

FRANK YORK

Frank H. York was largely based in Sydney during his early career, playing seasons with F. E. Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels, Cottiers' People's Concerts, H. Florack's Federal Minstrels and Dan Tracey during the 1880s. He also appeared in Lance Lenton's 1887 pantomime, *Dick Whittington and His Cat* (produced by Alfred Dampier). Following an early attempt at management, in collaboration with Harry Carroll (1888), York joined forces with George A. Jones to establish the Empire Minstrels (ca 1894-95). His long association with Harry Rickards is believed to have begun in 1897, and lasted until at least 1909, with occasional engagements with other companies during that time. His last known appearance on the variety stage was under James Brennan's management at the National Amphitheatre (Syd) in 1910. During his long career York worked alongside most of the leading Australian-based performers, including W. Horace Bent, Beaumont Read, Sam Keenan, Harry Leston, Wal Cottier, Harry Clay, Pope and Sayles, Jack Kearns, Charles Fanning, Percy St John, Ted Holland, James Craydon, Martyn Hagan, Billy Speed, and Roy Rene. York died in 1915, following several years of ill health.

In reporting the death of Frank York¹ in late 1915, *Australian Variety* records that he been a prominent endman and comedian twenty years ago, and that his big asset was a wonderfully strong voice. "Never a very humorous comedian," notes the writer, he was nevertheless "most successful in his boisterous line of work and was a great favourite with audiences. Like McKisson and Kearns, the late Irving Sayles, [and] Billy Whitburn... [he] was one of the stock cornermen on the Rickards' circuit for many years. Personally he was a very unobtrusive and kindly-intentioned fellow and had made a host of friends" (15 Dec. 1915, n. pag.). Roy Rene's affectionate recall of York provides some additional insight into the esteem in which he was held by his peers:

When I was first working, even revues were unknown... It was doing the farce that taught me how to walk and talk on a stage. It gave you confidence when you were told by the producer to come on and do a couple of lines. Working with Frank York, a great producer, or Ted Tutty, they'd just come to you and say, "look, I want you to go on in the afterpiece, you just come on and say so-and-so, now don't forget where you are supposed to do it." I'd think I was getting to be a big man when I got a chance like that. You'd get a lot of help, too, because Frank would say "Now don't do it like that, do it so-and-so." To tell you the truth that was [how] I learnt timing... Old performers were always ready to come to you at the end of a show and say, "Listen, son, I wouldn't do that, I'd do it this way," and then if you listened to them you'd learn a great deal. They always built you up when you did your turn because their clapping on stage would help get the audience into the proper mood.... I was only a very young performer at that time (52-5).

Born on 6 October 1864 in Botany Street, Waterloo (Sydney), Francis Henry York's first known appearance on the variety stage was in July 1884, when he was engaged by the management of the New Masonic Hall in Castlereagh Street, Sydney. It is likely, though, that he had been performing for some time prior to this because by the end of the year he was with Hiscocks Federal Minstrels at the Academy of Arts (Syd), appearing alongside such local luminaries as Horace Bent, Sam Keenan, Lou Brahm, Beaumont Read and J. S. Porter (also with the company at this time were Delohery, Craydon and Holland, who later went on to fame as the country's most popular dance trio). Among the earliest productions York and Craydon were cast in was Bent's "black pantomime" *Harlequin Black Bluebeard; Or, The Merry Musclemans' Mother-in-Law* (26 Dec. 1884). While it is not known how long York remained with Hiscocks' company, it is likely that the engagement was for a short time. By August 1885 he was on the bill of the Cottiers People's Concerts (Protestant Hall, Syd). The following year he appeared in Lance Lenton's Christmas pantomime, *Dick Whittington and His Cat, A Pantomime with Pur-Puss*. Presented by Alfred Dampier and J. Grant at the Royal Standard between Boxing Day and late January 1887, the company included Harry Leston, Harry Quealy, Charles Bovis, and Walter, Harry and Ernest Cottier. During the remainder of 1886 York found employment with several Sydney-based companies. As a member of Alf Lawton's troupe at the Academy of Music, Sydney (ca. June) he teamed up with James Craydon to present a specialty dance act described as "Clogographicalities" (SMH: 4 June 1887, 2). A few months later he was at the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds (Bondi) and in December he returned to play the People's Concerts at the Protestant Hall, although these were no longer being managed by the Cottiers. He is known to have appeared on their bills around April/May the following year.

1888 saw Frank York branch out, possibly for the first time, into management. With "double-voiced specialist, Harry Carroll, who had worked with York at the People's Concerts in April (along with Harry Clay and Rock Phillips), York put together a company that included Master Harry Quealy, Ida Murray and Charlie Horton. Known as Carroll and York's Minstrel and Variety Combination, the troupe was engaged to provide the entertainment at the Protestant Hall by the venue's management (26 May). Although only a temporary partnership, the experience did not deter York as

¹ York's surname was sometimes spelled "Yorke" in reviews and advertising. Greg Longworth, a family descendant, has confirmed that York (without the "e") is the correct spelling. Also, the 1915 *Australian Variety* obituary incorrectly claims that York was 45 years old when he died, which would mean that he was only 15 years of age when he joined Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels as a specialty act. He had in fact turned 20 a few months previous.

was to spend much of the next decade managing his own companies, sometimes in collaboration with other performers. One of the highlights of 1888, however, was his Grand Opening engagement at the New Haymarket Music Hall, then being managed by George Barr. A specialist "tambo" endman, York appeared opposite Charlie Fanning (bones), with Martyn Hagan serving as interlocutor. His appearance in the olio section was in a partnership with Jimmy Clunes - which as York and Clunes was billed as "the Australian pair in their song and dance" (SMH: 20 Oct. 1888, 2). A month later he was back at the Protestant Hall, appearing with Harry Carroll, Harry Clay, Charles Fanning and George Turner under the venue's new management (SMH: 17 Nov. 1888, 2).

PEOPLE'S POPULAR CONCERTS.
PROTESTANT HALL, SYDNEY.
TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY) and MONDAY, APRIL 28 and 30.
 Come and see our new First Part, consisting of Mr. Harry Carroll (double voice), Harry Clay, A. E. Robinson, Miss Kate Carey, Annie Lamont, Flora Murray, Frank York, Charlie Horton, Rock Phillips, Harry Montague.
 Popular Prices.—Body of hall, 1s; gallery, 6d.

Sydney Morning Herald 28 Apr. (1888), 2.

Much of Frank York's whereabouts over the next few years are unclear, with only a few engagements having been located at this stage - these being H. Florack's Federal Minstrels (Haymarket Theatre) around March 1889; the Bondi Aquarium, ca. February 1890; and Charles Fanning's Concert Party at the Protestant Hall from 22 December 1890. With the latter company he was again presenting a popular song and dance turn with Jimmy Clunes.

In 1891 York's services were secured by Dan Tracey, possibly his highest profile engagement to that date. Other principle artists engaged by Tracey during York's time with the company included Percy St John, Martyn Hagan, Lucy Fraser, Alf M. Hazlewood, J. S. Whitworth and the Sherwood Sisters. Along with his solo comic song and dance turns, and occasional appearances with Jimmy Clunes (20 Feb. 1892), York frequently appeared in burlesques, including Percy St John's works *Black-Eyed Susan*, *Cinderella* and *Faust Up to Date* (1891), and *Fra Diavlo* (1892). He remained with Tracey's company until around mid-1892, working at both School of Arts (Syd) and Melbourne's Gaiety Theatre. York's late 1892/early 1893 engagement with Ralph Walshe's Novelty Company Queensland touring party (which saw him again working alongside Harry Clay), was cut short in January when much of the city was forced to shut down due to extensive flooding. York soon afterwards joined the Empire Minstrel and Specialty Company in Toowoomba and undertook a north Queensland tour with the troupe until sometime around July. Upon returning to Sydney he accepted an engagement at the Royal Standard Theatre with a company known as the Elite Minstrels and Variety Combination (ca. July/Aug.), and in October appeared with a company then playing the Alhambra Theatre.

In 1894 York teamed up with high profile performer, George A Jones (ex-Frank M. Clark/Cogill Bros and Dan Tracey) to form York and Jones' Empire Minstrels. Their first known engagement was in Brisbane at the Gaiety Theatre (9 Nov.), which lasted into January 1895, and was followed by a Queensland regional tour before the company returned to Brisbane for another six weeks season. The troupe included a number of seasoned artists, notably Tom Edwards, Gus Franks, Jake Friedman, Will Wallace, Charles and Will Bovis and Steve Adson. Mid-way through the return Brisbane season York and Jones effectively put together a new troupe, which the *Brisbane Courier* suggested was a sign of their "determination to maintain the freshness and liveliness of their variety entertainment" (15 Apr. 1895, 3). The final weeks of the season indeed saw the troupe enhanced by the arrival of the Perman Trio, J. C. Bain and baritone, Mr J. Bottger.

York and Jones' Empire Minstrels opened their Sydney account at the Opera House on 20 May 1895 with many of the artists from the Brisbane season still with the company. Within a few weeks the theatre was renamed the Empire Theatre, and according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* the management transformed the theatre's stage, improving upon "any

Entertainments.

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Brisbane Courier 15 Jan. (1895), 2.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The 1915 *Australian Variety* obituary incorrectly claims that York was 45 years old when he died. This would have meant that he was only 15 years of age when he joined Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels as a specialty act - which is highly improbable. Greg Longworth's research into his great-great uncle indicates that York would have in fact turned 20 a few months prior to the Hiscocks' engagement - still a remarkable achievement at that age.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

* = Details regarding length of engagement are yet to be established

- 1884:** n/e (New Masonic Hall, Castlereagh St, Syd; ca. July*) ► F.E. HISCOCKS (A of M, Syd; 26 Dec. * > Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels)
- 1885:** F. E. HISCOCKS (A of M, Syd; 1 Jan. - * > Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels) ► COTTIERS' PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Prot Hall, Syd; 22 Aug. *)
- 1886:** DAMPIER & GRANT (Royal Standard, Syd; 27 Dec. * > Dampier & Grant Pantomime Co)
- 1887:** DAMPIER & GRANT (Royal Standard, Syd; 1 Jan. * > Dampier & Grant Pantomime Co) ► F. E. HISCOCKS (A of M, Syd; 4 June * > Alf Lawton's Co) ► ROYAL AQUARIUM & PLEASURE GROUNDS (Bondi, Syd; 28 Aug. *) ► PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Prot Hall, Syd; ca. Dec. *)
- 1888:** PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Prot Hall, Syd; ca. Apr/May * > See 28 Apr. 5 and 26 May) ► FRANK YORK & HARRY CARROLL'S MINSTREL Co (Prot Hall, Syd; 26 May*) ► GEORGE BARR (New Haymarket MH, Syd; 20 Oct. - *) ► PEOPLE'S POPULAR CONCERTS (Prot Hall, Syd; 17 Nov. *)
- 1889:** H. FLORACK (New Haymarket MH, Syd; 16 Mar. - * > Florack's Federal Minstrels) ► P. WALSH (Haymarket MH, Syd; 18 May *)
- 1890:** BONDI AQUARIUM (Syd; 1 Feb. *) ► CHARLES FANNING (Prot Hall, Syd; 20-31 Dec. > Fanning's Concert Party)
- 1891:** CHARLES FANNING (Prot Hall, Syd; 1 Jan. - * > Fanning's Concert Party) ► DAN TRACEY (S of A, Syd; ca. Jan.* > See also Mar. and June - Tracey's Minstrels) • (Gaiety Th, Melb; ca. July*) • (S of A, Syd; ca. Aug - Dec. *)
- 1892:** DAN TRACEY (S of A, Syd; 1 Jan. - * > See also Feb., May and July - Dan Tracey's Specialty Co) • (Gaiety Th, Melb; 23 July*) ► RALPH WALSHE (S of A, Syd; 24-31 Dec. > Walshe's Novelty Co)
- 1893:** RALPH WALSHE (S of A, Syd; 2 Jan. - * > Walshe's Novelty Co) ► EMPIRE MINSTREL & SPECIALTY Co (Toowoomba, Qld; 20 Jan. - *) • (Gaiety Th, Bris; ca. 22 May * > Last night) • (Qld regional tour; ca. May - July * > Incl. Gympie 23 May and Charters Towers 21 June) ► ELITE MINSTRELS & VARIETY COMBINATION (Royal Standard, Syd; 31 July - * > Mng. J. E. Creswell) ► DC&H (Alhambra MH, Syd; 12 Aug. - * > First appearance at the Alhambra)
- 1894:** YORK & JONES EMPIRE MINSTRELS (Gaiety Th, Bris; 9 Nov. - *)
- 1895:** YORK & JONES EMPIRE MINSTRELS (Gaiety Th, Bris; 1 Jan. - *) • (Qld regional tour, ca. Jan - Mar.* > See BC: 22 Jan. 1895, n. pag.) • (Gaiety Th, Bris; 23 Mar. to 14 May > Return season) • (Empire Th, Syd; 20 May - ca. Sept.* > Late Opera House)
- NB:** York and Jones Queensland tour incl. Rockhampton (Th Royal; 26 Feb. - *)
- 1897:** FRED FORDHAM (Empire Palace, Melb; 8 May - *) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; 23 Oct. - *) • (Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. Dec. *)
- 1898:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. Mar., June - July *) ► W.F. TRAVERS (Op House, Bris; 20 Sept. - * > Continental Vaudeville Co) • (Qld regional tour; ca. Oct/Nov. *) • (Theatre Royal, Bris; 28 Nov. - *)
- 1899:** DELOHERY, ST JOHN & HOLLAND (Th Royal, Bris; 27 May - * > Elite Variety Burlesque Co)
- 1902:** JOHN FULLER (Empire Th, Syd; 22 Feb. - 1 Mar. *)
- 1904:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; ca. Aug. *) ► J. C. BAIN (Temp Hall, Hobart; 31 Dec. > Bain's Gaiety Entertainers)
- 1905:** J. C. BAIN (Temp Hall, Hobart; 1 Jan. - ca. Mar. * > Bain's Gaiety Entertainers) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; 8 Apr. - *) ► (Tivoli Th, Syd; 1 July - *)

O P E R A H O U S E

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Brisbane Courier 20 Sept. (1898), 2.

- 1908:** JAMES BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 14 Mar. - *) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. Dec.* > See TT: Jan. 1909, 15)
- 1909:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 1 Jan. - ca. Mar. *) ► M. LUCAS (Temp Hall, Hobart; ca. 4 Oct. - * > Lucas's Gaiety Co, aka Grand Tivoli Vaudeville Co)
- 1910:** JAMES BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 1 Oct. > See also 10, 24 Dec.)
- 1911:** JAMES BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 1 Jan. - *) • (Gaiety Th, Melb; ca. Jan. *) • (Nat Amph, Syd; ca. July-8 Sept. *) • (Th Royal, Bris; 9 Sept. - *)

Additional information for this biography has been contributed by Greg Longworth.

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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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