Stiffy and Mo (Nat Phillips and Roy Rene) are generally regarded as the major Australian comics of the post-First World War era, and possibly of any era – establishing an Australia-wide fan base at a time when the country was beginning to seriously consider itself Australian and not a British outpost. Despite being such an important figure in variety entertainment very little information on Phillips’ life and career had surfaced since his death in 1932. His considerable achievements have been overshadowed by those of his more recognised partner, Roy Rene.

The discovery of manuscripts held in The University of Queensland’s Fryer Library, along with recent historical research into Nat Phillips, reveals a more accurate picture. The Nat Phillips collection had been held in the Fryer Library for 30 years before Clay Djubal, an enthusiastic PhD student from the School of English, Media Studies and Art History discovered its potential. This is his story:

Above:
Typical advertisement for a Stiffy and Mo production, The Theatre, Sydney, Moulton, 1919. PN2009.T45

My part in the Nat Phillips Collection story began a little over four years ago. For many younger Australians, the name Nat Phillips will fail to register. Even for those who remember the radio days of Mo McCackie, Phillips’s name may not be as instantly recognisable as his alter ego, Stiffy the Rabbit-oh, one half of the iconic Australian comedy duo Stiffy and Mo (Roy Rene). This story is not mine alone, however. It’s very much an ensemble cast that includes key people such as Jack Phillips (Nat’s younger brother) and his first wife; persons unknown from Brisbane’s Cremorne Theatre circa 1919-20 and 1944 (and possibly 1972); an ex-University of Queensland lecturer, several unidentified staff of the Fryer Library from the early 1970s, Margaret O’Hagan (Manager of the Fryer Library during the 1980s), a small group of prominent Australian historians, and last but not least, former Fryer Library staff member, Bill Dealy, my entry point into this story.

If I may digress slightly, the connection with Bill should be a reminder to any budding historian of the importance of bonding with librarians. You never know where it can lead. Indeed, the night that I became aware of the existence of the Nat Phillips Collection started a change that affected not only the focus of my PhD, but very likely the course of both my life and career. No small potatoes! I must admit, however, to being in a hurried state of affairs when Bill beckoned me over and suggested that I might be interested in some boxes of manuscripts he was trying to organise. My ears pricked up at the mention of Phillips’s name but I was running late for my bus so Bill, sensing my urgency, rushed off a photocopy of the collection’s known history allowing me just enough time to catch my transport home. Heading into the city that night my hands began to shake as I read the report.
The collection had come into the Fryer Library’s possession through the sharp eye of a friend of Fryer in 1972. Dr Rob Jordan, then a university drama lecturer, had stumbled across the boxes in a local antiquarian book store. Thinking they may have some historical worth he alerted the Fryer Library and they were subsequently purchased. Following their acquisition the boxes were put in storage until they could be processed. The problem, however, was not only finding someone who might know enough about Phillips to make sense of the contents, but also how to approach what was essentially a fragmented and jumbled mess of materials. Unbeknown to the Library, too, was the fact that additional material unrelated to Phillips had been added to the boxes around 1919-20 and again in 1944. And herein lay the greatest hurdle facing the Library.

With my PhD now on temporary hold, I began to think about ways of overcoming the enormous physical and chronological jigsaw puzzle that was the collection. Some sort of record obviously needed to be kept so that I could not only match various fragments, but also more readily locate items when required. The solution would eventually become the Nat Phillips Finding Aid. Even designing the aid was difficult. For a start I’d never had anything to do with archival collections before, (I’d never even heard of the term ‘Finding Aid’) and so designing the catalogue was a case of trial and error. The aid itself probably underwent five or six different designs until finally I settled on one that seemed to work for me. It actually never occurred to me that I should inquire about a typical format...
because the cataloguing was initially undertaken only for my own purposes. In a nutshell, the process required that I scan every page of every manuscript, score or piece of scrap paper looking for distinguishing features. This would invariably include the title, author or pertinent dates (if they existed), the cast of characters, the number of pages, setting, type of work, and in many cases the type of paper, typewriter print and handwriting style. The most problematic issues were authorship, titles, and dates of creation or performances. Very often all three were absent.

In mid-2005, almost four years after I began working on the collection, The University of Queensland in association with the Friends of Fryer celebrated the completion of the detailed cataloguing of the collection and the online publication of the Nat Phillips Finding Aid with a special event at Customs House. One might think at this stage that the story was drawing to a close, but this tale still has a lot more mileage yet. Within a couple of weeks our first major contact with people professionally interested in the collection came about via the collection’s online presence. One historian, currently writing a biography of Roy Rene, put me in contact with Nat Phillips’ great niece, Kim Phillips. It was through this contact that some pieces of the puzzle concerning the origins of the collection began to come together.

According to Ms Phillips, her family had long been puzzled by the disappearance of several boxes of memorabilia belonging to both Nat and Jack Phillips. The boxes had been left with Jack following Nat’s death in 1932, but when he and his first wife separated, the boxes somehow stayed with her and contact was later lost. How the Cremorne Theatre materials came to be in the collection is unknown, but it would seem that the historical significance of both sets of manuscripts remained unrecognised by those who held them. It is surmised that they were passed on to the Brisbane book store in the early 1970s either following the death of Jack Phillips’s ex-wife or through a clean-up at the Cremorne Theatre.

With the collection and on-line finding aid now available to anyone interested in its contents, it is hoped that new insights into Australia’s popular entertainment history might be made in the near future. My recently completed doctoral thesis exemplifies the collection’s importance. Containing four complete edited Nat Phillips scripts, the thesis clearly contradicts the long-held belief that post-WWII variety shows like Stiffy and Mo were revues (a series of sketches, songs and music put together under an umbrella theme). We now know that they were narrative-driven, one-act musical comedies – a form of ‘revusical’ that predates any similar variety genre from America and England by almost two decades.

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If you would like to access the Nat Phillips Collection please contact the Fryer Library on 3365 6276 or fryer@library.uq.edu.au. The Fryer Library is open to the public. The Nat Phillips Finding Aid is available online at www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/ms/uqfl9.doc and images from the collection form part of an online exhibition at www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/Stiffy_and_Mo/