

AUDIENCES WERE T

HARRY

CLAY RAN

VAUDEVILLE



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Outside the theatre he saw his top comedian, Ted Tutty. Clay rammed a couple of fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Tutty went down on all fours and as the traffic clattered to a halt crawled slowly across the road. He came up to his employer and kicked his hand. Clay patted him on the head.

"You're a good pooch, Teddy," he said "Be on time tonight, or I'll down you." Then he went his way.

Even the policeman on duty at the corner of King and Castlereagh Streets showed no surprise at these antics. Everyone in Sydney knew Harry Clay.

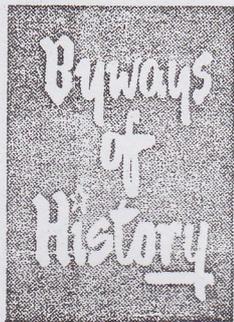
Clay was one of the greatest figures in the history of Australian vaudeville.

No actor was worth his salt unless he had run the gauntlet of Harry Clay's standards and the hypercritical audiences that followed vaudeville.

Clay was an enigma. He neither smoked nor drank. He would not

In his late teens he was earning a few shillings extra, singing with the vaudeville shows on circuit from Sydney.

At the turn of the century, he came to Sydney and devoted his



whole time to the theatre.

He had no trouble in finding work, but he did have trouble with his employers. His strong personality did not take easily to direction.

So Clay got together a few small acts and began Clay's circuit round the Sydney suburbs.

His main theatre was St. George's Hall, King-st., Newtown.

Vaudeville in those days was wild and woolly. It was a cut-throat battle between the promoters for audiences.

Backed by Harold T. Morgan and Archibald R. Abbott, Clay bought out an old blacksmith's shop and built his famous theatre at Newtown Bridge.

Expanded

As business grew so did his holdings. He went into the Princess Theatre near Central Railway, the Gaiety Theatre in Oxford-st., and the Coliseum (now the Independent) at North Sydney.

Clay also ran two country circuits, north in the Newcastle area and south round Wollongong.

EVERY act employed had to do all the theatres and circuits before the contract ended.

The going was tough for performers, particularly at the Newtown and North Sydney theatres.

Should the audience react unfavourably — usually by roaring their disgust until the whole building shook — the actor was given his pay and sent on his way.

◆ **HARRY** Clay and his artists and employees gather outside the Bridge Theatre when his vaudeville empire was in its heyday.

The cast was always prepared for practically anything when the Coliseum showed on Saturday nights.

Brick-carters from Gore Hill turned up in their hundreds in button-up boots, pearl buttons on their coats, slouch hats with the sides turned up and violently colorful scarves round their necks.

From the first act it was on, with the brickies bellowing and shouting their disapproval or delight.

Harry Clay's chief "chucker-out," "Snowy" Sturgeon, an ex-boxer, would go into action.

One loquacious brickie would follow another out the side exit until the more noisy element had been removed and the voices from the stage could be heard.

Fans came miles sometimes just to hear Harry Clay swear.

WITH Clay's ruling the roost at Newtown, the Fuller circuit decided to enter into competition.

Fullers took over the Majestic (now the Elizabethan) and the battle for audiences began.

The night Fullers opened found Clay's almost empty. Harry Clay told Chenoweth to do something about it.

On the Monday a full-page ad. appeared in the Newtown Daily. All it said was: "From Clay you came, to Clay you will return."

The next day, Fullers took over the Newtown Daily. Its ad. read: "No matter how full you are, we're always Fuller."

Tough

Though Clay gave the appearance of being tough with his actors, his quiet kindness often cost him money.

Once an English comedian new to Australia, came to him.

"Mr. Clay," he said, "I'm Clark Time, I'm a comedian."

Clay looked at his credentials and decided on the spot to give him an act at the Bridge the following night.

The comedian was a little wary of Australian audiences. He

warmed himself up with plenty of Dutch courage from a bottle before he went on stage.

Result was he got his lines mixed while his voice came out in great croaks.

Clay called him from the wings: "Mark Time. Are you ready? Quick march!"

As the little Englishman was leaving the theatre, Harry Clay slipped a £5 note into his pocket.

EARLY in 1920, with business booming, Harry Clay took a stroke. He was put to bed in his Peter-sham home.

It was hard, with his tremendous vitality, to stay in bed. He gave his coloured vocabulary full play.

Desperation

In desperation, he got up and went to the theatre. To one of the cast, he said:

"You know, I think it's time I got off this earth."

The man was startled. "Why, Mr. Clay?"

"Because" — and Harry Clay emitted a stream of well-chosen adjectives — "when I walked past the newsboy outside, I heard him say, 'There goes that old so-and-so Harry Clay.'"

"Now I don't mind being called a so-and-so, but I'm damned if I like that 'old business.'"

Early in 1924, Clay moved to a small home at Watson's Bay. Artists and fans at the theatres never saw him again.

With just a few friends about him, Harry Clay died.

They buried him at South Head Cemetery, where lie the remains of many others who helped to create Australian theatre.



◆ **HARRY** CLAY

tolerate a "blue" joke in his theatres.

His own lurid vocabulary, however, would have put any bullock-driver to shame.

There are still old-timers who speak of Harry Clay with tears in their eyes.

HARRY Clay was born in mid-1860's in the Newcastle district.

For several years he worked in various labouring jobs. His only asset was a fine tenor voice.

Sometimes his shows were a riot

BYWAYS OF HISTORY

HARRY CLAY, "King of Vaudeville," stood on the footpath in Castlereagh Street, opposite the old Tivoli Theatre. Outside the theatre he saw his top comedian, Ted Tutty. Clay rammed a couple of fingers into his mouth and whistled. Tutty went down on all fours and as the traffic clattered to a halt crawled slowly across the road. He came up to his employer and licked his hand. Clay patted him on the head and said: "You're a good pooch Teddy. Be on time tonight or I'll down you." Then he went his way.

HARRY CLAY was born in the mid 1880's in the Newcastle district. For several years he worked in various laboring jobs. His only asset was a fine tenor voice.

In his late teens he was earning a few shillings extra singing with the vaudeville shows on circuit from Sydney.

At the turn of the century, he came to Sydney and devoted his whole time to the theatre. Clay's pleasing voice always kept the audiences quiet. He was an excellent interlocutor.

Clay had no trouble finding work, but he did have trouble with his employers. His strong personality did not easily to direction.

So Harry Clay got together a few small acts and began his own circuit. His main theatre was the 5th George's Hall in King Street, Newtown.

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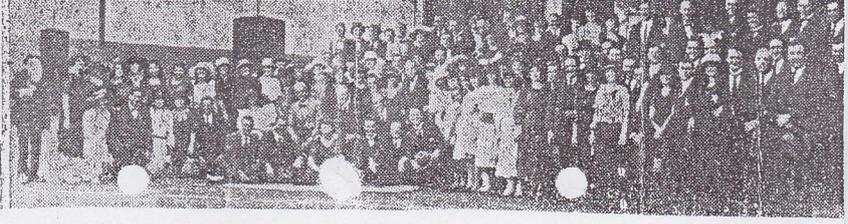
Clay's shows were among the best. He needed to expand and was given financial backing by Harold T. Morgan and Archibald R. Abbott.

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HARRY CLAY (left) and some of his artists, employes and other friends outside the Bridge Theatre, Sydney. Bricklayers rioted when he ran on a dud vaudeville show.



Now the Independent North Sydney. Clay also ran two counting houses, one in the New South Wales and another in Wollongong. Every act employed had to do all the theatres and circuits before the contractor.

The going was tough for performers, particularly at the Newtown and North Sydney theatres. If an act passed the standards set by Harry Clay, however, it was accepted by the audience. Should the audience be unfavorable, usually Clay's friends insisted all the while the building shook. The act was given his pay and sent on his way.

The cast was always prepared for practically anything when the Coliseum showed on Saturday nights.

THE brick from Gore Hill turned up in their hundreds, in button-top boots, in slouch hats and in slouches turned up in the air. The first act was on, with the bricks being thrown and shouting their disapproval or delight. Harry Clay's chief chucker out "Snow" Sturgeon, an ex-boxer would go into action. One ludicrous brickie would follow another out the side exit till the more noisy element had been removed and the voices from the stage could be heard.

Harry Clay was a pretty

good chucker out himself. He often gave a demonstration of this from the stage of the Bridge theatre.

Fans came miles sometimes, just to hear Harry Clay swear.

Just before the First World War, Clay's was showing at Bathurst. Harry called a rehearsal for 10 a.m.

When he walked into the hall at 10.30, only person he could see was comedian Will Wyland.

Clay went into a frenzy. "Where the devil are all those so-and-so performers?" he shouted, spattering the question with a flow of invective that lasted two minutes.

Wyland came to his feet. "Please, Mr Clay," he protested, "my wife (Lulu Eugene) is behind that curtain dressing."

Clay walked to the curtain. "Are you there, Lulu?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr Clay."

"Well," he added apologetically, "I'm sorry you hear me but if you had to work with a mob of Australian —" then followed another stream of adjectives — "you'd swear too."

At this time Harry Clay had a little dapper English manager, Jim Boyle.

When a circuit went on a north Queensland tour, it was Boyle's job to write ahead and book the local school of arts.

The company arrived at one small town to find no booking had been made. That afternoon Harry Clay received Boyle's letter back from the dead letter office. It was addressed to "The care of the School of Arts, Queensland."

At that minute Boyle walked in swinging his cane. Clay abused him roundly till he ran out of breath.

BOYLE was crestfallen. "You know, Mr Clay," he said, "I ought to be kicked."

A happy smile lit Harry Clay's face. He jumped to his feet and delivered a mighty blow with his foot that Boyle was still rubbing days after.

Some of the best attended shows at the Gaiety and Bridge were the amateur nights on Fridays.

Some of the talent was horrible. The audiences had full rein to voice their displeasure.

It was bedlam at times. Any performer who passed the ordeal was ready for a run on Clay's circuit.

Sixpenny seats were always booked out days ahead.

One of the big tasks was to offer a forthcoming attraction that would ensure a full house at the next show.

Boyle had the job one night. He had heard Miss Annie Jones sing privately and decided to build her up.

Annie Jones was 16 — a little thin.

"Thank you" for your attendance," Boyle told the audience. "I want to say that next Friday night you will be given the honor of hearing the greatest soprano voice ever produced in this country."

FOR 10 minutes he kept the audience sitting while he built up Annie Jones' reputation.

After the show some of the audience came back stage. "Is this fair dinkum," they asked.

"My oath, it is."

Next Friday the theatre was packed. They all came to hear the new Australian nightingale.

Miss Jones was the last act. She waddled on to the stage. There was a deep silence.

She opened her mouth. From it came a voice so thin the orchestra leader in the pit could hardly hear it.

The audience stayed still for a minute. Then all hell broke loose. The mob raged and roared. Missiles of every description were thrown at the unhappy soprano.

Boyle ducked out the stage door. He could still hear the shouting as he disappeared up King Street.

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The next day Fullers took over the Newtown Daily. Its ad read: "No matter how full you are, we're always Fuller."

In those years, many great artists were trained in the hard school of vaudeville.

They included Fred Bluett, George Wallace, George Sorlie, Dinks Paterson, Amy Rochelle, Ted Tutty, Sid Beck and Marshall Crosby.

One man, destined to rank among the greatest of Australian comedians, was summarily fired by Clay's manager.

The comedian went to Harry Clay. "Give me

another chance, Mr Clay," he said. "I'll prove I can make the grade."

Clay thought it over. "No man challenges me that I don't take it up," he replied. "I'll give you another chance."

Years later when the comedian was a top-liner, Clay took him by the hand and said: "I see you kept your promise."

Early in 1924 Clay moved to a small home at Watson's Bay. Artists and fans at the theatres never saw him again.

With just a few friends about him, Harry Clay died.

They buried him at South Head Cemetery where lie the remains of many others who helped to create Australian theatre.

Clay's theatres did not long survive their founder. When the new fangled talkies hit Sydney, legitimate theatre folded up practically overnight.

Clay's crumbled. Some of the houses were converted to picture theatres.

Others were pulled down. In a Sydney hotel which stands on the site of the old Criterion theatre, actors of years gone by still meet regularly every Monday and talk of men like Harry Clay.

Sometimes His Shows Were a Riot

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