

The Regent Theatre, Wollongong

“Australia’s most beautiful theatre” (Lady Marion Hall Best, 1958)

On Friday, 26 April 2002, the Illawarra community was informed that Lend Lease, a multinational land speculation and development company, was considering the demolition of part, or all, of the Regent Theatre, Wollongong, to make way for a supermarket and commercial complex. Knowledge of this proposal immediately engendered feelings of concern that developers and relevant authorities would consider the demolition of such a beautiful and culturally significant building. As a result, the Friends of the Regent Theatre (FORT) was formed to research the history of the theatre, to lobby for upgrading of its various protective heritage listings, to bring to public attention the threat of demolition and, if possible, to develop ideas towards securing the long term economic viability of the building.

The Regent Theatre is an item of significance to the region and to the state. In 1988 the Royal Australian Institute of Architects placed it on their list of Heritage Study recognised it as an item of regional significance, and in 1999 the Regent was given a Category 1 listing on the NSW State Heritage Listing of cinemas. In May-June Wollongong City Council moved to upgrade its various listings and level of support for the preservation of the Regent.

The theatre is cherished by many in the local community and by those who are aware of, and appreciate, the history and heritage value of theatres and cinema going in this country. Bob Parkinson’s 1995 book Gaufered Velour presented a detailed history of picture palaces and exhibition halls which have operated in the Illawarra since 1897, including the Regent and other Wollongong theatres such as the Savoy and Crown.

The theatres featured in Gaufered Velour were an integral part of the entertainment experience of those in the Illawarra during the twentieth century, with cinema going an almost everyday experience for many during the glory years of the 1920s and thirties. The Regent is now held dear for

the individual memories of the cinema experience it has offered for almost half a century. For a period during the 1960s and early 1970s it was the only cinema surviving the city of Wollongong. As such, it is well known, and continues to be patronised, despite the local proliferation of multiplexes. Its large size enabled it to accommodate a capacity crowd of over 1500 enthusiastic fans for the recent midnight release of Star Wars Episode 2.

The Regent today provides an element of Hollywood glamour to the city centre. It is a unique heritage building and one of only twenty such theatres remaining in New South Wales. In 1957 there were 660 such theatres surviving in the state. Unfortunately, since that time, the introduction of television and video and the needs of developers have seen many exquisite picture palaces fall in the path of the bulldozer.

The Regent is subject to only limited protection. With knowledge of its significance in mind, and the possible threat of demolition, on 2 May 2002 the National Trust prepared a statement of significance for the building, and gave it an urgent interim listing on its Register. That statement identified the Regent as an item of state significance, rare, and one of the few intact grand cinemas left in the country. The Trust noted that the design characteristics of its auditorium, vestibule, foyer and facade are unique in NSW. The Theatre is also technologically significant due to its surviving original 70mm Cinemascope projection equipment and screen.

The interior decorative elements, designed by noted interior decorator Lady Marion Best Hall and featuring works by noted artists such as Douglas Annand and Janet Single, are key elements in the building's significance.

As Bob Parkinson's book points out in detail, the Regent was first conceived by Herbert Jones - father of present owner Rowena Milgrove - in 1934, when he purchased the site in Keira Street. The building's distinctive Art Deco design and ornamentation was initially developed by architect Reginald John Magoffin in 1935. Magoffin also designed the Wollongong City Gallery (former Council Chambers). Due to funding delays, and the intervention of WWII, work on the building did not commence until 1950. It finally opened on Boxing Day 1957, some 23 years late. Marion Hall Best was heavily involved in the final fitting out of the building, including

responsibility for design features such as light fittings, fixtures, the mezzanine, and the overall interior paint scheme.

Since opening, the Regent has played an important role in the social and cultural life of the city. Where once there were many such theatres serving Wollongong between the 1920s and 1960s, it is now the last left standing. It has been the stage for art exhibitions, union rallies, theatrical performances, and widescreen cinema. The Regent continues to operate as a picture palace. It is a living, working museum to be cherished, supported, conserved and preserved. Its reputation spreads far beyond municipal boundaries.

Perhaps it is the muted elegance of the Art Deco facade with its mixture of angular lines and sensuous curves; the grand, spacious foyer with sparkling stars in the ceiling; the huge posters on the wall by the site of the former fountain which greeted you upon approaching the black curtains, behind which lay the theatre itself; the mezzanine lounge which reeks of 1930s decadence and is full of the ghosts of patrons past; or the main auditorium with a mini universe above, exotic motifs on the side and before you the screen where dreams come true - at least for 90 minutes at a time.

Many people in the local community hold fond memories of the Regent. I remember as a boy sitting in the upstairs balcony with friends, jaffas in hand, watching *Frankenstein* on the big screen and strangely feeling no fear. In fact, I was more interested in looking down at the crowd in the stalls below, observing young lovers, arm in arm, other groups of kids mucking about and making noise, families dressed to the nines, or the elderly, shuffling and quiet. I remember standing for the national anthem before a huge picture of the Queen, prior to commencement of the double feature, looking on at the ex-soldiers in the crowd who were distinguished by their solid, erect posture, saluting and on occasion emotional at what I felt was a seemingly everyday event.

Robert Parkinson observed in 1995 that "the Regent Theatre stands proudly today, displaying to a new generation an ambience that was sensational then, and still is." The National Trust has recognised its significance on a state and national level. FORT is working towards ensuring that the local

community, and Wollongong City Council are aware of its significance and will support its preservation.

Sydney has preserved the State and Capitol theatres. Newcastle has the Civic. It is imperative that Wollongong preserve the Regent, due to its cultural significance to the region, and its unique heritage values.

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References

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