

INTRODUCTION

The history of amusement in Australasia, if it is ever written, will astonish the reader at the amount of talent seen on our various stages... The vaudeville stage alone, in this country, could supply chapters of historical interest (M.A Keup).¹

The thirty year period between 1900 and 1930 produced a huge [number] of vaudeville artists. In 1915, Fullers advertised that they had over three hundred and ninety individual performers billed to tour their circuits and most were Australians. By the time Fullers had reached the full extent of their expansion in the mid-twenties, this number would most likely have approached a thousand performers... This tough tally does not include the many performers with Harry Clay's Vaudeville, Percy Dix's Vaudeville Company... Les Shipp's suburban circuits [or the Tivoli organisation] (Katrina J. Bard).²

What Oh Tonight, the first one act musical comedy starring Stiffy and Mo was staged by Nat Phillips and his Tabloid Comedy Revue Company at the Princess Theatre (Sydney) on 8 July 1916. It was not, however, the first of its kind to be produced in Australia. Although a date for the arrival of the revusical as a uniquely local popular theatre genre can not be precisely determined, it is clear that a number of foreign touring companies had introduced a proto-production format here from 1913 onwards. Several Australian-based variety practitioners are also known to have pioneered a similar style of production to What Oh Tonight during the previous twelve month period.³ Despite not being the first of its kind, this production (written and directed by Phillips) is nevertheless a significant historical moment. Without doubt the most popular Australian comedy duo of the era, and arguably one of the most influential of any era, Nat Phillips' (Stiffy) and Roy Rene's (Mo) position as comedy icons in this country remains a difficult one to surpass, even though the wider Australian public today remains largely ignorant of their reputations and career. The motivation for this thesis, however, was not the desire to explore the iconic career of Rene and Phillips, but rather an attempt to understand why the surge of creative and performance activity that occurred within the variety industry in the immediate weeks, months and years following What Oh Tonight's premiere has had such little attention paid to it by historians and academics.

Although there exists tangible evidence that the Australian vaudeville industry at the time of Stiffy and Mo and indeed during the decade or so following the start of their partnership was both expansively active and popularly supported, observations by those such as Katrina J. Bard (above) are all too rare. Indeed, the three decades of locally-staged variety entertainment

¹ "Vaudeville." Just It 29 Sept. (1927), 28.

² Katrina J. Bard. "The History of Vaudeville in Australia from 1900 to 1930" (1983), 66.

³ The term "revusical" will be used in this thesis rather than "revue," the term by which it is now more commonly known. This issue of nomenclature is discussed in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say, the genre was known throughout its heyday by many names, including musical revue, one act musical comedy, burlesque revue, revue, musical dramatic sketch, musical travesty, miniature musical comedy and musical playlet.

leading up to the arrival of the "talkies" and the 1930s depression might well have not existed for all the interest shown by theatre historians and the wider Australian public to date. This situation is perhaps best understood in relation to the paucity of detail currently available on Roy Rene's and Nat Phillips' career together. While Rene has at least been acknowledged by contemporary Australians through the annual Mo awards, Nat Phillips' role in this country's theatre industry has been almost forgotten despite the enormous input he had as a producer, writer and director over nearly two decades.⁴ Even Roy Rene's career is sadly lacking a detailed and rigorous appraisal. No publication, not even Rene's 1945 autobiography,⁵ provides any details relating to Stiffy and Mo's first season together, and only rare and largely inaccurate glimpses of their partnership are contained in other publications. Of the comparatively few insights focusing on Rene (including the documentary Strike Me Lucky), none interrogate his Stiffy and Mo period with any rigour, relying instead on the replication of second hand observations. Fred Parson's biography A Man Called Mo, the most comprehensive publication on Rene aside from Mo's Memoirs, similarly provides little in the way of accurate account of Rene's pre-1930s life and career. This failure to accord even leading theatrical figures like Rene and Phillips adequate historical treatment has resulted in an unfortunate legacy. Not only have we been unable to recognise the existence of a uniquely Australian theatrical genre (the revusical), but the explosion of theatrical activity that occurred during its ten year reign as the country's most popular live entertainment offering, and the insights we might otherwise have gleaned from the popular culture audience that supported it, have similarly been overlooked.

The concern raised here is exacerbated by the fact that the careers of at least two other leading variety practitioners, Jim Gerald and George Wallace, generally regarded as having been of similar standing to Phillips and Rene, still await definitive, sustained research (although Wallace has at least been given documentary treatment with Funny by George).⁶ Our poor knowledge of Phillips, Rene, Gerald and Wallace reflects an ignominious state of affairs for Australian theatre history.⁷ The fact that the Fuller family, William Anderson, Edward and Dan Carroll (including the early days of Birch Carroll and Coyle) and J. C. Williamson, to name but a handful of major theatrical identities, have had no rigorous academic historical research applied to them only adds to this charge of negligence. It is this problem of historical accountability that the following study endeavours to rectify. The thesis does not attempt to do

⁴ Chapter 6 examines in detail both Phillips' industry standing and his lack of representation in the current historical record.

⁵ Mo's Memoirs contains only five paragraphs relating to the Princess Theatre season of 1916 (see Chapter 5), with almost all of the focus being on how the name "Mo" was chosen. Surprisingly, there is no mention of the fact that Phillips originally called Rene's character, Sol. The name "Mo" is said to have been given the go-ahead after Rene's suggestion "Ikey" met with little enthusiasm.

⁶ First broadcast on the ABC in 2000.

⁷ The careers of both Wallace and Gerald prior to 1935 are given extensive treatment in Appendix D, with the Gerald file the most comprehensive currently available.

this through a concentrated survey of the life and times of just one or two practitioners like Roy Rene and Nat Phillips. Rather it will explore the issues surrounding how and why this situation occurred, and in addition propose a methodology through which historians might better investigate the complex and widespread nature of pre-1930s variety theatre.

The motivation for this study was sparked during my previous post-graduate research into Australian-born entrepreneur, Harry Clay. While the variety industry's historical neglect was not a focus of that study's research parameters, it nevertheless became an issue of increasing interest. The survey of Clay's operations in fact resulted in an extensive data collection - more than 2,200 individual acts - almost all of whom remain unacknowledged in the current literature. The evidence gathered for this current project clearly indicates, on the other hand, that several hundred of these artists were undoubtedly recognised as celebrities, if not stars, by variety audiences around Australia. Many of these practitioners were not only performers, but also writers, songwriters, managers, and producer/directors, who presented entertainment that was both appealing and relevant to their contemporary public. Data contained in both this thesis and its appendices indicates, too, that a high percentage of these people were long-term professionals who operated within an established, viable and connected industry. They were not a loose collective of amateurs and semi-professionals as the current record appears to suggest. The Harry Clay research also uncovered numerous production reviews and industry commentary indicating that the revusical productions he staged were not merely theme-related collections of songs, sketches and dances, as historians and even some later (post-1940s) variety practitioners have proposed. Rather they appeared to be founded on dramatically-organised narratives. Of further interest was the realisation that these productions were quite dissimilar to the revues and follies then currently popular in England and America, which suggested that the locally-devised format was very possibly of Australian design.

This dissertation's initial research inquiry was based then on two clearly defined issues: 1) why and how has the Australian variety industry and its leading practitioners been neglected to such an extent that the industry appears not to have existed aside from the Rickards/Tivoli and Fullers' operations; and 2) could I locate enough primary evidence to prove that the Australia variety industry produced not only a large number of performers of social and historical worth, but also created an original homegrown theatrical genre. Having identified this line of inquiry my underlying objective was to improve and extend on the methodology used for my Masters research so that this project could overcome the problems identified during the course of that study. As a result of developing this new methodological approach the thesis has been able show that an entire era of theatrical activity disappeared from historical records as a result of a complex series of external factors during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The evidence also

suggests that much of what we currently believe about the Australian variety industry and its relationship to the popular culture audience that engaged with it needs to be re-evaluated.

The argument I make here is that this newly devised methodology more readily copes with the vagrancies of the variety industry, its ephemeral nature, its widespread infrastructure and the seemingly limited amount of primary evidence available in respect of production and individual performance activity. As the following chapters will clearly demonstrate, the traditional approach has failed to piece together the vast industry activity produced within the popular culture sphere of the pre-1930s because it simply has not been able to identify or even recognise much of that activity. This has occurred to a certain extent because academically-trained historians have in the past tended to view variety as the "low" cousin of "legitimate"⁸ drama. As such there have been few attempts to provide serious and rigorous investigations of activity apart from a few isolated surveys into particular individuals. This thesis further argues that those research studies directed towards the general field of variety production have in most instances been unable to provide an accurate account of such activity because their approach has been either too focused on one area (Sydney and/or Melbourne, for example), or has failed to delve into the levels of social and industrial activity where the industry largely operated - most notably the popular culture demographic. An example of this is the erroneous notion that Harry Rickards and the Tivoli organisation was the only variety organisation (apart from perhaps the Fullers) that mattered. Although I have no intention of denigrating Harry Rickards' or Tivoli's position in Australian theatre history, much of this thesis will categorically debunk the long-held assumption that this organisation completely dominated the industry. It is true, for example, that Rickards remained unopposed in his particular area of the industry - the up-market variety show - during the period circa 1892 up until his death in 1911. It will be seen, however, that Rickards' market - his target audience in fact - represented only a small fraction of the overall activity. It will be further demonstrated that even combining the operations of Hugh D McIntosh (Tivoli general manager from 1912 onwards) and the Fullers does not provide enough evidence to indicate that the variety market in Australia was oligopolistic.

The consensus that one (or possibly two companies) dominated the market has existed for so long in the minds of historians that no one has yet attempted to put the industry under the microscope of academic investigation. Indeed as I now understand it, much that has been written

⁸ The terms "legitimate" or "serious" will be applied as short-hand terms for describing theatre that essentially targets non-popular culture audiences. In this respect variety entertainments differ from text-driven theatre (plays, opera and even melodrama, for example) in that the latter were attended on a less regular basis by the wider popular culture audiences (notably low and middle socio-economic groups and those living in the outer suburbs or regional towns). Because variety was cheaper and more accessible in terms of location and social practice (people could attend on a regular basis, even several times a week), it was more ideally-situated as a "popular" culture entertainment than the afore-mentioned literary/text-based productions (even despite the presence of "spectacular" situations presented in melodrama).

about the variety industry is not so much the result of rigorous investigative research but more a case of historical reporting - often the repetition of inaccurate memoir, long-standing myth and previously unchecked historical claims. Furthermore, the current history reflects a problem that until now seems not to have been considered by academics. I refer here to the probability that our current understanding of the past is less a reflection of real world activity than a culmination of the collective personal research interests of individual historians. The methodology devised for this study is therefore an attempt to circumvent such research flaws by focusing almost exclusively on primary source evidence - using secondary sources only when they can be aligned with uncontested original evidence, and treating the data with an egalitarian logic rather than through preconceived notions of value or success.

This study includes an extensive though not exhaustive chronological survey of Australian-written popular culture music theatre works staged between the 1870s and 1935. My findings effectively overturn the way we currently understand this period of theatrical activity in Australia. The research clearly demonstrates, for example, that the local variety industry was a significant part of Australian social and cultural life, and that it maintained its high profile presence for more than fifty years through a number of factors that have until now gone unrecognised. It will be shown that this Australia-wide industry comprised of dozens of high profile managers and entrepreneurs during that period and employed many thousands of artists each year. The findings pertaining to the Australian-written revusical serve to demonstrate not only how a significant aspect of variety production in this country can be relegated to minor status, but how easily it is for history to be erroneously reinterpreted. In an attempt to address this oversight, the revusical will be given a good deal of attention in the final chapters - particularly in relation to Nat Phillips and his role as a pioneer of the genre. That this locally developed theatrical genre emerged during Australia's formative years as a federated nation (including the critical years 1914-1918) yet still remains largely a mystery to theatre historians is not only remarkable but further demonstrates the problems highlighted in this thesis so far.

It is perhaps appropriate at this stage to situate several key terms and ideological parameters within the framework of this study, and in particular how and to what extent the term "popular culture" is being applied. At its most fundamental level, the term describes a particular social formation once uniformly referred to as the "mass." Taking my cue from contemporary cultural theory, I use "popular culture" rather than "the popular" as a strategy to distance the demographic central to this study from that referred to in previous theatre history studies. I refer here to the possibility that "popular" was applied too casually by historians prior to the emergence of cultural studies as a dominant research paradigm. While historically defined as "of the ordinary people," the term in fact defies precise, straightforward definition because it is very

much broader and more vague in scope and practice. Meanings associated with the popular demographic tended, therefore, to be appropriated or read into the social formations through a reservoir of existing cultural materials (texts) and via the individual experiences of the researchers themselves, rather than the other way round. Roy Shuker points out that "the popular" was first linked to a certain kind of music that conformed to the criterion "of the ordinary people," when publisher William Chapple released a series of scores, beginning in 1855, under the collective title Popular Music of the Olden Times. "Not until the 1930s and 1940s," writes Shuker, "did the term start to gain wider currency in the field of academic inquiry" (3). As Shuker understands it, however, a problem occurs when the term is applied too generously to cultural productions that in fact do not fall within the interests of the "ordinary mass."

An example of the irregular use of "popular" can be seen in its application during the 1970s to describe much of the theatre being produced in Australia during that period. It is not surprising either that many historians emerging in academia during this time also began to apply the term "popular" to past theatrical activity that was equally limited in its broad appeal across the national demographic. In hindsight we are able to see that in the case of theatre production in the 1970s the term popular applied only to a particular (though vocal and visible) segment of the Australian demographic - primarily the educated, middle-class (male dominated) youth of the era. Tom Burvill supports this argument in his criticism of playwright Jack Hibberd's use of the popular to describe his plays (29), a viewpoint supported by Hibberd's biographer, J. D. Hainsworth, who suggests that the term had been "bandied about a good deal" too much (48). Theatre historian Margaret Williams has also applied the term popular to her research into Australian theatre between 1829 and 1929. The issue at hand here, and which this thesis posits as problematic, is that Williams' genre parameters are largely text-based theatre, with the focus being directed towards pantomime, melodrama and plays. Williams' study collapses theatre to a "form of mass entertainment,"⁹ but does not attempt to differentiate between the type of entertainment one went to as a special night out and the type one went to on a regular basis. This issue is something that Barbara Garlick came to understand as having much industrial relevance while researching I. E. Cole and Kate Howarde. The "implicit diversity of response... [in] the wide range of audiences... dictated a certain opportunism in both repertoire, style and the ad lib," she notes. "Knowing the local issues and the political bias of the audience became more important than a constant political voice. In this way [commercially-driven operations like Howarde are] representative of those companies and players who expected different types of

⁹ Cited from the jacket blurb.

audience, in contrast to a company such as Cole's which, because of its genealogy and repertoire, catered to a more homogenous audience" (160).

This dissertation's principal concern is with those studies that are underpinned by the broader and more vague definition of "popular." As such they invite their readers to believe that non-variety theatre celebrated with vigour "the way Australians liked to see themselves" during our first century of professional theatre (Williams vii). The question to be asked here is how influential were plays and melodramas in comparison to that of locally-written and performed variety entertainment produced for the popular culture audience? It is this same question that Roy Shuker interrogates when he writes on the impact of popular culture within a society:

Popular culture was a term applied during the 19th century to separate (high) culture from that of the subordinate classes of the urban and industrial centres. Popular culture was seen to be both commercially orientated, and a culture of, and for, the people. The term has become more associated today with the commercial mass media and industries. The term popular, to a large degree, reifies popular culture texts to the status of objects to be bought and sold in the market place... Popularity is central to popular culture, as its various products and figures (stars, auteurs) attain general social acceptance and approval. In a sense, a circular argument holds here: the popular are mass, the mass are popular (3, 86-88).

In line with Shuker's perception of popular culture is David Mayer's proposition that popular culture theatre is produced by and offered for the largest combinations of groupings possible within a society. He writes: "We recognise that the population of any society is divisible on the basis of a variety of criteria. Wealth, education, occupation, political power, social rank all operate to produce static or fluid groupings... popular [theatre] is also determined by function, utility and amusement being the chiefest of these" (263, 65). According to Mayer then, the term popular culture is being situated as a means of identifying cultural production that attempts to target the largest market within a social demographic - the blue collar (low socio-economic)¹⁰ and middle-to-lower white collar workers and their families. What is being inferred here is that any group within Australian society (i.e. university educated, upper-level income earners and/or high culture artisans) that is distanced from the intimate, day to day existence of the low income, poorly educated demographic cannot be treated as representative of the popular culture that attended variety. It needs to be remembered on the other hand that such socially and economically advantaged people may have on occasion attended such shows. Evidence will be supplied in Chapter Four indicating, for example, that university students were seen within some quarters of the industry as an unknown quantity. Indeed, their appreciation of one particular *Stiffy and Mo* production (staged in 1919) was viewed by the Fullers management as being remarkably different to that of the typical Princess Theatre patron.¹¹ Of course the reverse can

¹⁰ The term blue collar and/or lower socio-economic is preferred over "working-class" as class division in the Australian context is much less obvious than in the British social landscape.

¹¹ See pages 174-75 in this thesis for further details.

also be proposed, with individuals from the lower socio-economic demographic possibly attending high art or up-market theatre productions on occasion.

The degree to which minstrelsy and vaudeville were articulated as commodity practices within the marketplace is also crucial to the methodological approach taken in this study. As the evidence will indicate, variety was being produced on a daily basis year in and year out right across the country by both professionals and amateurs. Traditional notions of artistic value and cultural aesthetics become problematic in this respect, not only because the historian is required to rely so much on the subjective opinion of the commentators of the day (rather than rely on their own ability to critique a text), but also because they are concepts that can only rarely be applied to variety performances.¹² The primary concern of variety was always entertainment and value for money because it operated according to the logic of commercial enterprise (that is, in response to and as a result of, real-world marketplace forces). As with the performers any business that failed to cope with or adjust to these forces invariably meant, as they still do, the real possibility of economic ruin. For the entrepreneur this could mean bankruptcy, the loss of standing within the industry, a lack of credibility with potential financial investors, and perhaps even the end of one's career in the industry. As several following chapters will testify, very few professional variety practitioners would have stepped up to the plate as potential variety entrepreneurs without some considerable understanding of the risks involved.

Where this study departs from traditional theatre history is that it does not seek to focus on the connections between the production and reception of signs or texts as a means of explanation. To a large extent this approach is required because so few texts or text fragments exist - a situation which has no doubt added to the lack of attention accorded the industry. Keeping in mind the problems of historicism (particularly in terms of explaining the genesis of particular historical stages), this examination counters the objections of structuralist social history theory by locating the study in the realms of industrial activity rather than putting it through the microscope of aesthetic criticism. Broadly speaking the thesis considers developments in form and production not as evolutionary stages in artistic "progress" but as industrially and economically-informed responses. Thus rather than attempt to read meaning back onto the audience as textual analysis does, the study of variety (using this new approach) is one that attempts to treat performance and reception as both equal and two-way. This is because variety, more than any other form of theatrical activity, was one founded almost exclusively on immediacy and the intimate relationship between artist and audience.

¹² The notion of success and popularity is an issue discussed in the following chapter.

Another aspect of this methodology that allows it to move beyond the scope of the traditional research approach is the realisation that while a focused diachronic investigation of one industrial practice (i.e. the revusical during the period 1916-1925) could possibly provide a sharp explanation of industry practice, such an approach would effectively sever the practice of one particular period from the crucial influence of historical time. The methodology especially developed for this study therefore acknowledges that artistic and managerial development occurs through a combination of factors, not the least being the accumulation of experience and access to influences and/or training. As such the thesis has mapped several strands of industrial influence and interpersonal networking in order to demonstrate that the explosion of activity that led to the rise of Australian revusical occurred through a unique combination of factors, both industrial and of popular culture-making. As Peter Bailey acknowledges when assessing the discourse of popular culture with social history:

[Popular culture] industries - the new pub, the music hall, the theatre, and the popular press - compete with each other, territorially and rhetorically, as also with the state and other respectable fractions of the social order. The constituency for popular culture fluctuates and recomposes; while not coterminous with any single class it is broadly democratic, answering both to the ritual promptings of an indigenous custom, old and newly forged, and the slicker formulations of mass or middle-brow commercial confection (10-11).

By association, Bailey is referring here to the vagrancy of popular culture production, its capacity to hybridise without reflection, and to draw on both traditions and the un-tested in order to create what is essentially an eclectic ensemble of texts, sites and practices that have direct relevance to the audience that consumes it.

As a departure from the traditional historical research paradigm, the variety methodology holds the key to defining and directing the research phase of this project and consequently receives a chapter to itself. Briefly, this newly devised methodology is better able to provide insights into variety activity because it accounts for the infrastructural and logistical organisation that operated both within and upon the industry. In this sense it has been adapted to suit the study rather than the other way around. Although I am suggesting here that the traditional approach to recovering variety theatre history is ultimately flawed, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the significant contribution that previous theatre history studies using traditional methodology have made towards unravelling particular areas of past theatre practice. The primary goal of this survey and analysis is not to re-write current knowledge as it pertains to "serious" theatre, but rather to expand on the account that currently exists in relation to variety entertainment. The achievement of this goal is the direct result of a more inclusive methodology - one that incorporates a highly reflexive response to the everyday social reality of late nineteenth and early twentieth century variety entertainment practitioners and the (largely working-class) audiences who supported it.

I begin the thesis, therefore, with a more detailed discussion of the major flaws and inadequacies inherent in the traditional approach to surveying theatre history, and how they have failed to adequately account for activity undertaken within the variety industry. This analysis effectively separates the problems into four distinct areas. First it examines the ephemeral nature of variety and thus its predisposition to disappear from the historical record. The second area of inquiry looks at the industry infrastructure, demonstrating that the enforced requirement of mobility among performers and organisations, and the apparent lack of readily accessible primary source evidence, has assisted in the process of denying Australian variety entertainment a more prominent place in the national memory. The third issue to be examined concerns the impact of several significant social, industrial and technological developments during the late 1920s and throughout much of the 1930s. It will be shown that collectively these created what I refer to as an historical "wall of silence." Most notable, for example, are the depression, World War II, the increasing dominance of the film exhibition industry, and other new media technologies of that era. The fourth area of investigation argues that the situation has been exacerbated by limited interest in popular culture entertainment by theatre historians, and the development of text-based academic theatre history research from within university English departments. This section further demonstrates that the validation of niche areas of research, erroneous reconstruction, and an over reliance on uncontested memoir have likewise contributed to variety having been under-valued and under researched over the past three or more decades.

Following on from the discussion of traditional research techniques, the chapter then provides an overview of how the variety methodology operates. To this end it identifies four key protocols: 1) Equity (the attempt to treat all data equally - without preconceived notions of importance or relevance); 2) Industrial (designing a research process that works with the industrial and social organisation of variety); 3) Primary Source (the recognition of secondary sources being subject to errors and bias); and 4) the Blanket Search approach (an ideological framework more conducive to identifying previously unknown activity because it collects data without prejudice or in response to preconceived ideas of value). The methodology also requires the formation of temporal and geographical grids and a designated survey parameter.

The second chapter establishes the dissertation's methodology and survey parameters as they apply to variety's commercial infrastructure and competitive practices, its social and industrial networking and the effect that social interaction had in maximising creative and performative development. My objective here is to set the tone for the chapters that follow by uncovering real-world structures of activity. By examining the Australian variety industry from the perspective of fundamental business practices, the thesis necessarily demands a methodological approach founded on key aspects of commercial competition theory. It is being

argued, for example, that networking provided the industry with the means of establishing a practical and efficient infrastructure over the course of some five decades. It effectively provided variety practitioners of all levels of experience and ages with the means of making employment and social connections, thereby increasing their opportunities for work (or career advancement) and allowing them opportunities to establish a subcultural support base. Inherent in networking, too, is the notion of cross-generationalism - a period of social engagement whereby new generations of practitioners worked with (rather than in opposition to) their older and more experienced peers.

In Chapter Three I survey the period from roughly 1875 to 1914, which provides the thesis with its first opportunity to demonstrate how strategic competitive practice and networking operated in the variety industry prior to the emergence of the Australian-written revusical. Some sixty Australian-born or based performers have been chosen, with their career movements collated within five year phases and entered into a chronological table. The survey is broken into two distinct periods (1870-1894 and 1895-1914), thus allowing the reader to more easily follow the pathways of the industry network infrastructure.¹³ By focusing on a prototypical network infrastructure (one particular strand of practitioners) Chapter Three's survey effectively demonstrates in microcosm the way the industry operated. The chronology serves to demonstrate the complex, interconnected and interdependent nature of this network by offering insights into general career longevity. This is an aspect of the pre-1930s entertainment infrastructure that is still not recognised within the current literature. Yet it provides a clear indication that activity was being undertaken as part of a viable, commercial industry. The chronology also provides evidence supporting the proposition that these performers played a much more important role in the social life of the country's popular culture audience than has previously been thought. It can also be seen that a significant proportion of these performers were regarded as national celebrities, if not stars.

Chapter Three's second objective is to focus much of the performative analysis on the creation and production of minstrel farces and burlesques leading up to the second decade of the twentieth century. The network of practitioners chosen for closer examination are those regarded as having played a key role in the creation and production of both the Australian minstrel farce and burlesque. They are, however, certainly not the only practitioners to have undertaken this role. Appendix E is also linked to this chapter, providing as it does additional supportive evidence by identifying a considerable number of minstrel farces presented during the period

¹³ Appendix A provides a comprehensive data file supporting these connections.

under investigation (and sometimes beyond).¹⁴ The chapter further demonstrates that a number of variety artists and managers whose early careers began during the minstrel show boom years in this country (c1880-1892) had become senior industry figures by the second decade of the twentieth century. As the following chapter shows, the collective experience of this network of elite practitioners became a significant factor in the early development of the revusical. Working either as creators or as mentors to the new generation of music theatre practitioners, they helped direct the organisation of a dynamic theatrical genre that was founded not just on farce and burlesque, but also on variety's commercial principles and practices. While the creative aspects helped provide the revusical with its form, it was the latter aspect that served as the genre's real strength. This can be seen both in the industry's capacity to adapt quickly to changes forced on it, and the genre's relatively low operational costs. Thus while the production-laden and less flexible operations of "serious" theatre meant that industry struggled, variety was able to continue providing popular culture audiences across the country with quality entertainment.

Chapter Four explores the early years of the Australian-written revusical (1913-1915), providing evidence that it originated in response to social practices within the popular culture audience. It is further demonstrated, too, that the revusical's development as a distinctively Australian genre corresponded with the emergence of a more clearly articulated Australian identity within the popular culture audience (although the characters and situations in these works appear not to have forcefully engaged with local issues and idioms until the arrival of Nat Phillips' *Stiffy* and *Mo* revusicals in 1916). An investigation of the variety industry's gradual expansion during the years immediately prior and after the outbreak of war includes a discussion of the role of the media as a factor in this growth period (and the revusical in particular).¹⁵ The influence of several leading practitioners of the period in the wake of the 1913 tour of Australia by the American Burlesque Company is also examined (notably the impact of Bert Le Blanc). The chapter's overall purpose, then, is to provide insight into the social and industrial circumstances that inadvertently created the right mix of conditions for an unprecedented market growth in popular culture entertainment beginning circa 1915.

Chapter Five examines the Australian variety industry between 1916 and 1919. The analysis demonstrates that its infrastructure was by then well-established and commercially viable, and as such was able to take advantage of the opportunities for rapid expansion brought about by wartime industrial and social upheaval. The chapter also begins to explore more

¹⁴ Connections between a number of minstrel farces and post-1916 revusicals are also provided in Appendix E.

¹⁵ The role of two industry magazines in particular are examined, these being The Theatre Magazine (also published as The Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage, and Theatre, Society and Home), and Australian Variety (published as Australian Variety and Show World from 1916). For the sake of brevity these two magazines are referred to throughout this thesis under the abbreviated titles: the Theatre and Australian Variety except when referred to in a direct citation.

closely the dissertation's secondary hypothesis - that the genre developed as a theatrical vehicle through which its numerous creators could present staple variety entertainment (songs, dances and topical sketches) within the framework of a dramatically organised narrative. Much primary source evidence will also support this dissertation's claim that the genre descriptive "revusical" should be applied to these productions in order to distinguish them from the musical revues staged by Australians from around the 1930s onwards. Although "revue" eventually became the default label attached to these productions, it can be shown that "revusical" was being applied to describe these Australian one act musical comedies from as early as 1915. This evidence therefore clearly contradicts one major publication's claim that the "revusical" did not come into existence until the early 1930s (and then only in relation to British and American productions).¹⁶ The long-held assumption that the Australian revusical (c1914-1925) was essentially a copy of the popular British or American theatricals of the period is also challenged. I argue here that even though it hybridised elements of American burlesque, minstrel farce, vaudeville and musical comedy, the revusical's overall design (and subsequent popularity) was informed by uniquely Australian cultural aspects and industrial practices.

The revusical's creative development will also be examined in response to the impact of the flapper phenomenon and popular music crazes like ragtime and jazz. Such an examination serves to further highlight the interactive relationship between a commodity product such as the revusical and the popular culture market. It will be shown that the infusion of these crazes into the revusical format collectively helped variety maintain a major share of the entertainment market for almost a decade (at least up until the mid-late 1920s) while in direct competition with the silent film industry. The flapper phenomenon will be seen to have manifested itself in the revusical through the pivotal role of the six-member chorus girl ensemble; while the inclusion of two of the early twentieth century's most dominant music genres - ragtime, and later jazz - helped provide additional levels of social relevance and commercial appeal. Incorporated into this discussion, too, is a brief exploration of the vital role that social humour played in the appeal of variety entertainments like the revusical.

Chapter Six provides a close study of the first four years of Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Company, with some additional background insights into the remainder of their eleven year career together. Most importantly it dispels several long-held beliefs about the Roy Rene and Nat Phillips partnership - in particular that Phillips worked as Rene's straightman. It is now clear that Phillips was held in high regard by his contemporaries, recognised not only as the Stiffy and Mo company's leader, but also as Rene's comic equal - a far cry from the current perception

¹⁶ See R. W. Burchfield, ed. Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (1980), 1244.

which proposes that he was over-shadowed by his partner's "comic genius." In providing much new information about Nat Phillips' role in the Stiffy and Mo phenomenon, the chapter demonstrates how easily Australia's theatre history, and even its key practitioners, can be inadvertently reshaped and erroneously recontextualised.

Chapter Six also shows that Phillips' productions were historically significant because they established a template from which almost every other revusical writer and producer followed. The chapter presents specific evidence that supports, for example, the argument that these productions were narrative-driven. Excerpts from four of Nat Phillips' original Stiffy and Mo scripts, uncovered during the course of the research phase,¹⁷ provide irrefutable evidence of the revusical's narrative foundations (full edited versions of these scripts, possibly the only complete revusical texts available to historians, are presented in Appendix B). A number of text fragments also held in the collection further strengthen the case for acknowledging that these one act musical comedies were not merely a collection of sketches, songs and dances put together under an umbrella theme as historians have previously supposed.

The dissertation's final chapter, presented under the heading, "A Matter of Time: Australian Theatre History in the Twenty-First Century," draws together the major findings of the study. It also invites the reader to consider the nature of theatre history research in today's current economic climate. This section also posits a number of questions and observations regarding the discipline's future, particularly in view of the massive increase in information available via digital and online resources. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that the way historians have gone about their research might necessarily be required to adapt to twenty-first century technological changes rather than continue as a nineteenth century practice. The methodological approach which underpins this thesis becomes, then, one example of a possible means of circumventing the demise of historicism under the weight of economic rationalism.

The major limitations existing in this area of study are presented in Chapter One (largely identified as flaws in the way historians apply a traditional approach to surveying variety entertainment). There are, however, a number of concerns that need to be addressed in the Introduction, as they fall within the general scope of theatre history research and not just the variety industry paradigm.

As historians know full well uncovering past practice is fraught with inherent difficulties. Our capacity to level any claim regarding the quality of a production, our ability to define success in terms of a particular performance (including that by individuals), or even our attempts

¹⁷ A fifth revusical, *In Mexico*, is not included with this thesis as it is not quite complete. It is believed that one or possibly two pages are missing from the end of the manuscript.

to articulate the success or otherwise of overall careers by individual's or organisations, are susceptible either to the need to validate the importance of the research (bias) or in respect of simply needing to fill in gaps by supposition. It is, however, a concern that this thesis is able to side-step to some degree. I am not entirely interested in attempting to validate or privilege particular artists over their peers. The study is to some extent still too general for such a task. As Chapter Two will explore at greater length, however, success in the commercial industry can be reduced to a single and ultimately significant factor - its commercial viability (perhaps best articulated as "bums on seats"). For the variety industry this might mean the length of a performer's engagement or the time a production or troupe spent in one locality or venue. Perhaps more pertinent to this thesis is the notion of content, and in this regard the limitations have been much more problematic. For example, of the many thousands of production reviews published throughout the period, particularly those relating to farces and revusicals, only rarely do any provide the sort of information required by the historian. This is primarily because most published observations have been written by journalists whose critical faculties were untrained and who never considered later interest by historians. Nevertheless, the meticulous sifting process undertaken as part of this extensive research project has provided more than enough evidence across the period to convincingly support its hypothesis. One conclusion I have drawn is that the primary sources emanating out of Melbourne and Sydney provide an ultimately inadequate foundation for surveying popular culture entertainment. Of much greater value is the role that regional and interstate newspapers play as a significant source of raw data.

What have been largely overlooked by historians to date are the everyday factors of supply and demand. It is likely that the varied and more plentiful sources of information available to the public in the major metropolitan centres led to a reduction in the quantity and frequency of information about particular entertainment issues in major primary sources like the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age. One reason for this is that the reviewers may well have assumed that the metropolitan public was familiar with certain aspects of industry news. In far-flung communities like Perth, Charters Towers and even Brisbane, and presumably major centres like Hobart, Adelaide and Broken Hill,¹⁸ the public relied to a greater degree on the information provided through the local newspaper. Of key use to this study were the previews, advance notices and publicity inserts published in these primary sources. Even though some degree of skepticism is naturally called for when attempting to process fact from fiction, the details provided are often useful signposts to further valuable research. The research

¹⁸ One further limitation concerns the absence of data acquired from the Tasmanian and Adelaide/South Australian circuits. While this has not created any fundamental flaw in the findings, the fact that these centres are not included is nevertheless unfortunate. The reasons for their omission are simply due to the unavailability of newspapers in Brisbane where much of the research for the thesis was carried out.

methodology undertaken for this project has identified a great deal of significant and additional information (notably concerning the background and careers of artists) not available in the metropolitan papers.

The notion of popular culture genre (and sub-genre) differentiation also requires some consideration at this point. Although the issue as it relates to the revusical is discussed in detail later in the study, the farce and burlesque genres propose a particular difficulty for historians. Despite being two distinct genres, on occasion there arises some disparity in the advertised descriptions of particular burlesques and farces which subsequently raises doubt about the type of work presented. American musical historian, Richard Kislán sees the same problem occurring with American burlesque. In noting that two other terms are often loosely applied to it - "spectacle" and "extravaganza,"¹⁹ Kislán also points out that it was not uncommon to see all three used in the descriptive title (62). While such inconsistencies of nomenclature in popular culture forms are at times problematic, often arising as they do with the fluctuation of genre structures over time, it is nevertheless possible to define both as distinct theatrical forms.

The farce, for example, is often accorded the status of sketch and vice versa. This in turn makes it difficult to establish the exact type of production being surveyed, especially in those instances where the same work might be given both labels.²⁰ Appendix E, which has attempted to identify and record individual farces in Australia leading up to the arrival of American burlesque and Australian revusicals around World War One, distinguishes the sketch from the farce (wherever possible) according to the number of people known to have been involved in the performance. It would appear that most sketches, including the society sketch (which became increasingly popular in the late 1890s as a vehicle for a male and female duo), involved a small ensemble, typically less than four or five actors. A farce by comparison, while having a plot that usually revolved around a similar number of performers, invariably called for other members of the company to appear in supporting/chorus-type roles, with the core plot roles performed by the company's lead comics (those with the most experience in improvisation). The farce also invariably involved much physical action (fall downs), highly ridiculous situations and unlikely characters. Unlike the farce a sketch could be serious, although these types were rare in minstrelsy and vaudeville. Generally sketches focused their brief accounts (anywhere from 5-15 minutes) on incidents or stories of a comic nature, finding humour in commonplace incidents.

¹⁹ While extravaganza was a genre in its own right, it also tended to be applied loosely to both pantomimes and burlesques. In their own right, extravaganzas (from the English "extravagance" and the Italian "stravaganza") could be characterized by involving more consistent stories. The music was also often more highly developed. The distinctions nevertheless were subtle (Sadie 8: 477).

²⁰ Horace Bent's original work "The Lawyer's Clerk" is a case in point. The 1885 production is referred to as a sketch, but in 1889 it becomes "Horace Bent's screaming farce." See Appendix E.

With regard to the literature available, as this Introduction has indicated on several occasions, the Australia-wide variety entertainment industry of the pre-1930s has been poorly serviced by academics and historians to date. Academic dissertations undertaken fall largely into two categories: 1) practitioner-focused surveys, and 2) general industry overviews. Of the three major vaudeville organisations whose operations fall within the temporal parameters of this study (Tivoli, Fullers and Harry Clay) only Harry Rickards and Harry Clay²¹ have been accorded academic attention. While Monica Crouch's 1987 Ph D thesis and subsequent Australasian Drama Studies paper both focus on the career of Harry Rickards to 1904, for the purposes of this study the involvement of both Rickards and Hugh D. McIntosh (from 1912 onwards) are of little relevance to the Australian-written revusical and of minor importance in so far as Australian engagements and audiences are concerned.²² This is because Rickards (from 1892 onwards) and Tivoli Theatres Ltd (from 1912) marketed themselves towards an upper-level audience, importing a high percentage of foreign acts. This policy therefore saw a more refined type of entertainment presented and also led to higher admission prices and standards of audience behaviour, neither of which appealed to certain segments of the popular culture market. Much of the available literature is therefore of a general historical overview type, often comprised of historians' perceptions of variety's role as a social investment²³ and the career details of a very select number of leading practitioners (which are invariably inaccurate and/or very limited in terms of factual detail).

The work of several historians has nevertheless served to contextualise the initial research phase of this project, although their application of traditional methodology has on occasion formed quite different conclusions to mine. Of the academic studies to have proved significant, Katrina J. Bard's 1983 Bachelor of Letters thesis "The History of Vaudeville in Australia From 1900 to 1930" represents one of the first real attempts to address the field of inquiry on its own merits. However, as with Delyse Ryan's more concentrated historical survey of theatrical productions in Brisbane between 1914-1918 (with a particular focus on variety entertainment), Bard's thesis shows a number of flaws which are the result of problems in methodology raised in Chapter One.

Edgar Waters' research into aspects of the popular arts in Australia between 1880 and 1915 has also influenced the early research phase of this study. Of particular importance is his investigation into popular songs of the period, with a number of significant Australian-written

²¹ See Clay Djubal. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998).

²² McIntosh took over the Governing Directorship of Rickards' Tivoli Theatres Ltd on 14 September 1912 (see "Hugh D. McIntosh: A Volcanic Personality" Theatre Magazine Oct. 1912, 28).

²³ At the heart of this thesis and its hypothesis is the argument that any previous assumptions about the role of variety entertainment in Australian society must be considered problematic subsequent to the flaws in historical accountability. This issue will be dealt with as matter of course throughout the thesis.

vaudeville and minstrel songs being accorded both historical and analytical treatment. As with Bard's research, Waters' conclusions concerning both the social world of the variety audience and the industrial world of production are problematic. To a great extent, however, Waters' study mostly supports the findings of this thesis and as such forms the basis of several sections presented in later chapters.

Paralleling this study to a certain extent, notably in respect of the time period and the focus on travelling theatre practice, is Barbara Garlick's 1994 dissertation which presents a close study of I. E. Cole's and Kate Howarde's operations (in addition to the emergence of digger companies). While Garlick's thesis looks primarily at the "legitimate" side of theatre practice it too serves to support the fundamental research conclusions drawn in this thesis, particularly in relation to the importance of country audiences to the theatre industry. It should be prefaced, though, that much historical data concerning key figures associated with Cole and Howarde is absent because her survey focuses almost exclusively on these two individuals. As the following chapter will also demonstrate, occasional erroneous conclusions are drawn by Garlick that would have been picked up through the use of a more effective methodology.

Virginia Kirby-Smith's 1969 thesis investigating the development of Australian Theatre and Drama between 1788 and 1964 is another study to have touched on aspects of variety theatre. In this instance, however, her temporal survey parameters are too broad, resulting in a lack of focus and consequently little insightful analysis. Kirby-Smith's thesis does demonstrate one particular issue of concern raised later in this thesis. I refer here to her extensive use of the Bulletin as a primary source for the investigation of variety theatre, an approach not uncommon among historians working in the same area. Chapter Four will contradict previously held belief that the Bulletin played a key role in the formation of national identity and self-awareness. It will in fact be further demonstrated that the magazine was overtly biased against popular culture entertainment, and so effectively dismissed the type of nationalistic awareness being expressed by the Australian popular culture. Evidence for the first proposition is provided via circulation records, which indicate that the magazine was accessed by a relatively small number of people compared to the overall Australian population. An analysis of the advertising content, language style, editorial focus and reviews of variety entertainment (including significant omissions) further indicate that the Bulletin's small market was comprised mostly of people who could be described as being untypical of the Australian popular culture demographic.

Of those theatre historians to approach the area of popular culture entertainment, John West and Richard Waterhouse also stand out. West's Theatre in Australia, published in 1978, is now rather outdated but is nevertheless deserving of its pioneering reputation. The same too

must be said of Richard Waterhouse's general overviews pertaining to this field of inquiry. I wish to acknowledge that Waterhouse's research strength is clearly evident when he focuses on a particular subject - for example his exemplary work on Charles B. Hicks.²⁴ That study remains a major influence on my own research development, and serves as a benchmark for all historians to match. It is when Waterhouse approaches the field from the general perspective, however, that his conclusions fall short of the mark. A good deal of his findings in the essays "Blackface and the Beginnings of Bifurcation" and "Popular Culture and Pastimes," along with the publication From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage are drawn from an account of activity which rarely ever goes below the surface of the Tivoli (and to a lesser extent the Fullers') level of operations. Although Waterhouse is by no means the only historian to take this approach, as is demonstrated throughout much of the Companion to Theatre in Australia,²⁵ he is unfortunately at this stage the most prominent of his peers to have published in this area. Chapter One presents a closer scrutiny of several flaws in Waterhouse's findings, further demonstrating the importance of approaching the variety industry with a methodology suited to its operations rather than to the historian's.

The justification for this study is effectively argued by British theatre historian, David Mayer. Speaking at a theatre symposium almost thirty years ago (a time when the study of Western popular culture was only then beginning to expand beyond its initial Birmingham School base), Mayer recognised even then that there existed a need to move beyond the long-held security of analysis founded on the standard text-driven and aesthetically respectable critical approach. His paper "Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre" proposes that our ability to understand the full range of Western theatrical experience has been only partially successful because text-oriented research conditions our critical faculties to accept literary merit "as the paramount test of dramatic excellence." On the other hand, Mayer notes:

Only when we accept the possibility that for every literary, philosophic, and consciously artistic theatrical piece there are some dozens of inartistic, energetic, mindless, unliterary dramatic genres which enjoy a vast popularity and which appeal, not necessarily to persons of refinement and educated taste, but to the greater part of the population, perhaps to the entire population, do we begin to see the theatrical expressions of an age in a more accurate perspective (259).

What he argues here is that the theatre historian must "look for evidence other than the script and that we [must] recognise tests other than the aesthetic for the existence and viability of dramatic occasions" (276). When one realises that minstrelsy, vaudeville, revues, revusicals,

²⁴ "Antipodean Odyssey: Charles B. Hicks and the New Georgia Minstrels in Australia, 1877-1880" (1986), 19-39.

²⁵ The thesis will draw comparisons between the entries in the Companion to Theatre in Australia and the research findings of this study on several occasions. Appendix D also references entries to that publication when applicable, providing there opportunities for comparison. See for example Harry Clay, J. C. Bain, Jim Gerald and Nat Phillips. Further to this, of the 70+ entries in Appendix D, very few are given even passing mention in the Companion to Theatre in Australia.

follies and musical comedies were collectively the dominant entertainment medium of the popular culture during the period under investigation, it becomes evident that a popular culture-based historical survey into Australian popular music theatre of the period is certainly justified, if not long-overdue. Just as cultural studies theorists now investigate seeming never-ending nuances of popular culture entertainment reception and production in an effort to understand the machinations of modern society, so an historical examination must also explore the popular entertainment forms if we are to come to some level of understanding of our cultural and social past.

One additional outcome, though not a motivation driving the study, will be the opportunity to question whether the "cultural cringe" factor should be attributed across-the-board in terms of Australian theatre practice. This long-held perception of national embarrassment, which we have been led to believe has resulted in a failure to measure up to the standards of foreign drama and music forms, may perhaps have some basis in so far as the high culture artistic endeavour is concerned. It seems, however, oddly out of context with perceptions widely held by the popular culture entertainment industry and audiences of the pre-1930s. Indeed much of the combined evidence proposes that the notion of a "cultural cringe" was seldom an issue because Australian variety artists, writers and composers were largely viewed as being equal to if not better than the foreign import.

Another issue of concern is the over-emphasis on research limited primarily to Sydney and Melbourne. It appears that a consensus among historians has developed over the years which tends to downgrade the significance of regional areas in the development of Australian theatre practice. Country audiences have been typically viewed simply as recipients of shows already seen in the capital cities. While this may well have been true of touring dramatic troupes, the variety industry's fundamental operational infrastructure depended heavily on the country circuits. Three key factors bear remembering. First, the vast majority of performers could not have maintained professional careers without these regional circuits. Employment security was necessary for the industry to remain viable, and hence the numerous country circuits established over the decades, and which operated anywhere from a week to nine months (as with Harry Clay's Queensland tours) helped provide constant employment opportunities. Second, the country audiences were ideal for working in new routines, a type of out-of-town tryout, before showing it to prospective city managers. Emerging artists would also have found the experiences of country audiences vital to their early careers. The concentrated access they had with more experienced performers on these tours also provided greater opportunities for proving their performances. A third factor concerns the collective audience numbers making up these regional circuits. While most towns provided their own entertainment through local

amateur organisations, touring variety entertainments, particularly those with established reputations like Harry Clay's company, were significant social events, even up to the early 1920s, and as such were mostly well-attended (unless other factors came into play, such as rival shows being staged at the same time or through inclement weather). As Clay's Queensland tours between 1901 and 1918 demonstrate, towns like Charters Towers for much of the era provided nightly audiences at the Theatre Royal in excess of 1,500 people - with Clay's seasons in that city ranging from fourteen nights (during the first nine or ten years) to five around 1917/1918. Other centres like Broken Hill, Newcastle, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Toowoomba, Ipswich, Rockhampton and Kalgoorlie, to name but a handful, were equally pivotal to the variety industry for decades. These issues by themselves provide additional justification for the study's focus on surveying regional variety production.

Barbara Garlick's research into travelling theatre provides much additional and valuable insight into understanding the regional theatre market. She not only demonstrates that country audiences were equally significant in terms of popular culture consumption as their city brethren, but highlights, too, the need for historians to be more careful in the way they reconstitute social formations. Concluding her study with Bourdieu's cautionary observation that the partial coherence of connotations like "popular" are deeply embedded in a network of confused and quasi-mythical representations (Bourdieu Language 91-2), Garlick identifies this issue as having particular relevance in so far as Australia's mobile theatre companies of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should be understood. "Popular theatre," she writes, "has most frequently been defined... as either the socialist dream of bringing theatre to the people,²⁶ or as a development from folk festivals with the emphasis on traditional genres such as circus, melodrama, pantomime." Garlick argues on the other hand:

A consideration of Australian travelling theatre [between 1890 and 1935] collapses the idea of both a class-targeted audience and a class-targeted repertoire. While the city seasons of the companies may have permitted the applicability of demarcation... leaving the main line resulted in audiences who were defined primarily by geographical location; under these conditions the repertoire ceased to have any overt class value, which was superseded by a more fundamentally important value, that of entertainment (254-5).

One final observation that further justifies the focus of this study concerns an issue raised by theatre historian Bruce McConachie. Because Australian theatre activity has largely been accorded study as a Sydney/Melbourne-based industry rather than a national one, a great deal of focus has also been given to the leading actor/managers/authors of the dramatic stage. This creates a further problem for historicism and one which this dissertation seeks to re-address. As

²⁶ Garlick argues that Denis Gontard's "An Example of Popular Itinerant Theatre: Gémier's National Travelling Theatre (1911-12)," 123 - cited in Mayer and Richards Western Popular Theatre (1977) - is a significant influence in this line of thought.

McConachie notes in his essay "Cultural Systems and the Nation-State," the romantic re-telling of a particular participant's history (as a means of demonstrating why that person is a crucial element in the nation's past) is a paradigm which attempts to wake us up to the greatness of the theatrical talent in our national past. The belief that we can all cease being cultural fools and subsequently our national life can move forward in the comfort that it has been ennobled and enriched, has no merit as far as he is concerned. McConachie's point here is that the uncovering of any individual performer, no matter how talented or significant, cannot hope to change or re-shape the way historians, let alone nations, perceive their history" (36). His proposition has some merit in so far as Australian variety entertainment is concerned because the industry was both fragmented and widespread, and hence no individual (even Harry Rickards) could have dominated or controlled the entire field of activity. McConachie is correct then in proposing that the history of such an industry could not be re-written following the publication of one individual's activities, no matter how significant he or she was at the time.

McConachie's position is somewhat problematic, however, when situated within the Australian context. This is because his argument reflects an American and European/British-centric view of theatre history. His knowledge of these past industries has been informed by many decades research by countless historians. Thus for McConachie little is changed when new individuals and their role in the theatre industry are brought to light. Perhaps rightly so he views these new historical insights as not so much a means of re-writing the historical consensus as simply adding to it. The overall perception of a major international theatre industry like America, for instance, remains much as it has for decades despite the continued research of individual historians. Each new discovery according to McConachie can at best only fine tune the current account. His argument collapses, on the other hand, when faced with the issue of an entire era of theatre industry having all but disappeared from the historical record.

With his view stemming from an essentially xenophobic theatre history tradition, the issue McConachie has not considered is that many countries outside his immediate domain have not been accorded decades of concentrated historical attention. Australia and its creative industries, for example, have long been under the mistaken assumption that a) nothing of any theatrical importance occurred prior to the latter decades of the twentieth century; and b) that no theatrical genre has ever been created by Australians. This thesis will not only prove that both these assumptions are unfounded, but that they have been allowed to perpetuate through too little attention having been applied to pre-1930s popular culture theatre. One consequence of this lack of research is that the notions of "cultural cringe" and "failure" have been allowed to continue their insidious undermining of the Australian creative industry psyche. The philosophical questions being raised here invite consideration of the long-term effects this may

have had on the industry's psyche - its self-esteem. What if the perceived failure of the Australia creative arts to measure up to foreign standards (being the benchmark by which the local theatre industry has attempted to match) should instead be applied almost exclusively to one segment of the theatre industry (a comparatively small aesthetically-motivated art form)? And how might this country's popular culture theatre industry have developed over the course of the twentieth century had we been aware of its overall success in servicing the Australian popular culture community for more than five decades leading up to the 1930s. As this thesis demonstrates, there were many local practitioners who not only provided entertainment on par with their international colleagues, but were recognised for their ability and accorded star status by the industry and public alike? Ultimately, then, this thesis attempts to address one problematic issue pertaining to Australian theatre history research. If the history of this country's entertainment past is biased against popular culture production, if it contains significant omissions and reflects little actual activity and too much myth, then why has this been allowed to occur and what can be done to fix it?

A Selection of Significant Australian-based Practitioners Still to Receive Historical Recognition



John N. McCallum and his Courtiers Company

John McCallum (Cremorne Theatre) rivalled Ted Holland as Brisbane's leading variety entrepreneur during the 1910s. Theatre Magazine June. (1918), 4.

John F. Sheridan

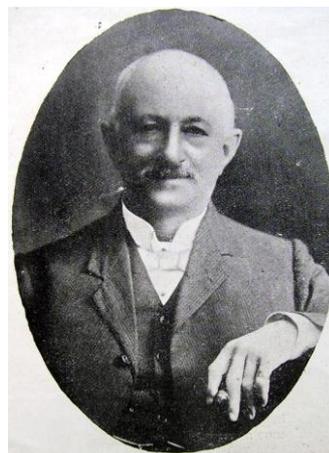
As the Earl in An Earl for the Night American-born, Sheridan had a long association with Australia and originated several productions here. Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly 15 Aug. (1905), 10.





Harry Whaite

One of Australia's leading scenic artists (c1885-1910s).
Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Dec. (1909), 21.



George L. Goodman

Long-serving manager with J. C. Williamson and later an entrepreneur in his own right.
Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Dec. (1909), 14.



Charlie Pope

Pope (here in "white-face") and fellow African-American comedian Irving Sayles, were Harry Rickards most popular comedians c1890s-1900s.
Theatre Magazine Nov. (1917), 11.



Joe Charles

Well-known for his routines with Emile Dani (Glory Girl).
Everyone's 18 May (1921), 4.



Edward Branscombe

Led the Westminster Glee Singers and Dandies companies, and built Brisbane's Cremorne Theatre.
Theatre Magazine Aug. (1915), 26.



Bert "The Droll" Howard

Also known as "the Lord Mayor of Poverty Point."
Everyone's 12 Dec. (1928), 136.



Les Bates

Comedian/writer/director.
Theatre Magazine Apr. (1915), 1.

All photographs courtesy of Fryer Library, University of Qld, except Joe Charles and Bert Howard (courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)