

Indexing theatre programmes

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Abstract

Finding useful biographical profiles, portraits and stories of theatrical performers, managers and technical support staff is not an easy task. Information in monographs about The Theatre is usually defined in broad categories such as 'Australian Theatre' or 'The World of Ballet' or is confined by the author to a biographical study of a suitably famous performer and their known associates. The need for a bibliography of theatre programmes arose from the intrusion of some theatrical items into a bibliography of more than 800 books printed or published by The Specialty Press during more than 70 years in business. As the firm printed programmes for J.C. Williamson in Melbourne for more than 50 years it became a case of either exclude them all (or all except Souvenir Programmes) or compile a separate listing. In choosing the latter course an alphabetical list of productions was embarked upon. The questions about how to proceed arose. Theatre programmes take many forms: booklets, magazines, flyers, folded leaflets and posters. All contain portraits and brief stories about the performers. Many carry illustrated advertisements for well-known sponsors and casts can change during the season of a play, opera or musical.

I remember reading in a magazine more than 30 years ago that if a farmer, an engineer and an artist were to stand together looking at a field they would all see something different. This is not unlike the way readers view bibliography and indexing.

In blissful ignorance I tackled bibliography with the naive confidence of a neophyte. I'd used bibliographies and indexes often enough, to find new sources or random references to people and events. A simple alphabetical list wasn't enough to satisfy me, so I arranged all of the books I located for my project, *A History of The Specialty Press* arranged in date order alphabetically. This allowed me to count the number of books printed by the firm each year and to create a time line. I told myself it gave a backbone to the story.

Then on my computer I found that by searching the bibliography for different publishers I could create a date range for any series of books printed for them. At this point I began to have doubts.

But what was I to do about the books that didn't have a definite date of publication? The simple solution seemed to be to assign them to a decade – problem solved. Now the question

became what did that do to the data? I was faced with a choice: I could either ignore the undated books, not counting them, or I could distribute them across the decades. The former solution seemed more elegant. Then I began to wonder about publishing an unorthodox date order bibliography; would it annoy the reader to have to check each decade to find a title? Well they could go to the index first and look up the title they wanted.

On the other hand it might be easier to recast the bibliography as a simple alphabetical list for publication when I'd exploited the possibilities of my version.

Till then my interest in the subject was bordering on indifference. I'd enjoyed the thrill of the chase in finding over 850 books in libraries and second-hand bookshops. This included one or two theatre programmes I found in library catalogues. Then I discovered that the Performing Arts Centre in Melbourne held an alphabetically indexed list of J.C. Williamson programmes. What could be simpler than going through these to extract the items that were printed by The Specialty Press?

So I began listing every item, noting the date of the theatre production, and looking for the date at which The Specialty press began printing them. I knew that they began printing theatre programmes for Hugh J. Ward and Benjamin Fuller during the 1920s and after a few false starts I narrowed the date range to 1923–1974 – just over 50 years.

I continued to list everything, but skipped all items clearly outside the date range and concentrating on the content of those relevant.

I discovered that theatre programmes took many forms: souvenir programmes (either identified as such or created for a specific production) as distinct from general magazine programmes (those regularly printed for one theatre, and later on for several on a nightly, weekly or monthly basis), as well as flyers, folded leaflets and special inserts. Almost all contained portraits and brief stories about the performers. Many carried illustrated advertisements and cast lists and venues that sometimes altered during the season of the play, opera or musical.

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An index became vital and it is the structure of this index that is the subject of my paper. I began with a formal structure reduced to the following categories:

1. A programme (the physical object)
2. Contents or playbill
3. Articles, theatre notes and profiles
4. Portraits
5. Advertisements

Each programme was given a number. Each number referred to an alphabetically listed production and the dates of the performances. The size, number of pages and a description of

the cover design was added, with, where known, the name of the commercial artist who created it.

You will notice that there is no attempt to list the cast in this hierarchy. The reason why ‘Cast’ was excluded is because (apart from the lead performers) it would reduce the bibliography to a long and tedious list of names. Should a reader need a cast list, then the obvious place to look for it is in the programme itself or in the press. Newspaper advertising can be found by reference to the production dates. Furthermore, items 3 (articles theatre notes and profiles) and 4 (Portraits) in most instances form between them a de facto cast list in the body of the programme.

Under 1, programme, each production falls into a definite category: such as concerts; Entertainments and spectacles; Grand Opera; Musicals and Operettas; Plays, and Revues.

Consequently ‘Performer’ was preferred to actor to describe cast members – ranging, if not from A to Z, at least from acrobats to xylophonists.

Narrower indexing distinctions are sometimes made: Percy Grainger, for example, is adequately identified by the label ‘performer’ but could equally have appeared under the separate heading of composer. George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, is best classed as a playwright. And as playwrights appear more frequently than composers, playwrights get a place in the index under a separate heading.

Under articles theatre notes and profiles, programmes contain: articles by specific authors; biographical profiles of performers; storylines and commentaries on productions; background and general interest pieces and Testimonials. Under Portraits, there are: performers; companies; authors and playwrights; producers, entrepreneurs, directors and choreographers. These are represented either by: photographs; accompanied sometimes by a named photographer or studio; caricatures and illustrations

Advertisements

With advertisements new problems arose. Many firms advertised regularly. Take for example the Melbourne confectioner Macpherson Robertson. MacRobertson’s, like Alfred Nott the optometrist, and the City Motor Service (chauffeured limousines) Barnett Glass Tyres, and King George IV Whisky – advertised continuously – some for the entire period and beyond.

With advertisements the following sub-categories apply: The advertiser and the product – for example MacRobertson’s Max Mints (with a date range). The artist or illustrator: for example Frank Elsworth, Walter Jardine, Gert Selheim and Ivor Horman. Service Agencies (later called Advertising Agencies): Paton, Samson Clark, The Specialty Service, etc.

Reusing cover designs

For economic reasons, cover designs were used repeatedly for a number of years. For example the cover of the girl with a basket by ‘Droyd’ was used in Melbourne between April and November 1932 and then again in 1939. Another was used in 1936-37 and again in 1940. This recycling was suspended from time to time when J.C. Williamson commissioned a

special cover for productions such as ‘The Desert Song,’ or ‘The Vagabond King’ before reverting to the regular design. Some covers adopted designs like the famous poster created for Ricordi of Milan for the Premiere of Puccini’s opera Turandot and used widely by J.C. Williamson throughout Australasia. In other cases a staff or freelance artist in Melbourne created original designs or redrew others imported from abroad.

Not only did The Theatre Royal, The Comedy Theatre and His Majesty’s in Melbourne use the same covers for years, but also the Tait brothers, who managed J.C. Williamson theatres, recycled the same artwork at different times in Adelaide, Brisbane, and Sydney and in New Zealand.

A closer look at all programmes, including the Souvenir Programmes, reveals that each was issued in batches throughout the season of a play or musical. Venues changed when productions were moved from one theatre to another; performers and advertisers came and went and layouts were altered accordingly. Tom Edmonds, an office boy who started work at The Specialty Press in 1939, told me that his last job at night before he went home was to take the night’s theatre programmes, after corrections had been made, up to the theatres.

Therefore two apparently identical programmes might have more or fewer pages (numbered or with unnumbered inserts); or might refer to plays whose seasons had begun earlier or to a forthcoming attraction in another theatre. Consequently advertisements, photographs and articles were often placed on different pages – and no doubt one day someone will be interested enough to chart the efficiency of these adjustments to page layouts and the subsequent reorganising the forme by the compositors before going to press.

The benefits obtained from this indexing exercise have been demonstrated already by the speedy location of items such as articles about Colonel De Basil’s Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, about Nellie Stewart, and Australian plays performed in Melbourne before World War II and unexpected background notes to culturally different plays (such as a glossary of American boxing slang compiled for Australian theatre-goers and inserted into the programme for the play ‘Is Zat So?’ in September 1926. It show that many American fight terms have been absorbed into the language, and that theatre-going Australians were themselves using a brand of BBC English that has since passed into history.

Headed: Read this over and take it away with you, and talk about it to your friends – We have from the ‘Glossary of Slang’ – A dame, frail, skirt, Jane, Wren, bread – for girl; a go, or a mill bout for a prize fight (perhaps the origin of the Australian ‘to have a go’ or a ‘fair go’). A Brow [a person] of low intelligence (now used as lowbrow which is somewhat different). The pejorative: goof, goofer, sap, tramp, and dumbbell – in the Australian BBC English of the time defined as a stupid fellow. Likewise a Gorilla became a Rough Fellow. And there are a few surprises too –Apple Sauce, Banana Oil – defined as: all wrong, or no good, was in a later context (the title of the play ‘Applesauce’) defined as a false compliment akin to ‘soft soap’ suggesting that the meaning was either loose or had shifted). A frame – defined as one round of a prize fight (curiously this meaning is not given in the 1987 edition of the *Australian Oxford Concise English Dictionary*), and colourfully – table finisher was a wry term given to a Glutton.

If I might be excused another gem extracted from J.C. Williamson’s theatre programmes, audiences of R.F. Denderfield’s 1950 comedy ‘Worm’s Eye View’ were reminded that (I quote)

during the [1939-45] war, Australia was in the fortunate position that such tribulations as Billeting were practically unknown. In fact, Adelaide was the only city in which the Government had to take steps in this direction, and then for a short time only.

In the British Isles, things were grimly different. With thousands of Britishers from all the Services to be quartered, to say nothing of Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Poles and Free French, it was beyond the capacity of the vast numbers of camps to accommodate them all. Consequently, every home in certain areas had to register its number of rooms and size of family; billeting officers would call in due course and the owners would be told how many men they had to billet. They were paid by the service from which the men came. In other cases, the residents were given a choice of servicemen or evacuee children from London.

Historical details, so succinctly put, are rare in history books, but journalistic compression sometimes shines through in these ephemeral publications.

A final example is a testimonial written by Sir John Monash recommending that the public should see the play 'Journey's End'. At first R.C. Sherriff's play 'was rejected by most theatre managements in London; some thought that the public [would] not want to [be reminded of the 1914-18] war, others [thought] that a play without women would not be popular – at last it was given a single Sunday evening performance by the Incorporated Stage Society in December 1928. Laurence Olivier, then 28 years old, played Stanhope on that occasion. This background aside found in Heinemann's 1987 schools edition brings with it a reason why the Tait's asked Sir John for his endorsement.

It is relevant that Australians who were, and remain famous, on the international circuit are featured along with great English, European and American stars who performed in Australia. Melba, Gladys Moncrieff and Peter Dawson, Coral Brown, Barry Humphries, Michael Caton and Robert Helpmann are featured alongside Dame Clara Butt, Richard Crooks, Anna Pavlova, Paderewski, the Menuhins, Victor Borge and Danny Kay.

In compiling this finders' guide (and I prefer finders guide to indexed bibliography) it has also been noticed that amateur genealogists who want to find performers for their family histories are in pursuit of the lesser lights of the theatre. Without a guide of some kind this is a hit and miss affair. Performers who were once well known are forgotten today. The example of Kathleen Fanning, who later appeared on the stage as Kathleen Goodall, comes to mind as a performer whose singing career began with her role as understudy to Gladys Moncrieff in 'Maid of the Mountain' ended with regular performances for ABC radio. J.C. Bancks (creator of Ginger Meggs), and incidentally, John Tait's son-in-law, was also a playwright – the author of *Blue Mountain Melody*.

Much can also be gained from a survey of advertisements in theatre programmes. Some ads were inserted in support of political campaigns like the prohibition referendum, or the plea made in support of a benefit concert for the League of Nations and publicity for the 1932 Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, compiling an index is an educational journey into the past. It draws us to forgotten acts of commission or omission and places them in context. It is the opposite of a library, where, as Alberto Manguel says:

Whatever classifications have been chosen, every library tyrannizes the act of reading, and forces the reader – the curious reader, the alert reader – to rescue the book from the category to which it has been condemned.