

BOOK REVIEW

by Peter Daly

Robert Parkinson: Gauffered Velour: a history of motion picture exhibition and picture theatres in the Illawarra district of NSW 1897-1994

Mr Parkinson has made a valuable contribution to the history of public entertainment in the district.

The title takes its name from the heavy velvet drapes that opened up all to a new world.

Fortunately for Mr Parkinson, public entertainment had to be promoted. The promotion was done in newspapers, in different forms in an extravagant style. This extravagant style has been a feature of entertainment ever since. In the early 1900s, the arrival of film by train "direct from London", was just one of the gimmicks used.

Courageous individuals, with vaudeville experience, came with their films and projectors. They hired the local halls, the School of Arts or mechanic Institute Buildings, performed and projected and moved on to the next town. It was a "one man band". The public response was so good that larger venues had to be found and open air theatres came into their own. The weather sent the proprietors looking for tents and other roof covers. Moving pictures and boxing matches seemed to have broad appeal and the entertainment, in some instances, became a double bill affair.

Silent movies had their own vocal and musical effects. technology improved all the time. By the late 1920s sound became a feature of the moving pictures themselves.

The next stage was the establishment of permanent theatres. parties became involved as owners and operators, spreading the business risks and costs. Large structures were built in Wollongong and in the outlying suburbs. Time went by, and a system of Government licensing was introduced, for public health and safety reasons. Individuals has their own approaches in meeting the standards of the time and in creating the Art Deco theatre style that was a feature of streetscapes in days gone by. Local individuals played their part in seeking fro themselves the business opportunities that public entertainment presented in one local area after another.. Interesting names appeared such as, Gordon, Bolard, Lang, Jones, Cox, Frost and many others and builders such as Knobel are mentioned. resources were carefully managed and local police were reporting on the degree to which public standards were being met. Churches too were involved. Wholesome entertainment and observance of the Sabbath were two areas of concern.

"The Drive-ins" came on the scene, but arrived at the same time as television and the Licensed Club movement, both contributing to the entertainment of the public. the decline of the theatres had begun. Wollongong theatres, The Savoy, The Civic and The Crown are now memories. The Regent remains as a stunning reminder of the style of the theatres of yesterday. Suburban theatres have declined.

It is a detailed account. Pictorial records are great and of general interest.

It is very much a bricks and mortar story. The romance and the fantasy of old movies, the excitement of a Saturday "Arvo" at the "Flicks", all for 6pd, are left for the reader to revive.

The book is on sale now at the museum.