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## **Luna Park Lower Esplanade (18 Cavell Street), St Kilda**

Like some great writhing sea-serpent, Luna Park with its sinuous heaving scenic railway body, clattering to syncopated crescendo, and its leering gigantic face, is set to gulp all comers. No other Australian building has been so prolifically depicted by artists, never more tellingly than David Larwill's *Luna Park* (1979) in black face and crazed almond eyes, fronting turmoil of expressive gesture and in Albert Tucker's *Extinction Express* (1988), where the scenic railway train is headed at full velocity vertically downwards, taking its passengers to certain obliteration. Here, Luna Park is not just for fun, but a powerful image of the darkest emotions. No wonder it remained closed during World War I, just when Melbourne needed cheering up.

Sidney Nolan, born and bred in St Kilda in the 1920s, was the most prolific and indeed joyful image - maker of Luna Park. His first Luna Park works were painted in 1940-41, when he kept a studio for a year at 5 Smith Street, St Kilda with John Sinclair. At the end of 1941, his first marriage broke up and he fled from St Kilda to be with John and Sunday Reed at Heide, Bulleen. Then again in 1944-45, when AWL from the Army, living at Heide but with a studio in Gatehouse Street and painting the first Ned Kelly series, Nolan would frequently visit Albert Tucker and his wife, artist Joy Hester in St Kilda (9). At this time of emotional turmoil for Nolan, he became obsessed with depicting the Giggie Palace. Yet even he described Luna Park as an 'atmosphere of repressed sexuality'.

In the hugely enjoyable exhibition 'Luna Park and the Art of Mass Delirium' at the Museum of Modern Art at Heide in 1999, twenty Nolans were included, depicting the Giggie Palace, the Big Dipper, the Carousel and the Scenic Railway (but not the Face). His images are coy and whimsical, recreating the world of childhood. Barrett Reid, the poet, recalled:

Nolan and I went a number of times to Luna Park in December 1946. He challenged me to various acts of bravado such as standing up at the top of a curve, just before the Dipper plunged down, going on the tall slide without a mat, etc.

The first artist to have chosen Luna Park as a subject was Clarice Beckett, with *Luna Park* in about 1919. It had only been open seven years and the paint was still sleek and fresh. Other famous Australian artists who have depicted Luna Park include: Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, Ian Burra, Jon Cattapan, Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, Kenneth Jack, David Larwill, Geoff Lowe, John Perceval, Robert Rooney, Michael Shannon, James Wigley and

some 26 others. From the rich emotional internalised metaphor of the 1940s, Luna Park came to be viewed from the 1950s as an icon of St Kilda, or of the Kingdom of Pleasure.



Clarice Beckett Luna Park, c.1919

Luna Park has little in common with Tivoli in Copenhagen, Blackpool or Battersea Gardens in England, or the Prado in Vienna. Its direct inspiration was its namesake on Coney Island, New York, which opened in 1903. 'Luna Parks' were immediately built all over the world, including seven in Australia. Novelist Joseph Heller (born 1923) grew up on Coney Island in the Great Depression. He recalls:

Coney Island, with its beaches, crowds, commotion, and a couple of hundred entertainments, has always been magical to children and a gaudy magnet for adults. People came from everywhere. Early in this century, even Sigmund Freud dropped in for a look on his trip to the United States...The founding of Luna Park and...Steeplechase Park date back to the last years of the 1890s. Both had long been established and were already in decline by the time I grew aware of them.

Of the two amusement parks, there seemed to be a near unanimous preference for Luna Park...The architecture was a fantastic, almost nightmarish corruption of the Moorish and Byzantine in circus-clown colours of chalk-white and cherry red with ornamental stripes of black and bright green on minarets, spires and onion domes.

After childhood, Heller's next experience of Luna Park, Coney Island was on his army discharge in May 1945, at precisely the moment Sidney Nolan, away from the army illegally, dallied in the Giggie Palace and the Big Dipper in Luna Park, St Kilda. Heller writes:

... I was holding on for dear life through the racing plunges and veers, and I tottered off with a thumping ache in my head and a wrenched neck... After sixty missions overseas, I was now selective in my adventures, and I had no doubt that I would never want to ride that or any other roller coaster again... I was twenty-two.

A map shows the region of Luna Park, St Kilda in about 1865 as wasteland, mainly lagoon. This was drained in the 1870s, but remained vacant. The St Kilda Foreshore Committee first met on 22 June 1906. Its role was to manage the Crown Land along the beach from Fraser Street south to Head Street, and promote its use. At this meeting, a vaudeville performer, E.S. Sal ambo applied to lease the paddock north of Shakespeare Grove.

In 1906, the world's first feature-length movie *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was filmed on this land which was to become the site of Luna Park. Later that year, Sal ambo opened Dreamland, St Kilda's first amusement park, over two hectares. It had a Mt Fujiama, the Rivers of the World, the Underworld, an Airship and the Destruction of San Francisco. It lasted three years. In 1907, (or 1909?) a figure-eight ride opened on the Palais Pictures (3) site, demolished five years later, when the Palais was built.

The Greater J.D. (James Dixon) Williams Amusement Company acquired the lease of the Luna Park site in 1911 and began building. Chief designer/builder was T.H. Eslick. Williams was a Canadian who owned cinemas in Melbourne and Sydney. Some of his team had experience at Coney Island. The visit of George V to India in 1911 is said to have popularised and influenced the Mughal forms; and the scenic railway, in a similar amusement park in Bombay.



Front Entrance to Luna Park c.1950

In 1912, Luna Park opened, illuminated by 15,000 electric lights; (Coney Island had 250,000!) which was not a common sight in 1912. 22,300 people came on the first night. Live entertainment was the main attraction: high wire artists, trick cyclists, unicyclists, a Swedish diver in flames, performing animals and a band. Next year, Williams returned to America. His film production house subsequently grew to become Warner Bros.

The Philips Brothers, also Americans, took over. New sideshows were added, including Aunt Jemina's Washing Day where 'hilariously', a Negro woman sitting over a washing tub fell in to the water when hit. By 1914, 8-10,000 people came each Saturday night. The Scenic Railway and the giant Bomarzo mouth attracted swarms of

revellers.

Both the funfair mouth, and its recent Post-modernist echo, the Sam Newman house (where cars enter through Pamela Anderson's mouth, (22)), are derived from the earliest pleasure garden giant mouth, at the extraordinary Sacro Bosco of the Orsini family, at Bomarzo, north-east of Viterbo, Italy (1552). Here, the stern strictures of the Church and of the Renaissance are enjoyably shattered. Similar frightening sensations of being eaten, of entering the pleurably transgressive delights of the Underworld, like Orpheus, occur at both Bomarzo and St Kilda.

In 1916, the Great War closed Luna Park. It did not re-open until 1923, when the centrepiece was the Philadelphia Toboggan Company's (PTC) Carousel. It is still the largest and most ornate of the 24 carousels known to survive in Australia. It operated until 1991, and repainted 24 times. 80 PTC carousels were made between 1903-31. They were one of the most highly regarded manufacturers and the last to stop making carousels. The Luna Park carousel (PTC number 30) was one of the company's finest four-row machines and the only one exported. Only about 25 PTC carousels still operate. From 1977-2002 a \$2,200,000 restoration of the carousel was completed, under Nigel Lewis, conservation architect. All 68 horses, two chariots, 25 scenery paintings and 35 plaster cherubs were fastidiously conserved. The carousel includes a band organ manufactured by Limonair Frères, Paris in an impressive Art Nouveau case. Its conservation is still continuing.

The first Dodgems ('dodg'em') ride in Australia, opened at Luna Park in 1926 and still operates; (Sydney's Dodgems opened 1935). It occupies the first floor of the games arcade, in a romantic Gothic Chateau. The ride was purchased in the United States by Leon Philips. It is not known what the first cars looked like, but American equivalents (from c1920) were oval capsule tubs, not resembling automobiles.

In 1951, the Rotor was installed and then, Luna Park remained generally unaltered for thirty years. In 1981 fire destroyed Nolan's Giggle Palace and most of the arcades and by 1983, both the River Caves (a fire risk) and the Rotor (unpopular) also went. Even the Big Dipper disappeared in 1988. Only the Face and entrance towers, the Scenic Railway, the Carousel and the Ghost Train remain from Luna Park of 1934.

The Ghost Train is technically a Pretzel dark ride, bought from the hugely successful Pretzel Amusement Ride Company of New Jersey in 1934. It derived from the first single rail 'dry' dark ride developed by Leon Cassidy in Bridgetown, New Jersey in 1928. Cars were guided on a double-flanged wheel on electrified track, emitting showers of sparks in the dark. By doubling back repeatedly via hairpin bends, a long track is compressed into a modest rectangle. Patrons in five to seven cars in the form of toy steam trains experienced 'fun devices': skeletons, ghosts, 'noise makers' and hung black thread to scarily brush the face of passing patrons. In the 1980s it was renamed 'the tunnel of terror'! About 65 dark rides are known to survive in the world.

During the 'brown-out' of lights during World War II, Luna Park continued to operate, popular with American servicemen. It became, as Nolan observed, associated with sexual

desire and looser morals. By the 1950s, it was a favoured rendezvous of Bodgies and Widgies. In 1957, Harold and Leon Philips died. Control passed to their financiers, the Abraham brothers who sold the lease to their relatives, the Hyams brothers who operated it until 1987.



Luna Park Entrance, c.1981

In 1981, Luna Park was classified by the National Trust and registered by Heritage Victoria six years later. Community realisation of its cultural significance instituted action to support its conservation and the Friends of Luna Park was formed in March 1993. In 1998, BCR investments, (or BCR Asset Management) an Adelaide Superannuation Fund, bought the lease. That year, the towers were repaired in colours of the 1950s, chosen by artist Leigh Hobbs. The first plaster face was discovered partially intact underneath an unfortunate concrete layer of the 1960s. This was used as a basis for a new glass-fibre reinforced face in a form, and with a complex expression, not visible for 70 years.



View of Scenic Railway from Shakespeare Grove, c.1981

A \$60 million redevelopment scheme was scrapped in favour of a \$10 million version: theming has replaced big gestures. New rides include the Spider, the Red Baron, the Enterprise, the Odyssey ASI Simulator and the Metropolis.

The City of St Kilda adopted the image of the Scenic Railway as its corporate identity.

Luna Park's face became a recognised meeting place for a good night out, something similar to 'under the clocks' at Flinders Street Station. US soldier M. Sam Burkes 87, met his Australian partner in 57 of years marriage, Elma May there in early 1942. In July 2001, Mr Burks brought his daughter Toni and granddaughter Sydney back to St Kilda to reminisce.

Now, the face is not only the most recognisable icon of St Kilda, but was one image of Victoria shown to British and worldwide television audiences of up to one billion, to introduce Melbourne as the site of the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

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