41. NAT PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Comprising eleven boxes of miscellanea, including scripts, scores, jokes, lyrics, business and legal papers, and photographs, the Nat Phillips collection is the most extensive collection of early twentieth-century Australian variety ephemera in existence.

The collection was found by sheer luck in a Brisbane second-hand shop in 1972. Descendants of Phillips’ brother, Jack, have since informed the Library that the boxes possibly disappeared during a bitter divorce between Jack and his first wife. The discovery of miscellanea from the Cremorne Theatre suggests, too, that they may have been stored there for a period of time. The bulk of the collection, however, comprises Nat Phillips’ ephemera. It includes items belonging to Jack Phillips, the Stiffy and Mo Revue Company and Fullers’ Theatres.

So who was Nat Phillips? Born in 1883, he first appeared on the stage at age eight and later toured the international variety circuits for over a decade, first in partnership with Tommy Armstrong and later with his wife, Daisy Merritt. After returning to Australia in 1912 Phillips joined the Fullers firm as a senior producer, writer and theatre manager. Four years later he formed the Nat Phillips Tabloid Musical Comedy Company to present a series of one-act musical comedies (revisitals) based on his original larrikin character, ‘Stiffy the rabbitoh’. Needing a straightman he engaged emerging comedian Roy Rene to play a character called ‘Sol’. When their onstage chemistry clicked beyond expectations, the act developed into a double comedian partnership. Rene also changed the character’s name to ‘Mo’.

The company toured Australia and New Zealand extensively until disbanding in late 1927. By then Stiffy and Mo had become the most popular comedy act on the Australian variety stage, rivalled only by George Wallace and Jim Gerald. Any chance of the pair reforming ended with Phillips’ death in 1932. Over time, as Roy Rene blossomed into one of Australia’s great radio stars, Phillips’s remarkable career was gradually reduced to that of a minor player in the Stiffy and Mo legend, despite his achievements having been widely acknowledged during his lifetime. The Nat Phillips collection has therefore played a major role in re-establishing his considerable contribution to the partnership, while also providing rich insight into Australia’s pre-1930s light entertainment industry.

Serendipity came into play once more when in 2002 Bill Dealy from the Fryer Library remembered a conversation with an enthusiastic PhD candidate interested in pre-1930s Australian variety theatre. This set in motion my three-year project of discovery which uncovered, among other gems, four complete Stiffy and Mo scripts (all written by Phillips). These scripts are also evidence of broader implications—that the Australian variety theatre industry had devised by 1915 its own original theatrical genre, the revultural. Research now indicates that these one-act musical comedies did not appear anywhere else in the world until at least the early 1930s.

One of the most significant aspects of the Nat Phillips collection is that it provides us with a much clearer understanding of the Australian larrikin personas developed by Phillips and Rene. Although based on Irish and Jewish theatrical types, Stiffy and Mo found much appeal with audiences throughout the country, capturing the same spirit that was emanating from the larrikin Aussie soldier of the First World War. The collection, which through accidental good fortune survived all odds, is now also able to serve as a reminder to historians and cultural theorists that popular entertainment is an area worthy of much further study.
Girls who have to work, don't stay at home & shirk Come and learn the Beauty art & stay & stay & stay If your very plain, don't sit there in pain Come and have it massaged all away, away, away Manicurings fine, pedicure devine Every girl who has a boy to win Come let's do your hair, we will make you fair Come on boys and see the fun begin

Chorus:
Beauty, Beauty, come along for Beautys in the a Beauty, Beautys in the a Beauty, Beautys in the a Beauty, Beautys in the a
On a frosty morning when the world is white Thats the time the massage is our hearts delight Wake up girls have all your joys And keep yourselves quite young to win the boys Dance to be arranged, Enter Mary C.

Girl: Hello Miss, have you seen the Miss'es
Mary: Yes, she's gone out to meet her cousin, you age it is very rich, and he don't know that the Miss'es is married so she went to meet him to keep him from going here, and while she keeping him off away the saloon to sell the place. He's advertised it in the paper. Enter Helen

Helen: Why hello girls no customers. Oh girls I've had a lovely time you know I went to meet my uncle and took him to the white city, and coming back the old chap took sick in the street And I got a doctor to come and fix him up, and I don't think I will tell you any more.

Mary: Oh, do go on Miss'es. You can stop just when you get to the agony. Oh it's all like a family hearing.

Helen: No No, No more.
Mary: Did he?
Helen: No we
Mary: Too be
Helen: Now run somebo Girls
Harry: What help for ever
Helen: He is all right, ask any buyer
Harry: Mary a bunch
Mary: Not when
Stiff: Now look here Or your on a
SOL: Ha, Ha, he think make for you
Helen: Good morning

PHILLIPS and MERRITT, The People of Joy and Gladness.