

My illustrated short story '**Antipodean Animal Acts**' was the lead article published in the National Library of Australia's online magazine *Unbound* March 2019 edition.

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## ANTIPODEAN ANIMAL ACTS

### CATHY KONING DISCOVERS THE ANIMAL ENTERTAINMENTS OF YESTERYEAR IN THE LIBRARY'S COLLECTIONS

While researching the life of Sydney performer Dorothy Rudder (1893–1940), I came across some incredible stories of animals appearing on the stage for trans-Tasman organisations such as Fullers' Theatres and the Tivoli vaudeville circuit during the early decades of the twentieth century. Although these specialty acts often comprised dogs, cats, birds and monkeys, there was also a veritable cornucopia of more unusual animals working hard for a crust. Though we now take a dim view of this kind of exploitation, it is still fascinating to see what was considered popular entertainment of the past.



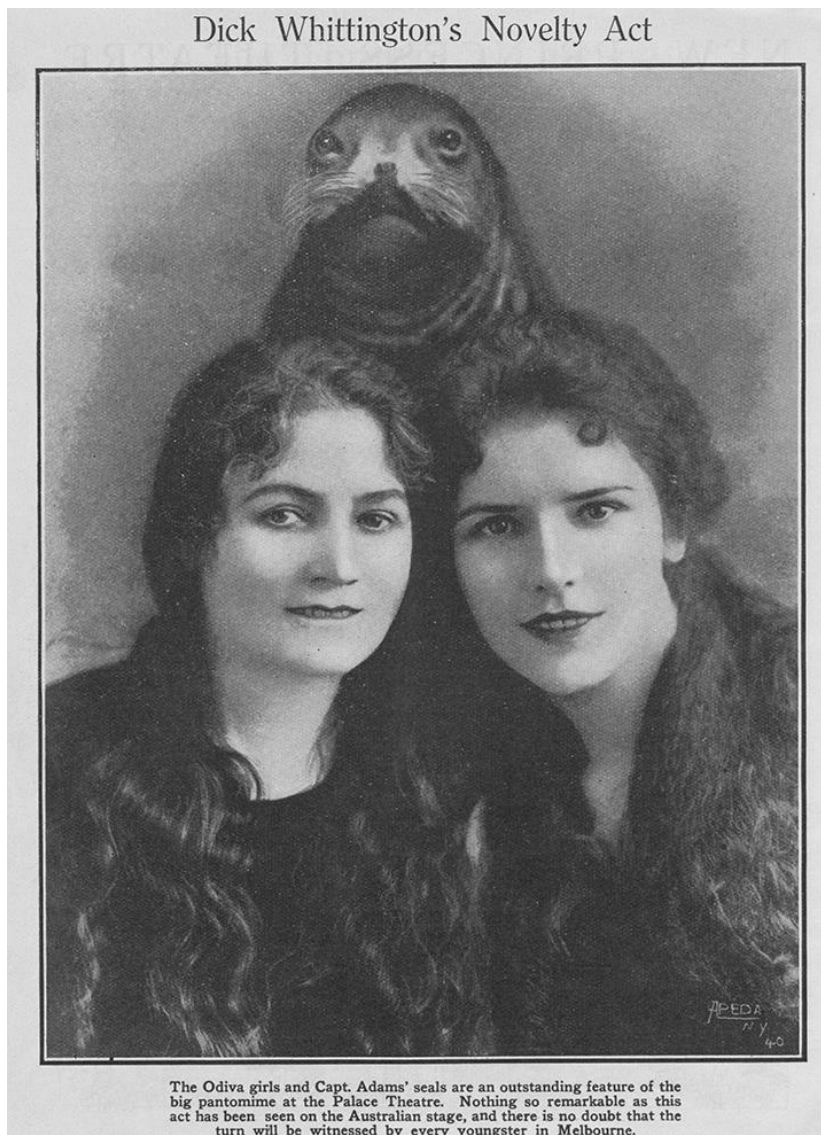
Adolph Friedländer, *George Techow's Wonderful Performing Cats*, 1906, Universiteit Van Amsterdam, Bijzondere Collecties de Theater Collectie, [TEY0010003235](#)

In 1907, Techow's Cats—who were brought to Australia at 'fabulous cost'—amazed with their skills as 'acrobats, equilibrists, wire-walkers, climbers, net-divers, and humorists'. It's hard to believe, but Techow somehow managed to herd cats. Food came into it, of course. The same trick was rehearsed over and over again with a small piece of raw rump steak as the reward. Techow found mixed breeds to be **the most intelligent**: 'The wilder the cats are when they first begin their education, the quicker they are to learn.'

Aquatic seal and sea lion act Odiva's Seals first visited Australia for the Tivoli circuit in 1914 and was so popular that it later toured with a major theatrical company, Fullers Limited. Odiva had an exotic image. Born in England but raised in Samoa, her feats rivalled those of Australian swimming star Annette Kellerman. A short lecture by American animal trainer Captain Adams was followed by various tricks in a seashore setting—seals walked on their hands, performed somersaults and even danced as a group. Odiva would then play with the seals inside a huge glass-fronted



tank. One of the seals towed her in graceful, sweeping circles as she held onto its tail underwater for up to two minutes.



Apeda, 'Dick Whittington's Novelty Act', *Dick Whittington and His Cat: Fuller's Fairy Pantomime*, in *Fullers' ... PROMPT Collection*, c.1912–1940, [nla.cat-vn346367](#)

Canine acts were also hugely popular. Ted Bailey's Posing Dogs illustrated famous art works in tableaux style inside a giant frame with a black velvet background. The white Llewellyn Setters managed to pose without moving or blinking and were so still that some people actually believed they were made of plaster. Top dog performer **Drunken Dan** was so smart he 'knew when it was near time for his act, and with his clothes in his mouth would go to an attendant to be dressed. He would then wander down to the stage and sit in the stage manager's corner until wanted.'

Gautier's Bricklayers comprised 12 uniquely talented canines that enacted a small comedy/drama set on a construction site. Dressed in overalls and with tails wagging, the dogs scrambled over scaffolding and hoisted up model bricks, the work interspersed with regular visits to a nearby pub for some liquid refreshment. An accident with a bag of cement 'knocked out' one of the dogs, who managed to lie perfectly still as if dead. The ambulance arrived, driven by dogs in uniform, along with a weeping wife and a miniature dog depicting her son. For the finale, the dogs leapt vigorously in turn through the windows of the building.

**THE SHOW  
WITH A "WOW"**  
AT THE  
**TIVOLI  
THEATRE**  
**2.30 & 8 p.m.**  
**TO-DAY**



**GAUTIER'S BRICKLAYERS**  
**NINE CANINE WONDER ACTORS** SEE THE DOGS SMOKING—  
 HEAR THEM LAUGHING!  
**DOLLIE & BILLIE** THE FAMOUS SISTERS,  
 Comediennes that Delight the Eye and Ear.  
**BEN NEE ONE** FULVIO, the Italian Balancer.  
 The Chinese Comedy Star. WALTER NILSSON, Comedy Cyclist.  
 Box Plan at Tivoli, Nicholson's, Golden Gate, or 'Ph. 84.

'Gaurier's Bricklayers Advertisement', *The Sun*, 22 March 1926, [nla.news-article224072291](https://nla.news-article224072291)

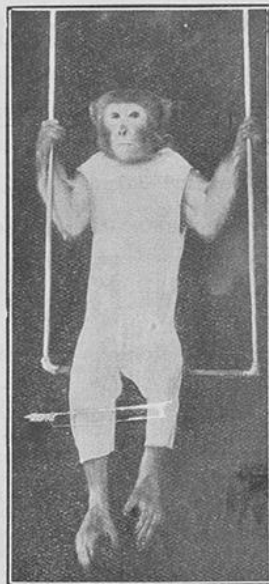
In 1920, Dix and Baker's Vaudeville in Newcastle promoted Professor Foley's 'thought-reading pony', which used its foreleg to count out numbers written on a board. To follow, a donkey unceremoniously bucked off young boys from the audience who tried to earn a cash prize by staying on his back. Looking quite benign, the animal would then wait patiently for its next victim. There is no indication the producers had—or needed—public liability insurance, or even a rope to prevent the boys from landing in the orchestra pit.

The Sunshine Players 1922 to 1923 tour for Fullers also featured a menagerie. Apdale's Circus, a veritable one-act zoo, combined two bears, ten dogs, three monkeys, a South American anteater, and a baboon comedian. According to the *Canterbury Press*, 'This eccentric individual is said to keep the stage in turmoil by reason of the unexpected pranks he plays'. The bears rode bicycles and played the banjo (sort of). The anteater's act was probably rather a slow one, though no report verifies this. The audience was asked not to throw lollies or peanuts at the monkeys.

## Everest's Monkey Hippodrome

### Wonderful Novelty Act

One of the most remarkable novelties in "Mother Goose," Fullers' big Hippodrome Pantomime, is Everest's Monkey Hippodrome, a wonderful troupe of performing monkeys. There are about 40 monkeys in this act, mostly of the small variety, who give a complete vaudeville entertainment on their own, without a human being appearing on the stage. The entertainment begins with an overture by the monkey orchestra, which would have delighted the scientific soul of Darwin, could he see them. The conductor is the Sousa of his



in training monkeys," says Mr. Everest. "I brought 20 monkeys with me, 15 of whom take part in the entertainment. There are five understudies, capable of taking the part of any other monkey in the performance—some performance—as the Simians excel as acrobats, cyclists, comedians and musicians. They all love their work and my hardest job is to get them to stop performing. If they had their own way they would give a complete evening's entertainment. They love applause and are positively human."



tribe, a veritable whirlwind, who has some difficulty in keeping his forces together, particularly the drummer, who is a sleepy fellow, and always comically half a bar late with his beats, and has to be nudged into activity by the very energetic kettle-drummer. The monkey performers include a tub-hurdler, a heavyweight lifter, a tight-rope walker, a Risley act performer, and last, but greatest, a monkey who does a flying trapeze act.

"Patience is the greatest virtue



'Everest's Monkey Hippodrome', *Hippodrome Fuller's Fairy Pantomime: Mother Goose*, in *Fullers' ... PROMPT Collection*, c.1912–1940, [nla.cat-vn346367](#)



Everest's Monkey Hippodrome also worked flat out during this tour. Seven monkeys 'played' in an orchestra while others cavorted on stage, performing tightrope, trapeze and weightlifting acts. Each act was introduced by two monkeys in livery who placed a numbered card on a stand. There was apparently no monkey union to defend their conditions. Everest's contract contained a clause prohibiting them from performing in Australia or New Zealand for 12 months after the agreement ended but the troupe appeared in Melbourne during this time. A court case resulted, but Everest did not attend:

'Apparently the monkeys are not defending,' remarked Mr Justice Schutt ...

Mr. Eager [for Fullers].—No; but the plaintiff company claims an injunction against both the defendant and his monkeys. ...

Mr. Justice Schutt.— You would have to call evidence to identify the monkeys.

Mr. Eager.—Once a member of the troupe, the presumption would be that a monkey would remain a member of the troupe.

Mr. Justice Schutt.—Once a monkey, always a monkey. (Laughter).

It was not all fun and games for those attempting to control their animals either. Stylish greyhounds appeared in the hit musical comedy *Sunny* at Sydney's Empire Theatre in 1927. While being walked home after the show, two started to fight each other, and then attacked their keeper, Robert Donald, when he tried to separate them. Each dog took a leg, with one reported to have locked on for a good five minutes. Donald's shouts eventually drew the attention of two policemen, to whom he observed 'I thought lions and tigers were bad enough, but hounds have got me all right.'



'Dave Meekin—Showman and Animal Trainer', *Everyones*, 21 May 1924, [nla.cat-vn1056073](#)

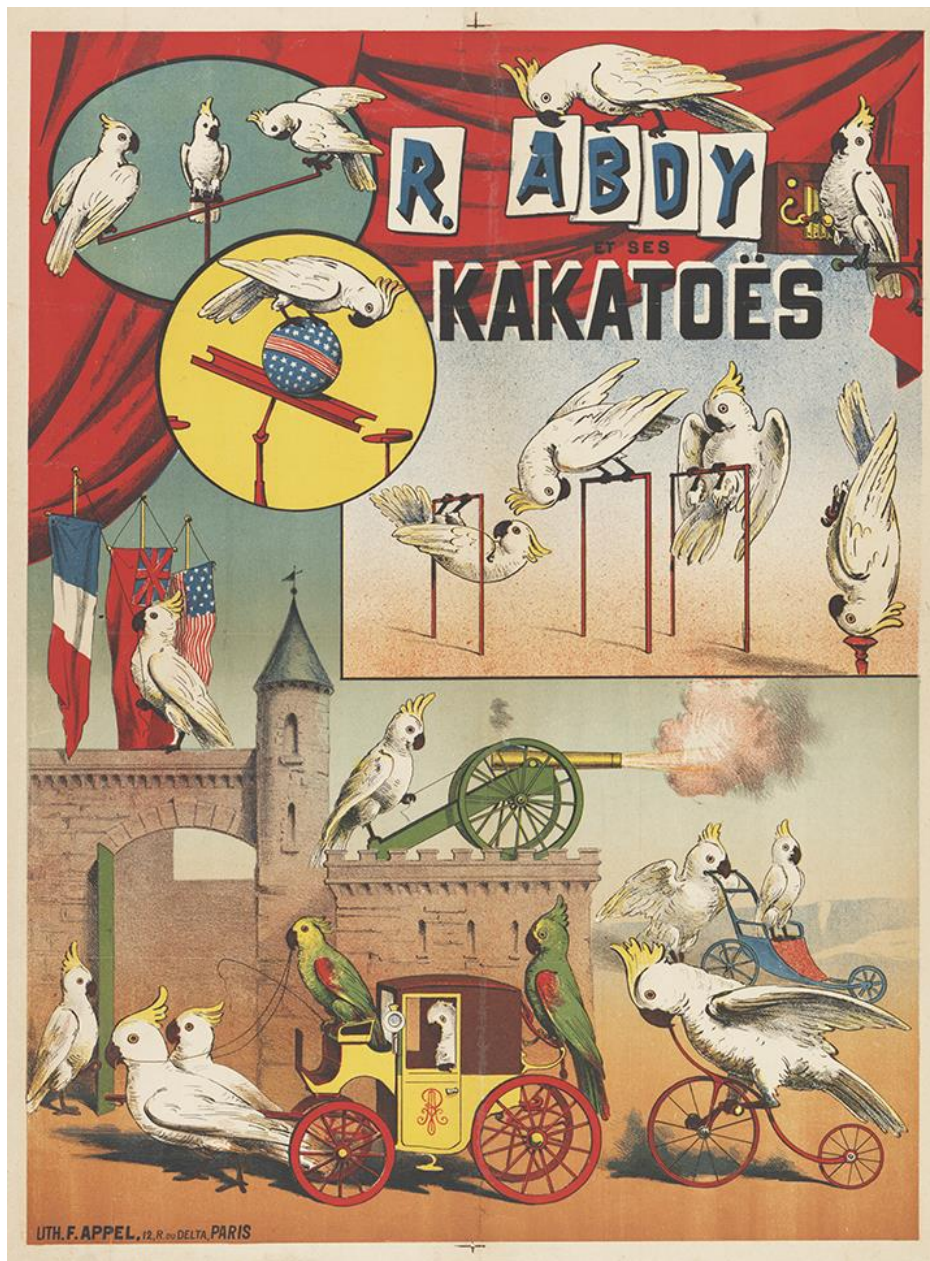
Lions and tigers were generally seen at the circus, but Dave Meekin (also known as Afrikander) and his big cats also performed on stage. The animals played on a seesaw, walked the tightrope and leapt through hoops of blazing fire inside a huge steel cage. The tigers were trickier to train than lions, [Meekin said](#). 'They are very sneaky, you know. You never know when they're going to come at you'. In 1926, Meekin found out just what the hard way—when he was badly bitten on the hand during *Jack and the Beanstalk* at Melbourne's Princess Theatre. The incident was widely reported as quite a thrill for the audience. Meekin was more fortunate than Cleopatra the Snake Charmer, however. While performing in Perth in 1928, she was bitten on the thumb by a large tiger snake, dying in hospital the next day.



'Are Snakes Faithful Animals Cleopatra Says No!', *The Sun*, 14 July 1910, [nla.news-article229974172](https://nla.news-article229974172)

Birds got in on the act too. Abdy's Animal Circus featured 'a cockatoo who can pick out any flag asked for, and who will ring a bell up to any desired number under 10', while [Clivelli's Miniature Circus](#) highlighted 'pigeons that will astound you'. Nellie Harmston's Cockatoos could seesaw, pose and pull chariots around Ben Hur-style, while one particularly talented bird played 'Home Sweet Home' on chimes. No bird brains here!





F. Appel (lithographer), *Robert Abdy et ses Kakatoes*, 1890, [nla.cat-vn73574](https://nla.cat-vn73574)

In 1905, the *Adelaide Register*'s reporter was impressed with Madame Marzella's talented winged funsters:

*Madame has 150 feathered friends. They include white cockatoos, macaws, pigeons, ravens, pigeons, corollas and a black cockatoo ... I saw the show, and was much struck by the remarks of the cockatoo Lucy, who called out when her brother artists were engaged in intricate business, "Cut it out; its rotten," much to the amusement of the audience.*



'On Bird and Animal Training', *Sydney Mail*, 14 October 1903, [nla.news-article164904024](#)

Animal acts certainly were popular during these 'golden years' of variety theatre. And to think many of the animals were working for peanuts, fish or—in the case of Madame Marzella's birds—seeds, bi-weekly bread and butter and a drop of whisky or brandy in a hot drink on cold days. The old adage 'if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys' might be true. And while 'paying' animals with food makes sense, in a way, it is reasonable to assume that these 'golden years' would have been considerably less rosy for the animals themselves.