



No 1.

25 June 2011

**"For the Duration': Australian One Act Musical
Comedies and the Fashioning of an Imagined
National Identity between 1914 and 1918"**

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Australian Variety Theatre Archive

www.ozvta.com

Mixed Bag: Early Australian Variety Theatre and Popular Culture Monograph Series
and the Australian Variety Theatre Archive are published by

Have Gravity Will Threaten

Woolloowin, Queensland, 4030



''For the Duration':¹ Australian One Act Musical Comedies and the Fashioning of an Imagined National Identity between 1914 and 1918''

I have been fighting alongside Australians all the time. Good fellows! Steal your booze, and share it with you. Fight like hell. We had a Turkish trench in front of us, about 20 yards away. We had taken it, had been driven out, and retaken it six times. The last time we were bombed out. Eighty New Zealanders, about a hundred Australians, and about as many Turks were all left in a mixed-up conglomerate. After this, instead of feeling sad about our mauling, a wag of an Australian christened the place, "The Sydney Abattoirs" (Captain D. White, qtd. in "From the Front" 27).

Nat Phillips has identified himself with an original type in Stiffy, the hero of the revues at the Princess. The character is typically Australian and Nat has it true to life ("Princess Theatre" 10).

The quest to determine a definitive Australian national identity has been a preoccupation of social commentators, writers, historians and cultural theorists for more than a century. The Australian legend, an ideal which incorporates the Bush mythology in its depiction of rugged masculinity, mateship, larrikinism, devil-may-care attitudes and ingenuity in the harsh Australian landscape has been arguably the most dominant stereotype. Following Russell Ward's now much criticised attempt in the 1950s to define the typical Australian, and certainly since the 1980s, the legend's core ideals - egalitarianism, mateship and larrikinism - have been interrogated,² with subsequent conclusions largely insisting that the Australian/Bush legend originated out the literary imagination of intellectuals, writers, poets and journalists once associated with the *Bulletin* magazine. The conclusions drawn from these later attempts to critically engage with Australian national or cultural identity, however, are themselves largely the result of a scholarly tradition that privileges literary texts (written by and for a more educated, discriminating and smaller demographic), while ignoring popular/mass culture texts. There appears to have been little interest, for example, in the thoughts and stories of circulating in popular culture magazines and newspapers written by or about "average" Australians. That literary insights have been given more evidential weight is perhaps because they appear to reflect a higher intellect than the type of material presented on the vaudeville stage by comics, sketch artists and revusical writers.

What is missed by ignoring the popular culture stage, however, is its immediacy. The jokes, patter and observations of vaudeville comedians, for example, were almost always required to be up-to-date and topical and as such articulated a form of communication that resonated within that social world. The fact that the popular stage's legitimacy as a vehicle for social and historical dissemination has long been overlooked is further demonstration of a tradition of bias that still sees a text like C. J. Dennis' "Songs of the Sentimental Bloke" dismissed as literature because of the inferiority of its writing style. The fact that Ennis deliberately wrote it in the vernacular of the characters he drew from real life appears to count for little. Perhaps even worse was its commercial appeal. Still the highest selling book of verse ever published by an Australian (with more than more than 100,000 copies in its first five years), "Songs of the Sentimental Bloke" also inspired several hugely successful film and theatrical adaptations during the first decade of its release. The immense

¹ The title of this paper comes from comedian Jim Gerald's 1922 revusical *1914-1918; Or, For the Duration*. Based on his own military experiences it originated from comedy sketch called "The Raw Recruit," first staged by Gerald in 1919. See Gerald's entry in the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* [Practitioners G].

² See for example: John Carroll's "National Identity" and "Mateship and Egalitarianism: The Failure of Upper Middle-Class Nerve"; and Graeme Davison's "Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend" in *Intruders in the Bush* (1982). Ed. John Carroll.

popularity it generated suggests that the characters and the style of writing made a significant connection with Australians during that time, and as such should open up insights into both the world Dennis writes about and the public that consumed it in such large numbers. This has not yet eventuated, however. Instead, works written in a more accepted literary style continue to be held up as mirrors for social behaviour, attitudes and aspects of national identity even though few of these texts were able to exact much interest from the contemporary popular culture demographic.³

It is not this author's intention to devalue the worth of literature as artistic cultural production or its value as a subject for textual criticism. It is being proposed, however, that before a text is to be used as evidence for the purpose of understanding cultural identity or history then the author of that work needs to be more rigorously interrogated in terms of his or her relationship with the world they have written about. A question which appears never to have been asked is "how much of our understanding of this country's past has been influenced by the imagination of individuals whose lives were lived outside the world they describe?" Any consensus that has been reached through scholarship based on literary texts alone must be questioned, however, because it does not take into account any number of factors that may have influenced the end results. The type of rigorous analysis one might apply in critiquing a scholarly paper appears to be routinely forsaken with the literary text (whether fiction or "based on real events") because of its alignment with high culture values such as artistic, social, political, intellectual or imaginative endeavour, and not to mention grammatical style. As the Helen Demidenko⁴ fiasco suggests, however, the eventual worth of the text as a social or historical document, even with all these attributes, can be rendered worthless when the author and his or her intent is closely scrutinised. The types of questions I refer to might include, for example: 1) was the work written specifically for (and hence did it appeal to) any particular demographic market; 2) were there economic reasons underpinning the approach taken by the author; 3) were the observations made by the author undertaken from an "outside looking in" perspective or from intimate, empirical experiences; 4) what personal issues and biases might the author have had in relation to his subject matter; 5) if based on "real" experiences, how long after the event were these memories recalled; 6) what input did the editor or publisher have in the end result; and 7) how did the work resonate with the broader general population at the time of publication.

While the research underpinning this paper is largely uninterested in the thoughts and perspectives of individuals whose intellectual, literary or artistic pursuits remove them from an ideological everyday-engagement with the popular culture, it is not arguing that they be rejected out of hand. Rather that they sit within the framework of an approach which takes into consideration a much wider range of sources. One result of following the popular culture line of inquiry, for example, is that it allows us to more readily consider that egalitarianism, mateship and larrikinism were central to the popular culture's perception (whether real or not) of a distinctly Australian type during the First World War. It also suggests that these core values were actively circulated within the broader Australian popular culture, and in turn accepted as both an individual and a cultural identity template.

³ Elsewhere I argue that the *Bulletin* magazine, long described as the "bushman's bible," and considered a "voice of the people," was in fact ignored by the popular (mass) culture, and would have been largely viewed by that demographic as condescending and irrelevant. A simple calculation dividing total Australian population by circulation figures at any time between 1886 and the 1920s shows, for example, that its sales never rose above 3.5%. This clearly suggests that the *Bulletin's* importance as an historical tool has been greatly inflated by historians who have never thought to question or interrogate the magazine's position within the broader community and have simply accepted its content at face value. See: "Looking in all the Wrong Places" (2009).

⁴ Demidenko's (aka Helen Darville) novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, about a Ukrainian family who become both bystanders and perpetrators during the Holocaust, won the 1993 Australian/Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript and the 1994 Miles Franklin Award. Although Darville claimed that the story came from interviews with family members it was later revealed that her claims of Ukrainian ethnicity were false.

Interestingly, larrikinism egalitarianism and mateship have been positioned by some critics as not peculiarly Australian experiences (Carroll, "Mateship" 146-7, for example), while others argue that if the ethos underpinned by these traits isn't shared by all groups within Australia's broad cultural demographic then they are also inadmissible as evidence of an Australian national identity (Walter 16). Another line of thought proposes that loyalty to mates should be excluded because there is evidence that not all Australians demonstrated this ethic to one another. Such conclusions, arrived at through overt intellectual analysis, are essentially irrelevant however. Just as one person's experience only requires a different context to differentiate it from another person's similar experience, so Australians generate sentiments and perceptions that have local and patriotic relevance and can be distinguished other culture's. Furthermore, national identity cannot be rationalised according to demographic percentages or total compliance because in the everyday world of social exchange "truth" and "perception" constantly rub up against each other to produce meanings that become social experience not academic reasoning. The malleability of cultural self-awareness is therefore the result of meanings and practices whose constituents are neither static nor unambiguous and which "cannot be insulated from the social processes and structures in which they are imbedded" (Rowe 7). The key to the argument being put forward here is that although popular culture is an on-going, deceptively complex and elusive process that follows no definitive path and is thus always contradictory (Fiske, *Understanding* 45), it nevertheless produces a social identity for the people involved (Fiske, *Reading* 1).

The evidence now available through the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* (www.ozvta.com) clearly demonstrates that the issue of national identity needs to be revisited because at least four very specific character traits are evident in the characters played out in our locally-written revusicals – a one act musical comedy genre that emerged in Australia around 1914/15 and went on to become the most popular form of variety entertainment in the country through until the mid-late 1920s. Although very few scripts survive, a good deal of evidence has nevertheless emerged which now demonstrates that these traits - larrikinism, egalitarianism and mateship, along with the use of "slanguage" - became the foundation upon which Australian revusical comedians helped reinforce an imagined Australian cultural identity during the crisis years of 1914-1918. The revusical's principal comedian(s) - invariably the main character(s) - were also in a unique position to articulate (or mediate) the notion of an "imagined community" because they were situated at the centre of everyday social gatherings and could respond to pertinent issues and current events with immediacy. Played out in highly social gathering places, and with narratives that provided an emotional/psychological resonance missing from pure vaudeville, the revusical made a significant contribution to the well-being of the public. This is because the bi-product of humour, laughter, is in itself an emotion-based coping strategy that allows people to withstand difficult or stressful situations without being overwhelmed by those emotions (Lefcourt 60-1). Humour is also one of the most effective means of maintaining social cohesion and shaping social behaviour (Lefcourt 63, 137; Snyder and Lopez 113; McGhee 26-31), and in this sense helped lay the foundation for an Australian national character type to become more distinct.

1914-1918 is a unique period in Australia's history because the impact of the war was unlike anything the country had experienced before (or after). Geoffrey Serle notes that it was only then that Australians began thinking of themselves as such, rather than as citizens of their particular state. As a consequence patriotism intensified and spread throughout the community to a level that even Federation failed to achieve (149). To understand the magnitude of the crisis one needs only to contemplate some of the figures. 1916, for example, recorded (for only the second time in Australia's post-invasion history) a decrease in the white population,⁵ while the 416,800 men who enlisted in

⁵ From 4,951,100 in 1915 down to 4,903,000 in 1916. The only other population decrease occurred between 1870 and 1871 (14,700 less people). Figures cited from Jan Lahmeyer, *Populstat* website, 2006. <http://populstat.info/Oceania/australc.htm>

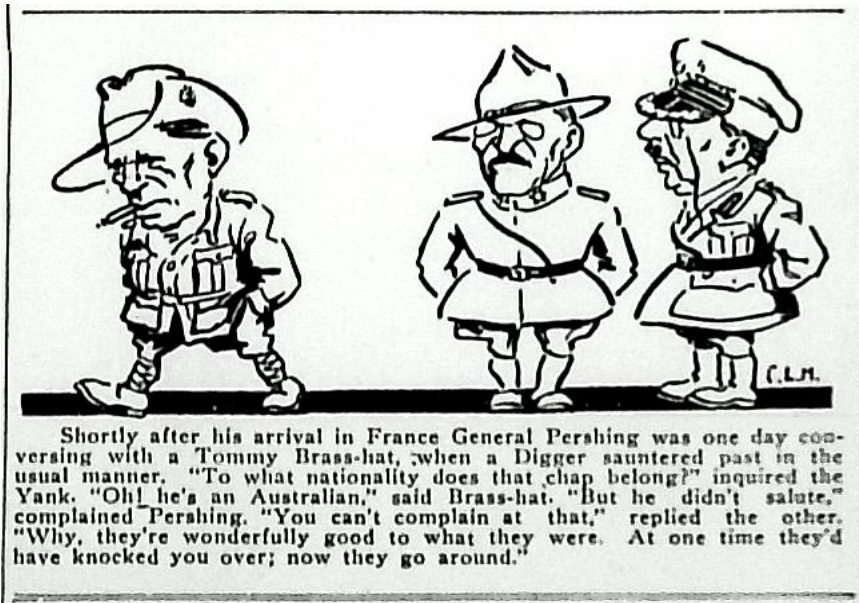
the Imperial Force (A.I.F.) represented around 20 percent of the (white) male population over 18 years of age. Of those who enlisted approximately 61,000 were killed and 156,000 wounded ("Australian Military" n. pag.), which suggests that not only would most Australians have known someone who enlisted, but that most probably also knew at least one of the casualties. Few Australians would therefore have come through the war without bearing some heightened level of emotional anxiety, whether experienced during the conflict years or in the aftermath as post-traumatic disorder.

When support for the war began to subside from around mid-1915 onwards, as Australians began to realise more fully the situation in Europe and the Middle-East, intense political and social divisions over the issue of conscription arose (Mackie 122-25). There does not appear to have been any lessening of patriotic encouragement for the soldiers, however. At the core of this public support was the knowledge that the A.I.F. was a volunteer army. This very fact led to a number of "fulsome, cloying eulogies" by people such as John Masefield and Compton Mackenzie, which were "were widely quoted and well known" (Serle 151). Because they were helping England and her allies – rather than defending the Australian shoreline – the diggers also saw their sacrifice in wholly different terms to the British. Their unwillingness to be treated as servants (i.e. to salute or call officers "Sir") was well-noted in entertainment magazines like *Australian Variety* and the *Theatre* as early as 1915, and as will be shortly demonstrated, this was reinforced on vaudeville stages across the country on an almost nightly basis.

One of the core factors in the emergence of the larrikin at this time was humour. That Australian soldiers articulated a resilient, mateship-orientated humour is not surprising given that they had been distanced from their family and pre-war friends and now found themselves fully dependent on the comradeship of those they were fighting alongside. The self-deprecating style of comic exchange that occurred between them is evident in much of the correspondence, published reports and personal insights still available to us today.⁶ One significant source for gaining insight into the life of the First World War Australian digger, however, is a magazine titled *Aussie*. Comprising jokes, humorous personal reflections, stories, poems, songs, tips and illustrations, it was published by and for Australian soldiers on overseas duty. Indeed, from its first issue *Aussie's* editor Lieutenant Phillip L. Harris sought "to reflect that happy spirit and good humour so strongly evident throughout the Aussie Army." Harris also refers to the role of humour in his introduction to the reprinted and bound 1918-1920 edition, writing: "The Digger put laughter into everything. Even when the circumstances made things too painful for him to laugh at himself, he passed laughter-stuff to his cobbers" (vii).

Examples of "real-life" humour being used (or even reportedly used) by diggers during World War I were not only published regularly in magazines like *Aussie*, the *Theatre* and *Australian Variety and Show World*, but were also introduced by variety artists (including returned soldiers) throughout and beyond the war years. Well-known comic Tom Dawson came to represent, for example, the "inimitable happy spirit" of the digger with his supposed last words. When asked "how it was," Dawson is said to have quoted with a "cheery smile and quaint expression" the title of one of his biggest song successes – "I'd Rather Have a Boiled Egg" ("Tom Dawson's Exit" 36). In the aftermath of the war *Smith's Weekly* continued to articulate this larrikin ethos with articles, reminiscences and cartoons.

⁶ Lenore Frost's survey of Melbourne's Boer War contingent (which includes evidence from personal letters) indicates that soldiers during that conflict also used humour to relieve stress.



Smith's Weekly 15 Nov. 1919, 23.

Making light of extreme conditions and one's own injuries became part of the vaudeville tradition during the war. Harley Cohen, whose letters were published in the *Theatre* magazine in 1915, returned home after losing the sight in one eye. Whilst engaged on the Tivoli circuit he recalled with much humour his stay in hospital with eleven other soldiers who between them had only thirteen eyes ("Signaller Tom Skeyhill" 44). In a letter to the same magazine Lance Corporal Jack Henkin recounts at length the bravery and death of several soldiers. Of his own scrape with death Henkin says only that "like a good racehorse [the bullet] went the distance and came out the other side." He then goes on at length to describe the glorious time he was having in the hospital in Malta with wonderful nurses, a bottle of beer a day, splendid food and a fine bed ("From the Front" 25).

Collectively, these stories, even if given to exaggeration, helped shape an entire generation because they provided Australians with a model for how they were expected to act in times of hardship. The revusical's principal comedians therefore tended to reflect the "natural jokes" imbued within the diggers' world of experience - of the type which given other circumstances might actually not be funny. This type of comedy relies on bisociation - whereby two or more ill-fitting or mutually exclusive cognitions converge in some incongruous context to jar or violate one's expectations (Lefcourt 58). A good deal of the humour presented in the revusical therefore differs from the jokes associated with patterology and stand-up comedy because the "joke work" of the comedian (or wit) almost always positions the straightman and audience as passive and inferior. By inserting ever-more complex convolutions (or cognitive leaps) into the material, the wit also necessarily becomes cleverer in the minds the audience, which serves to further empower the comedian at the expense of all others. On the other hand, the humour imbued within the revusicals of this time worked to situate the audience as accessories or accomplices to their exploits.

When the revusical's popularity began to increase markedly throughout 1916 the genre's leading comedians drew more and more on the digger as a means of defining and motivating their characters. It was not a one-way engagement, however, as these same characteristics were also being circulated within the popular culture as part of everyday social interaction (i.e. at work and during leisure hours) with the result being that the digger very quickly became an idealised Australian type. Even though the digger ethos was inherently drawn from bush traditions its placement in contemporary, urban and international settings made the legend more relevant than the bushranger/colonial version.

This form of cultural identity-fashioning is not uncommon during crises of war because the citizens of a country inherently look for valued qualities in their own traditions and then elaborate and reinforce them en masse as part of a national ideal or identity that serves to symbolise what is being fought for (Serle 152).

Any evaluation of the wartime Australian variety industry must conclude that the two most successful revusical troupes were Bert Le Blanc's Travesty Stars and Nat Phillips' Tabloid Musical Comedy Co (later known as Nat Phillips Stiffy and Mo Revue Co). In creating their shows Le Blanc and Phillips built their stories around set characters who appeared in each production, and who were subsequently allowed to develop even stronger personalities over time. Speaking to the *Theatre* in 1919, Phillips recalls that he originally invented Stiffy because readily-identifiable Australian characters were even then being demanded by Australian audiences: "Until I brought [him] on the scene the Australian low-life character - the larrikin - was always portrayed as a [London] coster. This always appeared incongruous to me... I decided to try the experiment with the Sydney larrikin. Steele Rudd made Dave an Australian bush type. I determined to come nearer home and present a city type. I couldn't have wished for greater success along the line I followed" ("Giving the Public" 4). The enormous popularity of the Le Blanc and Phillips revusicals quickly led to dozens of locally-based troupes copying the format, and by 1917 many more troupes were criss-crossing Australia and New Zealand on the established variety circuits [see *The Australian Variety Theatre Archive "Works" entries for this period*].

Research into the revusicals of 1914-1918 also indicates that there existed a clear link between the way the digger was being ennobled by Australians at home and the way the comedic protagonists were being represented on the variety stage. Most often they encountered hardship, were placed in unusual situations, or found themselves having to deal with the outrageous demands and behaviour of people above their station or from different backgrounds. There is no suggestion, however, that these larrikin characters were required to be from only one social class or representative of one particular personality type. Not only didn't they have to be from the blue collar demographic, but at least up until the early 1920s they didn't even have to be typically white Australian, or even Australian-born. What appears to have been most necessary was that these characters exuded traits that were relevant to both the everyday experiences of the popular culture audience and how it perceived itself as an "imagined" community. Thus we find male characters ranging from low-ratbag types like Stiffy and Mo (Phillips and Rene) and Ike Cohen and Morris Levi (Le Blanc and Jake Mack); to those portrayed by Charles Zoli (working along "Dago" lines), Victor Prince (an exuberant, over-sized boy-type), and Paul Stanhope's red-whiskered wild Irishman, "Spike Murphy."



Bert Le Blanc.
Theatre June (1913), 1.

While they rarely ever resorted to villainy, thuggery or hooliganism, the revusical's comedic larrikins were not always above petty criminal or social misdemeanours – conning people, using trickery and imposture - and taking advantage of others' misfortune etc. This is an important aspect of their characterisation because such behaviour was clearly associated with the popular culture/blue collar demographic. Indeed, variety practitioners like Will Whitburn, Lance Lenton and Florrie Ranger, had been introducing the larrikin to Australian audiences since at least the early 1890s (Djubal, "What Oh" 184-85). Thus when comedians like Le Blanc and Mack and Phillips and Rene introduced their larrikin alter egos into the revusical during the first years two years of the war, these low character types were already socially relevant to the vast majority of people around the country. The difference

by 1916, however, was that, as C. J. Dennis, observes in "The Moods of Ginger Mick," the same larrikin characteristics that might have been decried in the past as social irresponsibility were now beginning to be viewed from an entirely different perspective:

Me game is 'andlin' men, orl right, I seen it in the parst
When I used to 'ead the pushes in the lane,
An ev're bloke among 'em then done somethin' I arst,
For I never failed to make me meanin' plain.
Disturbers ov the peace we wus them days, but now I know
We wus aimin' to be soljers, but we never 'ad a show (10).

The importance of the larrikin to the Australian popular culture is also raised by Edgar Waters, who similarly observes that a quite obvious and quickly-moving shift in the national psyche took place during the first two years of the war:

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

Bert Le Blanc's larrikin humour struck a particularly strong chord with Australian audiences despite the thick Russian/Jewish dialect he imbued within the character of his alter ego Ike Cohen. His easy-going, laid back and dry style of delivery (quite unlike his more brash American contemporaries) had endeared him to Australian audiences from the moment he first arrived in the country with the American Burlesque Company in 1913. Typical of his comedic style is the following exchange. As a diner in one restaurant scene he questions the waiter (played by Jake Mack): "What do you charge for bread?" "Nothing" replies Mack. "And for the gravy" asks Le Blanc. "Nothing." "Then bring me some bread and gravy" (X-Ray 39).

Perhaps the most significant Australian character on the popular culture stage, however, was Nat Phillips' Stiffy the rabbitoh. Considered a "dinky-di" Australian by industry critics and the public, Stiffy had been developed by Phillips some 18 months prior to teaming up with Roy "Mo" Rene in mid-1916. Stiffy's irrepressible larrikin attitudes are evident in the four complete manuscripts held by The University of Queensland's Fryer Library.⁷ In *A Sporting Chance*, for example, his code is clearly spelled out – to shirk work whenever possible, to take any odds if there's a chance of some quick cash, to put one over Mo before Mo puts one over him, and to "mag" any available sheila (but without getting trapped). The following extract demonstrates a few of these attributes:

JURASHER: [*Approaching Stiffy in a kittenish manner*] Poor man. You look as if you are in hard luck.
STIFFY: Lor Lummy, will you get that dial. Hard luck lady, that ain't the word. If clothes were selling for a shilling a suit I couldn't afford to buy the armhole of a vest.
JURASHER: Why don't you look for work?
STIFFY: Turn it up. Turn it up. There is no work at my trade.
JURASHER: What is your trade?
STIFFY: Milking reindeer.
JURASHER: You poor misguided man. Come over to yonder bench and tell me all about it.
STIFFY: [To himself] She's making it a welter. I better duck me nut before I get in trouble (Phillips 6).

⁷ *A Sporting Chance*. An edited version of this revusical, along with *At the Grand*, *What Oh Tonight* and *Yes We Don't*, are available online either through the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* (www.ozvta.com) or through The University of Queensland's eSpace digital repository. The Nat Phillips Collection also holds an almost complete manuscript of *Mexicans*.

Mo also shares Stiffy's larrikin ethic, with the main difference being that Stiffy was portrayed as "a head" who relies on slang; while Rene played Mo as a "would-be-sport" who attempts slang but gets tangled up in the lingual meshes" ("Giving the Public" 3-4). Stiffy and Mo's stage attire, which rarely changed over the years, also typified them as city larrikins. Mo's was usually a singlet, an old pair of pants, a waistcoat, boots and anybody's hat, while Stiffy, once described as "a hard-up, red-nosed, coatless Irish Australian" sometimes sported a South Sydney rugby league jersey, an ancient well-greased pair of pants, an old vest and out-sized boots ("A Sporting Chance" 53). "If the lot caught fire," Phillips noted in the 1919 *Theatre* magazine interview, "we wouldn't lose five bob between us." Although Rene was just as quick to point out to Phillips that "for insurance purposes he should keep in mind that the clothes represented at least several hundred quid in terms of their importance to the show" ("Giving the Public" 4).

A factor which further contributed to the success of the Australian revusical was the egalitarian nature of the relationship between the two main characters/comedians. This was immediately apparent in the pairing of Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack (Ike and Morris). Although considered one of the country's foremost comedians, Le Blanc mostly played the straight role in his shows. This was "a generous arrangement" suggested the *Theatre*, "for Mr Mack is given every opportunity of scoring with the audience, even at the expense of Mr Le Blanc" (X-Ray, "La Blanc" [sic] 39). The Stiffy and Mo partnership is another example of an egalitarian relationship on stage. The long-held belief that Roy Rene was the principal comic and Phillips his straightman, has now been exposed as a myth. Research into their eleven years together clearly shows that they shared equally in delivering the punch-lines (Djubal, "What Oh" 262-91). Charles Zoli and Victor Prince, Joe Rox and Ted Stanley, Paul Stanhope and Les Bates also typified the equal relationship between the revusical's two principal comedians during the war years.⁸

The egalitarian approach also extended beyond the two main characters. Le Blanc and Phillips, for example, deliberately established their troupes as ensembles and not just as star vehicles for themselves. It's clear from reviews and insights published at the time that both constructed the storylines in such a way that their highly experienced co-performers could show off their capabilities – whether as actors, singers or dancers (Djubal, "What Oh" 286-87). The *Theatre* notes for example



Nat Phillips as Stiffy.

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

that Le Blanc seemed "more concerned in the success of the show as a whole than in any individual personal triumph" (X-Ray, "La Blanc" [sic] 40), while the extensive coverage accorded Phillips' Stiffy and Mo troupe indicates that all the performers (including the all-important female chorus) played a major role in their shows (Djubal, "What Oh" 276-80). Indeed, the small casts required for Australian revusicals (generally eight actors and a chorus of six) allowed many individuals the opportunity to establish Australia-wide reputations precisely because they were given expanded roles in the productions. The egalitarian ethic imbued within the revusicals (both the narrative and performative aspects) was in part shaped by the popular culture because as John Fiske argues, such products only succeed in the marketplace when they result from a mix of relevance and functionality – that is, when they relate to everyday life in a practical way (*Understanding* 45, 57). In this respect "big-heads" and "tall poppies" were rejected by both the public and media in very much the same fashion as they are today.

⁸ Interestingly, Paul Stanhope briefly experimented with a female off-sider, Val Newman, around 1917. By 1919, however, he had reverted back to the two male lead comics, first with Mark Erickson and later with Peter Brooks (ex-Stiffy and Mo).

Another integral part of the digger ethos to be heavily promoted in wartime revusicals was mateship. Although comprising aspects of egalitarianism, mateship has never been dependent on people or characters always obeying a "be true to your mates" code. Thus any assertion that mateship is irrelevant because our military forces were not the only ones reliant on mateship or comradeship (Carroll, "Mateship" 146-7) proves baseless for denying an Australian national identity because it simply doesn't matter. It's no doubt true that wars throughout human history have been fought by soldiers who established close bonds with their comrades. What made mateship between Australian soldiers different from other nations, however was that the stories and experiences of our diggers, and the way those experiences were articulated back in Australia, went through a process of collective imagining. The same process also allowed these stories and experiences to be differentiated from other forces (allies and enemy alike) because the soldiers from other countries were perceived as being both different and inferior. The popular culture's ability to construct a wholly indigenous mateship ideal and to be able to distinguish it from others was also very much a response to our distance and cultural isolation. Put simply, the Australian popular culture had neither the capacity nor the desire to view their nation-self as similar to others.

Reports from the war and the narratives of revusicals reveal that mateship was more than just companionship. For Australian soldiers sticking together became at best a strategy for winning out over adversity, or at worst a way to reduce (through shared experience) the effects of hardship and failure. The war time revusicals show, too, that mateship was not a fettered ideal, but rather that it occurred with all the tom-foolery, practical joking and skylarking that one associates with unrestrained everyday popular culture social interaction. Stiffy and Mo are clearly a pair of larrikin trouble-makers (sometimes innocently and other times deliberately) who'd go to any length to get on top of each other. Much of the humour in the relationship between these two mates - whether cast as plumbers, police, would-be lords, would-be club members or doctors - unfolds then as a consequence of egotism, self-interest, delinquency, lack of everyday constancy and an anti-authoritarian outlook. The following excerpt from Nat Phillips' *At the Grand* appears to demonstrate a rejection of the mateship ethic as Stiffy attempts to fleece Mo out of his share of some money they came by:

MO: Stiffy, I tell you what to do. You go down into the cellar and bring up a bottle. But what about that money? You better give me half now. One hundred... that's fifty each.

STIFFY: You don't think that I would cheat you out of it, do you?

MO: No, but a bird in the hand gathers no moss.

STIFFY: I suppose you want it to give away. What room have you put the old bloke in?

MO: Twenty-seven.

STIFFY: Twenty-seven. Twenty-seven. [*He starts giving Mo the money*] Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine.

MO: He's pretty old that bloke. Nearly as old as your old man. How old is he?

STIFFY: Forty-six.

MO: Forty-six. Forty-six. Forty-seven. [*He continues up to fifty as he exits*]

MO: It's a good job he didn't ask about my grandfather (Phillips 13).

Also seemingly at odds with the egalitarian/mateship ethos is the opening scene of *A Sporting Chance*, whereby Stiffy and Mo's relationship appears to be heavily lopsided in favour of the latter:

[*Stiffy and Mo enter. Mo is in a barrow being pushed by Stiffy*]

MO: [*Speaking as he and Stiffy enter*] On ve go across de mountain pass and plain, ever to see Valinski's face again. My face is blanched vith famine not vith fear, as my charger urges on his vild career. And ven ve come upon a peopled place. And vunce more I behold a human face. [*He looks at Stiffy*]

STIFFY: Ah look, this is no good to me. When you took me away with you, you said we were going to stop at good hotels.

MO: Vell don't ve stop at 'em?

STIFFY: Yes... outside. And you give a boy a penny to hold me just as if I were a horse.

MO: Vat seems to be de trouble my boy?

STIFFY: That seems to be the trouble! [*Bis.*] I want something to eat.

MO: You are always thinking of de inner man.

STIFFY: Not a bad place either. I won't have that to think of it if I stop with you much longer. Now when do we eat?

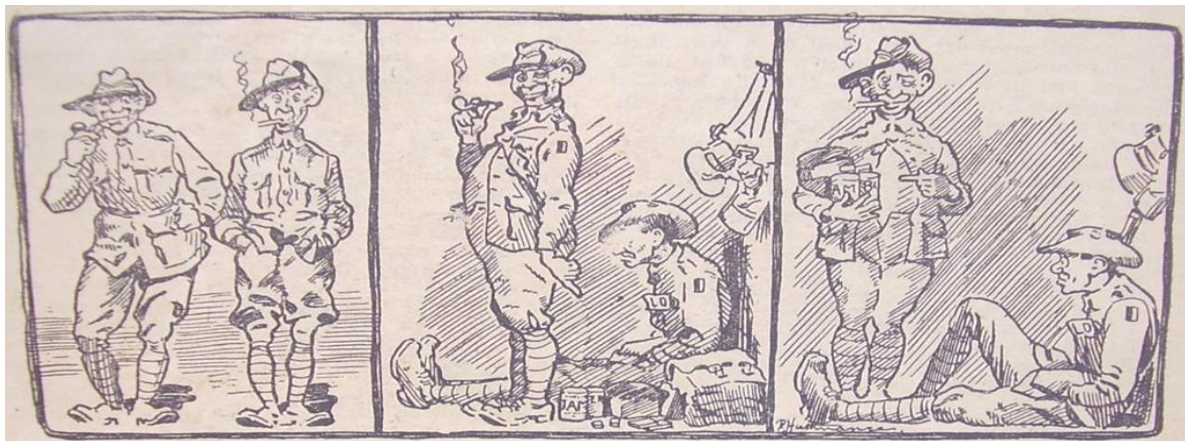
MO: What did you do with de peanut I gave you three weeks ago?

STIFFY: I ate it!

MO: Vell, didn't I tell you to keep it for a rainy day.

STIFFY: And didn't it rain the same day. (Phillips 3-4)

As both narratives unfold, however, Stiffy's and Mo's positions are seen to be more equal. Mo is still the "slightly-more intelligent" member of this "dumb and dumber" pairing, but it is clear that both rely on each other for support as they deal with the situations they come up against. By the end of *A Sporting Chance*, for example, their impecunious state of affairs forces them to work together to pull off a scheme to get out of paying their hotel bill. The *Aussie* cartoon below further provides additional insight into the complex nature of Australian mateship (11).



"The Wheel of Fate."
Aussie Mar. (1919), 11.

1. Two coppers Bill and Jim in normal condition.
2. When Jim was crook for a couple of days Bill ate his own plus Jim's rations, and rejoiced greatly at the expense of Jim.
3. But a week later Bill went crook, and Jim hopped in for his cut of Bill's rations and the rejoicing.

Larrikinism, egalitarianism and mateship are not the only elements of the revusical which work towards creating a distinctive Australian character type. Another commonly-used trait, again taken from First World War diggers, is the wilful mispronunciation of "proper" English. Looking through the issues of *Aussie* one is struck by the way language was amusingly re-appropriated, and how this must have served to further distinguish them from their British and American allies. Comprising a mix of borrowed, made-up and re-contextualised words, the Australian soldier (according to its editor) "put so much Diggerese into his slanguage that he was beginning to develop a distinctive tongue" (vii). In the 10 January 1918 edition of *Aussie* a dictionary was even provided "for the use of those at home" (10-11). Each bound volume of the magazine also contains a glossary at the end for similar purposes. Slanguage was a key factor strengthening the diggers' sense of self-aggrandizement, not only in fighting the enemy, but also in their dealings with foreigners and particularly the supposedly "superior" British. While language debasement had been a well-used

strategy in Australia previously, often influenced by Cockney rhyming slang, the new words and meanings created during the war had much greater relevance to the diggers. This was in turn taken up by Australians at home because it gave them a more concrete means of identifying with their soldiers.



"You parley Anglays, Moossee-er?"

"Yes, a leetle."

"Well, I wanter put th' fangs into yer for your blanky chopper to carve some wood for th' bleeding' brazier."

"Slanguage."

Aussie 4 Apr. (1919), 3.

(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland)

Mispronunciation in the revusicals of this era was another vital factor in the genre's popularity. This debasing of the official language was attractive to audiences because it was oppositional - a strategic manoeuvre allowing them the ability to legally offend, or at least thumb their noses at the dominant social forces (Fiske *Understanding* 106). It's no coincidence, then that much of the humour was directed at the interests of this demographic, as Paul Stanhope's ditty from *Safety First* (1917) exemplifies:

Here's to the heavens above -
 May they send down a dove.
 With wings as sharp as razors
 To cut the throat of every man
 Who'd lower the labourer's wages!
 ("Stanhope Revue Co" 43).

The most prolific destroyer of English on the Australian variety stage during the war years was undoubtedly Bert Le Blanc. While his verbal linguistics may well have originated as Hebrew-isms, his immense popularity with Australian audiences suggests that the connection was more than just ethnic approval. Evidence gathered from reviews and interviews with Le Blanc indicates that he was particularly careful in his choice of replacement words, and rarely if ever changed them. Some typical lines of dialogue include: "Where ignorance is a blister, it's folly to be foolish;" "Lady, you know we don't speak English very influentially;" "Won't you be conceited" [seated]; and "If that means what I think it don't there's going to be a fight" (ctd. X-Ray "La Blanc" [sic] 39). "Flavour' for 'favour' is [also] one of the words that always gets him a big laugh," records the *Theatre*, while "another word he gets a lot out of is 'explanalation' for 'explanation'" ("American Musical" 20). Classic Le Blanc mispronunciations also included the words: device (advice), explode (explain), telescratch (telegraph), write-typer (typewriter), auto-mo-bottle (automobile), hair-destroyer (hair-restorer), a-Jew (adieu), shovel (shuffle), ajopolise (apologise) and slush (flush).

Fellow-American Burlesque Company comedian Paul Stanhope, as Spike Murphy, is also said to have got laughs turning simple words like "hotel" into "ho-to-hell." Nat Phillips and Roy Rene similarly inserted commonly-used or newly-made up "slanguage" into their routines on a frequent basis. Another popular revusical from the period, *Dockum Street, Wooloomooloo* (1917) required comedian Harry Little to play the part of Loo-ite Blister – a local tough guy. His ability to get his character right (including language) was vital because inner city audiences, like those attending Sydney's Princess Theatre (where the show was first staged under the Fullers' Theatres management), tended to express their displeasure by throwing objects at the stage (Djubal, "Harry Clay" 2011, 75). One of the other comedians in that production, Jack Kearns, was also acknowledged for his ability to mangle proper English in the manner befitting a Redfern local (X-Ray "Month" 40).

Language misappropriation and slanguage were very much a part of the Stiffy and Mo revusicals, as evidenced by reviews of their productions and through the surviving Fryer Library manuscripts. In *What Oh Tonight*, for example, Stiffy and Mo (called Sol in this first ever Stiffy and Mo production) attempt to run a medical clinic without qualifications or experience. They do this by having Stiffy question the patient while Mo hides behind a screen. He then enters the room and attempts to tell him the patient what is wrong with them:

STIFFY: ... What's the matter with you?
 BILL: I have a pimple on my nose. Probably caused by inflammatory indigestion. I have a cold, chills and fever, and I keep magining that someone is trying to pull the top of my head off.
 STIFFY: Don't you tell that to the doctor. And I'll bet yer a sac he tells you that as soon as he looks at your dial. If he don't I'll kick him in the harbour.
 SOL: [*From behind the screen*] In the Spit!
 STIFFY: Are you married?
 BILL: Married, divorced, married again. And now I'm a grass widower. Look out, here comes the main squeeze. [*Enter Sol*]
 SOL: [*to Stiffy aside*] Stiffy I know a cert for today.
 STIFFY: What is it?
 SOL: Stomach ache. I got inside inflamation. [*To patient*] Good morning. I am glad so see you looking so rotten to day.
 STIFFY: Yes, he does look over ripe.
 SOL: [*To patient*] You have a pimple on your nose caused by Unsanitary Indigestion. You have a cold, chills. And fever. And you also imagine that somebody is trying to pull the top of your nut off. You were married... divorced... married again... and now you're a grasshopper.
 STIFFY: [*Aside to Sol*] Widower, yer mug.
 SOL: [*To patient*] Window mug. Excuse me while I read my pawn tickets.
 STIFFY: [*To patient*] Ah, mate. Have you got a wagonette.
 ["*Examining Patient*" *Bis.*]
 SOL: [*To patient*] You have trouble in your joints.
 STIFFY: Yes, he was thrown out of a two-up joint. How much cash has he got Mo.
 BILL: Only two pounds. I am a very poor man.
 STIFFY: Well put in the Swi funt and bring the eight tomorrow if you're better (Phillips 13-14).

The traits imbued within the characters played out by the revusical comedians were undoubtedly stereotypes, a factor which has not surprisingly led to a lack of academic interest in the genre. It is the emergence of this stereotypical male Australian, however, that provides a valuable insight into the way the country's popular culture began to articulate its own imagined national identity. As this paper has argued, the popular culture was actively engaged in generating and circulating news, rumours, facts and myths during the course of normal everyday social interaction and hence this imagined stereotype served to both unify and distinguish that community not only from foreigners

but also from the dominant (though less-numbered) Australian social stratum. John Fiske notes that this "bottom-up" process helps increase or at least maintain the power of the popular culture to effect change, and not only results in the softening of the harsh extremities of power, but also produces small gains for the weak which further strengthens their identity (*Understanding* 188).

It doesn't matter that none of the four character traits that underpin this imagined national identity were unique to the Australian experience. Neither does it matter that those traits were not uniformly reflected across the country or throughout all social demographics. This is because a national identity does not have to be true, new or an isolated experience in order to be perceived as such. In the context of 1914-1918 it only required that enough people recognised, emphasised with and/or accepted the ideal of Australianness, and to transmit or encourage its existence in social gatherings for the ideal to become a shorthand means of identifying the nation-self. By demonstrating that an imagined national identity can be identified, albeit during a specific time frame, this paper serves as a reminder to historians and academics for the need to re-examine both their methodological approach to mapping social changes and attitudes, and to re-appraise their understanding of the active social processes in play across the entire population. Critical attention needs therefore to be less biased towards literary constructions of social endeavour and directed more towards the popular culture itself – the demographic which plays the most influential role in shaping an Australian cultural identity.

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