

AUSTRALIAN NATIVES VAUDEVILLE COMPANY

Little is currently known about the Australian Natives Vaudeville Company, apart from the fact that the troupe originated from Kempsey on the New South Wales mid-North coast sometime prior to mid-1927. Only two articles have been located to date which refer to the troupe, and neither provides any clear indication of the number of performers or their heritage. The *Brisbane Courier* records only that "a novel and attractive vaudeville entertainment was given at the Pier Theatre on Wednesday night [20 July] by an aboriginal troupe from Kempsey (N.S.W.), a special feature of the show being the Gum Leaf Band. There were about a dozen items on the programme and the corroboree and other displays, as given by the natives in the early days, were weird and novel."¹ The troupe's shows reportedly comprised songs, aboriginal dances, a corroboree, all presented within a bush setting.

Managed and directed by George Davis, the Australian Natives Vaudeville Company is known to have played at least one show at Southport (Qld) and was reportedly invited to perform before the Duke of York at the official opening of Parliament House in Canberra. The only known performer to appear with the troupe was singer and musician Mrs T. Davis.

ABORIGINAL VAUDEVILLE SHOW

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The involvement by indigenous Australians, or indeed even representations of aboriginal people and/or culture on the Australian variety stage up until at least the 1930s, was almost non-existent. The only local performer known to have possibly portrayed an indigenous character as part of his stage act was Dave "Murrumbidgee" Gardener, a Melbourne-based minstrel comedian who presented his "Aboriginalities" around the late 1890s and early 1900s. While few details regarding Gardener's performances have also been identified it is believed that he developed a blackface aboriginal persona in place of the traditional American Negro. The early 1890s also saw the staging of Archibald Meston's *Wild Australia*. Although *Wild Australia* was not vaudeville, its mix of lectures and traditional Aboriginal performances certainly comprised variety. The troupe of over 30 "wild Aboriginals" played engagements in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne between December 1892 and February 1893 before Meston ran into financial difficulties and left his performers stranded in Melbourne.
2. While representations of Aboriginal characters were not uncommon in melodramas set in regional Australia, serious dramatic presentations of Aboriginality on the local stage were almost unheard of until the 1940s. One of the rare exceptions was Mrs E. C. Davidson's 1921 musical play, *The Laughing Murra* (Playhouse, Melbourne; 31 Oct.).

FURTHER REFERENCE

"**Aboriginal Vaudeville Show.**" *Brisbane Courier* 25 July (1927), 21.

"**Australian Natives: Programme for Royalty.**" *Sydney Morning Herald* 11 Feb. (1927), 8.

¹ "Aboriginal Vaudeville Show,' 21.