

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA AT THE UNVEILING OF A PLAQUE
TO COMMEMORATE THE CENTENARY OF THE OPENING OF
THE STATE CINEMA, WEDNESDAY, 2ND OCTOBER 2013.**

Good evening everybody and what a splendid occasion this is – the centenary of the opening of the State Cinema, then called the North Hobart Picture Palace, believed to be the first Tasmanian building constructed especially for the showing of moving pictures. The doors of what was then a wonder of modern times were opened on this day, 2nd October, precisely 100 years ago.

In 1907, Alf Chenhall and his family and his brother-in-law, Ed Morris and his family moved from Melbourne to Hobart to live – as, of course, right-minded people do. Alf was a carpenter by trade and probably the principal driver behind the idea that he and his brother-in-law should build an opulent Picture Palace on this very site where there then stood an old garage. It was an exciting idea, for in those days moving pictures were shown in places like town halls and the very idea of special, purpose built Picture Palace was an exciting prospect.

The actual picture hall was around the same dimensions as the main hall in the Hobart Town Hall. Built of double brick, it was very solid and built to last. Plush, deep blue velvet seats with rounded wooden armrests sat on a wooden floor that sloped down towards the screen that occupied the whole of the back wall. Maximum capacity was in the order of 500 people. This was in the days before ‘talkies’ and music was required, so Chenhall and Morris hired a local band of about 30 musicians, conducted by a Mr James Long, to play while the moving pictures were shown. On the big day 100 years ago, admission to the front of house was one shilling and sixpence, the middle was one

shilling, and the rear seats cost sixpence. Not so cheap when you consider that in 1913 a workman's wage was around 23 shillings a week. The star picture shown on that Opening Night 100 years ago was called *The Two Orphans*, a drama set in Paris.

Much has happened over the last century and time does not allow the telling of the full story, but I commend to you an excellent publication, "A Century of Cinema - The Life and Times of the State Cinema" by Bill Clyde - it is a fascinating read.

Of course, it wasn't all plain sailing for the opulent North Hobart Picture Palace. A short eight years after the grand opening, the building was sold and used as a billiard saloon, gymnasium and boxing arena. But in 1935 the building reopened as a cinema called the Liberty Theatre. It changed hands again in 1948, three years after the end of World War II, and commenced operating under its now much loved and respected banner, "The State Theatre."

However, in common with cinemas world-wide, eventually the advent of television put the State under great financial pressure and its demise was only avoided by the Film Radio and Television Board of the Australian Council acquiring the Cinema for the purpose of screening Australian and internationally acclaimed films. And so the State became what might be called an Art House cinema, and started to build a reputation which has been maintained to this day, for showing films that are not screened in the larger, mainstream chain cinemas like Hoyts.

In those days, the State was very much the cherished baby of Adrian Jacobson. He had inherited the management of this child from his father, and Adrian was anxious to see that the State did not become

just a small copy of the mainstream cinemas. However, in the pursuit of its ideals, the State was not really profitable and in the 1980s financial constraints on the Australian Film Institute led to the decision that it had to be sold. However, the Board had obviously underestimated the goodwill that the State Cinema had earned by that time, as there was a roar from a crowd of some 4,000 people who gathered in shocking weather, to protest against the closure and sale. The Board backed down and the State Cinema was saved.

But the trouble is that nothing stays the same, especially in the entertainment industry, and the competition was always pressing; television was in colour, video stores had opened; electronic games were becoming popular, the Internet was growing and so on. By the end of the millennium, the AFI determined again that in the light of reduced funding from the Government, the State had to be sold notwithstanding a recent refurbishment of seating, sound, curtains and the like, made possible by the recent successes of films like *Shine* and *Amelie*.

Enter John Kelly. Born in Tasmania, John had just acquired the building next door that used to be Soundy's and, knowing nothing about films or running a cinema, John bought the State from the AFI just 11 years ago. The deal was that he would be anonymous, Adrian Jacobson would continue to run the cinema and it would continue to show the same non-mainstream films that it had always shown. Indeed, it was even contemplated that the Jacobson dynasty would continue after Adrian retired, with his daughter taking over the management. John Kelly had one, what you might think totally reasonable condition: - the cinema had to make a profit.

John Kelly joined the Independent Cinema Association and it wasn't long before he began to have ideas for change that clashed with the conservative management style of Adrian Jacobson. But low returns demanded change, and the difference of views between John Kelly and Adrian Jacobson led to their business relationship breaking down and Adrian's resignation in 2003.

I know and respect Adrian and his commitment to the State Cinema, but I think that Bill Clyde is right when he describes Adrian Jacobson at the start of chapter nine (he calls it 'Reel' nine) of his book as [quote] "the traditional cinema manager", and writes that "Adrian Jacobson's vision for the State Cinema was that it would continue on the same as it had always been; or in his words 'a working museum'". John's view was that to survive the cinema had to make a profit and without modernisation, there would never be a profit.

So began a period of change that will be talked about at the bicentenary celebrations of the State Cinema. John Kelly had to get the balance right. He had to introduce new technology and computerisation. He had to modernise and make the foyer more efficient. At the same time, he had to preserve the heritage qualities and atmosphere of the building. He had to increase the number of theatres and show several films simultaneously, but at the same time he had to avoid showing what might be called mainstream films (except in special cases) At the same time as doing this, he had to up-grade the existing equipment and sound system and improve the seating. John Kelly also needed to provide facilities to make the place more attractive and so he developed the foyer to make it a welcoming social venue, and later developed the superb restaurant with extensions at the back of the

building. All the while, the number of cinemas, built both above and below the original theatre, were being increased, the latest – clearly *la pièce de résistance* – on the top of the building – outside. And finally, last year I think it was, acclaimed author, Richard Flanagan officially opened the State Cinema Bookstore next door.

It is to John Kelly's tremendous credit that his innovative ideas have created a warm and attractive cultural venue in an inner Hobart suburb to which people are attracted. The State Cinema provides a comfortable and inclusive ambience, not available elsewhere in the State, where people can see first rate films, many of which would not otherwise be shown in Tasmania; films that seriously engage the intellect and the emotions. The State Cinema is also a place to socialise. You can be confident that you will meet your friends when you go there. It is a friendly place where a Governor can feel comfortable in his old woolly cardigan. It is a place where you can enjoy a meal, or just buy one of those huge glasses of Tasmanian wine and sink into a comfortable chair and enjoy a good movie.

My wife and I love it. Our son, who worked here when he was at University, loves it. I am sure that you all love it. But for John Kelly's innovation, money and energy we would not have the State Cinema that can properly be described as a major contributor to the cultural life of Hobart. I am privileged to have been asked to take part in this centenary celebration of the State Cinema, and now call upon its longest serving current staff member, Rowena Ebsworth, to join me up here and help me unveil a plaque to record this important milestone in the journey of the North Hobart Picture Palace.