

*Afterpieces:
A miscellany of well-considered trifles*

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The Family Way

Many substantial works of theatre history present their material in the form of chronological career biographies of performers and/or managers. Along with standard scholarly research in archives, public records, newspapers and ephemera collections, their research necessitates considerable tact and persistence in sleuthing the clues of entangled or obscured marital histories, and in the tracing and contacting of living descendants. Such expertises are also the tradecraft of the professional genealogist, local historian and family historian. All have now become highly digitised pursuits – but only to a degree, as we shall see – and all possess a necessarily international dimension and import. This is especially so when their subjects are the 19th-century popular performers who typically worked in multiple regions, genres and media over long and varied careers, leaving a scattered but sometimes quite detailed paper trail of data which requires expert contextualisation in order to produce an interesting and useful account.

Philip and Susan Taylor, tracing information on their ancestor, the touring tragedian and manager Jonathan Dewhurst, summarise the pleasures and labours of a research process extending over many years. Their sleuthing “combined so many things in which we were interested – theatre, the Victorian era, family history, research, and the prospect of meeting people we didn’t yet know.”¹ Many would recognise the investments of collectorly obsession, intellectual and scholarly curiosity, the desire to more fully know one’s place in a legible line of descent, or sheer sociability, which variously drive both the academic historian and those television programmes about family and social history which ask a selected (frequently entertainment) celebrity who they think they are. The pursuits and methods of the family historian and the theatre scholar cover much common ground, and a selection of four recent publications in the area, all dealing with performers with major or occasional Australian presence, raise the problem of how chronicle and/or biography becomes the organising principle to support a scholarly study.

The publications include two volumes on the life of the actor and manager Jonathan Dewhurst (1837-1913), whose Othello, Richelieu and Hamlet fell under the sceptical eye of the Sydney *Bulletin* in 1881-82 during the reign of that weekly's first, and most floridly idiosyncratic, theatre journalist. The *Bulletin* could scent a moral improver a mile off, and Dewhurst, with his standard middlebrow repertoire (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richelieu*, *The Lady of Lyons*) and his nonconformist mission using theatre to spread the gospel of earnestness, self-improvement and respectable social morality, offered a broad target. The Taylors are mesmerised by the journal's flamboyant critical performance and cite large passages as too entertaining to pass up: neither the first nor the last historians to be seduced by this source. Frank Van Straten writes the biography of the soprano Florence Young (1870-1920), one of Australia's outstanding stars of comic opera, musical comedy and pantomime, who was the mainstay of the J. C. Williamson organisation and also worked occasionally in Britain, South Africa and New Zealand. Apart from her dominating talent as one of the age's most loved popular entertainment personalities, she was well connected industrially, as her sister Millie Young married the Williamson's supremo Sir George Tallis.

I am fortunate in this context in being able to read in TS form Mimi Colligan's unpublished joint biography of the actor Rose Edouin (née Bryer, 1844-1925) and her husband the circus performer and later theatrical manager George Lewis (1818-1906) and their families and descendants.² A child performer with a tribe of equally talented siblings (the great musical comedy star Willie Edouin was one of these), Rose danced and sang in the UK from an early age, played Puck for Samuel Phelps, and across her long career taught professional stagecraft to generations of child pupils. George Lewis was an early practitioner of circus in England who from 1853 pioneered circus in Melbourne, and later turned to theatrical management. Over their careers, their combined repertoire ranged from foot juggling to Euripides. Using Melbourne as their base, the Lewises undertook sustained touring activity in China and particularly in India after the Raj was established in the 1870s. Their productions of burlesque, drama and comedy were witnessed by keenly assessing Indians as well as by foreign expatriate communities; thus this troupe's role in the modern development of theatre in India is crucial and has not been fully explored. Colligan, however, has at least located Anglophone sources.

The publications are united in their search for recondite primary material, since, to a greater or larger degree, the telling of even the most local stories in this period of peripatetic world wanderers necessarily implies both an international research project and a transnational narrative scope. Newspapers (theatre advertisements, reviews, shipping notices, marriages, births and deaths) are so numerous in this period that their chattering prolixity and post-telegraph internationalism makes them both a rich source of information and also of undifferentiated white noise. They deal extensively with popular entertainment, commenting upon and sometimes obsessively monitoring this most public of activities. Not all their statements are equally important (or accurate) and their biographical 'facts' must be double-checked where possible by official records. At worst, the locating of press sources become teasing indicators that more

valuable information just might be found elsewhere. But how much detail is required to make sufficient historiographical sense of the data?

As family historians, the Taylors include the lot, and their second volume of 2011, in fact, continues the 'story' using the plethora of further documents and family contacts which ensued upon the publication of the 2001 volume, thus extending the multiple biographies of the Dewhurst clan, many of whom became 20th-century stage or film performers. Van Straten makes wide use of New Zealand, Australian and some British press sources in order to reconstruct and contextualise Young's prominent career, since despite her connections, she left no substantial personal papers. *Florence Young* benefits from the author's considerable knowledge of early Australian, and particularly Melbourne, social history and theatrical history, as befits a former Director of Melbourne's Performing Arts Museum. Nor did the peripatetic Lewises leave any major personal archive, so Colligan, a professional historian of popular entertainments, undertook exhaustive international searches of "civil registrations, public records, newspaper advertisements, articles and theatre reviews" ('Introduction'), always going to the official records for confirmation of information about names, marriages, births, deaths and ship travel. Of course, many of these documents of the pre-passport era are also works of convenient fiction, deriving from unstable information given by their subjects who altered and improved on their names, marital relationships and birth dates as it suited their immediate needs.

Over the last decade, the digitisation of once remote regional newspapers in publicly accessible databases (*Trove* for Australia, *Papers Past* for New Zealand) means that it now takes mere minutes to bring up data on the home computer which not so long ago would have necessitated trips to regional or overseas libraries; there to confront the creaking microfilm reader or the dusty bound copies, according to local repository rulings. It is no problem now to check the Australian activities of the Dewhurst connection, Alfred Rivers, who as stage manager, toured to Australia with Wilson Barrett and Maud Jeffries in 1897, and again to Australia and New Zealand with Barrett and Lillah McCarthy 1901-1902. Increased availability of such databases means that quests for totality of information, such as the Taylors have pursued, is ever on-going and 'completion' an impossible mirage. The consolidated newspaper databases do not account for all extant press sources, nor might they ever have the capacity to do so. They are necessarily selective as to date range and in their choices of titles for inclusion amongst the vast array of publications spawned by the mass media age.

The Taylors visited Australia in quest of Dewhurst's career there (and encountered the *Bulletin*, now readable in *Trove*). Colligan had to travel to India (unsuccessfully) and the British Library's newspaper collection (successfully) to research the Lewis's activities in India and China, and it is likely that much émigré or provincial journals, so vital to the global scholarship of popular entertainment, will remain in hard copy for the foreseeable future. Yet, for historians of the entertainments of the age of technological modernisation, with its teeming media and its criss-crossing individuals with their international

outreach, there is no doubt that it is now possible to search under a comparatively well-lit lamp-post. Conscious of their unique function as the pioneering and/or sole memorialists of their subjects, the authors of these four volumes make source inclusiveness their major goal, whereas the more theoretically oriented writer, surveying a well-covered field, would typically opt for a more symptomatically selective and interpretive selection and use of data.

The digital age has also increased the number of on-line repositories of colour and mono images available for study and publication, which is crucial since the period of global theatrical modernisation is also that of photography. The uses of pictorial sources are multiple: they can decorate a page nicely or be used as interpretive evidence. They can confirm the existence of individuals and sometimes place them at specific locales. They offer to indicate the performer's art and stage presence, to document interesting ephemera (sheet music, cartoons, movie stills, postcards, professional studio portraits or family snaps), illustrate the theatre structures and urban centres they worked in. *The Curtain Falls* shows a photo of Beatrice Fielden-Kaye (1883-1942) as a conventional but striking-looking Edwardian beauty³. She developed into a reliable character actor, and a film still shows her mature black-dressed figure as the Housekeeper, sternly regarding a beaming George Formby in the 1939 comedy *Trouble Brewing*, the last of the six 1930s British films in which she acted.⁴ The images are fascinating evidence for how female careers and lines of business can work out in specific times and regions, and the kinds of professional and media opportunities offered. Colligan's TS also contains numerous valuable illustrative resources, while Van Straten sourced much of his fine illustrations from his own collection. All the books have bibliographies, source lists, indexes and (to a greater or lesser extent) footnotes, while the Taylors include tables of family trees, production chronologies, scripts written or roles undertaken (on stage, film or television) by the many individuals involved.

A specific industrial situation is abundantly clear in the context of these studies: career biographies of those figures not distinguished as 'major', or perhaps 'national' (by what criteria though?) are pretty hard to get published. From a commercial print publisher's perspective, they don't seem to occupy any saleable or recognised territory. This is particularly so for figures who are 'local' or 'provincial' rather than clearly metropolitan, who moved around a lot, or who are arguably nationally significant but in a small-scale publishing area. Before me are two self-published volumes (Dewhurst), a lavishly produced book subsidised by a private Foundation (Young) and a typescript of an important original transnational work (the Lewises) which at the date of writing is yet to find a publisher. In the case of Florence Young, she proved posthumously fortunate given her connection with the Tallis family, who eventually left 'Beleura', their grand house on the Mornington Peninsula with its extensive gardens, to the people of Victoria. The Belleura-Tallis Foundation thus subsidised Van Straten's astute proposal for a study of the family's star performer, and it did her proud with a beautifully designed and produced volume, priced very reasonably in the \$30 area to catch the eye of visitors. The book thus exploits an opportunity to add value to an established operation within the heritage industry. Meanwhile, lacking these contexts, the Lewis

volume awaits a committed publisher and may also be privately printed. While the commercial and scholarly presses typically put out theoretically-driven publications in the discipline, self-publication (or cannily-appropriate local sponsorship) seems to be the lot of pioneering biographical studies, whether of the 'national' figure or the cosmopolitan wanderer. And yet, like the collecting of theatrical ephemera (all these authors are also collectors), such activities are vital to the larger historiographical project and all share various significant aspects of scholarly methodology. Passion-driven and largely self-subsidised, the career biographer in the 21st century remains a significant participant in the on-going reconceptualisation of the transnational impact of theatre and entertainment in the 'long' nineteenth century.

So, to return to our first question, is the personality or his/her context to be the main driver of such studies? It is hard to answer. As the biographical researcher, the local historian or the ephemera collector learns more of the historical and industrial context of his/her subjects, they are apt to evolve into area specialists; learning some disciplinary history, encountering its standard scholarly and reference works, and offering to intervene in its debates. Then they must decide upon modes of readerly address. Colligan's book is a clear and engagingly written chronicle based on widely undertaken meticulous research; the Taylors communicate the enthusiasm of their discoveries; and Van Straten writes warmly for the non-specialist reader while ensuring that his scholarly information is comprehensive. The academic scholar, for her part, might well employ a promising personality, troupe or genre in order to illustrate, initiate or complicate on-going debates about (e.g.) national theatres, or industrial or technological trends, or patterns of repertoire dispersal, interactions with modern entertainment media, or the mapping of international cultural contact. All share or exchange common approaches and skill sets – here family historians have much to teach about biographical source retrieval – while typically taking care to stay informally well linked: one writer's minor personality is of central importance to another. Thus, the 'independent' (read unfunded) scholar and the institutionalised professional are interactive agents in the larger scholarly conversations about the historiography of popular entertainments.

Works referred to

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¹ Philip and Susan Taylor, *Jonathan Dewhurst: The Curtain Falls* (Kibworth Beauchamp: The Authors, 2011), 163.

² I am grateful to Mimi Colligan for access to her TS of *Theatrical Adventures in Asia, Europe and Australasia*.

³ Taylor, *op. cit.*, 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.