

# THE KING'S THEATRE STRATFORD

## Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd

In June 1916 a group of people interested in furthering various aspects of the entertainment industry in Stratford held a meeting with the object of forming a moving picture company. One item on the agenda was the proposed purchase, from a Mrs Diamond, of His Majesty's Theatre, the town's sole venue at that time for the showing of cinematographic entertainment (S P & A Minute Books). On 26 August 1916 the private company, Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd, was incorporated under "The Companies Act 1908" at New Plymouth and, in a lengthy and ambitious Memorandum of Association, outlined 42 objectives, of which No. 4d specifically discussed the acquisition of the following properties:

...for the purchase from Thomas Cracroft Fookes of part section 318 and section 357 Town of Stratford by the Company, and for the purchase from Angelina Josephine Teresa Diamond of all her estate and interest as lessee of sections 310 and 349 Town of Stratford by the Company and for the purchase of all the estate and interest of Francis James Foley in the said sections 310 and 349 ... and of all his interests and rights (including film rights) in the picture business conducted therein as from the first day of July one thousand nine hundred and seventeen, by the Company (CO-NP 1 274, NA Wn.).

The latter two sections presumably were the location of His Majesty's Theatre while section 318 and section 357, which backs onto it, were earmarked for the new cinema building. Certificates of Title relating to the 27 April 1917 purchase of the land for the King's Theatre show that a narrow subdivision of the adjoining section 317 was also purchased at that time from the owner, Mary St George King (LINZ: CT 31/140; CT 90/95).

With the purchase of the lease of His Majesty's Theatre from Mr Foley, the Stratford Pictures and Amusements Syndicate commenced operations, as intended, on 1 July 1917 at His Majesty's having assured Stratford's cinema patrons that Mr Foley would be retained as Manager for twelve months from that date (SEP 21/6/1917:4). According to Wilf. Burgess, a projectionist with King's Theatre for many years Stratford's first picture theatre:

*"...was opened in a building down Broadway.... It was built as a stable but it was never used as a stable ... this Madame Bernard and her son and daughter came to Stratford ...along with a Mr Diamond. Now the son knew something about projection so they took over this building and they started up as a movie theatre"* (W. Burgess, 1984).

Even before Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd took charge of His Majesty's Theatre, Auckland architects H.C. Grierson and K.W. Aimer's plans for the new cinema were drawn up with tenders having already been called for in December 1916:

## TO BUILDERS

ERECTION of a Theatre in Stratford for the Stratford Pictures and Amusements, Ltd.  
Tenders for the above will be received by the undersigned until noon on the 22nd December.  
Plans and Specifications can be seen at "Dominion" Office.  
GRIERSON & AIMER, Architects,  
Security Buildings, Queen St., Auckland. (*Dominion* 16/12/1916:29).

This tender was initially awarded to the well-known Auckland firm of Johns & Sons for £6834, but was subsequently re-negotiated and altered to £7134 "...because of [the] possibility of labour unrest, a fresh award and need for more steel" (*S P & A Minute Books*). With both Grierson and Aimer involved in active service during the war, supervision of the job was eventually taken over by another Auckland architect, Mr G.S. Golsbøro. Mr C. R. Pease acted as clerk of works while the sub-contractors included: painting, Messrs Bellringer Bros.; plumbing, Cooper of Auckland in conjunction with Stratford based McMillan and Fredric; plastering, Mr Bater; fibrous plaster work, Carara Ceiling Co.; flooring, Fama Co. of Christchurch; fronting, N.Z. Shopfronts Ltd; marble flooring, Mr Bowskill; erection of seating, Messrs Evans and Tichbon and G. E. Wilson of Stratford (*SEP* 29/12/1917:5).

## The King's Cinema

In calling attention to "The Greatest Event in the History of Stratford Play-goers" the front page of the *Stratford Evening Post* of 29 December 1917 was perhaps foreshadowing the theatre's more recent ongoing function as a live theatre venue. Touted as "THE MOST PALATIAL PICTURE THEATRE IN NEW ZEALAND", the cinema promised its patrons an exciting opening night with the added knowledge that as they vicariously indulged in the antics of "Madcap Madge" the gross proceeds of the evening were going to a worthy cause, the local Patriotic Society. In fact, Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd had written a clause (No. 22) into their Memorandum of Association which stated that one of their aims was "...to contribute to any public or charitable object and in particular to any Patriotic Fund or Relief Fund in connection with the present European War" (CO-NP 1 274, NA Wn.). Comprehensive coverage was given in the Stratford paper to the prospective event and, in the following extract, to some of the architectural features of the building itself:

A substantial and imposing addition to Broadway's business buildings is the King's Cinema House. Higher than the usual two-storeyed structure and of ferro-concrete, the "King's" stands out prominently. The Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd. who are the owners have spared no expense in the construction and furnishings. All arrangements for the comfort, convenience, and enjoyment of patrons are of the most modern, and this fact will undoubtedly be quickly realised by the public who will see the theatre for the first time on Monday evening.

...Inside the building the finish is most artistic and pleasing to the eye and the general effect is heightened by the fact that all lights are "concealed". "Fama" flooring covered by cork matting in the approaches immediately gives an air of comfort to the surroundings. The pit has seating accommodation for 100 persons and the orchestral stalls for about 270. The seats are of the tip-up design and very comfortable, and are arranged so that patrons are enabled to see the pictures without being inconvenienced by those sitting in front; this, in addition to the floor-slope, gives a very clear view of the screen. The films are projected on to a "plaster screen" in place of the old white sheet, and similar to those now being installed in all the

most modern picture theatres. In connection with the actual screening of the films the operating box is situated in the middle of the building, (not at the extreme rear) which should make for more perfect projection.

The Dress Circle, which is reached by way of a marble stairway, accommodates 350 people, and here the seating is of somewhat better design than in the stalls and is equal to the best of its kind in the Dominion. The view from the back of the theatre gives the visitor the true perspective of the size, strength and finish of the structure.

Ventilation is on the latest lines and the heating is obtained by means of radiators inset in the walls. The orchestra is provided for in an enclosed compartment in the front of the pit. In the Dress Circle ladies and gents lavatories are provided. Parents will no doubt appreciate the provision which has been made for the storage of go-carts in a compartment near the entrance and here also bicycles may be left (*SEP 29/12/1917:5*).

By all accounts the opening on Monday 31 December was a great success drawing in the anticipated crowd who, having procured seats for 2s, 1s 6d or 1s, raised the combined sum of £69 19s. Overlooking Broadway, the Stratford Municipal Band, under the direction of Mr F.L. Spurdle, played a short programme from the balcony of the theatre between seven and eight o'clock. Inside the theatre the manager, Mr Foley, welcomed the audience on behalf of Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd and, after reminding them of the fine cause they were supporting, applauded the work of the Stratford Borough electric light staff under Messrs Newton and Bickerton for their efforts in connection with the lighting effects, which he claimed "...were second to none in any theatre in New Zealand". Mr Foley concluded his speech by expressing the hope "...that before the first anniversary of the opening the boys who were fighting in the trenches would return safely home". He then requested that the audience join him in singing the National Anthem (*SEP 2/1/1918:8*).

The specially selected feature, "Madcap Madge" starring Olive Thomas, prize beauty of the New York Follies, was described as:

...a sparkler, written round the doings of the most unruly minx ever caught by the camera, and a title-hunting mother to whom her pretty but totally heedless daughter is a sore trial. ...Madge is hastily dressed up as a flapper of 14, but she contrives to dance gaily through all the complications of the plot and end up with a runaway match (*SEP 31/12/1917:7*).

Other items on the programme that night included a Keystone comedy entitled "Cactus Nell", said to be a "whirlpool of laughter" and, on a more serious note, the latest War Gazette. A special orchestra, under the direction of Mr C.H. Rogers had been permanently engaged and had put together "...a choice selection of the latest melodies" for the occasion (*SEP 29/12/1917: 8*). An even bigger challenge was put to the musicians for the following night's exclusive "Race Night" programme, a one-off screening of "The Whip" requiring "specially arranged" orchestral music. Once again the theatre was "crowded to the doors" (*SEP 2/1/1918:8*) as the public turned out in full to witness the 1,200 strong cast in:

... hunting scenes ... full of excitement, with crowds of riders on superb hunters, a magnificent pack and a real fox. The society scenes are lavish, and the train wreck is a realistic incident that causes the onlooker to hold his breath [*sic*]. A whole express crashes full into the standing freight car, which is hurled clear of the tracks - the boiler of the engine

explodes, and the huge line of railway carriages topples over, blazing fiercely.... (SEP 29/12/1917:8).

A few days after the opening, Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd decided that the ticket selling arrangement was inadequate and that a separate ticket office for the dress-circle should be installed (SEP 10/1/1918:8). Business was obviously exceeding expectations!

One action packed film spectacle that graced the cinema's screen in its first days was the William Fox screen fantasy "A Daughter of the Gods", the production of which involved the conversion of part of a West Indian island, acquired specially for the production, into a realistic Moorish city. Complete with palaces, bazaars and mosques, the city is later destroyed by fire "...in order to obtain a spectacular effect". In addition to hiring 3000 horses, 1,200 donkeys and 21,000 people, including 1200 children for the "Gnome city" and 200 mermaids "...to be seen in the coastal views", Fox hired the noted Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman to exhibit her multiple skills as "...the greatest lady swimmer and the most beautifully proportioned woman in the world" (SEP 10/1/1918:8; 11/1/1918:8). Naturally, the film received a large amount of quite sensational publicity in the days leading up to its exclusive 11 January screening:

Have you ever seen a woman dive from a tower one hundred feet high into a stormy tempestuous sea?

...See Annette do it!

Have you ever seen a woman thrown into a pool of five hungry crocodiles?

...See it done to Annette!

Have you ever seen a woman bound hand and foot washed down the rapids and over a waterfall 30ft. high into a seething swirling whirlpool?

...It's done to Annette!

These are only three out of hundreds of hair-raising and sensational scenes that make the heart beat faster and the breath come quicker in the William Fox million dollar spectacle.... (SEP 9/1/1918:1).

In "A Daughter of the Gods", the Fox-Annette Kellerman film spectacle to be shown at the Kings Cinema on Friday, 15,000 or more persons take part in single scenes. Of the 10,000 persons in the slave market and Moorish city scenes, several thousand were negroes, other thousands were Hindus, and still more of them were alert but untrained native Jamaicans. Day after day these vast mobs were swung through their evolutions. When you see this gigantic picture you witness the uprising of the slaves and see the armed troops hold back the maddened thousands. And it will be worth remembering at the time that every movement in this great panorama was made at the direction of one man, William Fox who was at the time was 1400 miles away in New York. The box plan is now open at Grubbs (SEP 9/1/1918: 8).

According to Wilf. Burgess the orchestra that kept pace with such action generally consisted of about four or five players:

*"... there was the piano, a violinist and when Jack came he played the cello and there were times when Bert Vinsen would play the drums but he wasn't there all the time. But that's about it, four or five, I think there was a wood wind instrument occasionally.... It was a good little orchestra and the leader of the orchestra used to come to me and ask me questions... sometimes I'd put a run through in the afternoon to see just what the story was ... one or two reels ... and that would be sufficient for him to decide what types he'd have readily available ... but I couldn't agree to have a pre-run of every programme in the daytime because I was busy.... There was always a*



*synopsis of the particular show and they'd get a pretty fair idea from that you see and what to prepare for and they were pretty smart in changing over"* (W.Burgess, 1984).

## The Marble Bar

Sharing the frontage of the King's Cinema building was a commercial space constructed with the intention of housing refreshment rooms to cater for both the general public and hungry cinema patrons. As early as October 1916, the secretary of Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd had been instructed to investigate the possibility of installing a Marble Bar in the shop (S P & A Minute Books). Marble Bars were something of an institution at the time having sprung up in various centres around the country. Mrs Dryer who had previously managed the Willis St. Marble Bar in Wellington for two years was, along with two experienced assistants, brought in by the proprietary, Stratford Marble Bar Ltd, to direct operations while a local woman, Mrs F.W. Davies, was assigned charge of the sweets department (SEP 10/1/1918:8).

On 10 January 1918 at 7 p.m. the Marble Bar was officially opened making "... a bright addition to [the]... up-to-date picture palace". Business was described as "fairly brisk" and "...the splendid appointments of the Bar were greatly admired" (SEP 11/1/1918:8). The fittings were described in earlier newspaper accounts as follows:

The lounge room is also fitted with "Fama" flooring, and will be equipped with two counters. Underground is the refrigerating plant for the manufacture of ice creams, etc. and an automatic carbonater for soda water drinks. The Company with commendable foresight have provided an up-to-date filter for the water in the manufacture of the various commodities. The kitchen has all modern appliances, and included is a water cooler and an automatic cleaner for glasses. The large plate-glass window in the front of the bar will be decorated with an artistic design, and the work is now being done by Mr Riddle of Stratford (SEP 29/12/1917:5).

Messrs Dustin's Ltd., who have supplied the greater part of the plant, which is of the latest of its kind, have kindly sent Mr Alpress, an expert in the business, to insist in the installing of the plant and the opening of the Marble Bar. The company hope to have an ice-cream making plant shortly, and will be able to cater for local and district requirements in this commodity (SEP 10/1/1918:8).

Open daily from 10.30 am to 10.30 pm, the restaurant specialised in luncheons, teas and light liquid refreshments and, by the end of the year, was advertising a mouthwatering menu consisting of "...fruit juices, milk shakes, egg flips, ice cream, ice cream sodas, parfaits, fruit salads, sundaes, malted milk, hot chocolate, Imperial Coffee, Russian Tea, China buds and rolls and dainty afternoon teas". It was also hoped that the rooms would be popularised by catering by arrangement for weddings and birthdays parties. A constant supply of fresh milk and cream, available for sale, was arranged through a local dairy (SEP 11/1/1918:8; 5/11/1918:1).<sup>1</sup>

*- THE ROOMS IN 1917 OR EARLY IT STILL THE MARBLE  
AT THAT TIME?*

<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the space once occupied by the Marble Bar has been utilised as a music store, a milk bar / tearooms in the 1940s and 50s, a butchers shop in the early 1960s and then for some time, a takeaway bar (Bruce Cook pers. comm.). Currently it is occupied by a shop selling clothing and knick-knacks.

## The influenza epidemic

On 5 November 1918, Stratford picture-goers checking the front page of the *Stratford Evening Post* to see what cinematographic delight was in store for them would have noticed, and possibly been relieved by, a small postscript which read:

During the prevalence of the influenza epidemic, the management of the King's Cinema Theatre has arranged for the fumigation of the building each night and morning, while deemed desirable (*SEP 5/11/1918:1*).

By 11 November, the cinema had closed with only the words "WATCH THIS SPACE" in the column reserved for the promotion of coming attractions. However, the euphoria that must have accompanied the page 5 announcement heralding the signing of the armistice with Germany would, no doubt, have more than compensated for the closing of a mere picture theatre.

Although the cinema attempted to get up and running by announcing two sessions on 16 November they were compelled, two days later, to announce that they would not be opening again "...until such time as the possibility of further infection from the prevailing epidemic is past" (*SEP 18/11/1918:1*). On 12 December Stratford was given the all-clear and King's Cinema re-opened with a showing of "Paradise Garden" and a Keystone comedy entitled "His Busted Trust" (*SEP 12/12/1918:1*).

## The De Forest Demonstrations

It is thought that King's Cinema's claim to fame lies in the fact that it was the first theatre in the country to show the "talkies". Although the theatre was certainly not the first to have the system installed for regular showings, the evidence does point to it being the first venue in Australasia, and possibly the Southern Hemisphere, to demonstrate the De Forest Phonofilms<sup>2</sup>.

Early in 1925 a series of private and semi-public demonstrations were arranged by Mr W.P. Kirkwood, a director of Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd, who had secured the New Zealand and Australian rights to the system for fourteen years. The showings were scheduled for 16 January, 23 January, 2 February and 16 February (Clive Sowry pers. comm.) two of which were reviewed in the *Stratford Evening Post*. Following the 23 January demonstration, which was attended by leading representatives of Taranaki newspapers and other invited guests, the Stratford paper devoted a full column to the event. The demonstration took place after the evening's normal screening and commenced with an item called "Canin-a-tura" performed by a

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<sup>2</sup> The *Stratford Evening Post* (24/1/1925:5) summarised the system saying "...Briefly it consists of the sound waves being converted into light waves and photographed on the film. When the film is being exhibited, these particular light waves are reconverted to sound waves and transmitted to the audience by means of loud speakers".

singing dog bearing the name "Fluffy La Florette". This was followed by dance sequences, jazz bands and various instrumental items including an xylophone solo, a harmonica player and "Charles Foggart, Old Country Fiddler". Supper followed during which thanks were extended to Mr Kirkwood for his efforts and various speeches were made eulogising the wonderful invention (*SEP* 24/1/1925:5). The audience were reminded however, that it would be some time yet before the general public would have the opportunity to witness Speaking Pictures "...owing to preliminary commercial arrangements having to be completed throughout New Zealand and Australia" (*SEP* 24/1/1925:5).

At a "semi-public" demonstration, held at the theatre on the evening of 2 February Mr Kirkwood invited "fair criticism" from the audience. Doubt expressed by one woman as to whether this was indeed the first venue for "speaking pictures" prompted Kirkwood to state publicly that "... the syndicate's plant was the first and only plant of the De Forest Phonofilm that had 'Crossed the Line,' and there was no other in Australia and New Zealand except the one being demonstrated with that evening" (*SEP* 3/2/1925:5).

A little over a year later, on 24 March 1926, the first New Plymouth demonstration of the De Forest system took place in the Opera House where "...the audience was to the last man astonished" (Film Archives Wn. *DN* 25/3/1926). Around the same time, the King's Cinema treated the citizens of Stratford to "...the initial public demonstrations in the Southern Hemisphere of the most remarkable scientific achievement of the last half-century" (undated cutting in Luke Wilson's scrapbook). The actual installation of the "talkies" was, however, still three years away.

### Paramount week

An event which was to keep Stratford on its toes between 5 and 10 September, 1927 was the highly competitive trans-Tasman "Paramount Week". The locals were optimistic that their energetic and popular theatre manager, Luke Wilson, had every chance of taking the shield as the following extract from the *Stratford Evening Post* indicates:

. During Paramount Week all Australia and New Zealand will be competing for what is known as the Paramount Exploitation Shield which at the present time is being held by the Rialto Theatre, Auckland. The shield will surely change its abode after next week, and manager Luke B. Wilson, of the "King's" will probably be the winner. The chief attraction for "Paramount Week" will be "We're in the Navy Now" starring the two joy kings, Wallace Beery and Raymond Hatton (*SEP* 3/9/1927:8).

Points were to be awarded for newspaper advertising and publicity, lobby and theatre front displays, outdoor advertisements and stunts. In addition to a cash prize the winner would be able to proudly display the silver shield in his theatre for a year. In keeping with the nautical theme of the week's main attraction which was billed as "a tale of hilarity on the high seas", Luke Wilson had the town's children outfitted in sailor's hats on one occasion. On another, he posted a series of life size cut-out sailors on the theatre's balcony. The billboard display in the lobby was changed daily and the building was decked with flags of different nations (Luke Wilson scrapbook, n.d.).

Despite his and the people of Stratford's efforts Luke Wilson failed to take the shield. He did, however, win the first place for New Zealand with 80 points. Sydney's Haymarket theatre took first prize with 91 points while the second placing went to the Wintergarden in Brisbane with 82 points (Luke Wilson scrapbook, n.d.).

The irrepressible manager did not confine his stunts to Paramount Week. On one occasion a newspaper (no ref.) reported that:

The pubic (*sic*) of Stratford were the recipients of a big thrill last night when the Fire Engine went tearing through the streets with its weird siren emitting unearthly shrieks (*sic*). There was quite a large crowd in town and [as] it sped through the foggy streets the "engine" made quite an awesome spectacle. But it proved to be a "false alarm" as the Brigade had turned out to assist Mr. Luke B. Wilson advertise the current feature at the King's Theatre "The Still Alarm" a story dealing with the life and hardship and continued risk of the "Fireman" (Luke Wilson scrapbook, n.d.).

Another undated newspaper clipping tells of Wilson's efforts for the local children at Christmas when he decorated the whole theatre with special lighting effects and installed a Christmas tree. Santa Claus handed out gifts to the children who were treated to an hours worth of free movies while the adult admission price was reduced to 6d (*ibid.*).

### **The Talkies are installed**

*"... and then there came the time when the directors were called upon, I think by Western Electric Co and it was a question of putting in the talkies and apparently they settled upon some arrangement so the settlement date arrived after a lot of cases of stuff and we closed down, I think it was for a week whilst the new system was put in. I helped to do that..."*

*"...The opening feature ... I'm not certain whether it was "Broadway" or "Broadway Melody" ... the sound was on disc... but I had a little bit of trouble with one of the shorts ...it was on disc too and it jumped a groove which was a bit disconcerting and I had to try and do a little bit of juggling" (W. Burgess, 1984).*

On 9 November 1929 there was standing room only in the King's Cinema for its inaugural screening of the newly installed Western Electric "talkies". An enthusiastic audience, some of whom had tired of silent pictures, filed in to the theatre to view the main feature "Broadway Melody" starring Bessie Love, a star "of other days" who had made "a cyclonic comeback". According to the *Stratford Evening Post* review, the evening's programme was not without a few hitches including "...a few waits, occasioned by fusing on the Borough electric supply". However the show went ahead with public interest constantly maintained "...on account of the continuous speaking" (11/11/1929: 2).

The installation of the Western Electric Sound System involved a number of alterations to the theatre in order to ensure proper sound distribution without echoes or vibrations. Drapings and padding were commonly added to theatres in order to achieve



the required acoustical effects with the amount of padding depending on the construction of the theatre in question. In the case of King's Theatre :

Padding is required on certain walls. A start has already been made with the placing of curtains over the embrasures in the higher portion of the walls next to the screen. These curtains are of blue and gold and were made in Wellington to the special design of the manager, Mr. E. Norden. Behind each curtain there will be a lining of felt three-quarters of an inch thick (SEP 7/11/1929:2).

Drapery over felt lining was also continued around the barrier of the dress circle, on the wall under the circle and on the back wall. To complement these interior changes, the decision was also made to paint the exterior woodwork and re-condition the cement face of the building after the newly installed floodlighting exposed previously unseen imperfections (ibid.).

Mr Chris. Moore, A Stratford builder and contractor was entrusted with the challenge of altering the King's Cinema to meet the requirements of the new system. Forty cases of equipment were delivered to the theatre, where at least one, a giant case containing the sound horn, presented the workmen with the formidable task of manoeuvring it through the double front doors of the building.

Full coverage of the alterations undertaken by Moore were written up in the local paper:

...Mr. Moore's work included cutting a hole in the old screen, the erection of the lean-to for the sound tower and the construction of a wooden frame for the talkie screen. The new screen is of wood pulp, and is perforated, but it successfully stands the severe strain of being stretched on the wooden frame.

On one side of the screen there is a moveable screen with a width of only about three feet. This is for the purpose of lessening the exposed surface of the perforated screen, and it is essential that it should move easily. It is only required occasionally, and it is desirable that it should be quickly moveable. To ensure mobility, Mr Moore devised a method of working it, which he claims to be a decided improvement on previous methods.

Mr Moore also has the job of putting up the felt and the drapings. He has eight men busily engaged each day, working as many hours as possible, but they have had multifarious jobs to do, and only now and again can feel sure that everything will be completed up to schedule time.

The work of enlarging the operating box was one of the finest jobs undertaken and by taking in a portion of the old manager's office a fine room has been provided. This work involved the piercing of new holes in the front wall for projection purposes and the making of a new side wall (SEP 7/11/1929:2).

Wilfred Burgess was the first projectionist to operate from the renovated box which now accommodated the two projecting machines required for talkies and a control panel described as "...a veritable maze of wires" (ibid.). It was reported at the time that a Western Electric engineer would be based in Stratford to "instantly rectify" any technical hitches however, Burgess recollected a rather different situation:

*"...their control system was mounted up and they had a man ... I think he lived in Wanganui ... if things went wrong we were to contact him... well if anything went*

wrong during the show, he's a long way away isn't he ? So I only had one breakdown when the amplifier stopped operating ... so I ripped the back off and cut out, there was a bank of condensers and I cut out one that I felt had heated up and I got the show going inside a quarter of an hour. So next time this chap came along there was a great hue and cry over it ... I had no right to touch that amplifier and no right to try and get into it. Well ... my boss said, do you think were going to abandon a show?... Anyway whatever they might have said about it I was protected and after that I did my own servicing. I never had any further trouble with them ... occasionally something would happen and I was able to run it myself and I never lost a show...

... We used the Western Electric for some years ... the manager told me that the directors thought that they were paying too much for the hireage of the system and they tried to negotiate a better deal with Western Electric but they couldn't work it so they sought out to buy another system that they could buy for themselves and that was where they got in touch with somebody in Wellington who manufactured a plant.... They told the Western Electric Co. to take their plant out so that we could have this other one installed and the Western Electric Co. just simply ignored us, so we took the plant out ... we had a final screening one Saturday night and by 9 o'clock the next morning there wasn't a piece of equipment left in the theatre. It was all taken out after the show ... and we installed the amplifier system and so on and a new pair of projectors ... this was the Ernemann III and they were wonderful machines. ... the sound was good and I was able to service it myself.... I was quite happy with it until the time came when Kerridge-Odeon bought the theatre out ... I gave my notice and I left them" (W.Burgess, 1984).

During Luke Wilson's time as manager he purchased a camera and commissioned Mr Burgess to film local events that would be considered of interest by cinema goers in the district. Known as the "Kings Cinema Review" it was screened on Saturday nights at the theatre:

"...and people used to look forward to that. We didn't screen it before the newsreel, we screened it after the main newsreel. And on one Saturday only we didn't have it ready on time ... oh we were called to task over it ... where's the review? They must have liked it. ... We did that, I don't know for how long but we had always had something. ... always something of interest ... but I somehow feel that because it was of Stratford and what was happening in Stratford and it was made in Stratford that it probably carried a bit of weight to some extent ...

... But altogether right through, we never had any trouble whatever in turning the film out. We had ~~had~~ our little laboratory and we shot the film, we developed it, we arranged it into programmes, we spliced the negative and we had our printer, we printed it onto the positive, we developed the positive, the drying rack we had as usual a round rack that we could hold quite a few hundred feet of film on and I think we were fairly professional" (W.Burgess, 1984).

Many of these old films recording snippets of daily life in the Stratford area were found in the 70's by a New Plymouth theatre manager in some old half demolished sheds behind the King's Theatre. Unfortunately, the tins containing the rolls of film had filled up with water and out of a "car-load" of valuable cinematographic history only about

three minutes of screening time was salvaged. These "bits and pieces" included "... the opening of the grandstand at Victoria Park by the mayor of Stratford, Mr W. P. Thompson, a performance by a Stratford junior brass band, a steam locomotive filling up with water and scenes of Bert Vinsen's 'Monster Circus and Performing Ponies'" (*Sunday Express* 29/7/1973).

### The fifties and sixties

At the beginning of the 1950s some patrons were startled to find small chunks of plaster from the ornate ceiling in their laps. Steady deterioration of the domes and the plasterwork around the walls, due in part to leaks in the roof (parapet?\*\*) guttering was also causing concern to the Stratford Borough Council who subsequently had the theatre closed so that repairs could be undertaken (S P & A Minute Books; SIC 2). It was during this period, remembered by projectionist Bruce Cook (pers. comm.) as coinciding with the polio epidemic, that the magnificent ceiling domes and the plaster scrolling on the walls were removed. The domes and corbels were then replaced with solid plaster (S P & A Minute Books).

On 5 October 1961 the financially troubled Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd "...Resolved as a special resolution: that the company be wound up voluntarily and that Mr T.L. Penn, Public Accountant, Stratford be appointed liquidator". The company was subsequently officially dissolved on 18 March 1963 (CO-NP 1 274, NA Wn.).

The late 1960s saw further renovations and alterations to the King's Cinema by this time owned by Kerridge-Odeon<sup>3</sup>, one of two major theatre companies that virtually monopolised the New Zealand movie industry. "Modernisation" was uppermost in the thinking relating to cinema design and the stadium style auditorium with its single sloping floor was rapidly superseding the two-tier arrangement which, in the silent days, had been considered "...desirable in most cases" in order to separate "...the sheep from the goats" (Grierson, 1923:5). Another reason for the change to a single floor, in the case of the Stratford theatre, was to halve the number of staff. To complete the modern look, carpet was fastened to the solid marble staircase by means of drilled holes and the ornate Edwardian balustrades were covered up (SIC 2). It was also around this time that the elegant toilets at the top of the stairs were altered.

On 9 November 1969, the renovated re-roofed King's Cinema was re-opened as "The Regent". Representing the directors of the Kerridge Odeon company, general manager Mr Trevor Townsend, pointed out that "...no country other than New Zealand would [have]... a cinema of the standard of the Regent in a town the size of Stratford" (*TH* 10/11/1969). The mayor, Mr G. J. W. Boon performed the official opening ceremony:

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<sup>3</sup> Stratford Pictures and Amusements Ltd leased the theatre to Stratford Theatres Ltd from 1934. R.J.Kerridge was managing director of this company in 1946, possibly earlier. In 1961 the property was sold to Fullers Theatre Corporation (presumably Kerridge-Odeon since that company had purchased the complete Fuller holdings of 64 theatres in 1946). On 27 March 1972 the Certificate of Title was transferred to Kerridge-Odeon (LINZ CT 31/140; S P & A Minute Books; Encyclopaedia of NZ).

He said that a theatre was a family unit which families could attend and meet other families. The building had been almost rebuilt and gave Stratford a very modern theatre. It behoved people to support it....

The speakers were introduced by the manager of the theatre, Mr K. Saville. The film, a Taranaki premiere, was "Those Daring Young Men in Their Jaunty Jalopies."

Official guests were driven to the opening in vintage cars, with a team of Eltham marching girls and the Stratford Pipe Band in the parade. Coloured spot lights lit up the parade through Broadway to the theatre, where the Stratford Citizen's Band played (TH 10/11/1969).

Anecdotal evidence from Gwelfa Burgess, who managed the theatre from 1974 until 1986, but whose involvement with both the King's / Regent and its rival the Plaza goes back much further, provides a more personal touch to the theatre's recent history. She described one very awkward situation involving a film that they had just received:

*... this was a brand new film from overseas... we put it on the screen and we had crowds and crowds of people here and the last reel that went on belonged to another film. Oh it was terrible... the projectionist rang me quickly ...because he'd checked all the reels but he didn't check the name ... it was the "Sea Gypsies" I think, and the reel that went on the end was "Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger" or something like that. And it was the same on the end of the reel... it had this boat sailing in the water and then the other one had a boat sailing in the water and he didn't look much further ... when he could see the sea... just checked... well they did it where they got the film from overseas, so I had to ring Mr Kerridge at night and he had to get one from overseas... well some of [the audience] ... stayed and watched it but some came out ... so I quickly got a set of passes that we never had used, and I gave them one each and told them to come back, but they didn't all come back. ...You know it was awful, I felt terrible, but it's just something that happens and you can't do anything about it.*

Gwelfa also related another amusing story that had been told to her involving projectionist Francis Roberts who, while screening "Death on the Nile", had the following harrowing experience:

*"...At half-time the curtains rolled back as usual. When all the patrons were seated and the film was about to start again, the curtains jammed and would not open no matter what. Francis ran down with a big tall ladder, while people clapped and climbed to try and rectify the fault, to no avail. So he promptly tied the curtains back like an old time theatre stage and the show went on as usual." (G.Burgess pers comm.)*

It is impossible to discuss the theatre without at least mentioning the resident feline "Precious Kerridge". The black and white and ginger moggie arrived on the doorstep: *"... not long after I started managing and my doorman, he was the cleaner as well, .... let her in the door, she was a tiny cat ... wouldn't have been a year old ... but anyway she wasn't going away ... so he took her home, the next night she was back again ...so she came in here, she made herself at home and she just stayed here for the rest of her life... everybody loved her."* Even when the theatre closed Precious stayed on to keep



the mice at bay while Gwelfa delivered tasty morsels on a daily basis (G.Burgess pers comm.).

Falling attendances led to the theatre's eventual closure in 1988. The protracted process began in 1986 when a September closure was announced in the *Taranaki Herald* (6/8/1986) as inevitable despite an earlier plea for improved patronage. It seems that the Regent had been running at a loss for some time with increased staff wages and operating costs being a major contributing factor. Ironically, in the five months after the cinema "closed" in '86, two blockbusters were screened bringing in record audiences. However the theatre was unable to sustain the interest in moviegoing that "Crocodile Dundee" and "Labyrinth" had temporarily aroused and was forced to close its doors again in January 1988. The projection equipment was subsequently whisked away to a more commercially viable cinema in Whakatane (*Stratford Press* 27/1/1988)

### **Stratford District Theatre Trust (and others) to the rescue**

A glimmer of optimism for the theatre was ushered in with the new decade when, after a successful month long Shakespeare Festival in May 1990, the Stratford Shakespeare Society was formed. Incorporated in September of that year, the society's aims are "...to encourage the performance and appreciation of the works of William Shakespeare [in a town where] ... almost every street name... is derived from a Shakespearean character or place" (SSS 1994).

November 1990 saw the re-formation of the Stratford Theatre Group<sup>4</sup> and subsequently a resurgence of interest in the performing arts within the community. The following year The Stratford District Theatre Trust was formed with the aim of purchasing the neglected cinema and converting it into a multi-purpose venue for the theatre-less town. In order to get the transformation of the building underway, a fundraising committee then set about organising a series of events to achieve an initial \$130,000 target. Inspired by the idea of once again having an operative cinema, and eventually a live theatre venue, local people banded together to get the facility ready for the Stratford Theatre's fund raising Production of "Worzel Gummidge" in November (SSS 1994; SDTT 1996). Enacted on the old stage, this highly successful show was the first live performance held in the theatre since its closure as a movie venue in 1988 (Murray Herbert pers. comm.).

Sponsorships and grants totalling \$316,000 were received during the first four years of the Theatre Project in addition to rates assistance from the Stratford District Council (SDTT 1996). The Council itself injected \$30,000 into the project in December 1991 thereby assisting Stage I of the theatre restoration to be completed.

Movie screenings resumed after the large projectors, which had been on loan to a Whakatane cinema, were returned and installed in the Regent as part of the \$40,000 theatre purchase deal with Pacer Kerridge. The gala opening on 31 January 1992 was heralded by a screening of Kevin Costner's "Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves" and, in

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<sup>4</sup> Now known as Stratford on Stage.

May, the musical "Oliver" was performed by the Theatre Group on the new stage. In order to ensure the best possible presentation of the latter, Stage II of the theatre's development was brought forward with plans being drawn up in March. Although the new extended stage was completed for the production, the temporary dressing rooms beneath the stage were, on opening night, under several inches of water (SIC 1).

A major financial boost was received by the theatre in June 1992 when Petrocorp Exploration announced a \$50,000 sponsorship deal and in turn were granted naming rights for the theatre. Thus "Petrocorp King's Theatre" came into being and Stage III plans started to look feasible. These were to include "...external upgrading, curtaining installation, a new lighting system, new toilets, storage facilities and refreshment units" and were scheduled for later in the year (SIC 1).

Hard on the heels of the Petrocorp sponsorship was a \$30,000 grant from the TSB Community Trust in early August and, as a reminder of this contribution, the theatre's foyer was named after the bank. Around the same time (6 August 1992) title to the property was transferred to Stratford District Theatre Trust Incorporated (LINZ: CT J2/1086; CT J2/1087).

In November the warmth of the theatre's patrons was assured with the installation of a \$13,000 heating system sponsored by Taranaki Electricity in association with ECNZ. Meanwhile the facilities for the comfort of the actors and others involved in backstage activities were also improving with the construction of a dressing room, green room and make up room nearing completion. According to Theatre Trust chairman, Murray ~~W. J. J.~~ patronage of the cinema was "...sound and use of the facility was expanding all the time". A week long Shakespeare Festival was running at the time with "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" being performed by the New Zealand Drama School on the new stage. (SIC 2).

One of the highlights of the 1992 Shakespeare Festival for Petrocorp King's Theatre was the performance there by Dame Malvina Major and the Ars Nova Choir on 27 November. Of particular importance is the comment made by the renowned soprano that of all the venues in which she had ever performed worldwide, it was acoustically amongst the top ten. The New Plymouth based choir also agreed that it was one of the first times that they could actually hear themselves singing without their sound being "swallowed up" (Marie Walter pers. comm.).

The theatre's financial highlight of that year came in the form of a \$66,000 cheque from the Lotteries Grant Board which was presented by Roger Maxwell, MP for Taranaki to Trust fundraising chairman, Gary Sturgess who called the grant "...the jewel in the crown". Such a large donation, he said, would enable the theatre to become "...the real community asset we intended it to be" (DN 26/11/1992).

By 1993 the foyer of the theatre was starting to resemble its former elegant self. The upstairs and downstairs was painted throughout with colours selected by the Theatre Trust Decor committee while the old "Union Jack" patterned balustrades were released from their bland board sheeting. Associated with this cover-up was the story that 1960s women in their mini skirts needed to be shielded from prying eyes as they ascended the staircase (SIC 2).

Labour Weekend saw around fifty ex-movie theatre staff, some going back over sixty years, gather in Stratford for a grand reunion. The gathering included a tour of the refurbished theatre, followed by a screening of "Aladdin". Amongst the old-timers present was Edith Horn aged 92, who in 1918 had joined the orchestra as a violinist. With the advent of "talkies" in 1929 she went on to teach music and singing to locals, an occupation she continued until the age of eighty (SIC 2).

The centrepiece of the 1994 Stratford Shakespeare Festival was the Hamilton based Electra Theatre Company's staging of "Macbeth" in the Petrocorp King's Theatre. By this time a considerable amount of money had been spent upgrading all aspects of the staging area, refurbishing the entrance and mezzanine foyers and painting and repairing the exterior of the building. It was now felt that an upgrading of sound and projection equipment was essential in order to "...bring the film operation into line with other top-class cinemas in the country" (SIC 3). However, another area in urgent need of upgrading was the auditorium itself, so when Petrocorp Exploration announced a second large grant of \$35,000 in December this latter project was given first priority. On 6 January 1995 the theatre closed while the contractors set to work washing, plastering and repainting the auditorium and installing new chandeliers (SIC 3).

A \$20,000 Dolby stereo surround sound system was finally installed in May 1995. Consisting of three stage speakers, eight surround speakers and realigned projector senders, the new system replaced outdated equipment with which theatre staff had improvised since cinema screenings recommenced in 1992. "Forest Gump" was the first movie to be enhanced with the theatre's latest acquisition (SIC 4).

Ten months later Stratford was honoured to host the New Zealand premiere of the film version of Shakespeare's "Othello" which was shown as part of the 1996 Shakespeare Festival. Opening night was attended by a full house of 290 patrons and the film was subsequently screened again the following night to meet popular demand (SDTT 1996).

Communications between Stratford-Upon-Patea and England's Stratford-Upon-Avon led to arrangements for the internationally renowned flautist Elena Duran to perform in Petrocorp King's Theatre during her 1996 New Zealand concert tour. Mexican born Elena Duran was accompanied by Auckland pianist John Wells in her 3 June Stratford concert which included a selection of contemporary jazz and classical and Latin American music. It is hoped that links already forged with other Stratfords of the world<sup>5</sup> will continue to attract international artists of such high calibre. (SIC 4; SDTT 1996).

Two recent financial boosts have helped the community owned theatre through a funding crisis. The first came in the form of a \$60,000 sponsorship deal from Fletcher Challenge Energy Taranaki (formerly Petrocorp) whereby Fletchers would give the Trust three annual grants of \$20,000 to help with operation and maintenance costs of the building. In recognition of the deal the theatre's name was changed to "Energy

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<sup>5</sup> Apart from Stratford-Upon-Avon, links have also been established and maintained with Stratford in Connecticut, USA, and Stratford in Ontario, Canada (SIC 4).

King's". In handing over the first cheque to Theatre Trust chairman Tony Le Grove, Geoff Logan, general manager of Fletcher Challenge Energy Taranaki said:

"... We are most impressed with the considerable community involvement, mostly voluntary, that goes into the theatre. We are also happy to sponsor a project that covers such a wide spectrum of the local community. The theatre is a charming icon of a bygone age and needs to be well preserved" (SIC 5).

The second boost coming in the form of a \$100,000 grant from the Stratford District Council was part of the \$1.4 million development levy the district received from the construction of the Stratford Power Station. Part of this grant was earmarked for the purchase and installation of new projectors for the theatre. These had been sourced from the old Mayfair Theatre in New Plymouth, were in excellent condition and allowed for the running of much larger reels of film.

As of January 1998, further plans for the theatre involved : a new heating system; "...alterations to the stage area, including the removal of one of the two stairwells to the dressing rooms, work on the main lighting grid and cyclorama, new tab curtains and a new lighting bar"; additional carpet in the auditorium and the upgrading of toilet facilities (*Stratford Press* 28/1/1998 in SIC 5).



## ABBREVIATIONS.

DN = *Daily News*, New Plymouth

LINZ = Land Information New Zealand

SDTT 1996 = Stratford District Theatre Trust, *Sponsorship Proposal to Fletcher Challenge Energy Taranaki*

SEP = *Stratford Evening Post*.

SIC = Stratford Information Centre Scrapbooks, Theatre Trust

S P & A Minute Books = Stratford Pictures & Amusement Ltd Minute Books

SSS 1994 = Stratford Shakespeare Society, *1994 Shakespeare Festival Sponsorship Proposal*

TH = *Taranaki Herald*

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