

“AN ABSOLUTE FAIRYLAND”

The ‘Dutton Park Garden Theatre’ 1908-1913

A moon hung high in the heavens; bright, shining starlight; a soft refreshing night air; wooded heights, looking down upon a winding river; these were some of the natural attractions that caused large numbers of people to wend their way from different suburbs to Dutton Park on Saturday night to see and hear a Continental programme.

(Brisbane Courier, 19 September 1910)

Brisbane’s first permanent picture theatre, The Lyceum, opened in George Street in 1906, and its immediate success saw several more open in quick succession.²⁷ The arrival of the cinema in Brisbane, however, did not herald the immediate demise of more traditional forms of entertainment, and the new art form was integrated with these to produce a hybrid - the ‘Continental’. In the years leading up to the Great War, the people of Brisbane went in their thousands on a weekly basis to watch these shows, which blended old-style vaudeville, band concerts and screenings of moving pictures.

The Continentals were started by E.J. Carroll, who in 1906 acquired the Queensland rights for the first Australian feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*. The success of this picture enabled him to establish an open-air picture circuit around the suburbs of Brisbane.²⁸ The first of these “Summer Night Continentals” was held at the Woolloongabba Cricket Ground on a Wednesday night in September 1908. A crowd of 2,000 people were entertained by a popular balladeer, the Brisbane Concert Band, the screening of ‘biograph pictures’, and a fireworks display.²⁹ The following Saturday Carroll

presented a similar show at the Exhibition Grounds, and for the rest of the summer the Continentals were on twice a week, alternating between these two venues and attracting large crowds.³⁰ By December a weekly Continental in Ipswich was being regularly attended by 3000 patrons, and it was also around this time that the first open-air entertainments in Dutton Park began.³¹

Joseph S. Badger had formed the Brisbane Tramways Band in 1900, and they provided the music for a series of weekly open-air concerts in Dutton Park, the first of which was held on a Thursday night in December 1908.³² The band played a range of popular numbers that night:

The ground was well lighted, and the entertainment was very largely attended. Included in the programme was the intermezzo, “Ramona” (Lee Johnson), the light and shade being particularly well observed. The band also played the march, “La Premiere”, composed by Mr W.H. Butland, of Brisbane. The march was bright and tuneful, and the band rendered it with excellent precision. “Melodies of Europe” was a popular item, effect being obtained by a cornet playing in the distance.

(Brisbane Courier, 4 December 1908)

A range of other tunes was played during the show, and the night was successful enough for the tramway company to maintain the series of Thursday night concerts throughout the summer months. The concert season wound up in April 1909, and each performance had managed to draw large crowds.³³

Carroll’s Continentals, meanwhile, had proved to be such a success that when the next ‘Summer Continental’ season started in August 1909, several other venues began staging similar events. There were