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Tactical Agency in War Work: “Anzac Ada” Reeve, “the Soldiers’ Friend”

During World War 1 British stars of theatre and musical hall used their ‘pulling power’ to work as self-appointed charity organisers and recruitment campaigners to help justify the entertainment industry’s existence during war time. Typically these stars aimed to secure record sums of fundraising revenue and recruits. Ada Reeve (1874-1966), a star of music hall, pantomime, musical comedy and revue, entertained soldiers in camps and hospitals in Britain, Egypt, India, Australia and New Zealand. In 1917-18 while touring Australia and New Zealand she used her cachet as a star performer to directly appeal to audiences to donate funds for the Anzac Club and Buffet for Australian and New Zealand soldiers on leave in London. This article examines how Reeve’s specific choice of philanthropic work on and off the theatre stage, fundraising which saved the almost insolvent Anzac Club and Buffet, differentiated her from her counterparts and earned her the accolade of “Anzac Ada.” Her choice of philanthropy strategically worked to augment her identity as a transnational popular theatre star to create a personality that was proclaimed through shared community values and practices, and reframed her as an imperial star and “the soldiers’ friend.” Martina Lipton has published several articles in *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *New Theatre Quarterly* on pantomime and early-20th century popular theatre entertainers.

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The trope of actor as social worker pervades theatre histories and narratives of professionalism. Benjamin McArthur identifies theatrical charity work as an impetus for actors’ professionalism in late-19th century America. He proposes that by engaging in charity work the theatre profession endeavoured “to remove the profession’s stigma of indifference toward the poverty that affected many of its members” and to foster a reputation

for public service.¹ Tracy C. Davis documents a similar trajectory of British schemes that “attest to performers’ sensitivity to the difficulties women, men, and families faced in all branches of theatrical life,” culminating in the establishment of the Actors’ Benevolent Fund in 1882.² The early 20th century saw an expansion of theatre entertainers’ benevolence to non-theatrical causes, such as war work. McArthur and Davis suggest that in the 19th-century theatre performers’ commitment to charity work was motivated by their altruism and a desire to raise the professional profile of their career and the theatre industry. I propose that, from the broad spectrum of philanthropic work in which they could have participated, stars on the early-20th-century theatre made strategic choices to frame their civic personae, which in turn informed their specific construction of imbricated identity, that is, the cultural accretion of interleaved and overlapping depictions of the star’s identity: theatrical representations, civic persona, private self for public consumption, and posthumous legacy. British actor Ada Reeve lived and worked in Australia and New Zealand for extensive periods between 1897 and 1935 and her charitable work during and after World War 1 provides a case study for actors’ tactical agency in war work.

Great Britain’s declaration of war in August 1914 cast a shadow over the world of popular entertainment at home and in the colonies. The British royal family and the public initially deemed attendance at theatrical and sporting events, such as football, boxing and horse racing, to be inappropriate and unpatriotic since able-bodied men had a duty to enlist and leisure entertainments inhibited recruitment campaigns.³ Actors, theatre managers and sporting bodies responded by adopting a “wartime agitational role.”⁴ With the support of the royal family, who attended numerous theatrical charity fundraisers, theatre and music hall stars justified their existence as major champions of the war effort since they actively engaged in much-needed fundraising and recruitment drives.⁵ Many theatre and music hall performers enlisted to fight; those volunteers who were refused entry to military service, due to health or age concerns, such as actor-manager Seymour Hicks, found other avenues to serve Britain and its empire as recruiting and propaganda agents, war charity fundraisers, and as entertainers in hospitals and army camps, both at home and abroad.⁶

Theatres and music halls became a significant recruitment site and “in the most direct way [they] turned young men from civilians into soldiers.”⁷ Stars, such as Harry Lauder, incorporated recruitment into their acts and the would-be hero from the audience temporarily became the star when he got up onto the stage to volunteer. Lauder claims to have been responsible for recruiting 12,000 men whilst on concert tours in Britain and Canada where he combined theatre entertainment with after-show speeches.⁸ Similarly, Vesta Tilley, in her memoirs, boasts of how, during one performance, she persuaded three hundred men to enlist.⁹ F. V. St Clair’s “Follow the Drum” was the war’s first recruiting song and it was performed in conjunction with recruiting authorities “standing ready in the wings.”¹⁰ Star performers, such as Harry Tate, Harry Lauder, Seymour Hicks and his wife Ellaline Terris, had the prerequisite ‘pulling power’ to work as self-appointed charity organisers, raising many millions of pounds.¹¹ George Robey,

the popular music hall artiste, had collected £50,000 by March 1918.¹² Meanwhile, stars also entertained wounded soldiers in hospitals and military and naval training camps throughout Britain.¹³ For example, Ellen Terry performed a Shakespearian recital at the Aldershot Hippodrome in 1918 since Aldershot, 'the home of the British Army,' had the nation's largest concentration of troops engaged in training.¹⁴ In December 1914, Hicks and Terris prepared the first concert party of theatre and music hall performers, to entertain forces on the Front.¹⁵ Subsequently, Annette Hullah, a member of the Music in War Time Committee, Princess Helena Victoria and actress Lena Ashwell campaigned for a planned programme of British civilian entertainers to be sent to France and Belgium. Lena Ashwell was responsible for organising and financing the first of these concert parties, which left for France on 18 February 1915 to give thirty-five concerts in a two-week tour of base camps and hospitals.¹⁶ Female artists were not allowed to perform with such touring concert parties between 1915 and 1917 because it was considered too dangerous.¹⁷

During World War 1 the immensely popular stage and music hall star Ada Reeve actively embraced war work as an independent, self-appointed fundraiser. She travelled and entertained soldiers in camps and hospitals in Britain, Egypt, India, Australia and New Zealand. In 1917-18 while touring Australia and New Zealand she used her cachet as a star performer to directly appeal to audiences to donate funds for the Anzac Club and Buffet for Diggers on leave in London. This article examines how Reeve's specific choice of philanthropic work on and off the theatre stage, fundraising which saved the almost insolvent Anzac Club and Buffet, earned her the accolade of "Anzac Ada." Her strategy augmented her status as a singular, transnational star and created an identity that was proclaimed through shared community values and practices, and reframed her as an imperial star and "the soldiers' friend."

Ada Reeve was born in London on 3 March 1874 into a minor theatrical family. She made her theatrical debut in pantomime as a child in 1878. She later graduated from child parts in Fred Wright's dramatic stock company to work in music halls as a teenager, where she quickly distinguished herself as a comedienne and singer. As an adult she rose to the top of the bill and by the time she was twenty-three she was performing to packed houses in Britain and the colonies. Reeve travelled extensively both for business and for pleasure and was promoted as "The Idol of Five Continents."¹⁸ Between 1893 and 1935 she made repeated tours to America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, India, and South Africa.¹⁹ When Great Britain and the Empire declared war on Germany in 1914 Ada Reeve was performing in the Tivoli Follies in Melbourne, Australia. Within months the main theatres of war had ground to a bloody stalemate and London was flooded with casualties from the Front and soldiers on short periods of leave. Reeve returned to London in 1915 and while contracted to theatre entrepreneur Oswald Stoll she sought his permission to perform for soldiers at the Richmond Park Camp, the Second Military Hospital and Harefield House Hospital.²⁰ Reeve evidently enjoyed the interaction with the troops for later that year she went so far as to open her home, Malta Cottage, on the Isle of Wight, to convalescing Anzacs (see Fig. 1). Her generosity was reported in Australia, where

the *Referee* acknowledged its gratitude to her.²¹ Letters to her from Bandsman L.S. Murphy ('Spud'),²² written prior to his departure to Sydney on SS *Runic* on 7 November 1915, testify to the personal care Reeve took of him and his fellow Anzacs during their fifteen-day stay at Malta Cottage:

You did not know us, only the fact that we were wounded Australians...We were rough soldiers straight from the trenches but that did not matter to you. Where you went, we went. You introduced us to all your friends until we began to think we were one of the family.²³



With the Diggers at Malta Cottage, 1915

Figure 1. Ada Reeve and convalescing ANZAC soldiers at Malta Cottage, New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review, 13 September 1917, 5.

At this time Reeve's commitment to wounded soldiers was not restricted to Anzacs. She also entertained injured British troops, for example, in Netting, Scotland in late 1915. Furthermore, during the week commencing 29 May 1916 she put on a variety entertainment in Birmingham "to raise a substantial sum to lighten the load of our Blinded Heroes and ensure their future welfare and comfort." This was part of a scheme whereby leading variety theatres throughout

the United Kingdom held “Grand Matinee Entertainments” in support of Our Blinded Heroes’ Day (soldiers and sailors), organised by Frank Allen and under the patronage of H.M. Queen Alexandra.²⁴

Ada Reeve’s Australasian tour, 1917-18

As the war progressed Ada Reeve increasingly aligned her star persona as a singular transnational star with her specific choice of war work while overseas.²⁵ In 1917, after only a month in Melbourne, Reeve gave her support to Lady Stanley’s May appeal to raise funds for the British Red Cross Society.²⁶ She made a direct personal address to her audiences, as one who had witnessed first-hand the benefits of the British Red Cross Society’s work abroad: “I have come into personal contact with the Society’s great work in Britain, France, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, and I appeal from knowledge...More money is needed.” Reeve claimed:

I have come in personal contact with a greater number of soldiers than any other woman in the profession...I have made it a point to go to the military hospitals everywhere I happen to be...even deciding not to work for some weeks, so as to catch up the promises I had made to visit camps and hospitals to give entertainments.

The promotion of Reeve’s arrival in Melbourne in 1917 with a varied repertoire of songs was supported by images of her as “the soldiers’ friend.”²⁷

Ada Reeve opened at the Melbourne Tivoli on 21 April 1917. The *Referee* describes her return to the Melbourne stage as a triumph, in which she was accorded “a typical Australian welcome home.”²⁸ In response to such an enthusiastic greeting Reeve alluded to her international star status in a post-show interview when she referred to “this mass of telegrams and cables – over 300 – from all parts of the world. Great Britain, America, India, Australia – everywhere.”²⁹ Similarly, she framed herself as a world-renowned star when she thanked the audience for its floral tributes:

I can tell you it is worth coming over 12,000 miles with dangers or supposed dangers from submarines to come back and meet old friends again. These are some flowers. They give flowers in England, South Africa, America and India, but nowhere in the world do they give such beautiful flowers as they do in Australia.³⁰

Typically, the following day these flowers were sent by Reeve to the Base Hospital in St. Kilda Road.³¹

Reeve’s positioning as a transnational theatre star worked to ‘ghost’ her civic identity as a champion for wounded soldiers when on opening night she was associated with a specific group of soldiers in the audience. The *Referee* reported “throughout the evening it was very noticeable that Miss Reeve more

than once smiled sweetly to a small party of returned soldiers, who occupied seats in the orchestral stalls.”³² Reeve interrupted her performance to chat with these men and then included the audience in this dialogue by announcing that she had met them on New Year’s Eve 1917 at a reputable hotel in Calcutta. She described the soldiers then as being “battle-scarred and sick,” and framed herself as a ministering angel when she stated, “If I remember rightly Ada Reeve came along with some friends about two in the morning...and sang ‘It’s a Long, Long Trail,’ and ‘Tennessee’ for the boys,” and ordered and paid for their champagne.³³ At the end of her performance Reeve further associated herself with Anzac soldiers when she stated, “I have had some good times with your soldier boys abroad, and hope to have them again. What brave, noble boys.”³⁴ Reeve’s connection with soldiers abroad included entertaining them: for example she gave a concert at the Wounded Soldiers’ Home at Galstaun House, Calcutta on 24 January 1917.³⁵

Similarly, on 30 April 1917 Ada Reeve and her London Company gave a matinee concert for Australian Troops at the Fifth General Military Hospital, Melbourne. In a letter in a programme for this production written to “My Very Dear Friends” Reeve offered this entertainment “as a token of our loving appreciation of all you have done for your King, your Country, and your Countrymen – and – women.” Another letter reproduced in this programme confirms that it was Reeve’s initiative to entertain Anzacs, since she had asked “Fred Aydon to wire to headquarters at Sydney and secure the management’s permission for concerts to be given to Australia’s wounded soldiers.”³⁶ Again, on 12 May 1917 Reeve was responsible for the transport of forty convalescing soldiers from the Camberwell Rest Home to her matinee performance at the Tivoli and before their return she hosted an afternoon tea for them.³⁷ Such civic actions augmented the media’s discursive framing of her as “the soldiers’ idol,” demonstrating “a kindly interest in the welfare of the sick and wounded Anzacs” and “warm attachment to the boys back from the fighting line.”³⁸

The Anzac Club and Buffet, London

Reeve strategically cemented her reputation as “Anzac Ada” when in 1917 she took upon herself the task of championing the beleaguered Anzac Club and Buffet in London. On 11 May 1917 the *Age* reported on the plight of this organisation, which was close to insolvency: “when the volume of work and expenditure increased enormously, and must continue to increase while almost the full strength of the Australian Expeditionary Forces is being used in France.”³⁹ The Anzac Club and Buffet was opened in London by the Australian Natives’ Association and it provided free food and shelter for Australasian soldiers while on furlough. It was situated approximately halfway between Victoria Station, where most of the troops arrived and departed for France, and Horse Ferry Road, the locale of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) headquarters where troops had to report and receive their pay. It was also conveniently positioned for the information bureau, where soldiers could enquire about missing relatives or comrades.

Australian troops' distinctive uniforms made them conspicuous in London.⁴⁰ The Anzac Club and Buffet offered an alternative to the soldiers' obvious physical presence as potential aimless loiterers; in addition it also reduced any latent fears or anxieties about their sexual morality in the metropolis. Angela Woollacott cites examples of popular magazine articles that testify to the prevalent fear of female sexual abduction at this time.⁴¹ Prior to Gallipoli the day-to-day behaviour of the AIF was often marked by exceptional turbulence and indiscipline, "dramatised by incidents like 'the battle of Wazzir' in which Cairo's brothel quarter was sacked."⁴² Yet soldiers were also perceived to be in danger from prostitutes and venereal disease. Troops departing from Australia "were warned about the threat posed by 'flighty women'" and were urged to: "Come back clean, to be the fathers of a pure-blooded and virile Australian race."⁴³ These men, removed from the dangerous lure of alcohol and sex on London's streets, could be monitored and managed within the confines of the Anzac Club and Buffet. Such supervision was perhaps deemed necessary because during the first half of 1917, the desertion rate of the AIF was four times higher than the average for the other Dominion Divisions."⁴⁴

While the Anzac Club and Buffet provided a contained environment for Australian indiscipline hopefully to distract soldiers from London's brothels, taking absence without leave or resorting to desertion, the establishment in return provided a recreational sanctuary and free light refreshments: "Hundreds of lads returned to Melbourne tell at the soldiers' refreshment stall at the base hospital what benefits they have received at the Anzac Buffet, and how it got them out of awkward fixes when in financial trouble."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in 1917 the institution was facing the threat of closure.⁴⁶

Ada Reeve responded to the *Age's* article on the Anzac Club and Buffet with a letter to the newspaper's editor on 12 May 1917 in which she appealed to Australian sympathy to provide funds for its upkeep. She drew attention to her profile as a transnational star with personal knowledge of the institution to make the claim that it is "of inestimable service and value to the Australasian soldier in London" and "that it would be nothing less than a grave calamity if it had to close its doors."⁴⁷ She proposed that the Anzac Club and Buffet was a free and welcoming meeting place, a "real home" for lonely soldiers unfamiliar with the vast and strange metropolis of London.⁴⁸ Reeve called upon Australians to help her raise funds on behalf of the establishment to secure its financial position until such time as it was no longer deemed necessary. She asked the *Age* to open a subscription list and proposed to start her campaign with a personal contribution of £100. She stated that if twenty-eight contributors made a similar donation she would add a further £100, which would assure its first year's income. Reeve also called upon donations of gifts that she might publically auction. The *Age's* editor accepted Reeve's proposal and a public listing of contributions to the Anzac Buffet began in its paper on 15 May 1917. Senator Pearce, Minister of Defence publically supported Reeve's appeal, and the State War Council sanctioned her application to raise funds for patriotic purposes.⁴⁹

Reeve strategically connected her fundraising for the Anzac Buffet with her positioning as a transnational star when she donated the entire proceeds from the sale of her thirty-two page illustrated book *Pot-Pourri* to the cause.⁵⁰ *Pot-Pourri*, a collection of Reeve's personal travel anecdotes about North America, Central America, Canada and Africa, was completed in 1913, prior to her second tour to Australia in the following year.⁵¹ The *Referee* emphasised this representation of Reeve in its article "Miss Ada Reeve Hears her First Lion" as an introduction to herald her awaited arrival in Australia.⁵² This discursive framing implied that Ada Reeve was more than a mere comedienne because she was fearless in her exploration of territory rarely visited by European women. Africa's flora and fauna were depicted as threatening, savage and hostile. A connection between Reeve's experiences and those of Anzac soldiers fighting abroad was suggested by the common challenges they faced from the foreign and unknown.⁵³

Pot-Pourri is significant in that Reeve characterises herself as a transnational theatre star in her "reminiscences at random," and this 'ghosts' her civic identity as a performer whose travel experiences conferred authenticity on her personal knowledge of Anzac soldiers she met abroad. Reeve's persona as an experienced and trusted travel commentator gave her authority to speak about the Anzac Club to audiences who were unfamiliar with its function and services: "I have visited the buffet, and have seen the good it does."⁵⁴ She supported her own knowledge of the Anzac Club and Buffet with that of soldiers who had visited it, reading out their letters during her performances at the Tivoli. On 22 May 1917 Reeve read a letter from Thomas H. White, a soldier who had been blinded by a shell whilst fighting in France. He wrote, "While I was in London I spent many a pleasant hour there, and would not like to hear of the old place being closed down. It is the best bit of Australia the boys can get in London."⁵⁵

Theatre management also worked with Reeve to identify her as the Anzacs' friend and guardian. For example, a theatre programme for the Tivoli in May 1917 states that soldiers in France referred to Ada Reeve as their "Fairy Godmother" and they competed to collect trophies from the battlefields for her as a reward for all her kindness to them. This representation was reinforced by published letters from Anzac soldiers to Reeve: a returned soldier wrote, "You surely have endeared yourself to all the boys."⁵⁶ The association of Ada Reeve's theatrical persona with that of her off-stage civic positioning as pal, nurse and mother of 'the boys' was reinforced in her letter to the editor of the *Age* in which she included a "cheque for £26 16s 8d, the total amount realised by the sale of my photographs at the Tivoli Theatre for one week to 2nd June [1917]."⁵⁷ Furthermore, Reeve gave a special holiday Anzac Buffet Matinee on 8 June 1917, prior to the closing the next evening of her record-breaking seven weeks' season at Melbourne's Tivoli. During this production programmes, gifts, songs and photographs were sold in the auditorium, Reeve auctioned gifts at the close of the matinee, and all proceeds from this event "without deduction for expenses of any kind whatsoever" were donated to the London Anzac Club and Buffet. The matinee and auction realised £1000 16s 8d.⁵⁸ Due to shortage of time not all the gifts donated for auction could be sold at the matinee, so Reeve arranged to

auction them at the rooms of Baylee and Company in Collins Street, Melbourne, the next day and as a result a further £54 12s 6d was raised for the Anzac Buffet Fund. Reeve bought a case of passionfruit and then gave instructions for it to be delivered to the Base Hospital on St. Kilda Road.⁵⁹

The media worked in partnership with Ada Reeve to endorse her credentials as a significant civic identity when it published soldiers' testimonies of the worthiness of her philanthropic work in aid of the Anzac Club. The Australasian public's interest in Reeve was also nourished by the media's coverage of her extra-theatrical engagements. For example, the *Referee's* article "Soldiers' Day Every Day: Ada Reeve's Off-stage Moments" reported that her engagement book testified to her dedication to the soldiers while in Sydney. She concluded an evening concert at the Tivoli with a presentation of personal gifts to the 8th Reinforcements of the 23rd and 24th Battalions. She also spent an entire morning welcoming returned soldiers at the Anzac Buffet in Sydney where she presented them with gifts of cigarettes and floral souvenirs and on 6 July 1917 she visited the suburban Randwick Hospital and entertained soldiers there.⁶⁰

Reeve also officiated at less formal events in aid of raising funds for returned soldiers. For instance, she kicked off a football match on the Sydney Sports Ground on 28 July 1917, when a team from the Engineers' Depot competed against one of returned soldiers. The proceeds of this match were presented to the Comforts Fund for the Engineers and Signallers.⁶¹ Similarly, Reeve was photographed with her brother-in-law Sergeant-Major Cotton at "'Our Soldiers' Day' at the Domain – The Auckland Rugby League Carnival in Aid of Returned Heroes."⁶² Reeve's imbricated identity, that is the conflation of her on-stage persona as a world-famous star and her off-stage civic identity as social role model, was publically rewarded in the *Referee's* tribute that "even if the English comedienne was not the great artist she has proved herself, her work in connection with the Anzac Buffet would entitle her to the distinction."⁶³ Similarly, the *Brisbane Courier* stated, "Miss Reeve's reputation is so wide that the great artist needs no introduction to Brisbane. Her great war work, too, has endeared her to the hearts of Australian people."⁶⁴

While the press reported on the many occasions that Ada Reeve officiated as the inaugurator of the Anzac Buffet Appeal, it also sought to discursively frame her personal relationship to soldiers. Reports in the Australasian press of the plight of her two brothers wounded in France created a convenient point of connection.⁶⁵ In its article "Spud Murphy's Close Call: Ada Reeve's Mission to Goulburn" the *Referee* reported that Reeve had received news that a soldier, popularly known as Spud, was seriously ill at Goulburn Hospital in southern New South Wales, and that there was little hope of his recovery. The newspaper emphasised Spud's relationship as an old friend of Reeve's since as a convalescing Anzac hero he had been a recipient of her hospitality at her English home. The *Referee* reinforced Reeve as the caring guardian of Anzac soldiers, detailing how she made a strenuous train journey of a hundred and twenty miles to visit Spud after her theatre performance, that only allowed her a few hours before she had to return to fulfil her engagement at the Tivoli the next night.

Reeve's visit was presented as a mercy mission by the doctor in attendance.⁶⁶ Her on-stage persona was associated with her civic identity as the ministering angel when the press described the attitude of the gallery towards her in *Winnie Brooke, Widow*, as approximating:

to the admiring worship of the wounded 'ero for the beautiful lady who visits him in hospital and understands him; that is to say she doesn't ask him what it feels like to be a hero or whether he thinks the war will last long and in its admiration of the artist the gallery shows a fine discrimination, for Miss Reeve touches nothing she does not adorn.⁶⁷

Reporting on her farewell appearance at the Melbourne Tivoli on 10 June 1917, the *Age* stated that Reeve's immense popularity and professional acumen as a performer "is quite sufficient to place her on the pedestal of fame, but her splendid efforts on behalf of Australia's fighting men have done more than that. They have endeared her to the hearts of the people." Reeve received numerous floral tributes but the press notes that she seemed most pleased by a large heart emblazoned with "Ada," from convalescing soldiers at Caulfield Military Hospital. An accompanying letter reads, "This is just a small token of our high esteem and whole-hearted appreciation of all you have done for the boys, and the noble and self-sacrificing generosity in your own personal contributions for our home in London will ever endear you to the hearts of us all."⁶⁸ In Melbourne Ada Reeve's appeal on behalf of London's Anzac Club and Buffet realised £5000, and when she transferred to the Sydney Tivoli on 13 June 1917 she again worked in partnership with the press and called upon the *Sydney Morning Herald* to receive contributions towards the appeal. In response to doubts expressed about the Anzac Club's need for further funds, the New South Wales Premier William Holman paid it a personal visit "to satisfy himself as to the nature of the work done." He found that "the Anzac Buffet requires funds. It is doing excellent work and is the only establishment in England giving free feeding to Australians discharged from hospitals or on furlough."⁶⁹ In addition to her partnership with the press, Reeve also infused her on-stage performance with her framed connection to Anzac soldiers. "I'm So Lonely" was a popular song in her repertoire that featured as the opening number of her Australasian tour at the Tivoli, Melbourne in 1917. This song describes a "true-hearted soldier's wife, who longed for her dear one's safe return" and Reeve sang to a soldier's photograph.⁷⁰ She described the Anzac Club and Buffet to her audiences "as she had seen it so often," and collected monies thrown onto the stage in "a pretty basket of coloured straw made and presented for that purpose by the Wounded Soldiers' Depot."⁷¹

During July and August 1917 Reeve's work in Sydney and Brisbane in aid of the Anzac Club and Buffet adhered to the template she created in Melbourne. She made appeals during her performances, she officiated at ceremonies honouring Anzac soldiers, visited and performed for wounded soldiers in hospital, and the denouement of her Sydney season on 4 August 1917 was celebrated with a matinee benefit.⁷² Reeve's donation of linen that she had

embroidered projects a personal feminized commitment and connection to the 'home' of the Anzac Buffet.

Ada Reeve's reputation as a world-famous artiste and her identification as an intrepid traveller and explorer again 'ghosted' her civic persona when on 23 July 1917 she conquered Sydney's Tattersall's Club. Reeve was once more in unexplored and exclusively male territory when she made an unscheduled visit there and raised £350 for the London Anzac Buffet Fund. She was made an honorary member of Tattersall's.⁷³ She also has the distinction of being the first of only two women to have been elected honorary life members of Brisbane's Tattersall's Club, on 20 August 1917, and she was presented with a commemorative gold medal on 30 August 1917 for her exertions on behalf of London's Anzac Club and Buffet.⁷⁴

Like her tour to Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane in 1917, Reeve's tour of New Zealand was characterised by her appeals for donations to London's Anzac Club and Buffet both on and off the stage, her visits to wounded soldiers in hospitals, and civic receptions held in her honour. The New Zealand press, like its Australian counterpart, worked in partnership with Ada Reeve in promoting her work for the Anzac Club and Buffet and receiving public donations. It also supported her positioning as a world-travelled star whose personal knowledge of soldiers' experiences authenticated her credentials to represent them. The *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review* likened her to fighting personnel, using military rhetoric to describe how in 1916 she "invaded Egypt with a company of artists, and visited all the military hospitals."⁷⁵ Ada Reeve's company was the first theatrical troupe allowed into Egypt during World War 1, and by permission of General Murray they went to Romanz before the great push to El Arish to give a concert to soldiers in the trenches.⁷⁶ Reeve "expressed the opinion that if people here could see the terrible things that she had witnessed they would feel that nothing was too much to do for those who had risked not only their lives but the possibility of living and suffering always."⁷⁷ Reeve's personal experiences and initiatives were stressed to validate the worthiness of her fundraising mission.

Reeve's status as a transnational star was emphasised by the Grand Concert she organised on board TSS *Manuka* on 9 September 1917, en route to New Zealand, the proceeds from which were to be divided between the New Zealand Wounded Soldiers' Fund and London's Anzac Club and Buffet. Even though this was her first visit to New Zealand the press stressed Reeve's quasi-familial connection with the public, especially the troops. The choice of Auckland for the start of her tour was fortunate in that it cemented a personal relationship between herself and her brother-in-law Sergeant-Major Cotton, a member of the Military Board in Auckland. It also offered her the opportunity to meet Lieutenant-Colonel Samuels, whom she had first met in Egypt in 1916. The *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review* featured an article on Ada Reeve and the Anzacs under the heading "The Soldiers' Godmother."⁷⁸ Furthermore, the *Otago Daily Times* stated, "her unquenchable ardour in working for the boys in khaki has made her the friend of every soldier and every soldier's relative."⁷⁹ The press

accentuated Reeve's personal connection with people as a distinguishing feature that set her apart from other stars working for charitable causes. *The Dominion*, for example, reporting on a visit Ada Reeve made to Taumaruru Convalescent Home, noted:

She is not the sort that steps in, shakes a favoured few by the hand, sings a song, drinks a cup of tea, and says "good-bye." That is not Miss Reeve's style at all. By some occult power she arrives at a stage of hearty, healthy intimacy with the soldiers that would take other young ladies years to reach.⁸⁰

During her tours to Australia and New Zealand in 1917 Ada Reeve raised a total of £14,000 for London's Anzac Club and Buffet.⁸¹ Reeve's framing as the soldiers' friend permeated reviews of her professional and social activities in Australia and New Zealand during 1917-18. The *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*, reporting on Reeve's travel from Sydney to Christchurch, noted that "in a boat that brought some 70 or 80 returned soldiers...it goes without saying that she was a fast friend of theirs before the boat touched land."⁸² Although she was no longer fundraising during her Australasian tours in 1918, she continued to entertain returned soldiers in theatres and hospitals. They received concession tickets to performances such as "Special Soldiers' Night" at His Majesty's Theatre, Dunedin on 12 April 1918.⁸³ Reeve typically closed seasons in cosmopolitan centres with special soldiers' matinees. She "entertained over a thousand soldiers with a performance of *Winnie Brooke, Widow*" at a matinee to mark the end of her engagement at the Sydney Tivoli.⁸⁴ Reeve's tour was characterised by her self-sacrifice in the amount of off-stage time she spent with soldiers. The *Referee* reported, "during a hurried tour of the chief towns of Victoria, she never forgets the soldiers." She spent her birthday appealing on behalf of the State War Council to Bendigo's Chinese residents, and, on visiting a rest home in Ballarat, she paid for the last empty room in the establishment to be furnished at her own expense.⁸⁵

Significantly, theatre advertisements for her farewell tours to Australia and New Zealand in 1918 continued to promote her as the "World's Favourite Musical Comedy Actress and Singer" and as "the Soldiers' Friend."⁸⁶ Pathé's film of "Ada Reeve the Soldier's Friend" showed returned soldiers making a presentation at the Theatre Royal, Hobart, "to their loved 'Anzac Ada.'"⁸⁷



Figure 2. "Mascotte," August 1918 (private archive).

In August 1918 when on board HMT *Marathon* Ada Reeve gave soldiers an autographed photograph of herself, a "Mascotte" (see Fig. 2).⁸⁸ She presented herself as the Anzacs' friend and in particular as their symbolic guardian angel and talisman. "Mascotte" here refers to her hit song "Little Mascotte" in the pantomime *Babes in the Wood* which had successful seasons in Sydney and Melbourne during her inaugural tour to Australia in 1897-98.⁸⁹ This implicit reference to Reeve's first tour to Australia is significant because she repeatedly attributed her interest in the welfare of Anzac service personnel to a debt of gratitude she owed to Australia because "Australia made Ada Reeve, and Ada Reeve is forever grateful for it."⁹⁰

Ada Reeve's post-World War 1 tours to Australia

Her role as "the soldiers' friend" remained a significant constructed identity when Ada Reeve toured Australia again after the war. During her 1922 tour Reeve maintained her connection as a champion of the Anzacs with performances in aid of returned soldiers. For example, in May 1922 she performed in a charity matinee *A Tribute to the Diggers* at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, and in September 1922 she produced a matinee of *Spangles* in aid of the Limbless Soldiers' Association.⁹¹ Organisations such as the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia paid tribute to Reeve's "self-sacrificing service on behalf of Australia's Soldiers during and since the War" in the souvenir theatre programme for her two hundredth performance of *Spangles* at Melbourne's Palace Theatre on 5 October 1922.⁹² Reeve's positioning as "the soldiers' friend" continued to be 'ghosted' by her interrelated fame as an intrepid

explorer of the far-flung British Empire and world-travelled star, and in reviews of her performances, for example, the opening of *Pins and Needles* in 1926:

While appearing in Calcutta, Miss Reeve had an appeal from the commanding officer of Fort Chingrekahi, asking her if she could possibly pay them a visit, as the soldiers there were entirely cut off from entertainments. Although there were no trains to the fort and roads were very primitive Miss Reeve gladly complied, making the difficult journey by motor though she had a foot in splints as result of an accident.⁹³

Ada Reeve did not tour again to Australasia after 1935, but in 1954 at eighty years old she published her memoirs, *Take It For A Fact*, in which she detailed her travel experiences and devoted a chapter entitled “Anzac Ada” to her fundraising for London’s Anzac Club and Buffet.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Ada Reeve was one of many British stars of popular stage and music hall whose enthusiastic engagement in war work (1914-18) helped to raise the professional profile of the performance and entertainment industry whilst justifying its existence in war time as a vital source for fundraising, recruitment and of therapeutic benefit for wounded troops. Reeve’s philanthropic endeavours are significant because whereas her contemporaries aimed to raise vast sums or recruit record numbers, her specific choice of war work also augmented her constructed persona as a singular transnational star. On her 1917-18 tour to Australia and New Zealand, during which she raised funds for London’s Anzac Club and Buffet, Reeve was acclaimed by the media, theatre management and the public as “Anzac Ada.” Reeve’s strategic role as champion of Anzac troops strengthened her civic identity and complemented her desire for singularity since the Anzac Club and Buffet provided the opportunity for her to campaign for a worthy cause that didn’t involve other competing theatre personalities. Gwen Adeler, a long-standing friend of Reeve’s, astutely observed that while her own father greatly admired Reeve, her mother loathed her. She deduced that the likely reason for this paradox was that Reeve preferred the company of men to women, and she would ignore her female friends if a male visitor arrived to give him her sole attention.⁹⁵ Reeve’s civic performance as the soldiers’ friend perhaps satisfied her desire for singularity because it positioned her as *the* undisputed female idol for legions of male adherents and cemented a place for her in Australasia’s cultural imaginary as a symbolic surrogate mother for the country’s fighting boys.

Ada Reeve, aged ninety-two, died on 25 September 1966 at St. Charles Hospital, Kensington as a result of a cerebral haemorrhage. She was remembered in a service of thanksgiving and prayer held at the Royal Parish Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London on 27 October 1966 officiated by Rev. Austen Williams.⁹⁶ This memorial service, organised by her friends Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, paid tribute to Reeve as a stalwart partisan of the theatre industry, and a generous supporter of the imperial war effort during 1914-18.

Her positioning as a champion for the Anzacs was reinforced by the presence of the Agent General of New South Wales. It is perhaps therefore not so surprising that Ada Reeve was remembered in John Betjeman's tribute at her memorial service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields as "the soldiers' friend." Betjeman noted: "She had to the full, the generosity of theatre people, 'Anzac Ada,' as they called her in the 1914 war, gave her house in the Isle of Wight to Australian and New Zealand troops." A quartet from the Players' Theatre was accompanied by a choir singing "The Long, Long Trail," for which Ada Reeve was "famous in those Anzac days."⁹⁷

The media, theatre management and the public worked in partnership with Ada Reeve to consolidate her strategic framing of citizenship and star persona in the self-reliant but charity-conscious social ethos of the early-20th century. Today, a skilful management of such imbricated identity has extended beyond the theatre industry into the global marketplace of entertainment and commerce. Stars of theatre, film, sport and television vie with multinational corporations to manipulate their civic representations and augment their brand identities through their tactical choice of charitable, social or environmental causes.

¹ Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 92-93.

² Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 58-59.

³ L.J. Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-18* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998), 52; Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980), 98.

⁴ Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-evaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003), 11.

⁵ McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, 113-14.

⁶ Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-18*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

⁹ Midge Gillies, *Marie Lloyd: The One and Only* (London: Orion, 1999), 251.

¹⁰ Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-evaluation*, 129, 131.

¹¹ Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-18*, 50.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁸ *Argus* (Melbourne), June 7, 1922, 20.

¹⁹ Reeve made four tours to America between 1893 and 1928, seven tours to Australia and New Zealand between 1898 and 1935, and five tours to South Africa between 1906 and 1921, as well as touring to India in 1916.

²⁰ The Harefield estate in Middlesex was owned by Australians Charles and Letitia Billyard-Leake, who offered their manor house and 250-acre property to the Commonwealth Defence Department, to be used as a home for convalescing soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force.

²¹ *Referee* (Sydney), November 17, 1915, 15.

²² He was in the 1st Battalion NSW Regiment C Company, no. 274 Westham Camp Weymouth.

²³ L.S. Murphy, Letters to Ada Reeve, 1915. Ada Reeve Papers. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection.

- ²⁴ Letter to Wilfred Cotton from Frank Allen, organiser of Our Blinded Heroes' Day, dated May 26, 1916, thanking Ada Reeve for agreeing to participate in a variety entertainment in Birmingham as part of the scheme. Ada Reeve Papers. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection.
- ²⁵ During 1916-17 Maurice Bandman of the Empire Theatre in Calcutta promoted Ada Reeve as "the world famous comedienne" for a tour of his Eastern Circuit of theatres. His marketing included testimonials from the *London Daily Telegraph*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *Sydney Bulletin*, *Winnipeg Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian*, *San Francisco Examiner* and *Lorenco Marques Guardian*, supporting his claim: "Ada Reeve is the most travelled, the most versatile, the most universally popular English Actress of our time," *Stage*, January 4, 1912.
- ²⁶ Lady Stanley was the president of the Victorian division of the British Red Cross Society.
- ²⁷ *Referee*, June 20, 1917, 14.
- ²⁸ *Referee*, April 25, 1917, 14.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Argus*, April 23, 1917, 5.
- ³² *Referee*, April 25, 1917, 14.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Age* (Melbourne), April 23, 1917, 5.
- ³⁵ *Complimentary Matinee Concert*, Ada Reeve and Her Hospital Concert Party, Theatre programme, Galstaun House, Calcutta, January 24, 1917. Ada Reeve Papers. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection.
- ³⁶ Programme of Complimentary Matinee to Australian Troops by Ada Reeve and Her London Company at the 5th General Military Hospital, April 30, 1917. Ada Reeve Papers. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection.
- ³⁷ *Age*, May 14, 1917, 11.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*; *Referee* May 16, 1917, 14.
- ³⁹ *Age*, May 11, 1917, 6.
- ⁴⁰ Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 154.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁴² J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-18* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 170.
- ⁴³ Richard Arthur, *Keep Yourself Fit: The Dangers of Venereal Disease: An Address Given at the Camps in Queensland and New South Wales* (Sydney: Australia White Cross League, 1916), 11.
- ⁴⁴ Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, 168-69.
- ⁴⁵ *Age*, May 11, 1917, 6.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Age*, May 12, 1917, 11.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ *Age*, May 15, 1917, 9.
- ⁵⁰ In addition to sundry donations the *Age* lists a cheque from Ada Reeve for £55 1s 6d: "being the total amount realised by the sale of my book *Pot-Pourri* for the week ended Friday 18 May 1917" which was sold for 6d a copy at the Tivoli Theatre, *Age*, May 19, 1917, 10.
- ⁵¹ Ada Reeve, *Pot-Pourri: Reminiscences at Random* (London: A. Reeve, 1913).
- ⁵² *Referee*, April 4, 1917, 14.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ *Age*, May 21, 1917, 6.
- ⁵⁵ *Age*, May 23, 1917, 7.
- ⁵⁶ *Age*, June 8, 1917, 7.
- ⁵⁷ *Age*, June 4, 1917, 4.
- ⁵⁸ *Age*, June 9, 1917, 11.
- ⁵⁹ *Age*, June 11, 1917, 6.
- ⁶⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), July 6, 1917, 6.
- ⁶¹ *Referee*, July 25, 1917, 14.
- ⁶² *New Zealand Sport and Dramatic Review* (Auckland), September 20, 1917, 22.
- ⁶³ *Referee*, June 27, 1917, 14.

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- ⁶⁴ *Brisbane Courier* (Brisbane), August 11, 1917, 7.
- ⁶⁵ *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*, August 30, 1917, 32.
- ⁶⁶ *Referee*, July 18, 1917, 14.
- ⁶⁷ *Triad* (Sydney), March 10, 1918, 45.
- ⁶⁸ *Age*, June 11, 1917, 6.
- ⁶⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 5, 1917, 6.
- ⁷⁰ *Age*, April 23, 1917, 5; *Argus*, April 23, 1917, 5.
- ⁷¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9, 1917, 4.
- ⁷² *Referee*, August 1, 1917, 14; *Brisbane Courier*, August 31, 1917, 6.
- ⁷³ *Referee*, July 25, 1917, 14.
- ⁷⁴ *Daily Mail* (London), August 31, 1917, 3.
- ⁷⁵ *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*, September 15, 1917, 31.
- ⁷⁶ *Table Talk* (Melbourne), April 26, 1917, 19.
- ⁷⁷ *Evening Post* (Wellington), October 1, 1917, 2.
- ⁷⁸ *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*, September 13, 1917, 31.
- ⁷⁹ *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), October 13, 1917, 2.
- ⁸⁰ *Dominion* (Wellington), October 4, 1917, 7.
- ⁸¹ *Green Room* (Sydney), April, 1918, 15.
- ⁸² *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*, April 11, 1918, 32.
- ⁸³ *Otago Daily Times*, April 12, 1918, 1.
- ⁸⁴ *Referee*, January 23, 1918, 14.
- ⁸⁵ *Referee*, March 6, 1918, 14.
- ⁸⁶ *Evening Post*, May 10, 1918, 2.
- ⁸⁷ *Mercury* (Hobart), March 16, 1918, 8.
- ⁸⁸ HMT *Marathon* departed Melbourne on 23 July 1918 en route to London and stopped in Durban, August 16-18, 1918; Greville Tregarthen, *Sea Transport of the A. I. F.* (Melbourne: Naval Transport Board, n.d.), 162-63.
- ⁸⁹ Reeve played the lead role of Robin Hood in *Babes in the Wood, or Bold Robin Hood and His Merry Men* at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney (December 27, 1897 - February 11, 1898). When the production transferred to the Princess's Theatre, Melbourne for an Easter season, Reeve assumed the less strenuous role of Maid Marion (April 2 - May 5, 1898).
- ⁹⁰ *Stage and Society* (Sydney), October 11, 1922, 34.
- ⁹¹ *Argus*, April 19, 1922, 14; *Referee*, September 6, 1922, 15.
- ⁹² *Spangles*, Producer Fred Farren, Performer Ada Reeve, Theatre programme, Palace Theatre, Melbourne, October 5, 1922, [2]. Author's collection.
- ⁹³ *Table Talk*, January 6, 1927, 25.
- ⁹⁴ Ada Reeve, *Take It For A Fact: A Record Of My Seventy-Five Years On The Stage* (London: Heinemann, 1954).
- ⁹⁵ Gwen Adeler, "Ada Reeve: Yes - I Remember Her Well," *Call Boy* (October 1966): 8.
- ⁹⁶ *The Times* (London), October 28, 1966, 12.
- ⁹⁷ John Betjeman, Tribute to Ada Reeve given at her Memorial Service, St Martin-in-the-Fields, October 27, 1966. Ada Reeve Papers. Private Archive.