**Entry type:** Person
**Entry ID:** AWE4736

# Spencer, Senora

(1871 - 1940)

| | |
|---|---|
| **Born** | 18710515, Edinburgh Scotland |
| **Died** | 19400419 |
| **Occupation** | Projectionist |

## Summary

Senora Spencer was one of the world's first female projectionists. Spencer, together with her husband, is credited for making cinema-going attractive to the Australian middle class through the introduction of films with popular musical scores and ambitious special effects.

## Details

The beginnings of Mary Stuart's career in Australian film are unclear. In one interview Stuart claimed to have become interested after her marriage, however in another she claimed to have been involved for several years before meeting and marrying her husband Cosens Spencer.

Mary Stuart married Cosens Spencer on 14 February 1903 in Melbourne.

In 1905, Stuart and Spencer opened the Great American Theatrescope at the Lyceum in Sydney. Throughout the run of the Theatrescope, which ended in 1907, it is claimed that Spencer was present at every screening to assist with the projection.

In order to fill the time gaps in imported programs, the American Theatrescope (later Spencer's Theatrescope and then Spencer's Pictures) began productions of their own. While uncredited, it is likely that Senora Spencer was involved in their production. These include *Happenings Taken at the Adelaide Show* (1906) and *Adelaide's Fire Service* (1906).

By 1908, the company was producing enough footage to warrant the establishment of their own production unit. By 1909, the production unit had filmed*Adelaide the City* (c.1919), *Zoological Gardens* (c.1917) and *Fighting the Flames* (c.1917).

The success of their enterprise enabled Spencer's husband to acquire picture theatres across Australia, as well as overseas agencies for film releases that ensured the continued quality of programs.

In 1911, Cosens Spencer placed the company and its various units (including distribution, exhibition and production) into the control of a public company. Whilst overseas, the board of directors voted to merge the company with Australasian Films and Union Theatres, into what was to become known as The Combine.

As part of the agreement in which Cosens Spencer sold control of his company, he contracted that he could not, for a period of ten years, "either solely or jointly with or as manager or agent for any other person or company permit his name to be used in connection with any picture show business in the Commonwealth". The contract was deemed broken when Senora Spencer began her own moving picture shows in Brisbane and Newcastle and was thought to be bidding on the lease of the Lyceum. The lawsuit was based on whether it was possible that all the business arrangements could have possibly been done solely in the name of Senora Spencer, without her husband's backing or direction. That is, did Senora Spencer have the capacity to conduct business independently to her husband?

After two days, the parties settled and both the Spencers agreed to stay out of the film industry in Australia for a further 7 years. Shortly after, they left for Canada.

In 1930, Spencer's husband killed an employee and fled from authorities. His body was later found in the Chilco River. He was presumed to have committed suicide.

## Published resources

**Resource**
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

**Resource Section**
Spencer, Cosens (1874 - 1930), Collins, Diane, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120041b.htm

## Archival resources

**National Film and Sound Archive**
[Barrett, Franklyn : Documentation] : [Barrett, Franklyn : 'Press Book' c1901-1935 : Page 09 : Clippings]

[Spencer, Senora : Documentation]

**Author Details**
Alannah Croom

**Created** 10 January 2011
**Last modified** 20 November 2018