

Railway Culture: A Source of Railway Heritage Theatre *

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Introduction

This paper draws attention to the role that traditional Railway Cultural and arts activities can play in providing the basis for 'Theatre of Railway' events presented by Railway Heritage organisations and tourist train operators, events that can be attractive, interesting, and enjoyable for visitors to these locations. It argues that to achieve this rail heritage organisations should look closely for other local sources outside their own immediate successful connections that are already portraying railway stories, songs, and poetry in the theatre of life, drama and comedy and collaborate with the production of suitable events.

At the same time the presentation points out such activities are a potential viable economic income source for railway heritage organisations who want broaden their activity base. The Illawarra Folk Festival provides a Green Music Train transport alternative over the festival weekend. In 2013 there were two services on Saturday and on Sunday morning with 8 themed music carriages.

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The Theatre of Railway

Theatre in general is a highly developed form of communication or as Felicity Haynes put it theatre is 'an integrated process involving the relationship between the makers and audiences of arts works.'¹ Haynes goes

* This paper and associated visual overheads on Railway Cultural Heritage was jointly prepared by Brian Dunnett MA (Leisure and Tourism Research) and Mark Gregory, for the International Railway Heritage Conference, held in Brisbane October 2009. Due to last minute changes the paper was presented by Brian Dunnett. The content of this paper and the decision at the International Rail Heritage Conference to create an international online collection of the World Railway Heritage is being used to plan another stage in the research to bring together an extensive collection of Australian Railway Songs and Poems that can help record the ongoing Australian Railway Story.

Details of the International Railway Heritage Conference and other papers can be found at http://www.theworkshops.qm.qld.gov.au/exhibitions/events/railway_heritage.asp

¹ Felicity Haynes, *Applied Theatre Research* No 2, 2001 Article No.6/2, Griffith University QLD Australia.

on to point out that the establishment of any theatre activities requires new skills to transform ideas, the incorporation of historical and cultural knowledge and above all the working with potential audiences and dramatic performers in order to produce symbolic performances.

Developing the concept of a 'Theatre of the Railway' into heritage programs and events I would argue, should take us beyond the normal excepted definition of theatre.

The general definition of theatre is seen as: 'A place or building, consisting of a stage and seating, in which an audience gathers to watch plays, musical performances, public ceremonies etc.'²

The 'Theatre of the Railway' I feel should be seen as a theatre experience, more a tuned to a specific field of action, like the theatre of war. A place of action where everything and anything associated with railways can be used and applied.

In this concept of 'Theatre of the Railway' the symbolism created by the use of a steam 'locomotives' in any performance is powerful and can be used in many ways. It has been often described as a 'wild beast' or a machine with all its working on the outside. The opportunities to present these creatures in many ways are endless.

During Australia's Bi-Centenary in 1988 an extensive program was run over every railway track and hundreds of thousands of people turned out to see these wild beasts huffing and puffing at sidings. Several events were re-enacted that drew on railway history associated with the area that special trains drawn by locomotives like 3801 passed through. This train on its journey across Australia was once held up by a re-enactment of bushrangers robbing a preserved mail- gold train - a little use of dramatised fiction that was a dramatic and left passenger talking about this piece of railway theatre for some time.

The idea of basing railway events around local and national themes like this in recent years appears to have become restricted to themes centring on 'Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends'.

There is nothing wrong with this and many tourist railways in parts of the world have used this theme to involve the children who have grown up with this story.

What I feel is often overlooked by the use of 'Thomas' alone though is the wider sources of railway culture in each of these countries with a steam power background and that it fails to make use of the fact that many of the railway's technical improvements were not restricted to the UK alone. Also, a great amount of the human factors associated railways and the social structure that was used in their development is often over looked

² <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>

under the pressure of modern railway corporate ideas conflicting with railway culture.

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Sources of Traditional Themes

I would now like to refer everyone to eight diverse sources of traditional railway culture that I believe does provide source material for the development of railway theatre themes that have a history of attracting audiences and above all the interest of creative artists, musicians, writers and others who people like yourselves can work towards the creation of interesting railway theatre presentations.

My eight sources of railway culture I believe provide the sources for many 'Theatre of Railway' themes are, railway related:

- Music
- Songs
- Poems
- Yarns
- Visual Arts
- Performing Arts
- Gardens
- Films.

All of these rail cultural sources I believe can be found internationally and wherever there is a railway heritage or tourist operations including light rail and tramways that had a similar cultural tradition. All have the theatrical qualities in their own way for our 'Theatre of Railway'.

I feel sure from the research being conducted into each of these areas of railway art that there are people at hand working with or have an interest one or more of these traditional railway cultural art forms.

Since the mid 1980 there has been a marked increase in the number of organisations that are associated with each of these traditional railway cultural activities. This is certainly so in Australia.

This explosion of independent organisations coincides with the privatisation of Government Railways that once fostered such activities under their own umbrella. Or were programs of the Railway Institutes established primarily for staff training on the industry and socialisation of the railway staff.

The development of the 'world wide web' where the details of these new bodies can be found was another factor in this explosion of these

organisations that are now devoted to the preservation of railway related culture.

Many of these new bodies have come together as local organisations, others have been formed as State and national bodies and a few have come together as with International links.

There is now a situation, that heritage rail and tourist organisations need to study closely, where these independent organisations are superseding some earlier railway research centres and have learnt to run their own research programs and web sites independently of governments as a result of government mishandling of railways current technical changes and their attitude towards traditional railway culture that they are no longer prepared to support or encourage future generations to learn from.

A number of these new groups are at the centre of research into their particular railway culture interests. For example, major research on Australian Railway Folklore is being coordinated through the Australian Folklore network based at the University of Curtin in Western Australia that has strong connection with the National Library of Australian, the National Folk Music Festivals movement and Trade Unions that are generating a new interest in railway songs poetry stories to understand what their members and the general public feel about contemporary railway issues.

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Railway Film

The use of Railway cinematography should not be overlooked by those interested in creating a 'Theatre of Railways'.

Early filmmaking recorded the theatrical experience to make it available to an audience much broader than that of the theatre. Film was the first audio-visual that involved 'storage and delivery'. By storing the theatrical experience, it was extended beyond the physical boundary of the stage. Film could convey experiences that live theatre could not, allowing film stories to take their audiences to the moon, or back in time to past events. In the 20s, due to the enormous popularity of radio, movies incorporated a soundtrack — multiple media.³

In my concept of the 'Theatre of Railways' we are seeking to create as a means of interesting people in railway heritage we have many good films to draw on, both in older Cinematography and the new multimedia forms and much of the home work subject for its use is being done by film groups currently working with this art.

³ Bob Cotton and Richard Oliver.1993, *Understanding Hypermedia*, Phaidon Press, London.

In the area of Railway related film you can now find a number of research articles on railway films (the first railway feature film was made and shown in 1895.)

An important list of railway movies (but not the only one) that I recommend is by Mike Trout and Mark Brader for Usenet, a worldwide distributed internet discussion system in 1995. That feeds into Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia. Details of this list of 223 International Railway Movies and over 54 documentaries on railways can be found at <http://www.davros.org/rail/movies.html>

The value of this and other railway film research being carried out to bring together interesting ongoing programs is that these programs put bums on seats and maintain interests in railways activities as a whole.

The York, National Railway Museum this autumn is running a month-long season of films hits from 12 September to 11 October 2009. A wide range of films will be screened including classics like *Brief Encounter* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, British Transport Films including *Land of the White Rose*, and a one-off screening of *Trainspotting* in a drive-in movie theatre being created in our North Yard, York, September 12th to October 11th in England

This is an innovative use of railway heritage film that can reach out to wide audiences at heritage locations without lighting a match to fire up a boiler. Used in the right way as an annual non-running event, a Films Festival of this nature could have some effect on the bottom line of rail heritage organisations' finances when combined with other activities. See <http://www.luxurytraveler.com/blog/index.php?itemid=2222>

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Visual Railway Art

Similar opportunities for special events I believe exist in railway heritage visual arts, particularly in railway paintings and photography. The value and interests taken by audiences in this aspect of railway culture has been recognised in Britain at least for some time. A Guild of Railway Artists was established in the 1970's its aim was (and remains) to

forge a tangible link between artists whose interests include the depiction of the railway scene in all its facets both past and present. Amongst the aims of the Guild is the furtherance of the artistic portrayal of railways; the staging of Railway Art Exhibitions and assistance in the historical research necessary to accurately portray railway subjects with correct detail. Since its formation the GRA has mounted successful Rail-Art exhibitions annually throughout the United Kingdom.

See <http://www.railart.co.uk/about.html>

Members of the Guild include professional, semi-professional and amateur artists painting in a wide variety of mediums — oils, acrylics, gouache, tempera, watercolour, ink, pencil, pastel, airbrush, silk screen and even digital.

Although primarily a UK guild, membership extends throughout Europe, USA, Australia and South Africa.

In Australia Peter Ormsby who describes himself as a 'Steam Train Artist' conducts an organisation for Australian Artists who are painting railway images and has a web site called *On Track Down Under*. But while there are possibly hundreds of Australian contemporary visual artists working in this area of railway culture that has a history linked to some of Australia's greatest visual artists like Arthur Streeton, very little is heard of Peter's organisation outside of South Australia.

Work with Railway painted art goes hand in hand with railway photograph. Both these art forms I believe have a significant public demand where ever this work is shown. Exhibitions of this art should regularly be considered by railway heritage organisation as a group effort to move around existing rail heritage organisations for display and a means of defray costs. See <http://www.steamtrainartist.com/>

Many here will be aware of my association with the 'Trains of Treasure' Exhibition. This portable visual and audio exhibition that centres on railway songs and poems to tell part of the Australian Railway Story as seen through the eyes of poets, songwriters and musicians has been on the move throughout Australia for over 20 years. Most of the photographs and visual arts items it draws on came from dirty old workers lockers at the Chullora and Eveleigh Railway Workshops and other sources that included toilet walls and doors used by railway workers.

The exhibition was created with the assistance of the Australian Council for the Arts, The Trade Unions and State Rail and represents the heart and soul of railway workers experience over 150 years.

This exhibition continues to find its way into all kinds of railway events and activities. While it was first used, in art galleries, museums it gets an ongoing reaction on railway stations schools and other public places of interest. Displayed extensively during Australia's Bi-Centenary it has travelled may more miles of railway track than most Australians.

From this experience of helping to pull together such a display I believe that not enough is done to bring together a range of railway cultural exhibitions and activities that can be shared between railway heritage

organisations not just across nations like Australia but internationally. More can be done collectively with exhibitions that are produced for special occasions than locking them up in a box to gather dust. In recent years the original 26 panels of the Trains of Treasure Exhibition has been increased with the addition of 4 new theme panels that centre on poems and songs written on Australian Railways since 1985 when the original exhibition was perceived by workers at the Chullora Railway Workshops NSW Australia.

No doubt additional panels will be added to this collection from the 30 entries in the recent Song and Poem competition conducted by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (Australia) that can tell us something about how our contemporary crop of artists view railway issues today.

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Performing Arts

The performing arts, particularly music, songs and poems, is one area that needs more attention from by Railway Heritage sources. This is a railway cultural tradition and a large number of people are involved in by collecting older material and using it in varies ways to keep the tradition alive. Many of the tourist railways have recently re-discovered the value of 'Music Trains'. Australian popular music trains of Jazz and Blues are almost a weekly event in several places in Australia, allowing heritage train operators to run their loco's at such events on regular basis. Many Folk Music Clubs also use vintage trains in association with their music festivals.

Some enterprising operators like Queensland Ipswich Museum are turning to the 'Circus' for a modern theme and use of performing arts that is a good example of the 'Theatre of Railways'. This is being done in conjunction with Australia's Circus Oz group a modern circus group without animal acts. Here I understand that their modern circus' acts are using the train as a background to this form of entertain.

One traditional 'theatrical' use of locomotives that goes back along way involves dressing locomotives up in decorative themes for special occasions. A Sydney group similar to Circus OZ, 'Legs on Walls', once advanced the idea of extending this tradition to erecting a scaffold around or on a locomotive that would allow an acrobatic and trapeze act to occur through a mist of steam.

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Railway Related Music

I mention the popular growth of 'Music Trains' above but what of the explosion in music groups performing railway related music and song that are a potential source of programs in the theatre of railways.

Independent research available at the moment, points towards a much bigger opportunity for railway heritage groups working with music and performing arts bodies as themes for events.

One of the most amazing research documents on railway related music can be found on-line, just sitting there for the music industry or a combined music/ railway heritage body to grasp for concerts and music event of many types. Waiting for your local band or music group to build up a repertoire of railway music that can thrill visitor to your event at any time you need it.

This research by a recently retired British librarian Phillip Pacey titled *Railways and Music* brings together the music of railways that has been written since the early 1800's. His first reference begins with The Rail Road, for piano composed by Meineke, in 1828. This amazing document can be found at <http://www.philpacey.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/musrail.html>

As extensive as this item of research is, it only touching the surfaces of documenting what railway music is out there, waiting to be performed once again in railway festivals and events. This research should be considered by all heritage organisations that will be touched by this conference. Here is the source material for every local school band, pop jazz, blues, folk and classical music group within striking distance of your heritage operation. The involvement of these music groups in your local heritage museum has the possibility of finding someone or a group of local people that will help collect the railway songs and poems of your area's experience with railways.

In Australia an ongoing collecting of Australian railway songs and poems has seen the establishment of the *Railway Story web site* (<http://railwaystory.com/>) this was part of an initiative of the Australian Folklore network mentioned above one of the new type organisations with an interest in railways that lay outside of the old heritage railway structure we once knew. Hundreds of Australian railway songs poems items of music and the odd tall story or two are being collected and brought together to tell the Australian Railway Story through the eyes of the poets songwriters and writers who produced the material.

Queensland's rail tourists' interests should be mind-full of the railway songs of the Torres Strait Island railway workers who laid railway tracks in Queensland and Western Australia before the introduction of modern tracklaying equipment. They have recently released a DVD that features their application of their traditional music to this task. This work around railway songs I believe is significant for International railway heritage

organisations interested in the role music can play in their work to preserve railway heritage.

The oral material being collected across Australia is 'Australian Railway Folklore' passed on as oral history around the railway system in Australia by word of mouth. This is where the question of historical accuracy and issue and what stories to be told I believe becomes an issue. Represented in these sources of culture and arts is often the myths of railways.

The images of railway events and people recorded in this way it can be argued are shrouded by myth. Our image of the mighty locomotive captured by a painting say of 3801 or a song or poem describing its mighty feats creates a story that has all the elements of truth but something extra that may have been seen or add by the artists concerned.

Railway myths and culture are very powerful as some corporate railway authorities who have set out traditional railway culture, out of sight, out of mind, or killed off altogether. This is particularly so in areas where Railway Unions played an important role.

I take the opposite view and see the use of this culture, myths and all, as an important means of understanding the ideas that have motivated hundreds of thousands of railway employees and provided the foundation for their love of the industry that they have chosen to work in.

The use of art in its various forms taps into the imagination producing dreams that may not be reality but are the basis for action for the huge railway family; such material is also very valuable as a source for creating a theatre of railway.

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Final Thoughts

Just one final word on the Australian source of this material, that is so valuable for future generations understanding of this industry and those who wish to recall and use railway art and culture in a theatre of railway and other heritage project. I see the need for a balance between local and international activities and aims — centralism and diversity.

At the moment in Australia we stand the chance of losing hundreds of valuable stories of our railways due to the existing structure of libraries, museums art galleries etc. and the federal state relationship.

Australian railway culture rightly or wrongly grew up in a state system with very little federal influence until recent years and as a result a good deal of the Australian railway culture and art is scatted from one end of Australia to another. An understanding of the effects of this structure on

heritage railway activity is gradually creeping through. One of the major issues at the moment is the need for a modern structure that allows for an increase in the collecting of railway cultural material or should I say the registration of railway material in some easier centralised form that provides access to this material so that the Australian railway story can be told.

I have watched the work of the Australian National Library for some years that have a major responsibility in the Australian Federal structure for the collecting of Australian Culture items as a whole and a source of knowledge. This Library does an outstanding job in the overall preservation of Australian Culture and history. However, when it comes to railways its location in Canberra, in a virtually non-railway-city, lacks the resources or much of the political will to drive the work needed to collect railway traditional culture and make available for ongoing use in project like the 'Theatre of Railways'.

One thing sadly missing for our collective understand of Australian Railways and many aspects of railway heritage is an online listing of all of the books that were published in Australia over the first hundred years of our railway experience. 'The Railway Historical Society' and many scholars of Australian have established good valuable lists and collections but again lack the resources at a national level to complete this task.

More needs to be done with internet sources, to where we can walk into any of our Australian Libraries and refer to such a list from anywhere in Australia.

My support for the development of some centralised spot in the Australian Railway Heritage structure with links to all Australia's Heritage Organisations and the library federal structure to foster Australian Railway Culture and its Arts has been with the possibilities surrounding the Werris Creek Museum in Western NSW linked to the New England University, TAFE, the council library, and the Home of Australian Country Music — a project that I feel is worthy of following up over the next few years one that could provide us with substantially more material to draw on for the Theatre of Railways we are now envisaging.

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