

CHAPTER FOUR

"SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW...AUSTRALIAN POPULAR CULTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REVUSICAL TO 1915"

I found that with the exception of Continental Europe, art on the stage is deteriorating all over the world. In London the lighter and more frivolous a production is, the better the public likes it. A great deal of this is due to the great change in the mode of life among London people.... There is no doubt about it that in this age of electricity and rush and bustle, people have neither the time nor inclination to sit out a four act drama... It looks as if the public now, have only time for vaudeville shows and musical comedies, the latter being thinly disguised music-hall entertainments... But the managers are not to blame for the tendency to frivolity. It is the commercial people. Everybody is working so hard during the day that when the night comes they don't want to think. Satiety is the only remedy (George Musgrove).¹³¹

If the structural and generic origins of the Australian revusical can be located in the hybridisation of nineteenth century burlesque and minstrel farce, the ideology driving its production as an early twentieth century commodity entertainment product owes much to the impact of the American Burlesque Company tour of the country in 1913 and 1914. Produced along the lines of a large-scale spectacular, complete with the latest craze in music (ragtime songs and dances), flapper-style chorus girls, a principal cast of experienced comedians, and based around engaging stories that burst into moments of improvised madness throughout, these two-act musical comedies found enormous support wherever they were staged. As will be explored later in this chapter the American Burlesque Company's energy and professionalism, combined with a theatrical vehicle that contained much social relevance even to Australian audiences, impacted on the local industry at a time when variety entertainment in the country had been undergoing a period of standardisation.

For most of the previous decade vaudeville had been the focus of entertainment programmes. While hugely popular, vaudeville promoted creativity through individual acts rather than fostering an environment in which ensemble and narrative-driven music theatre works might develop new directions. Over the course of time music theatre production on the variety stage effectively cycled into a phase that might be best described as both static and homogenous. Indeed, as the slice of time research undertaken for this thesis clearly shows (see Appendix C), the first decade and a half of the twentieth century saw a marked decrease in the production of new locally-written music theatre works. The industry, conversely, was growing significantly in terms of practitioners, emerging entrepreneurs and the size of the market. This

¹³¹ George Musgrove in an interview published in the Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage 1 Apr. (1907), 3-4.

was very likely in response to the increasing population growth - not just within the urban sprawl of the major cities but also as more regional centres were opening up. At the same time there appears to have been a quite perceivable change in the Australian popular culture entertainment market - which mirrored the changes that had been occurring in Britain and America from around the turn of the century.

The timing of the American Burlesque Company tour could therefore not have been better - both for the company and the local industry. Even though based on older forms these ragtime-infused musical comedies were fresh and appealing to Australian variety audiences, and they broke house records wherever they were staged. It was a response not missed by the local industry. What occurred was that these mostly small-medium independent local operators saw possibilities in the American template and simply adapted it into a local version - one that offered a similar package but in a scaled-down form. Over the next two years, as the reality of war began to impact more and more on the nation, the demand for escapist entertainment with local themes and characters also increased. It was the "revusical" - as these one act musical comedies were referred to during the early developmental stages - that eventually provided audiences with precisely that type of product.

The first attempts by Australian-based variety practitioners to create and stage a one act, narrative-driven music theatre genre on the local stage occurred in the wake of the American Burlesque Company's tour, and first show their presence in Brisbane in early 1914, only a few months after that troupe's season there. Certainly there is no record in the Theatre or Australian Variety of similar productions having been produced in Sydney or Melbourne by then, the two cities which the troupe had played previously. These mini-musical comedies, put together in early January by expatriate American entertainer and producer, Post Mason (by then well known to variety audiences around Australia from his time with Harry Rickards), were not surprisingly labeled burlesque, there being no other readily available descriptive at that time. While reviews of the productions by Mason's Record Breakers company do not give much away in terms of format specifics, several factors suggest that these productions took elements from both the late nineteenth century and modern American burlesque genres, and thus lay claim to being a hybrid fore-runner of the Australian revusical. The key elements in this respect were that each was presented over an entire half of an evening's program; the cast was made up of the regular troupe members - approximately a dozen or so (including a female chorus); and they were built around production values that meant that the orchestra, scenery, costumes (and cast size) were kept within the company's budget guidelines - a far cry from the extravagant staging on the American Burlesque Company's tour. It is worth remembering, too, that old-style burlesques had been staged in Australia on infrequent occasions during the past decade, and thus in the

hands of a theatre practitioner like Mason these hybrid versions would have drawn on influences more in keeping with this up-to-date variety theatre fad (even despite the first known production being an old burlesque favourite, Uncle Tom's Cabin).



Post Mason

Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage Mar. (1906), 24.
[Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland]

Following the end of the Post Mason Record Breakers season no further burlesque activity appears to have occurred in Brisbane until May of that year, when Ted Holland revived the style of narrative-driven production he had gained experience in during his time with Delohery, Craydon and Holland. His Empire Theatre patrons were thus treated to Il Trovatore Trio, a variation on an old burlesque favourite from the early 1890s that featured production values not unlike the Post Mason shows. The only other similar production from 1914 located is The Pirate King, staged in June by the New Follies Musical Costume Comedy Co at the Palace Theatre (under the auspices of Brisbane-based film exhibitors, Sidney Cook and Wynn Fowles).¹³² As Appendix C indicates, however, the situation in 1915 became a somewhat different matter with many more Australian-based troupes beginning to experiment with this narrative-driven burlesque-style music theatre genre. The production teams who independently developed these early revivals were able to combine the skills of the emerging local, or newly arrived, industry professionals with the experience of older variety practitioners. The capabilities of these latter practitioners invariably ran the gamut of professional industry requirements,

¹³² Based on a comprehensive survey of Brisbane theatre production undertaken by Delyse Ryan (2000).

notably dramatic acting, comedy, singing, songwriting and management. Because they brought with them much past experience it is more than likely that the producers utilised the skills of these performers in the creative development of these shows. This would have been more efficient than requiring them to learn new skills or develop enough new routines for an entire production. It is not surprising then to see among the pioneers of the genre were not only a number of ex-American Burlesque Company members who had remained in the country after the troupe disbanded, but also expatriate English stars like Edward Branscombe (Dandies companies). Each of these performers would have had a vast catalogue of sketches and routines to fall back on - with many of these already tried and tested on audiences. Senior Australian practitioners like dramatic actor/manager, Kate Howarde (with her then husband, Elton Black) and actor/manager Frank Reis, were also involved to a limited degree in the production of these early revusicals. Having vast experience on the stage did not always invite success, however, as Howarde found out when she briefly attempted a career on the variety stage - and subsequently secured some of the worst reviews of her career to that point.¹³³ Among the local variety practitioners, those like Holland/St John and John N. McCallum (Brisbane), Harry Clay (Sydney), and well-known local variety performer/managers like Albert Bletsoe (Bletsoe's Musical Comedy Revue Co), Arthur Morley (Royal Musical Comedy Co) and Walter George (Smart Set), all saw early opportunities to latch on to the Australian popular culture's increasing demands for more of the same.

Harry Clay's decision in early 1916 to turn more of his Sydney circuit programs over to these revue/revusical/musical tabloid/mini musical comedy burlesques (as they were being referred to at that time), reflected a similar response to the Fullers' current policy. Together these two companies established a precedent that saw more and more local firms (Brisbane's Holland and St John (Empire Theatre)¹³⁴ and John N. McCallum (Cremorne Theatre), for example), and sub-managements like Sadler and Kearns (Sydney), follow suit. Because these companies were wholly dependent on the quality of the troupe, and the effectiveness of the creative teams putting the shows together, they invariably drew heavily on the expertise of senior and experienced practitioners. While some measure of success was achieved - a factor which not surprisingly led to the genre being further developed - none (apart from Bert Le Blanc's shows) were able to come near the level of success that greeted the Nat Phillips Tabloid Musical Comedy Company in 1916. In capturing the popular culture audience's attention in Sydney, Stiffy and Mo turned the revusical into a full-blown popular culture craze in that city, and

¹³³ See Elton Black biography in Appendix D for further details of Kate Howarde's revusical career.

¹³⁴ Following the death of Percy St John in October 1916 (Ted Holland had died in 1914), the Empire Theatre's management was briefly taken over by Edward and Dan Carroll in association with the Fullers (see Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 29 Dec. 1915, 38).

provided other troupes and companies with an incentive to do likewise around the nation.¹³⁵ At the core of this new development in variety entertainment, however, were the variety audiences around the country that found in these one act musical comedies levels of social and cultural relevance that made it the most appealing theatre experience on offer. Without their enthusiastic support for this new and exciting variety product, there could not have been an Australian revusical. For this reason, any attempt to analyse the Australian revusical's developmental precedents (industrial and creative) is dependent on first understanding the ideological, cultural and social world of the market that consumed it, and it is the dynamic relationship between production and reception (at the development stages of the revusical) that this chapter seeks to examine.



Ted Holland

Theatre Magazine June (1913), 29.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

That popular culture entertainment practice in Australia during the four decades leading up to 1914 has been accorded comparatively minor attention to date is due in part to the same problem facing urban biographers. As McCarty and Schedvin note, while the ultimate aim is to write up a "fully-rounded history of the city over a long period or the entirety of its history...

¹³⁵ Appendix C provides evidence supporting this claim. The research survey of new locally-written revusicals and musical scenas shows a significant number of new works having been created between 1916 and 1919: **1915** (19), **1916** (57), **1917** (107), **1918** (75), **1919** (56). It should be noted that these figures do not represent all the productions staged in Australia during this period, as many dozens of revusicals are identified as having been staged at particular venues on particular dates, but not by name. One reason for this is that reviews and advertising did not always refer to individual productions by their title. This is particularly the case for the years 1918 and 1919. Although Australian Variety provides the historian with the most accessible data from its first issue in 1913 onwards, the situation changes quite significantly from mid-1918. At one point it appears that the editors adopted, in the majority of instances, the practice of referring to troupes rather than the name of their current production - e.g. "Ted Stanley and company will appear next Saturday in a new revue" (27 Sept. 1918, 10). Without recourse to other primary sources (newspaper advertising) many of these revusicals have inadvertently disappeared from the historical record. It should be remembered, too, that the above totals are first known/premiere productions only and hence do not include return engagements, reproductions, revivals and suburban or regional tours. This factor alone exponentially increases the total number of productions staged around Australia during that time period alone into the thousands.

Australian historians simply have not yet undertaken the basic research needed to write even the most conventional sort of urban biography" (2-3). With a minimal toolkit of methodological techniques, urban historiographers and theatre historians have therefore been confined to the study of particular aspects of history, invariably leaving large gaps to be filled in by assumption and most-likely scenarios. It is important at this point to acknowledge, too, that although this thesis has adopted a more flexible and over-arching methodological approach, the nature of historical research means that this project will also necessarily leave gaps at both the upper, more stable A-level and more transient C-level ends of the industry. There are also a number of issues that are necessarily treated with a more generalised approach because they themselves require a more concentrated analysis in order to come to a satisfactory conclusion. This thesis, for example, has already pointed to the problem of attempting to establish when and how vaudeville took over from the minstrel first part. This issue is far from clear cut because although minstrelsy appears to have been in decline from around the late-1890s, and had all but disappeared well before Harry Rickards' death in 1911, the genre still continued to find widespread and regular support on the suburban and regional circuits around Australia through into the WWI years and beyond. The following examples provide evidence of this claim.¹³⁶ In 1913 ex-J. C. Williamson business manager, George L. Goodman, presented his Star Vaudeville and Minstrel Company at the Alhambra Theatre in Sydney.¹³⁷ Five years later Walter Johnston's Revue Company revived the minstrel semi-circle while on the Fullers circuit. Among the troupe were Les Warton and Jack "Porky" Kearns (Grand Opera House, Sydney).¹³⁸ The following year Andy Kerr, then Australian Variety's manager and lessee of the Gaiety Theatre (Syd), presented his Minstrel and Revue Company at that venue. The Theatre also records in its March 1920 issue that Benjamin and John Fuller's 1919-20 pantomime, Robinson Crusoe, included a "fortnight or so of burnt cork" (41), while Harry Clay is known to have continued to present the minstrel first part on his Queensland tours up until 1916, before finally bringing "down the curtain" on minstrel revivals in Sydney in May 1921 (Djubal 113-14). Even then managers like Clay later became creative with the genre and occasionally brought back the minstrel semi-circle, exchanging blackface for naval costumes and the like (Djubal 114). John N. McCallum also presented a week of "Christy Minstrels" at his Cremorne Theatre (Bris) in 1920, with the cast including Elton Black and Billy Maloney.¹³⁹ Leading Australian performers like Ted Tutty,

¹³⁶ The Brisbane Courier's "Music and Drama" column of 25 January 1902 records: "Rickards has abolished the Part 1 system at his Melbourne theatre and it will probably be relegated to the realm of things that have been in other Australian theatres" (9).

¹³⁷ Goodman's long association with J. C. Williamson included Williamson, Garner and Musgrove (between 1880 and ca.1905). He was also employed by other local and touring firms such as John Stofel (1879) and Brough and Boucicault (c1892), and went into entrepreneurial activity himself towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century (Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage Dec. 1909, 14; and "Music and Drama," Sydney Morning Herald 19 June 1915, 12). The director for the Alhambra Theatre in 1913, which featured vaudeville and pictures, Goodman staged a revival of minstrelsy in May of that year.

¹³⁸ Theatre Dec. (1918), 32.

¹³⁹ Brisbane Courier 5 June (1920), 2.

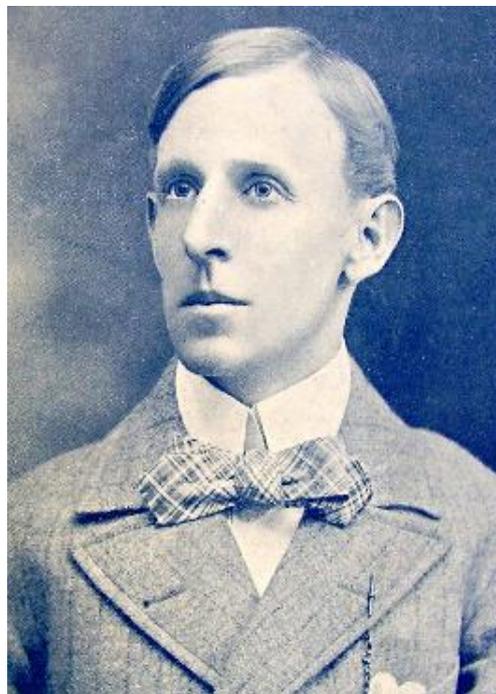
Billy Cass and Wal Rockley are also known to have continued the burnt cork tradition into the 1920s.¹⁴⁰ Rockley was still presenting blackface in 1929, as an Everyone's article indicates. Described as a "real veteran" whose association with the business went "back to the days of the old Alhambra and Frank Clark's Silk Stockings Company," Rockley is said to have successfully revived the minstrel first part for a brief season the Grand Opera House (Syd).¹⁴¹



Harry Clay

Australian Variety and Show World 23 May (1917), 1.

(Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



Frank Reis

Theatre 15 July (1905), Supplement, n. pag. (Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Qld)

The problematics involved in dealing with this seemingly straight-forward issue occur because although variety fads, imported stars, and the occasional local celebrity performer, are relatively easy to identify through the upper level capital city operations of the Tivoli, Brennan and Fullers operations, the lower-level industry suburban/interstate entrepreneurs and their audiences left much less spectacular evidence of having existed. Nevertheless it is possible to come to terms with this area of research by concentrating on three key factors: 1) the influence of the social infrastructure on variety - that is, the market forces produced by consumers rather than by producers alone; 2) the impact of the media (notably Australian Variety); and 3) the development of the locally-written revusical. One particular aspect that underpins this chapter' approach is the relationship between variety entertainment and post-Federation national identity. In this respect, one frequently overlooked aspect of the Australian culture of this period is the role that local popular culture entertainers had in shaping notions of Australian-ness.

¹⁴⁰ Theatre May (1916), 49; and Nov. (1919), 28.

¹⁴¹ Everyone's 13 Nov. (1929), 41.

Another factor to impinge heavily on the historian's ability to "discover" popular culture is an issue discussed by Peter Burke in People's History and Social Theory. Burke proposes, for example, that one also needs to distinguish "between the culture which comes from ordinary people... and the culture which is provided for ordinary people by someone else" (218). In this sense popular culture is inherently contradictory - industrialised and profit-motivated on one hand, but on the other made up of, and dispersed by, the people. Again as John Fiske points out: "popular culture is such an elusive concept: it cannot be firmly located in its texts or in its readers... popular culture is to be found [therefore] in its practices, not in its texts or their readers, though such practices are often most active in the moments of text-reader interaction" (45). At the core of popular culture pleasure then is the notion of participation in everyday cultural practices, whereby interpersonal structures and allegiances (friendships, family, workmates etc) intersect with the dominant ideologies and public utilities in place at any given time (laws, transport, social systems, gender, race, education and employment etc). Interestingly, no reviews, industry-related observations or editorial comments have been located in either Australian Variety or the Theatre that criticise the lack of Australian-ness in any local revusicals. Certainly the arrival of Nat Phillips' "Stiffy" around 1914, and Roy Rene's "Mo" in 1916 saw these characters hailed as being the first archetypical Australian characters to appear in the revusical - but prior to this there was no suggestion that audiences or industry critics saw the variety industry as being un-Australian. Instead the critics more often observed the everyday appeal of the stories and situations. An Australian Variety review of Where's the Wife, staged on Harry Clay's circuit in 1917, provides an example of this. Following its Bridge Theatre premiere, the magazine notes: "It should surely appeal to some of the poor old married men of Newtown, many of whom are very often ignorant as to the whereabouts of their respective 'better halves" [sic].¹⁴² This type of popular culture resonance within the urban market was located in the issues and instances affecting their immediate lives. The following lines from another 1917 revusical Safety First¹⁴³ "invariably [got] a loud hand from the back of the house." They serve to further demonstrate the type of subject matter and approach that appealed to the revusical's primary audience - the lower socio-economic demographic:

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.

(X-Ray, "A Worker's Toast" 43)

¹⁴² Australian Variety and Show World 23 May (1917): 4.

¹⁴³ First staged by ex-American Burlesque Company star, Paul Stanhope, for the Fullers (National Amphitheatre, Syd).

Any issue of social interest and/or concern - i.e. parents who sent their children to the local hotel to pick up alcohol - could become topical subjects for comedians to play around with:

Jack Kearns is of course THE comedian of the programme. Drink is one of the subjects of his discourse... [and] he concludes, "But there is one thing I do object to - the sending of children to hotels for your booze. It isn't fair. No; we should have it laid on to our homes - like water or the gas" (qtd. in X-Ray. "Gaiety Theatre" 28).

The subject of alcohol was particularly popular with audiences, a factor evidenced by the number of related jokes and lyrics published in the pages of Australian Variety and the Theatre. Comedic singer, Louis London, described as having a style of his own (simple street dress with little facial make-up) performed ditties with lyrics such as the following:

'Tis only an old beer bottle
Floating upon the foam,
Only an old beer bottle,
Many miles from home.
Inside is this piece of paper,
With these words writ thereon -
"Whoever finds this bottle,
Will find the beer all gone!"

(qtd. in X-Ray, "Month in Vaudeville" 28)

Alcohol was also a favourite topic with Nat Phillips and Roy Rene. A scene played out during their All Aboard revusical in 1916 demonstrates the link between the pair and their primary audience:

Stiffy: What was that great crowd down at the Town Hall tonight?
Mo: That was the wholesale and retail liquor-trades procession.
Stiffy: Who were those in the front in motor cars, with tall hats and smoking fat cigars?
Mo: Those were the brewers - the whole-sale men.
Stiffy: And who were those next to them in spruce clothes and driving natty little traps?
Mo: Those were the retailers
Stiffy: And who was that ragged, down-at-the-heels, scroucher crowd following in the rear?
Mo: Oh, those were the consumers.

("All Aboard" 49)

Many jokes told on a daily and weekly basis also contained references to contemporary celebrities - notably politicians, theatre people and sporting personalities - as well as social and sporting events and issues of public interest. Jokes (good or bad) relating to the on-going Sydney Harbour Bridge saga were common in the post-war years. Soubrette Jeanette Spellman's promise to give her answer to her lover "when the [bridge] is finished," elicits the sobbing reply "then we shall never speak again." Topicality was not always enough to save a poor joke, however, as a Theatre critic's scathing review of Spellman's performance indicates (X-Ray, "Month in Vaudeville" Mar. 1917, 31). Racing industry subject matter also invariably made its way into jokes and sketches. Sydney's Spring Carnival, for example, frequently saw an increase in equine-related material on the variety stage. The Theatre's X-Ray presented some patter

between two of Harry Clay's leading performers in the weeks leading up to the annual event which demonstrates this. "Reg Thornton [at the Gaiety Theatre] blows on to the stage in the street attire of one of the boys, and jokes and sings in a way that brings down the house," he writes. "With Maurice Chenoweth [Thornton] works off this: -

Mr C. I believe you're very lucky at the races.

Mr T. I am.

Mr C. Who do you get your tips from - Vockler?

Mr T. Vockler? Don't be silly. I get my tips from a man who never backed a loser in seven years.

Mr C. Never backed a loser in seven years! Who in the name of Heaven can that be?

Mr T. Mr Grahame.¹⁴⁴

Another relating to turf:

Mr T. During the Randwick meeting a horse actually won a race carrying timbre.

Mr C. Carrying timber! How do you make that out?

Mr T. Well, didn't Rebus win carrying Wood?"

(qtd. in X-Ray. "Month in Vaudeville" 28)

The Theatre's critique of George Edwards and Rosie Parkes' turn around the same time - while posing the question - "is there a pair of sketch artists in Australia to-day the equal of [locals] George Edwards and Rosie Parkes - home-grown or imported?" - indicates that they too were working with topical and socially relevant material. "Admirably worked is the offering in which they succeed in backing a 100-1 chance winner through the aid of a magic ring," writes X-Ray ("Month in Vaudeville" Nov. 1919, 28).

It is the relevance aspect inherent to the generation and circulation of meanings and pleasures within the pre-1930s popular "working" culture that has created the most difficulties for theatre historians, largely because this seemingly similar or like-minded era is somewhat foreign and unappealing to academic inquiry. As introduced earlier this thesis, the paucity of academic interest in the "barren" field of post-Federation/pre-1930s' popular culture theatre hasn't been by chance. "The profound transformation in the culture of the popular classes which occurs between the 1880s and 1920s," writes Stuart Hall, sees everything change - "not just a shift in the relations of forces but a reconstitution of the terrain of the political struggle itself" (229). Hall concludes that the non-appearance of a militant or mature ideological struggle within a culture so closely resembling our own has been disconcerting. Ultimately this has led to the period having been put aside. Nevertheless, the diaspora of popular culture pastimes within the fast-changing Australian urban social landscape over the decades leading up to the immediate post-Federation era is a consequence of the centralising of industry and commerce that requires

¹⁴⁴ It is likely that the "Grahame" referred to in this joke was the President of the Tattersall's Club (Sydney) and also State Minister for Agriculture. See Australian Dictionary of Biography 9 (1988), 69. The reference to Vockler is possibly one of three well known variety/sporting people from that era - Ern Vockler (known as the "Charlie Chaplin of Australia"), his sister, Lily (wife and on-stage partner of comic, Ern Delavale), or their brother, boxing champion, Art (Vockler) Martell.

academic consideration. With the six Australian cities sustaining most of the population growth, the economic forces were also largely determining its social structure. D. T. Merrett notes, for example, that by the start of the twentieth century 36 per cent of the 3.57 million population resided in these six capitals alone (171).

The reliance on coastal-urban growth rather than rural expansion also saw Australia's developing national identity, or consciousness, during this era become one peculiarly located in the suburbs - where most Australians lived, and where a large percentage of public utility resources were absorbed (Davidson 82). As the previous chapter has argued the urban and industrial developments of the late 1800s "produced new city dwellers, possessed of spare time, financial resources, and a desire to be entertained" (Waterhouse, "Popular Culture" 269). With most Australian workers being employed under more liberal terms and with greater monetary rewards than their British and American counterparts, its citizens, even the "common-sort" (269), had greater all-year-round access to leisure time and activities (Meader 145). The diffusion of leisure time in the urban areas, and particularly amongst male workers in the lower white collar and blue collar workforce, saw the country often described by visitors as a "working man's paradise," and indeed the success of recent social reforms was seen by Australians at that time as one of the country's great achievements (Birrell 262).¹⁴⁵

The spread of benefits derived from both state and Commonwealth arbitration during the early Federation years not only enhanced the lot of weaker employment sectors (domestic servants, shop assistants, manual laborers, factory workers etc) but also helped intensify the nationalistic feelings of the popular culture - whereby Australians began to more actively engage in thoughts and discussion about what it meant to be an Australian (Birrell 304). Considering yourself an Australian was not just about nationalistic sentiment, however. It was as Gordon Greenwood proposes, "a complex of ideas and emotions, partly apprehension of present reality, [and] partly aspiration towards an ideal future" (146). As suggested earlier, because much of our understanding of late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalism to date has been drawn from the work of Australia's leading artists and writers of the era, our understanding of what constituted an Australian individual is reflective of these works and the ideologies within them. Greenwood articulates this approach when he notes: "The most important avenue of publication, the Bulletin, attracted the best creative writers. For the first time the Australian land and people were seen through the eyes of writers who were consciously Australians, sensitive to its virtues, critical of its shortcomings, but confident in its future" (148). Critiques of leading Australian

¹⁴⁵ Another important achievement, which further reflects the improving everyday conditions ordinary people were becoming accustomed to, was the infant mortality rate, which fell from 107 deaths per thousand births in 1902 to 71.7 in 1912, a figure almost half that of England and Wales combined for the same period. See Commonwealth Year Book 7 (1914): 169-70.

writers of the pre-WWI era ¹⁴⁶ (David Walker, Kay Iseman, and Jack Lindsay, for example) indicate, however, that this minority were far removed from the great popular culture mass. They were well-educated, widely traveled, and heavily influenced by contemporary European socialist thought, and as such were the "products of both the middle-class and parent culture they decried" (Iseman 276). In Decay and Renewal Jack Lindsay argues that writers and intellectuals of the period tended to view with nostalgia the twenty year period of intellectual and creative activity leading up to Federation (ctd. in Iseman 276). As a consequence they saw themselves as effectively separated from their contemporary culture, both dominant and popular.

In attempting to come to terms with the intimate production/reception relationship that occurred in the variety entertainment cultural sphere of that era, this thesis argues that the significance attached to these writers, artists and intellectuals effectively denies the voice of popular Australian culture and the impact that this significant portion of the population had on determining a dominant Australian identity. It is not being suggested here that the intellectual/sophisticated cultural elite and popular culture mass did not share or exude their own sense of identity, but that there existed different means and levels of expression. A 1919 Theatre report on tertiary students attending a vaudeville programme as part of Sydney's University Day celebrations indicates, for example, that both the Fullers and the wider variety industry did not instinctively understand or identify with that particular audience. Indeed, two issues can be seen to have evoked different reactions in terms of ideological relevance and productive pleasure - these being anti-American sentiment and the type of entertainment on offer. The Friday matinee performance of Stiffy and Mo's Bullfighters - the second last session for that week's programme - was as X-Ray records fully packed due to the influx of students:

On the whole they kept themselves well within bounds. The only thing that got them going was the parading of American patriotism in the Pathe gazette, shown as the opening item in the first half of the programme. "They didn't go over," read the lettering on the screen in one instance; "but every man - and every gun - was ready!" This was the culminating point. From the whole of the cap-and-gown brigade came full-throatedly, the one-to-ten count out, repeated with increasing vigor until the somewhat long scene had run its allotted course. Nat Phillips (Stiffy) and Roy Rene (Mo) were applauded - genuinely and vociferously; and most generous were the students in their appreciation as regards pretty well every performer on the bill. For the all-round happy trend the proceedings took a great deal of credit is due to the tact and firmness shown by Manager George Audley in his handling of the situation from the moment the doors were opened ("Month in Vaudeville" 28).

The tone and content of this report appears to suggest that neither the management nor the Theatre magazine were aware that the Pathe reel would create such an antagonistic response from the students - especially seeing that the gazette would have been shown to a typical Fuller's audience at least twice a day from the previous Saturday without causing similar demonstrations. It's not that anti-American sentiment was a new discourse in Australia. The

¹⁴⁶ Such writers include: Vance Palmer, Louis Esson, Frederick Sinclaire and Frank Wilmot.

Sydney Morning Herald suggests as much in an 1899 "Music and Dramatic Notes" column when it proposes that the American invasion had been intermittently sustained since Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliott's Australian tour.¹⁴⁷ The column further notes that "the engagement [of several other companies]... points to the vigorous renewal of the campaign" (4). Michael Birch agrees that this specific problem goes back a very long way. "Australia," writes Birch "has always been the most efficiently colonised country in the world. We suffer, not from the tyranny of distance but from the tyranny of proximity. Australia has always been an avid consumer of other people's cultural product, whether British or American.... [thus] it is not difficult to understand [that] Australians... are the best cultural clones in the world" (522). The issue as it pertains to the above incident (much as it remains today) is that for the majority of the Australian popular culture of that era the issue of anti-Americanism did not register as loudly or as vehemently as it did for those whose livelihood or specific interests (including academic) were motivated by such concerns. The events of the 1919 University Day provide an insight into the separatist ideologies within Australian population extremes, not only in that the Pathe gazette story failed to evoke outcry from popular culture audiences attending during that same week, but that there was some measure of surprise at the "cap-and-gown brigade's... genuine" appreciation of the remainder of the programme.

This issue lies at the heart of the problem with Australian entertainment history in that academically-trained historians working in the areas of sociology, literature and theatre have tended to overestimate the degree to which the work of their intellectual peers have impacted on the lower socio-economic levels of the Australian popular culture. This is most likely the result of both past and present intellectuals finding a particular type of appreciation in the pursuit of high taste-culture production. At the other end of the taste culture continuum, however, such irrelevant pursuits play very little, if any, part in everyday activities. Rob Pascoe's detailed analysis of the manufacturing of Australian history similarly posits the problem of our past having been fashioned by a combination of selective interpretation and preoccupations with myth and stereotype.¹⁴⁸ R. W. O'Connell's observations in the late 1960s suggest too that our national identity around the turn of the century was largely the result of perceptions based on "a single tradition of social comment and criticism" (30). An example of such thought can be seen in the work of A. L. McLeod, who in 1963 proposed that Australia's recreational forms of the late nineteenth century became "a part of the whole social and cultural program" and in tandem with the artists, writers and intellectuals of the era worked towards "the establishment of a truly national identity." Thus by "the time of Federation," he writes, "an Australian ethos... [could be]

¹⁴⁷ The date of this tour is yet to be established.

¹⁴⁸ The Manufacture of Australian History. (1979), v. pags.

found in language, literature, art and all the other facets of cultural achievement" (8). Presumably, McLeod is not referring here to the achievements of our vaudeville and minstrel performers and writers who plied their trade the length and breadth of the country year in and year out to countless tens of thousands of people. And herein lies one of the more commonly misunderstood, or perhaps more often ignored, issues pertaining to a socio-historical evaluation of Australian culture and identity - the fact that the vast majority of literary and critical works published during this era appealed to a relatively small and sophisticated audience. Furthermore they had little impact on the broader population, who either didn't know of their existence, or if they did, possibly didn't care.

Taking the Bulletin as a primary example, its language, content (including advertising) and retail price, indicate that while the magazine's ideological standpoint may well have found support across the broader Australian-born demographic, its impact was all but restricted to a small sector of the consumer market (Waters 78). The general consensus that the Bulletin began developing after a year or so features that seem to have attempted to appeal to bush and "working-class readers," and that it was the first widely circulated journal (Waters 77-78), requires further investigation because the magazine too frequently debased the lower economic, under-educated population thereby suggesting that it would not have attracted the support of that market. Indeed, it is more likely that this demographic viewed the magazine as advancing intellectual and social snobbery. Typical of the attitude of the Bulletin's writers and its editorial direction is the following piece:

Percy St John with W. J. Wilson takes over the lease of the Alhambra Theatre "down in the remote works of Brickfield Hill, Sydney (on Saturday previous) after an almost unbroken silence of years. The theory is that at the far end of George Street there is a population that wants to get to the city theatres but knows it is no use trying because it would drink its eighteen-pence [on] the way; and that this population can be profitably reached by bringing the bones and the tambourine nigger and the interlocutor to its door (8 Oct. 1898, 8).

The Bulletin's position in so far as low culture entertainment was concerned appears to have changed little since the mid-1880s, when one critic wrote a lengthy article about the current offerings in "minstrel-mad Sydney" with a condescending form of expression:

If novelty is pleasing this notice should be popular; it is written for the public not for the profession. And it's a pleasant thing, too, mind you, to write nice things about the "pros," and to stand at the "corner," with a simper about free lunch and receive their tributes of admiration *re* your scintillating humour and dramatic acumen. We've had lots of this in our time, and it was not until a distinguished member of the variety profession gave us a dig in the ribs one morning, and called us a "sikaestic dawg," that we awakened to the fact that we were a great writer... Look in the advertisement columns of the dailies; gaze upon the hoardings of this city; and what appalling lesson do ye learn there! Simply this: Sydney has gone mad on minstrelsy. The list on names we read over with ghastly wonder, Hiscocks alone at his popular and fashionable lounge does not content himself with mere variety veterans. He must have in his bill, sirs, nothing less than Monuments of Minstrelsy (19 Sept. 1885, 9).

The author clearly positions himself above the audience by his use of language and satire throughout the review. As the "unfortunate critic... glued conscientiously to his *fauteuil*," he describes his experience attending the various variety halls with terms like "agony," "ugh," "dreary," "bewilderment" and "burden." Frank M. Clark's *Red Stockings* show draws particular criticism. "Miss Lillie Linden settled herself down to a little bright banjo, and began to sing comic songs. We do not remember to have heard anything sadder," he writes. His response to Clark's dreary patter as "The Man of Education" ("calculated to break the stoutest heart") apparently forced him to leave "in a deeply dejected condition" (9).

The magazine's format also invites a contestation of its historical value as window into the Australian popular culture past. The fact that the Bulletin was a commercial product, designed to target a specific market is an issue that has seemingly been overlooked. An analysis of advertising placed in the magazine¹⁴⁹ indicates that a significant proportion of products being promoted were luxury items (vehicles, photographic equipment, music equipment, high fashion and major household appliances) or business-orientated goods and services (machinery, cash registers, property investment etc). The cost of these products were beyond above the purchasing capacity of low income earners, which suggests that the manufacturers and business saw the Bulletin's market as being an upper-income demographic. As media writer Colin Stewart notes: "Specialist magazines are able to reach a minority audience by charging a higher cover price that allows profit with a lower circulation and by attracting advertisers who wish to reach a certain group in society" (301). This is a factor that Chapter Two argued must necessarily be taken into consideration because the make or break reality of cost over profits in the commercial marketplace was absolutely imperative.

It is being argued here that the influence of the Bulletin and its coterie of writers on the broader Australian demographic has been largely inflated by social and theatre historians who have failed to not only apply a rigorous evaluation of content in relation to the consumer market, but have also failed to do their sums. A clarification of influence or impact by the Bulletin can be drawn from Commonwealth census statistics which show that the population of Australia was approximately 2,323,000 people in 1881 and that by 1901 this figure had jumped to 3,771,000, an overall increase of 1,448,000 (roughly 72,400 new citizens per year over the two decades). If the Bulletin had a circulation of 82,560, as it claims for its Christmas 1886 issue (Greenwood 144), and at which time the population would have been around 2,557,400, this equates to only 3.23 percent of the population actually buying the magazine. By 1901, when the Bulletin indicates that its circulation had reached 100,000, this percentage would have in fact dropped to

¹⁴⁹ See page 179 for examples.

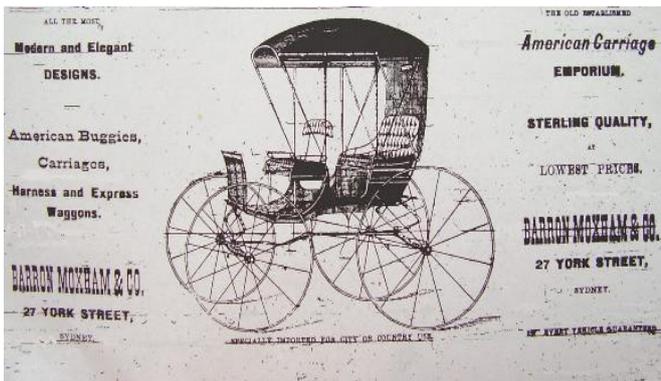
2.65 percent. Even given that each copy sold would have likely been read by more than one person, and that the Bulletin was unlikely to appeal to small children (and perhaps recent immigrants and British nationals), there is a distinct possibility that a good deal more than 50 percent of the population, and more likely as high 80 percent, did not buy or read the Bulletin on a regular basis (if at all).¹⁵⁰ Thus to assume that "widely circulated" translates into increased sales and widespread influence (Waters 77) has led historians to invite a type of contextual slippage that Graeme Turner warns can occur when cultural theorists fail to apply a comparative tradition that explicitly and routinely admits the contingency of its local analyses and arguments (4).¹⁵¹

It may be said then that the Bulletin's primary market consisted of urban-dwelling Australian-born and locally-educated professionals, along with local and immigrant artists and writers, all of whom had to compete against high status British works and reputations (Birrell 105). Because this relatively small percentage of the overall population comprised many individuals sensitive about their identity and constrained in their ability to compete on their own merits, it was a community open to alternatives that dismissed the aspersions of inferior colonial status (Birrell 128). On the other hand few non-professional white collar and blue collar Australians, despite also being disparaged and demeaned by English middle-class attitudes towards them, were in a position to endure public or official scrutiny of their worth as colonials. Instead the popular culture effectively discarded the negative cultural associations by identifying themselves within their own social world as proudly Australian. The question to be asked is if a more clearly definable national identity was emerging in post-Federation years, and it was at best only partly a response to the intellectuals and writers of the time, how else might this have occurred? While many sought nationalist brotherhood through associations like the Australian Natives Association (Birrell 105), most simply engaged with such ideals on an everyday basis through community or socially-based activities - including the leisure industry.

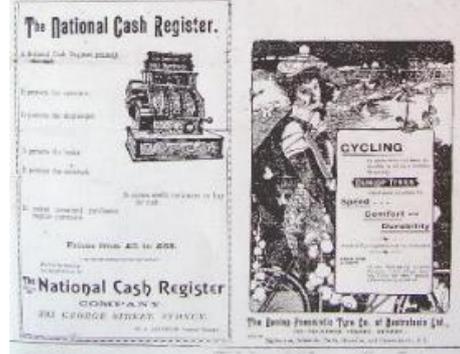
¹⁵⁰ Gordon Greenwood, Australia: Social and Political History (144) and Bob Birrell, Federation (123). It could be argued, for example, that if each issue's actual circulation in 1901 increased five-fold - because an average of five people had access to every one copy sold (500,000 people) - and one third of the population (2,514,000) were excluded from the survey (i.e. those with no interest in reading the magazine - including for example - children, new immigrants, illiterates and British nationals), then the percentage of access to each Bulletin issue would at best be only 19.89 percent.

¹⁵¹ The same logic applies to the use of language and other signifiers that generate meaning beyond the specific, or which misrepresent the actual. As the introduction to this thesis has already noted, the historian's choice of particular words can shift perceptions for the reader and produce flawed hegemony in the same way that exclusion of information (whether accidental or not) also creates a biased reading. For the historian, and well as the cultural observer, this requires a reflective and systematic appraisal of the various layers of meaning within the texts they present (Shuker Understanding 21). It also requires a kind of revisionary perspective that operates by referring to, and actively engaging with, the outlooks and experiences of the different cultural groups involved (Thwaites et al 214).

Bulletin Advertising (1886, 1895, 1900)



Bulletin 27 Feb. (1886), 19.



Bulletin 17 Feb. (1900), 21.



Bulletin 30 Nov. (1895), 26.



Bulletin 17 Feb. (1900), 8.

Of all the venue-based (non-sporting) entertainment forms that had been available in Australia up until the second decade of the twentieth century, minstrelsy, burlesque and vaudeville were ideally suited to both the day to day entertainment needs of the popular culture audiences and the economic conditions effecting the national entertainment market at the industry level. Not only was variety cheaper to produce than most forms of legitimate theatre, but as Richard Waterhouse notes, it was an attractive form of escapism for urban dwellers with time on their hands, money in their pockets and with a desire for carefree release from the daily grind ("Popular Culture" 269). Although film exhibition continued to expand its market share throughout the first 20 years of the new century, moving pictures and variety essentially competed for the same popular culture audience up until the mid-1920s without one dominating the market at the expense of the other. In many instances they even played to the same audience as part of a "vaudeville and pictures" bill. This mirrors general industry clustering practice within specific business orientations, in that the proximity of film exhibition houses and theatres

worked to establish entertainment precincts, and thus provided alternative leisure opportunities to the popular culture on a more or less equal basis. As Waterhouse further notes, in certain ways minstrelsy and vaudeville represented a continuity with the traditional values of popular culture - especially those relating to mocking minorities and defying authority (269-70).

Again the issue of surveying only the top level entrepreneurs comes back to haunt historical practice which assumes that wider industry practice would have merely reflected or mirrored the major organisations. As Grossberg et al argue the study of cultural practice requires historians to "spell out the relations between the theoretical and the empirical, and to rearticulate history in terms of specific material contexts" (15). The consensus up until now, however, has been that the variety stage only occasionally attempted to provide acts with Australian themes and flavours, a claim that cannot be supported even at the A-level venues, let alone the lower level establishments. For example, in citing *The Australs* and their variety turn circa 1909 as one of these rare instances, Richard Waterhouse ("Popular Culture" 269), misunderstands two important issues. The first is that local performers and writers had in fact been regularly presenting Australian characters, stories and themes within (or as the focus) of burlesques, pantomime, minstrel farces, comic sketches and songs as far back as the 1850s (see for example, Appendices C and E). Sometimes these are obvious, but mostly they did not require overt demonstrations of Australian-ness, just as contemporary products of popular culture television like Neighbours and Home and Away similarly establish their unique Australian connection through characters and situations that more or less typify contemporary society. Reflecting on the success of *Stiffy and Mo*, for example, Just It magazine proposed in 1927 that one reason for the duo's popularity was that they portrayed the 'bloke' perfectly, and were therefore a 'dinky-die' Australian turn, speaking the language fluently and 'to the manor born' as Hamlet says" ("Vaudeville" 28).

Much of the appeal of an Australian comic, too, was his or her ability to tap into local issues and poke fun at officialdom - whether politicians, councillors or even high-profile theatrical entrepreneurs. Although parochial and spectacularly "Australian" variety performers are difficult to identify, it is nevertheless possible that many exuded Australian-ness in their performance simply because they were Australian. If we accept that Australian identity was not an everyday issue for the popular culture of that era, in the same way that we today do not feel compelled to engage with Australian-ness in our everyday activities (it is simply accepted as given), then it stands to reason that Australian variety performers did not make it an issue within every performance. Thus the most popular songs of the era were not always about being Australian but more frequently about love, heroism (particularly firemen and soldiers), family etc. While local variety artists may well have encountered resistance to their heritage in

comparison to international stars at some point in their careers, many had no qualms about identifying themselves as Australian – such as with the "Australian team" of Delohery, Craydon and Holland. Others were given the label as a matter of course, as with the various female sopranos routinely referred to as "Australian nightingales," or through descriptives like "Australia's premiere tenor, Mr Harry Clay." Ultimately, however, audiences would have recognised in the leading Australian-born comics of the era a distinctly local attitude, accent or manner, even when these artists were disguised with burnt cork. Critics of the day also often remarked on connections between a performer and the level of popularity he or she established in particular locales. "Mr Charles Fanning is an Australian by birth - a Sydneyite in fact - which may account for his immense popularity with the audiences of this city" wrote one critic;¹⁵² while J. C. Bain was invariably linked with his hometown of Brisbane (actually Ipswich) whenever he returned to southeast Queensland. "Murrumbidgee" Dave Gardner is just one example of an Australian "black face" minstrel comic who from around 1898 established a reputation for Australian "aboriginalities." While reviews of Gardner's act are typically rare, the routinely Australian terms and descriptives applied to his appearances infer a blackface impersonation located in the Aboriginal/outback context. Such references include, for example: "back blocks comedian," "Eucalyptus comicalities," "outback comedian," "Murrumbidgee comedian."¹⁵³

The issue of national identity and the role of the popular culture audience also invites consideration of what actually constitutes an "Australian theme or flavour." In this respect, historians and literary critics have too often looked for spectacular signs (bushrangers, koala bears, kangaroos, boomerangs and coo-ees, for example) when, as the previous paragraph proposes, Australian-ness can be a much more subtle expression. Kay Iseman suggests, for example, that although the desire to define a unique Australian tradition had been going on for a long time the country's relative youth had made it all but impossible (276). And yet while Australians seemed able to recognise Australian-ness (whether consciously or sub-consciously), theatre and cultural critics continued to measure the relative value of past production using the "Australiana" yardstick. In 1977, the same year that Iseman published her article, two leading foreign producers of popular culture musical entertainment, Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim, similarly identified Australian identity as an inherent state of being. At the International Music Theatre Forum, held as part of the 1977 Festival of Sydney, Prince responded to a "nagging question [that] recurred through the sessions - the Australian-ness of a musical!"

¹⁵² *Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage* Feb. (1909), 9.

¹⁵³ See for example the *Age*: 22 Oct. (1898), 12; and 6 May (1899), 12.

You don't have to use Australian history to make an Australian musical. It isn't necessary to write about the Outback or Ned Kelly. That's parochial. The fact that it's written in Australia by an Australian and showing signs of a distinct Australian mode of attack - that makes it Australian (*Audible relief. Applause*)... but whatever else, the important thing is that your shows say something meaningful to an Australian audience (Shoubridge 9).

Although relatively few poems and song lyrics written by variety artists of the pre-1930s are still in existence today, there are examples to be found in publications largely marketed towards the popular culture audience. Arthur Morley, one of the very first Australian-born writers and producers of revusicals, was also an occasional contributor to magazines like Australian Variety. At least three of his poems can be found in issues of the magazine between 1914 and 1917.¹⁵⁴ In none of these poems are there distinctive signs of Australian-ness - no overt mention of wombats, bushrangers, larrikinism or even the Australian landscape. Read in the contemporary context, and by "ordinary" Australians, however, these poems would have shown "signs of a distinct Australian mode of attack" and subsequently produced an understated though clearly identifiable sense of Australian-ness. In Morley's poem, "Stranded! Xmas 1897" (1915), for example, there is little doubt, even today, as to the narrative's spatial and temporal location. In this sense it would have been read in the context of a distinctly Australian experience.¹⁵⁵

Interestingly the Theatre magazine referred to this emerging sense of national identification in an "Editorial" published in 1907 and which drew attention to the nation being then in a state of infancy in respect of its identity. The author notes, however, that even then the country was beginning to show signs of a distinctive Australian type:

At the present day an Australian is looked upon as a Britisher, but far away in the mists of the future we can see a time when an Australian will be regarded as an Australian – as a distinct species of the Britisher. Already there is a strong national sentiment growing up in Australia, and Australians are realizing that it is a proud boast in an assemblage of Britishers to say, "I am an Australian." The service which Australia gave to the mother country in the Boer War is largely responsible for this growth of national sentiment, alias national pride. Already the cry is rising from the sons of Australia, "Give us something Australian," and that cry will gradually become stronger (3-4).

Edgar Waters, in his examination of the popular arts in Australia around the turn of the century, sees the larrikin as possibly the most visible attempt by Australian variety practitioners to define a recognisable local character in this nation-building era. Although rarely presented in a softened or complimentary light, and sometimes drawing on pre-existing British "coster" influences, the larrikin in songs by writers like Lance Lenton and Pat Finn would have been readily identifiable to the popular culture audience. Unfortunately Waters' research, which also reflects the upper-level industry focus of theatre historians, is unable to conclude the reasons for

¹⁵⁴ See also "To Variety - 1914" (7 Jan. 1914, 4) and "The City of Make-Believe" (17 Jan. 1917, 4). Both poems are included in Appendix I.

¹⁵⁵ See Appendix I.

the larrikin's disappearance from the local stage after his brief period of popularity in the early to mid-1890s (215) and before re-appearing post-1915 (222). It is reasonable to speculate, however, that the answer may well lie in the fact that as Harry Rickards' entertainment philosophy moved evermore towards the high culture market, the larrikin's initial curiosity value would have lessened. And as an alarming social pest his onstage representation could only have turned towards the opposite "blue" or low-comedy end of the variety continuum. This aspect can be inferred from the lyrics of one of Lenton's big hits, "Woolloomooloo," written for Will Whitburn, one Harry Rickards' long-serving stars:

I happened to be born on a cold and frosty morn,
 In the famous suburb known as Woolloomooloo;
 For it was in Riley Street where the folks first heard me bleat.
 For at the time I had nothing else to do.

Oh, my name is McCarty
 And I'm a rorty party
 A larrikin so hearty
 That's a fact, oh strike me blue

I'm a perfect daisy, won't work because I'm lazy
 Gone way along the boozing throng
 That loaf round Woolloomooloo
 When I grew up a lad, I went straight to the bad....
 (qtd in Waters 211)¹⁵⁶

Waters' research also identifies a number of later larrikin-inspired sketches and songs, notably: "The Pride of Woolloomooloo" (staged by Hudson's Surprise Party in 1893); "The Sydney Larrikin" and "The Woolloomooloo Larrikin" (1894);¹⁵⁷ and two further Lenton songs, "The Larrikin's Hop" (a hit first for Whitburn c1894 and later covered by Daisy Chard in 1895);¹⁵⁸ and a parody of an traditional English song, "At Black Wattle Swamp I Met My Doom."¹⁵⁹ I have also uncovered further examples of songs and turns that utilised the larrikin character- notably, the Leslie Brother's musical act "Woolloomooloo" (1895)¹⁶⁰ and one of Frank M. Clark's big hits, "The Push" (1892), again written by Lenton.¹⁶¹

While the larrikin's demise on the Rickards circuit seems clearly apparent, in the lower level suburban variety houses audiences would have been more sympathetic to his portrayal because they either identified with or knew such characters. Some audience members would even have been members of a local push, and hence more receptive to having themselves

¹⁵⁶ See Appendix I for additional lyrics to "Woolloomooloo."

¹⁵⁷ This research survey has identified Whitburn's version as having been staged as early as 1889 under the management of Frank M. Clark (Academy of Music, Sydney; 13 July).

¹⁵⁸ See Tivoli Theatre, Sydney; 13 May 1895.

¹⁵⁹ See Chapter IV, pages 211-222.

¹⁶⁰ See Tivoli Theatre, Sydney; 1 Aug. 1895.

¹⁶¹ See St George's Hall (Melb), 13 Feb. 1892. Another of Lenton's hits written for Clark was "The Bookmaker's Concert," which undoubtedly drew on themes and experiences familiar to many Australians - see Gaiety Theatre, Melbourne, 27 June 1891.

represented on stage. That the larrikin was still a popular figure on the variety stage by the turn of the century is evidenced, too, by Florrie Ranger's hit "I'm the King of the Bottle-oh Push," which had been incorporated into the Jones and Lawrence-produced Christmas pantomime, Little Red Riding Hood and the Demon Wolf in 1899. Although it is quite likely that direct references to larrikinisms and "the larrikin" eventually phased out of variety, the characteristics and attitudes of larrikinism more than likely survived, being passed on, especially, in the routines of comedians who built their acts around the defiance of those in power (ranging from mother-in-laws to politicians). Katrina J. Bard has also identified this intrinsic relationship between popular culture audiences and variety leading up to 1914 when she writes: "Australian comedy developed anti-authoritarian themes directly linked to the working-class humour of the Cockney Londoner. Typical subjects to be undermined were judges, policemen, mothers-in-law and nagging wives. The central figure pitted against respectable pillars of society was frequently a larrikin or mischief-maker doing his best to pillory responsible figures but, in fact, often coming off for the worst" (9). For theatre historians trying to understand the social aspects at play here, the problem of attempting to rationalise popular culture identification through upper-level industry activity is that it tends to reinforce a "community of fate" scenario, whereby audiences simply accept what are given because the market is oligopolistic; as opposed to a "community of choice," whereby the market actually shapes entertainment production and developments through audience demand.

The popular culture support for minstrelsy and burlesque in the suburbs and down-market city venues was not just a response to generic form and local content, however. The dual impact of social and industrial evolution in Britain and America, and in particular the improvements in communications and transport, were not surprisingly delayed in Australia - a factor that had as much to do with established social activity, commercial forces and government decision-making as it was to do with actual distance from the British and US industrial epicentres. When the day to day impact of foreign influence did affect Australians it did so first and foremost in the two major cities, Sydney and Melbourne - before eventually reaching the interstate capitals and finally the bush. As with developments in commercial industry the stage, too, was "a thing of the cities, and by its nature... much more readily open to influences from outside Australia... [indeed] the environment of the cities was always less different from the environment of the British Isles than the bush" (Waters 247). The increasing preoccupation with leisure and recreational activities in the major Australian centres by the turn of the new century, as with American and Britain a decade or more earlier, can therefore be seen to have effectively separated that generation from those of the not so distant past. Peter Bailey, writing in Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City, notes for example: "Economic security and the

time and services that it could buy" became an important and wide-reaching factor in the changing social landscape (14). "As the mid-Victorian period unfolded," he adds, "the pursuit of leisure won an increasing number of devotees, for it was not only master manufacturers who enjoyed the new bounty, but the lesser lights in a middle-class that was becoming both more numerous and more prosperous" (14-15). In drawing a comparison between pre-industrial social life, which he articulates as being intermingled with work and "governed by the prescriptive ties of a heavily ritualised communal custom," Bailey argues that "the combined process of industrialisation and urbanisation effectively compressed and concentrated leisure and separated it out as a discrete new sector in an increasingly compartmentalised life-space" (20).

The leisure objective wasn't the only issue to provide a basis for different perspectives within in the wider community around this time, however. Bob Birrell draws our attention to the distinctive cohorts that emerged from the 1880s onwards as the Australian-born children of immigrant parents began to aspire in greater numbers towards controlling their own destiny at the expense of the older, immigrant generations. His research indicates that the tension created through these two quite hostile positions "elicited frequent comment" (106), with the emerging (locally-born) demographic desiring the removal of non-Australians from positions of control, while their elders increasingly resented the "brashness of the new generation" (106). In support of this is an 1882 Melbourne Review article by H. Taylor titled "Our Future Rulers." Taylor writes: "The policy of calmly ignoring the claims of such 'coming men' alienates the sympathies, undermines the confidence and creates a feeling of bitterness" (435).¹⁶²

Despite the difficulties in accurately mapping social behaviour in the historical context it would appear from contemporary references that shifts in audience behaviour and expectations were apparent to some within the industry, and particularly those with the necessary expertise or interest in its commercial aspects. The 1907 observations by George Musgrove concerning the decline of European and British music theatre into "thinly disguised music hall entertainments," were not the only comments directed towards this issue at that time (and nor were they the first he made publicly). Some two years previous Musgrove had pointed out that current theatre practice in London served the needs of audiences in a quite different manner to audiences in the colonies, reasoning that in Australia and New Zealand at least some semblance of "propriety" still remained:

In the colonies playgoers go the theatre at 8 o'clock, and want a piece which will keep them amused and interested till nearly 11 o'clock. But in London it is different; all that is wanted is

¹⁶² One of the most popular of Australia's minstrel farces of the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century was titled "The Coming Man." It is believed to have been first produced in 1885 but continued to be staged up until at least 1920 on a fairly regular basis (see Appendix E). While it cannot be established that the story is based around the same concept, the terminology is specific in its reference and suggests therefore the possibility of a relationship. If this is the case it would further indicate that the issue was not temporally-bound to the nineteenth century.

a piece to act as a kind of diversion between dinner and supper - that is why they are written with only a thread of a plot, and with all the variety business in the second act... Thus it is that musical comedy of today is merely a high-class variety show (12)¹⁶³

While Musgrove's opinions about the relative value of popular musical comedy in comparison to drama and opera are not an issue pertinent to this study, his observation that social behaviour was having a significant influence on theatre production is given much credibility because it comes from someone with a keen and experienced entrepreneurial understanding of the market. From Musgrove's observation it would appear that Sydney and Melbourne theatergoers during the first decade of the twentieth century had not then assimilated the current London fashion for moving on and about town over the course of an evening - an aspect of behaviour that W. Maqueen-Pope recollects as being part and parcel of the British theatre scene by that time: "It was not an Edwardian habit to get bored, life was flowing strongly... [and] you had your pick of a night life which was rich" (206). Conversely, Australian city dwellers of the same era tended towards different patterns of entertainment behaviour, despite having more attractive employment conditions. This was because their leisure patterns were being influenced by such issues as availability of transportation, the nature of the social infrastructure that developed in response to demographic movements (including immigration and employment), local government legislation and planning, and also the ways in which the variety industry had established its infrastructure during the preceding decades. J. W. McCarty argues, for example, that the concentric suburban demographic zones in Sydney around the turn of the century were a direct result of the commercial and administrative centre expansion. "The suburban railways pierced the boundaries with ribbon development; tramways and omnibuses began to fill in the interstices... it made the suburbs the body of the city" (32, 35). Graeme Davidson argues, too, that Melbourne's social patterns were largely the result of "newer municipalities" claiming the main share of population increase (82-3).¹⁶⁴ With more and more white-collar workers moving away from the cramped inner city districts and towards the more open suburbs, the call for entertainment in outer districts also increased. The desire to go into the city for their entertainment on a regular basis, particularly for families, was therefore lessened for many suburbanites as their choices became more readily available in the local context. These are arguments that support Richard Waterhouse's observation that Australia's more restrained and decorous recreational behaviour was largely a result of the suburban dwellers not needing the levels of emotional release experienced in the more densely populated British and American cities ("Popular" 271).

¹⁶³ Qtd in "Music and Drama." *Brisbane Courier* 27 Apr. (1905), 12.

¹⁶⁴ Davidson also makes the interesting observation that unlike most other western cities, Melbourne's demographic diffusion became "remarkable for its social homogeneity" (see pages 82-3).

The assimilation of aspects of Edwardian social/entertainment mores did eventually take place in Australia, albeit within a much shorter period of time than had been the case with previous social influences. Edgar Waters attests to this trans-cultural integration, proposing that while Australian popular culture had developed from penal settlement and squatting, it nevertheless developed a social structure that was open to cultural diffusion from, and indeed resembled that of the British Isles (243). Predating the observations of cultural theorists like Fiske and Rowe by several decades Waters highlights the contradictory nature of the Australian popular culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, noting its "antagonism towards many things British" while at the same time adopting British social behaviours. The antagonism he argues was largely a response to the emphasis on "compulsory" English values in the educational system and the continuing influence of "official" English culture (244). On the other hand British popular culture influences had assimilated into the local contexts through less openly antagonistic means - notably large scale British migration and "the growing ease of communication" (245). Waters finds it hardly surprising that "Stone's account of a Sydney slum around 1900 shows that important elements in the culture of its population resemble very much the culture of the London slums described by Mayhew in the 1840s" (244-5). Interestingly, while America had provided less influence in terms of social behaviour and cultural development during the same period, perhaps the result of a much smaller migration percentage, American entertainment traditions were much more vigorously assimilated onto the local stage, an aspect due in part to the relatively large numbers of visiting American performers who saw opportunities in Australia and subsequently stayed.

George Musgrove's complaints regarding the demise of "proper" or "legitimate" theatre in London during the first decade of the twentieth century, which are essentially no different to accounts of this kind published before and since (particularly when new forms of entertainment production find strong support from the popular culture market), do however reveal an astute observation regarding the speed of social change in London and the increasing urbanisation of western societies at that time. Such changes not doubt had a continuing impact on both the social aspects of theatre-going and the types of productions which found popular support. Macqueen-Pope refers to the "quickenning tempo" of life when he writes about the "creeping" impact of the motor car ("King Edward drove in them," he recalls). Not only that: "The taxi was competing [with] and beating the hansom, tube railways were burrowing underground, and flying machines invading the air" (8). In their research into history of Sydney's inner western suburbs Meader, Cashmen and Carolan also note that the new century's technological inventions and developments in transport brought about a "spectacular boom in mass entertainment" to suburbs around Marrickville. The unprecedented boom in the leisure industry during the war

years saw eight theatres in operation by 1920 in Newtown alone - including the Enmore Theatre, the Stadium (seating 3,000 people), and Clay's Bridge Theatre and the Fuller's Majestic Theatre - with both seating at least 1,500 people (145). This growth was matched in other cities - especially the two other major Eastern seaboard capitals, Melbourne and Brisbane.

The perception that life was speeding up saw an increasing demand on live entertainment, particularly variety, to match the times and the mood of the new popular culture generation. The indications are, however, that the first decade of the new century saw the variety industry undergo a period of slow creative growth. The concentrated survey of three years, 1900, 1905 and 1910 conducted over the course of this dissertation's research phase, indicates, for example, that while the industry was able to maintain enough numbers of performers to service the market (although this was stretched at times), there was an unwillingness to invest in new creative ideas. Each of these years show that increasingly smaller numbers of new locally-written music theatre works (burlesques, musical comedies) were being staged in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth than had been the case during any of the years surveyed in the 1890s.¹⁶⁵ The reasons for this are unclear at the present time, although deserving of some conjecture. Certainly a number of the leading writers of the earlier period had died, retired from the industry, or were no longer major industry players by the end of the first decade - such as W. Horace Bent, the Cogills, Frank M. Clark, Slade Murray and Frank York. Several other high profile performers had also left the country for extended periods to undertake careers in Britain or America - notably the husband and wife teams of Fanning and George Devoe and Hagen and Fraser; and brothers Will and Fred Leslie (c1900-1904 and c1911 onwards).¹⁶⁶ Many of the practitioners who had moved into entrepreneurial activity, such as Percy St John, Ted Holland, George A. Jones, the Bovis Brothers, Harry Clay and J. C. Bain, although having the required experience, were very possibly constrained by managerial and financial requirements and so unable to, or uninterested in, the creation of new genres. Of those to engage in producing the first locally-written revusicals, some like Arthur Morley and Elton Black were still only beginning to emerge as writers and directors, while others such as Bert Le Blanc, Paul Stanhope and Harry Burgess were not to arrive in the country until 1913.

It is worth considering a number of factors that may have played a part in variety's creativity having leveled-off during the first decade of the twentieth century. With Australia still living in the shadow of the depression of the late 1880s/early 1890s a decade or more after its initial impact, most commercial industries were still shaken by the collapse - the "psychological

¹⁶⁵ See Appendix C.

¹⁶⁶ The first decade of the twentieth century also saw emerging artists like Nat Phillips, Tommy Armstrong and Jim Gerald undertaking careers outside Australia.

impact of the crash [having been] so great" (McCarty and Schedvin 41). Wary of taking risks, be it through expansion or attempting new and untested directions, Australian industry overall saw itself constricted by conservatism, and the country paid a heavy price in terms of its position in the international markets. Internally, the situation appears to have mirrored the export position, with most industries adopting a play-it-safe philosophy. What is clear from the research undertaken for this thesis (presented in Appendix C) is that the variety industry leading up to 1914-15 lacked momentum in terms of new creative directions. Although more and more lower-level entrepreneurs, as well as performers, were emerging in the industry, most (if not all) were simply reproducing the type of programs on offer at the A-level. Hugh D. McIntosh and even the Fullers at this time were unwilling to experiment with new forms of entertainment. At stake was the increasing patronage at variety entertainments brought about by rising population growth, and the perception that following the death of Harry Rickards in 1911 the Tivoli's share of the prestigious A-level market could be infiltrated. What occurred then were a continuation and very possibly an intensity of the trend towards standardisation. That competition at the upper levels become more intense from 1912 was very likely due to the pressure on Hugh D. McIntosh, who took control of the Tivoli company, and on his new rivals the Fullers, who were in the process of moving their operations across from New Zealand. Not only were both companies seemingly (at first) in direct competition with each other but both were also attempting to deal with the increasing number of alternative entertainments available (notably film). This additional pressure forced each organisation to maintain a safe, reliable course of operations - at least until each was able to better assess their options in the market. What is interesting about the industry climate of the early 1900s, though is that the B and C-level operators seem to have also undertaken a conservative approach in terms of their competitive strategies leading up to this period.

The increasing demand for entertainment as a result of sustained population growth meant that opportunities to either expand or move into new entrepreneurial activities were constantly on offer at the lower end of the industry. This is supported by an observation in the Theatre magazine as far back as 1907, which although recognising the growth potential for the Australian entertainment industry, nevertheless failed to consider the extent of variety below the inner city/A-level of operations:

Quite a dearth of artists at present exists in the vaudeville profession in Australia, the cause of which is the extraordinary number of vaudeville shows now in existence... There are very few large cities without two or three variety houses in full swing, and scarcely any town in Australia but what has its show, small or large, in addition to which touring companies increase the demand for artists. It seems probable in the near future that leading managers will follow the lead of Harry Rickards, and import turns to fill up their programmes, which at present are very thin indeed (Aug. 1907, 12).

Economic conservatism and competition from new organisations were but two likely factors that effected the industry's slow creative development. As just mentioned, the pressure applied by rapid technological advancements provided further incentive for the industry to adopt an overall defensive strategy. The cheap admission prices for the other various leisure offerings and the increasing frequency of sessions times (whether they be other vaudeville venues, moving picture houses or dance halls) also meant that the metropolitan markets were being given greater opportunities to frequent alternative entertainment venues each week, or even during the course of one night (or day).

The issue of film exhibition replacing vaudeville as the key theatrical strand in the web of Australian urban popular culture from 1914 onwards requires some evaluation here. This is because an analysis of Australian film history in these years conflicts directly with the assertions of this dissertation. The claim that more people in Australia were going to the cinema by 1921 than to all other forms of live theatre combined cannot be so easily supported as Waterhouse would have us believe ("From Minstrel" 133). There is little doubt that film exhibition was indeed becoming a more formidable competitor to variety. One factor that arises when historians draw conclusions based on data such as "the ratio of seats per head of population" (Bain 40; Thorne 68), is that they tend to propose a division between film-goers and variety patrons by ignoring social factors such as the possibility of individuals attending both forms of entertainment on a regular basis. While the impact of film is more readily understood from the mid-1920s onwards, when its presence in newspapers and industry magazines becomes considerable, the pre-war era is much more difficult to ascertain. Arguments favouring the closure "of a number of suburban variety theatres" by 1914 because of competition from the film exhibitors (Waterhouse, "From Minstrel" 132), ignore much compelling contradictory evidence. They also ignore the possibility that such closures were as a result of other factors and not film (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Taking an alternative stance, as the following chapters will amply demonstrate, it is difficult to dismiss the public's infatuation with the huge number of home-grown (or de facto Australian) variety stars of the era - led of course by Stiffy and Mo, but also including Nellie Kolle, Amy Rochelle, Queenie Paul, George Wallace, Vera Pearce, Jack Kearns, Jim Gerald, George Sorlie and Bert Le Blanc, to name some of the most widely known. More compelling, however, are such issues as the rapid expansion of the overall variety industry post-1915 (including new firms and artists); the continued growth of the leading A and B-level firms (and notably their investments in either building new variety theatres and/or taking out long-term leases on existing venues); and the industry's increased presence and role within in the media of

the era. Seemingly in support of film exhibition's dominance in Australia from its early days is Harry Clay's assessment of the competition for audiences around 1911:

I would not open in the suburbs in summer-time, if I had the best performers on earth. The biggest trouble is that the picture-shows charge three-pence and a penny. The result is that it is impossible to compete against them. The penny charge is supposed to apply to children; but they would pass you in for a penny, even if you were as big as Dick Barker, the Queensland giant, and could hand them down a star.¹⁶⁷

Even the Fullers were briefly forced into giving vaudeville up for pictures over the summer of 1915/early 1916, with their National Theatre (Syd) being the only one staging variety ("Vaudeville Fluctuations" 35). Although this situation clearly reflects a concern on the part of Clay and the Fullers, further investigation indicates on the other hand that the situation they found themselves in was only temporary, perhaps the result of a brief surge in interest by the public towards moving pictures. This market fluctuation soon corrected itself as the revusical genre began to establish a connection with the popular culture audience, and particularly following the various Fuller's successes of that year - not the least being *Stiffy and Mo* and *The Bunyip* pantomime. A closer analysis of all levels of the industry operating in Australia prior to and immediately after the First World War suggests that there are no obvious signs of a major decline in variety entertainment overall up until at least the mid-1920s. Even Hugh D. McIntosh managed to keep the Tivoli's operations intact (if not at the same level of excellence) during his early years at the helm of the company, when it is clear that his inexperience in "staging attractive programs" (Waterhouse "From Minstrel" 132) during a period industry of crisis brought on by the war would have seen smaller companies go to the wall.¹⁶⁸

My research into Harry Clay's operations shows too that by 1916, the year in which locally-written and produced revusicals found massive and widespread popular culture support, Clay had long since overcome his reluctance to compete against the film exhibitors and had returned to operating his circuit in the suburbs all year round.¹⁶⁹ It is clear that Clay's concerns over the impact of film in 1911 were short-lived. By 1913 he was back running shows in various suburbs over the summer months (notably the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt).¹⁷⁰ In 1915, barely two months after again having expressed his concern over vaudeville's inability to attract large weekday audiences (he briefly became a film exhibitor himself), Clay reversed his decision and returned to six days a week vaudeville - a move *Australian Variety* declared was "good news for the profession generally."¹⁷¹ The reasons for Clay's decision to reduce his level

¹⁶⁷ Ctd. *Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to the Stage* Oct. 1911, 29.

¹⁶⁸ Delyse Ryan's research (2000) indicates, for example, that McIntosh was never able to match Holland and St John in Brisbane during the war years (no matter what new programs he tried or who he engaged), such was the strength of their relationship with the local popular culture audience.

¹⁶⁹ See Clay Djubal. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998), 99-157.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 21 July (1915), 8.

of competition with the film exhibitors over the summer months (on occasion between c1911-1916) are unclear at this stage. What can be established, however, is that by September 1916 Clay was once more operating vaudeville shows on his Sydney circuit. The following year he had extended the circuit into new territory by taking on the lease of Eden Gardens (Manly) and opening in the Eastern suburbs at venues from Surrey Hills and Mascot (in the south) to Bondi Junction. It was 1916, however, that saw Clay take his variety operations into direct competition with the film exhibitors when he opened up a south-west NSW circuit.¹⁷² Utilising trains for transport (as per his Queensland tours) the circuit took some two weeks to traverse, taking in towns from Katoomba and Bathurst down to Wagga, West Wyalong and Albury.¹⁷³ That Clay not only expanded his operations beyond Sydney but also went into direct competition with already established film exhibitors along that same circuit, suggests that variety entertainment was not being threatened by film. This proposition is supported by knowledge of Clay's operational policies, which for more than 15 years shows that he rarely took risks on opening in any centre where he wasn't not assured of filling his theatres. This can be seen by his refusal to open in any town during its annual show week, and his reluctance to go up against established competition like Ted Holland in Brisbane. The opportunities Clay saw in 1916, even though in competition with the film industry, proposes a scenario similar to the one film exhibitors faced during the 1980s when initial competition from video rentals saw their market temporarily shrink. As often occurs, however, such fluctuations in popular culture consumer spending patterns are invariably corrected, or at least reversed to some degree, after the public's initial infatuation wanes.

The competitive strategies in play from around 1912 onwards, whereby all of the leading A and B-level firms invested in building, renovating or leasing theatres for variety production, clearly indicate, too, that the industry's assessment of the immediate to short-term future (at least) assumed a sustained, if not, increased growth pattern. In this respect the substantial financial commitments outlaid by these companies cannot be ignored, because they indicate much more than the hopes of a few entrepreneurs. It needs to be remembered that investors would have demanded either some level of security or assurance. As George Till, an ex-Birch, Carroll and Coyle business manager (personally trained in the business by Dan Carroll during the late 1940s) notes, very few of the successful film and theatre showmen of the early days undertook expansion or new business ventures without conducting a comprehensive assessment of the risks and profit potential.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² See, for example "Clay's Budget." *Australian Variety and Show World* 27 Sept. (1916), 5; and *Theatre Magazine* Nov. (1916), 49.

¹⁷³ See Clay Djubal. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998), Appendix D, 123-32.

¹⁷⁴ Personal interview with George Till, 18 Sept. 2004.

Leading Australian-based Variety performers of the World War One Era



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2



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4



7



5



6

1. Jim Gerald 2. Clara Keating 3. Nellie Kolle 4. Amy Rochelle 5. Gus Franks, Walter Johnson and Jack "Porky" Kearns 6. Billy Brown and George Sorlie 7. Vera Pearce

1. Green Room June (1922), 7; 2. Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly Sept. (1909), 20; 3. Green Room Feb. (1922), 6; 4. Australian Variety and Show World 23 May (1917), 1; 5. Australian Variety and Show World 8 Nov. (1916), 1; 6. Australian Variety 27 Jan. (1915), 6.; 7. Theatre Magazine Dec. (1915), 37.

This aspect of industry operations has been surprisingly overlooked in the past, but clearly if we take Brisbane and Sydney as examples there is ample evidence of both horizontal and vertical expansion at the A and B-levels of the industry. Ted Holland's position in Brisbane as that city's leading variety entrepreneur was cemented well before he ended his six year residency at the Theatre Royal and leased with Percy St John the newly built Empire Theatre in January 1911 (the pair continued to lease of the Theatre Royal for several years as well). Some eight months later Edward Branscombe built the Cremorne Theatre and shortly afterwards leased it to John N. McCallum. McCallum, who had a controlling interest in the Dandies Queensland Ltd, purchased the theatre in 1916.¹⁷⁵ 1912 saw the open-air Palace Gardens venue begin its twelve years of variety operations in Brisbane, with the less-remembered Bohemia Theatre (1912-1935) also opening that same year for variety, boxing and other assorted amusements; and by April 1915, Hugh D. McIntosh was able to put on his first show at the newly built 1,800-seat Brisbane Tivoli Theatre. Edward and Dan Carroll, although today almost exclusively associated with the film exhibition company Birch, Carroll and Coyle, were heavily involved in live theatre production during the same era. From as early as 1911 they began taking over control of venues in "all the principal centres from Toowoomba to Charters Towers" for the purposes of not only motion pictures and variety, but also opera, musical comedy and drama.¹⁷⁶ Edward Carroll had begun his association with variety as early as 1908 through the "Summer Night Continentals," which he presented at Brisbane's Woolloongabba Sports Ground.¹⁷⁷ Carroll eventually established business relationships with Ted Holland and the Fullers to tour variety acts on a weekly basis along his Queensland circuit from as early as 1913. By 1914 international acts of the calibre of Japan's Royal Banzai troupe (1914), English music hall star Daisy Jerome (c July 1915) and Australia's own concert soprano and opera star Amy Castles (c July 1915) were playing the Birch and Carroll Queensland theatres.¹⁷⁸ However, most of the hundreds of variety acts engaged over the next decade or so were local acts - those such as Arthur Morley (1914), Ward Lear, Charles Zoli and George Sorlie (1915). They also toured whole companies, including, for example, Edward Branscombe's Green Dandies (1914)

¹⁷⁵ The Cremorne opened for business on 5 August 1911. McCallum took control of the theatre on 27 May 1916. Cited in Mavis Donovan *The Stars Shine On* (1984), 38. See also QPAM. *Treading the Boards* (1999), 43.

¹⁷⁶ See *Australian Variety and Sports Gazette* 15 Nov. (1913), 6.

¹⁷⁷ The first Summer Night Continentals show was staged on 26 September, with leading American singer Post Mason the headline act (see "Queensland Summer" 8). The Carrolls would later help give many Queensland variety performers their first big professional break, including a young Gladys Moncrieff, whose success was such that she was engaged for almost 20 weeks (Bradish 13).

¹⁷⁸ See for example, Theatre Royal, Charters Towers (Qld):- D. B. O'Connor and G. Castles Merry Widow Opera Company (29 May 1911); D. B. O'Connor's Comic Opera Co (22 May 1914); The Bert Bailey Dramatic Co (20 June); D. B. O'Connor's Opera Co (6 May 1915); Rafalewski and Lili Sharp - pianist and violinists to the kings of Greece and Portugal; 9 Aug. 1915). The Carrolls' interest in live entertainment continued up until around the WWII era, with Australian tours having been undertaken by such international acts like Sir Harry Lauder (1914, and his world tour of 1920), the Sistine Choir (1922), the stage version of *The Sentimental Bloke* (1922), world renowned violinist, Fritz Kreisler (1924), plays such as *The Laughing Optimist*, *The Luck of the Navy* and *The Alarm Clock* (1928), and a further Queensland tour by D. B. O'Connor in 1929. It should be recalled, too, that E. J. Carroll began touring live theatre as early as 1909, with the MacMahon/Carroll stage version of *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Brisbane c Aug/Sept).

and Smart Set companies (1915), Stanley McKay's Pantomime and Musical Comedy Company (1915) and the Bert Le Blanc-led revusical company (1920). As Australian Variety records in its 29 December 1915 issue while vaudeville acts (in conjunction with moving-pictures) had met with limited success in Brisbane, E. J. Carroll's mix of film and variety entertainment had proven highly remunerative for the "very imposing little circuit" (38).

A number of Sydney-based variety entrepreneurs were also investing their futures in theatrical real estate during the early 1900s. The National Amphitheatre, built in 1906 by James Brennan, was converted into a two-level theatre in 1919 by the then owners, the Fullers, and remained the (New) Fullers Theatre. Several years previously the company had bought the Princess Theatre (Thorne, "First One Hundred" 14) from T. J. West and leased it out to various managers before briefly taking control themselves in late 1916. Two years later Harry Clay took over a long term lease of the Princess and made it the centre of his city operations until 1925 - at which time it was sold by the Fullers. Clay had himself invested in the building of his own venue, the Bridge Theatre, Newtown in 1912. It opened in 1913. The high- density audience potential in the Newtown district was not overlooked by the Fullers, either. Their Sydney operations expanded in 1917 when they opened their newly built theatre, the Majestic, positioned across the road from Clay's. On the other side of the harbour, the North Sydney Coliseum opened its doors in 1911 as the Coliseum Picture Hall. Within a matter of months, however, it had been turned into a variety venue by J. C. Bain in response to the high demand for variety from locals. Bain ran it as such for several years before shifting his operations to the Princess Theatre around 1914. In 1916 Harry Clay took over a long-term lease of the Coliseum with his company continuing to operate out of there until c1930.¹⁷⁹ In the inner city precinct, too, the Gaiety Theatre (Oxford Street), which had been operating as a picture house until 1917, found new life as a vaudeville house when taken over by the volatile manager Harry Sadler. The Gaiety continued to show vaudeville and review after Sadler's suicide in July 1918, having been taken over by Andy Kerr (Australian Variety manager) and Harry Clay.¹⁸⁰

The examples of commercial expansion mentioned here indicate that within both the variety industry and the financial institutions of the era there was a belief that live (variety) entertainment had long-term high growth potential. They are by no means the only instances of growth and expansion occurring around Australia, however, with Leonard Davis in Perth being

¹⁷⁹ Some confusion has emerged as to when Clay began operating out of the North Coliseum (aka Clay's Coliseum). Ailsa MacPherson indicates 1918, while the Clive Lucas and Partners' Independent Theatre conservation report suggests 1913. Research undertaken for my MA concludes, however, that Clay opened his account at the Coliseum on 2 Sept. 1916. See Clay Djubal (1998), 122-127.

¹⁸⁰ See Theatre Magazine Dec. (1918), 32; and Clay Djubal "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930" (1998), 141-5.

another entrepreneur to increase his stake in the marketplace.¹⁸¹ In most instances, these entrepreneurs were responding to perceived increasing demand for live entertainment - and in particular to a type of program that provided a level (or type) of social relevance not yet matched by local or international filmmakers. Thus while silent film found commercial success in USA cities during the 1910s and 1920s, assisted in part by their appeal to the mass influx of non-English-speaking migrants (who visited the movie house to engage with American customs and behaviour as well as to be entertained), for Australian audiences the moving picture industry was much less relevant than variety in terms of establishing or clarifying social behaviour and cultural identity. Nevertheless it becomes clear from numerous observations published during the pre-1914 era that the Australian variety industry was not keeping in step with the needs of the marketplace.

Another critical factor at play in the variety industry's expansion, but which has seemingly been overlooked to date, was the media's role in according unprecedented exposure at the national level. The industry's eventual tie-in with specific media channels (notably the magazine format) around 1913 was not coincidental but rather the result of gradual shifts in editorial policy in the print media in response to changes within the Australia-wide social demographic. I refer here to the way in which the press gradually increased over several decades its capacity to influence social behaviour. As far back as the mid-1890s T. H. S. Escot, for example, acknowledged the impact of British newspapers, and particularly the role of advertising, in expanding the social possibilities of city dwellers:

The cheap press... has transformed the severely domesticated Briton of both sexes, of all ages, who belonged to a bygone generation, into an eager, actively enquiring, socially omniscient citizen of the world, ever on the outlook for new excitements, habitually demanding social pleasures in fresh forms (14).

Observing the Australian media context from a more contemporary stance, Julianne Schultz notes that from the time the local press was freed from interference from the colonial government it played "an active role in [the] economic and social development" of the country. Schultz further indicates that the commercial and public functions of the colonial press created additional momentum through the engagement of "new journalism," a British development that was likewise becoming "less concerned with political argument [and] more interested in human interest stories" (28). In support of this historical line of inquiry Denis Cryle points to the diversity of popular newspaper demand in Australia by the twentieth century, suggesting that "the commercial popular press had already established itself as a dominant nineteenth century tradition... and that it competed effectively for readers by popularizing liberal ideology rather

¹⁸¹ Leonard Davis's control of variety in Perth saw him take on a similar position as Ted Holland, albeit for a shorter length of time. Davis's investment in the open-air Palace Theatre saw him make considerable renovations prior to November 1905.

than by attacking it" (43). Cryle also notes that the majority of individuals carving out careers in the Australian newspaper business from the 1860s onwards were not "the out-spoken and politically ambitious lawyers who edited morning papers," but those with a closer attachment to popular culture ideology - civil servants, accountants and the like (43). The gradual commercialisation of the press during the late nineteenth century therefore created an environment in which "content helped ensure long-term commercial success" (Schultz 28). This new approach to journalism in the late 1800s saw the publication of magazines less focused on traditional newspapers fare and more on social and literary contexts - those such as Lorgnette (1878-1898) Table Talk (1885-1939) and Lone Hand (1907-1921) By the turn of the century specialty/industry-specific magazines like the Theatre (1904-1926) were also starting up publication as the local publishing and theatre industries responded to expanding market forces and the requirements of strategic competition. And by the second decade, too, newspapers around the country were routinely including weekly supplements for women, with these invariably devoted to fashion, cooking, children, society gossip and fiction.

The decision to publish an Australian version of the American entertainment magazine Variety in 1913, for example, came about not just in response to the need to channel publicity towards a specific market but also as a forum for providing a more focused examination of the overall industry. Up until that time the local variety activity had been almost entirely reliant on the mainstream press for publicity and critical evaluation. Reading through countless reviews of pantomimes, burlesques and minstrel entertainments, however, it becomes apparent that a correlation between the merits of particular performers or shows and the level of advertising submitted to the newspaper can be determined ("Vaudeville Critic" 9). This is an issue highlighted by Delyse Ryan who writes: "There is often a great difference between the realities of a given performance and the newspaper reportage of the event. It appears that the journalists responsible for presenting theatre news... were [often] not serious literary staff [and thus] their reviews rarely differed from conventional structure. Recurring phrases, criticisms and ideologies are indicative of this style of journalism" (10). The tendency of many critics was as Ryan notes to merely report rather than critique, particularly when advertising revenue was at stake. As the Chapter Two demonstrates, it was not uncommon for established variety firms to in fact withdraw their advertisements from a newspaper in response to receiving poor value for money.

A survey of reviews published during the period under investigation indicates that specialist critics writing the theatre columns for the metropolitan newspapers were often resistant to popular culture forms such as variety and subsequently the opinions expressed concerning the type of production tended to reflect their own cultural capital. While it might be argued that the Age newspaper and Bulletin magazine were possibly the most restrained in their

appreciation of variety entertainment, theatre critics writing for other leading metropolitan newspapers such as the Argus, Sydney Morning Herald, West Australian and Brisbane Courier, were also largely hesitant to openly (or at least regularly) embrace popular culture entertainment tastes at the expense of peer esteem. One consequence of this division of taste or cultural loyalties can be seen in the frequent objections to the lack of a plot in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century musical comedies, pantomimes, burlesques and revusicals. Typical of the opinions expressed by theatre critics concerning this matter is a review of a Robinson Crusoe pantomime in 1897 in which the critic writes: "True, those who have read Defoe's book, and who has not? - will find it difficult to discover any marked resemblance to its plot in this, its latest offspring of the stage. But plot in a pantomime is a thing hardly to be expected, and rarely looked for. What is demanded of it is that it shall be bright and entertaining" ("Bijou Theatre" 6). An 1898 Brisbane Courier critic notes in relation to Diavolo Up-to-Date that it "certainly [contained] very little of the opera; there was the merest outline. Still that is not expected in an openly confessed burlesque" ("Gaiety Theatre" 6).

An even clearer example of this juxtapositioning of personal (high-culture) taste with the responsibility of reviewing popular culture theatre can be seen in the comments of an Age critic who in 1913 writes of the American Burlesque Company's Grafters production: "It is rather a misnomer to speak of a plot... the burlesque so far as the libretto is concerned is built of thistle down - to quote a phrase from Midsummer Night's Dream, 'it is a thing of nothing'" ("Bijou Theatre: American" 10). A Sydney Morning Herald critic, writing of another burlesque extravaganza staged by the same company a few months later, similarly references high culture in his downplay of the libretto: "The plot is quite a subsidiary matter, and, like Bunthorne's poetry, it might may aptly be described as 'precious nonsense'" ("Speculators" 3). The Brisbane Courier similarly records: "[It] is a typical American whirl, in which tuneful music, farcical situations, ballets and songs tumble one on top of the other regardless of sequence" ("Speculators" 4).¹⁸² As this dissertation has earlier outlined the issue at hand is one that pertains as much to language (choice of expression), subjective opinion, taste culture and critical intent in the contemporary instance as it is to selective interpretation by historians. What is being proposed here is simply that critiques of popular culture productions which highlighted weak plots or poorly executed narratives were being done so in comparison to literary drama, but have since been accepted as evidence of an inferior entertainment product by historians with similarly high taste culture ideologies. With no scripts left to examine, the weight of opinion has continued to assume that narrative was hardly worth considering in relation to burlesques,

¹⁸² See Appendix C for numerous reviews containing references to poor plots or a lack of literary superiority. Such examples include: The Miller and the Sweep (1895), Trilby Burlesque (1896), Lance Lenton's Jack the Giant Killer (1897), The American Girl subtitled "A Play Without A Plot" (1898), John F. Sheridan's Mrs Goldstein (1902) and The Coquette (1905).

revusicals and even pantomimes. One consequence of this has been the maintenance of a cultural/social continuum that re-confirms and validates high culture aesthetics over (low) popular culture production. This has again led to a distortion, or perhaps misunderstanding, of popular culture attitudes and behaviour by historians and cultural theorists reliant on the observations and opinions of newspaper critics whose everyday world of experience was far removed from that experienced by the less educated, socio-economically lower-class working population. An example of this elitist thinking can be observed in a 1907 Theatre article:

The decline of the comic opera on the stage is doubtless due to the poor librettos of recent novelties. Consequently the musical comedy has arisen to take its place, and in so doing it has transferred the methods of the music hall to the dramatic stage. It provides a species of entertainment which often really entertains; but it is not quite a legitimate form of drama, it is indeed, formless - without head or tail; it represents the triumph of the go-as-you-please. It will no doubt have its day,' but in time it will cease to be (1 Feb. 1907, 20).

The arrival of Australian Variety in 1913, a weekly magazine largely devoted to advancing the local variety industry, was not unexpected, then, in light of the traditional press's reluctance towards evaluating vaudeville sympathetically. 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 lends further support to the previous chapter's arguments concerning industry clustering in response to perceived increased demand. That such new opportunities were being explored at this time is again evidence of the commercial realities of competitive industry practice. That is, profit-driven motives would have been at the forefront of any investment in any variety-related matters - whether directly economic (as with the starting up of Australian Variety and a few years later The Green Room) or as in the case of the Theatre, the decision to refocus a significant portion of a pre-existing magazine towards a theatrical genre that had previously been given only minor and condescending consideration. It is feasible to suggest, then, that there existed a quantifiable Australasian consumer market for theatre related information as early as 1905, and that certainly by 1913 variety showed enough potential for media clustering to emerge.

The decision by Martin C. Brennan to establish the country's first magazine devoted almost entirely to variety should therefore be seen as his response to the state of the industry at that time and as a reflection of his estimation of its future potential, and not as idealistic endeavour on his behalf. Indeed, some two years earlier, Brennan had made it clear that as a vaudeville critic he undertook the role seriously, and was not afraid to level 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 ("Vaudeville Critic" 9-10).



Martin C. Brennan

Australian Variety Managing Editor and founder.
Theatre Dec. (1911), 9-10.

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" (9). A close examination of Australian Variety over the next few years shows that Brennan and his staff, including senior writers like Harry R. Kitching (later to become the husband of Australian "nightingale" Amy Rochelle), took a hard line when expectations were not met. 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. As Kitching 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 weak¹⁸³

Harry Kitching's reviews for the next two productions were similarly dismissive, writing of The Cabaret - "a trifle weak" and needs the talent "strengthened considerably;"¹⁸⁴ and of The Sculptor's Dream - "it wants a lot more working up before it can be considered good."¹⁸⁵ A similar situation can be seen in his treatment of American musical comedy producer Lester Brown's attempts to stage revusicals on the Clay circuit in October 1917. A positive review of Mack's Troubles and the observation that Oh You Girls was well received (in addition to glowing tributes to his efforts in the second part vaudeville sketches "A Business Marriage" and "Whose Baby are You?")¹⁸⁶ were followed, however, by less than favourable comments for Flying High and Winning Tatts. Any suggestion that Kitching's perspective had by then become biased cannot be supported because in the second of these reviews he both applauds and dismisses Brown's accomplishments on that particular night:

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.)¹⁸⁷

Even particular 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 "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 quite and with great difficulty just got through;"¹⁸⁸ "Quine has the makings of a fair performer but she spoils herself by singing through her nose, which is painful;"¹⁸⁹ and "Grace Quine still sings through her nose."¹⁹⁰ 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.

That instances of bias existed in industry publications was undoubtedly the case, however, with evidence of this seen having occurred, for example, in respect of a select group of

¹⁸³ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 24 Dec. (1915), 5.

¹⁸⁴ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 1 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁸⁵ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 8 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁸⁶ See Appendix C (1917), for further details.

¹⁸⁷ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 20 Oct. (1917), 10.

¹⁸⁸ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 1 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁸⁹ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 8 Dec. (1915), 11.

¹⁹⁰ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 15 Dec. (1915), 13.

artists with strong (inner circle) ties to Australian Variety. A comparison with opinions published in the Theatre shows that these artists could receive occasional negative criticism for poor turns in that magazine - without corresponding reviews being published in Australian Variety. There appear, for example, to be some occasional disparities in the way Jack "Porky" Kearns was treated by the Theatre and by his "friends" at Australian Variety during his post-1913 career. It is fair to say that Kearns, a high-profile member of the latter magazine's social club, "The Chasers," was at times on the receiving end of some less than favourable reviews by the Theatre¹⁹¹ while rarely criticised at all by Australian Variety. Although this tends to support Delyse Ryan's observation that the Martin C. Brennan and his editorial team were prepared to compromise objectivity in favour of artists they knew personally, a close examination of that magazine over each issue from 1913 onwards shows that senior critics like Harry Kitching were still prepared to review particular companies, troupes, performers and even productions even-handedly on a week by week basis. A number of reviews of Harry Clay's shows entered in Appendix C indicate he was not beyond the magazine's criticism despite having been inducted into "The Chasers" in 1914.¹⁹² Clay found that any artists or aspects of his entertainment deemed below par could expect the type of critique handed out to revusicals like 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."¹⁹³ 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" (27 Jan. 1915, 6). 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" (20 Jan. 1915, 4).

As indicated earlier in this chapter, despite the industry's scale of operations increasing in response to population growth, a sense of stasis and homogeneity had pervaded the vaudeville's creative development of narrative-driven music theatre forms. This was a situation that the Sydney Morning Herald's "Music and Drama" column pointed to in early 1913 when it echoed the sentiment of many other leading observers who were suggesting the industry overall needed to be re-vitalised:

There is undoubtedly a great unexploited field available to vaudeville management in Australia... but a good deal remains to be done... Cities like Sydney and Melbourne are behind the times while they have only their existing variety programmes, in housing, in

¹⁹¹ See for example the Theatre Magazine's reviews of The Brook (Mar. 1916, 46-7) and the farce, "Jurisprudence," published under the title, "Kearns at His Worst" (Apr. 1916, 36).

¹⁹² 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 (Appendix H).

¹⁹³ "Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre." Australian Variety and Show World 2 Nov. (1917), 13.

equipment [and] calibre of programme. It all depends, of course, upon the question whether Sydney and Melbourne are to remain at a second-class provincial level in vaudeville, or whether they are to lift into metropolitan status... Vaudeville needs a first-class orchestra, and up-to-date comfortable appointments... (25 Jan. 1913, 4).



Two Chasers: "Porky" Kearns and Joe Wangenheim

Joe Wangenheim, the Chasers' cook, boatman and organiser, had been associated with vaudeville for more than 30 years. The outings were conducted each weekend on and around Sydney Harbour, and invariably included a number of high profile local performers and international guests.

Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 11 Mar. (1914), 1.

The same critic, in going on to suggest: "The one act sketch will bear enormous development in Australia" (4), was perhaps making an observation that variety needed not only new venues and orchestras but an injection of something new. The problem for vaudeville was that its generic format contained a number of ideological or structural factors that precipitated, or at least encouraged, a slowing down of creative product development. One issue may have revolved around the fact that it had no inbuilt dramatic tension. Where once the olio and the afterpiece had allowed some sense of structural tension leading to a finale the phasing out of the farce also meant that managers had to find non-dramatic means of maximising audience interest in their shows. Over a period of years, however, these programs and the continual flow of performers no doubt blurred in the audience's minds. Without narrative structure vaudeville provided enough variety but without "organic unity," an aspect of productivity that maximizes pleasure not only through the circulation of meanings within a recognisable structure but via incremental shifts in tension.

It is perhaps not surprising then that flexible (or mobile), independently-run (or geographically-distant) variety organisations like Post Mason and Ted Holland were able to capture new emerging markets, and later be the first to experiment with the revusical genre. This is because these entrepreneurs were able to tap into local communities with a type of immediacy that McIntosh and the Fullers could not achieve. Interestingly, this type of activity fits well within the research findings of contemporary popular culture theorists investigating the cyclical relationship between creative innovation and commercial industry. Peterson and Berger (1975), Rothenbuhler and Dimmick (1982) and Michael Christiansen (1995), for example, have sought to explain the bipolar nature, if not structure, that seemingly operates in terms of creative innovation and mass production. They argue that bursts of creative innovation occur in response to significant levels of consumer dissatisfaction with the blandness (standardisation) of products offered by the major companies within any particular industry.¹⁹⁴ Periods of standardisation (also referred to as periods of 'consolidation' and 'concentration') are said to be the result of risk minimisation strategies put in place by the major companies to counter and offset increases in marketplace competition. Innovative production subsequently emerges from the smaller, independent producers, whose capacity to identify possible new products or markets within the popular culture (an ears to the ground approach), and their preparedness to take risks allows them the opportunity to break into a market up until then dominated by a few companies (an oligopolistic structure). The major organisations are eventually pressured into establishing their own product (or buying out the independents). They also eventually regain market dominance by exerting vertical and horizontal strategies of control¹⁹⁵ (often at the expense of the independent operators who introduced the product in the first place). According to such theories the 'cycles' of diversity, innovation and creativity followed by consolidation and concentration, are analogous to the crises of paradigms (i.e. tension and release) which recur in the natural sciences (as proposed by Kuhn, 1970). As with the pop music industries of the mid-to-late twentieth century, the pre-1914 variety industry's shift from consolidation to innovation can also be seen as a direct response (but not the only one) to the market force pressure applied by Australian popular culture.

The rapid growth within the lower levels of the industry that occurred around the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century (in terms of both practitioners and entrepreneurs) demonstrates the fundamental realities of commercial opportunism highlighted by economic theorist, Michael Porter. He argues in this respect that "demographic changes are

¹⁹⁴ See also Gillett (1971) and Chapple and Garafolo (1977).

¹⁹⁵ Horizontal integration describes the processes of merger, takeover, subsidiary expansion and so on which extend the influence of corporations/enterprises in a given field of economic activity. Vertical integration refers to the level of control established over each stage of production, as well as product exploitation.

one key determinant of the size of the buyer pool for a product and thereby the rate of growth in demand" (164). While the chance of failure for these new or early career entrepreneurs was undoubtedly high, the initial costs of entry were still comparatively low, and many entrepreneurs used their public reputations (as opposed to business credibility) as the key selling point when seeking to sign up performers for their shows. Getting it right was not so easy, and looking from the safety of historical hindsight it is often easy to forget how difficult and uncertain, and how often luck (good and bad) plays a part in success or failure. Even though he helped initiate the first steps towards the development of the Australian revusical Ted Holland could not himself recognise the need for change. Shortly before he died in September 1914, the Brisbane-based entrepreneur spoke to the Theatre, citing a number of structural changes to modern vaudeville that he believed had improved the lot of variety artists, but which in hindsight may have in fact been gradually impacting negatively on audiences. Holland believed there was an advantage in performers only having to make one appearance in the programme, as opposed to being involved throughout the entire show:

In the past it was something like this: - On the corner as bones or tambo (a vaudeville artist had to be expert at both); sing two or three comic songs, tell a gag, and work in the finale in the first part; produce some specialty in the second part and then join in the farce at the close of the performance. The elimination of the minstrel first part is a change for the better. At any rate that is my opinion; and I consider the public think so too (34).

It would appear in light of the changes soon to overhaul the vaudeville industry and bring about the development of the second part Australian mini-musical comedy that Holland had misjudged the needs of the audience. The brevity of each act, and particularly those by performers who had attained, or were reaching, high levels of popularity, was insufficient in terms of providing functional relevance for an audience. The leading comics of the day were particularly adept at circulating intertextual meanings within their performance, thus providing the popular culture audience with a mix of productivity, relevance and functionality that Fiske argues lies at the heart of popular pleasures (57). The best comics, more than the specialty acts (animals, strength, magic etc) were able to redistribute the power structures between popular culture audiences and the dominant forces through the pleasures of micro-politics. Their satirical takes on all sorts of social and cultural issues from politicians, government, captains of industry and foreigners, to mother-in-laws and nagging wives, were invariably structured into the social experiences of the audience, thereby allowing individuals to negotiate and redistribute the unequal power relations so that they made more sense of everyday life (Fiske 56). The problem identified by commentators leading up to the critical 1914-15 period, however, was that audiences desired something that was not so much different as containing more substance. Narrative-driven musical comedy was therefore an ideal vehicle through which this could be achieved because it provided both relevance and familiarity, two vital aspects of popular culture production, as well

as functionality. While relevance and familiarity were inherent to vaudeville comedy it is the last aspect that played a key role in the revusical's rise in popularity in this country. This is because the structural format of stories are a more effective and pleasurable means of making sense of everyday life - and in this sense the genre's narrative focus functioned as form of social experience. After perhaps a decade or more of straight vaudeville acts dominating the variety stage, the revusical would have therefore appealed to both the new generation of audiences (being viewed as a new form of entertainment) and to older generations (who would have been familiar from earlier years with narrative genres like burlesque and farce).

From the upper echelons of both the industry and cultural elite Sir Benjamin Fuller put forward his take on why variety had been forced to embrace the "jazz age" vogue for revues and follies, suggesting in a 1927 Fuller News interview that the vaudeville format had simply become outdated. Despite not fully appreciating the style of humour favoured by the blue collar, low educated masses, Fuller's observations nevertheless suggest that vaudeville was in need of a burst of new creative and structural energies that still bore the interests of the popular culture:

There was the comedian who came on to the stage hogging the audience with inane songs and patter mostly concerning his mother-in-law, ladies bathing costumes, the interloping lodger and booze. Add the fat girl whose principal charm was her abbreviated skirts - giving a glimpse of limb that nowadays may be seen in the streets for nothing. Rightly the public grew tired of this form of entertainment... because of the played out character of vaudeville, the changed conditions of life and the development of a more modern sense of amusement... Revues and musical comedies - providing a feast for the eyes and mind [became] the vogue (qtd. in Bard 27).¹⁹⁶

Harry Clay highlighted another problem - that of performers throughout the industry taking audiences and their expectations for granted. Speaking to Australia Variety about his concerns in late 1914, he said:

There's a fine crimson lot of cerise individuals around. They come begging for work, when most of them ought to be out on the railway deviation works with a ruddy pick in their hands. The blanky cows very seldom learn a new song or business, and then wonder why they don't get cardinal work. One of these days I'll cut all these adjectives out, and put in popular drama, then I'll be rid of some of these flaming pests.¹⁹⁷

It was a move Australian Variety agreed with, proposing in the same review that the change was inevitable as audiences were tired of seeing the same old faces doing the same old type of routine - "week after week - for years" (8). By the end of the month Clay was as good as his word, discarding vaudeville in favour of drama. In its 7 April 1915 issue Australian Variety continued to lambast those local performers, particularly the cornermen, who showed little enthusiasm for their roles, warning them that "next week this paper will have a representative at several of the one-night stands, and he is empowered to criticise those cornermen who sit like

¹⁹⁶ Sir Benjamin Fuller. Fuller News 10 Dec. (1927), 3.

¹⁹⁷ "Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre" Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 6 Jan. (1915), 8.

dummies till their turn is called, when they rattle off their material, as if pleased to be finished. And some home truths will be told" ("Old Style First Part" 10). In June of that same year, and only a few months prior to staging his first-ever revusical - Arthur Morley's On the Sands - Harry Clay again vented his frustration at lazy performers, this time in the Theatre magazine:

Why don't they get something fresh? For year after year they will do nothing but the same old thing, with the result that the public get sick of them, and it is impossible for any manager who relies wholly on them - as I have done - to make a do of his show. There are two courses open to the Australian artist... either get out of Australia, when he has sufficiently worked the Australian field, or to get out of the business altogether ("Month in Vaudeville" 50).



Benjamin Fuller

Theatre Magazine Aug. (1913), 29.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)



John Fuller Jnr

Nat Phillips Collection.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

Without any formal or central organisation, the variety industry's response to the changing popular culture entertainment needs and the increasingly negative criticisms by industry leaders in the immediate years prior to the critical 1915-1916 period was gradual rather than explosive. This evidenced by the fact that it was not until 1914 that a few independent, B-level variety organisations began to investigate the possibilities of revisiting past practice - staging self-contained and extended narrative-driven performances as part of a variety program, and further two years before this became standard industry practice. One event that can now be seen as having incited the industry towards developing the revusical was the immensely successful 1913/14 American Burlesque Company tour of Australia and New Zealand.

Described as "genuinely American" and not just some "non-descript organisation recruited from nowhere in particular and stamped with an American label," the quality of the

American Burlesque Company's three-hour stage show was such that even the normally popular culture-resistant Age was forced to concede its merits as entertainment:¹⁹⁸

The Bijou Theatre revived a few memories of its former glories on Saturday night. The American Burlesque Company took possession of the theatre and held it successfully for nearly three hours... The singers know how to sing. The voices, it is true, are not remarkable, but the performers who made their first bow to an Australian audience on Saturday have all served an apprenticeship on the other side of the world, and what they do they do neatly, whether it is dancing a clog dance, singing a ragtime chorus, or indulging in a general riot of light-hearted pantomime ("Bijou Theatre - American" 10).

Comprising some sixty performers the troupe left San Francisco in November 1912 under the auspices of the Oriental Amusement Company Ltd of the USA. It play Honolulu, Japan, China "and the East generally" before opening their Australian account at the Bijou Theatre (Melb) on 15 March 1913. Of the three burlesque productions on offer for the Australian tour,¹⁹⁹ only The Grafters and The Speculators were staged during the initial Melbourne and Sydney seasons, the result according to one report²⁰⁰ of their overwhelming popularity. Certainly the length of first Melbourne and Sydney seasons, twelve and nine weeks respectively, suggests that there is a good deal of merit in this claim.²⁰¹ The company, which had been together for at least two years by that stage, was then being managed by Alfred Levey.²⁰² The undoubted star was Bert Le Blanc,²⁰³ although he invariably shared the spotlight with the other principal comics, Frank Vack, Dave Nowlin, Charlton Chase, Harry Burgess, Paul Stanhope, and Eugenie La Blanc (no relation). The Melbourne public's reaction led to William Anderson making an offer to tour the company under his management from Sydney onwards. Anderson's decision in this instance was no doubt a response to the reaction he encountered on a daily basis, while competing for audiences at the King's Theatre with his own dramatic company.²⁰⁴

The American Burlesque Company followed its first Sydney season with engagements in Newcastle (Victoria Theatre, opening 16 Aug.), and at His Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane (6-20 Sept.), where they introduced possibly for the first time a third production in their repertoire, A

¹⁹⁸ The role of the Australian press, and in particular the Age and Bulletin magazine's bias against popular culture entertainment (and vaudeville in particular) is an issue examined later in this chapter.

¹⁹⁹ A fourth production, Spielder Bounder's Dream (see "American Musical Burlesque" 22), was not staged in Australia.

²⁰⁰ See "A Day at the Races," Brisbane Courier 13 Sept. (1913), 6.

²⁰¹ The Melbourne season was 15 March to 9 June (Bijou Theatre). The Palace Theatre (Syd) season was 14 June to 15 August.

²⁰² The company directors were H. Frankel, W. B. Hughes and S. Kuber (see Age 15 Mar. 1913, 20). Le Blanc indicates in a 1916 Australian Variety and Show World interview that he had been with the Oriental Amusement Company for four years prior to coming to Australia (5 Jan. 1916, 18)

²⁰³ Various spelt La Blanc and Le Blanc, La Blanc is more common in the early years, with Le Blanc represented from around 1917/18 onwards. This thesis uses Le Blanc as the default spelling to avoid confusion. It should be noted that in his own Christmas advertisement, placed in Australian Variety and Show World's 29 Dec. (1916) issue, he spells his name Le Blanc.

²⁰⁴ Anderson's company, which staged in opposition to the American Burlesque Company such dramas as Theodore Kremer's The Evil that Men Do, included Cyril Mackay and Roy Redgrave. While some reports suggest that Anderson brought the American Burlesque Company to Australia, no evidence has been yet found to support the claim. Certainly his name is not linked to the Melbourne season in any reviews or advertisements, a matter that certainly would have been quickly rectified by the publicity-seeking manager.

Day at the Races.²⁰⁵ The Brisbane Courier's review of the troupe's opening night performance in front of a "splendid audience" reinforces the overtly positive reception by critics and audiences alike:

If to provoke continuous and unrestrained laughter for three hours be the test of success of a combination of this description, then it can at once be said that the entertainers were eminently successful. Their humour was bright, pungent, and racy; there was a sufficiency of vocal music in solos and choruses, supported by a well-organised orchestra, to warrant the burlesque being termed musical, and a considerable amount of clever dancing added diversion and attractiveness to an entertainment that went with a swing from the start ("Grafters" 10).

Returning to Melbourne on 1 November for the Melbourne Cup, not unsurprisingly opening with A Day at the Races, the company also revived the other two productions over the six week period to 17 December. A second Sydney season followed, and over the next ten weeks (to 27 Feb.) they maintained full houses playing the same three burlesques. While some quibbles invariably crept in to reviews of the company's productions, the enthusiastic reception to the company by audiences some nine months into the tour appears to have continued unabated. Even the negative criticisms rarely extended beyond that of the previous Age review, and in this regard most were directed towards the lack of "strong" vocals and/or the inferior plot developments. "From a musical standpoint," wrote one Sydney Morning Herald reviewer, The Grafters "is weaker, not possessing any singers of the calibre of those favourite comic opera artists, Maud Amber and Mr Blake... [while] the unconsidered odds and ends of songs and specialties [serve to] delay the consummation of the story" ("Grafters at the Palace" 4). The Brisbane Courier critic pointed to these same issues, writing: "there is a story, but it is a matter of small consequence as compared to the kaleidoscope of numbers which it serves to introduce pell mell, attention being no sooner released from one than it is seized by another, all being bright, pleasing and full of rollicking laughter" ("Speculators" 4). While the Brisbane Courier's reference to the new American style of entertainment was more cordially expressed, some southern critics were not prepared to hide their contempt for this brash popular culture entertainment, even if it meant debasing the Australian audience's taste for it. The Age was not surprisingly the main instigator of negative criticism in the daily press:

The average American is credited with being too much a man of business to have any time off for anything else. The average American joke accordingly is of so obvious a character that no time is wasted in seeing it. The Speculators... is composed of American jokes, with a little rag thrown in. The audience crowded the theatre, and as it saw every joke and laughed very boisterously at each, the production may be said to have been very successful ("Bijou Theatre - The Speculators" 7).

²⁰⁵ The six week period between the Brisbane and return Melbourne season has not yet been documented. The Theatre Magazine reports in its July 1913 issue that the company planned to "visit the other capital cities of Australia and take a hurried tour of New Zealand" (22). Whether it undertook the New Zealand leg at that time or traveled by steamer to Adelaide is unclear. It has been established that the company did not tour north Queensland.



American Burlesque Company (Principal Comedians)

L-R: Frank Vack (Lodi Mike, A German tramp); Bert Le Blanc (Sacramento Ike, A Hebrew tramp);
Dave Nowlin (Bakersfield Pete, A hobo), Harry Burgess (Rube Skaggs, the village constable)
Theatre Magazine July 1913, 21.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

The routinely packed houses that greeted the American Burlesque Company tour suggests that the combination of variety activity (songs, farce and comedy), large scale extravaganza and some level of narrative or plot development, were a potent mix that captured the popular culture market's attention in the same way that similar musical comedy offerings had begun finding widespread support in the US and UK almost a decade previous. The *Age*, specifically identifies this attraction when it notes: "For the most part A Day at the Races is a variety entertainment ("King's Theatre" 11). The *Sydney Morning Herald* concurred: "Of buffoonery there was an intimate quantity," wrote the paper's theatre critic, further noting that "the feature of the burlesque is the rapid succession of songs, dances and choruses" ("Day at the Races" 3). Typical of popular culture production, the burlesques also included "up to the minute" novelties like the Tango dance craze ("Palace" 3), ragtime music and a score or more of "brilliant musical hits."²⁰⁶ Also typical of vaudeville shows, was the practice of planting members of the troupe in the auditorium and having them extend the stage's fourth wall into the audience. "The chorus [was]

²⁰⁶ Advertising blurb in *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 Dec. (1913), 2.
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interrupted by the appearance of several young men amongst the audience," writes a Brisbane Courier critic. "The 'friends' [grasped] their travelling bags and [rushed] to the stage where they [were] revealed as 'The Grafters' male chorus" ("Speculators" 4). Charles Norman's recall of the American Burlesque Company, and Bert Le Blanc in particular, suggests that even were one to have a copy of the complete script "it would avail nothing":

For how could it indicate the falls of Jake onto his blown up rubber stomach, which Bert, in his fury would kick right in the centre. Jake would then bounce all over the stage till he came to a stop. This would bring on the sniggering, coughs, squeaks and spontaneous business as he tried to get back onto his feet and the right side up... newspaper reviewers had a hard time finding new ways of saying "excruciatingly funny, and winning the lion's share of laughter and applause" (48).²⁰⁷

**"The Speculators"
(American Burlesque Co)**

Frank Vack (L) and Bert Le Blanc (R)
Theatre Magazine Aug. (1913), 17.
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)



Perhaps one further reason for the public taking to these productions was the manner in which Le Blanc (in particular) delivered his comic lines. Despite the negative responses by some critics towards the hammering effect American humour had on audiences, Le Blanc's style was especially laid back. "[My] stage humour is of the dry kind," he told the Theatre in 1913. "My idea is that a laugh got by something told in an easy, quiet, dry manner is worth three laughs secured by a performer as a result of his having to make a hard, strained, noisy appeal for them" ("American Musical" 20). Le Blanc's ability to negotiate a strong relationship with Australian audiences right from the start may well have been, in part, the result of having spent some time in England during his early career.

The response by audiences around Australia to the tour was certainly magnanimous - so much so that several of the principal cast members remained in Australia for many years after the company disbanded in early 1914. Impressed by the response, local entrepreneurs and

²⁰⁷ It should be noted that Norman confuses Jake Mack (who co-starred opposite Le Blanc in the Travesty Stars) with Frank Vack, a member of the American Burlesque Company. It has not yet been established whether Jake Mack was a member of that troupe. His name does not appear in reviews or advertising.

writers were therefore given much incentive to try and emulate the shows, something that several of the American Burlesque Company stars also undertook. Most significant in terms of influencing the local industry, and early the development of the Australian revusical in particular, were Le Blanc, Burgess and Stanhope (discussed in more detail in the following chapter). Two other performers who also carved out long and successful careers in Australia were Carlton Chase and Canadian singer/comic and actor, Harry Ross, then a member of the company's "Grafters" male chorus.



American Burlesque Company Chorus Girls

Theatre Magazine July (1913), 21.

(Courtesy of the Fryer Library, U of Qld)

While there are a number of generic and structural similarities between the American Burlesque Company productions and the Australian revusical, the local product was forced to undertake some pruning in response to logistical and economic practicalities. As the introduction to this chapter pointed out, the first localised versions also possibly contained hybrid elements of the old 1880s/1890s style of burlesque. The American influence on this early genre development cannot be attributed to the Bert Le Blanc-led troupe alone, however. One of the early pioneers of the Australian revusical, Albert Bletsoe, who toured a well-known costume comedy company with his sister, Maude, throughout Australia and New Zealand during the early 1900s, indicated in a March 1915 interview with the *Theatre* that his ideas had been influenced by a thirteen-month tour on the Y.M.C.A. circuit in the USA:²⁰⁸

There is no field there as it exists here for costume comedy... The programme at the Wigwam [San Francisco] is divided into two parts. The first half consists of ordinary vaudeville items, except that at least three pictures are screened so as to keep down the

²⁰⁸ Apparently one of the Bletsoes' biggest hits was a dance which "because of the county of [their] origin [was] billed as 'The Kangaroo Dance'" ("Bletsoes" 48).

number of turns. For the second half a musical comedy is put on, with a picture to wind up the bill ("Bletsoes" 48).

Other Australian-based companies to experiment with the revusical format during this developmental period included Walter Johnson, who established himself in Brisbane for much of 1915 (playing both the Cremorne and Palace Gardens). Kate Howarde, better known for her touring drama company attempted a couple of productions with her husband, Scottish comedian Elton Black - although as previously mentioned, she seemed to find the style difficult to master, perhaps because it relied so much on improvisation and in building a more intimate relationship with the audience than legitimate stage actors were used to. After they separated, Elton Black established himself as a leading writer of revusicals and pantomimes, finding a good deal of success in Brisbane around 1918-1920. Edward Branscombe (who put together the various Dandies companies - each identified by a different colour; i.e. Green Dandies and Scarlett Dandies) also produced several revusical style musical scenas in Brisbane and on the Birch and Carroll Queensland circuit; while Arthur Bletsoe's move from costume comedy to revusical saw him encounter public and critical success on the Fullers' circuit. Bletsoe's company in 1915, which scored a particular hit with Fun in the Sanatorium, starred a young Roy Rene. Veteran comedian Wal Rockley also presented a first-class programme with his own revue company at Sydney's Oxford Theatre, Paddington, with this season getting a review in an October issue of Australian Variety.²⁰⁹ Of all the revusicals staged during 1915, however, On the Sands, by Arthur Morley, is believed to have been the first revusical written and produced by an Australian-born variety entertainer (whose career until that time had been undertaken entirely within the confines of the country).²¹⁰ As with the Le Blanc revusicals its popularity can be determined by the number of revivals it received over the next seven years on circuits around Australia, including Clay's and the Fullers'. The initial success of On the Sands not only established Morley's reputation as one of the country's brightest new writing talents but clearly demonstrated to the industry that variety audiences were ready and willing to embrace locally-written revusicals.

²⁰⁹ Australian Variety and Sports Gazette 13 Oct. (1915), 12.

²¹⁰ Although Arthur Bletsoe began producing revusicals before Morley, it very likely that his productions had been adapted either from shows he observed or from scripts he bought while in America.