**CATHS visits the Forum Theatre, Melbourne**

Approximately 30 CATHS members visited Melbourne’s iconic **Forum** (formerly **State**) **Theatre** on 28 July 2018. The superb John Eberson designed atmospheric-style theatre, which opened in 1929, evokes fond memories for many Melbournians and others.

Marriner Group Business Development Manager, Mr Jesse Cain, was our guide, explaining the many fine renovations that have been undertaken during the past eighteen months. The extensive project is likely to cost around $30 million, all privately funded. Trethowan Architecture has been in charge of the design. The **Forum** is heritage listed, which required all renovations to be authorised by Heritage Victoria.

Carpet had covered the ground foyer floor and stairs since 1937. It has been replaced by beautifully restored and new mosaic floor tiles and refurbished, polished marble stairs. Electrical wiring throughout the Forum has been upgraded to contemporary standards. Lighting, bathrooms and air-conditioning have also been enhanced. LED lighting, expensive to install, but relatively inexpensive to operate, elegantly highlights the glorious, repainted ceiling.

The downstairs auditorium, **Forum 1**, can accommodate up to 2,000 patrons for live music performances. It can comfortably be adapted for formal dinners and corporate presentations. The original fire curtain remains a formidable presence. The previous capacity of around 1,500 has been surpassed as a consequence of widening the auditorium from the seating area back. This has also enabled easier access to the rear bar service area at the west side. Hydraulic height-adjustable flooring at the rear section augments both the versatility of the venue and the audience experience. Sightlines from the booth style seating areas have been improved so that seated audience members no longer have their view obscured by patrons in the front standing area. There is even provision for cars to enter **Forum 1** by means of a hydraulic lift, as evidenced at a launch of the Mazda Corporation.

Alcove lighting, white in colour by default, can be modified variously to suit an occasion. The plaster restoration work has been contributed my Mr Ben Belzunce. Polished hardwood floors glow subtly beneath the ambient theatre lights. Statuary in **Forum 1**, as throughout the entire building, is awe inspiring.

The upstairs auditorium, **Forum** **2**, is perhaps better known to some as the **Rapallo**, the name it received when the theatre was twinned in the early 1960s. **Forum 2** can still function as a cinema during the Melbourne International Film Festival, for example. There is a reluctance to use both auditoria simultaneously due to concern about crossover noise.

Performing artists are the beneficiaries of a modernised and enlarged green room facility. A commercial kitchen has been installed in the underground section. The kitchen not only serves the **Forum**, but has also eased the fully-stretched catering capacity of the nearby **Plaza Ballroom**, Collins Street.

The Flinders Street awning of the building requires repair/replacement. In addition to the ravages of time, the awning has been damaged by the buffeting of large vehicles. A strategy that encompasses the input of Vicroads, Heritage Victoria and Melbourne City Council, in consultation with Marriner Group, may offer a long-term solution to the problem.

Jesse Cain affirmed his view of the **Forum** as a live venue that is highly adaptable and able to accommodate large audiences with an appreciable level of intimacy.