



**HERITAGE
COUNCIL**
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

PRINCIPAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC THEME(S)

- 3.21 Entertaining for profit
- 8.5.4 Pursuing common leisure interests
- 8.14 Living in the country and rural settlements

HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA THEME(S)

- 111 Depression & boom
- 405 Sport, recreation & entertainment
- 407 Cultural activities

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

Bijou Theatre is an unusual and distinctive example of a timber framed and corrugated iron theatre building designed in the Australian vernacular style with elements of the Federation Carpenter Gothic design style. (Criterion 1.1)

Bijou Theatre is a landmark building in Dempster Street, in the centre of Esperance, on account of its distinctive front facade and its larger scale in comparison to other buildings in the immediate vicinity. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Bijou Theatre illustrates the provision of an 1890s purpose built theatre by private enterprise in a regional port town in Western Australia, which has been the centre of its entertainment and social life since 1896, serving a multiplicity of uses in addition to its central role as a theatre and later picture theatre, before being renovated and extended as a theatre in the 1990s. (Criterion 2.1)

Bijou Theatre provides evidence of the rapid development of Esperance as the main port for those bound for the Dundas goldfield in the mid-1890s. (Criterion 2.2)

* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.
For consistency, all references to garden and landscape types and styles are taken from Ramsay, J. *Parks, Gardens and Special Trees: A Classification and Assessment Method for the Register of the National Estate*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, with additional reference to Richards, O. *Theoretical Framework for Designed Landscapes in WA*, unpublished report, 1997.

Edward James McCarthy instigated, designed and built *Bijou Theatre* for prominent South Australians Charles Townshend Hargrave (the Younger), Sir John William Downer and Hubors Giles. Esperance Land Company Limited, which played a significant role in the development of Esperance, owned the theatre 1900-48, and McCarthy, a leading businessman and public figure, and his family continued to be associated with it. (Criterion 2.3)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

Bijou Theatre is highly valued by the community of Esperance for social and cultural reasons for its central role in the social life of the town since 1896, and for aesthetic reasons especially since its restoration under the Esperance Theatre Guild. (Criterion 4.1)

Bijou Theatre contributes to the community's sense of place as a landmark on Dempster Street, the main street in Esperance, and as one of a very small number of buildings erected in the town in the 1890s that survive in 2011. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

Bijou Theatre, the only known 1890s theatre of timber and corrugated iron construction surviving intact in Australia, is rare as the oldest surviving purpose built theatre building in Western Australia continuing in operation for its intended purpose and the third oldest in Australia. (Criteria 5.1 and 5.2)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Bijou Theatre, the only theatre in Esperance, is highly representative of small theatre design from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with typical front of house, stage and backstage areas (Criterion 6.1)

The construction of *Bijou Theatre* in Esperance in 1896, when it was a small and remote settlement, is representative of the importance of theatre as a form of entertainment at that time. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Bijou Theatre is generally in good condition. The original building and later additions appear to have been well constructed and well maintained. A section of ceiling has fallen down in the back stage area, possibly caused by water damage. The ceiling and roof coverings in this area require attention to prevent further collapse and water entering the building. In addition the sub floor structure in the theatre space requires attention due to reported sagging of the floor.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Bijou Theatre has a high level of integrity. The place is a purpose built theatre and has been in almost continuous use as a theatre since its completion in 1896. The 1990's additions to the building support its continuing use as a theatre and contribute to the integrity of the place.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Whilst the original portion of the *Bijou Theatre* is relatively intact, there were extensive additions in the 1990's to provide ancillary rooms. The original stage is no longer extant and the theatre space has been remodeled with raked seating; however, the remaining original fabric of the theatre is readily discernible from the additions. Overall the place displays a moderate level of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentation for this place is based on the heritage assessment completed by Robin Chinnery, Historian, and Tom Stevens, Architect, of Howard + Heaver Architects, with amendments and/or additions by HCWA staff and the Register Committee.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Bijou Theatre is a theatre of timber and corrugated galvanised iron construction in the Australian vernacular style, with elements of the Federation Carpenter Gothic design style. It was designed and built in 1896 by Edward James McCarthy for the Esperance Land Company Limited. In the 1990s, builder John Crawley directed and supervised additions comprising new dressing rooms, the Petit Bijou, and additional storage.

In late 1893, Dundas goldfield was proclaimed, with its centre at Norseman.¹ In 1894-95, there was rapid development in Esperance as it was the closest port from which to travel to this goldfield. Land east of 'Dempster's Homestead' was acquired by Esperance & Adelaide Land Company, which surveyed it for a new townsite and constructed a jetty (extended in 1896) off Location 18.² On 18 July 1895, John Goodliffe, prospector, of Dundas Hills, purchased Lot 57, portion of East Location 4, with frontage to Dempster Street, the main street in the town. In June 1896, the Lot was transferred to Charles Townshend Hargrave (the Younger), Sir John William Downer, and Hubors Giles, gentlemen, of Adelaide, in whose direct ownership it remained until April 1900, when it was transferred to The Esperance Land Company Limited.³ In 1895, Edward James McCarthy (b. South Australia, 1863), who had been articled to the legal practice of Knox, Gwynne and Hargrave, arrived in Esperance to represent Esperance Land Company Limited, and set about establishing business in the growing town. In 1896, he erected three buildings on adjoining lots in Dempster Street: his own single storey residence (demolished) on Lot 56; a theatre on Lot 57; and a two storey store and quarters (demolished) on Lot 58, at the corner of William Street, which was built after rejection of the application for a hotel licence for this site, where it had been intended to build a stone and brick hotel at a cost of £6,000.⁴

In 1896, there was no purpose built hall for entertainment purposes in the town, so the increasing population utilised Messrs. Mackay, Richardson and Co.'s warehouse in Dempster Street for large social gatherings, such as balls and concerts. This included the fund raising concert in aid of the Church of England Building Fund on 21 July 1896, when the venue was advertised as Mackay Richardson's Hall. That day, E. J. McCarthy and Co., presented plans to Esperance Municipal Council and applied for permission to erect a hall, 55 ft. x 20 ft., with a 16 ft. stage, and 'proper escape doors' in Dempster Street, and the

¹ Crowley, F. K. *Australia's Western Third: A History of Western Australia from the first settlements to modern times* Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1960, p. 87.

² Voight, Don *Old Esperance: pictorial history 1894-1947* The Printery, Albany, 1996, p. 157. Note: Murray, Keith *First There Came Ships* Lamb Print, Perth, 2004, p. 27, states this jetty was built by the Hampton Plains Co.

³ Certificates of Title Vol. LXXII Fol. 11 and Vol. CXC Fol. 101.

⁴ Voight, Don, op. cit., p. 168; and 'Arjay' (McCarthy, R. J.) 'Tales From Dempster's Head: The Bijou Theatre' Typescript, 1971, p. 1. Held at Esperance Museum.

matter was left for the Town Clerk to consider.⁵ The plans were modified to enlarge the place (see description below), and *Bijou Theatre* was built by E. J. McCarthy and Co., 'in the incredibly short period of six weeks' under the supervision of Mr. Colgate.⁶

The origin of the theatre's name is not known. Bijou (from the French for 'jewel') was in common usage in the late nineteenth century. Local sources have suggested that the name of the theatre may have been given to it by C. J. Davis, Editor of the *Esperance Times*, who had been given a send off by the City Cycling Club at the Bijou Hall on his departure from Tasmania.⁷ The theatre may have been named after the Bijou Theatre in Melbourne, or because it was perceived as being in the Victorian 'bijou theatre' style, exemplified by the Theatre Royal (1834), in Hobart.⁸

On 9 September 1896, the *Esperance Chronicle* declared the opening of *Bijou Theatre* 'will mark an epoch in the history of Esperance, for we can now boast of a compact little theatre, replete with modern improvements, and a decided acquisition to the town.'⁹ A detailed description followed:

The Bijou Theatre ... is a credit to the builders and proprietors.

The size of the building is 93 by 32, the height from floor to ceiling 22 ft., the auditorium 60 by 30, the stage 17 by 30, with dressing rooms and the usual accessories, the rooms being 15 by 12 each.

The principal approach is from Dempster-street, the entrance being obtained by a pair of folding doors 6 ft. wide and leading into the main hall. On the left of the entrance is a staircase to the gallery, which is 20 by 12, with seating accommodation for 100 people. The gallery is framed with oregon bearers and hardwood storey posts and braced up to the principals with iron tie rods. At the back of the gallery is a large circular louvred ventilator. The structure is securely cross braced with hardwood, and has a very substantial and finished appearance.

At each side of the main hall are two escape doors opening outward; in fact all the doors of the building are made to open outward, a necessary precaution in a building of this description. The light is supplied by eight large windows, fitted with opening fanlights for ventilators. The whole of the interior is lined with narrow corrugated iron with cornices and moulding picked out in colors. In the roof are three ventilators, perforated and ornamented, weighing about half a cwt. each, and manufactured on the premises. The roof is a span one, constructed of oregon principles and longitudinal purlins, with cross collar ties and braces. The ceiling is ceiled in the collar ties, and splayed down the rafters, this leaving a large space of about 20 ft. above the ceiling and roof, which will materially add to the ventilation of the hall giving a means of exit for the hot air. The roof is covered in with corrugated iron, with bold ridge capping, has large over-hanging eaves and ornamental barge boards.

The main hall will be illuminated at night by means of nine mammoth kerosene lamps capable of giving a light equal to 3000 candle power, and they have been fixed with specially imported suspenders.

The floor has been laid with specially tongued and grooved pine, and it has also been

⁵ *Esperance Chronicle* 25 July and 12 September 1896, p. 2.

⁶ *Esperance Chronicle* 9 September 1896, p. 2.

⁷ Bijou Theatre. Typewritten, Esperance Museum Archives.

⁸ Note: There is no known connection between the theatre and the Baesjou and Knight-Baesjou families who were nineteenth century settlers in the Albany and Esperance areas and at Balladonia, although the phonetic similarity of their name might suggest a connection.

⁹ *Esperance Chronicle* 9 September 1896, p. 2.

planed, oiled and beeswaxed to suit the devotees of the dance. The seating comprises chairs for the front and forms with backs for the remainder of the hall, giving accommodation on the ground floor for 500 people, the theatre being capable of holding a total of 600 people with ease. The decorations of the interior are most striking, yet chaste and subdued. The walls are of a terra cotta tint, with various shades of French grey, while the ceiling is in celestial blue, the colors blending most harmoniously.¹⁰

There was an 'attractive and pretty' proscenium, the sides of which were decorated with 'huge urns, containing palms, surrounded with tropical foliage', and over the centre was the Western Australian emblem of a black swan 'sailing over a lake – on a shield ... enveloped by a device of the flags of all nations', as shown in an early photograph of the interior of *Bijou Theatre*.¹¹ The set drop advertised local merchants and other residents, and six footlights illuminated the stage. Hamilton Gough, a well known scenic artist of New South Wales and Victoria, 'connected with many of the leading theatres', was responsible for the scenery.¹² The first scene, of 'the well-known local fishing resort – the West Beach - with the schooner Grace Darling under full sail entering the harbor from Albany', 'faithfully depicted' the beach, gigantic rocks and distant islands; and the second scene was of a drawing room 'correctly arranged and skillfully treated'.¹³ R. J. McCarthy recollected 'some excellent paintings' by W. Bourne, of sailing vessels and steamships' hanging on the walls, later removed after one fell and came close to injuring people seated below.¹⁴ A sliding panel gave access to the area beneath the raised floor of the stage so that the form seats 'could be slid under the stage on to timbers set there for the purpose' when seating was not required in the auditorium, as on those occasions when the place was the venue for a ball or a dance.¹⁵

On Wednesday afternoon, 9 September 1896, in the presence of 'a large and representative assembly', Thomas Edwards, Mayor of Esperance, officially opened *Bijou Theatre*, with speeches and toasts also made by local business people.¹⁶ E. J. McCarthy related that when he first arrived at the town he had recognized the need for 'such a place ... and when he mentioned the matter to his friends they gladly determined to build the hall', and he was 'sure they were satisfied with it.'¹⁷ Councilor Coleman, who noted the 'extraordinary progress Esperance had made' during the past year when he proposed the toast to the mining industry, which was 'of vital interest to Esperance', eulogised McCarthy's enterprise and asserted 'the theatre was superior to the one in Coolgardie', whose population was 16,000.¹⁸ A free concert at the theatre that evening was 'largely attended and thoroughly enjoyed', followed by a free ball given by McCarthy to celebrate the opening, attended by 'the backbone of the town', 'representative of all classes of the community', which was lauded as a 'brilliant'

10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*; and Battye Pictorial Collection, 4428B/1, also reproduced in Voight, Don op. cit., p. 57.

12 *Esperance Chronicle* *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 'Arjay' (McCarthy, R. J.) op. cit., p. 2.

15 'Arjay' (McCarthy, R. J.) op. cit., p. 2.

16 *Esperance Chronicle* op.cit; and *West Australian* 12 September 1896, p. 5.

17 *Esperance Chronicle* 12 September 1896, p. 2.

18 *ibid.*

and ‘conspicuous’ success.¹⁹ Mr. Vincent’s orchestra provided the music, and supper was served on the stage.²⁰ Next evening, there was a ‘sensational incident’ when ‘Venderhatta, the great Rocky Mountain Wonder’ (a wire-walker from Albany) dropped a burning hoop during his performance and the scene-shifter attempting to quench the flames mistakenly used a tin of kerosene instead of water, resulting in ‘an enormous jet of fire that ascended to the roof.’²¹ As some of the audience in the gallery began to panic, the intrepid Mayor and Mr. McCarthy walked across the stage and extinguished the fire.²² The Ethiopian Minstrel Troupe, who assisted at the performances Thursday-Saturday in the first week of operation, performed their own show late September, with Vincent’s orchestra accompanying them on each occasion. *Bijou Theatre* was also the venue for the Teamsters’ Ball, the Esperance Quadrille Club Ball, the Children’s Fancy Dress Ball, the school concert, and a meeting of the Australian Natives’ Association²³, evidencing its fulfillment of various roles from the outset.

In 1897, the General Court of Quarters Sessions was held at *Bijou Theatre*. In late May, a Horticultural Society was formed at Esperance, which held the town’s first Agricultural, Horticultural and Floracultural Show on 1 November, at *Bijou Theatre*. A photograph of the event shows the interior with the painted frieze on the cross beams; the timber floor; and lighting to the auditorium.²⁴ For many years, McCarthy organised ‘Esperance Show’ in the theatre.²⁵ He played a leading role in business and public life at Esperance for 58 years, including serving as Mayor of the Municipality, and later Chairman and Secretary of the Roads Board. In the late 1890s, McCarthy established the first salt operation at Pink Lake, where he had garden areas. In the early 1900s, he became Manager for Standard Salt Company, which also leased Salt Lake on Middle Island, until the company ceased operation in 1916. Later, his suggestion of Dempster Head for the site of a wireless station was adopted after it had been previously announced that there was no suitable site at Esperance. In the 1920s, he was associated with the establishment of the operations of Esperance Pine Forests Company north of Esperance, and continued to take a keen interest in the agriculture and the work undertaken by the Agricultural Research Station throughout his life.²⁶

In 1898, photographs show *Bijou Theatre* with ‘THEATRE’ painted on the roof in large lettering, as shown also in an un-dated photograph of ‘Esperance Bay & Islands’ that shows the rear, separately roofed portion of the building that comprised dressing rooms.²⁷ In the late 1890s, and early 1900s, newspapers advertised performances and events at *Bijou Theatre*, and in the evening a boy cycled around town ringing a bell, calling “Roll up! Roll up to the Bijou Theatre!”²⁸

¹⁹ *Esperance Chronicle* 12 and 16 September 1896, p. 2 and p. 3 respectively.

²⁰ *Esperance Chronicle* *ibid.*

²¹ *Esperance Chronicle* 12 September 1896, p. 2; and *West Australian* 12 September 1896, p. 5.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *Esperance Chronicle* 9, 12 and 30 September 1896; and Voight, Don *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²⁴ Photo by C. J. Davis, reproduced in Voight, Don, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁵ Rintoul, John (Compiler) *Esperance: Yesterday and today* Fourth Ed., Esperance Shire Council, 1986, p. 202.

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

²⁷ Photos by C. J. Davis, and by J. R. Rushton, reproduced in Voight, Don, *ibid.*, pp. 75-76..

²⁸ ‘Arjay’ (McCarthy, R. J.) *op. cit.*, p. 3.

On 6 April 1900, The Esperance Land Company Limited was registered as the proprietor of portions of East Location 4, being Lots 23, 35, 52, 56, 57, 58, 66 and 67 on Plan 919, for which a single Certificate of Title was issued. The Company continued to own all these lots until the late 1930s, other than Lot 35, which was transferred to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Perth in 1932.²⁹

In the early 1900s, travelling cinema shows screened films at *Bijou Theatre*. When roller skating became popular, *Bijou Theatre* was put to this use also, which took a heavy toll on the soft pine timber floor, wearing down some areas leaving heavy knots protruding that adversely effected its use for dancing. As a result the central portion of the floor was replaced with jarrah timber flooring in the 1930s, leaving a fringe of the original pine timber floor around the perimeter.³⁰ Through the first half of the twentieth century, the place was the principal venue for social occasions including weddings, and for many political meetings.³¹

A 1916 photograph shows *Bijou Theatre*, a Norfolk Island Pine street tree, planted in 1897, that is already taller than the building, and McCarthy, his family, and Jim Lewis, in front of their single storey residence at the north of the theatre. There are double doors at the front entrance to the theatre, with a circular, louvred, timber vent high above. The barge boards to the gable above are scallop edged with finial at the peak. On the north side of the theatre, steps lead up to a landing at first floor height, from which a door opens into the theatre.³²

On 21 September 1929, the Centenary Ball at Esperance was held at *Bijou Theatre*.³³ In about 1929, P. L. McCarthy began showing films at *Bijou Theatre*, using a bio-box installed in the gallery, but during the Depression period few people could afford to attend the cinema, and audiences were small.³⁴ A 1933 photograph shows the word 'THEATRE' painted on the roof, steps leading up to the skillion roofed backstage/dressing room area at the rear of the building, and the mature Norfolk Island Pine on Dempster Street near the main entrance.³⁵

From 1 December 1936, Leslie James Anderson, operator of the electricity plant in Esperance, leased *Bijou Theatre*, at £50 per annum, for use as a picture theatre. The schedule with the lease included the above two back rooms and the film box in the gallery, the engine room, chairs and forms, and a piano.³⁶

In 1937, Esperance Land Company Limited sold Lot 23, followed by Lot 58 in 1940, and Lot 56 in December 1943, when a right of carriage way over part of Lot 56 was reserved for the proprietor(s) of Lot 57.³⁷ In 1945, the company sold Lots 65, 66 and 67; and Lot 52 in 1946. On 6 September 1948, Lot 57 was transferred to the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (R.A.O.B.) Grand Lodge of Western Australia (Under the Grand Lodge of England), Incorporated, to serve as their meeting hall at Esperance.³⁸ The place continued in use as the R.A.O.B. Hall for

29 Certificates of Title Vol. LXXII Fol. 11, Vol. CXC Fol. 101 and Vol. 1028 Fol. 762.

30 'Arjay' (McCarthy, R. J.) op. cit., p. 3.

31 ibid, pp. 3-4.

32 *Bijou Theatre and McCarthy's House*, Battye Library Pictorial Collection 26711P.

33 Voight, Don, op. cit., p. 181.

34 'Arjay' (McCarthy, R. J.) op. cit., p. 4.

35 Photo 'Bijou Theatre to Dempster Head' reproduced in Voight, Don, op. cit., p. 181.

36 Lease, 4 February 1937. *Bijou Theatre File*, Esperance Museum; and Rintoul, John op. cit., pp. 218-219.

37 Certificate of Title Vol. 1028 Fol. 762.

38 Certificates of Title Vol. 1028 Fol. 762 and Vol. 1112 Fol. 400.

some years until Scollick Memorial Hall was built on the rear portion of the Lot. In the post-war period, it continued to be leased as a picture theatre by proprietor E. McFetridge, and later by Mick Lalor until 1965, when this use ceased because the advent of drive-in theatres and television reduced audiences to an unviable level.³⁹

In 1968, the Esperance Repertory Club was formed and commenced using the R.S.L. Hall. In April 1969, the Club was renamed the Esperance Theatre Guild, and as membership increased to 60-80 people, it was soon mounting four productions per annum.⁴⁰ In 1971, the Guild leased the neglected R.A.O.B. Hall, restoring its original name, *Bijou Theatre*. Having agreed to purchase the place to serve as their permanent home, they undertook renovations and repairs, including re-roofing, extending the stage, installing tiered seating, utilizing second hand seating from a theatre elsewhere, and installing light and sound equipment in the gallery. On 21 October, the theatre officially re-opened when the Guild performed their first full length play, 'Blithe Spirit', directed by Audrey Hillerman.⁴¹

On 2 December 1976, a new Certificate of Title was issued in the name of the Lodge, and the right of carriageway was surrendered.⁴² In May 1977, Esperance Theatre Guild made its final payment of \$9900 for the purchase of *Bijou Theatre*. On 15 June, following sub-division of Lot 57, Lot 23, was transferred to Esperance Theatre Guild (Incorporated), which mortgaged the place on 29 June.⁴³ A feature article in the *Kalgoorlie Miner* under the headline 'ESPERANCE'S BIJOU IS A LITTLE GEM OF A THEATRE', noted it had been 'the centre of entertainment and social life from the town's earliest years', outlined its history, and reported completion of the purchase by the Guild, which was to hold a special commemorative night featuring excerpts from the musicals, dramas and old-time music halls held there.⁴⁴ Having a permanent home at *Bijou Theatre* had enabled the Guild 'to increase its standards of performance to attract a number of State and federal grants, totalling thousands of dollars, to employ professional directors' for some productions, among them Ray Omodei.⁴⁵ A photograph of the exterior shows the external stairs at one side of the building, which bears the name 'BIJOU THEATRE' above the main entrance.⁴⁶

In July 1991, the front footpath outside *Bijou Theatre* was 'artistically laid'.⁴⁷ In October, there were only 27 paid up members of the Theatre Guild, which appealed for membership fees, noting 'A lot of money is required for the continued maintenance of the theatre'.⁴⁸ In September, the place was included in the Town planning Scheme for the Shire of Esperance.⁴⁹

39 Rintoul, John op. cit.

40 *ibid.*

41 *Bijou Bulletin* April 1996; and Dale Johnson and John Crawley, conversations with Robin Chinnery, November 2007.

42 Certificate of Title Vol. 1112 Fol. 400.

43 Certificates of Title Vol. 1112 Fol. 400 and Vol. 1470 Fol. 641; and *Bijou Bulletin* May 1996.

44 *Kalgoorlie Miner* 25 June 1977.

45 *ibid.*

46 *ibid.*

47 *Bijou Bulletin* March 1992.

48 *Bijou Newsletter* October 1991.

49 Town Planning Scheme, Shire of Esperance, 27 September 1991.

In January 1992, a liquor license for *Bijou Theatre* was approved; and in autumn the Theatre Guild received a \$3000 Lotteries' grant to repair the sinking stage.⁵⁰ In December, a feature article under the headline 'The Bijou must, and does, go on' noted the place had been 'a much-loved and much-valued part of Esperance' since 1896.⁵¹

In 1994, Don Hall re-stumped and levelled the stage, which had been a long standing problem.⁵² A Building Fund was launched at the opening night of the Revue, and theatre patrons were offered the opportunity to "be a star" by purchasing a star with either cash or in-kind donations, which raised \$2,500 in pledges. The proposal was to restore the interior and exterior of the building and to add a wing at each side to provide additional space. The proceeds from productions would be added to the fund, and grants sought to assist with funding, by which means the Theatre Guild hoped to avoid the need for a loan for the works.⁵³ In 1995, local architect Gary Ramm prepared preliminary sketches for the proposed restoration project. In November, a Melbourne film crew from Channel Ten's 'Healthy, Wealthy and Wise' filming in Esperance included *Bijou Theatre* in their project.⁵⁴

In early 1996, work on the restoration project commenced under the supervision of Theatre Guild member John Crawley, with volunteers supplying much of the labour required to reduce costs as grants applications had not been successful. It was hoped to use a Group Training Project Scheme work crew for main work and volunteers for the rest.⁵⁵

In 1996, the centenary of *Bijou Theatre* was celebrated. Many residents of Esperance and surrounding district recollected dances, school concerts, roller skating and badminton at the place, and the annual Fancy Dress Ball, which was anticipated 'with secrecy and delight for months...'. The annual Christmas Tree, at which 'all of the town's children received a present' and the hall was filled, was 'remembered with joy and pride.'⁵⁶ From 30 June, volunteers repainted the interior of the theatre, which was painted Balmain Blue, with the foyer repainted in a lighter colour. John Crawley carefully repainted the frieze on the beams as per detailing revealed in the 1897 photograph, and sought out old ripple iron to match the existing iron where any sheets needed replacement. In September, 'Bijou Merry Moments', illustrated the history of the theatre in two parts, its life prior to the Theatre Guild period and the story from the Guild's first production in 1971, through to 1996, was performed as part of the successful centenary celebrations, with some guests coming from 'distant places.'⁵⁷ The Guild was delighted its paid membership had increased from 25 in 1995, to 110 by September 1996.⁵⁸ In 1996, *Bijou Theatre* was included in Shire of Esperance's Municipal Inventory.⁵⁹

50 President's Report, 2 April 1992, in *Bijou Newsletter* May 1992.

51 Express Bicentennial Souvenir 8 December 1992, p. v.

52 *Bijou Newsletter* April, May and October 1994.

53 *Bijou Bulletin* February 1995.

54 *Bijou Bulletin* August and November 1995.

55 *Bijou Bulletin* November 1995.

56 *Bijou Bulletin* May 1996.

57 *Bijou Bulletin* May and June 1996.

58 *Bijou Bulletin* September 1996; and John Crawley op. cit.

59 Shire of Esperance Municipal Inventory, Adopted 23 July 1996.

In 1997, the Building Fund was much healthier, and the Guild looked forward to completing restoration of *Bijou Theatre*. Plans were prepared for new rehearsal rooms and for the Petit Bijou to accommodate the children's theatre classes under Lyndal Taylor.⁶⁰ In mid-1998, the restoration work proceeded under the direction and supervision of builder John Crawley (life member of the Guild), and was completed in time for the Theatre Guild's end of year production. Many volunteers contributed their labour and/or donated goods for the project, including Doug and Marie Slater, who donated a plaque commemorating the centenary of the theatre beneath which a time capsule was buried.⁶¹ By mid-1999, wrought iron decorations were fitted over the front windows, and the additions to the south side were completed, providing much needed additional storage space.⁶² By December, Crawley had completed the hallway that was lined with memorabilia of the theatre.⁶³ Subsequently, the kitchen was renovated.⁶⁴ These works were assisted by the Work for the Dole Scheme and a Lotteries grant.⁶⁵

In 2002, the roof of *Bijou Theatre* was found to be beyond repair, and replacement was estimated at \$8,500, towards which Esperance Shire Council's Community Development Fund pledged \$3,500.⁶⁶ The Theatre Guild's Variety Show at *Bijou Theatre* to raise the remaining funds, entitled 'Raise the Roof', was 'a big success'.⁶⁷ John Crawley and his team repaired the worst areas, and the building was re-roofed in 2003.⁶⁸

In about 2006, fire doors were installed at *Bijou Theatre* at the direction of the Shire. In 2006-07, Esperance Theatre Guild continued to be an active theatre group, mounting three to four major shows annually at *Bijou Theatre*, generally a play, a musical, a mixed revue /cabaret show, and a Christmas pantomime, all of which are also rehearsed at the place. Their other activities there include a number of one-night or less intensive events such as debate nights, sing-alongs, one-act plays and social events. There are also occasional workshops (e.g. a directing workshop, circus workshops) led by locals or experts brought to Esperance by the Guild. The stairs from the Petit Bijou to the gallery are a popular place for wedding photographs.⁶⁹ In November 2007, a sub-floor inspection carried out by John Crawley after a section of the floor of the theatre was noticed to be sagging revealed some original stumps of paperbark, a timber that was locally available in 1896. The need for repairs has been noted, and they will be undertaken in due course.⁷⁰ In 2012, *Bijou Theatre* continues in use as a theatre.

60 *Bijou Bulletin* January to July 1997.

61 *Bijou Bulletin* May to September 1998.

62 *Bijou Bulletin* May 1999.

63 *Bijou Bulletin* December 1999.

64 *Bijou Bulletin* December 1999.

65 John Crawley op. cit.

66 *Bijou Bulletin* May 2002.

67 *Bijou Bulletin* September 2002.

68 *Bijou Bulletin* September 2002 and November 2003; and John Crawley, op. cit.

69 *Bijou Bulletin* 2000 to 2007; Dale Johnson, op. cit.; and Anne Hilton, conversation with Robin Chinnery, 2 November 2007.

70 John Crawley, op. cit.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Bijou Theatre, at 115 Dempster Street, Esperance, comprises an Australian vernacular style timber framed theatre building, with elements of the Federation Gothic style, clad in painted corrugated iron and timber. It was constructed by Edward James McCarthy in 1896. In the 1990s, additions were made comprising new dressing rooms, the Petit Bijou, and additional storage.

Bijou Theatre is located on the western side of Dempster Street, in the centre of Esperance, close to the junction with William Street. This section of Dempster Street contains predominantly commercial buildings dating from the early to late twentieth century. There are wide pavements and large Norfolk Island Pine trees (*Araucaria heterophylla*) on both sides of the street creating an almost continual avenue along Dempster Street, the main street of Esperance.

Bijou Theatre has zero setback on the east elevation facing Dempster Street. There are gravel driveways to the north and south sides of the building approximately three metres wide extending to the boundary. At the rear of the building running between *Bijou Theatre* and the adjacent Scollick Memorial Hall is a graveled laneway.

The front facade of *Bijou Theatre*, which faces Dempster Street to the east, is roughly symmetrical around the central gable of the building and contains double timber doors in the middle of the elevation with tall timber windows, with grilles over, to either side of the doors. Centrally above the doors, at high level, is a circular louvered timber vent and immediately below the vent is painted signage that reads "BIJOU THEATRE 1896". The roof verge to the central part of the front facade has decorative timber bargeboards and a tall timber finial on the ridge.

To the north and south of the central facade are narrow wings, approximately four metres wide, with blank parapet walls facing the street. On the street side of the parapet walls are short timber framed verandahs with hipped roofs.

The side and rear elevations of *Bijou Theatre* are clad in painted corrugated iron and contain a number of window and door openings. The windows are a mixture of aluminium and timber framed sliding and awning windows and the doors are predominantly painted solid core timber faced doors.

Internally the theatre space appears to retain much of its early layout and detailing, including corrugated metal wall and ceiling linings, timber windows and boarded doors, stepped gallery area, and the timber boarded floor below the more recent tiered seating. However, the proscenium arch has been lost from the stage.

The principal access to the theatre is through the timber double doors on the eastern elevation, which lead into a small lobby area containing a bar/ticket counter. The lobby area has painted walls clad in corrugated metal sheeting and pin board. The room has a relatively low ceiling, approximately 2.3 metres, due to the stepped gallery above. At either side of the main counter a short flight of steps leads directly into the main theatre space.

The main theatre space has nine rows of raking seating facing a raised stage area at the western end of the room. The walls of the theatre are clad in painted corrugated metal sheeting with timber double hung sash windows and timber boarded doors in both the north and south walls. The ceiling is clad in corrugated

metal sheeting and contains several large decorative plaster and metal vents. Visible below the ceiling are a series of timber cross beams that are decorated with a painted frieze that carefully replicates the original frieze as shown in the 1897 photograph. There is also a lighting grid constructed from timber members.

Backstage, to the west of the stage, are several ancillary rooms for the theatre, including storage areas, dressing rooms and wardrobe spaces. The storage areas extend along the entire length of the southern side of the theatre. On the northern side of the theatre is a large room, the Petit Bijou, containing a bar and seating. The walls and ceiling of this room are clad in perforated hardboard. The floor is concrete overlaid with carpet. On the northern side of the space are tall windows and in the south-eastern corner is a timber staircase leading up to the gallery area. To the west of the bar area is a corridor leading to toilet facilities, storage rooms and a kitchen area at the rear of the building. The theatre gallery is situated at the eastern end of the theatre space behind a timber paneled balustrade. The gallery has a stepped floor constructed from timber boarding covered in carpet tiles. The gallery area is under the same ceiling as the main theatre space.

Bijou Theatre is generally in good condition. The building has been well maintained and the additions constructed in the 1990's have been sensitively added to the original structure.⁷¹ There are some areas of the building that require attention, including the ceiling and roof structure of the back stage area and the floor structure of the main theatre space. However, as the building is a relatively simple structure it should be easily repairable.

13.3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

Building materials: Corrugated iron was a highly utilitarian building material, and being readily transportable, easily worked and readily fixed, with little waste, it proved practical and popular in Australia, where its use quickly spread in the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1850s, most corrugated iron imported into Australia was galvanized in a process patented in 1837, which protected the steel with a skin of non-rusting zinc. In the Victorian gold boom period of the 1850s, and similarly in the Western Australian gold boom period of the 1890s, there were many hastily erected buildings of corrugated iron construction that were sometimes un-lined, and at other times lined with iron, hessian, or lathe and plaster. As each of the boom periods subsided, and as timber weatherboards became more readily available, corrugated iron was less frequently used for the walls of residential or commercial buildings. For the most part, it was only on 'the most utilitarian of buildings – sheds, outhouses, stores and the secondary buildings' on rural properties that this material continued to be employed for walls in the early twentieth century.⁷² So far as is known, *Bijou Theatre* is the only surviving Federation period purpose built theatre building of timber and corrugated iron construction in Western Australia that continues in operation, and probably the only such surviving theatre in Australia, as no other such theatre is listed on

⁷¹ Email correspondence from the consultants states that they are unable to clarify what material has been lost from the Theatre through any redevelopments, and can only speculate that previous additions may have been removed to construct the rear section of the building, 15 May 2008, October 31, 2008, November 13, 2008, HCWA file 00828.

⁷² Freeland, J. M. *Architecture in Australia: A History* Pelican Books, Mentone, Victoria, 1972, pp. 119-120.

the HCWA database or Australian Heritage Places Inventory.

Cinemas/theatres

There are 94 cinemas/theatres on the Heritage Council of Western Australia (HCWA) database, of which 28 are entered on the Register of Heritage Places (RHP), of which only two are located in the Goldfields region. These are:

- *Barnes Federal Theatre (fmr)* (RHP 1474), built at Leonora in 1899, a rare example of a theatre constructed of local stone in the Federation Free Classical style, whose various uses have included serving as the Shire Hall, and, until recently, as the local Telecentre; and *Cremorne Theatre (fmr)* (RHP 3468), in the Federation Free Classical style, built at Kalgoorlie in 1907.

There are also two purpose built cinema/theatres in the Goldfields that are included in Municipal Inventories:

- Theatre Royal (fmr) (HCWA 00574), a vernacular timber weatherboard and corrugated iron building, erected at Coolgardie c.1895, which was purchased by Bishop Gibney for use as a Sisters of Mercy school in 1898, and relocated to its current site c.1905. Historically used as a combined school and currently as a community hall, recommended for RHP in 1995, which was recorded by National Trust (WA). Registered as part of *St Anthony's Convent of Mercy (fmr)* (RHP 00573).
- Palace Theatre (fmr) (HCWA 00186), an Inter-War Art Deco brick and concrete theatre built at Boulder in 1937.

Bijou Theatre, Esperance, built in 1896, pre-dates all of these buildings except Coolgardie, which served as a theatre for only a very short time.

In Western Australia, very few purpose built theatres were erected prior to 1890, and none have survived intact. During the gold boom period of the 1890s, and into the early 1900s, a number of theatres were built, but few survive into the twenty-first century, and of these *His Majesty's Theatre* (1904) (RHP 02006) is the only one that continues in operation as a theatre in 2012. The HCWA database lists ten theatres built in the 1890s, including *Bijou Theatre* (1896). Two listed were not constructed as theatres but have later been used for this purpose (*Victoria Hall* (RHP 00935) and *Northam Town Hall/ Lesser Hall* (RHP 1877), constructed 1896 and 1898 respectively). In addition to those mentioned above, the 1890s theatres are:

- Vaudeville Theatre (fmr) (HCWA 14818) (construction materials not noted in description), at Guildford, built in 1896, used as industrial premises for a smash repair business in the late twentieth century.
- *Theatre Royale and Metropole Hotel (fmr)* (RHP 1993), in Perth, the hotel being built in 1894, and the theatre in 1897.
- *Cummins Theatre* (RHP 1574) at Merredin, a brick structure with a profiled sheet metal clad fly tower, was originally built in about 1897, and was re-located in the late 1920s, when it was decorated according to that period.
- *Old Mill Theatre* (RHP 02389), a brick and iron building, was built as South Perth Mechanics' Hall in 1899, and served a variety of uses through to

about 1946, when it was converted to use as an amateur theatre.

Theatre Royal (1834), in Hobart, is the oldest theatre in Australia that continues in operation in the twenty-first century. *Bijou Theatre* (1896) is believed to be the third oldest theatre still in operation in Australia, and is the oldest in Western Australia.

Conclusion: Built in 1896, *Bijou Theatre* and Vaudeville Theatre (fmr) are the two oldest surviving purpose built theatre buildings in Western Australia. *Bijou Theatre*, the third oldest purpose built theatre in Australia continuing in operation for its intended purpose in 2012, and as the only surviving 1890s theatre of timber and corrugated iron construction in Australia, has considerable rarity value.

13. 4 KEY REFERENCES

No key references.

13. 5 FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research should be undertaken to determine what elements are original and what material has been lost from the Theatre through any redevelopments, as it is possible that previous additions may have been removed to construct the rear section of the building.

However, no early plans of the place appear to have survived, and the Shire of Esperance was unable to locate any plans or records relating to the 1990s alterations and additions. The index to E. J. McCarthy's records held in Private Archives, Battye Library, does not mention the place, and research in some of the archives, such as correspondence, did not yield any relevant material. Local newspapers may be a potential source of additional information about the place, and further research in records held by the R.A.O.B., and Esperance Theatre Guild may reveal further information about the place since 1948.