

JOHN N. McCALLUM

Associated with the original Cremorne Theatre in Brisbane for its entire life, John Neal McCallum's early career involved various managerial (including music director) and administrative positions with the Brisbane Musical Union, Centennial and Albert halls, and as Queensland representative for touring international variety acts such as the Edward Branscombe's Westminster Glee and Concert Party. When Branscombe opened the Cremorne Garden Theatre in 1911 he offered McCallum the position of manager. In 1916 McCallum bought the theatre from Branscombe and under his management the Cremorne became one of the city's leading variety entertainment venues, hosting year-long seasons with troupes like The Courtiers Costume Comedy Company, Huxham's Serenaders, the Town Topics, and Pat Hanna's Famous Diggers. Although the McCallum family retained ownership of the Cremorne until it burned down in 1954, it was leased out to other theatrical operations and film exhibitors from the early 1930s onwards. Despite being removed from the day to day running of the Cremorne throughout much of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, McCallum was still involved in much of the business that went with being a theatre owner. His son, John McCallum, was an actor, producer, director, and screenwriter who achieved both local and international recognition.

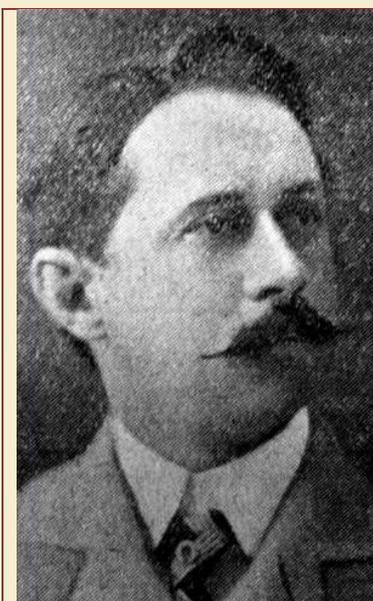
[NB: This biography primarily focuses on the years 1900-1925. Research into McCallum's life and career pre-1900 and post-1925 is yet to be undertaken.]

John Neil McCallum migrated with his parents from Scotland and settled in Brisbane, where they established a small farm in the suburb of New Farm. Following the early death of his father, he and his brother were brought up by their mother and continued to run the property. Margaret McCallum, who had previously been an amateur actress, insisted that he learn to play the piano and organ as a child. A more than capable music student, he later served for eleven years as organist at the Ann Street Presbyterian Church. One of his earliest jobs was with Harry Myers, proprietor of the Brisbane Finance Company, which was situated at the North Quay end of Queen Street. Here, he learned to write in copperplate. McCallum's sons John and Ian indicate that their father managed the business after the death of Myers. McCallum's interest and acumen in the area of finance saw him build an investment portfolio from an early age, and subsequently led to him being sought after as a secretary and manager for various local organisations.

1900-1910

By 1900 McCallum had established himself as the secretary and manager of the Brisbane Musical Union (effectively a choral and orchestral society), which had its office located at the corner of George and Queen Streets. The Union held regular concerts and benefits in Brisbane throughout the year with most being presented at the nearby Centennial Hall (Adelaide Street, between Albert and Edward Streets). Under McCallum's direction, the Union presented quality concerts comprising local performers and musicians, in addition to attracting some interstate and occasionally overseas artists. The musical director was George Sampson, with support from other experienced local musicians such as C. H. Allen and Robert Kaye. Among the highlights of 1900, for example, were a number of benefits in aid of the Queensland Patriotic Fund (including several musical performances of Rudyard Kipling's "The Absent-minded Beggar," accompanied by music composed by Robert Kaye, organist of All Saint's Church) and concerts by Mrs W. G. Willmore (10 Feb.), Lillian Parslow Wallace (21 Mar.), Kate Rooney (28 Aug.), and Elsie Hall (24 Nov.). The Union also staged a concert at the Opera House in late October (Mrs Mason-Beatty's Dancing Pupils / E. Lloyd Benefit Fund) and several more at the Exhibition Hall, with one notable production being *The Messiah*, featuring Hetty Holroyd (22 Nov.).

Over the next few years, McCallum continued to promote local talent such as young Queensland opera soprano Dora Isaacs (1902), while overseeing the Musical Union's regular choral and orchestral programs. By 1905, he had expanded his activities to include managing the Centennial Hall and acting as the business representative to touring performers such as Scottish prima donna Jessie MacLauchlan (ca. May 1905), Edward Branscombe's Westminster Glee and Concert Party (Exhibition Hall, ca. May 1905), Watkin Mills Concert Company (ca. June 1905), Ignacy Paderewski (ctd. AV: 13 May 1914, n. pag.), and a number of leading local artists such as soprano Amy Castles (ctd. AV: 13 May 1914, n. pag.) and violinist Ernest Toy (July 1907).



Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

It was to be McCallum's association with Edward Branscombe, however, that proved to be the most advantageous. Branscombe first toured Australia in 1903 and maintained a regular and often extended association with the country for several decades thereafter. When the Englishman returned to Brisbane in 1908, McCallum organised the season at His Majesty's Theatre (ca. Nov/Dec.) and helped arrange special guest artists such as "the wonderful Cherniavskis." Branscombe re-visited the Queensland capital in 1910 with his Scarlet Troubadours company and was greeted once more by packed houses at His Majesty's. The *Brisbane Courier* notes that McCallum once again looked after the local management details (18 Apr. 1910, 6). Another high-profile company to use McCallum's services was the Russian Operatic Singers, headed by Eugene Ossipoff (baritone) and Zoe Dolinsky (soprano), which played under Frank Musgrove's direction at the Albert Hall in August that same year.

1911-1915

By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Edward Branscombe conceived the idea of establishing an Australia-wide circuit of open-air theatres to house his Dandies costume comedy companies. The idea was to provide variety entertainment under a recognisable brand name. He did this by rotating half a dozen troupes (known variously as the Green Dandies, Scarlet Dandies, etc.) around the country. Each troupe stayed at any particular venue for between two weeks to upwards of nine months. For his Brisbane operations, he leased a plot of land on the city's South Bank (near the Victoria Bridge) from the Queensland Deposit Bank and developed 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). Naming the venue the Cremorne Garden Theatre, Branscombe engaged John N. McCallum as general manager and opened for business on 5 August 1911. Among the featured artists in the as-yet-unidentified Dandies troupe were light comedienne Maud Fane and basso/actor Howard Hall. Hall was later an integral member of the Jim Gerald Revue Company.

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. Under McCallum's guidance, the venue established itself as major rival to Ted Holland, who (in partnership with Percy St John) moved his operations from the Theatre Royal to the newly built Empire Theatre in Albert Street. 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).

EDWARD BRANSCOMBE'S
DANDIES.

Cremorne Gardens, Stanley-street, South Brisbane.

TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY), AT 8.15 O'CLOCK.

Palace Gardens corner of North Quay and Ann-street.
FOR TWO WEEKS ONLY.

TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY), AT 8.15 O'CLOCK.

Popular Prices, 2/ and 1/, Box Plans for both companies now open at
Paling's. No booking fee.

JOHN N. McCALLUM, Manager,

Brisbane Courier 9 Aug. (1913), 2.

Although the Cremorne and Empire theatres were rivals in the Brisbane entertainment industry, the respective owners/managers were still businessmen, and in 1912 McCallum, Branscombe, Holland and St John saw an opportunity to combine forces in a new venture. Forming a consortium called Palace Gardens Ltd, the quartet organised the erection of the Palace Gardens, an open-air theatre situated at the corner of Ann Street and North Quay. Management of the Gardens was initially undertaken by Holland and St John. When Edward Branscombe Ltd bought the freehold property in 1913 McCallum was installed as the new managing director. Under his direction it was leased out to various concerns, including boxing and film exhibition. Although McCallum removed himself from the day to day management of the Palace Gardens around that time, he may have remained Managing Director of the consortium (which effectively still owned the venue if not the land) until it was eventually sold (possibly in 1917).

1916-1918

In September 1915, Edward Branscombe also finally purchased the land on which the Cremorne stood (it was then owned by the Permanent Assets and Investments Co), but on 27 May 1916 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, which 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:

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 water away 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. However, in her thesis "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). Although the Dandies continued to be associated with Branscombe, the ensemble's extended Brisbane season was nevertheless attributed to McCallum's overall direction and understanding of his audience. One of his more significant policies was to change the membership of the troupe more frequently than had been the case under Branscombe. Thus, while the Orange Dandies were billed as the Cremorne's attraction until the venue closed for the winter break the following year, the troupe underwent some considerable personnel changes about half way through the season.

Among those engaged to play the Cremorne with the Orange Dandies were several leading Australian-based variety artists, notably comedian/singer Walter George, Georgie Martin, Courtney Ford, Pop Batterbury, and Harry de Roebuck. In addition to the usual vaudeville fare, the Orange Dandies specialised in miniature burlesques and revusical-style sketches. One of the first of such entertainments staged at the Cremorne was *Invitation's Out* (12-19 Aug. 1916). Over the next nine months McCallum produced such pieces as *Shakespeare Mad*, *The Mummy*, *The Noble Order of the Bad Lads*, *An Operatic Nightmare*, *A Pirate's Return*, *Seaside Incidentals*, *A Dream of Covent Garden*, *The Operatic Restaurant*, and *A Motorcar Burlesque*.

When the Orange Dandies ended their nine-month season at the Cremorne in early May 1917, McCallum had demonstrated the viability of the venue to a much greater degree than his predecessor. While the theatre was closed for the winter, he travelled south to Sydney and Melbourne in order to engage a new resident company for the Cremorne. When he arrived back in Brisbane in July, McCallum announced that he had secured the Courtiers Costume Comedy Company then under the direction of Sydney Mannering (previously associated with the Scarlet Troubadours). McCallum's Courtiers debuted at the Cremorne on 4 August 1917. Headed by Harry Borrodale (who eventually took over directorial responsibilities) the initial ensemble included comedian Joe Brennan (better known in later years for his partnership with Ida Newton), singer Colin Crane, and serio-comedienne Linda Dale. Crane and Dale remained with the troupe until 1918. Other key performers to appear with the Courtiers during the remainder of the war years included sketch duos George Edwards and Rosie Parkes (1917-1918) and Arthur Helmsley and Elsa May (1917/1918).



McCallum and his Courtiers
Theatre June 1918, 4.

Reviews of the company's performances indicate that it rarely fell short of expectations. The *Brisbane Courier's* theatre critic writes in the 10 November 1917 issue, for example: "As wine improves with age, so the Courtiers at the Cremorne Open-air Theatre appear to add to the quality of their entertainments as time goes on. Last night's programme dispelled any possible idea of ennui, for newness was apparent from first to last in song and jest, and patrons are assured of satisfaction whichever way their taste may lie" (7). McCallum's Courtiers presented a similarly upmarket vaudeville fare based on the costume comedy style of entertainment introduced by Branscombe. As Delyse Ryan notes, "The heaviest focus ... was place on the presentation of songs. Solos, duets, trios and quartets featured, but great emphasis was placed on what the company referred to as 'concerted items.'" Popular ballads and humorous songs numbers also appeared on the bill (130).

While Ryan sees the Cremorne's fare as more music hall than vaudeville, the entertainment was likely to have reflected McCallum's own tastes, which had undoubtedly been developed through his years with the Brisbane Musical Union and his relationship with concert-style performances. Nevertheless, the Cremorne's entertainment policy under John N. McCallum was always meant to be "merry and bright" (BC: 10 Nov. 1917, 2).

In addition to the mixture of popular songs and comedy interspersed with more serious musical entertainments, including orchestral and instrumental selections, the company excelled in presenting miniature dramas and musical comedies. One of the troupe's regular features was an entertainment that falls into a genre that one might loosely describe as the "musical scena." These short atmospheric-laden pieces were initially introduced by the Dandies troupe in early 1917 to not only exude the feel of exotic locations (notably images of the East) but also add glamour and spectacle to the programmes.

On 10 August 1918, McCallum reopened the Cremorne after another winter closure with a new variety troupe led by comedian/tenor Hugh Huxham and his wife Edith. Although offering a similar entertainment package to the Courtiers, part of the attraction of the Serenaders was that the troupe comprised a greater number of performers. Among the principal members were Dan Weldon, Miss Pop Batterbury, Reg Harrison, and Syd Hollister. Huxham's Serenaders remained at the Cremorne until May the following year.

1919-1922

The *Theatre* reported in its July 1919 edition that McCallum planned to launch out extensively for the forthcoming season, engaging the services of Walter Johnson as director for a new company called the Town Topics (23). McCallum had, in fact, secured Johnston as early as March that year and sent him to America for three months to procure the latest musical entertainments, sketches, burlesques, and other novelties (BC: 20 Sept. 1919, 12). Although the final ensemble had not been settled on at the time of McCallum's July announcement, it was revealed that Johnson's plan was to secure a short season in the south prior to the company's Brisbane debut in August, to ensure that the performers and the repertoire were ready to step up to the high standards set by the Cremorne's previous companies. The ensemble proved to be even larger than the Serenaders, comprising more than twenty principal artists, a chorus/ballet of twelve, and an orchestra of around a dozen musicians (BC: 21 May 1921, 12).

During the winter closure, McCallum undertook extensive alterations to the Cremorne, including the construction of a new stage, making it possible to present more extravagant musicals, dramas, and comedies. The theatre also finally received a permanent roof, replacing the old canvas one. The Cremorne still retained its al fresco appearance, however, with the sides remaining open. For inclement weather, McCallum had screens constructed, with these being fitted to the sides when required (BC: 21 June 1919, 12). In the lead up to the Town Topics season, the *Brisbane Courier* further records that alterations to the stage, designed by architect G. H. M. Addison, included replacing the old system of rolling up the screens and scenery with a system of counter balances, allowing the screens to be manipulated as required. The new stage also encroached on the auditorium by ten feet, and had been raised to five feet high, fifty feet wide and thirty feet deep, a considerable increase in size. With regard to the audience, a large and comfortable dress circle was still being erected and the increased seating was expected to allow up to 500 extra patrons, thus making the Cremorne's capacity somewhere around 2,300 people (16 Aug. 1919, 6). By mid 1921, however, the venue's increasing popularity forced McCallum to provide even more seating, thus "making it one of the largest buildings for entertainment in Australia," according to the *Brisbane Courier* (30 July 1921, 7).

Brisbane Courier 16 Aug. (1919), 2.

CREMORNE THEATRE.
 STANLEY-STREET, JUST OVER
 VICTORIA BRIDGE.
 GRAND REOPENING

To-night. To-night.
 WALTER JOHNSON'S
"TOWN TOPICS,"

A MAGNIFICENT ENTERTAINMENT:
 On lines never before attempted at
 Cremorne.

Picturesque Eastern Comic Opera,
"Rajah of Dampoor."
 Extremely Amusing Comedy,
 Beautiful Scenic Effects,
 Gorgeous Costumes,
 Musical Gems,
 Humorous Interludes.

RAGTIME GRAND OPERA
 SINFONETTE,
"A Midnight Cabaret,"
 A CHARMING BALLET AND
 CHORUS OF BEAUTIFUL GIRLS.
 FULL ORCHESTRA.

GRAND NEW DRESS CIRCLE
 NOW OPEN.
 200 Exceptionally Fine Seats.
 BOOK YOUR SEATS
 at Paving's. After 2 p.m. to-day the
 plan will be on view at the Theatre,
 where seats may be reserved by
 Telephone No. 3194.

REMEMBER—POPULAR PRICES.
 2/6 (Reserved), 2/, and 1/—Plus Tax.

The Town Topics opened on 16 August 1919, preceded by a good deal of advance publicity. The opening production, "a magnificent entertainment on lines never before attempted at the Cremorne" was a picturesque Eastern comic opera titled *The Rajah of Dampoor*, a spoof on Alfred Hill's 1916 comic opera *The Rajah of Shivapore*. In addition to Johnson and music director/composer Frederick Whaite, the ensemble comprised a "who's who" of local variety artists, notably Scottish comedian Elton Black, J. C. Williamson's stars Lou Vernon and Alice Bennetto, Yorke Gray, Leslie Jeffcott, and Dorothy Leigh. The engagement of this company indeed represented a marked change in direction by McCallum, a situation that came about only after the considerable changes made to the Cremorne. *The Rajah of Dampoor* was followed by the musical comedy *Castles in Corsica*, with the higher production values setting the Cremorne apart from its other Brisbane variety competitors in much the same way that Harry Rickards had previously done in Melbourne and Sydney. McCallum and Johnson were aware, however, of the importance of establishing strong local connections, with many of the productions being written by members of the troupe and relating to local and topical issues. Such productions in the second half of 1919 included, for example, *Woolloongabba Grammar School* and *The Tragedy of the Beaudesert Express*. That same Christmas, McCallum presented for the first time a Cremorne Christmas pantomime extravaganza, *Robinson Crusoe*, which had been written by Elton Black and Fred Whaite.

Cremorne Attractions.
 John N. McCallum's
"TOWN TOPICS"
 Three New Artists:
MR. CARL FORMES,
 The Wonderful Operatic Baritone, will sing
 "Figaro," from "The Barber of Seville."
MR. ARTHUR ALDRIDGE,
 The Brilliant London Tenor,
 By special request, will repeat
 "Come into the Garden, Maud," also "Oh,
 what a Pal was Mary."
MISS VERNA BAIN,
 Danse de la Poppy.
MISS SADIE TILBURN,
 "Come into the Kitchen, Mary Ann."
MR. ELTON BLACK,
 In Scotch Mixtures.
MISS NELLE FLEMING,
 "Yum Yum."
 (Specially written and composed by Mr.
 Fred Whaite.)
MISS CLARICE HARDWICKE,
 "Gay Paree."
JONES AND RAINES
 At the Piano.
MR. BILLY MALONEY
 In Comedy Numbers.
 14 OTHER BRILLIANT NUMBERS.
 Prices: 5/- (Reserved), 2/-, and 1/-—Plus
 Tax. Box Plans at Paling's, and after 1
 p.m. to-day at the Theatre. Telephones No.
 3194 and 1506.
BOOK YOUR SEATS

Brisbane Courier 22 Jan. (1921), 2.

It is believed that Walter Johnson resigned as producer in early 1920 to rejoin the Fullers organisation as one of its revusical producers. The troupe was subsequently billed as John N. McCallum's Town Topics. The company also continued to mix up its entertainment, presenting burlesques, pantomimes, comic operas, revusicals, farces, traditional vaudeville, and, at one time, revivals of the old minstrel show (5 June). Among the high-profile new performers engaged during the year were Fred Bluett, Nell Fleming, George Whitehead, Glenmore Jones, Sidney Jones, Howard Hall, and Billy Maloney, who eventually took directorial duties. Among the Cremorne's feature productions during 1920 were the Eastern musical comedy *The General and His Army* (10 Jan.), the short comic opera *The Flower of China* (3 Apr.), and the Christmas pantomime *Cinderella*, written and produced by Elton Black. The popularity of the entertainments being offered at the Cremorne led *Australian Variety* to suggest in its 10 September issue that "the biggest show in Australia at the cheapest prices [was] being provided by Mr John N. McCallum" and that "the Town Topics [were] not only popular - [but were also] a riot" (6).

By the end of April 1921, McCallum had presented a continuous run of eighty-eight weeks without substituting a repeat programme, a feat the *Brisbane Courier's* entertainment critic suggested was all the more remarkable given 'the varied nature of the numbers, and the fact that everything has to be memorised by each individual artist.' The critic went on to write that McCallum had 'earned the gratitude of the Brisbane public by giving high-class, bright, and varied entertainment, and the large audiences that assemble nightly at the Cremorne are ample proof that the people appreciate a good thing when it is offered to them' (30 Apr. 1921, 12). The extent of the operations can also be understood by a report that notes that McCallum employed a large staff of assistants in addition to his company

and the specialist production team looking after wardrobe, scenery, property and lighting (BC: 21 May 1921, 12). As with the previous year, McCallum temporarily engaged new performers throughout the year as a means of providing additional variety to the Town Topics' troupe. Among these were Amy Rochelle, Verna Bain (daughter of J. C. Bain), and, in September, Miss Ivy Shilling, arguably Australia's leading female dancer of the era.

Around August/September 1921, McCallum sent his principal choreographer, Marjorie Bray, to Sydney (and possibly Melbourne) to make arrangements for the opening of a ballet school at the Cremorne. The entrepreneur also undertook further improvements to the theatre, including new dressing rooms, a large scene dock, and a property room. The *Brisbane Courier* records that the additions were necessary due both to the growth of the company and the forthcoming Christmas pantomime (17 Sept. 1921, 13). September also saw McCallum make an arrangement with Harry Musgrove, whereby the latter's Tivoli Theatres Ltd would supply the Cremorne with star attractions. The first of these, Ivy Shilling, was followed by the Eclair Brothers and sketch specialists Beatrice Holloway and Robert Grieg. The agreement was not one way, however, as McCallum is known to have leased Nell Fleming and Arthur Aldridge to Musgrove's Sydney theatre for six weeks beginning late September (BC: 1 Oct. 1921, 17).

Among the variety of feature productions staged by McCallum during 1921 were the excerpts from such operas as *Pagliacci* (26 Feb.- first act) and *Carmen* (26 March). He also staged the hit London revue *Bran Pie* (4 March) in association with Hugh D. McIntosh; *The Highwayman*, a dramatic sketch by Mrs M. Forrest (25 June); Billy Maloney's burlesque *Too Thin Chow*, a spoof on Oscar Asche's *Chu Chin Chow*; Fred Bluett's burlesque *All Square* (11 July); the musical comedy revue *What's Next?* (6 Aug.); and, from October, a number of productions starring British actress Beatrice Holloway and her husband Robert Grieg, including *Baby Mine* and George M. Cohan's *Broadway Jones*. The final production for 1921 was the Billy Maloney/Fred Whaite Christmas pantomime *The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe*.

By the end of January 1922, *The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe* had broken the previous year's pantomime attendance by a week, with the farewell matinee attracting an audience of over 3,000 (TT: Feb. 1922, 23). When the Town Topics company resumed its season at the Cremorne, Robert Grieg was temporarily appointed the director, replacing Billy Maloney. Later that year, McCallum arranged with Harry G. Musgrove to send his Tivoli Frolics company to Brisbane to take over the Cremorne's entertainment. Led by Englishman James Gould-Taylor, and comprising such artists as Moon and Morris, Eric Masters, Dorothy Summers, Madeline Rossiter, and Hector St Clair, the Frolics staged a season of variety and musical revuettes throughout November and December, with the year culminating in the pantomime *The Babes in the Woods*.



Theatre Feb (1920), 29.

1923-1929

McCallum's entrepreneurial intuition can be seen at its best when he engaged Pat Hanna and his Famous Diggers for a season at the Cremorne, beginning 16 November 1923. Although the troupe had previously played the Queensland capital, including its debut Australian engagement back in 1920, and routinely returned to Melbourne for extended engagements over the summer at St Kilda, no one expected the Brisbane season to be as successful as it eventually became. The *Brisbane Courier* provides an insight into the Diggers' popularity during the earlier part of the season,

reporting, 'For three hours they occupied the boards, with merry jest, dance, pathetic song and scene, and a weird mixture of all at times. Opening with an orchestral barrage under the direction of Miss Mena Raymond the company went smoothly through over 20 items' (17 Nov. 1923, 10).

When the Diggers finally departed on 22 April 1925, the troupe had set a new Brisbane record for a length of stay by any theatrical troupe, and established McCallum's credentials as one of the country's most astute theatre managers. 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, Town Topics, and the Famous Diggers.

1930-1936

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 until 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.

SEE ALSO

- [Edward Branscombe](#)
- [Edward Branscombe's Dandies](#)
- [Courtiers Costume Comedy Co](#)
- [Huxham's Serenaders](#)
- [Famous Diggers](#)
- [Cremorne Theatre](#)
- [Town Topics](#)
- [Palace Theatre](#)
- [Fred Whaite](#)



Cremorne Theatre, ca. 1940s

Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. **John N. McCallum's Entrepreneurial Style:** A good deal of evidence points to McCallum's attempt to attract a high-end, more fashionable type of patron for the Cremorne, rather than going into direct competition with the Empire Theatre, which catered more for a lower socio-economic market. In this respect, he was likely influenced by the musicians and society with whom he associated during his time with the Brisbane Musical Union. One of McCallum's first announcements after taking control of the venue, for example, was to offer valet parking to his customers, with the vehicles being taken care of by the company's commissionaire (BC: 12 Aug. 1916, 20). A few years later, beneath the banner "MR BUSINESS MAN," a series of advertisements proposed that 'After a hot day spent at the office in sultry atmosphere, you feel fagged out and nervy. You must have relaxation - it is essential. Cremorne Open-Air Theatre (De Luxe) was built for you... Good Music, Graceful Dancing, Clever Monologues and Sketches and Comedy. Yes real Comedy - clean, clever, refined fun. The Courtiers positively undertake to

drive away dull care before you are aware of it' (BC: 19 Jan. 1918, 2). The *Brisbane Courier* records in early 1917, too, that the vocal strength of the Dandies ensemble then in residence was such that the management was intending to present excerpts from grand opera, including the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (3 Feb.1917, 12).

2. In her blog "[Sandgate, in a good pair of boots](#)," Mary Diamond writes: "On the corner is Cremorne. The house was owned by a theatrical family, and named after the Cremorne vaudeville theatre in South Brisbane, which opened in 1911. The actor John McCallum grew up there. Now there's a new Cremorne Theatre at South Bank, and the old Cremorne at Sandgate is due for renovation" (*Historians are Past Caring* – sighted 12/11/2011).



Courtesy of Cathy Leutenegger.

3. A landscape photograph published in the 9 February 1907 edition of the *Brisbane Courier* (p.12) is accompanied by the caption 'Margate Beach, West Point. (Showing J. N. McCallum's Camp).' No details or explanation for the photograph have yet been uncovered.
4. McCallum left Australia for United Kingdom in early May 1914 and remained there until at least September (ctd. AV: 13 May 1914, n. pag.; and BC: 5 Sept. 1914, 12). The *Theatre* magazine's "Tympani" reports in September the following year that McCallum was "back in his old place as manager, and [that] the mistakes which occurred last summer during his absence are not now likely to be repeated" (38).
5. Walter George and Georgie Martin (Orange Dandies, 1916-1917) formed the nucleus of the Smart Set Entertainers following their departure from the Dandies in May 1917. They returned to the Cremorne with the Smart Set in 1918. George later went on to form the Walter George Sunshine Players (featuring Jim Gerald).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "[McCallum, John N.](#)" *AustLit* (2007)

Nat Phillips Collection. Fryer Library, The University of Queensland (UQFL9).

[A number of boxes in this collection contain documents, manuscripts, and photographs relating to both McCallum and the Cremorne Theatre. A Finding Aid to the collection is available online.]

- See [Nat Phillips Collection](#).

- See also: The University of Queensland's [eSpace Digital Repository](#).

See also:

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

BC: 6 Jan. (1900), 2 • 3 Feb. (1900), 2 • 5 May (1900), 14 • 14 July (1900), 2 • 18 Aug. (1900), 2 • 20 Oct. (1900), 2 • 22 Mar. (1902), 2 • 27 Sept. (1902), 2 • 6 May (1905), 2 • 29 Apr. (1905), 2 • 27 July (1907), 2 • 6 Aug. (1910), 2 • 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 • June (1918), 4 • July (1919), 23 • Feb. (1922), 21.



Courtesy of the John Oxley Library.

Last updated: 13/12/2012

Expanded and updated from the 2007 AustLit entry

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:
Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/entrepreneurs-m-r/>