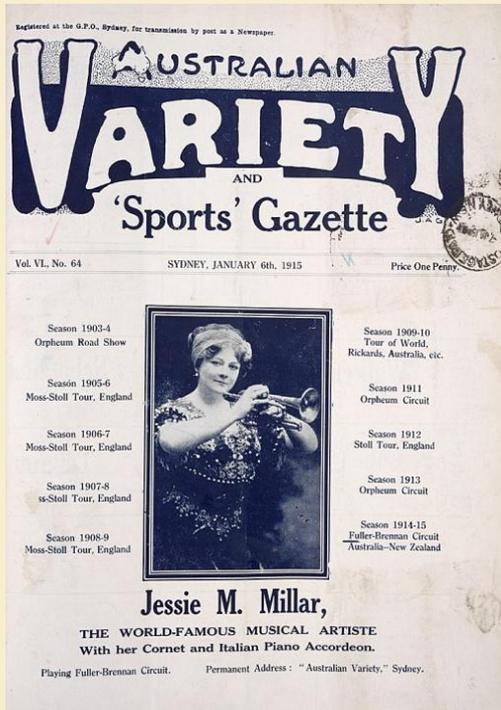


AUSTRALIAN VARIETY

aka **Australian Variety and Sporting Gazette / Australian Variety and Show World**

Established by Martin C. Brennan, *Australian Variety* was devoted not only to vaudeville, but also other popular entertainments, ranging from legitimate theatre, moving pictures and amusement parks, to sports like boxing and racing. The magazine took on the sub-title "Sports Gazette" in 1915, and the following year had its name changed to *Australian Variety and Show World*. From 1917 onwards it was co-published by Brennan and bookmaker/theatrical entrepreneur Andy Kerr. The magazine merged with *Everyone's* in March 1921.



Describing itself as "the only weekly paper dealing exclusively with Vaudeville, Drama, Pictures, Circus, Parks, Fairs and kindred amusements of the Antipodean Show World," *Australian Variety* was a weekly magazine largely devoted to advancing the local variety industry. Its arrival in 1913 was due in large part to the lack of attention and the reluctance to evaluate variety entertainment by the traditional press. Up until that time Australians were limited in so far as accessing up-to-date information on performers and the latest crazes to either American or English variety publications such as *Performer* (London) and *Variety* (New York), or via columns in weekly magazines like the Sydney-based paper *Footlights*. That *Australian Variety* began publication around the same time the *Theatre Magazine* introduced its extensive supplement "The Month in Vaudeville" also indicates that there was an increased demand for information, news and gossip regarding the industry. There was also very much a need to have specialist critics access the merits of performers and managerial operations, rather than rely on drama critics or journalists.

The magazine did not focus only on vaudeville, but also provided information and reviews for selected "legitimate" theatre productions, amusement park entertainments, moving pictures, boxing and racing.¹ It often included interstate notes and letters from performers working over-

seas and occasionally featured columns on related topics - including, for example, "Frocks and Frills at the Vaudeville Theatre." In addition it regularly published reports on social clubs such as the Australian Terriers Society, Australian Boosters Club, benevolent lodges like the Royal Order of Buffaloes (RAOB); professional associations such as the [Australian Vaudeville Artists' Federation](#) and Magicians Club; and its own regular social gathering, [The Chasers](#). *Australian Variety's* office even offered commercial services such as the preparation of performance materials, and served as a letter drop for itinerant practitioners. As a key industry organisation it also help arrange and produce benefits for distressed performers and their dependents, and lobbied against unscrupulous and unfair practices or legislation.

In June 1916 the magazine became known as *Australian Variety and Show World*. Jill Julius Matthews notes that "although the price increased, the size remained the same and there was no break in style or content between" the two versions. "It continued with 'newsy notes', regular reviews of shows at specific theatres, critiques of current film releases, interstate and international notes, club and association reports (Musicians, Magicians, Vaudeville Artists, Tattersall's), and boxing and racing columns. It also continued the tradition of large Christmas editions, carrying season's greetings (often in display form) from individual performers and companies" (n. pag.).

From August 1917 the magazine was jointly published by founder [Martin C. Brennan](#) and high-profile bookmaker [Andy Kerr](#) (aka "the Coogee Bunyip"). Matthews further records the history of the magazine over the next few years, writing: "The effects of war, paper shortages, and the influenza epidemic on business were noted. The magazine was still partially addressed to those in the know, including the racing community "Heads," "Bondi Beach combers", and the residents of the theatrical boarding house "Pacific Mansions," whose activities were recorded in cryptic references, nicknames, and innuendoes. The magazine also published a regular column called "The Chasers," which gave the public insights into the weekly gatherings of key industry people as they socialised on Sydney Harbour, fishing, barbecuing and partaking of physical contests such as boxing and wrestling etc.

¹ *Australian Variety's* commitment to sporting past times was made more explicit from the 6 January 1915 issue when it briefly changed its title to *Australian Variety and Sports' Gazette*. A new regular column by "Redleap" (aka bookmaker Jika Hendy) contained "items of interest to those men about town who relish the pointed references and innuendoes calculated to entertain and amuse" (ctd. Matthews, n. pag.).

As moving pictures became increasingly popular, vaudeville had to gradually share space in the magazine with film-related news, gossip and advertising. From early 1918, for example, film censorship became a significant topic of interest. In May 1920 (No.1043), the editor published an Open Letter to the Film Exchanges, declaring: "We have looked the matter over from all angles, and we have decided to cast our lot with the buyers and sellers of the shadowy screen, and, from now on, we are with you heart and soul."² By late 1920 it became evident to the publishers that the magazine's name was not reflecting the spread of content (notably the increased presence of film). A decision was made to merge its interests with the Sydney-based magazine *Everyone's*. For a period of time the two magazines were still effectively separate, and hence the title *Everyone's: With which is incorporated Australian Variety and Show World*. Eventually, however, the two distinct parts of the magazine gradually merged, creating, as Jill Julius Matthews notes, "the authoritative voice on cinema in Australia till 1937." She concludes her assessment of *Australian Variety* by noting that the magazine invariably "praised talent and good fellowship and fully accepted performers regardless of ethnicity."³



Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack
Australian Variety (Sydney) 26 Apr. 1916, 1.

SEE ALSO

- [Martin C. Brennan](#)
- [Harry R. Kitching](#)
- [Andy Kerr](#)
- [Everyone's](#)

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Australian Variety: Vol.1, no.1 (15 Oct. 1913) - Vol.12, no.137 (31 May 1916).

- From January 1915 the magazine was subtitled "and Sports Gazette."

- Vol.10, no.115 (29 Dec.1915) published as *Australian Variety Annual* (edited by [Dan Thomas](#)).

Australian Variety and Show World: Vol.13, no.138 (7 June 1916) - No.1075 (31 Dec.1920).

- Volume numbers were dropped after Vol.17, no. 232 (5 April 1918). They changed again after the publication of No.300 (25 July 1919). The next issue (1 Aug. 1919) was numbered: 1001.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND INSIGHTS

The first issue of *Australian Variety* made it clear that the magazine's aim was to treat vaudeville with both respect and without bias. In introducing the magazine to both the industry and the public, founding editor, Martin C. Brennan wrote that it would "provide pithy paragraphs about the amusement world generally, with special attention given to fair and impartial criticisms on vaudeville acts that will come under notice from time to time in this and other States."⁴ This approach had been signalled by Brennan in the *Theatre Magazine* some two years prior to starting *Australian Variety*. In an interview he expressed his commitment to take the role of vaudeville critic seriously, and stated that he was not afraid to level negative criticism when it was deserved:

A man who will write up an act in glowing terms [when it] should be written in a vein of censure does both the artiste and himself an injury. To the former it leaves a false impression of his act, whilst the latter acquires a reputation for unreliability... My duty is to treat an act in such a manner that when a manager reads the criticism he can with every sense of security engage it - or otherwise - without even seeing it.⁵

In the same interview Brennan describes the resistance he encountered from within sections of the industry to his candid observations, as well as the anxiety expressed by the proprietor of *Footlights*, for whom he was then engaged as a variety critic. "To obviate the danger of any individual but myself being caught in a whirlpool of abuse," wrote Brennan, "I signed my name at the top of the page. The first week had the "pros" talking; but the second week had two of them threatening me with all kinds of destruction."⁶

² Matthews, "*Australian Variety and Show World*," n. pag.

³ Matthews, "*Australian Variety and Show World*," n. pag.

⁴ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 15 Oct. 1913, n. pag.

⁵ Martin Brennan. "The Vaudeville Critic." *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Dec. 1911, 9-10.

⁶ *ibid*, 9.

There is little doubt that instances of bias occurred in every industry magazine published in Australia during the great vaudeville era. With regard to *Australian Variety*, for example, there is a strong suggestion of this in respect of a select group of artists with close (inner circle) ties to the magazine and its senior management. In this respect there are instances where those performers received negative criticism for poor turns in the *Theatre Magazine* but not in *Variety*. Taking one performer, **Jack "Porky" Kearns**, as an example, it is quite clear that he was treated differently by both magazines during his post-1913 career. It is fair to say that Kearns, a high-profile member of the "The Chasers," was at times on the receiving end of some less than favourable reviews by the *Theatre*⁷ while rarely being criticised at all by his friends at *Variety*.

Although these disparities tend to support Delyse Ryan's observation that Martin C. Brennan and his editorial team were prepared to compromise objectivity in favour of artists they knew personally,⁸ the issue might also have been one of a different perspective and knowledge base. While the *Theatre* was ultimately more interested in legitimate or literary drama, *Variety* was mostly staffed by editors, critics and writers with backgrounds in, or a greater appreciation of, popular culture entertainments. Indeed, a close examination of *Variety* over each issue from 1913 onwards shows that senior critics like **Harry R. Kitching**⁹ were still prepared to review particular companies, troupes, performers and even productions even-handedly on a week by week basis. *The Carnival*, **Arthur Morley** and the Royal Musical Comedy Company's third revusical for **Harry Clay** in 1915, was greeted, for example with a great deal less enthusiasm than its predecessors by Kitching. As he records in his weekly "Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre, Newtown" column:

Ted Stanley was the usual hit of the show but was not given the chance to his usual advantage. Given a free hand he is indeed a riot. The show on the whole, was slow, inclined to drag too much... It can be livened up a lot more by giving the right artists more scope to display their ability. The male members [in particular] are a very strong combination and should be able to get in a lot more good business. Outside **Elsie Bates** in the ladies, they are decidedly weak¹⁰

Kitching's reviews for the next two productions were similarly dismissive, writing of *The Cabaret* - "a trifle weak" and needs the talent "strengthened considerably;"¹¹ and of *The Sculptor's Dream* - "it wants a lot more working up before it can be considered good."¹² A similar situation can be seen in his assessment of a series of revusicals staged by American music comedy producer **Lester Brown** on the **Clay circuit** between late-September and mid-November 1917. A positive review of *Mack's Troubles*, was followed by a mixed critique of *Oh You Girls*. Although noting that the latter show was well received by the audience, Kitching adds: "the girls have very little to do and a few more musical numbers could be introduced."¹³ Glowing reviews for the company's second part vaudeville sketches, "A Business Marriage" and "Whose Baby are You?," were accompanied by less than favourable comments for two other Brown-produced revusicals - *Flying High* and *Winning Tatts*. Any suggestion that Kitching's perspective was biased is difficult to sustain because he both applauds and dismisses Brown's accomplishments on the night he attended *Winning Tatts*:

Winning Tatts was not quite up to the standard; plot was rather weak, the company in some cases could have been stronger, and has a long way to go yet before a success like previous revues is experienced... In "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" [however, Brown] was seen to good advantage, and his efforts at the finish of the turn met with the good reception he deserved. This class of business in such capable hands always goes with the audience ("Harry Clay's, Newtown" n. pag.)¹⁴



Martin C. Brennan
Theatre Magazine (Sydney)
Dec. 1911, 9-10.



MR and MRS HARRY R. KITCHING
(See Letterpress)

Harry Kitching and Amy Rochelle
Australian Variety (Sydney)
13 June 1917, n. pag.

Individual artists were regularly singled out in reviews if their stage craft was seen as below par. **Grace Quine**, a relative newcomer to variety when she joined Morley's company in 1915, was one of a number of performers given

⁷ See for example the *Theatre Magazine* reviews of *The Brook* (Mar. 1916, 46-7) and the farce, "Jurisprudence" ("Kearns at His Worst," Apr. 1916, 36).

⁸ Delyse Ryan. "Brisbane Theatre During World War I." PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, 2000, 16. [sighted 29/04/2020]

⁹ Kitching would later become the husband of Australian "nightingale," **Amy Rochelle**.

¹⁰ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 24 Dec. (1915), 5.

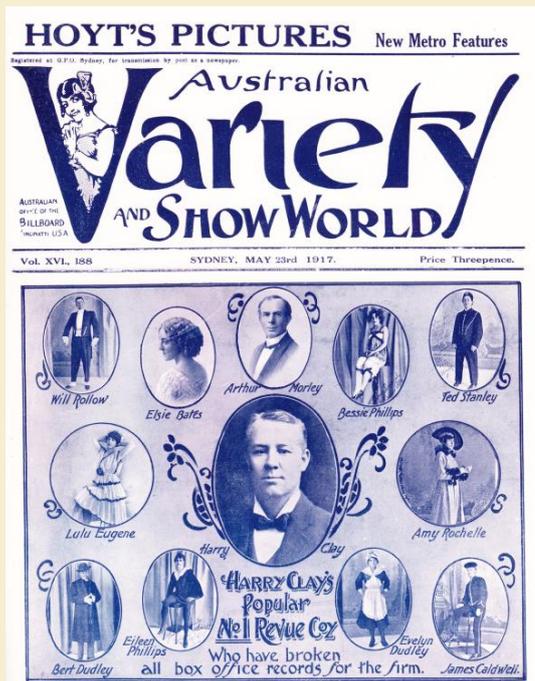
¹¹ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 1 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹² *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 8 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹³ Photocopies of Kitching's reviews for both *Mack's Troubles* and *Oh You Girls* were made by Dr Clay Djubal in 1997. Unfortunately the citation details are missing and have not yet been ascertained. The likely dates were 5 or 12 October and 12 or 19 October respectively.

¹⁴ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 20 Oct. (1917), 10.

"the bird" by Kitching as a means of motivating them to either improve or get out of the business. His reviews included the following: "Quine [was] very quiet and with great difficulty just got through;"¹⁵ "Quine has the makings of a fair performer but she spoils herself by singing through her nose, which is painful;"¹⁶ and "Grace Quine still sings through her nose."¹⁷ Despite such an undistinguished beginning, Quine went on to carve out a relatively successful career into the late 1920s - still performing on the Clay circuit in 1926.



A number of *Australian Variety* reviews of Harry Clay's shows further indicate that his organisation was not beyond the magazine's criticism even though the entrepreneur had been inducted into "The Chasers" in 1914.¹⁸ Clay was well-aware that any artists or aspects of his shows that fell short of expectations could receive the type of critique handed out to the revusical *Lovely Lovejoy*, which was also given the thumbs down by Kitching in 1917. "The revue," he writes, "has far too much talking in it [and] should be cut down by half and more good musical numbers introduced. The comedy is crude and unless it is built up more, cannot hope for success."¹⁹ Clay's attempt at producing a season of drama at the Bridge Theatre in 1915 also saw one production, *Convict Martyr*, accused of "lacking interest" and being "too hard to understand."²⁰ The previous week's production, *The Slaves of London*, was viewed in slightly better light by Kitching, however, with his opinion being that the "drama was [at least] better received than the two previous ones."²¹

23 May 1917, 1.

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Djubal, Clay. "'What Oh Tonight': The Methodology Factor and Pre-1930s Australian Variety Theatre." Ph D Diss. The University of Queensland, 2005, 199-203.
- Matthews, Jill Julius. "Australian Variety." *AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource* (2006), online. [sighted 24/04/2020]
- "Australian Variety and Show World" *AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource* (2006), online. [sighted 24/04/2020]



¹⁵ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 1 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁶ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 8 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁷ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 15 Dec. (1915), 13.

¹⁸ See "When the Baritone was waiting on the Hungry Harry Clay" the poem written by variety performer Charlie Vaude to celebrate Clay's initiation into the Chaser (reproduced in Djubal, Clay. "What Oh Tonight," Appendix I).

¹⁹ "Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre." *Australian Variety and Show World* 2 Nov. 1917, 13.

²⁰ Kitching, Harry. "Harry Clay's, Newtown." 27 Jan. 1915, 6.

²¹ Kitching, Harry. "Harry Clay's, Newtown." 20 Jan. 1915, 4.

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