

From Broadway to Brisbane - and back...

Edward Ralph de Tisne was born on March 20, 1890 in New York City, the son of French immigrants Pierre and Henriette de Tisne. He grew up in modest circumstances with countless immigrants from all over Europe clamoring for a better life in the New World. Throughout his childhood and youth he was drawn to live theatre which was plentiful in New York at the time. Strikingly good looking, de Tisne scored modest parts off Broadway, mainly in



vaudeville. He honed his craft well and decided to try his luck in England in 1912. Some years later he sought more adventure, arriving in Australia in 1919.

Meanwhile, Australian actress Yvonne "Fifi" Banvard, who had been touring in the United States with her mother as the *Flying Banvards*, landed in Melbourne. The experienced actress had made her stage debut as Fifi in *The Belle of New York* in San Francisco when only seven years old. Banvard was a true thespian and later emerged as one of Mack Sennett's bathing girls and performed in moving pictures for three years. With exaggeration,

she later claimed to have studied ballet with Anna Pavlova before deciding that 'it was easier to sing a comic song'.

Sometime after returning to Australia on 19 November 1920 Banvard and de Tisne married. De Tisne was by now not only a consummate actor, but a well established producer. They joined the Fullers' vaudeville circuit where they performed a popular song-and-dance act, "Fifi and her Excess Baggage" (1921). In Melbourne Banvard appeared in the successful 1921-22 pantomime *Bluebeard* as an exotically costumed Fatima and with more than similar resemblance to Theda Bara.



After a season on the Sydney theatre circuit, the couple's reputation continued to grow. It was in Sydney, too, that de Tisne was initiated into Freemasonry in Thespian Lodge No. 256, UGL of NSW on November 22, 1921. Several of his fellow actors - including Roy Rene - were already members of Freemasonry. The transient nature of theatre meant that few actors took office, fewer still went through the chair in their respective lodges.

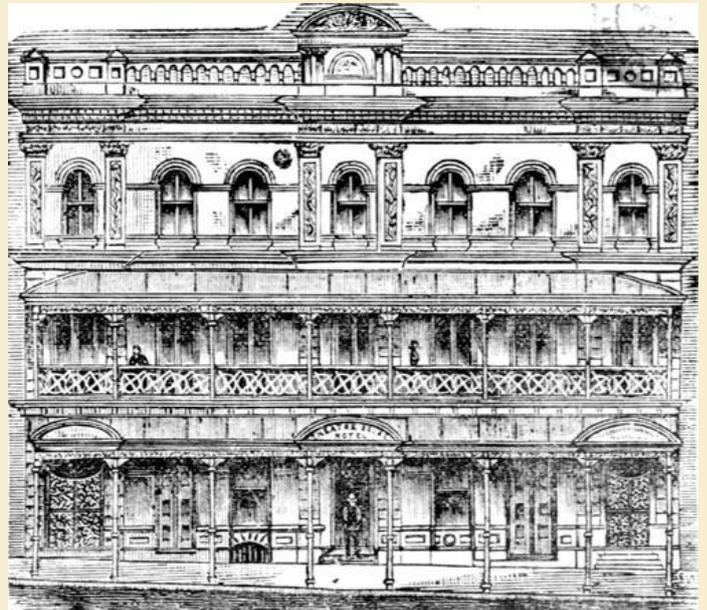
De Tisne's stay in Sydney and his lodge attendance was at best sporadic. When the *New Theatre Royal* in Elizabeth Street, Brisbane was looking for actors he simply packed up and moved north where they were well received. Teaming up with fellow producer Harrington Reynolds, de Tisne quickly established himself as a much sought after actor. His wife reverted to her maiden name of Yvonne Banvard and starred in most of her husband's over forty major productions.

Important events occurred in 1922. De Tisne decided to affiliate with Thespian Lodge No. 268 in Brisbane, which then met at the Alice Street Masonic Temple, easy walking distance to Brisbane's many theatres at the time. His lodge involvement was limited to 'attending when he could' on account of his commitment to theatre across Queensland.

As Yvonne Banvard, from September 1922 at Brisbane's New Theatre Royal, Mrs. de Tisne was the leading lady in all Reynolds-de Tisne Players' productions. The *Brisbane Courier* is peppered with reviews and advertisements about de Tisne and his successful spouse.

At the height of their success de Tisne and Banvard enjoyed Vice Regal patronage. In the *Rockhampton Bulletin* (14 June 1924), a writer heralds de Tisne's season at Rockhampton's *Tivoli Theatre* by mentioning that one of the company's greatest fans in Brisbane is none other than his Excellency Governor Sir Matthew Nathan who "was so impressed by their talents as to grant Vice-Regal Patronée, which we understand has not previously been bestowed upon any permanent theatrical company in Queensland."

Success, however, came at a price. The marriage between two strong-willed persons showed signs of cracking. The cracks widened, ending not only the marriage but also the theatre company which de Tisne had so successfully run. Without his wife as the obvious drawcard, the company ran out of steam, it seems. At the time de Tisne was starring in Manly (NSW). No sooner had he completed his run when Banvard divorced him. He did not work for close to a year. Starring with Harry Greene in *Nothing but Lies* and *Give and Take*, Greene liked de Tisne and took him to London in 1926. Sadly, *Give and Take* failed on the London stage.



Following her separation from de Tisne, Banvard was secured by J. C. Williamson Ltd. Appearing in a long run of musical comedies, including *Rose Marie* (1926-27) in which she won many admirers for her portrayal of the "vivacious and peppy" Lady Jane.



A new romance also blossomed, albeit with a non-Thespian this time. On September 17, 1928 at St John's Anglican Church, Toorak, she married a Perth merchant Ernest Cephias Hunter Broadhurst. The marriage didn't last, however, ending in divorce eight years later. Banvard then relocated to America where she found the competition hard and where her name was largely forgotten. In February 1931 she returned to Australia from the U.S.A. to tour with Clem Dawe in "gay and sparkling" variety shows. As the platinum vamp June East, she appeared with Roy Rene in the Cinesound film *Strike Me Lucky* (1934) and by 1939 was playing in Brisbane. Based in Sydney in the 1940s, she blossomed as a wireless personality, taking part in the *Bob Dyer Variety Show*, and in radio comedies and such serials as *Mrs. 'Obbs*.

On July 22, 1944 at St John's Anglican Church, Darlinghurst, Sydney, stretching credulity somewhat, she affirmed that she was a 30-year-old spinster and married 29-year-old Charles Kilburn, a clerk in the Royal Australian Air Force. They divorced in 1950.

In 1948-49 Banvard produced a number of plays, including Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* for the Whitehall management at the Minerva Theatre, Kings Cross. She moved to Hobart in 1950 with Gwenyth Friend, a set-designer and sister of the artist Donald Friend.

Leasing the *Theatre Royal* Banvard formed a repertory company, Fifi Banvard Productions, but despite favourable reviews, the venture was a financial disaster. Back in Sydney in 1952, she resumed work in radio and produced several plays at the Independent Theatre for Doris Fitton. In 1958 she supported Robert Helpmann in Noel Coward's *Nude with Violin* at the Theatre Royal. A woman of energy and passion, Banvard once said that she preferred serious dramatic roles, but it was her flair for comedy and sense of the burlesque that made her popular both in Australia and America.

Edward de Tisne's career, meanwhile, held its own. He was often torn between the stage and business side of theatre. The stage usually triumphed. With Banvard no longer in his life, de Tisne returned for a time to England from where he had set out for Australia some years earlier. There he was snapped up by American legendary producer Jed Harris who took *Broadway to Britain*. Fluent in French, on account of his French parents, de Tisne also starred in several Paris theatres. Teaming up with famous screen and stage legend, Russian-born Sacha Guitry, he made a good living as a character actor. However a yearning to return to America prevailed in the end. On March 13, 1927 he boarded *S.S. Berlin* for his last Atlantic crossing, arriving in New York City on March 22.

De Tisne took up residence at 310 West 88th Street in New York's Upper West Side, a fashionable four-storey apartment building built in 1900. He was then 37 years of age. Immediate publicity ensued with New York's *Daily News* noting: "Edward de Tisne has finally returned home after fifteen years abroad during which he has starred in plays in England, France and Australia. His return has been long-awaited. He is in rehearsal for the role of Steve Crandall in the Detroit Company's production on Broadway." Shortly after his arrival de Tisne joined the Lambs' Club, the famous New York establishment for actors, producers, musicians and others with connection to theatre.



It was not long before de Tisne's popularity was revived. He starred in several plays and the Liberty Theatre engaged him for the comedy play *Mr. Moneybags* in which he played no less than four parts during a two month season of sixty-five performances.¹

De Tisne's connection with Freemasonry became increasingly sporadic. There is no evidence that he affiliated with lodges in New York City. Thespian Lodge No. 268, back in Queensland, was most likely only a fading memory of happy times in the antipodes. The Lodge, in turn, felt compelled on June 30, 1927 to record "Struck off for Non-Payment of Dues" next to his name.

Edward de Tisne's health began to fail with the onset of the Great Depression. Years of treading the boards, grease paint and lime light had taken their toll. Live theatre was beginning to lose audiences flocking to 'Talking Pictures;' a new era in entertainment was dawning both in America and Australia, an era in which he would not take part. He died after a short illness in the winter of 1931, aged 42.

Stig R. Hokanson

¹ Located at 236 West 42nd Street in New York City, the Liberty Theatre operated from 1904 to 1933.