

AMERICAN BURLESQUE COMPANY

The American Burlesque Company came to Australia in 1913 under the management of the Oriental Amusement Company. Following the success of its debut Melbourne season its management was taken over by William Anderson. While the tour only lasted 18 months the company and its entertainment package became a major influence on the development of both the Australian variety industry and locally written revusicals. Several members remained in the country following the disbanding of the troupe – these being Bert Le Blanc, Paul Stanhope, Harry Burgess and Carlton Chase.

[The following biography relates primarily to the American Burlesque Company's Australian tour.]



L-R: **Jake Vack, Bert Le Blanc, Dave Nowlin, Harry Burgess**
Theatre July (1913), 21.

Comprising some sixty performers, the American Burlesque Company left San Francisco in November 1912 under the auspices of the Oriental Amusement Company Ltd of the USA. Following a tour of the Far East (including seasons in Honolulu, Japan, and China), the company arrived in Australia, opening at the Bijou Theatre, Melbourne, on 15 March 1913. Although the company's repertoire comprised four burlesques - *The Grafters*, *The Speculators*, *A Day at the Races*, and *Spielder Bounder's Dream* (aka *Dream City*), the last one was not staged in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. The stories were largely built around the antics of the troupe's three lead comedians, Le Blanc, Frank Vack, and Dave Nowlin, with other principal cast members being Eugenie Le Blanc (no relation to Bert Le Blanc), Harry Burgess, Paul Stanhope, and Carlton Chase. The public accorded the Bijou season packed houses night after night, and even the normally reticent Melbourne theatre critics acknowledged that although the productions were essentially low-brow vaudeville-based entertainments (with some semblance of a story to tie the processions of songs, dances, and comedy together), they were spectacular entertainment. Also on hand to notice the public's excitement was Australian entrepreneur William Anderson, then producing a dramatic play at a nearby theatre. Anderson moved quickly to offer the company his services as producer for the remainder of its stay in the country, an offer that was taken up its management upon completion of the Melbourne season.

Over the course of its stay in Australia, the company played Melbourne and Sydney (twice each), Newcastle, and Brisbane, and possibly briefly toured New Zealand. The *Brisbane Courier's* review of the troupe's opening night performance at His Majesty's Theatre (in front of a "splendid audience") provides an indication of how popular the company was with 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', writes the paper's theatre critic, '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" (8 Sept. 1913, 10).

The routinely packed houses that greeted the American Burlesque Company tour suggest that the combination of variety elements (songs, farce, and comedy), large-scale extravaganza, and simple storyline 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 that "For the most part, *A Day at the Races* is a variety entertainment" (3 Nov. 1913, 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" (22 Dec. 1913, 3). Typical of popular culture productions, the burlesques also included 'up to the minute' novelties such as the Tango dance craze, ragtime music, and a score, or more, of "brilliant musical hits" (SMH: 20 Dec. 1913, 2). 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] 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" (19 Sept. 1913, 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'."



Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack
The Speculators
Theatre Aug. (1913), 17.

Perhaps one further reason for the public taking to these productions was the popularity of Bert Le Blanc, and particularly the way he delivered his comic lines. Le Blanc's laid-back style was in stark contrast to the hammering effect American humour had on audiences. In this respect, Le Blanc either knowingly or unwittingly tapped into the Australian style of humour, a factor that was further enhanced by his equally unassuming larrikin streak. "[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" (July 1913, 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 his having spent some time in England during his early career.



American Burlesque Company Chorus Girls
Theatre July (1913), 21.

The company's influence on the development of the local revusical can be seen by the way the industry initially reacted. Impressed by the public's response, a number of entrepreneurs and writers attempted to emulate the shows. Among the first to create a similar style of show were several variety managers and showmen based in Brisbane during the first half of 1914. These were Ted Holland and Percy St John at the Empire Theatre; Sydney Cook and

Wynn Fowles at the Palace Theatre; and American-born/Australian-based singer Post Mason then at the Crystal Gardens. Englishman Edward Branscombe, who by 1914 was also based in Australia (initially with his Smart Set company), also attempted to develop a similar style of show at the Athenaeum Theatre (Melbourne) around the same time. 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 such, it developed itself around a small and more economically viable ensemble of eight to twelve actors and a chorus of six.

PRODUCTIONS

- ▶ **The Speculators:** Two speculators - Dennis Blossom (Bert Le Blanc) and Mike Bloom (Jake Vack) - desire to get in to business on Wall Street. They end up in partnership with Will Cheatem (Carlton Chase), 'a broker whose bad circumstances are thus relieved' (BC: 19 Sept. 1913, 4). Cheatem is secretly married to Leona Long, who has a guardian who wishes to marry her but is unaware that she is already wedded. An old sweetheart of Cheatem, Cassia Roland, enters the story and further complicates matters.

- ▶ **A Day at the Races:** Set initially at the Brighton racecourse, the narrative concerns the evil machinations of the racecourse manager, John Tomroy, and the guile of a most attractive adventuress, Cleo de Voy. When they fail to destroy Lady Love's chances in the big race, and hence make a fortune from betting, the pair decided to turn to robbery. The second act, set in Coney Island, sees most of those who attended the race meet revelling in the night life. The two villains set their sights on Louis Gloom and Mike Joy, but while they wander about looking for an opportunity Tomroy and de Voy are unaware that they are being watched by a Pinkerton detective, Will Gettum. In the meantime while Hal Prince (a disgraced trainer) secures the hand and fortune of Grace Honey, while Mamie Tomroy wins the love of Billy the jockey who rode Lady Love to victory.

- ▶ **The Grafters:** Two separate groups attempt to acquire the entire township of Watts, which has been built upon the property of a man called Watts, but who has not been seen or heard of for many years. One group - the well-dressed swindlers come armed with forged documents, while the other group - three outrageous tramps have nothing more tangible than bluff. While the swindlers and the tramps come up against each other and then have to deal with a hard-headed Yankee constable, a little 'rustic freak', turns out to be a relative of the deceased and scoops the pool (SMH: 16 June 1913, 4).

The Grafters was later reworked by Bert Le Blanc as *In Watts; Or, A Bombshell of Joy* and staged by his Travesty Stars company.

ORIGINAL CHARACTERS:

August Dinglebender . . . Bert Le Blanc.
(A Long Island Truck Farmer.)
Seth Hubbs Paul A. Stanhope.
(A Village Hackman.)
J. Bilkington Holmes . . . Carlton Chase.
(A Real Estate Boomer.)
Willie Harry Burgess.
(A Resilient Rustic.)
Old Man Platt Herbert Lancaster.
(A Relic.)
Big Bill Hawkins Chas. Larsen.
(A Farm Hand.)
Flora Meadowbrook . . Elaine Ravensberg.
Marie Dinglebender . . . Maxie Mansfield.
Mabel Peck Fritzie de Guy.
Amanda Boggs Teddy Martin.
(Help at the Dinglebender's Farm.)

ACT I.—The Dinglebender Farm at Malaria
Centre, Long Island.
ACT II.—The Principal Square in Dream
City.

MUSICAL GEMS INCLUDE—

"Oh! The Heat," "So-and-So," "To the
Strains of that Wedding March," "Phoebe
Jane," "Flower Garden Ball," "Gee! But
this is a Lonesome Town," "Volunteer Fire-
men," "Beautiful Dream Town," "Castil-
lano," "There's Only One in a Million Like
You," "And the Green Grass Grew All
Round," "Baboon Baby Lance," "Bound for
the Opera," "Funny Place to Kiss a Girl,"
etc., etc.

- ▶ **Dream City (aka Speilder Bounder's Dream):** "At the close of the first act Dinglebender falls asleep, and dreams the events occurring in Act II, when the scene changes to Dinglebender's farm following the devastation of Dream City. The mechanical change is very complete, and is made in twenty seconds" (HM: 26 June 1914, 3).

It is believed that original US title was *Speilder Bounder's Dream*. The title (and name of the principal character), name was likely changed to appeal more to Australian audiences.

Dream City advertisement
West Australian 8 Aug. (1914), 2.

SEE ALSO

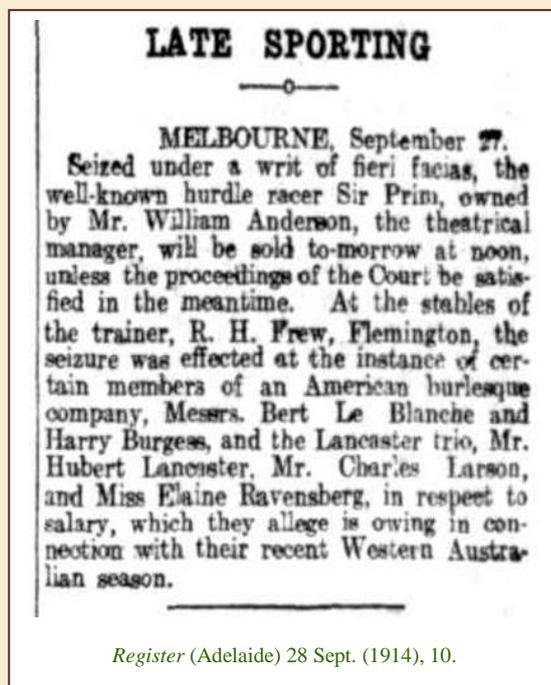
- [Bert Le Blanc](#)
- [Paul Stanhope](#)
- [Harry Burgess](#)
- [Carlton Chase](#)
- [William Anderson](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The American Burlesque Company's Australian tour ended in controversy while it was in Perth, and in fact the tour ended abruptly as the company was about to begin a season in Fremantle. The cause was made public not only in Western Australia but in most parts of Australia, and no doubt created a great deal of embarrassment for producer William Anderson who was taken to court by several members of the company for non-payment of wages. At the time Anderson was facing enormous financial difficulties after having over-extended his resources in the Wonderland City venture at Bondi (Sydney).

The situation with the American Burlesque Company reached critical point in mid-August when Anderson's manager, G. H. Barnes, was sued in the Perth Police Court by Bert Le Blanc, Harry Burgess, Hubert Lancaster (and the Lancaster Trio), Charles Larsen and Elaine Ravensberg. According to the West Australian this was the first of several batches of cases relating to the same issue. In court Barnes tendered evidence that telegrams and correspondence to Anderson regarding the matter had elicited no reply. Meanwhile the company continued to honour its commitments up until 23 August, at which time it cancelled the forthcoming Fremantle season and disbanded. The plaintiffs then decided to take no further action against Barnes after receiving legal advice that they would have a stronger case if they took their claims to Melbourne and proceeded against Anderson directly. This decision was proven correct when a separate claim taken against Barnes by a stage hand failed (WA: 22 Aug. 1914, 4).

While record of the extent of claims made against Anderson has yet been located, the seizure and sale of his prize racehorse (for £300) is likely to have settled his outstanding debt to the company.



1913-1914 AUSTRALASIAN TOUR

- 1913:** ORIENTAL AMUSEMENT Co (Bijou Th, Melb; 15 Mar. - 9 June) ► WILLIAM ANDERSON (Palace Th, Syd; 14 June - 15 Aug.) • (Victoria Th, Newc; 16 Aug. -) • (Toowoomba TH; 1-4 Sept.) • (His Majesty's Th, Bris; 6-20 Sept.) • (Th Royal, Adel; 4-27 Oct. - *) • (King's Th, Melb; 1 Nov - 17 Dec.) • (Palace Th, Syd; 20-31 Dec.)

NB: The *Theatre Magazine* indicates that the company was to undertake a hurried tour of New Zealand (July 1913, 22), but this has not yet been confirmed.

- 1914:** WILLIAM ANDERSON (Palace Th, Syd; 1 Jan. - 27 Feb.) • (New Zealand tour; ca. Mar. - May*) • (His Majesty's Th, Hobart; 20-26 June) • (Albert Hall, Launceston; 27 June - 1 July) • (His Majesty's Th, Perth; 25 July - 21 Aug. *)

NB: The New Zealand tour itinerary incl. Christchurch (ca. Mar.) • Dunedin (Grand Op House; ca. 21 Mar.) • Wellington (Grand Op House; 11-25 Apr.) • Palmerston North (27-28 Apr.) • Wanganui (29-30 Apr.) • New Plymouth (1 May) • Auckland (His Majesty's Th; 4 May -)

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "American Musical Burlesque Company." WC: 22 Apr. (1914), 8.
- "Bijou Theatre - American Musical Comedy." A: 17 Mar. 1913, 10. [re: *The Grafters*]
- "Bijou Theatre - The Speculators." A: 5 May 1913, 7.
- "Day at the Races, A." SMH: 22 Dec. 1913, 3.
- "Grafters, The," BC: 8 Sept. 1913, 13.
- "Grafters at the Palace, The." SMH 16 June 1913 (p.4).
- "King's Theatre." A: 3 Nov. 1913, 11.
- "His Majesty's Theatre: Anderson's American Musical Burlesque Company." WA: 27 July (1914), 7.
- "Speculators, the." BC: 19 Sept. 1913, 4.
- "Speculators, the." SMH: 26 July 1913, 18.
- "Speculators, the." SMH: 4 Aug. 1913, 3.
- "Thespians' Troubles: Police Court Cases." WA: 22 Aug. (1914), 4.

See also:

- A:** 15 Mar. (1913), 20 • 1 Nov. (1913), 20
B: 25 Dec. (1913), 8.
BC: 30 Aug. (1913), 6 • 6 Sept. (1913). 11-12 • 13 Sept. (1913), 6.
BM: 29 Sept (1914), 2.
CC: 29 Sept. (1914), 2.
SMH: 14 June (1913), 2 • 2 Aug. (1913), 16 • 13 Dec. (1913), 4 • 20 Dec. (1913), 22 • 19 Jan. (1914), 3.
WA: 29 Sept. (1914), 4.



Paul Stanhope
Theatre Apr. (1915), cover.



Brisbane Courier 20 Sept. (1913), 12.



The Grafters Quartette
Harry Ross, Teddy Long, George McCall, Arthur Renshaw
(order unknown)

Last updated: 24/09/2014

Expanded and updated from the 2006 AustLit entry.

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