

John Vyvyan Ormonde Dobbie

A GENTLE GIANT...

John Vyvyan Ormonde Dobbie was born on 4 April 1903 at Glebe, Sydney. His father was a policeman stationed in Hay, New South Wales. John's mother Jessie contracted pneumonia after being caught in a storm and passed away in 1905 which led to him being brought up by his paternal grandmother Mary Ann Dobbie and his aunt Diana. More tragedy lay in wait as his father succumbed to the Spanish Influenza pandemic in 1919. Encouraged in athletics and swimming by his family he received a string of certificates in swimming from 1915 onwards and became a swimming instructor in his teens.



Dobbie's working life began as an engineering apprentice at Morts Dock, Sydney. This career path did not last long however, as he found his true calling - show business. His first break came with screen and stage star Nellie Bramley in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By then he had become an accomplished musician with an impressive baritone voice and had been engaged by several dance bands as both a singer and a piano player. Having turned his back on a pedestrian career in engineering works for a lifetime in show business, the lure of wider vistas led him to take a job onboard a cargo ship bound for America in the mid-1920s. Earning his keep and a modest wage of 1/- a month Dobbie eventually disembarked the steamer S.S. Korean Prince to try his luck in New York.

New York, at the time, was in an upbeat mood. Prohibition did not stifle patrons who flocked to speak-easies, clandestine beer-joints, live theatre and vaudeville. The 6'4" Dobbie cut a dashing figure as he emerged from his modest abode at the corner of 42nd Street and Ninth Avenue. He once noted:

"The following day, dressed in my very best, I wandered up the street and saw a crowd of men outside the *Republic Theatre*. I pushed my way in. I was pretty tall and husky, so I managed to make the front row. I soon discovered that Anne Nichols, author of *Abie's Irish Rose*, was casting her new play *Sam Abramovitch*. Up on the stage I surged, and, finding a small Jew, I asked if he had anything for me. My size somehow seemed to impress him. He looked up at me and said 'yes'. A little later I was asked to the office, given some lines to read, and the part was mine - at \$15 a week! The show ran for 10 weeks. Three days after it closed down I decided to visit a well-know woman agent, Jenny Jacobs. As I sat waiting in the outer office, a small well-dressed woman walked past me into Miss Jacob's room. A minute later I was called in and introduced to her.



She was none other than Alla Nazimova! Fortunately I was the type she was needing for her Canadian tour and I was signed up immediately."

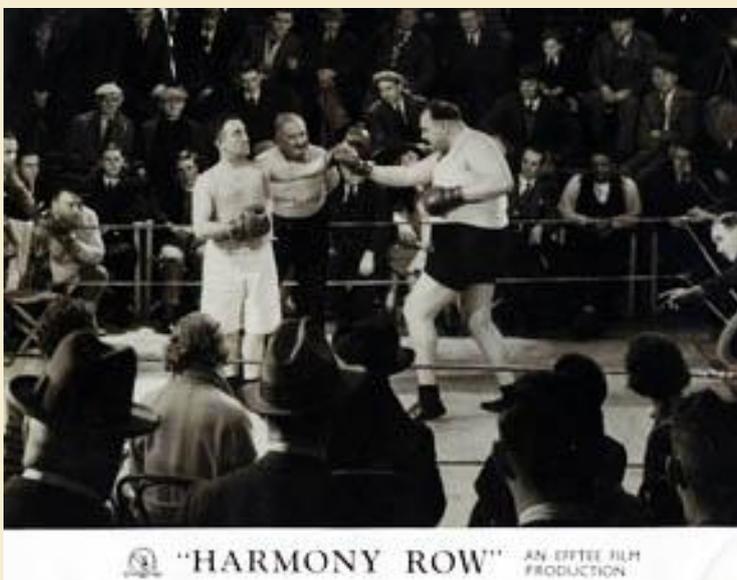
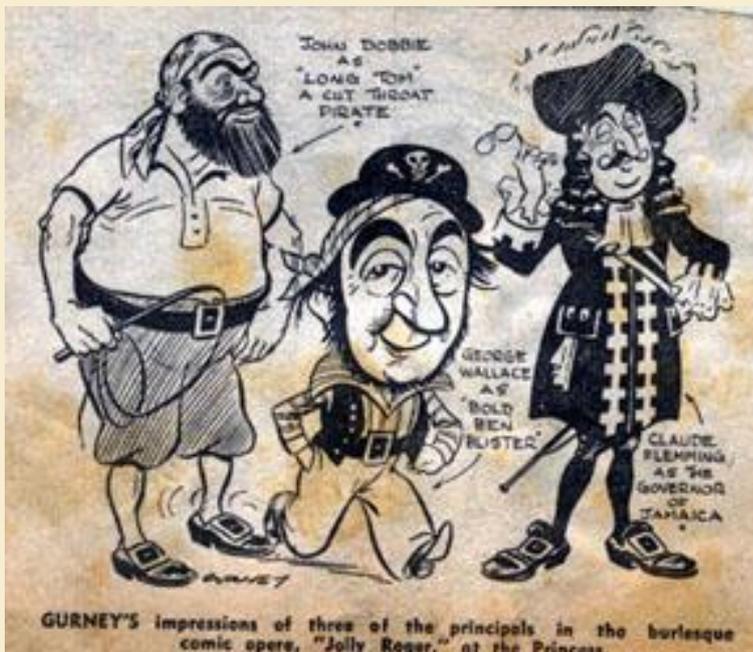
Dobbie became quite close to Nazimova during a brief tour of Canada in 1927. The famous actress was twenty-four years his senior but the age difference appeared no barrier to the liberated actress who notched up countless affairs with both men and women in the Roaring Twenties.

Dobbie did quite well during his short sojourn in America. Before returning to Australia, he was supposed to star with Mae West. An article published in the *Australasian Post* several years later notes: "On his return to New York Dobbie was chosen by Mae West for a new production. Before the play reached Broadway, however, the police stepped in and the engagement ended" (31 Aug. 1950). It was during an era of heavy censorship, particularly against actresses such as Mae West whose physical demeanour and double entendre were considered too daring for the times.

Before he left America Dobbie became a close friend of famous actor Victor Jory. By the time he boarded the ship (having overstayed his visitor's visa but certainly not his welcome) he had also appeared in *Woman of the Earth*, *The Jest* and *Mother India*. With such impressive overseas record Dobbie found little difficulty in landing a role in his first Australian silent movie, *Jewelled Nights* in late 1927.

From there Dobbie's theatrical career blossomed through a string of musicals such as *Whoopee*, *Over She Goes*, *Collitts Inn*, *Roberta*, *The Beloved Vagabond*, *The Merry Widow*, *Florodora*, *Jolly Roger*, *High Jinks* to name but a few. His versatility was such that he found himself equally at ease in vaudeville. He shone in *Fiddle de-dee*, *Your'e telling Me*, *Naughty Ninetees*, *Ballhoo*, *Swing Along*, *Les Follies Bergere*, *Blue Roses* and several other productions.

The early Australian movie scene did not fully sustain actors which meant that Dobbie simultaneously maintained a movie and stage career. His affable nature made him not only popular with growing audiences but also with fellow actors. He counted as friends, and performed with, Jim Gerald, Roy Rene and Will Mahoney. By the early 1930s Dobbie had secured a long career a straight man with Roy Rene and George Wallace Snr. Not surprisingly, he scored a leading part in George Wallace's *His Royal Highness* (1932). This was Australia's first musical film and was favourably received domestically as well as in England where it enjoyed a lengthy season.



Dobbie's popularity continued to grow throughout the 1930s. Movies such as *Harmony Row* (1933); *A Ticket to Tatts* (1934) and *Gone to the Dogs* (1939) cemented Dobbie's movie star credentials. In 1934 he met his future wife, professional dancer Dorothy Gwendolyn Turner. Dorothy (known as *Dolly*), had been dancing since age seven and performed in many of Dobbie's musicals and vaudeville tours. Marriage followed at St. Stephen's Church, Sydney 26 March, 1935. Gladys Moncreiff was Matron of Honour.

With the outbreak of World War II, Dobbie tried to enlist. Close to forty, weighing 20 stone and towering, according to an army medic, at a whopping 6'6", allowing for exaggeration, Dobbie was sent to an aircraft factory at Fishermen's Bend. The army

quickly realised they had made a huge mistake. A man of Dobbie's show business talent could be utilised in more suitable roles to support the war effort.

The Dobbies arrived in Brisbane in 1941. Then a garrison city, soon to be augmented with 80,000 American troops, and the Allied Command Headquarters for the War in the Pacific, Brisbane craved entertainment. Diggers and GIs flocked to shows provided by the city's sizeable live theatre community. The country was at war, many of the theatre patrons would not return once despatched against the Japanese. Theatre, dance halls and pubs combined for many as a last fling before the horrors waiting in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and beyond.

Dobbie tirelessly combined regular shows at the Cremorne Theatre with troop concerts for both Australian and American soldiers stationed in and around Brisbane during the war. He performed for troops at Camp Cable, Logan Village and on stage at the Archerfield air base and temporary and rudimentary venues around Brisbane. At the Cremorne Theatre he also featured in a string of up-beat shows designed to positively impact on the troops. Amongst them were *Lucky Stars*; *Laugh Round-Up* and *The Hat Trick*. These shows played six days a week with frequent matinee performances thrown in for good measure. Dobbie worked closely for four years with Americans Will Mahoney, Evie Hayes and long-time friend Bob Geraghty.

By January 1943 Mahoney had joined Geraghty in the management of the Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane. Popular with American and Australian servicemen, the theatre thanks - in a large measure to Mahoney - attracted a string of entertainers from overseas, among them Mahoney's personal friends Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Gary Cooper, Larry Adler and Artie Shaw.

At war's end the Brisbane live theatre scene contracted. Once packed theatres such as Cremorne, the Tivoli and Theatre Royal no longer had thousands of servicemen to fill their auditoriums. While a few seasoned actors stayed on, others found employment in different areas of the entertainment industry. 4BK, a leading Brisbane radio station at the time, hired Dobbie and he quickly morphed from a stage and screen actor into a radio announcer, racing, boxing and wrestling commentator. His sheer size is evident during a pep talk with two leading jockeys at Doomben Racecourse, circa 1950.



Dobbie had his own day-time programme on 4BK and doubled, ringside at Brisbane Stadium calling live broadcasts of boxing and wrestling events, interviewing combatants after each bout. Staying in the same place, as opposed to short periods all over the country was a novelty to him. Indeed, his versatility was such that he easily adjusted to new roles and vocational pursuits.



Having made Brisbane his home, after years on the road, Dobbie joined Freemasonry. Many of his friends in theatre were already members of the organisation. They had prodded their friend from time to time to join. The transient nature of show business made it virtually impossible to stay put. By 1945 things were different. Dobbie was initiated into Thespian Lodge No. 268 on the United Grand Lodge of Queensland register, on 3 May 1945. He became Master Mason in August the same year. He also became friends with legendary Brisbane bookmaker Wally Northcott and newspaperman Phil LeBrocq of the *Courier-Mail*, both members of Thespian Lodge.



Dobbie brought to Freemasonry the same enthusiasm he had earlier brought to theatre. Several actors and musicians were also members of Freemasonry at the time. The story goes that Dobbie was surprised at finding such large number of fellow actors being Freemasons, among them Roy Rene, Claude Holland, Hugh Huxham, Bud Tingwell, Ken G. Hall, Chips Rafferty and many more. By 1949 he had joined Royal Arch Freemasonry in Prince of Wales Chapter No. 1. Dobbie's Masonic journey, which continued into the 1950s, also saw him play piano, sing songs and entertain Thespian Lodge members at the well-attended afternoon Festive Boards in the Ann Street Masonic Memorial Temple.

Meanwhile, John and Dolly, after having been married for twelve years, welcomed their first and only child Vyvyan, in 1947. The famous Dobbie smile is captured in a photo from 1950 giving his daughter a toy grand piano (see below).

Away from home, Dobbie worked harder than ever and was in demand as an auctioneer. Gavel in hand he could dispatch motor cars to the public with legendary one-liners and sparring comments with punters that made each auto auction resemble live theatre at times.

Cremorne Theatre manager, and personal friend, American Bob Geraghty closed the Cremorne in 1949 and moved to the South Coast. Bob and his wife Joy were Godparents to Dobbie's daughter Vyvyan. The Geraghty's lived in Surfers Paradise and Dobbie decided to follow suit in 1952.

The family wanted a permanent place of residence after years on the road. Work was plentiful, and Dobbie took on the management of *Funland*, an amusement area adjacent to Cavill Avenue in Surfers Paradise. He had grand plans for the South Coast long before it turned into the Gold Coast under the stewardship of Sir Bruce Small, and he also made no secret of his ambition to launch a



political career, hoping to one day become mayor of the growing holiday magnet. He and his wife subsequently bought a house in the area but soon after moving in Dobbie suffered a burst appendix which led peritonitis. All attempts to save him failed and he died on 13 December 1952, aged 49. News of his sudden death featured in most metropolitan dailies in Australia and New Zealand. Obituaries spoke about his distinguished theatrical career, his kindness, affable nature and generosity. His well-attended funeral saw representatives from Brisbane's theatre fraternity, scores of friends and family. The great man was laid to rest in Southport Cemetery on 15 December 1952.

In a *Courier-Mail* obituary, Ron Pointon reflected:

The sudden and tragic passing of colourful stage, film and radio personality John Dobbie last Saturday came as a great shock to all of us who knew him for his ever-ready smile, cheerful acknowledgements and all-round happy demeanour. He was still a relatively young man at 49 when a ruptured appendix brought about his sudden death last Saturday. It was only a fortnight previously that I sat in Brisbane's St. James' Theatre watching a revival of *Harmony Row* starring John Dobbie and George Wallace Snr. and remarked that John has not aged a single bit in twenty years. Such was the late John Dobbie's outlook on life. He still had the same clear-skinned face of 20 years ago, showing nothing but the underlying vein of humour that was inherent in his character throughout his lifetime.

Dobbie, more than sixty years after his tragic death, is still remembered with affection by those who knew him. He combined the legendary Australian spirit of humour - and not taking life too serious - with high personal standards of integrity, honesty and a pervading warmth towards his fellow man. Moreover, he gave infinitely more than he took, a common trait amongst gentle giants.

Stig R. Hokanson