

CONCLUSION

"HARRY CLAY: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE"

"Vale, Harry Clay"

Vale, old chief, we'll miss your cheery smile,
Your repartee that would oft beguile;
The hearty grip, that lent a helping hand,
For those that knew you best - can understand
Australian "Mummers" mourn your loss and vow
You placed them first - to your memory we bow;
You lived - and died - Australians know your work,
Actor or not, the whitest man on earth.

(Reg. M. Thornton 34)

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this dissertation's focus on Harry Clay's Australian vaudeville career and the role he played in the production of popular theatre in Australia has been a three-fold historical examination. First, it has collected and presented documentary evidence which supports the argument that Clay was one of the three entrepreneurs to have dominated the Australian vaudeville industry from its emergence out of minstrelsy around the turn of the century to its eventual demise in the late 1920s. Second, it has traced Clay's life and career from his birth and early years as a popular minstrel tenor whose reputation was widely acknowledged throughout much of Australia, through to his death in 1925 and the final years of his Sydney based vaudeville and theatrical company. The third area of examination has provided an historical insight into the minstrel/vaudeville era in the decades which spanned the turn of the century, a period in which these forms of variety entertainment enjoyed their greatest popularity.

With regard to Clay himself, it has been argued that his achievement in providing regular employment opportunities for several thousand artists (many of whom maintained long-term associations with his company) over the significant period of time he operated has presented the most compelling argument for his inclusion in the annals of Australian theatre history. While his operations were generally regarded as being of the B circuit class, and his regional tours did not cover as much of Australia or New Zealand as did Harry Rickards and the Fullers, his comparatively substantial career was in no small way the result of his own high standards, work ethics, and reputation as a generous and conscientious manager. Indeed, his contemporaries were fully aware of his influence, particularly when his company established its dominance over the entertainment practices of Sydney's suburban audiences and the country centres of Queensland. Furthermore, the idea that Clay's was simply a repository for second rate entertainers has been shown to be incorrect. His influence upon the careers of a number of well-known Australian performers has been

identified, as has the fact that he regularly engaged top-line and/or overseas attractions for his circuits when they came off contract with the Tivoli and Fuller organisations.

In comparison to all the other B circuit competitors based in Sydney (and quite possibly throughout Australia), too, it has been shown that Clay's company was able to maintain its business operations continuously for almost thirty years, despite the many difficulties that occurred within the social and industrial fabric of the early twentieth century. His ability to adapt, re-direct, expand and contract his business when required saw him succeed where many others failed. And in doing so he was able to provide not only a regular and reliable work network for Australian performers, his many employees, and the various support industries; but he also presented regular and quality entertainment to audiences who were either infrequently serviced, or ignored by the other leading companies over those three decades. Further to this, the locations (whether city or regional) and social classes (particularly suburban audiences) that Clay targetted generally had very little access to quality vaudeville apart from those offered by him, and indeed were all too often presented with shows by small-time operators or one-off companies whose production values and standards could be considered as having matched their reputations.

As noted in Chapter One, the difficulties involved in being able to locate personal details concerning popular entertainers and entrepreneurs during Harry Clay's era are compounded by the doubtful accuracy of those records which have been found. These sources were to a large extent accessed from within advertising material, performance reviews, and industry gossip. It is for this reason that I have attempted to support and correct such information by presenting a variety of alternative sources; for example, Deceased Estate Files, Council Minutes, legal documents, directories and other non-industry and archival materials. This thesis has not, however, denied the relevance of the less-concrete or even fabricated representations, with these being considered to some extent as a reflection of the subject's audience - how he both wished to be seen and recognised by the public who patronised his entertainments, and in turn how he believed they wanted to interpret his persona.

As well as the unreliability of many historical sources, it has also been the argument of this thesis that the oversight with regard to Harry Clay's position in Australian theatre history has occurred partly because of his own business practices, and as a result of both the generally ephemeral nature of vaudeville's performances, and the everydayness of vaudeville as a cultural practice itself. As this thesis has shown, Clay did not utilise large scale or expensive publicity throughout much of his company's lifetime, but instead utilised the benefits of regularity by servicing established locations on a weekly basis in addition to word of mouth promotion and alternative/less expensive options – i.e. posting daybills in each area, and having children drop dodgers into the local letterboxes. As a result of these practices, however, the amount of readily accessed material for historical research purposes has been severely limited.

While it is true that Clay did utilise newspaper advertising for his country circuits and suburban shows, in Sydney it seems that this type of advertising was mostly published in the Sydney Morning Herald and not the suburban newspapers (hence a wider coverage with less expense). Consequently, detailed accounts of his work in particular suburbs are mostly unavailable. Reviews of his shows in the Herald also rarely occur, for as the Theatre notes in one of its earliest editions, "the critics on our daily papers write their notices according to the size of the advertisement in their respective papers" (15 July 1903, 8). Unfortunately it seems that the Theatre magazine was also guilty of such practice, for as previously mentioned, Harry Clay received almost no acknowledgment within its pages until he began advertising in 1909. Clay's initial reluctance to advertise in these magazines can be seen, however, as a response to his public, the majority of whom were working-class and who generally could not afford to subscribe to the trade journals of the period. Thus mention of him or his operations in such journals is almost non-existent until such time as he did begin to advertise.

Another consideration, too, is the fact that there were few musical or radio recordings of Australian artists during much of this period, while today there is only a limited store of early film which has survived. It can be argued that both of these aspects have been part of the problem in being able to locate physical records pertaining to Harry Clay and other artists and managers of his era - and have thus contributed to many of them being overlooked by historians. With no material of this kind available most of those performers (and their acts) who were among the elite of their profession during this period, but whose careers ended around the same time as vaudeville's demise, have ended up more or less anonymous. For example, in comparison to several of their contemporaries whose careers stretched on into the late 1930s and 1940s - people such as Roy Rene, George Wallace and George Sorlie - acclaimed performers and entrepreneurs like Amy Rochelle, Stanly McKay, Bert Le Blanc and Arthur Morley have been denied a place in Australian theatrical history.

It is only because of the lack of information, however, that these earlier pioneers of twentieth century popular culture remain unrecognised for the important and influential roles they played in the society of the period. Hence this thesis has sought to re-situate the position of one such person, Harry Clay, within the history of Australian theatre - and in particular examine his role as a leading figure in the development and maintenance of the most popular form of entertainment during his era.

In conclusion, then, this thesis has presented a case for Harry Clay's greater inclusion within the historical records of this country's theatrical traditions and accomplishments. His influential role in supporting Australian performers in an era and within an industry previously dominated by imported artists, is perhaps his most significant contribution. It is also a contribution marked by his desire to service audiences which were not a priority to the larger and more stylish organisations - these being the working-class, suburban, NSW and Queensland country audiences. While it can be argued that his interest was undoubtedly one

motivated by profit, he in return succeeded in offering the public what they wanted – "quality entertainment at popular prices."



Plate 52

From the Newtown Diamond Jubilee Souvenir: 1862-1922

S.D. Smith compiler

(Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, NSW)