

DINKS AND ONCUS

Jack Paterson and George Wallace

The most popular knockabout acrobatic comedy partnership ever to work for variety entrepreneur Harry Clay, Dinks and Oncus (Jack Paterson and George Wallace) came together in 1920. The act, a hit from the start, involved a knock-about style of comedy, comprising lots of falling around, impersonations of drunks, spoofs on other variety acts, and outrageous boxing displays. Paterson later formed an act with his wife Trixie Ireland that found much success in the UK, while Wallace went on to become one of Australia's most popular revusical and film comedians.

Dinks and Oncus was the most popular knockabout acrobatic comedy partnership ever to work for variety entrepreneur Harry Clay. Although they had no equal in being "so well remembered purely from appearances there" (Brisbane, 178), the partnership was surprisingly brief, lasting only around four years (1920-1924). Jack Paterson and George Wallace came together on Clay's circuit in early 1920. Although both men had initially been engaged as solo performers, they sometimes worked with other performers (Wallace, for example, worked briefly with his first wife after arriving in Sydney). After deciding to try out a comedy routine together the pair went over so well that within a matter of weeks their act had begun to invite interest from *The Theatre* and *Australian Variety* (the two leading industry magazines of the era). Published comments included the following:

George Wallace says he has a century of the best to say that his partner, Dinky Paterson, can get a decision over Sid Godfrey in a twenty-round route, or he will have a four spar with him any night at the Gaiety just for old times sake (AV: 22 July 1920, 21).

Dinks and Oncus ("The Two Drunks") never once become dull. They go from laugh to laugh, and get an exceedingly good reception (TT: Aug. 1920, 9).

Dinks and Oncus stopped the show in their inebriate sketch at the Gaiety and had to take no less than four bows before the pleased patrons would allow them to retire (AV: 17 Sept. 1920, n. pag).

Pint-sized Wallace was in marked contrast to the incredibly tall and skinny Paterson. They specialised in the very physical acrobatic type of comedy that had made knockabout comedians Jack Kearns and Albert McKisson stars of the Australian stage during the 1890s. Their knock-about style of comedy, containing lots of falling around, impersonations of drunks, spoofs on other variety acts, and outrageous boxing displays, created many hilarious routines. Charles Norman, an ex-Clay's performer and a one-time member of Wallace's revusical company, recalls the Wallace and Paterson partnership:

When George was beginning to be talked about as an excellent comic he was teamed with another comedian, a man from the First World War, Dinks Paterson. Dinks was a tall, very thin comedian with a nose that somehow got in the way of a breach loader gun, or so it seemed. But he was one of the most likable blokes you'd meet from here to the Cape. This tall and self-effacing character was a gifted funny man. He had a voice that tended to rise to falsetto when aroused in blow-up comedy situations. "What's the matter with you?" he'd call. They were a perfect foil for each other, screamingly funny and seemed destined to become a world famous comedy team (105-6).

By the end of their first year together, Dinks and Oncus had become Clay's biggest attraction, playing to packed houses and rivalling Stiffy and Mo for the 'mob's' favouritism. Both men were prepared to go to almost any extent in search of a laugh. One popular skit, a crazy boxing match that required Wallace to undertake a difficult backwards somersault over the ropes, once saw Dinks being KO'd by his partner. Another show stopper was their spoof on the posing act of De Maker's models, where Dinks would appear to be holding Wallace above his head with one finger (Wallace being held in a harness from above). At one show, however, the shoulder harness broke, not only tipping him upside down but also sending him swinging wildly, pendulum-like, out above the audience. "They couldn't let the roller curtain down for fear of cutting him in two," recalls Paterson, "I can still see him hanging up there, yelling for help" (57). Typical of their routine, too, are the following lines of patter:

Typical of their early routines is the following patter:



Source: Charles Norman
When Vaudeville was King (1983), 105.

George Wallace: Yes, I'm acquainted with your wife, old man. I knew her before you married her.

Dinks Paterson: Ah, that's where you had the advantage of me - I didn't.

(AV: 24 June 1920, 5).

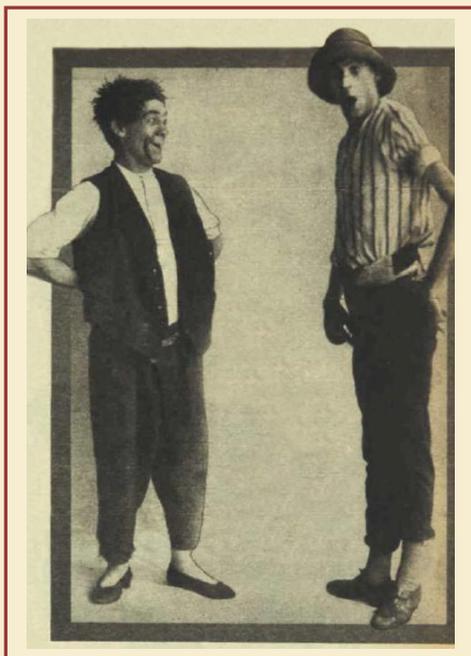
Despite their success, their off-stage relationship was not always harmonious. Paterson recalls that although Wallace was wonderful to work with, they nevertheless had their share of arguments. Although the act continued to fill Harry Clay's theatres up until the end of their partnership, Paterson's involvement gradually lessened over the last year or so. Their announcement in 1921 that they were splitting up was delayed only because the act was simply too successful to abandon (E: 30 Nov. 1921, 20). It no doubt became an even less conducive creative environment from mid-1922, when Clay began squeezing Paterson out by advertising "Oncus and his Merry Company" (TT: June 1922, 17). Indeed, as Paterson recalls, the pressure to work in new routines every month as the relationship became increasingly strained meant that the act often lagged towards the end. In these instances, "George would bring on his two year old son and that always earned us an encore" (SMH: 23 Oct. 1960, 57). According to Charles Norman, the final straw occurred as a result of a practical joke played on Trixie Ireland (Paterson's fiancée) during a performance. When Wallace tried to brush the incident off, Dinks took offence "and as a result one of the world's best comedy acts split up" (106). Paterson and Ireland subsequently formed their own partnership (as Dinks and Trixie) and, following their engagement in the 1924 Christmas pantomime *Cinderella* (Melbourne), left to work the United Kingdom's variety circuits. They came back to Australia in 1929 and appeared on the Tivoli circuit before eventually returning to Britain, where they remained until the late 1940s. [see *Jack Paterson's entry for further details*]

After the pair ended their association, Wallace went almost immediately on to the Fullers' circuit, playing an extended season in Dunedin, New Zealand, before returning to Australia, where he quickly established himself as one of Australia's leading writers and producers of revusicals [see *George Wallace and George Wallace Revue Company entries for further details*]. Jack Paterson formed a new stage partnership with Ireland (as Dinks and Trixie) and, following their engagement in the Hugh J. Ward/Fullers' 1924 Christmas pantomime *Cinderella* (Princess Theatre, Melb), the couple left to work the United Kingdom's variety circuits. They came back to Australia in 1929 and appeared on the Tivoli circuit, but with regular employment opportunities becoming more difficult to secure, they returned once more to Britain, remaining there until the late 1940s [see *Jack Paterson's entry for further details*].

SEE ALSO

- [George Wallace](#)
- [Jack Paterson](#)
- [Harry Clay](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS



1. A number of contemporary sources, including the *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (191), *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 2, 1988 (365), and *Memoirs of an Abominable Showman* (36) incorrectly note that the Dinks and Oncus partnership formed in 1919. This date is believed to have originated from Jack Paterson's erroneous recall published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* following Wallace's death (23 Oct. 1960, 57). Primary source research conducted into the Australian variety industry (see for example Clay Djubal, 'Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930' and Katrina Baird, 'The History of Vaudeville in Australia 1900-1930') has been unable to locate any mention of the Wallace/Paterson partnership prior to May 1920, however. Indeed all published references to both comedians up until that date refer only to their solo careers. Further evidence that the pair came together for the first time in 1920 is provided in an *Australian Variety* review, dated 27 May 1920, which notes, "[George Wallace] has doubled up with Dinks Paterson, and went a riot. As they have only been together a couple of weeks, we hate to think what they will give patrons in, say, a couple of months. No bigger laugh has ever appeared on the Clay time" (8).

Source: *Australian Women's Weekly* 30 June (1971), 13.

2. The claim that Dinks and Oncus were 'Australia's first pair of knockabout acrobatic comedians' (*Entertaining Australia*, 179 and *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, 191) is incorrect. Australia produced a number of comedic partnerships working this vein of humour in the decades preceding Wallace and Paterson. Two of the most popular knockabout comedians on the Australian stage in the 1890s, for example, were Jack "Porky" Kearns and Albert McKisson, who appeared with most of the

country's major variety organisations, including Harry Rickards, between 1893 and 1900 [*see Jack Kearns' entry*]. Another pair, Morris and Wilson were also well known to Australian audiences between 1902 and 1912, at which time they left Australia to tour internationally.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Baird, Katrina. "The History of Vaudeville in Australia 1900-1930." (1983), v. pags.

Djubal, Clay. "[Dinks and Oncus](#)." *AustLit* (2007).

Norman, Charles. *When Vaudeville Was King* (1983), v. pags.

"Oncus Rolled Them in the Aisles." *SMH*: 23 Oct. (1960), 57.

"When Dicks and Oncus Tickled Suburbia." *E*: 24 July (1929), 37.

"When Tivoli Fans Laughed Till the Tears Ran Down Their Cheeks." *AWW*: 30 June (1971), 13-14.

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