EMOTIONAL AND NATURAL

*The Australian and New Zealand repertoires and
fortunes of North American performers Margaret Anglin,
Katherine Grey and Muriel Starr*

Veronica Kelly

It is difficult to assess the international careers of touring stage performers in the early twentieth century without considering the related categories of the transnational and technological biographies. Deacon, Russell and Woollacott state that situated and regional readings of global mobility have their value: ‘we must abandon the search for the “whole subject” and allow that fragments of identity are produced in specific times and places’ (Deacon, Russell and Woollacott, 2010: 9). Australia and New Zealand from 1908 to 1930 provide a site from which a diagnostic perspective may be constructed and articulated concerning the careers of touring theatre stars during a crucial phase of globalised mediated entertainments. As Platt, Becker and Linton demonstrate in the case of the dominant genre of musical theatre, the early-century transfers and translation of scripts, scores, business cultures and performers between Berlin and London operated ‘across centres competing for authority’, even during periods of intense conflict (Platt, Becker and Linton, 2014: 3). The Australasian fortunes of the stage actors Margaret Anglin, Katherine Grey and Muriel Starr indicate that dealings with the technological ‘centres of authority’ of cinema and – to some extent – radio could be as significant to overall careers as eminence in their native theatrical discipline. These dealings may involve direct engagement with cinema, or – as here – mainly rejection, but both imply their necessary situational relations with mediated entertainment. Sometimes, as was the case with Muriel Starr, global technological and financial revolutions, their consequences reaching even to, say, the tiny Victorian Alpine town of Tumut, could remorselessly strike down the career of a genuinely popular stage favourite.

In a real sense, a completely non-international twentieth-century actor is a rare being. Newspaper saturation, accompanied by the

international penetration of performers via the related intermedial forms of radio and film, ensured that in Tumut, no less than in neon-lit metropolitan theatrical centres, touring performers were enveloped by the colourful discursive aura of the varied industries of global entertainment. Thus, for audiences, the 'vicarious experience' (Iriye and Mitter, 2010: xi) of the transnational operates as a dynamically textured, if partial, reception context. As they travelled Australasia, Anglin, Grey and Starr were ghosted by the discursive presences of those mostly North American stage actors who may have first created 'their' star parts abroad; by other theatrical performers in the Australian region who created or recreated their signature roles; and increasingly by the silvery phantoms of Hollywood actors performing 'their' stage successes on silent, and eventually talking, screens. Thus, the mediated presence of the movie stars Clara Kimball Young, Norma Talmadge, Loretta Young, Pola Negri, Norma Shearer and Pauline Frederick surround the Australian presence of Anglin, Grey and Starr, generating comparisons about their respective dramatic work. The distinguished American tragedienne Frederick was the only one of these luminaries to undertake stage work in Australia, and her signature film performance in *Madame X* (1920) for Goldwyn Pictures (de Groat, 2006) places her beside Starr in this local context, particularly as her 1925 visit coincided with Starr's third tour. In this transnational discourse, live presence initially trumped 'tinned theatre' in critical esteem. For example, cinematic roles that had been premiered as a Starr vehicle were 'introduced to Australia by Muriel Starr' and her performance held up as the gold standard: she was 'responsible for its Australian version', said a Tasmanian paper of Dorothy Mackaill's 1924 silent version of *The Man Who Came Back*.¹ But by this decade's end, Starr's popular dramatic vehicles were in a neck-and-neck race with the exhibition of their screen versions, with both frequently playing the same centre simultaneously, and the time gap becoming generally ever narrower.

As professional workers within global modernity, stage actors are significant coalmine canaries for mapping economic crises and disruptions, and revolutions in the generative practices of creation, mediation and distribution. In 1908 the popular and accomplished 'empire actor' George Titheradge (Kelly, 2009: 15), recruited to support Margaret Anglin on his third and her only Australian tour, declared his happiness at returning to Melbourne. After a twenty-year absence from the West End, he noted the effects of the long run in restricting opportunities for actor training, and the downplaying of performer versatility

gained through touring experience in favour of copycat performances or mere ‘personalities’.² Not all revolutions were managerial. Marlis Schweitzer’s study of early-century transatlantic exchanges emphasises the materiality of the ‘infrastructural elements and technological advances that supported the globalisation of popular entertainment’: transatlantic liners, telegraph cables, typewriters, offices, newspapers and postcards (Schweitzer, 2015: 4). Such spaces, technologies and networks are all prone to mishap and failure as when, for example, war cuts the submarine cables or sinks the ocean liner. But war is a capricious agent, dispensing opportunity as well as disaster. Much of the Australian success of Muriel Starr, apart from her genuine popularity, was due to the opportunities created by the First World War. This interrupted the flow of European entertainers and caused entrepreneurs to seek North

16 Margaret Anglin in 1930, at the time of her NBC broadcast of *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

American performers who could sail from Vancouver and San Francisco on the safer Pacific routes. So, just as the Wall Street copper panics of late 1907 caused thousands of Broadway and provincial American actors to be stood down (Schweitzer, 2015: 28), so too were the international careers of Anglin, Grey and Starr subject to global contexts such as the First World War, the Great Depression, silent film, broadcast radio and eventually sound film. While live theatre accommodated the first two of these innovations in mostly happy coexistence, the rapid phasing-in of the talkies in the major city theatres in late 1928, simultaneous with the Depression, saw an increase in suicides, hunger, desperation and mass unemployment for stage musicians and actors, as indeed for their audiences.

‘American’ actresses, natural and emotional

Born in Ottawa, Margaret Anglin (1876–1958) was clearly identified in the land of her birth as Canadian, even while establishing herself as a major performer in the USA. As Cecilia Morgan demonstrates, she flexibly claimed Canadian and American identity, together with social and cultural identifiers such as Irish or Catholic, enabling her to ‘[appeal] to a variety of class, gender, ethnic, national and imperial audiences’ (Morgan, 2010: 152). While Anglin was always advertised as American by her Australian management, socially she was happy to be interpellated as variously Canadian, a ‘loyal Britisher’, American or Irish, and she attracted an unusual amount of favourable coverage in the Australian Catholic press.³ The stage life of Montreal-born Muriel McIver (1888–1950), who took the stage name Muriel Starr, commenced in childhood. Although she was also professionally identified with American experience, in her case provincial touring in melodrama and musical comedy, in Australia Starr was also pointedly hailed as Canadian. No such ambiguities were applied to the San Francisco-born actor Katherine Grey (1873–1950), born Katherine Best, whose American origin and training was used in Australia as a selling point when realistic American social problem plays were dominating a significant sector of Australian dramatic production. The showcasing of this repertoire by the ‘Firm’ of J. C. Williamson Ltd put at a discount the high-romantic zest of American actors such as Grey who were well capable of producing it; and – in Anglin’s case – determined to do so.

Vocally, these performers would have sounded somewhat familiar to Australian and New Zealand ears. Each employed the dramatic *lingua*

franca of the 'English' accent, as Anglin did in her 1908 Shakespeare premieres in Adelaide and Sydney, where her German-American co-star Henry Kolker incurred disapproval for using his native accent in contemporary and classical plays alike. Except for American pieces, where Starr, a New Yorker from the age of six, produced a ringing Broadway vernacular, she too cultivated the voice beautiful with musicality and low tones: 'no excruciating accent spoils the sweet melody of her voice'.⁴ In 1910 a New Zealand interviewer detected in Katherine Grey's rich tones 'now and then just the faintest suspicion of the American accent'.⁵ Throughout the roughly three decades of silent film, a beautiful and thrilling voice remained a stage actress's major asset, filling the house and reducing audiences to jelly. Starr, whose voice, she insisted, is 'quite English, you know', found the part of Domini in Robert Hichens' desert melodrama *The Garden of Allah*, which headlined her third Australasian tour, 'difficult and thankless' since she was required to listen in silence to her co-star's lengthy monologues. This was not, she observes, how audiences wanted to experience their leading ladies.⁶ Hence, the advent of talkies also compromised this unique and valued advantage of the stage 'emotional actress'.

The category of 'naturalness' in performance remains ever relative and slippery. The 'natural' performance is to an extent place-bound but more essentially time-bound, as a culture's social modes of self-presentation evolve and mutate alongside its theatrical codes of mimetic representation, locked in a reciprocal dance whose conventionality is largely obscured from contemporaries, though more evident to the view of subsequent or foreign audiences. In the context of Australia before the First World War, Dennis Carroll judges that North American performers such as Muriel Starr were 'powerful and real' in contrast to 'the bombast and large effects common with English performers' (Carroll, 1995: 48). While reports of Australasian performances by Anglin, Grey and Starr certainly attest to their ability to produce the 'natural' effect, their performances belie any simple apportioning of distinctive performance styles to national origin. In Australasia, little was perceived as natural in the 'emotional' American star Minnie Tittell Brune's performances, while such English performers as Florence Trevelyan (Mrs Brough) or George Titheradge produced fine examples of elegant precision. It is more useful to consider actors as perfecting their own range according to their repertoires and working apprenticeships with established players, and seeking genres and roles to showcase their lines of work or challenge their distinctive abilities. The multi-regional genealogies of training,

experience and lineage are more revealing than classifying performance styles according to national origin.

While these three performers were all praised in Australia for their 'natural' acting, they were simultaneously hailed as 'emotional actresses'. Sited in the then-dominant tradition of Bernhardt, Stella Campbell, Olga Nethersole or Nance O'Neil, the 'emotional actress' was the default interpreter of dramatic melodrama and some classical work well into the 1920s, bearing major responsibility for audience engagement and connection. Only in the genres of musical comedy, farce or light comedy did she not dominate her stage. A fascinating yet graceful kinetic style and thrilling vocal tones were her major assets. Her characters embodied a maternal yet sexy kind of mature femininity, drawing from the conflated roles of saintly magdalene, redemptive heroine or sacrificial mother. These transgressors educe a morally transfigured validation beyond mere social laws, and the task of the emotional actress was to ensure this effect in performance. Anglin was first tagged as an emotional actress when she performed in *Mrs Dane's Defence* in New York in December 1900, where she subverted the play's rigid sexual morality by winning sympathy for its erring and prevaricating heroine (Le Vay, 1989: 53–5). A standard press question to performers was whether the actress 'really' felt the emotions she portrayed. Anglin's response to the riddle of 'emotionalism' was a cryptic 'Where would I have been without it?',⁷ and upon her arrival in Australia she gracefully fielded the inevitable query: her emotional roles were not reflected in the offstage life of an actress, any more than light, frivolous or saintly ones were.⁸ Even Grey, whose forté was George Bernard Shaw and social problem dramas critiquing the ills of America's urban capitalism and legal system, was nonetheless hailed as America's 'chiefest interpreter of the emotional drama'.⁹

As for any male equivalents of the 'emotional actress', few are identified as such. Indeed, the skin-part specialist Ernest Hendrie, in Australia to play the Dog in *The Blue Bird*, joked that since there was currently no emotional display perceivable in the West End, the 'emotional actors and actresses' would have to play animals.¹⁰ A search of Australasian newspapers between 1890 and 1930 reveals scant examples of the phrase 'emotional actor'. It was awarded to the great Italian tenor Fiorelli Giraud in *I Pagliacci* (1901) in Melbourne¹¹ and to the Dutch cellist August van Biene, who performed in his own playlet *The Broken Melody* over four thousand times.¹² As the 1920s proceed, the sole local occurrences of the phrase are found in the country press, and applied only to such film actors as Sessue Hayakawa, 'the famous Japanese emotional actor' (*The*

17 Katherine Grey, commercial postcard.

Call of the East), Henry B. Walthall (*Birth of a Nation*) and Tom Mix (*The Coming of the Law*). In the meantime, on the silent screen of the 1920s there reigned countless ‘emotional actresses’, confirming that a highly coded gendered physicality no less than voice was a vehicle of their emotional impact. Starr particularly endeared herself to Australian and New Zealand audiences on her first tour (1913–14) as ‘the brilliant young emotional actress’ (Black Kitten), her roles being the falsely accused shop girl Mary Turner in *Within the Law*, and the criminal but sacrificial

mother Jacqueline Floriot in *Madame X*. On her two subsequent tours (1918–20 and 1924–30) the ‘Firm’ of J. C. Williamson showcased Starr in the arty Orientalist spectacles *The Bird of Paradise* and *The Garden of Allah*, which played only the capital cities.

Yet when subsequently touring with her own stock company, Starr preferred quick-turnover repertoires based on the 1920s craze for comedy-thrillers and mystery-thrillers. The Firm, now in partnership with her, purchased their Australasian rights in order to feed her repertoire. These vernacular dramas contrast urban American plutocracy with its slums, featuring poor women under financial or moral pressure, drug fiends, slang-speaking Broadway molls, capitalist tycoons and the inevitable detective: variously tough or gentlemanly, genuine or imposter. The thrillers feature eerie séances, locked-room mysteries, terrified flappers, masked murderers and death by telephone, evoking fearful suspense and dispelling it through laughter. Playing into the audience fandom of these campily self-conscious genres, dramatists ingeniously combined their stock characters and generic features into startling innovations. In *Cornered* (1920) by Dodson Mitchell, premiered in Melbourne in May 1927, Starr played the dual roles of the crooked shop girl and the society lady. Max Marcin’s *Cheating Cheaters* (1916) was filmed in 1919 starring Clara Kimball Young, and again as a Universal silent in late 1927. In this, the chief (female) crook turns out to be an intrepid detective working sting operations on two rival gangs simultaneously. When Starr’s production premiered in Adelaide on 7 December 1927 it had just been preceded in that city by Kimball’s movie, while the MGM talkie of *Madame X* with Ruth Chatterton (successor to Frederick’s silent version) was shown in Australia in August 1929: portents of the revolution in stage actors’ professional environment. Even though by 1929 Starr had been playing in this vigorous repertoire in most of Australia and New Zealand, the national sensation caused by her 1913 performances in *Madame X* and *Within the Law* had solidified her identification with her early ‘emotional’ roles, re-demanded by tenacious audiences as must-see epochal landmarks right up to her departure.¹³

Actors, roles and managers

Artistic validation by association with great writers, major theatrical stars or managerial moguls was important to the reputations of Anglin and Grey; less so to the adventurous born-in-a-suitcase trouper Muriel Starr. The Greek tragedians and Shakespeare (in a minor way) were significant

MURIEL STARR

LAST AMERICAN APPEARANCE—LEAD IN "JOHN HAWTHORNE" THEATRE GUILD N. Y. **STARRED FOR THE PAST SEVEN YEARS**—ENGLAND, AFRICA AND AUSTRALIA IN "SECRETS"—"EAST OF SUEZ"—"THE LETTER"—"THE ENEMY"—"DE CLASSE"—"BILL OF DIVORCEMENT" AND "THE PELICAN"

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18 Muriel Starr seeks work in the USA, from *Standing Cast Directory*, Hollywood, July 1931.

in securing Anglin's prestige as a public-minded classical actor, while in her early American career Grey was an apostle of Bernard Shaw and of modernism generally. Anglin's Shakespearean ventures commenced in Australia, though their remote origins lay in youthful school dramatic recitations as preparation for a lady-like career of drawing-room reader. In her early work with the American melodramatic touring star James O'Neill, he proclaimed 'Mary, you must do Shakespeare, you have the Irish Sea in your voice' (Le Vay, 1989: 41). Allegedly because of expensive Australasian performing rights, Anglin was debarred from starring in her recent American success, William Vaughan Moody's *The Great*

Divide (1906). This play's Australian premiere was actually performed by Muriel Starr on her second tour in 1919, when the theatres reopened subsequent to the Spanish Influenza outbreak.¹⁴ Hence, Anglin's tour was rather muted in its impact compared with the popular sensations caused by Grey and Starr. Part of this was due to such external events as weather and strikes, some to her management's response to national events, and also to her rather undazzling repertoire before she resolved to produce her own Shakespearean comedies on the Firm's dime. Its publicity agent Claude McKay said of the Anglin tour that '[t]he theatre was comfortably filled throughout the season, but we were not turning crowds away' (McKay, 1961: 110).

Anglin's group sailed to Australia from Vancouver on 23 May 1908 on the *Aorangi*, which was crammed with many other American performers. Aboard were the companies of the musical comedies *The Red Mill* and *The Prince of Pilsen*, plus fellow Irishwoman Ada Dwyer and other cast members of the rural comedy *Mrs Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*. The *Aorangi* was not the only vessel of importance then upon the Pacific. The 'Firm' of J. C. Williamson was ensuring that the naval visitors of Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, eagerly awaited in both newly federated Australasian nations, would be surrounded by American entertainers and generally made to feel 'at home'. In this fevered Americanophile moment, and given her prominent reputation, local interest in Anglin's visit was strong. Yet initially her partner George Titheradge was hailed as the season's real star and Anglin as his leading lady, recruited because her style was perceived as similar to that of his famed co-star Mrs Robert Brough.

Anglin premiered in Sydney on 27 June 1908 in *The Thief*, a translation of Henri Bernstein's *Le voleur* (1906), which had appeared on Broadway in September 1907 and was also running at the St James Theatre in London with Irene Vanbrugh. It was Anglin's debut in this role, bought and imperiously bestowed upon her by J. C. Williamson himself. In nine days she undertook the tasks of rapid study, version-making and production: multiple roles in which she was well practised. Williamson was pleased with the result: 'She has won hands down. I knew she would!'¹⁵ Anglin was acclaimed as compelling in a way not seen since Ristori and Bernhardt.¹⁶ Her performance was 'so amazingly natural that, till one sees her, one doesn't realise what stage naturalness may mean', but the play was considered shallow and unworthy.¹⁷ *Zira*, adapted with a South African setting from the venerable Wilkie Collins stalwart *The New Magdalen*, gained little impact. Nor did Clyde Fitch's

comedy *The Truth* fare much better. Thanks to heavy rainfall plus a transport strike, it lasted in Sydney for only ten nights, though 'the thoroughness of this actress's methods and resulting technical perfection' was again commended.¹⁸

On 20 August 1908 tens of thousands of Sydneysiders walked or strap-hung on trams to South Head to see the Fleet enter the harbour. Anglin also snatched a few hours from rehearsals to witness the spectacle, which she cheekily 'reviewed' for the press.¹⁹ The next day she was despatched to Melbourne while *Mrs Wiggs* took her place at Her Majesty's, which had been too large a venue for Anglin's intimate repertoire. Melbourne appreciated Anglin: 'She [stands] right outside the character she portrays, so that she may rack the emotions of her auditors without straining her own.'²⁰ Then, over her manager's protests, she began rehearsals for *The Taming of the Shrew*, generating critical enthusiasm at the prospect of a full version of a play usually seen in Australia as the Garrick farce *Katherine and Petruchio*. Unlike Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton, who finally performed the full version in Australia to huge success the following year, Anglin omitted the Induction and most of Bianca's scenes. *Twelfth Night*, the next premiere, was dressed with the lovely scenery designed for George Musgrove's 1903 production (Kelly, 2009: 39–91). *The Shrew* was also played in Adelaide and Ballarat before a more successful Sydney farewell season. A thoroughly fatigued Anglin sailed for Europe on the *Mongolia* on 19 December 1908, and Ola Humphrey, with Kolker and Titheradge, was assigned for a New Zealand tour of the 'Anglin' plays. Cicely Hamilton's feminist shop-girl drama *Diana of Dobson's* (1908), which Williamson originally secured for Anglin, was subsequently premiered by Minnie Tittell Brune (Kelly, 2009: 139–40).

Anglin, something of a cultural missionary, returned to Shakespeare on an extensive North American tour commencing in late 1913, again leading with *The Shrew* followed by *Twelfth Night*, then *As You Like It* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Le Vay (1989: 253–6) notes a subsequent 1928 *Lady Macbeth* at the University of California with a design by Edward Gordon Craig, but overall the Shakespearean impetus begun in Australia was not sustained. In order to support such choices, many pot-boilers and hit plays had to be performed and exhausting national tours undertaken. Anglin's determined commitment to Greek drama, however, secured her a measure of patronage from well-funded and prestigious institutions. Commencing with *Electra* in 1913 (Le Vay, 1989: 142), the outdoor Berkeley Theatre at the University of California became her

19 Katherine Grey in costume drama, c. 1894.

venue for summer arena spectacles using huge casts of extras, dancers, musicians and choirs. In 1915 were added *Medea* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, with original music by a fifty-piece orchestra, five hundred extras and chariots (Le Vay, 1989: 161–9). Others followed sporadically during the 1920s, financed by her arduous commercial tours and performed in such diverse sites as opera houses, parks and on radio. While the prestige and impact of these ambitious classical spectacles were considerable, they

were never going to be career-sustaining money-earners. Anglin's plans to permanently institutionalise the Greek summer events at Berkeley failed for want of a sufficient initial money guarantee (Le Vay, 1989: 248). Later in her career she turned to production: 'I like to create, I like to see things grow and happen ... An actress cannot do this' (Le Vay, 1989: 179).

Katherine Grey's vehicles in Australia and New Zealand included Charles Klein's *The Third Degree* (1908), Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Fitch's *The Truth*, Edward Sheldon's *Salvation Nell* (1908) and Eugene Walter's *Paid in Full* (1908), which Muriel Starr later toured extensively in Australia. Her American apprenticeship displays wide experience in popular theatre undertaken with major managements, which soon flowered into enthusiasm for modern plays and the classics. Grey began in Augustin Daly's New York company, whose female star was Ada Rehan, and then joined one of Charles Frohman's companies supporting another superstar, Maude Adams. Kyrle Bellew, Nat Goodwin and Charles Coghlan were her later co-stars, implying a performer of some achievement. Her first great success (and Starr's first stage appearance) were in productions of James A. Herne's sentimental *Shore Acres* (1893), but Grey also succeeded as the tropically emotional heroine in Hall Caine's *The Christian*: a cat-tearing role which sustained many a touring actor. Like Anglin, she made an impression in Jones's *Mrs Dane's Defence*, which prompted Amy Leslie of the *Chicago News* to venture comparisons. Grey was

a sensitively emotional and delicately artistic actress [...] and without in the least attempting to compare two players so totally different in method and personality as Miss Margaret Anglin and Miss Grey, it must be admitted that Miss Grey is both sweeter and more tenderly womanly than the robust Canadian, and equals her in strength and fire.²¹

Grey's New York training suited her for touring as lead in contemporary plays interspersed with classics and poetic drama. In 1894 she played in the first American performance of *Arms and the Man* at Herald Square Theatre, produced by its Bluntschli, the great Shakespearean, Savoyard and Shavian Richard Mansfield. However, Grey was no stranger to romantic costume parts, and in a commercial partnership with Mansfield she performed Roxane in *Cyrano de Bergerac* and Belasco's *Sweet Kitty Bellairs*. Producing these dramas along with Shaw and Molière, she and Mansfield lost their savings. Undaunted, Mansfield went on to premiere an epic *Peer Gynt*: his last great role, whose New York season at the New Amsterdam Theatre was cut short by his death

on 23 March 1907. During this run, for her own repertory company at the nearby Berkeley Lyceum, Grey also performed her early signature role of Christine Dehring in Arthur Schnitzler's comedy *The Reckoning*. *Candida* and *The Man of Destiny* were included in this season. In 1909 she formed her own company, playing San Francisco and Denver in a modern repertoire of Shaw, Fitch's *The Truth* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.²² Hence at the time of her Australasian tour the slight-figured Grey was an established American performer and independent producer with a distinctively modern dramatic taste and very credible enterprises and achievements.

Grey's work in Australia and New Zealand proved something of an unexpected local sensation – not, as she might have wished, in the plays of her beloved Shaw, Ibsen and Rostand, but in the topical American dramas which agitated for labour equity and critiqued the police and justice systems. Her Sydney debut in January 1910 was as the new leading lady for the Firm's major romantic costume star Julius Knight, in Charles Klein's 1905 social drama *The Lion and the Mouse*. As Shirley Rossmore, the 'mouse' who overcomes the economic and gendered power of the 'lion', the multi-millionaire tycoon John Burkett Ryder, Grey's first entrance was greeted with a burst of prolonged applause. She struggled to conceal a severe cold, but as the performance proceeded and the newcomer showed her determination to earn her reputation, conventional star-worship became genuine appreciation with outbursts of cheering and repeated calls. What Grey was doing – and more importantly, not doing – was to play an 'emotional' role without overt foregroundings of emotionality. Vocally she used a 'conversational style', and her strengths were her 'absolute naturalness and her wonderful power of restraint'.²³

Her 'dowdy' costumes for *The Lion and the Mouse* simulated the off-the-peg garb of the American female urban worker. The contrast with the newly arrived Lily Brayton's lavish and artistic stage dresses was pronounced. Grey's costumes were of intense interest to those Australian working women seeking low-cost but smartly fashionable and durable clothing. *Table Talk* noted the straight severe cuts with their new clean collarless style and V-necks: '[s]he looks just as if she stepped from a picture in one of the American fashion magazines'.²⁴ Other observers missed the full-flounced signifiers of sensuous femininity: her Shirley Rossmore 'would be a thing of joy to suffragettes, feminine candidates for Parliament, and other champions of the sex'.²⁵ However, the *Bulletin* objected to her work being praised as 'untheatrical', citing the stagecraft that built up her first entrance as Shirley: Margaret Anglin, it

20 Grey as Louka in *Arms and the Man* in Chicago, from *The Stage*, July 1895.

averred, would have cut such effect-making business. Few knew Anglin had entered onstage in *The Thief* until she actually spoke: she was ‘the genuine article in the art line’, unlike Brayton, ‘that beautiful but essentially stagey young woman’.²⁶

In the Australian *Arms and the Man* premiere Grey played Raina to Julius Knight’s Bluntschli, though she preferred the part of Louka which she had created for America. ‘I think I was in every Bernard Shaw piece produced in America’, she told an Adelaide interviewer. ‘I would love to

play Ibsen. I know Mr Williamson wishes I didn't.' Thereupon she 'fell back and her chair and laughed merrily'.²⁷ This exchange alludes to the strong possibility of prior discussions between actor and manager in which the prospect of Grey playing in Ibsen had been raised and firmly vetoed. Whereas Anglin had imperiously over-ridden Williamson in devising her own Shakespeare productions, Grey's position was unlike that of (say) Nance O'Neil, who performed *Hedda Gabler* in Australia in 1900. While also sponsored by Williamson's organisation, O'Neil brought her own dramatic company, and so could do much as she pleased. Upon Knight's return to England, Grey took over as costume heroine with her dashing new co-star William Desmond. New Zealand also found her success 'absolutely reliant on her splendid art': in *The Lion and the Mouse* she performed with 'wonderful naturalness' and a 'quiet, placid, adroitness'.²⁸ Since many successful American pre-war plays during these decades were social protest pieces, gun-wielding crook plays or raucously colloquial comedies, Williamson was inclined to secure American casts for these. Grey accordingly performed Edward Sheldon's tear-jerking slums and sweatshops drama *Salvation Nell* throughout New Zealand.

Muriel Starr: stage and picture-shows

If Grey and Anglin were appreciated for their artistry, in the anxious years before the First World War Muriel Starr became both a popular national craze, with audiences mobbing theatres with almost hysterical enthusiasm, and an admired personality adopted into the local community for her displays of grit and commitment against the economic odds. She was less of a glamorous 'star' in the mould of Anglin, Lily Brayton or even Grey in her earlier career, but rather a character actor who ran her own touring troupes, for preference in interesting far-flung regions. When Bayard Veiller's Broadway play *Within the Law* (1912) opened in the Melbourne Theatre Royal on 24 May 1913, Starr led an all-American company.²⁹ The press declared that she

helps to confirm the impression already formed by a study of the acting of her American sisters, Miss Anglin and Miss Katherine Grey, who, in the portrayal of the emotions and actions of real people stand almost alone. Miss Starr acts quietly and naturally – her voice is like her acting – quiet and harmonious but full of colour and expression where needed.³⁰

Other cast members were also commended for what are usually seen as the cardinal 'English' virtues of subtlety and restraint, though the play

itself, a drama dealing with American social and economic conditions, cannot really be said to exemplify either of these virtues.

Like many of Tittell Brune's vehicles, *Within the Law* appeals to the 'shop girl' thematic, so scorned by critics of a feminised modernity yet so keenly appreciated by Australasian young women (Kelly, 2006). Mary Turner is wrongly accused of theft by her employer Gilder and serves three years in gaol. She protests that even the standard wage for workers such as she cannot sustain the necessities of life. Upon her release Mary sets out upon an elaborate revenge, marrying Gilder's son and master-minding a variety of lucrative rackets which, like the shop-girl's standard wage, are only just 'within the law'. Third-degree police interrogations, stool pigeons and murders by silenced revolvers fill out the action. Theatres displayed testimonials from Theodore Roosevelt: 'Six of the biggest department stores in New York raised the wages of their shop girls through WITHIN THE LAW!'³¹ The production played Broken Hill during a strike by shop employees. Cheering workers thronged the

21 A publicity postcard of Muriel Starr as Mary Turner in 'the great American Drama', *Within the Law*: 'The most absorbingly interesting drama of human nature ever produced in Australia.'

theatre and Starr was showered with letters and given a vote of thanks by unionists.³² The lives of shop girls did not, as their detractors claimed, revolve merely around escapism and 'gush', but involved them in serious economic struggles.

At the Melbourne Theatre Royal in April 1914 Starr took the lead in an American version of Alexandre Bisson's 1908 *Madame X*, a maternal melodrama that had been played by Bernhardt.³³ The play's scheduled two weeks were extended to six and a similar long run followed in Sydney. *The Bulletin* considered it the dampest weepie ever, a curious vehicle in which to impress through 'natural' playing, yet Starr triumphed in this mingling of registers.³⁴ Jacqueline Floriot deserts her husband and child for her lover, and upon her penitent return she is discarded by her husband. Twenty years of drink, hard drugs and low living ensue for Jacqueline until she shoots her current protector to protect her family's honour. Terminally ill, she stands trial as 'Madame X'. Her husband sits on the bench, but the defence counsel is the son she deserted, who, fired by obscure sympathy for the degraded yet charismatic stranger, secures a verdict of not guilty. As she dies, a mutual recognition occurs between mother and son. Accompanied by 'multitudinous sniffs from the darkness', Starr's performance '[touched] the heights of genius'.³⁵

As the world moved towards war, the Firm urgently needed to retain its popular contracted actors. Starr's salary increased from £40 to £50 and her contract was now for 52 weeks rather than the Firm's usual cautious 26-week hires. Her next role was the tough-talking Nora O'Brien in *The Chorus Lady* (1906), written by Canadian-American James Forbes, in which the eponymous heroine saves her wilful sister from a moneyed sexual predator, with slangy repartee and generally hard-boiled goings-on. Starr showed her flair for comedy and also her dramatic 'magnetism'. She was thoroughly back in her 'emotional' territory in the controversial play *The Yellow Ticket* by Michael Morton, which opened at the Criterion in September 1914, one week after the declaration of war. This American script, premiered in New York in January of that year, treated in high sensational style the restrictions on residence and occupations inflicted upon Jews in Tsarist Russia. Starr as heroine opts to obtain the prostitute's 'yellow ticket' as affording her more civil rights than those which Jews enjoyed. Despite its scandalous prostitute thematic, wartime governmental panics about venereal disease among the troops ensured the play lively attention and even official endorsement.

Starr preferred the 'gypsy life' of constant global touring in flexible repertoire, for which reason she had agreed to the Firm's engagement in

"THE CHORUS LADY."

Muriel Starr as Pat. In the dressing room.

22 Hal Gye sketch of Muriel Starr in *The Chorus Lady*, from the *Bulletin* [Sydney], 24 December 1914.

the first place, but instead her popularity had forced her into long runs. Touring was in her blood, she told one Wellington paper.³⁶ 'I like to be on the move. When I came to Australia I looked for travel all the time.' Privately, her managers were worried about their actor's endurance. The Firm's managing director George Tallis wrote to his partner Hugh Ward on 31 August 1914 that her tour to Western Australia cost her two stone in weight and that her health was 'awful'. This was inconvenient, since they had secured for her the two American vehicles *The Yellow Ticket* and George Broadhurst's *Bought and Paid For*. Her first Australasian engagement had stretched to two and half years, and upon leaving in August 1915 she was contracted to appear the following year in Firm theatres in South Africa.³⁷

Starr returned to Australasia as a headliner, partnered by the distinguished Anglo-Australian actor and later screenwriter Frank Harvey (Vagg, 2006). In the USA, she had been playing Chicago and San Francisco for Oliver Morosco in Richard Walton Tully's spectacle drama *The Bird of Paradise* (1911), which opened her reappearance at Melbourne

in December 1917. Typical of interrupted wartime patterns of theatrical circulation, this play was premiered in Australia twenty-one months before its London showing. Described as ‘a mixture of orientalism, colonialism, and a particularly American variation of the Pacific imaginary’ (Balme, 2015: 1), it saw Starr in blackface amid fiery volcanoes, swaying Hawaiian dancers and plangent steel guitars: these latter forming the play’s major attractions. Further vehicles included more of the American moral-regeneration dramas which now spoke anew to post-war trauma and upheavals in sexual mores: Eugene Walter’s *The Easiest Way* (1909), *The Man Who Came Back* (1916) by Jules Eckert Goodman, and George Broadhurst’s *Bought and Paid For* (1911). During the Sydney run Starr took an afternoon off to marry William Hartwell Johnston, the Chicago-born Sydney representative of Wrigley’s Spearmint chewing gum. A New Zealand tour was undertaken in late 1919, followed by three years of domesticity in Chicago.

Meanwhile silent screen versions of Starr’s vehicles made in the second decade of the century, plus the more glamorous 1920s silent remakes, had been, or would shortly be, exhibited in Australia. Starr’s career and the output of Hollywood were now meshing in what was initially a collaborative competition for the interest of popular audiences. At this juncture, the stage set the critical standard for emotional contact:

It is always a big test for a cinematograph film to follow a successful play, and repeat that success ... [T]he great American drama, ‘Within the Law’, made its first local appearance on the screen and scored an instant triumph ... the magnetism of the living portrayal has been conveyed into the pictorial narrative, so that the crowded audiences ... were gripped by the intensity and appealing force of the human tragedy, just as they were affected in the legitimate drama.³⁸

This refers to the 1917 Vitagraph version with Alice Joyce, but such was the material fragility of film stock and the short exhibition runs that, by 1919, the writer may have forgotten the Australian film made by the very actor who had first introduced this ‘great American drama’ to the country. During her first tour Starr had played in a four-reeler *Within the Law* directed by Monte Luke. As the war dried up overseas material and increased internal transport costs, the Firm entered the world of cinematic production, filming their recent successes such as Fred Niblo in *Officer 666* and *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford* in order to reach country audiences cheaply. In late 1915 Starr filmed the feature *Within the Law* in between her stage rehearsals and performances (Pike and Cooper, 1980: 77). Hence,

early one morning outside the Melbourne Law Courts, passers-by recognised their theatrical favourite being pursued and manacled by the police. A belligerent crowd quickly gathered, only dispersing when it was explained that she was being filmed for a 'picture' (Marsden, 2009a).

After an unsuccessful tour to a troubled South Africa, Starr arrived back in Australia in March 1924 with her troupe partner Harvey Adams, sharing the *Mongolia* with the Melba Opera Company. By now she was worth a weekly £80 to the Firm. The lugubrious *Garden of Allah* ensued, a show with a 'sheiky flavour'³⁹ employing Sweetie, the Firm's veteran stage camel, plus a host of donkeys, goats and sheep.⁴⁰ It showcased Frank Harvey's considerable acting abilities but did little for Starr. Melbourne's season opening in August 1924 continued the East-meets-West thematic with Starr as the treacherous Chinese 'half-caste' in Somerset Maugham's *East of Suez*, with the Pola Negri silent film released in January 1925 in hot pursuit. By April 1925 the stage version had played Brisbane and Adelaide and was dropped.

Then, after her contract expired at the beginning of 1926, Starr's third tour radically altered in character. She had saved £600 and the lure of the road called again. She formed her own company with Harvey Adams, who also directed her productions for the strenuous touring. Starr believed there was room in Australia for a good stock company, despite the 'pessimists [who] tried to dissuade her, telling her that musical comedy and the pictures had knocked the bottom out of drama'.⁴¹ But she had weathered plenty of gruelling back-roads travel and non-appearing salaries, and remained optimistic.

My idea was to take a small company out, and do the small towns, so that I could visit parts of Australia and New Zealand that in all my time here I have never had a chance of seeing. I was most anxious to see Northern Queensland, for instance, and I had never seen Rotorua. Then everyone wanted me to take 'Within the Law.' This meant a larger company, so I thought that as I had the company I might as well have a few other plays, and so the venture grew.⁴²

Leasing the Firm's theatres and dramatic properties, she began an exhausting series of stock visits to regional cities and towns. As the world slid into the Great Depression, this venture became more and more desperate, her finances drained completely, and the rural centres became ever smaller.

At first, the touring was successful financially as well as dramatically, with *Within the Law* securing steady income. She played Tasmania

for eight weeks and twenty in New Zealand. Sustained seasons were generally lucrative with a varied repertoire of thrillers, crook plays and comedies. In Adelaide in 1927 the company sustained 100 performances of a weekly-change repertoire. Major capitals were revisited towards the end of 1928, when the omens of the coming catastrophe became clearer. In Hobart the Musicians' Union walked out of Starr's season premiere in protest at being replaced by 'tinned music' via the panatrope.⁴³ It was not only 'tinned music' but tinned performances which in a few short months would also turn the actors out of their theatres.

"SWEENEY TODD." THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET-STREET.

Top: Sweeney Todd (Scott Alexander), who murders his customers and, with an eye to economy, drops them through his shop floor to a backhouse. . . . Bottom Left: Susan Lovatt (Muriel Starr), in charge of Todd's pie shop, supervises the making of the victims into pies. . . . Bottom Right: Doctor Lupin (Edward Lander), one of the shop's customers, who is delighted with the excellence of the pies.

23 Harry Julius sketch of the cast of *Sweeney Todd* at the Sydney Savoy, from the *Sydney Mail*, 17 July 1929.

Starr's last Australian year, 1929, shows her battling gallantly against the odds, increasingly so as the Depression destroyed her audience base. The Firm's metropolitan Melba and Pavlova tours were fairly quarantined, but their expensive productions of Noël Coward's revue *This Year of Grace* and of *Show Boat* – the latter playing to disadvantage alongside Universal's hybrid silent-sound version (1929) – bore the brunt of the collapse. The Firm then sent Starr to a series of small outback towns for the sole events still guaranteed to attract potential audiences: the annual agricultural shows. In Sydney in July, she appeared at the Savoy as Mrs Lovett the pie-shop keeper in *Sweeney Todd*: an early example of the popular pro-am *grand guignol* productions whose gruesomeness and ingenious stage tricks would sustain local actors through the 1930s. After October 1929 Sydney's stage productions decreased from eight to two, and the Firm wired its major urban houses for sound. Since the innumerable country picture theatres were slower to adopt this expensive innovation, the regions became the major territory for stage performers not working in musicals in the remaining urban theatres. The Australian comedy star Yvonne Banvard lamented the crowds who preferred the 'shadow shows' to their long-time stage favourites.⁴⁴ By February 1930 Starr could not pay her actors and went into voluntary sequestration with debts of over £3,400. Utterly bereft of cash, she was sustained in Sydney by a 'mysterious friend' who left her food parcels anonymously, telling the landlady 'she deserves it, after all I know she has done for others when she had it'.⁴⁵ After the Firm gave her a farewell benefit matinee, Starr sailed for San Francisco on 7 June 1930.

Although Australians may have hoped to see her in future Hollywood talkies, the wartime *Within the Law* (now lost) remains Starr's only film venture, and Anglin and Grey also survived the 1930s without recourse to film. Anglin briefly formed a Picture Corporation in 1916, but neither then nor later did she seriously seek a film career (Le Vay, 1989: 180). Grey appeared in four Broadway shows after 1929 before her death on 21 March 1950, mostly cast as older women in short-run plays in small theatres, the last being in 1940 when she was 67.⁴⁶ Like most ageing actors during the Depression, she gained income by occasional radio talks and live broadcasts. Starr toured widely in India, China and Japan, returning to America in 1935. Between 1937 and 1950 she did five Broadway plays, none particularly distinguished. Some Federal Theatre Projects were undertaken in 1938, plus understudy work, radio and television. On 19 April 1950, one month after Grey's death, Starr died of a heart attack in her New York dressing room after the first act of *The Velvet Glove*.⁴⁷

Australia and New Zealand audiences thus, in fact, got the best that Starr had to offer, and in these regions her work was widely seen and made considerable impact.

These three 'emotional' and 'natural' North American actors initially, and logically, saw Australia and New Zealand as a profitable career site within the English-speaking world, even if a lot of that 'English' consisted of dialogue in a lower-class American argot. Validation by artistic status and modernity, variously wielding the banners of Shakespeare or Shaw, was significant in building a credible track record but was not necessarily central to their Australasian repertoires. These were framed managerially by the commercial Firm of J. C. Williamson, which, while not fundamentally averse to 'art', was sceptical about its economic viability. This chapter indicates that, while major metropolitan theatre centres in Australasia or elsewhere might offer some protection and career prospects, the early-century economic and geopolitical revolutions – wars, depressions and cinema – worked to complicate the supremacy enjoyed by the transnational nineteenth-century 'theatrical trade routes' travelled by touring performers (Balme and Leonhardt, 2016: 1). By 1930 those who circulated globally on ocean liners and trains were less likely to be solely the adventuring theatre tourists such as Starr, nor even prestigious showcased actors such as Anglin and Grey. Mobile stage performers everywhere were now complemented and rivalled by the 'tins' of talking film that conveyed the gendered thrills of feminine 'nature' and 'emotion' to popular audiences in Toronto, Melbourne and Tumut alike.

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- 2 'Mr G. S. Titheradge, Coming to Sydney. His Impressions and Experiences', *Evening News* [Sydney], 12 June 1908, p. 6.
- 3 'Loyal Britisher', in 'Theatrical Enterprise. Arrival of Leading American Actress. Miss Margaret Anglin. Interesting Interview', *Brisbane Courier*, 15 June 1908, p. 5. The Australian Catholic newspapers which interested themselves in theatre and boosted Anglin were *The Referee* (Sydney), *The Catholic Press* (Sydney) and *The Freeman's Journal* (Sydney).
- 4 Oberon, 'Vivacity and Smiles. Miss Muriel Starr Talks. New York Shop Girls', *Daily Herald* [Adelaide], 19 August 1913, p. 2.
- 5 Orpheus, 'Mimes and Music', *Evening Post* [Wellington, NZ], 5 February 1910, p. 11.
- 6 'Miss Muriel Starr Discusses Plays and Parts', *Port Adelaide News*, 24 April 1925, p. 3.

- 7 Francis John, 'Emotional Acting Briefly Considered. Peculiar Question Gives Food for Speculation', *Winner* [Melbourne], 4 August 1915, p. 10.
- 8 'Acting and the Emotions. Miss Anglin's View', *Sunday Times* [Sydney], 21 June 1908, p. 2, and 'Emotionalism on the Stage. A Chat with Miss Margaret Anglin', *Age* [Melbourne], 22 August 1908, p. 14.
- 9 'A Visiting "Star". Miss Katherine Grey. Leading Lady in Two Years. Plays Moral and Unmoral', *Evening Post* [Otago], 18 January 1911, p. 8.
- 10 *Table Talk* [Melbourne], 18 April 1912, p. 24.
- 11 'Amusements. Italian Opera at Her Majesty's. *I Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*', *Age* [Melbourne], 1 July 1901, p. 9.
- 12 'Theatre Royal. Mr Geo. Musgrove's London Dramatic Company. "The Broken Melody"', *West Australian* [Perth], 20 July 1905, p. 5.
- 13 'Sob Stuff', *Sunday Times* [Sydney], 20 May 1928, p. 19.
- 14 'Stage Notes', *Critic* [Adelaide], 19 February 1919, p. 11.
- 15 'The Don, 'Sydney Shows', *Punch* [Melbourne], 9 July 1908, p. 37.
- 16 'Theatres &c', *Australasian* [Melbourne], 29 August 1908, p. 27.
- 17 *Bulletin* [Sydney], 9 July 1908, p. 8.
- 18 *Bulletin* [Sydney], 13 August 1908, p. 8.
- 19 'Miss Margaret Anglin, the great American actress, thinks that the arrival of the Fleet and its welcome were decorous and dignified; that the pageant was splendid, the scenery, so to speak, beautiful and artistic, but that the stage management was bad.' 'A Theatrical Opinion. Good First Act. Bad Stage Management', *National Advocate* [Bathurst], 24 August 1908, p. 2.
- 20 'Her Majesty's', *Table Talk* [Melbourne], 24 September 1908, p. 17.
- 21 Cited by 'Orpheus', *Evening Post* [Wellington], 15 January 1910, p. 11.
- 22 Grey's lengthy professional relationship with Mansfield, creator of the stage role of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, had its fractious and litigious moments (*Evening Post* [Wellington], 9 June 1900, p. 3). For an assessment of Mansfield's career, see Turney (2016).
- 23 Orpheus, 'Mimes and Music', *Evening Post* [Wellington], 5 February 1910, p. 11.
- 24 'Ladies Letter', *Table Talk* [Melbourne], 10 March 1910, p. 28.
- 25 *Age* [Melbourne], 7 March 1910, p. 8.
- 26 *Bulletin* [Sydney], 31 March 1910, p. 9.
- 27 "'Shirley Rossmore". Miss Katherine Grey Interviewed', *Advertiser* [Adelaide], 31 March 1910, p. 10.
- 28 'Entertainments. Katherine Grey Dramatic Season. "The Lion and the Mouse"', *Evening Post* [Wellington], 19 January 1911, p. 2.
- 29 Starr's contract in the Williamson 'Contract File' at the Performing Arts Centre (Melbourne) shows that she was contracted by Clyde Meynell in New York in March 1913 to 'play as cast' for £40 for six months, and *Within the Law* is stipulated as one of the productions.
- 30 'Entertainments. "Within the Law"', *Evening Post* [Wellington], 20 December 1913, p. 3.

- 31 See e.g. *Evening Post* [Wellington], 23 December 1913, p. 2.
- 32 'Amusements. The Drama &c', *Leader* [Melbourne], 14 November 1914, p. 36.
- 33 Bisson's play gained international exposure through translation, novelisation (McConaughy, 1910) and numerous screen versions.
- 34 *Bulletin* [Sydney], 9 July 1914, p. 8.
- 35 'The Criterion. "Madame X"', *Sydney Sportsman*, 15 July 1914, p. 3.
- 36 *Evening Post* [Wellington], 4 October 1913, p. 11.
- 37 *Evening Post* [Wellington], 21 August 1915, p. 11.
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- 40 'Sandstorms and the Camel', *Truth* [Sydney], 30 March 1924, p. 4.
- 41 'Stock Drama. Miss Muriel Starr's Record', *Register* [Adelaide] 3 November 1927, p. 10.
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- 43 'Trouble at Theatre. Unionists Walk Out. Objection to Gramophone. Pickets Distribute Bills', *Mercury* [Hobart], 28 December 1928, p. 6.
- 44 'Get Out! Actress' Advice', *Mail* [Adelaide], 15 February 1930, p. 1.
- 45 'The Mysterious Friend. Parcels of Groceries Sent to Muriel Starr. Remains Unknown', *Evening News* [Rockhampton], 20 May 1930, p. 10.
- 46 'Katherine Grey, Stage Actress, 77. Noted Trouper Appeared With Mansfield, Sotherns and Drew – Dies in Orleans, Mass', *New York Times*, 22 March 1950, p. 26.
- 47 'Muriel Starr Dies A Veteran Actress', *New York Times*, 20 April 1950, p. 29.

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