

ROBERT JORDAN

& THE CONVICT THEATRES OF EARLY AUSTRALIA 1788-1840

Until the 1990s, when he became 'infatuated' with the lives of the convict actors and theatre entrepreneurs of colonial New South Wales, Robert Jordan had no real curiosity about Australian history. But now his career-long interest in English theatre of the late 17th century has been overthrown by his passion for the convict theatres of Sydney, Emu Plains and Norfolk Island. Has it become an obsession? 'Absolutely, no doubt about it', he replies without hesitation. A 230 000 word obsession in fact (handwritten in pencil).

At the beginning of December, this magnificent obsession (trimmed of 30 000 words) became a published reality, when his book *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840* was published by the Currency Press and launched by the Premier, Bob Carr, at the State Library of NSW.

'When I was a kid, very little Australian history was taught', Rob Jordan observes, 'as though history was in England.' But now he is enthralled by the 'sheer excitement of Australian history' and the chance to 'find a place in the nation's folk history and popular culture' for the 'hard living convicts serving time at the end of the world', who created the colony's entertainment.

The task was not an easy one and Jordan describes years 'combing through unindexed London, provincial and colonial newspapers, through official correspondence, private letters, legal records, statistical returns, account books, logbooks and the like in the hopes of finding a paragraph, or even a phrase, that might be relevant. Months of reading often left little that could find its way into the final manuscript.'

His first real lead came from two playbills for performances in one of Sydney's earliest theatres,

which he found in the Mitchell Library, and three reports from 1797 to 1802 of performances in English newspapers. 'Armed with this information', says Jordan, 'I decided to do a test run on the early criminal court records of Sydney held at State Records to see if I could discover enough information to prove the project was worth pursuing. I was looking for actors turning up as witnesses at trials, or passing references to the theatre itself in the court cases. I found just enough on both fronts to launch me into the book.'

'THE WOMEN ALTOGETHER, ARE MORE DRUNKEN AND INFAMOUS THAN POSSIBLY CAN BE DESCRIBED'

from playbill for the Theatre,
Sydney, 1 June 1799

Jordan then painstakingly added names and references one-by-one, until each hard-won lead accumulated into the narrative storyline it is today. The State archives collection was 'pretty crucial for sorting out the people, their backgrounds and social context'. And he is 'incredibly grateful' to volunteer researcher Joan Reese, whose indexes to the Colonial Secretary's letters, chiefly relating to convicts from 1826 to the 1850s, are an 'an absolute gift', leading him directly to names of interest, rather than having to search through the records page-by-page himself.

The Mitchell Library and State Library of New South Wales were essential to the information search, as were the British Library and Public Record Office,



← Illustration of Fanny Davis in female and male dress, 1786, held by the British Library

{EXTRACT}

'Frances, or Fanny, Davis lived in Southwark and moved in criminal circles. On the evening of 2 September 1785 a grazier spent the night at an Essex inn en route for Smithfield market, with a canvas bag containing over £1200 in cash, drafts and banknotes. At the inn a 'genteelly dressed' young man who passed himself off as a horse dealer struck up an acquaintance with the grazier, sat smoking with him, and allegedly became aware of the money he was carrying – though it is more likely the victim had been targeted in advance. During the night the young man, who was Fanny Davis in disguise, stole the bag from the sleeping grazier (with whom she was sharing a room) and disappeared from the inn.

Fanny would have escaped undetected, had it not been for her indiscretion. Immediately after the theft she visited a friend in Newgate gaol and revealed the exploit to her. Unfortunately for Fanny, her friend was having an affair with the hangman, who passed the information to the authorities. Fanny was arrested. 'With great composure' she denied any knowledge of the affair, even though her male costume and £900 of the booty were found with her.

Cross-dressing was a subject of intense fascination for the late 18th century public, particularly when it involved women serving as soldiers or sailors, or criminals. Fanny Davis became the subject of several lengthy newspaper articles, two utterly fanciful biographies, a chapbook and several prints. Most of these accounts end with Fanny sentenced without hope of reprieve, or actually hanged – a fate which in real life she escaped.

She was sentenced to 14 years transportation and sailed for Botany Bay on the First Fleet vessel *Lady Penrhyn*. She was aged 22.'

both in London. Each added another element to the story. One major frustration for Jordan was his inability to pinpoint precisely why the Theatre, Sydney, was closed in the 1840s. He still hangs onto the hope 'that one day I will find a report of its closing in a provincial English newspaper somewhere'.

Meanwhile, since this mammoth study was completed, Rob Jordan has 'knocked off a few unpublished biographies' (20 000 words each) because it's just 'too much fun'. The first is of Henry Kemble, 'allegedly Australia's worst actor', and 'The Man with the Silver Nose', apparently one Henry 'Nosey' Herring, who had a total of 12 aliases and was transported as a convict on three separate occasions. Jordan's interest in Herring was piqued after finding a reference to his role in a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Speculation about the origins of his nickname includes Herring's claim that his nose had been cut off and that the silver one was a disguise. But actually it was a result of venereal disease.

Following is an edited extract from Jordan's study of convict theatre about the early life of Fanny Davis (cross-dressing thief in England) also believed by Jordan to be Fanny Davis (convict actress) in NSW. Davis appeared as 'the emotion charged tragic heroine' of *The Revenge*, the opening play of the Theatre, Sydney, and as 'the madcap female lead' in the *Busy Body*. 'If she could manage that range effectively', he observes, 'she was an actress of some talent.'

Susan Charlton
State Records