

NAT PHILLIPS COLLECTION

The Fryer Library, The University of Queensland (UQFL9)

Comprising eleven boxes of miscellanea, including scripts, scores, jokes, lyrics, business and legal papers, and photographs, the Nat Phillips Collection is the most extensive collection of early-twentieth-century Australian variety ephemera in existence. While the bulk of the collection comprises items belonging to [Nat Phillips](#), including those associated with his [Stiffy and Mo Revue Company](#) and [Fullers' Theatres](#), it also includes manuscripts and miscellanea belonging to [John N. McCallum](#), Brisbane's [Cremorne Theatre](#) (including [Will Mahoney](#) and [Walter Johnson](#)), [Tom Armstrong](#) and Nat Phillips' brother, Jack. One of the most significant aspects of the Nat Phillips collection is that it provides us with a much clearer understanding of the Australian larrikin personas developed by Phillips and [Roy Rene](#). Although based on Irish and Jewish theatrical types, [Stiffy and Mo](#) found much appeal with audiences throughout the country, capturing the same spirit that was emanating from the larrikin Aussie soldier of the First World War. Through accidental good fortune the collection survived against all odds, and now serves as a reminder to historians and cultural theorists that popular entertainment is an area worthy of much further study.

The Collection was found by sheer luck in 1972 when University of Queensland lecturer Dr Robert Jordan¹ and his then wife were looking through a bric-a-brac shop in Brisbane's West End. Aware that the boxes were important they quickly notified the Fryer Library of their find. The Library subsequently purchased them for a nominal sum soon after. How the collection ended up in the shop remains a mystery. A number of prominent theatre historians and academics were later asked to help ascertain the value of the archive - among them Dr Harold Love, Dr Richard Fotheringham, Alrene Sykes, Dr George Shaw and Dr Rob Jordan. Although it was agreed that the Collection was historically significant the boxes remained untouched for more than thirty years.

Why the collection was shelved for so long is not known. It is likely that a decision was made to focus on processing more "worthwhile" holdings, but even so this would have been only one of several 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 for some 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 that it did not already have.² An offer to purchase these scripts was never taken up by the Fryer possibly because the processing of the collection had not been undertaken. It is also feasible that popular culture artifacts were not high on the list of tertiary libraries prior to the rise of popular culture studies in the 1980s. Shand's offer appears to have been forgotten over the years and he has since passed away. The whereabouts of the scripts he had in his possession is presently unclear. If they have been accepted by any Australian library this has not been signaled within the wider theatre history community.

In all likelihood the main problem for the Fryer 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. Many were in a deteriorated condition. 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 proposed in her 1985 memorandum 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."

In 2002 serendipity once again came into play when Fryer librarian Bill Dealy was given the task of sorting through the collection. Recalling a conversation with PhD candidate and Fryer regular Clay Djubal, in which the latter talked about his passion for pre-1930s Australian variety theatre, Dealy invited him to have a look. While searching through the very first box the following day, Djubal discovered a script for what he knew was the debut [Stiffy and Mo](#) revusical, [What Oh Tonight](#) (1916). This find set in motion a three year project of discovery that uncovered among other gems, four complete [Stiffy and Mo](#) scripts (all written by Phillips). These scripts provide clear evidence that the Australian variety theatre industry had by 1915 established its own original theatrical genre, the revusical. Research now indicates, too, that these one-act musical comedies did not appear anywhere else in the world until at least the

¹ Jordan was later professor of drama at the University of New South Wales.

² [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*.

early-1930s. The findings from the Collection later became the focus of an entire chapter in Djubal's 2005 Ph D thesis "[What Oh Tonight: The Methodology Factor and Pre-1930s Variety Theatre.](#)"

Several years after he first began to sort the Collection, Dr Clay Djubal made contact with some family descendants. This connection has in part helped understand its provenance. According to Kim Phillips, granddaughter of Jacob "Jack" Phillips, the family had been aware of the existence of the boxes for more than sixty years but had no idea as to their whereabouts. Supposedly passed on to Jack Phillips after his brother's death in 1932, they likely disappeared during the bitter divorce with his wife. Shunned by the family she is believed to have later moved to Brisbane. The discovery of miscellanea from the Cremorne Theatre suggests, too, that the collection may have been stored there for a period of time and were subsequently combined. Over time their existence, and certainly their historical significance, were both forgotten. Fortunately the boxes were moved from the Cremorne at some stage and stored elsewhere. Had they not, they would have very likely been destroyed when the theatre burned down in February 1954.

The Nat Phillips Collection was officially launched by The University of Queensland in conjunction with the Friends of the Fryer and the faculty of Arts in August 2005.

- A [Finding Aid](#) to the collection is available online.
An updated version can be accessed, too, via the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* (<https://ozvta.com/repositories/>).
- "[What Oh Tonight: Stiffy and Mo and the Nat Phillips Collection.](#)" An online display.
- **eSpace:** The University of Queensland's Digital Repository hosts most of the photographs and images from the Nat Phillips Collection. At least 27 are directly related to Phillips, Stiffy and Mo, Daisy Merritt, friends and family.

CONTENTS OF THE COLLECTION

- Box 1: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: A-L
- Box 2: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: M-T
- Box 3: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: U-Z
Untitled Texts [UT]
Comic Routines [CR]
Miscellaneous Items [MI]
Song Lyrics and Poetry (Complete and Fragments) [SL]
Notes re: Nat Phillips items in other boxes
- Box 4: NAT PHILLIPS / FULLERS THEATRES LTD** Musical scores for revusicals and pantomimes.
- Box 5: JACK PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: A-Z
Untitled Texts [UT]
Miscellaneous Items [MI]
Musical Scores [MS]
- Box 6: CREMORNE THEATRE (Bris) Incl. John N. McCallum**
Scripts: Miscellaneous Authors: A-S (Produced by John N. McCallum)
- Box 7: JOHN N. McCALLUM / CREMORNE THEATRE / MISCELLANEOUS**
Scripts: Miscellaneous Authors: T-Z (Produced by John N. McCallum)
Programs, Running Order Sheets etc [CT]
Will Mahoney Collection [WM]
Unidentified and Miscellaneous [UM]
- Box 8: DOCUMENTS, MAGAZINES AND CORRESPONDENCE**
Programs, Posters and Published Magazines [PM]
Legal/Industrial Documents c1920/21
Unidentified Items
Actors Federation v J.C. Williamson and Others: Legal and Industrial Documents ca.1920/21 [AF]
Variation to Industrial Arbitration Act of 1916 by Queensland Branch of Theatrical and Picture Industry, Musicians and Electrical Union [QB]
- Box 9: MISCELLANEOUS AUTHORS/PRODUCTIONS**
Unpublished Scripts: Revusicals, Sketches, Farces and Film/Radio
Tommy Armstrong
Non-Australian Published Texts (Plays/Poetry)

Box 10: PUBLISHED MUSIC

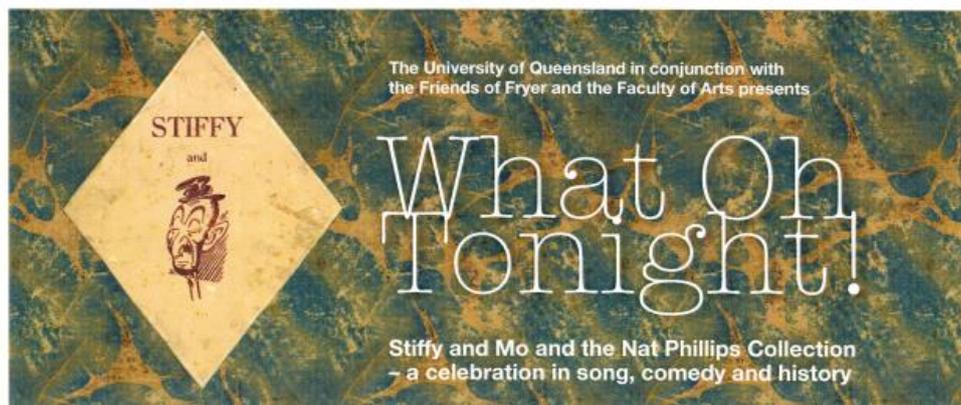
Songs, Songsters and Scores Published to 1929 [PM]

Songs, Songsters and Scores Published from 1931 onwards [PS]

Box 11: PHOTOGRAPHS

THE FRYER LIBRARY

The Fryer Library is the branch of The University of Queensland responsible for special collections. It has extensive Australian studies collections of published and unpublished materials. Its strengths are Australian literature, history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, art and architecture. In addition to over 100,000 volumes of publications, there are manuscripts, photographs, rare books, research theses, ephemera, dust jackets and posters.



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Nat Phillips

is remembered today as part of one of Australia's greatest ever comedy duos - Stiffy and Mo. With partner Roy 'Mo' Rene, Phillips dominated the variety stage in Australia and New Zealand between 1916 and 1928. Little was known of the life of Nat Phillips due to his premature death in 1932 and Rene's successful radio career. Phillips' ten years on leading overseas variety circuits, and as the country's leading writer of revivals (one act musical comedies) and pantomimes had faded from public memory over the years.

The Nat Phillips Collection has been held in its original state in the Fryer Library since 1972. In recent years The University of Queensland has been able to link Nat Phillips with the collection. Much of the history pertaining to Stiffy and Mo, and in particular the career significance of Nat Phillips, can be rewritten. The Nat Phillips Collection includes stage plays, sketches, sheet music and photographs pertaining to the life and work of Nat Phillips.

PERFORMERS

STIFFY Mr Steve Haddan - National Nine News Sports Presenter

MO Associate Professor Richard Fotheringham,
Acting Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts

PIANIST Ms Kelly Burton - The University of Queensland School of Music

VOCALS Ms Sarah Punch - The University of Queensland School of Music
Mr Clay Djubal - School of English, Media Studies and Art History,
Faculty of Arts

The Customs House Restaurant is open from 9.00am on Sundays.

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This entry is adapted in part from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight" Ph D Diss (2005) U of Qld (Chapter 1) and "As Luck Would Have It: The Nat Phillips Collection." *Found in Fryer: Celebrating UQ's Centenary* (2010).

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