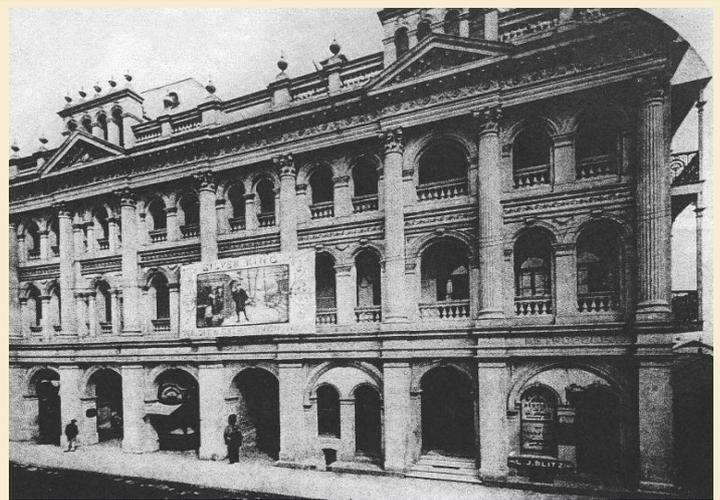


## THEATRE ROYAL (Perth)

(1897-1978) The Theatre Royal and Hotel Metropole (1894) was one of only two theatre/hotel complexes to be built in the Perth CBD, and also the first purpose built theatre built in Western Australia. Opened on 19 April 1897 under the management of Jones and Lawrence, the Royal was initially used for variety, drama and Perth's earliest film screenings before eventually being converted into a permanent cinema.

### 1897-1900

As one of only two theatre/hotel complexes to be established in the heart of Perth's central business district, and the first purpose-built theatre in Western Australia, the Theatre Royal was one of the most historically significant of the State's theatres. Initially seating upwards of 2,000 patrons, the building was also designed with the largest sliding roof in Australia, a necessity for cooling the auditorium down during the summer months. Situated at 637 Hay Street, the Royal operated as a place of amusement for eighty years, first as a venue for drama, musical theatre, variety (notably under the management of Harry Rickards), and Perth's earliest film screenings, before being converted into a permanent cinema in 1936. Designed to be Perth's grandest and most comfortable place of entertainment, the Royal was built by businessman and land owner Thomas G.A. Molloy (of Molloy, Thomas and Forrest). Additional investment was provided by his partner, and the presiding Perth Mayor, Alexander Forrest. Molloy also later became one of the city's Mayors, serving two terms in the office - 1908/09 and 1911/12. According to the Heritage Council of Western Australia (1999), Molloy's place in the State's history is cemented through the "great contribution to the civic, cultural and recreational development" he made "from the 1880s to his death in the 1930s (1).



#### **Theatre Royal, 1897**

Taken during the theatre's opening season, beginning 19 April.  
Billboard in centre advertises Stanford and Barnes' *Silver King* production.  
Source: John West *Theatre in Australia* (1978, 91).

The first stage of the development had been to build the Hotel Metropole, which opened in 1894. The following year the hotel was extended and given a new street façade by John Stuart Jackson, the architect who also designed the theatre.<sup>1</sup> The Royal's foundation stone was also laid that year (8 May 1895), with the formal ceremony followed by drinks at the Hotel Metropole, where the Premier, Sir John Forrest, expressed his view that the building of the theatre "was a sign of the growing popularity of Western Australia and the prosperity being experienced" (Register, 7). In its 1999 "Assessment Document," the Heritage Council records that the three-story theatre, which was built on the site of a former shooting gallery, had been constructed in rendered brick in the Federation Free Classical style, and included an attic and a basement. A laneway divided the hotel and theatre.

#### **T H E A T R E R O Y A L .** **PUBLIC NOTICE!**

Messrs. Jones and Lawrence are regretfully compelled to announce that OWING to the LATE ARRIVAL of the S.S. ROCKTON with the Stanford and Barnes Company and Scenery on board, they will be UNABLE to OPEN the THEATRE ROYAL on SATURDAY the 17th, as intended. The Scenery and Effects of the opening piece, the SILVER KING being so extensive, they find that in order not to jeopardise the production in any way, the OPENING must be unavoidably POSTPONED till EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 19, when the SILVER KING will be produced on a scale of lavishness never before attempted in Perth, with the following powerful cast, selected from the Theatres Royal, Sydney and Melbourne:—

*West Australian* 17 Apr. (1897). 1.

With the construction of the theatre drawing to an end in early 1897, Molloy arranged with variety entrepreneurs, George A. Jones and George R. Lawrence to take over the initial lease. As Jones and Lawrence, the pair had for the past year been the lessees and managers of the nearby Ye Olde Englyshe Fayre grounds (also situated in Hay Street). They did not open with minstrelsy or vaudeville, however, but rather with a season of drama. In this respect the Royal had been designed especially for dramatic performances – and as such was conceived as a venue that would attract middle to upper class patrons, as opposed to the working and lower-middle class audience which frequented variety amusements. Although ready to open on Saturday 17 April 1897, the late arrival of the S. S. Rockton, with the Stanford and Barnes Dramatic Company, forced Jones and Lawrence to postpone the opening until 19<sup>th</sup> (Easter Monday). The debut production was *The Silver King*.

<sup>1</sup> The WA Heritage Council Assessment Document records that although a number of sources have identified the Theatre Royal's architect as William Wolfe, the evidence points with more certainty to Jackson.

During Jones and Lawrence tenure, the Royal began its long association with cinema. Although not the first Western Australian venue to exhibit moving pictures – Jones and Lawrence actually introduced the new medium to Perth audiences for the first time in late 1896 at Ye Olde Englyshe Fayre – the Royal was the fourth venue used for such purposes. It was, however, the first place of amusement to devote a whole programme to film, this being the Corbett-Fitzsimmons prize fight, which Jones and Lawrence screened between 26 December 1897 and 2 January 1898. Among the other company's engaged by the pair during their twelve months association with the Royal were The George Darrell Dramatic Co, the Bracey Opera Co and the Tom Cannon Dramatic Co.

In terms of measuring the Royal's success during its early years, the WA Heritage Council notes:

Although it was popular and attracted big productions by professional theatre companies, and it was viewed as a much needed facility at the time, boom-time Perth could not support long seasons and the firsts lessees, Jones and Lawrence, filed for bankruptcy only a year after the theatre opened. Other problems associated with the Theatre Royal in its early years were also raised by the Health Department – in relation to poor sanitation, insufficient emergency exits, steep stairs and the absence of a fire curtain - and also by the Church, which objected to the Sunday theatre performances (8).

Interestingly, except for the Stanford and Barnes season, which lost £500, each of the seasons mentioned above made a profit. The Darrell season was the most successful, returning the entrepreneurs £600 after costs. At the March 1898 public examination into their application for bankruptcy, Jones and Lawrence indicated, however, that the financial strain on their operations had been brought about by the variety seasons they presented, with each of these losing them an average of £100 a week.

After Jones and Lawrence were forced to abandon their association with the Royal, Harry Rickards played a short season there between 23 January and 12 February 1898. The theatre was then leased by Charles Holloway and William Anderson. In May they bought Williamson and Musgrove's Royal Comic Opera to the West for the first time. Its debut production was *Ma Mie Rosette*, which opened on 14 May. The company also staged Perth's first ever Gilbert and Sullivan operetta at the Royal. Williamson later sent out other companies, including several dramatic troupes. One, which played a season in late 1898 presented such productions as *A Royal Divorce* and *The Prisoner of Zenda*, with a cast that included J. B. Atholwood, Harry Plimmer and Cyril Knightly (Plimmer returned in 1902 for Williamson, headlining a company that staged such works as *A Secret Service* and the ever-popular *A Royal Divorce*). Another Williamson company to play the Royal (in 1900) was headlined by Tyrone Power and Cecil Ward (1900).

**T H E A T R E      R O Y A L**

Lessees ... Messrs. Holloway and Anderson.  
 Under the Direction of Messrs. Williamson and  
 Musgrove.  
 Representative and Stage Director, Mr. Henry  
 Bracy.  
 Touring Manager ... Mr. J. St. Clair.  
 Treasurer ... Mr. Dick Stewart

**THIS EVENING, AT 8 O'CLOCK.**

Inaugural Production of  
**WILLIAMSON and MUSGROVE'S**  
**WILLIAMSON and MUSGROVE'S**  
 Famous  
**ROYAL COMIC OPERA COMPANY**  
**ROYAL COMIC OPERA COMPANY**

The Delightful Romantic Comedy Opera,  
 "MA MIE ROSETTE,"  
 "MA MIE ROSETTE,"  
 Adapted by Geo. Dance; Music by Paul  
 Lacombe and Ivan Caryll.

*West Australian 14 May (1898), 1.*

**T H E A T R E      R O Y A L**

**BOXING NIGHT, DECEMBER 26,**  
 And Every Evening until Further Notice.  
**GRAND XMAS PANTONIME,**  
 Entitled—  
**"SINBAD THE SAILOR,"**  
 Also First Appearance in Perth of  
**MISS KATE HOWARDE**  
 And Her Celebrated  
**COMIC OPERA COMPANY.**

Cast of "Sinbad" will include—  
 Mr. Arthur Hunter    Miss Violet Bertram  
 Mr. Sydney Carden   Miss Kattie Potter  
 Mr. Harry Craig      Miss Dorothy L'Estrange  
 Miss Therese Leoni    Miss Myra James  
 Miss Minnie Shipp    Miss Hope Maynard  
 And a host of others too numerous to  
 mention.

*West Australian 23 Dec. (1899), 1.*

**T H E A T R E      R O Y A L**

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1901.**

**GREAT GLOVE CONTEST** for the  
 Lightweight Championship,  
 Between **TIM HEGARTY**, Champion of  
 Australia, and  
**JACK CULLEN**, Champion of W.A.  
 For One Hundred Sovs. and Gate  
 Receipts.  
 Also Six-Round Go with "**COCKER**"  
**TWEEDY**, Champion of New South  
 Wales, and Local Lad.  
 Early doors open at 7. Box Plan open-  
 ed on Saturday, Monday, Tuesday, and  
 Wednesday, 10 till 5, at the Florist Shop,  
 Theatre Royal entrance. Stage, 21s.;  
 Stalls and Dress Circle, 10s. 6d.  
**G. H. HUNT, Manager.**

*West Australian 23 Feb. (1901), 1.*

The final years of the decade saw the Royal leased by a number of entrepreneurs who presented an array of differing entertainments, including burlesques, comediettas, pantomimes, musical comedies and even boxing. Among the lessees were Martyn Hagan (1898-99), whose burlesque/pantomime company included his wife Lucy Fraser and eminent comedian W.B. Warner; and the Kate Howarde Comic Opera Co (1899-1900), which staged pantomimes like *Sinbad* (1899-1900), operas such as *Maritana* and even a Kelly Gang drama. Actor John Cosgrove also presented a variety and biograph show ("Cosgrove's Pops") at the theatre, with the line-up headlined by John Coleman. This was sandwiched between the Kate Howarde's opera and dramatic company seasons at the Royal in January 1900. Other companies to lease and/or play the Royal in 1900 included the Wilson Forbes Dramatic Co (1900) and Charles Arnold's English Comedy Co. As a boxing venue the Royal played host to such contests as the 1901 Hegarty/Cullen fight [see above].

### 1901-1909

In 1901 William Anderson, without Charles Holloway, took over another lease of the Royal, having enticed John F. Sheridan to make his Western Australian debut at the theatre in early March. The Sheridan season was followed by several more dramatic organisations, including those led by Alfred Woods and Maud Williamson, and J. C. Williamson's former wife, Maggie Moore. The following year Harry Rickards took on a more permanent lease of the Royal. In line with his Antipodian-wide entrepreneurial operations, the Royal became a vaudeville house. Aware that Perth's smaller population would require an expanding of his audience demographic beyond the more sophisticated clientele he entertained at his Tivoli (Syd) and Grand Opera House (Melb) strongholds – Rickards introduced a tiered system of ticket prices (according to seating) so that his shows were more affordable to the less well-off. In September 1906, he sub-let the theatre on Sundays to former lessee George R. Lawrence, whose concerts were the first to be presented in Perth. Although popular the Sunday entertainments nevertheless raised the ire of the religious community who attempted, and subsequently failed, to have them shut down. Lawrence eventually introduced films to these shows, and then expanded his activities to include the King's Theatre, Fremantle.

Harry Rickards remained at the Royal until late 1906, at which time he moved his operations to the Palace Gardens (formerly the Cremorne Gardens/Theatre). As he was still the Royal's lessee, Rickards was required to sublet the theatre through until April the following year. Among the tenants who played the theatre during that period were Meynell and Gunn (1906-07), and the Sidney Howard English Drama Co (1907). From April to July 1907 the Royal was again under the management of J. C. Williamson, before William Anderson also returned, having spent several years associated with the nearby Her Majesty's Theatre.

Under Anderson's brief management the Royal presented a combination of variety entertainment and drama. Although he didn't stay long that year, the entrepreneur nevertheless returned again in early 1909. By this time, however, the Royal's popularity had been usurped by Her Majesty's, and as a consequence it went through a number of periods of inactivity. These were broken by local organisations, which leased the venue for short seasons or one-off events, and the occasional touring company, which may well have been unable to book alternatives for their Perth engagements. Among those to lease the Royal between 1907 and 1909 were the Willoughby and Ward Dramatic Company (1907-1908), Florence Barnes (1908) and St Andrew's Presbyterian Church (1909).

**THEATRE ROYAL**  
**PERTH.**

**Sole Lessee and Manager:**  
**Mr. HARRY RICKARDS.**

**MANAGERIAL CARD:**  
Mr. HARRY RICKARDS has the honour of introducing to the Perth Public positively the Greatest Combination of English, American, and Continental Artists that has ever been brought together in any part of the world. In submitting this Company to his numerous Western Australian Friends and Patrons, he confidently trusts that the Entertainment provided will meet with universal approbation and liberal support.

**SATURDAY, JUNE 21, 1902.**

**HARRY RICKARDS'S**  
**COLOSSAL COMBINATION**  
**OF**  
**VAUDEVILLE FAVOURITES.**

*West Australian 18 June (1902), 1.*

### 1910-1939

In May 1910 a firm by the name of Royal Pictures attempted a season of "film only" entertainment at the Royal. The difficulties in obtaining a regular supply of new films for the ventures made things difficult, though, and by September these nights were scaled back to two a week. The theatre was soon afterwards closed for renovations. The work carried out at this time included a "fireproof operating chamber" for the film projector. Also referred to as a "bio box," it was the first time that the projecting apparatus was able to be separated from the audience, and therefore helped eliminate the risk of fire spreading into the theatre should the highly flammable film stock ignite – as had happened in 1906. The Royal re-opened on 12 July 1911 under the management of Cosens Spencer (1874-1930). By then his company, Spencer's Pictures Ltd, was fast becoming the largest importer of films in Australia, and the hence one of

the country's leading exhibitors, especially on the East Coast. Spencer made the cinema attractive to middle-and working-class audiences by publicity, and especially through the celebrity status of his wife Senora Spencer whose talents as a projectionist were routinely promoted. The company, which also operated Spencer's Esplanade Picture Gardens in Perth for a period of time, maintained its lease of the Royal through until early 1917 (ca. March), after which it was operated by an as yet unknown firm.

**NEW THEATRE ROYAL.**

Sole Direction . . . . . C. SPENCER.

Which will be Opened by the Hon. Walter Kingmill, M.L.C., at 8 o'clock This Evening.

**TO-NIGHT, TO-NIGHT, TO-NIGHT,**  
**WEDNESDAY, JULY 12.**

**SPENCER'S PICTURES**  
**SPENCER'S PICTURES**  
**SPENCER'S PICTURES**  
**SPENCER'S PICTURES**  
**SPENCER'S PICTURES**

In their

ALL NEW	ALL NEW
ALL NEW	ALL NEW
ALL NEW	ALL NEW

**PROGRAMME,**

Including the

© 20th CENTURY SENSATION, 20th

THE FATAL WEDDING	THE FATAL WEDDING
THE FATAL WEDDING	THE FATAL WEDDING
THE FATAL WEDDING	THE FATAL WEDDING
THE FATAL WEDDING	THE FATAL WEDDING

West Australian 12 July (1911), 1.

**SPENCER'S Theatre PICTURES.**  
**SPENCER'S Royal. PICTURES.**

Starting at the Matinee To-day.

"WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?"  
"WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?"

Not a picture for those of tender years, but distinctly one for all classes and creeds of mature understanding.

**SPECIAL MATINEE TO-DAY,**  
**SPECIAL MATINEE TO-DAY,**  
**SPECIAL MATINEE TO-DAY,**

At 2.30.

**FOR LADIES ONLY.**  
**FOR LADIES ONLY.**  
**FOR LADIES ONLY.**

Children under 16 will not be admitted to any of the performances.

West Australian 17 Feb. (1917), 1.

In February 1918 Thomas (later Sir Thomas) Coombe took over the lease. In this respect it became one of several theatres he brought which subsequently became part of the Union Theatres chain. However, because it had not been specifically designed for films, the Royal management found it difficult to compete with the new picture palaces, particularly the Prince of Wales (built in 1923), and so in 1926 it closed for a short while.

**G** **GRAND PERMANENT RE-OPENING**  
**OF the**  
**THEATRE ROYAL.**  
**THEATRE ROYAL.**  
— Hay-street —  
Lessee . . . Fullers Theatres, Ltd.  
Direction . . . Union Theatres, Ltd.

**UNION THEATRES, LTD.,** beg to announce that they have secured a permanent lease of the Theatre Royal and have made arrangements in new contracts whereby the very best productions of the Film World will be screened.

Commencing  
**NEXT SATURDAY — JULY 31.**  
**NEXT SATURDAY — JULY 31.**  
At 41 a.m.

With  
**Paramount's Special,**  
**"THE — PONY — EXPRESS."**  
**"THE — PONY — EXPRESS."**  
**"THE — PONY — EXPRESS."**

West Australian 128 July (1926), 2.

From 1926 to around 1931 the Royal was leased by Sir Benjamin and John Fuller (Fullers' Theatres Ltd), whose Australian and New Zealand vaudeville circuit was still the largest operating at that time. Under the management of Union Theatres the venue offered both film and variety in the same entertainment package, a practice which many firms had adopted right from the early years of Australian cinema. When the Fullers divested themselves of the theatre the lease was taken over by Hamilton Brown. During his period of management the Royal was wired for sound.

In July 1934, James Stiles negotiated a lease of the Theatre Royal on behalf of the Grand Theatre Company, and a contract for first release in Perth of all MGM films was arranged. As the WA Heritage Council's 1999 "Assessment Document" notes:

In the early 1930s, a new company had formed, the Grand Theatre Company, under the leadership of successful real estate agent, James Styles. The Grand Theatre Company had already purchased the Grand Theatre in 1932, but due to securing contracts with the major film suppliers Paramount and Universal, as well as MGM, the company required a second city picture house. In 1934 the company took lease of Molloy's "white elephant" Theatre Royal. From this time on the theatre became exclusively a cinema house and no live performances were ever staged again at the theatre (?).

The Royal became virtually a showcase for MGM till the latter company secured the Regent in 1938 and renamed it the Metro. Even after this, the Royal continued to screen MGM films for some time, though no longer exclusively. Under the Grand Theatre Company, the Royal also underwent several renovations. The first was completed before the theatre re-opened in August 1934. At this time the central pillar in front of the theatre was removed to enlarge the lobby, and extensive redecoration and refurnishing took place. In 1937 the stage was taken out and the screen set further back, and in 1939 a major reconstruction was undertaken. The 1999 "Assessment Document further records that "in 1938, the Grand Theatre Company lost the MGM contract... [The following year, however], Stiles secured a contract with British Empire Films, which offered some consolation to the MGM loss.



#### **Interior, ca. 1930s**

Photo by Arthur Styles.  
Source: WA Cinemaweb

### **1940-1999**

In 1954 the theatre (but not the Metropole Hotel) was purchased from the estate of the late T. G. A. Molloy by Town and Suburban Properties Ltd on behalf of the Grand Theatre Company. The following year the company was renamed City Theatres, in recognition of its growth from holding a single city cinema (the Grand) to being Perth's largest independent chain. The company by that time was being run by James Styles's, nephew, Arthur Styles.

Another major reconstruction of the Theatre Royal took place early in 1965, prior to the opening of the Perth season of *My Fair Lady*. By this time the seating capacity had dropped from the original two thousand to 1,102, and in the reconstruction this was further reduced to 970, making it a "modern, more intimate showcase" (FW: 11 Feb.1965, n. pag.).

The Royal was among those theatres purchased by the consortium which bought out City Theatres in February 1973. It was then acquired in 1978 by TVW Enterprises (a subsidiary of West Australian Newspapers),<sup>2</sup> after the other partners in the consortium sold their interests in the company. By this time, the Royal had succumbed to the industry depression of the seventies, a situation which led to a diminishing number of old-style cinemas around the country. One of these was the Royal, which saw its doors shut for the last time on 9 February, 1978. The building was subsequently sold to developers, who constructed shops inside the shell of the old building.

In 1983 Hoyts Cinemas' Ltd punched through the wall adjoining the old Ambassadors theatre (629 Hay Street), where the Wanamba Arcade, with its two Hoyts cinemas was then situated. This allowed the company to provide a fourth cinema in what had effectively been the Theatre Royal's lounge. The whole complex later became known as Hoyts Centre, with Wanamba Arcade renamed St Martin's Arcade. The Hoyts complex closed down in April 1999, bringing to an end the site's association with entertainment that had last almost a century.

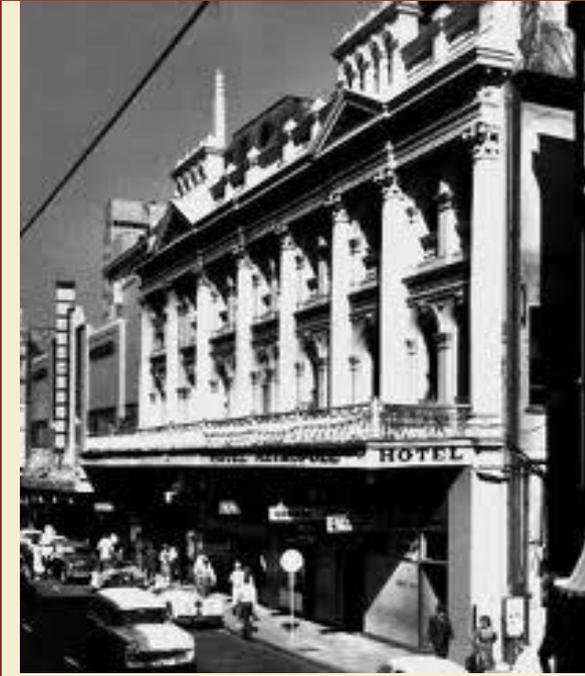
### **SEE ALSO**

- [Jones & Lawrence](#)
- [George R. Jones](#)
- [Harry Rickards](#)
- [William Anderson](#)
- [Martyn Hagan](#)
- [Fullers' Theatres](#)
- [J. C. Williamson](#)

<sup>2</sup> TVW Enterprises was also the managing company of Perth television station TVW 7.

## HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Cosens Spencer was largely associated with the Theatre Royal by name only. Although he formed Spencer's Pictures Ltd in 1911, the same year that the company took over its lease of the theatre, Spencer's relationship with his company was short-lived. In 1912, while overseas, the board of Spencer's Pictures Ltd voted to merge the company with the combine, Australasian Films Ltd, which had no interest in local film-making. He later resigned from the board. Although legally prohibited by the agreement with Australasian Films from being actively involved in exhibition, Spencer maintained links with the industry through his wife (Collins, n. pag.)



Above: Photo sourced from: *Heritage Perth*.

Left: ca. 1950s. Photo by Arthur Styles. Source: *WA Cinemaweb*.

## FURTHER REFERENCE

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