

CHARLES ZWAR

Charles Zwar first professionally produced musical comedy, *Blue Mountains Melody* (1934), was a collaboration with J. C. Bancks (*Ginger Meggs* cartoonist). The year before, however, he had provided additional lyrics to T. Stuart Gurr and Varney Monk's hit musical comedy *Collits' Inn*. Zwar left Australia for Britain in 1936 and carved out a successful career on the London stage as a composer and musical director for musical comedies and revues. In 1964 he contributed material to the Phillip Theatre (Sydney) revue *Is Australia Really Necessary?*

The youngest son of Mr and Mrs Charles Zwar of Broadford, Victoria, Charles Zwar (Jnr) was born on 10 April 1911. He was later educated in the Melbourne suburb of Williamstown, attending North Williamstown State Primary and Williamstown High School. During his childhood he developed a passion for music, and is reported to have been a student of Mr G. W. McKeown (WTC: 19 May 1923, 3). Zwar's name is mentioned in several newspaper reports during the early to mid-1920s in relation to his performances at various school concerts. The *Williamstown Chronicle* reports in 1923, too, that he passed the Grade III Theory examinations conducted by the Melbourne University's Conservatorium of Music. While studying Law and Arts at the University in the late 1920s Zwar was heavily involved in social events and student productions as both a performer and music director. Among these productions was the 1933 revue *Stude Prunes*. Of his contribution the *Adelaide Advertiser's* "Melbourne Gossip" column records:

Stude Prunes has some really witty and sophisticated passages. Some of the best items are provided by Mr Charles Zwar, a pianist of more than ordinary ability, who plays some excellent light music of his own composing. More perhaps will be heard of it. Melbourne likes *Stude Prunes* so well that the season has been extended by three days (22 May 1933, 11).

A few months later he made possibly his first appearance on radio, being part of a 3AR programme of dance music that was interspersed with singing by Ella Riddell and comedy by Johnny Marks. Zwar's contributions saw him billed as a "novelty entertainer" (QLD: 27 July 1933, 45). His popularity with audiences saw him return to the airwaves several times over the next couple of months, appearing on various light entertainment programmes (see 22 Aug., 23 Sept.). His performances were not confined to the piano, however, with a Derby Week engagement at St Kilda seeing him billed as a singer (ARG: 27 Oct. 1933, 4). Zwar's growing reputation also saw him invited to contribute additional lyrics for Frank Thing's 1933 production of the T. Stuart Gurr and Varney Monk musical comedy *Collits' Inn*. Others involved in the creative aspects of the musical included George Wallace, Harry Jacobs and Jock McLeod.

The following year Zwar contributed most of the music and lyrics for another university revue, *Swots Next* (18 Apr.) while also collaborating with J. C. Bancks (*Ginger Meggs* cartoonist) on the musical comedy *Blue Mountains Melody* (1934).¹ Produced by J. C. Williamsons, Zwar was given the opportunity to work closely with "the Firm's" highly experienced music director, Andrew MacCunn. The *Sydney Morning Herald* theatre critic wrote glowingly of Zwar's input into the production:

The opening scene established at once both the wit and resourcefulness of Mr Bancks as author, and the crisp, fashionable charm of Mr Zwar's music. The composer had scored the various numbers with varied melodic effect; with unflinching taste; and above all with a really delightful feeling for rhythm. Two pianos played an important part in the orchestra. At one of these Mr Zwar himself appeared; and he showed during a brief entr'act that he is a jazz pianist of considerable attainment (17 Sept. 1934, 4).

AMUSEMENTS.

Managing Directors J. C. WILLIAMSON, LTD. SYDNEY'S CHIEF THEATRES
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THEATRE ROYAL—GRAND GALA WORLD PREMIERE OF

"BLUE MOUNTAIN MELODY"—TO-MORROW AT 8 P.M.

Never has entertainment-loving Sydney been so thrilled . . . to-morrow night's gala world premiere will be the event of the year! Plans at Falinga. Don't delay—make your reservations NOW! Plans open six days ahead. "Blue Mountain Melody" sets a standard for the world to follow. Delicious comedy, haunting melodies, heart-warming romance, magnificent dramas, gorgeous girls, wonderful spectacle, brilliant scenes, revolving stage—and greatest array of favourites ever assembled!

AND, ABOVE ALL, IT'S AUSTRALIAN!

THEATRE ROYAL—ALL-AUSTRALIAN MUSICAL COMEDY—THEATRE ROYAL.

"Blue Mountain Melody" is from the brilliant pen of J. C. Bancks (creator of *Ginger Meggs*). Music and Lyrics by Charles Zwar. Lavishly produced by Frederick Blackman. Musical Director, Andrew MacCunn.

WITH MADGE ELLIOTT AND CYRIL RITCHARD.

And a super star cast of Australia's first favourites, headed by Leo Franklyn, Don Nicol, Marie Le Varre, Frank Leighton, Agnes Doyle, Athol Tier, Lois Green, Charles Zoll, George Moon, Arthur Cornell, the Kelly Trio, Mona Potts, Harry Dearth, Jun. Eric Bush, Mona Zeppel, Roy Hart, etc., etc., etc.

"BLUE MOUNTAIN MELODY"—WITH REVOLVING STAGE!

NOTE! Owing to the elaborate preparations necessary for the presentation of "Blue Mountain Melody," the Theatre Royal will be closed to-night. Week-night prices for "Blue Mountain Melody," 6/6, 4/6, 2/6. First night, 8/6, 5/6, 3/6. (Prices plus tax.)

Sydney Morning Herald 7 Sept. (1934), 3.

¹ The Sunday evening before its Sydney premiere, Zwar performed some of the songs from the production on radio station 2GB.

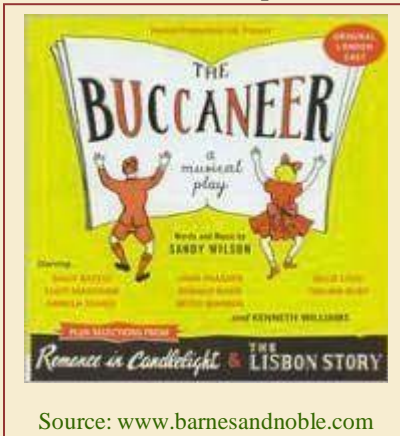
Zwar left Australia for Britain in 1936 on the same ship as children's author Isobel Shead. The couple, who married in Surrey in 1938,² had met in Melbourne while Shead was working for the ABC between 1933 and 1936. Both likely made the move to England in the hope of establishing careers there. In this respect they both succeeded, with Shead going on to work in a number of high profile positions with the BBC, while Zwar carved out a career as a composer and musical director for musical comedies and revues that lasted more than three decades. His longest and most successful collaboration was with writer/lyricist Alan Melville. He also wrote songs with Kenneth Leslie-Smith, Diana Morgan, Robert MacDermot (1910–1964) and Australian Lance Mulcahy.



Alan Melville
Source: www.doollee.com

Among Zwar's earliest West End revues was *Swinging the Gate* (1940). Comprising mostly his music, the show featured former *Blue Mountains Melody* star, Madge Elliott, and young South Australian dancer Robert Helpman, who in addition to his usual ballet work also presented impersonations of Margaret Rawlings, John Gielgud and Lawrence Oliver (ARG: 3 June 1940, 1).

While in Britain during the war Zwar enlisted in the A.I.F. eventually rising to the rank of Sergeant. In mid-1945 the A.I.F.'s Army Cinema Section produced for the Directorate of Army Cinematography a half-hour documentary called *The Australian Army at War*. Following the A.I.F.'s campaigns in North Africa, Crete, Greece, Syria and New Guinea, the film was accompanied by a "lucid, well-spoken commentary" and a musical score by Zwar (AA: 9 June 1945, 9). Following his discharge from the army Zwar took up an engagement at the Ambassador Theatre, London, as music director (AWW: 20 Apr. 1946, 24).



Source: www.barnesandnoble.com

It appears that by the early 1950s the Zwar's marriage was in trouble. In late 1951 Shead returned to Australia on her own, telling journalists that she was visiting her parents for Christmas while her husband remained in London producing musicals (SH: 2 Dec. 1951, 17). She went back to the UK early the following year but by 1955 she and Zwar had divorced. That year he remarried theatre manager and sound designer, Diana Helen Mary Plunkett (1918-92). At the time of the marriage he was musical director of Sandy Wilson's musical *The Buccaneer*. The couple had one child, a daughter.

Among the productions Zwar is known to have been involved in are: *Sweeter and Lower* (1943, a second edition of the revue *Sweet and Low*); *A La Carte* (1947, Savoy); *One, Two, Three*, for which he and Alan Melville contributed two songs, including the title number (1947, Duke of York); *Penny Plain* (1952, St

Martin's); *Bet Your Life*, which he co-wrote with composer Kenneth Leslie-Smith (1952, Hippodrome); *...And Another Thing* (1960, Fortune); and the musical comedy *The Station Master's Daughter* (1968). He was also engaged by Alan Melville to oversee the musical direction of his 1963 revue *All Square* (Vaudeville Theatre).

The *Station Master's Daughter*, possibly Zwar's last musical comedy, was co-written with Frank Harvey (1912-81), the son of Australian dramatist/screenwriter Frank Harvey (1885-1965). Modelled on traditional Broadway/West End lines at a time when the post-*Hair* industry was exploring new directions, Harvey and Zwar attempted to make a political comment by focusing the story on a Minister for Transport (played by Rose Hill) intent on shutting down a local railway. Adrian Wright, in *A Tanner's Worth of Tune* (2010), notes that the character was meant to be real-life minister, Barbara Castle (1910-2002), "but by the time the show opened [she] had moved to another ministerial post, rendering the piece historical" (214). Produced at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guilford beginning 11 April 1968, the cast also included: Jenny Wren, Hugh Lloyd, Sally Smith, Graham James, Neil Fitzwilliam.

Although his career from 1937 onwards was undertaken almost exclusively in the UK, Zwar's music did make it to the USA. He is included, for example in the credits for the 1960 Broadway revue, *From A-Z* (Plymouth Theatre). Premiering on 20 April, the show also included contributions from Woody Allen, Jerry Herman and Jay Thompson. He also reconnected with the Australian theatre during 1950s and 1960s, contributing material for such shows as *Sweetest and Lowest: A Revue in Time* (Minerva Theatre, Kings Cross, Syd; 5 Dec. 1947); *Metropolitan Merry-Go-Round* (Metropolitan Theatre, Kings Cross, Syd; 12 Feb. 1953); and the 1964 Phillip Theatre revue, *Is Australia Really Necessary?* (Syd; 3 Oct.).

Zwar died on 2 December 1989 at Oxford.

² Zwar and Shead were married in St James's Church, Shere (Surrey) on 28 April 1938. Several reports of the wedding published in Australian newspapers indicate that she was given away by her uncle, Professor Alexander Hay, and that Professor Bernard Heinze acted as Zwar's best man.

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- [*Blue Mountains Melody*] Mr J. C. Bancks has striven to bring his book into line with the immemorial traditions of musical comedy. He has chosen a tragic and meandering plot with plenty of spectacular effects, and decorated it neatly and wittily. Mr Charles Zwar's music and lyrics are in the same vein - apt and pointed, with a touch of sentimentality when required and acid enough to stimulate the appetite (ARG 5 Nov. 1934, 4).

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. In the *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*, Stanley Green cites 1914 as Zwar's year of birth.
2. **Isobel Ann Shead:** The only daughter of estate agent Frank Shead, Isobel Shead was born in Adelaide on 23 April 1906 but raised in Sydney from the age of five. After completing her education at Abbotsleigh Girls' School, Wahroonga (1919-22) she returned to Adelaide, initially securing work freelance writer and later as a reporter. Her first big story was covering riots at the Port Adelaide docks, where an angry mob chased her up a ladder. Shead worked on the *Sydney Sun* for a year, then moved to Melbourne where she directed the ABC radio children's session in Victoria (1933-1936). Known to children as "Isobel Ann" of the Argonauts Club, Shead also wrote a serial, *Sandy*, for the children's *Chatterbox Corner* on a commercial radio station (ARG: 29 Apr. 1938, 4). It was published as a book in 1935 and became a best-seller. After moving to England in 1936, Shead was employed by the BBC as a radio and television producer. She started the *Children's Hour* there and ran the *This is Britain* radio program during World War II.
3. The *Australian Women's Weekly* records that Zwar and Shead were living in Landsowne Terrace, London, following his discharge from the army (20 Apr. 1946, 24).
4. **Diana Helen Mary Plunkett** (1918-92) was theatre manager of the Lyric, Hammersmith from 1947 to 1955 and a director of Stagesound Ltd, a company that provided sound systems and special effects for theatres and broadcasting. For further details see her obituary in the *Independent* (UK) 15 Sept. 1992.
5. The National Library of Australia holds "[Biographical cuttings on Charles Zwar, composer and lyricist, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]" (NLA: 878218; BIOG).

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

The following list of works comprises those productions established as having music contributions by Charles Zwar. The list is very incomplete. All productions between 1940 and 1963 are for the UK unless otherwise noted)

* Denotes Australian production

- 1933:** **Stude Prunes** * [revue] (additional music) • **Collits' Inn** * [musical comedy] (additional lyrics only)
1934: **Blue Mountains Melody** * [musical comedy] (with J.C. Bancks) • **Swot Next** * [revue] (additional music)
1940: **Swinging the Gate** [revue] (lyrics by Patrick White)
1942: **Sky High** [revue]
1943: **Sweeter and Lower** [revue] (with Alan Melville)
1946: **Sweetest and Lowest** [revue] (additional music)
1947: **A La Carte** [revue] (with Alan Melville) • **One, Two Three** [revue] (additional music with Alan Melville) • **Sweetest and Lowest** * [revue] (additional music)
1951: **The Lyric Revue** [revue] (additional music)
1952: **Bet Your Life** [revue] (music also by Kenneth Leslie-Smith) • **Penny Plain** [revue] (St. Martin's Th; additional music)
1953: **At the Lyric** [revue] • **John Murray Anderson's Almanac** [revue] (additional music) • **Metropolitan Merry-Go-Round** * [revue] (with Lance Mulcahy and Alan Melville)
1959: **Marigold** [musical comedy] (with Alan Melville)
1960: **From A to Z** [revue] (additional music only) • **...And Another Thing** [revue]
1961: **Queen's Revue** [revue] (additional music only) • **Out on a Limb** * [revue] (additional music)
1963: **All Square** [revue]
1964: **Is Australia Really Necessary?** * [revue] (additional music)
1965: **Hello Watford Goodbye** [revue] (additional music)
1968: **The Station Master's Daughter** [musical comedy] (with Frank Harvey)

FILM AND TELEVISION SCORES

- 1940: **Hullo, Fame!** [documentary]
1945: **The Australian Army at War** [documentary]
1964: **Eight Hundred Mile Voyage** [documentary]
1967: **Before the Fringe** [TV comedy series] (additional material)

RECORDINGS

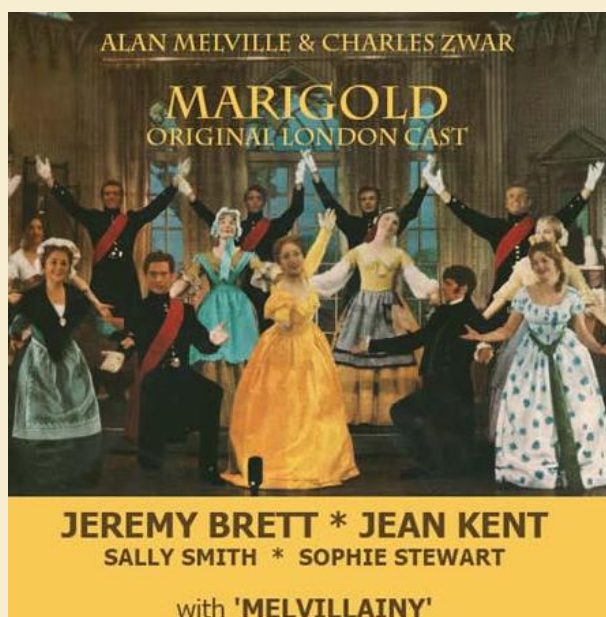
Compilation. *Stars Sing World War Hits* (Hallmark 2010). ["Wishing" by Charles Zwar and Ruby Duncan]
Marigold - soundtrack ([Must Close Saturday Records](#), MCSR 3052).
Turner Layton. *These Foolish Things* (Asv/Living Era, 2004). [Zwar on piano for some songs]

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "[Australian Army at War: World Premiere of New Film.](#)" AA: 9 June (1945), 9.
"[Australian Play: Success of Blue Mountains Melody.](#)" SMH: 17 Sept. (1934), 4.
Djubal, Clay. "[Zwar, Charles.](#)" *AustLit* (2006).
"[In Other Cities: Melbourne Gossip.](#)" AA: 22 May (1933), 11.
Wright, Adrian. *A Tanner's Worth of Tune: Rediscovering the Post-War British Musical* (2010).

See also:

WTC: 16 Dec. (1922), 2 ["North State School"] • 18 Dec. (1926), 2 ["High School Concert"]



"Alan Melville and Charles Zwar's delightfully charming romance relates the story of young Marigold's thrilling escape from the dullness of Peebles to the excitement of Edinburgh."

Based on the play by F R Pryor and L Allen Harker
Source: Must Close Saturday Records.

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