

## CHAPTER ONE

### **"Evidence of Slack or Lack of Evidence? Australian Variety Theatre and the Methodology Paradox"**

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

(William Shakespeare)<sup>27</sup>

As a result of the survey undertaken during this dissertation's research phase, it has been established that a role call of prominent Australian-based managers and producers of variety entertainment during the 1880s and 1890s would include the following individuals:

<b>Frank Smith</b> (Syd)	<b>Frank M. Clark</b> (Syd/Melb/Perth)	<b>Dan Tracey</b> (Syd/Melb)	<b>F. E. Hiscocks</b> (Syd/Melb/Bris)	<b>W. J. Wilson</b> (Syd/Melb)
<b>Charles &amp; Harry Cogill</b> (Syd/Melb/Bris/Perth)	<b>Cottier Family</b> (Syd)	<b>L. M. Bayless</b> (Melb)	<b>Jones &amp; Lawrence</b> (Perth)	
<b>Kelly &amp; Leon</b> *	<b>Harry Rickards</b> (Syd/Melb,Perth/Kaloorlie)	<b>Charles Fanning</b> *	<b>W. H. Speed</b> (Syd/Perth/Bris)	<b>Charles B. Hicks</b>
<b>Frank Weston</b> (Melb)	<b>H. Florack</b> (Syd)	<b>Frank St Clare</b> (Melb)	<b>D'Arcy Stanfield</b> (Syd/Bris)	
<b>J. Billin</b> (Melb)	<b>Percy St John</b> (Bris)	<b>Martyn Hagan</b> (Syd/Bris)	<b>Wilson &amp; St John</b> (Syd)	<b>J. C. Bain</b> (Bris/Qld)
<b>Delohery, Craydon &amp; Holland</b> (Syd/Perth)	<b>G. Liddy</b> (Bris)	<b>Slade Murray</b> *	<b>Harry Barrington</b> (Syd)	

**Figure 1**

#### **List of Australian-based Variety Entrepreneurs (c1880-1899)**

Locations entered under each name indicate known primary centres of operations only.

\* Entrepreneurs without a city reference operated almost exclusively as mobile touring companies, and thus are not known to have set up medium to long-term operations in any one location.

Although not the only entrepreneurs operating in Australia during the period, the evidence collated indicates that each was well-known in their respective metropolitan communities, with most also having established similarly high profile reputations across the wider Australian entertainment market. One key concern of this study therefore is that of these 27 individuals only Harry Rickards has been granted any sustained attention by theatre historians. Of the others fewer than half receive passing mention in the historical account of Australian theatre as it currently stands, while the remainders are entirely absent. An additional concern arising from Rickards' over-representation in the published history of Australian theatre is that despite all the critical and historical attention he has received to date, several myths continue to be accepted and reproduced by historians. One such myth is that as the "Napoleon," "king" or "dictator" of

<sup>27</sup> Hamlet Act 2; Scene 2.1 [211].

vaudeville (Waterhouse "Popular Culture" 270; Crouch 73; Van Straten 501), Rickards overwhelmed his competitors, forced them into submission (Brisbane 120) and "established a near monopoly of the Australian variety stage" (Waterhouse "From Minstrel" 119). Claims that Rickards was "reputedly the largest single-handed music hall manager and proprietor in the world" (Crouch 73), also imply that his power and influence extended beyond the inner city Sydney and Melbourne precincts to the suburbs and beyond - from Hobart to North Queensland, through Broken Hill and across to Perth, Fremantle and the Murchison goldfields of Western Australia. However, as the following chapters demonstrate, Rickards' operations were never able to service the country's entire population week in and week out, at any stage of his career.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, evidence from around the country shows quite clearly that Rickards largely serviced a niche up-market audience and that his influence and power over the rest of the industry was negligible.

Two questions that motivate this chapter, then, are how did such an obviously problematic myth come about in the first place; and why has it never been challenged? A further concern is that, if such a high profile variety practitioner can be subject to erroneous historical representation, how reliable is the account of lesser known individuals and organizations, or indeed the industry itself? What is being proposed here is that the problems inherent in traditional theatre history methodology are much greater and more entrenched than has until now been recognised, and to a certain extent reflect a bias brought about by that history having focused on one (niche) end of the variety industry to the exclusion of the broader market. The purpose of this chapter is therefore a twofold response to the way pre-1930s' variety history has been researched and assessed. The first section, "Traditional Methodology and the Variety Factor," engages with the problem of accountability, providing examples of myth and erroneous claims which have significantly distorted the historical record, and offering insights into why these instances have occurred. It does this by exploring four key areas of concern:

- 1.1 The Ephemeral Nature of Variety
- 1.2 The Variety Industry Infrastructure
- 1.3 The 1930s' "Wall of Silence"
- 1.4 Research Limitations
  - (i) Limited Academic Interest in Variety
  - (ii) Validation of Niche Areas of Activity
  - (iii) Erroneous Reconstruction
  - (iv) Memoir

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<sup>28</sup> Although the term "the king of vaudeville" was also applied to Rickards during his lifetime, there was never any inference that he alone supplied the country with variety. An article titled, "A King of Vaudeville" (Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage Apr. 1909, 12) indicates, for example, that Rickards owned, managed or leased five theatres in Australia and that he currently had companies in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Kalgoorlie. In 1908 Rickards imported 115 foreign artists and employed 117 local performers (232 in total). These details alone indicate that Rickards neither dominated nor controlled the vast Australian variety market. He was simply the most successful.

The chapter's second section, "The Variety Methodology and its Protocols," presents an alternative approach to surveying and collating historical data, one that is more effective in dealing with variety's peculiar industrial structures. The introduction of this new methodology also serves to establish the framework through which the following chapters engage with their particular objectives. By focusing on four protocols and two specific design parameters it can be seen that the methodology engages with the pre-1930s' variety industry on its terms rather than in response to preconceptions, value systems and expediency operating within contemporary institutional practice. The result is an approach that more effectively tracks formations of activity that were real-world dependent - the result of a free-flowing interaction between producers and the market and between those engaged in the industry as practitioners. The four protocols are:

- 1.5 Equity
- 1.6 Industrial
- 1.7 Primary Source
- 1.8 Blanket Search Approach

## **1. TRADITIONAL METHODOLOGY AND THE VARIETY FACTOR**

The inherent weakness of previous theatre history surveys is that the research invariably requires an established historical presence in order to begin. Individuals or companies that are not recognised, or are barely known, seldom register as being historically important because they are not positioned within an already existing historical frame of reference. The problem is exacerbated, too, because historians traditionally tend to focus on a particular high-profile subject to the exclusion of secondary personnel. Most industry practitioners therefore continue to remain a minor or forgotten presence within the history because they have been overlooked in the broader context of their careers (their presence fails to register across several decades or in various locations). Furthermore they do not appear to have reached a level of achievement that makes them suitable candidates for historical research. As a means of uncovering variety theatre this reliance on frequent or sustained (high profile) presence is a wholly unacceptable approach because the industry's infrastructure was regulated in a quite different way to legitimate theatre. Very few variety performers' careers, for example, were undertaken with permanent headline status - as might be the case with leading actors in a legitimate theatre troupe. Their billing status regularly fluctuated because audiences demanded variety. Changes in troupe or company status (i.e. a different position on the programme) occurred even during the course of an engagement because new artists were often brought in as headline act requiring others in the company to be demoted down the bill. With this demotion came less prominence in advertising,

and thus any act given a lower position on a company's billing order might then be required to work up a new routine to regain headline status. Being repositioned down a programme did not usually indicate that an act had lost favour with audiences, though, as experienced performers invariably continued to maintain their popularity with audiences. The situation was simply tied to the way managers marketed their product, and new acts were seen as the best way to encourage patronage. While these issues provide some insight into the difficulties historians face when trying to uncover lower level industrial activity, one factor perhaps more than any other has played a significant role in variety's tendency to remain unnoticed..

### **1.1 The Ephemeral Nature of Variety**

As a product sold and consumed within the popular culture market, variety entertainment served an expressive function rather than an aesthetic one. Developed according to principles of commercial enterprise, variety not only supplied but also helped create consumer demand for new crazes and fashions. This was itself representative of a major ideological shift in cultural production and reception that occurred during the late nineteenth century. In similar fashion to the way popular culture commodities are incomplete and insufficient by themselves until incorporated into the everyday lives of the people, consumption of variety entertainment was an immediate gratification, enjoyed in the moment. This is a critical aspect of variety in terms of the difficulties faced by historians because it functioned not as an object to be venerated but as an agent in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure (Fiske 123).

Many aspects of the variety industry, particularly common practices, take on an invisible presence because people simply took them for granted. It was essentially part of the everyday social landscape. Not only did very few people think to reflect on it critically, but even within the industry most people didn't think to orchestrate their careers for historical posterity. The managerial careers of businessmen like Harry Clay and Bert Howard exemplify the middle level entrepreneur of that era whose day to day business decisions worked against them in terms of their historical accessibility (despite the fact that both men maintained a high profile presence in Sydney during their careers as vaudeville showmen). This has occurred, in large part, because neither engaged long-term advertising through the Sydney Morning Herald - a key source of primary research for historians looking at activity in that city (and for Australia in general). By not advertising, too, they didn't receive reviews or other forms of publicity, a factor that in the end contributed to their historical significance being down-graded. The reason why neither manager bothered to utilise the Sydney Morning Herald was simply a practical one - there was

no need.<sup>29</sup> With their operations catering to a largely suburban or inner city audience, they preferred more cost-effective and locally-orientated methods (local newspapers, posters, leaflets etc). Word of mouth could also be counted on as an effective, and cheap, means of promotion.

The issue of low or non-existent value recognition has not been entirely the domain of performers, historians and academics. The consumers of variety not surprisingly considered it insignificant in terms of cultural value. Thus little was kept or archived for later generations to analyse or admire. Some families might have retained keepsakes, but over the years much of this disappeared. And while there are a few archives available for the historian, these rarely tell us much about the onstage activities. In interviews conducted in 1997 with ex-Clay's performer Charles Norman and the family of other key Clay's personnel all expressed their sorrow at having discarded or lost important memorabilia over the previous decades before eventually realising the significance of those artefacts.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally some unexpected finds have been made, although these are all too rare. One such discovery was in the early to mid-1990s when the Independent Theatre at North Sydney was being renovated and a number of small items from the days when it was known as the Coliseum were located under the floor boards.

The value of the Nat Phillips Collection, which contains evidence central to this study, is believed to have been passed on to Jack Phillips after Nat's death. The family later became aware that the boxes of scripts were missing. It is surmised by Nat Phillips' great niece, Kim Phillips (the daughter of Jacob Phillips), that they were either left in the care of her grandfather's second wife after he died in 1938 (she had apparently been shunned by the family) or that they were somehow put into storage at the Cremorne Theatre in Brisbane (and later forgotten about).<sup>31</sup> The collection came to light only after having been passed on to a Brisbane bric-a-brac shop in the early 1970s. They came to the attention then University of Queensland lecturer, Dr Robert Jordan (later professor of drama at the University of New South Wales). Jordan notified the Fryer Library of the boxes and they were apparently purchased for a nominal sum. Interestingly, although regarded as having historical significance, the boxes remained in the same state in which they were purchased in for more than thirty years.<sup>32</sup> Why the collection was shelved for so long is not known. It is likely that a decision was made in order that more "worthwhile" holdings could be processed, but even so this would have been only one of several

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<sup>29</sup> Harry Clay did briefly place advertisements for his company in the Sydney Morning Herald during the latter part of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while operating the Royal Standard in the city's Castlereagh Street. It would appear that the regular audiences he attracted soon made this practice unnecessary.

<sup>30</sup> These interviews were with Jo Mercer and Del Buchanan (the granddaughters of comedian, Ted Tutty) and Valmai Goodlet (daughter of Maurice Chenoweth, a senior manager and performer for the same company).

<sup>31</sup> Information concerning the collection was obtained after the submission of this thesis. I am grateful to author/playwright Jon Fabian, and Kim Phillips for helping piece together the puzzle. Ms Phillips recalls that the whereabouts of boxes belonging to her famous uncle had been a family mystery since at least the early 1950s.

<sup>32</sup> Several prominent theatre historians were approached by the library in an effort to ascertain the value of the archive. Those to respond were Dr Rob Jordan, Dr Harold Love, Dr Richard Fotheringham, Alrene Sykes and Dr George Shaw.

intervening factors. Certainly there was no priority given to either the Nat Phillips Collection or the possibility of increasing the library's collection of popular culture scripts by the University at that time. Evidence of this is contained in a memorandum to F. D. O. Fielding by Fryer Librarian Margaret O'Hagan (dated 9 Sept. 1985). The letter reports that veteran comedian/actor Ron Shand was in possession of a collection of original *Stiffy* and *Mo* scripts and was prepared to make available to the library (at cost) any it did not already have.<sup>33</sup> An offer to purchase these scripts was never taken up by the Fryer possibly because the processing of the collection was not started until 2002, and/or because popular culture artefacts were not high on the list of any tertiary institution's priorities prior to the rise of popular culture studies in the 1980s. It is likely that Shand's offer was subsequently forgotten over the years and he has since passed away. The whereabouts of these scripts is presently unclear. If they have been accepted by any Australian library this has not been signalled within the wider theatre history community.

In all likelihood the main problem for the library was its inability to process the material, or indeed find anyone who knew enough about Phillips and his work to make sense of what was effectively an unsorted, unidentified and often fragmented collection of manuscripts and musical scores, with many in a deteriorated state. An additional problem relates to the fact that some of the material is not related to Phillips' or the Fullers' operations but rather constitutes a John N. McCallum/Cremorne Theatre collection. Despite these problems Margaret O'Hagan well understood the importance of the collection (even though referring to the Phillips' scripts as being less sophisticated than those held as part of the library's Phillip Street Revue Company collection). This is made clear when she proposes that the collection would compliment several existing library collections (Max Afford, Billy Moloney and Maxwell Dunn). "There is also a strong argument," she wrote, "that this collection of popular entertainment counterbalances the Hanger Collection of Australian Playscripts." The fact that it has taken more than 30 years to process it (in addition to the rejection of Ron Shand's offer), does suggest on the other hand that being a collection of popular culture texts it was not accorded the level of priority that more sophisticated or serious collections have been given.

With only rare instances of industry-produced primary source materials now available, the variety historian's main supply of information therefore comes almost exclusively from newspapers (metropolitan and regional); industry magazines such as Australian Variety, the Theatre, Just It, Green Room and Everyone's; and a selection of other magazines such as the Bulletin, Table Talk, Imperial Review and Australasian Stage Annual. These sources come with

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<sup>33</sup> Shand and his wife, Letty Craydon (daughter of James Craydon, of Delohery, Craydon and Holland fame) were members of Jim Gerald's company in the mid to late 1920s. Shand later became well-known to Australian television audiences as Herb, in the popular 1970s' soap, No 96.

their own unique set of problems, however, and these difficulties are ones which relate specifically to the industry's infrastructure and logistical organisation. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the fact that variety entertainment was accorded poor representation in these primary sources. In some instances the references are so temporally-bound that modern historians have difficulty understanding what is being said or referred to. A similar issue is clearly evident in popular culture publications today - notably free music industry-specific "street magazines" like Time Off, Scene and Rave (all Brisbane-based). Each of these ephemeral weekly publications assume that their readers have the necessary sub-cultural capital concerning contemporary music genres, performers and current industry issues. They therefore tend to present little in the way of useful background or insights. Furthermore, their reporters and editors are invariably inexperienced, early career journalists or music industry insiders (noticeable in the frequent errors of grammar and spelling), and hence the articles and reviews tend to be unsubstantial as historical sources. While the cultural capital issue might not have played as significant part in the editorial decisions of nineteenth century print media, David Mayer's comments regarding "innocuous British media fodder" might well be describing these same publications:

The very fact that [popular theatre] is not literary by intent means that written evidence is slight... Audiences are too caught up in what they are seeing to recollect and record the occasion in adequate detail... it has [therefore] been extremely easy to overlook the popular [theatre] or to misinterpret it. The occasional reporters tell us very little about those involved in the performance... and many [of the] facts relevant to the social, historic and economic aspects (259-60).

This is an aspect of historical research that Delyse Ryan also highlights in her work on the Brisbane theatre industry during World War One. "There is often a great difference between the realities of a given performance and the newspaper reportage of the event," writes Ryan. She notes, too, that in "following a standard formula, they rarely offer any negative analysis" - a matter quite possibly the result of newspapers protecting their commercial [advertising] interests (10-11). Subsequently, any historical record drawn from the major city newspapers is invariably founded on recurring phrases, conventional structure, questionable memoir, commercial ideologies and tit bits of information meant to be read and discarded in the typical 'everyday' fashion.

The evidence put forward in this section argues that no single factor has been at fault in allowing the variety industry to receive such poor treatment to date by historians. Rather, a combination of factors relating to the fundamental nature of popular culture entertainment production and its perception as a low status form has been at play. This inadvertently led to the loss of almost all physical evidence relating to the industry or individual performers before their historical value was recognised; and much of the primary source data available is unable to provide the type of information required for historians attempting a rigorous appraisal of the

variety industry during the pre-1930s' era. As the following section will further demonstrate, the very nature of that industry itself has also played a key role in allowing its achievements to disappear from the historical record.

## **1.2 The Variety Industry Infrastructure**

Appendices A, C and D provide much evidence showing that professional variety artists of the pre-1930s' era maintained mobile existences throughout much of their careers. Only in rare instances did some performers manage to establish a home base for lengthy periods of time (Will Whitburn, for example), and even then this only tended to occur late in their careers.<sup>34</sup> Appendix D also provides insights into several performers who spent long periods of time overseas, and whose careers from that point on escaped the notice of most Australians. For the next generation audience who were too young to have seen these expatriates the last time they performed in the country, their names and past reputations may not have even registered. Although overseas career opportunities were not pursued by all Australian variety artists, temporary inconspicuousness within the local context was simply how things worked. Virtually every professional variety artist was forced to move away from Sydney for periods of time. This is significant because the New South Wales capital was essentially variety's industrial base. It is because Sydney audiences proved to be the strongest supporters of variety (for virtually all of its five decades as the country's most popular form of entertainment) that the majority of leading companies set up their headquarters there. It's also where more industrially-based operations clustered (particularly agencies), and from 1913 onwards where the industry's two key industry magazines were published. Because so many practitioners moved frequently in and out of Sydney during the pre-1930s' variety era, historians have been unable to get a fix on who most of these people were. Using only Sydney-based primary sources (even in tandem with Melbourne newspapers like the Age and Argus) therefore provides not only very limited data but also skews that data in favour of just two cities. Conclusions about industry activity or individual careers drawn from such research must therefore be considered insufficient, even when the individuals are ostensibly well-known like Nat Phillips and Roy Rene. Taking three examples of high profile Australian-born performers from Appendix D, those whose career achievements have been affected by enforced industrial invisibility, the following section demonstrates one area of variety's industrial infrastructure to have impacted negatively on its historical standing.

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<sup>34</sup> Whitburn's entry in Appendix D indicates that he still made brief appearances in Sydney at the Tivoli from time to time during his later years. Other performers known to have been based for long periods of their career in one city are Kohlman and Gardner (Melbourne c1890s).

Charles Fanning, regarded during his fifteen or more years in Australia as one of the country's "greatest minstrel endmen" established his reputation working for all the leading variety firms, including Frank Smith (Sydney), F. E. Hiscocks, Frank M. Clark, the Cogill brothers and Harry Rickards. Almost all of his last seven or eight years in Australia were on the Tivoli circuit, with much of it spent partnering his American-born wife, Georgie Devoe, in original comedy sketches.<sup>35</sup> Fanning also regularly contributed his own farces and songs to the company. Looking to extend their careers beyond the limited Australian market Fanning and Devoe left the country sometime around 1901, spending most of the next decade in the United States and in England (among other places) before returning to Australia on a Rickards' contract in 1909. While several reports suggest that Fanning's overseas career was more than prosperous (this claim being supported by the length of time he spent away), that success did not become widely known in Australia, nor did it invite recognition in the next generation variety audience. As Australian Variety notes following Fanning's death in January 1916, despite being "at one time Australia's best-known comedian, he returned [in 1909] virtually a stranger to an audience that, with few exceptions, knew him not."<sup>36</sup>

The second performer to be highlighted is Martyn Hagan, who although not reaching the same iconic status as Charlie Fanning, nevertheless established a high profile three decade-long career in Australia before leaving for overseas with his wife Lucy Fraser in 1912. The pair had been performing together on stage throughout the country and had built formidable reputations as society sketch artists and specialists in farce, musical comedies and particularly in pantomime (Hagan as a dame and Fraser as a principal boy). Such was their ability to attract regular work overseas that the couple did not return until 1919 ("Round the World" 48). As with Fanning and Devoe, however, the Hagan's departure saw their past careers effectively erased from the continually evolving industry. The Theatre drew attention to this situation through correspondence from an Australian travelling through England in 1916 who wrote to question the authenticity of "so called" Australian performers appearing on the principal vaudeville stages of England and America. "I say so-called," writes the correspondent, "for the majority of the names are quite unfamiliar...but still they come!" Among the names mentioned was Hagan's. "I do not wish to do Mr Hagan an injustice," he goes on, "but does any Theatre Magazine reader, I wonder, know of this comedian who has [supposedly] made a name for himself in Australia. I confess I don't" ("Does Anyone" 45). While the magazine went on to publish correspondence over the next two months from readers who not only remembered Hagan's name but could also remember details of his long career, the issue further demonstrates

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<sup>35</sup> Devoe had herself spent at least five years with Rickards prior to meeting her husband at the Tivoli (Syd) in 1893.

<sup>36</sup> Australian Variety and Show World 19 Jan. (1916), 10.

popular culture's tendency to dismiss the past as irrelevant in favour of new and current stimuli. It is worth remembering, too, that this was a time when access to historical information was unavailable to the general public, and hence an artist's long-term status invariably relied on either their presence or the memory of those who had actually participated in their careers.

The third example, Sam Rowley, was a variety comedian and dancer from Sydney who left Australia before establishing his reputation nationally. He is known to have spent some twenty-five years on and off touring the United States - with nine of these under engagement to the Sullivan and Considine organisation. Billed throughout his career as "the Little Man with the Big Voice," Rowley returned to tour Australia on six occasions prior to 1913, almost always with headline status.<sup>37</sup> His origins as an Australian were rarely made obvious on those tours, although mention of it was made in some reviews - particularly in the regional press. Because information is difficult to locate, recognition of his achievements (quite considerable in retrospect) has suffered even more so than Fanning's and Hagan's. Until now historians have been unaware of his Australian heritage and the three decades he spent overseas because the keys to unlocking his movements prior to 1913 have not been recognised. The problem for Rowley as an historical subject, however, is not that we still only know the bare bones of his career, but that any survey of his career would require extensive research through American sources. Thus, his considerable achievements have been negated by where he achieved them.

Fanning, Hagan and Rowley were not the only variety performers to have their achievements in Australia overlooked as a result of overseas careers. Other high profile performers to have spent considerable time on the international variety stage include Clara Keating and Claude Golding, Tommy Armstrong, Olga Pennington, Lily Rockley (daughter of Wal Rockley) and Verna Bain. The capacity of variety artists to maintain a visible historical presence is a problem more commonly seen in the Australian context, however, even though it did not greatly affect the artists during their careers. Although temporary descents into obscurity might occasionally be broken by an update in Australian Variety or the Theatre, as long as a performer or act was finding constant (quality) work, they were likely to renew their acquaintance with previous audiences at some stage in their career, knowing that a certain portion of that audience would remember their last visit. Furthermore, variety's constant demand for fresh ideas, faces and material meant that for any act to stay in one place for too long was to risk outstaying their welcome.

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<sup>37</sup> "The Little Man with the Big Voice" Discusses Vaudeville Conditions in America." Theatre Magazine June (1913), 31.

Because these performers were so often absent from the media cluster based in Sydney, and rarely were their future movements made public, the historian's ability to recognise and track individual careers during this period depends on luck. This factor itself demonstrates a major difference between the legitimate and variety theatre paradigms. The former invariably allows the historian greater access to key individuals whose movements might be aligned with a particular company for a long period (or the extent of a tour) or those based mostly in one location (i.e. Sydney or Melbourne). Legitimate theatre performers were also, up until 1913, likely to receive more attention in the contemporary media - particularly those like the Bulletin, Table Talk and Age, which were more ideologically aligned with literary-based theatre. For most variety performers, however, few details were presented in the reviews and press releases of the day. Sometimes an act's final performance at a venue or with a company is signalled in advertising. However, as an industrial practice this was the exception rather than the rule. In most instances the historian cannot be sure therefore if a particular act had ended its engagement with a company, had been moved down the programme billing order, was taking a break or had been temporarily leased to another manager.<sup>38</sup> Because we rarely know where, when or with whom most artists were previously engaged, or the location of their next employment, it is extremely difficult to track their movements. The paucity of details available was not merely a response to the information being considered unnecessary but rather reflects a social communication infrastructure that was less reliant on the media for particular aspects of local news and gossip. Information on particular artists could become known through any number of alternative means - notably as part of a performance, within programs, via posters and handbills, and through casual everyday communication. It must be remembered that word of mouth within a community during this era (prior to radio, television and high speed transport) was in fact a major contributor to information reception and broadcasting.

The Tivoli or the Fullers had no need to use interpersonal communication as a primary promotion technique, although it would have occurred anyway. Their considerable reputations meant that potential audiences didn't need to rely solely on advertising, while at the same time such promotions meant that audiences were well-informed of what they might expect should they attend a particular show. For the smaller operations who serviced a more readily defined local audience, word of mouth was an advertising technique to be exploited at any time.<sup>39</sup> It was also the most effective means of keeping overheads down. Playing to their strengths these managers built personal relationships with their immediate community. However, while this was not too difficult a task for the suburban manager, regional touring required much greater

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<sup>38</sup> The issue of leasing performers to other organisations, a common practice in the pre-1930s' variety industry, is discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>39</sup> The following chapter provides examples of this managerial exploitation as utilised by Frank M. Clark and Harry Clay.

awareness. Because a successful season meant that you could return confident of securing good financial returns, managers like Harry Clay, Walter Morris, Percy Dix, Percy St John and Ted Holland worked hard over the years to give regional audiences the impression that they had been entertained by friends. Harry Clay, for example, would greet patrons at the front door of each venue whenever he toured. It was his job also to remember their names and any pertinent information – i.e. who they were and what they did in the town. He also knew that some information could be well turned to his advantage - and his shows regularly made reference to local personalities and current issues. What many of these managers had in common was a solid reputation – established along particular circuits or in particular regional areas as members of other companies – prior to returning with their own troupe. This was in itself possibly the best advertising of all. As experienced showmen rarely did they engage acts that would lower their reputations, and conversely were ready to send any performer back on tour as often as they saw profit in the engagement. Ted Tutty was one such artist. He toured Queensland for Clay seven times between 1905 and 1915. Such was Tutty's popularity as a comedian that advertising his name was probably not required. Word of his forthcoming presence in a town would have come from travellers who saw him perform a show somewhere down the circuit (see Appendix D).

The low costs of promotion, in addition to the work of advance agents, worked well for established companies who fine-tuned their jobs through many years of experience. Well-known advance agents like Harry Clay's long-serving employee, Jimmy Boyle, employed numerous cost-effective promotional techniques. He would procure local children to do letterbox drops with dodgers in exchange for free tickets (they in turn would bring their parents and friends), and put up posters in the shop windows of local businesses. These same establishments would later advertise on the stage curtain or along the walls of the theatre during Clay's season in the town (Djugal 181-6). Jimmy Boyle would also maintain frequent communication with Clay, filling him in on any new developments along the circuit and forwarding any useful local information that might be used in the company's performances. The problem for historians is, of course, that these commercial strategies left little or no record behind.

The issue of industrial absence - whether as a result of physical absence from the marketplace or as an historical reconstruction, is essentially the result of a combination of human behaviour and social and technological changes. Indeed, as Julian Meyrick observes, theatrical activity rarely follows the tropes of literary fiction. While artists typically make career choices in the present (with the future in mind) most "do not see themselves as steps on an evolutionary ladder" of progress (v). And because very few performers have the ability to predict future outcomes for either themselves or the industry in which they are engaged, the

choices they make are therefore undertaken without guarantees of either success or failure. The opposite invariably applies, however, when a historian attempts to reconstruct past practice. Value tends to be attributed to artists who chose largely successful options, while those who chose with less success, or indeed, failure, are positioned on the sidelines or ignored. Thus "not only do we read history with a winner's eye," notes Meyrick, "but reading it at all says something about who has emerged the victor" (vi). As this study proposes, however, pre-1930s' artists effectively lost control over their historical destiny not through inappropriate career choices, but through a series of world-shattering social, industrial events and technological developments which began to occur in the late 1920s/early 1930s and extended until at least the mid-1940s.

### **1.3 The 1930s' "Wall of Silence"**

One answer to the question of why only a small number of pre-1930s' artists became historical 'winners' (so to speak) may well be the fact that only these few were able to continue their careers well beyond World War II. We know, for example, that some were in a position to write their memoirs, or contribute knowledge to the generation of historians who began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. The names George Wallace, Roy Rene, Jim Gerald were instantly recognisable to historians or academics with an interest in (or general knowledge of) variety theatre - even if they were by then retired or only recently deceased. Although these three performers are yet to be accorded sustained research, their names appear in the current literature with some semblance of their achievements recognised. Other performers whose names registered less in terms of historical recognition, but were nevertheless theatrical celebrities in their day have been able to cement their names in the historical record simply because they had the opportunity to do so. Charles Norman's, When Vaudeville was King, published when the author was in his early eighties, is typical of this scenario. Most of the other familiar names however, were of artists who had first established themselves in the post-World War II variety industry (Valantyne Napier, Billy Maloney, and Nancy Bridges spring to mind here). An examination of the current historical account clearly establishes, on the other hand, that almost every single Australian variety artist whose career had ended by the early 1930s, including high profile practitioners like Nat Phillips, Bert Le Blanc and (until recently) Harry Clay, failed to make an impression on later generations. Three outside factors can be seen to have contributed most to this situation, and in contribute to the challenges facing the historian reliant on a traditional theatre history approach. These factors are:

**1.3 (i) The Talkies:** While variety managers had been able to sustain their operations in competition with silent film, relying on live theatre's immediacy and responsiveness, the arrival of sound-on-film saw the talkies become an entertainment phenomenon. Already under pressure due to mounting costs, very few variety companies could compete with the film exhibitors' low cost admission price and increasing advertising budgets.

**1.3 (ii) The Depression:** In tandem with the massive interest in talkies, the depression simply levied too much pressure on the live popular culture theatre industry. The once-powerful organisations run by Sir Benjamin and John Fuller, and Harry Clay, were eventually wound down, along with almost the entire industry. Only the Tivoli and a very few small, highly mobile and flexible touring companies were able to ride out the decade.

**1.3 (iii) Lack of New Media Access:** Those few artists who did manage to maintain their careers past the depression were often able to access the new media of the period - film, radio, sound recordings and eventually television. The career longevity of George Wallace (film), Roy Rene, Jim Gerald and George Edwards (radio) owed much to their capacity to embrace these new technologies. On the other hand practitioners whose careers ended in the late 1920s had little if any recourse to these new forms of mass communication. Some performers who had established themselves at the top of the local industry during the 1920s were able to secure lower profile engagements into the 1940s (Charles Delavale and Amy Rochelle, for example), but they were too old and too steeped in past traditions to be of much interest to the emerging post-war youth generation. As such they were also unable to break through into radio or film. By the 1950s even fewer artists from the 1920s were still on the stage - Gerald and Wallace, George Sorlie, Stanley McKay and Charles Norman being among the small number to undertake this achievement.

#### **1.4 Research Limitations:**

British popular culture theorist, Stuart Hall, has suggested that the "profound transformation in the culture of the popular classes which occurs between the 1880s and the 1920s" may be one reason for our failure to adequately engage with the industrial and entertainment structures of pre-1930s society. He argues that the closeness of our present society to the earlier era creates an ideological (perhaps even psychological) barrier (229). Because both temporal periods closely resemble each other but at the same time are different, he suspects "there is something peculiarly awkward in the non-appearance of a militant, radical mature culture of the working-class in the 1930s when - to tell you the truth - most of us would have expected it to appear" (231). Perhaps as a consequence of this lack of interest, little rigour has

been applied either to the research methodologies applied, or in attempting to understand both the society and industry of the era. Compounded by the problems outlined above, the field of inquiry has become one in which too many inconsistencies and gaps appear, but which invite no obvious solutions.

**1.4 (i) Limited Academic Interest in Variety Entertainment:** While the investigation of Australian theatre history over the past three to four decades can be seen as the work of many varied individuals and organisations, ex-practitioners and their families, the dominant voice in this field of endeavour has long been the academic community. Those who contribute to peer-reviewed journals, Australasian Drama Studies for example, and to encyclopedic-type publications such as the Companion to Theatre in Australia, have in most instances completed one or more post-graduate degrees. In the process they have established their reputations within university schools or departments as specialists in drama, English, art history, and in recent years through the relatively new fields of media and cultural studies. Some tertiary educated theatre historians have also emerged from other disciplines such as history or music. Even though coming from disparate fields of academic endeavour, it is in most cases the similarity in cultural capital and critical training (often steeped in formal theory - be it literary, musical or artistic) that results in an essentially like-minded community. The stimuli to have driven this community's research and analysis over the last years of the twentieth century must therefore also be considered as largely intellectual, which suggests that a level of bias against low popular culture entertainment has led to the field of inquiry having been organised around contemporary priorities.

What is being alluded to here, then, is that a historian whose training was undertaken within academic institutions during the 1950s to circa 1980s was very likely uninterested in tackling popular culture theatre like variety because of its ephemeral nature, unfamiliar structures and, in traditional terms, low aesthetic content. I suggest here that they were ideologically ill-equipped to investigate a culturally-driven and essentially non-text based entertainment form. Perhaps more to the point, though, is that collectively they have been interested, and not surprisingly so, in aspects of theatre history which are of professional, personal and intellectual interest. The text or the score, and the dramatist or composer, have been pursued because they have been viewed as more suitable candidates for academic research and analysis. Only in the last decade or so have new fields of inquiry such as media and cultural studies begun to give popular culture theatre production and reception academic legitimacy. The latter half of the twentieth century can now be seen as a period in which the uncovering of Australian theatre history largely reflected tertiary practice, and conclusions about cultural formations prior to the 1930s were formed mostly from a literary perspective. The problem with

this approach, however, is that it inadvertently skews the historical reconstruction of theatre activity towards one particular field of theatre production - legitimate narrative drama - at the expense of variety. The extent to which this lack of interest in pre-1930s' popular culture entertainment production has manifested itself can be seen with the over-reliance on secondary sources as a means of forming the historical account. Indeed, as the following sections show time and again, many of the non-primary sources used, including memoir (which has long been acknowledged as unreliable), have been allowed to influence the published history without being investigated with any rigour whatsoever. Not only do the reasons for this continue to be ignored, but there has also been no attempt to understand why the variety industry is so difficult to survey. Thus without any central design or plan of attack the historical account has unfolded both in a haphazard fashion and in response to a considerable amount of myth.

Rather than accord variety its due place in the history of Australian entertainment, the approach taken to date has instead reinforced the self-enclosed territory of high culture historical analysis. It has subsequently reconstructed a history built not so much from an engagement with the theatre industry as it operated in its contemporary setting, but more as a result of decisions made by (and perhaps in response to the interests of) the researchers themselves. Without any definitive study of the variety industry and the popular culture audience in a national context, social and theatre historians have, therefore, been forced into drawing unfounded conclusions about the formation of Australian cultural identity during the period under investigation. These conclusions must now be questioned. What have gone unrecognised, for example, are issues relating to the impact variety had on Australian audiences; the extent to which variety artists and genres contributed a sense of national identity; and how many types of audiences made up the national demographic. It is this inability to acknowledge popular culture formations, or rather the collapsing of popular culture with more bourgeois social elements, that has weakened the historical record as it stands. This has occurred primarily because historians have too often articulated a notion of "popular theatre" production being made up of genres such as melodrama, sensation play or legitimate plays. The argument of this thesis is that such approaches both misappropriate the term "popular" and fail to consider the mass low income popular culture audience who attended such productions on an infrequent basis at best. Previous theories about the construction and maintenance of Australian identity through locally written plays, Australian literature and even the influence of magazines like the Bulletin, therefore, need to be re-evaluated; mainly because as a means of cultural transmission they were accessed by a much smaller percentage of the population.

By itself this argument - that cultural capital and the academic training and intellectual interests of historians have served to create an environment of disinterest in Australian variety entertainment - would be difficult to prove without first surveying all the people to have worked in the field of theatre and assessing their respective backgrounds. There are, however, a number of other issues that provide additional weight to the argument. The history of variety as it currently stands is made up of short cuts and assumption, much of which has been required to fill in the gaps of historical knowledge. To a large extent these gaps occur because much of the history of variety is itself made up of data discovered either by historians who have been researching other more "serious" subjects, or through an over-reliance on the testimony of former practitioners (many of whom had been long retired from the stage). This has led to additional levels of bias infiltrating the history, because without a rigorous survey and appraisal of the industry at the time in question, these brief glimpses all too often appear to validate an already-arrived-at erroneous consensus.

An example of how ignoring the impact of variety leads to erroneous conclusions about theatre activity in general can be seen in Barbara Garlick's close analysis of travelling theatre between 1890 and 1935. The claim that Kate Howarde was the only actor/manager of her era to have "remained determinedly separate from the big companies" and that she "was more consistent and lasted longer than all the male actors who were her contemporaries, all of whom were at times in their careers contracted to the big managements" (162) is not correct. Howarde, like many of her thespian contemporaries, worked the variety stage during her career. It has been determined that she was under contract for at least one big firm, the Fullers, while co-operating a revusical company with her second husband, Scottish comedian, Elton Black around 1915 and 1916.<sup>40</sup> The Elton Black-Kate Howarde Revue Company even toured the Fullers' Dominion circuit in early 1916. By that stage, however, the troupe was being referred to as simply the Elton Black Revue Company (which may have been one reason why the pair separated not long afterwards). Garlick's reference to "actor/manager" also effectively negates the achievements of several high profile variety performer/managers who also determinedly carved out similarly lengthy periods as their own boss - notably Harry Clay. The untimely deaths of Ted Holland and Percy St John in 1914 and 1915 respectively, possibly prevent them from also being included alongside Clay in this select company.

**1.4 (ii) Validation of Niche Areas of Activity:** The degree to which Harry Rickards and the Tivoli organisation dominate turn of the century Australian popular culture entertainment landscape is a clear example of historical bias. While Rickards undoubtedly played a significant

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<sup>40</sup> See both Appendix C (1915 entry) and Elton Black biography (Appendix D) for additional details.

role in the Australian variety industry, his "King of Vaudeville" reputation has ultimately seen him regarded as the entrepreneur who monopolised the Australia-wide industry to the point where most of his competition went out of business (Waterhouse, "From Minstrel Show" 116). And he is similarly positioned as the entrepreneur who set the bench mark against which all other aspiring managers compared themselves (Waterhouse, "Popular Culture" 268). The implications here are that Rickards succeeded because he provided the type of theatrical experience that Australian audiences wanted, and that other managers failed because they could not, or did not, offer this class of entertainment. Such observations clearly warrant investigation because they not only reflect the traditional high art assumption that there is a superior type of theatre which all audiences want, but deny a range of circumstances - including economic, social, political, personal, or a combination of any of these - which may have caused other managers to fall short of Harry Rickards' success.

The tendency of historians to deny the day to day needs and desires of audience segments within a past society has significant ramifications for any historical investigation of popular culture production because there was no one idealised form of theatre everyone wanted to see. Even variety, as popular as it was over half a century, always competed against other cheap forms of popular culture entertainment – including cycloramas, sporting events, circus, film and local community festivities. Taking Rickards' post-1893 operations in Sydney, for example, if the current history is correct and he dominated the industry into submission by offering better quality shows, why then did he not open more theatres in the city so as to further increase his profitability? The number of people living in the Sydney metropolitan and suburban districts around the turn of the century was certainly too large for his operations at the 1200 seat Tivoli Theatre.<sup>41</sup> On a few occasions he did open at other inner city theatres, but these operations were for brief seasons only. The answer to this question is that despite there being upwards of a 100,000 people on any given night throughout Sydney interested in some form of entertainment, for Rickards to cater to them all he would have had to re-brand his entrepreneurial image and re-structure his overall business. This move would not only have lowered the tone of his organisation (as well as his social standing), but would have also put him in direct competition with the independent, ears-to-the ground, local suburban operators. Rickards was too astute a businessman to take a risk on something he neither wanted nor needed to do.

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<sup>41</sup> Eric Irvin's data on Australian theatre capacities - published in the Dictionary of Australian Theatre (1985) - indicates that Sydney's central business district and inner suburban theatres could have catered for more than 10,000 people on any given night during the 1890s. Even if some theatres were temporarily closed and those open were at less than full capacity (and we do not take into account the many other non-theatrical entertainment opportunities and outer suburban shows on offer), it is still evident that the Tivoli Theatre (1,200 capacity) was a minor part of the city's entertainment market. While Rickards' interstate touring troupes provided additional patronage for his company, these still represented only a very minor part of the overall Australian variety industry.

This failure to acknowledge the business side of variety has similarly led a number of historians to assume that failure in the industry was a direct consequence of poor entertainment quality. While the logic for this long-held belief has been validated by Rickards' success in the variety industry, most business theorists would argue that such thinking is simplistic and ill-informed. Edith Penrose, whose work is introduced in the following chapter, notes in relation to this issue that not only do "new, small and unknown firms not have the same facilities for raising capital as do established, large and known firms" and hence operate in a more volatile and risk-laden economic environment, but those that "do grow into large firms... do this, for the most part, by virtue of a special entrepreneurial ability" (37). As Penrose sees it product quality, while important, is only ever one of many factors that play a part in a firm's growth or demise.

The traditional (and enclosed) approach to Australian theatre history can also be seen to have created a lop-sided account because literary or text-driven drama staged in the major Sydney/Melbourne theatres has been given priority over low culture entertainment staged in the suburbs and regional centres. This validation of high culture status and inner city activity can be seen in the way playwrights have been accorded higher status over the writers of sketches or farces; art music composers were elevated at the expense of songwriters; and legitimate drama productions have over-riden variety entertainment in all the major theatre history publications. In the same way, dramatic actors were given more attention than song and dance artists, and opera has been deemed more worthy of attention by scholars than the musical burlesque. Only pantomime (a hybrid of variety), burlesque and drama, can be considered as having received some degree of attention from historians and academics.

Perhaps the most fundamental flaw in the way historical analysis operates is that the research itself is directed by contemporary value judgments. That is to say, historians themselves become the arbiters of which theatrical works/genres/individuals deserve priority. By default the process becomes one in which history emerges in response to contemporary factors (the researcher's personal interests and financial expediency, for example) rather than as an attempt to accurately map the real world activity of the time. Along the continuum of theatrical activity in Australia, variety entertainment has long held a low position. Even when variety becomes the subject of discussion, it is invariably the Rickards'/Tivoli operations and overseas stars like Little Tich, Marie Lloyd, Harry Houdini and W. C. Fields that dominate the account. The implications therefore have long been that no local activity is being mentioned because there wasn't much to speak of and that which did occur was second or worse still, third rate. An erroneous and biased historical account has continued to be reinforced then because historians have too readily accepted at face value generalisations that this thesis will show are easily proven to be illogical or baseless. The recontextualisation of variety entertainment has

been allowed, however, because very few studies have attempted to extend their historical analysis beyond the contemporary perspective and into the real world of past industrial activity.

The historian's choice of words and syntax can equally valorise or expand a subject's status beyond that in which it was held or seen by the public of the time. Harry Rickards, for example, is routinely referred to as the "king of vaudeville." He has been constructed as an almost myth-like figure who like the Emperor "Napoleon"<sup>42</sup> was a "self-made man"<sup>43</sup> who "reigned"<sup>44</sup> over the industry. At the other end of this variety continuum are the unseemly mass of performers and managers, the drunks and performance frauds that clung to the lower rungs of the industry. In between these extremes are the run of the mill or "second rank" practitioners like J. C. Bain.<sup>45</sup> The extent to which the misuse of language can distort or debase reputations can be seen in Entertaining Australia, where entrepreneurs Dan Tracey and Frank Smith are said to have "soon closed their doors because their rival Harry Rickards was so successful" (120). There is no doubt that both men faced financial difficulties in the early 1890s that led to them abandoning their entrepreneurial careers around 1892/93, almost at the same time as Rickards opened his first Tivoli Theatre in Sydney. The implications behind phrases like "soon closed their doors" in the same sentence as "rival" and "Harry Rickards' success" are obvious. Rickards quickly put them out of business. Richard Waterhouse reinforces this perception by proposing that Harry Rickards' Tivoli network drove most of the other variety companies out of business and that from 1892 onwards he "enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the Australian stage, defeating all attempts... to establish a rival circuit." His conclusion that "only with the arrival of James Brennan was the Rickards' stranglehold finally broken" (116), like the other claims is pure myth, however - a result of the erroneous assumption that there was a direct connection between Tracey and Smith closing down their operations and the opening of Rickards' ultimately successful Tivoli Theatre. Indeed, neither author appears to have understood the fundamental tenets of competitive business practice nor the actual level of industry activity of that period, and hence their choice of description only serves to exemplify a problem of "language" that structuralist theory argues against, and for good reason.

What these historical reconstructions suggest is that no one, not even Dan Tracey and Frank Smith, could compete with Rickards because he staged more attractive programs, which in turn led to more people attending his shows. The result was that less people patronised his rivals' entertainments, sending them into financial ruin. This scenario is erroneous, firstly because Smith and Tracey serviced a different market than Rickards. The survey of reviews,

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<sup>42</sup> Monica Crouch "Harry Rickards: The Napoleon of Vaudeville" (1990), 73-84.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Waterhouse. "From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville" (1990), 120.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Van Stratton. "Harry Rickards" in Parsons and Chance, eds. Companion to Theatre in Australia (1995), 501-2.

<sup>45</sup> John West's description. See his entry in the Companion to Theatre in Australia (1995), 79.

performers and audiences over the period in which they operated together in Sydney clearly shows this (see Appendix C). Furthermore, no other entrepreneur from 1892 onwards was interested in targeting Rickards/Tivoli audience demographic, apart from perhaps the Fullers in later years, because it was a niche market. Even when the Fullers attempted to create an up-market operation in competition with Hugh D. McIntosh the evidence suggests that it was only a temporary (and Melbourne-based) business decision.<sup>46</sup> It is for the same reason that Harry Clay did not try to take on Ted Holland in Brisbane when touring Queensland and James Brennan did not attempt to go head to head with Rickards in Sydney as Waterhouse and other historians have proposed. There was simply no advantage in that strategy because the upper-level, high quality market was too small. Both Brennan and Rickards would certainly have counted on (and coveted) a percentage of cross-over patrons in Sydney, but by and large both businessmen targeted the audience they knew best and could best attract.

If we examine more closely the suggestion that Smith, Tracey and Rickards were in direct competition with each other, it is easy to see that such a proposal is problematic. For a start any reference to the entrepreneurs of this period must include F. E. Hiscocks because he more than any other variety manager attempted to compete against Rickards - as seen by the fact that in 1889 he disbanded the hugely popular Federal Minstrels and went into direct competition with Rickards by putting together the London Pavilion Company. That his name does not appear in Entertaining Australia along with Rickards, Tracey and Smith indicates that the author was not familiar with either the variety industry at that time or with Hiscocks' position as one of its leading figures. What has not been considered until now is that the timing of the Smith and Tracey closures was coincidental, and very likely the result of a combination of forces relating to the depression and common management issues - including "un-enterprising direction, inefficient management, insufficient capital-raising ability, lack of adaptability to changing circumstances, poor judgment leading to frequent and costly mistakes, or simply bad luck due to circumstances beyond their control" (Penrose 7). To suggest that Rickards closed Smith and Tracey down by putting on better entertainments is erroneous not just because he targeted a different market, but because it implies by association that most of the Alhambra Theatre (Smith) and School of Arts (Tracey) audiences went across to the Tivoli. The capacity limit at the Tivoli is one good indication that such an audience migration could not have occurred.

**1.4 (iii) Erroneous Historical Reconstruction:** The issue of erroneous reconstruction of history has been identified in the previous sections, but largely in response to neglect and

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<sup>46</sup> Evidence arguing that the Fullers attempted to target an up-market audience can be seen in their Melbourne operations - whereby one theatre in the city would offer the "low-brow" revivals while the other theatre staged a higher class of vaudeville. There appears to have been less differentiation between the Fullers' audiences in Sydney, though. See Chapter 5 for further details regarding the opening of the Fullers' Palace Theatre in 1916 (page 218).

various types of bias from the wider theatre history community. In this section the discussion turns more directly towards examining the way historians have engaged with research into variety. The research undertaken during this project has in fact identified many dozens of erroneous claims concerning Australian variety industry activity, many of which are examined either in this dissertation or presented in the production database and individual biographies (see Appendices C and D respectively). While such errors and inconsistencies might singularly have little overall effect, collectively they demonstrate that currently Australian theatre history practice is not able to cope with variety theatre, even when details or information were once widely known and reported in the country. An example of this is that two of the biggest stars on the nineteenth century Australia stage, Charlie Fanning and W. Horace Bent, are still believed to have been "imported negro performers" (Bard 76-7), when it was well-known during their lives that both had been born in the country.<sup>47</sup> The problem of erroneous historical reconstruction appears to stem then from three ineffective approaches: a) an over-reliance on secondary sources; b) the failure to investigate the accuracy of these secondary sources; and c) the acceptance of memoir by ex-performers and other industry practitioners whose credentials have never been investigated (discussed in the following section).

Returning to the Rickards/Tivoli industry-domination myth, it might appear to be an error isolated in its specific context, but in fact there is a flow-on effect that extends into other areas of industrial activity. The issue here is that because the Tivoli organisation has been viewed as the dominant variety organisation, its fortunes have also been linked to those of the variety industry itself. This has led to the supposition that variety theatre activity was in serious decline in Australia by the early 1920s because the Tivoli was struggling to find audiences. It is certainly the case that Hugh D. McIntosh's management saw the Tivoli operations undergo a decline in both prosperity and critical appraisal for more than a decade. This thesis will argue, however, that other companies like the Fullers, Harry Clay, Birch and Carroll were growing at an unprecedented rate during the war years, and newly emerging entrepreneurs like Andy Kerr and Bert Howard were finding the new circumstances much to their advantage. While some measure of blame can be attributed to the difficulties the Tivoli had in securing imported artists during and immediately following the war, much blame must be levelled at McIntosh's failure to capitalise on the groundswell of enthusiasm for local revusical productions around the country.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Bent was born in Sydney in 1844 to Andrew Bent and his wife Honorah; while Fanning, the older brother of Tivoli coon singer Maud Fanning and contralto singer, Bertha, was born at Newcastle, NSW. Bard's claim, too, that Horace Bent was still performing around the 1910 era is incorrect, because this hugely influential Australian comedian died in September 1907. See Appendix D for further details on Bent and Fanning.

<sup>48</sup> See Chapters Two and Five for further details concerning McIntosh and the Tivoli operations c1913-1919.

An example of over-reliance on non-primary evidence can be seen in a recent paper "Roy Rene 'Mo': Australian Clown or Monarch of the Mob." The author, Kathy Leahy, attempts to argue an alternative historical and cultural narrative for Rene based entirely on secondary publications - citing among others Rene's autobiography, Fred Parson's biography and essays by Richard Waterhouse and Max Harris. Her reliance on these sources, which the following chapters will demonstrate contain numerous errors themselves, effectively makes her entire argument baseless. Two issues become very clear when reading the essay. One is that Leahy is not familiar with fundamental aspects of variety production. She writes, for example, that Ben Fuller promoted Rene from cornerman to Hebrew comedian during a tour of New Zealand. In the first place, the senior position in any minstrel-based show was always the endman (also known as the cornerman). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the position was given only to the most experienced comics in the company (Toll 54-5; Engel xviii).<sup>49</sup> In later years as the minstrel show gradually lost its appeal, the role of tambo or bones might be given to someone who showed promise - as Roy Rene more than likely did - but even the interlocutor held no greater attraction than the endmen.<sup>50</sup> This is because each show's success often hinged on the comic repartee and improvisation between the two comics. The second point is that even when Rene was on the corner in the first part he would still have been performing in the second half as a Hebrew comic. To suggest that he had been promoted is therefore wrong on both counts because Rene would have been required to perform the two duties. A much more likely scenario is that the reverse situation occurred; that Rene was employed as a second part Hebrew comic and then promoted to the first part-cornerman position. That Leahy does not understand this fundamental industrial practice is likely the result of both her over-reliance on secondary sources and lack of knowledge about the variety industry at that time.

Several other major errors are also made by Leahy. The claim that Rene adopted his professional name in 1916 is wrong as he was using the name at least as early as 1913 while on Harry Clay's circuit (see Rene's entry in Appendix D).<sup>51</sup> The reference to Rene being called "Monarch of the Mob" and "King of the Mob" (95) is another post-Stiffy and Mo construction. Not one Stiffy and Mo review, article or advertisement uncovered during this study refers to either title being used in connection with Roy Rene during the era under investigation. It is

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<sup>49</sup> In the local context Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels (arguably the most popular Australian minstrel company of the nineteenth century), demonstrates the importance of the endmen. These roles were almost exclusively undertaken by W. Horace Bent (bones) and Sam Keenan (tambo), two of the highest profile Australian-based comics in the country.

<sup>50</sup> "Mr Interlocutor" was also a position requiring the experience of a senior performer. The claim here is based on the greater audience appeal of the endmen, whose chief role was to align themselves with the audience. The interlocutor, on the other hand, was required to present a formal, authoritative and more pretentious persona.

<sup>51</sup> Leahy possibly relies on Victoria Chance's entry in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (1995) for this information (page 485).

believed to have been attached to his name only after he started touring his Merry Monarchs' company in 1929. As Chapter Five will clearly show, Nat Phillips and Roy Rene were viewed by the contemporary public essentially as equals - with Phillips possibly accorded greater attention because he starred in, wrote, produced and often composed songs for the company. Again, the construction of Roy Rene as the comic genius of Stiffy and Mo is an historical reconstruction - recycled and repeated by historians and writers who have never bothered to undertake primary source research.

A second concern with Leahy's essay is that "Mo" is deemed to have been a fully fleshed out character from the start; that he was essentially the same character at the end as he was when Rene created him. This is an approach that denies real-world structures relating to creative growth and out-side influences. An examination of the Stiffy and Mo scripts in Appendix A and the manuscripts held in the Nat Phillips Collection indicate, for example, that Mo's character developed over time. The long held assumption that Rene's humour was always blue is another erroneous conclusion sustained by Leahy and others. Certainly there was an element of innuendo in his comedy, but there is very little evidence to suggest that his on-stage performance was of moral concern to audiences and critics up until the latter stage of the Stiffy and Mo partnership (c1927-1928). This issue of erroneous historical reconstruction as it pertains to Roy Rene and Nat Phillips, arguably among the country's greatest ever comedy duo, is examined at length in Chapter Six.

Another misconception arising from the lack of primary source research into variety concerns the pre-1930s' Australian-written revusical. Because revue has long been the term used to refer to these productions, the presumption continues to be that it was of a type similar to the modern understanding of the genre. Contemporary descriptions also tend to liken the revue to a locally-adapted (down-market) version of American "Follies" and English revue - as staged by leading producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld (USA) and Charles B. Cochrane (UK). Typically then, the Australian revue/revusical is viewed as a series of unrelated topical and/or satirical sketches, dances and songs brought together under a thematic umbrella, or at the very least through a catchy title. John West's reference to British revues in his Companion to Theatre in Australia entry implies, for example, that the Fullers and Hugh D. McIntosh staged this same type of revue. His suggestion that "revue had ousted true vaudeville completely by the 1930s" (500), further implies that the revue of the 1930s and beyond was essentially the same as those staged between circa 1915 and the late 1920s.

West is not alone in assembling secondary source information to arrive at this conclusion. Delyse Ryan and Katrina J. Bard both maintain a similar position. While Bard proposes that the

revues contained some semblance of a storyline, the inference is that this was of little consequence because the plots tended to be so thin they became "quickly lost in the quick exchange of repartee" (69-70).<sup>52</sup> Pamela Heckenberg and Philip Parsons describe a theme-based and import/adaptation genre:

Revue made its appearance in Australia during the war years. These parades of singing, dancing and costume display laced with comedy probably found their earliest Australian equivalent in Hugh D. McIntosh's Tivoli Follies of 1916. At the same time, however, the circuits were advertising revue companies named after and loosely built around a leading performer with some gesture towards a central idea in their programs, though they were in fact performing straight vaudeville with a second half given over to comedy sketches (128).

Of concern here, however, is the suggestion that Hugh D. McIntosh was involved in developing or introducing the revue in 1916. This claim is wide of the mark, not just because the revue was first introduced to Australia by J. C. Williamsons,<sup>53</sup> and that local revusicals had been undergoing their hybridised development since at least early 1915, but because McIntosh's organisation played no part in the development of the Australian revusical whatsoever. Heckenberg and Parsons have in this respect confused his imported shows with an entirely different genre.

The revusical's generic make-up is further complicated by descriptions put forward in later years by several ex-vaudevillians. Although the professional credentials of these past practitioners is rarely an issue, their recollections are all too often accepted without question. In Valantyne Napier's Glossary of Terms Used in Variety, for example, revue productions are once again described as being "several scenes based on a loose theme and with a title to the show," while post-1930 Tivoli and Fuller stars like Roy Rene, George Wallace and Jim Gerald are identified as revue comics" (xi). Although seemingly straightforward, Napier's description reinforces the belief that the revues of both eras were the same by erroneous association. The evidence put forward in this thesis contradicts Napier's perspective, suggesting in the process that she has inadvertently collapsed the pre-1930s' revusicals of her early childhood with post-1930s' revue (the genre she knew as a teenage and adult vaudevillian). A check of Napier's age would show that she was little more than ten years old by the time the revusical's popularity had begun to slide in the mid to late-1920s.<sup>54</sup> As will be demonstrated later in the thesis,<sup>55</sup> the revusical was a significantly different genre to the one Napier describes.

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<sup>52</sup> Ryan's claim is discussed in the following section on memoir.

<sup>53</sup> In fact the first British-style "revue" to be staged in Australia was Come Over Here, which toured Sydney and Melbourne in late 1913. Written by Max Pemberton and W. Mizner (and adapted for Australian audiences by the director, Frank Dix), the cast included several high profile English performers – notably Daisy Jerome and Jack Cannot in their first appearances in this country. Also in the company were Fred Leslie and Ivy Schilling. See, for example, the season at Her Majesty's Theatre (Syd), 20 Dec. 1913.

<sup>54</sup> The daughter of Hector Napier ("The Human Spider") Valantyne Napier was born in 1923. As she claims to have made her first professional stage appearance in 1930 (aged 7), her knowledge of the revusical (1916-ca. 1928) was most likely second hand.

<sup>55</sup> See Chapters Four and Five and Appendix F for further details of the narrative structure and issues relating to nomenclature of revusicals.

**1.4 (iv) Memoir:** The capacity to re-contextualise, condense and change events, or even introduce other peoples' recall as one's own, are aspects of human reconstructive memory that have been studied at length by psychologists such as Frederic Bartlett in the 1930s, Sulin and Dooling (1970s) and by Elizabeth Loftus in the 1970s and 1980s. Their findings demonstrate that humans tend to reinterpret events in their memory (even within short periods of time) that differ to the actual event. We do this through two fundamental processes - reconstructive and constructive distortion. Over time these responses allow an individual's recall of particular events, even ones that did not involve them, to become progressively more embedded as memory. As Wayne Weiten summarises, "*reconstructive* errors are distortions that are introduced during retrieval, as people fill in gaps based on their schemas and scripts [while] *constructive* errors are distortions introduced during encoding and storage as people rearrange events to mesh with their schemas and scripts" (250-1).

Although it has long been a tenant of historical research that memoir, whether biography or autobiography, can be unreliable and has the potential to distort the past, historians surveying variety activity have been given little alternative due to the paucity of primary source material available. The realisation that there was an increasingly urgent need to orally record the history of twentieth century theatre pioneers did not begin to occur in earnest until well into the 1980s. By this time, however, most of the pre-1930s performers were either deceased or had long since retired from all contact with the industry - effectively disappearing from public record. Unfortunately, even the relatively few ex-performers in a position to talk to historians were able to accurately recall specific details about their own careers or those of their peers. These recordings and interviews were also often undertaken by people both untrained in critical investigation procedures and unfamiliar with the era - particularly the variety industry. Thus interviews tended to be directed by the participant rather than by the researcher/recordist. This has ultimately led to the continued reconstruction of a history of variety theatre formed from various levels of reconstructive and constructive distortion. This problem is not confined to recent times, however. The same issue arises within the historical period under investigation, as the following example demonstrates. In 1916 a contributor to the Theatre recalled Martyn Hagan and Lucy Fraser's success as headliners in the Williamson and Musgrove pantomime, Sinbad the Sailor. "I saw [them] dozens of times on the vaudeville boards," writes J. G. "It is doubtful if there ever was a panto before or since that was better known than this one" ("Hagans" 52). Research can now confirm, however, that he has confused the 1896 Williamson and Musgrove production of Sinbad (which did not include among the principal cast members Hagan and Fraser) with the 1894 pantomime Cinderella (which they did appear in). Although Hagan and Fraser were not engaged as dame and principal boy for the premiere Sydney

production they were promoted to the roles when the production went on tour in early 1895.<sup>56</sup> This example is a reminder that much critical appraisal needs to be applied to any and all aspects of historical investigation based on recollection.

The usefulness of memoir, on the other hand, is its capacity to provide colour and background to the history. Very few of these recalls can be given primary source weight, however, because they are themselves too often based on secondary sources (industry gossip, referred memory etc). There is little doubt, for example, that Charles Norman's recall of the variety industry during the 1920s - a period when he was actively engaged in the industry - serves as a valuable source of historical record. The series of interviews I held with Norman in the months before his death in 1997,<sup>57</sup> provide many insights into the day to day operations of Clay's company that I would not otherwise have been able to access. On the other hand, my research up until then had uncovered much primary source information - some of which contradicted Norman's recall. These were mostly issues relating to dates and specific details. It became clear, too, that his recall of industry-related events prior to the 1920s were not always his, an aspect which also occurs in When Vaudeville was King. In one instance, for example, Norman writes: "When George [Sorlie] finally got to Sydney he joined up with Harry Clay's circuit, which was my first stamping ground of any merit. The circuit took five weeks to complete. George opened at the Newtown Bridge Theatre, as it was always referred to" (63). Norman's account cannot be right because the Bridge Theatre was not built until 1913 - some ten years after Sorlie first began working for Clay (see Sorlie's entry in Appendix D for further details). In this instance Norman has inadvertently collapsed the Bridge Theatre with St George's Hall, the theatre that Clay hired for his Newtown shows between 1901 and 1913. Norman also refers to the early traveling variety show circuits having been opened up by Harry Rickards and that companies like Harry Clay mostly "played small towns where people waved at passing trains" (130-31). Chapters Two and Three demonstrate, however, that regional touring networks had developed around Australia long before Rickards started sending companies into the country. Appendix C provides numerous examples of companies touring regional Australia from the 1850s onwards. My research into Clay's Queensland operations (1901-18), reveals, too, that very few of the towns along that circuit were small enough, or far enough off the beaten track, that locals would find his arrival by train a novelty.

Another example of erroneous memoir is that which has had serious repercussions in terms of the way we think about Nat Phillips' role in the Stiffy and Mo partnership. In his biography of Roy Rene, A Man Called Mo, Fred Parsons presents a complex array of fact and

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<sup>56</sup> See Martyn Hagan entry in Appendix D. For details on Sinbad the Sailor see Appendix C (1896 entry).

<sup>57</sup> See Djubal, Clay. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998).

fiction that requires some diligence on the part of the historian attempting to account for the career of Rene. Given authorial weight through his long association with Rene (as both an acquaintance and writer), Parsons provides five chapters' worth of personal insights into the comic's life and career, including the Stiffy and Mo years, before indicating that it was not until a few years before the Second World War that he had first made personal contact with the famous comic. "The year was 1936," he writes (39). A number of issues come into play with this account, making it a less than reliable source of historical activity. First, Parsons' version of events must be considered as containing some degree of bias given that he and Rene worked together for many years in a creative relationship. Second, the Stiffy and Mo years are all second hand reporting because he had not been involved in Rene's life prior to 1936, and very likely never met Nat Phillips personally.<sup>58</sup> Parsons' only direct access to Stiffy and Mo was therefore as a fan. Third, because the book itself was written in the early 1970s (almost fifty years after the Stiffy and Mo partnership had ended), all aspects relating to them must be treated with circumspection. Perhaps the most serious fabrication, as Chapter Six demonstrates in more detail, is the claim that Rene was the superior comic:

The original idea was that Nat and Roy were to be the co-stars, but Roy had other ideas about that. There was never room for another comedian in any show that he was in, not even if the other comic was his partner. Within months, it was obvious that Mo was far funnier than Stiffy. Nat Phillips realised this. But he was a good businessman, and a much better producer than a performer. So he was quite content to let Roy get most of the laughs. Actually, there was little he could have done about it. Roy always dominated a stage, no matter who was on it with him (18).

Chapter Six also provides a great deal of primary source evidence contradicting the long-held belief that Phillips was Rene's on-stage feed or straightman. Not only was Nat Phillips regarded as one of the country's finest comics (as well as a leading producer of pantomime and revusical), it was common knowledge throughout most of their career together that the pair did not work as a traditional straightman and comic but developed an act in which both men shared the comedy honours. Parsons' account must therefore be seen as a combination of recontextualised memory and secondary sources written more than half a century after the duo ended their partnership. It is also an account written by someone whose memory of Rene was very likely biased in his favour through their relationship in later years.<sup>59</sup> Despite these problems with accountability (including a number of glaring errors),<sup>60</sup> the book is still used as a major source by historians.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Phillips died some four years before Parson's first met Rene.

<sup>59</sup> Roy Rene's recollection that Bill Sadler invented the names Stiffy and Mo is another example of memory distortion (Mo's Memoirs 63). Sadler in fact only came up with the name "Mo," as Phillips had been presenting his Stiffy on stage for at least a year prior to joining Rene in their partnership (see Chapter 5 and the Rene and Phillips entries in Appendix D).

<sup>60</sup> For example, Parson dates Stiffy and Mo's debut performance as being in 1914 (it was 1916).

<sup>61</sup> See for example, Kathy Leahy. "Roy Rene." Australasian Drama Studies 42 (2003), 91-111.

The problem for historiography is that such observations are invariably repeated within later studies, thus effectively cementing myth as fact. One can follow the trail beginning just seven years after A Man Called Mo was published, when a contributor to Entertaining Australia reiterated Parsons' account that "Phillips, [the] accomplished] straightman, fed Mo with ease" (178). This is further echoed by Katrina J. Bard who writes: "Nat was traditionally the 'feed' - it was his role to offer situations, quips and anecdotes which Mo then developed into comic descriptions. Mo invariably got the laughs" (70). The entries on Phillips and Stiffy and Mo in the Companion to Theatre in Australia further reinforce the myth by indicating that Phillips was the "straightman" (561) who "fed" Rene (441). The Companion also levers Rene's status above Phillips by claiming that he "brought [the revues] alive" through his "comic genius" (561). In not one instance, however, is any primary evidence provided to support these claims.

Another specific example of recontextualised memory occurs in relation to our understanding of the revusical. Delyse Ryan cites a letter by William Kursey to Nancye Bridges to support her description of this theatrical genre as staged in Brisbane during the First World War. Kursey claims that from its opening the Cremorne Theatre was almost entirely devoted to what was then called intimate revue, recalling: "The standard cast comprised male singers (bass, baritone and tenor) and female singers (soprano and contralto)... a stock comedian, two leading dancers, a soubrette, and a small ballet, usually numbering about six." Kursey also indicates that musical numbers were accompanied by an on-stage pianist (129). The issue of contention, here, however, is that no primary source evidence has been found to support Kursey's recall. Taking each issue at time it can be seen how problematic memoir is when taken on its own.

In the first instance, Kursey's reference to intimate revue is not associated with any production during the period under examination, including those staged in Sydney, Melbourne or Perth. Several points need to be considered here. First Ryan has assumed that Kursey is referring to productions staged in the years immediately following the opening of the Cremorne in 1911 and up until at least 1919. However, the term "opening" was not used only in reference to the "Grand Opening" of a new theatre. It could equally apply to any time a theatre re-opened after renovations or whenever new management took over the lease, and hence Kursey could be referring to a much later period in the Cremorne's history.<sup>62</sup> For McCallum to have been producing intimate revues at the Cremorne in 1911 as Kursey claims would require, too, further re-writing of history because the genre did not even emerge in Britain until Charles B. Cochrane started essaying it in London in 1914 (Hartnoll 690-2). A comprehensive survey of Brisbane variety theatre between 1914 and 1919 indicates that revusicals, musical scenas and costume

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<sup>62</sup> For example, Will Mahoney's time as lessee of the Cremorne in the mid-1940s.

comedy were the favoured forms of music theatre being staged at the Cremorne. A third point concerns Kursey's reference to the vocal capacity of the singers, thereby proposing that the important roles in these "revues" were the singing characters. Such a suggestion has no basis, because a performer's experience as an actor and/or comedian was almost always preferred over singing ability. The Nat Phillips' Collection contains numerous scripts which call for theatrical and not vocal types. Furthermore, the presence of a pianist on stage in a revue was quite rare. Pianists did appear on the stage when a vaudeville act called for a piano as part of the turn and, no doubt, for any revusical that required a piano as part of the narrative. A close examination of standard production techniques in the revusical industry indicates, on the other hand, that the vast majority of city-based productions utilised a small orchestra (or ensemble), usually based around a core unit of pianist and drummer who were situated off stage. The most common instrument after these two was the violin, with cornets and trumpets also popular. Taking all these points into consideration it must be considered that Kursey's recall is either erroneous or perhaps as appears to have happened with similar memoir, he has inadvertently collapsed two different time periods from his memory into one.

As the previous section demonstrates, a number of significant problems exist in the way variety theatre has been researched up until now, and that many of the conclusions drawn must now be reevaluated. In order to do this, however, a new approach to surveying variety industry activity is required, one that accounts for the way the industry and its practitioners operated, the extent to which these operations were carried out on a national scale and without the baggage of presumed historical knowledge.

## **2. THE VARIETY METHODOLOGY AND ITS PROTOCOLS**

The variety methodology's strength as a research tool is its operational design - the extent to which its research parameters more effectively identify previously unrecognised activity and practitioners, and its capacity for lowering institutional and personal bias. While the methodology's development required some trial and error during the early research phase, the premise that industrial activity be given precedence over the text has always been fundamental to the design, and as such has guided its progress from inception. To a large extent this has been necessary because not only have very few texts survived, but also the industry itself was geared towards a non-text-based entertainment practice. Thus any investigation into variety theatre must always be attempting to interpret industrial activity and performance as signifiers of social interaction and cultural practice. This is not to say that texts (or the content of any particular

performance) do not have relevance, but that both issues require attention in order to provide a more reflective interpretation.

By focusing on variety's operational ideology - an industrial logic that initially developed through the influence of visiting minstrel troupes during the 1870s - the methodology acknowledges that its professional practice always operated within a commercial market structure. The industry did this through a system of processes that are not only intrinsic to capital-driven investment but at the same time invite a "close and often uneasy link between cultural and economic activity" (Rowe 20). These are processes, too, which John Fiske argues must bear the interests of the people. "Popular culture," he writes, "is not [just] consumption, it is culture - the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system" (23). For David Rowe popular culture is also "the domain of simple, bodily pleasures which could - indeed, must be readily differentiated from the complex, cerebral forms of culture which could only be commanded and understood after rigorous training" (3). As he further notes: "Popular culture is regarded as those shifting sets of social and cultural relations, meanings and texts which in varying ways emerge as contemporary forms of pleasure, leisure, style and identity, and which are linked to personal and expressive politics, aesthetic address and cultural economy" (7-8). It is this capacity to similarly balance popular culture production with industrial mechanisms that sees the methodology operate more effectively with variety activity than previous approaches.

In order to overcome the difficulties and biases that appear to have distorted the history of variety activity in Australia up until the 1930s, it was necessary to establish two clear objectives. First, to conduct a more inclusive and less biased research survey; and second to extend the parameters of traditional research methodology so that they more effectively accounted for industrial and social activity. This new methodology essentially departs from previous approaches through the formation of four key protocols: Equity, Industrial, Primary Source and Blanket Search.

## **2.1 The Equity Protocol:**

Because this new methodological approach situates "theatre" and "entertainment" as having equal value, it seeks to avoid a predetermined value system. Not only does it refuse to position "high art" cultural capital as more deserving of attention and validation than "low" culture entertainment, but within the variety industry itself all practitioners are initially treated as data repositories. Over time the data itself signifies various levels of activity. All subsequent conclusions are therefore formed from the collected data rather than the other way around -

whereby personal interests and contemporary institutional practice dictate the outcome by focusing on particular subjects from the outset.

The complex problem of language - its ability to infer perceptions beyond literal meaning - is another aspect through which the egalitarian logic attempts to reduce inadvertent bias. This aspect of the methodological design effectively runs against the rationale of historicism, which attempts to make sense of raw data by creating a historical meta-narrative. Appendices C and D, and indeed this thesis, prefers to allow the data to tell the history. Wherever supposition is required or aspects of the data appear incongruous, the study aims to acknowledge this so that historians coming to the area in later years have a more objective foundation from which further investigation can proceed. Simply put, whenever particular aspects of the history are unknown and/or unclear, and supposition is required, this is acknowledged.

Another aspect of the Equity Protocol has been to treat all areas of production as equal. For example Sydney and Melbourne are traditionally valued as being more important to the drama historian than say Brisbane or Adelaide, and certainly of much greater importance than regional centres. As previously argued, however, the variety industry could not have existed without the regional circuits, and hence their key role in providing greater opportunities for both employment and creative development (i.e. the out-of-town tryout). The long-held validation of Harry Rickards and the Tivoli organisation as the principal providers of variety entertainment and of Sydney and Melbourne as the epicentres of activity are major contributors to the continually reinforced notion that little other activity occurred in Australia. This protocol is another instance of the methodology investigating variety production on the industry's terms and not through retrospective assumption.

The equity protocol also provides the historian with an opportunity to present his or her findings with a higher level of ethical considerations - much as one is obliged to do in dealing with contemporary research and investigation. Applying discriminatory labels ("second rank"), proposing baseless scenarios (he "went to the wall through an inability to compete with his rival") and/or to levelling judgement (he was a "drunkard") in order to make sense of historical activity is therefore deemed unethical on two counts. First, no entire life, career or even individual incident can possibly be reduced to generalisations; and second, individuals from the past no longer have a voice and thus are not allowed an opportunity to defend themselves. This protocol's egalitarian logic therefore attempts to apply a level yardstick not only to notions of "success" or "significance," but also to the positioning of reputations. This does not mean that controversial or discriminatory issues cannot be raised, but rather that they need to be flagged as supposition unless supported by irrefutable evidence.

## **2.2 The Industrial Protocol:**

The dissertation's focus on industrial organisation and infrastructure is examined at length in the following chapter, and hence requires only a brief overview here. Suffice it to say, the methodological tools utilised in the reconstruction of the pre-1930s' variety industry are essentially those of commercial business practice theory (competitive strategies) and networking (including the notion of cross-generational relationships between emerging and senior practitioners). The emergence of an Australian variety entertainment industry is seen therefore as one that developed in response to both the foreign (primarily American) business model and local conditions. Chief among these local factors were the country's smaller population and greater distances between centres, the popular culture's increasing desire to see Australian performers and entertainments, the 1880s/early 1890s' depression and the rise of a nationalist identity in the immediate post-Federation era.

In attempting to reconstruct industrial activity - and particularly in evaluating the effect such activity had on audiences, the industry or individual practitioners - various critical yardsticks have been put in place. As mentioned in previously, any supposition concerning aspects of industry is required to be highlighted. The methodology also refuses to be swayed by reviews or opinions of the day unless these claims are backed by evidence from other sources. As with autobiographical reconstruction and the self-aggrandising anecdote, problems occur when terms such as "success" - as in a successful season or production, or "popular" are applied too generously. The study therefore situates success in much the same way that Eric Irvin does - by rating the level of success against factors such as the length of a company's season in one locality, the length of a stay by a particular artist or troupe, or the length of a run by a particular production.<sup>63</sup> Where critical responses seem to concur with the practical aspects these are conveyed. If there is conflict between the two, the practical aspects are accorded primacy.

## **2.3 The Primary Source Protocol:**

The third protocol concerns the project's almost exclusive reliance on primary research (newspapers, magazines, and archival material) rather than on memoir or secondary sources. This aspect is perhaps less a departure from traditional methodology than it is a reaction to much of the published theatre history. It is being acknowledged therefore that a good deal of what is currently assumed to be historical fact has been re-produced time and again from suspect initial (and often secondary) sources, thus serving to reinforce an assumed account which bears little

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<sup>63</sup> In his survey of productions in *Australian Melodrama* (1981), Irvin writes: "The yardstick of a play's success or failure has been the one used by managers, actors, and authors themselves - the number of performances the play received. This is a purely commercial assessment in what was a purely commercial theatre" (xi).

resemblance to actual events. Examples of these types of erroneous reconstruction will be highlighted throughout the thesis.

## **2.4 The "Blanket Search" Protocol:**

The fourth protocol was vital to both the early development of the methodology and in allowing the other protocols to maintain their objective focus. The "blanket search" protocol's genesis lies in my earlier research into Australian-born vaudeville entrepreneur, Harry Clay. I began that project with almost no knowledge of my subject or the industry of his era, and with the initially misguided belief that his historical significance would be best understood in relation to the artists he employed and nurtured (I was unaware, for example, that he had forged a considerable reputation as a singer before undertaking his entrepreneurial career). The first objective then was to collect data on all individuals connected in any way to Clay or his operations. The unexpected result of this survey was that more than 2,000 variety practitioners were identified as having been in his employ (very few of who are recorded in current theatre history). Many dozens of other practitioners were also identified as having been associated with Clay during his earlier career as a minstrel tenor (c1885-1900). That survey, much of it not utilised in the Harry Clay thesis, indicated time and again that the published history in respect of both particular high profile individuals and the industry in general was too often either incorrect or inadequate. Over the past seven years the number of performers known to have been associated with Clay has grown by more than 500 (see Appendix H). One result of this data collation is that a much clearer picture of industry activity has emerged. Had the earlier research focus been directed primarily at Clay, as with the more traditional approach, most of these performers, industry practitioners and indeed the industry itself would have remained hidden and this dissertation would have had no investigative basis.

Using the same methodological principles the current study has extended the previous study by compiling a database that both identifies and maps the careers of more than 200 Australian music theatre writers, librettists and songwriters whose careers were undertaken at some stage up to the 1930s. More than forty of these practitioners were not included in the previous database as they were not known to have been associated with Harry Clay's operations.<sup>64</sup> In addition the database includes more than 1,000 revusicals and burlesques known to have been written and staged by Australians up until the late 1920s (see Appendix C). The methodology's *modus operandi*, founded on the above protocols, relies on two key research undertakings - the use of temporal and geographical grids.

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<sup>64</sup> Appendix D contains a sample of updated biographical entries on nineteenth century and early twentieth century music theatre practitioners.

## **2.5 The Temporal Grid:**

The establishment of a temporal grid effectively requires the researcher to treat the historical period in question as an investigative site – not unlike that of an archaeological site. My grid design therefore confined the principal research to the years 1890 and 1919, with two secondary (interest) grids 1850-1889 and 1919-1930. The primary grid area required a comprehensive survey of the available primary sources for that 20 year period using a "time slice" technique - whereby all available primary sources were mapped every five years. Some additional one year spot surveys have also been carried out in the secondary grid at particular places in order to follow up lines of inquiry. A map of the completed research grid is included on the following pages.

## **2.6 The Geographical Grid:**

The establishment of a geographical grid has allowed the thesis to more effectively map the variety industry's logistical network. By focusing attention towards the circuits variety artists toured, along with the capital cities, the information initially surfaced in no discernable order. Gradually, however, a picture of particular artist's movements and other useful data began to emerge. In some instances it was possible to track a performer using my growing knowledge of established touring patterns, while in many other instances particular artists (whose files had since grown) simply appeared with no warning.

Newspaper sources emanating from Sydney and Melbourne (Sydney Morning Herald, Age and Argus) were utilised, as were those from Queensland (primarily but not exclusively the Brisbane Courier) and Perth (primarily, but not exclusively, the West Australian). The geographical grid does not currently include South Australia or Tasmania, due to difficulties in obtaining newspapers from South Australia and Tasmania. Nevertheless, a good deal of information has been located in respect of those states.

Because few companies failed to stop in either Brisbane or Perth, the Brisbane Courier and Western Australian also allow a solid identification process of activity within each state to be carried out.<sup>65</sup> Companies touring the Queensland and Western Australian circuits up until the mid-1920s more often than not followed predictable routes, and thus it is not especially difficult to track individual companies at any time leading up to the pre-1930s. In Western Australia, for example, troupes tended to follow similar patterns – playing Perth and Fremantle before and/or after undertaking short tours of the goldfields. Furthermore, companies would invariably play seasons in Adelaide either on the way to Western Australia or on the way back (and sometimes

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<sup>65</sup> No other suitable newspaper resources were available for this study. While this is unfortunate, the evidence collected from other states is believed to be sufficient.

both). In Queensland, companies would either start in Brisbane (if arriving by steamer) or in Toowoomba (if travelling by train). Up until the First World War the north Queensland circuit operated mostly along the coast through a combination of steamer and rail, with any inland deviations also largely travelled by rail. Ready access to some smaller regional newspapers, notably the Northern Miner (Charters Towers), has allowed much more useful data to emerge – particularly in respect of biographical details.

## **2.7 The Survey Parameters:**

Each Saturday (or Friday<sup>66</sup>) edition of a target newspaper has its advertising and entertainment section scanned. A comprehensive data gathering process is then undertaken – noting artists, companies, venues, dates, productions (if they fall within the search parameters). Those artists known to be non-Australian or non-Australian residents are not recorded. Each Monday (or Saturday) review is scanned for additional information, as are any additional columns of interest, for example "Music and Drama" columns or editorial sections.

Industry magazines like the Theatre, Australian Variety, Everyone's, Green Room, Fuller News etc were thoroughly scanned. Because the Theatre was the first major source utilised (during my Masters research phase) it was scanned a second time – as many artists escaped my attention the first time through.

## **2.8 The Process:**

The recording, filing and collation process is rigorous and methodical. As each artist's data collection grows it is moved from a miscellaneous (minimal data) file to an intermediate (small but growing) file and if necessary into an individual file. Once a particular act or practitioner reaches individual file status their data is transferred to a biographical entry in an Australian Music Theatre database. Examples of these biographies are presented in Appendix D. A similar process is accorded the collation of Australian revusicals.

## **2.9 The Result:**

The result of this process is that a more responsive and reflective picture of industrial activity emerges – not one constructed by the historian's research focus or particular interests but by what is found through a systematic, rigorous and largely unbiased survey.

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<sup>66</sup> Saturdays were the most common day for starting a new week of entertainment, and hence generally provide the most details. Some locations during particular periods (i.e. Brisbane) changed their weekly programmes, however, on Fridays.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND TEMPORAL GRID: 1870 – 1930

	<u>Sydney Morning Herald</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Brisbane Courier</u>	<u>West Aust</u>	<u>Northern Miner</u>	<u>Theatre</u>	<u>Aust Variety</u>	<u>Every-one's</u>	<u>Green Room</u>	<u>ACP (1870-1890)</u>
1870										☺
1871										☺
1872										☺
1873										☺
1874										☺
1875										☺
1876										☺
1877										☺
1878										☺
1879										☺
1880										☺
1881										☺
1882	< 5 June									☺
1883										☺
1884										☺
1885	☺									☺
1886	☺									☺
1887	☺									☺
1888	☺									☺
1889	☺									☺
1890	☺		☺							☺
1891	☺	☺								
1892	☺	☺	☺							
1893	Dec >									
1894	< Feb/Dec >									
1895	☺		☺							
1896	< Feb/ Dec >									
1897	☺	☺	☺	23 Dec >						
1898	☺	☺	☺	☺						
1899	☺	☺	☺		1 Dec >					

For explanation of symbols - see Figure 2a

**Figure 2**

	<u>Sydney Morning Herald</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Brisbane Courier</u>	<u>West Aust</u>	<u>Northern Miner</u>	<u>Theatre incl. Just It</u>	<u>Aust Variety</u>	<u>Every-one's</u>	<u>Green Room</u>	<u>ACP (1870-1890)</u>
1900	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺					
1901				< Jan.	May - Aug					
1902			☺		May - Aug					
1903					May - Aug					
1904	Dec >	Dec >		Nov >	May - Aug	☺				
1905	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺				
1906	☺				May - Aug	☺				
1907			☺		May - Aug	☺				
1908					May - Aug	☺				
1909		Dec >	Nov >	Dec >	May - Aug	☺				
1910	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺				
1911					May - Aug	☺				
1912	Dec >				May - Aug	☺				
1913	☺				May - Aug	☺	☺			
1914			☺		☺	☺	☺			
1915		July - Dec	☺		☺	☺	☺			
1916			☺	2-23 Dec	May - Aug	☺	☺			
1917			☺		May - Aug	☺	☺			
1918			☺		May - Aug	☺	☺		☺	
1919			☺		May - Aug	☺	☺		☺	
1920			☺			☺	☺	☺	☺	
1921			☺			☺	< Mar (E)	☺	☺	
1922						☺		☺	☺	
1923						☺		☺	☺	
1924						☺		☺		
1925			Sept. - Dec			☺		☺		
1926			☺			☺		☺		
1927					☺	☺		☺		
1928		☺						☺		
1929								☺		
1930								☺		

☺
Survey Year Completed

Source not published (or does not cover) this year

< = all months leading up to	> = all months following
(E) publication ends	

ACP (1870-1890) = Annotated Calendar of Plays Premiered in Australia 1870-1890

Figure 2a