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Noms d'arena: the use of pseudonyms in Australian circus

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*What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (I,ii).*

Since its beginnings in Tasmania 152 years ago, the circus in Australia has been a point of intersection for many of the social, economic and cultural currents of an emerging society. Its history holds a wealth of material awaiting research and analysis. One theme in Australian circus about which little has been written is the use of invented names, 'that which' the early British circus historian Thomas Frost dubbed *noms d'arena* – names of the arena.

Noms d'arena are of special interest to me because my own surname has a long and twisted history as a showman's pseudonym. The mystery surrounding the origins of my family name provided the initial *raison d'être* for my early inquiries into Australian circus history some thirty years ago. I was to find that my family was not the only one to have adopted a pseudonym for the bills. To whet the reader's appetite, here is an incomplete listing of *noms d'arena* that were adopted by Australian circus proprietors and their families in the 'traditional' circus period.

Circus family name	Main period	Original name
Barton*	c1904-c1920	Worley
Colleano*	c1910 +	Sullivan
Cousins*	c1857 +	Bumpuss
De Vere	c1890	Petty
Eroni	c1894-1922	Perry
Hyland*	c1888-c1923	Roberts
Lennon*	c1904 +	Wythes (?)

Martini	c1906	Breheymy
Milo	c1920 - c1960	Miller
Rowan	c1912	Denner
St Leon*	1865-c1963	Jones
West*	c1900 +	Sooby

* These eventually became the accepted names of the families concerned.

Almost certainly, Australia's first circus pseudonym appeared in 1837, some years before the first colonial circuses were established. In February of that year, licences to perform rope dancing, tumbling and horsemanship in five country hotels in New South Wales were issued to George Croft and a Thomas *Astley*. The name of 'Astley' was almost certainly borrowed from Philip Astley, the so-called 'father' of the modern circus, whose name still graced the famous amphitheatre in London. The identity of the colonial *Astley*, however, remains a mystery.

It was not unique to Australia or Australian circus that an entertainer should replace his or her own prosaic surname with another more engaging one for the bills. The use of professional pseudonyms in the various branches of the arts appears to have come into vogue in England early in the nineteenth century. The word 'pseudonym', meaning literally 'false name' as its two Greek elements suggest, was not defined in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1846.¹ By that time, show people of all persuasions were donning names more romantic than their own in order to captivate their public. Some quite prominent English circus families in this period romanticised their own names in a ridiculous fashion, Clarkini for Clark and Hodgini for Hodges for example.² But whether real or adopted, a recognisable name stood for much in show business. In Victorian England

some circus-menageries were considerable business, with quantities of stock and equipment loaded on their long, lumbering wagon trains, and while the family that ran one might be seen cooking their dinner in black pots outside their caravans like so many gipsies, the gaffer's name on a bill could well be good for a very substantial sum....³

Although the casual mixture of authentic and adopted names over the years has enormously complicated the tracing of circus genealogies, we now know of numerous examples of the use of pseudonyms in the Australian circus, and we have a better idea of their origin and the purposes and processes by which they were adopted.

Research sources and scope

The names that form the basis of this brief study have been mostly extracted from my card file index of some 2,500 people active in Australian circus and its allied arts in the 'traditional' period 1833-1953 (chiefly in the period

1847-1921), whether as performers, proprietors, family members, musicians or supernumeraries. These names have been complemented with anecdotal material culled from various published and unpublished sources. In the sections and pages that follow, I will visit some of these *noms d'arena*, attempt to identify their origins and explain how they came to be adopted by Australian circus people. I have italicised the names if only to smooth the passage of the reader through this catalogue. Footnoting has been selective.

Social respectability

While the reasons and steps involved in employing *noms d'arena* in Australian circus were numerous, the cravings for recognition and respectability are their unifying threads. The names that adorned the bills and passing wagons of Australia's nineteenth and early twentieth-century travelling circus people added a dimension of culture, romance and excitement to the solitude of town, bush and outback. But there was a colonial surge towards respectability in the 1860s, the aftermath of the goldrush period that had to be addressed.

In the developing country towns, a new generation of hawkers – 'travelling Jews with trinkets, organ-grinders, German bands, Ethiopian serenaders, circuses, electro-biologists, and people of that class' – were now felt to be great nuisances ... Social leadership had been taken over by full-time bankers, ministers and the like.⁴

The colonial circus people reacted with their own drive towards respectability and their reliance upon *noms d'arena* became increasingly common in the closing decades of the nineteenth-century. In due course, these names carried their reputations with them, a stamp of some relative degree of performance integrity and quality, as well as social respectability.

The theme of social respectability continued well into the present century. My 1988 interview with Madge Seymour (1902-1991) of the Seymour circus family offers some clarification.

MADGE: Lizzie [Mackie] went to get a job [as an acrobat] at the Tivoli. Australian performers were nothing. Supposedly. The manager....gave her the audition. He said, 'Your act is good but your name's no good.' So he said, 'We've got to do something about it'. So they changed it to 'Delavante'. See. Lots of people did the same.... [The] St Leons' name isn't really 'St Leon' is it?

MARK: It's Jones.

MADGE: Yes, well, 'Jones' Circus'. How would it sound? That's what it amounts to.... you have to change your name to get anywhere, see?⁵

Evolution, design or appropriation

The Tivoli manager's advice to Lizzie Mackie was but one route to the adoption of a show business pseudonym. Other routes by which *noms d'arena* came to be chosen and adopted are also apparent.

At the simplest level, assumed circus names appear to have evolved out of the nicknames used on the circus lot. Take, for example, the case of a young dark-skinned Mauritian Creole named John Edwin Despoges. The year 1885 saw him begin his show business career in St Leon's Circus as a clown but he practised hard to learn the gymnastic skills of the circus. His swarthy gipsy-like features earned him the nickname of *Zinga*, arguably derived from the gipsy word for a male, *zingaro*. The nickname certainly made easier reading on the circus bills than 'Despoges'. By 1889, John Edwin Despoges had been transformed into 'Zinga, The Great Continental Tumbler'.

Possibly the most elevated level of a circus name's invention occurred when it was 'designed' with a particular objective in mind. But even then some element of serendipity could be involved. Mervyn King, one of the founders and co-proprietors of the original Silver's Circus, recounted how he and his partners (the Hardie family of tentmakers) in 1945 settled on the name of 'Silver' for their successful post-war circus.

We were always juggling around with names for the circus. In my own mind I think a name has got a lot to do with a circus. You have got to have a name that will be easy for people to remember. ... The Hardies said, 'Well, what's wrong with King's Circus?' I didn't fancy my own name while the name Hardie wouldn't read well as a name. Lesley James and myself was walking down Pitt Street one night. I just happened to come out of a shop and there was a fluorescent sign right in front of me that said 'Silver Grill'. It struck me, the 'Silver' part of it. I said to Lesley

'There's the name of the circus.'

'What?'

'The 'Silver'. There it is. Silver's Circus.'

'You're joking.'

'No, I'm not joking. That's it.'

The next morning I said to Dave and Les, 'There's the name, "Silver's". What do you reckon?' They agreed straightaway. Old Dave said, 'Oh yes, there's nothing wrong with that name'. The name 'Silver's' has got an 's' on each end which carries a sign good. There's a hundred different things in that. It's a name that people can easily remember. If it's good, bad or indifferent, they will remember it.....⁶

In between the extremes of 'Zinga' and 'Silver', were the names appropriated from or inspired by one source or another, outside the world of

live entertainment. In one category are the *noms d'arena* that can be linked to a person of some eminence. Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, provided the Worley family with the name for their circus, Barton Bros Circus, which was on the road by 1904.⁷ It seems not improbable that the surname of *Moby Dick's* author, Herman Melville, gave the young James Munro (or his mentors) the idea for his *nom d'arena* of James *Melville*, when he commenced his illustrious equestrian career in Malcom's in Sydney as early as January 1852.

In another category are the *noms d'arena* that can be linked to a place or object such as the inner Sydney suburb of Annandale (for Miss *Annandale*, a young rider who appeared in Malcom's company in Sydney in 1851); a large ship that plied the route between England and Australia and which was itself named after a South American peak (*Cuzco*, adopted by the showman George Yeast); or a colony (for *Queensland Harry*, an Aboriginal buckjump rider around the turn of the century).

Adopting or adapting the name of one's spouse, someone in one's immediate family circle or adoptive family instantly conferred what greater weight of reputation the spousal name might have carried in the hierarchy of show business. The young equestrienne Jane (or Jenny) Kendall first used her brother-in-law's pseudonym of *La Rosiere* while a member of his travelling circus in 1855. She used the professional name of *Mdlle La Rosiere* for some thirty years thereafter. The equestrienne Philip *St Leon* (born Philip Vincent Jones, 1890) took the name of *Phil Wirth* for professional purposes in the USA in the 1920s after marrying Stella Martin, a niece of the original Wirth brothers. The equestrienne May *Zinga* (daughter of the aforementioned Johnny *Zinga*) was given the name of *May Martin* when adopted in 1902 by Mrs Marizles Martin (a sister of the original Wirth brothers and mother of the aforementioned Stella). Although it was as *May Martin* that she performed in Wirth Bros Circus, it was as *May Wirth* that she commenced her American career in 1912 with Barnum and Bailey's Circus at New York's Madison Square Gardens.

In other cases, a performer had to look little further than his/her own name (or that of his/her spouse) to settle on a suitable pseudonym. Adding an 'o' or an 'i' to one's own name immediately produced the required foreign touch in the case of *Benhamo* (by the clown Henry 'Merry' Benham)⁸, *Bernardo* (by Samuel Bernard, whose original name had been Samuel Gooseman)⁹, *Milo* (by the outback showman Miller), *Martini* (by the buckjump showman Martin Brehemy).

Many of the *noms d'arena* used by Australian performers were appropriations of the names of prominent Continental, English or American circus performers and other entertainers. In these cases, the intention appears not to have been deliberate impersonation of the foreign product but simply the borrowing of a ready-made, nice-sounding name to put before the

Australian public. The name of *Cardello* (sometimes *Cardella*) that the FitzGerald circus brothers conferred on their infant Afro-Aboriginal equestrian Harry Dunn in 1889 was the name (or pseudonym) of a contemporary American vaudeville performer. Another FitzGerald apprentice, Ernie McMurtrie, was lightened of his own surname and given the *nom d'arena* of Ernie Shand, the name of a contemporary English music hall comedian, for his career with FitzGerald's Circus.¹⁰ The *nom d'arena* of *Onzalo* that the wirewalker Alfred Rowe used as early as 1890, was taken from the original Onzalo, an English performer who had appeared at Sydney's Queen's Theatre as an 'Aerial Evolutionist, Gymnast, Globe and Barrel Performer' in March 1876 and whose real name was William Biddall.¹¹ The identity of the equestrienne *Madam Tournaire*, who was active in Australian circus in the 1860s and 1870s has yet to be established but she was almost certainly not the real Madame Tournaire, a famous Parisian equestrienne of the day. The rider Jesse Hunt took the name of *Mena Val*, the 'Val' at least being inspired by the name of a touring vaudeville company, *Valdare's*, with she had previously been associated.

Sometimes the names conferred by Australian circus proprietors on their performers were reflective of circus heroes from bygone eras. With two circuses operating under the Perry name in the early 1890s, W.G. Perry and his family found it necessary to adopt the name of *Eroni* to distinguish their circus from that of W.G.'s brother, Charles 'Jubilee' Perry. The inspiration for the name *Eroni* apparently came from a brother of Mrs W.G. Perry, an equestrian who had performed under the name of *Master Erone* in the 1860s.¹² The name of the *Robinson Brothers*, conferred by the St Leon circus on two young boys, William and Thomas Lynn, 'apprenticed' to the circus in 1891, suggested the name of the famous American equestrian James Robinson who had visited Australia in 1876-77 as a member of Cooper and Bailey's Great International Allied Shows. The origin of the name of *George Shields*, used by wire-walker George Perry in *Eroni Bros Circus* c1910, may be found in an (apparently) Australian¹³ acrobat, vaulter and jockey of that name who returned to Australia in 1876-77 as a member of John Wilson's circus from the USA. The *Master Ord* (real name unknown) who appeared in Malcom's Royal Australian Equestrian Circus in 1851 echoed the name of a well known circus that toured Scotland and the northern counties of England earlier in the century.¹⁴

Female performers

The presence of female performers on a bill contributed to the image of respectability that a circus craved for itself. More so than male members of a circus company, female performers, who most frequently filled equestrian roles, were given *noms d'arena*. These were usually prefixed with *Mdlle*, *Madam* or *Miss*, occasionally *Signora* or even *Fraulein*.

A female *nom d'arena* was often a diminutive or derivation of a performer's own name. The aforementioned *Miss Annandale* in Malcom's in 1851 was probably the equestrienne Annie Griffiths. Sally Anaroon achieved fame as *Mdlle Annareau* before her death in a circus ring accident in New Zealand in 1883. *Mdlle Antoinette* was the name adopted by another female rider, Antoinette Aitken.¹⁵ On the other hand, the equestrian wife of circus proprietor Henry Adams derived from her husband's name the pseudonym of *Madame Henriques* for the bills of Adams' Circus in Adelaide in December 1864.

Some female *noms d'arena* were suggestive of flowers. *Mdlle Fleurette* toured as a member of King and Anderson's Combination Troupe in 1874. The London-born wife of circus proprietor Henry Burton (maiden name Lee) had adopted the name of *Mdlle Rosina* while performing in Astley's in the 1840s¹⁶ and used the name (or variations thereon, such as *Madame Rosalie*) during her brief colonial career.

Numerous female *noms d'arena* were suffixed with the letter 'a'. *Mdlle Rhoda* appeared with Burton and Taylor's Grand United Circus Company in 1876, *Mdlle Minetta* with the English Circus in 1881, *Miss Allitia* with Montgomery and Moreni's Circus in 1892, and *Mdme Zuida* and *Mdlle La Gracia* with Warren and Bristol's in 1898. Other names, presumably adoptive, embodied both a first and last name: *Mdlle Mary Aveland* appeared as an equestrian with the Great World Circus in 1875, *Mdlle Marie Valeska* with the World Circus in 1883; *Miss Eva Germaine* as a contortionist with Woodyear's in 1884; and the *Misses Fanny Clemens* and *Rosie Faust* with Warren and Bristol's in 1898.

While some performers used the same *nom d'arena* over many years, others were inclined to change their adopted name as the season or situation required. The *Minnie Cordella* who appeared with St Leon's Circus in Brisbane in August 1878¹⁷ appears to have been the *Mdlle Elvira* who appeared with the same circus in Newcastle barely three months later enthusiastically billed as 'a model of youth, grace and beauty... from the equestrian schools of Berlin, London, Paris and the principal cities of Europe'.¹⁸ In turn, *Mdlle Elvira* may have been the *Madame Dockerill* (a *nom d'arena* borrowed from a famous American lady rider of the day) who performed a 'refined act of equestrianism'¹⁹ in the same circus. The identity of *Minnie Cordella*/*Mdlle Elvira*/*Madame Dockerill* is unknown. The names of both *Mdlle Elvira* and *Madame Dockerill* last appear on the St Leon bills during its 1881 Tasmanian tour²⁰ after which both names simultaneously disappear.

As a footnote to the use of *noms d'arena* by female performers, the names assumed by their male impersonators should be mentioned. Female performers were constantly in short supply, and to redress the shortage of female riders in particular, young male riders were dressed and bewigged for

their parts, and imbued with an appropriate set of female mannerisms for their performance as women in the ring. The most capable managed to beguile (if not bewitch) all but the most sceptical observers. The aforementioned Ernie *Shand* was presented in FitzGerald's Circus as *Daisy Shand*. The aforementioned Philip St Leon was presented in Wirth Bros Circus for three seasons as *Senorita Philipina*, the Spanish lady rider.²¹

Siblings

Apparent from the late 1850s but increasingly as the century drew to a close, there was a penchant for presenting pairs and trios of performers as 'brothers' or 'sisters', whether their familial status was real or imagined. The first known instance of this is the appearance of the *Italian Brothers* with G.B.W. Lewis's Equestrian Company at Geelong 1857. The *Swiss Brothers* were a trapeze act presented in Adams' Circus, in Adelaide in December 1864. The *De Glorion Brothers* were listed on the bill of O'Neill and Company's Circus in Adelaide in 1875.

Mary and Maggie Sole, the grand daughters of W.G. Perry, the proprietor of *Eroni Bros Circus*, were twelve and eight years of age respectively and genuine sisters, when they were presented in the family circus in 1904 as the *Majeroni Sisters*. The name 'Majeroni', which conveniently embodied the Perry family's own *nom d'arena* of *Eroni*, was borrowed from a family of Italian actors active in Australia at the turn of the century.²² A few years later in Hobart, in February 1908, the same girls were presented in Eroni's Circus as the *Sleting Sisters*, the origin of which has not been established.

Other examples include the adopted natural sisters of Mrs John Wirth, Edith and Gertrude, who were presented in a double trapeze act in FitzGerald's Circus in Sydney in September 1900 as the *Wingate Sisters*; an act billed as the *Mysterious Wilton Sisters* which appeared with Foley's Circus at Balranald in February 1904; and the appearance of the *Adelia Sisters* (one of whom appears to have been Adele Willison) in Wirth's Circus in Melbourne in 1911.

The eighteen-year-old *Sadie Onzalo* who joined Gus *St Leon's* Great United Circus in outback Queensland in 1911 performed several acts in the evening's program. So that people would not know that it was the one girl doing all the acts, she was given the billing of the 'Three *Sadie Sisters*'.²³ A man said one night after the show, 'Those *Sadie* sisters, they're very much alike but the one that does the trapeze is a little fatter than the one that walks the wire!'²⁴

Aboriginal performers

Young Aboriginal performers were presented in Australian circus as early as 1852.²⁵ Master *Parello Frank* was the name given to one little boy who my great-great-grandfather John Jones collected from the Bathurst district and brought back to Sydney with his equestrian troupe. Children and youths of

Aboriginal extraction were regularly seen in Australian circus thereafter. The *noms d'arena* given to the early Aboriginal performers – such as *Mongo Mongo*²⁶ and *Combo Combo* – suggest the esteem in which they were held by public and proprietors alike. The *Madam Mungo* who was presented in the Olympic Circus in Sydney in 1852 may have been Australia's first female Aboriginal performer.

As the century wore on however, the novelty of Aboriginal equestrians palled and proprietors found it more prudent to understate or even suppress the Aboriginal identity of their performers. The young Aboriginal Tony Hargreaves, although described by one observer as 'a black boy of the darkest dye',²⁷ was presented as 'Antonia, the Brazilian horseman' with Ashton's Circus at Grafton in 1874. An Aboriginal known in North Queensland by his native name of Reka left his tribe to join the St Leon circus in 1896, at a time when Aboriginals were exhibiting 'an unhallowed desire to go into the show business wherever they could'.²⁸ As an acrobat, the St Leons gave Reka the *nom d'arena* of *Alec Orlandi*, the origin of which is yet to be established.

Child performers

Youthfulness and diminutive size were emphasised in the *noms d'arena* conferred on performing children. A circus usually carried several children as performers, either born naturally into a circus family or politely 'adopted' or 'apprenticed' from the back lanes. The description of 'Little', 'Master' or 'Young' was prefixed to a child's real or adopted first name, his/her real identity rarely being disclosed. An 'American' equestrian named *Master Romeo* appeared with Ridge's Royal Tycoon Circus at Roma in 1879; the thirteen-year-old equestrian son of the aforementioned *Mdlle La Rosiere* was billed as *Little Jack Cousins* along with the subtitle *Young Australia* when he appeared at the Royal Amphitheatre, Sydney in February in February 1880; *Little Violet Raphael* appeared in Barton's Circus in Hobart in 1906; and the aforementioned Madge Seymour was presented when twelve years of age as *Little Madge* in Seymour's Circus at Broken Hill 1914.

The description 'Young' was usually used in conjunction with the name of a colony or country. *Young America* was a gymnast who appeared in Bird and Taylor's Great American Circus; *Young Roma* appeared with Barlow's in Sydney in June 1875; and *Young Queensland* was billed as an equestrian with Walhalla and Barlow's Great American Circus in Sydney in September 1881. It could be safely conjectured that the equestrian *Young Java* who was presented in Abell and Klaer's in Sydney in October 1894 had been acquired by the showmen during their visit to the (then) Dutch East Indies prior to arriving in Australia. It is unlikely that he was the same as another young Javanese rider presented in the early 1900s in FitzGerald's Circus as *Lycurgus*.

Case study No. 1: Mdlle La Rosiere

Apart from the aforementioned Thomas Astley, the earliest definite example that we have of a professional name used by a circus performer in Australia is in the name of Edward *La Rosiere*. *La Rosiere* was the professional circus name of the stilt-walker, slack-rope walker, contortionist, acrobat and eventual circus proprietor, Edward Hughes (c1824-1857). Already dressed with this *nom d'arena*, *La Rosiere* was a member of the gymnastic troupe of Luigi Dalle Case in Sydney December 1841.²⁹ It was subsequently stated that he had 'only recently' arrived from England.³⁰ He was instrumental, with my great-great-grandfather John Jones, in opening the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus in York Street in 1850, Sydney's first successful circus.³¹ By early 1853, *La Rosiere* was travelling with his own circus, at first styled *La Rosiere's Olympic Circus*. This opened in Goulburn in February 1853.³² His 'talented company of performers' opened in Brisbane on Saturday 9 June 1855. *La Rosiere* died at Ipswich in July 1857 and was buried there. *La Rosiere's Travelling Circus* ceased to exist after that date.

La Rosiere's real name was, for many years, a mystery. There had been no children of his marriage to Ann Kendall.³³ Verification of his real name may have remained impossible were it not for the chance corroboration provided by an 1851 marriage entry which established Edward *La Rosiere's* real name as Edward Hughes. Shortly after the opening of the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus, Hughes had married, at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Sydney, Ann Elizabeth Kendall. Ann subsequently travelled with her husband in his circus, styled *La Rosiere's Travelling Circus*, for several years. About 1853, they were joined in the circus by Ann's younger sister, Jane (later Jennie or Jenny). She was adorned with her brother-in-law's *nom d'arena* and performed in the circus as a rider and tightrope walker under the name of *Mdlle La Rosiere*.³⁴

Although *Edward La Rosiere* left no family of his own to carry on a circus dynasty and although his widow soon retired from circus life, the circus career of his niece-by-marriage, *Mdlle La Rosiere*, blossomed. Jenny continued to use the adopted name of *La Rosiere* for professional purposes as an equestrienne into the 1880s despite, or perhaps because of, four marriages.

Her first marriage was to an English Shakespearian clown and jester named John Plevy Bumpuss³⁵ who, understandably, had assumed another name for his professional circus activities, the name of *Reuben Cousins*. The second of their three children was born on the ship *Vernon* that carried the family back to Australia from a tour of India in 1863. As was the custom of the day, the new-born child was partly named for the ship as Vernon Ida Bumpuss. Arrived back in Australia, *Reuben Cousins* organised his own circus – *Cousins' Oriental Circus* – for a tour of the Far East in 1865 but died in Batavia the following year of cholera during the first leg of the tour.³⁶ His widow and children and other members of his company eventually drifted

back to Australia where Jenny's career as *Mdlle La Rosiere* was renewed afresh.

Jenny's shortlived second marriage was to another circus clown, or 'comedian' as he was described on the marriage certificate, Harry Coles, professionally known as Harry Cowle.³⁷ In 1873, Jenny's daughter the ten-year-old Vernon Ida Bumpuss made her debut as a circus equestrienne in Burton's National Circus, her given name of Vernon Ida Bumpuss re-composed for the bills as *Mdlle Ida Vernon*. Her mother continued to perform as *Mdlle La Rosiere*. A third marriage to Burton's circus agent William Woodyear in 1879 proved eminently successful, the couple taking over the remnants of Henry Burton's Circus and re-presenting it as Madame Woodyear's Circus. Madame – Jenny Kendall/Bumpuss/Cousins/Cowle – Woodyear continued to perform in the ring as the equestrienne *Mdlle La Rosiere* until well into her forties. Her last, post-equestrian, marriage was to a man named Harland-Taylor. It was under that name that she was buried in Melbourne in 1915.

Case study No. 2: 'Mathew St Leon'

The London-born performer John Jones (c1826-1903) was one of Australia's earliest identities of the circus.³⁸ A tumbler before his enforced departure for Van Dieman's Land, he appeared as an acrobat in Radford's Royal Circus in Launceston on the eve of its opening in 1847 and subsequently developed into an expert equestrian under Radford's direction. Visiting the Bathurst goldfields with Henry Burton in 1851, Jones organised his own troupe which eventually grew into Jones' National Circus, a modest-size travelling circus for the day. The last appearance of his National (later British-American) Circus before the colonial public was an 1863 tour of Tasmania. We then lose complete track of Jones' movements and activities for some 18 months until 27 January 1865 when he and his three sons surface in Melbourne to be presented at Barry Sullivan's Theatre Royal 'for a limited number of nights ... in their celebrated Drawing-Room Entertainment'. John Jones and his sons were now not the products of neither London 'gaslight' shows nor the Australian bush but instead 'The Wonderful St Leon Family', consisting of *Mons St Leon* and his three sons, Augustus, Walter and Alfred, from the Gymnase Imperial, Paris.

How the name of *St Leon* came to be chosen as the Jones family's professional pseudonym may now never be completely known. As the Tivoli manager had done with Lizzie Mackie in changing her name to Delavante, it seems more than likely that Barry Sullivan suggested to John Jones the need for a more engaging name for the Theatre Royal bills. It was, after all, Melbourne's most prestigious theatre. A famous Shakespearian actor of the day whose career had temporarily landed him in Melbourne, Sullivan may have been familiar with a three-act drama called *St Leon* that was written in 1835 by John Hobart Caunter.

If Sullivan was not the instigator, another possible source may be found in the danseur-pantomimist and trapeze artist, J. H. Flexmore, who had arrived in Australia in 1861 and who was a member of the St Leon Troupe by the time it opened at the Victoria Theatre in Adelaide on 30 March 1865. Flexmore was reputedly a nephew of the celebrated danseur and mimist, Richard 'Dicky' Flexmore Geatter.³⁹ As a dancer, Flexmore was probably aware of the work of a famous French choreographer Charles Victor Arthur Michel, born in 1821, who assumed the professional pseudonym of Arthur Michael *St-Léon*.⁴⁰

The assumption by John Jones of the *nom d'arena* of *St Leon* is thus partially explained. What is not explained is Jones' assumption of the name of 'Mathew'. The explanation for this appears to lie in the confusion generated by the abbreviation of 'M.' (for Monsieur) used in conjunction with the name *St Leon* in the advertising for the *St Leon* Troupe and, later, the *St Leon* Circus. Provincial Australia could hardly be expected to possess the same degree of sophistication as the audiences of Melbourne's Theatre Royal. In the bush, it was apparently easier to pass this 'M.' off as standing for 'Mathew' rather than 'Monsieur'. In his direction of Silver's Circus, seventy years later, Mervyn King seems to have addressed a similar problem.

There had to be a 'Mr Silver' around the circus if we were going to call the show Silver's Circus, so I called myself Alwyn Silver. I don't know that the 'Alwyn' part appealed to me. I know I wouldn't call any of my kids 'Alwyn' but it just seemed to blend nicely with 'Silver'.⁴¹

The *nom d'arena* of *St Leon* was not unique to John Jones and his family. As mentioned, the name had already been long used by an eminent French choreographer. In addition, there are at least two separate instances of the name being used on the Australian stage before the *St Leon* troupe, while the name was also used by a troupe of American minstrels around the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴² Whatever the source of this *nom d'arena*, it gave Jones and his family an air of legitimacy which might otherwise have been beyond their wildest imagination.

Case study No. 3: 'Colleano'

In 1910, Con Sullivan, an Australian-born showman of Irish parentage, his wife Julia of Aboriginal and West Indian extraction, and their growing number of children settled on the name of *Colleano* (at first, *Collino*) to capitalise upon their swarthy features before the Australian outback public.⁴³ How the family came to settle on the name has long languished in obscurity. One source said that the name was suggested to the family by the childrens' schoolteacher. But an outback station in far north-west New South Wales called 'Kaleno' might have been the inspiration of the name too. The most likely source however was a troupe of acrobats called the Kellino Family,

well known in vaudeville in England and the United States around the turn of the century, a troupe which had visited Australia in 1897.⁴⁴

In the case of the Sullivan family, the use of a *nom d'arena* served a two-fold purpose. The not uncommon Irish name of Sullivan was conveniently replaced by one with more romantic overtones, in much the same way as John Jones had adopted *St Leon* in 1865 or W.G. Perry had adopted *Eroni* in 1893. But for the Sullivan family, the adoption of *Colleano* as a *nom d'arena* provided the additional benefit of masking their Aboriginal origins at a time when one's Aboriginality was not something to be flaunted before the public.

The family's reliance upon *noms d'arena* did not stop with the name *Colleano*. To fill out their program, the ten children appeared in the ring under such names as *Zeneto*, *Senorita Sanchez*, *The Royal Hawaiians*⁴⁵ or the *The Marasetta Sisters*. A further, albeit temporary, transformation occurred when the bush circus family wound up its show and most of its members gravitated to Musgrove's Tivoli circuit as an acrobatic troupe. After their successful trial (audition) in March 1923, Musgrove spent several hundred pounds in preparing the eight strong troupe for the Australian public. Vaudeville acrobats were often presented in Arab costume and the Colleano family, to its displeasure, would be no exception. At a time when it was 'in' to have Arab acrobats, when Rudolph Valentino and the popular song 'The Sheik of Araby' were the rage, and when the war-time exploits of T.E. Lawrence were still fresh in the public mind, eight of the Colleano children came on at the Tivoli as the *Akabah Arabs*, a vaguely foreign importation.⁴⁶ However, the Tivoli engagement over, the 'Akabah' name was discarded. The family departed for England and then America, finding undreamt-of success in circus, stage and film under the name of Colleano.

Titles

English circus proprietor George Sanger took the self-appointed title of 'Lord' Sanger. American wild west showman 'Buffalo Bill' Cody dressed his name with the self-appointed title of 'The Honourable'. We find no such grand parallels in Australian circus. However, the use of lesser titles such as *Mons* (for Monsieur), *Signor*, *Herr* and *Professor* were certainly not unknown. No particular rules appear to have applied to the use of these titles other than to add or emphasise a foreign touch of class, real or imagined. The *Signor* Walter Sherrington, a trapezian in Ashton's Circus in 1875, was obviously not of Italian extraction. However, the animal trainer Herr Zapf and the band master Herr Carl von der Mehden, members of FitzGerald's company around the turn of the century, were Germans. The title of *Professor* appears to have been bestowed on (or donned by) performers for whom some special gift or skill was in evidence, especially bandmasters and horse trainers. 'Professor' Walker was the bandmaster for the Californian Circus in 1865, 'Professor' Watson the bandmaster for Walhalla Bros Circus in 1885 and 'Professor' Turner the bandmaster and co-proprietor of Turner,

McMahon and Moreni's Circus in 1891. On the other hand, 'Professor' Organ was a horsetrainer in the visiting South African circus of Frank Fillis of 1893 and the American 'Professor' D.M. Bristol was the horsetrainer and co-proprietor of Warren and Bristol's Circus of 1898.

Miscellaneous

A few *noms d'arena* appear to have owed their origin to metaphors. The word 'agility' probably explains the billing of the *Agilio* Brothers, acrobats with the English Circus in 1879, the *Boneless* Boys, who appeared with the Asiatic Circus in Sydney in 1875, were probably contortionists. The word 'skeleton' appears to have inspired the billing of a Master Herbert *Skelton*, a contortionist with Burton's company in Adelaide in 1865.

There was a tendency by the early 1900s for a small family troupe to retain its original family name for the bills. Family names which might otherwise have been replaced with a more appealing *nom d'arena* were instead prefaced by a simple 'the' as if to lend authenticity and integrity. *The Bisleys* who appeared in Wirths Circus in 1911; *The Urens*, jugglers who appeared in Bibby Bros Circus in Hobart in May 1912; and *The Leonards* who appeared in Eroni and Soles Circus in 1912 are examples of names that fell into this category.

Individual performers, especially those of a sensational character, were being billed with a single name by the turn of the century. *Aeola* was 'The Human Cartridge' in FitzGerald's Circus in 1888.⁴⁷ *Alfredo* performed a spectacular single trapeze act outside the tent of Probasco's Circus each evening before the performance in Melbourne in October 1898. *Ajax* was the *nom d'arena* of a contortionist in FitzGerald's Circus in 1899.

Unadopted names

Some performers were blessed with names that did not require replacement or modification by a *nom d'arena*. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most notable examples were genuine importations. The Signor Cardoza who came to Australia with the circus of J.S. Noble in 1851 was almost certainly a Brazilian despite his Germanic forename of Joachim. The Signor Giuseppe Chiarini who brought his Royal Italian Circus to Australia three times during the 1870s and 1880s was indeed Italian, the name of Chiarini being traceable to puppeteers active in Italy since the sixteenth century. The American horsetrainer Ellsworth Lincoln Probasco who was brought to Australia for FitzGerald Bros Circus in 1895, conducted a circus under his own name in the years 1896-99. The name Probasco has been traced as far back as the sixteenth century and appears to have been of Spanish or even Polish ('Probatiski') origin. The charmingly named American gymnastic duo of Honey and Cherry that came to Australia late in 1908 were the natural names of Alfred Honey and his partner Frank Cherry.

Summary

To sum up, we can distinguish the usage of *noms d'arena* in Australian circus at several different levels:

- by an entire circus family
- by an entrepreneur
- by an individual performer
- by small groups of performers without any familial relation to each other

The use of *noms d'arena* in Australian circus was fundamentally dictated by the need to fashion what today we would call a corporate identity or image. Yet, the underlying reasons for names being adopted (or discarded for that matter) by Australian circuses and circus people were deeper, indeed often quite pragmatic. The principal factors that lead Australian circus people to adopt a professional pseudonym in place of their own inherited name could be summarised by the following list but not necessarily in order of importance:

- to 'carry' a sign better before the public
- to disguise or suppress ethnic or national origins
- to distinguish one circus family from a related (and possibly rival) family
- to identify (real or supposed) female performers
- to identify child performers
- to promote (real or supposed) ethnic or national origins
- to 'recycle' a limited number of performers within a circus program
- to 'recycle' an established family or performer before the public
- to replace an unattractive family name with one with more public appeal
- to simplify and/or Anglicise an existing, non-Anglo-Saxon, family name

Any of these factors, and sometimes a combination of them, can explain the adoption of *noms d'arena* by Australian circus people.

NOTES

- 1 A. Room, *A Dictionary of Pseudonyms and Their Origins, with Stories of Name Changes* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1981), pp. 4-5.
- 2 J.M. Turner, *Victorian Arena: A Dictionary of British Circus Biography*. Vol. 1 (Formby: Lingdales, 1995), p. 69.
- 3 Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 74.
- 4 Morison (1867), cited in Michael Cannon, *Life in The Country: Australia in The Victorian Age*, vol 2 (Melbourne: Nelson, 1973), p. 74.
- 5 St Leon (1988), unpublished record of interview. The name Delavante incidentally was itself recycled, its origins owed to a family of Italian acrobats who came to England in the 1850s but whose name was later used by others. See Turner, *Victorian Arena*, pp. 39-40.
- 6 Mervyn King, quoted in Mark St Leon, *The Silver Road: The Life Story of Mervyn King* (Springwood, NSW: Butterfly, 1991), p. 197.

- 7 In the inter-war period period Barton Bros Circus metamorphosed into a travelling vaudeville show, Barton's Follies.
- 8 *Lorgnette*, 28 June 1890.
- 9 *Northam Advertiser*, 22 August 1908.
- 10 Record of interview with Ron Shand in Mark St Leon, *Australian Circus Reminiscences* (Sydney: private MS, 1984), p. 226.
- 11 Turner, *Victoria Arena*, p. 96.
- 12 Record of interview with Mary Sole Lindsay in St Leon, *Australian Circus Reminiscences*, (1984), p. 110. The appearance of a Master Erone with the Great International Circus at Sydney's Royal Lyceum Theatre on 26 December 1866 has been noted.
- 13 *New York Clipper*, 31 January 1874.
- 14 Turner, *Victorian Arena*, pp. 96-7.
- 15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 1870.
- 16 A.H. Saxon, *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow and the Romantic Age of the English Circus* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1978), p. 188.
- 17 *Brisbane Courier*, 19 August 1878.
- 18 *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 November 1878. The 'real' Miss Elvira was an English equestrienne and tight-rope artiste whose name was Marian Bowen. See Turner, *Victorian Arena*, p. 43.
- 19 *Hobart Mercury*, 8 February 1881.
- 20 *Launceston Examiner*, 17 January 1881; *Hobart Mercury*, 4 February 1881.
- 21 The idea of male riders impersonating females originated in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century when the young Creole rider Omar Kingsley conceived the idea of bewitching his audience disguised in female costume with wig donned as Ella Zoyara. He/she visited Australia in 1866 as co-proprietor of Cooke, Zoyara and Wilson's Circus.
- 22 Philip Parsons, gen ed., with Victoria Chance, *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency/Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 337-38.
- 23 *Richmond River Herald*, 17 February 1912.
- 24 Record of interview with Mrs Sadie St Leon in St Leon, *Australian Circus Reminiscences*, pp. 131-32.
- 25 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1852.
- 26 *Illustrated Sydney News*, 6 May 1854.
- 27 *Maryborough and Dunolly Advertiser*, 10 February 1879.
- 28 *Bulletin*, 10 October 1896.
- 29 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 December 1841. The arrival in Sydney of a self-styled 'Professor of Gymnastics', Signor Luigi Dalle Case, on 10 July 1841 on the ship *Salazes*, was sudden and unprecedented. Within a few months he opened the first – albeit very shortlived and unsuccessful – circus seen on Australian soil. Given the traditional and universal propensity for circus people to adopt suitably attractive noms d'arena, the authenticity of Dalle Case's Italianate name might also be doubted. However, Hall and Cripps describe him as 'Italian'. Suspicion as to the authenticity of his Italian origin is aroused by the baptismal entry of a son baptised at Green Ponds, Van Dieman's Land, on 18 August 1843, the entry in the baptismal register showed him to be the son of Lewis [sic] and Margaret [sic] Dalle Case of Batavia.
- 30 *Sydney Morning Herald* 26 January 1842.
- 31 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1850.
- 32 *Goulburn Herald*, 19 February 1853.
- 33 NSW Death Certificate (1857) No. 2999.
- 34 Jennie's name at birth was Jane Kendall. She was baptised, according to the International Genealogical Index, on 1 September 1844.
- 35 NSW Marriages (1858), No. 1337.
- 36 *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 21 July 1866.
- 37 *Pastoral Times*, 17 August 1867.

- 38 The most recent research suggests that even 'Jones' may not have been his name at birth instead but Connelly, Conley or Coney.
- 39 To give him his full name, Richard 'Dicky' Flexmore Geatter, was probably the Mr Flexmore who visited Sydney in 1841 and appeared briefly in Dalle Case's troupe. A youth of seventeen, he was a clown and dancer-comique. Not to be confused with his nephew J.H. Flexmore, himself a danseur-pantomimist and trapeze artist extraordinaire who was seen in the colonies in the 1860s and 1870s, the original Flexmore was later renowned as one of England's most talented mimics until his premature death at Lambeth on 21 August 1860. See Edward Pask, *Enter the Colonies Dancing: A History of Dance in Australia 1835-1940* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1979), pp. 51-52; *The Player*, 25 August 1860.
- 40 The husband of the famed ballerina Fanny Cerrito, Arthur-Michael St-Leon was the choreographer of such famous ballets as *Coppélia* and *La Vivandière*.
- 41 King, quoted in St Leon, *The Silver Road*, p. 197.
- 42 An actress named 'Miss St Leon' appeared on Victorian playbills around 1861. There is also the intriguing presence in the colonies at that time of a 'Mons St Leon, The Great Delineator of French Comic Character who, it was announced in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 13 May 1865, had arrived and will appear shortly'. He appeared at the Victoria Theatre on 16 May 1865. As far as can be gathered, this Mons St Leon had no connection to the acrobatic St Leon family.
- 43 *Wairialda Standard*, 28 November 1910.
- 44 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 December 1897.
- 45 The name of the 'Royal Hawaiians' was inspired by a genuine Hawaiian musical group of that name that visited Australia in 1911.
- 46 *Theatre*, 1 June 1923.
- 47 *The Western Star*, 28 April 1888.