1896
THE MOVIES

The magic of the movies — and, once, they really *were* magical — came to Australia on 22 August 1896 when, at the Melbourne Opera House, a variety show audience saw a London street flicker dramatically to life before their very eyes, thanks to a marvellous machine operated by an illusionist named Carl Hertz.

The *Lumiere Cinematographe,* as the new form of entertainment was known, had reached far-off Australia less than eighteen months after the world's first public screening by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumiere in Paris.

In September 1896, Maurice Sestier, a former Lumiere employee, introduced the 'photo-electric sensation' in Sydney. Two months later he exhibited the first film ever made in Australia which he advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 24 November as 'the WONDERFUL TABLEAUX of the MELBOURNE CUP'.

This historic film (a copy is held by the National Library in Canberra) was greeted, according to Press reports, by 'thunders of applause and unbounded enthusiasm'.

Other Australian 'documentaries', some with such thrilling titles as *Gallop Past of the Sydney Fire Brigade* and *The Divers taken at Farrner's Baths,* at first attracted capacity audiences. Soon, however, the novelty started to wear off and cinemas in Sydney and Melbourne began to close.

Something different, more imaginative and exciting, was obviously needed to attract paying customers. While the early 'movie moguls' scratched their heads, the answer came from a most unlikely quarter — the Salvation Army.

On 13 September 1900, at the Melbourne Town Hall, the Army's Commandant Herbert Booth presented 'a Wonderful Limelight Lecture entitled Soldiers of the Cross'.

Billed as featuring 'Soul-Thrilling Stories of the Martyrs, illustrated by the Most Beautiful Living Pictures by Kinematographe and Limelight', it consisted of 914 metres of film, projected in 18-metre lengths.

The film segments, showing Christian martyrs being tortured and killed for their faith, had been photographed with great ingenuity in Melbourne by the Army's Major Joseph Perry from a 'screenplay' by Commandant Booth.

Realistic back-drops, hung from the netting around a tennis court, transformed a Salvation Army girls' home into 'Imperial Rome', while the municipal swimming baths stood in for the River Tiber.

To keep the audience of 4000 occupied during the all too frequent reel changes, 'vividly coloured slides' were projected, during which time the Commandant probably delivered his 'lecture'.

The Salvation Army's weekly newspaper, the *War Cry,* gave a detailed de-

scription of the 'lecture' in a full-page article on 22 September, while the *Age,* calling it 'thrilling, novel and instructive', said: 'To have some of the most tragic episodes of Christian history carried out in all its savage but soul-stirring realism is an accomplishment essentially of today'.

According to Eric Reade in his authoritative history, *The Australian Screen,* 'It has been claimed that this was the first full-length film in the world. Various film historians have disagreed, but no conclusive proof to the contrary has been supplied. Even the American *War Cry* of 1 May 1971 does not dismiss Australia's claim.'

Unfortunately, all that survives of this epic, which cost 600 pounds to make, are a few of the slides, now held at the National Library in Canberra. The film was taken by Commandant Booth to the United States in 1901, where it vanished.

On Boxing Day 1906 Melbourne saw what is generally regarded as the world's first full-length feature film — *The Kelly Gang.* Advertised as 'upwards of three-quarters of a mile long', the movie was the first of many to cash in on the romance surrounding Australia's best-loved villain.

And cash in it did — according to Reade, the 400-pound production grossed an estimated 25 000 pounds.

Critics were generally impressed with *The Kelly Gang,* although the *Argus* pointed out that 'events have had to be created and for dramatic reasons many liberties were rightly taken', but added that this served 'to make the exploits all the more convincing'.

The film, in some cinemas at least, was transformed into an early 'Talkie', for one Sydney newspaper particularly praised 'The voices behind the screen which supplied the realistic dialogue needed to keep the audience in touch with the action of the story'.

The Kelly Gang film too, vanished, except for a small section found under a bed in an old house in 1979.

Bushrangers and Australian historical themes suddenly became the rage among film producers. Among those churned out in the next few years were *Eureka Stockade; Robbery Under Arms; Ned Kelly, the Ironclad Bush-ranger; Life and Adventures of John Vane, the Australian Bush-ranger; Moonlite, King of the Road; Thunderbolt; Captain Midnight, the Bush King;* and *Ben Hall — the Notorious Bush-ranger.*

By 1919, when the brilliant director Raymond Longford made *The Sentimental Bloke,* which was generally regarded as the first Australian film classic, the movies were Australia's main form of entertainment.

In 1920 about 67 million tickets were sold annually at 750 cinemas spread throughout the country, a figure which had almost doubled to 126 million by 1928 when Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* introduced sound-and silenced an era.