



Friends of The Astor Association Inc.
PO BOX 1149 Windsor VIC 3181
ABN: 52 558 399 171

3600 people say Protect the Astor Theatre, an art deco icon

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Melbourne movie and heritage buffs are being urged to protect the art deco icon The Astor Theatre.

“The 1936 cinema, one of Australia’s most important art deco picture palaces, is under threat from an elite St Kilda school’s plans to turn it into a performing arts centre and uniform shop,” the president of community group Friends of The Astor Association, Vanda Hamilton, said.

“St Michael’s Grammar School was portrayed as a white knight when it acquired the building that houses The Astor Theatre five years ago.

“When the current lease expires, St Michael’s intends to close the building for five years, effectively killing the cinema business. The Astor, as generations of Australians know it, will be gone.”

Supporters want to raise \$5 million to buy the building and ensure it can continue its historic purpose as a cinema. An online petition on change.org, calling on St Michael’s to relinquish the site and let The Astor Theatre continue, was launched at 1pm yesterday and by 5am today had attracted more than 3600 signatures.

Actor Stephen Curry, who played Dale Kerrigan in the iconic Australian movie *The Castle*, will launch the campaign on 16 June [*Eds: Note corrected launch date*] at an event featuring a free movie and popcorn, tours and Jaffa rolling.

Other film industry luminaries supporting the campaign include the television and film actor Michael Caton, Underbelly star Roy Billing and ABC TV *At the Movies* host David Stratton.

The heritage-listed Astor, with its neon star spangled façade, is famous for its double-bill cult and arthouse classics at Melbourne’s last operational single screen cinema.

“It has survived a World War and the advent of video, DVD, movies online and the multiplex,” Ms Hamilton said.

“It would be a tragedy if it went the way of other classic and arthouse cinemas, like the Walter Burley Griffin Capitol Theatre, the Valhalla Cinema, The Longford, The Trak and the Carlton Moviehouse.”

Ms Hamilton dismissed the statement released late yesterday by St Michael’s Grammar School.

“The school says it plans to consult with the community but with more than 3600 petition signatures in 16 hours calling for The Astor Theatre to continue it seems to us that the community is speaking loud and clear,” she said.

“We are calling on the board of St Michael’s Grammar to be good corporate citizens and respect the school’s own values by returning this culturally and architecturally important landmark to the people of Melbourne.

“There are many places where school plays can be staged, but only one Astor Theatre.”

To sign the online petition go to www.change.org and get more information go to www.fota.net.au.

Media contact: Ingrid Svendsen | 0409 007 530 | i.svendsen@cprcomm.com.au