

CHAPTER THREE

CLAY'S VAUDEVILLE COMPANY: THE EARLY YEARS, 1901 -1915

Vaudeville in those days was wild and woolly. It was a cut-throat battle between the promoters for audiences. Clay's shows were the best [and] he needed to expand....

("Sometimes," n. pag.)

The first decade or so of Harry Clay's career as a variety entrepreneur remains to a large extent an unknown quantity. As a fledgling small-time Australian manager he had neither the resources nor, as will shortly be discussed, the need to use extensive newspaper or trade journal advertising during his early years (apart from his forays into the regional centres of Northern NSW and Queensland). In Sydney he primarily serviced suburban centres and the working-class leisure seekers, thus requiring promotional strategies of a different nature to those of say Harry Rickards, or in later years, the Fuller-Brennan operations. Naturally, comparisons with these rather more prestigious organisations dictated that Clay's shows be relegated in the minds of many as being "third-rate" (McPherson, 18). This sentiment would continue to dog Clay's reputation throughout his life, a situation of which he was well aware from the start. During an interview with the Theatre magazine in 1911, he points to this problem - suggesting that many "suburbanites" have the impression that his company must necessarily be inferior to city based shows because it caters directly to non-city based audiences (Oct. 1911, 29).

It becomes apparent, too, that Clay's steady rise as a variety entrepreneur during the first nine years at least, was largely ignored by the metropolitan trade magazines, newspapers and non-working class audiences (apart from country audiences). And similarly he had no use for them. Chapters Three and Four will demonstrate, as indeed did the previous one, that Clay's management style was honed from years of experience in the industry, and from a hard-nosed business attitude. With a reputation for trusting no one, despite the close relationship he had with his small band of loyal managers, and possessing an innate ability to tightly control the complex financial and logistical aspects of his business, Clay became renowned for keeping his fingers on the everyday pulse of his company - even to the extent of auditioning virtually all those who wished to work for him. And he maintained this work ethic right up until his stroke in 1921.

The difficulty in finding primary source material relating to the early years of Clay's vaudeville company, apart from newspaper advertising and reviews for his N.S.W. and Queensland tours, is hardly surprising in view of the circumstances surrounding both his business dealings and the perception of him by many within the industry. In this sense he was simply a novice, attempting to do what many had tried to do before him. With regard to his name or operations being mentioned in newspapers and trade magazines during this early period, for example, it is not until he begins advertising in the Theatre in June 1909 that that publication

starts to seriously recognise his organisation. A comprehensive search through this particular monthly publication between 1905 and 1909 shows that Clay and his operations are mentioned less than a handful of times. And it would not be until the arrival in 1913 of Australian Variety and Show World, a magazine which during its early years devoted itself almost exclusively to vaudeville, that he would join the ranks of the well-publicised. Long before this, however, significant sections of the theatre-going public had found in Harry Clay's theatrical management much that was desirable. And as this chapter will indicate, they patronised his shows like no other suburban/country entrepreneur before him, and arguably, after him.

Harry Clay's career as a variety entrepreneur is believed to have begun in 1901 with his first tour of Queensland - an excursion of some six months which saw him revisit a number of those regional centres where his name as a tenor and minstrel performer was already held in high regard. Advertising for the second tour in 1902 indicates that between these two northern visits the company also travelled through Victoria and Tasmania. Whether or not he continued to tour other centres outside NSW and Queensland between the 1902 and 1903 tours is unknown.¹ According to the 1914 Theatre profile, however, he is reported to have opened up his Sydney suburban circuit in 1903, in addition to the Queensland tours ("Performers," 25). And it is during this period, leading up to around 1905, that he is known to have engaged the likes of George Sorlie, Bert Howard, and Harry Sadler for these Sydney shows.

For the first five years of operations Harry Clay's weekly itinerary consisted of the following locations:²

City (Masonic Hall)
North Sydney (Masonic Hall) [Saturday nights]
Newtown (St. George's Hall)
Petersham
Balmain
Parramatta

Of these, it would be the City, Newtown and North Sydney areas in particular (albeit in different venues) that would continue to act as strongholds for his company right through until the late 1920s. As the previous chapter foreshadowed, St. George's Hall was to become an essential element in Clay's plan to forge his own suburban circuit. It was undoubtedly an important centre in the social lives of the Newtown area residents, easily accessed by public transport, and an ideal place from which Clay could open his account as a Sydney entrepreneur. An article in the Newtown Chronicle indicates that the venue had been closed for some time prior to August of 1903, and that it had been extensively renovated before being reopened. The report notes that "it is quite evident that [the hall] fills a long-felt want in the western suburbs for those who desire a suitable place in which to give first class entertainment on a large scale" (10 Oct. 1903, 3). It is most likely, then, that having been closely identified with the hall in previous years, Harry Clay began his suburban circuit with it as his foundation base.

¹ Information concerning all of Harry Clay's Queensland tours (including the NSW legs) will be dealt with in Chapter Five, as well as Appendix C.

² For further information regarding Clay's Sydney and NSW country circuits 1901-1929 see Appendix D.

It has become clear that the other two venues (these being the North Sydney and the inner city locations) were also strategically important in terms of Clay launching his suburban circuit. The North Sydney Masonic Hall, situated on the corner of Walker and Mount Streets, was another popular community centre having been used for "theatrical entertainments, lectures, Concerts, Balls etc." from around 1887 ("To Let" 2).³ And as with St. George's Hall it is believed that Harry Clay's first shows here would have occurred sometime after his return from Queensland in 1903. According to an advertisement placed in the Sydney Morning Herald by the venue's agents, G.T. Clarke and Co, the hall accommodated over 600 people seated and contained the main Lodge Room, supper room, ante-rooms, caretaker's quarters, and two large shops ("St. Leonards" 2). Harry Clay's highly successful association with the North Sydney area was to be one which would last almost the entire life span of his company, and is very much a result of the reputation he built during his early years at the St. Leonard's Hall.

The Masonic Hall located in the city, on the corner of Castlereagh and Goulburn Streets (and not to be confused with the old Masonic Hall in York Street, opposite the markets) was to be another of Harry Clay's prime locations. It had been a place for popular entertainments from the early 1880s, and played host to a number of theatrical and minstrel/vaudeville companies who competed for audiences at similar low cost venues, particularly the Protestant Hall. Little is known about Harry Clay's five year association with the venue, but suffice it to say, it allowed his name to become recognised among the city centre's population, and provided a launching pad for his even more successful venture at the Standard Theatre beginning in 1908.

Clay's Sydney shows and logistical organisation were run along the same lines as his country tours. In terms of the entertainment, he continued the traditional minstrel format with its semi-circle first part followed by the second part vaudeville section and concluding farce. It has been noted, too, that by 1905, as with the Queensland tours, his shows often included animated pictures as part of the second half entertainment (Theatre Oct. 1905, 13). With regard to methods of promotion, however, Clay's city circuit was far more cost effective than the country tours as these shows required virtually no newspaper advertising. His method was simply to get children or youths to put dodgers advertising the forthcoming week's programme into the letter boxes of the local community in return for free tickets to the show. He would also have daybills posted around each suburb to catch the eye of the locals, many of whom attended the shows on a weekly basis. These advertising practices were also part and parcel of his NSW and Queensland tours, but were an

³ Almost always referred to as the North Sydney Masonic Hall, the venue was officially known as the St. Leonard's Masonic Hall. Formally opened by Lodge Samaritan No 50 on the 7th of January 1884 ("Lodge Samaritan," 12-13), it was eventually purchased by Sydney dance instructor Ernest Needs in 1905 (around May/June). Needs remodelled and refurbished the venue creating, as the Theatre notes, a venue in "the latest and most up-to-date style" (July 1905, 15), and included for the first time a stage in the main function room.

addition to newspaper advertising - a requirement brought about by the once or twice a year visits, as opposed to regular weekly shows.

During the first decade Clay's Sydney circuit seldom changed venues or suburbs. His company's popularity among the Newtown, City, North Sydney, Parramatta, Ashfield and Petersham audiences was such that he continued to play these suburbs on a virtually continuous weekly basis. In 1908, for instance, the North Sydney shows were being presented on Friday nights rather than Saturday nights. This change was brought about when the company moved from the city's Masonic Hall to the Standard Theatre (previously the Royal Standard). The better conditions of the latter venue, in addition to a larger capacity and its attraction as a Saturday night theatre for city audiences no doubt influenced his decision. And indeed this theatre (often referred to as Clay's Standard Theatre)⁴ can be considered as Harry Clay's premiere venue up until the opening of the Newtown Bridge Theatre in 1913, due to the large attendances regularly claimed for his shows.

There are several indicators which suggest the level of success that typified Harry Clay's operations in his first ten year period as an entrepreneur, one being the cash purchase of 218 Glebe Point Road (mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis) within days of his company's return from Queensland. Another is his foray into serious theatre, with the sending of a dramatic company through Queensland around September-November of 1908, while in the following year he again acted as producer, touring well-known Scottish actor Walter Bentley and a company (including Clay's daughter Essie) through the same state. Although these tours are as yet the only known dramatic productions sent out to regional centres by Clay (he is known to have presented serious drama at the Standard theatre in 1909, and at least one season of the same at the Newtown Bridge Theatre in 1915), he also sent a pantomime company through the north in 1911, this time under the direction of Stanley McKay.⁵ Clay's association with McKay, the energetic founder of the Sydney Muffs amateur dramatic society, is believed to have begun in April 1909, with the Easter week presentation of Uncle Tom's Cabin at "Clay's Standard Theatre," directed by McKay (Theatre May 1909, 18). [*These tours are also dealt with in Chapter 5, and Appendix C*]

⁴ Located on the southern side of the city's fire station in Castlereagh Street between Liverpool and Bathurst Streets, the original hall was built by the Royal Order of Forrester's. In 1886, Frank Smith remodelled the venue, naming it the Royal Standard Theatre. Reopened on the 8th of May in the same year, its first tenants were Alfred Dampier's Dramatic Co. ("Royal Standard" 6). The Royal Standard later became a silver coin theatre for the purposes of vaudeville and minstrelsy, seating some 960 to 1,000 people (Thorne 198-99) - and was leased by the Fuller family (among others) who struggled in it during the early years of this century, trying to lay the foundation of their theatrical empire (Everyone's 4.267 1925: 16). Known briefly as The Empire (during the Fullers' period) it was renamed the Standard Theatre shortly before Harry Clay's lease of it in 1908. Advertising, reviews and general references concerning Clay's shows at the venue published in the Theatre from October 1909 regularly refer to it as "Clay's Standard." For an example of this, see the review of Doris Williams engagement in J.C. Lees' Out on the Castlereagh, in the October 1909 issue, page 18. The Royal Standard was demolished in 1925 (Theatre May 1926, 41).

⁵ McKay produced Walter Bentley's enormously successful Hamlet season at the Criterion Theatre shortly after presenting "Uncle Tom" at the Bridge Theatre, and immediately prior to Bentley's Queensland tour for Harry Clay. For more information on McKay, see Appendix G

Although details regarding Clay's operations during the first ten years or so are scarce, research has nonetheless provided at least some idea as to several key figures engaged by him during the period. Understandably, the time periods in which they were involved are not always known. As mentioned previously, however, George Sorlie, Harry Sadler and Bert Howard are known to have played significant roles in Clay's first few years. Howard,⁶ later to become one of Harry Clay's rivals for Sydney's suburban audiences and who kept his smaller organisation going right up until the end of the vaudeville era, recalls briefly his time with Clay:

I'd been interested in the boxing game ever since I was a newsboy selling papers down at the Quay....until Harry Rickards got hold of me and made me his office boy and valet. Working for the Old Man gave me a good all-round knowledge of vaudeville, and being able to use my fists helped a lot when I stepped out into the suburban theatres with Harry Clay.... I was everything from manager to chucker-out, and a manager had to be a fighter then. Lots of times Harry, Wally Edwards and I had to tame the natives, and hold out the pushes without calling in the cops. Bang! Slam! Crash! Either they went out or we did! (Howard 104).



Plate 19

St George's Hall, Newtown 1922

From the Newtown Diamond Jubilee Souvenir: 1862-1922, p. 14.

(Courtesy Mitchell Library, NSW)



Plate 20

St George's Hall, Newtown ca. 2007

(Courtesy of Guy Wilkinson (Ghee) at www.flickr.com)

⁶ Information concerning Bert Howard and Harry Sadler are included as part of Appendix G. Information about George Sorlie, and primarily his time spent as part of the Clay organisation is included within Appendix F.

While it is known that Howard divided his time during the first ten years or so of the new century between Clay's and J.C. Bain (*Australian Variety* 16 May 1917, n. pag.), he also recalls in the same article that, "being a showman is like being a punter. The things you remember are your big wins, or your long successful stretches. Nine months with Harry Clay in Queensland...." (Howard, 104). To date it has not been possible to locate the specific year in which Howard was associated with one of Clay's Queensland tours, although this is not unexpected due to his role probably being that of production and/or stage manager, and hence his name not being mentioned in the regional papers.

Of the others whose engagements helped give Clay's company its reputation during this first ten year period, the names which stand out are those of Ted Tutty, Wally Edwards, Frank Herbert, Harry Elliot, Stan Kerridge, musical director T.W. Rhodes, Joe Rox, Will Wynand, and perhaps to a lesser extent Will Gilbert - he being involved towards the end of the period, but who continued as one of Clay's senior attractions well into the 1920s. [*Information regarding some of these artists is included as part of Appendix E and F*] But it is Tutty and Edwards, both of whom established careers in excess of twenty years with Clay and whose names were inextricably linked to that organisation, who stand out. Tutty, the blackface cornerman and comic, who toured Queensland on no less than seven occasions, was a consistent drawcard for shows, and deemed by one *Theatre* commentator as being to Clay "what Irving Sayles was to Harry Rickards" (Oct. 1914, 35). Edwards, the popular baritone who had worked with Harry Clay in 1890s, was along with Jimmy Boyle, Clay's most trusted lieutenant.

One aspect to have become increasingly clear as the research for this thesis unfolded has been the number of artists and staff who maintained long associations with Harry Clay. Indeed, the consensus of opinion among his employees was not just a matter of expressing marked deference to their boss, but overwhelmingly supports the general impression of Clay as being a remarkably consistent and fair employer. Both Charles Norman and Thea Rowe recall their treatment under his regime as being wonderful experiences (see interviews in Appendix H), and Roy Rene similarly recalls his time with Clay's as being "like one big happy family, a laugh a minute on and off [stage]" (Rene 43).⁷ Clay's reputation in the press of the day also indicates that his "geniality" was common knowledge. The "Audiences Were Tough When Harry Clay Ran Vaudeville" article notes for example that although giving "the appearance of being tough with his actors, his quiet kindness often cost him money" (n. pag). The writer then relates an anecdote regarding Mark Time, an English comic who had a disastrous opening night at the Bridge Theatre, but who nonetheless was the recipient of Clay's generosity. It is claimed that Time got himself an on the spot engagement with Harry Clay (without an audition) on the strength of his credentials but that:

⁷ See Appendix I for selection of quotations concerning Clay and his reputation with both employees and the general public - notably Arthur Morley (1918).

His error was in fortifying his courage with plenty of Dutch courage... [the] result [being that] 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 pound note into his pocket (n. pag.)⁸

The contemporary perception of Harry Clay can best be illustrated through the following piece published in the Theatre in June 1909, which also serves to indicate not just his reputation with the public, but how he was finally being recognised within the industry:

In building up his City and Suburban Vaudeville Company into the success it is to-day, Harry Clay has succeeded where dozens before him failed. Harry takes the liveliest interest in every individual turn, revelling in it if it is at all good with the enthusiasm of a youth who is at an entertainment for the first time in his life; and on the other hand, sympathising with the performer, and trying to drop him a serviceable hint or two, if the item is not what it ought to be. As for the performance itself, the stage-manager of a mammoth pantomime could not be more taken up with his first-night's production than Harry is with his show every night in the week all the year round. It is this ever-present geniality, this ever-present energy, and this ever-present watchfulness on the part of Harry - for the men and women in his employ on the one hand, and for the servicing up of his entertainment in the best possible way on the other - that endears him at once to performers, and has likewise earned him the goodwill of the public by always ensuring them an excellently-run and excellently-presented show (18).

In later years a number of publications would indicate the level of esteem accorded Clay, with several positioning him and another of the local vaudeville managers, J. C. Bain, at the top of the list of those responsible for helping to generate and sustain Australian variety entertainment. In highlighting their past efforts a Theatre scribe in 1916 wrote, for example, "the Australian artist has never had in a small way two better friends than Harry Clay and Jimmy Bain" (Jan. 1916, 35). And to a large degree, it was Clay's geniality his energy and his determination during these undoubtedly difficult early years which saw him achieve his status within the industry and the broader community. Throughout the remainder of his years these traits would ensure his unquestioned reputation and in turn help to sustain him through the troughs that frequently accompanied the vaudeville industry's fight for survival in both the war and post-war periods; a battle which would be fought against the rapidly emerging film industry, discriminative tax laws, the 1919 flu epidemic, increasingly tougher theatre and public halls legislation, and the ever-demanding need to find newer and more entertaining acts.

Reviews published during the first six months of 1910 indicate that the company was by that time doing tremendous business. Barely six months after the Theatre noted that "'the House Full' sign is always in requisition" (Jan. 1910, 23), Clay closed down his Sydney circuit, claiming that competition by picture shows was to blame. "Yes," said Mr Harry Clay, speaking to the Theatre [in May 1910], "for the present I have entirely given up my city and suburban vaudeville circuit. The picture shows, particularly in the

⁸ The only primary source reference found in relation to Mark Time's engagement with Clay's is in an Australian Variety notice for a forthcoming bill at the Bridge Theatre in August 1917 (29 Aug. 1917, n. pag). This would seemingly support the 1951 article's claim that the English comic's stay with Clay was a one night affair.

suburbs have proved too much for me.... I am leaving Sydney to join my Queensland show at Rockhampton.... [and] I shall be returning... about the end of August, when I may give the city and suburbs another try in the matter of vaudeville" (June 1910, 23). It would not be the last time that Clay called a halt to his city and suburban vaudeville operations during the next few years due to competition from the invading film industry although these hiatus periods, which generally coincided with his Queensland tours, are believed to have occurred no more than three or four times.

It can be seen, then, that in terms of survival during this period - when he was obviously attempting a great deal of entrepreneurial exploration in addition to some initial expansion of his vaudeville operations - that the continued success of the Queensland tours was intrinsic to his ability to maintain a strong financial basis. In support of this claim comes a quote from Clay in 1911, in which he speaks enthusiastically of Queensland as a great state. "Towns are springing up that you would never have dreamt of playing in a few years ago. Today you can take a good-sized company into them, with most payable results" (Theatre Oct. 1911, 29).

On his return to Sydney in August 1910, Clay did indeed re-establish his city and suburban circuit, opening at the Standard Theatre before a packed audience. In the same issue it is noted that Clay had returned once again to the stage, after several years concentrating on management. It is likely, then, that his enforced "lay-off" from the constant pressure of managing his Sydney circuit, encouraged him to get back into performing. And indeed, if the favourable responses he got to his own stage performances in Rockhampton are any indication it is of little surprise that he re-established himself as a performer. One Morning Bulletin reviewer write for example: "Mr Clay, who had a most enthusiastic welcome, made his appearance on the stage in Rockhampton after an absence of some years. His voice - a fine tenor - was heard to much advantage and the number was one of the most attractive items of the evening" (1 July 1910, 4). Reviews, too, over the remainder of the tour indicate that his status among Queensland critics and audiences, who "vociferously recalled" him on many occasions, had not diminished. After this tour Clay continued to take to the stage on a regular basis right up until 1921 when, as previously mentioned, a stroke forced him into semi-retirement.

The following year, 1911, saw Harry Clay return to Queensland where he toured with his Comedy Company as both manager and performer. It is likely that he was forced to take on the managerial duties because of Jimmy Boyle's unavailability. Boyle is known to have gone back to England after the 1910 tour, which left Clay in the position of not having anyone with the same experience, and just as importantly, someone he could trust to the same extent as the long-serving manager. The fact that Clay included himself in the tour, in addition to there being no records found regarding his Sydney operations for the greater portion of 1911, seems to suggest that as with the previous year he temporarily shut down the Sydney circuit. It is during this period, too, that Clay is believed to have been contemplating his entrepreneurial future, with vaudeville already beginning to face serious threats to its viability from forces within and outside the entertainment

industry. These concerns were recorded as part of a Theatre interview published in October of that year. Stating that he had no time for picture shows in the suburbs due to the extremely low admission price (three pence and one penny) compared to his more than reasonably priced shows (one shilling and six pence), Clay expressed a tirade of ill feeling towards the industry and the problems faced in relation to the bias held against his suburban-based company:

The penny charge is supposed to apply to children, but they would pass you in for a penny even if you were as big as Dick Barker, the Queensland giant, and could hand them down a star. People come into the city from the suburbs to go to the theatre. It does not matter what they pay. They will go to that theatre - even if the programme is not half as good as the one you might be giving them right at their very door. The idea they get into their heads is that your company must necessarily be an inferior sort of thing because it is appearing in the suburbs. Consequently, this fact also tells against the vaudeville-man in catering for suburbanites (29).

According to Clay, in the same Theatre article, he had no intention of presenting vaudeville in the suburbs over the summer months, "even if I had the best performers on earth" (29). The exact reasoning here is unclear, but in the context of an interview targeting his struggle with the picture shows, it seems that the holiday period was a contributing factor in lower audience numbers at his shows. For whatever reason, it can be assumed that this situation may well have lasted up until September of 1912, as he is known to have once again toured Queensland with his company. And with the tours starting in mid-to-late February and ending around August it is unlikely even at this stage of his company's development that he would have handed over the reins of his Sydney operations to anyone else. While the Sydney circuit seems to have closed down, the same cannot be said of his interstate interests, however. In this regard it is known that towards the end of 1911 he re-established his association with Stanley McKay, using his connections and experience to send the young theatre director's Bo-Peep pantomime company through Queensland under the Clay banner. [*For further details see Chapter Four/Appendix B*]

It can be assumed, then, that around this same period Clay began putting together a plan to base his operations out of one venue in Sydney in order to combat the ever-increasing difficulties that were being faced by vaudeville operators in the metropolitan areas of Australia. The decision to concentrate his efforts in Queensland during the period immediately prior to that plan being put into effect indicates the financial value he placed on the venture in comparison to the risks involved in running the city circuit. There is of course no evidence to suggest that he considered giving up the Sydney operations. Rather, it would have been the benefits in having a base from which to run the company's various operations (and which also provided unlimited access) in addition to the prestige that came with owning a theatre that influenced Clay's decision to build his Newtown theatre. Furthermore, this venture was initially seen as presenting him with the opportunity to run at least two companies, each alternating between a week around the suburbs and a week at the headquarters (although this practice would eventually be suspended for several years). There is

little doubt that with his well-established reputation in the rapidly expanding suburb of Newtown the choice of location was ready made. Newtown and the suburbs immediately south and west had during the previous decade or so begun to feel the brunt of a movement away from the inner city and Glebe areas by the gradually expanding middle-class society. It created, in effect, an ideal support base for Clay's new operation, with the new population including many families with working-class values but with incomes that allowed for more leisure activities.

Sometime in 1912 a partnership is believed to have been formed between Clay, Harold T. Morgan (solicitor, local alderman and past and future Newtown Mayor) and another local businessman A.R. Abbott, resulting in the establishment of the Bridge Theatre Company Pty Ltd. [*For details on Morgan and Abbott, see Appendix E*] By October of that year they had made an application to the Newtown Council for permission to erect a theatre at the corner of Bedford and Denison Streets, directly opposite the Newtown Railway Station and next door to the old Town Hall building (Sydney City Council Archives - 1912 Minutes, page 462). Its location was perfectly positioned, being as it was (and still is) in the heart of the suburb's central business area. The following month the application, which the council initially referred to the Works' Committee, was granted permission to proceed subject to the Government Architect's approval (468).

Prior to the purchase of the property by the newly formed company, the site had been a blacksmith's shop ("Audiences" n. pag.), and included a small strip of land on the opposite side of Alton Lane, across from the soon to be built theatre (see Plate 20). This would be used, in later years, as a two story extension to the theatre, housing an electrical plant, dressing rooms, and scenic artist's workshop amongst other requirements. The second story of this building (which no longer exists) housed the dressing rooms, and was accessed by a small bridge over the laneway, the location for this - a couple of metres from the corner of the theatre's north west wall in Alton Lane - can still be seen in the different brickwork which closed the original entrance to the bridge. A copy of the New South Wales Certificate of Title, dated the 29th of May 1924 (Vol 3596, Folio 220 - Application No 24761) shows that the land was originally granted to one Thomas Rowley in 1803, and identified as being Lot 19 of the North Kingston estate in the Municipality of Newtown, Parish of Petersham and County of Cumberland. It was part of a 240 acre block owned by Rowley.

Work on the Newtown Bridge Theatre is thought to have begun around the end of February/beginning of March 1913 as Clay is reported to have left his Queensland touring party and returned to Sydney at the end of February to "oversee the construction" (Theatre Feb. 1913, 19). Although details regarding the building's contractors and architects of the theatre and its design are presently unknown, it has been established that its seating capacity was 1,500 people (Australian Variety 12 Aug. 1920, 4), and that it contained an upstairs and downstairs foyer, box-office and manager's office. The auditorium consisted of a dress circle and stalls, as well as projection booth for the screening of films. Originally, the dress circle

simply ran from one side of the theatre to the other in a straight line. Later reports mentioning reconstruction of the theatre, however, indicate that the dress circle was eventually lowered and reshaped around the sides, and that several boxes were installed as well.

Clay kept his Sydney circuit operating during the theatre's construction, although it is believed that his association with the Standard Theatre must have terminated prior to November 1913. An exact date is difficult to establish, mainly because of the lack of details concerning the company between 1910 and 1913. Ross Thorne points out, however, that the Standard had been taken over by Mr and Mrs Hugh Buckler sometime in 1913, and that they altered and redecorated it, renaming the venue the Little Theatre. Thorne records that in a Souvenir of the Little Theatre "mention is made of the bedraggled, tawdry interior with antiquated stage, a place for the holding of boxing matches and a 'two-up' school" (Thorne 199), suggesting that perhaps some considerable period of time had elapsed since Clay last used the theatre.

The Bridge Theatre was opened on 19 July 1913, three days after Clay's Bridge Theatre Company received license from the NSW Fire Commissioners enabling it to operate the venue under the Theatre and Public Halls Act (Fire Commissioners/Theatres and Public Halls 1928-1958 file - NSW Government Archives, Location No; 20/15013 dated 21 July 1930, page 2). A letter submitted by A.R. Abbott (Bridge Theatre Secretary) to the Newtown Council for consideration during its June meeting, indicates that the theatre had been near completion by that time. In the request, Abbott asks that the disused vehicle entrances around the theatre be turned up, and the footpaths be repaired. He also points to the need to tar pave Alton Lane (Newtown Council Minutes/Sydney Council Archives). The day after the opening of the Bridge Theatre the Sydney *Sun* published a small article on Clay and his suburban operations:

Mr. Harry Clay opened his new Bridge Theatre at Newtown last night to a capacity house... On his salary list are over 75 performers, while over 100 theatre attendants, mechanics, electricians, stage hands etc draw salaries every week. Mr Clay has two vaudeville companies at present playing in Sydney, also a dramatic company and a vaudeville company on tour in Queensland. The Coliseum, North Sydney, plays three nights' vaudeville and three nights' drama, as does the National, Balmain. The Bridge Theatre is devoted to vaudeville. Mr Clay hopes to eventually control seven suburban theatres (20 July 1913, 15).

By early November Australian Variety was reporting that "Harry Clay's Newtown home is playing to capacity business nightly" (5 Nov. 1913, 6). The following month the same magazine publicised Clay's termination of his suburban circuit (apart from a No 2 company at the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt, every Saturday night), a decision he claimed was made so that he could "devote his whole attention to the Bridge Theatre, Newtown, which is his stronghold" (3 Dec. 1913, 6).

It is believed, too, that 1913 also heralded the first engagement with Clay's by Roy Rene, considered one of Australia's greatest comedians. Rene had previously moved to Sydney from Melbourne to undertake an engagement as stable boy for J.C. Williamson's racing drama The Whip. The comic recalls in his

autobiography that he stayed on in Sydney because he believed "there was more scope for [him] there," and "started off by trying to see Harry Clay," whom he remembered as being "a most marvellous man" (42).

I went on trying to see Mr Clay for months, but no matter how often I went to his office, they would never let me in. One Friday night, sitting in my little bed-sitting room in Phillip Street, I just about decided I'd never see him, and I spent the next Saturday morning around all day, and by 5 o'clock that afternoon I was standing at the corner of Pitt and Market Streets feeling a pretty dismal sort of failure, when who should walk by but Harry Clay. He took a look at me and then came up and said "What are you doing tonight, Jewboy?" I said "Nothing, sir."

"Go and get your props and come out to Balmain to work tonight, one of the turns is off sick."

I didn't stop to ask how much money I'd be getting or what I'd be doing or anything else, I just bolted back to my room, picked up my props, shoved them in my port and raced off to the theatre..... I must have been about nineteen then, and this felt like a big chance. When Mr Clay arrived, he said to me, "Go on to the corner and do your number." Well I went on and did my biggest number, a thing called "That's all she lets me do," which was all about a man and his girl and how he never even gets kissed goodnight. I was very thin in those days, and I wore black tights and very big boots and funny make-up with stripes like a zebra down my back. I'd already taught myself eccentric dancing, and I went on that night and I really was a riot. Even so, I got the surprise of my life when I was packing up after the performance, when Mr Clay said "You'll stop for the rest of the week."

He gave me £6 at the end of that week, and I certainly thought I was made of money. I can tell you it was pretty good money, too, most of the performers only got £4. Mr Clay must have liked me quite a lot, because after that I was with him for many years playing his circuits (42-43).

Although the exact date of Rene's initial engagement has not been established, it is known that he appeared on the second leg of Clay's 1913 Queensland tour and was billed as a comedian (à la Julien Rose⁹) and an impersonator (Gympie Times 17 July 1913, 2). The fact that he was considered good enough to go on tour would seem to indicate that some period had elapsed between his tryout (believed to have been sometime around April) and his July appearance in Queensland. Despite his claim that he worked for Clay's for "many years" it seems that Roy Rene's initial engagement¹⁰ would last only until sometime into 1914. In terms of its importance to the development of his early career, however, the engagement can be considered immeasurable. As the 1951 Perth News article notes: "no actor was worth his salt unless he had run the gauntlet of Harry Clay's standards and the hypercritical audiences that followed vaudeville" ("Audiences" n. pag.).

Essentially, Rene, like countless other Clay's performers before and after him, found himself having to prove his ability not only to the boss, but to the boss's audiences. Renowned for being tough on those who failed to make the grade, as several anecdotes included in both this and the following chapter will testify, the patrons of Harry Clay's establishments could in themselves make or break a performer. While Rene's act and his

⁹ Julian Rose - Hebrew Comedian, renowned for his rendition of "Lavinski at the Wedding."

¹⁰ Rene and his second wife Sadie Gale were engaged by Clay's for the Sydney circuit in 1929, and are believed to have also toured Queensland for the company that year. For further information see Chapter Five.

Given the opportunity to work with one of the best professional organisations in Australia so early in his career, the experience would have been a major factor in Rene's ability to attract the attention of the Fullers' organisation (during a brief stint with J.C. Bain) soon after the conclusion of his contract with Clay. In this regard Harry Clay's determined interest in supporting and directing his artists would have been very much a part of the young comic's development throughout his engagement. And in this respect, Clay's influence on Rene's career along with the likes of George Sorlie, George Wallace, and Arthur Tauchert, can be again seen to have played a significant part in the development of an Australian popular entertainment industry.

The success of Clay's new venture at Newtown seems to have continued unabated during 1914, despite the fact that, as Australian Variety points out in April, the "amusement slump is now general" (22 Apr. 1914, 5). Indeed, the reviews in that magazine throughout the year regularly note the support he was given by the local audiences. The January 10th edition of Australian Variety, for example, indicates that "a great majority of vaudeville followers [in Newtown] seldom leave the environment of their residences to seek amusement elsewhere. This speaks volumes for the quality of programmes submitted by Mr Clay..." (n.pag). With complete changes of program every week, and consistently good bills on offer, it seems that the theatre regularly turned patrons away due to being booked out (Australian Variety 15 July 1914, n. pag.). The "Audiences Were Tough When Harry Clay Ran Vaudeville" article records that "sixpenny seats were always booked out days in advance" (n. pag.). Thus in an effort to alleviate demands on the theatre's box-office, the management arranged to have Mick Simmons Ltd at 311 King Street, Newtown take bookings during business hours.

1914 began with a season of drama at the Newtown Bridge Theatre, starting off with Uncle Tom's Cabin (6th January), followed by Slaves of London the week after. The first production, which included the esteemed Australian actor Harry Leston¹¹ and also had Harry and Essie Clay (as well as Bert Corrie) in singing roles. Harry Clay continued to perform on a regular basis throughout the year, entertaining the audiences with his tenor songs, as an interlocutor, and in comic/patter or duet turns with others such as Ted Tutty and Maurice Chenoweth. Other performers with established reputations to be engaged by Clay during this period include, besides Roy Rene, Billy Maloney, Lulu Eugene, Joe Lashwood, Joe Charles and Emile Dani, The Phillip Sisters, Desmond and Jansen, Will Gilbert, Pagden and Stanley, Jack "Porky" Kearns, Eileen Fleury, Bert Corrie, Joe Rox, Louie Duggan, Peter Brooks, Max Martin, Sadie Gale and her mother Myra, Billy Cass, English comic Denis Carney, and two people destined to be among Australia's biggest stars during the vaudeville era, Amy Rochelle and Arthur ("the Sentimental Bloke") Tauchert. [*For information regarding Rochelle and Tauchert, as well as several other artists mentioned, see Appendix F*]. All of these artists, however, were to establish considerable reputations and careers both with Clay's and

¹¹ Harry Leston - mentioned in the previous chapter as being one of the most consistently employed, and popular actor/reciters during the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was also a well-known teacher of drama and elocution. Essie Clay is known to have been a student of both Leston and Roland Watts-Phillips (daughter of Watts-Phillips, English playwright and writer), who appeared in many of George Rignold's productions.

with various organisations throughout Australia. Several also made successful transitions to other entertainment mediums such as theatre management, pantomime, dramatic theatre, and later film and radio.



Plate 22
Amy Rochelle
(Australian Variety 14 Apr. 1915, n. pag)

In November of 1914, arguably the most popular vaudeville sketch of the period, the dramatic piece "Humanity," was presented for the first time in Australia at the Bridge Theatre (Theatre Jan. 1915, 46). Owned and produced by Englishman John Lawson, and first presented in England¹² during 1900, the sketch's successful season on Clay time¹³ echoed the similar success it had, and would continue to achieve around the world. Its popularity was such that the Fullers would bring it back to the Australian variety stage in 1920 in a much larger production. The initial Clay's production, which garnered high praise from reviewers, continued the tradition of presenting what many considered to be the most realistic fight scene ever put on for the variety theatre. In terms of production values, too, it was considered by the Australian Variety reviewer as being "the finest that has ever been seen on any stage in New South Wales, everything being finished in detail, and not the smallest item being overlooked" (11 Nov. 1914, 6). Lawson, who owned

¹² Lawson first presented "Humanity" at the Gaiety Theatre, Brighton, England in 1900. Its popularity saw it play 16 consecutive weeks at the Oxford Theatre, London; 18 weeks at the Paragon (East London); and 36 weeks in South London. "Humanity" was made into a film (screened in Australia by Wests Pictures ca. 1916) and sold on gramophone records - 30,000 copies being sold between 1916 and 1918, "a majority of them going to the trenches" records Lawson in Australian Variety ("John Lawson Discourses," n. pag). The sketch considered the relationship between a Jew and a Christian, and the latter's betrayal of their friendship through lust and greed. The sketch finishes in fight, in which "an appalling amount of crockery is broken." (Theatre Jan. 1915, 46).

¹³ The reference to "time" as in Clay time or Fuller time, for example, was a common part of journalistic and public discourse during the vaudeville era, and refers to each organisation's "show-time" – i.e. the current venues, artists and programmes etc.

the rights to the thirty minute sketch, had formed two companies to tour the show around the world, with the No 2 troupe, starring Edward Rainer, being the company engaged by Clay's. In this respect, then, it can be seen that Harry Clay was quite capable of successfully seeking out, and securing, quality overseas attractions before the larger variety organisations (in later years this also included the purchasing of revues) and not being simply a receptacle for second hand artists and shows, as the company has generally been regarded.

The success of the "Humanity" season in part can be attributed to the prevailing emotional upheaval within the Australian population, and perhaps the general desire to make sense of man's inhumanity, created no doubt by the advent of the Great War some six months earlier. Its success also acted as a precursor, however, to Clay's decision to continue the presentation of serious drama at the Bridge Theatre in early 1915. Seemingly despondent over the lack of fresh ideas and professionalism of many Australian vaudeville performers, he acted on an earlier threat to cut them off from work as a means of teaching them a lesson in entertainment responsibility. Australian Variety, in supporting the same conclusion that audiences were "tired of seeing the same old faces - week after week - for years," published Clay's opinion on the matter in its January 6th, 1915 issue:

There's a fine crimson lot of cerise individuals around. They come begging for work, when most of them ought to be out on the railway deviation works with a ruddy pick in their hands. The blanky cows very seldom learn a new song or business, and then wonder why they don't get cardinal work. One of these days I'll cut all these adjectives out, and put in popular drama then I'll be rid of these flaming pests (8).

Consequently Clay's Dramatic Company presented in January, Never Despair, Slaves of London (again with Harry Leston in the cast), and then Convict Martyr. Many of the actors involved were seen in all three productions and, according to reviews they were both well attended and well received. The prevailing thought within the local community seems to have been, however, that the Bridge Theatre was a vaudeville establishment, and soon after, Harry Clay brought back the variety side of his entertainment.

While Clay's patience with the attitude of many of his artists was being tested it did not stop him, however, from holding the company's second annual picnic in February of 1915. Held at Killarney, the social gathering was put on specifically for the artists and managers of the company - along with his two major business partners A.R. Abbott and H.T. Morgan. Sporting events were held - with prizes donated by Clay, competing vaudeville manager Jacky Landow and A.R. Abbot amongst others - while dancing and other entertainments were also provided. These picnics, which were often publicised in the entertainment magazines, were held consistently throughout the lifetime of the company, providing an extra-curricular bonding activity for the company, which prided itself as a family-style organisation. As discussed in the first chapter it is surprising to note that although the picnics regularly attracted large numbers of Clay's people and their families, and were organised by a committee from the company, no mention of Kate or Essie Clay attending or helping to arrange these events has yet been found. This factor, along with Kate Clay's non-

existent profile in her husband's life and the vacating of the Glebe residence in 1914 by Harry (at least), has contributed to some speculation regarding their relationship.

Although business seems to have been steady, by May of 1915 Clay was again blaming competition from the film exhibitors and the problems prevailing throughout the industry for the smaller audience numbers. In a Theatre interview he noted that Saturday night always saw a packed house and that "if we could only get two nights like it a week we would be satisfied. But except on Saturday night there is nothing doing" (June 1915, 47). He subsequently began screening films during the week, opening on Saturday nights with vaudeville. Some two months later, however, he returned to "regular vaudeville," a move which Australian Variety declared to be "good news for the profession generally" (21 July 1915, 8).

Another aspect to the year was the decision by Clay's, for a short time at least, to adapt the first part minstrel circle to something more modern. The Theatre, in reporting the disappearance of "nigger business" almost to the point of extinction, noted in relation to the new first part at the Bridge Theatre (which opened on the 24th of April 1915 under the title of Fun on Board the S.S. Newtown):

First [the minstrel format] was cut out at the National, then at the Tivoli, and next at the Princess - when that house passed from Jimmy Bain to the Fullers. Even Harry Clay at the Newtown Bridge Theatre before closing down on vaudeville had substituted something of a topical character for the nigger business - the men being in navel uniforms, and the girls in blue jackets, white skirts, and navy caps. As the admiral of the fleet - for that in his company is what he appeared as - Harry himself would have been the hit of the Belgian Day procession if he could only have been lassoed into it (June 1915, 48).

This tends to indicate, then, that Clay had been presenting minstrelsy as part of his city circuit entertainment from the start, despite the fact that it was no longer considered viable by the larger organisations.¹⁴ While the minstrel show's style and content had indeed lost much of their widespread appeal by the 1911-14 period, reviews and comments published up until the early 1920s suggest that blackface entertainment continued to find favour with Clay's audiences up until at least that period. In May 1921, however, Maurice Chenoweth (Clay's Princess Theatre manager) is reported to have finally brought down the curtain on it in response to the popularity of the revue format. There are several references to minstrelsy in reviews published during the 1920s which indicate, nonetheless, that it continued to be presented by the smaller variety management stables who played the suburbs and regional circuits (and once or twice by Clay's), but were generally promoted as "old-time revival" shows, or a one-off attraction.

Perhaps the most significance aspect of 1915, however, was Harry Clay's association with Arthur Morley, then known as a comic and singer, but who soon became one of Clay's leading revue writers and producers. In this regard it can be seen that there was more committed activity towards the area of revue production than had previously been the case. While Clay's reputation is almost exclusively identified with vaudeville

¹⁴ The minstrel/vaudeville format continued to be presented on the Queensland tours until 1916, after which the company began presenting vaudeville and revue.

entertainment today, it should be noted that his organisation was recognised at the time as being as much a revusical company as it was a minstrel/vaudeville one. The revusicals gradually began to take over the place of the minstrel first part, and by 1916/17 had become very much the focus of advertising. This becomes clear when one considers that Clay's touring companies (apart from the No 1 company) were generally known as or referred to by the revue they were touring (for example the Oh that Hat company). Thus while the minstrel formula would, as previously mentioned, invariably reappear for periods of time, the revues were seen as essential to the company's continued success right through until its demise at the end of 1929.



Plate 23

Arthur Tauchert (from *The Sentimental Bloke*) 1919
(Australian Variety 21 Mar. 1919, 1)

Arthur Morley is believed to have been the first of the professional revue writers and producers to work for Harry Clay, and he would be followed by many others - notably, George Edwards, Art Slavin, Charles "Ike" Delavale, George Wallace, Elton Black, George Pagden, George Drew, Ted Stanley, Nat Hanley, Bert Desmond and Lester Brown. These writer/actor/producers worked very much under the conditions of present day television sitcom writers; churning out new scripts at an amazingly quick rate in order to supply the huge demand. As each show was completed, including a musical score (and perhaps choreography), the writers would invariably be required to present the scripts for rehearsal, after which they would then send them out on the circuit - and more often than not taking on the responsibility of directing, in addition to

any acting roles demanded of them.¹⁵ The need for new material was such that by the height of Harry Clay's NSW circuit organisation, 1917/18, a period when he had no less than five companies running simultaneously, he was forced to look overseas for productions. In 1917, for example, he utilised the services of Lester Brown and Arthur Morley, both of whom were reported to have purchased revues from America for Clay. Morley is believed to have bought the rights to four revues around September 1917 (Australian Variety 8 Aug. 1917, n. pag.), while Brown is said to have purchased at least 3 revues from America for production in late 1917 (Australian Variety 3 Oct. 1917, n. pag.).

First part revues began appearing regularly on the Clay circuit from at least October of 1915, one of the earlier productions being The Carnival. In this revue the Bridge Theatre stage was reportedly transformed into a continental cafe, and the performers dressed as pierrots (Australian Variety Oct. 1915, n. pag.). By the end of the month Arthur Morley's Royal Musical Comedy Company was presenting shows such as On the Sands and Not a Word to the Wife with great success. During the Christmas holiday period, however, revues took a back seat to the pantomime - with Stanley McKay's company putting on a number of shows around the Clay circuit over the December/January period, including Old Mother Hubbard. Reviews of this production in particular report that McKay's version had proved immensely popular with the Clay audiences, further entrenching his reputation for presenting quality popular theatre productions, as well as providing Clay's with the financial boost it needed in the wake of the difficulties experienced during the previous twelve months.

The following chapter will examine the operations of Harry Clay's company during the period of time in which it achieved both its pinnacle of success, and conversely, underwent its eventual demise. That the company was able to survive the severity of the conditions facing vaudeville during the 1920s was undoubtedly one of Harry Clay's more significant accomplishments. And will shortly be argued, it was an achievement which to a large extent had its foundation in the business decisions and operations undertaken by Clay during the 1916-18 phase of its operations. In contrast to the previous couple of years this was to be a period of great expansion and reorganisation by Harry Clay and his company. During this time he opened up a south-western NSW circuit, established the country's leading vaudeville booking agency, expanded his suburban circuit to unprecedented levels, leased and ran several significant theatres in Sydney's city precinct, and ended his Queensland regional tours after eighteen years of unbroken service. It will become clear that these activities effectively provided his company with the stability and resources it required in order to continue operating throughout the later years - a period which saw very few survive in vaudeville.

¹⁵ Morley and several contemporary commentators have indicated on a number of occasions that these revues were churned out on a weekly basis. Australian Variety, for example, records Morley's response to suggestions regarding his workload with Clay's: "Oh yes," said deep-voiced Arthur, "very little to do have I? Only to keep Mr Clay's companies supplied with a new musical production every week, very often play a part in the said production, work in a trio, play in a farce, do a single, make out a mile or so of publicity matter, and conduct rehearsals" (18 July 1917, n. pag.). Another report indicating Morley's output notes that "he is a real hard worker, and it is no easy matter putting on a new revue each week at the Princess Theatre" (Australian Variety 22 Feb. 1918, n. pag.).

CLAY'S BRIDGE THEATRE, NEWTOWN

Saturday Next : : October 23rd

MR. HARRY CLAY has much pleasure in announcing that he
has made arrangements to present, on the above date,

The Royal Musical Comedy Co.

Comprising a collection of the Finest Australian
---- Artistes in the Southern Hemisphere ----

The Opening Production will be Mr. ARTHUR MORLEY'S Original One-Act Musical Comedy :

"ON THE SANDS"

A Veritable Feast of Melody. Magnificent Costumes. Charming
Dances. A Beauteous Bevy of Femininity. Australia's Cleverest
Comedians. Pretty Stage Settings. And

THE HARMONIOUS FOUR

The Finest Male Quartette in Australia.

SYNOPSIS OF EVENTS:—Flo and her Friends arrive. On the Sands. Private, Strictly
Private. Clarence the Sport. Somebody's taken my Togs. I wonder who were there before?
Police! The Rich Uncle from Fiji. Everybody Happy.

A FEW PRESS EXTRACTS :—“The finest entertainment ever given in Ballarat. The house was a record one and the season
assured of success.”—Ballarat Star. “Mr. Arthur Morley's clever combination present all that is best in bright musical
comedy. The Harmonious Four sang magnificently.”—Geelong Times. “It did not matter whether the full company was
'On the Sands,' The fine male quartette was trilling harmonious ditties. There is not a dead 'un in the bunch.”—Mildura.

In addition to the above Great Attraction, there will also be presented

A MAGNIFICENT AND HIGH-CLASS VAUDEVILLE OLIO

To which Old Favourites and New and Up-to-the-Minute Speciality Acts will contribute. Finally

There will be NO ADVANCE IN PRICES.

BUT BOOK—AND BOOK EARLY.

Plate 23

(Australian Variety 20 Oct. 1915 n. pag.)