

THE GREEKS RETURN TO BINGARA: 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF THE ROXY



By now most readers are familiar with the Roxy story. How in 1936 three intrepid Kytherian-born entrepreneurs, Peter Feros, George Psaltis and Emmanuel Aroney built a fabulous Art Deco theatre, three independent retail premises, a café and guest house - their "Palace of Dreams" - in the small rural township of Bingara in the New England area of New South Wales.

In his delightful book, *Katsehamos and the Great Idea*, in which he chronicles the history of the Roxy, Peter Prineas recalls the efforts by a local businessman, Victor Peacocke who operated the rival Regent Theatre, to try and influence local authorities in opposing the plans for the Roxy. At one point, in a letter to his local MP in September 1934, Peacocke warned of the "Greek invasion into our little burg".

Well, that 'prophecy' finally came true on the weekend of 9-10 April 2011 when Bingara celebrated in grand style the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Roxy Theatre and the adjoining Peters Café. The Greeks descended upon Bingara *en masse*, and showed the locals how to party.

The town of Bingara (pronounced '*bin-gara*') is situated on the banks of the beautiful Gwydir River. Seven hours by road from Sydney along the New England Highway and at the end of the Fossickers Way, Bingara - derived from an Aboriginal word meaning "shallow water" - is a quaint and picturesque country town.

I had been looking forward to this for weeks and drove up with George Cassim and Chris Tsolakis. The long drive was made more enjoyable by us listening to an eclectic though slightly incongruous mix of music by the likes of Mikis Theodorakis, the Jersey Boys, Cabaret Balkan, Roy Orbison, Vicky Moscholiou, Nikos Xylouris and Blondie. But it did not stop there. We wanted to make an entrance. And sure enough just as dusk had set in bemused locals were confronted by three rowdy Greeks driving up and down the main street several times to the strains of Theodorakis' *Zorba the Greek* blaring out. The Greek 'invasion' was well and truly on.

There was also a special dimension to my first trip to Bingara. My father, John Vardas, came to Australia when he was 19. Like many who came before him, and after, John followed the well-travelled route through country New South Wales to work in established cafes and restaurants, mostly operated by Kytherians, before making enough to return to Sydney to open his own business. The Greek café and milk bar culture had a strong presence in rural and regional NSW in those years. John recalls that during the war years he passed through Bingara and may have even stayed the night.

This was the essential Greek migration experience and we were about to relive one of its more interesting chapters.

The Roxy first opened to the public on Saturday 28 March 1936. It was a landmark building. According to the *Bingara Advocate* at the time, "no event in the history of Bingara had caused more interest or excitement" as the opening night horde took over the street such that "long before opening time, it was impossible to wind one's way through the crowd in front of the main entrance."

75 years later and the clock was turned back with the celebrations and the official re-launch of the refurbished Peters Café, together with a preview of the site of the Roxy Museum that will be integrated into the venue. Then followed the Black Tie Gala Ball to recall the glamour of the 1930s.

The scene of the *panayiri* at the intersection of Cunningham and Maitland Streets could have been easily mistaken for the plateia of Mitata or any other village on Kythera. Alright, perhaps the black ties and long gowns were a slight give-away, but the *kefi* was certainly there as was the brilliant music of the Kytherian band "Havana" entertained the crowd.

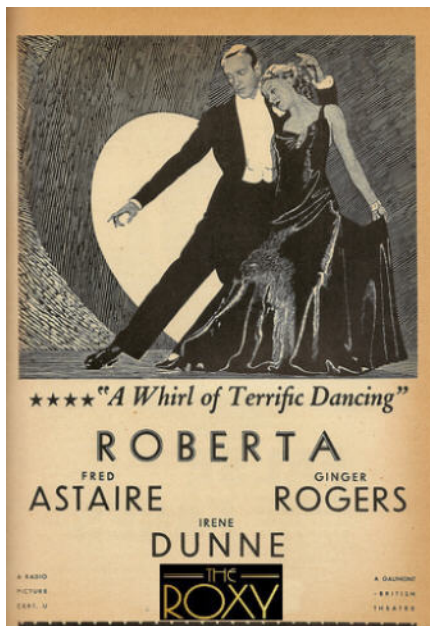
The locals were fantastic. On the first day, local businessman Rick Hutton introduced the various speakers inside the Roxy and gained loud applause for his equally loud suits and bow ties. He made the point that country towns are dying and in the Roxy the locals have placed high hopes for a renaissance in tourism and the performing arts as people travel to Bingara to be part of the Roxy phenomenon.

The vivacious and energetic Roxy Manager, Sandy McNaughton, spoke with passion about the effort to restore the Roxy and described how she had been overwhelmed by the response of the Greek community.

As Sandy explained, the Roxy is a story about big ideas which had its humble beginnings in Kythera. Bingara was a sort of frontier town in the 1930s and yet it was witness to the creation of a Greek landmark which symbolized the Greek-Australian migration experience. The restoration efforts that went into the re-birth of Peters Café as a café and refreshment room were nothing short of miraculous. Sandy noted in particular the efforts of locals Bob and Elva Kirk who had the foresight, after selling the freehold land upon which the café was operated to a Chinese restaurateur in 1989, to retain much of the interior of the café which otherwise would have been stripped and thrown out. To the restorers' delight, the Kirks had managed to hang on to original wood panelling, a section of booths or cubicles including the original table tops, marble shelving, a glass window panel and decorative etched glass panes. They even had the original neon sign.

The Greek café is a quintessential Australian phenomenon that changed the cultural and culinary landscape forever and was in fact described by some as the "Trojan Horse" for the Americanization of Australian food tastes. Peters Café is a vivid, living reminder of that part of our collective history.

Visitors were then treated to a newsreel from 1936 entitled "A Year to Remember" that presented an overview of the events in the year the Roxy was opened. A highlight was the showing of the first film ever screened at The Roxy, *Roberta*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as well as cartoons from the period. As Roxy manager Sandy McNaughton had previously commented, the screenings would be like a "step back in time when going to the cinema was an event in itself".



In the afternoon, the street in front of the Roxy was converted into a open dining room with white table-clothed tables, a special menu, olive branches and tea lights to create that special Mediterranean ambience in a rural outback setting.



After the official speeches, the ribbon was cut and patrons were able to enter the café and enjoy a milk shake. Not a thick shake or some latter day milky abomination. But a real milk shake with country milk, dollops of ice cream and rich flavor, made by experts such as Con Fardouleys, Peter Makarthis and even our own George Poulos. A milk shake to die for.



And then came the food and the dancing. Roast lamb, goat, spanakopita, zorba the greek, zembekika, plate smashing, olive branches , *kefi* and an Australian acting icon Yiannis Xylo (aka John Wood) all came together under a starry-lit night in a fantastic celebration of a dream come true. A troupe of Greek dancers in traditional costume performed a range of Greek dances. The Roxy complex, a palace of dreams from a bygone age, had come alive.

Greek dancing also took over the square, followed by the inevitable smashing of plates. This was possibly the most un-Kytherian thing of the night: paying money to buy plates only to send them hurtling into the ground. But it made for good vision as the film crew from ABC's *Landline* program captured the celebrations and the dancing and the *kefi*. It was as though Bingara meets Mitata.

It was truly a memorable and great weekend. 75 years ago three young men from Kythera had a dream. Although their initial venture ended in bankruptcy, their dreams were realised even more than they could have imagined with the re-birth of the Roxy complex in Bingara in all its Art Deco glory.

Kythera now has a new adopted town. Although not on the island, the township of Bingara will remain in our hearts and minds forever.

George Vardas



The writer in an Art Deco moment