

CONCLUSION

"A Matter of Time: Australian Theatre History in the Twenty-First Century"

A nation's conception of itself is fashioned not only by the myths, traditions and stereotypes of popular culture but by its historians' selective interpretations of past events. An awareness of the way historians have 'manufactured' our past and a knowledge of the different models of Australian history which they have advanced or downplayed is therefore vital to our understanding of the Australian national ethos (Pascoe 3).

Theatre history is still a young discipline, but it has begun to reach its maturity at a happy moment when pervasive attention is being given throughout humanistic scholarship to means and methods, to theory and practice... [but] unless we thoroughly scrutinize these fundamental and far reaching issues relating to the evidence we use and the tools and methods of its accumulation and identification, we risk producing a puerile, superficial, and ultimately useless scholarship (Donahue 178).

Writing in the late 1970s and mid-1980s Rob Pascoe and Joseph Donahue argue a case for historical investigation to continually redefine its objectives and approached. Both emphasise the importance of being aware of the relationship between facts and argument and the need to indicate the gaps as well as the connections between sources, while also acknowledging the existence of a fundamental approach to research and analysis. For Pascoe this has manifested itself in certain features of style and outlook which he sees as having separated historians into various schools of thought. His critique is also not so much interested in the intellectual, social and political backgrounds of historians but in "what they have actually produced." The Manufacture of Australian History concentrates almost exclusively on output - "analysing the inner logic of selected historian's interpretations of the past and exploring their ideological implications and underpinnings" (3). In focusing on points of difference, however, Pascoe finds it difficult to accept that contrasting ideologies can find common points within their respective approaches.

For Donahue, the critical factor underpinning his critique of how historians collect and document their evidence is less a matter of competing ideologies than the danger of the "unexamined method." Interpretation is not being ignored as much as being put into perspective. The key to his approach is the "primacy of argument" – that is, the historian's initial engagement with a subject or area should not be dictated by the quantity or structure of facts. "A moment's thought," he writes, "should convince us that the survival of sources is subject to all the vagaries of life and is itself no guarantee of significance" (193).

Even though both Pascoe and Donahue tackle a similar area of concern regarding historical research, one difference between the two authors impacts on this thesis. While Pascoe's critique is concerned with analysing the published output of some fifty prominent historians and separating them into different and often competing camps, Donahue highlights the need to defer to scholarly tradition, whatever its background. His reason is that "if we can manage to keep a sense of where we stand in the sometimes stormy process in which old knowledge is scrutinized, rejected or revised and new knowledge created, we may more effectively seize the moment for useful scholarship of our own" (195). Although this study's methodological and ideological approach is very much in line with Donahue's, from a practical perspective it also falls within the "empiricist" paradigm described by Pascoe in his third chapter. It must be stated, however, that the variety methodology is not opposed to speculation and ideological interpretation - two aspects Pascoe describes as akin to "grievous crime" and "cardinal sins" for the empiricists (84) - as long as these are signalled as such. One problem with Pascoe's critique is that he sees the "obsession" with facts and "the desire to narrow the field of study down so sharply as to permit low-level generalization and the marked distrust for ideas" (90) as nitpicking and overly conservative (92). As this dissertation clearly demonstrates in the case of Nat Phillips and Roy Rene, the revusical, and indeed much of the pre-1930s' variety industry, the failure of past research to identify factual data has led to far too many erroneous conclusions about the level and type of activity produced and the relationship between this activity and the Australian populace.

Although it has been necessary on occasion to draw attention to flaws within past historical approaches, I am mindful that my own education as an emerging historian has been shaped by the important work of many of those same individuals. To a large degree this dissertation's focus on a small number of published historical accounts is a consequence of there having been too little research conducted in the area of pre-1930s' popular culture music theatre to date, and hence certain historians appear to have been targeted, perhaps unfairly so. Donahue's observation that "everyone's knowledge is partial... [and] that today's deeper insight may prove tomorrow's meretricious trendiness" (194), is a welcome reminder that historical reconstruction can never be static and that new methods and approaches can only be derived in response to the efforts of those who come before. It is also clear that only in very few instances have the errors or bias of past research and memoir been intentional. Indeed, the motivation driving this project from its inception has not been one of levelling blame or attempting to dismantle the traditional approaches to theatre history, but rather as an attempt to find a more appropriate way of acknowledging the achievements of a long-forgotten Australian theatre industry. The end result, however, is one that posits another reminder that historical scholarship cannot progress if

remaining bound to tradition. Historians must necessarily continue to reassess their approach and the parameters of their area of study, as well as the perceived limits of its coverage, if the field of scholarship is to continue as a viable academic enterprise. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of past theatre history research is that too often conclusions have been drawn based on inadequate primary research or through an over-reliance on untested memoir and secondary sources. As Donahue argues, it is imperative that the historian invoke a measure of skepticism (to both the subject and the sources), to accurately treat and respect the circumstances of source origin, and to signpost gaps and assumption, so as to allow fellow scholars the ability to either retrace or follow on with their own related research into the area (194).

Throughout the preceding chapters I have demonstrated a number of instances in which historical interpretation has been undertaken with very little attempt to fulfill the fundamental obligations of historical research. This is an approach that operates contrary to the principles of historicism. "Theory-building cannot claim a privileged immunity from empirically-grounded critiques," Raphael Samuel argues, because "the two are necessarily dependent, even if they occupy different planes of abstraction" (xlix). If the theory is not grounded on empirical research, the possibility of fabrication increases. While on an individual basis such occurrences may not operate to overly distort any one field of inquiry, the problem increases exponentially as the errors are repeated by successive generations of historians or used to form the basis of accepted belief. In the case of Australian variety entertainment during the pre-1930s era, for example, the erroneous understanding that Roy Rene was the dominant comedian in the Stiffy and Mo partnership has no significant impact on the way the nation perceives its own history. Such an error can be effectively remedied within a short period of time as new accounts are published. What is of greater significance, on the other hand, is the impact that negligence or error has on the scale of national identity or esteem. There has long been a perception, for example, that Australian creative industries have rarely been able to match or surpass foreign forms, both in terms of box office success and aesthetics (or structural form). The point to be made here is that debates over the existence (or reality) of an Australian cultural cringe or low national self-esteem within academic forums is neither here nor there. It is when the perception is continually reinforced within the popular media forms that the issue becomes instead a de facto reality. A casual glance over the past century of comments relating to the perceived failure of Australian music theatre is testament to the power of media reinforcement in shaping opinion - even though the historical evidence (in relation to the Australian-written revusical) suggests otherwise.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the inadequacy of Australian-written high culture works was invariably to focus of media criticism:

It was a sad reflection that few works of art, music or literature were accepted in Australia until they had received the seal of approval of recognition in England. It was this mental attitude of the average Australian which had driven away such novelists as Mrs Humphrey Ward, Mrs Campbell Praed, and others... and Signor Lardelli, in the same way, was now forced to visit London to produce an opera which should be hailed with enthusiasm on the Australian stage" (Bruce Smith, Sydney Morning Herald 22 Mar. 1895, 6).

Without attempting to predict the future of [the comic opera] The Coquette was produced for the first time upon any stage at the Palace Theatre last night, it may be pronounced one of the very few pieces originated in this city that stand a reasonable chance of permanent success ("Palace Theatre - The Coquette." Sydney Morning Herald 29 Aug. 1905, 8).

As early as 1958, Age critic Bruce Grant asked the question "What will the Australian musical look like when it establishes itself?... Australia has no tradition to steer it through. I doubt if a line of development can be detected."³²⁸ By the end of the 1970s, following the rush of creative enthusiasm and self-reflection that had begun to emerge as early as the mid-1960s, the attention had turned primarily towards our inability to create popular successes and export them overseas. "Is it really what critics (and everyone) are still looking for in an Australian play - a *commercial* success at home which will then prove to the West End and Broadway that we can do it too? It seems very like it," wrote Margaret Williams in 1977 ("Australian Drama" 445). Despite there being some positive critical responses and good public support for musicals like Albert Arlan's The Sentimental Bloke (1961), the issue of continual failure was being put increasingly into an historical perspective, with the cultural cringe and low self-esteem factors becoming increasingly noticeable:

Since 1900 over 300 musicals have been professionally produced in Australia. Do you know how many of those shows were written by Australians? About 40. And that's the good news! The bad news is that out of those 40 shows, only 13 have been seen in more than one state (Tony Sheldon, Theatre Australia Sept/Oct. 1977, 9).

Far from being an adherent to the cultural cringe theory of Australian arts, [John] Diedrich believes it is possible [for the Australian musical industry] to emulate the achievements abroad. It will, however, require the same dedication and discipline exhibited overseas (Simon Hughes, Theatre Australia Apr. 1982, 15).

What happened to the Australian musical?... Or did it ever exist? Or are The Venetian Twins and Dorothy Hewett's Muckinupin the closest we're ever going to get? (Graeme Blundell, Sydney Morning Herald 3 July 1982, 39).

Have there been any really successful Australian musicals? Clearly the answer is a resounding no! (Peter Johnston, Melbourne Review 8.3 1992, 30).

This same line of inquiry continued through into the 1990s. Although some measure of perceived optimism became noticeable following the debut of The Boy from Oz in 1998, and the question of its export potential was seized upon by the media, the issue of Australia's long-held perception of failure in terms of both musical theatre and the ability to compete against foreign products was never far from the surface:

³²⁸ Literary Supplement 15 Feb. (1958), 19.

Whether [The Boy from Oz is] "the great Australian musical" some people have willed or expected it to be, the dedication of the creative team, cast and technical crew has paid off handsomely... What audiences at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney have in front of them is a long overdue, confident and heaven-sent musical (Bryce Hallet, Australian 7-8 Mar. 1998, 12).

For years the pitiless search for "the Great Australian musical" has gone on. Dough has been done and early baths taken as show after show stepped up to the footlights only to fail, either bravely or dismally. And as the latest Lloyd-Webber or revived Rogers and Hammerstein sucked in the crowds and the dollars, we began to suspect it *was* true: Australia just couldn't *do* musicals (Diana Simmonds, Bulletin 17 Mar. 1998, 66).

One definition of optimism these days would be involvement in the development of an Australian musical (Helen Thomson, Age 15 Mar. 1999, 16).

Somehow, [The Boy From Oz] has boldly gone where few local musicals have gone before: successville. It is being talked about as the Great Australian Musical. The subtitle crops up inevitably, confidently and proudly. We have had Great Australian films, plays, rock groups, artists, but not, until now, something from musical theatre (Michael Shmith, Age 15 May 1999, Saturday Extra 6).

In light of the findings presented in this thesis what becomes a new issue is that for at least the past forty years Australian inadequacy in the field of music theatre production and creativity has established a national psyche built around the perception that nothing of any significance ever happened until the 1970s. Even then the success was limited to a market largely fashioned around tertiary educated, white youth and the wider Australian popular culture as the term "popular theatre" seemingly implies. The accepted belief that Australia has never been able to establish a successful popular culture music theatre industry must therefore now be seen as a failure of historians and the industry itself to acknowledge that the country did succeed in doing this on a wide scale and for several intermittent decades prior to the 1930s. Interestingly, too, of all the reviews located during my research into post-1930s Australian musicals, rarely is there any mention of Oscar Asche's musical extravaganza, Chu Chin Chow, which premiered in London's West End in 1916 and held the record for the longest run (2,238 performances) for almost forty years, and which also ran on Broadway for six months (Oct. 1917 - Apr. 1918). This lack of recognition (for a production written, produced, directed and starring an Australian) within the wider Australian public provides further evidence of neglect by historians in the area of popular culture theatre research and its dissemination into the public record.

To a large extent the problems encountered in the initial research stage of this project are those which have inadvertently occurred as a result of an ad hoc approach to Australian theatre history research over the past three or four decades. As a field of academic inquiry it is unsystematic because theatre historians have traditionally preferred to investigate their own interest areas in their own way. With no over-arching structure or direction, the human resource factor is inefficiently utilised. Individual historians, for example, too often cover the same

territory as their peers (past or present). This inefficient practice is of a type that has no place in contemporary industry management because it ignores fundamental time and motion principles - the result being that overall output is decreased. Thus although historians network through academic channels - conferences or at a departmental level, for example, the separate nature of their research means that information valuable to one researcher is often overlooked by others researching another field of inquiry from the same period or sources. Of further concern is the continued downgrading of pure theatre history research both at a school level, where it is invariably seen as a poor cousin of theory-based analysis; and at an industrial level, which sees the paradigm pushed further towards the margins of academia.

Concerning the first issue, as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, the problem for any historian attempting to interpret Australian social attitudes and behaviour or industrial activity in response to pre-1930s' popular culture entertainment is that there has simply not been enough research undertaken. The methodology that I have applied to this dissertation has therefore been an attempt to demonstrate a more effective way of surveying this industry, so as to maximise the quantity and quality of data required. The evidence presented in this thesis is an example of what can be achieved.

Two further concerns relating to methodology have also been identified within the thesis. In each instance the variety methodology has accounted for limitations by organising its research around industrial activity and by providing primary source evidence. The first of these issues relates to an inherent bias within the field of theatre history research. The traditional approach sees history unfold largely as a result of the interests of historians. The validation of particular historical figures, for example, reinforces the self-enclosed territory of historical analysis, because it reconstructs a history built not so much from an engagement with the theatre industry as it operated in its contemporary setting, but in accordance with what the researchers decide is important. The second concern is that traditional methodology is inadequate other than for "known" history. Although traditional methodology works effectively with "known" or "assumed" history, it cannot cope with activity or individuals of which the historian has no prior knowledge. This has been a major flaw, for example, in the way historians have attempted to engage with pre-1930s' popular culture entertainment. Because most professional variety performers were required to move constantly around the country and to take up engagements under various levels of management, any research concentrating either on the upper echelons of the industry (Harry Rickards) or in a limited location (i.e. Sydney and Melbourne) cannot adequately account for overall activity.

An additional concern that is not specifically related to this study, but which supports my argument that Australian theatre history requires further re-assessment is that too little history is being unearthed, and that this situation is likely to get worse because of the economic pressures being brought to bear on the humanities overall. In one respect, the issue counters Bruce McConachie's assertions that "the romantic re-telling of individual history as a means of demonstrating why a particular person is a crucial element in the nation's past cannot hope to change or re-shape the way nations perceive their history."³²⁹ This thesis provides compelling evidence that in the Australian context the issue is not one of re-shaping the way we think about our history through uncovering individual careers, but rather the need to uncover an entire industry that operated over the course of half a century and which serviced Australians across the length and breadth of the country during its formative years as a Federated nation. One conclusion to be inferred by the evidence of activity presented in this study is that the long-held and mistaken belief that nothing of any importance occurred in Australian theatre until the latter part of the twentieth century is erroneous.

The second and final issue to be raised here concerns the shifts in tertiary institution structuring and planning. While the work carried out by the relatively small (and shrinking) band of theatre historians to date has undoubtedly been an achievement, the current trend towards marginalising and downgrading theatre history research raises the possibility of the field being less attractive to post-graduates. The result may well be that theatre history will in the not too distant future find itself out of business. The perception that theatre history research is unwarranted may soon be reached by university administrators and bureaucrats because the history itself currently reinforces the impression that little activity of any great significance could have happened in our past because if it had, surely we would have uncovered it by now. Theatre history might therefore be said to be a victim of its own making. It is not surprising that its image and relevance is suffering.

Joe Siracusa observed in 2002 that the humanities, and history in particular, had been undergoing a slow, painful death for some thirty years. "Like other important branches of learning concerned with human thought and relations," he notes, "history has been hammered, harassed and finally marginalised by forces it could not have forseen" (8). As universities increasingly rationalise their function and future they appear to be directing more resources into scientific research and more firmly embrace corporate institutions. The pressure on schools within the humanities to justify their relevance is evident in the new programs and courses that have emerged in the past decade. Not surprisingly traditional fields of inquiry have been pushed

³²⁹ McConachie, Bruce. "Cultural Systems and the Nation-State: Paradigms for Writing National Theatre History." New England Theatre Theater Journal 8 (1997): 29-44.

evermore towards the margins. As Siracusa further notes, "it wouldn't have taken a rocket scientist to work out that the post-Dawkins era would see the humanities attacked first, and that perhaps in the long run some traditional schools and courses would be done away with altogether" (9). Evidence of this pressure on traditional fields of academic inquiry can also be observed both in the world-wide demise of academic publishing houses the decline of interest by those still operating towards all but the most "saleable" products, and the gradual undermining of tenured research positions within the tertiary education system.³³⁰

While successive Australian governments and tertiary institutions are an easy and perhaps not unwarranted target for blame, theatre history's slide towards possible irrelevance has not been entirely one-sided. To a large degree it might be said that history has failed to catch up with the times. Concerning Australian theatre history, for example, is it a case of too little and too late? A little over a year after Siracusa's article was published, I presented a seminar at the School of English, Media Studies and Art History³³¹ titled "Fresh Insights into Australian Theatre History: The Methodology Factor and Variety Theatre." During the conclusion to that paper I made the point that theatre history research today is a nineteenth century paradigm attempting to be relevant in the twenty-first century, and that if it were a business it would be now on the verge of bankruptcy. Constrained in terms of its overall results, ineffective in its scope and capacity to sustain growth (through results), with its practitioners under increasing teaching and administration workload, and of little interest to the wider community, academic theatre history is possibly on borrowed time. It certainly cannot compete with the emerging "popular" media and cultural studies paradigms.

That theatre history may be pushed to the extreme margins of academic inquiry is, of course, at this stage more a possibility than a prediction. While pressure to "make it pay" is being applied to the discipline by the schools and institutions that administer it, there is also the possibility that the current trend towards rationalisation may correct itself - either across the board or by allowing certain institutions the capacity to interrogate aspects of history without the need to prove economic viability. Even so, the need to further assess and continually deploy new methodological approaches to surveying history is paramount to the discipline's future relevance. The ultimate purpose of this thesis has been to demonstrate a means by which historians can counter the seeming lack of primary source materials that allows them to interpret past popular culture activity. The evidence presented in both the thesis chapters and appendices

³³⁰ See also Probyn, Elspeth. "The Vanishing Professors." *Courier Mail* 23 Feb. (2005), 40.

³³¹ This school is itself an example of economic rationalism whereby "unproductive" schools (i.e. Art History) are restructured into larger ones as a means of decreasing costs while still maintaining a semblance of high culture academic tradition for the university. Another example of this move towards economic productivity over intellectual training are schools of music, which are under increasing pressure to increase student intake from outside their traditional base in order to survive.

clearly shows that the methodology is effective. The new insights into the level and nature of industry production and its leading practitioners suggest, too, that much more work is required if this industry is to be better understood and its achievements fully acknowledged. Even so, this methodological approach has its own limitations, and will require further modification in later years. The strength of this methodology is its capacity to locate and collate data that is available from primary sources that may best be described as relatively small and incomplete. For historians in the future, perhaps those attempting to interrogate this era's theatre activity, the problem will be reversed due to the enormous amount of information available through advances in technological data storage. The possibility that future historians can continue to work in isolation may be tested in the coming years, simply because the effort required to identify, collate and interpret the massive amount of information which will then available will very likely be beyond the capacity of any one individual.