Victorian Heritage Database place details - 2/4/2015

Comedy Theatre

Location:
228 - 240 Exhibition Street, MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number:
Listing Authority: HI
Extent of Registration:

Statement of Significance:
The Comedy Theatre, designed by A.H. Walkley and C.N. Hollinshed and built in 1928 is of State Significance because it is the only historic theatre remaining in Victoria that was built specifically for staging plays and was for many years Melourne's 'premier playhouse'. It is also significant for employing an architectural style not usually associated with theatres in Australia, but instead has close parallels with the type of theatres being built in the 1920s in the famous theatre district of New York known as Broadway. It is also notable for its level of intactness.
The Comedy was the first theatre to dispense with the gallery and combine dress circle and upper circle into one tier, and its comparative smallness (1008 seats) gives the theatre the intimate feel required for the staging of plays. From the 1930s to the 1960s the Comedy was Melbourne's most important commercial playhouse, finding success mostly with dramas by notable English and American playwrights.
The Spanish/Renaissance style of the facade and indeed the size of the theatre and arrangements of the interior are probably directly inspired by the theatres of Herbert J Krapp, the pre-eminent theatre designer on Broadway in the late 1910s and 1920s. These theatres all feature an intimate size and buff brickwork relieved by tapestry brick decoration and terra-cotta details. The Comedy could fairly be described as a Broadway theatre transplanted to Melbourne.

The especially intact and ornate interior features Spanish influenced grilles, railings and candelabra, a beautifully detailed beamed ceiling in the auditorium, textured plaster wall finishes and richly upholstered Jacobean settees in the upper foyer. It has strong similarities with Spanish influenced cinema design of the 1920s. The entire building, apart from a wall of the foyer, is original. All other historic theatres in Victoria have been altered at some point in their histories, making the Comedy unique not only stylistically, but in its level of originality.
The theatre is also on a site with a long theatrical history, being the site of George Coppins 'Olympic' (also known as The Iron Pot) from 1855-1860, and the Australian Hippodrome from 1894-1911.
Classified: 15/03/1984
Revised: 01/04/1996

Description

Heritage Study	
Year Construction Started	
Architect / Designer	
Architectural Style	
Heritage Act Categories	
Municipality	["MELBOURNE CITY"]
Other names	
History	