

ON Christmas Eve 1904, the new His Majesty's Theatre Perth, Western Australia opened to a performance of 'Forty Thieves'. The theatre was designed by William Wolf for Perth businessman T. G. Molloy.

It was not uncommon in the early 1900's for theatres to be built with hotels, and His Majesty's followed this practice, with the hotel having 42 rooms available, as well as dining rooms and bars.

The theatre auditorium is horseshoe shaped and originally seated 2,588 people, with 974 in the stalls, 540 in the dress circle, and 1,074 in the 'family circle' and gallery.

Four artificial waterfalls and a ceiling dome which divided into two, allowing increased ventilation on hot Perth nights, were major features of the new theatre.

The raked stage was twenty by twenty three metres, but the backstage facilities were extremely limited.

For over 70 years, His Majesty's Theatre was the major touring theatre venue in Perth, until the economics of touring throughout Australia made taking shows to Perth a risky business.

Perth is the capital of Western Australia, which is Australia's largest state, being a third of the Australian Continent. Adelaide in Southern Australia is the "closest" state capital being nearly two and a half thousand miles away!

This distance combined with Perth's relatively small population and the increased cost of touring, meant that very few shows would venture across the Nullarbor Plain to perform in Perth. In spite of this until the 1970's 'The Maj' was in regular use, and served as a base for the Edgley Organisation.

In the early 1970's the property was bought by one of Sir Norman Ridge's Companies, and at that time in addition to the hotel, there was a health club in the basement (including a swimming pool) a jeweller's shop, a hairdresser and a coffee shop.

The new owners were investigating the possibility of re-developing the site. After 70 years the theatre was falling into disrepair and with less shows coming to Perth, it appeared that the theatre's days were numbered.

The main users of the theatre were the local opera and ballet companies. However the audience and staging facilities were not up to standard. The Western Australian Arts Council took up the fight to have built, two new theatres in the State Governments Cultural Centre Complex. Simultaneously, a number of theatre people started a 'Save the Maj' campaign.

In June 1975, a committee was appointed to carry out an in depth study, 'because of the complexity surrounding arrangements and the desirability, or otherwise, of Her (sic) Majesty's Theatre and the construction of a new theatre at the Cultural Centre'.

The committee recommended the appointment of Sydney Theatre Consultants; Tom Brown and Associates to 'Advise on the suitability or otherwise

of the Her Majesty's Theatre for use as a venue for both visiting and local companies and groups'.

Mr Tom Brown recommended that the building be acquired and renovated, as a base of operations for the State Opera and Ballet companies and others. He further recommended that the existing hotel and shops be converted and renovated to provide additional public spaces and offices for the theatre's operation, and to provide space for the administrative headquarters of the local Opera and Ballet companies, together with meeting rooms, rehearsal areas and teaching areas for community arts activities.

In March 1976, a seminar was held with representatives of all the Perth Performing Arts Organisations with the Premier and other Government representatives. The seminar unanimously recommended that the State Government should attempt to obtain the theatre and renovate it.

Within twelve months the State Government had purchased the theatre and planning for its renovation commenced. At one stage it was considered that the theatre should be 'gutted' and a new theatre built within the shell.

However, the project architect, Peter Parkinson, believed that the theatre's three tier seating structure could be retained by re-designing it.

The original drawings of the building had been lost and detailed planning for the renovation could not be undertaken until demolition crews uncovered the structural fabric.

Peter Parkinson said that he was never surprised, as he always expected the worst!

Wherever possible, the original fittings have been re-used, and where this was not possible, the fittings and mouldings were re-created.

Major restructuring of the foyers was made possible by using areas formerly part of the hotel. An enormous stairway to the dress circle was renovated to provide more open access to the stalls, and a new staircase, using the old balustrades, relocated. One of the old hotel bars was converted into a booking office.

Inside the auditorium the 'notorious' pillars that held up the dress circle have been replaced and repositioned to allow an unimpeded view of the stage by all stall patrons.

A new wall was provided within the auditorium to exclude the traffic noise of the city.

The original dome and its opening mechanism has been replaced with a fixed dome. The decoration of the dome is created by a large photomural.

The colour scheme of the auditorium is a deep burgundy with cream and gold highlights.

Continental style seating replaces the original. (Gallery patrons previously had to contend with bleacher style seating!) All floors have been re-raked, or re-stepped to improve the sight lines. The total seating, is now 1,247, a significant reduction since 1904!

On stage the proscenium was widened, and the rake on the stage eliminated. A larger orchestra pit has been provided to allow the local Opera and Ballet companies to use orchestras of an adequate size.

A new grid and flying system using counter weights has been installed, and improved loading dock facilities provided, while a completely new dressing room complex was constructed at the back of the theatre. Space has been made available in the Hotel areas to provide administrative offices and rehearsal rooms for the local Opera and Ballet companies.

The Strand name is naturally much in evidence with a wide range of luminaires from the 'ubiquitous' Pattern 23 to Iris 4 Cyc Lights.

Lighting Control will be by a new Galaxy Memory Lighting Control (the second of ten so far ordered in Australia). As the theatre was operational before Galaxy was available the 'Maj' has been using a 240 channel MMS temporarily.

The dimmers are the Australian built J.T.M. Dimmers in a bright orange finish as requested by the electrical consultants.

The architects had set out to retain the old theatre's auditorium, which still held a kind of magic, by inserting the necessary equipment in and around it to give it a 1980's function. Peter Parkinson always insisted that he was not engaged on a museum style restoration, instead he was 're-cycling' the theatre to make it a viable venue in the 1980's.

Peter says: "If the 1980 audience walks in and says: How nice — new seating and a new paint job. Here's the dear old Maj back in business but what did they spend all the money on? We think that as architects, we will have done our job."

When the theatre re-opened on 28th May 1980, the audience could only agree.

FOOTNOTE:

The name of the theatre has been the source of some controversy. One side insisting that the possessive pronoun should change with the reigning monarch, the other insisting that it was His Majesty's in perpetuity. The Premier of W. A. Sir Charles Court solved the problem by a cabinet edict, 'the words 'His Majesty's Theatre' are built into the original building, and cabinet has decided that this is the correct name to be used in the future'.

UP, UP, UP, SHE RISES!

SO says the old sea shanty, and so say Strand, who are now agents for the Tatton Cineavor.

These are motorised stands which will operate from 110 volt AC or DC and will raise two of Tatton's Arri 4K luminaires, or anyone else's lanterns, up to 11ft from the ground.

They have lockable wheels, are fully weather protected. High winds are no problem.

Rank Film Equipment, in the person of Mr Tom Samuels, are the agents. ●



THE GERMAN ALTERNATIVE

FOR sixty years we have made stage lighting in Britain. For fifteen years we have been agents for the Quartzcolor range of Television studio lighting made in Italy. We now offer U.K. lighting professionals another range of lighting aimed at film and T.V. production units and lighting hire companies, the Arri Apollo series.

The Arrid & Richter Company of Munich, long famous for their professional 35mm and 16mm film cameras have now appointed Strand as their agents for the U.K. for their specialised lighting products. ●



Graham Anderson and Barry Miller, both of Samuelson Lighting — a leading lighting hire company based in London, with two of their recently acquired Arri 4k Fresnel H.M.I. units.



The Arri Report 200 Watt H.M.I. Note the combined buffer unit, ballast and battery pack.

Photograph by Brian Stevenson, Perth, Western Australia.