

History

The 4.5 hectare site upon which the Arts Centre is situated is steeped in entertainment history.

In 1877 Cooper and Bailey's Great American International Circus was one of the first travelling circuses to pitch its Big Top tent on the site. In 1901 a permanent circus home, Olympia, was built by the Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus, Australia's biggest circus of the 19th century.

In 1904 the area of the site not occupied by Fitzgerald's was developed as a fashionable meeting place called Prince's Court. This area featured a Japanese Tea House, open-air theatre, miniature train, water chute and a 15 member military band.

In 1907 Wirth Brother's Circus took over the entire site from Fitzgerald's and remained there for the next 50 years. By 1911 they had built a new circus Hippodrome and a roller skating rink, and had leased the original Olympia as a cinema. During World War 1 some of the buildings were used as nursing homes for soldiers and nurses.

Wirth's continued to entertain children during the 1920s while adults enjoyed the new Green Mill Dance Hall, which replaced the Jazz Pavilion and Olympia Dancing Palace.

The entertainment bug soon spread to adjacent streets. There was ice-skating at the Glacarium in City Road, and around the corner, opposite the Snowden Gardens, Gregan McMahon's Repertory Company ran seasons of drama. In 1922 a 16 year old aspiring architect, Roy Grounds, played the part of a boy scout in a production at the Playhouse Theatre, opposite the present Stage Door of Hamer Hall he later designed.

The Depression of the 1930s and the worries of World War II meant most of the entertainment venues, with the exception of the cinema, fell on hard times.

The Green Mill, renamed the Trocadero, managed to survive this era as a rendezvous for servicemen and their partners, but eventually closed in the mid 1950s. Wirths continued to occupy the site until their buildings were destroyed by fire in 1953.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, before construction of the National Gallery of Victoria commenced, much of the site was used as an outdoor car-park.