NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE (Melbourne)

(aka Brennan's Amphitheatre/Palace Theatre/Apollo Theatre/ St James Theatre/The Metro)
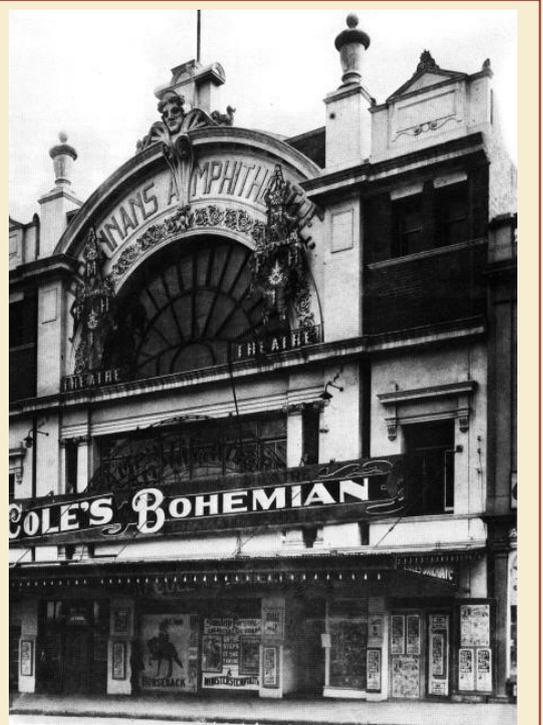
James Brennan built the Melbourne National Amphitheatre, situated at the Parliament House-end of Bourke Street, in 1912. That same year, however, he sold his vaudeville circuit to the Fullers. The 2,000 seat venue remained a part of their theatrical empire until 1940. During that time it was known variously as the National Amphitheatre (1912-16), the Palace (1916-34), and the Apollo (1934-40). Under MGM three decades-long ownership the venue was also called the St James and the Metro. Since being restored in 2007 it has once again become known as the Palace Theatre.

Situated in Bourke Street on the site of the Douglas Theatre (1860-1911) and initially known as Brennan's Amphitheatre, this Melbourne institution was opened on Easter Saturday, 6 April 1912. With an initial capacity for 2,000 patrons, the theatre's design comprised raked stalls seating with a balcony at the rear. In its 2 May edition, the *Bulletin* reports that the land and construction of the theatre cost some £32,000, and that very little appeared to have been 'wasted on interior decoration" (n. pag.).

Brennan built the theatre as a replacement for the smaller and less salubrious Gaiety Theatre, which he had been using since 1907. He did not retain ownership of the Ampitheatre long however. Shortly afterwards the Fullers gained a controlling interest in his vaudeville circuit, and although its operations were for several years known as Fuller-Brennan Ltd, James Brennan played no part in the new venture.

Under the Fullers management the building became known as the National Amphitheatre, in line with their Sydney venue at that time. In 1916 it was remodelled, with architect Henry E. White designing a three tier auditorium with smaller seating capacity (1,700 seats). According to Ross Thorne, the design was similar to other theatres that White had drawn up for the company - including venues in Sydney (Adelphi) and Wellington, New Zealand (423). After being re-opened on 4 November as the Palace Theatre, it continued being used for vaudeville, revusicals and musical comedies but eventually became the home for the Fullers' various dramatic companies.

(ca. 1912-1915
Source: www.palace.com.au

In 1923 the Palace was given another makeover, with White being once again commissioned as the architect. Ross Thorne further notes that his primary input was to redesign "the plater decoration of the auditorium in the more elegant Adam style he had just used in the nearby Princess Theatre" (423). By the early 1930s the Fullers were turning most of their venues into cinemas, and in 1934 the Palace was again remodelled and given a name change - the Apollo Theatre. Between 1936 and 1940 it was leased to film exhibitors Snider and Dean, and in 1940, shortly before the Fullers sold it to MGM, it was again renamed - this time as the St James.

As a cinema in the 1970s
Source: www.palace.com.au

2011
Source: David S. (www.yelp.com.au)

Under the ownership of MGM the venue operated for some three decades as a cinema - first as the St James and later as the Metro. In the early 1970s the theatre was returned to a live venue, with the rock musical *Hair* being the most successful production staged (39 weeks). It was renamed the Palace Cinema in 1974 and by the end of the decade had been bought by a revivalist Christian organisation. After being sold in 1987 the venue operated as the Metro Nightclub. It was taken over by the former owners and operators of St Kilda's Palace Entertainment Complex in 2007, and has since been restored as The Palace Theatre.
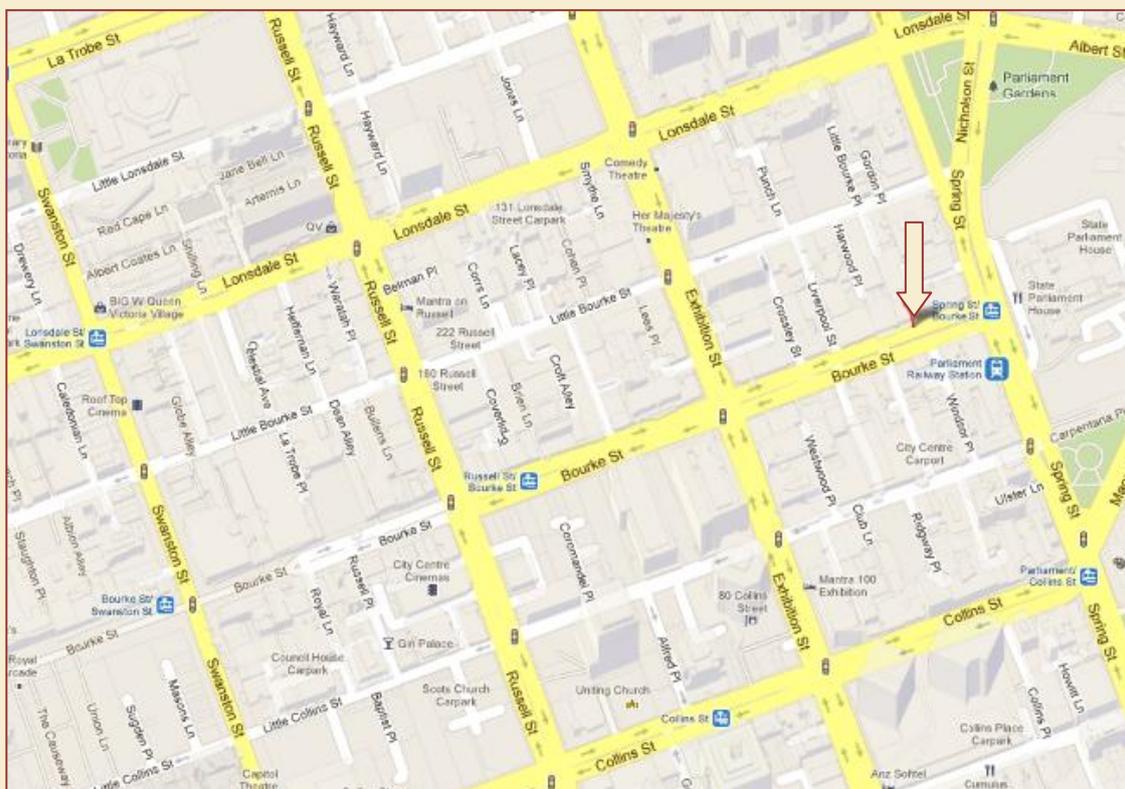
SEE ALSO

• **James Brennan**   • **Brennan's Amphitheatres Ltd**   • **Fullers Theatres**

FURTHER REFERENCE

"**History**." *Palace Theatre* website. [sighted 16/01/2013]
Thorne, Ross. "Palace Theatre Melbourne." CTTA: (1995), 422-3.