


Drama under the sails

As its 50th birthday looms, the Sydney Opera House is the star of an ABC series that goes behind the scenes for the first time.

By MATTHEW WESTWOOD

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Someone once described the Sydney Opera House as being a three-dimensional jigsaw, and it's a neat way of thinking about a building that is both a hardworking performing arts centre and a piece of modernist architecture that is also Australia's most visited tourist destination. So intricate and complex are its various parts that nothing can happen there without it affecting something else. It's a place that combines all the exhilaration and spontaneity of live performance with the brainiac complexity of logistics and spatial reasoning.

And it keeps giving up stories, fascinating details and facts about its history, construction and maintenance. The monumental sails that soar over Sydney Harbour are given their luminous presence by the 1,056,006 tiles that cover the exterior. Made in Sweden, the tiles each measure 12sq cm and are coated with either a gloss or matt glaze. The arrangement of the gloss and matt tiles in a chevron pattern along the length of sails gives them their characteristic shimmer – especially gorgeous in the early morning light.

And here's something I didn't know about the Opera House and its upkeep. Every few years, the tiles have to be checked for wear and tear. This is done by a team of abseilers, suspended by ropes over the gently billowing curve of the building's sails. They use a long cane to tap each of the million tiles in turn. A hollow sound may indicate a tile is damaged. In the event that one needs replacing, there's a stockpile of another 48,000 in a warehouse, waiting to go into active service.

These are just some of the facts, revealed with stunning footage, in the three-part ABC series *Inside the Sydney Opera House*. The series is timed with the advent of the Opera House's 50th anniversary in October next year, but it is more than simply a commemorative piece about this remarkable building. The episodes track some of the dramas that have unfolded at Bennelong Point across the past year or so, including the on-again, off-again disruptions brought about by the pandemic, and the race to complete the biggest-ever upgrade to the building, a \$150m refurbishment of the Concert Hall. We're also given a close-up of some of the nation's best-known performing arts companies, including the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre, all resident companies at the Opera House.

In the first episode there's a ratcheting of tension as the countdown begins to New Year's Eve 2021 and as Covid numbers steadily rise with the Omicron variant running rampant in Sydney.

The ABC's cameras follow the special preparations for the New Year celebrations in which the Opera House itself has a starring role. It's one of the enviable places to watch Sydney's famous fireworks as the clock strikes midnight, plus there are the bars and restaurants, and a performance of La Boheme, the most romantic of operas, in the Joan Sutherland Theatre.

The cameras go to places that are usually off-limits to the public. Head of security John Lomax describes the "low risk, extreme consequence" of a major incident ever happening at the Opera House, nevertheless a terrifying thought. We see inside the secret nerve centre where CCTV screens appear to have every nook and public area covered, and Lomax mentions a commando unit ready to strike in the event of danger.

Backstage in the Joan Sutherland Theatre, a crew is building the set for La Boheme, including a theatre-within-a-theatre for the Café Momus scene, while the director and conductor lead a rehearsal of the singers and children's chorus. The performance is supposed to mark the start of Opera Australia's summer season at the Opera House, but the Omicron outbreak threatens to unravel those plans. OA artistic director Lyndon Terracini admits to being on tenterhooks as opening night approaches.

Inside the Sydney Opera House is narrated in warm and measured tones by actor Marta Dusseldorp, who has family connections with the building. Her grandfather, Dick Dusseldorp, a remarkable Dutch engineer, led the construction of the Opera House podium, which forms the base for Jorn Utzon's magnificent sculptural sails.

"They poured the base of the Opera House – that's all they did," Dusseldorp says of her grandfather's firm, Civil and Civic. "But I'm very proud of him, obviously."

Dusseldorp's earliest memories of the Opera House, though, are of her dancing with her ballet school and in eisteddfods on the Concert Hall stage. She'd also be taken to ballet performances with her maternal grandmother, sitting high up in the "stickybeak seats" for Swan Lake or The Nutcracker. The experiences gave her the thrill of live theatre, and the inkling that she too wanted a life on the stage. As an actor, she has performed many times at the Opera House with Sydney Theatre Company and others.

It's a place full of memories for many people, and it has a particular way of summoning them, of anticipating the next theatrical adventure. Utzon's design for the podium has those broad steps, which lead up to theatre level and down the other side to the northern foyers facing the Harbour. The very act of ascending the steps creates a sense of expectation, as Utzon intended.

"The width of the steps – as I walk up into any of those spaces – is very particular and it turns me into an audience member," Dusseldorp says.

"I don't know how else to describe it. But it metamorphoses you, and prepares you to start to begin to concentrate. It's quite a magical place."

Remarkably, Inside the Sydney Opera House is said to be the first behind-the-scenes documentary about the place. You wonder why it hasn't been done before, although viewers with long memories may recall a BBC series about London's Royal Opera House in 1996, called The House. Its expose of backstage hissy fits, blown budgets and air of privilege put a chill on this kind of open-access journalism, and cultural organisations remain as wary of such media attention as their corporate counterparts.

But the ABC series coincides with major developments and celebrations at the Sydney Opera House, which it naturally wants to share. The Concert Hall refurbishment is the culmination of a "decade of renewal" of the building inaugurated by Opera House chief executive Louise Herron. It has been a remarkable period of change, including upgrades to the Joan Sutherland Theatre, the public foyer areas, new Yallamundi function rooms, and the opening of a Centre for Creativity. One of the most important interventions has been the careful installation of lifts to the major venues, so visitors can now use a lift to reach all the main public areas of the building.

Lou Rosicky, project director of the Concert Hall renewal, leads the viewer through the refurbishment works. He's been growing a long beard since the work began in early 2020, and has sworn not to shave it off until it's all done and dusted.

In the Concert Hall, adjustments were deemed necessary to improve the acoustic quality. For orchestral music, the ceiling is too high and the hall too long – a design hangover from when it was also intended to function as a theatre for staged productions. The acoustic nip and tuck, seen in footage as the work progresses, includes fitting sound reflectors and banners above the stage, and beautifully contoured brush box timber panels around the side walls.

It all involves the delicate handling of this unique and idiosyncratic building, both the main structure designed by Utzon and the Concert Hall interior which was designed by Peter Hall. In the program, Rosicky says the operation is a bit like doing surgery on the Queen – a quip that somewhat dates the footage but which underlines the dauntless precision required.

Along the way there will be delays caused by Covid and supply-chain blockages, and an incident, recounted in episode two, involving the Grand Organ and the sprinkler system. But we know the Concert Hall at last was able to reopen in July with a gala homecoming concert led by conductor Simone Young with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. With the renewal work now complete, and with celebrations leading up to the 50th anniversary soon to begin, Inside the Sydney Opera House is a well-crafted and intriguing portrait of this architectural and cultural marvel.

Inside the Sydney Opera House, ABC TV, from October 23.

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