

CHAPTER SIX

"Nat Phillips' 'Stiffy and Mo' Company and the Re-contextualisation of History - A Case Study"

One thing I am always glad of is the way the public have remembered Stiffy. They have never forgotten the wonderful vaudeville he gave them and the humour he put across. People will tell you that in this business you are forgotten overnight, and that may be so in many cases, but I do not think the Australian people have forgotten Stiffy, and that is the best monument any artist can have (Roy Rene).²⁹²



Nat Phillips

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

Although Nat Phillips' and Roy Rene's contribution to Australia's entertainment industry during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, and the widespread adoration they were accorded by the Australian public, has been acknowledged within theatre history literature published over the previous thirty years, there can be little doubt that they no longer retain the status of household names. This is not to say that the two men have entirely disappeared from the cultural landscape. Indeed, such was the impact of Phillips and Rene on Australian society between 1916 and 1928, and Roy Rene's popularity as a radio star in the 1940s and 1950s, that

²⁹² Mo's Memoirs (1945), 84.

the majority of people aged over fifty, and who were raised in this country, would surely recognise the names Stiffy and Mo, or at the very least Mo McCackie. While it is unfortunate that the careers of these two men have been largely overlooked as cultural icons, apart from brief inclusions in theatre history publications (and in Roy Rene's case a one-off documentary),²⁹³ this chapter seeks not to understand or explain why later generations of Australians have failed to recognise or value their historical significance. It is after all the very nature of popular culture that it refuse cultural resources that fail to generate and circulate meanings (especially those of previous generations). For Stiffy and Mo to regain their relevance today, for example, they would need to be reinterpreted within a repertoire of current commodity texts and cultural resources that provide popular culture pleasure. And as John Fiske notes, pleasure in a cultural context can only be produced through a combination of productivity, meaning and functionality (57). This chapter is concerned, on the other hand, with demonstrating that not only has the Stiffy and Mo partnership been erroneously re-interpreted and reconstructed within historical and academic literature, but that we still know so little about it. As the introduction to this thesis notes, there are major errors in the current account concerning the type of production they presented, the on-stage dynamics between the two comics, and most disconcerting that Nat Phillips' pivotal role as company leader (he was also the director, principle writer, manager, sometimes songwriter and co-star) has over time been downgraded to support status through a mythologising process that continues to attribute the partnership's success to the sole impact of Roy Rene. Nat Phillips is not alone in having his role in the company under-valued, either. Every member of the company (apart from Mike Connors and Queenie Paul) has effectively disappeared from the historical record despite having been considered by their peers as being among the elite of Australian variety performers during their time with Stiffy and Mo.

This chapter's principle purpose, then, is to present the findings of research into the Stiffy and Mo company that is founded on the methodological process outlined in Chapter One. The research, which draws almost exclusively on primary sources (archival manuscripts and contemporary media sources), clearly demonstrates that much of the memoir and secondary source accounts dictating our knowledge of this significant theatrical partnership are wrong. It will be shown, for example, that Roy Rene was not the sole reason for the venture's early success, but rather that Nat Phillips' input that was the most outstanding contribution during the troupe's first nine years together (1916 – 1925). Phillips' role as writer of all the company's early revusicals will be given considerable attention (supported by manuscript evidence in Appendix

²⁹³ Rene is also the subject of Steve J. Speirs' 1976 play Young Mo (aka The Resuscitation of the Little Prince Who Couldn't Laugh as Performed by Young Mo at the Height of the Great Depression). Since 1976 his name has also been associated with the annual Mo Awards.

B). Evidence supporting one of this dissertation's secondary hypotheses, that the stories were narrative driven, and not simply a series of songs, sketches and dances as is typical of the revue genre, will also be presented. Of particular concern, too, is the overturning of one clearly inaccurate assumption - that Phillips was Roy Rene's "foil" or "straightman." As will be shown, Phillips' and Rene's strategy throughout their career together was to alternate the straight/comic roles within each show. Both comics therefore played for laughs. A third aspect to be examined is the company itself. While there can be little doubt that Roy Rene and Nat Phillips were the stars, as with most live commodity theatrical entertainments, critical and commercial success depended on more than just one factor. Much credit for the success of *Stiffy and Mo* should therefore be given to the various performers who appeared in the company, in most instances for long engagements, during its eleven years together. Indeed, it will be demonstrated (through reviews like the one below) that the troupe was viewed by critics and public alike as very much an ensemble company:

Stiffy and Mo as fun-compelling waiters in Nat Phillips' musical revue were perfectly capable of entertaining the house right through the second half, but they had the assistance of as blithesome a company of fellow artistes as ever graced the vaudeville stage.²⁹⁴

The chapter will also explore a number of other factors played a key part in the company garnering the support of a seemingly large section of the Australian popular culture audience. No less important than *Stiffy and Mo*, for example, were factors such as the right balance of material (songs, choreography, comedy), the socially-relevant topics, the increased level of visual pleasure (sexual and scenic), and the improvisational skills articulated, not just by Rene and Phillips, but also by their very experienced support cast. Together, these findings demonstrate the need for historians working in the area of popular culture entertainment to engage a methodology altogether different from that which has served them to date. This is of particular importance in terms of the early twentieth century entertainment industry because the period represents a significant era in Australia's emergence as a fully-fledged independent nation. Indeed a re-evaluation of the impact that variety performers had in helping coalesce a national identity may well lead to new understandings of the Australian community at large during that era. The findings laid out in this chapter further propose, too, that the field of Australian theatre history needs to not only accord popular culture entertainment a higher research status than it currently receives, but to recognise that it can only be adequately researched using a different methodology. As such these findings also serve to remind us that what we currently know of this era represents merely a fraction of the history still requiring attention.

²⁹⁴ Brisbane Courier 4 Feb. (1918), 2.

Barely two months after Nat Phillips' Tabloid Musical Comedy Company opened at Sydney's Princess Theatre, the public clamour and industry interest was such that Australian Variety announced on 16 August that a special issue was being prepared (9). This significant industry/media event saw the troupe accorded not only extended coverage within the pages of the 30 August issue, but presented them with photographic spreads on both the front and back covers. No other theatrical organisation, troupe, or performer (Australian or international), had received such attention from either the Theatre or Australian Variety prior to this time, which indicates that something of an unheralded nature was being recognised as early as mid-way through the company's debut season. This proposition is further supported by the attention paid to the company within the pages of the Theatre magazine, which similarly saw the Princess Theatre revusicals as no less than "exceptional" ("A Sporting Chance" 52) and a "triumph" ("All Aboard" 49). The same magazine's review of the return season of Yes We Don't (13-19 Oct.) further suggested that an indefinite stay at the Princess was not beyond the realms of possibility. "The business has been phenomenal," wrote one critic. "Any night of the week you've got to be there in good time to make sure of a seat. Mr Phillips must, in short, be credited with having achieved the biggest revue-success ever scored in Sydney" ("Yes We Don't" 51).

There can be little doubt that the company presented "phenomenally" popular seasons in Sydney and elsewhere during its first few years of operations - a situation that appears to have remained unabated for many years to come. During the formative years, too, Phillips and Rene garnered much praise for their Stiffy and Mo feature engagements in The Bunyip.²⁹⁵ The combined success of that pantomime and the Stiffy and Mo revusicals over the next few years not only further established Phillips' reputation as being among the elite directors and writers then working in the Australian entertainment industry, but also cemented Stiffy and Mo's celebrity status in the minds of the public. This in turn generated much interest from within the entertainment profession and led to a response that Michael Porter argues must necessarily occur in a competitive industry. Those firms already in place, as well as those emerging (or which were to shortly begin operations) recognised an opportunity to not only increase profits through the development and production of similar "replacement" products, but also the opportunity to expand the possible scale of their operations (168). While this thesis has argued that steady industry growth had been building in the years leading up to the outbreak of war and continued through 1915 and 1916, the rate and extent of the expansion that occurred from at least the beginning of 1917 was very much in response to both the locally-produced revusical's appeal as

²⁹⁵ The company's popularity was such that it took until February 1918 before they were able to play a season in Brisbane. Although this delay was to some extent brought about by the company's involvement in The Bunyip (and its subsequent national tour), the situation was exacerbated by the length of the seasons it was forced by public demand to play in each of the other capital cities prior to the Brisbane debut.

entertainment, and its social relevance. Support for this claim can be seen in the responses of the two largest employers of locally-based variety artists the Fullers²⁹⁶ and Harry Clay,²⁹⁷ who both markedly increased the "absolute size" of their operations in the wake of Nat Phillips' *Stiffy* and *Mo* Company debut season. At the same time many new entrepreneurial entrants were attracted to the marketplace, thus further increasing the total industry scale in accordance with Porter's theory (175-6).

One clear question arises from this industrially-driven reaction. What did the *Stiffy* and *Mo* company offer that was so pleasurable to audiences, and in turn directed, or at least influenced, such widespread product replication and/or duplication? The inherent nature of commodity production and marketplace structure is such, that if *Rene/Mo* was the primary reason for the company's success, reducing Phillips to a support role not unlike that of the remaining characters, we would expect to see a spate of wartime and immediate post-war revusicals built largely around one lead comic (and possibly the emergence of *Mo*-like characters²⁹⁸). This simply didn't happen until around the early to mid-1920s - when the next generation of comedians, led by George Wallace and Jim Gerald appeared. What occurred instead was that most of the established operations and new industry entrants producing locally-written revusicals attempted to replicate the egalitarian (*mateship*) ideal espoused by *Stiffy* and *Mo* through Nat Phillips' narratives.²⁹⁹ Indeed up until the Wallace and Gerald revusical era, most locally-written revusicals as identified in Appendix C either revolved around a pair of established comedians, or unfolded as an ensemble production (with each performer given a greater share of the storyline). Both formats were socially relevant in that they reinforced an egalitarian ideology that was becoming ever more deeply embedded in the national psyche as a result of the country's involvement in the war. Although the twin-comic relationship was an international tradition, it nevertheless presented the basis for local revusicals to build into them the unique Australian *mateship* ideology through an emphasis on local idioms, local (and recent) issues, and by strengthening the developing Australian war time identity (often within local contexts).

²⁹⁶ See for example, "Wanted in Sydney" *Theatre Magazine* July (1916), 31; "Chat with Ben J. Fuller." *Australian Variety and Show World* 1 Aug. (1917), 3; and John West "Fullers" *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (1995), 238-9. A survey of newspaper advertising (particularly in Melbourne and Sydney) between 1914 and 1917 also shows the level of expansion being undertaken by the Fullers.

²⁹⁷ See Clay Djubal. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998), Chapter 4 and Appendices D and K.

²⁹⁸ Fred Parsons indicates that Charles "Ike" Delavale wore similar make-up to *Mo* at one stage. According to Parsons this "minor-*Mo* character didn't last very long." While the veracity of his claim cannot be established, it is the only reported instance of an other performer attempting to replicate *Rene's* famous character (or at least his make-up) after *Mo* had become nationally famous. It should be remembered, however, that *Mo's* Hebrew make-up did originate with Roy Rene.

²⁹⁹ Examples of such partnerships include, for example: Roe Rox and Wal Rockley, ca.1917-1918; George Pagden (*Bulky*) and Will Gilbert (*Lanky*) ca.1918; Joe Rox and Billy Watson, ca.1918-1919; Paul Stanhope (*Spike*) and Charles Delavale (*Ike*) ca.1920-1921; George H. Ward (*Jacob Schultz*) and Les Warton (*Mike Murphy*) ca.1921; and Jack Patterson (*Dinks*) and George Wallace (*Oncus*) ca.1920-1921.

The long-held acceptance that Roy Rene dominated the company appears to have been given credence as a result of his high, almost legendary, position in Australian entertainment history over more than three decades. With his career continuing on well into the 1950s, Rene maintained a presence (and influence) in the national consciousness through countless radio and stage appearances. As Mo he was recognised by several generations of Australians living in an increasingly media-driven society,³⁰⁰ and thus well-known to the first generation of theatre historians and social commentators whose inquiries led in this direction. Without evidence to the contrary, too, it has been assumed that the Phillips/Rene partnership must have been founded on the traditional format of straightman and comic - as entrenched through comedy duos such as Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, and including Australian comedy icons of the 1970s, Paul Hogan and John "Strop" Cornell. The reasoning has no doubt been that if Mo was the comic genius, then Phillips must have been his feed. As the previous chapter has already demonstrated in the instance of Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack, comedy partnerships are not always so clear cut. One cannot assume, for instance that just because the company was called the Bert Le Blanc Travesty Stars that Le Blanc was the principal comic and Mack the straight-man, just as Bert Newton cannot be thought of only as Graham Kennedy's or Don Lane's foil during the comedy sketches presented during the *In Melbourne Tonight* variety television shows of the 1960s and 1970s.

The extensive primary source evidence gathered for this thesis in no way support the view that Roy Rene became, or was at least viewed as, a comic genius shortly after joining the company, and that he was soon afterwards recognised as the company's principal star. Rather, it is being proposed that such conclusions have occurred through a combination of myth acceptance, biased or unreliable memoir, and several significant socio-historical factors. These factors have also collectively negated the impact of pre-1930s' variety industry in general. Because we have had so much more access to Rene's legacy, it has been easier to unintentionally skew the historical account concerning Stiffy and Mo towards one that fits contemporary desires for legend fulfilment, even at the expense of those whose contributions at least equalled Rene's. An analysis of the current literature indicates, for example, that this manufactured history has been allowed to emerge not only through assumption, omission, untested acceptance of "facts" (and their subsequent repetition in later accounts), but also through each historian's syntactical expression. Several instances demonstrate this process. Fred Parson's for example, writes that during their period of separation (1925-1927), "Stiffy hadn't

³⁰⁰ An example of this connection occurs in my own experience through an expression often used by my grandfather (born in 1911) when commenting on the childhood foibles and actions of any of his grandchildren. "Ah McCackie, you've done it again, "he would say. Although I was born the year Roy Rene died, and did not become aware of the origins of the phrase until several decades later, this phrase has continued to be part of my vocabulary - especially in relation to my own children. In this sense the exclamation serves as my own intimate - though very distant - connection with the Rene legend.

been doing very good business on his own, but as soon as Roy rejoined him, the 'House Full' signs went up each night" (24). The problem here is that Parsons conveniently fails to mention that Rene's career had also effectively stalled without Phillips, and that his new partnership with Gus Bluett, as with Phillips' ventures during that time, was unable to recapture the same public fervour.



Stiffy and Mo Advertisement

Theatre Magazine July (1919), n. pag.
(Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

Max Harris's four page tribute to Rene, "Mo," published by Meanjin Quarterly in 1986, mentions Phillips only once: "With his partner, Stiffy (Nat Phillips), he became a household word for his broad slapstick comedy" (250). A later article by Harris, which appears in the Bulletin, refers to George Wallace but does not raise Phillips' name once in its three-page

overview of Rene's life and career ("Secret Life" 40, 43-4). In both instances Phillips can be seen to have been siphoned out of both the partnership and industry equations through omission. Similarly Oscar Mendelsohn's five page "Salute to Mo," sees Phillips' association with Rene reduced to one paragraph. Here, too, we again see Phillips attributed the "feed" role, although Mendelsohn does note that Phillips was "a considerable comedian in his own right" (52). A comparison between the way Rene's and Phillips' legacies are currently recorded can also be found in their respective entries in the 1995 edition of the Companion to Theatre in Australia. While Phillips receives just 27 lines (447), Rene is accorded over 280 lines (485-6).³⁰¹ Given the Companion's weight as a key reference for Australian theatre history, the belief that Phillips' career was minor, or at least not as important as Rene's, continues to be interpreted as fact.

The research undertaken for this thesis further demonstrates that it is not only omission that influences perception. Subjective and uncontested opinions concerning both Phillips and Rene have not only been given credence but have been allowed to go unchecked within accounts published during the past thirty or so years. Later research is therefore dependent on whichever memoir has been located or which fits the line of inquiry. How for example are we to understand the inner machinations of Roy Rene when two people with long career connections with him describe his professional manner and philosophy so differently. Mike Connors' version indicates in this respect, that what he liked "about Roy [was] his unselfishness on the stage." Connors further proposes that Rene wouldn't hesitate to help anyone else get a laugh and that he always worked for the show "not for himself" (Rene 181). Fred Parsons records, on the other hand, that Rene always dominated the shows he performed in. "There was never room for another comedian in any show that he was in," writes Parson, "not even if the other comic was his partner" (18). The problem of repeating historical myth appears to occur most often when supposed industry-credible sources are not first checked for veracity, and later publications use the shortcut route of accepting the initial (often subjective) recall. When someone of Connors industry standing writes, for example, that "Nat was a brilliant feed for Roy" while at the same time articulating his belief that the difficult and important feed role has nevertheless been largely underestimated, the statement tends to be given prima facie status. With no contradictory evidence available from other contemporaries of Phillips, such an apparently balanced insight fits, and therefore re-conforms the consensus. An entry in Entertaining Australia provides a typical example of the way Rene and Phillips are currently perceived. "Rene's comic genius," it notes, "enlivened the revues by playing the obsequious underdog who defeated Stiffy's attempts to keep him in line [while] Phillips, an accomplished straightman, fed Mo with ease" (178). This

³⁰¹ While this situation is clearly due only to the amount and focus research undertaken at that stage (and not indicative of a comparison of their respective careers), the end result is that it adds further weight to the erroneous perception already in place.

view appears to be supported by the accounts given by Parsons³⁰² and Connors. The latter writes:

I remember the old Stiffy and Mo days. Roy and Stiffy worked almost as one man. Nat was a good craftsman, and he understood Roy. He knew the business thoroughly, but he lacked the touch of genius that made Roy what he is. Perhaps that doesn't give you a fair idea of Nat. One carpenter can make a table, a good serviceable piece of work maybe; but it takes more than a carpenter to make a Chippendale. That's the difference between Nat and Roy. Touch of genius I suppose is the best way of putting it (Rene 181).

Celestine McDermott's description of the "legendary Mo" in The Australian Stage (137), and Victoria Chance's "Stiffy and Mo" entry in the Companion to Theatre in Australia (561) similarly position Phillips in the background as a performer, reiterating the Parsons and Connors line that that it was Rene's comic genius that brought the revues alive and quickly made him one of Australia's biggest stars. The published memoirs of commentators and ex-entertainers like Charles Norman, Billy Maloney, Isador Brodsky inadvertently work to further distance Phillips' historical significance by their inclusion of Roy Rene's career and omission or downplaying of his. This situation is exacerbated in Mo's Memoirs, particularly in the sections written by other former practitioners like Mike Connors. It is not that these publications set out to do this intentionally, each author has after all explicit reasons for including Roy Rene in their recollections, most often through their own association with him. The problem arises, however, in that the collective weight of these publications and the larger encyclopaedic-style entries given to Rene effectively skews the history away from the real-world context of their partnership and individual careers, and positions a de facto history, founded less on an empirical reconstruction of the past and more through retrospectively-manufactured consensus.

What became most surprising during the research phase of this thesis was that the Rene "genius" / Phillips "support" scenario, as articulated by Connors, could not be supported by any views or comments published in newspapers or magazines during the Stiffy and Mo era.³⁰³ Contradicting the long assumed view that Phillips wasn't up to Rene's standard in improvisational work, on the other hand, is a review of the Cinderella pantomime staged at the Fullers Grand Opera House (Sydney) over the 1918/1919 holiday season. One of their acclaimed routines from that production is said to have been worked up as a spur of the moment offering while in Brisbane earlier that year. "An actor in the first half suddenly fell ill and Stiffy and Mo volunteered to fill in the [spot]," writes X-Ray. "They followed Rio and Helmar, and covering themselves with a sheet a piece burlesqued the stars from their entrance to their exit.

³⁰² See Introduction to this dissertation ("Limitations" section).

³⁰³ It should be noted here that this thesis in no way attempts to lessen or disparage the reputation or impact of Roy Rene. While the term genius is too complex and difficult a word to position in an academic study such as this, I have no difficulty in acknowledging that Roy Rene was a significant Australian comedian of his time, and fully deserves the legendary status accorded him. Rather, what is being proposed instead is that Phillips early death effectively robbed him of similar recognition by denying him the opportunity to either continue his career or at the very least correct later errors of memoir.

The impromptu was so successful that it was decided to reserve it for a pantomime item."³⁰⁴ There is no suggestion in this review that Phillips' simply rode Rene's coat tails in the improvisation, and nor would he need to. Phillips had by then more than twenty years experience in onstage improvisation, with at least a decade of this experience having been honed on international circuits. It is inconceivable that someone of his high industry stature (as comedian, producer, writer, composer) would have played second fiddle to anyone on stage unless they were themselves a senior and more experienced performer.



Roy Rene

Aged about 25 when this photograph was taken, Rene had been engaged as a fully professional variety comic a little over four years - his first top level vaudeville engagement in this role having been with Harry Clay (Syd) in 1913. Prior to that Rene had served his variety apprenticeship as a child/juvenile singer ("Little Roy" and later "Boy Roy") in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide.

Theatre Magazine Apr. (1915), 35.

(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

Mike Connors' and Fred Parsons' recall of events serve to demonstrate how easily history can be inadvertently shaped towards one account at the expense of the real world context out of which that memory stems. In the first instance there is the distance in time between Stiffy and Mo's careers and the publication of Mo's Memoirs which, although only two decades, does immediately raise questions about what is fact and what is the result of unconscious reinterpretation. In this respect several disparities arise in relation to the time frames Connors provides concerning his relationship with Rene (and presumably Phillips³⁰⁵) and those indicated

³⁰⁴ *Theatre Magazine* Feb. (1919), 17.

³⁰⁵ Connors fails to include Phillips' name on several occasions when it is clear that he is talking about either Stiffy and Mo or Phillips and Rene. An example of this is the reference to The Bunyip pantomime, which featured the pair.

in contemporary industry magazines like the Theatre, Australian Variety and Everyone's.³⁰⁶ What is clear is that Connors' name doesn't become permanently associated with the Stiffy and Mo company until 1920, at which time he and his wife, Queenie Paul, became members of the troupe.³⁰⁷ Any of Connors' recollections relating to Stiffy and Mo prior to that period must therefore be treated as a combination of second hand reportage, conjecture or as a non-connected industry bystander. As will be shortly demonstrated, too, Connors' recall should be treated with some degree of caution by historians due to the possibility of bias towards Rene. Although he and Paul remained with Phillips' as members of his Whirligig's company until late 1926, their departure in the middle of the company's Brisbane season saw them set up a rival company at the Cremorne Gardens. That the parting was less than amicable is also indicated by the fact that they went head to head with Phillips at Christmas by staging their own *Robinson Crusoe* pantomime (Phillips' production was a revival of his 1925 show). The couple later worked extensively with Rene during the early 1930s which may also have worked to position Rene more favourably in Connors' memory.

While this thesis does not disagree in principle that the on-stage balance of power between Phillips and Rene might have tipped in favour of the latter comic during the latter stages of Connors' and Paul's time with the Stiffy and Mo company, it is being proposed that any lessening of Phillips' onstage role was likely the result of factors that had less to do with a lack of "genius" and more to do with his life and career at that time. There is some indication within the media coverage of their 1927/1928 reunion that the onstage dynamics had begun to tip in Rene's favour by then. However, Rene's inability to attain similar success with Fred Bluett in 1926 suggests that Phillips' input into the partnership was more pivotal than would be expected of an off-sider. With regard to his off-stage life, pressure is believed to have increased quite significantly by the early to mid-1920s as a result of the considerable responsibility placed on him by the Fullers as writer and producer of their pantomimes, his ongoing multiple roles in the Stiffy and Mo company, and the additional pressure of maintaining the company's standing as the country's leading revusical company. There is a suggestion, too, that by the mid-1920s Phillips' drinking had become an issue, if not a problem. According to information gleaned from family research undertaken by Phillips' great-niece, Kim Phillips, both Nat and Daisy were known to have been heavy drinkers - a factor that may have well contributed to Phillip's early

³⁰⁶ One concern here is that Connors' engagement with the Stiffy and Mo Revue Company did not occur until mid-1920. Connors' statement that he worked with Mo within a year of first seeing him in The Bunyip pantomime of 1916/1917 tends to infer they worked an act together which is not the case. Connors appeared only for a few weeks in the vaudeville part with his then partner Fred Witt. Thus without clarification or readily-accessed supportive evidence, the relationship is contextualised as more significant than was actually have been the case.

³⁰⁷ Connors and Paul joined the Stiffy and Mo troupe during its 1920 Melbourne Bijou season (ca. July onwards). Connors would have had occasion to see Phillips and Rene on stage between 1916 and 1920, though. For example, he and Fred Witt were engaged by the Fullers to play a vaudeville turn at their Bijou Theatre (Melb) at the same time Stiffy and Mo were appearing in The Bunyip's Melbourne season at the Princess's Theatre (ca. May 1917).

death, and possibly put strain on his relationship with Rene and other members of the company.³⁰⁸ It is also likely that over time their almost opposite personalities had begun to wear thin on each other, leading to an increased and constant state of tension. As Rene himself recalls when talking about how he would wage rehearsals. Nat "used to get mad at me and shake with rage" (Mo's Memoirs 65).

The issue of authorship in relation to the Stiffy and Mo revusicals is another aspect of the history that appears to have denied Nat Phillips due recognition. Several publications, including Entertaining Australia indicate, for example, that Vic Roberts, an Englishman, was responsible for writing the productions:

In spite of the Australian character of Rene's work, many of the scripts that he and Phillips performed as Stiffy and Mo were written in London by an Englishman hired by Ben Fuller. He did not even see the duo perform until he had been writing for them for several years (178).

The entry then goes on to propose that Roberts was able to write these revues because English music-hall lauded drinking, gambling and sport and scorned work, authority and moderation all of which "fitted Australian myths." Any role Nat Phillips had in authoring these productions is further reduced because Rene apparently "transformed scripts that were written for him" (178). The Companion to Theatre in Australia gives this perception historical weight by reproducing the same account in its entry on Stiffy and Mo. "Rene's comic genius," it notes "brought [the scripts] alive and quickly made him one of Australia's biggest stars" (561). Not only is Phillips' celebrity status ignored in favour of Rene's, but the entry also indicates that "many of Stiffy and Mo's early scripts were written in London by Vic Roberts," and implies that Phillips only "wrote and produced" later revues. Confusion over this issue is furthered by Charles Norman in his book When Vaudeville was King. Although Norman doesn't directly associate Roberts with their career, his loose temporal grounding of events and incidents does present an opportunity for misreading by anyone not familiar with the era or the Phillips and Rene partnership. When he states, for example, that "their" sketches were written by Victor Roberts (185), a close reading reveals that he is talking not about Stiffy and Mo, but about the company Roy Rene and Sadie Gale formed in 1928 shortly after parting a second time with Phillips. Norman in fact makes no reference to Roberts being the author of the Stiffy and Mo productions.

A number of problems can be seen in any historical record which proposes that Vic Roberts wrote the early Stiffy and Mo revusicals, and possibly even all the later ones. While it is not being denied that he may have contributed scripts for the company, it is being argued that the number was much less and much later on in the partnership than the current literature would

³⁰⁸ According to Kim Phillips, Daisy Merritt's death little more than two years after her husband's was linked to her serious drinking problem. This information is supplied on a family history CD-ROM compiled by Ms Phillips that was given to me by Jon Fabian (see Acknowledgments).

have us believe. Evidence for this comes from a variety of sources, including Roberts himself. He states in Roy Rene's autobiography, for example:

I came out here for Fullers, and the ship stayed at Perth for a little while. That was when Roy had split with Stiffy and was on at the Luxor Theatre, Perth in his own revue. Well I got off the boat and decided to go and see him, but I was determined to dislike his work... I hadn't been in the theatre three minutes before I fell for his humour... I have been seeing him and continuing to write for him ever since that day in 1925 when I first saw him in the flesh (189).

The first concern raised by Roberts here is why did the Fullers wait until 1925 (and after Rene and Phillips had broken up the troupe) to bring Roberts to Australia, particularly if he had been writing Stiffy and Mo material since the early days of the company? Furthermore, Roberts openly admits to both disliking and being unfamiliar with Phillips' and Rene's humour - a highly unusual admission for someone who it is claimed had been writing their material for some time. Contrary to the claims stated in Entertaining Australia and the Companion to Theatre in Australia, Roberts' own comments suggest the possibility that he first became involved with Rene during the two and a half years Stiffy and Mo were separated.³⁰⁹

No one reason for Vic Roberts having been accorded authorship of most of the Stiffy and Mo revusicals can at this stage be determined. Mo's Memoirs, for example, contains no actual reference to him writing for Stiffy and Mo. Indeed, each reference to Roberts providing scripts is made only in relation to Rene (or Mo), and with no specific, or even general, time period being identified. The words "long before" in the quotation below provide no precise temporal framework through which we can establish even a precise year. It is feasible, then, that instances such as the following (contributed by Elizabeth Reed and Max Harris) have been collapsed from Roy Rene's solo years (ca.1925-1927) into the earlier Stiffy and Mo years:

We found out how Mo's most famous scenes came into being from his principal script writer, Vic Roberts... Long before he had ever seen Roy Rene he was writing scripts for Mo over in England... "How was it Mo's name and fame arrived in England?" "Via Sir Ben Fuller," [he] replied. Ben Fuller came over the England shortly after Stiffy and Mo reviews [sic] started. After Sir Ben arrived I used to get Stiffy and Mo, Stiffy and Mo all the time, and I can tell you I got very tired of hearing what great comics they were (188).

It is possible to surmise, too, that accounts such as this, in combination with the accepted belief that Rene was the dominant member of the troupe, provided the basis for this erroneous account being manufactured as historical fact. Another reason why this account has been accepted by historians since Rene's autobiography was published in 1945 is that his post-WWII stature as "Mo McCackie," among other career achievements, had by then begun to inadvertently overshadow the reputations of Phillips and Stiffy. A few decades later Rene's "comic genius" was being hailed as almost the sole reason for Stiffy and Mo's success. Phillips' relegation to

³⁰⁹ Roberts' own recollection, too, is that he shortly afterwards returned to England and began contributing material for Rene from his base in London before eventually immigrating to Australia in 1932 (Rene 191).

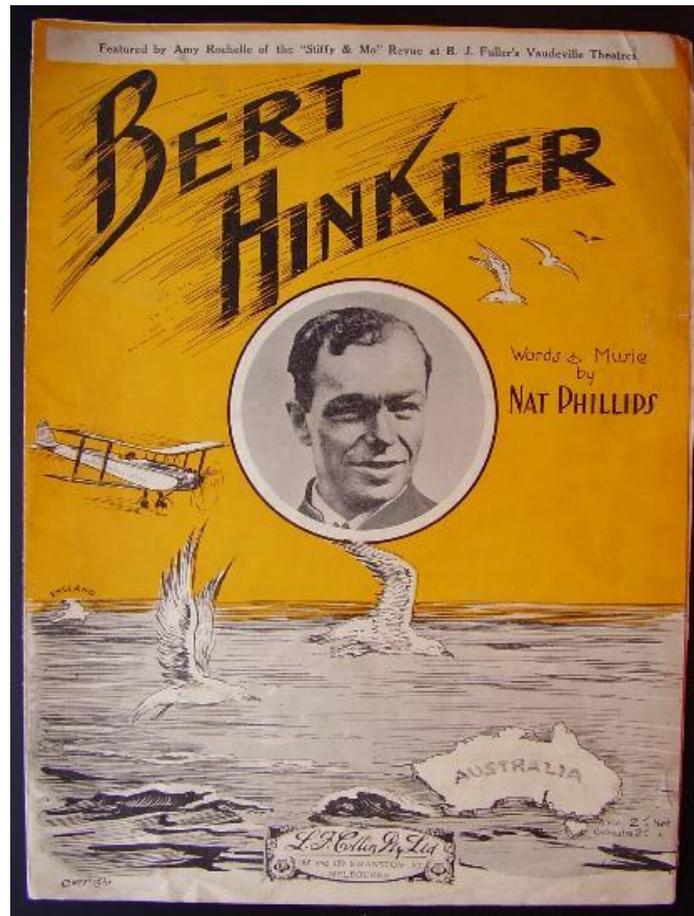
the sidelines in the Rene and Parsons' publications, therefore, served to reinforce his minor status and allowed Vic Roberts to be acknowledged as the primary author of the Stiffy and Mo revusicals in his place.

A good deal of additional evidence has been found in the Nat Phillips Collection and from primary sources such as newspapers and programmes which indicates that Phillips wrote all the early Stiffy and Mo productions - certainly up to 1918/1919 - and most, if not all, the productions up until 1925. If he did turn to Roberts more in later years this was very likely in response to the increased production and performance duties he was undertaking for the Fullers - particularly the writing and producing of the company's pantomimes. Although Phillips and his troupe were under contract to the Fullers and the shows were produced by their organization (in accordance with the Fullers' entertainment policies), Phillips nevertheless operated largely along the lines of an independent production house. Any decision regarding the outsourcing of Stiffy and Mo scripts would therefore not have taken place without Phillips' prior agreement and most certainly his input into both the negotiations and the content of those scripts. That Roberts doesn't acknowledge this further suggests that his creative role was at some distance from the inner-Stiffy and Mo sanctum. Of the productions staged by Phillips and advertised in Fuller News during 1922, for example, all were credited as being wholly "written and produced by Nat Phillips." Further to this, much of the Nat Phillips' Collection material held in Boxes 1, 2 and 3 (being manuscripts identified as belonging to Phillips) indicates that he was a prolific writer, not only of revusicals and comedy routines, but also of songs - both lyrics and music.³¹⁰ Several manuscripts in the collection also raise the question as to why Phillips would have been required to purchase scripts from Roberts to suit his partner's comedy talents, as Parsons indicates (25), when they were often available for pirating through overseas industry magazines like Madison's Budget (USA). One particular Stiffy and Mo revusical held in the collection, A Pretty Kettle of Fish, has clearly had much of its story adapted from a comedy sketch called The Dooleys. This can be ascertained because part of the original script is included in the collection. Phillips appears to have fashioned his own work by changing the title and some of the characters' names and situations, and then inserting Stiffy and Mo into the story.³¹¹ Another script in the collection, Fun in Mexico, provides similar evidence that Phillips made "subtle" changes to pre-existing sketches - in this instance by simply replacing the names of the characters Mike and Cohen with Stiffy and Mo. Thus while Fun in Mexico (aka Mexicans amongst other titles) was one of the troupe's more popular revusicals, the Nat Phillips Collection manuscript includes the

³¹⁰ See Appendix I for further examples of his work.

³¹¹ See Appendix G; Box 2 - P.2. The extract is from *Madison's Budget* No 18 (1921), 55-58, 61-68 only. There is at this stage no record of this production having been staged in Australia.

names Stiffy and Mo only once, in the form of a handwritten note beside Mike and Cohen in the 'Cast of Characters' listed on the first page.



The cover of Nat Phillips' "Bert Hinkler"
Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

The argument that an Englishman based in London could write the material for Stiffy and Mo and provide the degree of social relevance necessary to form a bond with Australian audiences requires much closer examination, too, particularly in light of the factors discussed in the earlier chapters of this thesis. Although it must be considered that any scripts contributed by Roberts would very likely have been modified, or at least localised, by Phillips with additional material also being added over time in response to both audience reactions and improvisation, the issue of having an Englishman write the bulk of material seems to have been accepted too easily by historians to date. While there no doubt existed similarities between English music-hall audiences and Australian popular culture audiences, some doubt must exist in relation to the suggestion that someone writing from so great a distance could be in tune with the day to day issues of importance to the Australian audiences and could create vehicles for two characters whom the audiences recognised as innately local. This is an issue that Edgar Waters draws attention to in his examination of the popular arts in Australia to 1915. His observations of

Australian poetry and lyrics during the first two years of the war indicate that a quite obvious, and fast-moving, shift in the national psyche was taking place - and it was quite clearly non (or perhaps even anti)-English.

Australians seem once again to have felt the need to emphasise that they were unlike the English, that they lacked that respect for authority and for convention which they regarded as a characteristic of the English. Of all Australian types, it was the larrikin who was most marked by his disrespect for authority and convention. It was the aspect of the larrikin which had most appeal for other Australians (256).

A close analysis of reviews and commentary during the early Stiffy and Mo years shows that Phillips was acknowledged for his pioneering of a distinctive Australian larrikin identity on the local variety stage. This is another aspect of his career that has been denied historical recognition in favour of Roy Rene. Entertaining Australia, for example, gives Rene credit for articulating an Australian identity via Mo's picturesque colloquialisms and local expressions (like "strike me lucky"), while failing to acknowledge that Phillips had fashioned an original Australian character in Stiffy some two years before Stiffy and Mo first appeared together on the stage. In reviewing What Oh Tonight, on the other hand, Australian Variety records, that Phillips' Stiffy character was not only particularly original but also "typically Australian" ("Princess Theatre" 10).

The fact that Stiffy had been a major part of Phillips' repertoire for at least two years prior to teaming up with Mo suggests that the character had undergone an extensive development period. The first appearance of Stiffy on the Australian stage appears to have been some time during late 1914 or early 1915. We can be certain that by early February 1915 the character had become a regular part of Phillips' turn, as Australian Variety mentions in its 10 February issue that "Stiffy is [being] presented in a series of concluding farces at the Princess" (6). Whether Phillips included Stiffy in the act he and Merritt presented during their mid-1915 tour of the East (which included a season at the Empire Theatre, Colombo, Ceylon, in September) is not known. Stiffy's popularity by this stage, however, was such that not long after returning to Australia he was forced to write to Australian Variety warning other practitioners that he held the Australian rights "to the 'Stiffy' series of sketches recently worked by him over the Fuller circuit... [and that it was his] intention to proceed against any performers infringing on them" (13 Oct. 1915, 12). Phillips continued working Stiffy into his act throughout the first half of 1916, and it is believed that much of the material written around this time served as a basis for the productions he presented during the Tabloid Musical Comedy Company's debut season.³¹²

³¹² The Nat Phillips Collection contains at least three Stiffy sketches from around this period, these being "Stiffy the Steward," described as a nautical comedy in 3 spasms (see Appendix I), "Sowing the Patch" (UQFL9 - Box 2, S.9) and "Stiffy the Lunatic" (UQFL9 - Box 2, S.13). See also "Belgravia" (UQFL9 Box 1, B.12). The "Stiffy the Steward" manuscript indicates that it was written on 31 May 1916, barely six weeks prior to the Stiffy and Mo premiere in July.



Daisy Merritt and Nat Phillips (pre-Stiffy and Mo era)

"The People of Joy and Gladness."
Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

Reviews of the Stiffy and Mo shows throughout most of their partnership together clearly contradict the view that Phillips had submitted to Rene's genius. Not only are the two performers rarely split in terms of their performance or their impact on the audience, but most reviews give more space to Phillips than any other performer. Throughout the first Sydney season of 1916, for example, reviews routinely point to Stiffy's role opposite Mo in equal terms at the very least, but more often highlight Phillips' impact because he was viewed as the dominant factor in each show's overall success. The Theatre's August 1916 review of A Sporting Chance typifies the view that Phillips was the undoubted "scream" in the company:

His character is that of a hard-up, red-nosed, coatless Irish Australian with a particularly old-well-greased pair of pants, held up by a belt. Phillips is never so good as in roles of a low-comedy or burlesque character. He gets roars where another wouldn't get a smile. The explanation is that he has by nature the gift of being funny (53).

Although individual reviews of the period only rarely provide a level of insight into performance and production sufficient for historical purposes, sifting through the numerous reports available nevertheless provides enough collective information to allow the historian to draw an overall picture of the company and its productions - if not always of any one particular performance. An example of this can be seen in the jokes and scene descriptions that often accompany these reviews. It is clear, for example, that Phillips provided the punch line to many of the jokes and scenes played out between himself and Rene - an aspect of their onstage

dynamics which departs from the traditional straight-man role. This is not unexpected in terms of Phillips' early revusicals as he had gained much of his comedic experience directing and starring in farces and society sketches, two variety genres that rely heavily on the interplay between two or more principal comics. Although it was common practice for earlier burlesque companies to split the lead roles into those of comic and straight-man, Phillips' conceived his first season of shows as vehicles through which he could highlight his particular strengths as much as Rene's.³¹³ This is very likely one of the keys to the success of the Stiffy and Mo revusicals. By all accounts not only was there an instinctive rapport between the two when called upon to improvise comedic "business," or even make a set comedy piece look improvised (as would no doubt have been the case in many instances),³¹⁴ but each was working for laughs, and thus a sense of friendly rivalry would most likely have been provoked right from the start. It needs to be remembered, however, that not only was Nat Phillips vastly more experienced than Rene when they first began working together, being more than a decade older and having worked extensively for laughs on leading variety circuits across America, Europe and Great Britain; but that as a senior Fullers' producer and manager it is again inconceivable that he simply gave in to Rene's comic genius within "months" as Fred Parsons would have us believe (18).

Interestingly, the role and importance of the ensemble cast is one factor that has been almost entirely overlooked up until now, largely because the Stiffy and Mo, as well as the Roy Rene, legends have dominated the historical interest. A closer examination of the company and its critical and public reception indicates, however, that the fundamental appeal of the Nat Phillips-led troupe should be attributed not just to the Phillips and Rene partnership, nor Phillips' pivotal role in developing the Australian revusical genre. Much of the company's success was also due to the supporting cast's ability to respond to the requirements placed on them. In essence Phillips' approach effectively redefined the revusical's potential as a popular culture entertainment form by more effectively articulating the genre's innate capacity to provide productive bodily pleasures (as discussed in the previous chapter). He did this, for example, by situating the chorus girls within the narratives, and by infusing socially relevant themes and outlooks with a more overt sense of Australian identity - both in terms of the stories and the

³¹³ Perhaps the closest example of this type of comedic interplay in modern times can be seen in the work of Graham Kennedy and Bert Newton, and later between Don Lane and Newton. Even though Kennedy and Lane effectively anchored their respective *In Melbourne Tonight* shows as hosts, Bert Newton's comedic role and input was a significant factor. In fact he routinely took centre stage in terms of gags and punch-lines.

³¹⁴ The Nat Phillips Collection manuscripts frequently include "bis" in the stage directions, sometimes with specific titles (i.e. "Boxing Bis") and at other times unspecified. These directions indicate that it was not just Rene and Phillips who were required to provide some improvised 'bis.' Although long regarded as improvised by historians, and perhaps viewed as such by audiences, there is reason to suspect, as mentioned earlier, that these comic business scenes were often founded on set routines and made to look improvised. Certainly whenever a successful improvised routine was developed few performers were likely to discard it. The frequently fluid relationship between performers and audiences is also an aspect of variety entertainment that must be considered as having helped artists develop and "originate" new comedy material.

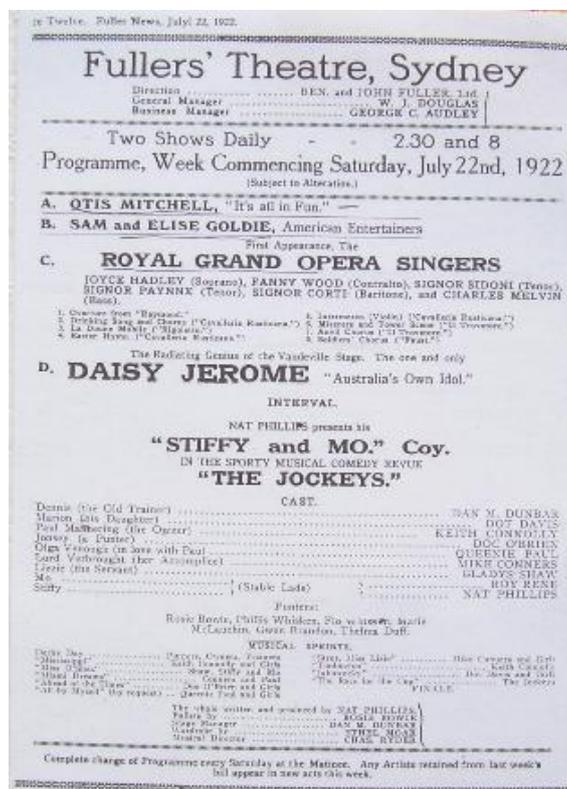
characters. One can read into these shows, particularly the texts available in Appendix B, an egalitarian logic and implicit realisation of larrikin attitudes that audiences not only found pleasurable but which they themselves identified with, or at least understood. A clear indication of this second issue can be discerned from the revues and commentary generated not only during the 1916 Princess Theatre season but over the course of the period being examined in this chapter. It is evident, for example, that even though Roy Rene's reputation with the Sydney popular culture audience was clearly beginning to rise above the level he had established to that date, most early reviews position him more or less as one of the ensemble cast, while articulating a consensus that Phillips was the principal star. In the Theatre's August review of A Sporting Chance (1916), for example, Rene gets only five lines (which although positive in terms of his "posturing" nevertheless suggests that singing wasn't his forte). On the other hand, several other members of the troupe receive considerably more attention from the critic, with much of it of a positive nature - Peter Brooks (10 lines), Daisy Merritt (5 lines), Ivy Davis (9 very flattering lines), the chorus girls (9 lines), Mann and Franks (11 lines) and Nat Phillips with 20 lines of glowing tribute to his efforts as both producer and performer (52-3). Thus while contemporary logic proposes that Stiffy and Mo must have captivated the public and critical attention right from the start, this does not appear to have entirely be the case.

Evidence contradicting the currently held belief that Stiffy was Mo's feed can be found in a variety of sources. Nat Phillips' reputation as a performer prior to the company's debut in July 1916 was already well-established in the minds of the Sydney and Melbourne public not just as a writer and director, but as skilled and seasoned comedian in the society sketch and farce genres. Indeed, the sheer volume of coverage Phillips received in both the industry magazines and newspapers throughout the Stiffy and Mo era indicates that the public would have considered him as one of variety's elite, and regarded his comic ability as being the equal of, if not superior to, Roy Rene. An April 1915 Theatre report notes, for example, that prior to being sent to Melbourne in March by the Fullers to manage its theatre there, Phillips had managed the Princess Theatre for them for some five months. He "contrived to give [his patrons] a fresh [farce] every week - twenty in all," notes the magazine. The report further indicates:

Mr Phillips is a strong believer in farces, in the way of a finale... In all of them [he] himself played the principal comedy part. For acting of this kind he has a distinct gift, and in the farces he was responsible for some excellent - indeed, memorable - character studies (43).

Material from the shows, published in both Australian Variety and the Theatre provide additional supporting evidence that Phillips was viewed as one the company's two lead comedians. During a scene in All Aboard, for example, Stiffy and Mo discuss the question of gender. When Stiffy asks Mo why he keeps referring to the ship as a she, Mo replies "all ships are a she." Stiffy's punch line is: "Well, what about mail-boats?" A review of A Sporting Chance

in the August issue of the Theatre similarly indicates that Phillips delivered the show's final punch-line (53). The corresponding script held in the Nat Phillips Collection supports the review (see Appendix B.2). In this scene, in which the pair successfully trick the Hotel Keeper out of the money they owe him, Rene and Phillips share the lines in the scam. The punch-line, however, is left to Phillips.³¹⁵



Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Company programme
 Fuller News 22 July (1922), 12.
 (Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

The four original Nat Phillips scripts included as Appendix B, further indicate that Phillips originally conceived these revivals around Stiffy as his parts are given more comedic scope and are also larger. Phillips even appears in a number of key scenes without Rene, suggesting that his character was conceived ostensibly as the lead. In What Oh Tonight, for example, Phillips again gets the laugh lines in their brief scene with Helen, the co-owner of the beauty parlour:

Helen: Good morning gentlemen.
 Sol:³¹⁶ And me too. What's your name?
 Helen: Helen Summer.
 Stiffy: What is it in winter?³¹⁷

³¹⁵ The Theatre's review indicates that Horace Mann played the Hotel Keeper. The Nat Phillips manuscript and the Theatre critic's recall of the scene are quite similar in respect of the dialogue, although Phillips originally referred to "sticks" instead of "apples." See Appendix B.2, lines 310-334.

³¹⁶ As mentioned in the Introduction, Roy Rene's character was initially called Sol. According to the Princess Theatre stage manager, Bill Sadler, Rene intended to change it to Ikey, but at the last moment took Sadler's suggestion - 'Mo.' For further details see Roy Rene Mo's Memoirs (63) and the Nat Phillips entry in Appendix D.

³¹⁷ See Appendix B.1., 5.

Two scenes between Stiffy and Mo presented during the 1918 Babes in the Wood pantomime further demonstrate that Phillips' punch-line delivery was common. "In a particularly well-given song," records the Theatre, "Mr Phillips says to Mr Rene: 'They thought you were a lord.' 'Lord Lancaster?' inquires Mr Rene. 'No,' Mr Phillips informs him, 'Lord Helpus!'" Also recalled was this piece of repartee - "Roy Rene: 'I saw you to-day outside the Hotel Australia.' Nat Phillips: 'Yes; that's where I'm staying - outside the Hotel Australia.'"³¹⁸ This type of comedic interplay continued to be part of the pair's formula throughout their career together, as the Theatre magazine records in an article on the Rene and Phillips in its January 1919 issue:

Ignoring the precedent in comedy doubles, neither Stiffy or Mo works straight. Both play for laughs. There is a difference, however - Stiffy is "a head," and Mo is a would-be sport. Stiffy relies on slang, and Mo attempts it and gets tangled up in the lingual meshes so to speak (3).

Reviews of the Stiffy and Mo appearances in the various Fullers' pantomimes often include snippets of their material as well as invariably commenting on the success of their appearance. These reviews provide additional evidence to support the argument that the pair worked the routines as comic equals (see various Phillips' pantomime entries in Appendix C). Further to this almost every review situates the partnership as the key to their success rather than singling out one over the other. Typical of such reports is the Age critic's view of their efforts in The Bunyip, staged at the Bijou Theatre, Melbourne in April 1917. "Mr Nat Phillips and Mr Roy Rene, as the rouseabout, Stiffy and Moe [sic] Lazarus, bore with success the burden of the comic interludes."³¹⁹ Those reviews that do make additional positive comment directed at either Rene or Phillips also seem to be shared fairly equally between the two. Mo's Bunyip appearance in the 1918 Brisbane season attracted the critic's attention, for example, leading him to write, "Mo danced unusually well, and performed some dexterous wringles [sic] in time which seemed little short of miraculous and at the same time exceedingly funny."³²⁰ X-Ray's review of the 1919 Grand Opera House production of Cinderella, on the other hand, highlights one of Phillips' "highly applauded topicalities, purporting to be addressed to a political gathering."³²¹ Perhaps the biggest surprise in terms of contradicting the 'Phillips as foil' perception is a review of Stiffy and Mo's 1918 production of Two Stripes:

Stiffy and Mo are packing the Empire at every performance, which is only to be expected by all who know Nat Phillips. As a "rabbit-oh" he is one of the most delightfully humorous personae vaudeville has had. There is something about him that brings the laughs, no matter what kind of mood one may have been in on entering the theatre. Roy Rene is a fine "feeder."³²²

³¹⁸ Theatre Magazine Feb. (1919), 17.

³¹⁹ Age 9 Apr. (1917), 7. See also other reviews of The Bunyip, including Table Talk 27 Dec. (1917), 27; Brisbane Courier 1 Apr. (1918), 8.

³²⁰ Brisbane Courier 12 Aug. (1918), 4.

³²¹ Theatre Magazine Jan. (1920), 23.

³²² "Empire." Truth 10 Feb. (1918), 6.

A week earlier the same newspaper had written of the company's debut Brisbane performance:

Nat Phillips, as a real merino Australian comedian, is it. He carries a punch or a joke that wins every time. We in Brisbane have had that proved to us before. He has now proved that he is some producer. And he has some splendid artistes with him. Roy Rene as "Mo," Daisy Merritt, Mann and Franks, Pollard and Jackson, Peter Brooks, Vince Courtney, Dan Dunbar, Cliff O'Keefe and twelve dancing darlings comprise an array of talent rarely seen on the same bill.³²³



Nat Phillips as a Porter

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)



Nat Phillips as Stiffy

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

As noted previously, the onstage relationship does appear to have changed somewhat by around 1924. The Theatre indicates in 1924, for example, that Stiffy was mainly the foil in their scenes together during the run of In Mexico ("In Mexico" 29). Other reviews from this period also record that Roy Rene's improvisations were becoming more pronounced, as was his tendency to lapse into vulgarity, which suggests that the comic interplay was being taken over by Rene. The aforementioned In Mexico review notes, too, that Phillips had wisely refrained from copying Mo's blue humour "knowing [full well] that he could not put it over" (29). However, even though differences between the two comic's interpersonal dynamics may have been building gradually for some time prior to the 1925 split,³²⁴ the relationship between them appears to have been one of equals for the majority of the nine years they were together. Certainly reviews of the company's productions from around 1922, when Mike Connors' had been firmly ensconced in the troupe for some two years, still imply that Phillips and Rene were

³²³ Truth 3 Feb. (1918), 6. Few Australian revusicals of this era comprised a 12-member ballet/chorus. This rare occurrence is believed to have been a Fullers directive called upon in response to the fact that the company was touring The Bunyip pantomime as part of the same Stiffy and Mo season, and hence required a much larger cast size. Members of the vaudeville first part most likely also played parts in the pantomime as a means of keeping costs down.

³²⁴ See Mo's Memoirs. Rene mentions the "little friendly jokes" and fights - during which Phillips' would get "really crazy mad" at him, "especially when Daisy and me would ad-lib and carry an act on for five minutes longer than it should have been going" (85-6). See also pages 64-5.

being viewed as equals in terms of their performances and impact on the audience. The industry (and hence public perception) of who was running the operations does not appear to have been unclear, however, with Phillips' name still predominant. Indeed, advertisements published in Fuller News in 1922 still demonstrate that the company was being run by Nat Phillips. The wording of the July 8, 1922 advertisement, as with all others that year states, for example: "Nat Phillips presents his 'Stiffy and Mo.' Coy in The Club" (7).

Although regarded as Phillips' company, it is clear that Rene and Phillips were the principal attraction, and notably this perception appears to invariably implicate both performers not one more than the other. Rarely is one highlighted over the other. A review of the 1924 Bunyip revival published in the Sydney Morning Herald again typically refers to Stiffy and Mo on equal terms. "Phillips and Rene," notes the critic, "assume various characters but maintain throughout the strongest appeal to the laughter-loving audiences who flock to see them."³²⁵ A sample of reviews from the 1924 Fullers' Theatre season (Syd) further support this argument. "Nat Phillips and Roy Rene," writes the Everyone's critic in the 12 November issue, are "comedians who do as they like and who are liked by the audience" (44). The Theatre's October review of In Society also implies that Phillips and Rene were both lead comedians, when noting that they had wisely surrounded "themselves with 'excellent' straight people" so as to avoid the possibilities of their "humorosities... becoming too boresome" (15). Earlier in the season, too, Everyone's had reported that:

As two absurd-looking sailors, Stiffy and Mo have the crowd in a perpetual simmer of merriment from the time of their stage arrival. At times the hilarity is deafening, as Roy Rene, in most inimitable manner, finds himself in most absurd predicaments; or the dominating Nat Phillips adds further to the ludicrous attempts of his co-conspirator to create mirth (3 Sept. 1924, 36).

The 4 March 1925 issue of Everyone's, published not too long before the ill-fated Adelaide season which became Stiffy and Mo's last appearance for several years, does indicate that by that stage Roy Rene had begun to carry the weight of several others in the company. It is likely, too, that the tension between the two principals may well have begun to have an impact on the troupe as a whole, possibly separating the company between those whose loyalties were with one or the other. This also likely led to an increase in tension, if not always noticeable on stage then certainly off it. This negativity and unpleasantness would have been at odds the generally harmonious atmosphere of previous years - a hypothesis supported by the rather stable composition of the ensemble. In this respect the core group or supporting actors remained relatively unchanged for long periods, an aspect that very likely contributed to the company's success over the years, and certainly during its formative phase.

³²⁵ "The Bunyip," Sydney Morning Herald 22 Dec. (1924), 5.

While the revusical form itself played a key part in allowing the surprising connection to be made between production and reception, what seems to have set the company apart from others at that stage was the fact that Stiffy and Mo were wholly identifiable Australian types - even despite Mo's Hebrew characterisation. At first glance Nat Phillips' revusicals appear to differ little from others being staged at that time. These early productions include: What Oh Tonight, A Sporting Chance, Watch The Step, Gee Whiz, All Aboard and Yes We Don't. What seems to have captured the attention of both audiences and critics, however, was Phillips' unusually clear delineation of what audiences accepted as Australian identity in the characters (notably Stiffy and Mo, but also in the other roles) and his ability to create situations that allowed all the performers an opportunity to show what they could do. Indeed, these productions were far from being two-man shows. The Australian Variety critic writing in the 30 August 1916 special edition provides an idea of the effect the company had on the public and critical consensus at that time:

It is safe to say that no greater laughing hit has ever been registered at any other theatre in Sydney. This is no idle assertion, but is the honest conviction of this scribe, who has seen every production in the last five weeks, when the laughter has been so great it has stopped the show repeatedly - even the principals becoming engulfed in the wave of cacchination [sic] spreading over the house (16).



Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Company, Lead Male Cast

(L-R) Peter Brooks, Nat Phillips, Walter Jackson (aka Walter Whyte), Roy Rene, Horace Mann
Theatre Magazine Sept. (1918), 29.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

Significantly, the core membership of the first Stiffy and Mo line-up was particularly strong, comprising well-established and experienced variety performers. This is just one aspect that appears to have been forgotten as the legend of Stiffy and Mo took shape over the forthcoming decades. Indeed, hardly any reference is made in the currently available literature to the fact that this was an ensemble company - a troupe that relied very heavily on the ability of the whole cast to rise to the levels expected and not just rely on Phillips and Rene to carry the

show. Had this been the case, the revusical genre would most likely have been withdrawn as a performance vehicle to allow Rene and Phillips to work instead as a variety duo. In this respect Phillips was aware of the same need to surround himself with quality performers that Bert Le Blanc admits made his career so successful. "I am very fortunate in securing the services of the people whom I have," he says in "A Chat with Bert Le Blanc." "To my way of thinking no man should attempt to produce unless he is a capable actor, and [and he should be] a man... not be afraid to do the same things he is telling his actors to do" (17). Similarly Phillips, being highly regarded by the Fullers, was able to extend his influence to most areas of his operations, and thus the members of his troupe were each aware that their continued livelihood depended on maintaining a consistent level of performance. The Theatre hints at the possibility of the pressure felt by members of the troupe in response to the spectacular success achieved in such a short space of time, when it records that Phillips was garnering too much on-stage attention from the other cast members. "They should leave [the boisterous laughter] to the audience," writes the magazine's critic. It "gives you the unpleasant feeling that they are trying to sweeten themselves with Mr Phillips as the boss of the show."³²⁶



Stiffy and Mo Chorus "The Radio Six"

Green Room June (1922), 9.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

Whatever criticisms were made of the cast during the first Princess Theatre season appear to have been either heeded or unnecessary because the nucleus of that troupe remained much as

³²⁶ See Phillips' entry in Appendix D for information.

it was over the next two years - a factor that may well have further impacted on the capacity of the actors to respond to the mayhem created by Roy Rene's increasing instances of improvisation. This core group of performers included Caddie Franks and Horace Mann (aka Mann and Franks) who, like Phillips and Merritt, were leading sketch artists of the era. The handsome young lead, Peter Brooks, described by the Theatre as having a "particularly good stage appearance" (Sporting Chance 53), provided the cast with a suitably heroic character, while ex-J. C. Williamson star Walter Whyte³²⁷ (along with Horace Mann) provided the all-important elderly targets of Rene and Phillips' larrikinism. Reviews of the Tabloid Musical Comedy Company's performances indicate, too, that Daisy Merritt's role in the proceeding was vital to their overall success - particularly in the repartee between herself and Phillips. Certainly she receives a good share of space within most reviews. It can be assumed in this respect that, as a regular low-comedy foil to Stiffy, the intuitive timing between the pair (the result of years of practice) and her intimate understanding of Phillips as a producer, writer and actor, provided Merritt with an ideal vehicle through which she could establish her credentials as one of the most accomplished, and certainly one of the funniest variety artists of the era. Typically, as the Theatre records of one particular scene in A Sporting Chance, Merritt's characters scored just as much laughter as her husband's ("Sporting Chance" 52). Another key member of the initial company was Maisie Pollard, whose career stretched back to early childhood. Again, her experience provided the troupe with a high level of professionalism, while her "principal girl" looks and demeanour provided an appealing female love interest for Peter Brooks' juvenile characters. Often the company was required to bring in additional actors to fill out roles, and in these situations Phillips could draw on any performers available from the first part vaudeville programme. This occurred for example with A Sporting Chance, when popular sketch artists, Courtney Ford and Ivy Davis, were brought in to play additional roles.

It is reasonable to suppose that the process of manufacturing the Stiffy and Mo (or more precisely the Roy Rene) legend over other company members has gone unchecked largely because those writing the accounts have either had a personal investment in the legend, in most instances either through association with Roy Rene, or because their status as former variety performers has been granted unconditional testimonial status. An example of this latter aspect occurs in Billy Maloney's Memoirs of an Abominable Showman. "For sixteen years, Australia and New Zealand were regaled with Stiffy and Mo as jockeys, lords, waiters, Frenchmen, sailors, boy-scouts," he records. "In fact any social status was good enough for the theme of a revue. There was little plot, a dancing specialty of two, a tenor and a soprano, and a line of six

³²⁷ Walter Whyte appears in the company under the name Walter Jackson. The reason for this is unknown. See the Theatre Magazine Oct. (1916), 49. Whyte came to prominence in the early 1900s through his roles in J. C. Williamson's Gilbert and Sullivan productions. His fellow Australian stars included John Ralston and Dolly Castles (see c1905/06).

girls, but week after week Stiffy and Mo packed Fullers' theatres to the rafters" (22). As well as there being several inconsistencies in this recollection, a number of issues emerge which deserve closer scrutiny - notably the reference to "theme" and "lack of plot" and the relegation of the company to the chorus, a tenor, soprano and one or two specialty acts. Later insights focusing specifically on Stiffy and Mo, such as those by John West, Victoria Chance (Companion to Theatre in Australia), Katrina Bard or Katherine Brisbane contains very little if any reference to the early members. Interestingly, although Mike Connors and Queenie Paul only joined the troupe in mid-1920 they nevertheless receive greater attention than those who comprised the initial ensemble. Even Fred Parson's account in A Man Called Mo reveals little regarding the other members of the troupe. This is compounded by an almost incredible lack of interest even in Nat Phillips, who surely must be regarded as one of the most influential and significant practitioners working in the Australian variety industry during the era in which it saw its greatest impact on the country's popular culture.



Roy Rene and Nat Phillips (mid to late-1920s)

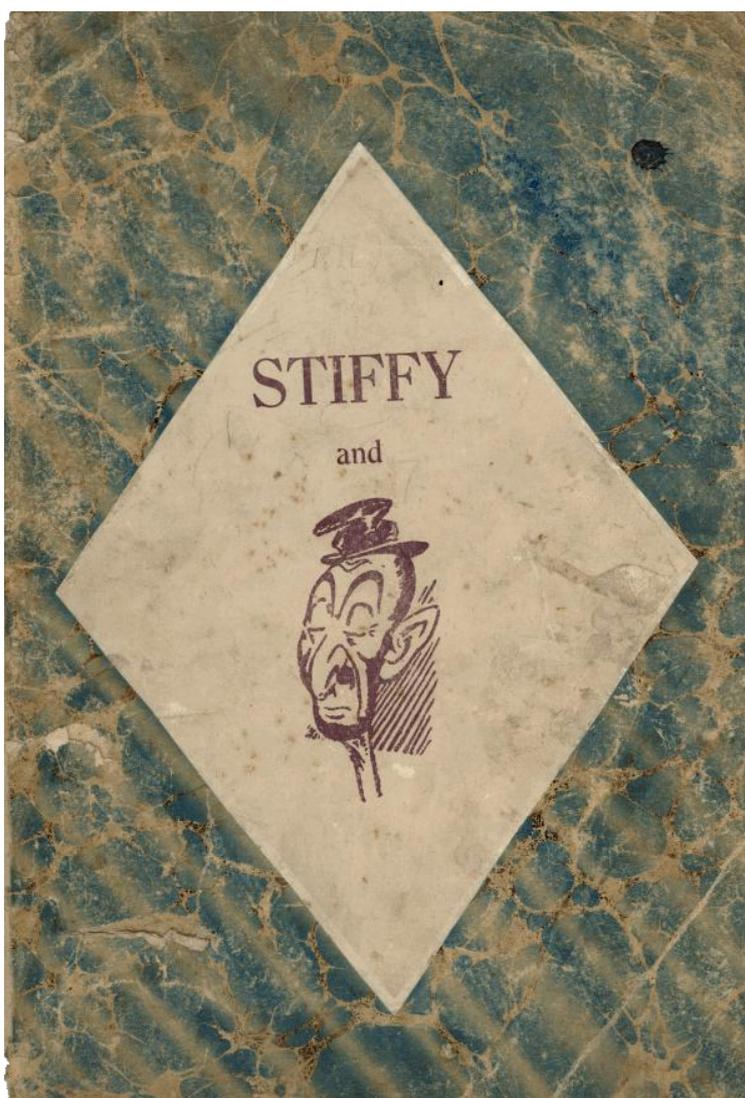
Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

Although it is not clear how much time Phillips had to prepare his first season of revusicals, Australian Variety indicates that not much time elapsed between his taking over the reigns of Albert Bletsoe's company and turning it into the Nat Phillips Tabloid Musical Comedy Company. It is likely, however, that Phillips had perhaps as many as six productions ready prior to starting his season at the Princess, which corresponds to the length of the Phillips' initial

contract with Sadler and Kearns. That he reused a good deal of his previous material in these productions is almost certainly the case. This claim is supported by the comedy routine "Stiffy the Steward" (see Appendix I). Written only a few weeks prior to the formation of the Tabloid Comedy Musical Company, it contains several passages which found their way into the first few revusicals. After their contract with Sadler and Kearns was renewed, the company repeated the same revusicals - as much a response to demand as it was to necessity. The next six weeks and the season that followed gave Phillips enough time to not only prepare new material, but also begin pre-production on The Bunyip for Christmas that year. These first half a dozen revusicals, and the success they generated, therefore effectively crystallised the Stiffy and Mo format, and subsequently offered a template for the local industry. Of particular appeal (as noted earlier) were the distinctive Australian characters - as purveyed by Stiffy and Mo. This facet perhaps more than any other encouraged most of the other, and later, revusical creators to do likewise, primarily because they were also operating at an intimate level with their audiences, and were therefore aware of the social changes occurring. Indeed, as Appendix C shows, there are numerous examples of Australianness - characters, situations, settings and ideological intent - in the revusicals emerging from 1916 onwards. In many instances, however, the degree of Australian identification on the variety stage is one of subtlety rather than the more overt and parochial manifestations of Australianness exhibited in the dramatic stage. It is for such a reason that leading variety star Jim Gerald, long regarded as an "internationalist" in his approach to staging revusicals, can now at last be recognised for producing revusicals with a distinctive Australian bent, even though his stories were sometimes set in foreign climes - a practice commonly undertaken by most Australian revusical writers, including Nat Phillips.

The manuscripts held in the Nat Phillips Collection allow the historian access to texts of the pre-1930s era that are driven by popular culture needs and not aesthetically-orientated literature, and are therefore an important site from which we might better understand what motivated the Australian variety theatre industry and its audience to share in this form of entertainment. To reiterate David Mayer's comments from the Introduction, we need to move beyond the long-held security of analysis founded on the standard text-driven and aesthetically respectable critical approach. Only when we accept the possibility that inartistic, energetic, mindless, unliterary dramatic genres enjoy a vast popularity and appeal to the greater part of the population, can we begin to see the theatrical expressions of an age in a more accurate perspective (259). Minstrelsy, vaudeville, revues, revusicals, follies and musical comedies were collectively the dominant entertainment medium of the popular culture during the period under investigation. It becomes evident, then, 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. To do this effectively the historian has to engage with the industry and social aspects of its production and reception so as to be better able to draw conclusions about the history of that era. This case study focusing on Nat Phillips demonstrates that not only do we still have a long way to go, but that there exists an entire industry worthy of our attention.



Stiffy and Mo promotion image

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL 9).
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)