

CREMORNE GARDENS / CREMORNE THEATRE (BRISBANE)

Built by Edward Branscombe for his costume companies, the open-air Cremorne Gardens (later Cremorne Theatre) was taken over by John N. McCallum in 1916. Although it was leased out to various theatre and film concerns in later years the Cremorne remained under the McCallum family's control until it burned down in 1954. Among the companies and people associated with the venue during its 50-odd years were the Dandies, Courtiers Costume Comedy Co, Town Topics, Huxham's Serenaders, Pat Hanna's Famous Diggers and Will Mahoney and Evie Hayes.

1911-1916

Brisbane's Cremorne Theatre (originally known as the Cremorne Gardens) was built in 1911 by variety entrepreneur Edward Branscombe as part of an Australia-wide circuit of open-air theatres designed especially for his Dandies costume comedy companies. An 1800-seat open-air venue complete with a covered stage, semi-circle seating, and the usual conveniences (although described as open-air, the theatre did have a waterproof covering), the venue was built on a vacant plot of land on the city's South Bank (near the Victoria Bridge), which was then owned by the Queensland Deposit Bank. It opened for business on 5 August 1911. While the Cremorne was largely unsuitable as a venue during the winter months or whenever heavy rain fell, the cool breezes from the river made it a particular favourite with patrons during the warmer half of the year. The venue's first general manager was John N. McCallum; under his guidance; the Cremorne Gardens flourished, establishing itself as the first major rival to Ted Holland's Brisbane operations. The entertainment offered at the Cremorne between 1911 and 1915 was predominantly given by Branscombe's Dandies, and in this respect the venue played a key role in Brisbane's cultural development. The *Brisbane Courier* records in its 14 March 1914 edition, for example, that the troupe then playing the theatre had been responsible for "introducing the Tango to Brisbanites." Led by Florence Henderson and Herbert Walton (in specially designed Spanish costumes) the troupe demonstrated both the ballroom and stage versions, with the latter being described as "much more elaborate" (8).

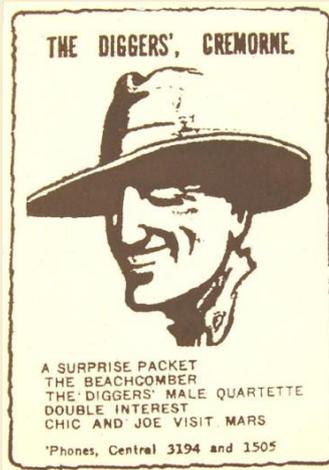


Cremorne audience ca. 1920s

Source: Queensland Performing Arts Trust. *Treading the Boards* (1999), 43.

In September 1915, Branscombe finally purchased the land on which the Cremorne stood from the new owner, the Permanent Assets and Investments Co). On 27 May the following year, however, he sold the entire venture to McCallum. Although Branscombe had removed himself from the Cremorne's day-to-day operations, an arrangement was struck between the two men that allowed him to continue sending his companies to the theatre on a regular basis. The *Brisbane Courier* records at the time the deal with Branscombe was announced that "Mr McCallum has floated his theatrical enterprise into a limited liability company, to be known as The Dandies (Queensland) Limited, of which company he is the managing director. Several important alterations are being made at the Cremorne, and special attention has been directed to the vestibule and entrance. New waterproof awnings and side screens have replaced the old ones, and the entire interior has been repainted. The stage has not been neglected, and patrons will see a beautiful new stage setting [and] new costumes" (29 July 1916, 12). In addition to increasing the electric lighting to "3,000 candle power," McCallum also installed a large gutter for draining away water from the overhead awnings, thereby reducing to a minimum the amount of water on the ground inside the theatre (BC: 7 Aug. 1916, 11). The Cremorne opened under McCallum's management on 12 August 1916 with the Orange Dandies. In her thesis on Brisbane Theatre During World War I, Delyse Ryan observes that Edward Branscombe still had some influence on the Dandies during the first year of McCallum's operations, with this evident, for example, in the engagement of Phillip Hardman, previously music director of the Pink Dandies and at the time Branscombe's general musical director (81).

1917-1939



Brisbane Courier 4 Sept. (1924), 2.

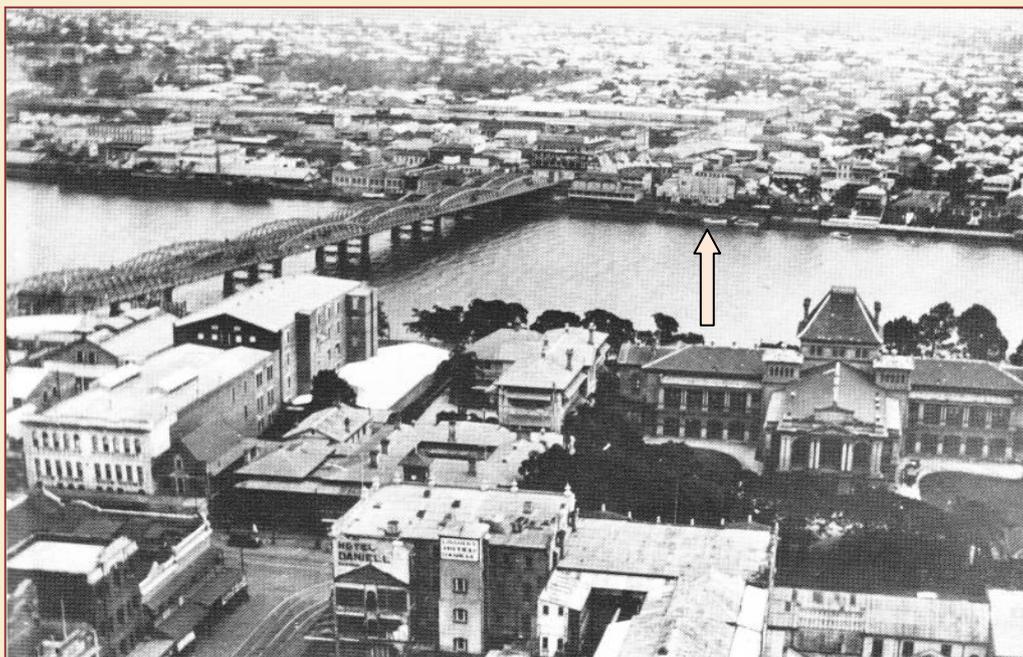
The Cremorne continued featuring musical revues for much of the first four years of the 1930s, with hit shows including *The Spice of Life* (1934), starring Syd Beck, Billy Maloney, and Maurice Barling. Increasing competition from film eventually forced McCallum into wiring the theatre for sound in 1934, and he subsequently leased it out to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (the initial two-year contract was later extended to 1940). Although the change to a film venue meant reducing the seating by over half (down to 1300) so as to make it more suitable for patrons, the result is said to have improved both the acoustics and ventilation. The MGM lease also effectively marked the end of McCallum's full-time management of the Cremorne's entertainment. Live variety entertainment returned to the theatre in the early 1940s, but from then on the entrepreneur's management was mostly concerned with leasing arrangements, thus allowing others to take the financial risks. From 28 May 1936, Dandies Queensland Ltd, the original company formed by John N. McCallum, ceased operations and the theatre came under the control of McCallum Enterprises Pty Ltd.

During the remainder of the war years, the Cremorne played host to three major variety companies, with each playing upwards of nine months at the theatre without a break. These companies were McCallum's Courtiers, Huxham's Serenaders, and Walter Johnson's Town Topics (aka McCallum's Town Topics). By 1919, after having made a number of extensive changes to the theatre, including a roof, expanded backstage area, and additional seating (allowing for almost 3,000 patrons), McCallum was able to produce large-scale spectacles at the Cremorne, including annual Christmas pantomimes and operas.

The variety company that became most associated with the Cremorne during the 1920s was Pat Hanna's Famous Diggers, which played there continuously between November 1923 and April 1925. During the remainder of the 1920s, McCallum put together an assortment of troupes under various names, including the Topics of 1925 and Snapshots of 1926. None, however, were to match the longevity of the Orange Dandies, Huxham's Serenaders, the Town Topics, and the Famous Diggers.



Originally published by the *Daily Sun*
Source: Mavis Donovan. *The Stars Shine On*
(1984), 43.



View of Brisbane South Bank (including Cremorne Theatre) from the CBD (ca. 1920s)

Original photo from Queensland Newspapers Pty Ltd
Source: Mavis Donovan. *The Stars Shine On* (1984), 41.

1940-1954

Between January 1940 and early 1943, the Cremorne was leased to a Sydney-based firm, Roxy Theatres. The management initially continued screening films but in 1941 returned the theatre to a live-entertainment venue, largely in response to the influx into the city of Australian and American military personnel. Among the stars brought to Brisbane by Roxy Theatres were American variety performers Will Mahoney, his wife Evie Hayes, and Bob Geraghty (the trio had first arrived in Australia in 1938 on a Tivoli contract.) By the following year, South Brisbane had become the primary entertainment centre for US soldiers and naval personnel, and the Cremorne found itself in competition with such theatres as the Trocadero Ballroom, Blue Moon Skating Rink, and several hotels in Stanley Street.



It was the Cremorne, however, that became the most popular entertainment establishment, which in 1943 led to Mahoney, Geraghty, and Hayes taking over the lease with their own newly formed company, Cremorne Productions Pty Ltd [see *Nat Phillips Collection, Box 7: Will Mahoney section*]. Mahoney's connections back in America allowed him the opportunity of attracting a number of high-profile American entertainers and celebrities who might otherwise have not travelled north to Brisbane. Among the most notable were comedians Jack Benny and Bob Hope, musicians Larry Adler and Artie Shaw, and actor Gary Cooper (ctd. 'Mahoney, William James' ABD: online). Mahoney and Hayes did not produce only their own shows during the five years they leased the Cremorne, however, as a number of revues are known to have been staged there in 1946 under the auspices of Harry O. Wren (Wren's Greater Theatres Pty Ltd). Among the noted Australia variety stars to play the Cremorne during the early to mid-1940s were George Wallace, Mike Connors and Queenie Paul, Gloria Dawn, John V. Dobbie, and the young Peggy Mortimer (later Peggy Toppano).

Following Mahoney and Hayes' return to America in 1948, the Cremorne attempted to continue as a live venue. This was largely due to the increasing number of purpose-built cinemas that effectively superseded the old theatre venues. The poor patronage that ensued eventually saw the venue close in 1949, although it was used for several years by local amateur groups such as the Musical and Theatre Guild of Queensland (Donovan, 73). In 1951, John McCallum leased the Cremorne Theatre to Universal-International Pictures, and it was subsequently converted into office spaces. Three years later, on 18 February 1954, the theatre was destroyed by fire. A *Courier Mail* report on the fire estimates that 40,000 people watched the theatre burn down (19 Feb. 1954, n. pag.).

SEE ALSO

- [John N. McCallum](#)
- [Town Topics Co](#)
- [Edward Branscombe's Dandies](#)
- [Edward Branscombe](#)
- [Courtiers Costume Comedy Co](#)
- [Famous Diggers](#)



Source: *Courier Mail* 30 Jan. (2010).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Ryan, Simon and Delyse. "[Cremorne Theatre \(Brisbane\)](#)." *The Academy Literature and Drama Website* [sighted 16/04/2011]

Djubal, Clay. "[Cremorne Theatre](#)." *AustLit* (2008).

Donovan, Mavis. *The Stars Shine On* (1983).

[Nat Phillips Collection](#), Fryer Library, The University of Queensland (UQFL9). [Several boxes contain documents, manuscripts, and photographs relating to John N. McCallum and the Cremorne Theatre. Photographs in this collection can be viewed on line at The University of Queensland's eSpace repository - see: [Australian Popular Theatre](#)]

Queensland Performing Arts Museum. *Treading the Boards: A Survey of Theatre Buildings in Brisbane 1847-1998* (1999), 43-45.

Scott, Dulcie. "The Ghosts of Old Cremorne." *TBR*: 28 Feb. (1954), 15, 17.

See also:

AV: 13 May (1914), n. pag. • 10 Sept. (1920), p.6.

BC: 9 Aug. (1913), 2 • 14 Mar. (1914), 12 • 5 Sept. (1914), 12 • 23 Sept. (1916), 12 • 10 Nov. (1917), 7 • 22 Sept. (1917), 12 • 21 June (1919), 12 • 26 July (1919), 12 • 16 Aug. (1919), 6 • 18 Aug. (1919), 8 • 20 Sept. (1919), 12 • 22 Nov. (1919), 12 • 30 Apr. (1921), 12 • 21 May (1921), 12 • 30 July (1921), 7 • 10 Sept. (1921), 13 • 17 Sept. (1921), 13.

TT: Sept. (1915), 38 • Mar. (1916), 13 • July (1919), 23 • Feb. (1922), 21.



Cremorne Theatre Company entertaining the troops at Doomben

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL9)

Source: Fryer Library, University of Queensland

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