

# COMEDY THEATRE



2665\_Comedy\_Theatre\_Melbo



2665 Comedy Theatre 228  
240 Exhibition St Facade 3



2665 Comedy Theatre 228  
240 Exhibition St Lonsdale  
Street View 1 3



2665 Comedy Theatre 228  
240 Exhibition St Lonsdale  
Street View 2 3



2665 Comedy Theatre 228  
240 Exhibition St View North  
East 3



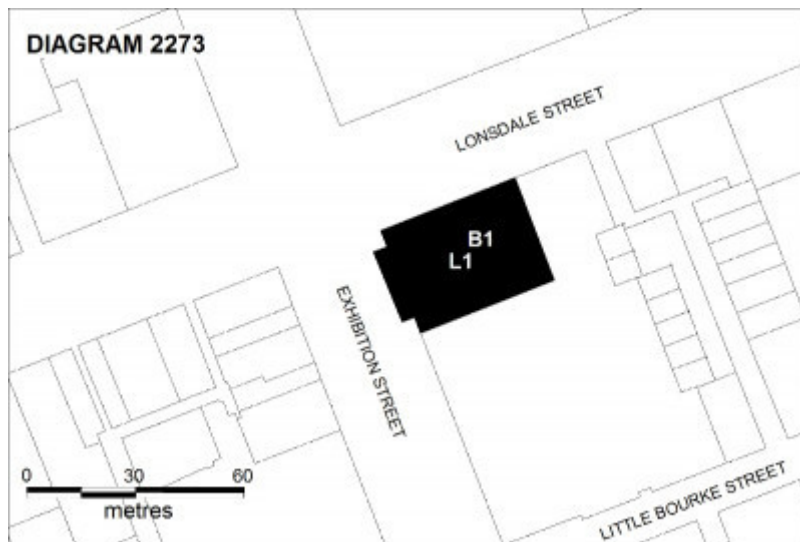
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comedy plan.jpg

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## Location

228-240 EXHIBITION STREET MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2273

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO632

## VHR Registration

March 10, 2011

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - November 29, 1996

What is significant?

The Comedy Theatre, constructed in 1928, was designed as an 'intimate' theatre for the JC Williamson Ltd. firm of theatre operators.

Theatre manager and actor, James Cassius (J.C.) Williamson, purchased the block of land on the south-east corner of Exhibition and Russell Streets in 1913, shortly before he died. The site had previously been home to a number of Melbourne's early entertainment venues including George Coppin's Olympic Theatre (1855) and the Hippodrome (1880). Though plans were drawn up for a memorial Williamson Theatre in 1913, the site was instead occupied until the mid-1920s by JC Williamson's short-lived film studio and a scenery dock for Her Majesty's Theatre (H0641, 1886) opposite. In 1927, JC Williamson Ltd. commissioned theatre architects Albion Walkley and Charles Neville Hollinshed to design the Comedy Theatre. This new theatre was to be for the production of literary comedies and 'repertory' plays, which would be suited to the 'intimate' scale of the theatre. Its eclectic style, known at the time as Spanish-Renaissance, was intended to convey the more intimate and modern character of the theatre, a contrast to the grand style of the nineteenth century theatre opposite. This style was likely influenced by the Broadway theatre designs of the period by Herbert J. Krapp, the noted American theatre architect. The building also became the administrative headquarters of JC Williamson's Australasian operation, with three levels of offices incorporated into the design.

Upon its opening in April 1928, the Comedy was billed as the 'latest word' in patron comfort, with heating provided throughout the building. It was the first theatre in the country to dispense with the gallery, and instead seated 1008 theatre-goers in the stalls and dress circle. Despite fluctuating success in the 1930s, due to the rise in the popularity of cinema and the Depression, the Comedy continued to stage successful live theatre productions throughout the twentieth century. These included plays by Noël Coward and J.M. Barrie, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar named Desire* in the 1950s, and the first Melbourne season for entertainer Barry Humphries in 1966. The New Zealand revue troop, the Kiwis, enjoyed record-breaking seasons in the post-World War II years. The Comedy Theatre continues to operate as a live theatre venue.

The Comedy Theatre is a five-storey tapestry brick building, with rusticated render base, of an eclectic style, known at the time of its construction as Spanish-Renaissance. Its facade features cartouches, arched windows with cast-iron balconies and a cantilevered awning fronting Exhibition Street. The doors at the main entrance and in the foyer are of copper with the initials 'JCW' engraved in the glass, and the foyer features imitation travertine walls. The auditorium is decorated with richly coloured beams and brackets, painted arches and coats of arms on the frieze, and gold leaf detailing on the dress circle balcony and box seating balustrading, and a tiled drinking fountain, wrought iron light fittings and panelled ceiling are incorporated into the dress circle foyer.

How is it significant?

The Comedy Theatre, Melbourne is of historical and architectural significance to the state of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Comedy Theatre is historically significant for its association with Melbourne's theatre scene in the twentieth century. It is important as the only live theatre building constructed in Melbourne in first half of the twentieth century, and as an unusual example of an 'intimate' theatre, demonstrating the development of live theatre in the twentieth century. The Comedy Theatre is of historical significance as an example of the work of theatre architects Albion Walkley and Charles Hollinshed.

The Comedy Theatre is of architectural significance as an outstanding and intact example of an interwar theatre, which still retains its original design and features both externally and internally. It is important for demonstrating the influence of the Broadway theatres designed by noted American architect, Herbert J. Krapp in the mid-1920s.

## 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 must 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.

### **Signage**

Note: The permit exemptions below apply to signage in public areas

Installation, removal or replacement of promotional signage on cantilevered awning, providing signage does not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

Temporary installation and removal of promotional signage in the foyer, providing signage does not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

### **Stage:**

Note: The permit exemptions below apply to the stage areas.

Installation, removal or replacement of equipment within the stage areas, fly towers, wings and backstage areas as required, providing they do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

Temporary installation and removal of all structures and equipment required to stage a performance within the stage area, providing they do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

Installation, removal or replacement of projection and sound equipment, providing they do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

Installation, removal or replacement of screens or curtains, including cinema screens and curtains (and associated structure), curtain tracks, rods and blinds, providing they do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

#### Back-of-house

Note: The permit exemptions below apply to the back-of-house areas

Removal or replacement of electrical wiring provided works do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

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

Removal or installation of shelving and non-original built-in cupboards in back of house areas if no structural work is required.

Non-structural works to all back-of-house areas which do not impact on original fabric (eg. plant and equipment rooms, loading docks) as required.

Installation or removal of carpet/flexible floor coverings in back of house areas.

Installation, removal or replacement of plant within existing plant areas.

Installation, removal or replacement of mechanical systems, electrical systems and equipment, switchboards, communications, hydraulics, including fire services, providing they do not impact on original fabric, or involve structural alterations.

#### Offices:

Note: The permit exemptions below apply to the offices in the upper three levels of the theatre building.

Demolition or removal of non-original stud/partition walls, suspended ceilings or non-original wall linings (including plasterboard, laminate and Masonite), bathroom partitions and tiling, sanitary fixtures and fittings, kitchen wall tiling and equipment, lights, built-in cupboards, cubicle partitions, computer and office fitout and the like.

Refurbishment of existing bathrooms, toilets and kitchens including removal, installation or replacement of sanitary fixtures and associated piping, mirrors, wall and floor coverings.

Painting of previously painted walls and ceilings provided that preparation or painting does not remove evidence of any original paint or other decorative scheme.

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.

## Theme

### 9. Shaping cultural and creative life

Construction dates	1928,
Architect/Designer	Hollinshed, Charles Neville,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Hermes Number	2665
Property Number	

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## History

### HISTORY:

The Comedy Theatre is located in what is a traditional precinct for entertainment in the city. The site itself, on the corner of Lonsdale and Exhibition Streets, has been home to George Coppin's Olympic Theatre from 1855 (known as the 'Iron Pot'), the 'Hippodrome' - a large entertainment venue - from 1880, Rowe's Circus, the lease was held by Edward I Cole's Bohemian Dramatic Company from 1906-1910, and JC Williamson's film studio from 1913 until 1928. JC Williamson himself was a prominent actor and theatre manager, who had staged a number of successful productions in both Australia and America, who renovated the Alexandra Theatre, renaming it Her Majesty's. Williamson died in 1913, but the company JC Williamson Ltd continued to be an influential force in Australian Theatre. The 'Firm' as it was known, planned to build a comedy theatre, opposite Her Majesty's, from as early as 1913 (*The Argus*: 14.6.1913; p 16). The 'Williamson Theatre' for comedy productions was first announced in July 1913, to be a memorial to the firm's owner, and reports in the Age noted that William Pit and Kent and Budden had been commissioned to draw up plans. Ralph Marsden notes that JC Williamson Ltd 'saw the prominent corner as perfect for a modern playhouse. This would be better for more intimate offerings than the larger theatres, which generally showed spectacular melodramas and musical comedies' (Marsden, Ralph. *Metro Magazine* 157). It appears that this theatre was put on hold due to the outbreak of war, and it was during this time the firm was looking into entering the film business. A wood and fibro cement building was constructed at an estimated cost of £66. By 1918, the studio had been converted to a scenery dock for Her Majesty's Theatre, JC Williamson's intended purpose for the site.

The theatre was designed by Charles Neville Hollinshed and Albion Walkley, and tenders were called for its construction in April 1927. It appears the theatre was heavily influenced by the Broadway theatre designs of the 1920s by renowned architect Herbert J. Krapp. The John Golden Theatre (originally Theater Masque, opened in 1927), and the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre (originally Royale Theater, opened January 1927) in particular are similar in appearance, and all feature rusticated stonework at the base of the facade, with tapestry brickwork and arched windows.

*The Argus* noted that the theatre would be 'Melbourne's first example of an intimate theatre', intended for 'the production of literary comedies and what are known as Repertory plays'. The design was said to be 'drawn from northern Italian', the theatre being constructed of brick and reinforced concrete, with exterior finishes of tapestry brick and cast stone'. The intimate size of the auditorium was confirmed by the provision of only two tiers; 'there will be no gallery', and seating would be for 'only 1000 patrons'. The name of the theatre, the Comedy, had been announced in March 1927, and *The Argus* predicted it would be compact enough to allow the presentation of light comedy at its best, 'without the over emphasis which is called for when small plays are given in large theatres' and that it was the first new theatre built in Melbourne in 'many years'.

The owners of the theatre gave high praise to their new venture in the opening night souvenir program: 'It may be said without fear of contradiction that there is no other theatre anywhere quite like the Comedy. It represents an aggregation of ideas and features which have been proved sound and effective in every phase of the theatre - for the efficiency of the stage production side and for ministering to the comfort of the people in the auditorium, as well as providing restful, harmonious, and tasteful surroundings. In style, and the completeness of its "atmosphere", it stands alone. [...] Its facade is of a warm umber and bronze tapestry brick, mortared curiously and effectively with green, and rises above the base of cast stone, conveying an effect of Southern Europe. From the wrought iron balconies that protect the five big windows Juliet might at any moment peer for her lover. A broad cornice juts from the attic story. Beneath this is a curious diaper treatment in brickwork, the soffit containing

coffers coloured an intense blue, with stone coloured modelling in the centre.'

Internally, too, the theatre would impress: Come, now, into the entrance hall, the lobby whence once gains the foyer. Its low ceiling is vaulted and groined. Here, the Italian influence is continued, even intensified. [...] At the very threshold grilled admit heated air, so that no errant cold wind from the street may chill the place. The walls are of travertine, imitated [...] with its queer, cracked effect it heightens the reality of this Italian palace wherein Comedy is to be enthroned.

The Comedy was promoted as the 'last word' in theatre construction, and patron comfort was paramount - there would be no cold draughts at the Comedy. The decorative scheme was said to be 'new and novel'. Upon its opening the theatre was praised by *The Argus* as 'a gem among theatres', and by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as a 'picturesque and shapely building with a beautiful interior'.

The theatre opened with a satire - 'Our Betters' - starring well-known Canadian actress Margaret Bannerman, in her first Australian appearance. The play was not hugely successful.

The theatre perhaps did not enjoy huge success early on. *The Argus* (17.12.1928) wondered at the end of 1928 if the Leon Gordon play, 'Scandal', could 'remove the "hoodoo" which seems to have settled on the beautiful New Comedy Theatre?'. Margaret Bannerman's show had proved 'disappointing', but the paper deemed the venue's fortunes the fault of the 'apathy Melbourne folk show towards anything but the lightest entertainment.'

Productions at the Comedy Theatre:

The Comedy Theatre was constructed as an 'intimate theatre' to stage productions of a different nature to more large scale productions in Melbourne, and, indeed, others at theatres operated by JC Williamson. As was the intention of the venue, 'literary plays' by renowned playwrights including Noel Coward, J M Barrie, Anton Chekov all enjoyed runs at the Comedy. 'The Miracle Worker', by William Gibson, was staged in 1962 and was based on the autobiography of Helen Keller. In 1935, Aimee and Phillip Stuart's 'Sixteen' was staged, and was seen as the perfect blend of comedy, sentiment, incident and humour.

The theatre had fluctuating fortunes with productions in its early years - hampered by the onset of the Depression in the 1930s. However, by the 1940s, fortunes had improved and the Comedy staged a run of successful productions, culminating in the more than 800 shows of the Kiwi Revue season from 1946.

The theatre also staged a number of productions which perhaps were considered a bit more risqué. In 1943, British actress June Sylvaine starred in 'White Cargo' as a 'dark-skinned African beauty', set on a British plantation in the Congo. A correspondent to *The Argus* in 1930, was none too pleased after seeing 'The Road to Romance', complaining the 'sordid character depressed us. Are there no censors for plays? Why should such a play disgrace Melbourne?' Yet there seems to have been a large audience for such productions. 'The Kiwis', a revue company comprised of New Zealand ex-servicemen, ran for a record 857 shows of music, singing, comedy and cross-dressing. The Hogarth Puppeteers arrived in Australia in 1952, described as 'one of the biggest theatrical troupes of its kind in the world'. The Colin Morris farce, 'The Reluctant Heroes', premiered to strong reviews in 1953.

Though the Comedy, as it was affectionately shortened to, was almost continuously in use as a live theatre, there were times when it was held other entertainment events. Comedy Theatre Pictures screened the occasional film in the venue, mainly in the mid to late-1930s. In 1930, the Amateur Boxing and Wrestling championships were held there, as were various charity fund-raisers. Despite fluctuating success in the 1930s, due to the rise in the popularity of cinema and the Depression, the Comedy continued to stage successful live theatre productions throughout the twentieth century. These included plays by Noël Coward and J.M. Barrie, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar named Desire* in the 1950s, and the first Melbourne season for entertainer Barry Humphries in 1966. The New Zealand revue troop, the Kiwis, enjoyed record-breaking seasons in the post-World War II years. The Comedy Theatre continues to operate as a live theatre venue.

Theatres of 1928

*The Argus*, 'Real Estate and Building - Three New City Theatres' 24 January 1928, p. 7

'Theatre building in the heart of the city is an important factor in the current construction work. There are three theatres in various stages of erection at present. The one illustrated - the Comedy - is the nearest to completion. This is the 'intimate' theatre for J.C. Williamson Ltd. on the site of the old Hippodrome on the southeast corner of

Exhibition and Lonsdale streets. It is across the road from His Majesty's Theatre, owned by the same firm. The new theatre is intended to house small audiences, which will enjoy literary plays. The front design is intended to indicate the character of the theatre, the delicate forms and colouring of the Italian school having been chosen. [.] The theatre will cost about £125000 and will seat 1,100 persons. It contrasts with the more grandiose exterior of the theatre opposite.

In Collins street, opposite the Town Hall, Sir George Tallis and Messrs. J. and N. Tait are interested in the construction of a theatre [Regent] with larger commercial possibilities. This is to be a picture house with a large seating accommodation. As this is near to the Auditorium and the Capitol, each of which is competent to take large crowds, it seems that this commercial centre of the city is also regarded by entrepreneurs as a good base for cinema shows. The approaches to this site are to be increased and improved by a row of shops in an arcade stretching from Collins street to Flinders lane. As picture shows are open in the daytime, when shop-keepers are trading, it is evidently expected that the new theatre will bring business to the shops; thereby ensuring a good rental return to the owners of the dual property.

The third new theatre is to be on the corner of Russell street and Flinders street [Forum, former State]. Sydney capital is interested in this venture, and the plans provide for a building covering a large area of land. [.] This theatre, it is understood, will be a home for vaudeville and melodrama.

[.] Considerable distances separate these new theatres, a somewhat surprising fact in Melbourne, where the tendency of specific industries to group together in nearly all other industries. [.] Theatres in other cities, such as London and New York, have their settled centre too, but in Melbourne they are scattered over a wide area, from the Princess, in Spring street, to Alexandra Gardens, Prince's Bridge, and in Russell, Bourke, Collins, and Swanston street. With the exception of the Collins street building opposite the Athenaeum, and the Capitol, none of the lately erected theatres have been built on high priced land. Theatrical managers appear to prefer sites as near as possible to retail trade centres without coming into the ambit of high land values. There are not many eligible theatre sites left in or around the heart of the city. A theatre site must be of ample dimensions, and it is required that the building shall have thoroughfares on all four sides, to provide for the easy escape of an audience in case of fire.

## **Assessment Against Criteria**

### ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

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

The Comedy Theatre is historically significant at a State level for its association with Melbourne's theatre scene in the twentieth century. It was the only live theatre building (not cinema) built in the It is important as an 'intimate' theatre building, seating only 1000 patrons, a shift in the scale and type of theatre productions in Victoria.

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

The Comedy Theatre is significant at a State level as a rare example of a theatre building which still retains its original design and features both externally and internally.

#### 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.

#### e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

The Comedy Theatre is of architectural significance as an outstanding and intact example of an interwar theatre, which still retains its original design and features both externally and internally. It is important for demonstrating the influence of the Broadway theatres designed by noted American architect, Herbert J. Krapp in the mid-1920s.

#### 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.*  
The Comedy Theatre is of State significance as an example of the work by theatre architects Albion Walkley and Neville Hollinshed. The Comedy Theatre is of significance for its association with JC Williamson Ltd, the important and influential theatrical company, which owned and operated a number of Melbourne's theatres in the first half of the twentieth century.

## **Plaque Citation**

Designed by CN Hollinshed and Albion Walkley for prominent theatre operators JC Williamson Ltd in 1928, the Comedy is an 'intimate' scaled theatre influenced by Broadway theatres of the period.

## **Extent of Registration**

1. All of the land marked L1 on Diagram 2273 held by the Executive Director, being all of Lot 1 on Title Plan 611666X.
2. All the building including the verandah marked B1 Diagram 2273 held by the Executive Director.

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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/>*