

NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE (Sydney)

(aka **Fullers Theatre/The Roxy/The Mayfair**)

In 1906 James Brennan took over the lease of the National Sporting Club in Castlereagh St and converted it into a 5,000 seat vaudeville theatre. The "Nash" became part of the Fullers vaudeville circuit in 1912, but was renamed Fullers Theatre in 1919 following extensive alterations and a significant reduction in seating. The venue was converted it to a cinema and renamed the Roxy in 1930. Later known as The Mayfair it was bought by Hoyts in the mid-1950s. The cinema ceased operations in 1980 and four years later was demolished.

Situated at 73 Castlereagh Street (on the southern side of King Street), the National Amphitheatre had been occupied by the National Sporting Club from 1902 and used for a variety of athletic events. Previous to that the site had been the premises of a carriage-building firm, and before that a butcher's shop (E: 10 Mar. 1920, 3). According to John West in *Theatres in Australia* (1978), the National contained club rooms, bars and billiard rooms, along with an athletic hall seating 2000 people. The events held in the hall included regular boxing contests.

In 1906 James Brennan took over the lease and converted to a one level vaudeville theatre. The *Theatre* magazine records in its 1 November issue that the hall measured 155ft by 75ft and accommodated 5,000 patrons:

It will be built in the amphitheatre style, and there will be several tiers of galleries. The roof is to be reconstructed and supported by several steel girders in order to do away with columns of stanchions. The roof will be a sliding one. There will be 10 exits [and] each staircase will be 7ft wide.... The cost of the work will be about £6000. Messrs Eaton and Bates are the architects, and the contractor is C. B. Smith (20).

Renamed Brennan's National Amphitheatre, the venue opened on Boxing Night 1906. The entertainments were subsequently offered at "popular prices" and became so successful that in 1911 Brennan floated a company that was over-subscribed by 35,000 pounds, but which allowed him to expand into other states. One of the best known vaudevillians to be associated with the theatre during the Brennan period was J.C. Bain who was employed as its General Manager between ca. 1908 to 1912.

Brennan retained control of "the Nash" until the Fullers' bought out his circuit in 1912. Ross Thorne's research has uncovered an internal report on the National by the New South Wales theatre licensing authority (dated 16 Aug. 1921) which records that the premises had been considered "antiquated and dangerous" when the Fullers took over the theatre. Interestingly work for improvement was not approved until September 1918.

On 24 August 1918 the Fullers closed the National Amphitheatre, transferring their vaudeville operations to the Grand Opera House so that the entire building could be remodelled (or as Thorne puts it - "rehabilitated") along American lines. The design was again provided by New Zealand architect Henry E. White, who had previously worked on other Fullers venues - notably the National Amphitheatre (Melb), the Majestic, Newtown (Syd) and the Grand Opera House (Syd). The building work was carried out by Tom Turner (TT: 14 Mar. 1919, n. pag.)

The National was rebuilt as one of the smaller model -- on two levels with a rather shallow, typical vaudeville, fly tower stage. It seated in the stalls (762), dress circle (546) and side boxes (28) a total of 1336 people according to the licensing authority 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 (Thorne "Mayfair Theatre," 1)

Opening Night (1906)

Sydney Morning Herald 26 Dec. (1906), 2.

NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE.
CASTLEREAGH-STREET
(Leave all trams King-street).
JAMES BRENNAN, Sole Proprietor.

TO-NIGHT AND EVERY EVENING.

CHAS. BOVIS BROS. WILL.
MAMMOTH VAUDEVILLE ENTERTAINERS,
and their Moving Pictures.

NOTE—"NATIONAL" CLOCK—NOTE.

AT 7 P.M. DOORS OPEN—POSITIVE.
AT 7.15 HOUSE FILLING—SURE.
AT 7.43 HOUSE FULL—CERTAIN.

AT 7.45 Overture, "Bric-A-Brac," National Orchestra
AT 7.50 Vocal Overture, "Woodland Revels," Picnic Party.

AT 7.55 Miss Phoebe Lewis, Clever Serio and Dancer
AT 8.3 Joe Box, Loose-Legged Comedian.
AT 8.10 Miss Essie Jennings, Gifted Lyric Vocaliste.
AT 8.15 Little Maud Stewart, Soubrette and Dancer.
AT 8.21 Sam Keenan, Quaint Comedian.
AT 8.27 The Vivians, Clever Song and Dance Artists.
AT 8.35 Will Wallace, the Black Diamond Comedian.
AT 8.40 Mr. Dick Stead, Brilliant Vocalist.
AT 8.45 Baby Quinn, the Child Marvel.
AT 8.50 Chas. Pope. Nuf Sed.
AT 8.55 Grand Finale, The Melbourne Cup.

AT 9 Interval of 10 Minutes.

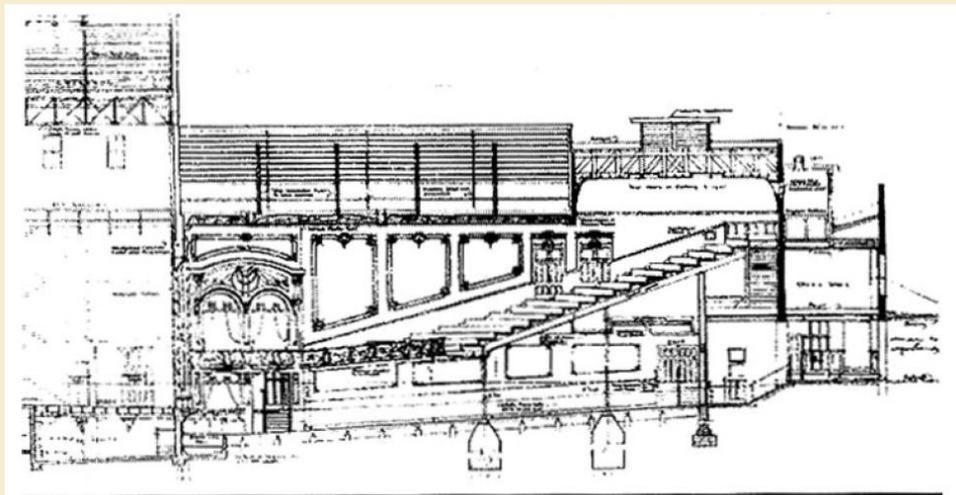
AT 9.10 Selections, "Eureka," National Orchestra.
AT 9.15 Illustrated Songs. Miss M. Vivian.
AT 9.19 Carden Wilson, the Great Mimic.
AT 9.30 Happy Nellie Marshall, Dialect Comedienne.
AT 9.40 YOURS TRULY, BOVIS BROS., ORIGINAL SPECIALITIES.

AT 9.55 Master Jim Saunders, Clever Boy Balladist.
AT 10.4 Denis Carney, the Great Dialect Comedian.
AT 10.15 Rexo, the Great Equilibrist and Juggler.
AT 10.25 Magnificent Moving Picture of the FATAL WEDDING, and Comic Films.
AT 10.45 Curtain. God Save the King.

ADMISSION:
Family Circle, 6d; Stalls, 1s; Orchestral Stalls, 1s 6d. No Early Doors.
Box Plan at Theatre. No extra charge.

TO-NIGHT, TO-NIGHT.
NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE.
(Leave all Trams King-street).
PEARSON CORELLI, Business Manager.

Renamed Fullers Theatre (often also advertised as "Fullers' New Theatre") the venue opened on 8 March 1919 with greater comfort for patrons due to vastly reduced seating. The first half vaudeville entertainment featured American couple Joe and Vera White (billed as the "chop Suey of vaudeville"), the Elmar Trio and Musical comedy artists Eve Kellend. The second half revusical, "Do It Now," was provided by Bert Le Blanc's Travesty Stars. In the company at that time were Jim Gerald, Essie Jennings, Queenie Paul, Mike Connors and Le Blanc's off-sider Jake Mack.



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.

Source: Ross Thorne. "Mayfair Theatre." 2.

TO-MORROW, AT 2.30 AND 8.
 Vaudeville in a true setting.
 A Great Show in a Beautiful Theatre.

FULLER'S NEW THEATRE.
FULLER'S NEW THEATRE.

in the Heart of the City.
 Castlereagh-street, opp. Daily Telegraph-bldg.
 Direction Ben and John Fuller.
 General Mgr. W. J. Douglas.

THE LIMIT
 in comfort, in hygiene, and in the matter
 of entertainment.
 Vaudeville at its best, in the
 Finest Possible Setting.

A THEATRE THAT HAS NO "WORST SEAT"
 (says "The Daily Telegraph").
 A perfect Stage View from Every Seat.
 Comfort in Every Part.
 The Ventilation is such that the Theatre is
 refilled with new air every 7 minutes.

Opening

TO-MORROW AFTERNOON, 2.30.
TO-MORROW AFTERNOON, 2.30.
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TO-MORROW AFTERNOON, 2.30.
TO-MORROW AFTERNOON, 2.30.

Two Shows To-morrow,
 at 2.30 and 8,
 and Twice Daily thereafter.

VAUDEVILLE,
VAUDEVILLE,
VAUDEVILLE,
VAUDEVILLE,
VAUDEVILLE,
VAUDEVILLE,

TWICE DAILY, 2.30 AND 8.
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Sydney Morning Herald 7 Mar. (1919), 2.

Fullers' Theatre operated as a vaudeville theatre through until 1930, at which time they converted it to a cinema and renamed it the Roxy. Two years later it was reopened for live theatre, but by the end of 1932 was given a refurbishment. Ross Thorne writes that "Architect, Charles Bohringer was commissioned by Fullers Ltd to do a makeover, the drawings being approved by the City Council in September 1934" ("Mayfair," 1-2).

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 around 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 (Thorne, "Mayfair," 2).

Re-opened as the Mayfair it again operated as a cinema. The building was eventually bought by Hoyts Theatres in the mid-1950s.

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 (Thorne, "Mayfair," 2).

Hoyts Theatres discontinued showing films at the Mayfair following the opening of its mega Entertainment Centre in George Street. It was then periodically leased for live theatre. After Hoyts sold the building in 1980 shops were built in its foyer and in back stalls space. The site was soon afterward sold again, leading to the building being demolished in 1984 for redevelopment.

SEE ALSO

- [James Brennan](#)
- [Brennan's Amphitheatres Ltd](#)
- [Fullers Theatres](#)



FURTHER REFERENCE

- "[Buildings and Works: A New Theatre.](#)" SMH: 5 Mar. (1919), 10.
"City Music Hall, A." TT: Nov. (1906), 20.
"Fuller's New Theatre." AV: 14 Mar. (1919), n. pag. [re: opening of Fullers' Theatre]
Irvin, Eric. *Dictionary of Australian Theatre: 1788-1914* (1985), 293.
"Month in Vaudeville." TT: Apr. (1919), 27 [re: opening of Fullers' Theatre]
--- TT: Sept. (1918), 29 [re: closing of the National Amphitheatre for renovations]
Thorne, Ross. "[Mayfair Theatre: Photo Essay.](#)" *Ross Thorne* (no year). [sighted 16/01/2013]
--- "Fullers' National Theatre." CTTA: (1995), 239.

See also:

E: 10 Mar. (1920), 3.



Mayfair Theatre (ca. 1970s)

Source: Ross Thorne. "Mayfair Theatre." 3.

First published: 16/01/2013

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