

# Rod Blackmore's **AUSTRALASIAN THEATRE ORGANS**

## Victoria section



*Best known location:*

**Regent Theatre,**  
**Melbourne**

**FIRST ORGAN**

**WurliTzer theatre organ**

Opus No. 2009

Style 270

4 manuals, 21 ranks

***Destroyed in fire***

Melbourne's "palace of dreams", Hoyts Theatres' Regent was the most lavish of their theatres bearing that name in capital cities around Australia, as well as a number of regional centres and in New Zealand. Opening on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1929 Melbourne's Regent was the fulfilment of the dreams of entrepreneur Frank Thring and was a response to the palatial theatres built by the competition, Union Theatres under the direction of Stuart Doyle. It is claimed, however, that the Regent style of architecture was more aesthetically acceptable than those built in the "atmospheric" style by the rival company. The architect for this *tour de force* was Cedric Ballantyne and the style adopted was the *Empire* style. The Regent was to sit on top of a single-level cinema, the Plaza, which was given an extravagant Spanish Gothic décor. The builders were James Porter & Sons who had already built the Adelaide and Sydney Regent theatres. The theatre had the largest stage in Australia until the Adelaide Festival Centre was built. Seating accommodated 3,287 people.

Early in the morning of Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April 1945 disaster struck. A fire commencing in the rear of the dress circle was found to be ablaze, and the ceiling soon collapsed into the auditorium. In just a couple of hours the great Regent theatre was reduced to a cavernous, smouldering ruin. The destruction was absolutely complete. The Plaza theatre beneath was flooded with water to a depth of 1.5m but otherwise was not badly damaged.

Architects Cowper, Murphy and Appleford were commissioned to design the Regent Mk.II, aiming to restore it to accord with Ballantyne's original concept. Largely this was achieved, although the proscenium had a reshaped rectangular opening instead of the grand arch that had been the hallmark of Ballantyne's style. Construction was undertaken by Hansen-Yuncken a Danish-German partnership. The rebuilt theatre opened on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> December 1947.

The WurliTzer theatre organ ordered for the original Regent in 1929 was also the largest of those installed in Regent theatres in Australia. Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane Regent theatres each had organs of 3 manuals 15 ranks, style 260 by WurliTzer. Melbourne's Regent gained a 4 manuals 21 ranks organ, style 270, opus 2009, the same model as installed by the rival Union Theatres in their State theatres, Melbourne and Sydney, although without a secondary console. (WurliTzer had built only one other of this style, that installed in the Trocadero cinema, Elephant & Castle, London, U.K., opus 2139) The console was on a hydraulic lift in front of the left hand side of the stage, adjacent to the orchestra pit, and also controlled a Grand Piano. The pipework was contained in two chambers, one either side of the proscenium.

The organ was opened in 1929 by organist Stanley Wallace from the U.S., in keeping with WurliTzer policy of having an experienced theatre organist accompany the organ as part of the purchase agreement. Other organists who played at the Regent prior to 1945 included: Eileen Mc Carthy, Eddie Fitch (also from U.S.), Lionel Corrick (notably holding the longest residence), Charles Tuckwell, Stan Seddon, Will Westbrook, Victor Riley and finally Mervyn Welch (who was resident at the time of the fire.)

WurliTzer opus 2009 was tragically and completely destroyed in the fire that consumed the theatre.

**Go now to the stories of the second and third organs in the rebuilt Regent theatre.**

**Pipe ranks of opus 2009 were:**

Solo chamber: Horn Diapason, Kinura, Orchestral Oboe, Trumpet, Tibia Clausa, Tuba Mirabilis, Saxophone, Quintadena, String, Oboe Horn.

Main chamber: Diaphonic Diapason, Dulciana, Bourdon-Flute, Clarinet, Vox Humana, Tuba Horn, Gamba, Gamba Celeste, Viol d'Orchestre, Viol Celeste, Unda Maris.

*Photo of Eddie Fitch at Regent 4/21 console c.1930 – with acknowledgment to Ian McIver's "Theatre Organs under the Southern Cross" →*

