



## **The History of Walsh Bay**

By the end of the C19th the streetscape of Millers Point consisted of palatial wool and bond stores dominating the houses they surrounded. The Walsh Bay wharves on the other hand were in a very unsanitary state. At that time there was no sea wall and much of the harbour foreshore was awash with rubbish, tainted by pollution and infested by rats. There had been much talk of schemes to improve the situation, but not much action.

All that was changed by Arthur Payne, a van driver of Ferry Lane, off Windmill Street, who had the misfortune to become the first person infected by the Bubonic Plague, which arrived in Sydney in mid-January 1900. Other ports on the trading routes to Sydney had already been affected, but the authorities, although aware of this, invoked no measures that could have prevented the outbreak. By the end of April, however, the Government had resumed all of the motley array of wharves from the head of Darling Harbour to Circular Quay. Houses were disinfected and whitewashed, and by May 1200 residents had been sent to the Quarantine Station at North Head. The rat population was eventually brought under control and by the end of August the outbreak was over. There had been 103 officially registered deaths.

The Sydney Harbour Trust was established in October 1900 and began operating in February 1901. Its task was to rebuild the port of Sydney to render trade more efficient. The first major works undertaken were wharf renewal and road construction on a massive scale. Eventually whole streets would disappear as the cliff was cut down to form Hickson Road. In 1910 new double-decked finger wharves were commenced with a series of bridges connecting the upper levels to the high roads of Millers point. The wharves between Dawes point and Millers Point (at what was named Walsh Bay in 1919, after the Trust's Engineer in Chief) were not completed until 1921.

Activity on Walsh Bay wharves rose and fell in response to the rhythms of the shipping industry and the changing patterns of international trade requirements. By the early seventies the wharves were redundant to port operations and fell into a period of disuse. Gone were the great ships, vast cargoes of wool, and the pandemonium of comings and going on Hickson Road.

In 1982 Pier One was turned into a shopping and amusement complex and in 1984 wharves 4 and 5 were taken over by Sydney Theatre Company and the restaurant.

## **Conversion of the Wharf**

Having at last secured Wharf 4/5 and with funds allocated, designing architect Vivian Fraser, who had been chosen because of his Nimrod Theatre conversion, began work.

Refurbishment took place around the STC workshop. Staff, who having heard that they were eventually going to be housed at Wharf 4/5, decided in 1980 to squat there. When they arrived there was a bitumen floor and two toilets, only one of which worked.

Apart from the decision about which end of the wharf to locate the theatre, before there could be any approval of a theatre, the 70 year old 200 meter building had to conform to fire regulations. The existing timber structure was ironbark which has inherent fire resistant qualities. The weatherboard external lining however had to be covered with wall drenches connected to the sprinkler system. In addition upward sprinklers were installed under the lower deck in case of fire on the water from an oil spill. Staff and public are protected by a fire proof tunnel running the length of the building and directly accessible for its full length from the restaurant, theatres and all departments. It has a smoke extractor and emergency lighting and is guaranteed fire proof for a minimum of two hours. The roof of the tunnel forms a mezzanine gallery with viewing access to workshop, scenic art and the rehearsal rooms.

Fittings such as gantries have been left, painted and used as sculptures. The timber of the building has been sometimes painted, sometimes oiled and sometimes left rough. Along the public walkway are large panels of glass and glass louvres letting in light and fresh air, and providing a gradually unfolding view of the harbour bridge. The colour scheme of blue and grey tones reflects the harbour location.

There is an 'Industrial' logic to the wharf. Materials enter at one end via the overhead roadway and progress through various stages of construction towards completion in either of the two theatres.

Workshop was followed by Scenic Art, but Wardrobe didn't move to the wharf until after its official opening in December 1984, because there was no dust-free environment.

The most often used seating plan at the Wharf 1 theatre is a half-octagon shape around the thrust stage. Three tiers which form the base of the octagon are fixed in position with two mobile tiers attached. These tiers can be moved to provide a total of four arrangements. Not exactly total flexibility, but a reasonable and practical compromise. Maximum seating is about 320 seats.

After the building was taken over, it was discovered that one of the three rehearsal spaces would make an excellent smaller theatre and it has now become Wharf 2 Theatre with a seating capacity of 200.