

The State Theatre Sydney and its Wurlitzer

by Bruce Ardley

On June 7, 1929, Sydney gave toast to a glittering movie palace, the State Theatre, and in 1986 the State closed its doors as a cinema. Designed from sketches by the Austrian-born, American architect, John Eberson, the State possessed the latest in cinematic technology at that time and stands as a monument to an era long since past.

On the occasion of that gala opening, the audience beheld the grandeur of the gigantic proscenium — "a poem of iridescent red, gold and ivory, and the glorious cascades of the cardinal red velvet curtain" — all surmounted by a large crown. Installed below the front of the stage were the elevated orchestral stage and organ hoist, accommodating the State Symphony Orchestra and Wurlitzer organ respectively. The first orchestra leader was Will Prior, who had come to Australia to open the Prince Edward Theatre in 1924. Another American, Price Dunlavy, from United Artists theatre Los Angeles, was the first organist.

As the house lights dimmed and the audience settled back with expectancy, the majestic opening notes of Wagner's overture to *Tannhauser* announced the appearance of the orchestra, which rose slowly from the depths of the orchestra pit. This was followed by a Fox Movietone Newsreel which in turn gave way to Price Dunlavy's organ recital. Dunlavy demonstrated his and the organ's capabilities by playing "Pomp and Circumstance" and a popular song of the day, "Sally of My Dreams."

The State's opening attraction was Emil Jannings in *The Patriot*. As the distinguished audience left the theatre that night, one State occasion had passed with many more to come.

No expense was spared in fitting out the theatre with the most elaborate and expensive fittings. The main chandelier, at that time one of the largest cut-crystal chandeliers in the world, was imported from Czechoslovakia. It is 25 feet high and 16 feet in diameter.

The main entrance, off Market Street, led through a spacious Gothic Hall, designed in 14th Century Style. The paving of the hall is in French mosaic of an elaborate and unusual pattern, and a novel feature is the insertion into the pavement of an electric clock with an illuminated dial.

The walls are of Roman travertine, with bronze enrichment of an elaborate character, and a number of bronze galleries are introduced to the upper part of the walls behind which electric lights are concealed. At the end of the hall, over the doors, facing the main entrance, are two niches in which are set life-size statues of St. George and King Arthur, and between these is a bas-relief panel of St. George and the Dragon.

From the hall, patrons pass through an annexe designed in Empire Style to a magnificent Rotunda, which is the junction to all parts of the house. The walls are treated with Sienna marble and corinthian columns of Verdi Corona marble. The giant staircases leading to the Art Gallery and Dress Circle are also made of Italian marble.

The auditorium is an unusual fan-shape, 128' wide, 112' deep and 36' in height, and the walls are lined with rose and gold silk tapestry and draped with crimson velour. The enormous chandelier is suspended from the main dome, and twelve smaller ones are suspended around the walls. The main dome and proscenium are illuminated with concealed lighting in four colours. The proscenium curtain is of heavy crimson velour, with gold enrichment, fringes and tassels. Seating capacity is 2,684 in its original configuration.

While the State has operated since 1929, post-war economic measures saw the disbanding of the State Symphony Orchestra in 1952. Several years later the famous Wurlitzer organ was closed down, and organist Mannie Aarons retired after more than 25 years at the console.

Failing attendance took its toll on the viability of the State Theatre, and in the 1960s plans were drawn for conversion of the State into a cinema complex of four screens. In the 1970s the same type of alterations were envisaged but did not get off the drawing board. The National Trust of Australia classified the building in 1973, and in the late 1970s long periods of darkness were interspersed with occasional "live" concerts by rock groups and one-man shows.

In 1980 the State was completely refurbished and restored as a first-run cinema on a slightly reduced seating capacity. However, the increasing popularity of television and home video recorders once again placed the theatre in an uneconomical position. The weak economy and substantially increased operating costs have virtually seen the end for the State Theatre as a viable commercial cinema in the City of Sydney, and the venue is now used for a variety of "live" performances.



Leader Hamilton Weber and the State Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Ian Hanson Photo

THEATRE ORGAN



Manny Aarons reigned at the Sydney State Wurlitzer for 25 years, circa 1944.

Ian Hanson Photo

The Wurlitzer in the State Sydney

The organ in the State was built by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company in 1928. It arrived in Sydney on March 18, 1929, and was conveyed from the wharves in a convoy of 25 lorries. The original plan was to have the organ played by two organists at two separate consoles, a procedure that had been adopted at the State Theatre Melbourne three months earlier. The State Sydney had a narrower proscenium than the State Melbourne, however, and the space limitation did not allow for the second console to be installed. It is presently in a home in Sydney.

The Sydney State Wurlitzer is one of a group of four 21-rank instruments of similar specifications. Three were built for large Australian theatres, Sydney State, Melbourne State and the Melbourne Regent. The fourth organ was installed in the Trocadero Cinema, Elephant and Castle London. The Sydney Wurlitzer is the only one of the four remaining in its original home. The specification has not altered from that of its opening.

In the early days three American organists were featured. Price Dunlavy, who opened the organ; Fred Scholl, who had recently opened the Sydney Capitol 3/15 Wurlitzer, and Eddie Horton, who had opened the Prince Edward Sydney and Arcadia Chatswood 2/10 Wurlitzers and the Roxy Parramatta 3/10 Christie. Over the years that the organ remained in regular use several other organists were featured for short seasons. In 1932, Manny Aarons was appointed resident little knowing that he would remain in the position for 25 years until the organ was silenced in 1957. Manny, an excellent pianist and arranger, had been leader of the orchestra at the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney.

At the time of closure in 1957, Greater Union also stopped the maintenance of the organ. The building itself was showing signs of wear and tear. Sydney lies in a weather belt that suffers heavy torrential storms and these, unfortunately, were the undoing of this great Wurlitzer. The roof areas over the chambers were in a bad way, and water continually cas-

caded in doing enormous damage. Gradually less and less of the organ worked and the only times that it was used were for the occasional premiere or the Sydney Film Festival.

In 1980, following the renovation of the theatre, Alan Tranter was appointed to preside at the console. Through constant hard work he was able to keep a few ranks going with dead notes everywhere. To make matters worse, the organ pit had flooded on several occasions when the pump had failed, allowing the console cables to float for days in the water. In 1986, however, the theatre closed as a first-run house, so again the organ fell silent. The theatre is being retained and there is a strong move to have the Wurlitzer totally renovated to its 1928 glory. We certainly hope that the move succeeds and the soul of this great building is restored.

(Note: my thanks to Ian Hanson of Sydney N.S.W. for permission to use suitable material from the submission prepared by the group interested in the retention of the State and its Wurlitzer.)