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# Effect of the 1918-19 Spanish Influenza Pandemic on Picture Shows and Theatres in New South Wales

**Robert Parkinson**

On 28 January 1919, the NSW Government issued a proclamation requiring the immediate closure of picture shows, all other places of entertainment, churches and schools in the Sydney metropolitan area. Attempting to control the spread of pneumonic influenza or 'Spanish flu', these regulations affected almost anywhere that large groups of people congregated. The state was also quarantined from Victoria in an attempt to prevent further progress of the disease—but it was too late.<sup>1</sup>

The wearing of masks was made compulsory, and various medicinal preparations were hastily devised for inhalation or application. These invariably comprised mixtures of ammonia acetate, zinc sulphate, menthol, phenol, formalin and eucalyptus oil. The provision of so many treatments, not always cost free, must have been very confusing to a frantic public.<sup>2</sup> With official approval, inhalation chambers were set up in public places, and even in railway carriages. These devices required a person to stand in front of an automatic sprayer and inhale a zinc sulphate vapour.<sup>3</sup>

Even though picture shows had been banned, Elite Picture Theatres generously installed a sprayer in the foyer of their Piccadilly Theatre in Pitt Street, Sydney. It was reported that more than 11,000 citizens availed themselves of this free service in the space of only two days. Spraying of throats was also arranged by the Health Department throughout the city.<sup>4</sup>

It was not long before other prophylactic concoctions were marketed to desperate customers, but many potions were later found to be either dangerous or of little effect.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly with good intentions, the matron on a troopship recommended one teaspoonful of formalin in two quarts of boiling water. Once a day the fumes were to be inhaled in five deep breaths while keeping the eyes closed; formalin is a very strong disinfectant. 'Some chemists advise using only half a teaspoon of formalin, *but use your own judgement*', she wrote.<sup>6</sup>

With more respectability, but no less confusion, the Lassetter & Co. department store on George Street advertised that:

We have established a properly equipped inhaling chamber on our furniture floor which will be at the disposal of our patrons free of charge. As all our employees have been inoculated and each wears a mask, customers will, therefore, be enabled to do their shopping with the utmost safety.<sup>7</sup>

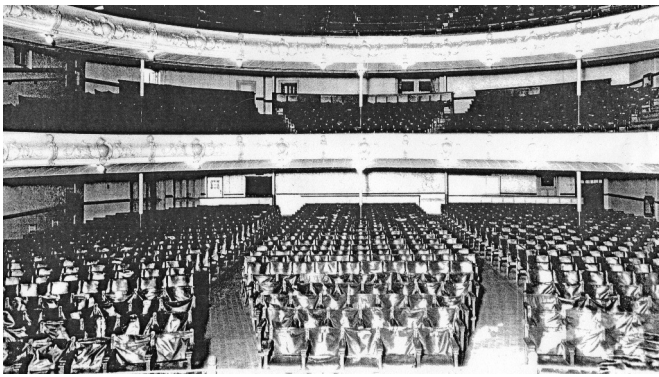
Capitalising on community concern, Lassetter's also advertised an extensive range of preventives and treatments.<sup>8</sup>

## Catching flu and catchy names

Similar treatments used by picture shows and theatres were often advertised and marketed under a variety of catchy names—much as theatrical promotions have always been prone to do. In the meantime, the Theatrical Managers and Federated Picture Show Proprietors' Association of Australasia protested to the Government that the meaning of the term 'metropolitan' was in doubt and bans should not apply to the suburbs, in particular Newtown. This was the site of Fuller's Majestic Theatre, a major live venue which happened to be operated by Benjamin Fuller, founder of the Association.

Fuller and his colleagues submitted that theatres were an unlikely source of infection because strict hygienic practices were already observed. They also drew attention to London and New York, where theatres had reopened after a brief closure. Their well-equipped ventilating plants, together with the use of sprays for floors and patrons, were considered to be the best disinfecting methods available.<sup>9</sup> Finally the objectors suggested that drastic and precipitate action could unnecessarily alarm the public more than was already the case. Despite these pleas the Minister for Health announced that theatre closures would remain in force.

While city streets became gloomy and many residents felt inconvenienced by the restrictions, there was some confusion about applicable restrictions in country districts, where many proprietors chose at first to ignore the regulations. Two South Coast picture shows,



*Majestic Theatre, Newtown, auditorium from stage  
[Barry Sharp Collection]*

Wollongong Crown and Woonona Princess, advertised that they would stay open, with their auditoriums continuing to be thoroughly fumigated before and after each session.<sup>10</sup> Further south, Braidwood citizens in favour of restrictions held a February meeting on the ground floor of the Literary Institute, while 'incongruously enough a picture show was in full blast at the time upstairs'. Restrictions by early April included closure of the local picture show, but by the end of the month it had reopened for business.<sup>11</sup>

## A grim picture

Restrictions outside of Sydney were apparently imposed at different times and for varying periods—if at all. Newcastle shows were closed not long after Sydney, but reopened in early February.<sup>12</sup> The Government continued to monitor the situation and acted only if local authorities requested implementation of restrictions that were considered to be necessary. An unexpected boon for some showmen was a better choice of films which could not be shown in the city. In early February the manager of Monarch Pictures in Wellington, for instance, anticipated receiving the finest batch of films ever.<sup>13</sup>

The Federated Picture Show Proprietors' Association of Australasia made their own request for a moratorium on closures in Sydney, arguing that many operators were under heavy obligations for rent and mortgages. They also suggested that monetary relief might be approved in cases of extreme financial stress.<sup>14</sup> The Government again would not give way, and received support from an unlikely source:

Several letters have appeared lately which advanced the idea that the theatres and picture shows should be turned into public inhalation chambers. Naturally the suggestion comes from persons who are financially interested in the reopening of the shows ... but I know that our theatres are not built in such a way as to render the wholesale fumigation of the public either successful or possible.<sup>15</sup>

The correspondent, simply named 'A Picture Show Employee', continued:

There is a marked antagonism among women to the masks. Many women are avoiding the city because they think the mask a disfigurement and a discomfort. About three-quarters of the average picture show audience is female, and I am certain that not a quarter of them would go to a show if they had to wear a mask.<sup>16</sup>

Within a week the Women's Column of a newspaper painted a grim picture of the hardship experienced by women. Some cleaners had been kept on for one day a week, but 428 female members of the Theatrical Employees' Union, such as ticket sellers and ushers, had no means of livelihood, as did non-union members. While some financial support was provided by three theatrical companies—JC Williamson, Tivoli and Paramount Pictures—in early February the State Government also established a Distress Relief Fund to which many theatrical employees and other citizens applied.<sup>17</sup>

## Easing restrictions

Towards the end of February, the disease appeared to be abating and restrictions were eased. However, authorities warned that while there was still a risk of infection, people would be well advised to continue with masks and arrange regular inoculation. If the affliction showed signs of getting out of control, all or some restrictions would be reimposed. Sydney picture shows were permitted to reopen on 3 March 1919, but with sessions two hours apart during which complete disinfection was mandatory.<sup>18</sup> Further regulations on the ventilation and sanitation of picture shows and theatres were to be promulgated subsequently.<sup>19</sup>

With as little delay as possible, press advertisements summoned the large contingent of employees back to work—managers, operators, utility men, attendants, cleaners, spruikers, publicity men, distributors, orchestral musicians, pianola players, ushers and cashiers. Union Theatres announced that the Sydney Crystal Palace, Strand, Globe, Lyric, Empress, Grand, Majestic, King's Cross and West's Olympia had been thoroughly sterilised and cleaned, and would reopen on 3 March. All Union Theatres, as well as the new Lyceum, would provide absolute proof against germs by air processed through newly installed Radiolene sterilising plants.<sup>20</sup> The Tivoli Theatre was to open on Saturday 8 March after extensive renovation and 'an entirely new ventilation plant installed which ensures a perfect current of air passing through the theatre day and night ... it is now the most hygienic and perfectly equipped theatre in the Southern Hemisphere'.<sup>21</sup>

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## Sprays, washes and inhalations

As foreshadowed on 5 March, regulations under the *Theatres and Public Halls Act* were issued requiring daily and thorough washing and spraying of premises with a mixture of phenol and water.<sup>22</sup> Another precautionary measure recommended for theatres, and endorsed by some, was the disinfectant Gumlypta, obviously featuring eucalyptus oil as an essential ingredient.<sup>23</sup> Prior to this development, the Newcastle Lyric advertised that the theatre was ‘hygienically sprayed and fumigated by the latest American method, the greatest known disinfectant “formalin” being used every 20 minutes, and patrons are sprayed as they enter and leave the theatre by a harmless yet effective disinfectant’.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, towards the end of March 1919, the pandemic spread as feared. Theatres and places of entertainment were closed once again and wearing of masks was compulsory.<sup>25</sup> It was ironic that the Minister responsible for the Act, Chief Secretary George Fuller, was reported as sceptical of some regulations. His schoolboy son had been treated in an inhalation chamber but soon after was sent home with a sore throat and spent several days recovering.<sup>26</sup> It might be noted that the Chief Secretary was not related to Benjamin Fuller of Newtown’s Majestic Theatre.

Travelling showmen may have been unknowingly responsible for spreading the contagion after exposure on their circuits. During the second outbreak of the disease, an instance was reported in Gundagai. A Mr McFarlane from Wagga had shown pictures in the town on the previous Monday. On Tuesday he became so ill at the nearby village of Tumblong that he had to stop the show and refund admission money. On returning to Gundagai he camped with his wife and child on the river flats. On Thursday his condition became known to a local doctor who admitted him to hospital. Apart from his immediate plight the incident shows how parlous the life of itinerant showman could be.<sup>27</sup>

## The financial impact

Just as the pandemic was again abating towards the end of April 1919, the Greater JD Williams entertainment company issued their annual report for the previous year. As well as outlining assets and earnings, the directors recommended against payment of a dividend because of the adverse effects on business of the influenza restrictions.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time a deputation of businessmen to the Chief Secretary and the Minister of Health repeated similar sentiments, while judiciously expressing concern for the public’s wellbeing. The group’s spokesman, William Szarka, proprietor of the Enmore

Theatre, also suggested that morale would be restored by once again providing the public with amusement.<sup>29</sup> Within a few days, abolition of restraints was announced to everyone’s relief. Masks were discarded, picture shows resumed business and other amusements soon followed.<sup>30</sup>

The question of financial relief for losses incurred by picture showmen had already been flagged by the Federated Picture Showmen’s Association in their February approach to the Government. In May, a deputation led by Szarka—the Association’s President—stressed the need to compensate members for losses and even ruin.

After several months of inaction, representatives of the picture showmen again pleaded with the authorities for appropriate redress. At the time many picture shows were being rebuilt, or were about to be upgraded or enlarged. Plans were made for lavish and more comfortable interiors to satisfy the growing demand for this type of entertainment. If showmen’s assets had been adversely affected by the pandemic, financiers might be unwilling to lend funds, or landowners reluctant to lease their properties, fearing that commitments might not be met. At last the State Government responded encouragingly by announcing the preparation of a Bill for consideration by Parliament.<sup>31</sup> The *Influenza Epidemic Relief Act* received the Governor’s assent in January 1920, and the Minister for Health was appointed to administer it.<sup>32</sup>

On 19 August 1920, the Commissioner submitted to Parliament the total final relief payments to owners and managers of picture shows and theatres under provisions of the Act. Amounts included components for rent, rates, taxes, interest, insurance, lighting and wages. Altogether, these 121 claimants received a total of £9,253/2/7.<sup>33</sup> Many expected their total expenses and estimated lost profits would be covered, but it was quickly pointed out that the Act specified relief only, not compensation.<sup>34</sup>

## Escapism, excitement and espionage

The pandemic had been a serious threat to the health of the population, but withdrawal of official restrictions allowed a return to normal life. Once again picture shows and theatres could offer escapism and excitement eagerly awaited by their many patrons. In hindsight we can appreciate how the proliferation of medical treatments and questionable advertising could create confusion and anxiety. However, would citizens truly be so desperate as to be influenced by the following examples of ‘fake news’, 1919-style?

A girl who had settled in the US wrote to her parents about a common belief that influenza germs



*Majestic Theatre, Newtown [Inner West Council Archives]*

were being put about by Germans [After all it was just after World War I]. Two Germans disguised as nuns were caught at it. The luggage of another pair, dressed as women and travelling on a train, was found to contain the influenza germs.<sup>35</sup>

A cure-all influenza inoculant which was credited with virtues commonly included in patent medicine announcements, namely a cure for all ills. An old Newcastle resident who had been unable to walk without a stick claimed that, after he had the first dose, he felt no rheumatic pains and had been able to discard his stick.<sup>36</sup>

## About the author

After graduating from Sydney University, Robert worked in the NSW Public Service as a teacher and administrator. He has been a member of several associations such as the Royal Australian Historical Society, Marrickville Heritage Society and the Cinema and Theatre Historical Society. Robert has produced a number of books, articles and talks for these groups, while in recent years he has volunteered in the archives of the City of Sydney and Marrickville Municipal Council.

## References

<sup>1</sup> 'Proclamation 13', *Supplement to the Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, 28 January 1919, p.591.

<sup>2</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1919, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 13 February 1919, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February, p.8.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1919, p.6 and 19 April 1919, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Author's emphasis; *Daily Telegraph*, 13 February 1919, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 1919, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 1919, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 1919, p.5.

<sup>10</sup> *South Coast Times*, 21 January 1919, p.11 and 31 January 1919, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Braidwood Review*, 11 February 1919, p.5, 8 April, p.4 and 25 April, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 7 February 1919, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> *Wellington Times*, 10 February 1919, p.2.

<sup>14</sup> *Evening News*, 5 February 1919, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1919, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1919, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 1919, p.5; 'Distress Relief Fund, Pneumonic Influenza: Food Order and Invoice Book', 1919. State Archives & Records New South Wales, Series NRS 1118 Folder 5/1203.

<sup>18</sup> 'Proclamation 44', *Supplement to the Government Gazette of New South Wales*, 27 February 1919, p.1241.

<sup>19</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1919, p.13.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3 March 1919, pp.4 and 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1919, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1919, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> *Sun*, 9 March 1919, p.9.

<sup>24</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 3 February 1919, p.8.

<sup>25</sup> 'Proclamation 68'. *Supplement to the Government Gazette of New South Wales*, 31 March 1919, p.1943; 'Proclamation 70'. *Supplement to the Government Gazette of New South Wales*, 2 April 1919, p.1985.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 19 April 1919, p.9.

<sup>27</sup> *Gundagai Independent*, 14 April 1919, p.2.

<sup>28</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 1919, p.8.

<sup>29</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1919, p.7.

<sup>30</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1919, p.1.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 1919, p.6.

<sup>32</sup> 'Notice 2'. *Supplement to the Government Gazette of New South Wales*, 2 January 1920, p.35; 'Notice 18'. *Supplement to the Government Gazette of New South Wales*, 30 January 1920, p.514.

<sup>33</sup> Kessell, W.J., Progress Report, Second Progress Report and Final Report of Royal Commission of Inquiry Into Claims Lodged Under the Provisions of the Influenza Epidemic Relief Act, 1919, in *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, Second Session of the Twenty-Fifth Parliament*, Vol. 3. Sydney, William Applegate Gullick, 1920.

<sup>34</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1910, p.9.

<sup>35</sup> *South Coast Times*, 20 December 1918, p.6.

<sup>36</sup> *South Coast Times*, 24 January 1919, p.3.