

# AUSTRALASIAN THEATRE ORGANS

## New South Wales section



*Best known location:*  
**Arcadia Theatre, Chatswood**

**Wurlitzer theatre organ**  
Opus No. 1167  
Style H  
2 manuals 10 ranks

**now 2 manuals 11 ranks**  
**at Willoughby Civic Centre, Chatswood**

**RECENT NEWS:** In the final week of November 2007 the organ was removed to storage pending demolition of the Civic Centre auditorium and its reinstallation in the new Civic Precinct Project auditorium.

The Arcadia theatre in Victoria Avenue (west), Chatswood (a north shore suburb of Sydney) first opened in 1915, privately owned and built by the Crispe family. In later years until its close as a cinema in 1961 it was leased to and managed by the Hoyts circuit. Following closure it was leased for a time by the Crispe estate to the Australian Broadcasting Commission as rehearsal and recording studios for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The building was finally demolished in 1989.

The Wurlitzer organ, opus 1167, was the second of the "mighty Wurlitzers" to be installed in a theatre in New South Wales, following not far behind the installation at the Prince Edward theatre, Sydney, and being of a similar size. The opening of the organ was performed by the same organist, Eddie Horton from U.S.A. on Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1926. Eddie was followed in 1929 by Julia Dawn (also from the U.S.) The organ was installed in two chambers, one on either side of the stage and the console was originally on a raised platform at the left. In 1936 the theatre was remodelled and the console installed in a niche underneath the main chamber on the left (as seen in the photo above.) A separate grille at stage level on the right concealed an upright Wurlitzer piano connected to the organ. The re-opening of the organ in its new position was played by Barrie Brettoner on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1936. Many well-known and received organists who performed at the Arcadia over the years included: Nicholas Robins, Barrie Brettoner, Des Tanner, Jim Williams, Penn Hughes, Denis Palmistra, Charles Tuckwell, Paul Cullen and Idwal Jenkins. This was the first pipe organ ever heard by the author of this site in his childhood when he stayed with aunts at Chatswood in the early 1940s; I had the good fortune from 1959 to 1961 to have out-of-hours access to play on this Wurlitzer. In the few years leading up to closure on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1961 the organ was only heard on Saturday nights, again played by Barrie Brettoner, without payment. The final film session was played for by theatre organ buff Ron West.

In 1962 the Crispe family donated the organ to the citizens of Willoughby and from 1969 the organ was reinstalled in the Civic Centre in Victoria Avenue (east), Chatswood. A number of "openings" at this new location were far from successful, due to insufficient attention being given by Council to the requirements for refurbishment. After intensive voluntary effort, the final official opening (played by organist David Parsons) took place on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1994. Organ concerts are presented there 3 or 4 times a year, and the organ occasionally used for other functions. Current Council plans are to demolish the Civic Centre and rebuild, with closer attention being given to the organ's requirements in a new auditorium. An English Horn rank has been added.



*Disposition of organ at the Willoughby Civic Centre:*  
Main chamber (left) Diapason, Violin, Open Flute, Clarinet, Celeste, English Horn  
Solo chamber (right) Tibia Clausa, Kinura, Orchestral Oboe, Vox Humana, Tuba.  
← Console at Willoughby Civic Centre