Book Review: The Two Coliseums

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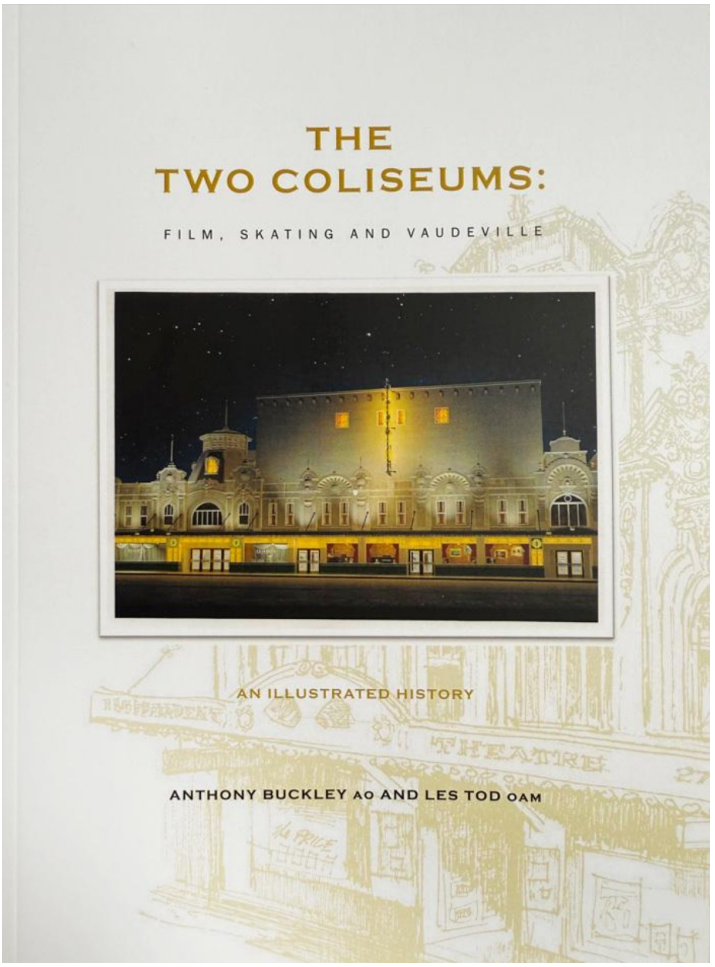
***The Two Coliseums: Film, Skating and Vaudeville*, by Anthony Buckley AO and Les Tod OAM, Seaborn Broughton & Walford Foundation, Sydney, 2025. RRP A$60.00.**



The original Colosseum in Rome is renowned not only for its monumental scale but for its sophisticated technical ingenuity: accommodation for tens of thousands of spectators, complex animal enclosures, hydraulic systems capable of staging mock naval battles, a vast velarium for shade and ventilation, and an intricate network of lifts, pulleys, and winches to enable rapid scene changes. It was, above all, a place of spectacle, an entertainment venue whose engineering ambition matched its cultural significance.

In *The Two Coliseums: Film, Skating and Vaudeville*, Anthony Buckley and Les Tod approach their own pair of 'coliseums' with a similar appreciation for complexity. They acknowledge the contestability inherent in reconstructing early entertainment history and embrace it, weaving together archival fragments, personal collections, and decades of research. Their study traces the entrepreneurial energy that shaped Sydney's early twentieth-century leisure culture, charting the rise of motion pictures, the popularity of roller skating, and the evolution of vaudeville. This contextual groundwork leads naturally to the emergence of the North Sydney Coliseum, a former tram shed transformed into entertainment hub, the other a theatre that would later become the Independent.

Before the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, travelling from the lower north shore to the city for entertainment required a determined combination of ferries, trams, and time. In this context, the establishment of two substantial entertainment venues in North Sydney was an act of strategic foresight. The skating hall, capable of hosting an estimated 1,400 patrons, and the adjacent auditorium, seating around 400, provided a reliable commercial foundation. Despite interruptions caused by war, economic downturns, fire, and the occasional artistic misstep, the enterprise thrived for decades.

One of the book's strengths lies in its vignettes, compact yet evocative glimpses into daily

life at the Coliseum. These episodes are sufficiently detailed to satisfy the curious reader while leaving space for imagination. Among the more striking examples is the revelation that a rifle range operated in the basement between 1914 and 1920, even as a fashionable Wintergarden—advertised as "just the thing for the girls"—drew crowds at street level. Such juxtapositions highlight the eclectic and adaptive nature of early entertainment spaces.

The narrative also charts the decline of the buildings. Like its ancient namesake, the North Sydney Coliseum endured periods of neglect. A devastating fire during the Army's occupation effectively ended the life of the Coliseum de Luxe, leaving a ruin that was later repurposed in various ways before the entire site, including remnants of the tram infrastructure, was cleared in 1995 for residential development. Its neighbour, the Independent Theatre, survived somewhat longer under the formidable leadership of Doris Fitton, whose tenure shaped its artistic identity. After her retirement, however, the theatre passed through a succession of owners and uses, its future often uncertain.

The authors give due credit to Dr Rodney Seaborn AO OBE and the Seaborn Broughton & Walford Foundation, whose acquisition and restoration of the deteriorated Independent Theatre prevented its loss. Yet even this apparent rescue contains a final twist: in 2013 the theatre was purchased by Wenona School, ensuring its preservation but shifting its primary function to education, with only occasional public performances.

If the book has a limitation, it is that the density of interconnected stories may occasionally overwhelm readers unfamiliar with the period. The authors' commitment to documenting the full constellation of personalities, businesses, and cultural shifts sometimes risks obscuring the central narrative. Nevertheless, this breadth is also part of the work's value, reflecting the messy, overlapping realities of entertainment history rather than imposing artificial simplicity. The modern era receives only brief attention, consistent with the book's focus on the first half of the twentieth century, when the sites were at their most influential.

As a scholarly resource, the volume is both rigorous and accessible. It is richly illustrated, drawing heavily on private collections rarely seen by the public, and printed on high-quality glossy stock as a limited edition. The inclusion of an index and comprehensive references enhance its utility for researchers, while Susan Mills' foreword situates the work within broader heritage and performance-history scholarship. As a companion to the earlier documentary *Coliseum de Luxe & Palace of Dreams*, the book deepens and extends the archival record.

The Two Coliseums: Film, Skating and Vaudeville is an important contribution to Sydney's cultural historiography. For collectors, theatre historians, and anyone interested in the evolution of local entertainment architecture, it is an essential addition to the library, one that preserves, with care and clarity, the memory of two remarkable venues now lost to the city's physical landscape but not to its cultural imagination.

Available online from Abbey's Bookshop or privately through Les Tod at thetods@bigpond.com

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