THE EMPIRE

1911 - 2026

HISTORY

The Empire is the beating heart of performing arts in the Darling Downs, shaped by history and fuelled by the creativity of generations past, present and future.



54-56 NEIL ST, TOOWOOMBA

EMPIRETHEATRE.COM.AU

TOOWOOMBA REGION

1911

A GRAND BEGINNING



On 29 June 1911, Toowoomba audiences were introduced to a dazzling new form of entertainment when the original Empire Theatre, known as 'Empire Pictures', opened its doors.

Boasting the latest in cinematic technology and seating more than 2,200 patrons, this grand picture palace quickly became a cultural beacon for the Darling Downs.



1933

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Tragedy struck on 22 February 1933 when a devastating fire destroyed much of the original building.

Only the northern and southern walls remained standing. With astonishing speed and resolve, the theatre was rebuilt in just nine months.

The new venue, unveiled on 27 November 1933, was a masterpiece of Art Deco design, a popular style at the time. With a 2,400-seat auditorium and a distinctive architectural identity, the Empire Theatre once again became a cultural anchor for the community.

For decades it was the region's premier entertainment venue, screening films and hosting vaudeville, opera and touring shows, noted for its diffused lighting effects and one of Australia's largest stages.

1971 – 1997

DECLINE AND RESURRECTION

Patronage declined in the 1960s and by the 1970s, the rise of television and changing entertainment habits led to declining audiences.

The Empire Theatre closed after its last film on 1 April 1971.



After closure, years of neglect followed and the Empire Theatre stood mostly abandoned, gradually falling into disrepair.

For over two decades, the iconic building—once a central part of Toowoomba's cultural life—was used intermittently as a warehouse by the local TAFE and its once-grand interior suffered significant neglect.

IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S, PROPOSALS TO EITHER DEMOLISH OR REDEVELOP THE BUILDING SPARKED PUBLIC CONCERN AND DEBATE.

Some saw the site as derelict and beyond saving, while others, particularly heritage advocates, campaigned for its preservation.

The controversy grew when discussions began around funding a new performing arts venue—some argued it should be built from scratch elsewhere; others insisted the Empire Theatre should be restored.



Eventually, the Toowoomba City Council, backed by state and federal funding, opted for restoration—a decision praised by arts supporters but questioned by critics concerned about the costs and practicality of retrofitting an aging structure.

THE THEATRE WAS LISTED ON THE QUEENSLAND HERITAGE REGISTER IN 1994, AND A MAJOR RESTORATION RETURNED THE INTERIOR TO ITS 1933 ART DECO GLORY, WHILE ADDING MODERN TECHNICAL SYSTEMS.

The project was awarded to architects Hassall Pty Ltd, and on 28 June 1997, the Empire Theatre reopened in spectacular fashion.

Combining modern performance infrastructure with a lovingly restored 1933 interior, this rebirth cemented the Empire Theatre as the largest performing arts theatre in regional Australia seating 1,561 and a centrepiece of the Darling Downs arts scene.



It has since become one of the leading regional performing arts venues in Australia.

1990 - 2014

THE PRECINCT EXPANDS



Gavin John Photography

Church Theatre

Immediately adjacent to the Empire Theatre stands the former Wesleyan Methodist (later Uniting) Church, a Gothic-inspired landmark designed by the well-known Queensland architect Willoughby Powell and built in 1877-78 by Richard Godsall, later an alderman and Mayor of Toowoomba, to serve Toowoomba's growing congregation.

It was extended in 1901 by architect William Hodgen Jr. who added two transepts with choir and minister's vestry. It houses exquisite stained-glass windows, including a rare circular western window crafted by Ashwin & Falconer of Sydney, timber trusses and a broach spire.

The church was purchased by Toowoomba City Council in 1997, deconsecrated and integrated into The Empire precinct.



Dan Vonhoff Photography

Since 1998 it has served as the Church Theatre, linked by a glass-enclosed walkway in 2004 to the main theatre as part of the "Centenary Conference Precinct" a Toowoomba Regional Council project that included the construction of the Restaurant space. This work commemorated the Centenary of Toowoomba, which was proclaimed as a city in 1904.

RETAINING ITS HISTORIC CHARACTER – STAINED GLASS, ORIGINAL PIPE ORGAN AND ARCHES.

The Church Theatre now hosts cabaret, comedy, jazz and function events, adding an intimate heritage venue to the precinct.



Cassidy Cloupet Photography

Armitage Centre

The newest venue in the precinct is the Armitage Centre, opened in 2014. This modern black-box theatre (351 seats) was designed to complement The Empire's heritage buildings, even enclosing part of the old church structure.

Named after its benefactors (Clive & Conchita Armitage), the centre provides a fully flexible performance space featuring retractable tiered seating, advanced technical equipment, and 400m^2 of adaptable space. Since its launch it has hosted drama, dance, film, conferences and community events, further enhancing Toowoomba's regional arts infrastructure.

The Armitage Centre's design received architecture awards (AIA William Hodgen Award, 2015) for excellence in melding new and old elements.

1878
Wesleyan Methodist Church opened on Neil Street (4 August)

1901
Two transepts with choir & ministers' vestry added to The Church; stained-glass windows installed



1911
First Empire Theatre opened as 'Empire Pictures' (29 June), a 2,200-seat picture theatre

1928
Organ installed in Wesleyan Methodist Church; sound integrated into Empire Theatre auditorium for film



1933
Original Empire Theatre destroyed by fire (22 February); rebuilt in Art Deco style (incorporating surviving walls) and reopened in the same year (27 November)

1942
Iconic central "bomber" ceiling light fixture removed as a safety measure during WWII



1971
Theatre Manager Bob Dodd retires & Empire Theatre closed (final film screened on 1 April)

1973–75
Building sold to private owners (1973) and then to Queensland Government (1975) for TAFE use as a warehouse; falls into disrepair

LATE 1980S
Community and local groups begin informal discussions around the future of the site

EARLY 1990S
Toowoomba City Council and stakeholders debate whether to restore or demolish the Empire Theatre



1994
A major decision is made by the council to restore the building as a new performing arts complex. Funding is sought from State and Federal sources

1994
Empire Theatre added to Queensland Heritage Register (31 May)

1995
Restoration begins under architects Hassall Pty Ltd, preserving key Art Deco elements and retrofitting modern facilities

1997
The Friends of The Empire is established—just prior to the official reopening



1997
Empire Theatre reopens (28 June) as the largest performing arts precinct in regional Australia; The project is recognised for architectural and heritage excellence. Toowoomba City Council purchases adjacent church (October)

1998
Wesley Uniting Church incorporated into precinct as the Church Theatre



2005
New conference/theatre wing completed, connecting the Empire Theatre to the adjacent Church Theatre via glass walkway and construction of a restaurant space

2011
Empire Theatre celebrates its Centenary (100 years since 1911 opening)

2014
Armitage Centre officially opened (September) as a 351-seat black-box venue



2015
Armitage Centre wins AIA Queensland William Hodgen Award for Architecture (Building of the Year)

2018-19
Major refurbishment of auditorium, foyers and bar of the Empire Theatre

2020
The Empire precinct closed due to COVID-19 pandemic government restrictions (11 March) and later reopened with restricted capacity for *The Empire Strikes Back* series (11 June) returning to full audience capacity by the end of 2020 (17 November)

2021
Final refurbishment stage completed including stage door and dressing rooms

2023
The Empire underwent a digital upgrade with new logo and brand identity launched



2025
The Empire Theatre iconic red curtain was refreshed and upgraded for the first time since the grand reopening in 1997

2018 - 2026

A NEW ERA: MODERNISING THE EMPIRE

From 2018-2019, a multi-stage refurbishment enhanced every aspect of the theatre experience.



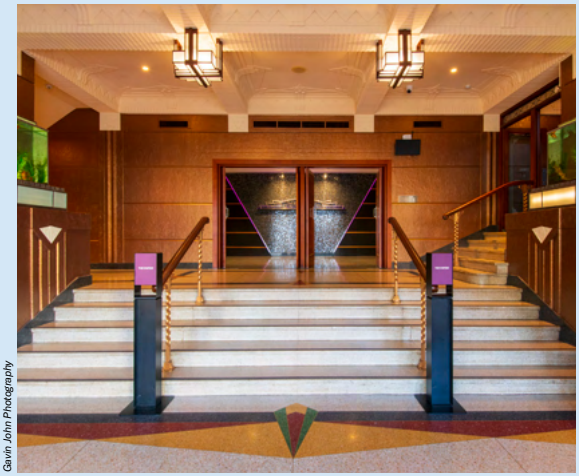
Gavin John Photography

The main auditorium was repainted and recarpeted, new seating was installed, the Ticket Office was updated, and the South Bar was expanded. Public amenities, foyers, and dressing rooms received significant upgrades. During the mainstage closure, the Church Theatre and Armitage Centre were fully operational and heavily utilised until the Empire Theatre reopened for the opening night performance of *Kinky Boots* in March 2019.

The final stage of the refurbishment, which saw an external lighting upgrade, dressing room renewal, Studio space functionality and a Stage Door reception area renovation, was completed in mid-2021.

THE CURRENT BUILDING FEATURES MODERN SEATING FOR 1,561 PATRONS.

It includes state of the art air-conditioning, bars and lounge areas, with purpose built backstage areas and excellent technical capabilities to stage the most complex of productions.



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In 2023, The Empire undertook a digital refurbishment, with upgrades to the website and refresh of the logo and brand, inspired by the theatre's original front awning in a modern take of the classic art deco architecture.

Designed for versatility and digital adaptability, the new identity reflects the venue's evolution into a contemporary, multi-venue arts precinct, adopting the colloquial term 'The Empire'.

THE EMPIRE



Lucy RC Photography

TODAY

HERITAGE AND ARCHITECTURE

Today, the Empire Theatre is heritage-listed and renowned for its exceptional blend of restored grandeur and contemporary functionality.

At the heart of its Art Deco interior is a rare and majestic backlit proscenium arch—believed to be the only one of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere—custom-lit to frame performances with elegance and precision.

Above, the ceiling is adorned with a 20-metre-long light fitting affectionately known as the “bomber light.” Named during World War II, both for its shape and for the fear it could shatter in a bombing raid, the light is a striking example of Deco-era design.



Gavin John Photography

It was removed during the war and later reinstated as part of the restoration, earning a commendation from the Illumination Engineers Society of Australia in 1997. A series of decorative sconces along the auditorium walls enhance the warm, atmospheric house lighting.

The theatre’s reincarnation was led by Brisbane-based architects Hassall Pty Ltd, who sensitively balanced heritage and innovation. They ensured the building’s three distinct architectural periods remained visible. A key requirement of the heritage approval was the clear legibility between old and new achieved through glass walls and skylights that connect to the original 1911 brickwork.



Gavin John Photography

Throughout the foyers, original acid-washed bricks, complete with surviving downpipes, light fittings, and porthole air vents, provide a tangible link to the past. These vents have been upgraded with acoustic panels to meet contemporary performance needs.

Complementing the heritage elements, dual-level glass towers now house four bars, lounge areas, and supper spaces. The restoration extended to every detail: decorative plasterwork was meticulously repaired, paint colours were matched using scrapings from the original surfaces, and

THE ICONIC EMPIRE THEATRE NEON SIGN ATOP THE BUILDING WAS FAITHFULLY REVIVED.

A major modern engineering addition is the Krantz micro-climate air-conditioning system. Designed for both comfort and preservation, it delivers cooled air from under the seats to a height of only three metres, maintaining optimal temperature without interfering with the heritage ambiance.

The result is a seamless fusion of historic charm and state-of-the-art performance infrastructure—a nationally recognised venue that continues to honour its architectural legacy while offering a world-class audience experience.

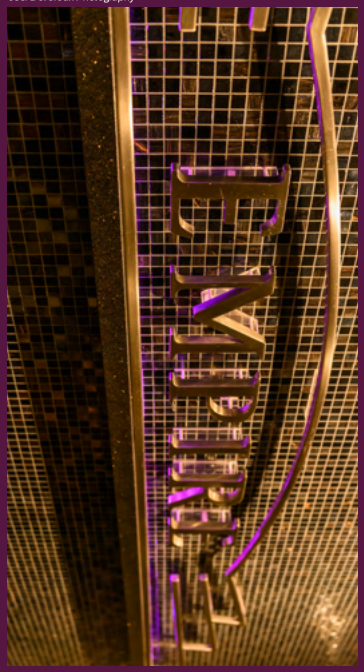
Joel Devereux Photography



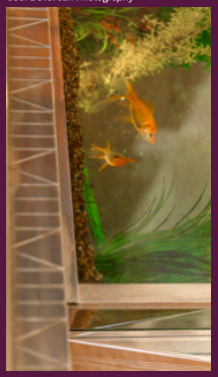


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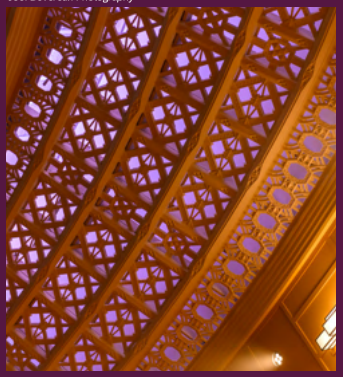
Joel Devereux Photography



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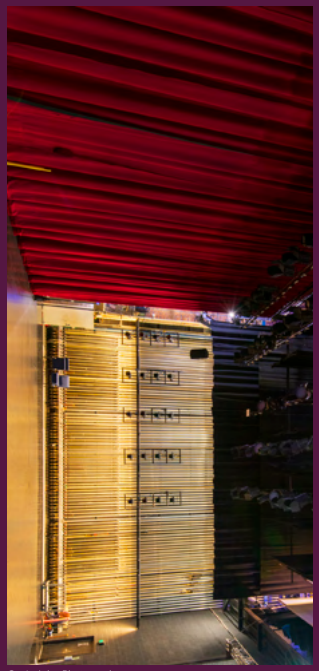


Cassandra Miller Photography





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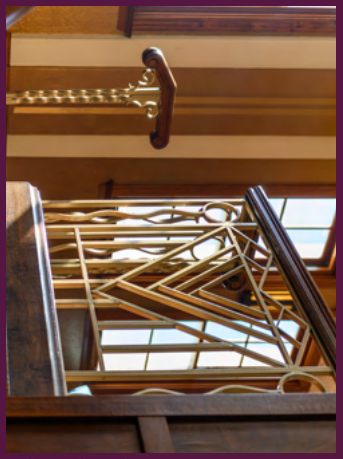


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Joel Devereux Photography





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THE EMPIRE



HISTORICAL TOURS

Take a peek behind the iconic red curtain where you can appreciate the architecture and learn about the behind-the-scenes happenings of a working performing arts complex.