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BARNETT LEVEY'S THEATRE ROYAL — A REASSESSMENT

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It is no news to you, ladies and gentlemen, any more than it is to me, that throughout history the Jewish people have been among the world's leaders in the arts and sciences, in law, and in the humanities generally. It is not my purpose tonight to tell you something you already know, but to deal with something not yet generally known, and, in some quarters, known but not recognised. I shall talk, in other words, of some of the Jewish people associated with the foundation and growth of the theatre in Australia.

I am a man who has a fair to good working knowledge of the history of the theatre generally, and a slowly increasing knowledge of the history of the theatre in Australia. But I am not a walking encyclopaedia or historical compendium. I have the time and ability to do a certain amount of original research, but to fill a great many gaps in my knowledge I must confess that I have occasionally to turn to work done by others before me, and by others contemporary with me. In the last group is your distinguished Vice-President, Dr. G. F. J. Bergman, whose articles on Solomon and Barnett Levey and their family I have read with the deepest gratitude, not simply because they saved me from having to do some of the arduous research they involved, but also because without them I am sure I could not have obtained the information I wanted when I wanted it.

Among the Jewish people who helped to found the Australian theatre there are several major figures and a great many minor figures. While I will deal in this talk with both, even if only briefly, I shall naturally devote more time to the major figures—to Barnett Levey, who is unquestionably the father of Australian theatre; to Joseph Simmons, to John Lazar, to Isaac Nathan, to W. L. Montefiore, to the Josephsons and others. With such a vast

canvas to cover I must remind myself that time and your patience are limited, and so I can deal only with the highlights of my subject.

Barnett Levey established the permanent theatre in Australia. This fact is known to almost everybody who is at all interested in our history; but very, very few of them know any more than this fact. How did he establish the theatre? What kind of theatre was it? What plays did it present? How long did it last? Who and what are its actors? What kind of audiences did it have?

It is a peculiar thing that among those people who tell me with confidence that they know Barnett Levey established the Australian theatre, the majority will go on to say that of course his theatre was of no real importance. Theatre, they say, really started in the 1840's or 1850's. Now, they tell me this with the greatest assurance, verbally, and in writing by way of books and articles on the theatre. Yet it is obvious that they know nothing whatever about Barnett Levey or his theatre, and not much more of the theatres which succeeded it and about which they speak with confidence as the "real" theatre. They don't know, for instance, that during its brief reign Levey's theatre introduced all the 18th century plays which we today regard as classics. Such plays as *The School for Scandal*, *The Rivals*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, as well as plays by German and French playwrights, operas by 18th and early 19th century writers, and, as you will soon see, the plays of Shakespeare. Far from being negligible as a theatre, or a theatrical company, Levey's had a repertoire unequalled by any single Australian theatre company since it was established. In the period late 1832 to early 1838, when it was closed, the Theatre Royal presented the staggering total of 342 first performances of works for the stage—that is, comedies, tragedies, operas, operettas, burlesques and ballets. Nearly all of them, of course, were given many repeat performances. And the influence of Barnett Levey on the Australian theatre—through the men and women who learnt most of what they knew while with his theatre—lasted from 1832 until at least 1880, when the last of the originals began to leave life's stage.

To illustrate one or two of the points I have so far made I should now like to digress a little to discuss one of the most recent of the few books published on the early Australian theatre. This is a book published in 1965 and called, or miscalled, *Coppin the Great. Father of the Australian Theatre*.

Coppin may have been great, though I take leave to doubt it. He was certainly not the father of the Australian theatre, for he did not come to Australia until eleven years after that theatre was established. How does the author of this book get over such an awkward fact? One looks in vain in the index for any mention of Barnett Levey or his Theatre Royal. This is not so surprising, perhaps, for it would be extremely embarrassing to have two fathers for the one child. One then turns to the introduction, where one reads: "It is true enough that it was he—(and by "he" the writer means Coppin)—who really established Shakespeare as an integral part of Australian theatre. Great Scott! I said to myself when I read this, for I was really astounded. True enough for whom?

Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal was opened in Sydney as the first permanent Australian theatre on 26 December, 1832. It was closed early in 1838, so that it had an active life of five full years. What did Barnett Levey and his theatre do for Shakespeare in that time? First performances of no less than seven of Shakespeare's plays were given in that five-year period, and each one of them had subsequent performances. But that is not all. The Theatre Royal's successor, the Victoria, opened early in 1838. Its company was made up almost exclusively of Barnett Levey's original players, and its owner and manager were both men who had received whatever theatrical experience they had in Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal. Up to 1843, the year in which Coppin arrived in Australia, the Victoria Theatre presented first performances of a further five of Shakespeare's plays. This means that in the eleven years before Coppin arrived in Australia no less than twelve of Shakespeare's plays were in the Australian theatrical repertoire. I ask you, who was it "really established Shakespeare as an integral part of Australian theatre"?

Having got over the shock of that particular piece of nonsense, I persisted a little further with this book, for I knew the writer could not shirk for ever the task of explaining how Coppin was the "father" of the Australian theatre, and yet come to play in a theatre already established. This is how he did it, and I quote: "In 1843 the established theatre in Australia was barely ten years old. Emerging from a disreputable beginning sponsored by soldiers and Her Majesty's servants who had formerly been Her Majesty's prisoners, it had not yet reached the standard of respectability where its activities could command columns of free publicity."

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask for your patience for just a few minutes more while we take a closer look at those extraordinary statements. "In 1843 the established theatre in Australia was barely ten years old . . ." If it was an established theatre then somebody must have established it, and surely *he* was the father of the Australian theatre? But not according to the author of the book on Coppin. Now for the next sentence. "Emerging from a disreputable beginning sponsored by soldiers and Her Majesty's servants who had formerly been Her Majesty's prisoners . . ." The theatre in Australia did *not* have a disreputable beginning. If it did, then the theatre of the time in England, France, America and Germany was also disreputable, which we know is nonsense. It was *not* sponsored by soldiers. And as for the phrase "Her Majesty's servants who had formerly been Her Majesty's prisoners," that is equally nonsensical. The convicts were permitted to establish a theatre in Sydney in 1796, which was closed in 1800. Those convicts were not "Her" Majesty's servants, for King George III was on England's throne. The convicts at Emu Plains were also permitted to establish a theatre in 1827, which was closed in 1830. Again, they were not "Her" Majesty's servants, for King George IV was on the throne. If, as I suspect, the phrase is meant to refer to Barnett Levey's theatre, it is still hopelessly wrong, for King William was the reigning monarch in 1832, and the only proviso made to granting Levey a theatre licence in that year was that no convicts were to be employed in his theatre. It was not for nothing that Levey's successor in 1838 called his theatre the Victoria, for "Her" Majesty had ascended the throne only the year before.

Finally we come to the last phrase in the passage quoted, the one in which it is said that in 1843 the theatre "had not reached the standard of respectability where its activities could command columns of free publicity," by which the writer means that the theatre in 1843 or earlier was not respectable enough to deserve notice by Sydney's newspapers. In 1832 there were seven different newspapers being published each week in Sydney; in 1833 there were five; in 1834, six; in 1835, seven; and in both 1836 and 1837 there were eight. With perhaps only one exception, every one of those newspapers, every week in which Barnett Levey's theatre was operating, devoted generous space to a coverage of the plays he presented. Every one of those newspapers is on file in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, available to all research workers willing to take the trouble to read through them. From them I have learned almost everything I know about Barnett Levey's theatre.

I would not have wearied you with these details were it not for the fact that the book I mention was published by a reputable university press, and is going to be taken for some years as *the* most authoritative book on the early Australian theatre. But please do not misunderstand me. I do not believe, I can see no reason for believing, there was any malice in this writer's non-recognition of Levey and his theatre. George Coppin was his subject, and he made the fatal mistake of thinking that George Coppin lived in a vacuum, or in a world of Coppin's own creating. And so this writer did not do his homework; he did not do the research necessary to reveal the already established world into which Coppin entered when he first came to Australia.

The writer has also done his subject, and history, a disservice by whitewashing Coppin. If a man's life story is to be properly written it must show him true to life—warts and all. This is how I am going to present to you tonight some aspects not only of Barnett Levey's life, but also of the lives of many of the people associated with him. But do not be alarmed. They were neither criminals nor scoundrels—they were merely human beings.

Throughout his life Levey never lacked supporters. He had them in their hundreds. But he soon learnt, as most of us do when we walk out into the public arena, that the support of thousands is of very little use if the real power is in the hands of half a dozen men. He was a man literally obsessed with the desire or need to establish a theatre, and he did not much care what he did so long as he got it. But at the same time he was also an intensely humane man; a man who not only supported every appeal made to him on behalf of charity, but a man who was also at various stages during his life the victim of a great army of hangers-on and sycophants who wanted him only for what they could get out of him. And most of them got a lot more out of him than they either earned or deserved.

There were two attempts made to establish a theatre in Sydney before Barnett Levey actually made a start on his. The first was started in George Street, alongside the offices of the *Gazette* newspaper. Unfortunately, in digging the foundations for the theatre part of the foundations of the *Gazette* building were endangered, and the newspaper sued the builder, who lost the case and later sold the shell of what was to have been a theatre for use as a factory. In the second instance, a group of men toyed with the idea of raising money in shares to build a theatre. Somehow they either got wind of the Governor's displeasure at the idea, or were otherwise satisfied a theatre would be frowned

on, and so dropped the scheme. Barnett was the third to try, and the only one to succeed, but only after a hard and bitter fight against the opposition of the established church and Governor Darling.

I must now telescope a great deal of interesting history so as finally to arrive at the opening of the theatre, and to deal with its subsequent history. The first mention of the fact that Barnett Levey was building a theatre was made in the *Monitor* of 7 July, 1826. This theatre was first used publicly in 1829.

Levey apparently had a great contempt for, or indifference to, officialdom. He first got into trouble when he decided to install a huge windmill on top of his building in George Street. When the Acting Attorney General remonstrated with him about this, Levey got his lawyer, William Charles Wentworth, to draft a most impolitic letter which concluded to the effect that if the Government made him, Levey, take down his windmill he would insist that all Government windmills should be similarly dismantled. Governor Darling, an autocrat who had never, before he came to Australia, been thwarted by the "lowest class"—as he referred to convicts and free men alike who did not agree with his policies—was naturally infuriated with this reply. But he bided his time. Just the same, he sent the whole correspondence, with his comments, back home to England. It can be seen to this day in the Mitchell Library, along with Levey's letters of all kinds.

Barnett also tried to interest shareholders in his theatre. As first he got good support, by way of promises, but drought and an economic depression deprived him of all the promised money, and he finally decided to go it alone. For Barnett Levey believed, despite everything everybody told him, that the people wanted a theatre and that there was money to be made in it.

The *Gazette* warned Levey indirectly in 1828 that it was very likely he would not be permitted to use his theatre when he had completed it. Levey's reply to this was a statement that he had no intention of applying for a licence, as his theatre was to be a private one. Again the *Gazette* warned him. It felt sure, it said, that a private theatre would not be allowed; and again Levey ignored the warning. Then the newly-appointed Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay, stepped in to make these warnings official. "I am directed distinctly to apprise you, that the Governor will not license a theatre," Macleay wrote to Levey in a letter dated 4 July, 1828, "and further that his Excellency is fully determined to resort to every means in his power, to

put a stop to your unauthorised proceedings in this and other respects."

Levey's reply to this was to mortgage his uncompleted Waverley Cottage on the South Head Road, so as to get the money he needed to complete his theatre; then to rehearse his assembled company for three days a week during August, and to announce in an advertisement in the *Gazette* of 3 September, 1828, that those who did not pay by 12 September for the theatre boxes they had reserved would lose them. By one of those ironies of fate which occasionally dogged Levey, in the same issue of this newspaper appeared another advertisement, a notice that the Government had hurried through the Legislative Council an Act for regulating places of public exhibition and entertainment. This Act made illegal any kind of public performance given without a licence. It was an Act designed to make a clean sweep of everyone connected with such a performance. Not only the producer or manager and his company, but also the owner of the premises in which the performance was given and the audience which watched it would be held culpable. All would be deemed "rogues and vagabonds", and subjected to the drastic penalties laid down for such at that time.

Levey thus learnt that if he had never done anything else, he had become the first man in Australia to have a special Council Act promulgated to put a stop to his activities.

It was now the turn of the moralists to move in. They knew Levey did not lack support, but now they also knew *their* views carried more weight with the Governor than those of Levey's supporters. So it was that clergymen were seen hawking a petition against the theatre, and all kinds of other people were seen hawking a petition *for* the theatre about the town. Not even Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, famous soldier, surveyor and explorer, escaped. He wrote to his brother in Scotland on 3 October, 1828: "I have just been called on by the two clergymen to sign a petition *against a theatre* which has been erected, on the plea that the people are too bad, and that the theatre will make them worse!! Who would live in such a country! Yet *I* must, for I can't afford to come back . . ." From the fact that Mitchell heavily underlined the words "against a theatre," and used double and single exclamation marks at the end of his sentences, it is easy to deduce that he found it incredible there should be any movement against the establishment of a theatre. But he signed the petition, because he, too, had to live.

The newspapers also took sides in the dispute, with almost all of them for Barnett Levey and his theatre. But here we must recognise a further fact. In this instance Levey was to some extent the meat in the sandwich. It was not so much that the majority were for Barnett Levey—though they undoubtedly supported and admired this little David in his fight against Goliath—as that they were all anti-Darling. Governor Darling's restrictive measures of all kinds annoyed and infuriated the "lowest class", and they welcomed any opportunity, by word of mouth or in print, to let him know what they thought of him.

Needless to say, the clergy's petition signed by the few prevailed against Levey's signed by the many, and when Levey—as he had to—applied for a licence to open his theatre it was refused. But he would not admit defeat, for he was now fighting an enemy more insidious even than Darling—approaching bankruptcy. Levey began to bargain, without the other side realising for a while what he was up to. He offered to dismantle the contentious mill and re-erect it outside the town environs on a site to be chosen by the government. At the same time he was thinking back to a series of highly successful concerts given in Sydney in 1826, at which he first sang some of his comic songs. He decided to apply for a licence to hold concerts in his theatre. Meantime, he kept the ball rolling with correspondence on the removal of his mill. For at least the first four months of 1829 letters on its removal circulated between Levey, the Colonial Secretary, and the Surveyor General. From the beginning of these negotiations the circle seems to have been: Levey suggests site to Colonial Secretary; Colonial Secretary refers to Surveyor General; Surveyor General refers back to Colonial Secretary objecting to site, and suggesting another; Colonial Secretary suggests new site to Levey; Levey rejects new site and suggests yet another to Colonial Secretary, Colonial Secretary refers back to Surveyor General—and so the wheel kept on revolving. The upshot was that Levey, as a seemingly "reformed" character, got his licence to hold concerts, and the windmill stayed where it was.

The concerts were attended by all the "best" people in Sydney, audiences which were in themselves testimony against Darling's restrictive Act. Levey gave a second and a third concert, all of them packed to the doors, and in between the musical items he regaled the audience with some of his comical songs. The newspapers were enthusiastic about the success of these concerts, and said quite boldly it was a pity Levey was not allowed to "act" rather

than have what should have been a stage performance spoiled by musical items. This was enough for the ambitious, effervescent little Barnett Levey. He announced that for his fourth concert he would be "at Home" à la Charles Mathews. Now, Charles Mathews was a famous early nineteenth century actor, singer and ventriloquist who gave highly successful one-man performances to packed audiences in London. What Levey was proposing to do, in effect, was defy the law by giving a theatrical performance without a licence. But he announced his plan quite openly in the Press, as though to show the contempt he felt for the Governor and his laws in the face of such widespread public support for his concerts.

The people of Sydney proved no different from the people of London when faced with the prospect of seeing a one-man performance. Levey had a full house, and also an unwelcome but surely not unexpected visitor. The "laird" himself, the angry Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay appeared backstage in person and attempted to stop the performance. But once again Levey had presented the opposition with a *fait accompli*, a full house, and after a great deal of bitter talk and argument on both sides the Colonial Secretary allowed this one performance to be held, rather than send seven or eight hundred people home disappointed.

What followed is fairly well known. Levey tried again and again to get a licence for his theatre, but the Governor was adamant; and then Barnett Levey's peculiar ideas of business conduct caught up with him and he went bankrupt and lost everything, including his theatre.

It is not at all surprising that when, in 1832, it was learned that the hated Governor Darling was to be replaced by Governor Bourke, Levey should be a signatory to an address to His Majesty in England which made three points, the last being "for the benefit conferred upon the colony by the recall of Lieutenant General Darling, and the appointment of a successor in the person of Major General Bourke, and praying that His Majesty will be pleased to adopt such measures as may be calculated to prevent the recurrence of various grievances, which have taken place during the existing administration." It is easy to imagine the bitter thoughts of Governor Darling when he parcelled this address, with his comments scrawled against Levey's name and those of others who had subscribed to it, and sent it home to England.

As is well known by now, Levey finally obtained his theatre licence, and opened a temporary theatre in the

saloon of the Royal Hotel in December, 1832. The next year he and his company were in their theatre proper and the saloon theatre was demolished.

From the opening of his theatre Levey's real troubles started. He had gathered together a group of ambitious amateurs, very few of whom had had any but the slightest previous acting experience. There were fools among them, but there were also a number of talented and devoted players who formed the core of the company for as long as it existed at the Theatre Royal, and for many years afterwards at the Victoria and other theatres.

By today's standards the company was grossly overworked. Very often six different plays were presented each week, and in addition to having to learn these plays, and the lines of the plays which were to succeed them the following week, the actors also had to "double" as singers, dancers, musicians, and even backstage crew and scene-painters. In other words, the more talents a man could summon to his aid the better the place he held in the company. This applied not simply in Australia, but in the theatres of the time all over the world. A man like Knowles, the company's leading male actor, or Simmons, or Lazar, or any of the other leaders of the stage would have to play the leading part in a three to five act melodrama, then sing a song or dance a hornpipe between curtains, then play in a farce or afterpiece which would make still greater demands on his ability and endurance—and this for three nights every week. Inevitably, having to work under such constant pressure, the whole of the company, from Levey down to the humblest candle-snuffer, lived on their nerves and consequently fought and argued among themselves interminably.

To complicate matters ever further, the theatre of the period—that is, the theatre of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century all over the world—was ruled by its audiences. If an audience did not like what was happening on the stage—if it did not like an actor or singer or dancer, or had a grudge against the manager for some reason or other, it hissed and groaned at the unfortunate actors, or threw things at them. As well, members of the audience took sides in these matters, and fought among themselves. The audience of the time could and did frequently demonstrate and even riot until it had forced an actor or a theatre manager to give way to its demands. Not even the famous Goethe was able to control his audiences at his Weimar theatre, and in the 1820's when some of London's leading actors took a company to Paris their

performance ended with the audience throwing the theatre benches at the actors, and the police being called into clear the theatre. Now this sort of thing was a two-way weapon. An unscrupulous actor could use an audience for *his* ends, by "wording it up" before the performance, and thus inducing a riot or demonstration so as to gain whatever he hoped to achieve. As a result, theatrical performances in theatres all over the world were often quite rowdy affairs until well into the 1850's. It is as well to remember this fact, ladies and gentlemen, when we read one of those articles one still sees occasionally about the uncouth, drunken, villainous audiences of the early Australian theatre. Anyone who visualises the nineteenth century theatre in terms of that of the twentieth is being quite unreal. Those theatres were the theatres of their time and must be judged in their time, not by twentieth century standards. There was nothing done in the early Australian theatre that cannot be matched with similar happenings in the theatres of the time all over the world.

Barnett Levey was a man who, unlike the majority of actors, seems to have known and recognised his limitations on the stage. He was good at comic songs and humorous monologues, and rarely ventured beyond them except in an emergency. But theatrically he had no limitations. He was passionately fond of the theatre, and his knowledge of it was very wide. He had gained that knowledge, I must assume, by visits during his boyhood and youth in London to Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Sadler's Wells, the Lyceum, and Coburg Theatres.

It is necessary to have some knowledge of the history of the English theatre of the early nineteenth century if we are to understand the early Australian theatre. You will remember I said the author of the book on Coppin made a fatal mistake in thinking that Coppin lived in a vacuum—was self-contained. It is equally fatal to believe the Australian theatre of this period also lived or was contained in a vacuum. It was not. It was to all intents and purposes the English Theatre of the time transplanted in Australia. Therefore, anyone with a knowledge of the early nineteenth century English theatre can, in reading the reports on Levey's theatre, read between the lines and match what they say with what is known of the architecture, plays, acting styles, audience and stage of the period, and see how wide his knowledge really was; how he always knew what he wanted, and that what he wanted was invariably right. He can also see that although Levey and his company were more than two thousand miles from its source, they were carrying on a long established tradition.

A little more than a month after the opening of the Theatre Royal its unqualified success so far turned the heads of a few of Levey's actors that they began to assume the airs of prima donnas or stars. They grew self-opinionated and assertive, and began to adopt airs and graces not only with their employer but also, in some instances, with members of the audience. With the obvious financial success of the theatre before them, some of them attempted to gain a bigger share of the profits for themselves. Even though the *Gazette* lost no time in telling these malcontents that but for Levey most of them would be behind a plough, they tried various ways of coercing into giving them more money, finally threatening not to appear on stage unless their demands were met. Levey did the only thing he could—he dismissed two of the ringleaders just a few hours before a performance was due to begin. They were players he could ill afford to be without, but he also could ill afford to give them a victory. At that night's performance Levey and his remaining players had their first taste of "London" manners from a displeased theatre audience. There was, of course, a claque to lead the audience in its demonstration; a claque carefully primed and placed by the disaffected players, who had spread the tale that Levey had grossly mistreated them, and had dismissed them when they remonstrated. There were loud calls from all over the house for the missing players once the curtain went up that night, and every attempt made by Levey or the members of his company to explain matters was howled down by an enraged audience. The demonstration sent Levey, never the most equable of men, into a high-pitched frenzy. The curtain fell on him dancing up and down in impotent fury at the audience's disregard of his willingness and right to give an explanation. But the audience was enjoying itself and, as one newspaper reported, Levey was "permitted to perform a little ballet, but as to speech, not one word could be gathered." Then followed a general fight between some of the audience and some of Levey's players, with Levey's stage manager, John Meredith, delightedly contesting the right of members of the audience to clamber up on to the stage. In the course of the fight grappling antagonists fell and rolled together under the curtain from view of the audience, and then back on to the front of the stage again. Finally, Meredith prevailed, and cleared the stage of intruders. The next day, of course, the disaffected players came to their senses. Audiences might give verbal support to real and imagined grievances, but they wouldn't pay wages. So the actors

apologised to Levey, and for about a fortnight or more there was peace.

The season at the saloon Theatre Royal continued until October, 1833. In this month Levey announced the opening of his real Theatre Royal, which was to be held on October 5. Now fully launched on the treacherous and unpredictable seas of theatrical management, Levey had already experienced some of its squalls, and had not always shown himself to be the wisest of captains. He was to learn as he went. Meantime he had established a new industry in Sydney; one which, with the opening of his new theatre, would provide employment for more than one hundred people. In addition, his activities had helped to swell the annual profit of the various chandlers, haberdashers, hatters, clothiers and other stores from which he and his company bought their theatrical supplies, from canvas to dress lengths, from candles to men's slops. And his theatre was also an unforeseen and unexpected boon to Sydney's infant printing and newspaper industries. From no other source in the town did so many orders emanate for advertisements, posters, and "bills of the day," or programmes.

By yet another of those coincidences which occasionally dogged Levey's activities, on the day in 1833 when his final advertisement for the opening of his renovated Theatre Royal appeared the *Gazette* carried a paragraph announcing the retirement from his fashion and haberdashery store in Pitt Street of Joseph Wyatt. Mr. Wyatt, the newspaper said, had retired from shopkeeping to live on his means, "acquired without a breath of calumny." It was a retirement which was to bring Wyatt much more before the public than his earlier undertakings had done. I suspect that the canny Wyatt, who was quite young at this time, and had made his fortune early, was looking for a way to build on that fortune and had noticed that Levey's theatre was making money, and would no doubt continue to make money.

The years passed with Levey's company presenting an amazing variety of plays, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, but with few periods in which houses were not full and financially satisfactory. The peaks during these years were the occasional visits to the theatre by the Governor and his party, on which occasions the Governor chose the programme for the night, as Royalty did in England. In between were fights and law cases between Levey and his players; disturbances in the audience; too much conviviality backstage (with the proprietor himself some-

times setting the example); criticism of his actors and their methods by Levey, and criticism of *his* methods by his actors; occasional slipshod stage performances, and occasional poor houses. Not only was his company living on its nerves, but so was Levey—and inevitably they all resorted to alcohol in a lesser or greater degree to help keep them going.

The truth is Levey now found that having a theatre was one thing, controlling it another. Whatever his many faults may have been; whatever enemies his bad temper, his lack of assurance, his now fair now foul reactions to his favourites of the moment may have made, he was at heart a man with a wish to do well by his fellow men. He could be cajoled or even importuned, but not held to ransom or tyrannised. Nor, in these early years, did he ask his company to do anything he was not prepared to do himself. In the first year of his theatrical activities his must have been close on a twenty-hour working day. It was all proving too much for him, and towards the end of 1833 he advertised for a partner willing to supply a small capital and to take an active part in the management of the theatre. In February, 1834, it was announced that Mr. Joseph Simmons, lately from London, had taken a share in the Theatre Royal and was to have the entire management of the stage. "He will be a valuable acquisition," one newspaper said, "as Mr. Simmons is perfectly conversant with theatricals." That is a claim which I have yet to establish. That he was an acquisition to Sydney's Theatre Royal there is no doubt whatever. He was a most gifted and versatile player. There seems to have been nothing he could not do—sing, dance, act in a wide variety of parts, manage a theatre with unusual ability, and even write plays—everything, in fact, except get on with Levey. They inevitably fell out, their temporary disagreement being fostered and fanned by the internal jealousies of the rest of the company, particularly that of the theatre's original leading man, Conrad Knowles. They parted company in 1835, by which time Simmons had firmly established himself as a favourite with Sydney audiences. At the same time Levey announced that he had leased his theatre and company to a syndicate of six Sydney business men.

When Levey came on stage at Simmon's farewell performance to make some announcements about the changes which were to take place, the audience showed what it thought of things by ordering him off the stage with loud and repeated cries of "Off! Off!" They would not listen to him, for Simmons was a favourite. They were not to know,

or perhaps they knew and did not care, that Levey was far from well. Worry and an over-indulgence in alcohol were aggravating an inherent sickness. He needed quiet and rest, which he could not get in his theatre.

The combine leased the theatre from Levey for two years at an annual rental of £1,300, a large sum for those days, and sufficient indication that despite its real and alleged irregularities it was certainly not losing money. Among this combine or syndicate were two men who at the time knew nothing whatever of the theatre, but who in a few years learned all they needed to know to establish and run a number of the theatres which succeeded Barnett Levey's. One of these men was Joseph Wyatt, the retired haberdasher, and the other William Knight.

The fickle Press, with an indecent "off with the old love, on with the new" haste, welcomed the new management, and lost no time in telling it how the theatre should be run. They were enthusiastic about the change, for a while, for they were quite sure most of the theatre's faults, or what they said were its faults, were due to Levey's mismanagement. They soon found that no matter who was the management, the old troubles continued—fights among the actors, disturbances in the audience, and the same round of hard, trying work for all connected with the theatre.

The new lessees installed Simmons as manager, and as time progressed they in turn found that running a theatre was no sinecure, so that in November, 1835, they farmed the remainder of their lease to Simmons. Now there ensued what could be called a fight for power between Conrad Knowles, Barnett Levey and Joseph Simmons—who could not get on with each other. Knowles was jealous of Simmons's acting ability and popularity with the audience; Levey was annoyed because control of his theatre had fallen to Simmons, and Simmons was doing his best to cope with two men whom he felt he could well do without. Simmons apparently had his lease, or sub-lease until May, 1836. Knowing this, Levey did his best to influence the main lessees to refuse a renewal to Simmons. He was more successful than he had perhaps hoped. The six lessees offered Levey £30 a week to manage the theatre for them, thus sparking off an explosion of domestic politics whose repercussions were to be felt for the next few years.

Simmons was dismissed, and immediately retaliated by inserting an advertisement in the newspapers detailing his wrongs, in the course of which he said that "Mr. Levey had consented to receive £30 per week as manager of the

theatre, and that any dog who breakfasted upon his, Levey's, generosity would not be liable to choke upon it." Levey, not to be outdone in invective, at once wrote an advertisement of his own which he planned to have printed as a handbill and distributed by the town bellman. But it was so strong the printer refused to print it. Instead, he very maliciously passed the copy to Simmons, who handed it to his solicitor and instituted court proceedings. Meantime Knowles took advantage of the general excitability to press his interests. The upshot was that the astute Joseph Wyatt moved in, bought out the five other lessees, and installed Knowles as manager until such time as the lease expired and Levey regained control of his theatre.

Needless to say, when Levey did regain control of his theatre in 1837 Knowles was not among the company. Which meant that without Simmons or Knowles the company was short of a good leading man. This shortage was filled the next month, when John Lazar made his Sydney debut in the part of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Despite a mixed reception from the newspapers, Lazar's performances drew the wildest enthusiasm from the packed audiences which witnessed them.

Levey, in this year of 1837, was at last back at the helm of his beloved theatre with a company purged of nearly all of its trouble-making elements. But he was not to be left long to enjoy it. Sydney's newspaper readers on Monday, October 2, 1837, opening their *Monitor* (the first newspaper to be published that week) were disappointed if they were looking for a report of the previous Saturday's performances at the theatre. There was not the usual page-two article headed "The Theatre". Instead, tucked away among the "Local Intelligence," was a brief paragraph which read: "In consequence of the death of Mr. Barnett Levey, the theatre will be closed for one week . . ."

Everyone, of course, rallied to the aid of Mrs. Barnett Levey, the former Sarah Emma Wilson, who from then on conducted the theatre under the guidance of Joseph Simmons (who had again secured a "part lease"), John Lazar, and her step-father, Jacob Josephson.

But the Theatre Royal's days were numbered, for Wyatt had almost completed his Victoria Theatre on a site near his former haberdashery store in Pitt Street. He and Mrs. Levey came to an arrangement whereby the Theatre Royal was closed, and a few months later Wyatt bought the whole of Levey's former property so as to ensure that the Royal remained closed and could not open in competition with his Victoria Theatre. About twenty years

later Wyatt's lease on the land on which his theatre was built ran out, and theatre and land were bought by a member of the Josephson family. Wyatt then built his first Prince of Wales Theatre on the site in Castlereagh Street occupied by today's Theatre Royal (soon to be demolished).

When the Victoria opened it had a company of twenty players—that is, twenty actors whose names were considered important enough to be listed on the playbill. Sixteen of these were from Barnett Levey's theatre, and as time went on the Victoria company was made up almost exclusively of Barnett Levey's original players.

I think I have now told you enough about Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal and his players, ladies and gentlemen, to give you an inkling of how much I have *not* told you. The history of this theatre, I find, is fascinating, but it is also long and involved and one cannot do justice to it in a talk. But perhaps you can see now that it was far from negligible as a theatre, and is the solid foundation on which our subsequent theatrical history was built. Despite the fights which marred their dealings with each other, Levey and his company presented many great plays, ably and well. And Levey's theatre was the training ground for a long list of people who were to take their experience into theatres in Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Tasmania. They helped to build what we today know as—or perhaps I should say, once knew as—the Australian theatre.

I should also have made it possible for you to see how foolhardy it is for any writer to attempt to judge the merits of a theatre such as Levey's without first finding out everything about it. It could be said with a great deal of truth that we find in history what we bring to it. The more we know about affairs of all kinds in the world outside Australia in a given period in our history, the better we will understand, the more we will learn about Australian history. Only when its performances have been thoroughly analysed can one really see what kind of theatre Levey's was, and what kind of actors it had. One could talk for hours and not exhaust this subject.

One could talk, for instance, of Eliza Winstanley, who came to Australia from England at the age of fifteen when her father was engaged as scenepainter to Levey's Theatre Royal. A year later, at the age of sixteen, she made her stage debut at that theatre, and ultimately became the first Australian-trained actress to achieve success in New York, Philadelphia, Manchester, and then London. In 1851 she joined Charles Kean's company at the Princess's Theatre in London, just at the start of his now historically

famous Shakespeare revivals, and she remained there with him until he gave the theatre up in 1859. During this period she also made at least eight appearances in command performances before Her Majesty Queen Victoria, at Windsor Castle. Even if we allow for the possibility that Eliza Winstanley had a natural talent as an actress, we still must recognise that the only stage training she ever had was received at Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal. In view of her success this could not have been negligible.

Next we could talk of the operas and musical plays presented by Levey's company. But we must remember that "opera" in the early nineteenth century meant something a little different from what it means today. Today when we say "opera" we mean a theatrical performance in which every word is sung instead of spoken. In Levey's day, and before it, an opera was a play with songs interspersed. These songs were sometimes solos, sometimes trios or quartets, sometimes choruses. Today we class these as semi-operas—that is, part sung and part spoken. Levey's company presented an astonishing number of these semi-operas, of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the year 1833 alone they performed *The Devil To Pay*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Inkle and Yarico*, *The Lord of the Manor*, *The Mountaineers*, *The Miller and His Men*, and *The Children in the Wood*. I might mention in passing that *The Marriage of Figaro* was Mozart's opera "arranged" by Henry Bishop—that is, turned from an opera into a part-spoken, part-sung play. In fact, it was Mozart's music horribly mutilated to suit the English audiences of the day, which had not yet become opera minded, or had not yet come to appreciate what we today call "grand opera".

Then, if we turn to the year 1835 we have our first meeting with Isaac Nathan. Certain aspects of this composer's life are by now familiar enough—how in 1815-1822 he set Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* to music, and how in 1841 he emigrated to Australia, where he taught singing, organised vocal and instrumental concerts, worked for a while in or with the theatre, and continued with his composing, meeting his death by accident in 1864. What is not so well known is that he wrote or was associated with the music for at least three works for the stage in England, of which one was extremely popular in both England and Australia. In England Isaac Nathan had the well-known farce writer James Kenney as his librettist, and in Australia he had Charles Nagel and J. L. Montefiore. It may be assumed from the available evidence that James Kenney was responsible for Nathan turning his attention to the

theatre—or that he gave him the necessary encouragement. On 7 July, 1823, Kenney's comic opera, *Sweethearts and Wives*, was produced at the Haymarket Theatre in London with music by Whitaker, Nathan, Cooke and Perry. The inclusion in this semi-opera of songs by four composers indicates that it was a *pasticcio* opera, and it is possible that Nathan compounded this particular work. In any event, this introduction led to another work by Kenney the following year, for which Nathan wrote all the music. This was an Oriental story called *The Alcaid; or, The Secrets of Office*, first given at the Haymarket on 10 August, 1824. Three years later Nathan wrote the music for another work of Kenney's, *The Illustrious Stranger; or, Married and Buried*, presented at Drury Lane in 1827. This was by far the most popular of the three works with which Kenney and Nathan were associated, and was the first opera by Nathan to be produced in Australia. It provided a perfect vehicle for the versatile Joseph Simmons, who first played and sang in it at Levey's Theatre Royal on 28 May, 1835. In fact, Nathan's *Sweethearts and Wives* and *The Illustrious Stranger* were given many performances in Levey's theatre long before Nathan arrived in Australia. *The Illustrious Stranger* was also presented at a benefit performance for Nathan at the Victoria in 1847, and at a benefit for Joseph Simmons as late as 1879, when, at the age of at least 70 Simmons again played the part he had first played at the Theatre Royal 44 years before.

Inevitably, when Nathan wrote his opera *Don John of Austria*, for which J. L. Montefiore provided the libretto, it was also a semi-opera—with Francis Nesbitt playing the leading speaking part, and the brothers Howson and Mrs. Guerin, later to become the mother of the famous Nellie Stewart, providing the singing leads. This opera was first presented in Sydney in May, 1847. It is still not generally known that while he was in Sydney Nathan wrote the music for three other stage works beside his *Don John of Austria*.

I could next talk about some of the actors themselves—Joseph Simmons, for instance, who in his years at the Theatre Royal played such differing roles as Petrucchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Iago in *Othello*, Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Horatio in *Hamlet*, Pierre in *Venice Preserved*, Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Macbeth, Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the lead in a host of melodramas of the period, including the first Australian performance of *The Flying Dutchman*, the play which preceded Wagner's opera of that name. And yet this extraordinarily

versatile man specialised in stage Irishmen. He brought down the house night after night in the various comic Irishman parts featured in so many of the plays of this period, and in which he also sang a variety of Irish comic songs and danced a jig or two. When the Victoria Theatre first opened he was, theatrically, unemployed for a few months, but by September, 1838, he was playing Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, and a month later was made stage manager. The following year he became a publican, but in 1842 he was back at the Victoria again as manager. In 1843 he opened his own theatre in Market Street near George Street, on a site now occupied by Farmers. It was, architecturally, a beautiful little theatre, but it was never a success and by the following year Simmons was back at the Victoria again and playing the lead in a melodrama which he wrote himself, *The Duellist; or, The Minister's Daughter*.

While Simmons was at his Royal City Theatre in Market Street in 1843, John Lazar played a leading role in J. L. Montefiore's play, *La Duchesse de Chevreuse*, which Montefiore had translated from the French and presented to the Victoria Theatre before leaving on one of his trips to Europe. John Lazar was another perfect example of the extraordinary versatility of these gifted men of the early Australian theatre. They were not only versatile on the stage, but also off it. They conducted hotels and stores, they held auctions, they built or opened theatres, they even, as in John Lazar's case, held office in city councils. Another extraordinary thing about them is the way they fought and called each other eternal enemies. But as soon as one of them was in trouble of any kind, the rest rushed to his rescue. When Wyatt was in trouble because a rival theatre opened in Hunter Street, it was Simmons and Lazar who helped him. When, in turn, Wyatt tried unsuccessfully to block Simmons from building his Royal City Theatre, it was all the old original leading players of Levey's company who came to the aid of Simmons, including his so-called mortal enemy—the man whom he said he would never act with again, Conrad Knowles. And when, by their defection, Wyatt was left with only the dregs of the players in Sydney, it was Lazar who came to his assistance and, by working like a madman, knocked a company of sorts into shape. It was in this year, 1843, that John Lazar's son, Samuel, first appeared on the stage, at the age of five, in the part of Tom Thumb in the play of the same name. Thirty-two years later the same Samuel Lazar opened what is, in effect, today's Theatre Royal in Castle-reagh Street.

Of Lazar the elder the *Herald* said when he first appeared at the Theatre Royal in 1837: "We are glad to find that, notwithstanding his partial failure in the important characters he first appeared in, he will be a useful addition to the company—besides which he is said to be a very decent man, having lately arrived in the Colony with his wife and family." And in September, 1843, towards the end of his managerial role at the Victoria, the *Australian* complimented him on the work he had done for that theatre, adding: "Mr. Lazar, in his capacity of impressario, has done much to secure the best wishes of the lovers of the drama—his revivals of some of the finest productions of Shakespeare, Otway, Milman, Sheridan, Colman, and Sheridan Knowles would of themselves obtain for him the warmest thanks of the friends of the stage . . ." This was the year, ladies and gentlemen, in which George Coppin arrived in Sydney—the year in which, according to his biographer, the Sydney theatre was not important enough to merit the notice of the newspapers.

One could, in fact, talk for hours about the variety of plays presented at Levey's theatre and during the first few years at the Victoria—or one could write about them, as I have. I have had an article on his Shakespearian productions accepted for inclusion in a publication of the Cambridge University Press. I have had another on his opera productions accepted by a London musical magazine. I have had an article on the eighteenth century plays presented in the early Sydney theatre accepted by an American university journal. Once again, I could not have done this, I could not have written those articles if Levey's theatre had been as negligible as some would have us believe. Even his theatre tickets are a source of interest in themselves. I have discovered that the Sydney printers, W. C. Penfold and Co. Pty. Ltd. have in their possession one or two of the original engraved plates used for these. I have had a brief article on these tickets accepted by a London theatre research journal.

At this stage you could well be asking yourselves why on earth anyone in England or America should be so interested in the Australian theatre of the 1830's. The truth is that, everywhere but in Australia, there is an enormous, a world-wide interest in theatre research. Universities in England, France, Germany, Italy and America, all with their drama and theatre departments, are studying theatre history in the minutest detail. America, England, and other countries have their Theatre Research Societies, all of which are members of the world

body, the International Federation for Theatre Research. Each society, and the federation, produces its own quarterly journals. Six American universities that I know of publish journals on specialist aspects of theatre history. All these, of course, provide a vast body of interesting and valuable information on theatre history all over the world. A man doing research in England or America—or anywhere else, for that matter—on the kind of stage performances given in London in the 1830's is astonished and delighted to find that much the same programmes were being given at this period in history not only in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, America, and even India, but also in far away Australia. Even the design of Sydney's Theatre Royal tickets was much the same as those in use in the overseas theatres of the time—a direct carryover of a style established in England in the late eighteenth century.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I should like to say: Never accept a judgment on our history or on our forbears unless you are certain the one who makes that judgment has established his claims. In the case of Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal, if ever you hear anybody say, in effect: 'Nobody will deny that the first permanent Australian theatre was of little importance,' be like the famous German playwright, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in a somewhat similar circumstance, and say: 'I am that nobody! I deny it absolutely!' Thank you.

AUSTRALIAN JEWRY IN 1966

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My earlier analysis, "The Demography of Australian Jewry",¹ based upon the 1961 Census, concluded with the observation that

... Jewish life in Australia has reached a peak. However, below the surface of the vitality of the committed and involved, the alluring pressures of the free society are causing a steady drift of the uninterested, if not disaffected, away from Jewish communal life. . . .

In the years ahead, numbers, emotional motivation, and intensity of involvement are likely to decline as second and third generation attitudes replace those of the cohesively-knit communities deriving their current vitality largely from the impetus of first generation immigrants . . .

The 1966 Commonwealth Census has now offered a welcome opportunity to test these conclusions against the