

# DRAMA QUEEN

**Once surrounded by brothels and opium dens, she has survived two world wars, depression and fire. Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne reveals her secrets in a new book.**

**BACK IN 1886**, this iconic Melbourne theatre predates Broadway. In the 19th Century, the Victorian gold rush made Melbourne, briefly, the richest city in the world. The economic boom allowed the entertainment scene to flourish, with open-air circuses and lavish equestrian events staged at The Hippodrome.

Progress, and a growing sophistication, led to the construction of the beautiful Victorian Alexandra Theatre. Its opening show was called *Bad Lads* and, along with Italian opera, the venue also housed Saturday afternoon wrestling. In 1900, it was refurbished and renamed Her Majesty's after Queen Victoria.

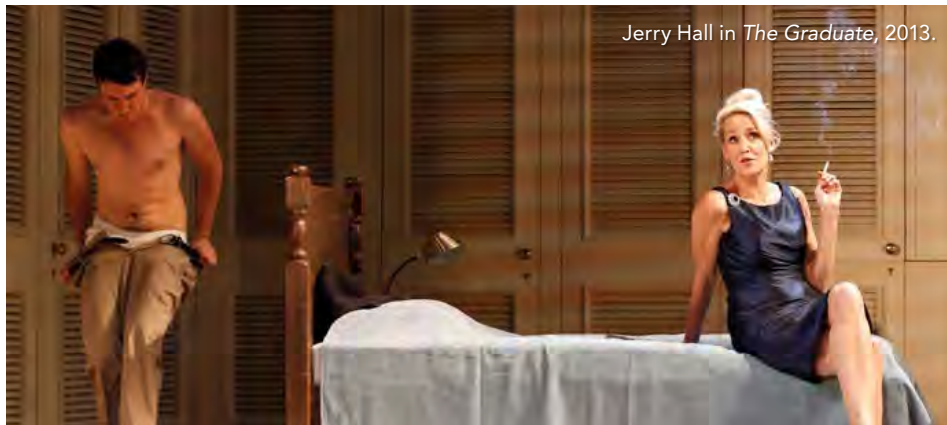
Entertainment historian Frank Van Straten provides a concise rundown of this theatrical institution over 14 decades with his new book, *Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne: The Shows, The Stars, The Stories*.

"It all began for me in 1947," says Straten. "My parents loved all types of theatre and took me to The Maj to see *Annie Get Your Gun*. I was hooked! I fell in love with the theatre, the show, and its now-legendary star, Evie Hayes. Many years later at Her Majesty's 100th birthday, she was an honored guest on my ABC Radio Nostalgia program."

Since its construction, Her Majesty's has hosted Anna Pavlova, John Barrymore, Jerry Hall and Marcel Marceau. Katherine Hepburn starred with Sir Robert Helpmann in a 1955 production of *The Merchant Of Venice*. Dame Nellie Melba insisted the theatre be remodeled for better acoustics, and Marlene Dietrich famously fell off the stage and broke her leg just four days before her famous leg-insurance policy ran out!

More recent productions have included *Strictly Ballroom*, *Kinky Boots*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon*. The theatre is currently preparing to host *Muriel's Wedding*, with a new score by Kate Miller-Hiedke.

"I loved meeting and chatting with backstage and front-of-house crew," says Straten. "They have so many stories, and there's a great love and respect for the theatre. But the most interesting and important person I've met is Mike Walsh. In 2000, the Maj was doomed to be redeveloped, but Mike rescued it and poured millions of dollars into restoring its former Art Deco glory."



Jerry Hall in *The Graduate*, 2013.

There are distinctly Australian moments in the theatre's history, such as when crowds gathered to protest the hanging of infamous bushranger Ned Kelly. The Seekers reunited on stage for the *Georgy Girl* premier, and Peter Allen performed *I Still Call Australia Home* for the very first time. But a rather shocking, un-Australian detail the book reveals is that there were once separate entrances for rich and poor!

As with theatres around the world, it was also a popular place for queer folk to socialize in less accepting times, and offered a safe workplace for gays, lesbians and others who didn't fit neatly into broader society.

“**Dietrich fell off the stage and broke her leg just days before her leg-insurance policy ran out.**”

Apart from its cherished history, Straten believes Melburnians regard Her Majesty's as the centerpiece of what's now called the East End Theatre District. "It's a special part of the CBD, similar to Broadway and London's West End. It's home not only to Her Majesty's, but also the Princess, Comedy, Athenaeum, Forum and Regent theatres. All are great live venues within a stone's throw of each other, and there's nothing else like it in Australia!"

BY MATTHEW MYERS

**MORE:** To order the book on Her Majesty's Theatre go to [www.hmt.com.au](http://www.hmt.com.au)



A performance of *Aida*, 1928.



Robert Helpmann and Katharine Hepburn, 1955.



Sammy Davis Jr backstage, 1978.