

INTRODUCTION

Harry Clay, theatrical entrepreneur and one of Australia's premier tenor vocalists during the minstrel and vaudeville eras, was an enigma according to several historical features published some twenty-five years after his death. An apparent workaholic who neither drank nor smoked, and whose lectures to his employees and associates on the evils of these addictions were notorious (Theatre June 1915, 7), he was himself a committed gambler - especially where horses were concerned. His reputation for providing clean family entertainment over his numerous venues and circuits was second to none. While he would not tolerate a "blue" joke in any of his theatres, he had "a prodigious flow of invective" (West "Harry Clay" 149) that allegedly would have put a bullock driver to shame. In his early career as a minstrel tenor he found engagements with a number of prominent companies, but his strong personality, manifesting itself in hard-nosed and uncompromising standards, created tension with many of those employers, and rarely did he stay for any considerable length of time. It has been said of him that he did not take easily to direction ("Sometimes" n. pag.). Physically Clay was a robust man, used to handling all manner of unruly patrons, but it was also said of him that the outwardly tough exterior with which he related to his performers belied his generosity and quiet kindness.

Clay's position in Australian theatre history is also an enigma. He has been acknowledged as one of the three leading vaudeville entrepreneurs in the country (Andreacchio n. pag.), yet there has been surprisingly little information concerning him or his operations in the various historical accounts published over the past seventy-five years. And of that recorded, much is either inaccurate, or in no way reflects his achievement as one of the great figures in the history of Australian vaudeville. This thesis will demonstrate, however, that Harry Clay's career and reputation was highly regarded by his contemporaries throughout Australia as well as within the vaudeville industry, an industry which along with its generic twin minstrelsy, was the dominant form of popular entertainment in the country for over half a century.

An examination of numerous publications over the last decade or so which focus on Australian theatre history indicates quite clearly the extent to which Harry Clay's position in our historical accounts has been overlooked. Virtually the only account of his life to date has been John West's short entry in the Currency Press publication Companion to Theatre in Australia (149). In so far as other examples are concerned, the 1987 publication A Biographical Register: 1788-1939, provides little more than the following: "Clay, Harry.... Interested in vaudeville, revue, pantomime: dir.-mangr Clay's Bridge Theatre Co. which controlled Gaiety and Princess theatres Syd and Bridge Theatre Newtown: had formed co ca.1902 and been performer himself" (129). Katherine Brisbane's Entertaining Australia mentions Clay in passing only three times, one of these being in relation to George Wallace and Dinks Patterson (120, 148 and 179); while similarly the Australian Stage: A Documentary History, makes one brief mention of Clay (Love 193-4).

Harry Clay, however, is not alone in suffering from such oversights, or perhaps bias, against him, for as my research has made all too clear, there is an enormously rich history of Australian popular entertainment during the first three decades of this century, including both well-known and countless forgotten (though highly popular in their time) artists, managers and theatre workers, who like Clay have slipped through the cracks of our national memory. Perhaps this says a good deal about both the Australian psyche towards our own cultural heritage - that we seem to find it more culturally satisfying to study foreign theatre traditions before we acquaint ourselves with our own - as well as the general disdain towards non-dramatic traditions inherent in past scholarly and historical thinking. Interestingly, too, it is the non-Australian managers and artists, in addition to the American minstrel companies which toured this country during the second half of the last century, who dominate the comparatively small number of academic or historical perspectives in the area of popular theatre during the vaudeville and minstrel eras. Such people include Harry Rickards, the Fullers and Charles B. Hicks. Only the most well-known of local acts, and principally those who lasted into the 1940s and beyond, including those who successfully made the transition into radio, film and television - the most notable being Roy Rene, George Wallace and George Sorlie - have been given any semblance of coverage so far.

While these claims suggest a past bias by Australian theatre historians against popular traditions such as vaudeville, it will also be the argument of this thesis that other factors have contributed towards the lack of research into a period of relatively recent theatrical history. For example, I would argue that to a large extent it has been both Clay's own business practices, as well as vaudeville's very popularity which has 'contributed to this void. To this end vaudeville's "everydayness" and the conception by many of its being plebeian and ephemeral has contributed to its being overlooked. In addition, both its distance from contemporary understanding and the lack of primary records available, have led to this situation. With regard to Harry Clay, then, it will be one of the arguments of this thesis that it was his very popularity, in addition to his organisation's strong relationship with the communities it serviced, that saw him accepted as an everyday part of life. No one thought to collect memorabilia, or make historical records of his career. For as with any other person going about their business in these communities, Harry Clay's visits to each of the suburbs on his circuits was simply part of a weekly routine. Even the trade journals of the day took it for granted that his contribution and position within the industry would simply be a matter of historical record and an accepted fact. As the Theatre notes in its May 1922 issue:

Australian talent owes a lot to Mr Clay. Any act with the least promise in it can always get a show with him. In this way he is responsible for bringing out some of the finest performers Australia has produced. But it is first and foremost as a stand-by to Australians - employing them by the hundreds year in and year out - that he will ever be most gratefully remembered (24).

Of further surprise, however, is the fact that even his eighteen annual tours of Northern NSW and Queensland (these being on average some six months in duration) have consistently failed to surface in accounts of his career. This is completely disproportionate to the exploits of his contemporary George Sorlie, whose travelling tent shows began touring the country only a few years or so after Clay's death, and which have become part of Australian theatrical folklore. During his career, too, Clay ran one of the country's leading vaudeville booking agencies. His name was also synonymous with the theatrical institution known as "Poverty Point," a place where unemployed artists and hopefuls congregated in their attempts to seek an interview with Sydney's "King of Vaudeville." Again, this has all but been forgotten or overlooked.

This thesis will, through its historical survey of Harry Clay's life and career, propose several arguments which will be supported by evidence in the form of historical records, published accounts, reviews and anecdotes, as well as several interviews. It will provide empirical support to the argument that Harry Clay, along with Harry Rickards and the Fuller brothers, was indeed one of the three most influential vaudeville entrepreneurs in Australia. While such a claim has generally been accepted by theatre historians, this thesis will present the first comprehensive examination to back up the largely anecdotal evidence available to date.

The second argument will be that both Clay and his organisation were responsible for supporting and nurturing the careers of Australian performers to an extent unmatched by any other management, even that of the Tivoli and Fuller circuits. In this regard, his influence stretched beyond vaudeville and into the areas of radio and film, dominated by artists such as Mo, George Wallace, Arthur Tauchert and countless others who learned their craft under his tutoring and/or the auspices of his company. And third, that Clay's surprising omission from historical and social accounts of his era is both the result of his business practices - primarily his ephemeral methods of advertising and promotion - as well as the comparatively low profile he maintained socially, despite his fame and the public's recognition of him. Further to this, it will be seen that in addition to the period he operated in being perhaps just out of reach of current research activities and contemporary memory, it has also been the genre of vaudeville itself which has been under researched, and that Clay's part in it, influential though it was, is simply a continuation of that oversight.

Chapter One will look primarily at Harry Clay from the perspective of the private man - his relationship with his family, his personality and his non-business interests. Its purpose is to give a general idea of the kind of person Harry Clay was, or to be more precise, how he was represented by his contemporaries, and by those in later years.

Chapter Two examines his early career as a minstrel singer, leading up to the formation of his own vaudeville company in 1901. This period, although still containing several gaps with regard to his whereabouts and the extent of his engagements, provides both a perspective on the beginnings of his career,

as well as that of several other city based and touring minstrel organisations. In this sense, a number of those people he was himself influenced by also will be presented for a cursory examination.

The third chapter investigates the early years of Harry Clay's vaudeville operations - focusing primarily on his Sydney suburban shows, while Chapter Four will examine the company's operations from 1913, the year he built the Bridge Theatre (Newtown), through to its eventual demise in the late 1920s. It is a period which saw the company undergo a great deal of expansion, including both the Sydney suburbs and a south-western NSW circuit. The underlying purpose of these chapters will be to analyse Clay's entrepreneurial and logistical organisation, as well as his relationship with his audiences and his employees - with a view to understanding why, despite the enormous popularity and success the company enjoyed during its almost thirty years of operations, so very little is known about it today.

The final chapter will focus on Clay's Northern NSW and Queensland vaudeville tours which ran for eighteen unbroken years starting in 1901, with an additional tour being undertaken in 1927. Further to this were several pantomime and dramatic tours, including the 1909 Walter Bentley Hamlet tour (with the repertoire also consisting of a selection of melodramas). A tour of North Queensland by Roy Rene (which has been attributed to having been financed and produced by Clay's) just months before the eventual demise of the company's operations will also be discussed.

The appendix section which accompanies this thesis has been provided primarily to assist further research into this area and consists of (aside from additional information concerning Clay and his family) details relating to his company's personnel and operations, associated organisations, and the Queensland touring parties, all of which was uncovered during the course of the project. In this regard, it was the lack of secondary source material available from the start of my research which created the need to collect anything and everything associated with Harry Clay before being able to determine what was or was not needed. I have referred to the appendix section throughout the thesis whenever certain information is required.

The theatres and halls referred to throughout this thesis were invariably located in NSW and Queensland. Any interstate and regional venues mentioned are accompanied by the town or city they were situated in. All theatres or halls which have no such reference were therefore Sydney city or metropolitan based.

Due to the historical nature of this thesis, and the need to provide dates for a large number of performance engagements, all bibliographic citations for the dates can be referenced, unless otherwise stated, in the newspaper for that town or city on those particular dates given. This is simply the result of almost all of this kind of information having been found in newspaper advertising. In Sydney, for example, such dates will have been published in the Sydney Morning Herald; in Toowoomba the Toowoomba Chronicle; and in Rockhampton the Morning Bulletin etc. A list of newspapers consulted for this thesis is presented as part of the bibliography. With advertising seldom failing to appear on the given day of a performance (the

exception being almost always Sunday engagements) during the period covered by this thesis, on the rare occasions this does not occur a full citation will be included within the body of the work. All other non-performance related references (i.e. quotes, anecdotes and details, for example) will be fully cited according to MLA style.

During the period covered by this thesis the terms producer and director meant the opposite to that which we now understand them to be. So as not to confuse readers I use the modern meanings (i.e. director indicates one who manages and directs the stage performance) throughout the written parts of the thesis. The terms, when included as part of an historical source (e.g. as part of an image or quotation) will, however, naturally indicate the older/reverse use of these terms.