

## TEACHERS EXHIBITION NOTES

## KINGS CINEMA

The **Kings cinema** exhibition is an art deco style cinema like those of the 1930s. On a computer in the foyer you can test your knowledge of the movies and glamorous stars of this era. In the theatre you can watch Australian newsreels and films from the 1920s and 1930s and hear the magical sounds of our Fotoplayer, a mechanical music-maker used to provide the accompaniment for silent films.

The cinema has been built to look like the original theatres of the famous Kings cinema chain. Kings built many art deco cinemas in Sydney's suburbs in the 1930s.

Sadly this exhibition is only possible because so many of our old buildings have been demolished. The foyer includes interior fittings from the Queen Victoria Building. The seats are from the Manly Odeon, built in 1932 and demolished in 1985.

### Going to the pictures

In the 1920s and 1930s going to the pictures was cheap, popular entertainment. While only the well-to-do could afford ten shillings for a seat at a live theatre, nearly everyone could afford a ticket to the pictures. A seat in the stalls cost sixpence; a seat in the dress circle cost a shilling.

In the years between World War I and II the cinema was the best attended, most criticised, liveliest and most influential component of our popular culture.

Never before had Australian life been influenced by such a popular form of entertainment. Australian children saw weekdays as the long period between Saturday afternoon matinees. The matinees featured American westerns starring Hopalong Cassidy, the Cisco Kid and Gene

Autrey, or one of the Laurel and Hardy comedies. Their parents were more likely to be on the look out for a new film starring Shirley Temple, Clarke Gable, or Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The most popular films were predominantly American.

The showing of newsreels was a major function of cinemas. The newsreel offered the only moving pictures of news items. The cinema offered education, excitement and shelter from the harsh realities of everyday life in the 1920s and 1930s.

With the advent of the 'talkies' came the spread of picture theatres into the suburbs. By 1933 there were 22 cinemas in the city and 115 in the suburbs. At first the movies were entertainment for the working class. However the building of handsome cinemas and the clever use of advertising soon brought the middle classes into the cinemas as well.

### An Australian film industry

The exhibition also draws attention to the fact that, although American films dominated Australian screens at this time, there had been an Australian industry since the early 1900s. References are provided below for those interested in finding out more about our early film industry.

The beginnings of the Australian film industry can be traced to the production in 1900 of a multimedia spectacle, *Soldiers of the cross*. Made by the Salvation Army, it combined 200 slides and 13 rolls of film (each approximately one minute long) with music and lectures that provided a commentary on the images.

In 1906 *The story of the Kelly gang* was produced by the Tait Brothers. It was the

longest narrative film then seen in Australia and possibly the world. Although at least ten prints were made for the film's release, all known copies had disappeared by 1939 and today only three seconds of the film remains.

By 1911, Australia led the world in the production of silent films, producing a total of 61 features in that year. These included *The double event* and the *Romantic story of Margaret Catchpole*.

At the same time, however, local independent production was being thwarted by the development of a film distribution and exhibition monopoly that would not screen the local product. Known as 'the combine', Australasian Films and Union Theatres were effectively responsible for preventing the screening of Australian-made films in Australian cinemas.

By the mid 1920s, over 90% of films on Australian screens were produced in America. Hundreds of American silent films came out of Hollywood, with a vigorous publicity machine promoting their glamorous stars. The dominance of American films in Australian cinemas was inevitable as 'the combine' imposed a block booking system. This system forced local theatre owners to buy a block of American films with one contract. Since they already had a full program of American films — and had paid for them — the theatre owners were not interested in paying additional fees to screen independent Australian films distributed outside 'the combine'.

The advent of the talkies brought increased production costs to filmmaking, resulting in the centralising of production on the Hollywood studio model. This model was copied in Australia.

Cinesound studios, established in 1932 and based in Sydney, was the most successful of these Australian studios. Their first production, *On our selection*, broke box office records in Australia. It was based on Steele Rudd's stories of life on the land and appealed to Australian nationalism. The film launched

Bert Bailey as Australia's first 'bankable' film star.

Few features were produced in Australia between World War II and the 1970s. However independent filmmakers such as Charles and Elsa Chauvel continued to make films under difficult circumstances up until 1955.

## References

Andrew Pike & Ross Cooper, *Australian film 1900–1977*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980.

Graham Shirley & Brian Adams, *Australian cinema*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

John Tulloch, *Legends on the screen*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1981.

John Tulloch, *Australian Cinema*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

## Fotoplayer

One of the Powerhouse's most entertaining exhibits is the 'Fotoplayer' in the Kings Cinema. This musical instrument works like a player piano (or pianola), with the addition of many special effects. Its purpose was to accompany silent movies — which were originally called 'photo plays'. It was made by the American Photo Player Company of Berkeley, California, between 1918 and 1925 and was brought to Australia by a South Australian chemist, Dr Percy Middleton Wells. As the mayor of Goolwa, Percy had intended to show movies to the townsfolk and to this end he built the Centennial Hall and purchased the photoplayer in about 1929. However, the silent movie era came to an end in 1930 and, as the instrument was never linked to its blower and used for its original purpose, it has remained in excellent condition.

It has been fully restored by the Mastertouch Pianola Roll Company, who also recut some of the original 'Picturolls' that came with the instrument. In addition, they generously keep the museum supplied with suitable demonstration rolls from their own factory.

The photoplayer has three parts:

1. *The console*: comprising keyboard, the piano player mechanism and the controls for special effects
2. *The instrument cabinet*: which contains organ pipes, three drums, two cymbals, castanets, tambourine, a train whistle, a siren, a door bell and a chime.
3. *The motor and blowers*: these can be seen through a window and they power the mechanism and play the organ pipes. The works are almost all pneumatic or 'manual, the only exception being the doorbell which, at some stage, was modified to an ordinary electromagnetic action.

The simple, robust case is built from American quartered oak.

This instrument is one of the smallest models and may be the only one of its type remaining. Its excellent condition is extremely rare as many photoplayers were used for 14 hours a day. It is demonstrated almost every weekday afternoon by a member of museum staff (and there are also weekend and holiday performances). The demonstration usually includes the presentation of a silent movie accompanied by music and special effects provided by the photoplayer.

Visit the foyer of the Kings cinema and look at the film poster history display and play the movie trivia quiz game for Australian films.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

Select questions that will help your students interpret the exhibition. If necessary, adapt

the questions to suit the ability of your group. The answers can be found by looking at the objects, photographs and labels, and by using the interactive (hands-on) exhibits.

- What information is there about the rise and fall of the Australian film industry from 1900 to 1939?
- Later, consider how the Australian film industry of the 1980s compares.
- What was the first narrative film made in Australia called? (made in 1906)
- How many silent features were produced in Australia in 1911?
- Later, find out how many Australian films were produced last year. (The Australian Film Institute might be able to help you answer this.)
- By the mid 1920s, 90% of films screened in Australia were American. Why do you think this was so? (Find out about the *combine*.)
- Later, look in the cinema pages of a newspaper and find out what percentage of films screened in Australia today are American, British or Australian.
- What was the first talking picture made in Australia?

Look around the foyer and the cinema that has been designed in the style of the 1930s art deco style cinemas.

- What features can you find that help to create this art deco style?
- Some materials come from cinemas and other buildings built and/or renovated in the 1930s. What examples can you find?

For details of other exhibitions and ways that students can visit the Powerhouse Museum, consult the current *Powerhouse teachers guide* or **call** (02) 9217 0222 or **fax** (02) 9217 0441 or **email** edserv@phm.gov.au

#### **Available from the Powerhouse Shop**

*Kings cinema: going to the pictures*, a full-colour booklet about the exhibition.  
ISBN 1 86317 014 6, 8 pp, \$3.

#### • *Ideas in Action* •

The Powerhouse Museum, part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, also incorporating Sydney Observatory, is a NSW government cultural institution. © 1989 Trustees of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Revised June 1996, January 1998.