

Movie first could be big news for theatre

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By PHIL HAMILTON

THE official recognition that Stratford's theatre was the first in Australasia to show "talking films" could mean a complete restoration for the Fletcher Challenge Energy Kings Theatre.

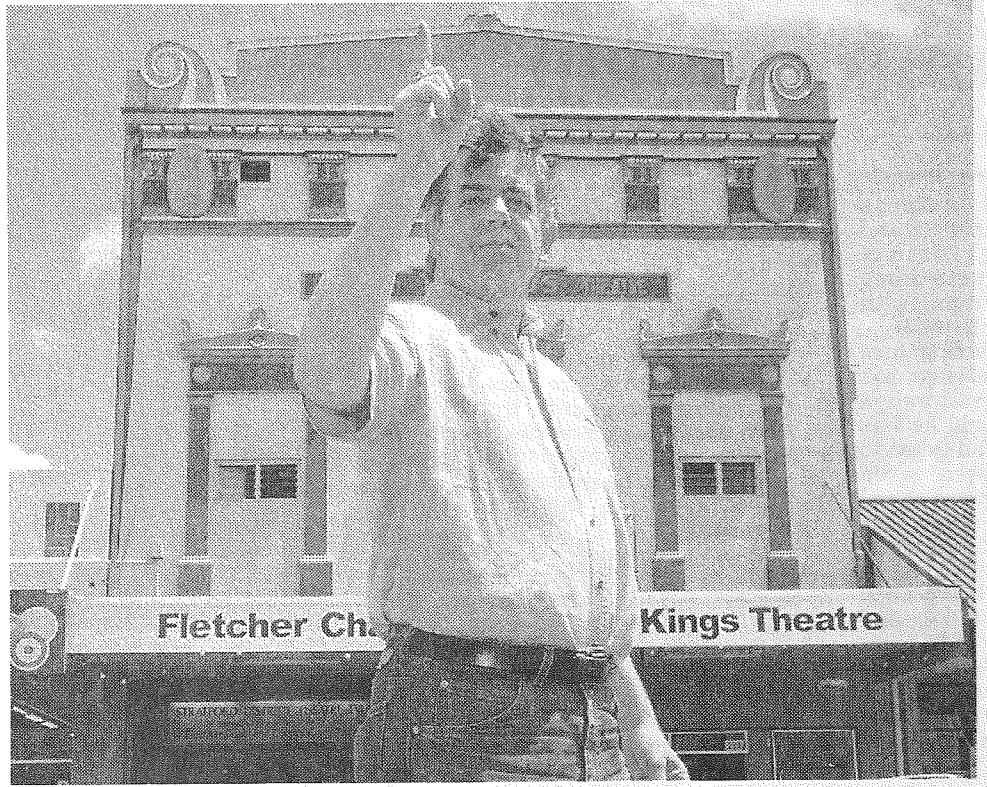
The claim that the theatre was the first to show "talkies" had long been rumoured in Stratford, and late last year the New Zealand Film Archive acknowledged it was true.

"I certainly think the Kings Theatre can claim to be the first theatre where sound on film was played in New Zealand," said New Zealand film history researcher Clive Sowry. Wellington's Paramount Theatre was previously believed to be the first when it showed *Street Angel* in 1929.

Kings Theatre manager Barry Milner said Stratford was the first by more than four years, with the De Forest Phonofilm system first demonstrated in the town in January 1925.

De Forest, an American inventor, developed a system for putting the soundtrack to a movie on to the film, and first demonstrated it in New York in 1924.

The rights were secured by a past Stratford Mayor, William Kirkwood, who brought the system to Australasia, and told the audience at a 1925 Stratford screening that it was the first in the Southern Hemisphere.



NUMBER ONE: Barry Milner in front of Stratford's Kings Theatre, the first theatre in Australasia, and perhaps the Southern Hemisphere, to show talking movies.

Photo: PHIL HAMILTON

Mr Milner said the discovery would certainly help the theatre's case for a full or partial restoration, for which they had applied to the Lotteries Heritage Commission on December 27.

"This makes us a true blue historic place in the cinema world. It's quite exciting and could lead to a major development for us here," he said.

Auckland conservation architect Jeremy Salmund, who prepared the preservation plan which has gone to the Lotteries Heritage Commission, said it was very important historically as well as a very good building architecturally.

"And, architecturally, it's capable of being much better. I would say it is a very deserving case (for funding)," he said.

Founding member of the Stratford District Theatre Trust, Marie Walter, said the aim was to restore the 1917 building, as much as was practicable, back to its original state. "I am confident we will get some grant but just how much will be interesting to see. The historical details which have come to light should contribute to an increase in the amount," she said.

The theatre should hear back in mid-March on the success of the application.