



## **The Original His Majesty's - 1904**

Perth had good reason to be proud of the new His Majesty's Theatre when it opened to a performance of "Forty Thieves" on 24 December 1904.

The theatre had been some two years under construction and, according to the programme notes for the opening performance, "neither brains, money nor pains have been spared in erecting an edifice which would rank among the finest of its kind in the Commonwealth ..."

The cost of the combined theatre and hotel building, without land, was £42,000.

It was built for Perth businessman T G Molloy by contractor Gustav Liebe and designed by architect William Wolf.

Wolf was born in New York City and trained as an architect in Germany. He migrated to Australia in 1877 and worked in Melbourne and Sydney before setting up a successful practice in Perth in the mid 1890s.

Undoubtedly it was Wolf's architectural skill that made His Majesty's a successful theatre. He wisely followed the proven style of the nineteenth century and his theatre had much in common with some of the great English theatres of the time – with some European influence for good measure.

The horseshoe shape favoured by the Edwardian architects brings the audience closer to the stage than do later styles of theatre. Members of the audience see and hear better, and enjoy more interaction with the actors and with one another.

Wolf's design achieved these qualities well enough to have endeared "The Maj" to several generations of theatregoers. It was unthinkable that it should ever be demolished.

The new building presented an impressive sight in the Perth of 1904. "The massive grey walls are relieved with long rows of balconies and deep-set windows, and are set off with ornamental cement modelling of great variety of rich design," the *Western Mail* reported.

"The Italian style of architecture has been followed. Two tiers of balconies, carried out in the Doric Order, run around the whole front, while the windows of the top floor have annexed to them balconettes which form a happy blend with the rest of the façade."

Sadly, the balconies were removed in 1947-48; the pillars which supported them were considered a traffic hazard.

The theatre's main entrance, in Hay Street, opened into a tiled vestibule and onto a broad marble stairway. The stairs divided to meet in a spacious and highly ornamented foyer outside the dress circle.

Within the theatre the auditorium was 23 metres by 21 metres, seating 2,584 people in its three tiers – 974 in the stalls, 540 in the dress circle and 1,074 in the “family circle” and gallery combined. The stage, large by any standards, was 20 by 23 metres.

The horseshoe design gave a line of sight that was considered “excellent in the extreme, an uninterrupted view of the stage being obtained from any point in the house.” Perhaps the reviewer never sat behind the pillars that became so familiar to later stalls patrons.

The auditorium featured four artificial waterfalls, which seem to have disappeared early in the life of the theatre. The waterfalls were reputed to improve ventilation; however, the really spectacular aspect of the ventilation plan was the dome of the roof, built to slide both ways from a central dividing line so that on warm, fine nights the audience “could have the sky for their roof”.

theatre folklore says that on one occasion this allowed nature to provide the effects of thunder and lightning called for by the script of the show in progress. The drenching rain which followed was not so well received by the audience, for it took some time to close the hand-operated roof.

If contemporary reviewers were delighted with the new His Majesty's, the Superintendent of the Fire Brigades Board was not so impressed. What, he asked in his report of 30 December 1904, would happen if the water mains in Hay Street and King Street should be empty? Central Perth had, apparently, been without water for as long as 24 hours at a time.

His demand for improvements must have been met, for the theatre settled down to play a vital role in the artistic life of the city for the following 70 years.

## **The Refurbishing Process**

“If the 1980 audience walks in and says, ‘How nice – new seating and a new paint job. Here’s the dear old Maj back in business – but what did they spend all the money on?’, we think that as architects we will have done our job,” says Peter Parkinson, architect in charge of the “recycling” of His Majesty's Theatre.

Recycling, he insists, is what the two and a half year job entailed. It was not a museum-style restoration.

The architects set out to retain the old theatre’s auditorium, which still held a kind of magic, by inserting the necessary equipment in and around it to give it a 1980s function.

They had little to guide them. The original drawings have long been lost and many modifications were made during the life of the theatre. It was therefore often necessary to carry out some demolition before detailed plans could be prepared.

Wherever possible, the original fittings were re-used. Those that were damaged were replaced, often in plaster moulded from the original; and where no decoration was present but seemed to be needed, it was moulded from appropriate examples elsewhere in the building.

The Edwardian ambience of the theatre has thus been retained, but with a 1980s technology added for the benefit of audience, artists and technical staff.

The theatre’s Hay Street façade is much as it has been for the past 20 years. Inside the main entrance the central stairway has been removed to allow for a bigger foyer. The stairway, which now goes off to the right, taking patrons to the dress circle, gallery and theatre bars, has new marble treads but incorporates the old balustrade. To the left of the entrance, what was once the hotel’s Sportsman’s Bar is now the theatre’s box office. The former side entrance in King Street has become a fire escape.

Inside the auditorium it seems, at first, that nothing has changed. But new stepped floors have been installed throughout to improve sight-lines; and the old pillars, so familiar to rear-seat patrons, although still there, are now far enough back to give an unobstructed view of the stage from every seat.

Within the old auditorium wall is a new wall which excludes traffic noise. There is also a new ceiling, moulded in plaster to the original pressed-metal pattern.

The dome no longer slides open but the original decoration has been reproduced as closely as possible from what could be seen in a 1904 photograph. The “umbrella effect” mentioned in a *Western Mail* of the period is again evident.

The proscenium arch is still there but is nearly two metres wider, and is framed with mouldings taken from the pressed-metal decorations of the original arch. It is topped by the same crown and a turn of the century painting by artists Sam Abercromby and Jan Omerod to replace two long-lost originals.

The building is painted in colours typical of the Edwardian period but in rather a lower key than in the original and to a less elaborate colour scheme.

It is behind the scenes that the greatest changes have been made. The old raked stage has given way to a new flat one, and the old counterweight-operated stage machinery has been replaced. New lighting has been installed throughout. The orchestra pit is bigger and deeper but part of its area can be used for audience seating if required.

Facilities for artists and technical crew are now at least equal to any in Australia. Space for new dressing rooms and rehearsal-rooms is provided in a new back-up building, which also houses on its top floor the plant for the new air-conditioning system installed throughout the complex. The building is physically separated from the theatre to exclude mechanical noise.

Other facilities have been vastly improved by taking over the space occupied by the former His Majesty’s Hotel. The saloon and balcony bars have been reconstructed and enlarged, using the original fittings. In the basement is a new area used for cabaret evenings, seminars and cocktail parties. On the same floor a Museum of Performing Arts is housed, which mounts four exhibitions per year and is available for tours and to the general public.

Important beneficiaries of the project are the WA Opera and Ballet companies. Both have gained new rehearsal rooms and administrative accommodation in the area once occupied by the guest-rooms of the old hotel.