

## ACADEMY OF MUSIC / BIJOU THEATRE No 1 (Melbourne)

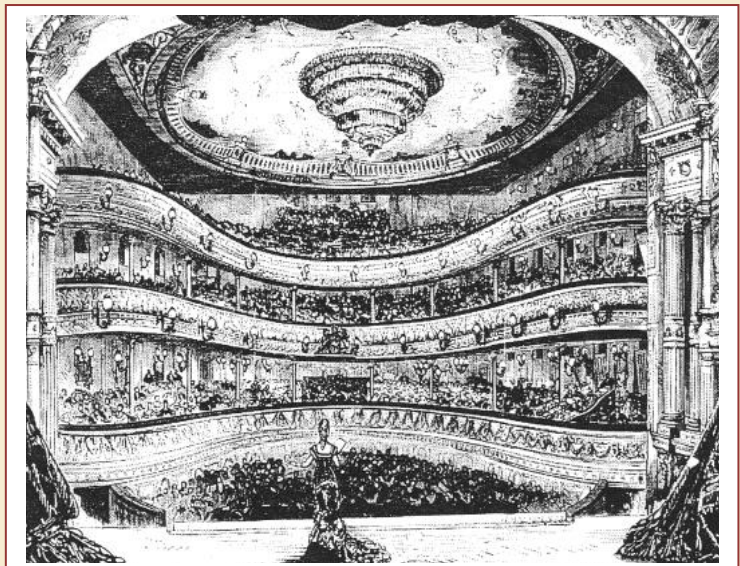
Situated beside the Victoria Arcade in Bourke Street, Melbourne, the 1500-seat Academy of Music opened in 1876 but was renamed the Bijou Theatre in 1880 by lessee Eduardo Majeroni. The theatre was perhaps most associated with the Brough and Boucicault Comedy Company which used it as a home base for several years. The Bijou was destroyed by fire in 1889. It was replaced by a second Bijou Theatre and a smaller, purpose-built vaudeville house called the Gaiety.



Source: [walkingmelbourne.com](http://walkingmelbourne.com)

Built and opened by Melbourne alderman Joseph Aarons on 5 November 1876, the Academy of Music was located in Bourke Street between Swanston and Russell streets, with the building running all the way down to Little Collins Street. The design, by architects Read and Barnes, incorporated three and a half tiers of gallery seating for up to 1500 patrons. Ross Thorne notes that there was no pit, "only stalls surrounded by a dress circle at stage level - half a level above the stalls floor" (87). Aarons' also had a billiards saloon built alongside theatre. The first lessee was G.B. W.

(George) Lewis<sup>1</sup> who engaged soprano Ilma da Murska and American actor Edwin Adams as his first attractions (West 56). He then put together a stock company featuring actors J. P. Hydes and Mrs G.B.W. Lewis (formerly Rose Edouin). One of the most successful seasons mounted at the Academy occurred in 1878 when John L. Hall played Captain Gingah in Byron's comedy *Our Girls*. John West notes that it ran for a more than creditable 54 nights (56). The theatre also saw George Titheradge make his first appearance in the role of Lord Chiltern in *False Shame* (1879).



**Ilma da Murska performing at the opening night.**

Source: John West *Theatre in Australia* (1978), 56.

The venue was renamed the Bijou Theatre in 1880, not long after actor/manager W. H. Lingard had been sued by W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan for having produced an unauthorized production of their H.M.S. Pinafore operetta there. The lessee at that time was Eduardo Majeroni. W.J. Wilson was also associated with the venue in the mid-1880s. Majeroni and Wilson's Grand Comic Opera Company staged, for example, Luscombe Searelle's *Bobadil* there in 1885. The Bijou also served as a home base for the Brough and Boucicault Comedy Company for a number of years.

<sup>1</sup> See "Historical Notes and Correction" section below regarding Lewis's relationship with the theatre's proprietor, Joseph Adams.

In 1888 the Palace Hotel was built on the opposite side of the Victoria Arcade, with that establishment also incorporating a hall which the management used for social and community events. While occupied by Brough and Boucicault, however, the Bijou and Victoria Arcade were destroyed by fire in 1889. Within 12 months they were replaced by a second Bijou Theatre and a smaller, purpose-built vaudeville house called the Gaiety. A new Victoria Arcade was also erected, thereby providing both venues with a joint vestibule.

In his entry on the Bijou Theatre in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Ross Thorne writes:

After the coroner's inquest into two deaths caused [by] falling bricks, Lorgnette magazine attacked the Victorian Board of health, which licensed theatres. It also condemned fire brigades for their "petty squabbles, their concentrated detestation of each other, their puerile punctiliousness, their contemptible intriguing, their peculiar appropriation of funds granted by Government, their drunkenness, thievery and [their] insubordination" [all of which] indicates why fires were rarely brought under control (88).



**"After the Fire at the Bijou Theatre."**

Source: State Library of Victoria

## **HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS**

1. Within a month of being opened, the Melbourne press reported that a dispute between Joseph Aarons and G.B.W. Lewis was likely to lead to litigation. Several issues had apparently arisen after the proprietor made the decision to alter the entrance to upper circle entrance by moving it to the Victoria Arcade. In doing so he had to sacrifice a room which was being used to house fire extinguishing and cleaning equipment. In order to accommodate the equipment Aarons then resolved to partition off a section of the scene dock. Lewis's response was to threaten to tear down any wall erected in the dock. The standoff then led to the dispute escalating with trivial allegations. The *Argus* reports that one of these was Aaron's claim that Lewis had neglected to engage a night watchman (ARG: 11 Dec. 1876, 5).

The dispute continued through until the middle of the following year, and culminated in an Equity suit, at which time Aarons applied for an injunction to restrain Lewis from issuing complimentary tickets of admission to the theatre as well as asking for a receiver to take control of all receipts (ARG: 1 June 1877, 5). Before Justice Molesworth, Aarons argued that his contract with Lewis included 12 percent of the takings, and that since the

during the start of the lease the attendance figures appeared to be much lower than he expected, and that part of the problem was that Lewis was giving out far too many complimentary tickets. Lewis subsequently sued Aarons for trespass (claiming that the owner had gained entrance to the building without permission) and wrongful conversion (in relation to the changes to the entrance). Justice Pohlman eventually awarded his decision to the plaintiff, ruling that Aarons was in no way justified to take the course of action he had adopted (ARG: 17 Aug. 1877, 5).

### **FURTHER REFERENCE**

**"Bijou Theatre, The."** BC: 13 Jan. (1891), 5.

**"Destructive Fire in Melbourne: The Bijou Theatre Burned - Two men Killed and Others Injured."** AA: 23 Apr. (1889), 5.

**Editorial.** ARG: 11 Dec. (1876), 5.

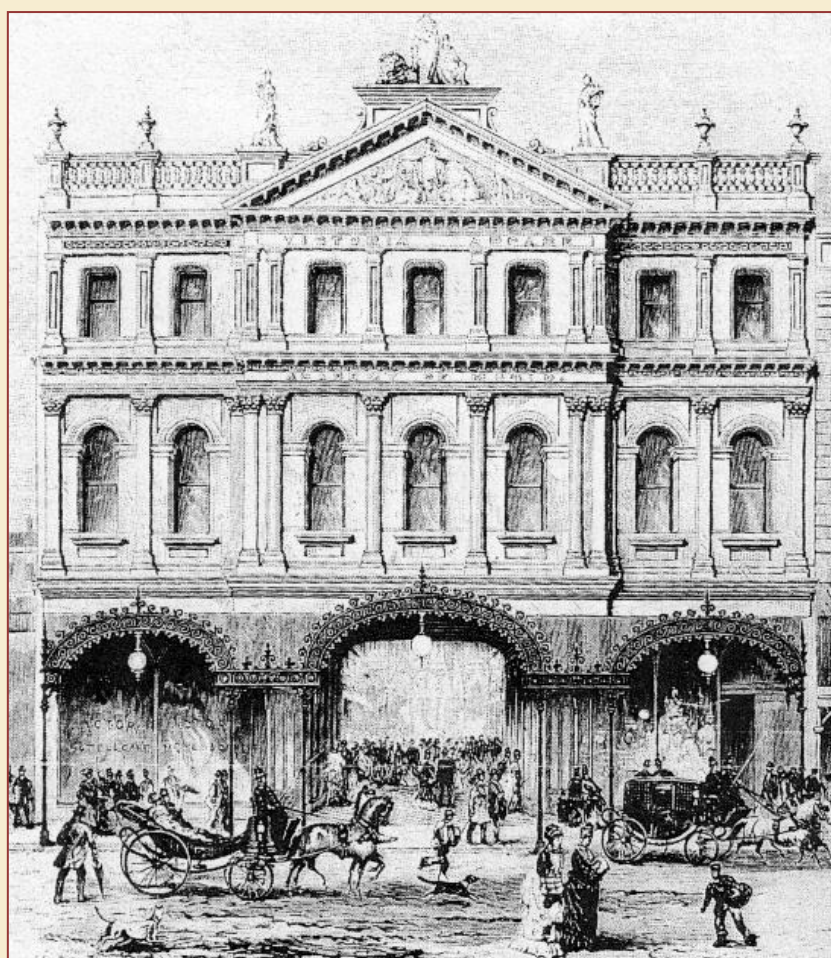
**Editorial.** ARG: 17 Aug. (1877), 5.

**"Great Fire in Melbourne: The Bijou Theatre Destroyed - One Life Lost."** SMH: 23 Apr. (1889), 5.

**"Law Report: Supreme Court Sitting in Equity - Friday June 1."** ARG: 2 June (1877), 8.

Thorne, Ross. "Bijou Theatre." CTT: (1995), 87-88.

West, John. *Theatre in Australia*. (1978), 56.



Source: John West *Theatre in Australia* (1978), 56.