

Lancelot Sherlock Fitzgerald

a.k.a. *Lance Vane*



By Dr. Robert Colomb and Stig R. Hokanson (2013)

Lance Vane was a memorable character born into an acting family that took Australia by storm in the early part of the Nineteenth Century. His credits included several silent movies, vaudeville and musical revues across the width and breadth of the nation.

Lance was born Lancelot Sherlock Fitzgerald in West Maitland, New South Wales, on 3 January 1884ⁱ, second surviving son of the actor Stephen Australia (S. A.) Fitzgerald and Mary Ann Ingram. (Sherlock was his maternal grandmother's maiden name.)

The other three surviving sons also were on the stage (Richard McGuinness as Max Clifton, Clifton Stephen as Cliffe Stevens, and James Balmain as the famous comedian Jim Gerald). In 1889 the family moved to Sydney when S. A., having been prominent in amateur theatre in Maitland, took to the stage professionally.

Lance began his stage career at age 18 in 1902 with the Maggie Moore company, of which his father was a member, for their Queensland tour, staying with them until June 1904, except that he did not go on the New Zealand leg of the tour.

With his father and Max Clifton, Lance was from December 1905 a member of the Allan Hamilton company. On this tour he performed in "The Mystery of a Hanson Cab" (revived in 1912 on television.) as Felix Rolleston. He remained with the company until January 1906. From February to October 1906 he was a member of several William Anderson companies, the first of which opened with Offenbach's "La Fille du Tambour Major" in Sydneyⁱⁱ. An Adelaide season of melodrama included Max Clifton in the companyⁱⁱⁱ.

The first of his three film roles came in 1907, in "Robbery Under Arms", directed by his father and featuring also Max Clifton and Jim Gerald^{iv}. He then returned to the Allan Hamilton Company with his father, touring until March 1908, including New Zealand. In October he performed in Rockhampton with Harry Clay's Dramatic Company^v.

1909 found him first with the Meynell-Gunn company in New Zealand, then Tasmania^{vi}, then again with his father, first in the Walter Bentley Shakespearian company in September and October, then with the Hamilton-Maxwell Company from March to August 1910, and with William Anderson's production of Nat Gould's "Chance of a Lifetime" from September to October 1910^{vii}.

His second film role came in 1910, in "The Life and Adventures of John Vane, Bushranger," his father again directing and again with Max Clifton and Jim Gerald^{viii}.

Starting in June, 1911, Lance performed with small companies, the Harrington^{ix} and Ernest Archer^x, in suburban Sydney.

In 1912, S. A. formed a family company called the Fitzgerald Brothers, including all four of his sons, which performed vaudeville in the Grafton district. In April 1914, he formed another company, the Clifton Vane, whose principal actor was Max Clifton, including again all four sons and also Jim Gerald's wife Essie Jennings. The

company performed both melodrama and vaudeville in the Northern Districts of NSW and in Rockhampton, Queensland and points west, finishing in April 1915.

In between, from November 1912 to February 1913 Lance toured Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide with the Violet Black Dramatic Company^{xi}, which performed short comedy sketches as part of vaudeville bills; and from November 1913 to March 1914, Lance performed a summer season at the Princess Court Theatre in Rockhampton, consisting of melodramas directed by W. A. Turner^{xii}.

The War broke up the Clifton Vane company, as Max Clifton and Jim Gerald both enlisted, the former being killed in action at Poziers in 1916. In November that year, Lance performed a season with Robert Hollyford's Dan Barry Dramatic Company, which performed under canvas at Ipswich, Queensland^{xiii}.

November 1918 saw Lance with the Bert le Blanc Revue Company in Brisbane^{xiv}. On his return from service in Mesopotamia in March 1919, Jim Gerald performed briefly with the company along with Essie Jennings^{xv}, before striking out on his own. During that year, Lance performed in his third film, "The Waybacks."^{xvib}

1919 had him in Sydney with a Fullers' Dramatic Company^{xvii} with a weekly change of melodrama, from July until October, and then a season with the Charles Stanford Company^{xviii} in December.

He spent 1920 and 1921 in Queensland, in June 1920 with the Phillip Lytton Company at Rockhampton^{xix}, and from May 1921 to April 1922 with the Newton Carroll Dramatic Company^{xx}, based in Brisbane.

Then in August 1922, Lance joined^{xxi} his brother Jim Gerald in his successive Revue companies, performing with them until Jim Gerald and Essie Jennings departed for an extended tour of the U.S. in March 1928.

While in Brisbane Lance met a number of actors who were Freemasons. It was while working with his brother Jim Gerald in 1922 that Lance made application to become a Freemason.

Since 1918 a Masonic day-lodge, Thespian No. 268 on the register of the United Grand Lodge of Queensland, held its monthly meetings at the Alice Street Masonic Temple on Thursday afternoons. Meetings were always concluded in time for evening theatre performances. Lance was thirty-eight years old at the time and resided at the Empire Hotel, Fortitude Valley.



He was initiated into Freemasonry at the Alice Street Masonic Temple in Brisbane on December 7, 1922, and was passed to the Second degree March 13, 1923.

By mid-1923 Jim Gerald's company had moved to Sydney. Lance Vane was given permission to conclude his Masonic journey in Thespian Lodge No. 256, the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.

It was in Sydney that Lance Vane became a Master Mason September 21, 1923. He affiliated with Thespian Lodge 256 in Sydney on account of work commitments and remained active in that Lodge until 1929.

While working in Melbourne Lance attended that city's Thespian Lodge. Indeed, his interest in and support of Freemasonry continued beyond his eventual return to Sydney in the mid-1930s.

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Jim Gerald had returned to Sydney in October 1927^{xxiii} for a season at Fullers' Theatre, where Phyllis du Barry joined the company. Phyllis' mother, Bertha Hillyard, was the wardrobe mistress at the Empire^{xxiv}, using the professional name "Madame du Barry". She and Lance were married at St. John's Church on 4 February, 1928^{xxv}. Lance was 44 and Bertha 47 at the time of their marriage and no children were born from their union.

Bertha was born in 1881 at Leeds, Yorkshire, to Thomas and Zilpha Giles^{xxvi}. Thomas was a milk dealer. She had two brothers, Lyndon (b. 1883) and Sydney (b. 1885). By age 19 she was a dressmaker, working from home on her own account. In 1907 she married Seth Joy Hillyard, a joiner, at Leeds^{xxvii}. On 3 January, 1909, they had a daughter, Gertrude Phyllis^{xxviii}.

The couple separated in 1911, and Bertha moved to London. There is no record of a divorce, but a Seth Hillyard of Leeds died in 1924. In London, she was wardrobe mistress for the Haymarket and Pavilion theatres^{xxix}. In 1923 she and Gertrude migrated to Australia, arriving on the "Orvieto" on 2 August.

Gertrude was a gifted dancer, having trained with a John Tiller troupe under the stage name Phyllis du Barry. In September 1923, at 14, Phyllis started an engagement as a dancer with the newly-established Wentworth Café^{xxx}, which continued until May 1925. In that year, she had a part in a film "Painted Daughters^{xxxi}," which seems to have had a limited distribution.

Phyllis then had a dance duet with the Frances Scully Pony Ballet in August 1925 at the Haymarket Theatre, then until July 1926^{xxxii} she was one of the dance acts entertaining dining guests at the Ambassadors' Club^{xxxiii}. At Christmas 1925 she performed in a J. C. Williamson variety show at Her Majesty's Theatre^{xxxiv}, in aid of providing Christmas Dinners for poor children. From July, she toured with vaudeville acts Chefalo and Palermo and the Imperial Midgets^{xxxv}, in the Fullers' Circuit, played in Melbourne, Adelaide, Broken Hill and points between, finishing in mid-September.

Her second film, "Sunrise," (1926)^{xxxvi} in which she starred along with Zara Clinton and Harry Hodson, seems to have been widely distributed, at least in Australia.



At the end of 1926 she joined a Fullers' company, performing in the Christmas Pantomime "Cinderella" at the Newtown Majestic^{xxxvii}, and continued with the Moon and Morris Revue Company^{xxxviii} until the end of January 1927, then the Zig Zag Revue company^{xxxix} until the end of February.

Turning to musical comedy, she played "Winnie" and was a specialty dancer in the Brisbane season of "No! No! Nanette", starring Elsie Prince^{xl}. Then in Sydney, she performed as a specialty dancer in Gershwin's "Lady Be Good,^{xli}" with the same company, finishing in October 1927. She next joined the Jim Gerald Comedy Company^{xlii}, performing in a series of musical comedies and revues at Fullers' Theatre in Sydney, alongside Essie Jennings and Lance Vane, continuing until March 1928.

Her newly acquired uncle and aunt, Jim Gerard and Elsie Jennings, undertook an intensive tour of the U.S. from March to November, 1928, and they invited Phyllis to accompany them.^{xliii} The trio travelled 10,000 miles by car, seeing hundreds of shows, buying performing rights to material, buying costumes, and generally enjoying themselves. The trip was a tremendous educational experience for the 19 year old Phyllis^{xliv}.

While his brother was overseas, Lance performed in Melbourne with Eric Masters' Merry Whirl Revue Company^{xlv}, in June and July 1928.

Jim Gerald reconstituted his Revue Company on his return. They opened their first metropolitan season in Adelaide on Boxing Day 1928, with Phyllis and Lance again in the company^{xlvi}.

Lance stayed until March 1929, then went with a vaudeville company The Novelettes, playing in Broken Hill^{xlvii} and Adelaide^{xlviii} until July.

Phyllis left at the same time, going first with George Ward's Revue at Fullers' Theatre in Sydney^{xlix}, then joining the cast of "Rio Rita," starring Gladys Moncrieff, beginning with their Perth^l season and touring through Kalgoorlie, Adelaide, Wellington, Auckland, Brisbane, North Queensland and other towns, ending at Broken Hill in January 1930^{li}.

Madame du Barry by 1930 had a costumiere business in Kings Cross^{lii}.

Phyllis, 21, now decided to see what Hollywood had to offer, departing on 22 February 1930. She performed as a dancer in Fanchon and March revues for a year or so, then got her break, being cast as "the other woman" opposite Ronald Coleman in "Cynara," now as Phyllis Barry. The film was released in September 1932^{liii}.

In the meantime, Phyllis had married Abner Nordlund, in Chicago, on 17 March, 1932. (Abner was born in Merrill Wisconsin on 15 June, 1905). Following her mother's example, Phyllis' marriage did not endure. By 1934 she went to Reno, Nevada for a quick divorce before marrying painter and decorator Gilbert M. Caldwell in 1934. The couple rented a house at 1258 N. Curzon Avenue, West Hollywood. Bertha, who retained Lance's surname 'Fitzgerald,' shared the house with Phyllis and her husband.

By this time, Phyllis' mother had separated from Lance and moved herself to Hollywood, where she was described in 1931 as having a flourishing frock design business^{liv}. Bertha arrived in the US at San Francisco on 17 July 1930, on the "Sierra" and boarded a train for Los Angeles.



Lance, too, went to Hollywood in 1932 to join Bertha, possibly hoping to revive his short-lived marriage, arriving on 2 March. While in the US, he appeared gratis in "The Crime at Blossoms" at the Pasadena Playhouse^{lv}. This was a common practice for actors trying to attract the notice of the film industry. Unlike Phyllis, Lance was unsuccessful.



Lance never remarried. His financial situation would have been strained after his eighteen months trying, but not succeeding, in gaining entry into Hollywood's lucrative film industry. Upon his return to Australia on 28 September 1933 his brother Jim Gerald made him 'assistant producer' for the successful Jim Gerald Company.

He toured with the company until the end of his career, sometime after November 1934. The gap of eight years between retirement in 1934 and death in 1942 is poorly documented, beyond the Electoral Roll in which he is listed as 'Actor'.

Unlike most stage and screen actors, who leave substantial pictorial archives behind, Lance Vane left little or nothing. Despite substantial trawling through State libraries we are only left with a poor quality portrait from *The World's News*, a Sydney publication, from 24 February 1923. The only physical description of Lance Vane beyond this picture comes from U.S. Immigration records where he is described as being 5'8" tall, fair complexion, brown hair and blue eyes.

On 21 October, 1942 Lance collapsed and died of a heart attack at his home, which he had shared with his father, S.A. Fitzgerald until the latter's death on 31 December 1939. Father and son lived at 101 Victoria Street, Potts Point. Lance was cremated at Rookwood on 22 October, 1942.

His stepdaughter Phyllis - albeit for a very brief period of time - meanwhile starred alongside Buster Keaton and Jimmy Durante in the comedy "What! No Beer?" for MGM in 1933. Her career never included any other major productions, but she had parts in lesser films such as a role with the Three Stooges and numerous other small parts up until 1947.^{lvi}



She became a naturalized U. S. citizen in June, 1933. Little is known about her later years. Suffice it to say, she would have been troubled by shrinking post-war job offers in movies and on stage. To this end Phyllis died in Los Angeles on 1 July 1954 from barbiturate poisoning caused by the ingestion of Phenobarbital^{lvii}.

The gifted Fitzgerald family, from its patriarch S.A. Fitzgerald to his four sons Lancelot, Richard, Clifton, and James contributed in no small measure to Australian live theatre, silent and talking movies. All sons saw a need to change their names, not uncommon in theatre circles. It would possibly be wrong to attempt to rank their professional contribution, especially since one son died in World War I. However, James Fitzgerald, a.k.a. Jim Gerald, for a long time, towered over his siblings. His familial loyalty was in evidence on more than one occasion towards Lance Vane, especially on Lance's return from America.

Lance Vane was the only member of the famous Fitzgerald family to become a Freemason. His memory is held in high regard alongside other actors, vaudevillians and movie actors who were once members of Thespian Lodge No. 268 in Queensland, Australia.

^{ix} The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People (Sydney, NSW : 1900 - 1918) 17 Jun 1911: page 2. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article102797890>>.

^x Referee (Sydney, NSW : 1886 - 1939) 21 Jun 1911: page 16.<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article129930013>>

^{xii} Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld. : 1878 - 1954) 3 Nov 1913: page 5. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article53313873>>

^{xiii} Queensland Times (Ipswich) (Qld. : 1909 - 1954), Wednesday 29 November 1916, page 4 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article113185670>

^{xiv} The Brisbane Courier (Qld. : 1864 - 1933) 2 Nov 1918: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article20270362>>

^{xv} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Monday 10 March 1919, page 5 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15828868> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Waybacks_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Waybacks_(film))

^{xvii} Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Thursday 31 July 1919, page 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15845919>

^{xviii} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 13 Dec 1919: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15871947>>

^{xix} Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld. : 1878 - 1954), Tuesday 15 June 1920, page 10 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article53893722>

^{xx} Queensland Times (Ipswich) 18 May 1921 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109985214>>

^{xxi} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/20564806>

^{xxii} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/20564806>

^{xxiii} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/16410149>

^{xxiv} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/122811457>

^{xxv} Evening News (Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931), Wednesday 1 February 1928, page 17 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article121855361>

^{xxvi} FreeBMD. *England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth Index, 1837-1915* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

^{xxvii} West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, Yorkshire, England; *Yorkshire Parish Records*; New Reference Number: RDP54/2/6.

^{xxviii} West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, Yorkshire, England; *Yorkshire Parish Records*; Old Reference Number: P54/1/6.

^{xxix} Arrow (Sydney, NSW : 1916 - 1933), Friday 9 September 1932, page 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article103424201>

^{xxx} Sunday Times (Sydney, NSW : 1895 - 1930), Sunday 30 September 1923, page 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120536638>

^{xxxi} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Painted_Daughters

^{xxxi} Evening News (Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931), Tuesday 13 July 1926, page 13 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article114387511>

^{xxxi} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Saturday 29 August 1925, page 2, 3, 4, 5 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article28063650>

^{xxxi} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Monday 21 December 1925, page 2, 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16260824>

^{xxxi} Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957), Wednesday 14 July 1926, page 29, 30 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3795311>

^{xxxi} [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunrise_\(1926_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunrise_(1926_film))

^{xxxi} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Saturday 25 December 1926, page 4 National Library of Australia

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16343085>

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- ^{xxxviii} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Saturday 15 January 1927, page 10 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16347571>
- ^{xxxix} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Saturday 29 January 1927, page 12 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16351013>
- ^{xl} Sunday Mail (Brisbane) (Qld. : 1926 - 1954), Sunday 6 March 1927, page 11 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98216922>
- ^{xli} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Monday 1 August 1927, page 7 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16393649>
- ^{xlii} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Monday 10 October 1927, page 7 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16410149>
- ^{xliii} Evening News (Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931), Wednesday 28 March 1928, page 19 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article121856885>
- ^{xliv} The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Friday 9 November 1928, page 8 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16507873>
- ^{xlv} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3935902>
- ^{xlvi} The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929), Wednesday 26 December 1928, page 2 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article53608760>
- ^{xlvii} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/46057556>
- ^{xlviii} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/53489629>
- ^{xliv} <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/103458231>
- ⁱ <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/83385958>
- ⁱⁱ <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/46588790>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sydney Morning Herald 27 May 1930, page 18 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/16664627/1169126>
- ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Arrow (Sydney, NSW : 1916 - 1933), Friday 9 September 1932, page 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article103424201>
- ^{lv} Arrow (Sydney, NSW : 1916 - 1933), Friday 9 September 1932, page 3 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article103424201>
- ^{lv} Townsville Daily Bulletin (Qld. : 1885 - 1954), Tuesday 30 May 1933, page 8 National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article61723577>
- ^{lvi} http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0058132/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1
- ^{lvii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Barry