

NAT PHILLIPS COLLECTION

The Fryer Library, The University of Queensland (UQFL9)

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. While the bulk of the collection is ephemera belonging to Nat Phillips, including items associated with the Stiffy and Mo Revue Company and Fullers' Theatres, it also includes manuscripts and miscellanea belonging to John N. McCallum and Cremorne Theatre (including Will Mahoney and Walter Johnson), Tom Armstrong and Jack Phillips. 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.

The Collection was found by sheer luck in 1972 by then University of Queensland lecturer Dr Robert Jordan (later professor of drama at the University of New South Wales) and his first wife while they looking through a Brisbane bric-a-brac shop. The Jordan notified the Fryer Library of the boxes and they were apparently purchased for a nominal sum. Descendants of Phillips' brother, Jack, have since informed the Library that the boxes possibly disappeared during a bitter divorce between Jack Phillips (Nat's brother) and his first wife. The discovery of miscellanea from the Cremorne Theatre suggests, too, that the boxes may have been stored there for a period of time.

The Collection is believed to have been passed on to Jack Phillips after Nat's death in 1932. The family later became aware that the boxes of scripts were missing. It is surmised by Nat Phillips' great niece, Kim Phillips (the daughter of Jacob Phillips), that they were either left in the care of her grandfather's second wife after he died in 1938 (she had apparently been shunned by the family) or that they were somehow put into storage at the Cremorne Theatre in Brisbane (and later forgotten about). According to Ms Phillips the family had been aware of the existence of the boxes for at least several decades but had no idea as to their whereabouts. After their purchase in 1972 several prominent theatre historians and academics were approached by the Fryer Library in an effort to ascertain the value of the archive. Those who responded were Dr Rob Jordan, Dr Harold Love, Dr Richard Fotheringham, Alrene Sykes and Dr George Shaw. Although all agreed that the Collection was historically significant the boxes remained in the same state in which they were purchased in for more than thirty years.

Why the collection was shelved for so long is not known. It is likely that a decision was made in order that more "worthwhile" holdings could be processed, but even so this would have been only one of several intervening factors. Certainly there was no priority given to either the Nat Phillips Collection or the possibility of increasing the library's collection of popular culture scripts by the University at that time. Evidence of this is contained in a memorandum to F. D. O. Fielding by Fryer Librarian Margaret O'Hagan (dated 9 Sept. 1985). The letter reports that veteran comedian/actor Ron Shand was in possession of a collection of original Stiffy and Mo scripts and was prepared to make available to the library (at cost) any it did not already have.¹ An offer to purchase these scripts was never taken up by the Fryer possibly because the processing of the collection had not been undertaken and/or because popular culture artefacts were not high on the list of any tertiary institution's priorities prior to the rise of popular culture studies in the 1980s. It is likely that Shand's offer was subsequently forgotten over the years and he has since passed away. The whereabouts of these scripts is presently unclear. If they have been accepted by any Australian library this has not been signalled within the wider theatre history community.

In all likelihood the main problem for the library was its inability to process the material, or indeed find anyone who knew enough about Phillips and his work to make sense of what was effectively an unsorted, unidentified and often fragmented collection of manuscripts and musical scores, with many in a deteriorated state. An additional problem relates to the fact that some of the material is not related to Phillips' or the Fullers' operations but rather constitutes a John N. McCallum/Cremorne Theatre collection. Despite these problems Fryer Librarian Margaret O'Hagan well understood the importance of the collection (even though referring to the Phillips' scripts as being less sophisticated than those held as part of the library's Phillip Street Revue Company collection). This is made clear when she proposed in 1985 memorandum to F.D.O. Fielding that the collection would compliment several existing library collections (Max Afford, Billy Moloney and Maxwell Dunn). "There is also a strong argument," she wrote, "that this collection of popular entertainment counterbalances the Hanger Collection of Australian Playscripts."

Serendipity came into play once more when in 2002 when one of the Fryer's librarians, Bll Dealy, was given the task of sorting through the boxes. Dealy recalled a conversation with Clay Djubal, at the time a PhD candidate in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History (EMSAH) who had talked about his passion for pre-1930s Australian variety theatre. Within less than an hour of searching through the Collection Djubal discovered the script for the very first revusical ever staged by Phillips' Stiffy and Mo company. This find set in motion a 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 revusical. Research now indicates that these one-act musical comedies did not appear anywhere else in the world until at least the early 1930s. The findings from the Collection also became

¹ Shand and his wife, Letty Craydon (daughter of James Craydon, of Delohery, Craydon and Holland fame) were members of Jim Gerald's company in the mid-to-late 1920s. Shand later became well-known to Australian television audiences as Herb, in the popular 1970s soap, *No 96*.

the focus of the final chapter of Djubal's dissertation, which looks at Nat Phillips career and influence on the development of the revusical genre.

The Nat Phillips Collection was officially launched by The University of Queensland in conjunction with the Friends of the Fryer and the faculty of Arts in August 2005.

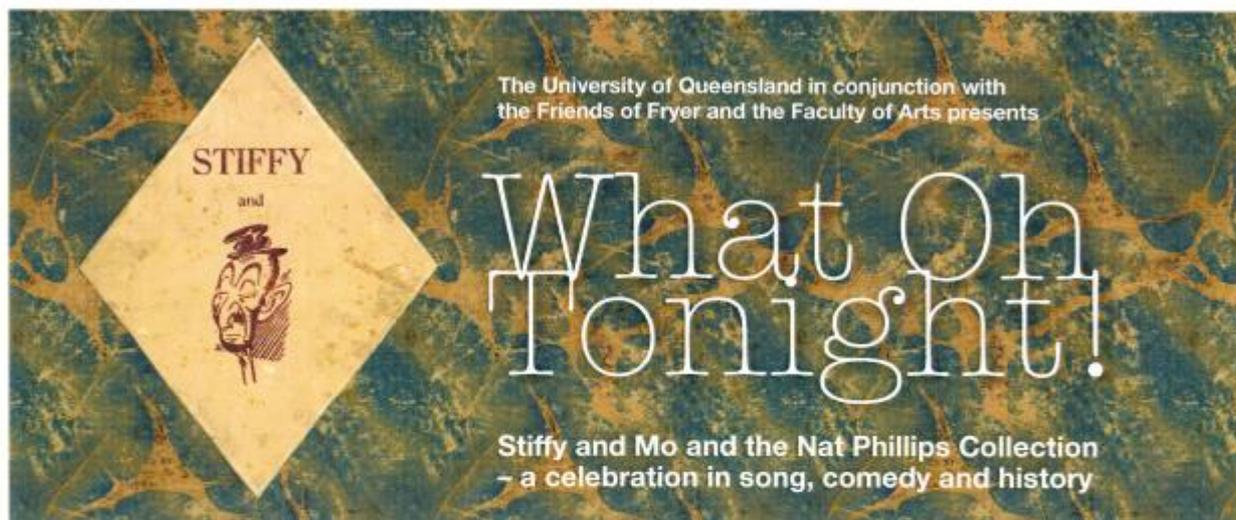
- A [Finding Aid](#) to the collection is available online.
- "["What Oh Tonight": Stiffy and Mo and the Nat Phillips Collection](#)." An online display devoted to Nat Phillips has been established by the Fryer Library.
- **eSpace:** The University of Queensland's Digital Repository hosts most of the photographs and images from the Nat Phillips Collection. At least 27 are directly related to Phillips, Stiffy and Mo, Daisy Merritt, friends and family.

CONTENTS OF THE COLLECTION

- Box 1: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: A-L
- Box 2: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: M-T
- Box 3: NAT PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: U-Z
Untitled Texts [UT]
Comic Routines [CR]
Miscellaneous Items [MI]
Song Lyrics and Poetry (Complete and Fragments) [SL]
Notes re: Nat Phillips items in other boxes
- Box 4: NAT PHILLIPS / FULLERS THEATRES LTD** Original musical scores for revusicals and pantomimes.
- Box 5: JACK PHILLIPS** Revusicals, Sketches, Farces, Pantomimes: A-Z
Untitled Texts [UT]
Miscellaneous Items [MI]
Musical Scores [MS]
- Box 6: CREMORNE THEATRE (Bris) Incl. John N. McCallum**
Scripts: Miscellaneous Authors: A-S (Produced by John N. McCallum)
- Box 7: JOHN N. McCALLUM / CREMORNE THEATRE / MISCELLANEOUS**
Scripts: Miscellaneous Authors: T-Z (Produced by John N. McCallum)
Programs, Running Order Sheets etc [CT]
Will Mahoney Collection [WM]
Unidentified and Miscellaneous [UM]
- Box 8: DOCUMENTS, MAGAZINES AND CORRESPONDENCE**
Programs, Posters and Published Magazines [PM]
Legal/Industrial Documents c1920/21
Unidentified Items
Actors Federation v J.C. Williamson and Others: Legal and Industrial Documents ca.1920/21 [AF]
Variation to Industrial Arbitration Act of 1916 by Queensland Branch of Theatrical and Picture Industry, Musicians and Electrical Union [QB]
- Box 9: MISCELLANEOUS AUTHORS/PRODUCTIONS**
Unpublished Scripts: Revusicals, Sketches, Farces and Film/Radio
Tommy Armstrong
Non-Australian Published Texts (Plays/Poetry)
- Box 10: PUBLISHED MUSIC**
Songs, Songsters and Scores Published to 1929 [PM]
Songs, Songsters and Scores Published from 1931 onwards [PS]
- Box 11: PHOTOGRAPHS**

THE FRYER LIBRARY

The Fryer Library is the branch of The University of Queensland responsible for special collections. It has extensive Australian studies collections of published and unpublished materials. Its strengths are Australian literature, history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, art and architecture. In addition to over 100,000 volumes of publications, there are manuscripts, photographs, rare books, research theses, ephemera, dust jackets and posters.



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Nat Phillips is remembered today as part of one of Australia's greatest ever comedy duos – Stiffy and Mo. With partner Roy 'Mo' Rene, Phillips dominated the variety stage in Australia and New Zealand between 1916 and 1928. Little was known of the life of Nat Phillips due to his premature death in 1932 and Rene's successful radio career. Phillips' ten years on leading overseas variety circuits, and as the country's leading writer of revivals (one act musical comedies) and pantomimes had faded from public memory over the years.

The Nat Phillips Collection has been held in its original state in the Fryer Library since 1972. In recent years The University of Queensland has been able to link Nat Phillips with the collection. Much of the history pertaining to Stiffy and Mo, and in particular the career significance of Nat Phillips, can be rewritten. The Nat Phillips Collection includes stage plays, sketches, sheet music and photographs pertaining to the life and work of Nat Phillips.

PERFORMERS

STIFFY Mr Steve Haddan – National Nine News Sports Presenter

MO Associate Professor Richard Fotheringham,
Acting Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts

PIANIST Ms Kelly Burton – The University of Queensland School of Music

VOCALS Ms Sarah Punch – The University of Queensland School of Music
Mr Clay Djubal – School of English, Media Studies and Art History,
Faculty of Arts



*The Customs House Restaurant is open from 9.00am on Sundays.
For breakfast, lunch or coffee and cake reservations telephone 3365 8921.*

Published: 10/05/2011

This entry adapted in part from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight" Ph D Diss (2005) U of Qld (Chapter 1) and "As Luck Would Have It: The Nat Phillips Collection." *Found in Fryer: Celebrating UQ's Centenary* (2010).

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