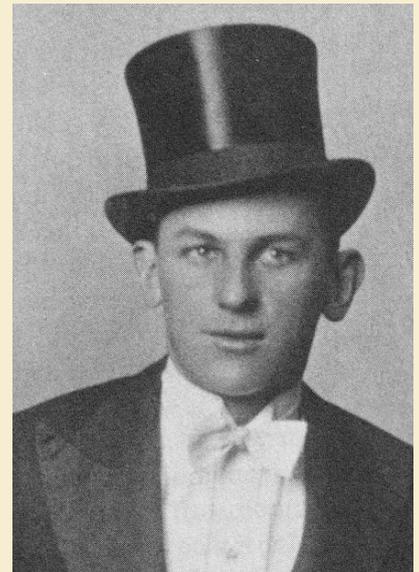


CHARLES NORMAN

After emigrating to Australia with his parents in the late 1910s, Charles Norman began appearing on the amateur variety stage. He teamed up with Chick Arnold as a patter and song-and-dance duo and in the early 1920s they got their first big break working for Harry Clay. When they separated some three years later, Norman went on to work in musical comedy, revue and revusicals. Arnold and Norman reunited in England in the late 1930s, and returned to play Australia several years later. Norman later joined forces with Garnet Carroll and Sir Benjamin Fuller to form Savoy Theatres. As one of the company's directors, he helped reproduce a number of the old Fuller-Ward musical comedies. In 1948, he also joined a company formed by American comedian/ entrepreneur Will Mahoney, at the Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane. Norman continued to be involved in variety theatre in one capacity or another well into his later years.

The son of a Cockney plasterer, Charles Norman immigrated to Australia with his family shortly after the First World War. In his late teens, he began appearing on the amateur variety stage in Melbourne as a singer and comedian, taking advantage of his long and "loose" legs. He later teamed up with another local lad called Chick Arnold and together they worked up a patter and song-and-dance act around the city's suburban halls and cinemas. By around 1922 they decided to attempt a professional career and subsequently moved to Sydney where the opportunities were seen to be better. They got their big break working for Harry Clay on his Sydney and N.S.W. circuits (including the Hunter Valley Illawarra/southern line), beginning in 1922. Their salary at the start was £14 between them. This period played a significant part in helping Norman develop as an entertainer, not only through the support he received from management and older more experienced artists but also because the audiences were so demanding. As Norman notes in a 1998 interview:

Clay audiences were Clay audiences. They were exactly that. They knew the business. You had to please them. They knew a lot about it, and you couldn't kid them. Any act or acts that didn't have much talent – well they woke up to that pretty quickly. No, they wanted the best and they demanded the best let me tell you (Djubal n. page.).



Courtesy of Charles Norman
When Vaudeville was King (1983), 24.

In late 1924 Arnold and Norman secured a contract with Fullers Theatres as a straight vaudeville act but as Norman recalls they also appeared briefly with the George Wallace Revue Company which had only been founded that year (106-07). In March the following year, and barely a few months after leaving Clays, Arnold and Norman "the

Arnold and Norman, the Gentlemen Wags, after two years partnership, dissolved this week. The comedy man was offered a part in Frank Gorman's revue, and accepted without consulting his partner. The latter is naturally incensed at the turn of affairs, considering that their joint work had been so successful and they had professionally and personally done so well together.

Gentlemen Wags" dissolved their partnership amidst some acrimony. According to *Australian Variety*,¹ Norman had been invited to join Reverend Frank Gorman's revue company but had failed to consult his partner, which subsequently led to the split. After playing a season with Gorman at Sydney's Princess Theatre around April/May, he was booked as a solo comedian/eccentric dancer at the Fullers' Bijou Theatre (Melb), and billed as "the dancing daddy long legs." By the end of the year Norman was with F. Gayle Wyer's Bandbox Revue Company, playing alongside veteran comedian Billy Bovis and Hebrew comedian Sam Ward.

Norman's popularity with the Fullers was such that the following year he was booked to play 6 months season at the Luxor Theatre in Perth beginning around September/October 1926. He eventually moved from the Fullers, however, taking up an offer from J.C. Williamson's (including its Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville operations), which allowed him to begin specialising in musical comedy. *Everyone's* reports in this respect that shortly before he left for the United Kingdom that Norman had been a "big success in one of the principle roles of *Rio Rita*" in 1929 (26 Feb. 1930, 39).

Norman left Australia for the UK in March 1930 with the intention of first trying the legitimate stage and later possibly attempting to break into the "talkies" (E: 26 Feb. 1930, 39). Sometime later he met up with Chic Arnold in London and after resolving problems that had led to the end of their partnership, they decided to team up again and tour the English provincial and city circuits. Having learned some 300 songs during the three while they were with Clay's and with a good store of comedy routines ready the pair found their feet almost immediately and ended up remaining in the UK for several years.

¹ The citation details for this par have been temporarily lost, and hence a copy has been presented instead.



Courtesy of Charles Norman
When Vaudeville was King (1983), 69.

By 1933 Norman and Arnold had returned to Australia. One of their early appearances was in the Ernest C. Rolls revue *Honi Soit* (Princess Theatre, Melb) which premiered in February that year. In its review of the production the Argus records: "Mr Charles Norman is a comedian with a pleasant stage presence, an attractive voice and remarkable agility as an eccentric dancer. Mr Chic Arnold has similar gifts" (13 Feb. 1933, 3).

In 1937, Norman joined forces with Garnet Carroll and Sir Benjamin Fuller to form Savoy Theatres. As one of the company's directors, he helped reproduce a number of the old Fuller-Ward musical comedies. He also returned the United Kingdom in the late 1930s, appearing in the London Hippodrome revue *Black and Blue* in 1939, before coming back to Australia to star in Brandon Thomas's production of *Charlie's Aunt* (Melb). Norman's popularity in the role saw him tour the show, along with other comedies, revues and farces throughout Australia for a number of years. In 1948, he joined a company formed by American comedian/entrepreneur Will Mahoney, at the Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane and during the late 1940s and early 1950s also worked on the Tivoli circuit. In 1950 created the part of Wilton Chute in Edmund Samuels' original Australian musical *The Highwayman* (aka *The Silver Swan*) and that same year appeared in the musical *Salad Days* (St Martin's Theatre, Melb). Frank Van Straten records, too, that Norman's later career appearances included George Miller's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Bowl Music Hall in 1962 and in *Waltzes of Vienna* at the Palais Theatre in 1968.



The "Newsboys" number from Charles Norman's show *There's Going to Be Good News* - Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane (ca. 1948)

Courtesy of the *Telegraph* (Bris) and Mavis Donovan. *The Stars Shine On* (1984), 71.

Charles Norman's career on the Australian vaudeville stage continued well into his later years. As an actor, he was mostly associated with musical comedies. In variety, he worked alongside many of the leading performers of his era, including Roy Rene, George Wallace, Jim Gerald, and George Sorlie. In 1984, he published a book of memoirs and historical insights titled *When Vaudeville Was King: A Soft Shoe Stroll Down Forget-Me-Not Lane*.

SEE ALSO

- [F. Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co](#)

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- "A Comedian." Charles Norman, leading comedian with the Band Box Revue Company at His Majesty's, Wellington, is a refreshing type of humorist. His almost lazy way of speaking his lines and clean make-up, or rather the absence of make-up, is very appealing. He possesses originality and gets many a laugh for lines which would otherwise fall flat. His almost four feet of leg length performs some remarkable contortions, and to take in one downward stride six or seven steps is an easy effort for this athletic-looking comedian (NZT: 8 Dec. 1927, 2).

RECORDINGS

- *Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 2*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 430. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] (Patter/"It's De-Lovely").

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Charles Norman Returns from London: Australian's Successful in London."

SMH: 21 Jan. (1936), 10.

Djubal, Clay. "Norman, Charles." *AustLit* (2006).

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"Stars of the Air: Charles Norman's Stage Friends." WTS: 9 Mar. (1945), 1.

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--- *Tivoli* (2003), 120, 166.

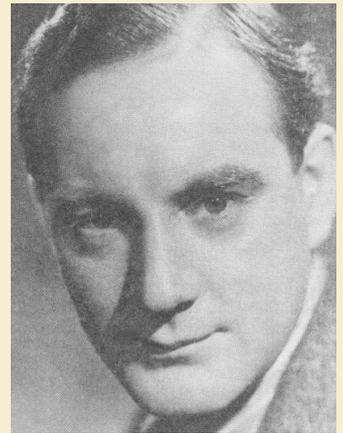
See also:

A: 13 Feb. (1933), 11.

ARG: 13 Fe. (1933), 11.

E: 15 Dec. (1926), 30. [F. Gayle Wyer Band Box photo] • 26 Feb. (1930), 39.

TT: June (1925), 14.



Courtesy of Charles Norman
When Vaudeville was King
(1983).

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Expanded and updated from the 2006 AustLit entry

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