

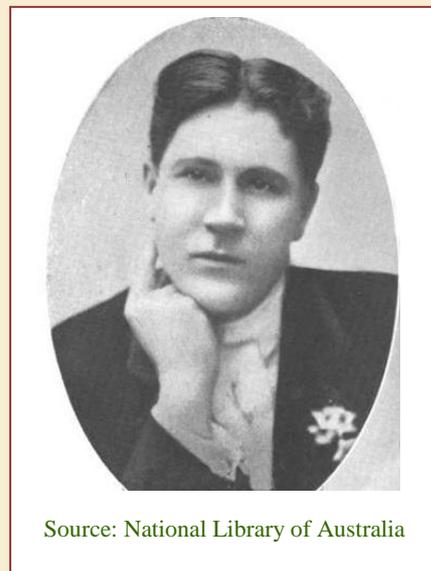
FRANK NEIL

Frank Neil had his first career break with Cole's Bohemian Dramatic Co ca. 1908. He later worked with George Willoughby, and in 1918 wrote and directed his first Fullers pantomime, *Bluebeard*. In 1925 he formed a comedy and toured for Fuller -Ward. Financial difficulties in 1929 led to a move to South Africa. He returned in 1931, and in 1934 took over the Tivoli circuit with Mike Connors and Queenie Paul. He died in 1940 after being hit by a car.

The son of John and Sarah Neil, Frank Neil was born in Corindhap, near Ballarat (Victoria) on 21 December 1886.¹ He worked for E.I. Cole's Bohemian Dramatic Company around the late 1900s/early 1910s as an actor and property man, and according to Charles Norman also spent some time with a circus. In a 1922 *Fuller News* article (cited from an unnamed Sydney newspaper), it is claimed that Neil had to that time played over 500 different roles:

He began at the very bottom of the ladder, and confesses that he had a hard time trying to get his foot on the first rung. Much of his early experience was gained in the country with touring dramatic shows, and there was a time when his job required him to play the overture, pull up the curtain, play the funny man and double for the heroine's father (22 July 1922, 4).

By the end of 1918 Neil had appeared in melodrama, pantomime and farce for such organisations as George Willoughby's Dramatic Co (ca.1913-15), Hugh J. Ward and the Fullers. He wrote and directed his first Fullers' pantomime, *Bluebeard* in 1918 (it was revived in 1920 and 1921), followed by *Red Riding Hood* (1919) and *Puss in Boots* (1922).



Source: National Library of Australia

After spending several years with the Fullers' Dramatic Company during the 1920s Neil formed his own troupe (Frank Neil's Company of Comedians) in 1925 and opened at the Apollo Theatre (late Palace Theatre). Although his first two productions, *The Relations of a Wife* and *Queen of My Heart* failed to attract much interest, Neil scored a runaway hit with his third show, *Charlie's Aunt*. That same year he was engaged by the Fuller -Ward organisation to write and direct its Christmas pantomime *Cinderella*. Further Neil pantomimes included a revised version of *Puss in Boots* (1926), *Mother Goose* (1927) and *Little Red Riding Hood* (1928). Later successes also included *Up in Mabel's Room* and *Getting Gertie's Garter*.

PALACE THEATRE
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Proprietors ... Fullers' Theatres Ltd.
Lanesees ... Hugh J. Ward Theatres Pty. Ltd.
Direction ... Frank Neil and Maurice Tuohy.

COMMENCING TO-DAY AT THE MATINEE.
COMMENCING TO-DAY AT THE MATINEE.
FRANK NEIL'S DRAMATIC COMPANY,
FRANK NEIL'S DRAMATIC COMPANY,
FRANK NEIL'S DRAMATIC COMPANY,
Headed by
MAURICE TUOHY and JESSIE PAGE,
MAURICE TUOHY and JESSIE PAGE,
In the Thrilling American Mystery Play,
THE REVELATIONS OF A WIFE.
THE REVELATIONS OF A WIFE.
THE REVELATIONS OF A WIFE.
FULL of THRILLS, LAUGHS, and SURPRISES.

A NEW PLAY EVERY SATURDAY.
Matinees Saturday and Wednesday, 2.15.

POPULAR PEOPLE'S PRICES:
WEEK NIGHTS AND ALL MATINEES,
3/ ——— 2/ ——— 1/.
3/ ——— 2/ ——— 1/.

SATURDAY AND HOLIDAY NIGHTS,
4/ ——— 3/ ——— 2/ ——— 1/.
4/ ——— 3/ ——— 2/ ——— 1/.

CHILDREN HALF-PRICE TO ALL PARTS,
EXCEPT SATURDAY and HOLIDAY NIGHTS.
BOX-PLAN AT GLEN'S Till Noon To-day,
and at Palace Theatre from 1 p.m.

Argus 29 Aug. (1925), 40.

In 1929 Neil bought two productions from Ernest C. Rolls, *Whoopee* and *Clowns in Clover* which failed at the box office due largely to the economic conditions brought on by the Depression. Frank van Straten writes that his disenchanted, led to him taking an Australian farce company to South Africa in 1930 (109). He returned the following year, however, staging revues and pantomimes with his Vaudeville and Revue Entertainers at the Roxy (late Fullers' National Theatre). Other productions included *Hullo Paris* (revue) and *Cinderella* (pantomime). In 1932 he also presented male impersonator Ella Shields and George Wallace with much success.

In 1934 Neil joined Mike Connors and Queenie Paul to run the Tivoli circuit and soon afterwards bought them out in order to establish a new Tivoli organisation - Tivoli Circuit Australia. In *Vaudeville was King*, Charles Norman credits Neil with saving not only the Tivoli circuit but also top end Australian vaudeville during the peak of the depression.

The war between talking films and live theatre was only about five years old... The fight was not quite equal and lots of people were watching for the demise of the 'legit' corpse. When Harry Musgrove secured the lease for the Tivoli Theatre, Melbourne from J. C. Williamson's Ltd, Frank Neil then took over the management. The big fight was on from then on in. With Percy Crawford beside him with his expertise of many years' standing and Mr George Dickenson, of the firm of Melbourne accountants as chief shareholder, the future for the fun looked very promising (and turned out to be so). Neil re-introduced the twice a day show policy. With stars from overseas and the best of local ones, Australia's patrons of vaudeville were going to be well catered for (247, 49)

¹ See "Historical Notes and Corrections" section.

In 1935 Neil appointed American producer Wallace R. Parnell to oversee the Tivoli productions. Some five years later Parnell took over the running of the circuit when Neil died on New Year's Day 1940. His death came about from injuries suffered the previous day after he stepped in front of a car in South Melbourne. The Tivoli ran for another four years under the Parnell's leadership before being taken over by David N. Martin.



Australian Women's Weekly 6 Jan. (1940), 27.

SEE ALSO

- [Tivoli Circuit Australia](#)
- [Percy Crawford](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. 1890 has long been proposed as Neil's year of birth. Charles Norman, for example, records this year in *When Vaudeville Was King* (1983). 1890 is also supported by several newspapers which record in their obituaries that Neil was 50 years of age at his death. See for example *Advocate* (Burnie) 2 Jan. (1940), 2; *Brisbane Courier* 9 Jan. (1940), 4; and *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 Jan. (1940), 11 (which cites the Victorian Coroner's report on the accident). However, in correspondence with the AVTA Frank Van Straten (12 July 2013) cites Neil's birth certificate as having recorded 21 December 1886.
2. Neil's estate was valued at a gross amount of £3,761 (ARG: 30 Apr. 1940, 3).

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

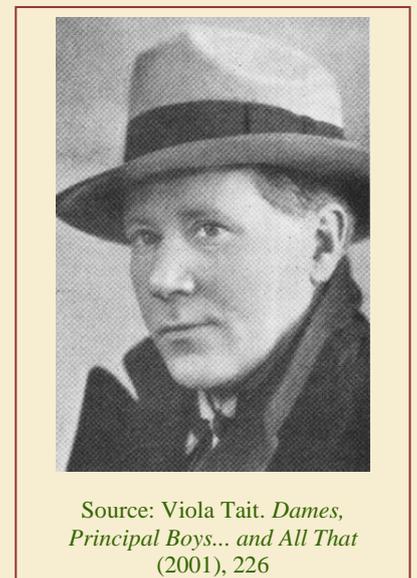
- Mr Neil was one of the most progressive theatrical entrepreneurs in Australia, and his reputation stood as high in the United States as in Australia. The Tivoli Theatres in Melbourne and Sydney, which are among the most successful houses of their kind in Australian theatrical history, reached that position under his management. vaudeville artists declared that their acts were better presented in those theatres than anywhere else in the world. Mr Neil, who was an actor, understood and had a flair for recognising talent. He often said that he was a poor actor, and it was as an actor/producer that he first came under notice (HM: 2 Jan. 1940, 2).

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Djubal, Clay. [Neil, Frank](#). *AustLit*. (2006).
["Frank Neil Dies After Accident: Well-Known Vaudeville Producer."](#) AA: 2 Jan. (1940), 14.
["Mr Frank Neil Dead: Accident Victim."](#) ARG: 2 Jan. (1940), 2.
["Mr Frank Neil Dead: Sequel to Injury - Theatrical Genius."](#) HM: 2 Jan. (1945), 2.
 Norman, Charles. *When Vaudeville was King*. (1983), 245-51.
 "Through the Mill: Frank Neil Experiences." FN: 22 July (1922), 4.
 Van Straten, Frank. *Tivoli*. (2003), 109.

See also:

AA: 2 Jan 1940, 14.



Source: Viola Tait. *Dames, Principal Boys... and All That* (2001), 226