



Maintaining a Tradition of Mixed Entertainments: Birch, Carroll and Coyle's regional Queensland Wintergarden Theatres

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Birch, Carroll and Coyle established Wintergarden Theatres at Ipswich, Bundaberg, Maryborough, Rockhampton and Townsville, during the second half of the 1920s. Research undertaken by the authors confirms their significant role in the entertainment industry extending to regional Queensland. Historically it also shows that since the advent of blockbuster movies and television, the presentation of movies to the public has turned full circle rather than following a linear process. In the manner reminiscent of early screenings from the 1920s in often makeshift, non-descript cinemas, small bland auditoria usually grouped around a single ticket box have replaced the picture palaces which succeeded them.^[1] In the early years of its Australian development, film was used as a novelty to support live entertainment, particularly vaudeville. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, this trend was reversed and live theatre was used to support film until the introduction of blockbuster movies. Subsequently it was still used in the form of street theatre for exploitation purposes. This historical overview will show that live entertainment was used in the case of the Wintergarden Theatres to augment film thereby confirming that the transition in entertainment patterns was neither abrupt nor integrated.

Birch, Carroll and Coyle's Tropical Theatre Concept

The Birch, Carroll and Coyle Company was formed in 1923. Edward John Carroll was a prominent entertainment entrepreneur with interests in both Sydney and Brisbane and his younger brother Dan Carroll was Chairman of the Company for many years. Earl's Court Theatre at Rockhampton had previously been owned by the Birch family who operated this and other theatres in the town. It was subsequently incorporated into the then Birch Carroll partnership and subsequently, Birch, Carroll and Coyle circuit, with George Birch as a Company Director.^[2] At Townsville the *Olympia*, an open air theatre owned by Virgil Coyle was also integrated into the circuit when he joined the Company.^[3] On several occasions local people in the towns where it was intended to erect Wintergarden theatres were invited to become shareholders. After a successful issue of 25,000 pounds to Queensland regional residents living in its theatre centres, the newly-formed Birch, Carroll and Coyle consortium issued a further 10,000 one pound shares to Ipswich and Maryborough residents to cover further expenditure in those locations.^[4] An interesting facet of the Birch, Carroll and Coyle circuit was the acquisition of twin or multiple theatres in each town as well as the construction of new and more grandiose theatres. W.J. Winterflood was the first General Manager and served in that position for approximately thirty-six years of the Company's seventy year history. According to George Till, himself a long serving manager of the company, Winterflood was a "leader of tremendous ability...who saw the Company through the great depression after having overseen the construction of the Queensland regional Wintergarden theatres".^[5]

The concept behind the Wintergarden theatres was to provide venues that suited Queensland's sub-tropical climate; a sprawling network of decentralised venues, unsophisticated and mostly outdoor, Queensland posed particular problems not only for touring troupes but also for film exhibitors. With this in mind, gardens featuring palm trees and ferns were incorporated into the site plans with the aim of providing beauty as well as comfort.^[6] Building interiors were decorated in the art deco style and were in keeping with the lavish decoration and furnishings of picture palaces such as Prince Edward in Sydney^[7] and the Wintergarden in Brisbane, both designed by Sydney architect Henry White. The Prince Edward Theatre was commissioned by brothers, Edward John and Dan Carroll, as a sophisticated and architecturally pleasing, yet functional venue for both the performance of the visual arts and the screening of movies. Designed for multipurpose entertainment, like the Capitol Theatre in Sydney (Figure 1), Wintergarden stages were renowned for their size and were "capable of accommodating the biggest metropolitan companies".^[8] The Carrolls formed a company known as Carroll Musgrove Theatres Ltd^[9] to run the Brisbane Wintergarden, with Stuart Doyle as managing director. Doyle remained the driving force behind Union Theatres, a significant shareholder in Birch, Carroll and Coyle Limited, which controlled the regional Queensland Wintergardens. Like E.J. Carroll, Union Theatres management had a wider view of entertainment that included stage acts and it was prepared to invest 40,000 pounds in the Queensland circuit.^[10] Regional theatre managers such as George Till at Townsville, and Jim Watson at Rockhampton and later Bundaberg, share this view. Although Birch Carroll and Coyle was centrally run for the purpose of finance and distribution, its regional managers were largely autonomous in the day-to-day running of the theatres; it was this which enabled them to respond to their local communities as cultural opportunities arose.

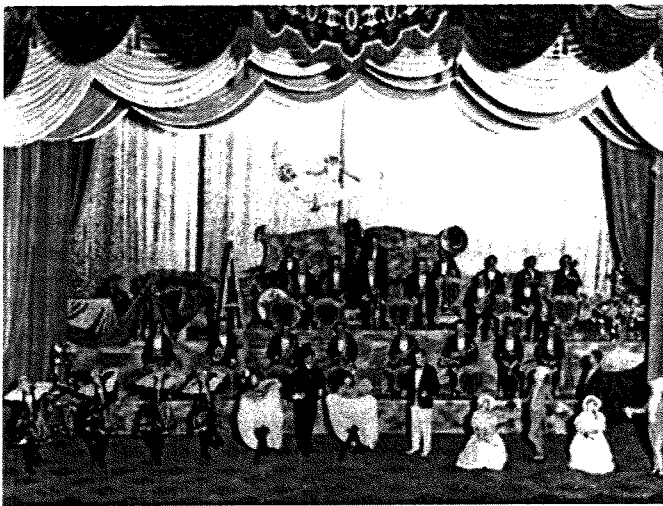


Figure 1

In keeping with the proposed entertainment mix, the Brisbane Wintergarden theatre, opened by the Mayor of Brisbane in August 1924, featured its own Royal Concert Orchestra and Grand Wurlitzer Organ, which performed both independently and in conjunction with its film segments.^[11] The décor and design of the Brisbane theatre, emulated four years later in Henry White's design for the new Sydney Rose Bay Wintergarden,^[12] was also the inspiration for the twin theatres planned for Ipswich and Rockhampton. At a period in time when modern air conditioning was still not available, seating had been either bench type seats or canvas deck chairs. In the case of the regional Wintergardens, these were replaced by seats with slatted wooden backs for coolness. Additionally, the pattern established in the Brisbane Wintergarden of open windows and roller shutters for ventilation and lighting was adopted. According to Latham,^[13] a form of air-conditioning was installed whereby air was blown over "blocks of ice in space beneath or at the rear of the stage... forcing the cold air into the auditorium and onto the stage". Theatre lighting, another feature which followed the pattern set by the Brisbane Wintergarden, promoted itself as having "the greatest lighting scheme ever".^[14] The lighting scheme, equipped with dimmers, was multicoloured and sophisticated for its time. Dome lights were suspended from the lattice ceilings and as many as one hundred and fifty were concealed in the central dome.^[15] Theatre chandeliers were subsequently installed in the Ipswich and Rockhampton theatres. Specialised lighting was also incorporated in the other regional Wintergarden Theatres and some of the large lights which illuminated the Bundaberg Wintergarden have since been re-installed at nearby Fairymead House.

In the 1920s no public buildings of this kind had been previously attempted on such a grand scale in regional Queensland. Few homes or buildings had carpet on the floors or lavish interiors so it is understandable that the impact of the Wintergarden theatres on the social life of people was considerable. Competing cinemas remained more functional, often open air, and retained bench or canvass seating. In contrast, Wintergarden patrons frequently had permanent bookings in the same seats for every Saturday night performance. Interviewees said we always "dressed for the occasion" to attend the Wintergarden Theatre. Men always wore suits and the ladies wore stockings, gloves, and hats and carried handbags.^[16] 'Going to the Movies' became a social event designed to attract the wealthier echelons of interwar society. Interviewees who had been employed by Birch, Carroll and Coyle confirmed that they were treated well and considered themselves to have been privileged to work at Wintergarden theatres.^[17] This was due in part to Birch Carroll and Coyle's paternalism towards its employees but also to community perceptions of the Wintergarden as catering to a more sophisticated clientele.

Regional Performance and Entertainment

As in metropolitan picture palaces, provision was made for the performance of live theatre in the regional Wintergarden Theatres. National and international productions such as performances by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and the Vienna Boys Choir could be staged for the first time in these centres. Les Duthie, owner of the Rockhampton Leichhardt Hotel and subsequently of the local Wintergarden, recalled a J.C. Williamson production, *Forty second street*, as the "most outstanding and the first show of its kind that I saw there",^[18] while another senior Rockhampton resident recalled paying as a young girl to see the acclaimed Anna Pavlova and her European troupe of fifty dancers perform on the Rockhampton Wintergarden stage.^[19] To a large extent, this was facilitated by E.J. Carroll's acclaimed skills and contacts as a theatre entrepreneur both in Australia and abroad.

One exception to this pattern was the Wintergarden at Maryborough where Birch, Carroll and Coyle had purchased the Boomerang Theatre and deemed it to be the more suitable venue for live theatre, although occasional performances were staged at the local Wintergarden. Announced in a lavish advertisement in *The Townsville daily bulletin*, the first local performance at "The Wintergarden: the theatre exquisite" was a not a film, but a series of Shakespearian plays produced by Allan Wilkie, commencing with *Henry VIII*.^[20] Birch and Coyle understood that the venues would be primarily picture theatres but the Townsville, Rockhampton, Bundaberg and Ipswich theatres continued to proudly stage live theatre and concerts, ranging from drama, comedy, vaudeville, musical ice skating, variety, ballet, orchestral, rock and roll, and recitals. According to long-serving Townsville manager George Till,^[21] it was almost another half-century before local authorities would plan and build their own cultural and theatre centres,

capable of accommodating such performances as the Vienna Boys Choir, the Ziegfield Follies and the Oriental Cavalcade, all of which toured the regional Queensland Wintergarden circuit.

Despite the absence of national and international entertainment due to distance and the absence of sizable venues, most towns in the Birch, Carroll and Coyle circuit had already developed traditions of live entertainment. Entertainment was provided by tent shows such as Sorlie's and McKay's that annually toured Queensland, usually at Show times. In this way, the company maintained its connection with established live entertainment and encouraged local participation as well as attendance. During Show Week, it was customary for the local Wintergarden theatres to cease film screening altogether, in order to feature live show acts, some of whom went on to achieve wider acclaim both nationally and internationally.^[22] Additionally there were many local amateur groups in all forms of the performing arts, often of a high standard. The Wintergarden theatres proved an excellent venue for their performances. At Bundaberg, the Amateur Players staged a number of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and comedies during the 1950s.^[23] In cases such as the Stars of Mobil Quest, sponsored by Vacuum Oil Company Pty. Ltd. in the 1950s, productions were organised for all Queensland regional Wintergarden Theatres.^[24] Thus, the establishment by Birch, Carroll and Coyle of large sophisticated venues in regional Queensland assisted local cultural development and regional talent through the possibility of larger and more formal circuits. In part this was a commercial strategy by the company to forestall other outside competitors. But the construction of large stages and the excellent acoustics of the theatres were also an asset which local managers were well positioned to advertise and exploit in their regional communities. In Townsville, some local performers found the sheer size of the Wintergarden daunting, preferring instead the intimacy of the Theatre Royal.^[25] Elsewhere the excitement of appearing on the Wintergarden stage for the first time remained a memorable experience. One young Rockhampton debutant recalled his appearance on the occasion of the ANZAC Day concert, "impeccably attired in starched white shirts and black bowties, black trousers, socks and highly polished shoes":

Third on stage I dutifully turned to face the auditorium and in the glare of the footlights saw, not people, but hundreds and hundreds of bald heads.^[26]

Promotion and Performance: the legacy of theatre

As film production became steadily more sophisticated during the 1920s and films such as Cecil B De Mille's *The ten commandments* were shown, supplementary prologues were staged as part of the evening's entertainment. These were often very lavish as can be seen in Figure 2 when *The ten commandments* was screened in 1926 at the Maryborough Wintergarden. The props used for the production of the prologue at Maryborough were the same as those used at city theatres such as Prince Edward and the Brisbane Wintergarden.^[27] Not only were prologues staged at film presentations from the 1920s, but theatres engaged their own orchestras; as in Brisbane, organ and/or orchestra recitals were also conducted together with other forms of live performance by solo or group artists. This practice continued until the introduction of television after which it was gradually phased out. Wintergarden managers were responsible for the promotion of programmes and their campaigns to promote major movie attractions were often very extensive. As pointed out by George Till, only limited copies of films were available; since it took as long as twenty to thirty weeks for copies to reach regional theatres, local theatres were often obliged to do their own promotions.^[28] Each town competed with the others to produce the best campaign and a number of American Awards and Citations were awarded to Birch Carroll and Coyle's managers.^[29]

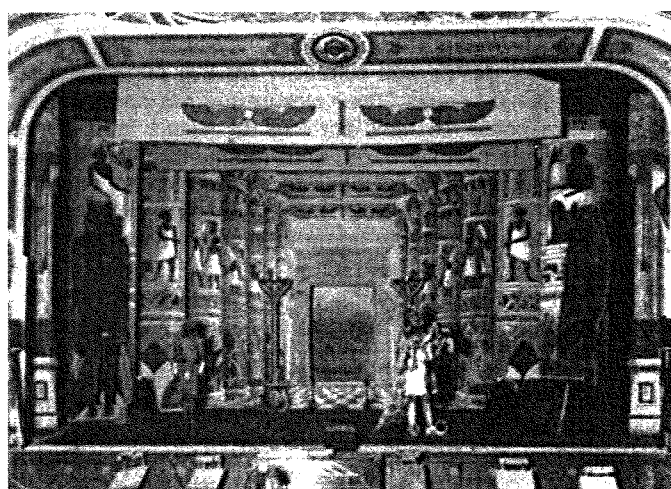


Figure 2

Hand bills were widely used and distributed to different business houses for display, while larger ones were pasted to billboards at bus stops or on vacant land. Advertisements also appeared in local newspapers and were broadcast by local radio stations. An example of early newspaper advertising was that which accompanied the screening of *The jazz singer*, the first talkie to be screened at the Ipswich Wintergarden in 1929. Promotions using street theatre in the post-war years included Townsville, where a very large flock of pigeons was released amid great fanfare to publicise the Hitchcock thriller, *The birds*.^[30] For later films and special events like the premiere of *Eliza Fraser* at Maryborough in the 1970s, promotion using street theatre was much more intensive. Employing live theatre as a means of

promoting the movies was a practice which continued until the decline of the cinema industry itself. In the case of *Eliza Fraser* an historical tale of shipwreck among the Aborigines of nearby Fraser Island, a horse-drawn parade for promotional purposes made its way to the theatre from the Maryborough Town Hall.^[31]

In Rockhampton, local personnel were also employed in regular promotions of the same kind. According to one of these:

One of the main promotions was a big book which rested in the bowels of the Wintergarden down in the snake pit. This big book would be brought out at times and toured around the streets when a big movie came to town... the biggest one was Davy Crockett; they had buckboards and Indians and Davy Crockett outfits. They went through the streets from the Earls Court to the School of Arts.^[32]

Promotions such as these drew on traditions of showmanship and vaudeville, although some had unintended consequences. When a mock fire was staged at the Maryborough Wintergarden, another employee recalled that:

I got into a trouble over that... There was a poor old Chinese fellow next door and he thought it was real.^[33]

Underpinning these elaborate stunts was the competition between the regional theatres previously alluded to and the rewards in terms of publicity, company prizes and staff recognition.

While television emerged as a significant threat to live entertainment in Australia by the mid 1950s and, in regional centres by 1960, entrepreneurs in the movie industry, including Birch Carroll and Coyle, were preparing to open a new kind of venue, the drive-in theatre. In Queensland, change was in the air by 1959. In that same year, when two of its founding executives, Dan Carroll and W.J. Winterflood died, Birch, Carroll and Coyle opened its first Starline Drive-in at Ipswich.^[34] The move away from large indoor venues like the Wintergardens allowed the film industry to withstand the encroachment of television, constituting a partial return to the outdoor style of entertainment which had characterised the pre-Wintergarden period. Subsequently the very notion of the stage audience became problematic and the company's resources were re-assigned to the detriment of live performance. An ongoing legacy of live performances in the 1960s, however, was the arrival of rock and roll and the regional circuit tours by Australian performers and overseas acts like Roy Orbison. In existing hard-top venues at Townsville and elsewhere:

Australian Rock and Roll stars Normie Rowe, Col Joye, Johnny O'Keefe, Johnny Rebb and Lucky Star all gave appearances to capacity crowds.^[35]

In the Rockhampton Wintergarden complex, the Blue Room located upstairs at back of the theatre operated as a dance and coffee club with modern bands, enjoyed good attendances in spite of television.^[36] Smaller local picture theatres, which were also feeling the effects of the small screen, experimented with a combination of film and record hop:

there was one movie, then at interval, the staff removed the downstairs seats to the sides - with great difficulty - so the teenagers could dance... Entrance prices (two shillings) did not change for the mixed events.^[37]

In conclusion, it is interesting to contrast press and community perceptions of the massive Wintergardens, around the time of their closure in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the euphoria which surrounded their construction and opening during the 1920s. During the early phase of their operations, in spite of rapid change and the arrival of the talkies, live theatre continued to be used to support film, a practice which persisted until after the Second World War. This was facilitated, in the case of the Wintergardens by their tropical design and suitability for live performances, many of which could not have been accommodated in existing regional venues. Their closure and, in some cases, eventual demolition by Birch, Carroll and Coyle constituted a response to new patterns of leisure and home consumption, which, while slower to emerge in regional centres, elevated family-based entertainment and television viewing above social events like film and theatre going. Of its prestigious regional Queensland theatre chain, only the Rockhampton Wintergarden would survive demolition or refurbishment by the turn of the twenty-first century. But disparaging views of the early Birch, Carroll and Coyle theatres as "nothing to write home about", "cold as charity in winter" (ironic in view of the tropical theatre concept) and possessing poor acoustics (still more ironic in view of their acknowledgement as superior venues), need to be seen in the context of the cultural opportunities they provided for the best part of a century and the partnership which Birch, Carroll and Coyle and its local management successfully negotiated with regional Queensland communities.

Endnotes

(To return to your place in the text, simply click on the endnote number)

[1] Katharine Brisbane, (ed), *Entertaining Australia: an Illustrated History* (Paddington, Currency Press, 1991) 311.

[2] George Till to Grace Johansen, 21 September 2003.

[3] *ibid.*

[4] Birch Carroll and Coyle, *Supplementary Prospectus* (Brisbane, Birch Carroll and Coyle Archives).

- [5] Till to Johansen, 21 September 2003.
- [6] *Sunday News*, "Special Supplement", 23 November, 1924, 7.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Birch Carroll and Coyle, Prospectus, 1923, (Brisbane. Birch, Carroll and Coyle Archives).
- [9] B. Sharp, and J. Gardiner, *History of the Prince Edward...Theatre Beautiful: A Pictorial History of Sydney's Prince Edward Theatre Beautiful*, (Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1984).
- [10] Peter O'Brien, *The Greater Union Story 1910-1989* (Sydney: The Greater Union Organisation Pty Ltd. 1985), 38.
- [11] Birch, Carroll and Coyle Brisbane Wintergarden Opening Program, 1 August 1924.
- [12] Ian Hanson, "The Wintergarden Rose Bay" *Kino* 6, (1983) : 5.
- [13] Don Latham, "Saluting the Rockhampton Wintergarden", *Kino Quarterly*, (1999) : 2.
- [14] *Brisbane Courier*, 30 July, 1924, p.3, quoted in R. Boyle, C. Burke, B. Cosgrove, D. Cryle, *The Rockhampton Wintergarden Theatre: A Heritage Study* (Rockhampton,: Centre for Social Science Research, Central Queensland University, 2001) 13.
- [15] Boyle et al, op.cit, 60.
- [16] John and Melodie Watson, interview by Grace Johansen, Bundaberg, 7 May 2003.
- [17] Jean McGill, Patricia Santalucis, Doug McKenzie and John Hampson, interview by Grace Johansen, Bundaberg, 5 May 2003.
- [18] Boyle et al, op.cit, 93.
- [19] Personal communication to Denis Cryle.
- [20] *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 4 June 1927, 3.
- [21] Till to Johansen, 21 September 2003.
- [22] Boyle et al, op.cit, 95.
- [23] Bundaberg Theatre Programmes (Bundaberg: Bundaberg and District Historical Society and Museum).
- [24] Theatre Programmes (Maisie Walker Collection, James Cook University, 173R - 175L).
- [25] Ron Alexander and Brian Peace, interview by Grace Johansen, 17 October 2003.
- [26] Doug Wallace, "The History of the Rockhampton Mouth Organ Band" in Phil Wright, *The Music History of Rockhampton* (Rockhampton, the author, 1990) 192.
- [27] Brisbane, op. cit, 193.
- [28] George Till, Cuttings Book.
- [29] ibid.
- [30] Till to Johansen, 21 September 2003.
- [31] Tony Matthews, *River of Dreams: A History of Maryborough and District* (Maryborough: Maryborough City Council, 1995) v2, 629.
- [32] Ron Wakenshaw interview with Grace Johansen, 20 November 2003.
- [33] Beryl Madsen interview with Grace Johansen, 13 November 2003.
- [34] History, Anonymous, Birch Carroll and Coyle (Typescript: Birch Carroll and Coyle Archives nd).
- [35] Till to Johansen, 21 September 2003.
- [36] Ron Wakenshaw, interview with Grace Johansen, 20 November 2003.
- [37] Roy Hobler interview with Betty Cosgrove, 7 September 1959, quoted in Boyle et al, op.cit, 95.
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