

**WWDHS
NEWSLETTER
No. 455
April 2023–June 2023
ISSN 2207-1016**

Meetings: The next meetings
will be held on **Monday 15th
May 2023:**

Committee meeting at 1.30 p.m.

General Meeting at 2.00 p.m.

Venue: Museum of the Riverina,
Willans Hill site

COMMITTEE

President: Geoff Burch; Vice President: Geoff Haddon
Secretary: Margaret Hill; Treasurer: Geoff Burch
Committee: Brian Andrews, Judy Buik, Mark Chistison, Leanne Diessel, Craig Dixon, Dianna Lovett, Peter Morris, Sherry Morris, Margaret Nowlan-Jones, Rhonda Reedy,

Dates to remember:

General Meetings: 15th May - Bill Speirs, speaker on his book, Marie Narelle

Activities: April 24 Anzac special movie event - Athenian Theatre in Junee

Excursion: Pen Museum, Gundagai. Date to be advised. Details on page 2.

WWDHS Patron: Michael McCormack,
Federal Member for Riverina,

**WAGGA WAGGA & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.
PO BOX 90, WAGGA WAGGA. 2650.**

President: Geoff Burch Mob. 0417 277 592
Vice-President: Geoff Haddon
See our web site for additional details.
Newsletter Editor: Sherry Morris
Email: info@wwdhs.org.au
Web site: www.wwdhs.org.au

Committee meetings: 3rd Monday of the month .
General meetings: 3rd Monday of the month .
Annual Subscriptions: Single: \$20, Couple: \$30.
Due by 1st July each year.

Disclaimer: The Wagga Wagga & District Historical Society Inc., and/or its members, through this newsletter, endeavours to provide accurate and reliable information, but does not warrant or make any representation regarding the accuracy or reliability of information contained within this newsletter. To the maximum extent permitted by applicable law, the Society and/or its members shall not be liable for any damages of any kind relating to the use of this information, including without limitation, direct, indirect, special, compensatory or consequential damages, loss of profits or damage to property, even if the Society and/or its members have been advised of the possibility of such damages. Anyone acting on the information contained within this newsletter does so at their own risk.

MEETING AT MUSEUM OF THE RIVERINA, MARCH 20, 2023!

First Meeting at the Museum since April 2019

Speakers:

April 24, 2.30 p.m. at the Museum of the Riverina, Willans Hill

Les Gormly (a great grandson of James Gormly) will speak about the Hon. James Gormly M.L.C. and author of the book, *Exploration and Settlement in Australia*, first printed in 1921 and reprinted by Les in 2004.

May 15, 2.00 p.m., Museum of the Riverina, Willans Hill

Bill Speirs, Temora Museum, will be speaking on his new book, Marie Narelle

April 21, 2023 @ 8pm - the Wagga Wagga Antique Society will hold their monthly meeting at the ARCC Hall in Tarcutta Street. Noel Thompson, local Heritage Architect, will be talking about early house styles in Wagga Wagga.

June 19 – TO BE ADVISED

Excursions and Events

June Excursion, Monday April 24: We will visit the Historic Athenium Theatre and the Broadway Museum. The Theatre will be running a special Anzac feature which will include a 10 minute newsreels and a feature film, *The Lighthorsemen*. We will commence with morning tea at 9.30 a.m. at a cost of \$10, profits to go to Local Legacy.

Pen Museum at Gundagai, Date & time to be advised. Proposed program will be morning tea at the Niagara Café, a tour of the Pen Museum which will cost \$5 per person, followed by lunch. Then we will visit the Gundagai Museum before returning home.

Pleasant Hills/Henty at a date and time to be arranged. Proposed program will be visiting the Lutheran Church and a Public Hall, the Asterisk Horse Collars, an old printing press and the Headlie Taylor Header Museum and the Arts and Craft shop. Plus lunch.

Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS) Annual Conference will be held in Wagga Wagga on the weekend of 21st and 22nd October 2023 in Mirage Room, Wagga Wagga RSL. Preconference drinks in Historic Council Chambers on the evening of Friday 20th. We will advise members of additional details as they become available.

Volunteers to help with the conference will be much appreciated. More details as the date draws nearer.

“The Saga of the Wagga Wagga Plaza”

By Stephen Walsh

The story of Wagga’s Plaza Theatre is as different to the Capitol Theatre as the building was. The Plaza spent its first 22 years as a ‘second run’ multi purpose venue in the shadow of the Capitol Theatre, Wagga’s premiere showplace, finally being thrust into the limelight upon the Capitol’s demise in 1965. Then from 1966 as Hoyts Wagga Theatre, after enduring a mauling at the hands of contemporary decorators, survived the seventies into the heritage conscious eighties. It received a heritage rating as one of the finest theatre buildings in N.S.W. only to be internally destroyed in the nineties. Thus, ending the theatrical life of a building that was never fully understood.

Prologue

The construction of the Strand Theatre by Henry Campbell in 1915 anchored the southern end of Wagga’s entertainment strip, which commenced with the Oxford Theatre four blocks north on the eastern side of Fitzmaurice Street. The Oxford, formerly the 1870 Oddfellows Hall, screened pictures regularly from 1906 and as Wagga’s first cinema, was an imposing three-storey building, although narrow Victorian building, adjacent the Criterion Hotel. Both buildings were demolished in the 1960s. Heading south, on the northeast bank of the picturesque Wollundry Lagoon was the Southern Cross Picture Gardens. After a stint of miniature golf, it became, whilst under lease to the J K Capitol Theatre Company, the New Moon Cabaret, then after World War II, the Evergreen Nursery. It was demolished in the early 1960s to make way for the widening of the lagoon to form a lake as foreground to the Civic Theatre.



The Strand Theatre

Continuing south over the lagoon bridge where Fitzmaurice becomes Baylis Street, on the southeast corner at Morrow Street was the 1915 Great Southern Picture Hall. Later to become Great Southern Motors Ford Dealership, later demolished. A block further south, the Strand Theatre and behind it, the Wonderland Theatre adjoining the Coconut Grove Dance Palais. The Wonderland had served well as Wagga's alternate playhouse and multi-purpose auditorium but was virtually redundant after the opening of the municipal Civic Theatre in 1962 and by the 1970s was in use as a warehouse. The Coconut Grove became a smash repair shop for Hartwig's Motors. With demolition, seemingly becoming Wagga's growth industry, the Wonderland, Coconut Grove and their 190ft. long Baylis Street entrance arcade, were razed along with 'Hartwigs for Holden!' the Royal Hotel and well, while they were at it, most of the remaining block for construction of the Sturt Mall shopping centre and car park in 1980.

In 1931 just before the opening of the new Capitol Theatre, the J K Capitol Theatre Company gained 'exclusive picture rights' in Wagga with the acquisition of the lease to the Strand and the Southern Cross Picture Gardens from Messer's Smythe Bros. The opening of the 50,000-pound Capitol in Gurwood Street instantly reorganized the social hub of the town back north into the central business district with a reverberation that rocked the 10,000-pound Strand, until then Wagga's most palatial picture venue, to its foundation. Forty-nine weeks after the opening of the up-to-date Capitol, the seventeen-year-old Strand, now no competition, was actually spared 'demolition' by a spectacular fire in the early hours of Sunday November 13, 1932.

Act One "*Out of the Fire!*"

An inquest held in December 1932 into the Strand fire that had gutted its stage and fifty foot wide auditorium, including the bio cabin and projection equipment, found no evidence as to its cause. Insurance covered the estimated cost of fifteen to twenty thousand pounds but reportedly did not cover two pianos and a considerable amount of seating, probably from the Wonderland, that had recently been installed by J K Capitol Theatres Ltd. However, at the inquest Jack Kouvelis deposed that he was a theatre proprietor residing at Bellevue Hill, Sydney and held a lease of the Strand, which had fourteen years to run. He did in fact have an insurance of 15,000 pounds on the property that he had in the theatre. [Quite an amount considering the buildings' insured value.] It was reported he owned the Capitol Theatre in Wagga and held an interest in the New Moon and Dixieland dancing palais.

Time was not wasted in setting out to replace the Strand, which was owned by Wagga Amusements Ltd. although exactly how much involvement they had with the new project, if any, is not clear. The brief called for a spectacular new theatre that was to be on the same lavish scale as the Capitol, all in the latest modern style of architecture – reposeful dignity and elegance. Designed primarily for the screening of talkies, it would also have a fine roomy stage and dressing rooms for the housing of legitimate stage productions. In addition, as Wagga's Town Hall lacked an auditorium, the stalls floor was to be laid down as a dancing floor so as the 'sumptuous theatre' would be available for balls and other social functions.

The fallout over the construction of the Capitol necessitated a new design and building team and, as often seems to be the case, no local press credit was given to the architect, although a Mr. Ohlsson of Ryde, Sydney, was noted as the builder. However, it was likely a commission given noted theatre architects, Kaberry and Chard, who were involved with quite a few projects at the time for Western Suburbs Cinemas, the parent company of Wagga Amusements. The theatre was estimated to cost around 30,000 pounds, the amount Kouvelis and Wagga Amusements held between them in insurances. Undamaged bricks were salvaged for re-use, then the remains cleared to make way for the *New Strand* which, having a 77ft. wide facade to

Baylis Street and a depth of 189ft. right to the rear boundary on Wonderland Lane would make it over a third larger than the original building. The auditorium was four feet wider than the Capitol, but lower with a one level *Igloo Style* roof from the rear of the circle through to the stage house. Narrow alleys to externally open the wall ventilation shutters separated the auditorium from adjoining properties and made the building in effect a 'T' shape. Exit stairs from the dress circle paralleled the foyer stairs but were directed straight into Baylis Street. The stalls exits passed below dressing rooms each side of the stage to the rear lane. In fact, the plan was so tight on the lot that land was originally leased from the adjoining hardware yard on the left to house the theatre boiler room and stand-by power plant.

Apparently, Strand's lease contained a clause preventing a name change. However, the J K Capitol Theatre Company cited that as the Strand no longer existed and this was to be an entirely new theatre it *would* be named the '*Plaza*'. What inspired and what was the inspiration for such a radically elaborate departure for a country theatre will probably remain a mystery, but in any case, the Plaza was certainly a designer's tour de force. At least 95 percent of its publicly visible surfaces were decorated with meticulously designed pre-cast plaster panels or at the very least textured plaster and sculptured cement render. Anything rather than a plain flat surface!

Its blocky structural form and abstract decoration reflected the then contemporary Continental Jazz Age. Although not themed to any one particular culture, its overall style relied heavily on triangular, pyramid and oblique shapes with strong Egyptian influences, particularly in the design of the proscenium. Unlike the Capitol, the Plaza's light fittings, exit lights, doors and door handles and foyer furniture were also created on the drawing board and then built into or custom made for the theatre rather than added as an afterthought, thus creating a fully co-ordinated ensemble.

Its 75-foot-wide auditorium designed on the stadium principal, that is, no balcony projection over the stalls, had most of its 1466 tip-up seats divided evenly between the lounge/circle and stalls or 680 up and 786 down. The stalls seats were fixed to battens so they could slide through doors under the stage front then down a ramp for storage in the stage basement. The area under the lounge and dress circle that would usually contain some commercial space was in this case entirely required for a spacious lounge foyer as an adjunct to the ballroom. This foyer, flanked either side by generous conveniences, and surrounding a large square soda fountain, was intended to cater for dancers during breaks and suppers as well as picture show intervals and was accessed directly from the dance floor through four pairs of wooden doors at the rear of the stalls.

There was a blaze of vertically ribbed cast plaster wall pilasters that continued horizontally across the ceiling to break the space into rectangular sections widthwise across its length. There were four sections in the foyer and the entrance or '*Salle de Reception*' contained an octagonal dual window ticket box and stairs left and right leading directly into the Dress Circle. The second, '*The Regal Promenade*', with the Ladies' powder room under the stairs to the left, centrally placed leather lounges, and staff rooms under the right stairs. A full width rectangular cove-lit dome designated and illuminated this area. The next, with the central soda fountain cafe and the Gents smoking lounge to the right, then the assembly area into the stalls with the house managers office to the left. The ceilings of the last two sections dropping down consecutively to about eight feet over the stalls entrance reflecting the rake of the lounge directly above it, but also intentionally creating the illusion upon entering the auditorium that the ceiling appeared loftier than it really was.

The auditorium was divided into six sections. Filigree ventilation grills stretched across the ceiling in these sections with matching panels concealing the wall shutters. Throughout both chambers, the colour scheme was a mix of Middle Eastern styles that created an exotic [although heavy] look with maroon and green the predominating colours and all the timber surfaces stained. The jade green wall treatments were relieved with gilt and/or cream pin striping on the fluted wall surfaces and brushed gilt and cream overlays highlighting filigree plaster surfaces. A deep rich maroon featured mainly in the dado areas. The ceiling and cornice work was heavily appliquéd in intricately repeated reds, yellows, oranges, browns and blues, greens and black saturated colours to highlight in exquisite detail the decorative plaster pattern work. The overall colour scheme and its co-ordination looked fantastic. The piece de resistance of the auditorium was its lighting scheme, described as being controlled by a novel dimming process and employing thousands of lights. The main source of illumination in the auditorium was from fifteen large rectangular ground glass boxes, the bottom plate etched in a design that matched the ticket windows. These glass plates, duplicated in the foyer, were held by a brass and chrome cross arrangement to the horizontal ceiling beams in three rows of five and were illuminated internally in amber and green in two separate circuits. They were supplemented with vertically rectangular plaster filigree boxes with ground glass panels also lit internally with amber and green, cast into the pilasters just below the ceiling.



Smaller open topped versions with amber lights were molded into the portal tops of a series of wall niches that contained filigree infill, cove-lit from the base in amber and green. These recesses alternated between the panels of carved [filigree] plaster that covered the window shutters from dado height to the cornice line. They were backlit with a vertical row of green interspersed with occasional red general electric E/S 20w natural colour lamps concealed in troughs each side of the shutter cavities. At the front, the walls stepped inward to highlight the auditorium's singularly most spectacular feature, its proscenium. The uniquely shaped and intricately crafted proscenium arch, itself internally illuminated in green was supported each side by a pair of the wall pilasters with light boxes divided by a backlit vertical grill. The presentation effect was fading the amber general lighting so the theatre was awash in a green [second house] lighting circuit that had occasional red highlights to interrupt the intensity of the green. Next to the right front exit was an octagonal backlit clock identical to the Capitol's with the exception of 'Nesbitt's for Furniture' a local emporium displayed in its glass face. All this, and including its spectacularly wide Spanish Revival façade, complete with multi-coloured mission tiled parapets managed to rise up to tower over its neighbours on 'Wagga's Bright Way' from start to finish in a mere eight months. An amazing feat in any case, even if 'perhaps' it was already pre planned!

As the Plaza neared completion a press release braced the public for the opening with: *‘Already acclaimed the last word in elegance and beauty of theatre construction, the new Plaza is nearing completion and at last the brains, money and ceaseless effort that have been lavished on it are showing definite results. The modern Continental style, employing the latest French and German decorative methods rather than American, is now growing in all its beauty and Wagga theatre-goers have a wonderful treat in store for them when the Plaza will fling open its doors and become a permanent and beautiful addition to the architectural style of Wagga’.*

Bookings came into the Capitol box-office at a steady rate in the lead up to the much-anticipated opening night and its ‘sensational programme’ which was to run on Tuesday and Wednesday also. The Plaza was officially launched onto an astonished Wagga three weeks before its completion in order to open during ‘Show Week’ and Wagga’s Mayor, E. E. Collins MLC had the pleasure of declaring it open in an evening ceremony on Monday twenty-first of August 1933. Billed as the starred attraction on stage, and performing at the Capitol as well, was Australia’s Queen of Song - Miss Gladys Moncrieff with Australia’s most famous pianist Gil Dech in a setting by Maple’s Ltd. The main feature amongst an assortment of newsreels and shorts was Metro’s fittingly titled “PROSPERITY”. E. B. Kouvelis was advertised as the proprietor.

Act Two “From a Blaze to Glory!”

According to all press reports, the Plaza Theatre opened in a blaze of glory! It was an unprecedented triumph. Those who saw the Plaza marveled. It was a revelation. Its publicity preamble had stated “In Your Wildest Conjectures you could not Imagine the Elegance, the Grace, the Beauty, Gorgeous Splendor, Radiance and Comfort that Delight Your Senses as you Walk Through the Palatial Portals of the NEW PLAZA! You are awed by its Magnificence – yet you feel that here, at last, is a Theatre made for you – Built out of the Brains and Artistry of Man, Conceived so that the Motion Picture may have a fitting setting in this City of Entertainment Loving People! ACCLAIMED AS THE REVELATION OF THE CENTURY - THEATRE MAGNIFICENT - THE PRIDE OF THE RIVERINA!” This hyperbole, could actually, for once, be considered an understatement as the Plaza’s ‘Show’ which commenced on the sidewalk with an eye- popping display of predominately orange and black glazed Art Deco patterned tile work, gave way to a jaw-dropping interior of exotic décor and lighting effects that literally had to be seen to be believed! Their sum totals virtually a tangible monument to the decorative versatility of fibrous plaster and coloured light bulbs, if nothing else!

Imagine it now. You surrender your ticket to an attractive dark-haired usherette elaborately costumed in a maroon and beige uniform dominated by a large bow at her neck. Gracefully, she guides you through this vast Aladdin-like cavern to your royal blue leatherette covered seat, naturally in the lounge. Settling into its comfort, you gaze in wonder at the electrically jeweled walls that guard you from the outside world before your attention is hi-jacked upward by a riveting multi-coloured riot of sculptured, stepped and filigree surfaces that temporarily defies full comprehension. However, almost immediately before you have it figured out, your focus is summoned by the beauty of the unusual proscenium and its exotically appliquéd curtain as the lighting comes into play with a “*dazzlingly beautiful effect.*” The amber aurora gives way to the green and red lighting, glowing through a maze of filigree tracery, re-enforcing the three-dimensional effect of the whole space and here you are, ready to be entertained in this ‘*Technicolor Shrine*’ to make-believe, and with an exhilarating sensation of suddenly being anywhere other than in a building in Baylis Street. The Plaza was calculated by experts to inspire one’s imagination by offering just such an experience, and it did!

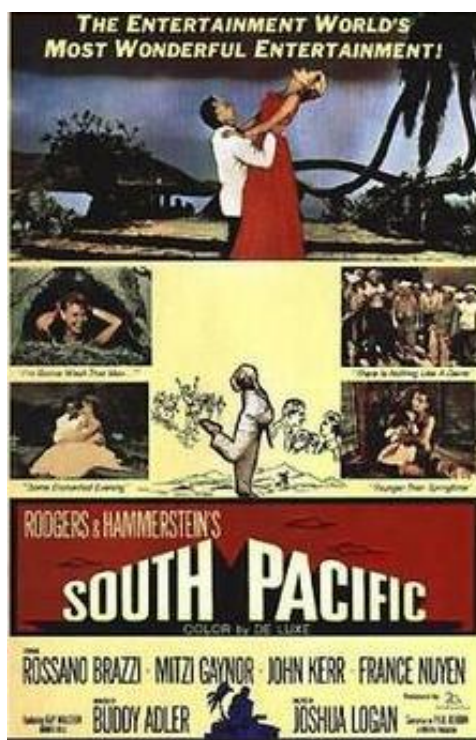
On Tuesday evening the September 19, 1933, four weeks after the Plaza opened as a theatre, the completed building was officially launched as a ballroom with the first ever Digger's Ball to be held in Wagga. The spectacular balls attendance exceeded that of any function of a similar kind in Wagga for many years and the fact that it was held in the Plaza was one of the chief factors credited with making the ball such a tremendous success. Wagga's Mayor Alderman. E. E. Collins officially opened the ball and stated that, "the function was a wonderful one, unique in that it was the first of its kind to be held in the beautiful Plaza Theatre." The Theatre's owner Mr. Jack Kouvelis, who was present with his wife, said, "he had done his best to build a theatre worthy of Wagga and hoped all approved of it. He was optimistic of the prospects so far as Wagga was concerned and felt that the theatre would be appreciated." The 'Diggers Ball' and theatre was described thus in the *Daily Advertiser* the following day. "The decorative scheme, spaciousness and appointments of the Plaza Theatre leaves nothing to be desired. From the outside, one is struck by the beauty of the theatre, but the beauty of the exterior is surpassed by the interior. The Plaza was built after the Art Novo style, Art that is generally open to a 'new' or different interpretation with each viewing which is well known in England and on the Continent and is one of the first of its kind to be built in Australia. One of the most outstanding features of the theatre is the floor which has been constructed in a circular style and is stated as being the only one of its kind outside the metropolitan area. The flooring has been laid down in such a way that the dancers move in the same direction as the flooring. The innovation was acclaimed by dancers last night as the perfect dance floor". [Sic] The 'Wagga Melody Masters', augmented for the occasion, provided suitable music from the Plaza's beautifully curtained and well-raked stage. Needless to say, the '*Pride of the Riverina*' soon proved a major asset to Wagga and quickly settled into becoming a leading function centre in the town. In July 1942, manager Jack Macauley on behalf of Jack Kouvelis offered the Plaza for use by the Mayor's Patriotic Fund committee who decided to use it for a series of Sunday night concerts for members of the forces and friends. One dramatic moment, not on the screen however, came sometime after the buildings completion, when the massive façade bowed forward into Baylis Street. This incident prompted the closure of the dress circle, whose rear bearers had started to pull out of the wall, until its floor supports could be suitably braced.

Act Three "*The Plaza's Big Picture*"

The Plaza came under the Hoyts banner with Hoyts takeover of the J K Capitol Theatre Company in 1946, the year the Strand's lease was due to expire if in fact it still existed, but continued to operate basically in its same role with the Capitol still remaining as Wagga's first run showplace. Probably at this time, the leased land was relinquished and the theatre then heated by mains gas fired radiators in the stalls. The stand-by power generator was re-located to a rear dressing room stage left. Cinemascope opened at the Plaza in September 1955 well *after* it had premiered in Wagga at the Capitol. No doubt due to the fact that the Plaza's proscenium, which was rather narrow considering the width of the auditorium, had to be widened by a third to present a reasonable size picture, had created a major installation problem. The extra width was achieved by the removal of the inside decorative pilasters and light boxes, the vertical ornamental backlit grills and then continuing the proscenium soffit horizontally to the outer set. The alteration then re-plastered and painted to match existing decoration and completed with a pair of new tangerine velvet travelers bordered with gold fringe, identical to the set that had been installed at the Capitol for its Cinemascope debut.

The Plaza's first Cinemascope show was Twentieth Century Foxes '*Prince Valiant*' plus in Cinemascope and color '*Supersonic Age*' and '*El Toro*'. Cinemascope looked excellent, particularly from the lounge, with its shallow rake due to the absence of a mezzanine foyer

level giving excellent sight lines for picture viewing. With the screen virtually in front of one, the low angle of projection afforded minimal picture distortion and hardly any key stoning. However, technical presentation aside, decoratively the Plaza's 'end result' was not exactly as originally suggested "*on the same lavish scale as the Capitol – reposeful dignity and elegance*". In fact, its '*avante garde*' vogue was in direct contrast to it, and as such was received with a mixed reaction from a very conservative country clientele, who generally regarded the Plaza as an exercise in bad taste. No doubt exciting as a dance hall, its intense decor never seemed to afford the '*sense of occasion*' that prevailed in abundance at the sedately refined Capitol. What was worse, the glaring omission of a mezzanine foyer meant the Lounge and Dress Circle Set were expected to mix with the Stalls Crowd at street level! This reason combined with move-over programmes from the Capitol, plus a certain amount of '*B*' product that had to be played somewhere, relegated it fairly quickly into a lower tone status that tended to attract a predominantly down-market audience.



South

Pacific and Prince Valiant movie Posters at the Plaza Theatre in the 1950s

Nevertheless, the Plaza was at least commercially successful in all its functions and did host handsomely the bulk of Wagga's live entertainment as well as motion pictures. Everything from dances and balls to school concerts, eisteddfods, the ABC subscription concert series and traveling pantomimes in the school holidays, even the consecration of a Roman Catholic Bishop as well as top line variety shows. For example The '*Col Joye Spectacular*' with '*Little Pattie*' which played the Plaza in October 1964, all in between the ever-popular Saturday 'arvo' matinees and double feature Western Night every Tuesday., bookings for all of which were handled through the prestigious Capitol's box-office.

Interestingly, although an ad in the trade paper *Australasian Exhibitor* in mid 1962, announced commencement dates for "*South Pacific*" at Hoyts Capitols, at Armidale, Inverell, Moree, Tamworth and Wagga, it was in fact the Plaza that scored this major break with Wagga's

exclusive two week, twice daily season. The Plaza and staff were suitably 'decked out' in South Seas regalia to set the mood for the big event, which commenced on August 27, although bookings were still handled through the Capitol's box office. Finally, the Plaza's turn did come in November 1964 when Hoyts placed the Capitol onto a restricted screening policy after the opening of the local television station had decimated Wagga's cinema business. It was bestowed with permanent first run status in readiness to become Wagga's only hardtop once the doomed Capitol closed in six months, thus returning Wagga's cinema hub back to the Strand site after a thirty-three-year reign in the north.

Act Four "*Crows Nest comes to Wagga Wagga!*"

The 1960s ushered in an era of wholesale change, which included a shake up in the movie industry. A new breed of independent directors decreed to the studios and stunned theatre owners still coming to terms with the rapid downsizing of the exhibition business, that movie making had come of age and their [now epic] productions were above competition with building decor. Showmen, ready to try any idea or fad that might help salvage an industry that had once employed millions, kicked off a decade of 'architectural slaughter.' The decorative distraction, that had originally been intended to seduce us out of our 'hum drum' lives into their pleasure domes, sometimes even twice a week, was in accordance with the new command, hastily covered up, painted out or curtained over in an attempt to shrink and convert the 'showplace' into a 'showcase' for celluloid entertainment only. Gaudy as the Plaza was considered in 1965, its box-like construction provided the underlying potential to resemble what was then deemed as suitable in which to view 'the cinema', combined with its excellent front of house [and less valuable] main street location spared it when the crunch came from the wrecker's ball in lieu of the Capitol.

The following year Hoyts, in line with current United State's trends, commenced a \$100,000 face-lift, a colossal amount for 1966, with the proceeds of the sale of the Capitol. The 'upgrade' was designed to bring "the theatre into a standard of luxury comparable with state capital centres", although locally the intention was to rid the Plaza of its second rate 'social' status and try and win custom from a populace still peeved over the loss of their beloved 'Gurwood Street Showplace'. The project, which spread over a six-month period, was carried out around normal sessions under the direction of interior decorator, Howard Ball, of 'Cabana' North Sydney. Mr. Ball "chose colours to unify the interior of the theatre and to convey a feeling of both warmth and coolness at the same time". His supervision saw the "drab foyer transformed into a bright elegant area furnished in the best possible taste. Deep Sauterne walls and a frosted white ceiling provide the backdrop for the furnishings and fittings designed by Cabana." The red, blue, cream and brown diamond patterned rubber carpeting was replaced with high maintenance gleaming white vinyl tiles and a section of new Hoyts house style red and gold Ax Minster replaced the central soda fountain. A modern ticket office located under the right-hand stairs adjacent the new manager's suite in the former staff rooms dispensed with the island ticket box.

By bizarre co-incidence, or someone's idea of an 'in' joke, the contents of the recently closed Hoyts Crows Nest Theatre Sydney, including a long kidney shaped red vinyl padded candy bar counter, were shipped to Wagga to complete the re-furbishment. The mysterious ambience of the cavernous foyer was instantly retired with the use of "twelve new Marie Therese crystal chandeliers suspended on long gilt chains" that dangled from the now frosted white ceiling in place of the art deco glass box fittings. A selection of miss-matching period furniture which included a few refurbished pieces from the Capitol, replaced the custom designed art deco red and green trimmed brown leather lounges and were positioned throughout the vast vestibule in

an attempt to create a cozy lounge room atmosphere. With over seventy 40 watt bulbs in the twelve chandeliers, the new look foyer was to say the least, dazzling!

The lounge and dress circle were re-seated with maroon vinyl covered lounge chairs from Crows Nest with matching maroon vinyl covered tip-up chairs also from Crows Nest permanently screwed to the stalls dance floor. Aisles and stairways, carpeted and the original leadlight exits and convenience signs, were replaced with standard types. The coup de grace of the auditorium was a 'complete modernization of the front end'. The first step into the stage section was removed, then behind it re-surfaced in plain Gyprock; and the exit doors turned around into this wall to face the projection room. In between, at the start of what was the second inward step and some ten feet forward of the stage, a new horizontally con-curved proscenium in plain smooth plaster was constructed. Apart from squaring off the room, the aim was to add extra space to the stage area, which would be useful for the large ABC Concert Orchestra. The press release continued with, "*A highlight of the theatre is the Sauterne coloured silken-satin curtains which dominate the front of the stage. Fashioned from 360 yards of fabric, the curtains blend perfectly with the other colourings and fittings.*" Now with virtually everything 'blending' in the same colour [sauterne] and the deletion of the clock, abandoned by Nesbitt's sponsorship in favour of the new local television station's timepiece, left nothing that could possibly 'upstage' or distract one's attention from the 'cinematic fare' Hollywood had ready for the Plaza's imported "American, 38- foot wide, anti-static screen". With a loss of only 140, mainly front stall seats, the Plaza's had a 1326-capacity auditorium and was still the preferred venue, particularly for one night stands over the recently completed, well equipped, but commercially under-seated [495] Civic Theatre.

Exterior alterations commenced with smashing off the orange, yellow and black art deco tile work and replacing it with [high maintenance] white gloss painted cement render. The custom made red, green and chrome art deco crash bars on the stained timber doors disappeared in favour of smaller brass pull type handles, that looked like they could have come from anywhere, on now dark mustard coloured [probably *deep sauterne!*] painted doors. The silhouette attraction sign was lowered and recessed to cover the sandblasted glass art deco fanlights. The Plaza's red and cream baked enamel vertical neon was changed to spell 'HOYTS' and 'HOYTS WAGGA WAGGA THEATRE' painted over 'HOYTS PLAZA THEATRE' in gold letters across the center of the awning. With the '*show*' now well and truly removed from the '*business*' the Plaza was set to continue as the New Hoyts Wagga Wagga Theatre, although sans Air-conditioning. The final \$100:00 amount was actually the result of a budget blowout caused by a few unforeseen problems such as the replacement of the entire solid concrete foyer floor, which had to be jackhammered up and re-laid to combat a rising damp problem.

Act Five "*The Beginning of the End*"

To Hoyts and their accomplice's credit, the main aim, the annihilation of the 'Plaza,' *was* successfully achieved! The 'New Hoyts Theatre' could not have looked more different. It *was* 'transformed' into an excellent bright and bland example of what was considered required at the time, the modern as tomorrow but unfortunately not the next day sixties! It certainly would not have been half the architectural tragedy if done to any other lesser building, possibly including the Capitol. However, in hindsight Hoyts may as well have saved their money and spared the building. To older generations it was still basically the Plaza and with only the power of the screen fare left to attract business, most people, who by now had houses as equally modern and bland as anything Hoyts could come up with, plus electronic entertainment for virtually nothing, considered 'the cinema' a low priority. Maybe just something for the kids to

do. The masses only went to what they absolutely had to, holiday Disney's, or major attractions such as "My Fair Lady" or "The Sound of Music." etc. During a period of restricted screenings, courtesy of the colour television battle, the stalls seats were freed from the dance floor and basic kitchen facilities installed in the vast stage basement. In an attempt to bolster revenue and utilize the free nights, the 'Plaza' was available for functions again!

In April 1978, Hoyts sold the Plaza, their last operating NSW Country Theatre Circuit hardtop, complete, as a going concern to a syndicate of local businessmen. This seemingly rash move was actually part of a property rationalization scheme to try to relieve the massive financial strain placed on the company over construction of the Sydney Cinema Centre. The new group saw the Plaza mainly as an investment but was interested in redeveloping the site to include a number of shops and a theatre. The sale was not publicly disclosed until July after a deal between the consortium and Hoyts to lease it back fell through. A press release in the *Daily Advertiser* on July 11 under the heading LAST PICTURE SHOW subsequently then detailed Hoyt's intentions for the future.

Wagga cinemagoers will see their last movie screened by Hoyts Theatres tonight at the Plaza Theatre. The theatre will close down for two weeks after tonight's screening but will re-open under new ownership. A group of local businessmen, known as Hipapa Pty. Ltd., have bought the old Plaza Theatre. They intend to tear it down in about eight months time to make way for a shopping complex and twin cinema upstairs. Hoyts Theatres will continue to operate the Drive-In Theatre at Gumly. The residential manager of Wagga branch of Hoyts Theatres, Mr. Jim Stanes said yesterday that, he was sorry to see the end of Hoyts Cinema in Wagga. He said Hoyts would continue to bring top line movies to Wagga straight from the capital cities and added that the drive-in programs would now include more family viewing and diversify the type of films screened. Tonight's final Hoyts' screening at the Plaza is "Sasquatch" the story of "Big Foot." "[Sic]

Now suddenly after twelve years, officially referred to as the Plaza again, Hoyts surrender of it was particularly notable for the fact that it instantly terminated thirty-two years of their total exhibition monopoly in Wagga and forty-seven years of exclusive picture rights that had been originally set up by the J K Capitol Theatre Co. in 1931. Without a major tenant, the proposed re-development did not proceed within eight months or even the next two years whilst in the interim the Plaza was casually let. Then in December 1980, a large headline in the *Daily Advertiser* announced NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR THE PLAZA. "Wagga's Plaza Theatre, in semi retirement this year, will get a new lease of life late this month. From December 27, the Baylis Street landmark will revert to life as a full-time cinema. And for city movie-goers, who have only been offered only a handful of feature films at the theatre this year, there is a feast of films in store. Unveiling the new venture yesterday, Plaza manager, Paul Brown said a Wollongong company was behind the moves "to get the theatre back on its feet." Interestingly, during a nostalgic visit in April 1982, the Plaza looked as if Hoyts were still running it, particularly as all their signage was intact. It appeared well maintained, including its famously large projection room, which looked exactly as it did in 1968 when I first commenced employment in it at the start of my turbulent 'show business' career. On August 21, 1983 heralded the Plaza's fiftieth anniversary. Its amenities – once the pride of the management for their luxuriousness in facilities for men and women were now nothing short of 'barely adequate.' Unfortunately, this could only serve to remind people who seemed happy enough freezing to death in their own cars at the drive-in, in mid-winter as to why they did not go there. Although on a positive note, it continued with 'dances, balls and dinners and was

still capable of handling the biggest crowd of any venue in Wagga.’ However, with the then exhibitor, facing stiff competition from the first run drive-in the beginning of the Video boom and an apathetic public that had lost its ‘spirit of adventure,’ the Plaza’s last hurrah as picture theatre was doomed!

Act Six “*Tarnished Gold*”

The 21st of August 1983 heralded the Plaza’s fiftieth anniversary. It’s amenities – once the pride of the management for their luxuriousness in facilities for men and women were then nothing short of ‘barely adequate.’ Unfortunately, this could only serve to remind people who seemed happy enough freezing to death in their own cars at the drive-in, in mid-winter, as to why they did not go there. Although on a positive note, the Plaza continued with ‘dances, balls and dinners and was still capable of handling the biggest crowd of any venue in Wagga.’ However, with the then exhibitor, facing stiff competition from the first run drive-in [now controlled by Village] the beginning of the Video boom and an apathetic public that had lost its ‘spirit of adventure,’ the Plaza’s last hurrah as picture theatre was doomed! It’s spacious auditorium, generous lounge, excellent sightlines and picture ratio ideal for picture viewing, was overlooked by a brainwashed public who had been convinced that you now watched ‘movies’ in something marginally larger than a lounge room and economically rationalized. Thus by the end of 1983 and now commercially unpopular as well, the owners were forced to look for other ways to find the rates. In 1985, a world-class ice-skating rink was imported from New Zealand and its installation in the stalls necessitated the removal of most of the stage to accommodate it. Its refrigeration plant was installed on the stage house roof. The HOYTS neon was changed to read Ice in small letters horizontally and SKATING in large letters vertically. It was scheduled to open on June 1 as the ‘Plaza Ice Palace’.

High operating costs, including trying to keep the rink frozen in a non-air-conditioned building during a Wagga summer, on-going maintenance and the faddy nature of the sport soon proved it a short-term solution to the Plaza’s future. After a ‘SAVE THE PLAZA’ action campaign failed, with the full support of a council tired of approving demolition permits, the building was purchased and a restoration program under a heritage guidance and grants scheme commenced.



Former Plaza Theatre converted to an ice skating rink

Wagga's Plaza Theatre first closed in 1978. Since then it has had several occupants (including re-opening as a theatre). One of the popular businesses to open there (in June, 1985) was the Plaza Ice Palace.



Plaza Twin Theatres (on second floor) with Pizza Restaurant below.