



# The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840

*Robert Jordan*

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The first theatrical performance in Australia, the 1788 performance of George Farquhar's play, "The Recruiting Officer", by the convicts at Sydney Cove on the birthday of King George III was the subject of Thomas Kenneally's novel, "The Playmaker", and Timber Wertebaker's inspirational play, "Our Country's Good," but the first 40 years of European theatre in Australia have never until now been the subject of intensive inquiry. Robert Jordan brings to life the shadowy figures that created the colony's first entertainment. These theatres were not, as had been thought, the initiative of soldiers and settlers nostalgic for home but of hard-living convicts serving time at the end of the world. Here is a society creating its own rules, its own class system based on enterprise and exploitation. The book analyses the impact on the theatres of the convicts' tastes and origins, the temperaments of powerful individuals and the shifting views of penal servitude. As the centres of power changed, the theatres quickly became fields in which battles for supremacy were fought: between convicts and authority and between friends and enemies of the participants. A substantial appendix provides biographies of the 42 convicts and soldiers known to have been active in the theatres before 1800.

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