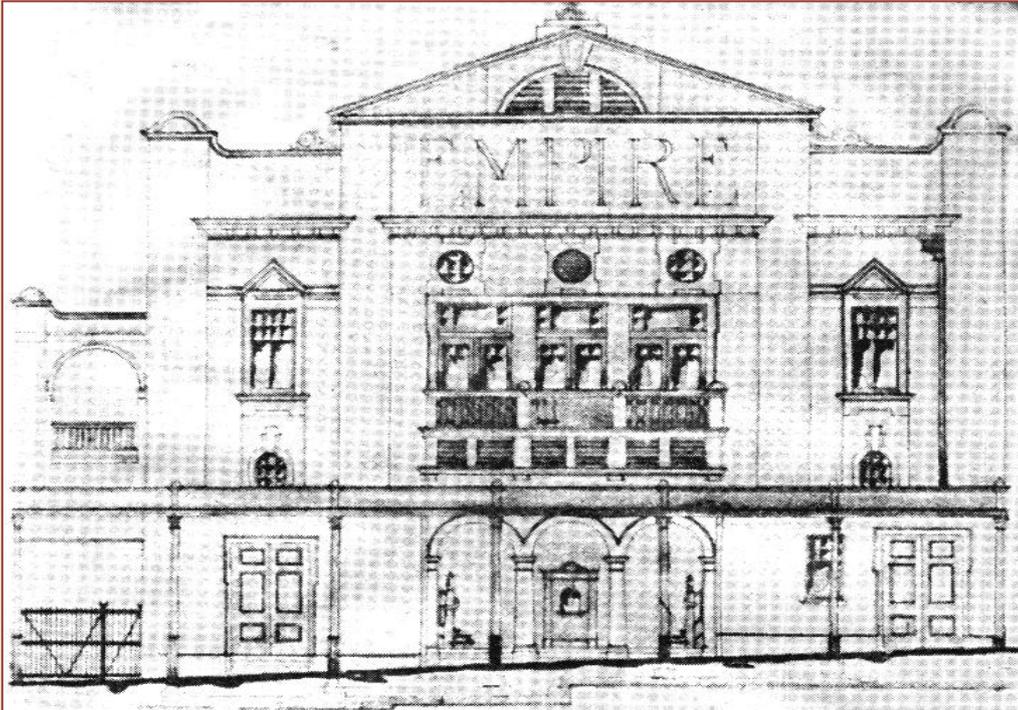


## EMPIRE THEATRE (Brisbane)

(aka **Fullers Empire, St James Theatre and Paris Theatre**)

Considered one of the finest purpose-built vaudeville theatres in the southern hemisphere at the time of its opening, the Empire was opened by Ted Holland and Percy St John in 1911. Following their deaths the theatre was managed by the Fullers until the original lease expired in 1918. They then took over control and it subsequently became known as Fullers Empire Theatre. Between 1930 and its demolition in 1986 (for the Myer centre), the venue was as the St James and Paris cinemas.



### **Empire Theatre, Brisbane**

Artists impression of the facade, 1911

Source: Queensland Performing Arts Museum. *Treading the Boards* (1999), 40.

Opened in early 1911 and situated at 176 Albert Street (between Queen and Elizabeth Streets), the Empire Theatre was a purpose-built vaudeville house designed especially for its initial lessees Ted Holland and Percy St John. With both men having had extensive careers as both performers and entrepreneurs, Holland and St John were also reportedly accorded considerable early input into the plans eventually drawn up architects H.W. Atkinson and Charles McLay. Advertised as "the coolest, most comfortable, and commodious theatre in the Commonwealth" (BC: 13 Jan. 1911: 2), the design included the installation of a cinematograph plant, suggesting that the lessees were even at that early stage aware of film's potential as an entertainment package. On the day its opening the *Brisbane Courier* wrote of the new theatre:

The attractiveness of the scheme of decoration was a matter of first impression, while the cool, comfortable seats, the roominess of the circle, and the excellent arrangement of the floor of the theatre evoked immediate appreciation. Apparently there is not a seat which does not command a good view of the stage, and ample space is allowed between the chairs and for the approaches, so that when the house is full no one need be crowded. The design seems to have been to secure a wholly pleasing effect, and at the same time insure coolness, abundance of fresh air, and the maximum of convenience and comfort (14 Jan. 1911, 5).

As to its design, the outside of the building included "Empire" in large raised and gold-coloured letters that were illuminated from above by a huge electric light globe, while a series of louvered windows along the second floor allowed fresh air to be carried throughout the auditorium. After ascending three marble steps patrons entered the large vestibule, which is described as having "caustic tiles and a glitter of light everywhere" ("New Empire," 13). Prominent here was the box office (made of silky oak) and two gently-sloped marble staircases (with the banisters made of the same wood) which took patrons to the dress circle. Each of the staircases was also adorned with bronze statues standing on pillars and holding light globes. Patrons who attended the stalls section of the theatre were seated in oak chairs, with those towards the front half of the auditorium being able to look up to a ceiling made of stamped steel and which featured a large central ventilation system.

ENTERTAINMENTS.

**THE EMPIRE.**  
 Direction: Holland and St. John Ltd.

**TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT.**

**GRAND OPENING**  
 OF OUR SUPERB AND COMMODIOUS THEATRE,  
**BRISBANE'S OWN SHOW.**  
**TED HOLLAND'S NEW VAUDEVILLE ENTERTAINERS**  
 AND EDISON'S VERY LATEST MOVING-PICTURES.

Five Appearances in Brisbane of  
 The Dainty and Delightful Society Entertainer,  
**MADAME LYDIA**  
**YEAMANS-TITUS,**  
 Assisted by Professor Titus.  
 (By Special Arrangement with Mr. Harry Rickards.)  
 A Tremendous Hit made by  
**FRED | GRAY AND GRAHAM | NELLIE**

**"THE MUSICAL BELL BOY"**

Appearing in conjunction with our grand double company.

**SPECIAL PRICES 3/-, 2/-, & 1/-.**  
 Box Plan at Piping's. No Extra Charge for Booking.  
 To commemorate the opening of our new home, we shall present every member  
 of the audience attending "THE BELL BOY" Tonight with a specially designed  
 SOUVENIR.

In addition, to Commemorate the Occasion,  
**A FLASHLIGHT PHOTO**  
 of the Audience will be taken. To insure its entire success, intending patrons are  
 requested to be seated by 7.50 p.m., after which his Worship the Mayor will de-  
 clare the Theatre open.

Brisbane Courier 14 Jan. (1911), 2.

The most beautifully furnished part of the theatre was naturally second floor lounge balcony and dress circle. Ringed by portraits of well-known theatrical identities, this area included "a commodious ladies cloak room and a retiring room fixed with marble wash basins and accessories. Immediately above the balcony was the cinematograph room and its machinery. The broad entrance led to the dress circle, which was floored with a combination of blue Axminster carpet and rich linoleum (in the passages). The seats are recorded as being upholstered with "cool and hygienic Japanese grass," while the balustrade was again made of silky oak. Interestingly, the dress circle did not have steps, but rather a gently sloping floor. Another feature of the theatre was a long balcony lounge that ran along one side of the dress circle. Measuring 110 ft by 12 ft, this balcony was furnished with lounge chairs and a light refreshments area. Access to the stage could also be made from the dress circle ("New Empire," 13).

Aware of the importance of looking after their performers and production staff, Holland and St John spared little expense in providing "splendidly-appointed dressing rooms" that were located on

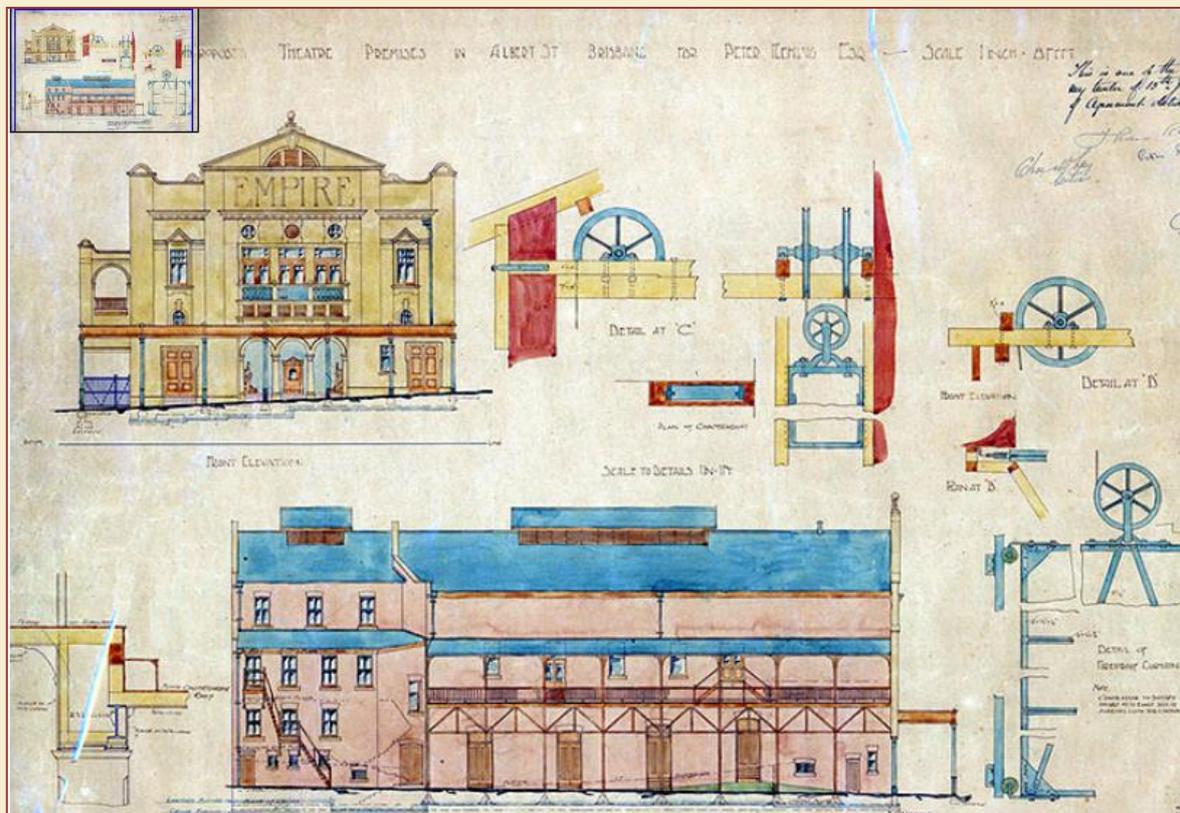
both the stalls and dress circle levels. Members of the orchestra were given their own room in the basement, as were the cornermen (the lead minstrel comedians). In its critique of the theatre, the *Brisbane Courier* made special mention of the numerous windows that were clearly designed to provide abundant ventilation, an especially important concern in the summer months. With regard to the stage and immediate surrounds, the *Courier* records that the proscenium arch was 28ft by 19ft (9x6m), with the stage having a depth of 32ft (9.5m). The orchestra pit, also especially designed to remain cool in summer, was surrounded by a nickel-plated railing, with the walls heavily draped. The floor comprised wooden boards over a concrete base but rubber inlay between the two layers (7 Jan. 1911, 13).

Holland St John opened the Empire on 14 January 1911, inviting the then Mayor of Brisbane, Alderman J. Hetherington to officiate. Simon and Delyse Anthony in their entry on the Empire as part of the *Academy Literature and Drama Website* cite former bell-boy Eddie Dunford's recollection of theatre during its early days. According to Dunford, audiences would arrive at the theatre in buggies and sulkies and "the women used to wear—well, I suppose you'd call it a sort of evening dress—with high collars and long sleeves, and the longest trains" (SM: 22 Aug. 1943, n. pag.).

As in previous years Holland and St John regularly featured both Australian and international artists from Harry Rickards stable along with local performers who had established reputations in Sydney and Melbourne and New Zealand through vaudeville companies run by managers such as Harry Clay, Percy Dix and J.C. Bain. Promising Brisbane performers were also sometimes given an opportunity to demonstrate their talent. Mostly billed as Ted Holland's New Vaudeville Entertainers, the Empire's popularity with the Brisbane public was such that no other management was able to compete with it during the three and four years that it was managed by Holland and St John.

**1914**  
 Source: State Library of Tasmania

It is not clear whether Holland's leasing arrangement with Harry Rickards continued when Hugh D. McIntosh took over Rickards' company in 1912. It is known, however, that Holland and St John established a similar arrangement with James Brennan and the Fullers sometime around April/May 1913. The *Theatre* magazine reported on the "amalgamation" in its June 1913 issue, suggesting that it was advantageous to Holland and St John's patrons because it gave them the opportunity to see the "best of the artists imported by the Brennan-Fuller firm" (29). By February 1914 the Empire was booking more than 200 acts a year from the south, with none playing more than two weeks in Brisbane (TT: Feb. 1914, 17). Among the better-known Australian performers engaged by Holland and St John between 1911 and 1915 were Courtney Ford and Ivy Davis (as members of the Vagabond's troupe), Sharratt and Lang, Maurice Chenoweth, the Two Driscolls (aka the Driscoll Brothers), Will Raynor, Sadie Gale and her mother Myra (as Sadie and Gale), Carrie Moore, Alf Lawrence, Les Warton, Ernest Pitcher and Wykeham and Preston.



### Plans for the Empire Theatre, Albert Street, 1910.

Architect: H.W. Atkinson & Charles McLay

Source: Fryer Library, The University of Queensland, Conrad and Gargett Collection (UQFL228, Job 394)

Following the deaths of both Ted Holland (Sept. 1914) and Percy St John (Oct. 1915), the theatre was managed temporarily by Dan Carroll (Birch and Carroll) until a deal was struck between the widows of Holland and St John and Benjamin and John Fuller to oversee the theatre's operations. Holland and St John's leasing arrangement with the Fullers made the latter the obvious choice to take on this role, and the transition went almost unnoticed. Advertisements placed in the *Truth* (published Sundays only) between early 1916 and early 1918 record that the theatre was still under the direction of Holland and/or Holland and St John. With the various combinations of billing mostly being: "Holland's Vaudeville Entertainers by arrangement with Fullers Theatres and Vaudeville Ltd" (see for example TBRS: 5 Mar. 1916, 7; "Direction: Holland and St John Ltd." TBRS: 28 Jan. 1917, 8; or "Holland's Vaudeville Deluxe." BC: 10 Nov. 1917, 2). Interestingly, no Empire Theatre advertisements appear in the *Brisbane Courier* between 10 October 1914 and 27 July 1917, a period of almost three years. No explanation for this lapse has yet been ascertained.

During its first year overseeing the Holland and St John operations, Fullers Theatres renovated the Empire, leading *Australian Variety* to record that the refurbishment made it "as cosy and pretty a theatre as could be wished for" (8 Nov. 1916, n. pag.). When the Holland and St John lease eventually expired Fullers' Theatres took full control of the establishment, announcing the entertainment as being under their direction from 19 January 1918. Within a short period of time the theatre became known as The Fullers' Empire Theatre.

In 1930 the Empire was converted into a cinema so as to take advantage of the new "talkie" phenomenon. It was also renamed the St. James Theatre on 19 April that year. Management would sometimes put on live revues in the theatre during the 1930s but these gradually became less common over the next decade or so. When the theatre was given another renovation in 1965, and renamed the Paris Picture Theatre, it was used for cinema only (SM: 17 June 1979, n. pag.). The Paris Theatre was demolished in 1986 to make way for the Myer Centre development.

### SEE ALSO

- [Ted Holland](#)
- [Percy St John](#)

**EMPIRE**  
THE SHOW YOU KNOW.

Holland's  
Vaudeville de Luxe

From  
The Famous European  
Circuses & Theatres.

**THE Bradnas**  
Continental Comedians in  
Boomerang Hat Throwing Act.

ALWAYS  
WORTH  
WHILE

**VIOLA** **EDDIE**  
**DENNY & DUNIGAN**  
In New Edition of Dance Ideas.  
Snappy Songs & Odd Nonsense.

Those favourite Funsters —  
**BERT LE BLANC & JAKE MACK**  
and Musical Travesty Stars in  
Breezy New Revue  
"IN WATTS."  
Bombarding Audiences with Happiness.

And the Wild West Wanderers.  
**BILLY LEE & BONITA**  
The Whip King / Queen & Rifle

**Mme. Lorenz**  
Mid Air Marvel  
on the  
High Trapeze

**THE  
MECCA  
OF  
VARIETY.**

Above: Final programme produced under the direction of Holland and St John Ltd  
Brisbane Courier 12 Jan. (1918), 2.

**EMPIRE THEATRE,**  
**BARGAIN MATINEE TO-DAY.**  
**BARGAIN MATINEE TO-DAY.**  
BARGAIN PRICES: 2/ and 1/  
Children, Half-Price.

**EMPIRE THEATRE.**  
Direction: Fuller's Theatres and  
Vaudeville, Ltd.

**EVERY EVENING AT 8.**  
**Fuller's Vaudeville.**

**TO-NIGHT! 'TO-NIGHT!'**  
**CHANGE OF PROGRAMME.**

First appearance of the Mental  
Miracles,  
**SERGT. COPELAND and THE  
KID,**  
Returned Soldier and Amazing Youth-  
ful Clairvoyant. A Mysterious Act.  
Unusually Unique.

First Appearance of  
**IRENE PEARSE,**  
The Wise Scotch Lassie, with Lifting  
Songs, "from the Heilans."

Last week of the Continental  
Comedians,  
**THE BRADNAS,  
THE BRADNAS,**  
In their unique Boomerang Hat-  
throwing Act.

Last week of the Disciples of Mirth,  
(Vivie) (Eddie)  
**DENNY and DUNIGAN,  
DENNY and DUNIGAN,**  
Nimble-footed and Nimble-witted  
Humorists.

Last week of  
**BERT LE BLANC,**  
And his favourite organisation of  
Comedy Stars, presenting by special  
request the One-act Musical Tonic  
"WHAT'S THE USE."  
"WHAT'S THE USE."

Prices: 2/6, 1/6, and 1/2, plus tax.  
Reserve, 3/3, (inclusive of tax), at  
Palmer's till midday, then at Theatre.

Right: First program under the Fullers' management  
Brisbane Courier 12 Jan. (1918), 2.

**MATINEE,**  
**To-day 2.30.**

**EMPIRE**  
EVERY EVENING  
HOLLANDS BIG BILL

**THE  
MUSICAL BENTLEYS**  
Wonder Xylophonists.

**Barron & Rossetti,**  
BELGIAN CELLOIST AND THE  
FRENCH SINGER

**Miss Milly Tilley,**  
SOPIANO

**ROSS & WYSE,**  
AND BIG SURPRISE.

**ARTHUR CROXON,**  
IN SONGS AND PATTEN.

**SHIRLEY & SHIRLEY**  
NEW MELODY SPECIALITY

**JACK QUINLAN,**  
**WARD LEAR,**  
NEW BOLLERIES.

**DO ZEY**  
Chinese Athlete.

PRICES 2/6, 1/6, 1/2.  
PLAN AT PALMER.

Return of advertising in  
the Brisbane Courier  
28 July 1917, 2.

**THE EMPIRE.**  
Direction: ..... Holland & St. John, Ltd.  
**TWO PERFORMANCES TO-DAY.**

**MATINEE THIS AFTERNOON, 2.30. AND EVENING PERFORMANCE, 7.30.**

**Ted Holland's Vaudeville Entertainers.**

**LAST NIGHT OF THE SHOW (CARNIVAL)  
AND STILL MORE STARS!**  
Very Special engagements. Dives from New York, of  
**WILLIAMS AND WARNER,**  
America's Famous Eclectic Musical Comedians.  
**ENTIRELY NEW BILL TO-DAY!**  
Headed by the Very Greatest Act ever Imported to Australia,  
**MORRIS' WRESTLING PONIES.**  
(Assisted by John Hedge.)  
The Champion Lasso Makers of America. A Regular Riot of Comedy.  
Also, Direct from America's Principal Theatres,  
**MATILDE AND ELVIRA,**  
Typical Spanish Dancers (from the Winter Garden, New York City).  
Also Representatives (all Direct from America and Europe) of  
**JOLLY FANNY RICE**  
And her Jolly Family of singing and Dancing Dolls.  
**MISS DOROTHY HARRIS,** **MR. CLEMENT MAY.**  
(The American Comedienne). (Charles Holmes Impersonator).  
**THE BOUDNI BROTHERS, CUNNINGHAM AND ROSE.**  
And Our Grand Double Company of Vaudevilleans.

**POPULAR SHOW PRICES. BOOKED SEATS 1/ EXTRA.**  
Box Plan at Palmer's, until 12 Noon (after that hour at Theatre) until 5  
p.m. Phone 2145 and 3643. Book early.  
NOTICE—Owing to length of Programme, the Curtain rises 7.30.

Brisbane Courier 15 Aug. (1914), 2.

**ENTERTAINMENTS.**

**EMPIRE THEATRE.**  
**BARGAIN, To-day, MATINEE.**  
**BARGAIN, AT 2.30, MATINEE.**  
A Treat for the Children. For  
Young! For Old! For All!!  
2/ BARGAIN PRICES. 1/  
Children Half-price to all parts.

**Empire Theatre.**  
Direction, Fuller's Vaudeville Ltd.

**TO-NIGHT.**  
**FOLLOW THE CROWD TO**  
**Fuller's Vaudeville**  
To See  
**STIFFY and MO Ltd.**  
in their Third Musical Prank,  
**OH, DOCTOR!**  
STIFFY & MO. IN HOSPITAL.  
(He—the nurse is coming!)  
Different Ballets—Different Ideas  
Different Jokes—But the Same Nae  
Girls in New Gowns  
Also, **TO-NIGHT,**  
**MURFAYNE,**  
The Master Xylophonist,  
**THE MOLINARIS,**  
**BARON, DESPERADO,**  
and **LA ROSE.**  
Saturday Prices: 2/6, and 1/6, to  
arrive 3/3, at Palmer's till midday,  
then at Theatre.

Brisbane Courier 16 Feb.  
(1918), 2.



The final week's program at the Empire Theatre before it became the St James. *Brisbane Courier* 28 Dec. 1929, 2.



*Brisbane Courier* 18 Apr. (1925), 2



*Brisbane Courier* 21 Dec. 1929, 2.

### HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Simon and Delyse Ryan point out that Alwyn Capern's article in the *Sunday Mail* and in his entry on to the *Companion to Theatre in Australia* both record that Gladys Moncrieff performed at the Empire in 1909 (some two years before it was built!). They also note that this story, repeated in Moncrieff's autobiography (*My Life in Song*), is a clear demonstration of how memories can be distorted over time. As the Ryans' further note, if Gladys Moncrieff made her professional debut in Brisbane in 1909 under Holland's management it could only have been at the Theatre Royal.
2. In 1911 Hugh Huxham formed Huxham's Serenaders with his wife Edith especially for a season at the Empire Theatre. The 14 weeks engagement was so successful that they decided to abandon their trio act and focus on the troupe. After undertaking a nine weeks tour of Queensland for Birch and Carroll (in association with Holland and St John) they then worked the Fullers Theatres circuit for a number of years (TT: Oct. 1915, 44).

### FURTHER REFERENCE

- Fryer Library, The University of Queensland. "Empire Theatre Brisbane: Program File."
- Ryan, Simon and Delyse. "[Empire Theatre, Brisbane.](#)" *The Academy Literature and Drama Website* (sighted 31/07/2011)
- Queensland Performing Arts Museum. *Treading the Boards: A Survey of Theatre Buildings in Brisbane 1847-1998* (1999), 40-41.



**Moon and Morris Revue Co,  
Empire Theatre, 1926**  
Source: State Library of Queensland