

## WALTER JOHNSON

Variety performer, director, and revusical troupe leader. Walter Johnson was associated with the Wintergarden (New York) and the United Kingdom's Moss-Stoll circuit prior to arriving in Australia sometime around 1915/1916. After establishing his credentials with the Fullers' Follies of Pleasure Company he founded his own troupe, Walter Johnson's Musical Vaudeville and Revue Company, producing a series of revusicals on the Fullers' Australasian circuit. In 1919 he secured a year-long season at the Cremorne Theatre (Bris) with a more refined company – The Town Topics. He returned to the Fullers circuit as revusical director in the early 1920s and was later associated with Dave Lee's English Revue Company (Crystal Palace Theatre, Syd) as producer. Johnson's various companies included high profile performers such as Jack "Porky" Kearns, Harry Burgess, Elton Black, Yorke Gray, Gus Franks and Lola Hunt.

Possibly born in America, Walter Johnson is said to have had considerable stage experience in both England and America prior to coming to Australia (BC: 20 Sept. 1919, 12). The first record found to date of his appearance on the Australian variety stage was in 1916 when he was billed as a feature member of the Fullers' Follies of Pleasure Company (New Adelphi Theatre, Sydney; 15 July). A few months later, Johnson opened with his own troupe at the Fullers' Palace Theatre in Melbourne, staging a series of revusical-style musical comedies that included *The Kissing Maid* and *The Flyaway Girl*. Billed as Walter Johnson's Musical Vaudeville and Revue Company, the troupe comprised a number of leading Australian-based variety practitioners, notably American-born comedians Gus Franks and Harry Burgess, Jack 'Porky' Kearns and his daughter Vera, comedienne Lola Hunt, soubrette Belle Millette, and singer/actor Ernest Lashbrooke. Johnson and his ensemble later toured the Fullers' Australian circuit, with seasons known to have been undertaken in Brisbane (ca. Jan. 1917), albeit under the direction of Holland and St John, and at the Grand Opera House, Sydney (ca. Oct. 1918).

In early 1919, Johnson was approached by John N. McCallum to put together and manage a variety ensemble for the Cremorne Garden Theatre's (Brisbane) forthcoming season (beginning August). After agreeing to terms, Johnson returned to the United States on the urging of McCallum to procure new material, ideas, and novelties (BC: 21 June 1919, 12). Upon his arrival back in Australia three months later, Johnson began putting together the troupe that would become known as Walter Johnson's Town Topics (and later McCallum's Town Topics). Johnson finally settled on the line-up in late June and then reportedly rehearsed the new company somewhere in the south before it made its Brisbane debut on 16 August. Among the original company members were music director Frederick Whaite, comedian Elton Black, Lou Vernon, Alice Bennetto, Leslie Jephcott, and female impersonator/comedian Yorke Gray.



**L-R: Gus Franks, Walter Johnson, Jack Kearns**

*Australian Variety* 8 Nov. (1916), cover.

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2/ - BOOKED SEATS. - 2/**  
*Advertiser (Adelaide) 21 Aug. (1916), 2.*

Arriving after three successful nine-month seasons by The Orange Dandies, Courtiers' Costume Comedy Company, and Huxham's Serenaders, the Town Topics attracted much popular support through not only the much larger size of the ensemble but also its more extravagant productions. This was made possible as a result of the considerable extensions to the stage and facilities by McCallum during the Cremorne's annual winter closure. Among the 1919 highlights were a number of productions written or adapted by members of the company, including the burlesque comic opera *The Rajah of Dampoor*, the musical comedy *Castles in Corsica*, and the comic opera *In Gay Seville*, which Johnson co-wrote with Fred Whaite. A *Brisbane Courier* theatre critic wrote of Johnson towards the end of 1919 that '[He] seems to have a clear and concrete conception of the art of entertaining, for he has succeeded very eminently in establishing marked popularity for his costume company' (1 Nov. 1919, 15).

Johnson remained with the Town Topics until around January 1920, with his final production being the Cremorne's first-ever Christmas pantomime, *Robinson Crusoe*. He subsequently returned to the Fullers circuit as revusical director, and later undertook a "phenomenally lengthy and successful" tour of New Zealand (ca. 1920-1922) for that organisation (BC: 10 Sept. 1921, 13; FN: 25 Mar. 1922, 11). Upon his return to Australia in early 1922, Johnson was sent by the Fullers to Adelaide and then possibly Melbourne.

The last known whereabouts of Walter Johnson in Australia identified to date was in May 1926 when he presented Dave Lee's English Revue Company at the Crystal Palace Theatre, Sydney. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports following the opening night of the season that Johnson was previously associated with the Wintergarden, New York and the United Kingdom's Moss-Stoll circuit (17 May 1926, n. pag.).

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