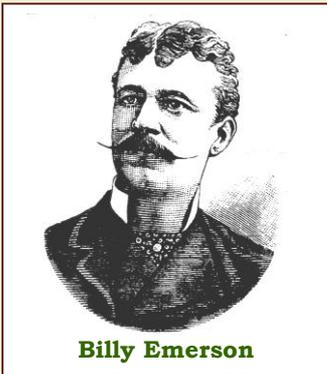


AUSTRALIAN VARIETY THEATRE ARCHIVE

Scope and Background

Work on the Australian Variety Theatre Archive began in late 2010, with the website becoming available to the public on 10 May 2011 (the 146th anniversary of the birth of Harry Clay). As the name indicates, the AVTA is a specialist website devoted to Australian variety theatre and popular culture entertainment between the years 1850 and 1930. The entries within the archive are presented as a means of both acknowledging and celebrating the incredible number of local and locally-based performers, writers, composers, entrepreneurs/managers, producers, music directors, scenic artists, and other associated practitioners who were involved in this once major industry. As the AVTA's homepage notes, this field of popular culture history, which to date has received little analysis, is now increasingly being recognised as a key site for the expression of ideas about Australian people, identities, and behaviour.



Billy Emerson

Chronologically, the AVTA begins with the emergence of variety theatre in the 1850s; a period when minstrelsy, pantomime and burlesque dominated the Australian popular stage. The second half of the nineteenth century saw increasing numbers of overseas performers and entrepreneurs touring Australia. Performer/managers like Billy Emerson, F.M. Clark, the Cogill brothers and Dan Tracey brought with them new ideas and greater levels of professionalism. Some, like Harry Rickards, J. C. Williamson and Benjamin and John Fuller eventually settled here, establishing permanent operations that, in turn, helped variety establish itself as the major creative industry in the years before and immediately after World War I. As the Australian population expanded rapidly around the country so did the variety industry, leading to the employment of thousands of local performers, managers, writers, composers, scenic artists, costume makers and other ancillary theatre professionals. A number of high profile foreign artists also saw advantages in remaining in Australia, and some like Bert Le Blanc, Jake Mack, Bert Gilbert, Edward Branscombe and Jack Cannon to name but a few, became big stars on the Australian and New Zealand variety circuits.

Variety eventually moved away from minstrelsy and burlesque to encompass the ragtime and jazz age, through genres such as the revusical, the follies and musical comedy. Although live popular culture entertainment began to decline as a major entertainment form in response to increased competition from film (particularly the arrival of the 'talkies') and the advent of the 1930s' financial depression, the industry continued to find other outlets. Radio and film offered the initial opportunities for work and creative expression, while live popular culture theatre maintained its presence through the nation's club circuits

SCOPE

Temporal: The temporal parameters for the archive are primarily 1850 to 1930 but not exclusively so. This is because a number of practitioners and organisations were involved in the industry either before or after these dates. In such instances these periods (if known) will be incorporated into the entry. The AVTA cannot, however, provide entries on people whose careers either ended before 1850 or started after 1930s.

An interesting example here is the case of George Wallace Jnr, who first appeared on the stage with his father as a young child in the early 1920s. Even though Wallace Jnr is recognised as having been a significant variety performer, he did not establish himself as a variety performer in his own right until after 1930 and so is not given individual inclusion in the archive. Some details on his early stage appearances are provided, however, within the George Wallace biography.

Practitioners: The following list comprises the most common types of variety industry practitioner.

- **performers (individuals and acts)**
- **entrepreneurs and managers**
- **troupes**
- **scenic artists, stage managers, front-of-house managers, costume and property-makers, choreographers**
- **writers, composers, songwriters, lyricists**
- **musicians, music ensembles, orchestras**
- **directors, music directors, producers**
- **associated industry practitioners (journalists/critics, advance representatives etc)**



George Wallace

Comedian, scenic artist, songwriter, acrobat, producer, actor, writer, musician and manager.

Forms and Genres: The AVTA's scope in relation to forms and types of entertainment production is directed primarily towards a select group of theatrical genres which were either presented on the variety stage or which had close links to the variety industry either through the creative or industrial production processes. These are:

- **burlesque**
- **extravaganza**
- **minstrelsy (including the minstrel farce, also known as the afterpiece)**
- **pantomime**
- **revue**
- **revusical**
- **scena (also known as the musical scena)**
- **society sketch**

NB: It should be noted here, that the AVTA presently includes only a few revues (a genre which was first staged on the Australian stage in 1913 with the J. C. Williamson's production *Come Over Here*). The reason for this is two-fold. The initial research conducted into this area by Clay Djubal as part of his Ph D was almost exclusively interested in narrative-driven music theatre works, and hence revue fell outside those parameters. The second reason relates to the difficulties involved in establishing whether the whole production, or parts thereof, were written by Australians. It is hoped that over time this area of the research will be expanded to include revues which were all Australian, or which comprised mostly Australia-written material

Related genres to also be included in the archive are:

- **musical (also known as musical comedy, romantic musical)**
- **play with music**

The 1932 production of the romantic comedy *Collits' Inn*, for example, not only featured vaudeville comedian George Wallace, but also some songs which he collaborated on.

As noted on the AVTA homepage, the archive also includes several music theatre genres which are not generally associated with variety entertainment, but which for one reason or another share some common ground. The two most common ones are:

- **Opera**
- **Operetta**

In some instances this common ground occurs through the involvement or inclusion of variety performers and/or material. In a number of cases the works are included because the authors (librettist and composer) are also known to have been involved in some form of variety entertainment during their career and the inclusion of these works helps provide some context in so far as the relationship between popular culture and "legitimate" (or serious) culture production.

Alfred Hill is a good example here. In the 1890s he was involved in a number of pantomimes for J. C. Williamson as composer and/or music director and later wrote several operas and comic operas. Some of Hill's songs were also popular on the variety stage, especially his Maori compositions from the early 1900s.



John F. Sheridan

An American actor/producer who was frequently associated with Australia during the 1890s and early 1900s.

Identity: The issue of who or what was Australian during the period 1850 to 1930s is very often difficult to establish. Not only is the national identity of some people almost impossible to now verify, but notions of what constituted an Australian were quite different to our contemporary understanding. The ease in which variety practitioners crossed the Tasman Sea between New Zealand and Australia, in some instances spending many years in either country, is also problematic.

Individuals are obviously included if they were born or at least raised in Australia. Anyone who resided in the country and was actively involved in the local industry for at least 12 months, and/or who participated in the creation of original works which were subsequently performed on the local stage is also included. Not included, however, are those artists who came to Australia on a single contract (e.g. for J.C. Williamson's or the Tivoli organisation) and who left at the conclusion of that arrangement – no matter how long the stay.

BACKGROUND

Until quite recently the popular culture theatre industry in Australia lay outside the priority interests of academics and professional historians. Much of what was known about the industry prior to the 1930s, for example, was a combination of recycled myth, unreliable memoirs (from retired industry practitioners or social observers), or piecemeal information located by historians as they researched other areas of theatre activity.

Recent research by academic theatre historians, particularly at The University of Queensland, has begun to supplement and correct the historical record, and this sub-set records their findings as a first step. There is now ample evidence demonstrating that variety

theatre, for example, made a key contribution to Australian popular culture between the 1850s and late 1920s. Peaking in the years after 1916, when the World War I forced the major variety organisations to rely more on local talent, the industry not only increased its overall professional ranks, but also established possibly the first ever locally-created theatrical genre – the Australian revusical. With its performers constantly moving around the country via a network of established circuits, the industry was uniquely placed to transmit and respond to everyday issues of concern and interest, much as the television industry does today. Many of its performers became national celebrities. Some, like Nat Phillips and Roy Rene (Stiffy and Mo), George Wallace and Jim Gerald, became legends during their careers.

AustLit and the Australian Popular Theatre Subset: The research which currently forms the basis of the AVTA has been conducted by Dr Clay Djubal between 1997 and 2011. During this time he completed his Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees at The University of Queensland. Both of these were supervised by Professor Richard Fotheringham. In early 2006 Dr Djubal joined AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource as a specialist historian. Under the leadership of Professor Fotheringham and AustLit executive manager Kerry Kilner he devised and provided content for the Australian Popular Theatre (APT) subset. Much of this was based on the information presented in the appendices of both his MA and PhD theses. Funding for the APT initially came from an Australian Research Council grant. When this ran out in mid-2008 additional part-time funding was provided by Professor Fotheringham through an ARC Discovery grant that he had been awarded some years previous. In accordance with the new funding, Dr Djubal's research subsequently turned specifically towards looking at the impact and involvement of variety theatre on Australians during the WWI and post-war era. The APT project continued through until the end of 2008 when all funding ceased.



To find out more about [AustLit](#) and the [Australian Popular Theatre](#) subset click on these links.

NB: AustLit is still (as of May 2011) a subscription service. It can be accessed for free through all State libraries, most Australian universities and many public libraries. For those unable to get to one of these institutions you can might like to join the Australian National Library which will allow you online access. Alternatively individuals can contact AustLit and ask for free temporary guest access.

Postscript: Although AustLit's database, arguably the most advanced currently available in the humanities field, appeared to be the ideal solution for Dr Djubal's new variety theatre methodology, the lack of on-going funding (vital for an online digital research archive) has meant that the Australian Popular Theatre subset is now effectively finished. While the Australian government's policy for funding research projects through organisations such as the ARC remains focused on supporting limited lifespan projects with essentially one-off outcomes, the prospects of restarting the APT will now likely depend on the alternative funding. This would seem to be a most unlikely scenario. The issue of concern here, however, is that the research into the pre-1930s variety industry has literally scratch the surface, and needs much more attention if we are to fully understand it.

While the AVTA admittedly lacks AustLit's advanced technological capabilities,¹ it is not a subscription service and hence freely available to anyone at anytime. The research will also be ongoing, and in the future will hopefully include contributions from others – whether they be historians, descendents of variety practitioners or just people with an interest in early Australian variety theatre and/or popular culture.

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IMAGE DETAILS FROM HOMEPAGE

1. **Elton Black** (*Theatre* Nov. 1913, 9); **Daisy Jerome** (*Theatre* Oct. 1916, 46); **American Burlesque Company Chorus** (*Theatre* July 1913, 21); **Georgia Minstrels** - Sam Keenan, centre (picturehistory.com – courtesy of David and Tracy Rae); **Joe Brennan and William Hassan** (*Green Room* June 1919, 12); **Victor Prince** (citation details missing)
2. **Australian Variety masthead** (17 Dec 1913, 3)
3. **Rosebuds Chorus** (Nat Phillips Collection, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland)
4. **Arthur Adams** (National Library of Australia); **Alfred Hill** (National Library of Australia); **Roy Redgrave** (redgrave.com); **G. B. Allen** (State Library of Victoria)
5. **Thornton's Rosebery Theatre, Mascot (Syd); 1916** (*Australian Variety* 26 Jan. 1916, 6)
6. **Have Gravity Will Threaten** masthead (Northern Tablelands Music Industry Archive)

IMAGE DETAILS FROM THIS PAGE

1. **Billy Emerson** (*Bulletin* 15 Aug. 1885, 22.)
2. **George Wallace** (*Theatre* May 1925, 14)
3. **John F. Sheridan** (*Theatre* Nov. 1907, 11)
4. **AustLit/Mo logo** (courtesy of AustLit)

¹ The AustLit database allows users the ability to use a keyword and federated searches, and will soon be able to provide visual mapping tools.