Celluloid dreams: the cinema in Waverley

In 1937 dressing up to go to the cinema was the norm, these women are enjoying an evening at Bondi Beach's Kings Theatre. Hood collection, State Library of NSW.

In 1919 there were 750 picture theatres in Australia and attendances for 1919-1920 ran to an astonishing 67 ½ million. However the bulk of films shown were American and it was only through shrewdness, and a tough competitive instinct, that Australian producers managed to survive.

The cinema was always a popular form of entertainment, from the silent era to the 'talkies', the magic of the big screen has never lost its allure. This was reflected locally, with Waverley having been home to eight of cinemas and two major Australian film production companies.

The history of the cinema has been marked by its rising and falling fortunes: its rise with the silent screen, its decline, then its renaissance with talking pictures, its decline again with the coming of television – and then its triumphant return.

Bondi Junction used to be the hub of Waverley's cinemas, which were operated first by Olympic Theatres and then by Hoyts Theatres, marking a division between the silent and sound eras. Today Waverley's only remaining cinema, Greater Union Birch Carroll and Coyle at Bondi Junction, is located in Bondi Junction. But audiences still flock to local film events, all located at Bondi Beach: Flickerfest, Bondi Open Air and Bondi Short Film Festival.

Olympic Theatre no. 1: later the Regal Theatre
The first silent picture show opened in Bondi Junction in 1910. The Olympic Theatre no. 1 was built on the Woollahra side of Oxford Street, and later became the Regal Theatre, and then the Metro.

Olympic Theatre no. 1: later the Coronet Theatre

The second Olympic Theatre no. 1 opened in May 1921 on the corner of Oxford and Waverley Streets. It was bought by Hoyts in the 1930s and re-named Hoyt's Coronet Theatre, although it was known affectionately by the locals as 'the bughouse'. It closed in July 1968 and was later demolished.

Olympic Theatre no. 2

Hoyts Bondi Road, on the corner of Avoca Street, opened in 1924 as the Olympic no. 2 Theatre. It was taken over by Hoyts in the 1930s and remodelled. It closed in the late 1950s and was later demolished.

Bondi Six Ways Theatre

After opening in 1923 and being operated by the Betts family, this cinema was acquired by Hoyts in 1937. Located at the six ways intersection at Bondi, on the corner bounded by Hall St, O'Brien St and partly Glenayr Ave. It screened its last program in 1959 and was later demolished.

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Bondi Beach Kings Theatre, 1937. Hood collection, State Library of NSW.

Bondi Beach Kings Theatre

Opposite the beach in Campbell Parade, on the corner of Roscoe Street, the Bondi Beach Kings Theatre started life as a dance hall before being converted to a cinema in 1937. It closed in 1969 and became a club and disco.

Bondi Plaza United Cinema

This Oxford Street cinema operated in the 1980s and 1990s and was demolished to give way to the Westfield shopping complex. It was briefly renamed the Hoyts Showcase, but continued to be known to locals as 'the Plaza'.

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