



MR. L. J. SLYFIELD operates the switchboard which controls the Opera House stage lighting. This modern system has been installed in the theatre in recent years, replacing an older console which had fewer dimming circuits.

### Building of a thousand memories

# OPERA HOUSE FACE HAIRS IN BALANCE

The 44-year-old New Plymouth Opera House is up for sale, and its fate is in the balance. Lack of patronage forced the management to cease showing films in 1967, and since then its use for shows and public gatherings has been steadily decreasing. Now, there are fears that it might be lost to the city as a theatre.

The Opera House was opened on November 29, 1925, by the Mayor of New Plymouth, of that time, Mr. F. E. Wilson. Part of his speech, taken from the files of the Taranaki Herald, is worth recalling. It read: "Since the old theatre was lost in 1916 the whole district had sorely felt the want of such a building. It was one thing to recognise the want and another to supply the deficiency. The people of New Plymouth are indebted to the public spirit of those citizens who took courage in their hands and raised the £40,000 necessary to provide this site and the handsome Opera House..."

An advertisement for the opening performance carried the information that, "His worship the Mayor would declare the

Opera House open for entertainment of New Plymouth theatre-goers of this and following generations." Citizens were invited to attend the opening night of "New Plymouth's gorgeous new Opera House."

**By Peter Hamling pictures: Ray Pinyey**

House... the theatre beautifully... the opening performance was an Irish play—"Molly Bawn," presented by the Dennis Kehoe company, which played for seven night. Prices were interesting... dress circle £5, stalls £4, gallery 2s.

tant projector operator at the Opera House and became manager of the theatre in 1939. After over a service he returned in 1946 and remained manager until transferring to the Mayfair in 1955. There were all sorts of shows and plays come... usually on the road, Mr Saunders recalled recently. At least several times each month the Opera House had "live theatre," and the rest of the time it showed films.

### Acclaimed Vaudeville

But the saying that "vaudeville is king" certainly applied, said Mr Saunders, who had started his touring shows always drew good houses. New Plymouth was recognised as a good show town and was always included on company itineraries. One of the longest associations with the theatre is that of Mr L. J. Slyfield, who worked at the Regent Theatre in Devon St, New Plymouth, and was subsequently associated with the establishment of both the Mayfair and Regent theatres. He was general manager of the "pool company" which operated the Opera House, until his death in 1945.

"Talkies" came to the Opera House in 1931. Before that time an orchestra played for the silent movies. The nine or ten years immediately after the Second World War were the great years for shows at the Opera House, according to Mr G. B. L. Saunders, a director of the company and son of Mr G. H. Saunders.

Mr Saunders began his career in the entertainment industry as an assistant to Mr L. J. Slyfield. He regards Fay Compton as one of the greatest actresses he has seen. An English actress, she appeared in New Plymouth in the early 1920s in "Victoria Regina." The Homers Symphony Orchestra was one of the best ensembles he has heard — they came to...

**LEFT:** This was the scene on the morning of July 22, 1916, after fire had destroyed the Theatre Royal and most of the other buildings in the block. At a subsequent inquiry into the fire, which started in the theatre, the owners of the building rejected rumours that the showing of a war film earlier the same night had led to pro-German incendiarism. Nine years later the Opera House was opened on the same site, giving the town its first block of buildings in permanent materials.

New Plymouth in 1955. For Gladys Macmillan Mr Slyfield has special regard. "She was the real lady of the stage," he said. "A fine singer and a really friendly person, she made a point of going round before each performance to greet everyone associated with the show." And as a band enthusiast, Mr Slyfield remembers well the visit of the Band of the Black Watch Regiment, during the 1950s. Mr Slyfield also had a great deal to do with the late Mr T. H. Bates — sentiments that were shared by many people during inter-viewings of this article. "I am certain he made a great job of this theatre was designed as an open house, not a picture theatre, and the acoustics are excellent," he said. Touring artists often came to the stage to try their voice in the theatre before a performance, and they were always happy.

### War years

During the war years the Opera House was a lady manager, Mrs W. A. French, now living in Wanganui. Mrs French had worked for the company from 1931 until 1939, when she went to Australia for a time. On her return she worked at the Regent Theatre and took over as manager of the Opera House in 1942 to 1944. Then she managed the Regent until Mr G. B. L. Saunders returned from overseas service. He called her over and said, "I've seen you somewhere before." He thought for a minute, and said, "Yes, Opera House, New Plymouth." — and off he went.

During the war, said Mrs French, audiences were very good but the Opera House saw very few shows. "It was mainly picture houses, then, and shows were very few and far between." Another former employee of the Opera House is Mr Ian Cameron, of Dartmouth Avenue, New Plymouth, who was projectionist from 1940, until he left shortly before the theatre closed for picture screenings. He too had a close association with the touring companies, as he was regularly the operator of the large "arc" spotlight in the gallery.

Like Mr Slyfield, Mr Cameron has a "bag of memories" with his programmes of shows, but it is with films that he can endure up massive statistics. Mrs French particularly remembers two artists during the years she worked at the Opera House. One was Amelita Galli-Curci, the other comedian George Wallace. Amelita Galli-Curci was rehearsing in the theatre when Mrs French walked to and stood at the back of the auditorium. A famous singer told her that the Opera House was "so easy to sing in... it is magnificent."

George Wallace, the Australian comedian, made many visits to New Plymouth with vaudeville shows, and Mrs French said he would often come to the front of the theatre during the show. At a quick estimate, Mr Cameron calculated he has screened something over 10,000 film programmes during his time at the theatre and in total this is in excess of 145 million feet of film. He must surely be a millionaire of the picture industry.

### 'Millionaire'

During the past 15 years many famous personalities have appeared on the



AN ENTERTAINER'S DREAM — a full house — with stalls, dress circle and gallery packed. It is lack of patronage for films and fewer "live" shows on tour which have forced the owners of the Opera House to offer the building.

— the days of the Theatre Royal. This theatre was the venue for films and live entertainment for over 30 years and was one of 17 buildings burnt to the ground in an early morning blaze on July 21, 1916.

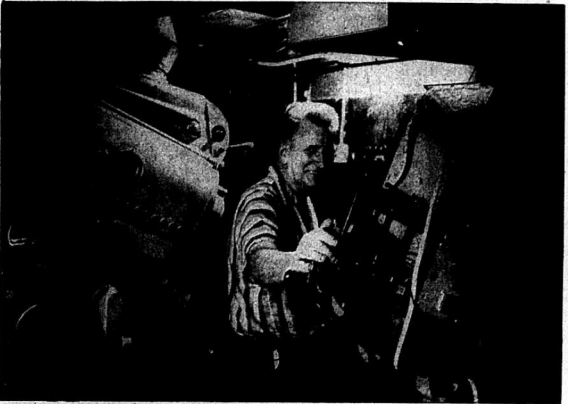
### Early days

It was nine years before another theatre was opened on the site, and during that time "dash and blood" shows continued at the Empire Theatre. Designed by well-known New Plymouth architect the late Mr T. H. Bates, the 1200-seat Opera House was said to be based on the Atfield's Opera House.

It was built by T. Julian and Son. Smart Bros were the plumbing and electrical sub-contractors, and Baker and Co had the responsibility for the furnishings. The Opera House has been more than a theatre. It has been a centre of community activities; a building of a thousand memories.

There have been wrestling matches, boxing bouts, dance recitals, political meetings, religious gatherings and school break-up ceremonies. The stage has been frozen for ice shows; there have been plays and musical comedies, choral ensembles, orchestras and solo artists, magicians and tumblers. Artists from virtually every country in the world.

Even animals have had their moments of glory on the stage... hares, cows, donkeys, goats, pigs, birds — even white mice, have taken their place in shows and variety acts. It is thin to be lost, or is this theatre to live on for another generation of entertainers and entertainment since the 1880s



MR IAN CAMERON still operates the "arc" spotlight from the Opera House gallery for live shows. Behind him is one of the two 35mm projectors which have lain idle since film screenings ceased in 1967.



## ROSTROPOVICH AND BRITTEN

One of the finest cello recordings ever made — that description fits Rostropovich's incomparable performances of Haydn's C major concerto and Britten's Cello Symphony. The LP was originally released about six years ago; now it has been reissued by the World Record Club.

In each work Rostropovich is accompanied by the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Benjamin Britten. The Haydn concerto is still comparatively little-known; a very strong and indeed complete set of parts was discovered only in 1961, in the Tardent Collection of the National Museum, Prague.

The wealth of melody and satisfying formal proportions make this a valuable counter-foil to the rather sparse and challenging; but the ECO makes these demands are quite well met, and the recording is of the highest quality.

**Record Magazine**  
**COMPILED BY MARK BIRCH**

most searching test. Rostropovich's unerring human demands are quite particularly lyrical. The virtuoso despite the sleep-

### Lyrical warmth and life

Mozart sonata (the one which begins with a theme and variations and ends with a "Turkish" air) recently exploited by Chris Barber and his band. The Haydn concerto is of a Mozartian flavour, quite a Mozartian flavour, quite a Mozartian flavour.

### FILM SOUND TRACK

Members of the spectacular film "Camelot" will be called from the sound track. Neither Richard Harris nor Vanessa Redgrave has much to do with the film. Some embarrassing ob-

Guinevere."



ALTHOUGH 44 years old, the Opera House still retains a modern outward appearance on its site in Devon St in the heart of the city business area.