Lost Cinemas of Rundle and Hindley Streets

Remember when going to the ‘flicks’, ‘talkies’, ‘pictures’ or a ‘show’ in Adelaide was an occasion to dress up for? Take a stroll with us as we explore the lost cinemas and theatres of Rundle and Hindley Streets.
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cityofadelaide.com.au/lost-cinemas
Curzon Theatre

124 Rundle Mall, Adelaide (now shop)
Local Heritage (Townscape) Place

Known as:
Liberty Theatre 1943-1952
Curzon Theatre 1952-1964

Located alongside the Richmond Hotel, this war-time single level 400-seat cinema, opened New Year’s Day 1943 as the Liberty Theatre.

Described as ‘the aristocrat of intimate cinema’, it became Adelaide’s first art house, showing foreign films which were referred to as ‘sizzlers’.

The large first floor display window was used to advertise its current attraction and the projection room was originally placed between the 1st and 2nd floors.

It was also known as the Curzon Theatre from 1952.

The building was originally constructed in 1901-1902 for H L Vosz Ltd (reputedly Australia’s oldest glass, oil and colour business) to the design of architect English & Soward. This business developed into Clarksons Ltd. It is currently used as a shop.

Image courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 631/2/404

Image courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, B 12328
The first theatre on this site was the short-lived Arcadia Picture Palace which opened on 2 July 1910 in a converted former shoe store. It closed less than a year later on 11 February 1911 and was redesigned as the Pavilion Theatre (The Pav), which turned out to be rather more successful. Unlike other theatres of the time, the Pav operated on a 'continuous' system of non-stop film displays from 11am to 11pm. For the price of three pence for a seat in the stalls, or six pence for a seat in the circle, movie-goers could stay for as long as they wished.

Its child-minding service was an unusual attraction and as a result, made it one of the most popular cinemas in Adelaide – especially amongst women who needed to do some shopping in Rundle Street. Special lady attendants were on hand to look after the children and those old enough could watch the films, seated in the dress circle. In the first year of operation, about 500,000 tickets were sold, when the population of South Australia was only around 400,000.

The Pav closed in 1929 and the facilities were repurposed as a mini-golf course but that was short-lived, and it reopened as the Rex Theatre on 31 March 1933. The new theatre featured ‘rear projection principles’ and an advanced trough lighting system new to Adelaide at the time. Business was so successful that by early 1940 an extensive redevelopment of the building was undertaken, and the Edwardian façade of classical elements was redone in a new Art Deco style to the design of architect John Kirkpatrick. On hot nights the roof could be opened to allow the cool breezes to blow through the theatre. After a short closure and reopen period the theatre finally closed on 29 July 1961 with the showing of Black Orpheus. Shortly after closing the contents were auctioned off and Cox-Foy’s department store expanded.
The Plaza Theatre was built from the old Embassy Ballroom. It opened on Thursday 27 October 1955 with “Summer Madness” - Katharine Hepburn attended in person to officially open the theatre.

Special sight lines and seating gave the 735 patrons an uninterrupted view of the screen in the one level cinema.

It was the first Adelaide theatre especially built for CinemaScope presentations. The entrance was in a laneway, which ran beside the Regent Theatre. The main decorative motif inside the Plaza Theatre was a bold striking plaster moulding of Pegasus, the legendary winged-horse, curving away on each side of the proscenium. The main programming idea was to screen exclusive British product, but this could not be sustained and ended by June 1957. In April 1958 “Around the World in 80 Days” started its 45-week season in the new Todd-AO process. A new screen was installed, but within the confines of the original proscenium. In November 1959 the Plaza Theatre closed for 10 days for the installation of a new wrap-around screen and curtains which covered up the proscenium and the Pegasus motifs on the walls. The theatre opened again on Wednesday November 18, 1959 with “South Pacific” in Todd-AO, running for 82 weeks.

In February 1966, the Plaza Theatre was renamed the Paris Theatre and opened with its new signage with “The Sound of Music” in the Todd-AO process, lasting two years and three weeks. “The Sound of Music” concluded its long engagement on Saturday May 25, 1968. A few months later, after a few very minor features, the theatre closed with “A Guide to the Married Man” and was demolished in late-1968, to allow for the completion of a shopping arcade, which also decimated her beautiful sister theatre, the Regent Theatre.

In April 1969 a new cinema opened on the former Plaza/Paris Theatre site, with Julie Andrews in “Star!”. Known as Regent 2, it was designed by architect Peter Muller. Since that time, it has been twinned and was still operating in 2001, but has since closed.
Regent Theatre
101-107 Rundle Mall, Adelaide (now Regent Arcade)

When it opened in June 1928, the Regent was described in The Advertiser, 29 June 1928 as Australia’s most luxurious theatre, a “Palace of Art”. It contained tapestries, paintings, statues and other objects of art that enhanced the idea of grandeur and the cultural prominence of the theatre and bore a strong resemblance to the Regent in Sydney, which opened three months earlier.

It had an orchestra pit that could accommodate a full-size orchestra and in 1930 a huge Wurlitzer organ was installed.

The US and Australia were leading in world cinema architecture at the time and when Hoyts Theatres were taken over by Twentieth Century-Fox, its President, Spyros Skouras said that their Australian theatres were comparable with any in the States.

In December 1953 the first CinemaScope film “The Robe” opened for an eight-week run, seating 2298 people. The theatre noticed an economic downturn after the introduction of TV in South Australia in late 1959 and then sold off 298 seats, which enabled six external facing shops to be built. However, by 1967 there were still dwindling theatre audiences, so an arcade was created in the stalls area to accommodate 38 shops at ground level. The theatre was remodelled and reopened on 30th May 1968 with seating for 894 people on just one level.

It eventually closed in 2004 and was gutted. A shopping arcade and two small cinemas were built into the shell, with one utilising the original circle. Remnants of the Arabesque filigree walling decoration are retained, and a copy of the impressive Regent’s Rundle Mall facade was built to front Grenfell Street in the late 1980s.
York Theatre
66 Rundle Mall, Adelaide (now demolished)

This section of Gawler Place is noticeably wider than the southern side of the Mall. That is because the old York Picture Theatre was demolished in 1960 as part of an Adelaide City Council road widening project.

The York Theatre had a rather narrow entrance considering the 1700 people seating capacity of the building with offices above. It was built for the Greater Wondergraph Theatres chain and was designed by architect CA Smith. The theatre opened on 5 November 1921.

The side-walls of the auditorium had painted landscapes, representing Australasian scenery, the work of decorator George Coulter.

The York Theatre was taken over by the Greater Union Theatres chain in January 1929. It was modernised in 1938 when it became a first run release house for MGM films.

The basic form of the auditorium and the proscenium was retained after the 1938 works, being made simpler and less cluttered with ornament. One feature that always pleased attendees was the progressive opening of the main curtain and two white travellers immediately behind, lit in different colours, as the auditorium lights dimmed, and the picture hit the screen.

The theatre was described by Ross Thorne in Picture Palace Architecture as a "magnificent building, certainly second to none is the Southern Hemisphere".
Savoy News-Luxe Theatre
43 Rundle Mall, Adelaide (demolished)

Known as:
Savoy News-Luxe 1941-1961
Globe 1961-1962

Opening on 26 September 1941, people could drop in to the Savoy News-Luxe Theatre for an hour or so and catch up with the latest from the war front, local news, a cartoon and a featurette. Admission was 1 shilling with seating for 310 and a change of program every Friday. The side walls had large Art Deco-style molded plaster designs and wall light-fittings.

CinemaScope was installed in the mid-1950s but the impending dawn of TV in 1959 began the end of this popular little newsreel theatre. It closed as the Savoy Theatre on Saturday 25 February 1961.

The place was spruced up and reopened a week later as the Globe Theatre, again screening newsreels for the following eighteen months until it finally closed at the end of 1962.

The theatre had a most spectacular neon display on the facade, with the world rotating at the top and skyrockets shooting up and exploding into myriad coloured stars.

Until the WWII brownouts, Rundle Street had the reputation of being the most brilliantly neon sign lit street in the world after Broadway.

A brownout is an intentional or unintentional drop in voltage in an electrical power supply system.
Grand Theatre

23 Rundle Mall, Adelaide (now shops/offices)

**Known as:**
- Grand Theatre 1916
- Mayfair Theatre Early 1930s-1953
- Sturt Theatre 1953-1976

Opening as the Grand Picture Theatre on 30 November 1916, a small theatre organ played by the later famous Horace Weber was installed by Alfred Drake. When sound came in the early 1930s, there was an art deco makeover and the theatre was renamed the Mayfair.

It was modernised again in the early 1950s to plans by architects Lawson, Cheesman & Doley and began screening long runs of major films projected onto the 40-feet wide screen and renamed the Sturt Theatre under the ownership of the Greater Union Theatres chain. Seating was for 700 in the orchestra and balcony levels. The features were typically those of a well-designed former silent picture theatre with good sight lines both laterally and vertically.

The cinema closed in February 1976 and was remodelled into offices.
The Wondergraph Theatre was built by CH Martin to the design of Garlick & Jackman in 1912-1913 for £60,000. It was originally an imposing building, with two distinctive domes topped with high swan-necked lights each side of an ornate ‘temple of dreams’ arched façade and seated 1,800 people.

It opened on 5 September 1913, main hall was said to be the “prettiest chamber of its kind in the Commonwealth”. Along with the Regent it was the first cinema in Adelaide to screen talkies.

The Wondergraph theatre was taken over by Union Theatres in 1929 and was renamed the Civic in 1932. While some of its elaborate exterior décor was removed it was still regarded as a premier house.

Rebuilt to include CinemaScope and air conditioning, it reopened as the State Theatre in 1957. It ceased to be a theatre by 1977.
The Cyclorama was established in 1893 and was described as ‘the grandest and most thrilling art production you have ever witnessed’. The Cyclorama surrounded the theatre on a 15m x 1,200m canvas, illustrating huge paintings on a moving backdrop. Each of these paintings was displayed for two years. The first painting featured Jerusalem during the time of the crucifixion and the last in 1897 the Crimean War. People were able to view the paintings by passing underneath through a tunnel to the centre of the theatre and climbing up onto a platform to view.

By 1904 the building was remodelled as the Glaciarium skating rink by H. Newman Reid’s Ice Palace Skating Company, which was the first ice skating rink in Australia. This was followed by a roller-skating rink where the ice was replaced with a rock asphalt surface for roller skating and the building was renamed the Olympia Roller Skating Rink.

After being purchased by T.J. West, West’s Pictures opened on this site on 5 December 1908 and was Adelaide’s first permanent theatre. It retained the original buildings from the Cyclorama but underwent renovations where seating accommodation was increased.

In 1939 a newly constructed Wests Theatre reopened. More than 1,500 people attended the opening to watch the popular British film Pygmalion. Described on opening night “Its bold, ultra-modernistic façade is a column of solid white architecture, brilliantly lit: a thickly carpeted foyer decorated with colourful murals, leads to a pair of curving staircases, which form the approach to the theatre lounge. Elaborate powder rooms furnished in modernistic style in mulberry toning’s are provided for women patrons.”

The buildings Art Moderne style of architecture is distinguished from Art Deco. It was renowned as one of the three best examples of this style of Art Deco Moderne in the world but was sold by Greater Union. It closed on 28 February 1977 and the last movie played was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

After some years of varied uses, vacancy and neglect, it was purchased in 2001 by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra as their permanent home.
This once beautiful Art Deco style theatre opened as Metro Theatre and was built for MGM. It was only MGM Metro Theatre in Australia to be equipped with fittings sent from the USA. The Metro Theatre was designed by noted American theatre architect Thomas W. Lamb, in association with local architect F. Kenneth Milne.

The Metro Theatre opened on October 6, 1939, with a seating capacity for 1,286 patrons. The seating was uniform throughout with air-cushioned seats upholstered in sea-blue moquette, which toned well with the pastel brown, beige and gold of the auditorium and the rich burgundy carpets. On each side of the proscenium four indented columns diffused the amber light which beamed up towards the ceiling. The opening attraction was MGM’s “Sweethearts” with Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, plus a James A. Fitzpatrick Travelogue, “Glimpses of Australia”.

The decoration of the facade was reminiscent of a mini-skyscraper of the 1930’s. A large marquee with neon-strip lighting and back-lit cut-out letters adorned the main entrance.

In 1954, CinemaScope was installed, and the original proscenium was widened. A new waterfall curtain in gold crushed velvet was a beautiful feature of the newly designed stage area.

In 1975, the beautiful interior was gutted for a four-cinema complex for Greater Union Theatres. Finally closing on 11th April 1991, the building was demolished in 2005 following years of various uses, neglect and vacancy.