

Australian Film and Vaudeville as Intermedial Industries, 1896 to ca. 1935: An Introduction

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Vaudeville as it is constituted to-day is not an art or a science. It is a commodity. The big men who control the central markets have spent a lifetime - not studying art - but in trying to fulfill the needs of a huge mass of customers of varying tastes with the goods which they seem to like best (Bert Levy, 1922).¹

The increasing popularity of moving pictures in Australia during the early twentieth century has long been considered one of the main reasons for the demise of vaudeville. Indeed, the idea that Australian audiences around the country increasingly turned to film as their preferred form of entertainment during the two decades leading up to the introduction of synchronised sound film in 1929 has scarcely been questioned. Richard Waterhouse, for example, argues such a point in his 1989 essay "Popular Culture and Pastimes:"

"In the 1920s, films replaced vaudeville as the preferred form of theatrical entertainment" (278).

Almost two decades earlier Ross Thorne wrote in *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905: From the Time of the First Settlement to the Arrival of Cinema* (1971):

Sound films, the depression and the high entertainment tax on theatre seats had a simultaneous effect on the theatre industry at the end of the nineteen twenties and early thirties - an effect that was almost disastrous (222).

The reasoning behind such views has been the long-accepted belief that by the late-1920s variety theatre had become outmoded, too expensive to produce, and subject to the vagaries of economic and social change. Conversely film was cheaper to exhibit, it was vastly superior as a visual spectacle and its narrative potential offered more compelling and exciting entertainment. Reinforcing this view was the marketing power of the international film combines. Their ability to dominate space in newspapers, industry magazines and entertainment precincts seemed to provide equally compelling evidence that live entertainment had been crushed almost into extinction. Current research into Australia's variety theatre industry, utilising the continually-expanding digital resources such as *Trove* (National Library of Australia) and *Papers Past* (National Library of New Zealand) and increasingly sophisticated internet search engines, confirms a quite different scenario, however.

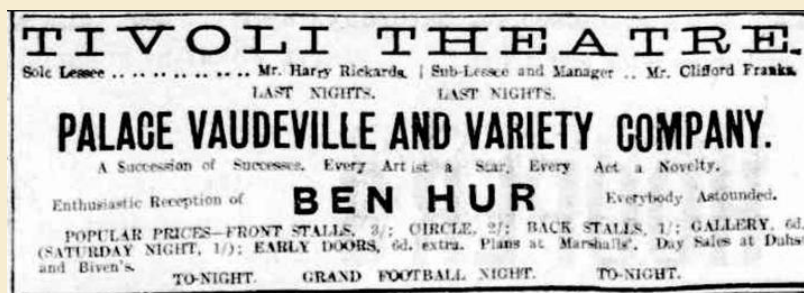
To a large extent, cultural and theatre historians have failed to understand the widespread and complex nature of the live entertainment industry of that era. They have also tended to mangle their use of theatrical terminology. In using the word "vaudeville," as Richard Waterhouse does, the implication is specifically form-bound - he infers an entertainment programme comprising approximately 8-12 individual and unrelated acts. Waterhouse's statement also implies that up until the 1920s, vaudeville had been the dominant live theatrical entertainment of the masses. However, the simple fact is that it never had been the "preferred form of theatrical entertainment" in Australia. From its earliest presence in Australia vaudeville was always just part of the variety theatre spectrum, arising out of, and maintaining a presence alongside minstrelsy, burlesque, pantomime and circus among other entertainments. From the mid-1910s until well into the 1930s vaudeville also co-existed alongside revue, the revusical and musical comedy. To say, then, that "film replaced vaudeville," not only ignores the wider and more significant role that variety theatre had in entertaining Australians, but has subsequently led to the myth that the variety industry fell by the wayside and eventually died.

We now know that variety theatre, in its many guises (including vaudeville and revue) never actually died or faded away. In fact it continued to be part of the Australian cultural landscape, entertaining audiences throughout the country well into the 1960s, particularly in the suburbs of our major cities and in regional centres. In this respect variety (including vaudeville) also played a significant role in shaping the first decade of television production in this country. Its longevity suggests several possibilities that have never be fully explored. One is that live variety theatre offered the public something that film (and even serious drama) could not - immediacy. Variety's great strength was that its performers, and especially the comedians, could communicate with their audiences directly, responding to current issues and local events and people. A second factor concerns its long-held appeal with a large segment in the population who grew up with it. The idea that all Australians began rejecting variety entertainment upon the arrival of film is akin to saying that all Australians turned their backs on film after the arrival of television or that the television industry collapsed because of the internet. These two scenarios sound preposterous to us today but such thinking is at the heart of what many leading historians have led us to believe happened in the past. The notion that any entertainment form or even an industry could die within a period of a few years is clearly unsustainable when one considers that blackface minstrelsy was revived with much popularity on numerous occasions between the mid-1920s

¹ Levy, Bert. "Vaudeville: Words to a Critic." *Fuller News* (Sydney) 28 Jan. 1922, 6.

and 1930s - notably under the management of J.C. Williamson's [Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville](#), [Fullers' Theatres](#), [Harry Clay](#) and [George Marlow](#) among others (including the various [Tivoli](#) operations).² The enormous amount of fully professional variety entertainment shown on early Australian television,³ provides additional and compelling evidence that variety theatre never died away.

It is also abundantly clear from primary source evidence that the early Australian film industry and the established variety theatre industry maintained a close relationship until well into the 1930s. Previous notions about film and vaudeville being in competition with each other can now be debunked as well. This thinking, based very much on the idea that they were mutually exclusive - not just as entertainment forms but also as products of two markedly different industrial systems - came about because both fields of inquiry were effectively treated as distinct. This separateness has been exacerbated, too, because early Australia film research was largely being carried out by people whose interests lay almost exclusively with cinema. Vaudeville on the other hand has long been seen by academically-trained historians as the poor cousin of "legitimate" theatre. Its history in the Australian context, especially that published between the 1970s and early-2000s was based either on accidental and inconsistent discoveries or through the myopic examination of a few high profile firms - notably the Tivoli circuit and J.C. Williamson's. Crossover research has therefore been difficult (or not considered), and as a result there has been a tendency to approach them as distinct forms when in fact the opposite occurred. In this respect it is useful to briefly consider the history of film production and exhibition in Australia.

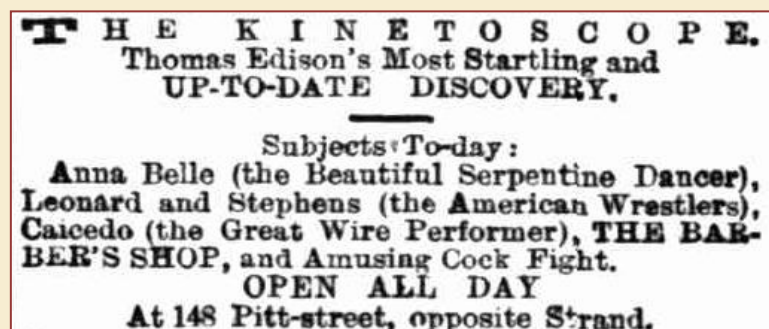


Advertiser (Adelaide) 13 Aug. 1906, 2.

Individually-watched "moving pictures" were exploited commercially in Australia through Edison's Kinetoscope as early as 1894. Although not considered a movie projector the Kinetoscope was nevertheless founded on the same principles that eventually become the standard for all cinematic projection (prior to the arrival of video). In this respect it created the illusion of movement by conveying a strip of perforated film bearing sequential images over a light source with a high-speed shutter. Because the Kinetoscope was designed for individual viewing it was never considered appropriate for exhibition in a theatre. The machines were therefore set up in rented spaces, typically in a central location. Newspaper advertisements, or more typically posters, advertised the various subjects available for viewing each day.

The first truly "moving pictures" to be seen by the Australian public were shown at a vaudeville house - [Harry Rickards' Melbourne Opera House](#). Robert C. Allen notes a similar pattern in the early dissemination of moving pictures in the USA:

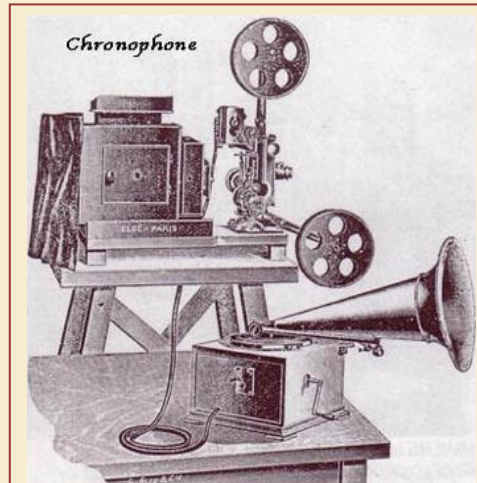
[Between] 1894-96 when Edison, the Lathams, the Lumieres and others were beginning to commercially exploit motion picture technology, the mass entertainment market... was dominated by vaudeville... It is not surprising, then, that in 1895-96 when the motion picture made its public debut as a projected medium (as opposed to the peep-show format), it should do so as one act on a vaudeville bill' (*Film and Vaudeville* 1980, 4).



Evening News (Sydney) 7 Dec. 1894, 5.

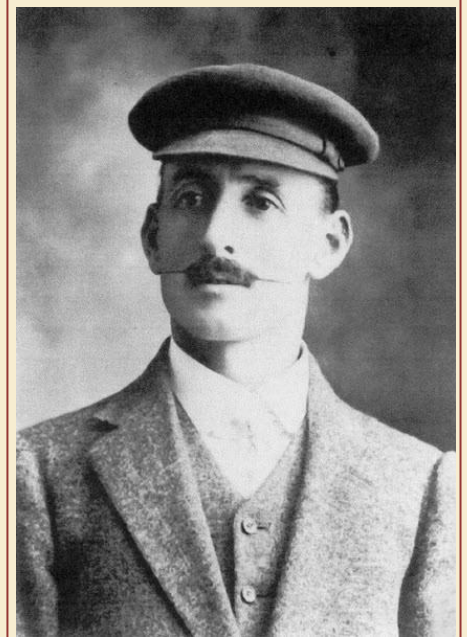
² See for example [Old Time Nigger Minstrels](#) (Fullers' Theatres) and [Ye Olde Nigger Minstrels](#) (J.C. Williamson's).

³ Not forgetting the re-emergence of minstrelsy in the late-1950s courtesy of the popular television series, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958-1978)



The Chronophone, a smaller version of the Chronomeagaphone

Left: Two of vaudeville's biggest film stars - George Wallace (top) and Arthur Tauchert



Percy Verlo (aka George Percy Hausmann)

Australian Postal History and Social Philately



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Everyone's 9 May 1928, 45

Many film exhibitors also found advantage in utilising variety performers within their programmes. Indeed the practice of engaging one or several artists as "between-films" or even as the feature entertainment began with Harry Rickards first film showing and continued for well over three decades. A huge number of variety and theatrical performers, including some of Australia's biggest stars were therefore able to supplement their income through appearances at established cinemas, on cinema circuits or with travelling film shows. Gladys Moncrieff's juvenile career in North Queensland, for example, included engagements at moving picture shows. In 1909 Birch and Carroll even signed her up to be the feature live entertainment for the opening season of their Olympia Pictures (at the [Olympia Skating Rink](#), Charters Towers). Birch and Carroll's association with film and vaudeville was in fact a mainstay of the company's Queensland operations well into the 1930s. Classically-trained pianist [Dot Mendoza](#), largely associated with J.C. Williamson's during the 1920s and 1930s, is another high profile practitioner with links to film screenings as a performer (and not as a film accompanist). Some cinemas, like the Strand, Newcastle [below], were still offering occasional 50/50 live performance and film screenings in the 1930s. The Szarka Brothers (Enmore Theatre) and Pugliese Enterprises were two of Sydney's many independent cinema firms to maintain a close relationship with the vaudeville industry, as did [Robert McLeish](#) and [North's Vaudeville Company](#) (Melbourne), [Dan Clifford's Star Picture circuit](#) (Adelaide), and [Bella Sutherland](#) in Brisbane to name but a few. The same relationship was also maintained by numerous suburban cinemas throughout the country. Even the large cinema firms like [Hoyts](#) and [Union Theatres](#) were involved in vaudeville and film exhibition during the 1920s and 1930s, with both companies setting up separate divisions that were devoted to live performance.



The extent to which film and vaudeville crossed over can also be seen in the development and marketing of new technologies. Throughout the late-1890s and early-1900s the advertising for many touring shows focused more on the projector than the films themselves. For his annual New South Wales and Queensland tours, which began in 1901, [Harry Clay](#) operated several machines - all advertised as the latest international success. These included the Bio-pictro-scope (1905), Sperantoscope (1906), Theatregraph (1907-11) and "Gaumont's machine" (1912, possibly the Chronos). Other machines used in Australia included the Lumières' Cinématographe, Edison's Vitascope, the Vitagraph, Bio-Tableau, Projectorscope, Phono-Bio-Tableau, Animatograph, and Biotint. Another form of moving picture device (more closely associated with Edison's Kinetoscope) was the Mutoscope - an individual, coin-operated viewing machine which operated on the flick-book principle. In 1904 the Australasian Mutoscope Biotint Company of Sydney conceived a marketing ploy to send a vaudeville company throughout the region accompanied by a selection of machines, which could be viewed in the foyer of each venue (during the day and in connection with each evening's performance).⁶

Newcastle Sun (NSW) 3 July 1933, 9.

Perhaps the strongest connection between technology and vaudeville was the Chronomegaphone. A form of early talkie, this system allowed sound (via a gramophone record) and moving pictures to be presented at the same time. The sound operator (behind the stage) and the film projectionist (out front) would attempt to synchronise their machines manually (communicating by telephone). Arguably the biggest star to be given the Chronomegaphone treatment was Scottish music hall comedian [Harry Lauder](#). Australian comedian [Albert Whelan](#) was another artist whose voice and performance were captured for public exhibition via the system. The Chronomegaphone was first demonstrated in Australia on Harry Rickards Tivoli stage in 1906 (as the Chronophone)⁷ and introduced commercially by Cousens Spencer in late-1908. After an extended season at Sydney's Lyceum Theatre, he showed the machine in Adelaide, Newcastle, followed by a return to Sydney, and Melbourne. Spencer later leased the machine out to other entrepreneurs, including for example, Rockhampton-based exhibitor and theatrical manager, George Birch.⁸

<p>SHIRE HALL, WODONGA. MONDAY, 25th, and TUESDAY, 26th APRIL. COLONEL LUMARE'S WONDERFUL Biographe and Musical Company. The CINEMATOGAPHE SUPER- SEDED. THE MUSICAL COMPANY INCLUDE Those Popular Favorites, The Ruby CLARE SISTERS Myra (Late of Opera House, Melbourne). WILL WYNANDS, Tivolian Character Impersonator. Pianiste Madame CARROLL. Vocalist Our Prices - 2s and 1s. HARRY HALL, Director. TALLANGATTA, 26th APRIL.</p>	<p>T O W N H A L L . — TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT. LAST NIGHT. ENTIRE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME. CLAY'S COMPANY. THE BIO-PICTRO-SCOPE, showing beautiful new moving Songs and films. NEW ILLUSTRATED SONGS. 6d ADMISSION 6d. Front Seats 3d Extra. 1059</p>	<p>Institute Hall, Narracoorte. — FRIDAY and SATURDAY, APRIL 15 and 16. — THE FAMOUS KENNEDYS. THE FAMOUS KENNEDYS. THE FAMOUS KENNEDYS. — ORCHESTRA. SINGERS, HUMORISTS. Immense Success. Everywhere crowded to the Doors. Every Item Encored. — The Theatregraph All New Pictures. All New Musical Items.</p>
<p><i>Wodonga and Towong Sentinel (Vic) 22 Apr. 1898, 3.</i></p>	<p><i>Maitland Daily Mercury (NSW) 15 Mar. 1905, 1.</i></p>	<p><i>Narracoorte Herald (SA) 12 Apr. 1910, 3.</i></p>

Lauder and Whelan were by no means the first variety artists to be exhibited on film before a paying Australian audience, although the Chronomegaphone was better suited to vocally-orientated performers like singers and comedians. French dancers François Chabre and Madam Aida Darto, who worked professionally as [The Dartos](#), were recorded performing several of their feature dances while working for Harry Rickards. The film is known to have been

⁶ The tour, headlined by Percy Verto, began in Cairns in mid-1904, travelled south through regional Queensland and parts of Northern New South Wales before playing Brisbane in late October/early November. No further details have been located in connection with the Mutoscope tour after the end of the Brisbane season.

⁷ "The Chronophone at the Tivoli." *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) 1 Nov. 1906, 22.

⁸ The Chronomegaphone was not Australia's first introduction to combined sound and pictures, however. The Phono-Bio-Tableau, for example, allowed for sound effects and vocal/musical recordings to accompany the pictures. J.C. Williamson had much success touring this show around Australasia (1904-1906), as did others like Charles Sudholz, and A.T. Richards.

exhibited by John H. Tait's⁹ [London Bioscope Company](#) in late-1901 and early-1902. A film featuring contortionist [Ferry the Frog](#) was toured around Australia in 1906 by the Leonard's Beautiful English Pictures (in association with the Corrick Family of entertainers). Either the same or another film of Ferry is also known to have been touring the country in 1911 (see Pier Gardens, Fremantle, ca. 28 Jan., for example).¹⁰ That same year a film called *Wild Australia*, featuring Skulthorpe's Buckjumpers and Rough Riders, helped publicise the troupe's regional tours.

Other examples of variety performers featuring in their own films during the silent era include [Lindsay Kemble](#), who highlighted his Adelaide exploits dressed as a woman in 1915 ([\[Lindsay Kemble\]](#)), and Charlie-Chaplin imitator Ern Vockler (later [Ike Delavle](#)) in *Charlie at the Sydney Show* (1916). Comedians [Fred Bluett](#) (*An Interrupted Divorce*, 1917), [Arthur Tauchert](#), (*The Sentimental Bloke*, 1918), [Claude Dampier](#) (*Hullo Marmaduke*, 1924; and *The Adventures of Algy*, 1925), and [W.S. Percy](#) (*Percy Gets a Job*, 1912; and *Percy's First Holiday*, 1914) are a few of the more prominent entertainers to star in a feature film prior to the advent of the talkies.

Not surprisingly the coming of synchronised moving pictures (aka "talkies") provided a new outlet for the continuing intersection between variety theatre and film. While most people today associate the first talkie with Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (it wasn't), few Australians realise that the first fully synchronised sound film to be exhibited in this country was *The Street Angel*, a Hollywood feature starring Charles Farrell and Janet Gaynor. It premiered at Sydney's Prince Edward Theatre on 9 January 1929. In addition to a 110 piece Symphony Orchestra (leased from the Roxy Theatre) the entertainment also included sound films of famous personalities talking, as well as sound effects and singing. Among the featured artists captured on film were George Bernard Shaw and Gertrude Lawrence.¹¹ Among the very first people to be filmed during the development stage of Australian sound film technology were variety entertainers [Jack Cannot](#) ([\[Jack Cannot\]](#), 1920) and [Fred Bluett](#) and [Hector St Clair](#) ([\[Australian Talkie Shorts\]](#), 1929).

A few years later [Arthur Tauchert](#), [Les Coney](#), [Peggy Pride](#) and [Grace Quine](#) featured in [Arthur Higgins](#) feature film *Fellers* (1930). Although regarded by some critics as Australia's first talkie, *Fellers* was initially made as a silent movie. A music soundtrack accompanied the film throughout but only the last reel included synchronized sound - and this involved only a few minutes of dialogue and a song. That same year comedian [Syd Hollister](#) was cast in A.R. Harwood's talkie *Out of the Shadows*. Production on the film was abandoned shortly before shooting was completed when the only set of wax discs buckled in a heat wave. It was never released. Actor and vaudeville mimic [Frank Hawthorne](#) was another to variety entertainer to be involved in the early talkie industry as a member of the cast of [Paulette McDonagh's](#) *The Cheaters*. As with *Fellers* the film was a partial talkie having been produced initially as a silent picture. Some sound was added later to new footage using an improvised sound-on-disc system. Fellow-*Fellers* stars [Tauchert](#), [Coney](#), and [Pryde](#) were also involved in the purpose-made talkie, *Showgirl's Luck*, along with comedians [Fred Bluett](#) and [George Lloyd](#). Although production began in May 1930 the film's release was delayed until November the following year due to complications with the original soundtrack. None of the three films to find eventual release fared well with critics or with distribution.

The first variety entertainers to find widespread success with talkies were comedians [George Wallace](#) and [Pat Hanna](#). Interestingly both men were also heavily involved in the creation of their own films. Wallace's first two productions were based heavily on two of his more popular revusicals - *His Royal Highness* (1932) and *Harmony Row* (1933), while Hanna's first two films, *Diggers* (1931) and *Diggers in Blighty* (1932) were similarly adapted from routines and sketches previously produced on stage (by his [Famous Diggers](#) troupe). The 1930s also saw the release of at least one local film founded on variety genre forms (*Cinesound Varieties*, 1934), while *Show Business* (1938) was set within the popular theatre industry. Even [Roy Rene's](#) 1933 feature, *Strike Me Lucky*, is heavily influenced by variety - particularly through his days as a revusical comedian with [Nat Phillips](#) (as [Stiffy and Mo](#)).



⁹ See [J. & N. Tait](#).

¹⁰ William Ferry (aka Ferry the Human Frog) was still appearing on film in the 1930s. An advertisement for *The Mickey Mouse Party* screening at Wests, Adelaide in late December 1930 records his appearance in "The Storybook Parade" segment (*Register News-Pictorial* 27 Dec. 1930, 22.).

¹¹ In early-1929 vaudeville and revusical comedian Jim Gerald, newly returned from a visit to the United States, burlesqued the talkies with his silent film *Getting Through*. Gerald had ventured overseas the previous year hoping to establish his career outside Australia. While in Hollywood he co-wrote and produced several two reel films including *Getting Through*. After returning to Australia in early-1929 Gerald toured that film as part of his live stage shows. First exhibited in Adelaide on 2 March the audience was led to believe the picture was a talkie. When the screen was raised at the film's conclusion its actors, Gerald, Essie Jennings and Phyllis Du Barry and members of Gerald's revue company could be seen still seated at a table with megaphones and scripts in hand, having provided all the dialogue live.

Frank Thring's Efftee Films also produced short variety films in the early 1930s under the series title *Efftee Entertainers*. Among the artists were George Wallace, Ada Reeve, Jack O'Hagan, George Moon Jnr (with Stan Ray), Lou Vernon, Minnie Love and Marshall Crosby.



The influence of vaudeville on film can also be seen in the subject matter and settings of quite a few of the international films to make their way to the Australasian region. One of these, *The Radio Parade* (1933) received unexpected publicity following a special industry preview in Sydney. Representatives from the Australian Broadcasting Commission were so enamoured with the film that ABC management sought and received permission to broadcast *The Radio Parade* in its entirety to Sydney listeners via radio station 2BL prior to its release. The broadcast's popularity with the metropolitan listeners led to being transmitted nationally soon afterwards.

Other vaudeville-inspired or narrative-influenced feature films to be screened in Australia during the 1930s and 1940s included: *Show Folks* (1930), *They Learned About Women* (1930, silent), *Puttin' on the Ritz* (1930), *Broadway to Hollywood* (1933), *Stage Mother* (1933), *On the Air* (1934), *Hollywood Party* (1934), *Rainbow Over Broadway* (1934), *Say it with Flowers* (1934), *George White's Scandals* (1934 and 1935), *Music Hall* (RKO, 1935), *Talking Feet* (UK 1937/1939),¹² *Little Miss Roughneck* (1938), *Goodbye Broadway* (1938), *The Star Maker* (1939), *Hello Frisco Hello* (1943), *Spotlight Scandals* (1943/1944), *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* (1943), *Follow the Boys* (1944), *Show Business* (USA, 1944), *Atlantic City* (1944), and *London Town* (1946). *The Road to Utopia* (1945), starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby also involved a nod to variety, with the two stars cast as vaudeville performers. In addition to feature films countless shorts with either vaudeville performances or settings were produced in the USA, Great Britain and elsewhere. How many of these films came to Australia is currently unknown.

The relationship between the film and vaudeville industries is perhaps best demonstrated by the practitioners we now know were active in both Australian vaudeville and film. For a list of these people or the films see:

- ▶ [Australian Variety Theatre Practitioners \(and the Film Industry\)](#)
- ▶ [Australian Films \(with Variety Practitioners\)](#)

Some additional research for this introduction into Australian film and vaudeville was carried out by Dr Clay Djubal under the direction of Professor Tom O'Regan (School of Communication and Arts, The University of Qld) as part of a project into the intermedial connections between Australia's theatre, radio, film, and television industries.

¹² The first date indicates its original release date (in the USA, Great Britain etc). The second date indicates its first known release in Australia.