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'Two Hours Genuine Fun Without the Vulgarly'; As the Bishop Said to the Actress

Written by
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Early in the twentieth century, as the professional theatre industry in Australia was beginning to decline in its popularity, religious organisations helped to make live performances available to the public, albeit on an amateur level. World War I was a particularly interesting time in this regard for the Australian city of Brisbane. Being a much smaller centre than its southern counterparts of Melbourne and Sydney, Brisbane struggled to keep live performance on the professional stage. The financial viability of the industry was under threat, but the people of Brisbane were still able to enjoy theatrical evenings produced by amateur performers, and this type of activity was often sponsored and encouraged by religious organisations. This was the case in spite of some of the churches' beliefs that aspects of the theatre were less than savoury.

The morality of the stage had long been a nineteenth-century concern for Brisbane's religious leaders. As Richard Fotheringham has noted, public condemnation of the theatre for its immorality was the norm throughout the second half of the century.¹ By World War I, the views of religious leaders were far more accommodating of theatrical enterprises, and they made it acceptable for parishioners to take part in amateur theatrical events while the churches encouraged community participation in the arts for both social and financial reasons. The relationship between prominent religious personalities and the conduct of local professional theatre practitioners was not totally without ambiguities. The theatre continued to function under pressure from moral leaders within the Brisbane community as epitomised by the response of both the Anglican and the Catholic churches to particular incidents that occurred during the period.

The morality of the stage was a great concern for Brisbane at this time as is indicated in the reviews in the daily paper; it was not just the church leaders who were ready to criticise the

¹ Richard Fotheringham, "Brisbane," *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Paddington, NSW: Currency, 1995) 100.

theatre for any perceived impropriety on stage. The *Brisbane Courier* frequently adopted a moralistic tone towards the content of plays produced in Brisbane. It often criticised productions, especially vaudeville performances, for including suggestive or improper references. For example, the *Brisbane Courier* reported that "a brilliant programme was presented inside the artistic and charmingly decorated main Tivoli Theatre on Saturday evening, but a little suggestiveness by some of the performers could have been omitted".²

The *Brisbane Courier* was not alone amongst the papers to be highly critical of the theatre when it was thought to be stretching the bounds of moral propriety. The national periodical, *Australian Variety*, focussed almost exclusively on vaudeville and variety performances around Australia. It took on the role of providing gossip columns for the industry and within these articles, it presented itself as the moral arbiter of actors' conduct. For example, the journal's Brisbane correspondent, "Al", warns that "a certain member of the theatrical profession is making things too warm here. As he is staying here for some time, he should put a 'stopper' on his conduct towards ladies, otherwise his name may be mentioned!"³ The behaviour of male members of the profession in regard to their treatment of women is often the subject of comment in this column. For example, "two 'gentlemen' (please spare the word) connected with the theatrical profession here, have a very bad habit of using obscene language towards the lady members of the company. I do not wish to be personal, so trust that they will understand—and cut it out!"⁴ Women, however, did not escape from the moral rectitude of *Australian Variety*. It once warned that "a certain young lady, connected with the vaudeville profession, would be well advised to consider her husband a little more, and to have less to do with dentists. This is just a word in time!"⁵ This type of self-censorship of the industry shows that the attitudes of the church leaders were not really out of step with the wider Australian community of the day.

Suggestive or lewd comments by vaudevillians were habitually criticised in the newspapers but the *Brisbane Courier's* most violent denunciation of improper theatrical

² "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier*, 1 Jan. 1917:9

³ Al, "Brisbane Brevities," *Australian Variety* 26 Apr. 1916: N. pag.

⁴ Al, "Brisbane Brevities," *Australian Variety* 17 May 1916: N. pag.

⁵ Al, "Brisbane Brevities," *Australian Variety* 23 Aug. 1916: N. pag.

behaviour was reserved for an article which outlined a sermon delivered at St. Stephen's Cathedral. In 1918, the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, James Duhig⁶, vehemently condemned the salacious activities of theatre proprietors in a sermon provoked by the threat to public morality from an advertisement that was entitled "Wanted Girls", that was placed in the *Brisbane Courier* by the Empire Theatre. Duhig was an extremely powerful and influential figure in Brisbane's history; his term as Archbishop lasted from 1912 until 1965.⁷ The advertisement to which his sermon referred appeared on 2 March 1918 and the *Brisbane Courier* printed Archbishop Duhig's sermon in a style which slipped seamlessly from direct quote to third person reporting on 4 March 1918. The advertisement's request for 'young ladies' to send a photograph of themselves in a bathing costume if they were interested in taking part in the ballet and chorus of the Easter pantomime enraged the prelate. He declared that "surely there was enough modesty amongst our women and chivalry amongst our men here in Brisbane to cause them to rise in united protest against the insult to womanly modesty implied in that advertisement!"⁸ The Archbishop condemned the inappropriate conduct of the theatre which required women "to be subjected to the degradation of sending through the post for the inspection and scrutiny, approval or disapproval, of a probable employer their photographs, taken in the scanty covering afforded by a bathing costume".⁹ Primarily, the Archbishop claimed, the theatre was wanting to exploit "the daughters of the poor" who were "so frequently endowed with physical beauty".¹⁰ His righteous anger, and that of his 'coreligionists', was directed towards pressuring the government to prohibit such theatrical practices:

With all the force and influence of his position as an Archbishop and a citizen he protested against and condemned the offence to womanly modesty contained in that advertisement, and he took the full

⁶ Boland, T.P., *James Duhig* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1986), 8. Archbishop James Duhig was born in Limerick, Ireland, on 2 September 1871, and he died in Brisbane, Australia, on 10 April 1965.

⁷ Boland, 139. Duhig was Archbishop Dunne's Coadjutor until his predecessor's death in January 1917.

⁸ "Insulting Womenly Modesty: Unseemly Advertising: Emphatic Protest by Archbishop Duhig," *Brisbane Courier* 4 Mar. 1918: 4

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

responsibility of such protest and condemnation. It was the duty of the Church to speak out on such matters, and it was high time for such speaking. They were bound to protect their working girls, who, in the course of their employment, whether in offices, shops, or domestic service, were exposed to many temptations. It would greatly astonish him if the Federal Government allowed theatrical agents to use the agency of the post office to carry out the purpose of this advertisement, and he would be still more surprised if the Government of Queensland did not raise its voice to condemn this attempted degradation of the young girls of the poorer class in this State.¹¹

Duhig's sermon highlights that despite the Church's support for a certain type of theatrical performance, the bounds of propriety could not be breached. The Archbishop suggests that the Empire Theatre's management was lasciviously preying on young, innocent, working-class girls; this conclusion was reached because the advertisement was "surely not [aimed at] the daughters of wealthy parents for they had no need of tempting employment or the salary attached to it. It was particularly the daughters of the poor (so frequently endowed with physical beauty) that the advertisement was concerned with".¹² The Archbishop suggested that this type of decadent behaviour was reminiscent "of the slavery and female degradation of ancient times".¹³ Duhig concluded his tirade against the Empire Theatre's management by threatening to deny communion to Catholic women who sent their photographs, stating that "no self-respecting Catholic girl would answer the advertisement in question, but should any be so weak as to do so he warned them that they would be denied the sacraments of the Church, and parents encouraging their daughters to reply to such advertisement would be treated likewise".¹⁴ The reporter was quite sympathetic to the material presented by the Archbishop and it is explained that the sermon "was listened to with rapt attention, and murmurs of

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

indignation were quite audible as he disclosed the purpose of the advertisement".¹⁵ The bias in the reporting of this event is clearly evident yet the fact that it was published at all indicates that theatrical enterprises had not completely shaken off their nineteenth-century reputation for promoting immorality amongst the residents of Brisbane

Barrington Waters from the Empire Theatre provided an equally scathing response to Duhig's attack in a letter to the editor on 5 March 1918. He criticises the Church's anachronistic ideologies regarding women and practically accuses the Archbishop of having "a mind distorted on the subject of sex".¹⁶ Waters sympathises with the Archbishop and suggests that "he must necessarily adopt medieval views of the costuming and behaviour of women as taught by the Fathers of his Church in the Middle Ages".¹⁷ The company's primary defence suggests that the procedure of sending a photograph would save potential candidates from the embarrassment of being scrutinised in person to see if their appearance would blend in with the professional actors "without attracting unfavourable comparison from the audience".¹⁸ The real dilemma here would still be problematic amongst contemporary feminists. The advertisement may be read as suggesting a sexist approach to the display of the female body, but Duhig's extreme response in condemnation of the women who might have been tempted by the chance of being on stage, is perhaps even more draconian in its oppression of women because of the threat of excommunication from his Church.

Despite this tirade against the theatre, Duhig, along with other Church leaders, was in fact quite supportive of theatrical enterprises in Brisbane. By World War I, the interest in encouraging theatrical activity, in particular amongst the churches' youthful members, is apparent by the rise in the number of church groups from many denominations producing concerts in church and community halls. This may have been a self-interested strategy given that the money raised from such events usually went into the Church's coffers, but it also helped to foster a performance culture. This is not to suggest that the mainstream churches were totally happy

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Pantomime Methods," *Brisbane Courier* 5 Mar. 1918: 5

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

with the way in which theatre was run in Brisbane. There were a number of instances which provoked critical attention from the hierarchy of both the Anglican and Catholic Churches. Most of these problems arose out of the various churches' perceived notions of the appropriate representation of morality. Archbishop St. Clair Donaldson, the Church of England Archbishop of Brisbane from 1904 to 1921, drew his congregation's attention to the immorality of some stories performed on the stage. In a sermon to mark the opening of St. Andrew's church and hall at Indooroopilly, he said:

If the Church stood for the bright things of life, it claimed that the public amusements should be clean and healthy, and there was need here for continuous and watchful care. His charge was against the public taste. He had had some little experience in Brisbane on the Council of Public Morality in connection with this matter. They there received complaints from time to time about films shown in the picture shows, and about plays produced in Brisbane, and about literature circulated in the public libraries. Their investigations invariably showed the same result. They heard of plays the whole plot of which, the very name of which indirectly suggested a side of life upon which no clean mind wished to dwell...The public taste is not so far educated as to condemn this kind of representation, whether in picture, print, or drama, as revolting to a clean mind.¹⁹

The offensive material to which he referred included plays and pictures which dealt with the white slave trade or with life in 'houses of ill-fame'. However, to contextualise this sermon, Archbishop Donaldson was in fact encouraging the hall to be used for performances, but he was warning the congregation of some of the evils associated with immoral productions. The corollary to this is that Donaldson was prepared to encourage theatrical performances among his parishioners as long as they were 'clean and healthy'. One way to control the morality of material presented on stage is to be involved in the production process. The churches, then, not only stood outside the boundaries and condemned the theatre but they also actively worked to

¹⁹ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 27 Nov. 1914: 6

prevent salacious performances and production techniques by directing theatrical energies into acceptable outlets.

The churches would have been aware that the theatre in Brisbane during World War I served several important roles within the community apart from the obvious function of theatre as a diversion from the war. The theatre provided women with a socially respectable public pastime. It was used for 'patriotic' causes, it enabled charities to raise funds for the war-effort, it gave the opportunity for groups within the community to organise social outings, it served to unite cultural groups who were trying to maintain a unique cultural identity, and it allowed special interest groups such as religious organisations to present amateur theatrical events. All of these functions of the theatre would have met with the approval of the churches. An example of the type of patriotic amateur performance that was popular at the time, is a Concert held in the Exhibition Hall on 1 March 1916 which was in aid of the Soldiers' Church of England Help Society. The *Brisbane Courier* reported that "the large audience...had the satisfaction of knowing that while enjoying a capital entertainment it was supporting a deserving cause".²⁰ The program was described as being both 'topical' and 'patriotic' and it included such features as recitations of "Heroes of the Dardanelles" and "A Perfect Day", and Archbishop Donaldson contributed by making a speech in praise of the Help Society's efforts. By speaking at such an event, the Archbishop was tacitly affirming the role of 'patriotic' performances on stage.

The social role of the theatre was shifting in Brisbane during this period. It enjoyed a professional reputation during the nineteenth century that was rapidly changing throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. As an indication of the role that theatre played within the Brisbane community, an analysis of articles surrounding the *Brisbane Courier's* regular weekend column called "Music and Drama", shows that theatre was strongly connected with general items of social interest rather than being associated with other professional enterprises. The article was usually surrounded by photographs which featured golden wedding anniversaries, family portraits showing four generations, Sunday School groups, Church Choirs, and successful candidates for Trinity College music examinations. By being juxtapositioned beside this type of social activity it is possible to see that the *Brisbane Courier* considered the theatre's artistic role was subordinate to its social role. Theatre, both amateur

²⁰ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 2 Mar. 1916: 5

and professional, was seen in the same light as general matters of local community interest; it was little more than just another social event. Especially at an amateur level, the theatre provided opportunities for community members to socialise and demonstrate their united position towards the war-effort. The emphasis was on having fun and supporting 'our boys' at the Front rather than in sustaining a vibrant theatre culture.

Throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed continuing throughout World War I, the churches in Brisbane held the unique position of being both the defender of the benefits of theatre within the community and the moral arbiters of the professional theatre industry. The churches encouraged young people to participate in amateur performances in church halls around Brisbane. One prominent local shoe retailer named Vic Jensen had a long association with amateur theatricals in Brisbane. Vic Jensen's Cutting Book²¹ which is housed in Brisbane's John Oxley Library, includes many programs for productions by the Holy Trinity Amateur Dramatic Club²² held in the parish hall at Hawthorn Street, Woolloongabba, dating from late in the nineteenth century to early in the twentieth.²³ The program for an early Minstrel Entertainment presented by the Holy Trinity Boys' Debating Club gives an indication that providing a wholesome night's entertainment was high on the agenda for the group. The program was presented for two nights in 1893 and one in 1894 and it boasted that the audience would receive "Two Hours Genuine Fun Without the Vulgarity".²⁴ The churches must have seen the value of theatre as a means of occupying the time of their younger parishioners so that they could be kept in a 'wholesome' environment.

Concerts, a mixture of instrumental programs, songs, and recitations, were to come into their own during World War I as a form of community solidarity with the war-effort. They borrowed elements of theatricality from the dramatic world and they allowed people who would otherwise have no opportunity of having their skills seen on the stage to perform before a sympathetic audience. On 9 August 1914, the first "Grand Patriotic Concert" was held in the

²¹ JOL catalogue number OM92-182.

²² This group was originally known as the Holy Trinity Boys' Debating Club.

²³ Vic Jensen Cutting Book, ms. OM92-182, John Oxley Library, Brisbane.

²⁴ Program, *A Minstrel Entertainment*, Holy Trinity Boys' Debating Club. 13 July 1893, 5 Oct. 1893, and 28 Mar. 1894.

Botanic Gardens on a Sunday evening, "after Church hours".²⁵ The war, then, paved the way for the rise in prominence of the community concert; one which required the efforts of many people from different community groups to band together to create the performance and church groups around the city were prepared to dedicate their time to the creation of entertainment that was for patriotic or charitable causes. The format for this first "Grand Patriotic Concert", and for the many which followed throughout the war, included instrumental items, vocal numbers, dramatic recitations, and patriotic sing-alongs. Church groups did not provide the only source of community interest in public concerts. There were also amateur theatre workers who teamed with charities such as the Red Cross to create public performances but the contribution of church groups was quite considerate.

The threat of failure for the amateur is alleviated when the performances they offer are labelled as being for 'patriotic' purposes. The idea of 'doing what you can' to help 'our boys' made it possible for many people to perform a wide variety of theatrical activities 'all for a good cause' so it didn't matter if the quality of the performances was questionable. The parish community participated in many different social activities including the creation of sporting teams, choirs, instrumental groups, and dramatic societies. Funds raised by performances were often used for charitable or church causes but would sometimes benefit other church community groups. An example here would be the Grand Concert given to benefit the Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Tennis Club. Items on the program included the performance of dramatic scenes, recitations, and songs. Reviews of such amateur performances tended to focus on how clearly the actors spoke their lines; elocution was the flavour of the day. The trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice* was performed by Ethel Clark and W.P. Sparkes, and the *Brisbane Courier* recorded that "the former spoke her lines with dignity and intelligence, and the latter brought to his elocutionary task an unusually deep and sonorous voice".²⁶ The connection between the Church and live theatrical performance was beginning to become important in Brisbane's dramatic scene at this time. The churches were particularly well placed to help foster and encourage live performance in the city because they had facilities such as Church Halls that could be utilised for productions of theatrical events on a modest scale plus they also had the

²⁵ Entertainments, Advertisement, *Brisbane Courier* 8 Aug. 1914: 2

²⁶ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 6 Apr. 1914: 10

human resources to create the performances and a willing crowd of spectators to watch them. The churches, therefore, were providing a threefold benefit to the Brisbane community; they gave amateur performers a chance to perform, they raised valuable funds for important community initiatives, and they promoted a vibrant alternative to the professional theatre industry that was slowly declining in public appeal as a result of the rising popularity of film.

Concerts were regularly held for the entertainment of troops stationed at camps in Brisbane while en route for the Front. These took place either in the camps or in local church halls. Social, political, and cultural groups altered the focus of their club's activities, tailoring them towards the perceived war-effort. For example, the Soldiers' Church of England Help Society organised weekly concerts in various camp locations such as Fraser's Hill Camp, Thompson's Camp, Bell's Paddock Camp, and Alderley Camp. The concerts consisted of musical items, humorous sketches, and dramatic recitations, mostly performed by women. However, sometimes soldiers would be involved in the performances as well. The general public was asked for assistance towards creating these concerts.²⁷ Other church groups, such as the parishioners from St. Barnabas's Church of England parish in Ithaca, organised one-off special performances designed to entertain the troops. This parish group produced a concert on 8 January 1916 for the soldiers of the 8th Depot Battalion stationed at Bell's Paddock. The evening included Mr Eltham presenting a musical sketch as well as a comical song while Elsie Rudd sang several songs. Soldiers in military costume often featured on the bills of such programs; on this occasion, a recitation was presented by one of the soldiers.²⁸ Here we see the soldier as entertainer; his uniform is a costume and his artistic ability is intrinsically linked with the patriotic feelings of his audience.

Annual performances by some of Brisbane's inner-city Catholic Schools were often reported in the local media. These performances were attended by the Archbishop and other Church dignitaries and they were important social occasions. When the Queensland Catholic Club, which consisted of pupils from All Hallows', St. Stephen's, and Christian Brothers' Schools, presented their "Grand Concert" in Centennial Hall, *The Merchant of Venice's* trial scene

²⁷ "Camp Concerts," *Brisbane Courier* 23 June 1916: 9

²⁸ "Soldiers Entertained," *Brisbane Courier* 11 Jan. 1916: 8

once again was applauded in a similar manner to the amateur performance held earlier in the month:

An illustration of commendable attention shown to classic literature was afforded by the pupils of St. Joseph's College, Gregory-terrace, who gave the trial scene from "The Merchant of Venice." The youthful performers owed little to costume or scenery, but they were word perfect in their lines. No suggestion of a prompter was heard through the long speech of "Portia," or indeed, in any of the dialogue. The boy who appeared as 'the learned judge' showed intelligence, and spoke his words clearly and pointedly, while the representations of the Duke, Shylock, and Antonio were equally worthy of recognition.²⁹

Thus, the critic does not attempt to discuss the artistic merit of the amateur performances. The important critical evaluation extends no further than a statement that the performers knew their lines. From this it can be assumed that the quality of the performance was not the primary concern for the artists and the audience members. Such performances were fulfilling an important social and cultural function by allowing young people to express themselves artistically in a controlled performance environment and the eclectic nature of a concert program gave the people the opportunity to have their otherwise hidden talents observed by a sympathetic audience. That the churches were an integral part of this is indicative of the changed role that the theatre was having within society.

Concerts produced by students from Catholic church schools were regularly featured in the *Brisbane Courier*; this is probably more an indication of the newspaper's Catholic sympathies rather than a suggestion that other church schools were not making similar community contributions. The St. Joseph's College, Nudgee, performance held in Centennial Hall attracted high praise from the paper which noted that "the Nudgee College students' entertainments in the past have always reached a very high standard, and that which was given last night adds another success to the meritorious roll".³⁰ The performance, which included Molière's *The Upstart* as well as a gymnastics display on the parallel bars, dancing, and choral items, attracted

²⁹ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 16 Apr. 1914: 5

³⁰ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 19 June 1914: 4

some high profile community members including a deputation from Government House.³¹ This signals the social significance of such community events. Another concert held by the students of the Christian Brothers' College, Gregory Terrace, and St. James's School made the most of the turbulent pre-war atmosphere by presenting their Concert in Centennial Hall and using the theme of "Songs of Wars and of Warriors".³² Students and audiences were encouraged on such occasions to enter into the popular discourses of patriotism on the stage.

Despite theatre and religion in Brisbane experiencing a chequered relationship throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as demonstrated by the incidents discussed, church organisations played a major role in nurturing live performance during a period in Australia's history when professional companies were declining in their popularity and some theatres had difficulty maintaining financial viability. By providing opportunities and venues for amateur performers to demonstrate their talents, the churches also fostered a community interest in live performance that otherwise may have been extinguished.

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³¹ "Entertainments," *Brisbane Courier* 18 June 1914: 8

³² Entertainments, Advertisement, *Brisbane Courier* 19 Aug. 1914: 2

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