

# Spouting in the Colonies

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Robert Jordan

THE CONVICT THEATRES OF EARLY AUSTRALIA  
1788–1840

Currency House, \$49.95hb, 386pp, 0 9581213 0 3

**T**OO OFTEN AS AUSTRALIANS we have preferred our history one-dimensional: *terra nullius*, convicts, gold rush, Federation, Gallipoli. Barren land, barren culture: in the grim struggle against tyranny, nature and distance, hardly the place to find artists with the time to create music, dancing, theatre or opera; or mass audiences willing to spend their meagre incomes on such diversions. But you could, even in the earliest days of settlement and at the places of extreme torture. On Christmas Day 1846 on Norfolk Island, a group of convicts got up a play ‘in the Lumber Yard’ under the nose of Superintendent John Price, the model for the sadistic tyrant Maurice Frere in *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Facts like this challenge our understanding about what kind of people convicts were, what pleasure they took in the midst of their oppression, and what was tolerated and even at times encouraged by the authorities.

For convicts to aim ‘humbly to excite a smile’ by performing *The Recruiting Officer* for Governor Arthur Phillip on the King’s Birthday in 1789 is interesting but unexceptional — a sort of school speech-day item. But for them to be building playhouses and setting up professional acting companies and finding audiences with leisure time and the price of admission, possibly as early as 1793–94, is quite a different matter.

Robert Jordan, Emeritus Professor of Drama at the University of New South Wales, has spent a decade and more trawling through government records in both Australia and the UK, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers, private diaries and unsourced and often inaccurate popular histories of early Australia. He has produced a magnificent work of excavation and scholarship full of great stories with fascinating characters.

Sensibly, he has relegated the exhaustive detail to eighty-six pages of appendices where, for example, he picks his way carefully through eleven men and thirty-one women named Davis or Davies in search of Mrs Davis, the only woman actress mentioned by name at the opening of the Sydney Theatre in 1796. This leaves the main text uncluttered for the story of how British theatre came to Sydney, Norfolk Island, Emu Plains and elsewhere. Often he is obliged to work from chance reference and fleeting glimpse, but even this reveals

a remarkable amount of organised entertainment, beginning with the Brickfields Theatre, possibly operating as early as 1793, and succeeded by an equally obscure venture in the same area in the 1810s.

He argues convincingly that Robert Sidaway’s 1796 Sydney Theatre was located just south of the Rocks in Windmill Row (now under the Bradfield Expressway) rather than in Blich Street or George Street, as previously suggested, and also speculates plausibly that it operated more frequently and for many more years than was known before. Theatre on Norfolk Island has already been documented, principally because of the well-known 1794 riot at the playhouse, as well as through interest in the later (1840) experiment in drama as therapy and civility by the humane Captain Maconochie, but Jordan presents major new evidence about another important and long-running convict theatre, at Emu Plains (c. 1822–30).

This book ought to be read in the UK as well as here, because its first chapter, ‘Britons Abroad: The Early Convicts and Their Theatrical Background’, assembles evidence that theatre in Georgian England was by no means the preserve of the gentry; all classes and trades went to theatre regularly. Further, Jordan queries Tom Keneally’s speculation, in his 1988 novel *The Playmaker*, that the 1789 staging of *The Recruiting Officer* must have been under the direction of a military officer able to coach ignorant and illiterate convicts in the subtleties of dramatic literature and the art of good acting. A large number of the lower orders in Britain had opportunities to perform in small travelling troupes and amateur ‘spouting’ clubs; they needed no teacher, merely opportunity.

One limitation, inevitable given Jordan’s determination to exhaust every source about convict theatre, is that other simultaneous thespian activity gets marginalised. Sailors and soldiers also regularly performed plays for their own entertainment and for others, and to describe a playhouse as a convict theatre alone may sometimes be too narrow a focus. Nor was the divide between the ordinary soldier and the convict precise — they were together at the end of the world trying to make life liveable, and Jordan finds plenty of evidence of shared playmaking. He sometimes employs the same assumptions as Keneally, for example in relation to Private Joseph Vasconcellis, described in 1799 as the manager of the Sydney Theatre: ‘it is tempting to suspect he was imposed on the company ... as a means of controlling the theatre.’ Possibly, but maybe it was just soldiers and convicts, amateur or professional thespians all, getting together to work up a show, trying to create an echo of the cultural world they knew, and making money.

But this is a small quibble. Jordan modestly fails to highlight just how much of this wonderful book is his own original research, and the rest is a careful checking, correction and reassessment of what was known before. If any volume working from such fragmentary and inconclusive evidence could be said to be definitive, this is it.