



**HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE**  
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**PROGRAMME BIOGRAPHY OF 'THE MAJ'**

**BY IVAN KING –HISTORIAN**

*As long ago as 9<sup>th</sup> November 1896, a good night out could be had on the corner of King and Hay Street. It was Prince of Wales Day and people gathered there for the opening of an outdoor theatre and showground called Ye Olde Englishe Faire. The premier attraction was Ooda The Aerial Marvel, a daring young man who apparently bedazzled onlookers with his skills on the trapeze.*

*Twelve days later, on 21<sup>st</sup> November, came an event of immense social and cultural significance. Carl Hertz, an American magician, screened six one-reelers on his Cinematograph, thereby treating the Colonial audience to its first moving pictures.*

*Later, when Leoni Clarke introduced his animal act, featuring 170 creatures of various shapes and kinds, the patrons must surely have appreciated the fact that the entertainment was in the open air!*

*A greater grandeur came to the corner on CHRISTMAS EVE, 1904, when HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, opened its iron gates for the first time and West Australians could appreciate the opulent auditorium created by architect WILLIAM WOLFE and contractor GUSTAV LIEBE.*

*Named after Edward VII, the Theatre was built for Thomas George Molloy, who in 1897 had financed the construction of the Theatre Royal. Like His Majesty's, the Royal adjoined a hotel - the Metropole and today it's recently refurbished edifice still brings a touch of the Goldrush to Hay Street Mall.*

*The Royal, of course, is no longer in show business but the Maj continues to enrich our city's history with a roll call of legendary names, among them*

*- DAME NELLIE MELBA, ANNA PAVLOVA, PERCY GRAINGER, DAME SYBIL THORNDIKE, PETER DAWSON, YEHUDI MENUHIN, GLADYS MONCRIEFF, DAME MARGOT FONTEYN and SIR ROBERT HELPMANN. Seven Academy Award winners have tread the boards - KATHARINE HEPBURN, VIVIEN LEIGH, SIR JOHN GIELGUD, CLAUDETTE COLBERT, REX HARRISON, GEOFFREY RUSH and CATE BLANCHETT. Those same boards bore the weight of Ben Hur's chariot in 1913.*

*The gala opening night production was THE FORTY THIEVES, publicised as a "Stupendous Spectacular Extravaganza of Gorgeous Magnificence and Stirring Tableaux". But despite all the Gorgeous Magnificence the House Full sign did not go up that night.*

*According to Truth, "Christmas Eve was rather an unfortunate night to choose for the opening of a new theatre. People prefer to spend their Christmas Eve in the orthodox way .... for this reason, THE FORTY THIEVES at His Majesty's on Saturday night was presented to a much poorer house than the house warranted".*

*Those few first-nighters enjoyed an auditorium which featured four artificial waterfalls, reputed to improve ventilation. They seem to have disappeared early in the life of the theatre.*

*The really spectacular aspect of the ventilation plan, however, was the dome of the roof, built to slide open, so that on a warm night the audience could have "the sky for their roof".*

*Through the decades the theatre has also played host to everything from political rallies to boxing matches to IRVINGS IMPERIAL MIDGET'S in "An Exhibition of Necromancy, Thaumaturgy and Magic". Even the Prince of Wales dropped in for a Diggers Reception in 1920. During the Second World War, travel restrictions prevented visits by national and international companies, so the theatre became a cinema, but that was nothing new. In 1917, it had given Perth its first screening of D.W. Griffith's "Intolerance".*

*The 50's and 60's was the era of the Great American Musical and the J.C. Williamson Management brought them all across the Nullarbor - ANNIE GET YOUR GUN, OKLAHOMA, KISS ME KATE, PYJAMA GAME, FUNNY GIRL and of course, MY FAIR LADY.*

*This was the time when the Edgley family leased and then bought the theatre, which they made the venue for the first of their many Russian spectaculars.*

*With the coming of the Entertainment Centre in the early 70's, Michael Edgley relinquished his hold and after a period of uncertainty, the theatre was bought by the State Government and three years of alteration and refurbishment followed. **On MAY 28TH, 1980, the Maj re-opened to a new generation of theatre-goers.***

*Now the King and Hay street corner boasts a building which is part of the National Estate, a sumptuous setting for today's theatrical glories, most of which is now be provided by our own national and regional companies.*

*Within its Edwardian setting, His Majesty's is completely equipped to meet the technological demands of big contemporary musical productions.*

**A GOOD NIGHT OUT CAN STILL BE HAD AT 825 HAY STREET PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA!!**

***Don't forget to also visit –***

**The Museum of Performing Arts (DownStairs at the Maj) open Monday – Friday 10:00am – 4:00pm** with constantly changing interesting exhibitions of theatrical costumes and memorabilia taken from the treasure trove of the backstage archives.

**Gold coin donation entry.**