
- [Coppin, Hennings & Greville](#)
- [Raphael Tolano](#)



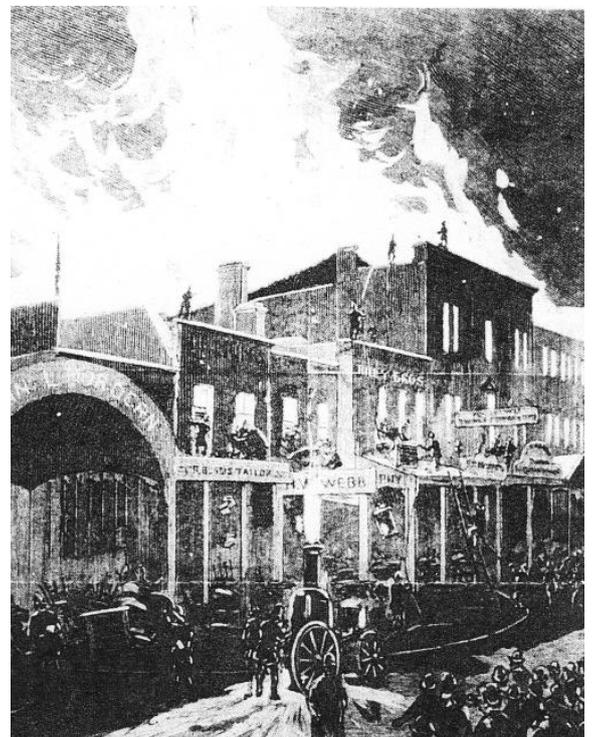
Source: Ross Thorne. *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905* (1971), 11.

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "[Destruction of the Royal Victoria Theatre](#)." SMH: 24 July (1880): 6.
- "[New Theatre, The](#)." SMCA: 28 Mar. (1838), 3.
- Oppenheim, H. L. "[Wyatt, Joseph \(1788-1860\)](#)" ADB: 2 (1967). [sighted 10/03/2014]
- Parsons, Philip, ed. *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1997. [See entries under Joseph Wyatt and Royal Victoria Theatre]
- Thorne, Ross. "Royal Victoria Theatre Sydney." CTTA: (1995), 512.
- *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905: From the Time of the First Settlement to the Arrival of Cinema*. 2 Vols. Sydney: Architectural Research Foundation, U of Sydney, 1971.
- *Theatres in Australia: An Historical Perspective of Significant Buildings*. Sydney: Department of Architecture, U of Sydney, 1977.
- West, John. *Theatre in Australia* (1978), v. pags.

See also:

SGNA: 3 Feb. (1838), 2 • 17 Mar. (1838), 1.



Destruction of the Victoria Theatre, 22 July 1880
Source: John West. *Theatre in Australia* (1978), 63.

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