



PROMPTING AUSTRALIANS OVERSEAS

In the second of two articles on the Library's collecting of materials relating to Australian performing artists overseas, Richard Stone highlights the role of a private collector and dealer based in New York

There is an ironic touch to the spectre of an Australian expatriate resident in New York collecting memorabilia of expatriate Australian performing

artists and exporting the material back 'home' to Australia.

Karl Levett has lived and worked in New York City for over 35 years. He is originally from the far north coast of New South Wales. Karl's travels and a yearning to see the best theatre that the world could offer landed him in New York where he secured a job at the Australian Consulate General from which he retired only four years ago. As well as indulging in the theatrical riches that New York can offer, Karl has been a critic for magazines in America and

England and was the New York correspondent for *Theatre Australia* in the early 1980s. He also became a serious collector of theatrical memorabilia.

Annette Kellermann, a 'glorious example of perfect womanhood' according to her billing in this Keith-Albee New York Hippodrome program
From the PROMPT Collection

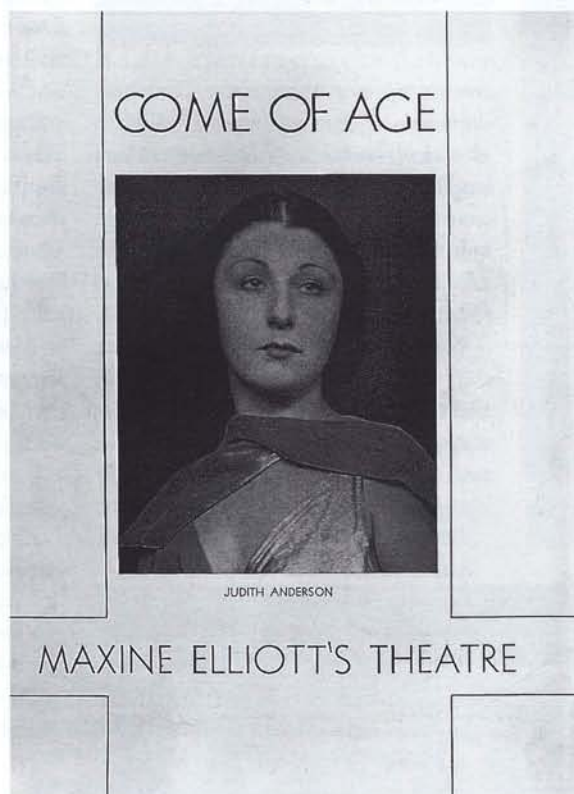
Our paths crossed during my term as the National Library's Liaison Officer in North America, based in the Australian Consulate General in the early 1970s. I became aware of Karl's collecting activities which centred on his personal interest in American and English theatre. However, it was not until 10 years or so later that the Library turned to Karl as a source for Australian theatrical memorabilia. In the intervening years the collecting policy for Australian performing arts was refined. The documentation of Australian performing arts and artists overseas was identified as a major thrust in the development of the Collection.

The Library was fortunate in having the services of its Acquisition Officer in London seeking out current and retrospective material. However, with the closure of the National Library's Liaison Office in North America, there was no equivalent source across the Atlantic. The opportunity to utilise the services of an expert in America with knowledge of American and English sources was very tempting. Subsequently, with a little encouragement, Karl began seeking and finding Australian material of potential interest to the National Library.

His first list was offered to the Library in 1985, and from it just three items were purchased, including an 1864 playbill for performances in Boston of a play called *Janet Pride*, part of which was set in 'The bush at Murrumbidgee'; a program for renowned Australian actress Dame Judith Anderson performing her signature role of Euripides' *Medea* on Broadway in 1947; and a lengthy 1913 American newspaper article on the Australian-born playwright Charles Haddon Chambers.

Subsequently the lists have grown in size, frequency and variety. Several arrive in the Library each year from New York and include a rich mix of programs, posters, playbills, issues of

magazines, postcards, photographs and significant clippings. They embrace Australians performing in both the United States and the United Kingdom and include actors, singers, dancers, conductors, choreographers, directors, soloists, variety performers, pop stars, comedians, and designers. The megastars, the famous, the forgotten stars, the not-so-famous, as well as those who may be relatively unknown (at least to audiences 'back home' in Australia), all are embraced by the dogged collector.



Australia's Judith Anderson (1898–1992), as featured on the program cover for *Come of Age*, showing at Maxine Elliott's Theatre in New York in 1934
From the PROMPT Collection

Karl collects from sources on both sides of the Atlantic. On regular trips to London he scours the healthy second-hand book trade, visits dealers and collectors specialising in theatre memorabilia and rummages

through the offerings at ephemera fairs. The field of theatrical pickings is potentially richer in the UK because of the large number of Australians who have been drawn there for training and experience.

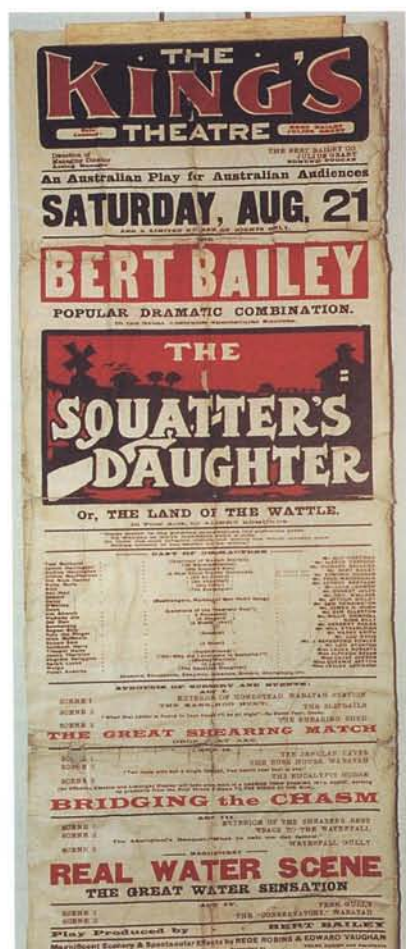
As well as locating Australians in the mainstream theatrical scene in the UK, Karl's penetration of English sources has yielded documentation on neglected fields of popular theatre such as the variety circuit. Evidence of Australian variety performers is particularly elusive. Many of these peripatetic performers worked the English provincial variety circuit with acts such as whistling, boomerang throwing, escapology, comedy—and rustic turns such as Fred Lindsay, whose billing promised 'Swordsmanship as applied to the Stockwhip'.

The Argyle Theatre of Varieties in Birkenhead was an important variety venue that suffered severe bomb damage in World War Two. Its poster collection was miraculously rescued at the time by a local collector. After his death it was auctioned at Sotheby's and Karl extracted 22 posters featuring Australian artists over the period 1890 to 1930. Some of the forgotten names treading the boards include: George Meldrum—

The Australian Boy Comic and Descriptive Vocalist; The Moscows—The Australian Wonders and Living Marionettes; Mr Fred W. Mills—The Unrivalled Australian Ventriloquist and Humorist; Odessa and Lovett—Australian Duetists and Dancers; and Ed. E. Ford—The Australian Sundowner, President of the Farce Trust.

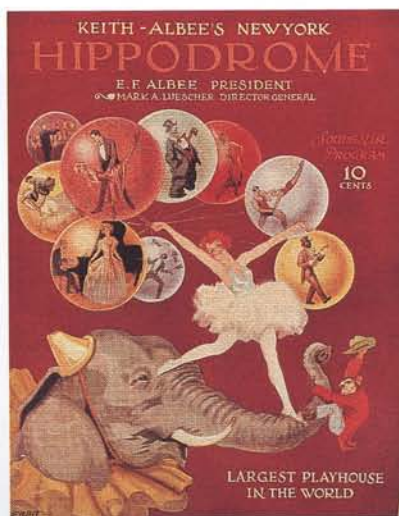
As Karl stated:

While being attractive for their own sake, the information they provide is invaluable documentation of an area of the entertainment world of which little is known ... Australian variety performers of long ago will be given a new life.



(above) Playbill for the King's Theatre
From the Broadside Collection

(above right) Program cover for
Keith-Albee's New York Hippodrome
show from the mid-1920s, featuring
Australia's celebrated swimmer-entertainer
Annette Kellermann
From the PROMPT Collection



foreign actors working in the US, which continues to the present day. (Witness the newsworthiness of Australian actor/singer Todd McKenney being granted a permit to perform the lead role as Peter Allen in the Broadway production of the Australian musical 'The boy from Oz'.)

Not only is there a smaller Australian presence in American theatres, but the market place requires a much more varied and inventive approach. As Karl testifies:

In the United States the subculture of paper collectibles has none of the structure that exists in Britain. This particularly applies to theatrical material. The search is much more random, involving several methods that are consistently carried on throughout the year. The process is very time consuming, with serendipity playing a large part in locating anything worthwhile.

As bookshops do not yield as much material as might be expected, it is imperative to monitor other sources, including weekly mail order catalogues from groups such as the Universal Autograph Collectors Club. Karl travels up and down the north eastern seaboard from Massachusetts to Maryland, frequenting auctions, antique shows, local flea markets, paper collectible shows in church basements, and fairs held by autograph and photograph hunters. As his reputation as a collector has spread he has moved into the swap market. It was through such a trade that he acquired a rare 1924 program

for the play *Cobra*, which featured the young Australian actress Judith Anderson in a pivotal role which established her as a new 'star' on Broadway.

A major event in the diary of the avid Manhattan theatre collector is the Lincoln Center Sale. At this annual event, duplicates from the great Library of the Performing Arts at the Lincoln Center in New York are sold off. As Karl laments from bitter experience, 'It is a regular bun fight, elbowing aggressive competition to get to the boxes.' Once Karl has elbowed his way to the boxes at the Lincoln Center, or anywhere else on the paper trail, patient sifting and sorting through tonnes of paper is necessary. The hours spent may yield a program or poster or flyer with an Australian strutting his or her stuff. Gradually a portfolio of material is built up for each individual. A selection of these is grouped together in a composite list, usually around themes such as opera, ballet, variety, etc. Once Karl's list is received in the Library, the items are checked against the existing collections.

For example, a 1995 list was entitled 'Those hard working Aussie actors'. It included 21 individual performers and listed over 240 separate programs, posters and playbills. Karl prefaced the list by saying:

It is an attempt to catalogue the remarkable careers that some Australian artists have had and, in many cases, continue to have. The package represents four years of 'fossicking' but also includes some rarer items from my personal collection that have been held for 15-20 years.

The list was an impressive roll call of Australians on American and English stages: Oscar Asche, Judith Anderson, Robert Helpmann, Marie Lohr, Cyril Ritchard, Coral Browne, Zoe Caldwell, Ray Barrett, Diane Cilento, Kevin Colson, John McCallum, Leo McKern, Vincent Ball, June Bronhill, Patricia Connolly, Maggie Fitzgibbon, Bill Kerr, Keith Michell, Ron Randell, Cyril Ritchard and Madge Ryan.

The list also included Errol Flynn, a movie star not usually associated with the dramatic stage. Karl located programs for the 1933 Malvern Festival in England, in which the young Flynn had small parts in two plays. The plays subsequently transferred to London where the handsome Tasmanian was noticed and given a part in a minor English movie subsequently seen by Hollywood's Jack Warner—and the rest is history. (In his autobiography, Flynn names the Stratford Festival. Was this a case of lapsed memory, or a desire to promote the more prestigious Shakespearean venue as the catalyst for his rise to stardom?)

Over the years, Karl has supplied hundreds of items to the National Library. Among his favourite finds are programs of Nellie Melba singing for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle, Edouard Borovansky dancing with Anna Pavlova in Turin in 1928, Robert Helpmann's first role on an English stage in 1933 (as an actor not a dancer), and J.C. Williamson's Farewell Benefit Performance in New York in 1871 just as he leaves for San Francisco and the Australian colonies.

The overseas links in Australia's theatrical history produce a script full of entrances and exits, of arrivals and departures. The roundabout comes full circle with Arthur ('Bert') Bertram. Born in South Australia in 1893, the young Bertram was an actor in the troupe of players assembled by Bert Bailey which performed many Australian classic melodramas such as *The Squatter's Daughter*, *On Our Selection*, and *Man from the Out Back*, in the period before World War One. Later, Bertram with his wife Rubee Raymond, formed a

specialty dance act and toured on the Australian variety circuit. They eventually joined the American vaudeville circuit in 1923 and remained in the USA. Bertram's career as a dancer and actor lasted a remarkable 58 years, and included stage, radio, film and television. He died in New York in 1991. Among his small collection of personal memorabilia, Bertram had carefully kept some Australian variety programs as well as nine posters for the Bert Bailey company in which he had performed 80 years earlier. With Karl's assistance, the Library acquired the posters and programs.

The Bailey/Bertram posters are iconic gems of Australian theatre in themselves, and are further enriched through their association with an expatriate actor whose strong sense of being Australian ensured that he retained a tangible link to his national and theatrical origins. Through the expertise of a determined hunter and collector, Karl Levett, they are a unique legacy that has become part of the Australian performing arts heritage collected in the National Library.

RICHARD STONE is manager of the Library's Australian Collection Development Unit

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Karl Levett with an array of material he collected for the Library, 1998
 Photograph by Loui Seselja; from the Pictorial Collection

