FRANK YORK

Frank H. York was largely based in Sydney during his early career, playing seasons with F. E. Hiscock's 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 Brahms, 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 Muscleman's 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 "Clogographical" (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

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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).

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 1889 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...
setting that had been arranged there for a long times past." Noting that the new company had made rapid strides in terms of securing the support of audiences, the same review further indicates that York and Jones had made additional changes since then to provide an even superior setting (17 June 1895, 6). Notable new members over the next few months included Martyn Hagen and Lucy Fraser (ca. June), Delohery, Craydon and Holland (ca. July) and W. H. Speed (ca. July). Neither Frank York nor George Jones were content to remain behind the scenes with their company, however, and were regularly accorded good reviews for their appearances. "After Mr Frank York had sung 'Keep a Knocking,'" wrote one reviewer, "there were loud calls for 'Can't Stop,' and several other favourite songs which Mr York has popularised in Sydney. The artist's vocal organ is naturally so full of music that it would be interesting to hear him sing a ballad that would put his vocal powers to a better test" (SMH: 10 Aug. 1895, 7). York was also regularly featured in the company's farces and burlesques. The Empire Minstrels continued to be run by York and Jones until around mid-September, when W. H. Speed and Thomas Delohery assumed control, continuing to use the name Empire Minstrels. It is not clear why York and Jones ended their association with the theatre or where they went. While no mention of either performer has been located in the immediate period following their departure from the Empire at this stage, it is possible that they continued their entrepreneurial activities in some other location.

1897 saw Frank York engaged as a performer with Fred Fordham's company at the Empire Palace (Melb) from early May. In October that same year he made possibly the first of his appearances with Harry Rickards, with this engagement occurring at the Melbourne Opera House (23 Oct.). While his association with Rickards is believed to have involved regular, and often lengthy, engagements over the next 13 years, York also undertook occasional employment with other companies. These include an 1898 Queensland tour with the Continental Vaudeville Company, which saw him again working with Harry Clay. In between two Brisbane seasons (ca. Sep. and Nov.) the troupe visited a number of major regional centres throughout the state. The following year he was back in Brisbane, this time with Delohery, Craydon and Holland's Elite Variety Burlesque Company at the Theatre Royal (27 May). It was with Harry Rickards, however, that Frank York's career became largely associated in the minds of his contemporary Australian public. Over the years he worked alongside not only the leading Australian acts of the era, but also supported some of the biggest names in international variety - notably Little Tich and George Fuller Golden (both 1905). Among his Australian-based peers were Jack Kearns and Ida Rosslyn, Steve Adson, Fred Bluett and Irving Sayles and Charlie Pope.

In 1902 York, billed as the "Boss of Funny End-men," headed an all new company for the final week of John Fuller and Sons' season at the Empire Theatre, Sydney. The Fullers advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald records: "Mr Frank York makes his re-appearance after a number of years in a budget of up-to-date specialties, including: "I'll Show You the way" and [the] farce – "The Monte de Piete" (22 Feb. 1902, 2). His movements over the next seven or eight years are yet to be located, with the next appearance found being an engagement in late 1908 with Harry Rickards at the Sydney Tivoli. Late the next year he was in Hobart with Lucas' Gaiety Company (which also appears to have been known as the Grand Tivoli Vaudeville Company).²

In 1910 York appeared on the National Amphitheatre programme under the management of James Brennan (1 Oct.). It is not known how long he stayed, although it is known that he was still performing there in September 1911. His engagement with the entrepreneur also included a season in Brisbane with the touring Brennan's Vaudeville players company. During this period he played a significant role in helping develop a number of emerging comedians, including Roy Rene. In Mo's Memoirs Rene recalls that York was employed by Brennan both as a performer and a producer (now referred to as a director), and taught him a great deal about being both an endman and a farce comedian.

Although York's whereabouts are unclear from this point on, it appears that he began suffered some debilitating health problems around 1912 or 1913. Australian Variety notes in its 6 April 1914 issue that he had not enjoyed good health for some time, and was at that time seriously ill in Melbourne. He returned to Sydney sometime during the next year, and died of paralysis and cardiac failure at the Eastwood home of his elder sister, Ellen Ward, on 13 December 1915. He was aged only 51.

² It would seem unlikely that the Lucas Gaiety company had any connection with Harry Rickards' Tivoli operations, and hence it is unclear why the "Tivoli" name was used in connection with its Hobart engagement.
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.

**HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS**

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. * > Dampie & Grant Pantomime Co)

1887: DAMPIER & GRANT (Royal Standard, Syd; 1 Jan. * > Dampie & 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. 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. *)


1890: BONDING 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)


1894: YORK & JONES MINSTRELS (Gaiety Th, Bris; 9 Nov. -*)

1895: YORK & JONES 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. *)


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**ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY**

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

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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)


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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