



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA

**What Oh Tonight: The Methodology Factor and  
Pre-1930s' Australian Variety Theatre  
(with Special Focus on the One Act Musical  
Comedy, 1914-1920)**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Clay Djubal

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### Updated Acknowledgement

This thesis was submitted for examination prior to making contact with actor/playwright/author, Jon Fabian. Unbeknownst to me Jon was several years into a research project on Roy Rene. He subsequently put me in touch with Kim Phillips (the great niece of Nat Phillips). Both Kim and Jon have since supplied me with much invaluable information on Nat Phillips and *Stiffy* and *Mo*, some of which I have been able to either include during the corrections stage, or in turn which has allowed me to revise some details.

Contact with Ms Phillips and Mr Fabian, along with a number of other interested parties occurred after the Fryer Library put the Nat Phillips Collection Finding Guide (see Appendix G) online. This in itself coincided with an event put on by the Friends of the Fryer in conjunction with The University of Queensland's Office of Communications and Marketing at Custom's House, Brisbane on 21 August 2005. That presentation, titled "*What Oh Tonight: A Celebration of Nat Phillips in Comedy, Song and History*," is possibly the first public acknowledgement of Nat Phillips since his funeral in 1932. My appreciation for this event is accorded to John Moller and Helen Burke from the Office of Marketing and Communications; and Fryer Library staff - Ms Deborah Stumm (Manager), Jo Ritale and Laurie McNeice. The event also called on the services of Professor Richard Fotheringham (Executive Dean of Arts, UQ) as "Mo" and Steve Haddon (Channel 9, Brisbane) as "Stiffy." Ms Sarah Punch, who sang "Bert Hinkler" (among other songs) and Ms Kelly Burton (piano accompaniment) were also integral to the success of the event.

Special thanks must also go to Mr Bill Beach, Senior Manager Arts Faculty Library Service at The University of Queensland. During his brief time as acting manager of the Fryer Library Bill became aware of the problems I had regarding missing citation details from *Australian Variety* and *Everyone's*. This had occurred while researching at the Mitchell Library in 1997. *Australian Variety* rarely included page numbers and many of the photocopies from *Everyone's* did not include them. Bill immediately put in an order for microfilm versions of both magazines and I was able to fix the problem for the thesis prior to it being prepared for final binding. While I was unable to do this for the appendices, due to the size, the problem is confined largely to Appendices C and D. Most reviews are easily found, however, by matching the place of performance (i.e. Fullers' Theatre, Sydney) with the appropriate page dedicated to that city (i.e. Sydney).

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of all the great and not so great Australian vaudeville and minstrel artists of the pre-1930s' variety era... and in particular to Nat and Daisy and every member of Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo company.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The poor state of knowledge currently relating to pre-1930s Australian variety theatre is reflected not only in the huge gaps in the history of even the most prominent minstrel and vaudeville companies and practitioners of that era, but also in the large number of erroneous conclusions contained within the published history. Two case studies will be included within this dissertation's broader study of the variety industry between circa 1870 and 1930, demonstrating that that Australian theatre history has failed to properly account for variety theatre production during a period when, as Charles Norman succinctly calls it, "vaudeville was king." The purpose of this thesis is therefore to argue first, that the methodological approach taken by historians to date is inadequate for dealing with variety industry activity both on a national scale and at a level of operations below that of the Tivoli circuit. The second purpose is to propose an entirely new methodology - one which allows historians the ability to uncover substantial new evidence about the organisation, personnel, and creative product of that industry.

One case study addresses the absence of any sustained research into the partnership of Nat (Stiffy) Phillips and Roy (Mo) Rene, arguably Australia's most influential and significant comedy duo of the first half of the twentieth century. The thesis demonstrates that much of what currently stands as knowledge about their onstage relationship is wrong, particularly the assumption that Mo was the dominant comic and Stiffy the straight man. The second case study identifies several erroneous conclusions that also exist today as historical fact. The issues examined here relate to the generic form and structure of the "revues" staged from World War One up until the late 1920s. The research undertaken clearly shows that these productions were not a sequence of songs, dances and sketches carried out under some umbrella theme but were instead narrative-driven one act musical comedies - initially referred to in the industry as "revusicals."

At the core of this dissertation's hypothesis is the realisation that historians need to engage with the variety industry on its terms - by responding to the infrastructure and social networks through which it operated - if they are to gain insight into its production and reception as popular culture entertainment. As a result of this new methodological approach it has been possible to track the movements of hundreds of performers as they criss-crossed the country (some over several decades), thereby providing new reserves of data and historical insights previously unattainable to historians. The evidence supporting the dissertation's conclusions is contained not only within the thesis itself, but also as part of several extensive production and biographical databases reproduced in the Appendices section. This evidence also makes available for possibly the first time in more than ninety years, four original Stiffy and Mo scripts written by Nat Phillips, including the first two productions ever staged by the troupe.

Vaudeville was the entertainment of the people, its brassy assurance a dig in the nation's ribs, its simplicity as naive as a circus. The Tivoli shows that I worked in... were complete characterisations of the pleasant gullible clowning Aussie, physically bestowing itself and reflected in the response of the audiences, its entertainment largely topical fun. The trend of the humour was the march of those times. Thus vaudeville is an important chapter, not only of the stage, but of Australia.

(Charles Norman)<sup>1</sup>

Little drops of humour  
Little drops of light  
Knock our daily troubles  
Higher than a kite

(Charles Hugo)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When Vaudeville was King (1984), 61.

<sup>2</sup> An advertising jingle published in the Sydney Morning Herald by Charles Hugo during his Buffalo Minstrels season at the Princess Theatre (26 June 1886, 2)