

Four Grande Old Ladies

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With the opening this month of the Lord of the Rings, New Zealand has never been more visible to the outside world. Even so, it might come as a shock that Peter Jackson was not created in a vacuum. Right from the very beginning New Zealand has had a vibrant film history, catered to by some of the most magnificent theatres, some of which survive to this day. For at its peak in the early twentieth century Wellington was packed with independent theatres, built in high Edwardian style, dishing out spectacle into ordinary peoples lives. These were the days when film was something special, and going to places like the Embassy was a real event.

However with the coming of the latter part of the twentieth century, this had all changed, and the city was in danger of losing its theatres, both film and stage, to the wrecking ball. But perhaps Wellington learnt from other cities just in the nick of time. For while many did fall, thanks to the foresight of some citizens, others were saved.

So it is that on the 19th of December 2001 the Embassy theatre will be host to the Australasian premiere of the largest film every made in New Zealand (perhaps the world). And this magnificent theatre is getting a face-lift for the occasion. She is one of the remaining four grand old ladies from the age when going to the theatre was something really special. They inspire real love, and affection from the people of Wellington, so this month I thought it was pertinent to have a glimpse into their past.

The Saint James

Nestled, like all the other grand ladies, close to Courtney Place this theatre was built in 1912 in the Edwardian style with sweeping pillars and grand staircases. She was the first theatre in Australasia to use steel framed reinforced concrete, and her architect cantilevered the dress circle area so there would be no pillars to obscure the audiences view.

Considerable attention was also lavished on getting acoustics, the ventilation, and comforts for people watching the show just right. It is also heavily ornamented with beautiful plasterwork, both inside and out. All very impressive- considering that it was built in nine months. She seats 2344 people, and was in her time the largest theatre in Australasia.

She was opened with the name His Majesty's Theatre, but after being bought by Kerridge Odeon she was renamed the Saint James. More changes were made. Built for stage shows and vaudeville acts, she was now in the business of movies. People flooded to her to experience the new phenomena of the 'talkie' movie. Still she was finally closed in 1987, the projection room shut off, the crowds came no more. Then in a flurry in 1998 the Saint James was restored, but this time to go back to her origins. She has become once more a Mecca for live theatre, and the home of the New Zealand ballet.

The State Opera House

Not far from Courtney Place, in Manners Street in the second lovely lady. In the same year as the Saint James was begun, work was started on the Grand Opera house. Two previous ones, though on different sites had been destroyed by fire- a real risk for wooden buildings in those early years. She too was a very large proscenium arch theatre for her time, and was beautifully decorated with elaborate plaster works. But she is made of brick rather than concrete. One real indulgence on the architects design was her floors, made of the Australian hardwood Jarrah. Her name was changed in

1977 when the State Insurance Company paid to have her restored and strengthened against the ever-present threat of earthquakes.

The Paramount

Another Grande dame of Courtney Place, she is the oldest one purpose built for showing movies- a task it still performs, nearly eighty-four years later. Built in 1917 it was the scene of the first talking film in 1929, but has been modified since those days when it could fit over a thousand in. Today it has a much more modest four hundred and fifty-seat capacity. She is the most modest of the ladies, but her most noticeable feature is a parapet above the street that was added in 1926. It is very Art Deco in style, decorated with suns.

Her architect Bennie was a Scot, who studied in Australia, but returned as a practising architect to New Zealand. He designed many of the old theatres of Wellington; the Kings, Queens, and the Crown - most of which were lost to the wrecking ball. He was also a founding member and a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

The Embassy

This is the queen of Courtney Place, and the scene of the Lord of the Rings premiere. The Embassy, or the De Luxe as it was known then, dominates the area from Kent Terrace, and was for a long while the largest building in the vicinity, always visible in photos. It was also built as a theatre for film, but in 1924, and in the classical style, designed by Llewellyn Williams. The first movie to show in it was 'The Ten Commandments'.

Opened as the De Luxe, she was renamed in 1945 the Embassy. And like the Paramount she was reduced in size, from 1800 seats originally, to 880 in the 1970s. These days the Embassy has a brand new digital sound system, but when she opened in 1924 the De Luxe orchestra provided the music.

This theatre is a vital piece of Wellington history. It's seen war, depression, the arrival of the 'talkies', and as such it is much beloved by Wellingtonians.

Architecture is a visible reminder of the past, and it is sad to see so much of it has disappeared. But when the red carpet is rolled out, it will be one of the grand old ladies of Wellington's history that will take centre stage. The Embassy and her three contemporaries are much-treasured icons of the city that make the stage and film experience even more special.

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