

## BILL SADLER

The brother of comedian/entrepreneur Harry Sadler, Bill Sadler is now remembered largely for suggesting to Roy Rene that he call himself "Mo" just prior to the comedian's debut with Nat Phillips as Stiffy and Mo in 1916. Sadler is believed to have started out as a performer before taking up a position as doorman/front of house manager for his brother at the Princess Theatre (Sydney) ca.1916-17. He was later associated with Harry Clay's circuit and the Tivoli organisation in various positions - notably as a theatre manager.

As with his brother Harry, little has yet been found with regard to Bill Sadler's earlier life other than they are known to have had two other brothers, Victor and Sid. Bill is believed to have started out in theatre by the early 1900s and was involved with Harry Clay on his Sydney suburban circuit as a performer prior to 1916. Charles Norman, who knew Sadler well, records in *When Vaudeville Was King* that Sadler had "been a performer touring with the Harry Clay circuit... [and that he came from the same school of thinking as Clay] so they learnt their values well" (245).

In 1916, after his brother Harry had taken on the Princess Theatre management for the Fullers, it is believed that Bill became a doorman/house manager/occasional performer at the venue. His prominence within the industry saw him accorded some coverage within magazines such as *Australian Variety* and the *Theatre*, with *Australian Variety*, for example, recording in 1916: "Bill Sadler, brother to manager Harry (of the Princess Theatre) is becoming particularly useful in the farces played at the George Street vaudeville house. One of these days William will be gazetted as a regular actor" (6 Sept. 1916, 7). It was shortly before this, however, that Sadler made his mark in Australian theatre history by helping Roy Rene decide on the name of his stage alter ego. The newly formed partnership of Rene and Nat Phillips was originally to be called Stiffy and Sol, but Rene didn't like the name given to him by Phillips. Still at a loss shortly before making their debut in July 1916, Sadler, according to Rene, is supposed to have said, "Why don't you call yourselves Stiffy and Mo?" (Rene 62-63). The name "Mo" has since become part of variety theatre history being associated not only with Rene's career but as the name of the variety industry's annual awards event.

Bill Sadler's reliability and work ethic brought him much praise throughout his career, aspects which Harry Clay also recognised from the start. He was still house manager at the Princess for his brother at the time Clay took over the lease in early 1918, retaining his position there under the new management. After successfully taking over the reins of the theatre while Clay was away in Western Australia, he was given the job of running the Coliseum Theatre in North Sydney, after that venue's manager, Jimmy Boyle, took on the responsibilities for Eden Gardens Theatre at Manly. *Australian Variety* reported Sadler's first week as the Coliseum's new manager, noting that he "must have been pleased with himself last Saturday night. It was his first night as manager...., and it was a record house, no doubt due to the fine manner in which Will had the district billed during the week" (11 Oct. 1918, 13).

Sadler remained at the Coliseum for many years and later managed the Bridge Theatre in the last days of its operations under the Clay banner. He stayed on in the same position for Harry Kitching for an undetermined period, and is known to have been associated with the theatre at least until December 1930, having been recorded in a NSW Fire Brigade report as the manager at that time. During the 1930s he had a long-time association with the Opera House/Tivoli Theatre, apparently becoming something of a Sydney theatrical landmark. He is, for example, known to have gone into partnership with a south coast entrepreneur by the name of Boland, who owned the Wollongong theatre which Harry Clay had used for his shows for a number of years. Sadler and Boland leased the Opera House for some time, running their own shows there to some success. He was also at one stage heavily involved with the careers of Queenie Paul and Mike Connors, being induced by the pair to join forces with their new set up. Charles Norman records that it was said of Bill around this time that:

[He] pasted his shares [in the company] inside his bowler hat - and very sensible. He had heard there was a big-take-over taking place. Bill then assigned himself as stage doorkeeper and sat pat until the right price came up for his shares. He remembered his training with the bag-carrying Harry Clay. I'm told that Bill never raised his hat to a soul during the take-over time (246-247).

Sadler, according to Norman, raised "a fine family, mostly boys, and one, Ray, became the treasurer for the Shovel for years. Some of the others entered show business" (247).

In his day [Bill] Sadler had been a performer touring with the Harry Clay [NSW country and suburban] circuit. Mr Clay himself was a shrewd showman. When travelling through the country with his shows you would see this significant figure in front of the theatre or hall with a bookmaker's bag slung over his shoulder, taking the money and giving the necessary tickets. Harry trusted no man. Bill Sadler came from the same school of thinking. So they learnt their values well (Norman 246).

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