

Isis Town & Country

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BEHIND THE SCENES: Merissa Craft looks at an old slide, once used at the Paragon Theatre.

PHOTO: MAX FLEET

Labour of love

Paragon Theatre owners prepare to call cut on renovations in time for grand opening next month



RECORD SIZE TURTLE FOUND IN BOOYAL
PAGE 3



LIFE TRAGICALLY CUT SHORT
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BATTLE WON, MISSPELT SIGN TO BE REPLACED
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History behind the Paragon Theatre

Gee's Hall screened the district's first silent movies

IN 1906, William Gee, a confectioner from Bundaberg, relocated to Childers with his wife Minette and their two children.

The Gee family bought a single-storey shop where the Paragon Theatre now stands, in the main street of Childers, and opened it as "refreshment rooms", complete with fruit shop, tea rooms and a catering business.

By 1908 they had added a ballroom, which was used for various functions, including Friday and Saturday night dances, before the floor was ruined by roller-skating.

In 1912, the Gees installed a lighting plant run by an oil-fuelled engine, and Gee's Hall became the venue for the first silent movies screened in the district.

The first film shown was The Iron Claw, starring Pearl White.

The Gees also introduced a travelling picture show service to other towns in the Isis district, including Dallarnil and Booyal.

By 1923 a second picture show, the Palace Theatre, had been opened in Childers by Harold Philpott in partnership with Mr A Archer.

In this same year, William Gee had disposed of his interest of the business, handing it over to his son Dudley and Harold Philpott.

By 1927, films had proved so popular that Philpott and Gee planned to erect a modern, purpose-built cinema in the town.

The scheme interested



1927: The building receiving a makeover.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

William Gee's daughter Margery, and a new firm, Gee, Philpott & Gee, was established to facilitate the construction of the Paragon Theatre where Gee's Hall once stood.

Some of the material from the original hall was used in the construction of the new theatre.

Plans were prepared by Brisbane architect Arthur Robson, who was reported in the local press of 1927 as having been responsible for the construction of more than 20 cinemas in Queensland, including theatres in east Brisbane, Gladstone and Ayr.

Robson designed the Paragon Theatre as a "tropical theatre". This referred to the use of timber lattice and fretwork throughout the interior, on the ceiling and the proscenium, concealing high-level windows providing ventilation not used in standard cinema design.

The tropical theatre style was popular for

Queensland theatres of the 1920s and 1930s, including the Alhambra Theatre at Stones Corner and the Paddington Theatre on Given Terrace, Brisbane.

The theatre was intended to accommodate 1200 people, in a hall measuring 60 by 120 feet, but this may have been optimistic as the Film Weekly Directory of 1938-39 lists the theatre as seating 600.

During construction, Gee, Philpott & Gee screened films at the Palace Theatre and at the Band Hall until a temporary screen could be erected in the semi-completed Paragon Theatre.

When the new picture theatre formally opened in 1928, the first film screened was Warner Brothers' 1927 classic, The Jazz Singer, which pioneered synchronised-sound film production.

Soon after the opening

of the new theatre, Harold Philpott sold his share of the business to Dudley and Margery Gee, who exhibited under the name Paragon Pictures Company.

The Paragon Theatre was now the only picture theatre in the Isis district and regularly screened films and cartoons on Wednesday and Saturday nights, for which seats could be reserved.

The theatre was sold in 1949 to Peter and Mary Sourris of Gayndah, who changed the sound system, replaced the entrance gates with glass doors, closed one of the internal staircases to the dress circle, and replaced the forms with canvas seats.

By 1960 the Sourris family had sold the theatre to Granville and Iris Knowles, who constructed a ticket box and fitted a cinemascope screen, which closed the stage for concert use. The theatre was later sold to the Ricciardi family.



DREAMS COME TRUE: Merissa Craft and her husband Nigel can see light at the end of the tunnel in their restoration project.



BEHIND THE SCENES: Nigel Craft inside the Paragon Theatre, reflecting on work that's still to be completed.

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SENTIMENTAL: Merissa and Nigel Craft were married in the historic Paragon Theatre in 2012.

▶ PARAGON THEATRE

News



HARD WORK: With blood, sweat and paintbrushes Merissa Craft has been lovingly restoring the theatre, which has been in her family for well over 40 years.

PHOTOS: MAX FLEET

By MELINDA BRADFORD

SIXTEEN years ago Paragon Theatre patrons watched on as the infamous “unsinkable” Titanic ship was submerged by the North Atlantic ocean.

And just like the sinking ship, the much-loved theatre went down with it.

In late December 1998, Titanic was the last film ever screened at the historic theatre in Childers.

The theatre, which was the Isis district’s entertainment hub since it opened in 1927, has sat dormant ever since, its future left hanging in the balance.

Arguably one of the community’s most treasured buildings, the

grand old girl was reduced to silence after aging owners Marietta and Carmelo (Charlie) Ricciardi were physically unable to continue to operate the venue.

Far from the dignified life the theatre deserves, it has been left as little more than an empty shell, used intermittently as rented floor space for businesses.

That is, until Merissa Craft stepped in.

Marietta and Charlie were about to sign over the building to an out-of-town electrician when Merissa, their granddaughter, heard of their plans.

The theatre had been in the Ricciardi family for 40 years and Merissa wasn’t about to let go of the

sentimental building.

Despite financial advice warning her against the purchase, Merissa purchased the theatre from her grandparents in February 2007 without any hesitation.

From that day on, the



Merissa Craft:

“I’ve had this vision that I’ve been just so stuck on from the beginning and that’s what’s really got me through.”

Childers-born-and-bred 29-year-old has had big dreams to breathe life back into the theatre.

Through blood, sweat and tears, and hundreds of thousands of dollars,

Merissa and her husband Nigel have poured everything they have into restoring the rundown building back to her former glory.

Those endless hours spent painting, replacing rundown walls and

floorboards, reupholstering chairs, rewiring lights and other major structural works are set to pay off when the theatre re-opens to the public next month.

While the seven-year

journey hasn’t been easy, and sceptics came in thick and fast to voice their doubt, a determined Merissa says she just couldn’t give up on her vision.

“It just pulls me in, this place,” she said.

“There’s something supernatural there because the amount of times I’ve felt like giving up.

“So many times I just wanted to walk away, but I couldn’t handle the thought of someone else having it... I can’t admit defeat on this place.

“I’ve had this vision that I’ve been just so stuck on from the beginning and that’s what’s really got me through.”

Merissa and her husband,

who married in this very building in December 2012, have invested their entire life savings into the project, and while it’s been a huge risk, she says it’s all been worthwhile.

“Everything we have gone into this place. We’ve got everything riding on it. Everything comes back to this place.

“This is a huge risk for us. This has to be a success for us – this will make or break us.

“It’s a big thing but I feel good about it. I think it will come together.”

The couple are currently awaiting final council approval to use the building as a multi-purpose entertainment public facility.

Festival celebrates opening

THE highly-anticipated grand opening of the Paragon Theatre will be an event not to miss.

In celebration of the theatre’s new beginnings, an Inaugural Paragon Film Festival will be held to coincide with the Childers Festival.

To kick off the festival, Paragon Theatre owners Nigel and Merissa Craft will host an 18+ event from 7pm on Friday, July 25.

Tickets include canapés, the Best of 2013 International Short Films, followed by fun and dancing along to the tunes of local band Slyru.

GRAND OPENING

WHAT: Inaugural Paragon Film Festival
WHEN: Friday, July 25 & Saturday, July 26.
COST: \$40 for Friday’s 18+ event, \$10 for Saturday’s family event (includes one free drink).
 Tickets available at paragontheatre.com.au

Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages will be available for

purchase at the event.

Organisers will also host a family session on Saturday, July 26, from 10am. This event will feature numerous animated movies, so bring your picnic rugs, prams, and let your kids run loose.

A comedy session will follow the family event at 1pm. The theatre will also host retro markets from Saturday afternoon into the night and all day Sunday.

Come along and check out the newly-renovated theatre to help Merissa and Nigel celebrate their hard work.



BEHIND THE SCENES: One of the old projectors at the Paragon Theatre. PHOTO: MAX FLEET