

# DRAMA DRAMA DRAMA

ALL THE WORLD MAY BE A STAGE, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO CREATIVE, INNOVATIVE THEATRE SYDNEY IS THE PLACE TO BE, WRITES **FELICITY CARTER**.

**W**hen tourists visit Sydney, many walk around The Rocks or Sydney Opera House without realising they're passing by some of the city's finest assets – its theatres. Yet the theatre is the place where the cultural heart truly beats, because that's where Sydney strips off and bares its soul. On any given night, there is razor-sharp wit, top-notch professionalism and a no-holds-barred approach to drama to be found. Here's a sample of what's on offer.

## **SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY**

The STC, as it's known locally, is the state's flagship theatre company. It's here that both classics and the best new local and international works are delivered by the likes of Cate Blanchett, Miranda Otto and Colin Friels. But the big names don't necessarily mean a safe approach is taken.

"My approach to programming has been to shift it away from what I saw as a commercially run approach to theatre," says artistic director Robyn Nevin. "I made a concerted effort to find actors who take risks."

The STC's international reputation brings significant shows to Sydney, such as the National Theatre of Great Britain's production of *The History Boys*, and attracts serious talent such as Oscar-winner Philip Seymour Hoffman, who is directing Andrew Upton's new play *Riflemind*.

And the company is set to make an even bigger name for itself overseas when husband-and-wife team Upton and Cate Blanchett take over the reins at the end of this year from Nevin, who has been artistic director since 1999.

## **BELL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY**

If you ever pass the historic Rocks area and hear a bloodcurdling yell, don't panic as it's probably coming from the Bell Shakespeare Company's rehearsal rooms. True, these aren't rehearsals the way Shakespeare would have done them, as the words are uttered in Australian accents.

Don't expect to see actors in Elizabethan dress, either, because the company's founder and artistic director, John Bell, says he sees no point in archaic costumes.

"It's far more important to reflect on who we are and where we live, and compare it with [Shakespeare's] text," he says. "I find tension between a 400-year-old text and us very exciting."

Instead, the classics are reinvented with a distinctly local sensibility, and infused with energy and irreverence. "It has to be contemporary and reference our own society," says Bell. "An Australian company will have a different view of monarchy, of male bonding and authority, or towards male and female relationships."

So *Romeo and Juliet* might be staged against the backdrop of the Cronulla riots, or *Macbeth* ▶

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*Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Surry Hills' Belvoir St Theatre; The Government Inspectors at the Bell Shakespeare Company; the Sydney Opera House - home to some of the Sydney Theatre Company's productions; and the new theatre taking the arts to the masses.*



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Acting royalty Geoffrey Rush (centre) starred in this year's production of *Exit the King* at the Belvoir St Theatre.

might raise confronting questions about the roles of women and violence in society. "We keep it fairly vague and open," says Bell. "You get the connection, but we don't hammer it home."

The Bell Shakespeare Company, despite its name, doesn't focus solely on Shakespeare. This year, for example, it is staging Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, a classic Russian comedy set on a bunch of slacker public servants about to get the worst performance review of their lives.

Bell suggests punters take a risk with theatre: "It's a great thrill to see a play you don't know, done well."

### BELVOIR ST THEATRE

If you're familiar with Belvoir St Theatre, the Sydney institution that's tucked away in a grungy corner of inner-city Surry Hills, you'll be pleased to hear the seats are now comfortable.

"Now you can concentrate on the show rather than your numb bum," says general manager Vicki Middleton, discussing the theatre's recent renovations.

"We have an extended foyer and B Sharp has wonderful new facilities."

B Sharp is a theatre partnership that gives promising independent companies a chance to showcase their work in the intimate embrace of the Downstairs Theatre. Upstairs in the main theatre is one of this country's most-lauded theatre companies, Company B. It performs under the

artistic direction of Neil Armfield and encompasses new Australian works, indigenous works, reinvented classics and new international works. It's innovative and provocative stuff, performed by homegrown talent such as Angie Milliken, Geoffrey Rush and David Wenham – and it's also up close and personal, because the theatre is small.

"Our venue is incredibly intimate," says Middleton. "Our audiences have a close relationship with the venue and a strong sense of ownership and family."

It's this connection that perhaps keeps a throng of theatregoers hanging around the foyer after the shows, buzzing about what they've just witnessed.

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### OLD FITZROY THEATRE

This year Old Fitzroy Theatre hits the double digits, celebrating its 10th birthday. The Fitzroy is a 65-seat theatre inside the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Woolloomooloo, where you can grab a beer on the way to your seat. "It's a venue that's unique to Australia," says artistic director Leland Kean. "It's a tiny little space

that gets a diverse crowd through."

On any given night, you could find yourself squeezing in next to a surfer, corporate suit or black-clad, inner-city artistic types. And due to the size of the venue, you'll also find yourself very, very close to the performers.

"It's incredibly intimate," says Kean cheerfully, noting that when a show speaks to audiences, ▷



Time for a close-up:  
The new theatre staged  
the powerful modern  
classic *The Crucible*  
earlier this year.

their rowdy reactions can really electrify the theatre's atmosphere. But what makes the Old Fitzroy stand out is it solely features Australian works, many of which are specially commissioned from major talents like Sue Smith, who co-wrote the hit television series *Brides of Christ*.

"We're quite bold and daring in what we choose, because we only have ourselves to answer to," says Kean. "We can be groundbreaking." And that's a hallmark of many Sydney theatres, whether they're presenting Shakespeare, pub comedy or the latest offering from the West End.

## THE NEW THEATRE

The new theatre also reaches a theatrical milestone this year – its 75th anniversary. The company has staged performances in trade union halls, above a grocery wholesaler and down a coal mine. It's even been shut down by police. And that's because the new theatre, one of Australia's oldest continuously performing theatre groups, was created to bring radical ideas, and art, to the working classes.

"Maintaining the rage is difficult, because some of that agitprop was not good theatre," admits the Newtown company's artistic director Louise Fischer.

But that doesn't mean the fire has gone out. While theatrical standards can be variable, because the productions use a mix of professional and amateur actors, directors and crew who volunteer their time, the new theatre has a lot going for it.

"This means we can put on big theatre," says Fischer, explaining most theatre companies can't afford to mount productions that call for large

numbers of actors or multiple scene changes.

The new theatre's long history means it's in contact with theatres around the world, so it can secure rights to some of the latest plays. "The Royal Court [Theatre], for example, does brilliant theatre but the plays don't get snaffled up by the STC, so there's enough to go round," says Fischer.

The company is marking its anniversary with a season of banned plays. "They were banned because they offended the czar or the church or whatever," explains Fischer. "They're happening once a month until the end of the year."

So, who knows? If you're really lucky, you could be there as the theatre gets raided by the police again. Now that's what you call drama. 

### MASTERPIECE THEATRES

#### :: Bell Shakespeare Company

+61 2 8298 9000, [www.bellshakespeare.com.au](http://www.bellshakespeare.com.au)

#### :: Belvoir St Theatre

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#### :: new theatre

+61 2 9519 3403, [www.newtheatre.org.au](http://www.newtheatre.org.au)

#### :: Old Fitzroy Theatre

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#### :: Sydney Theatre Company

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