

*Natal Society Lecture (abridged)*  
*Friday 21 March, 1986*

## *“Putting the Playhouse Together Again”*

I recall as a child, before the War, being taken to the Theatre Royal to see the Carl Rosa company, and being terribly impressed when Samson pushed the temple over, though even at the age of nine I could tell that there were ropes lowering the fractured pillar to the floor.

These seasons were followed during and after the War by the National Opera Company under the direction of John Connell at the Criterion, the Theatre Royal having already fallen prey to the advent of the cinema.

In fact, a few of us from the D.H.S. cadet corps were press-ganged into performing in *Carmen* — with Betsy de la Porte.

In the first act we were soldiers of the guard and in the third act by means of marching across the stage, running round the backcloth and donning different hats and cloaks for our next entrance, were in quick succession, matadors, picadors and toreadors.

Edward Dunn and others struggled to present opera, including “*The Consul*”, at the City Hall and subsequently we had visits from the University of Cape Town Opera Company, and various visiting Italian opera companies.

Ballet has been well served in Durban over the years, from the visits of overseas companies, Dolin and Markova at the Playhouse, the Royal Ballet at the Alhambra and many presentations of high standard by the Rodney Sisters, Eileen Keegan, Dorothea McNair, Joy Shearer and others, and visits by the University of Cape Town Ballet under Dulcie Howes and David Poole.

All this was before the formation of the Performing Arts Council some twenty years ago and we have had annual seasons of Opera from NAPAC.

Since then also there have been erratically spaced seasons of ballet at the Alhambra by the original NAPAC company, and again visits by the CAPAB and PACT Ballets together with PACOFS short-lived International Ballet which probably presented the best value for money available anywhere in the world, and recently by the newly formed NAPAC Dance Company.

Nonetheless, an “Opera House” for Durban is a bit of a misnomer. What we are actually getting in the Playhouse is a large auditorium suitable for opera but also suitable for all sorts of entertainment which will keep it operating throughout the year: ballet, musicals, symphony concerts, pop groups, spectaculars, visiting superstars and, with the other venues which I shall list later, drama, chamber music, chamber opera, recitals, experimental drama — in fact the whole gamut of the performing arts.



The Opera auditorium, The Natal Playhouse

(Photograph: Contract Seating)

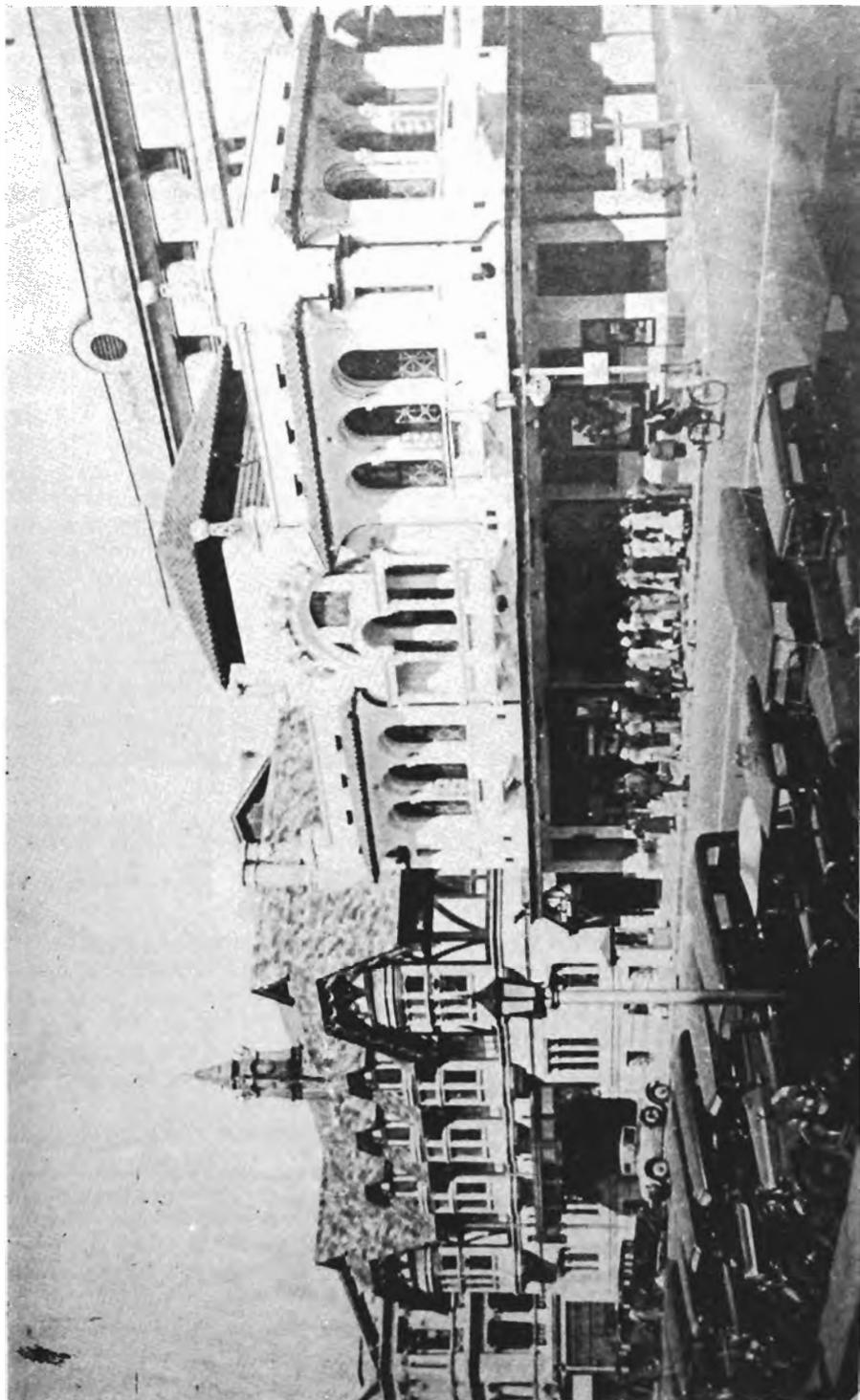
In my own case, *proposed* theatres for Durban, civic or otherwise, have been legion.

In 1955, in conjunction with Calvert McDonald, I prepared plans for one on the old Traffic Centre site between Pine Street and Commercial Road. Then in 1959 on the invitation of the then Mayor, I prepared plans for a two-auditorium theatre on the site of the Old Police Station or City Engineer's Building adjacent to Medwood Gardens — it was to have cost some *three hundred thousand pounds* and to be ready for the first Republic Celebrations in 1961.

We then produced a much more modest remodelling of the Kings Cinema to accommodate the by then flagging Intimate Theatre Company.

My files also contain yellowing plans for a theatre on the old Criterion site for a financier who unfortunately did a midnight flit, a conversion of the Theatre Royal from cinema back to theatre, a theatre for Donovan and Molly Maule in Albany Grove, and a theatre for Brickhill-Burke on yet another site in Albany Grove.

The idea for the Playhouse was, I think, first proposed by Ivor Kissen to James Conrad the NAPAC Opera Director, and when I was first approached by NAPAC I was not altogether enthusiastic. As I said to James



at the time, I just couldn't visualise a Tudor Opera House — a revamped Victorian building yes, even a magnificent Art-Deco-interior such as the tragically lost Metro, yes, but a Tudor one, not really (unless one was going to confine the repertoire to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Faust*, or *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, which were the only half-timbered operas that I could think of at the time.)

However, a meeting was arranged with Butcher Bros and in mid-1977 the first of what seems now an almost continuous series of visits was paid to the building.

As we stood in front of the orchestra pit and contemplated the 6-metre depth of stage, I stared that there was no way that it could be done without at least 15 metres of the Albany Parking Garage being available, which was out of the question. Walter Butcher immediately took the wind from my sails by saying it was *not* out of the question.

“Well”, I said as we walked out of the exit into the alleyway, “it still doesn't help as we have no side stage, no dressing room space, no rehearsal rooms. Now if *that* were available”, gesturing towards the Colosseum building, “it would make all the difference.”

Imagine my astonishment when he said he knew it *was* available although they didn't own it.

“Well we'll need this block of flats too”, pointing to Medwood Court in Acutt Street — that they did own.

So the very first scribbles were based on the acquisition of the Playhouse, the Colosseum, fifty feet of Albany Garage, and Medwood Court, and so the final working drawings remain, although much modified over the months and years.

I shall not dwell on the permutations of on, off, maybe, no, yes; appointments, terminations of appointments, disappointments, City Council resolutions, counter resolutions, Exco deliberations and counter deliberations which occupied some two years. I have two large scrapbooks of press cuttings recording the trauma of whether to start from scratch or recycle.

The reasons for recycling are not purely economic, although in the case of the Playhouse itself this is undoubtedly the case where considerable money has been saved by adapting the existing structure. In this case the economics of recycling must be seen in a much broader context.

Firstly we are in the centre of Durban's traditional entertainment quarter which, although deteriorating in the late 70s, is still firmly entrenched in the minds of both locals and visitors. We therefore begin with a head start.

The Playhouse is the last of the four great atmospheric cinemas built for Schlesinger and one of the few remaining in the world. Call it nostalgia if you like, but it is proving to be a very viable form of nostalgia.

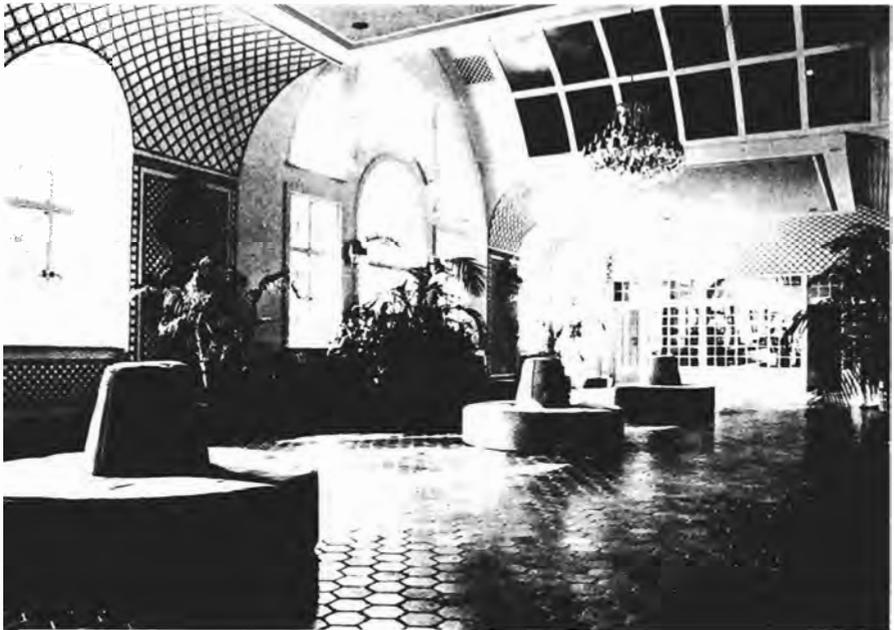
Secondly, together with the old Railway Station, Expo '85 Site and the Revel Fox plans for the CBD, the Playhouse Complex completes an overall plan of improvements for the central area. In this regard, it is interesting to

quote from a prophetic Memorandum prepared by Councillor Donald Smith for the then Administrator of Natal, the Honourable J.G.C. Botha, in February, 1980:

That the heart of the city should be vibrant and prosperous is obviously essential, not only to commercial interests, but to the city as a whole. One of the most important causes, if not the prime cause underlying the CBD's decline generally, is the decentralisation of commercial activities from the CBD. More specifically, one has noted that enterprises located in the proximity of the Playhouse have, since this theatre fell into virtual disuse a few years ago, suffered a grievous decline. Several have closed, all of which relied heavily on custom previously generated by the Playhouse. Others are surviving but report a drastic reduction in their profitability.

The proposed conversion of the Playhouse-Colosseum will not only revitalise the immediate area through the introduction of a performing arts industry but will also play an important role in reversing the deleterious effects of decentralisation on the CBD.

In every regional shopping centre, one will note that like enterprises group together in the same locality. Durban's CBD is no exception. This grouping is evident in the location of banks and financial institutions, of fashion shops, of department stores, of motor dealers. There are sound reasons for this phenomenon. Most important is this, that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts. By offering comparative shopping, variety and convenience, the enterprises — though competing one with the other — become mutually reinforcing.



The Alhambra room, The Natal Playhouse

(Photograph: Scenaria)

The entertainment business follows the same rules. The Playhouse and Colosseum are but two of eight entertainment houses closely grouped together. Surely any proposed performing arts complex belongs in the traditional entertainment heart of Durban too?

Durban has a unique opportunity of integrating, through imaginative urban landscape, such landmarks as the City Hall and the Main Post Office, both national monuments, with Francis Farewell Square and Medwood Gardens, a composite of buildings and spaces, each with its particular period character, and incorporating the Playhouse-Colosseum conversion, thereby creating a civic centre unequalled anywhere.

Supporting facilities required by any performing arts complex exist already all round the Playhouse and Colosseum. The Royal and Mayfair (now the Albany) Hotels would provide accommodation and restaurant facilities and entertainment and could hardly be any closer. The airways terminal is just round the corner in Aliwal Street. Shops of every description and all the financial institutions are within very easy walking distance and public transport is on the doorstep.

Housing the performing arts at the Playhouse-Colosseum would be to bring the arts to the people. There would be a high level of desirable exposure to the public, thousands of whom pass the buildings daily. They would be influenced by exposure to the advertising posters, by invitations to ‘pop in’ and experience the orchestra in rehearsal, or a play or ballet or opera in production, by art exhibitions, poetry readings, chamber or folk music, lunch time happenings and by a variety of restaurants on three levels. The complex could become a living invitation to the ordinary townspeople to adopt the performing arts as part of their lives. Patrons intent on seeing a film, may decide on a play, opera, ballet or concert instead.

This was written by Don Smith early in 1980 in support of the recycling and he has certainly been proved correct.

Although the scheme has enlarged considerably since then, the basic layout remains the same. In 1978 a trip to other theatre centres in the country was made by Chris Lombard of NAPAC and Pat Gordon, the then Director of Building Services, which firmed up certain requirements and the brief was further expanded and developed.

Without going into chronological detail, various changes to the brief and the accommodation had to be made over a period of years to meet changing circumstances. Because of the restricted site, additional accommodation had to be provided vertically and not horizontally.

So many things which may appear to be purely administrative decisions have a profound bearing on the requirements of a building of this nature but what can be said positively is that NAPAC and the Administration have at least put the horse firmly in front of the cart in that the building has been designed in response to the needs of NAPAC and the performing arts and it will certainly not be some sort of vacuum waiting to be filled.

The complex is *not* just two re-vamped old cinemas; but provides everything necessary for a vital performing arts programme to be presented both by NAPAC and visiting companies.

It compares in facilities with the Nico Malan in Cape Town and Sand du Plessis in Bloemfontein but of course not with the Pretoria State Opera House and Theatre. (But then why should it? Such a complex can only be a ‘one-off’ in South Africa, and at some ninety million rands perhaps that’s just as well.)

Overall, it provides much better facilities than Covent Garden or any similar complex in Britain other than the National Theatre or Barbican in London, and I would suggest it will be adequate for Durban.

I have now become not only reconciled to but downright enthusiastic about our ‘Tudor Opera House’. The restaurants, foyers and auditorium have been restored to their former splendour and the stars have been faithfully replaced — though not, I’m afraid, Halley’s Comet.

GORDON SMALL

