

# Clarence Alphonse Lambert, aka Lou Vernon - A man of many talents...

## 1888 BEGINNING



This story, about the life and times of one of Australia's stage and screen legends, will make use of his preferred alias, 'Lou Vernon'. Vernon was born Clarence Alphonse Lambert June 26, 1888 to Frenchman Louis Lambert and Eliza Colton of Newport, Wales. The birth took place in Fortitude Valley where his father ran a store in Brunswick Street. Vernon was the seventh child out of eight. There were four girls and four boys in the family. His father Louis was a French sailor who jumped ship [*Mary E. Ray*] in Brisbane in 1869. Vernon's parents were married at Ann Street Presbyterian Church Manse in 1871.

All eight children were baptised at St. Stephen's Catholic Cathedral yet there appears to be no attachment to Catholicism, nor other creeds in Vernon's later life. His shop keeper father later sold the Brunswick Street store, acquired land at Breakfast Creek, adjacent to the Breakfast Creek Hotel, where he also ran a store. Somewhat restless, Louis Lambert left his wife and family in 1895 and moved to Perth, Western Australia. He was gone for twenty years, returning by 1915. He died in 1929.

Without a husband and eight children to rear, Eliza relocated to Pinkenba where she ran a boarding house. Vernon and his brother Louis were sent to Pinkenba State School. Vernon's

attendance records suggests early talent in a lad who later would carve out a distinguished theatrical career spanning some sixty-five years.

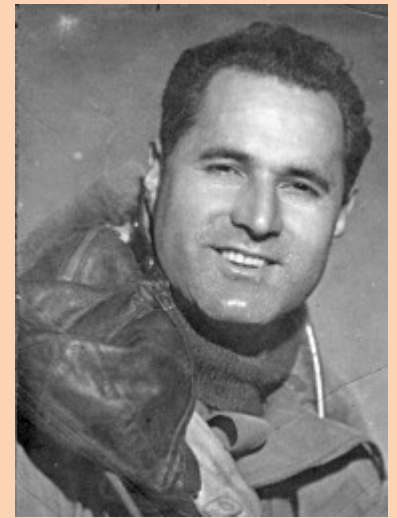
Unrelated to theatre we note that young Vernon sat for and passed the State Milk and Cream testing Examination for men desirous of a career in dairy, possibly a fall-back trade should his tentative steps into theatre come to nought. Queensland electoral registers in 1910 and 1911 include Clarence Lambert, carpenter, residing at "Camden," Lancaster Rd, East Ascot, near the tram terminus. There is no mention of his brief carpentry career anywhere else.

By 1911 his voice was well recognised and stage work was coming his way. The name change had not yet taken place as a *Brisbane Courier* advertisement informs: "*The Brisbane Liedertafel* 1911 Season starring Miss Clara Smith from London and Mr. Clarence Lambert held at the Exhibition Hall, tickets at Paling's." (The Brisbane Liedertafel first consisted only of male voices. It was established in 1882). Favourable reviews followed. Vernon could have further developed his melodic voice, yet a yearning for theatre won out.

By 1917 we find Vernon in Sydney making substantial inroads into Sydney's theatre scene. He also found love in a stunningly good looking divorcee Olive Stella Josephine Lockyer Norris, nee Sinclair. The two were married at Waverley in 1917. Olive had earlier been married to a



Townsville man, Edwin Norris in 1912. Edwin Norris was also a stage performer and changed his name to Jack Vincent. (Under this alias Edwin Norris died at Gallipoli in August 1916). Their union was brief however, as Olive had a child, not to her husband, but to Lou Vernon. Walter Ross Vernon (1913-1945). Olive was four years older than her husband. Their child, Ross Vernon would later show ambitions to follow his famous father into theatre. However that was not to be. As Flt. Lieutenant Ross Vernon, leading a second bombing sortie over Mawaraka, Bougainville, Ross Vernon crashed his RAAF bomber during World War II and was killed 11 January 1945.



Versatility and mobility soon became Vernon's trademarks as he and Olive made Brisbane their home in 1918. Vernon scored plenty of work in Brisbane theatre with a strong emphasis on the Cremorne Theatre at South Brisbane. He became one of its stock players largely due to his enormous range and talent. Olive, was an actress in her own right and was often billed with Vernon as "*Vernon-Sinclair - Comedy Duo.*" During World War I they had performed both in Adelaide and Perth.

It was in Brisbane that Vernon took an interest in Freemasonry.

### **MASONIC CONNECTION**

Many of Vernon's friends were, or became Freemasons shortly after the end of World War I. Freemasonry was well established in Queensland from the 1860s. A myriad of Lodges held under English, Scottish and Irish constitutions attracted members of Brisbane's ruling elite, from Colonial Secretaries (later Premiers) and high ranking members of the Judiciary to members of all walks of life. Freemasonry was well supported by academics and - for no particular reason - clergy, actors and musicians. Membership of a Masonic Lodge might not have yielded work, nor granted favours, however it did create a strong bond amongst actors who subscribed to similar ethics and values in a volatile and hugely itinerant profession.

While still working in Brisbane Vernon came across several Freemasons on stage. Conversations inevitably led to talk about Freemasonry in general and the actors' lodge - Thespian No. 268, UGLQ - in particular. To this end, Vernon made application for membership. Bank manager James A. Miles of London Bank Chambers in Wharf Street was Worshipful Master at the time and the Lodge held its monthly meetings on Thursday afternoons in the Alice Street Masonic Temple.

Vernon was initiated, aged 31, into Thespian Lodge (then No. 73) in December, 1919. He was passed in January 1920 and raised the following month. His speedy ascendancy was not unusual.



Actors often enjoyed an inside run through degree elevation as they lived an itinerant life, appearing on stage in Hobart one month, Adelaide the next, only to play Rockhampton, Queensland the month after. Thespian Lodge was eager to raise Vernon to the degree of Master Mason which enabled him visitation rights across not only Australia, but the world beyond its shores. Throughout the early years of membership Vernon had all his Masonic correspondence sent to c/- Cremorne Theatre where he was employed prior to later work in Sydney and Melbourne.

Vernon also felt right at home in Thespian Lodge No. 256 in Sydney, NSW. Once relocated to Sydney he became a regular visitor to this predominantly actors' lodge in the 1920s. Fellow actors, Chips Rafferty, Bud Tingwell, Roy Rene, Nat Phillips (Stiffy) and movie director Ken G. Hall as well as countless producers, actors and musicians were all Freemasons and found Thespian Lodge's day-time meetings convenient.

## NAME CHANGE

Vernon's canon of work is too impressive and extensive to be fully retold in this article, but has been catalogued by others, e.g. Austage database and IMDb Video Archives. Noteworthy around the time of Vernon's move to Sydney was his name change. He no longer performed as Clarence Lambert, but chose the alias/stage name *Lou Vernon* which were the Christian names of his brother Louis Vernon Lambert. The name change was not uncommon as Marion Morrison became John Wayne and Archibald Leach morphed into Cary Grant. Indeed, most who knew Vernon only ever knew him by that name as no further reference appears to his birth name of Clarence Alphonse Lambert.

By the mid-1920s Vernon's fame had grown substantially. He was engaged by J. C. Williamson and quipped about his bona fide credentials "I've played everything you can think of, from black-faced comics to Grand Opera excerpts and Shakespeare." A year earlier he had told a *Brisbane Courier* reporter about the art of acting... "There's only one way to learn acting, the hard way. I learned it... where you either act or don't eat." (Vernon always ate well, it is said).

Not long after his engagement by the J.C. Williamson Company Vernon landed the plum role of Emile La Flamme in Rudolph Friml's romantic musical *Rose Marie*. Also in the cast was famous California-born Fifi Banvard, at the time separated from her husband and fellow member of Thespian Masonic Lodge in Brisbane, Edward de Tisne. The several times extended season of *Rose Marie* provided, in Richard Lane's view: "The venue for a long tempestuous love affair between Fifi and Lou Vernon. *Rose Marie* ran non-stop until 1928.

A tolerant Mrs. Olive Vernon, meanwhile kept her own counsel only instigating divorce proceedings against Vernon a decade later in 1937. As to Fifi Banvard, she moved on to marry and divorce several suitors in her energetic career on and off stage. There was no break for Vernon who left *Rose Marie* and immediately played a major part in *Show Boat*. This was followed by a string of popular musicals before, in 1933, turning his talents at the Criterion Theatre to *The Command to Love*, a straight drama playing packed houses in Sydney.



Firmly based in Sydney working for J.C. Williamson, Vernon was still enticed to perform in other cities. By the late 1920s and early 1930s Vernon would do short seasons in Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne only to return for more performances in Sydney. The onset of the Great Depression had no effect on Vernon who even branched out further, taking on the new medium of talking pictures. From early appearances in the Efftee (Frank Thring Sr) film *His Royal Highness*, Vernon kept up steady work in motion pictures such as *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and the internationally acclaimed screen adaptation of Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1959) starring Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner.

*The Power and the Glory* also featured a young Peter Finch in, for the times, an appropriate plot. In Europe, a peaceful Czech scientist, Professor Marnelle (Lou Vernon), has unintentionally developed a nerve gas while working on a new fuel. Marnelle doesn't want to use his invention for evil but he's threatened by his Nazi masters, including Von Schweig with a concentration camp. Marnelle destroys his lab and manages to escape with his daughter Elsa

– but is then recaptured. We then meet two members of the British secret service who are in a café – when another man is arrested the two of them flee. They trick a passing German car into stopping and knock them out – to discover Marnelle and his daughter are in the back seat, prisoners. They take the Germans uniforms, drive the prisoners to the airport and manage to escape in a plane. The Marnelles go to Australia but the Nazis find out about it and decide to track him there.

## 1937 DIVORCE AND RE-MARRIAGE

1937 was a busy year for Vernon. His marriage to Olive had somehow survived twenty turbulent years. However, by 1937 it ended in divorce, this at a time when Divorce Courts held sway naming guilty and errant parties. Vernon was now free to marry long-time friend Asthore Sarah Katherine Taunton (1907-1963). Asthore Sarah Taunton (Tory) was a dance teacher and choreographer whom Vernon met through theatre. They remained married until Tory's death in 1965.

## A SWITCH TO RADIO

Vernon lived during a unique era of entertainment. Starting off as a singer, later an actor, vaudevillian and movie star, he turned his talent to radio where some hold he made his greatest contribution. Radio was well established in Australia by the 1930s. The new medium reached far and beyond what was possible with theatre. Combine the two - radio and theatre - and you had the perfect combination of entertainment both in the cities and the bush.

Vernon had honed his craft well and was a gifted radio actor. Over the years he would project voices and accents with such ease that listeners would swear they were listening either to a Scot, an American from the anti-bellum South or a swaggie on a lonely outback road.

Interviewed in 1937 by *Women's Weekly*, Vernon spoke candidly about radio acting at the peak of his work with Sydney station 2GB. "I hate being photographed at the microphone. Radio theatre is all about illusion. Take the illusion away, and what have you got?" Alluding to the picture conjured up in the listener's mind Vernon gives an apt example:

"Everybody wants to know how we manage those realistic sound effects on radio. It's alright to explain to listeners that a real sword fight would sound over the air more like a short circuit in a powerhouse. That keeps them guessing! But should you tell them that you use a pair of knitting needles instead of swords (which we don't), of course, then the next time they hear a sword fight they will visualise someone banging two knitting needles together... The illusion of reality would be gone."

Vernon's extensive work in radio almost came to overshadow his live theatre performances in later life. By 1935 Vernon landed a contract with the ABC. For the next years the bulk of his work would be in radio where he became one of its all-time biggest stars. While initially starring in serious plays he was enticed to 2GB where his comedic talent bloomed. His first taste was in the hit comedy series *Dolly and Dan*, written by E. Mason Wood, and running for a staggering 280 quarter-hour episodes until January, 1937. He was also performing in *Dad and Dave*, here breaking up fellow cast members in a 1937 episode...

It was in *Dolly and Dan* that Vernon developed the character Luigi, a bumbling Italian green grocer who, according to Richard Lane "hilariously mangled the English language to such extent he, rather than the serious players became famous." [Con the fruiterer' on Ch. 10 in the 1990s mentions that he listened to Vernon's tapes in the development of his character].

Vernon's friend and writer Mason Wood created another character for Vernon in 1940. Again, self-contained quarter-hour episodes were the time frames for this new program called *Doctor Mac*. Here we found Vernon in a staggering 11-year run about an old Scottish Doctor. It was difficult to shake off the Doctor Mac role, as audiences always knew Vernon as Dr. Mac. Indeed, in his obituary headline in 1971 the *Canberra Times* writes "Dr. Mac" dead at 83.



## TV TRANSITION IN AMERICA

Television came to Australia in 1956. Vernon wasted little time in making yet another transition. Stage acting, movies and radio had already been conquered. Television was a new, challenging medium. Getting in on the ground floor so to speak, Vernon decided to go to the United States where television was already well developed, indeed a world leader. Vernon, armed with an impressive CV left Sydney on the *Oronsay* in July 1955 and arrived first in Hawaii and then onto San Francisco where he disembarked. A day's train journey south landed him in Los Angeles.

At the CBS studios long running radio serial *Gunsmoke* was in transition from radio to television. Vernon scored the part of Cal Ross, the local store keeper in Dodge City. Vernon was sixty-three years old at the time, showing no signs of slowing down. The TV Western genre were popular during the 1950s. None more so than *Gunsmoke* which ran for several decades, starring James Arness as Marshall Matt Dillon. Several episodes still exist and are available on YouTube, *The Hunter* is a good start.



It would be pure conjecture to speculate as to why he did not stay in America and branch out beyond TV westerns, yet Vernon eventually found his way back Down Under where the US acting experience aided his inroads into local television.

A year after his return from America, Vernon landed a part in the film adaptation of Neville Shute's *On the Beach* (1959). He played Ava Gardner's father. The film, also starring Gregory Peck, was shot in and around Melbourne and reached world acclaim at the time. While still active in radio, Vernon also found time starring in several of the Crawford Productions' *Homicide*, *Division 4* and others. However, one of his finest acting performances at ATN7 was in *Other People's Houses* as an old man fighting against being sent to a nursing home. This tour-de-force was later followed by *You Can't See 'Round Corners*, based on Jon Cleary's novel.

Richard Lane, personal friend of Vernon, mentions two memories in his *The Golden Age of Australian*

*Radio*. The first goes back to radio in 1950: "I was producing for Macquarie Radio in Studio A on the third floor in Phillip Street. We were held up, waiting for an actor who had been delayed. After a while Vernon wandered over to the piano in the studio. He began playing, gently, then singing, gently. The actors sitting around stopped talking, put down their newspapers and crosswords. Not a movement! Vernon gently sang ballads he had sung forty years ago, but no one there had been around then to hear them. The errant actor arrived, and Vernon got up and went back to his chair and picked up his script. Life went on again, in the present."



Sir Alec Guinness once said 'there are no bit parts, only bit actors' alluding to the fact that a great actor is a great actor whether given a minor role or a lead. Lane recalls how "Vernon was cast as 'Nugget' a noisy resident drunk we had decided to write into the pub scenes.

It was a nothing part, hardly more than an extra, but Vernon brought a raucous larrikinism to it that made it so much more - and it stayed in when we made the feature film of the story. He was eighty at the time."

Vernon's last three years were spent in retirement in his Vaucluse home. Most of his contemporaries in acting and entertainment had either retired or passed on when Vernon 'got his call' dying just before Christmas, 1971. He was cremated at Northern Suburbs Crematorium, Sydney, on Christmas Eve, 1971.

Vernon never had to make use of his fall-back position as a Milk and Cream Tester in Queensland. Instead he went on to conquer theatre, vaudeville, film, television and radio both in Australia and abroad - no mean feat for a young boy with a dream, from Pinkenba State School in Brisbane.

*Stig R. Hokanson*

Acknowledgements: *Libby Richardson, (Lou Vernon's great niece); Richard Lane, The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama (1994); State Library of Queensland; Mitchell Library; CBS Television Archives, California; Thespian Lodge No. 268 UGLQ records.*