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## Jessie Matthews' Construction of a Star Persona on her Post-war Australian Tours

Jessie Matthews' post-war tours to Australia were part of a sequence of commercially successful imported productions then heralded as a great boom era in Australian theatre. However, Matthews' waning popularity in Britain since the 1940s meant that she was no longer recognizable as the screen darling of the 1930s. Indeed, the Australian press had to remind its readers of 'evergreen Jessie's' succession of British film hits such as *The Good Companions* (1933) and *Evergreen* (1934). This article examines the critical and public reception of Matthews' tours with a focus on the strategic management of her star persona, both on and off stage, including her public criticism of Australian theatre management and employment opportunities for Australian theatre performers. Martina Lipton is an Honorary Associate Lecturer at the University of Queensland and was recently the Research Fellow (Australia) on the Leverhulme Research Project 'British-Australian Cultural Exchange: Live Performance 1880–1960'. Her publications include the chapter 'Localism and British Modern Pantomime' in *A World of Popular Entertainments* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012) and articles for *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, and *Popular Entertainment Studies*.

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We remember her in the thirties as the exciting star of *Evergreen*, and no title ever fitted anyone better, for evergreen indeed she is.<sup>1</sup>

JESSIE MATTHEWS was one of Britain's most popular stars of stage and screen in the 1930s but by 1952, when she first toured to Australia, the press referred to her as 'the former well-known English musical comedy star of films and stage' and dared to ask, 'Who can remember Jessie Matthews? If you're a bit hazy about Jessie herself, you must know her songs.'<sup>2</sup> Matthews, at forty-five years old, was promoted as 'evergreen Jessie' – a reference to her signature performance in the Gaumont British film box-office hit *Evergreen* (1934) and to her ability in 1952 to remain 'looking just as youthful in recent photographs as she did in movies in the thirties . . . a sort of ingénue-ness . . . which gives the impression of eternal youth'.<sup>3</sup>

This framing of Matthews' star persona reinforced her personal construction of self-hood that relied upon her image in *Evergreen*. For example, Matthews' autobiography, *Over My Shoulder*, derives its title from one of her

hit songs from the film. Reflecting in her memoirs on her tour to Australia she notes, 'If they expected the young dancing star of *Evergreen*, they might be surprised.'<sup>4</sup> Yet, on her arrival in Melbourne she endeavoured to convince Australians that she was, indeed, the youthful star of *Evergreen* when she 'put on a wonderful show. . . . She sang about twenty of the nostalgic "evergreen" numbers she made popular in her films of the thirties', as if to placate Australian news reporters and prove that she 'was still the agile dancer Australia remembers in films like *Evergreen*', who had lost none of her appeal as a musical comedy star.<sup>5</sup> However, Matthews had retired from film in the 1930s and had made a late career move from musical comedy to straight stage drama. This article examines the critical and public reception of Matthews' 1952 and 1956 tours with a focus on the strategic management of her star persona, both on and off stage, and media criticism of her as part of the glut of overseas 'has-beens', a procession of so-called stars who played in Australia since they could no longer command their once-high fees at home.<sup>6</sup>

<i>Larger than Life</i>	Princess Theatre, Melbourne	23 June–27 Aug 1952
<i>Larger than Life</i>	Theatre Royal, Adelaide	30 Aug–20 Sept 1952
<i>Castle in the Air</i>	Theatre Royal, Adelaide	22–30 Nov 1952
<i>Larger than Life</i>	His Majesty's Theatre, Perth	26 Dec 1952–12 Jan 1953
<i>Castle in the Air</i>	His Majesty's Theatre, Perth	13–24 Jan 1953
<i>Larger than Life</i>	Tivoli, Sydney	4 Feb–12 March 1953
<i>Larger than Life</i>	His Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane	19 March–9 April 1953
<i>Larger than Life</i>	Theatre Royal, Hobart	25 April–9 May 1953
<i>Castle in the Air</i>	Theatre Royal, Hobart	4–14 June 1953

Fig. 1, above: Jessie Matthews' tour itinerary 1952–53.

In June 1947, Ernest C. Rolls, acting as Jessie Matthews' business manager, wrote to Charles Moses, General Manager at the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Moses had formerly encouraged Matthews to consider an Australian tour, but she had subsequently been ill and unable to commit at the time. When he again discussed the possibility of an Australian tour, she was enthusiastic about the prospect of missing an English winter if the ABC would offer her a broadcasting contract at agreeable terms.

In an internal ABC memo, W. G. James notes that he would like the matter to be discussed at the next meeting of the Artists' Tours Committee, and he further adds that 'I think Jessie Matthews is essentially a light entertainment artist, therefore we'd need a report from Mr Harry Pringle, Director of Variety Entertainment.'<sup>7</sup>

### 'Evergreen' Jessie

Matthews arrived in Australia on 20 May 1952 and toured interstate for a year, as in Figure 1. She was promoted as 'English stage and screen star and radio artist' and this tour was heralded as part of 'one of the greatest boom eras in the history of Australian theatre . . . when several of the biggest names in the theatrical world will arrive from the United States of America and England'.<sup>8</sup> Matthews pursued stage work in straight drama in England after her film career ended in the 1930s, but this oeuvre was largely unknown to Australian audiences.

The promotional publicity for Matthews' 1952 tour, under the management of Kenn Brodziak for Aztec Services Pty Ltd, in association with Garnet H. Carroll, thus relied



Fig. 2, right: Jessie Matthews in *Evergreen* as Harriett Green (above) and her daughter Harriet Hawkes (below). Ogden's cigarette card (author's collection).

heavily upon reminding Australians of her screen successes, in particular *Evergreen*, to reinforce the myth of the age-defying youthful gamin. *The Argus*, for instance, notes: 'Perhaps Jessie's biggest show was *Evergreen*. With a delightful musical score (including "Dancing on the Ceiling") which is still played quite a lot on the air, it was also one of her biggest screen hits.'<sup>9</sup> Adelaide's *Mail* refers to her as 'Same Young Jessie',<sup>10</sup> and Perth's *Sunday Times* reports that 'the years have been kind to her and her vibrant personality still sparkles as brightly as . . . in *Evergreen*'.<sup>11</sup>

*Evergreen* was an adaptation of Charles B. Cochran's lavish and hugely successful production of the musical revue *Ever Green*, which premiered at the Alhambra Theatre, Glasgow, in 1930, before transferring to the West End.<sup>12</sup> In the screen version, Matthews plays the dual role of Harriet Green, a famous Victorian music-hall star who left her daughter in the care of a nanny when she quit the London stage at the height of her fame many years previously, and her daughter Harriet Hawkes, an ambitious performer who disguises herself as her mother to secure a starring role in a revue. This masquerade perpetuated the myth of the ever-youthful star performer. Hawkes's disguise, as illustrated in a contemporary Ogden's cigarette card (see Fig. 2), goes no further than a



Fig. 3: Lux toilet soap card (author's collection).

grey wig. There is not a line or shadow on her face to suggest her mother's advanced years; instead, her rouged lips accentuate and reinforce her youthfulness.

Matthews drew upon this conceit in other endorsed advertising. For example, dressed in costume as Harriet Green, in an advertisement for Lux Toilet Soap, Matthews is clearly identified by her name and signature, declaring the product to be 'so very soft and gentle it keeps my skin so soft and clear' (see Fig. 3). Matthews' 'private life' for public consumption reinforced the mother-daughter dyad in *Evergreen* because she was accompanied to

Australia by her seventeen-year-old adopted daughter Catherine. Catherine is described as having 'dark hair, flashing eyes', and a personality which made her 'quite capable of following in mother's footsteps'.<sup>13</sup>

Although Catherine was studying art at Farnham Art School in Surrey and intended to be an artist, she also had aspirations to be an actress.<sup>14</sup> Her first role was in *Pygmalion*, which toured England in 1950, and starred her mother. While on tour in Australia, she was also engaged as an understudy in the cast, assisted with stage managing, and did some acting when her mother could not perform due to sickness.

The accompaniment of notes with the press photographs of Matthews and her daughter on their arrival in Fremantle and later Adelaide (see Figs. 4 and 5) suggests that not only might Australians fail to recognize Jessie Matthews in the flesh, but that she might also be mistaken for Catherine's sister since she 'looks at least ten years younger than her real age. . . . Her figure is slight and trim, and she wears her curly brown hair cut short'.<sup>15</sup>

### Managing the Onstage Star Persona

Matthews opened at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne, in Guy Bolton's romantic comedy *Larger than Life* on 23 June 1952. She had previously been successful in London in this play, adapted from Somerset Maugham's novel *Theatre*.<sup>16</sup> Matthews plays Julia Lambert, a leading actress who faces the day when she will no longer be engaged to play siren roles as a result of her ageing and concomitant loss of sex-appeal. Rather than be forced to give way to younger performers, she determines to prove to her producer, from whom she is happily divorced, that she hasn't reached this stage yet by carrying on a flamboyant flirtation with a young and impressionable man, Tom Fennell. The play was deemed to be an excellent vehicle for Matthews since it enabled her to play on the stage a role familiar to her in real life, that of a woman of the theatre.<sup>17</sup>

Matthews' transition from musical comedy star to a serious dramatic actress appears to



**SISTERS?** One is British film, stage, and TV star Jessie Matthews, the other—her daughter, Catherine, 17. And which is which? That's the star at right. They reached Fremantle today in the *Stratheden* on their way to Melbourne, where Jessie Matthews will play in "Larger Than Life" and "Happy Birthday".—Picturegram.

Figs 4–5: News (Adelaide), 20 May 1952, p. 20 (above), 29 August 1952, p. 3 (below).



**THIS LIVELY LOOKING COUPLE** could well be taken for sisters, but in fact one is the adopted daughter of the other. On the left is stage and film star Jessie Matthews, who arrives in Adelaide today for a season of "Larger Than Life" at the Theatre Royal. With Jessie is her 17-year-old adopted daughter Catherine Hale-Munn.

have been problematic. London audiences insisted that she always finish a play with 'a quite irrelevant song or two and a kick'.<sup>18</sup> Although the press heralded her arrival in a dramatic role, Australian audiences were told that she would oblige them, too, with a couple of songs at the piano in *Larger than Life*, and that if they clapped loudly enough she might provide a few more at the end of the play.<sup>19</sup> The play's producers had apparently persuaded Matthews to perform some of her greatest hit songs interpolated in the play hopefully to reignite the public's memories of her films and placate critics such as Frank Doherty, who lamented the fact that 'Tommy Trinder was one of the few artists in any branch of the theatrical field to come to Australia while still at the peak of his fame abroad'.<sup>20</sup> He was critical of

former stars who have come from either voluntary or necessary retirement abroad to give this country a gracious sample of the talent that made them famous elsewhere. Miss Jessie Matthews had forsaken the London stage for hotel life [in Farnham, with her third husband Brian Lewis] until she was persuaded that the colonials were aching for a sight of her.<sup>21</sup>

Matthews, keen to associate herself with her film-star image of the 1930s, proudly announced that she kept limber and could still kick above her head. However, she was not going to, because 'I'm doing what other musical comedy stars have accomplished with great success – Gertrude Lawrence and Jack Buchanan, for instance. I'm leaving gymnastics on the stage to the younger ones and moving over to concentrate more on straight parts',<sup>22</sup> because 'when a woman has reached forty it's time for her to give away bouncing and bounding across a stage, and to concentrate on dramatics'.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this, Matthews appeared loath to distance herself from her former musical comedy star persona and danced on the deck of the *Stratheden* when the ship pulled into Melbourne on 25 May 1952.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, she promised to sing and dance in Melbourne, either in a musical production or in special matinees.<sup>25</sup> She performed her hit songs in a show for reporters in Melbourne,

and her sense of nostalgia that 'it's just like old times' was augmented by her accompanist on the piano being Vera Buck, who had played for her at the Gaumont British studios in 1936. Buck was engaged to play offstage for Matthews' numbers in *Larger than Life*, including a selection of her stage and screen hits, in films such as *Evergreen*, before the performance and in the intervals.<sup>26</sup>

### The 'Straight Actress' Criticized

Matthews wanted to be taken seriously as a straight actress, but the Australian press reviews were mixed. John Healey's critique of her opening in *Larger than Life* at the Theatre Royal, Adelaide, on 30 August 1952 notes that she is 'the Jessie of the English musicals – vital, youthful in manner, impulsive. Remember *Evergreen*?'<sup>27</sup> Frank Doherty, in his review of the play on its first night at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne, was far more critical. He took exception to those who supported Matthews singing in *Larger than Life* because she was remembered in Australia more as a songstress than as a straight actress. He writes:

Certainly let Miss Matthews sing to her, and her sponsor's content . . . but not in a play that has no provision for musical numbers. Were this form of reasoning to set a precedent, we might well expect to see Robert Helpmann come out here for a ballet season, and halt in the midst of say, *Swan Lake*, to deliver the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy from *Hamlet* since Helpmann is a fine Shakespearian actor as well as a dancer.<sup>28</sup>

Doherty expresses surprise that Garnet H. Carroll and Kenn Brodziak had approved of the plan to interpolate Matthews' hit songs into the play, since this contravened one of the accepted precepts of theatre: 'Any illusion that she was Julia Lambert vanished with the first notes, and she became Jessie Matthews, former English musical comedy star.'<sup>29</sup>

Matthews' performance as Julia Lambert again received lukewarm attention from critics and audiences when she toured to Sydney's Tivoli. She was criticized as an actress of great experience and charm, but very limited range, who was unable fully to merge character with her own personality.

Her light and graceful 'principal boy' personality was deemed to be seriously miscast in a generally disappointing production. In particular, Matthews' style and temperament were thought to be ill-suited to the play:

She is a thrush trying to be a bird of prey. . . . The early parts of the play were played so blatantly for music-hall laughs, by her and the others, that she had little sense of touching in the hungers and doubts that are the character's real motivations.<sup>30</sup>

Matthews' vocal range was judged to be limited and her acting style extravagant, with too much fussing, incessant hand-waving, and head-nodding, which smothered the outline of her movements.<sup>31</sup>

Matthews presumably did not heed this critical response to her performance since Perth critics also found fault with her 'will o' the wisp approach' with excessive darting about that completely overshadowed other members of the cast.<sup>32</sup> Babette Stephens, theatre reviewer for Brisbane's *Sunday Mail*, also advised that Julia Lambert should be played with more restraint and dignity:

It is extraordinary to witness an artist like Miss Matthews, who has developed over the years an enchanting style as a musical comedy actress, embrace a new medium. It is also essential that she eliminate many of the endearing tricks which served to make her the toast of London for similar success in the new sphere. Particularly in playing Julia Lambert . . . nothing could convince me that a 'first lady of the theatre', which Julia unquestionably was, could indulge in the first act's prolonged exhibition of leg art.<sup>33</sup>

Matthews also starred in Alan Melville's *Castle in the Air*, a comedy about the inability of aristocrats to maintain their stately homes. Although Matthews did not sing or dance in this production, she nevertheless typically entertained audiences after the show for up to fifteen minutes, singing her 1930s hits.

### Promoting the Radio Performer

The public's desire at least to listen to Matthews perform her musical comedy hit songs was also realized with her engagement to perform six concerts for the ABC from 26 June 1952, by arrangement with her theatre



Fig. 6: Matthews' arrival in Australia, 1952. ABC publicity photograph, courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

management during her season at the Princess Theatre. The *Jessie Matthews Show*, as it was called, was a half-hour radio programme on Melbourne's 3AR every Thursday night at 7.15 p.m., which was relayed to regional stations and featured Matthews singing the hits from her stage and film shows.

B. Ross in the ABC's publicity department requested that Matthews be photographed in a happy smiling pose at the ABC microphone when she was interviewed on arrival on the *Stratheden* on 20 May 1952, as this image would hopefully be suitable for publication in *The ABC Weekly* (see Fig. 6).

Matthews' publicity for the ABC sought to frame her onstage persona with her reputation as a dancer and singer in musical comedies of the 1930s. For example, she is pictured in her Queen's Road flat in Melbourne relaxing with one of her favourite books on ballet. Reading, particularly books on ballet, is described as her favourite pastime and she is further linked with the genre of dance with an anecdote about her childhood training in the same ballet class as Markova (see Fig. 7). This image was used to publicize Matthews' guest appearance with the ABC Melbourne Dance Band in *Screen Serenade* on 11 November 1952, as she sang 'When You've Got a Little Springtime in Your Heart' from *Evergreen*.

Matthews was promoted as a widely experienced radio performer and a favourite with the BBC radio and television audiences, having gained experience as a top-billed star



Fig. 7: ABC publicity photograph of Jessie Matthews 'relaxing at her Queen's Road flat, Melbourne', courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

in popular English radio shows of the late 1940s such as *Workers' Playtime* and *Variety Bandbox*.<sup>34</sup> However, *The Jessie Matthews Show* was criticized by the press, with barbs such as 'the disappointment of the week'. The major disappointment was the

sad truth that Miss Matthews sounded her age. In her songs her voice trembled like the last rose of summer in the first blast of winter, as well as showing a lamentable tendency to drop clean through the bottom of the low notes. Mrs Q. summed it up neatly when she said: 'Her voice hasn't worn as well as Our Glad's.' That was generous, for in fact Miss Matthews' vocal chords seemed quite threadbare in places.<sup>35</sup>

Matthews' cross-over to radio appears to have failed because she was unfavourably compared with her screen star persona of the 1930s with comments such as 'the gay creature who romped about the screen in such happy movies as *The Good Companions* was not evident here'.<sup>36</sup> Despite such criticism Matthews was invited to appear in special radio features such as an interview by Dick Moore in John Fowler's *Theatre Magazine* and a sing-song with a nationwide audience in *Australia's Hour of Song*, recorded at Melbourne's Tivoli Theatre.<sup>37</sup>

### Mediating Star Image and Civic Persona

Jessie Matthews was feted as a star during her 1952 tour, with gala parties hosted in her honour. The press paid particular attention to her fashionable wardrobe and jewellery, which was considered to be one of the best and most valuable private collections ever seen in Australia.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these trappings of celebrity, the theatre managements had difficulty controlling Matthews' offstage star persona. She particularly disliked being photographed and 'will abuse any photographer who attempts to take her at lower than eye level'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, she stated: 'Your men were a bit of a disappointment.'<sup>40</sup> On her arrival in Perth, in December 1952, Matthews also criticized Australians for not supporting their own theatre performers,<sup>41</sup> and in an address to the Junior Chamber of Commerce

in Perth she stated that amateur theatre in Australia was a menace to professionals.<sup>42</sup>

As guest at a luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club of Hobart, she again used the opportunity to condemn the lack of support in Australia for local theatre performers. She noted that, although Australian actors compared favourably with overseas artists, they were not appreciated by local audiences and so were forced to gain experience in England before they could find acceptance at home.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps this prickly offstage public persona was a protest at negative critiques of her own radio and stage performances. Thus, she sparked controversy in February 1953 when she performed the shortest opening ceremony on record – one minute and a quarter – for Max Ragless's show at David Jones department store. Her record speech was: 'If I were on the stage I'd probably be bright. As I'm not, I'll just declare the show open.'<sup>44</sup>

Unlike a host of English stars imported to post-war Australia, such as Tommy Trinder (1946), George Formby (1947), Jenny Howard (1947), Laurence Olivier (1948), Vivien Leigh (1948), and Stanley Holloway (1949), who came with the intention of raising money for the Food for Britain Fund and other Australian charities, Jessie Matthews appeared initially uninterested in philanthropic causes.<sup>45</sup> Instead, she focused on her own need to escape: 'I heard so much about sunshine and steaks that I felt I must have a holiday from dull skies, rationing, and queues. I would be happy to spend up to a year here.'<sup>46</sup>

A further rationale for Matthews' tour was reported to have been her desire to make Australia home for herself and her third husband Brian Lewis, if suitable opportunities arose.<sup>47</sup> When Matthews was approached to help raise £7,000 for an old people's home on the Hopkins River, Warrnambool, she briskly responded: 'Can't just now, but if it's possible later I'd like to visit Warrnambool.'<sup>48</sup> In contrast, comedian Tommy Trinder, who opened his Melbourne season at the Tivoli on 26 June 1952, declared his determination to campaign vigorously for the £50,000 he planned to realize for Australian charity.<sup>49</sup>

Matthews socialized with Tommy Trinder at parties such as the one hosted by English

stage star William Hodge.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps conscious of Trinder's philanthropy, Matthews became involved in fund-raising, typically for children-related charities, which reinforced her private persona as a mother who had two miscarriages before adopting a child.<sup>51</sup> In press interviews she repeatedly stressed her role as mother, stating, 'For me, Catherine has long ago ceased to be anything but my real daughter. . . . She's my baby and I'm her Mama.'<sup>52</sup> Certainly her participation in a Mothers' Club concert at Melbourne's Town Hall on 10 May 1953 supported her self-identification.<sup>53</sup>

Jessie Matthews' choice of charity work also resonates with her 'lost' childhood as a consequence of working from an early age to escape poverty. Matthews was born in Soho, into a non-theatrical family of sixteen children of whom only eleven survived infancy. She was pushed into show business by her older sister Rosie in the hope of a new life far away from her abusive father. Matthews' first charity engagement in Australia was to auction two bullocks to help raise £50,000 for the Queen Elizabeth Maternal and Child Health Centre, Carlton.<sup>54</sup> She became further involved in the Children's Hospital when she attended the reading of its annual report, which called for more children's specialists, and she presented prizes to members of the nursing staff.<sup>55</sup>

Matthews also recorded a message of goodwill in Brisbane to be played in aid of radio station 5AD's Good Friday Appeal on 3 April 1953, which raised £21,600 for the Adelaide Children's Hospital building fund.<sup>56</sup> Although Matthews and the *Larger than Life* company put on their show for patients at the Repatriation General Hospital, Adelaide, on 29 September 1952, she made sick and disadvantaged children the centre of her philanthropy.<sup>57</sup>

### The Focus on Disabled Children

Matthews' decision to focus on fund-raising for disabled children is particularly poignant since it reinforced her identification with hospitalization, vulnerability, utter powerlessness and the stigma of mental illness. She



had a history of nervous breakdowns. She states: 'Henry [Dr Rowan] knew about the misery I'd endured behind locked doors. . . . Lock 'em away where no one can see them, that was the policy.'<sup>58</sup>

When she made an hour's unscheduled visit to the South Australian Spastic Paralysis Welfare Association's home in Woodville Road (see Fig. 8) on 5 September 1952,

She shook hands with some children and retrieved toys that small, uncontrollable hands, had swept on the floor. She was rewarded in many cases with grateful, twisted smiles and hoarse sounds that should have been happy childish laughter. She went from child to child with unabated cheerfulness, and even those with undeveloped minds showed pleasure at her visit. Then she broke down and cried, and it was realized what a gallant act hers had been. She walked alone in the garden and came back white and strained, but still cheerful.<sup>59</sup>



Fig. 8: 'A star was his escort when Allen Dennis, sixteen, was wheeled round the Spastic Children's Home at Woodville this week. The star was stage and film actress Jessie Matthews.' *The Mail*, 6 September 1952, p. 14.



Fig. 9: 'Behind the Footlights – the Oven', *Sunday Mail*, 22 March 1953, p. 10.

The following day she bounced the ball at a football match between police traffic officers and jockeys at Weigall Oval in aid of the Spastic Association's appeal. About four thousand people contributed more than £400 at this charity carnival. The auctioning of a football autographed by Matthews raised £17 for the fund.<sup>60</sup>

Matthews and her daughter also put down the first pennies for the 'penny-on-the-line' drive which opened on 13 September 1952 for 'Miss Crippled Children' (Miss Leonie Ross) in the Miss South Australia Quest.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Matthews supported the Society for Crippled Children when she opened the Combined Clubs' dog show at Wayville on 29 November 1952 in aid of the Somerton Crippled Children's Home.<sup>62</sup>

Matthews continued her charity work in aid of disabled and sick children while on tour. For instance, on 1 May 1953 she blew up and released the first balloon in a barrage launched by a Hobart store as part of a campaign to raise funds for the Crippled Children's Society.<sup>63</sup> Matthews' opening of the YWCA Gracious Living Exhibition in Brisbane's City Hall on 25 March 1953, in aid of its maintenance work, supported her framing as a domestic woman.<sup>64</sup>

This portrait of Matthews' private persona was sustained by articles about her



Fig. 10: ABC publicity photograph of Matthews as Mrs Gilbey in *The Shadow Between*, the ABC's radio play on 3AR, 22 March 1952. Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

home life (see Fig. 9). For example, her love of cooking was emphasized – ‘She is a good cook – she likes to try new dishes, especially national ones – and enjoys her own cooking’ – and her favourite recipes were shared with readers.<sup>65</sup> This positioning was reinforced with ABC publicity images of Matthews as Mrs Gilbey, the chirpy cockney housekeeper in *The Shadow Between*, the ABC's radio play broadcast on 22 March 1952 (see Fig. 10).

### The Performance of *Janus*, 1956–57

Matthews' onstage performance in 1952 appears to have been warmly received by audiences, but it was slated by critics as

‘professional theatre at its worst’.<sup>66</sup> Despite this, Matthews made a return tour in 1956, with J. C. Williamson's Theatres Ltd. starring in Carolyn Green's Broadway hit *Janus* (see Fig. 11). Matthews entered into a percentage arrangement with J. C. Williamson's which guaranteed her £150 against seven and a half per cent of the gross takings up to £2,000 per week. For takings in excess of £2,000 per week she received ten per cent of the gross receipts per week.<sup>67</sup>

She was described in the promotion of the *Janus* tour as a renowned star of musical production, who had nevertheless ‘proved her straight acting ability in her last Australian tour when the Guy Bolton–Somerset Maugham drama *Larger than Life* was her

Theatre Royal, Sydney  
29 December 1956–7 March 1957

Theatre Royal, Adelaide  
9–15 March 1957

Comedy Theatre, Melbourne,  
23 March 1957–4 May 1957

Fig. 11: *Janus* performance seasons, 1956–57.

medium'.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, she was praised in *Janus* for being likeable, bright, and hard-working, despite not being the 'best player of comedy we have seen' and skipping around the stage as though she were still a top musical comedy dancer.<sup>69</sup>

*Janus* was chosen to suit Matthews' style: a little naughty, a little daffy, and a little witty. She is described as 'wayward in the manner her fans enjoy but she doesn't carry off the awkward attempts at seriousness'.<sup>70</sup> According to H. Stafford Northcote in *The Advertiser*, Matthews was certainly given a warm welcome by her audiences, but this apparently

did not disguise the fact that in giving *Janus* the treatment, she did not entirely manage to give us a treat. The tribute was for the charming personality we all know and admire, rather than for the actress – but it is as the actress that Miss Matthews must be assessed. This vivacious hard-working player endows the role with her own particular brand of enthusiasm which unfortunately is not quite the right kind – it is far too redolent of musical comedy and far, far too girlish.<sup>71</sup>

Although *Janus* was a straight domestic comedy, Matthews performed her song 'When You Fall in Love' in the first act, and others after the play. Indeed, Matthews' tour included selections from her stage and screen hit songs and also three unpublished tunes that she'd composed.

*Janus* itself is a comedy triangle involving Jessica, a Seattle shipping tycoon's wife (Matthews), and the two men she loves, Gil, her husband, and Denny, a married French teacher, who have widely differing appeals and temperaments. Matthews did not try to hide her *Evergreen* technique in *Janus*, even displaying a glimpse of her lovely legs, but her charm failed to move theatre critics.<sup>72</sup>

Elizabeth Riddell's review in the *Daily Mirror* notes that she was a curious choice for the lead, since her acting style was pre-war musical comedy and her voice was so light it was almost inaudible.<sup>73</sup>

Another review in the *Sunday Telegraph* states that Matthews looked beautiful in spite of a fussy wardrobe, but was a light-weight comedienne, who could colour her character with warmer humanity.<sup>74</sup> The *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Herald* also considered Matthews to be miscast as the American wife leading an involved double-life since 'she was as "London" as Bow Bells' and spoke 'radio English'.<sup>75</sup>

### Restraining Jessie's Temperament

Although theatre management approved of news stories about Matthews' love of the sun, swimming, and cooking, any mention of her marriage to Brian Lewis was to be avoided in interviews by 1957, since he was living in South Africa and their relationship was strained. Matthews and Lewis divorced in 1959. Despite Matthews' three failed marriages to Englishmen, she antagonized the public when she described Australian men as appalling in an informal chat session with members of the Women's Australian Travel League.<sup>76</sup> She contrasted Australian marriages to those in Britain and France where she believed couples had a more equitable attitude, noting 'if only Australian men could have three months in Paris, then they would know how to treat their women'.<sup>77</sup>

J. C. Williamson's management restricted Matthews' access to the press and had difficulty coming up with fresh angles to promote her since 'she refused to cooperate on even the old ones. Wouldn't talk about what she's been doing in recent years, or about her film and theatrical experiences'.<sup>78</sup> Peter Morrison, the press relations officer at J. C. Williamson Theatres Ltd., advised his colleague Jim Rendall in Adelaide that he had written to Matthews appealing to her to be more helpful. He notes that Matthews was a charming personality with a large fan base and that *Janus* could be successful given her past record and present charms, except that:

she is not over willing to have interviews. She insults photographers, telling them she knows better than they how to take her picture. She antagonizes the press and public alike by undiplomatic statements about, for example, Australian men, the Australian press, Australian actors. . . . The answer is to watch her carefully, and as far as possible line up in advance what she'll say at interviews or broadcasts.<sup>79</sup>

Morrison, in a letter to Charles Deardon, publicity manager at J. C. Williamson's Comedy Theatre, also explains that he struggled with Matthews from his very first contact with her because of her temperament and her apparent antipathy towards the press. Matthews was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as claiming that theatrical perfection would never be attained in Australia because 'there's a slap-happy and lackadaisical attitude towards rehearsals'.<sup>80</sup>

Morrison states: 'I could enumerate in detail the unhelpful things she's said and done but let me say simply that it's essential to watch Miss Matthews very closely indeed, and as far as possible vet in advance anything she may say to the press or radio'.<sup>81</sup> Morrison expressed concern that Matthews did not realize how damaging her public comments were to her own reputation and to the play's chances at the box office.

Deardon supported Morrison's attempts to reign in their star and vet her radio broadcasts since he had always understood her to be a 'particularly trying person to deal with and quite irrational, to use the kindest word, in her behaviour'. He notes that during the Adelaide season of *Janus*, Matthews spent half the time in solicitors' offices in dealings with the management, and accompanied by Anthony Ward (stage manager) 'swept up the drive' of Government House and asked the Governor to intervene in a disagreement between her and her employer, for no other reason than that he had attended the play and spoken kindly to her afterwards. Government House's response to this was to supply Matthews with the name of a solicitor in the city and suggest that she get in touch with him.<sup>82</sup>

Matthews travelled alone to Australia for her 1956–57 tour and was reclusive. She was

no longer feted with gala receptions in her honour and did not engage in charity work as she had done during her previous tour. She abandoned her flat at King's Cross and leased a houseboat on Sydney Harbour, which at high tide was cut off by twenty feet of water. Her life in 'happy seclusion' was eventually curtailed when influenza forced her to relinquish her lease.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

Jessie Matthews' tours of 1952 and 1956 were part of a sequence of commercially successful imported productions which were heralded as a great boom era in Australian theatre. However, Matthews was criticized by Australian media as one star amongst a surfeit of overseas performers who were no longer at the height of their fame. Indeed, Matthews, forty-five years old when she first toured to Australia, had endured waning popularity in Britain since the 1940s. By the time she arrived in Australia she was no longer the screen darling of the 1930s.

Nevertheless, every effort was made to promote Matthews as the 'evergreen' feather-footed gamine who had changed little with the years. Matthews was torn Janus-like between her desire to be accepted as a straight dramatic actress and management's desire to cash in on the nostalgia of her 1930s musical comedy screen successes. Matthews appears to have been frustrated by this paradox and, as a consequence, had difficulty controlling her onstage and offstage star persona, much to the chagrin of management.

Her Australian tours were marked by her failure to shed her image as a lightweight comedienne who lacked the means to colour her characters with warmer humanity. Her exposure on national radio as a variety performer during her 1952 tour appears to have worked against her onstage persona as a serious dramatic actress. Indeed, despite being a gamine whom no one had ever out-gamed, her inability to hide or tone down her *Evergreen* technique challenged the representation of her star persona and her ability to cross over successfully from musical comedy to straight roles.

## Notes and References

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