



HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE

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PROGRAMME BIOGRAPHY OF 'THE MAJ'

BY IVAN KING -HISTORIAN

A good night out could be had on the corner of King and Hay Street as long ago as 1896 when on November 9th - "Prince of Wales Day" - Ye Olde Englishe Faire opened on the site. This was an outdoor theatre and showground. The previous summer it had occupied a spot in "Howick Street", as Hay Street east of the Town Hall was called.

Its premiere attraction was "OODA THE AERIAL MARVEL", who apparently bedazzled the town with his skills on the trapeze. Then on November 21st came an evening of great cultural and social significance - the Faire treated the people of Perth to their first glimpse of moving pictures.

Later, when Leoni Clarke introduced his animal act, featuring 170 creatures of various shapes and kinds, the patrons must surely have appreciated the fact that the entertainment was in the open air!

A greater grandeur came to the corner on CHRISTMAS EVE, 1904, when HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, named after Edward VII, opened its iron gates for the first time and West Australians could appreciate the opulent auditorium created by architect WILLIAM WOLFE and contractor GUSTAV LIEBE, for proprietor T G MOLLOY/T G M who in 1897 had financed the construction of the Theatre Royal. Like His Majesty's, the Royal adjoined a hotel - the Metropole - and the facade still stands there in the Hay Street Mall. Its former dress circle area is now a Hoyts Cinema, entered from St Martin's Arcade.

The gala opening night production was "THE FORTY THIEVES", publicised as a Stupendous Spectacular Extravanganza of Gorgeous Magnificence and Stirring Tableaux. But despite all the Gorgeous Magnificence the House Full sign did not go up that night.

According to Truth, "Christmas Eve was rather an unfortunate night to choose for the opening of a new theatre. People prefer to spend their Christmas Eve in the orthodox way for this reason, "THE FORTY THIEVES" at His Majesty's on Saturday night was presented to a much poorer house than the house warranted".

Those few first-nighters enjoyed an auditorium which featured four artificial waterfalls, reputed to improve ventilation. They seem to have disappeared early in the life of the theatre.

The really spectacular aspect of the ventilation plan, however, was the dome of the roof, built to slide open, so that on a warm night the audience could have "the sky for their roof".

Soon the Maj was weaving its way into the artistic and social life of Perth and its history has been enriched by a roll-call of legendary names - DAME NELLIE MELBA, ANNA PAVLOVA, PERCY GRAINGER, DAME SYBIL THORNDIKE, PETER DAWSON, YEHUDI MENUHIN, GLADYS MONCRIEFF, DAME MARGOT FONTEYN and SIR ROBERT HELPMANN. Six Academy Award winners have tread the boards - KATHARINE HEPBURN, VIVIEN LEIGH, SIR JOHN GIELGUD, CLAUDETTE COLBERT, REX HARRISON and GEOFFREY RUSH. Those same boards bore the weight of Ben Hur's chariot in 1913.

Through the decades the theatre has also played host to everything from political rallies to boxing matches to "IRVINGS IMPERIAL MIDGET'S" in an Exhibition of Necromancy, Thaumaturgy and Magic". Even the Prince of Wales dropped in for a Diggers Reception in 1920. During the Second World War, travel restrictions prevented visits by national and international companies, so the theatre became a cinema, but that was nothing new. In 1917, it had given Perth its first screening of D.W. Griffith's "Intolerance".

The 1950s and 60s was the era of the Great American Musical and the J.C. Williamson Management brought them all across the Nullarbor - "ANNIE GET YOUR GUN", "OKLAHOMA", "KISS ME KATE", "PYJAMA GAME", "FUNNY GIRL" and of course "MY FAIR LADY".

This was the time when the Edgley family leased and then bought the theatre, which they made the venue for the first of their many Russian spectaculars.

With the coming of the Entertainment Centre in the early 1970s, Michael Edgley relinquished his hold and, after a period of uncertainty, the theatre was bought by the State Government and three years of alteration and refurbishment followed. On MAY 28TH, 1980, the Maj re-opened to a new generation of theatre-goers.

Now the King and Hay street corner boasts a building which is part of the National Estate, a sumptuous setting for today's theatrical glories, most of which is now provided by our own national and regional companies.

Within its Edwardian setting, His Majesty's is completely equipped to meet the technological demands of big contemporary musical productions.

A GOOD NIGHT OUT CAN STILL BE HAD AT 825 HAY STREET PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA!!!!!!

Don't forget to also visit –

The Museum of Performing Arts (Down Stairs at the Maj) open Monday – Friday 10:00am – 4:00pm with constantly changing exhibitions of theatrical costumes and memorabilia taken from the treasure trove of the backstage archives.

Gold coin donation entry.

IVAN KING

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Perth, Ivan King has worked throughout Australia in countless plays, musicals, reviews, pantomimes and television productions. After a period in English provincial repertory companies, he returned to Perth for a three year run in Diamond Lil's Theatre Restaurant, shows for which he wrote songs and sketches, followed by work in many other plays.

For the West Australian Opera he directed the 1984 production of The Merry Widow and featured in the comedy roles of the Gaoler in Die Fledermaus and Penizek in Countess Maritza. As a columnist he wrote "Pensees de Perth", a gossip page in Arts West magazine. He has also written articles on West Australian theatre history for various other publications.

He began the archives of theatrical memorabilia in 1980, which is now the basis of the Museum of Performing Arts (MOPA) at His Majesty's Theatre and of which he is now the full time professional archivist.

Ivan is the recipient of the WA Actors Union Guild Award and the Southern Cross Award – both for Lifetime Contribution to West Australian theatre.