

“Around the show caves”

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Reported on 29 May 2018 by Inga Stunzner of ABC Capricornia and reproduced with permission.

Photos—Ann Augusteyn, Capricorn Caves, Queensland

Want to hear the best opera in the country? Forget the Sydney Opera House and head to Capricorn Caves

Forget the Sydney Opera House, the best place to listen to opera lies under 30 metres of limestone, through tunnels and narrow passages, in a spectacular cavern that is described as the closest thing to having perfect natural acoustics.

It is for this reason that for 10 years Bruce Edwards has been bringing his Underground Opera Company to the Capricorn Caves, just north of Rockhampton in central Queensland.

"If you're looking for acoustics, this is the place to be," Mr Edwards said.

"They say a perfect acoustic equals a value of two, which is about two-tenths of a second before your voice is reverberated back to you.

"The Opera House has been measured at about 1.8, but here it's actually been measured at 2.1."



Mr Edwards knows a thing or two about underground spaces, having spent 25 years in the mining and tunnelling industry before hanging up his boots permanently four years ago.

On his time off, he dabbled in musical theatre.

It was while he was working in a mine in Tasmania that the seed for underground opera was sown.

A foreman on that mine heard of Mr Edward's hobby and mentioned that the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra had performed at the Renison Bell tin mine.

"I thought 'what a fantastic idea'," Mr Edwards said.

It was not until several months later that he did something about it.

"I was working halfway between Darwin and Kakadu in a little place called Tom's Gully Mine and I was chatting with one of the guys there, and he said 'Didn't they do some show down in Renison mine?'

"And I thought 'Hold on a tick. If they can hear about a show that was done in the middle of nowhere in Tassie, in the absolute middle of nowhere in the Northern Territory, then maybe we should be actually producing some stuff."

So he did.

Over the past 11 years, the Underground Opera Company has performed in caves, abandoned and working mines, tunnels, power stations and castles all over the country.

"After working in mines for years and years, coming into these natural caves is just a breath of fresh air," he said.

It is not so easy to find the perfect caves to perform in, so Mr Edwards is always on the look-out.

"There are many caves across the country, but not many of them are suitable for what we do," he said.

"A lot might be too small or not have a nice, large cavernous sort of space, but when we get places like the Capricorn Caves it's just amazing."

The Cathedral Chamber is fitted with pews and, at a stretch, can squeeze in 90 people.

But it is more comfortable with about 75.

"What I love about it is you can sit here in the audience and even if you've never heard an opera piece before you just get the voices, you get the sound, and it just goes straight through you and it turns something that is just audible into something physical," he said.

"It's just magical."



Ann Augusteyn owns the caves and jumped at the chance to host opera when Mr Edwards approached her a decade ago.

"It's been a fantastic relationship," she said.

Since then, people from all over Australia and overseas have come specifically to hear the opera, but it still remains a bit of a secret from locals.

"So many people have never been to the caves until they come to the opera and then all of a sudden the visual beauty hits them," Ms Augusteyn said.

From the outside, it looks unassuming.

It is an above-ground cave system in a hill of limestone that is covered in vegetation — a foil for what lies inside and underneath.

"There are many chambers in our cave system, but the Cathedral, where we're standing now, is an absolute highlight," she said.

"When we come through different tunnels and passages, through another cave, then you have a whole new experience when it takes you through to our fossil deposits.

"There is so much in this limestone rock."



Performing this particular night are tenor Glenn Lorimer, soprano Dominique Fegan, baritone Lionel Theunissen, mezzo soprano Kathryn Bradbury and pianist Mark Connors.

These caves are one of the nicest venues to sing in, they said, and there is the added bonus of inquisitive bats.

"I got pretty close to them the first time I performed here 10 years ago," Mr Lorimer recalled.

"I went to the top of the stairs and sang the end of Rossini's La Danza, where I sustain a high note at the end.



"And the bats actually came out of what I usually refer to as 'the bell tower' above and were spiralling around me."

Sadly there was no camera to capture this, and when Mr Lorimer performed the following night in front of various media the bats did not make an appearance.

Upgrades to facilities at Jenolan Caves, NSW

On 30 May 2018, the Sydney Morning Herald ran a story concerning a number of upgrades (both completed and proposed) for visitor facilities at Jenolan Caves. The following information is taken from the two Ministerial press releases concerning these facility upgrades.

The first announcement was on 24 April by the New South Wales Deputy Premier, John Barilaro MP. He visited Jenolan and announced that \$8.5 million had been committed “to give the ancient cave system and tourism hotspot a modern facelift”. The funding was allocated from the state’s *Regional Growth - Environment and Tourism Fund*. The funding is to improve visitor facilities within the caves’ precinct.

The Deputy Premier said:

... we are funding the long overdue renovation of Jenolan Caves which will not only improve the grand entrance to the caves, but will also build and upgrade nearby walking tracks to give tourists unique access to the amazing landscape, lake and wildlife that surrounds the ancient caves system.

The Minister said that the funding will go towards three key projects. These are the upgrading of the Blue Lake area; construction of the Binoomea Track and Inspiration Point Lookout; and upgrading of the visitors’ centre.

The works in the vicinity of the Blue Lake will include upgraded walking tracks, boardwalks and observation platforms.

Construction of the three project elements announced by the Deputy Premier is expected to commence in December 2018 with the works to be completed by December 2021.

This announcement was followed, on 29 May, by the opening by the Minister for the Environment, Gabrielle Upton MP, of the renovated heritage café after a \$1.9 million upgrade. The Minister also indicated that the caves management was also investigating and costing possible renovations to Caves House.



Photos — NPWS