

ALEC STAGPOOLE

(1873-1962) Alex Stagpoole (born Alexander Wright) came from Scotland to Australia in the late 1800s. He took the Stagpoole surname from his wife, Madge, and with her brother, Ted, formed the nucleus of the comedy knockabout/sketch and specialty troupe known variously as the Stagpooles, the Four Stagpooles or the Stagpoole Family. He retired from performing in 1915 to take up a position as Harry Clay's scenic artist at the Bridge Theatre (Newtown).

Born Alexander Wright in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1873 to pastrycook George Wright and his wife Jessie (nee Adams).¹ Alec Stagpoole's professional name² was adopted from his wife, Mary Ann "Madge" Stagpoole (1876-1982), and with whom he co-founded the comedy knockabout/sketch and specialty troupe known as the Stagpooles or the Stagpoole Family.³ While much Alec's life and career prior to 1900 is currently unknown, it is quite likely that he had been performing as a comedian/singer as early as the mid-1890s. He may also have been trained as an engraver prior to leaving Scotland.⁴ The marriage between Alec and Madge likely occurred sometime between 1897 and 1899, and by which time the New Zealand-born soubrette had already begun making a name for herself in Australia. Her name has been located, for example, as a feature act during a lengthy season in Perth over the summer of 1896/97.



Source: *Stagpoole Family and Friends Website*

While the Stagpoole Family act reportedly came together around the time of Alec and Madge's marriage no details have yet been located prior to 1900. It is originally believed to have comprised Alec and Madge, along with her half-brother Edward "Ted" Stagpoole (1884-1966) and half sister Hannah Sarah (aka Addie). By 1901, however, the quartet was reduced to a trio, with Addie's name no longer featuring in reviews. The Stagpooles returned to being a quartet around 1908 when Ted's wife Adelaide (Ada) joined the act while on tour in America. Over the next decade or so the act was engaged by most of the leading variety entrepreneurs operating in Australia and New Zealand, including Leonard Davis (Perth), [F.M. Clark](#), [John Fuller Snr](#), [Benjamin and John Fuller Jnr](#) ([Brennan-Fuller](#)).

They are known to have been still touring the Australasian region as a quartet in 1915, at which time *Australian Variety* noted that "their well-remembered act [was] meeting with great success. As before, the wonderful acrobatic ability of Ted Stagpoole is the big laugh maker."⁵

Mr. Harry Baxter, who is shortly leaving for South Africa, was on Monday last the recipient of a complimentary benefit, when the Empire Theatre was crowded in every part. The programme was lengthy, and Mr. Baxter received a magnificent ovation from his many admirers. Mr. Ted. E. Box still continues the great draw, and his new "turns" go splendidly. Mr. Alex. Stagpoole is to be complimented for his artistic painting of a new first-part setting, entitled "Brooklet Home."

Examiner (Launceston, Tas) 16 July 1903, 7.

Direction **THE EMPIRE**, ... Holland & St. John, Ltd
GRAND MATINEE TO-DAY, 2.30.
TED HOLLAND'S VAUDEVILLE ENTERTAINERS.
STILL MORE STARS!
Special Engagement (Direct from America) and First Appearance of **THE FOUR STAGPOOLES**,
In Their Potted Pantomime Sketch, "The Crazy Caddie."
(Featuring Ted Stagpoole, the "Neck-fall Marvel.")
First Appearance To-day of the
COLEMAN SISTERS (Soubrettes and Danseuses). WILL RAYNER (Tenor Robusto).
Appearing To-day, To-night, and Every Evening, together with Madame MARVELLE and her Troupe of Comedy Creations.
FRITZ VON LISTON. "MIK." "ESMERALDA."
AND OUR GRAND DOUBLE COMPANY OF VAUDEVILLE STARS.
Popular Prices: 3/., 2/., 1/., Box Plan at Pidd's until 12 noon; after that hour at Theatre until 5 p.m. No extra charge for booking. 'Phones 2115 and 3543.

Brisbane Courier 26 July 1913, 2.

Alec Stagpoole retired from the stage sometime that year, however, in order to take on duties as [Harry Clay](#)'s resident scenic artist at the [Bridge Theatre](#), Newtown. As with many vaudeville performers, versatility was a prerequisite for maintaining any semblance of a career. Alec is not the only Stagpoole to have had artistic abilities, as his brother Ted is believed to have involved himself in scenic building, too. A 1907 account reports that he burnt himself severely on the head, face and hands with melted glue at the Auckland Opera House, but with no permanent injury. In so far as Alec is concerned, however, he almost immediately came in for praise for his work, with *Australian Variety* making comment towards his work shortly after he began his engagement as Clay's scenic artist.

¹ All family history details relating to Alec Stagpoole and the Stagpoole family have been provided by Janine Stagpoole (Christchurch, NZ).

² His name has been spelled variously as "Alec" and "Alex" in the variety industry and by family. See "Historical Notes and Corrections" below for further details.

³ One review from 1900 also records the troupe as the Stagpoole Comedy and Variety Company ("Stanley." *North Western Advocate and Emu Bay Times* 27 Nov. 1900, 2).

⁴ Sourced from the marriage certificate of Alec's daughter Elvira (courtesy of Janine Stagpoole).

⁵ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 17 Mar. 1915, n. pag

Alex Stagpoole was responsible for the excellent scenery at Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre on Saturday night last. The stage looked better than it ever looked before, and was well worth the trouble spent. Alex is turning out some first-class work at his studio, in the Bridge Theatre, and any artists requiring additions to their act in the way of scenery or props should lose no time in seeing Alex Stagpoole.⁶

Stagpoole's work also saw him designing settings for commercial companies like Grace Brothers⁷ and private organisations such as W. Yinson Lee, organiser of a 1916 Chinese procession in Sydney,⁸ in addition to his work with Clay's and individual artists. In 1916 Stagpoole invented a fire-proof scenery known as "Noburn"⁹ which was passed by the Metropolitan Fire Board. Another invention was his system of utilising scenery to advantage by allowing it to be folded up into small sections without affecting the material.¹⁰

While details regarding Stagpoole's career from around 1920 remain unclear, he is known to have continued in Clay's employment up until at least the mid-1920s. [Charles Norman](#) also recalls him being at the Bridge Theatre during his own career with the company. Stagpoole was apparently well respected for his work with vaudeville scenery and props, being known to have designed equipment for some of the leading acts in Sydney during his career, including [Leonard Nelson](#) and Jim Romaine.

Alec Stagpoole died on 12 June 1962. He is buried in Catholic section of the Point Clare Cemetery, Gosford (New South Wales), with the plot registered under his professional name.

SEE ALSO

- [The Stagpooles](#)
- [Harry Clay](#)
- [Elvie Stagpoole](#) (Delavale and Stagpoole)
- [Bridge Theatre \(Newtown\)](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Alec Stagpoole's Christian name has been shortened in newspaper and magazine articles as either Alex or Alec. The AVTA has settled on Alec (seemingly the more common spelling during his career) so as to maintain consistency.
2. Alec and Madge had two daughters - Elvie and Eula, both of whom went on to the vaudeville stage. Of the two Elvie established the highest profile reputation, first as a soubrette in the mid to late-1910s and in the 1920s through her partnership with husband [Charles "Ike" Delavale](#).

Although little is presently known of Eula's life and career in the variety industry, a report in *Australian Variety* in 1916 indicates that she assisted her father in his scenic art business for a period (see below).

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- 1915:** Alec Stagpoole is kept quite busy at his studio at Clay's Bridge Theatre, Newtown, and is turning out some first-class work. He has just finished making and fitting up a stage for Grace Bros., Ltd. Anyone wishing to add to the tone of their act, Alec will be pleased to hear from them, as he is sure he has something that will suit you (*Australian Variety* 27 Oct. 1915, n. pag.).
- 1916:** A. Stagpoole, formerly of "The Three Stagpooles" who had had a fine vaudeville act, is now settled in Sydney as a scenic artist. W. Yinson Lee, the organiser of the Chinese procession depicted on this page, is enthusiastic in his praise of the work done in that connection by Mr Stagpoole and his daughter Eula. "Besides the artistic value of it," adds Mr Lee, "no money could repay Mr Stagpoole and Eula for the efforts they put forth - night and day - to ensure our turn-out being all we wished it to be." Amateur and professional companies requiring a scene from time to time might well bear Mr Stagpoole in mind (*Theatre Magazine* Apr. 1916, 32).
- 1916:** Alec Stagpoole, the scenic artist, is now specialising in "dye work," a new system of utilising scenery to advantage. This latest invention allows the scenery to be folded up very small, and does not affect material. A trip to Clay's Bridge Theatre, Newtown would be well worth the visit, particularly to those who desire new scenery at a minimum of cost (*Australian Variety* 31 May 1916, 9).

⁶ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 24 Nov. 1915, 17.

⁷ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 27 Oct. 1915, n. pag.

⁸ *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Apr. 1916, 32

⁹ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 9 Dec. 1916, n. pag.

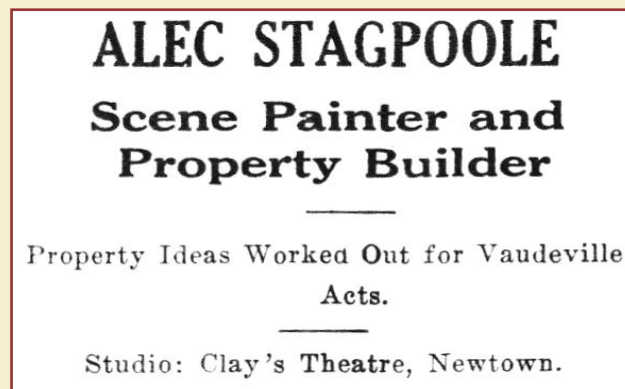
¹⁰ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 31 May 1916, 9

- 1916:** Alec Stagpoole is responsible for the scenery at Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre this week. Eululie [sic] Stagpoole [Alec's] daughter is an able assistant doing most of the designing and painting of the scenery. Some of her work is seen in the appearance of a huge Xmas Cake on the opening this week. Alec is the inventor of "Noburn," the fire proof scenery and anyone wishing to improve their act should lose no time in seeing him at Newtown; it will be worth your while (*Australian Variety* 29 Dec. 1916, n. pag.).¹¹
- 1916:** Alec Stagpoole is responsible for the drop curtain which Leonard Nelson has in use at the Majestic Theatre. Any artists thinking of adding to their offering should consult Alec. He has some excellent and original ideas (*Australian Variety* 25 July 1917, 3).
- 1918:** Alec Stagpoole, scenic artist at the Bridge Theatre, Newtown, has been confined to his room during the week suffering from a poisoned foot. He hopes to be around again in a few days (*Australian Variety* 5 Apr. 1918, n. pag.).
- 1918:** Alec Stagpoole was responsible for the scenery in the act of Romaine and Ollaf. Alec's work is always the best, and any artist desiring to add to their act could not do better than consult this gentleman who will be pleased to interview you (*Australian Variety* 7 Nov. 1919, n. pag.).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930 (1998).

"Four Stagpooles: Brilliant Performers - A Credit to Australia." *Mail* (Adelaide) 23 Aug. 1913, 12.



Australian Variety (Sydney) 13 Oct. 1915, 12.

Information relating to the Alec Stagpoole and the Stagpoole family has been provided by Janine Stagpoole (New Zealand) and John Stagpoole

¹¹ See also advert in 9 August 1916 edition of *Australian Variety* re: Noburn (n. pag.).