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Harry Clay. *Australian Variety*, 23 May 1917, p. 1 (Photo courtesy Mitchell Library)

*From minstrel tenor to vaudeville  
showman: Harry Clay, 'a friend of the  
Australian performer'*

**Clay Djubal**

*In his career as a manager, Mr Clay was a staunch friend of Australian artists, and won a high name in the profession for his generosity.<sup>1</sup>*

Despite having been the dominant theatre practice in Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, variety entertainment – in the generic forms of minstrelsy and vaudeville – has fared rather poorly in terms of historical or academic examination. While a small body of analysis has been undertaken in recent years, much of the little light shed upon this unique social and cultural exchange has unfortunately come from less than salubrious accounts such as memoirs, advertising and hearsay. Being in a sense reconstructions, these become a matter of interpretation which Barbara Garlick sees as 'an obvious site of possible misrepresentation' requiring the historian to 'negotiate the hagiography of publicity and the pitfalls of reconstruction from frequently disparate and ephemeral sources'.<sup>2</sup> Although much of the evidence presented in this paper has been located in primary sources such as newspapers, trade journals, directories, legal documents and archives (including Deceased Estate files),<sup>3</sup> I too acknowledge that bibliographic refiguration must by its very nature result in a manufactured text. Indeed, as Garlick further notes, 'the problem of biography ... is probably the most dangerous of minefields for the theatre historian... All wrote their lives for public consumption, that is, for publicity and thus economic purposes.'<sup>4</sup>

This paper will attempt to serve as an introduction to the area of popular culture during the heyday of antipodean minstrelsy and vaudeville entertainment (roughly 1880-1925) through a focus on one particular identity – Harry Clay, the Australian-born minstrel tenor who later became one of the three leading vaudeville and revue entrepreneurs to have operated in this country. Regarded by his contemporaries as the Australian 'King of Vaudeville',<sup>5</sup> Clay's ability to present consistently high quality

entertainment, in addition to providing considerable employment opportunities throughout New South Wales and Queensland for over twenty-five years, was matched only by that of Harry Rickards and the Fuller Brothers. Where Clay differed, however, was in his support of local performers. As the *Theatre* notes in its May 1922 issue:

Mr Clay is really the patron saint of the Australian performer. And how many hungry homes would there be, if it were not for the commercial-showman genius of Harry. For the simple truthful fact is – the generous Sir Benjamin Fuller himself would be the first to admit it – that nobody in Australia has surpassed Mr. Clay in the employment of Australian-born artists (17).

Furthermore, it has become clear that Clay also provided the training ground from which a great many artists were able to forge careers in the national, and sometimes even international, arenas. While it is sometimes claimed that Rickards and the Fullers 'gave many Australians their starts', this was highly unlikely. Indeed no inexperienced vaudevillian would have walked off the street into a Tivoli or Fullers engagement, but rather would have gained their professional 'starts' from lower ranked organisations such as Clay's (invariably through auditions and talent nights). This article will dispel, then, the generalised notion that Harry Rickards and the Fuller family were the only management firms of any consequence to operate within the Australian popular theatre industry during the first thirty years of the twentieth century.

Harry Clay's company, which operated between 1901 and 1930, was effectively a B-circuit organisation. It competed in the highly volatile market of popular entertainment at a time when the premier institutions were concentrating on securing overseas attractions for their shows, in addition to enticing emerging local stars away from the smaller managements. Richard Waterhouse, in his historical account of the Australian popular stage to 1914, notes in accordance that, 'men like [J.C.] Bain and Clay found that they were involved in a high-risk and extremely competitive business ... yet, if nothing else, they were tenacious show business survivors.'<sup>6</sup> Along with Clay's, the more significant of the second rung of managements included (for various periods and at different times) Harry Saddler (NSW/Tasmania/WA/Victoria); Bert Howard (NSW); Frank Reis (NSW); Jacky Landow (NSW); Percy Dix (NZ/Newcastle); Ike Beck (NSW/Newcastle); Les James (NSW South Coast); Walter Morris (QLD); Tom Holland (Brisbane); and of course James Bain (NSW/QLD/Tasmania). It is evident that most of these managers first procured their managerial experience in the employ of the larger organisations before stepping out on their own. Some, like Bert Howard, had been employed as doormen/theatre managers etc, while others had learned

the ropes through many years on the premier Australian circuits as performers (such as with Clay, Saddler Holland and Bain, who are also known to have been allotted stage manager duties for tours on a number of occasions). Bain, Sadler and Howard, in particular, were often able to use their highly placed connections to their advantage, utilising the larger organisations' reputations and resources (such as artists, venues, and circuits) in the early periods of their own activities. At the lower end of the industry were the small-time entrepreneurs and fly-by-night operators, invariably coming from the ranks of the B or C circuit performers. Many were family-based troupes, and supported by any act or acts desperate for work and willing to take the chance. Colourful sporting identities and shysters also fleshed out what had become by the early years of the twentieth century a national industry. Few had any financial backing or business acumen, and most were forced to eke out their existence on the fringe of the industry; travelling around the bush and in the outlying suburbs of cities.

In the post-war period, too, the film industry began more effectively to capture the imagination of Australian audiences, and made its inevitable inroads into the entertainment market through the efforts of a new breed of entrepreneur – showmen such as Sydney's Szarka Brothers or the Queensland-based Birch and Carroll – whose relatively low-cost and high-profit operations (despite low admission prices) could utilise saturation advertising and Hollywood hype to their benefit. In the early days the film exhibitors would generally provide both vaudeville and film for their audiences, until the live element was no longer needed as an attraction. With the film industry syphoning away live theatre's drawing power and earning capacity, however, competition amongst the vaudeville operators intensified. Few survived for long, and in the end, none did.

The Tivoli and Fuller organisations were able to withstand the mounting social and industrial pressures forced upon them during the 1920s by diversifying their operations and utilising their considerable financial and logistical resources. With fewer economic options, however, Harry Clay's company relied greatly on the support of the working-class public he had serviced for over twenty years, as well as that of his band of managers, employees, principle artists, writers and producers. In this latter regard, reports published within the trade journals of the day frequently indicate that their loyalty to the firm was renowned throughout the industry. Furthermore, it becomes clear that Clay's reputation, tenacity and resourcefulness, founded in the experiences he encountered during his early career as a minstrel tenor and actor, were essential factors in his ability to survive in the volatile world of popular entertainment. Indeed, within a few short years of beginning his entrepreneurial pursuits Harry Clay was able to gain control of both the vast

Sydney suburban circuit and what had by then turned out to be a highly lucrative Queensland circuit. He later expanded his Sydney operations into regional New South Wales, instigated what was to be the largest vaudeville booking agency in the country, and infused the increasingly popular revue format into his vaudeville programs to considerable success. In establishing this complex and highly professional network of interests he is known to have contracted at its peak (1916-18) close to one hundred performers a week, in addition to a large number of non-performing employees.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the significant reputation Clay held during most of his long career, the influence he and his company played in developing the careers of many of Australia's most renowned variety performers has all but disappeared from public memory. Many of these performers, including Roy Rene, George Wallace, George Sorlie, Charles Norman, Arthur Tauchert, Ron Shand and George Edwards, moved their careers into radio, film and television, taking with them the experiences and knowledge they had gathered during their vaudeville periods. While the recognition they achieved under the Fullers and the Tivoli managements no doubt played an instrumental role in furthering their careers beyond vaudeville, in many cases it was the efforts of the B-circuit entrepreneurs, and most notably Harry Clay, who supplied much of their early training and opportunities, in addition to providing secure work conditions for Australian performers. Although Clay's motives for providing these opportunities were with little doubt financially driven, his experiences as an emerging minstrel performer may well have provided him with an incentive to correct what he had himself endured. In this regard he was just one of a growing community of Australian performers who struggled to find secure work in both the cities and on the country circuits. Furthermore, local performers found themselves all too often ignored by the top end of the industry – an industry dominated by overseas managers, artists and touring companies.

Harry Clay was born Henry Clay in May 1865, the youngest surviving child of a London-born dealer, John Clay, and his wife Mary who came from the Windsor district of New South Wales. The family was initially based in Sydney, but by around 1862 were living in the Patrick's Plains area (now known as the Singleton district). At around age eight the Clays relocated to Newcastle, where the young Henry Clay is believed to have begun his entrepreneurial activities with a delivery service that he recalled himself operating. It was run 'not with goats and boxes, but with real horses and carts,' and Clay apparently drove one of the carts, employing a man to drive the other one.<sup>8</sup> By the age of eighteen he was apprenticed into the plastering trade, while filling his spare time playing with several amateur theatre groups. He is believed to have developed his singing voice through an

association with the local church choirs, and later became identified with the Great Northern Variety Company around Newcastle. It is also known that he toured the northern rivers of New South Wales with an amateur minstrel troupe in the early 1880s.

Clay's professional career seems to have begun in late 1885 through an eighteen-month engagement with Sydney-based entrepreneur Frank Smith. Smith, who was the proprietor of the Alhambra Theatre, also ran Sunday concerts at the Sir Joseph Banks Pavilion and Pleasure Grounds in the suburb of Botany.<sup>9</sup> During the next five years or so Clay's name is also associated with various small operations, including the Bondi Aquarium, Walsh and King's Minstrels, the Federal Minstrels, and the 'Peoples Popular Concerts' held in the city's Protestant Hall. While opportunities for local artists were extremely difficult during this period a few local performers were able to make their mark on the Australian scene – chief amongst these being the incomparable Charles Fanning, along with the trio of Delorhey, Craydon and Holland. It seems, however, that the vast majority of Australian-born performers were forced to find engagements with small-time managements, playing inner city halls, and touring the suburbs and country regions. In support of this is a 1914 *Theatre* article profiling Clay in which he refers to several years 'skirmishing in the bush.'<sup>10</sup> Although this may well have been discouraging from the point of view of making it in the big time, in effect these years provided Harry Clay with the opportunity to forge his reputation with the country folk. This in turn provided him with a foundation from which he could later establish his own regional touring company.

During 1889 it seems that Clay's reputation was such that he was able to secure short engagements with W.J. Wilson's Anglo-American Frolics, the Great Faust Perman Combination, and in October of that year a season with F.E. Hiscocks' London Pavilion Co.<sup>11</sup> Although his career was still far from secure over the next year or so, by 1891 he appears to have established himself within the upper echelons of the Sydney popular theatre industry, starting out with an extended engagement at Sydney's Gaiety Theatre with Dan Tracey. Clay's association with Tracey would last some eighteen months, including a headline season in Melbourne, when the American dancer/entrepreneur started operating in that city's Gaiety Theatre. Also it becomes clear that from this point onwards Clay was considered by his peers as being among the top tenor vocalists performing in the country. During the next decade, leading up to the end of the nineteenth century, Clay performed with a number of significant companies, including Harry Rickards, an association through which he further established his reputation as a 'local star.' He also began learning the ropes as a manager and stage manager with a number of companies, touring Queensland on several occasions. One of

these tours was the ill-fated 1893 Brisbane season with Walshe's Novelty Company, which was forced to close a week into its season due to the massive floods which hit the city. Several of these tours included amongst the troupe his wife Kate and daughter Essie, the latter having been a performer since infancy. Kate Clay more often than not worked under the stage name of Kate Henry, taking her husband's birth name as her surname, although by the mid 1890s Clay had taken to using Harry rather than Henry.

From around 1894, and shortly after his Harry Rickards engagement, Clay began his long association with the Newtown district, taking on a managerial role at St George's Hall. He is believed to have remained there at least until 1898. Later that year he undertook another Queensland tour, this time as a tenor and stage manager for the Continental Vaudeville Company. In 1900 he and his wife and daughter made what is believed to have been their last tour under another company's banner – this being the Walter Bell Waxworks, Boer and London Vaudeville Company. Interestingly, Bell's tour shows remarkable logistical similarities to Clay's own Queensland tours, particularly in style, content and itinerary. It is also clear that Harry Clay was by then viewed throughout much of northern New South Wales and Queensland as somewhat of a household name, a response which can be seen as an essential ingredient in his initial success as a vaudeville entrepreneur.

While the name Harry Clay is largely absent from theatre magazines and newspapers during his first ten years as a Sydney-based vaudeville entrepreneur, it seems that during these years he was able to establish both his reputation and his financial situation (no doubt helped out by his lucrative Queensland operations). By 1908, for example, he was able to buy, with cash, a £1500 property in the fashionable area of Glebe. During that year, too, he had toured a dramatic company through Queensland, and the following year sent Scottish tragedian Walter Bentley on a reputedly successful tour through the same state performing Shakespeare and melodrama. In Sydney, he had confirmed his status as the city's leading suburban manager, and though his circuit was relatively small in comparison to his later operations it remained remarkably stable, at least from the second half of the decade. The popularity of his Saturday evening show in the city precinct, too, had led to the theatre he leased being known as Clay's Standard Theatre. A few years later he was ready to consolidate his position as a major player with the opening of his own theatre in Newtown.

It can be argued that Harry Clay's early years in Sydney remain largely unknown, due in large part to both his position within the industry as well as the business and advertising practices he operated. With regard to the first factor, there is no doubt that Clay was initially seen as a novice by critics and commentators – one of a long list of managers yet to prove himself, and

hence not deemed important enough to be included within the pages of industry publications such as the *Theatre*. This argument is supported by his lack of inclusion in that magazine up until 1909; there being less than a handful of mentions concerning Clay or his operations. After this it seems that his operations and reputation (as well as his paid advertisements) brought about a great deal more coverage. With the advent of *Australian Variety* in 1913 – a magazine which focused almost exclusively on vaudeville in its early years – Clay was more frequently acknowledged.

A second aspect affecting Clay's being overlooked from a historical perspective is that he didn't really need to concentrate his advertising and promotional strategies through Sydney's major newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Furthermore, no evidence has been found so far which indicates that he advertised in local suburban papers during his early days. What has been ascertained, however, is that Clay used a variety of other methods to promote his activities; chiefly, dodgers (delivered by children in exchange for free tickets), daybills and performance promotion. With the country tours on the other hand, he did advertise in the regional papers, as this was seen as being an essential requirement for each town's season of shows. In addition Clay, and most other touring companies, utilised the services of an 'advance man' to raise the local interest.

What is known about Harry Clay's early days is that he relied heavily on the Queensland tours to first repay the initial expenditure and then to raise further capital for his entrepreneurial activities. The success this venture generated later allowed him the opportunity to concentrate his energies on the Sydney circuit, leaving the running of the northern tours, which were generally six months in duration, in the hands of Jimmy Boyle, the dapper little Englishman who was one of his inner circle of trusted lieutenants. Among the artists and managers who were associated with Clay during the company's infancy were Bert Howard, Harry Sadler, Wally Edwards (who was another of Clay's senior managers) and a young George Sorlie.

Harry Clay's programmes for the Queensland tours, which also exhibited elements of his Sydney shows, were primarily in the minstrel format. The first part of the show contained the traditional semi-circle of artists, at the centre of which was the host, or interlocutor. On either end of the semi-circle were the blackface endmen (almost always the most experienced comics) who accented the proceedings with their tambos and bones. A second part – the olio, or what we more commonly recognise as the vaudeville segment – followed the intermission. Here the artists would return without the semi-circle, presenting their specialty acts, working in duos, trios, etc, and presenting a concluding farce. For many years, starting with the first tour in 1901, Clay's evening of entertainment included a waxworks display



of up to fifty models and a cosmorama; a portable optical picture exhibition with stereoscopic scenes, typically war scenes or foreign sights such as London by night, Paris, China etc. Other items of interest were automatic machines which delineated a person's character or gave out sweets etc, plus whatever pieces of the current technology were available.<sup>12</sup> For many years, too, the highlight of each show would be the illustrated songs, operated initially by a limelight machine and later using film. From 1905 until 1912 Clay also presented a variety of films from overseas and sometimes from Australia.

These tours were highly successful, and within a few short years were being hailed in many regional newspapers as Queensland's most popular touring vaudeville show. By 1906 the success of the northern tours enabled Clay to turn his full attention to the Sydney venture. Before this his Sydney circuit had been operating in the six month off-tour season of approximately September to February. Initially the circuit comprised the Petersham, Newtown, Balmain and Parramatta town halls, along with the Masonic Halls at North Sydney and in the city, relocating in 1910 from the latter venue to the Standard Theatre in Castlereagh Street. By 1912 Clay had formed a partnership with Sydney solicitor, Newtown alderman and both past and future Mayor, Harold T. Morgan, and another businessman A.R. Abbott. This company, known as the Bridge Theatre Co Pty Ltd, built the Bridge Theatre at Newtown in 1913. For the next few years Clay continued to concentrate on that venture, closing down his Sydney circuit but maintaining the Queensland tours. By 1916 Clay was ready to expand once again – both with his theatrical activities and his business operations. Within the year he had formed what was to become the largest vaudeville booking agency in the country, Harry Clay's Theatrical Enterprises and Theatrical Booking Offices. He then reintroduced his Sydney circuit, (including in it the Coliseum Theatre at North Sydney, which was to become one of his most popular venues), and was soon operating between two to four companies around a variety of suburbs throughout the extent of the Sydney metropolitan area.<sup>13</sup> As an extension of this circuit he also instigated a south-west New South Wales country circuit which encompassed towns from Goulburn to Albury and returning through Bathurst, Katoomba and Lithgow. Each company of performers would operate on a rotation system, moving from one circuit to another in order to offer patrons maximum variety.

It should be pointed out that Harry Clay's audiences were very much of the working-class mould. They were rowdy, tough, and demanding. It was said that any performer 'was not worth his salt unless he had run the gauntlet of Harry Clay's standards and the hypercritical audiences that followed vaudeville.'<sup>14</sup> Despite some snobbery from the more refined social circles

who saw Clay's as third rate, chiefly because of the make-up of the audiences, this certainly did not apply to the quality of his regular performers. Charles Norman recalls his experiences with the coalmining communities along the Hunter circuit, saying that:

Clay audiences were Clay audiences. They were exactly that. They knew the business. You had to please them. They knew a lot about it, and you couldn't kid them. Any act or acts that didn't have much talent – well they woke up to that pretty quickly. No they wanted the best and they demanded the best let me tell you.<sup>15</sup>

Several sources published in later years provided colourful images of the type of audiences Clay's attracted. A 'Byways of History' article, for example, published in various papers from the 1950s onwards records:

Should the audience react unfavourably – usually by roaring their disgust until the whole building shook – the [artist] was given his pay and sent on his way. The cast was always prepared for practically anything when the Coliseum [at North Sydney, now the Independent Theatre] showed on Saturday nights. Brick-carters from Gore Hill turned up in their hundreds in button-up boots, pearl buttons on their coats, slouch hats with the sides turned up and violently colourful scarves round their necks. From the first act it was on, with the brickies bellowing and shouting their disapproval or delight. Harry Clay's chief 'chucka-out,' Snowy Sturgeon, an ex-boxer would go in to action. One loquacious brickie would follow another out the side exit until the noisy element had been removed and the voices from the stage could be heard.<sup>16</sup>

In Roy Rene's autobiography, '*Mo's Memoirs*,' one of Clay's leading managers, Bill Sadler, recalls a similar evening's proceedings, this time at the Newtown Bridge Theatre:

The mob would roar its head off. Bottles would be rolling down the steps. And enthusiastic games of dice and cards would be in progress at the back of the theatre, and there would be scarcely a night when our strong-arm squad would not have to quell a fracas. Many are the teeth I have seen splattered round the floor in the old days.<sup>17</sup>

Harry Clay was certainly not shy himself about removing the rowdy elements from his theatres, either. Indeed his reputation with his fists was held in high esteem. It was not a period suitable for retiring accountant-type entrepreneurs. Bert Howard, famous as the 'Lord Mayor of Poverty Point,' recalls that 'a manager had to be a fighter then. Lots of times Harry, Wally

Edwards and I had to tame the natives, and hold out the pushes without calling in the cops. Bang! Slam! Crash! Either they went out or we did.'<sup>18</sup>

Harry Clay's most dynamic expansion activity lasted from 1916 until 1919, at which point the Spanish Flu epidemic forced the closure of most public entertainment activities around the country. The closure of his Queensland tours and the New South Wales country circuit was most likely due, however, to the expanding competition brought about by the film exhibitors. In Queensland, for example, it was the firm of Birch and Carroll whose operations created the most significant opposition, not only through their increasingly popular and regular attractions, but also because they were able to tie up the better country venues (traditionally used by vaudeville operators), a practice which often forced other theatre companies to use the less popular and less central halls. Upon the reopening of the theatres after the lifting of the Flu restrictions, and with his activities now free of long distance managing, Clay began concentrating on the Sydney circuit, and in particular the opportunities available in the inner city precinct.

Harry Clay's later city operations are the best known of his activities. They include a highly successful association with the Princess Theatre at Railway Square, and the new Gaiety Theatre at the south-east corner of Hyde Park. Of the two theatres, it would be the larger Princess Theatre which would dominate Clay's attention, even outstripping his home base the Newtown Bridge Theatre. Around the same time, too, he began sending a company north to Newcastle for week-long engagements, something he was again to do in 1922, when he took over the Ike Beck Hunter circuit. In addition to this the company returned to Wollongong, where it apparently had established a strong audience base in the past. During the early Princess days George Sorlie again returned to Clay's, heading a company of artists who were recognised as among the best on offer in the country. A pattern of cyclic growth and consolidation seems to have occurred between 1919 and 1925, at which point the company went into crisis mode when Harry Clay died – presumably the result of poor health following his stroke in 1921. Although he is known to have returned to work sometime in 1922, a number of reports suggest that he was far from his old self. A court action taken against him in 1923 by an ex-conductor is certainly seen as a further blow to his vitality. Despite being given a positive verdict by the judge, and supported in no uncertain terms by the industry trade magazines, it seems that within a year Clay had retired from the public arena. Indeed, it is reported that for the last twelve months of his life he was seen by no one other than his small circle of intimate friends. Some three months after the surprise death of long time associate Jimmy Boyle, Harry Clay also died, close to midnight on 17 February 1925.

Following the loss of the company's general, it is believed that Maurice Chenoweth took over the role of Managing Director, supported by Bill Sadler (brother of Harry), Wally Edwards, and later on ex-Clay's performer, Stan Kerridge. The Princess Theatre was sold the same year by its owners the Fullers, forcing the company to open at the Sydney Hippodrome in order to keep its hold on the city audience. The Gaiety Theatre, however, is believed to have remained a stronghold for Clay's, as was the Bridge Theatre until the company ceased its theatrical operations in late 1929. In December of that year one-time Australian Variety editor Harry Kitching took over the lease of the Bridge Theatre, opening a season with his wife Amy Rochelle and Nat Phillips. Although Clay's divested itself of theatrical pursuits, it is believed to have continued operating, mainly leasing out properties such as the Newtown theatre. The company is known to have stayed in business until at least the late 1960s, while the Bridge Theatre (now The Hub) stands as one of the few variety theatres remaining since the halcyon days of vaudeville.

Of those involved with Harry Clay from the performing aspect a great many Australian-born or based vaudeville artists spent at least some time with his company. The most recognisable of these are Roy Rene, George Sorlie and George Wallace. Others of note include the 'Sentimental Bloke' Arthur Tauchert; one of Australia's premier principle boys Amy Rochelle; Vaude and Verne (patterologists); Charles Norman; Australia's premier coon singer Maud Faning (sister of Charles Faning), and her children and husband Arthur Elliot; Nellie Kollé, Arthur Morley, George Edwards, Bert Le Blanc, Delavale and Gilbert, Harry Sadler... the list is endless. Clay has been noted for his fierce loyalty to Australian artists and his role in assisting the emerging local artist was seen by many of the day as second to none. He was not, however, unobliging when it came to overseas artists who had finished their contracts with the Tivoli or Fullers' organisations. He was able to offer many of these artists extended stays in the country at reasonable rates of pay, and in doing so he not only raised the perceived standard of his own operations but helped provide invaluable professional influences for his emerging artists. Perhaps Harry Clay's greatest contribution, however, was his ability to maintain his operations virtually continuously over at least a twenty-five year period, thereby providing reliable support to the A-circuit companies. Even though he was forced to close down his Sydney circuit on a couple of occasions, Clay maintained his momentum by continuing his Queensland tours. No other vaudeville entrepreneurs other than Rickards and the Fullers were able to emulate this achievement.

While this paper has presented a brief account of Harry Clay's business activities, aspects regarding his personality still remain to be examined. Keeping in mind the problems associated with bibliographic interpretation,

the perspective one gets from the many published 'insights' into Clay is that he was an enigma – larger than life, and yet down-to-earth with those who worked for him. His geniality, generosity and quiet kindness were notably apparent, and yet he was tough and uncompromising in both his manner and his standards. This last factor may well explain the difficulties he had in his early career as a minstrel, for although he found engagements with a number of prominent companies it seems his strong personality, manifesting itself in hard-nosed and uncompromising standards, created tension with many of those employers, and rarely did he stay for any considerable length of time. A workaholic who auditioned almost every artist he employed up until his stroke, he was of robust and stocky physique, and good with his fists. He neither drank nor smoked, and was notorious for the lectures he gave to his employees and associates on the evils of these addictions. Yet on the other hand he was himself a committed gambler, especially where horses were concerned. And while his reputation was built on providing clean family entertainment over his numerous venues and circuits (he would not tolerate a 'blue' joke in any of his theatres, despite the make-up of his audiences) he possessed, as John West notes, 'a prodigious flow of invective'<sup>19</sup> that would have put a bullock driver to shame.

An anecdote which perhaps provides one of the more amusing insights into Clay is that published in a 'Byways of History' article titled 'Audiences Were Tough When Harry Clay Ran Vaudeville,' published in the *Perth News* in 1951:

Harry Clay, King of Vaudeville stood on the footpath in Castlereagh St., opposite the old Tivoli Theatre. Outside the theatre he saw his top comedian, Ted Tutty. Clay rammed a couple of fingers into his mouth and whistled. Tutty went down on all fours and as the traffic clattered to a halt crawled slowly across the road. He came up to his employer and licked his hand. Clay patted him on the head. 'You're a good pooch, Teddy,' he said. 'Be on time tonight, or I'll down you.' Then he went his way. Even the policeman on duty at the corner of King and Castlereagh Streets showed no surprise at these antics. Everyone in Sydney knew Harry Clay.<sup>20</sup>

Of all the insights published on Clay over the years the aspect of his personality most commonly referred to was his generosity and concern for his performers. The *Theatre* magazine recalls, in the wake of the court case taken against him in 1923, that it was the only time to their knowledge that any complaint had been levelled against him by an employee or indeed by anyone in the business throughout his entire career. There are also many indications that he ran his company along the lines of an extended family. Both Charles Norman and Thea Rowe make this quite clear in interviews,<sup>21</sup>

as does Roy Rene in his autobiography. Further to this, tributes paid to Clay following his death reiterate the concern he had for Australian performers. Not only was his company able to maintain its operations over a continuous thirty-year span, but during that time he gave opportunities to literally thousands of performers, a large number of whom went on to establish careers in the A-circuit organisations, and even beyond vaudeville. His commitment to regional audiences, particularly in Queensland, though motivated by economic needs, was noted regularly by the critics of the towns he serviced. He maintained the same prices for his shows for virtually the entire length of his association with that state, and was highly regarded for the quality of the programmes he presented. The same was frequently said of his Sydney and New South Wales country circuits.

In light of the research undertaken for the project upon which this paper is based, it became somewhat surprising to realise the gap that exists in the contemporary understanding of the vaudeville era, including our knowledge of Harry Clay. While historical and academic interest in variety theatre has no doubt been down played due it being seen as plebeian and ephemeral, several other aspects have also played their part. Vaudeville was almost uniquely popular – it was to a large degree part of everyday life. Very few people saw the need to keep records or memorabilia. Going to a vaudeville show was more common to much of society than going to the movies – people often went more than once a week. Harry Clay's own business practices, particularly in the early days, also acts retrospectively to down-play his role. Rather than use newspaper advertising, as did Rickards and the Fullers, Clay used children with dodgers, daybills and word of mouth – none of these being initially seen as, or acting as, valuable historical resources.

There is, however, a considerable amount of information concerning the vaudeville and minstrel era available to theatre historians. While the production of vaudeville and minstrelsy may well have been of a non-serious and non-dramatic nature, the implications stemming from their structure and psychological motivations have, nonetheless, seeped their way through the entertainment practices of this country over since their demise. There are, for example, the Leagues Club style of variety entertainments. There is also the culture of television, with shows of the *Late Night/In Melbourne Tonight* variety, or those such as *Good News Week*, *The Panel*, *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, and even the variety-style format of the current *Footy Shows* with their minstrel-like semi-circle, comics, music, and audience interaction, presenting an argument for a vaudeville relationship. From a purely historical perspective, too, there are the many artists and individuals whose achievements can well provide greater depth to contemporary understanding of past Australian entertainment practices. In this regard Harry Clay's role as

friend and mentor to the Australian performer stands, perhaps, as his most significant achievement.

## NOTES

- 1 'Death of Mr Harry Clay,' *Theatre* (March 1925), p. 17.
- 2 Barbara Garlick. 'Australian Travelling Theatre: 1890-1935: A Study in Popular Entertainment and National Ideology.' (Ph.D Diss. U of QLD, 1994), pp. 15-16.
- 3 Clay Djubal, 'Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930: An Historical and Critical Survey,' (MA Diss, U of QLD, 1998) This thesis includes an extensive Appendices section (256 pages) surveying in greater detail not only Harry Clay's life, family and NSW and Queensland operations, but also presents brief details on over 2,200 artists known to have worked for Clay, with some forty or so given more extensive coverage.
- 4 Garlick, pp. 13, 16.
- 5 'Audiences Were Tough When Harry Clay Ran Vaudeville,' *News* (Perth) (23 September 1951), n. pag.
- 6 Richard Waterhouse. *From Minstrel Show To Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788-1914*, (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1990).
- 7 *Theatre* (November 1916) p. 49.
- 8 'Performers of Today - And of the Past,' *Theatre* (September 1914), p. 25.
- 9 Frank Smith is attributed as having given Sydney its famous foot-running handicaps, known variously as the Sydney Gift or the Botany Gift.
- 10 'Performers of Today,' p. 25.
- 11 The London Pavilion Company included John Fuller Snr.
- 12 In 1902, for instance, this included Edison's phonograph.
- 13 Some of the more popular suburban venues over the next decade included, Eden Gardens and Paris Gardens (Manly), Coronation Theatre (Bondi Junction), Crown Star Theatre (Surrey Hills), Boomerang Theatre (Coogee), Queen's Theatre (Hurstville), Mosman Town Hall, and the Democratic Hall (South Kensington). For more details see Clay Djubal, Appendix D.
- 14 'Audiences Were Tough,' n. pag.
- 15 Clay Djubal, Appendix H, p. 208.
- 16 'Audiences Were Tough,' n. pag.
- 17 Roy Rene, with Elisabeth Lambert and Max Harris, *Mo's Memoirs* (Sydney: Reed and Harris, 1945).
- 18 Bert Howard 'Confessions of The Droll,' *Everyone's* (11 December 1929), p. 104.
- 19 John West, 'Harry Clay'. *Companion to the Theatre in Australia*. Eds. Philip Parsons and Victoria Chance (Sydney: Currency, 1995), p. 149.
- 20 'Audiences Were Tough,' n. pag.
- 21 See Clay Djubal, Appendix H.