



Great, Grand & Famous  
Opera House

... where art and drama meet

With a Foreword by  
Dame Kiri Te Kanawa



Presented by Fritz Guble

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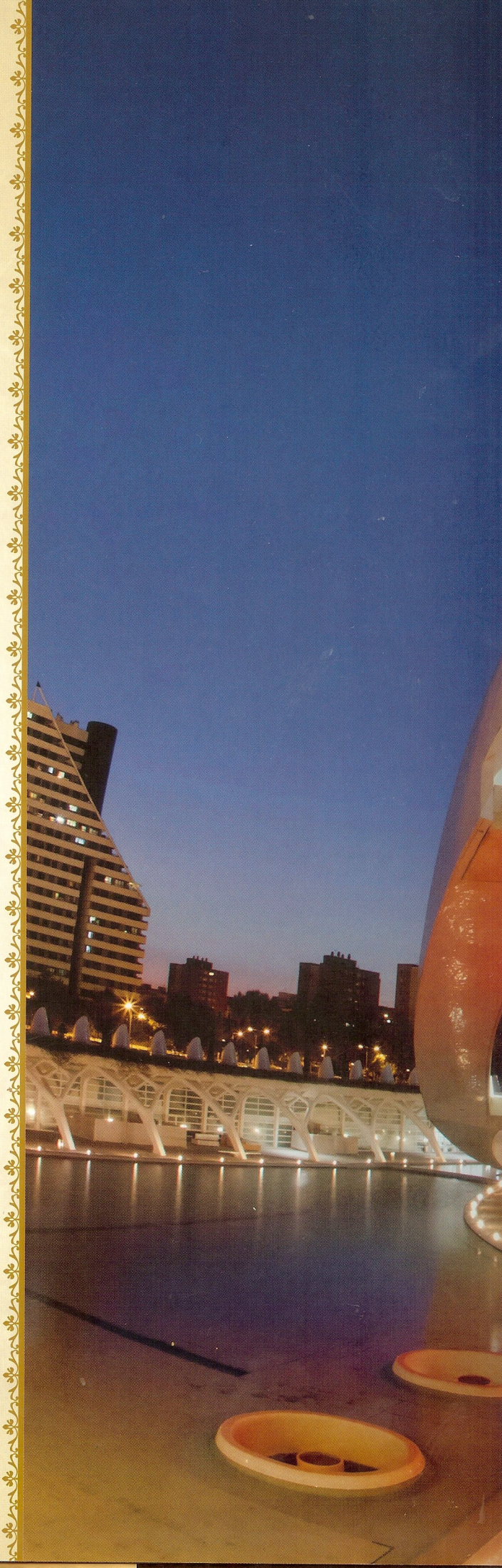
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# CONTRIBUTORS



MOFFATT OXENBOULD AM has contributed to the development of opera in Australia for more than 45 years, as a stage manager, administrator, director, artistic director, broadcaster, and writer. In retirement he continues to direct operas in Australia and overseas, and he presents radio programs documenting Australia's operatic heritage. In addition to contributing text for *Great, Grand & Famous Opera Houses*, Moffatt acted as the book's Chief Consultant, providing invaluable expert advice both during the development of the book and in reviewing the work in its entirety.

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VICTORIA WATSON is a coloratura soprano and was an ensemble and principal artist with the Victoria State Opera in Melbourne, Australia. She has run education projects with Opera Australia in Sydney, introducing opera to new audiences, and regularly lectures at festivals, educational institutions, and for special interest groups.

IAN WATT is a publisher and writer who lives in New Zealand. After completing his university education, he worked for several years in the classical music industry in London, United Kingdom, where he was a keen operagoer and occasional concert reviewer. His publishing career includes a period as editor of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*.

# FROM THE ASHES



The history of fire in theaters makes for grim reading. In his architectural survey of opera houses and theaters of the world, Edwin O. Sachs lists over 1,000 fires occurring in the period from 1792 to 1892, with significant loss of life. From Berlin to New York City, there were few opera houses untouched by tragedy.

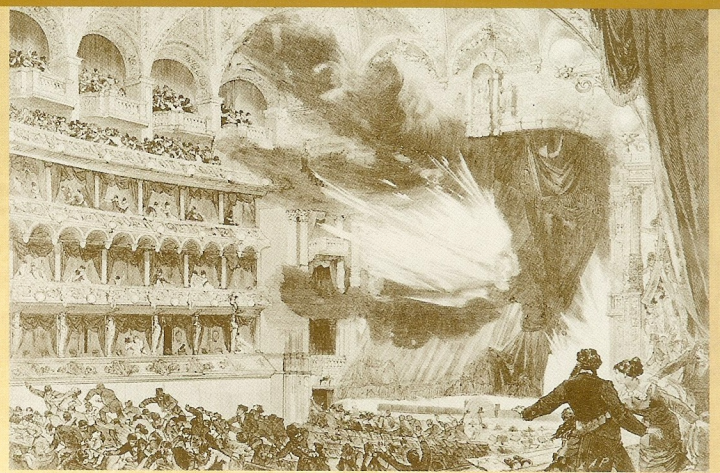
There were numerous causes for the disasters. Naked flames—either used to light candles and gas batters, or for heating—were often the starting point, as were pyrotechnic effects on stage. Highly flammable scenery, clothes, and upholstery accelerated the fires. Another factor was poorly planned ventilation systems, which resulted in fires either pulling oxygen from the auditorium,

or being sucked into the auditorium when there were inadequate vents above the flytower.

Finally, having a large number of people packed into a relatively small space in dim lighting conditions greatly contributed to the casualty rate. According to Sachs's calculations, most theaters built before 1900 would be lucky to stand for more than 20 years without a major fire.

BELOW Hubert Robert's painting depicts the burning down of the second Salle du Palais-Royale, home to Paris's Opéra company, in 1781.





## LIFE AND DEATH

La Fenice means “Phoenix” in Italian, and Venice’s Teatro La Fenice certainly lives up to its name. The first theater was built in 1790–92 on the site of the Teatro San Benedetto, which had been destroyed by fire in 1774. Teatro La Fenice then burned down in 1836. It was swiftly rebuilt and went on to become one of Giuseppe Verdi’s favorite houses. Then in 1996 flames once more lit up Venice’s night sky, when two electricians deliberately set the building on fire. Reconstruction began in 2001, with a team of 200 plasterers, artists, and woodworkers restoring the interior to its nineteenth-century glory. Like the mythical bird, La Fenice rose from the ashes.

Vienna’s Ring Theatre was not so lucky. The second night of a run of Jacques Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) was about to begin at the theater on December 8, 1881. The galleries were full of excited theatergoers, and the stalls were beginning to fill with wealthy patrons. At 6.45 PM, a stagehand used a lighter on a pole to ignite the gas battens above the stage. He accidentally set some scenery alight, and the flames quickly spread to the stage curtain.

Within minutes, smoke and flames were billowing from the stage into the auditorium. The gas was turned off to prevent further explosions, but without lights, people had to find their way out in darkness and thick smoke. It was a scene of utter chaos: people jumping from balconies, crushing others below, with panicking crowds blocking exits and still more people trapped behind locked doors. The death toll was over 600; it was a catastrophe that shook the opera world to its core.

## LEARNING THE LESSONS

Governments responded to disastrous fires with upgraded building regulations and fire prevention measures, but their implementation was patchy. The Ring Theatre had a steel fire curtain and emergency paraffin lamps, but stagehands fled without lowering the curtain or lighting the lamps.

In Munich, the magnificent Nationaltheater München commissioned by King Maximilian I had water tanks and a hose system, but when a fire broke out in January 1823, just five years after the theater’s inauguration, the water tanks were frozen solid. At the inquest into the 1887 fire at the Theatre Royal in Exeter, England, the jury returned a verdict of accidental death, but fire-safety experts laid the blame at the feet of the architect, Charles Phipps, for not complying with voluntary safety regulations. The disaster led to the introduction of mandatory fire regulations in Britain.

## MODERN FIRE PREVENTION

Building codes vary from country to country, but opera houses nowadays will always have smoke or fire curtains to separate the stage from the auditorium, adequate ventilation, clearly lit escape doors that open outward, stair lights, fireproof passages, sprinkler systems, and fire hydrants. Stage scenery, curtains, and upholstery must be treated with fire retardants, and a fire officer will be in the wings whenever any naked flame, cigarette, or pyrotechnical device is used in a production.

Fire prevention in theaters has developed into a precise science. The Sydney Opera House, for example, has a central fire-control room that is manned 24 hours a day, where sophisticated fire-detection devices—including closed circuit cameras as well as heat and smoke detectors—are monitored at all times. And while the Sydney Opera House has, thankfully, never experienced a major fire, its evacuation plans and fire systems have been developed using computational fluid dynamics to model how heat and smoke would spread through any given space in the building.

Modern technology, stricter building regulations, and a sophisticated understanding of how fire, smoke, and people flow through spaces have, therefore, created a much safer environment for modern opera audiences. They have also led to a longer lifespan for the opera houses and theaters themselves.

ABOVE The disastrous fire at Vienna’s Ring Theatre started above the stage and quickly spread into the auditorium.

ABOVE LEFT An intense heat haze engulfs the firefighters as they battle to save Venice’s Teatro La Fenice in 1996.



ABOVE Naked flames such as candles used during opera performances contributed to the high number of theater fires prior to 1900.