

# HORSHAM THEATRE



Horsham Theatre front elevation 2009



Horsham Theatre rear view of fly tower 2009



Horsham Theatre interior of auditorium 2009



Horsham Theatre detail of auditorium ceiling 2009



Horsham Theatre detail of ceiling 2009



Horsham Theatre Plan 2009

## Location

37-41 PYNSENT STREET HORSHAM, HORSHAM RURAL CITY

## Municipality

HORSHAM RURAL CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2225

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO27

## VHR Registration

December 3, 2009

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

### What is significant?

The Horsham Theatre was built as a commercial venture in 1926 for Horsham Theatre Pty Ltd, a company of local and Melbourne investors. It was designed for cinema and live performances and was one of the last to incorporate a stage with full fly facilities for drama and vaudeville. The architects were Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson, with Ron Taylor being the partner responsible for the design. This firm designed a number of theatres in both Victoria and interstate.

The three storey Horsham Theatre is of red brick with a rendered front facade. The side walls have highlight windows with diagonal metal glazing bars. The stage walls and the fly tower are constructed from reinforced concrete.

Horsham Theatre is designed in a subdued version of the neo-Classical revival. Used for many of the picture palaces in the 1920s, this style brought conservative and respectable associations with the theatres of ancient Greece and Rome. Decoration is minimal on the symmetrical rendered front facade. The composition is surmounted by a high square parapet and a deep bracketed cornice, with a shallow pediment above the slightly projecting central section. The upper facade includes three blank panels, the central one incorporating a simple sign and a row of windows with distinctive diagonal metal glazing bars below. The street frontage has been altered.

The building has undergone many alterations and improvements to keep up with changing fashions and technical advances. New sound equipment was installed in 1929 for talking movies and Cinemascope equipment after the introduction of television in the late 1950s. In 1937 the building was thoroughly renovated, largely due to the construction of a new theatre in Horsham the previous year.

Early decoration has been retained in the upper and lower foyers and the auditorium, probably dating from both the original construction and the 1937 remodelling. This includes detailed plaster work and lighting. Finely detailed panelled ceilings have been retained throughout these areas. The main auditorium has a raked floor and the original square proscenium arch includes decorative plaster work. Piers divide the side walls into sections which contain panels and decorative shields. A small number of early seats remain in the theatre. The bio box

remains in use and some early equipment has been retained, including a pair of Victoria X, Cinemeccanica projectors fitted with Xebex Hi-beam lamps (c1950s).

The cinema changed ownership and lessee, and was finally faced with closure in 1960 when the City of Horsham purchased the property and the business. Some changes have been made to the building from the late 1970s, including the alteration of the ground floor facade, the removal of shops and other changes to the ground and first floor foyers. The auditorium remains intact, unlike many rural cinemas which have been divided into smaller spaces.

#### **How is it significant?**

The Horsham Theatre is of historical and architectural significance to the State of Victoria.

#### **Why is it significant?**

The Horsham Theatre is of historical significance as one of the earliest surviving and largest purpose-built cinemas in rural Victoria. It is rare for its combined cinema and live performance functions and for retaining a pair of 1950s projectors.

The Horsham Theatre is of architectural significance as an outstanding example of the work of Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson, one of the most important and prolific cinema architectural firms in Australia. It is the best surviving example of their work in rural Victoria. This firm designed the Forum and Rapallo cinemas (former State Theatre), Melbourne in 1928 (VHR H0438) in conjunction with the American cinema architect John Ebersson, and Ron Taylor designed the Astor, St Kilda in 1936 (VHR H1751).

## **Permit Exemptions**

### **General Exemptions:**

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### **Specific Exemptions:**

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. Note: All archaeological places

have the potential to contain significant sub-surface artefacts and other remains. In most cases it will be necessary to obtain approval from the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria before the undertaking any works that have a significant sub-surface component. General Conditions: 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan endorsed by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it. Note: The existence of a Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan endorsed by the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. General Conditions: 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions. General Conditions: 5. Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authorities where applicable. Minor Works : Note: Any Minor Works that in the opinion of the Executive Director will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place may be exempt from the permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage values of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is required, it is recommended that the permits co-ordinator be contacted.

**Exterior:**

Minor repairs and maintenance.

Removal of extraneous items such as air conditioners, pipe work, ducting, wiring, antennae, aerials etc, and making good.

Installation and repairing of damp proofing by either injection method or grout pocket method.

Installation or removal of external fixtures and fittings such as, hot water services and taps.

**Interior:**

Installation, removal or replacement of projection and sound equipment (excluding early or significant equipment), providing they do not adversely impact on significant elements, or involve structural alterations.

Painting of previously painted walls and ceilings in appropriate heritage colour schemes, provided that preparation or painting does not remove evidence of any original paint or other decorative scheme.

Installation, removal or replacement of carpets and/or flexible floor coverings.

Installation, removal or replacement of screens or curtains, including cinema screens and curtains (and associated structure), curtain tracks, rods and blinds, other than where structural alterations are required.

Installation, removal or replacement of hooks, nails and other devices for the hanging of mirrors, paintings and other wall mounted art works.

Removal or replacement of non-original door and window furniture including, hinges, locks, knobsets and sash lifts.

Installation, removal or replacement of ducted, hydronic or concealed radiant type heating provided that the installation does not damage existing skirtings and architraves and that the central plant is concealed.

Installation, removal or replacement of electric clocks, public address systems, detectors, alarms, emergency lights, exit signs, luminaires and the like on plaster surfaces.

Installation, removal or replacement of bulk insulation in the roof space.

Installation of plant within the roof space, providing that it does not impact on the external appearance of the building or involve structural changes.

Installation of new fire hydrant services including sprinklers, fire doors and elements affixed to plaster surfaces.

Installation, removal or replacement of electrical wiring.

Installation, removal or replacement of fixed seating, other than early or original seating.

Construction dates            1926, 1937,

Architect/Designer           Bohringer Taylor & Johnson,

Heritage Act Categories      Registered place,

Hermes Number                112817

Property Number

## History

The Horsham Theatre was built in 1926 for Horsham Theatre Pty Ltd 'a company which included both local and Melbourne investors'(Kennedy, *Cinema Record*, Issue 16, May 1997). The chairman was Mr Percy Learmonth; the company secretary was Mr. J. E. Gooding (of J. E. Gooding Pty Ltd, real estate agents of Reservoir and Melbourne) and one early investor and later manager was Mr. C. W. McDonald. The opening night was 23rd June 1926 when the Mayor, Cr. R. J. Wilmouth officiated with Mr. Gooding and the theatre manager, Mr. Conabere (Official Opening Programme). The building was not yet licensed for live performances but an orchestra under the direction of Mr. J. R. Baillie accompanied shorts and the feature film, *A Son of His Father*, directed by Victor Fleming and starring Bessie Love and Warner Baxter. It was a story of Arizona" where pioneer blood and pioneer traditions still persist, released in the USA on 28 September 1925. The performance ended, rather than began, with *God Save the King*.

The architects were Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson with Mr. R. Taylor specifically mentioned in the local newspaper's glowing report as the partner responsible for the design (*Horsham Times*, 25th June 1926; Official Opening program). A Mr. Stansfield-Smith of Melbourne was also mentioned as an architect who may have had local connections but his role is not certain. The firm was one of the most important in cinema design in Australia and, in 1928 in association with the American cinema architect John Ebersson of New York, would design the glamorously atmospheric State Theatre (later the Forum and Rapallo) at the corner of Flinders and Russell Streets, Melbourne. Charles Bohringer designed a number of important NSW cinemas including the Homebush Theatre and the Capitol Theatres at Tamworth, Armidale and Wagga Wagga in the neo-Classical revival style. Along the architect, R. Morton Taylor designed the Astor, Dandenong Road, St Kilda in 1936 in the Moderne style. In rural Victoria the firm was responsible for: the Rex, Daylesford; the Prince Regent, Hamilton; the Prince Regent, Sale; the Theatre Royal, Bairnsdale; and the Prince Regent, Lakes Entrance. The style chosen for Horsham was a subdued version of the neo-Classical revival used for most of the picture palaces in the 1920s. It brought conservative and respectable associations of the theatres of ancient Greece and Rome. After the advent of the 'talkies' Modernism brought other associations. The builder was a Mr. W. [or F.] Walton of Brighton, the furnishings came from the Myer Emporium and the seats were made by Riddell and Preece of Fitzroy but most of the contractors were local (*Horsham Times*, 25th June 1926).

The theatre was designed for cinema and live performances, which had been standard until the early twenties while traditional vaudeville was still performed. Drama was also expected to be performed with metropolitan companies presenting plays in July, 1926. It was hoped that companies travelling between Melbourne and Adelaide would stop to perform in Horsham. The advent of 'talkies' in 1929 effectively killed vaudeville performances.

There were several precursors to the Horsham Theatre (Kennedy, 1997). Travelling picture shows briefly exhibited short silent films in the former Mechanics Institute, Firebrace Street until it burnt down in 1908. There were several open air theatres including the 'Soldiers Pictures' which screened films in the yard at the rear of the former Wimmera Shire Council offices at the north-east corner of Firebrace and Roberts Street until 1926 when it was demolished. The former Town Hall was used until it was replaced by the new Town Hall in Wilson Street in 1939. It included full projection facilities but was not used on a regular basis. The rear hall of the new Mechanics Institute next door to the Horsham Theatre in Pynsent Street was also used before 1926. It was converted into another modern 'screen' for the cinema in the 1990s re-using the early bio box.

The main competition for the Horsham Theatre was the Twentieth Century Theatre in Firebrace Street, now demolished. It was built in 1937. The owner was Mr. J. Downie of East Malvern who owned the Garden Open Air Theatre next door, opened just a few months before (Kennedy, 1997; *Horsham Times*, 22nd December 1936). The architect for the new cinema was Harry A. Burt, of Melbourne but formerly from Queensland and the builder was Percy Dawe. The style chosen was a stripped down version of Classicism with fashionable Art Deco details. The building permit application was for 782 seats but, by the mid 1950s this was increased to just over one thousand, almost as many as the Horsham Theatre had when it opened in 1926. The Twentieth Century Theatre closed on 31st December 1959 as a result of competition from television and the new form of cinema, the drive-in theatre. Between 1959 and early 1990 the Mota Vu Drive-in Theatre screened films in Kalkee Road. It had a capacity of 660 cars and offered a different freer sort of experience from the closed auditorium of the faded glamour of a picture palace.

The Horsham Theatre changed ownership, names and lessees several times. After Horsham Theatres Pty Ltd, it was owned by Wimmera Theatres Pty Ltd, part of Melbourne based Victoria Theatres Pty Ltd, when Mr. Graham Slobom of Melbourne was the managing director. By the 1950s it was owned by Consolidated Theatres. The next

lessees were R. T. & J. N. McCracken when it was known as the St James Theatre. Like the Twentieth Century Theatre, the Horsham Theatre also faced closure so, to save it, the City of Horsham purchased for 27,500 pounds in 1960. Nonetheless it ceased screening in 1966. The Horsham Arts Council leased the building and it was used mainly as a live venue. 'In November 1969 the Arts Council entered into an agreement with Sherwood Productions Pty Ltd' (Kennedy, 1997). This Melbourne company had a local director, Mr Max Barlett, it screened films three nights a week and the theatre was renamed the Bowman Theatre but the arrangement failed. In 1970 the Arts Council took over full control and films were screened on weekends under the management of Mr. Lawrie Yeates. The building was renamed the Horsham Entertainment Centre. In 1973 it was the location of the world premiere of the film, *Lost in the Bush*, directed, produced and written by Peter Dodds for the Victorian Education Department. It was the story of Jane Duff, aged seven, and her two brothers who are lost for nine days in the Victorian bush. Screenings were arranged in association with the Motor Vu Drive In through its owner, Mr. Ivan Stevens but the Arts Council ceased screening films in mid 1977. In 1979 Mr. John O'Meara of Ballarat began regular weekend screenings. This revival was supported by major changes and extensions to the building from 1986 to 1995 when it was re-named Centre Cinemas Triple.

The building has undergone many alterations and improvements to keep up with changing fashions and technical advances. New sound equipment, both disk and film soundtrack, was installed for the talkies in September 1929. New toilets were added in 1935 when Horsham was sewered. In 1937 the building was 'thoroughly renovated' and new sound equipment had been installed as well' as a direct result of competition from the new Twentieth Century Theatre (*Horsham Times*, 12 November 1937). In 1949 the projection room extended to incorporate a new film winding room and entrance area. In May 1955, new Gaumont Kalee projectors were installed along with other improvements costing 30,000 pounds to accommodate Cinemascope. This technically advanced wide-screen system was an attempt to win back audiences from television. The earlier attempts, Cinerama and stereoscopic 3-D soon failed because of their expense and inconvenience. 20th Century Fox's system was launched in 1953 with *The Robe*. The seating in the Horsham Theatre was reduced to 937 (stalls 587, lounge 126, dress circle 224). The first Cinemascope film shown there was the recently released *There's No Business Like Show Business*, directed by Walter Lang, starring Ethel Merman, Donald O'Connor, Marilyn Monroe, Dan Dailey, Mitzi Gaynor, Richard Eastham, and Johnnie Ray (*The Film Weekly*, 3 Nov 1955). There were minor 1969 minor renovations under Sherwood Productions Pty Ltd. Major changes occurred in 1979 when 200 seats were removed from under the dress circle, new toilets were added in part of the foyer, the front shops were removed to create a new side entrance, a new refreshment counter and a separate ticket box. Many of the original seats were replaced with new seats installed from the former East End Cinemas, Melbourne. In 1995 two new cinemas were installed in the Mechanics Institute hall, reusing the earlier bio box, and in part of the adjoining former Holeproof factory.

## References

- Horsham Historical Society, files notes and cuttings.  
Horsham Theatre, Official Opening Program.  
*Horsham Times*, 'Horsham's First Theatre', 25th June 1926.  
*Horsham Times*, 'New Theatre Opens To-morrow Night', 22nd December 1936.  
*Horsham Times*, 'Mayor Officiates at Theatre Ceremony' 12 November 1937.  
*Horsham Times*, 'Theatre bought by Council for ?27,500', 1960  
Kennedy, G. & I. Ballinger, *Cinema Record*, Part 1 & 2, Issue 16, May 1997.

## Plaque Citation

Built in 1926 for both cinema and live performances, this venue was designed by theatre architects Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson. It was amongst the last country theatres to incorporate a stage with full fly facilities.

## Assessment Against Criteria

a. Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history

The Horsham Theatre is one of the earliest surviving, purpose-built cinemas in rural Victoria. It is an example of a large privately managed Victorian rural cinema.

b. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.

The Horsham Theatre was designed for both cinema and live performances which was unusual at the time. The theatre retains a pair of early projectors which are illustrative of the development of cinema in rural Victoria.

c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history.

d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.

The Horsham Theatre is an outstanding example of the work of Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson, who were important and prolific cinema architects in Victoria. It is the best surviving example of their work in rural Victoria.

e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

g. Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.

h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

## **Extent of Registration**

1. All of the building marked B1 on Diagram 2225 held by the Executive Director.

2. All of the land marked L1 on Diagram 2225 held by the Executive Director being all of the land described in Certificate of Title Volume 2219 Folio 702.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*