The State Theatre: ‘Melbourne’s Palace of Pleasure’

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Melbourne 1928 - 60 years ago. The Wall Street crash is a year ahead and the city bustles with building activity. Two massive cinemas, each destined to become a landmark, race to completion.

In Collins Street, the mighty Regent was being built for Francis W Thring’s Hoyts Theatres Ltd., to designs by Cedric H Ballantyne; and on the corner of Flinders and Russell Streets, James Porter and Sons were building the grandiose State for Union Theatres Ltd.

The State won the race; its plush velvet curtain rose on 23 February 1929, three weeks ahead of its rival. It joined Melbourne’s other great picture palaces, the Capitol (1924) and the Palais (1927). Its 3371 seats gave it the largest capacity of any theatre in Australia.

The State’s site was well away from Bourke Street, traditionally Melbourne’s entertainment focus. But it was right opposite the city’s main railway stations (Figure 1) and was well serviced.

Figure 1  The mighty State rises triumphantly above the railway yards, Jolimont. (Photo: Performing Arts Museum, Victorian Arts Centre)
by trams and buses. The site was previously occupied by the Morning Post-Herald building and, on Russell Street, the State Migration Office. The frontages were 37 metres to Flinders Street and 55 metres to Russell Street.

The site had been bought in 1927 by Rufe Naylor's Empire Theatres Ltd. of Sydney. Naylor planned to erect a large 'live' theatre as a sister house for his Empire in Quay Street, Sydney (the site now occupied by Her Majesty's Theatre). However, in May 1928, Naylor sold the site to Stuart F. Doyle's Union Theatres. Construction started in July, to designs prepared by architects Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson. It was completed in a remarkably short time.

The State was an 'atmospheric' - a term coined to describe that special style of interior decor that simulated an exotic outdoor setting. The 'atmospheric' was the speciality of the American architect John Eberson, and it appears that Eberson advised Henry White, Union Theatres' consulting architect, on designs for the Capitol in Sydney (1928). The State's interior was in many respects a mirror image of the Capitol. The State and the Capitol are today the only surviving 'atmospherics' in Australia.

Figure 2 The circle lobby (Picture: Performing Arts Museum, Victorian Arts Centre).
The State was a creation of fantasy inside and out. One of relatively few Australian cinemas to indulge in an exotic exterior, it conveyed the impression of an enormous Moorish palace, complete with delicate minarets, one of which was said to have been modeled on a minaret on a Turkish mosque in Cairo. From the Flinders/Russell Street corner rose a 61 metre clock tower surmounted by a 'jewelled' copper dome (the work of R H Mytton and Company, who also supplied the zinc ceilings). The expanses of the pressed cement walls were broken with ornate windows, balconies and towers, and studded with hundreds of electric lights so that at night the building glowed and twinkled.

The main entrance doors, on Flinders Street, led to a broad foyer with a central ticket cubicle, and an illuminated clock let into the floor. Off the foyer were the main 'retiring rooms'. The College Room, for gentlemen, was furnished in oak, and featured on its paneled walls the crests of Melbourne's public schools; the Pompadour Room, for ladies, was reminiscent of Versailles at its most extravagant.

Figure 3 The auditorium from half way back in the circle- note the organ console near the stage (Photo: Performing Arts museum, Victorian Arts Centre).
From the foyer, twin marble staircases led to the circle lobby and entrances (Figure 2). The foyer and the auditorium were in Florentine style. The auditorium was vast; a sea of 1999 chairs in the stalls, with a further 1372 in the circle. The walls were like those of a fantastic Italian garden (Figure 3), dotted with plaster temples, reproduction statues of naked gods and goddesses, and imitation greenery. Marble doves perched in the cypresses. There was a balcony 'modelled on the Doge's Palace in Venice'. Above, the huge cerulean arc of the ceiling represented the sky at night. Electric stars twinkled, and projected clouds drifted across it.

A Venetian-style proscenium framed a large stage, capable of accommodating elaborate 'live' presentations (Figure 4). At either side were the Wurlitzer organ consoles which cost 25,000 pounds - one of very few dual installations in the world. The consoles could be raised, lowered and rotated on their pedestals, and a bewildering variety of special effects could be conjured from the battery of pipes hidden around the stage. Between the consoles was an orchestra platform which, also, could be raised and lowered.

Beneath the stage were dressing rooms, ballet and orchestra assembly rooms, and the machinery which circulated heated or cooled air throughout the theatre.
The Bulletin summed it up: 'A flapper's dream, compounded of all she has picked up of art and beauty from an exclusive study of the goods the vast pink palace has been built to provide. Therefore the architecture is thoroughly appropriate. Nothing could be more apt'.

The total cost was 500,000 pounds; 50,000 pounds was spent on the interior.

The State was created as Union Theatre's Melbourne showplace, and it formed a link in a chain of similarly ornate first run houses which already included the 'atmospheric' Ambassadors in Perth and the previously mentioned Capitol in Sydney. Australia was booming and thousands of people went to 'the pictures' every week - many went more than once a week. Apart from the large, luxurious city houses, there were many less pretentious city cinemas screening the less exalted films, and dozens of second-run and third-run theatres spread across the suburbs and the country. The various exhibitor chains were linked with particular studios. Union Theatres screened products from Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Universal and Warner Brothers.

As noted, the State Theatre opened its doors on 23 February 1929. As the lights dimmed, the packed house cheered the appearance of the 30-member State Orchestra, under the direction of American Leon Rosebrook. The overture was Tchaikovsky's 'Marche Slav' for which the orchestra was supplemented by the Mighty Wurlitzer, with Frank Lanterman and Renee Lees at the twin consoles. Like Rosebrook, Lanterman had been brought from the United States for the occasion.

The programme proceeded with the State's own newsreel, Lanterman's organ novelty 'Sense and Nonsense', the Buster Keaton comedy The Cameraman, then the first edition of the State's stage entertainment. For this, the orchestra was joined by the State's permanent ballet of 10 dancers, the chorus, and 'Deno and Rochelle' in their World Famous Apache Dance. The stage production was by O G Perry, with the dances created by Jennie Brennan.

After interval came the featured film, Clara Bow in Paramount Pictures' The Fleet's In. To finish came the Exit March; 'The Spirit of Melbourne,' written by Rosebrook 'and dedicated to the Patrons of the State'.

The Fleet's In was a silent film; it wasn't long before the State was wired for sound. On 6 April 1929, the State presented 'the initial 100 percent All-Talkie Production, The Doctor's Secret. Two weeks later patrons could 'see and hear Rin-Tin-Tin in Land of the Silver Fox.

During the State's first years the featured film and the stage presentation changed weekly. The State switched to a longer run policy in April 1938. The new era got away to a happy start with Deanna Durbin in 100 Men and a Girl, supported by a stage presentation featuring Bert Howell and the State Orchestra, plus a Tivoli stage act.

By 1961 television had started to make serious inroads into cinema's traditional audiences. Very large cinemas were no longer needed, so Greater Union boldly decided to convert the State into two cinemas, the first time such a conversion had been attempted anywhere in the world. The old stalls, with the side walls brought inward, became the Forum, using the original prosenium and stage. The circle, again with walls moved inward, became the Rapallo, with its screen built above the old stalls area below. The architects for the alterations, which retained much of the style and fabric of the original theatre, were Cowper, Murphy and Associates. The Forum opened at Easter, 1962 with Flower Drum Song; the Rapallo opened some eighteen months later, with Charade.

In 1981 the theatres were extensively refurbished and re-opened as the Forum 1 and 11. In more recent times the building has been taken over as the Melbourne Revival Centre, and is used regularly for services and social gatherings. The building carries a National Trust classification, and is recorded by the Historic Buildings Preservation Council.

And so, after 60 years, the State survives, its flamboyant exterior familiar - taken for granted? - by today's crowds as they hurry home. No longer is the city automatically the place for a night's entertainment, and the State's particular part of town is now forlorn and bypassed. Gone are the heady days when the programme for that gala opening night in 1929 could proudly proclaim:

'There is but one State. Never was a theatre so beautiful... the great State Theatre at the portals of Melbourne - the notable palace of pleasure 'neath the Southern Cross'.

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