Roll Up To The Circus!

_Gillian Arrighi searches for remnants of The FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus, Australia’s largest and most dazzling producer of popular culture in the late nineteenth century_

During the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century, the circus tent was arguably the most popular place of entertainment in Australia. Of the many native and foreign circuses which toured our continent throughout those years of emergent nationhood, the FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus became the largest and most successful provider of circus entertainments across Australasia. Yet, despite thousands of performances during the years 1889-1908, very few pieces of ephemera remain. A recent week spent at the National Library revealed some unique and diverse articles relating to the FitzGerald, each of which casts light upon this important nineteenth century entertainment company.

The FitzGerald’s rose to prominence in the eastern colonies of Australia during the depression years of the early 1890s when their principally equestrian circus marketed themselves with rhetoric which was fiercely nationalistic and protectionist. The circus enjoyed its first major success in Melbourne in 1892 when it presented two hundred performances over a period of twenty four weeks, a season which was claimed as a show business record for Melbourne, and they followed this impressive run a year later with a popular season in Sydney which lasted fourteen weeks. During these years the FitzGerald’s ring tent seated over 3,000 people and by 1898 the company and their popularity had grown to such an extent that their vast performance marquee accommodated a huge audience of 7,000. From 1894 the company regularly crossed the Tasman to tour New Zealand where they spent up to six months at a time working through the islands, and in 1904 the FitzGerald’s expanded their reach to the colonial outposts of Asia, touring for two years through the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, the Straits Territories, India, and eventually travelling into China as far as Shanghai.

Of all nineteenth century entertainment genres, the performance histories of travelling shows may be the most problematic to retrieve. The transitory nature of the travelling circus meant that its proprietors and performers generally left few records concerning either themselves or their business operations and the challenge to the historian conducting research in this field is increased when the subject lies beyond the reach of living memory. My task of tracing the movements of the FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus and their shifting range of productions and personnel is being conducted through microform newspapers from the various colonies and territories where the circus played. Despite the seemingly endless hours spent scanning the screen of the microfilm reader, these newspapers constitute the primary source of information for the project. Amusement column advertisements provide essential indices of date and place while reviews provide, to a greater or lesser degree, the names of the performers together with detailed descriptions of their acts. Reviews can also provide surprising information about a range of variables which might have impacted on performances, things such as the weather conditions, the range of technology utilised by the production, details concerning the audience, and the tone in which the show was received. Occasionally, a newspaper may divulge a rare interview with one of the agents or proprietors of the circus which fills some of the gaps in my research, while
very occasionally these primary sources are enriched by the discovery of a programme, an oral history, or a selection of photographs such as those I discovered on my recent visit to the National Library.

The Prompt Collection holds one programme for the FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus, and given the scarcity of ephemera relating to this company, this is a rare commodity indeed. Finding such an article can be both exciting and poignant. The materiality of the fragile paper connects me immediately with the past; it is the last remnant of a singular and vibrant performance. As I read through the twenty two acts on the bill the thrill of finding another piece of the jigsaw becomes clouded by the fact that nineteenth century circus programmes were rarely printed with the date or location of the performance they describe. The programme in the Prompt Collection is no exception but in this case, the many display advertisements which fill the margins of the pages indicate that it originated in Sydney. Further newspaper research has enabled me to identify it as being from a Christmas and New Year season which ran from December 22, 1897 through to January 22, 1898. The FitzGerald Brothers’ career was highlighted with numerous successful metropolitan seasons, but this programme dates from a period when they were unchallenged as the premier circus in Australasia, and were attracting larger audiences than any yet entertained by a native circus.

The circus had spent most of the preceding year in Western Australia where the standing company of artists, stud and menagerie had wintered at a camp near Albany. During those few months of hiatus from touring Dan FitzGerald, the elder of the brothers, had travelled to Europe to engage new artists for the coming year, and the Sydney season at the close of 1897 marked the company’s first return to that city in eighteen months. Styled the *FitzGerald Brothers’ Monster Combined Shows*, the aggregation shipped to Sydney from Adelaide aboard three steamers and amongst the large travelling community were the prizes of Dan’s expedition to Europe. These included a range of unique performing animals from Carl Hagenbeck’s Zoological Circus in Hamburg, reportedly purchased at a cost of 60,000 marks. The recent acquisitions were an elephant that ‘performed’ two acts, the first being a comedy routine with a Russian pony named “Oscar”, the second being with a lion. The latter of these turns was presented as the climax to the show and involved the elephant “Lizzie” riding a specially constructed tricycle around the ring with the lion “Prince” seated on a velvet cushion on her back. At a time when society generally accepted the novelty of animal acts, this particularly amicable pairing of two natural enemies was promoted as a triumph of wise and gentle training. Such an approach to animal education was the hallmark of Carl Hagenbeck, a German animal handler and dealer renowned for a system of animal training which was based upon gentleness and patience.

A closer study of the programme reveals that the circus company was a multi-cultural and multi-racial community, and I make this comment even allowing for the outright mendaciousness which characterised the publicity of nineteenth century circuses. Amongst the acts appear the names of two Aboriginal performers, Harry Cardello and W.E. (Billy) Jones, both of whom were long standing and versatile members of the company, while performers from Germany, Japan, Java, England and the United States were also represented on the bill.
Item number 11 on the programme refers to Ernest Shand, *The Marvellous Boy Jockey*, and despite the announcement that he was from “Sanger’s Famous Circus, Liverpool”, Ernest was in fact a young lad from Fitzroy, Melbourne, who had been apprenticed to Dan FitzGerald in 1894 at the age of eleven. It is Ernest Shand who provides a link to the Oral History holdings of the Library and the life story of Iris Shand (1912-2000), recorded by the unit in 1985. (ORAL TRC 1860) Iris was Ernest’s daughter, and Iris’s mother, Katie Montgomery, was a highly skilled equestrienne who joined the FitzGerald’s in 1900. In the recording Iris recounts the stories which her parents told her concerning the methods used to train circus acrobats and equestrians; these preserved memories in turn illuminate the hidden backstage operations of the FitzGerals and other Australian entertainment organisations of the period. One of the acts explained by Iris is the *Serpentine Dance on a Rolling Globe* which was a regular item in the FitzGerals’ programmes. The routine was a signature of *La Belle Rose*, the *nom d’arena* of Millie FitzGerald, wife of Tom FitzGerald, co-proprietor of the circus. *La Belle Rose* also appears in the Prompt Collection programme.

Time spent in the Library’s microform newspaper collection with the weekly magazine Melbourne Punch revealed a number of photographs of performers who appeared with the FitzGerals during the Sydney season of 1897/98. The static images can never attest to the skill, the energy or the excitement of the acts performed by these artists, but some idea of their costumes and the manner in which they wished to present themselves is nevertheless captured in these photos.

The personal papers of Agnes Greenwood (1885-1977) in the Manuscript Collection (MS 72) brought to light a rare photo which captures the FitzGerals’ staff in a very different aspect of their work. Agnes Greenwood was born into a small rural circus and performed with the FitzGerals before going on to work on the Variety stage. The battered photo from her papers shows an informal gathering of circus workers in the midst of preparing a site for the tents; the slogans on the wagons indicate that the photo postdates 1893, the year the company first assembled a menagerie. The efficient and ordered labour displays of the circus workers as they unloaded animals and paraphernalia, then transformed a vacant site by setting up pavilions and seating, were another type of public performance generated by the circus. This informal photo catches a glimpse of the less than glittering work regimen of the travelling nineteenth century circus.

My retrieval of the performance history of the FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus has been enriched by the multi-vocality of these sources, but the task of locating these inter-related items and allowing them to “speak to each other” as it were, could not have been possible without the fine detail evidenced in the catalogues of the National Library’s various collections.