Document title:

THE Mayfair THEATRE

a photo essay

Author/s: Ross Thorne,

Summary / abstract:

At 73 Castlereagh Street, Sydney, once the site of carriage builders, there opened the National Sporting Club in 1902. According to John West in *Theatres in Australia* (1978), it contained club rooms, bars, billiard rooms and an athletic hall seating 2000 people, where boxing contests were regularly held. On December 1906, James Brennan, after some alterations and retaining "National" from the former name, put on a variety bill at popular prices. Brennan's National Amphitheatre, as he called it, was an immediate success so, in 1911 he floated a company that was over-subscribed by 35,000 pounds, but which allowed him to expand into other states.

In 1912 Brennan's company acquired new half owners, the brothers Benjamin and John Fuller who were also in the variety business (having originally emigrated from England and built up a circuit of variety theatres in New Zealand). They quickly took over control. However, the theatre licensing authority, in an internal report on the National (16 th August 1921), notes that in 1912 the premises were "antiquated and dangerous", but work for improvement was not approved until September 1918. The Fullers had brought over from New Zealand, their architect Henry White, to build or rehabilitate a number of theatres in their circuit. The National was rebuilt as one of the smaller model -- on two levels with a rather shallow, typical vaudeville, flytower stage. It seated in the stalls (762), dress circle (546) and side boxes (28) a total of 1336 people according to the licensing authoriy in 1919.

The internal architecture was in White's typical French rococo (Louis XV) style that he had used for theatres in New Zealand, and others already built or rehabilitated in Australia.

Shortly after the Great Depression started the National converted to showing sound films and was renamed the "Roxy". It soon was renamed again -- this time to the "Mayfair" in 1932. Architect, Charles Bohringer was commissioned by Fullers

Ltd to do a makeover, the drawings being approved by the City Council in September 1934.

A new Art Deco facade replaced the older one; a new auditorium ceiling and proscenium in Art Deco style fibrous plaster were fitted. The latter wrapped atound the sides to cover the former boxes. The form and structure of the dress circle remained but it was re-seated. Proposed alterations to the stalls ceiling and foyers was largely omitted. When the blockbuster films, such as *Sound of Music* in 70mm or Todd-AO arrived, the facade was converted again to be a flat cement-rendered sheet for huge painted film advertisements; and a new screen and curtain curved around in front of the stage (see illustration), and the rear back stalls was converted to new foyer space.

After films were discontinued in the theatre (when the Hoyts Entertainment Centre opened in George Street), it was periodically leased for "live" theatre during 1978/79 until Hoyts Theatres (who now owned it) sold it in 1980. Shops were built in its foyer and back stalls space, then it was onsold again and demolished for redevelopment.

The photographs are of the theatre in its 70mm phase, showing much of the Art Deco decor. The original (faded and fungus marked) colour 35mm negatives were scanned and colour-corrected as much as possible.

Copyright owner

Ross Thorne, 2009, waived upon death of the copyright owner.

Long Section as drawn by Henry White: At left, fly tower stage; Next, side boxes with decorative treatment; At the centre is the start of the dress circle, extending up to the right; At extreme right is the front-of-house lobby and foyer.

Above: Plan by Charles Bohringer for the alterations of 1934. The original stage is at left; the boxes are walled off; the dress circle is as designed by Henry White.
Below: The final manifestation of the facade to Castlereagh Street, reconstructed as a flat plane for painting huge advertisements. For this film even the neon sign was to made to suit.

The half front elevation, showing half the 1934 proscenium with its setbacks and Art Deco style "trimmings". Further to the right is the set back that shows two openings, the upper one to exit the dress circle behind the former side boxes; the lower one to exit patrons from the stalls behind the former boxes and into the side lane of the building. At top right is a band of typical Australian early 1930s Art Deco motifs, as too the capping above the exit opening from the dress circle.

Above: Lobby off the street, with the ticket box. A glimpse of the stair to the dress circle foyer is visible at top left corner of the photograph.

Below: The stair up to the corridor that leads to the dress circle foyer. Note the illuminated niche in the wall at the top of the stair; this is illustrated on the next page.

Above: Corridor at top of stair to dress circle foyer.

Left: Detail of architrave to "archway" showing some 1919 with an overlay of 1934 design.

Below: Art Deco illuminated niche on the wall at the right of the above photograph (facing the stairway).

Above: The corridor across the building to provide access to the dress circle and, up the three steps, the dress circle foyer. The sloping ceiling, above left, is part of the underside of the dress circle.

Below: The dress circle foyer; The gloss yellow paint and orange and white wallpaper were applied in the final redecorating when the blockbuster policy came into operation. The carpet is a mass produced "theatre" design used in almost all its theatres by Hoyts.

Above: An Art Deco style decorative door to the men's toilet. It is made of soft fibre board grooved for the architrave, and fret-worked for the grille.

Left: The original back stalls were reduced in depth to form a stalls foyer in the "blockbuster period". Note how the ceiling of the former stalls was not redecorated in Art Deco style. This ceiling shows Henry White's rococo "panelling" if 1919.

Below: The auditorium viewed from the screen curtain-line, with the foreshortened stalls as explained above.

Above: The Art Deco decorated auditorium, but reusing the structure and shape of the 1919 dress circle.

Below: South wall of the auditorium. The small boxes on the side wall and rear of each part of the auditorium are for the surround sound of the multiple audio track films.

Above: The 1934 Art Deco style ceiling (with a much more recent paint colour job).
Below: The full auditorium from the rear of the dress circle. The curtain covers a curved screen installed in front of the earlier stage and side boxes.

Q

st. marys kid!

By Kevin Bennett, David Mason—Cox and Max Iffland

the Q theatre
AT THE MAYFAIR

ST. MARYS KID is coming to town! In its first week at the Q Theatre Penrith, it has broken all box office records. Wildly applauding audiences have refused to leave the theatre until the cast has encored the shows major numbers and have swarmed dancing onto the stage. So we are bringing Australia's first grass-roots rock musical into the Mayfair Theatre, Castlereagh Street, City for a strictly limited season.

ST. MARYS KID is an emotional plea for the improvement in the quality of life of suburban Australia. It is relevant, moving, funny, passionate - sometimes violent - occasionally controversial and absolutely entertaining. The show has been carefully developed over the past three years through a series of workshops and limited public performances. It was the surprise hit of the first Festival of Sydney. The Q's production is the first with a major theatre company and the first to be opened in Sydney's Outer Western Region, the area the show is all about.

The leading role of Toby, the young high school drop-out who becomes a rock star is played by Greg Apps, who appeared for 9 months in the "Rocky Horror Show" and is currently to be seen in "The Young Doctors". Toby's Mum is played by Doreen Warburton, whose last musical appearance was as quite a different Mum in J.C. Williamson's "Irene". Director (and co-author with Kevin Bennett and David Mason-Cox) is Max Iffland, resident director at the Q. Max directed the Q's successful "Flash Jim Vaux" earlier this year. Design is by N.I.D.A. graduate Anthony Babicci, best known for his highly praised design for "The Grand Adventure" at the Seymour Centre.

Left: One of the first stage shows to take place at the Mayfair Theatre after films were discontinued. A revival of "Godspell" also was put on (see next page), but the most memorable stage show, while still a theatre, was June Salter in "Crown Matrimonial".

Below: The roof of the Mayfair Theatre as viewed from a nearby building. Number 1 is an arrow pointing to the rather shallow stage house; Number 2 is the roof of the auditorium; and Number 3 is the roof of the original 1919 foyer area.

Below: Light fittings beneath the dress circle, above the stalls. This ceiling remained as Henry White had designed it in 1919, and the light fittings may date from this time. Chandeliers in the lower photograph possibly date from the late 1940s or later.