

# FANCY DRESS

PHOTOS OF **BRYANT & MAY** COSTUME-MAKING CONTESTS  
RECALL THE INNOCENCE OF EARLY MARKETING

STORY  
BY  
**CAROLYN  
FRASER**

In 2000, 72 years after Ida Atchison and her friend Bessie Stevens were photographed together in fancy dress, she remembered almost nothing about why or how the costumes came to be made. She did remember, however, being glad she was the one wearing the dress—Bessie, she recalled, suffered the indignity of not being able to go to the bathroom because her paper pantsuit wasn't easily removed. The professionally posed photograph shows the two girls dressed in costumes covered in the brand insignia of Bryant & May's famous Crown Safety Matches. The two girls are wearing paper crowns pasted with Bryant & May's box labels. Even Ida's shoes are decorated with labels. A placard in the form of a giant match is propped between them, with an oversize replica of a box label and a hand-lettered sign that exhorts "Buy Australian Made."

Clare Williamson, Exhibitions Curator at the State Library of Victoria (Australia), interviewed Ida after Ida's great-niece saw the photograph on exhibition at the library. The photograph is part of the large Bryant & May archive acquired by the library in 1986 and is one of 35 similar images pasted into two photograph albums in the archive. The images are of adults and children, sometimes in pairs or groups, dressed in costumes made out of Bryant & May advertising materials. Curiously, the images are variously dated between 1921 and 1933 and were taken at locations around Australia. I wondered if perhaps they were Bryant & May staff or their children? Some of the costumes suggest a metonymic relationship between the brand insignia and the product—crowns feature in many of the outfits, and a few of the most creative employ oversize matches as part of the ensemble. In Jack Seller's case, he becomes the matchbox itself.

My curiosity was piqued when one of these albums came through the library's Conservation Lab before going on exhibition. Clare loaned me her research notes and I requested boxes of materials from the archive held at our off-site storage. Clare's hunch, and mine too, was that the costume-making was a promotional competition held by Bryant & May. Making my way through the archive mate-

rials, I found that some facts suggested this might be the case. The company's ongoing battles to secure tariff protection against cheaper foreign imports meant that they were actively trying to harness consumers' purse strings to a sense of national pride. To do so, they promoted creative use of their matchboxes. *The Brymay Toy Book* was available free on request and the company sponsored popular toy and model-making competitions.

Bryant & May was established in Melbourne in 1909, when representatives of the English parent company took over an existing match concern and proceeded to build what became known as the "model" factory of Australia. At its height of production, it employed 800 workers, 500 of whom were women. In addition to its first-class machinery, ergonomically correct work stations and clean, well-ventilated work spaces, the company became famous for its workers amenities, including dining halls, club rooms, a ballroom, tennis and basketball courts and a bowling green. Workers began their days with the "Daily Jazz," dancing to popular music. The staff social club organized regular socials and picnics, and were active in raising funds for charities. The archives for the Empire Works Social Club contain pages and pages of letters between the Club and amateur orchestras, vaudeville agents and dance troupes, making arrangements to engage their services for social occasions.

Frustratingly, nothing I found in the archive referred to the fancy dress costumes. There were no advertisements for competitions or reporting of fancy dress balls in the social club correspondence. I spent a motion-sick afternoon scrolling through microfilm hoping to see an advertisement or report, without luck. Searching the National Library of Australia's digitized newspaper collection, however, I found mention of Bryant & May in the "Poster" category at fancy dress balls all over the country, from the 1900s through the 1940s. At first, I thought this must refer to two-dimensional poster-making competitions that were perhaps sponsored by Bryant & May, then, suddenly, it dawned on me that the costume-wearers were the posters—that it was a category of costume distinct in the way "Fairy," "Aborigines" and "Rosebuds" were. Riffing





back through Clare's notes, I found a photocopy of a page from the *Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, May 11, 1928, with the headline "State School Children's Ball: A Wonderful Success." Organized by the Mothers' Club, the costume ball was described as "much more successful both socially and financially than last year." The hall is described as having been artistically decorated by the mothers. The children all had a wonderful time, "the girls flitting about like butterflies and the boys chasing them everywhere." After the costume judging, a jazz dance competition was held for adults. The prize winners for Best Poster were Bessie Stevens and Ida Atchison.

In the Social Notes column of *The West Australian* newspaper, November 23, 1900, the correspondent writes, "A rage of the moment in the Eastern colonies is for poster entertainments, poster balls, poster fêtes, poster carnivals, and poster this, that and the other thing are heard of in an unceasing round. Knowing the success which in the other colonies has followed these efforts for extracting coin from the pockets of the public, the congregation of St. Mary's Church, Colin-street, West Perth, thought that they could not do better than follow suit." The poster balls (and "poster this, that and the other things") were a subset of a broader phenomenon of fundraising fancy dress balls. They specifically required participants to dress as advertisements of the day or as the advertised product itself. At the Children's Poster Ball held in Atherton, North Queensland, in September 1947, poster costumes represented iconic brands including Aspro, Bex powders, Capstan cigarettes, Yates seeds, Reckitt's Bag Blue, Bon Ami, Sutall soap, Persil washing powder and Bryant & May matches. A special prize of 10/6 was given by Mr. Hopper of Hopper's Radio to Marion Evans, who wore the championship-winning costume of the evening, "a perfect depiction of a tube of Ipana toothpaste."

In May 1932, a "Juvenile Poster Ball" was held at Yarra Glen. The *Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian* correspondent wrote, "the interior of the hall reflected a brilliant scene with its canopy of coloured streamers, beneath which a bevy of juveniles garbed to represent familiar advertisements and trades ambled among the large concourse of dancing couples." The Mothers' Club provided "a generous and tasty supper ... including raspberry vinegar and cakes for the children, who appeared to be having the time of their lives." The prize-winning girl under 9 was dressed as Silver Star Starch; the boy under 9 was dressed as Solvol. Other brands represented included Pelaco shirts, Standard cigarettes, Brasso, McAlpin's Flour, John Bull Oats, Tip-Top Toffee, Wrigley's Chewing Gum and, of course, Bryant & May matches.

In 1926, the Pantom Hill Returned Soldiers' Ball had a poster and floral theme. The newspaper correspondent reported that "the hall was beautifully decorated with Iceland poppies, hanging ferns and streamers, and the walls were gay with multi-coloured posters." He comments on the veterans' spirit in evidence at the event: "When it is re-



membered that most of those in the district are orchardists, and have had their fruit crops ruined with the thrip, it shows that they retain that buoyant spirit which characterized them when doing gallant deeds for the Empire." The Best Lady Poster went to Mrs. Cordner (Rolf's Tea), Sustained Character to Miss Walkem (Chamberlain's Cough Remedy) and Child's Costume to Miss Lily Revitt (Palm Olive Soap).

It seems most likely that Bryant & May and other iconic brands of the day provided printed materials for people to use in poster costume-making. Bryant & May printed all their label stock and corollary printed matter in-house on state-of-the-art presses. An article about Bryant & May published in the *Herald* newspaper in September 1924 describes the 2- and 3-colour Chambon presses at the plant. "These machines are made in Paris—and they look it." In 1927, an advertisement appeared in newspapers around the country advising that "in response to the repeated requests which the British Imperial Oil Co., Ltd., have received for fancy dress costumes to be worn at poster balls &c., they have the pleasure in announcing that costumes are now available in three designs, representing a Shell petrol pump, pennant quart can and the Shell can." The ad states that no charge is made for the costume but that stamps must be included to cover the cost of packing and postage. Also noted is that the costume remains the property of the wearer. I wonder if in sending out printed materials to costume-makers, Bryant & May might have requested copies of photographs which showed the completed ensembles, thus preserving this scant documentary evidence in their archive?

Thrillingly, what seemed at first to me to be a curious fad associated with Bryant & May turned out to be a window into a world in which children and adults alike related to and embodied advertising in a manner seemingly devoid of our contemporary ambivalence. The period of the poster ball rage saw an explosion both in the availability of consumer goods and the printed materials used to promote them. That people of the period chose to embody these goods and revel in the saturated colours and imagery of the products and their promotional materials speaks to the particular enjoyment we find in things and our sensual relationship to them. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people welcomed things as helpers, as comforts, as evidence of prosperity. Companies sought to win consumers' trust in their brands. The poster ball craze was a marketer's dream, one that contemporary advertising professionals can only hope in vain to emulate in our far more cynical age. **U**

Photographs courtesy the State Library of Victoria