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# Sydney's strangest, most secretive stage show turns 60

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For many, the last weekend of September means football finals. For students at the University of Sydney's St Paul's College it means taking to the stage to continue a tradition that began in 1964 – long before they were born.

On Friday night they will don their top hats, coat-tails, corsets and gowns for the 60th-anniversary instalment of *Victoriana*, believed to be the longest-running theatrical production in the country.

College director of music Jack Stephens says "there's really nothing like it" elsewhere in Australia.

The show – part anachronism, part send-up and part knees-up – is based on the tradition of the British music hall. After a well-lubricated three-course dinner and a toast to Queen Victoria, the audience – dressed to the nines in black or white tie – is treated to a camp rendition of classics from the Victorian era; think *Oh I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside*, *Where Did You Get That Hat* and *The Road to Mandalay*.

Surrounded by candelabras and British flags, attendees also receive the lyrics to the choruses on a printed card and are encouraged – nay, required – to sing along. At the end of the night they wave sparklers and file outside into the St Paul's quadrangle for a fireworks display.

"What makes it so unique is you're transported into this other world," says Stephens, 28. "It is one of the wonderful things – these 18- and 19-year-olds would never have thought they'd fall in love with this random show of 19th-century musical songs."

It's a long way from Taylor Swift or Chappell Roan – but the songs have their own charm. A new one added this year, *A Little Bit of Cucumber*, can be read as an "up yours" to the upper class, mocking its predilection for tasteless cucumber sandwiches despite having access to the finer things.

"I was saying that to an older member of the cast who said, 'That's my favourite thing to eat at the Australian Club'," Stephens says.

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Cast members revive Victorian-era favourites in dress rehearsals this week.  
Photos: Janie Barrett



*Victoriana* was founded in 1959 at the University of Sydney proper by Pamela Trethowan amid an exciting and innovative era for performing arts at the university. It moved to St Paul's in 1964 under

director and emcee Lloyd Waddy, who remained in the role until 1999. Waddy simultaneously had a prominent legal career as a barrister, Queen's Counsel and a Family Court judge, and as the

founding national convener of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy.

*Victoriana* has a loyal band of followers in politics, business and the law. NSW Chief Justice Andrew Bell, an Old Pauline and former college council member, is on the guest list for opening night, while Coalition figures Ben Franklin, Pru Goward and Don Harwin are known regulars.

In times gone by, the show has cloaked itself in cult-like secrecy, known only to those in the know. Scandals and a toxic culture at St Paul's College, exposed in a review by former sex discrimination commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, contributed to nervousness about outsiders.

But in recent years the show has been reinvented, even modernised. Some of the "problematic" songs have been excised, along with jokes that don't pass muster in 2024.

A male striptease that used to conclude proceedings is on hiatus but may one day return.

The cast has also changed. In the past it was dominated by Old Paulines who returned year after year. When Stephens took over as music director in 2022 he had never even seen the show before. Of this year's personnel of 25, only four are non-students.

Annika Johnson, a second-year media student and sophomore at St Paul's, says the songs may be old-fashioned but the subject matter – from secret affairs to summer flings or getting older – is timeless.

"Just because they're old doesn't make them any less fun," she says. "Some are just so absurd, but that's kind of the point. You get to wear all these big, fun costumes. Once you're involved and you understand it, you just want to keep coming back."