

MAURICE CHENOWETH

(1881-1968) A Gold Medal student at Adelaide's Elder Conservatorium, Maurice Chenoweth later toured Australasia with both the Westminster Glee Club and West's the Brescians touring show. He performed with several Leidertafel and Royal Philharmonic Societies, before taking up engagements in vaudeville with James Brennan, Ted Holland, and J.C. Bain. Chenoweth started with Harry Clay in 1914, and later worked with Bert Howard before an engagement on the Fuller circuit around 1916. He later returned to Clay's where he eventually worked as a theatre/circuit manager and revue producer. Upon Harry Clay's death Chenoweth became General Manager of the Bridge Theatre Co, holding that position until 1928, at which time he returned to the Fullers as one of their House Managers. He continued working in the industry, appearing both on stage and on radio, until his retirement.

One of Australia's foremost tenors during the first decades of the twentieth century, Maurice Clayton was born on 26 December 1881 at Aldinga, South Australia, to Edwin George Chenoweth (a saddler from Cornwall, England) and Esther (an organist). After leaving school he began an apprenticeship as a plumber but having had a sound musical training courtesy of his mother he later applied for and was accepted to study at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide. Although an accomplished pianist, Chenoweth's musical training at the Conservatorium was largely under singing teachers F. Myles Shearer and Frederick Bevan (1856-1939),¹ through them he also gained a great deal of concert platform experience. He also won several awards, including the 1901 Elder Scholarship. When Chenoweth graduated in 1902 he did so as the Gold Medal student, having scored 145 out of 150 marks - the highest-ever points for a final examination to that date. He then worked professionally as a concert tenor for almost a decade. Among his engagements were an Australasian tour with [Edward Branscombe's](#) Westminster Glee Singers (ca. 1905),² and with West's Pictures (1906-1908).³ Chenoweth also performed in *The Messiah* for the Brisbane Musical Union (Exhibition Hall, Dec., 1909), appeared as Arthur Donegal in *Floradora* for the Petersham Choral Society (Jan. 1910), and featured in the Royal Sydney Philharmonic Society's production of Elgar's *Caractacus* (Town Hall, June 1910).

Maurice Chenoweth is thought to have started his professional career in vaudeville in 1911 after accepting a contract with [James Brennan](#). This engagement included seasons in Sydney ([National Amphitheatre](#)) and Melbourne ([Gaiety Theatre](#)) as a member of Brennan's Vaudeville Players. He also toured for Brennan that same year, being recorded in the programmes for a season at Brisbane's Theatre Royal in November. Chenoweth later appeared with [Ted Holland's](#) shows at the Empire Theatre, Brisbane, in 1913, and the following year worked for [J.C. Bain](#), [Bert Howard](#), [Harry Clay](#), [Brennan-Fuller](#) and [Jack Landow](#).

In early 1915 Chenoweth took his own concert party on tour through the New South Wales Northern Rivers region, and around the same time was elected to an executive position with the [Australian Variety Artists Federation](#) (A.V.A.F.). Towards the end of 1916 he returned to Harry Clay's organisation, and thereafter spent much of the next ten years working for the Sydney-based entrepreneur. This association also saw expand his stage opportunities from being primarily a singer to working as an occasional straight man to various comics. The longest of these partnerships appears to have been with [Ted Tutty](#) (ca. 1917-18). He later worked opposite [Reg Thornton](#) (the Kangaroosta) for a brief time. As a singer Chenoweth also regularly performed in duos and larger ensembles with Harry Clay, [Marshall Crosby](#) and [Arthur Morley](#) among others.

Courtesy of Valmai Goodlet



In 1916 Chenoweth began operating his own training college, offering a scholarship system to successful applicants. He started producing revues for Harry Clay in 1917 and by 1920 had become one of the company's senior managers. Following Harry Clay's stroke in 1922 he was responsible for looking after the programmes at Clay's three city venues the [Gaiety Theatre](#) (Oxford Street), [Princess Theatre](#) and [Bridge Theatre](#) (Newtown). When the entrepreneur passed away in February 1925 Chenoweth became the General Manager of [Clay's Theatres Ltd](#). He eventually left the company in August 1928, to take on the position of House Manager for [Fullers Theatres](#).

¹ Frederick Bevan was a Professor of singing who was educated as a chorister at All-Saints Margaret St, London. See his entry in [Wikipedia](#) [sighted 14/08/2019]

² "Personal Gossip." *Critic* (Adelaide) 5 Sept. 1906, 5; and "Maurice Chenoweth." *Sunday Sun* (Sydney) 10 July 1910, 1.

³ "Mr Maurice Chenoweth." *Quiz* (Adelaide) 14 Sept. 1906, 7. Edwin Geach bought the Brescian entertainers to Australia from England in 1905 and teamed them with West's Pictures. T.J. West later took control of the venture, touring it throughout Australia and New Zealand with additional local artists. The shows comprised films with variety items and music.

Married to Florence Gertrude Quarrell, Maurice Chenoweth had two children Romney⁴ and Valmai. He continued his involvement in theatre management well into the 1930s, and possibly the 1940s. His late-career activity also included both stage and radio appearances, with his latter involvement largely consisting of billing in variety shows. Chenoweth died aged 87 in Sydney in 1968.

Insights from both the *Theatre Magazine* and *Australian Variety* indicate that Maurice Chenoweth was extremely popular within the industry. He was certainly highly regarded by Harry Clay, who described him as an extremely versatile and tireless worker. He is known to have written several songs, including the popular "Papa's Troubles" (1917). As a singer he was undoubtedly among the best the country produced during his era, being especially noted for his clear articulation. Indeed he and Marshall Crosby were considered the best singers on the Clay circuit. As the straight man to Ted Tutty, he formed one of the more popular double acts to have performed for Clay's, leading to his reputation for versatility and adaptability. According to the *Theatre* he had, by December 1917 "developed into a particularly fine all-round vaudeville performer, [who] besides being always good for an enthusiastic recall for his well-delivered tenor songs [was also] at home on the stage in a multitude of other directions."⁵ Chenoweth was also known to have consistently broken the company's box office records at each of the theatres he was responsible for.

SEE ALSO

- [Clay's Bridge Theatre Co Ltd](#)

ADDITIONAL ANECDOTES AND QUOTATIONS



- 1914:** Perth: Mr. Maurice Chenoweth, tenor and orchestral utility man with the Brescians, is a warbler of good tone and compass, his middle and upper notes being exceptionally fine. In the extreme lower register a bad break towards the crow-croak is noticeable. With further voice-culture this vocal flaw could be eliminated from what is otherwise a splendid voice ("The Busker." "Greasepaint Patter, *Burnt Cork Chronicles*" *Sunday Times* 6 Oct. 1907, 1).
- 1914:** Maurice Chenoweth caused quite an outburst in singing "The Death of Nelson" (*Australian Variety* 19 Aug. 1914, 10).
- 1914:** Maurice Chenoweth and Harry Clay were at their best in singing "Jack Crawford" and "Annie Laurie," and they went for their good work the best on the bill (*Australian Variety* 26 Aug. 1914, 6).
- 1917:** Maurice Chenoweth, who was down the south coast last week in conjunction with Ella Caspers concert company, created quite a sensation with his singing. The fair-haired one was in fine form, and the audience demanded song after song from him, till in the end he had to come forward and make a speech (*Australian Variety* 13 June 1917, 12).
- 1917:** Maurice Chenoweth figured as a composer at Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre last week. The opening number of the revue, "Papa's Troubles," was written by him, and if this is a sample of his work, more would like to be seen of it (*Australian Variety* 27 June 1917, 3).

Theatre Royal, Hobart 1914
Source: State Library of Tasmania

⁴ Romney Chenoweth also pursued a career in theatre management, and is known to have worked for the Tivoli organisation for many years.

⁵ *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Dec. 1917, 47.

- 1917:** The programme at the Newtown Bridge Theatre for the week November 10-16 included an item "Chenoweth and Tutty - White and Black." In this Mr Chenoweth appeared in evening clothes, and Mr Tutty as a black-faced comedian. Such was Mr Chenoweth's work as to merit his being described as the Fred Niblo of vaudeville. Pattering with Mr Tutty he displayed an ease and confidence - to say nothing of the point he gave to every line he uttered - that imparted to the turn a distinction rarely seen in vaudeville (*Theatre Magazine* Dec. 1917, 47).
- 1917:** Maurice Chenoweth is now well into a successful stride, and doing excellent work, producing revues for Harry Clay; in fact the latter claims the good business that is being done by the company to M.C.'s good work. During the past four months more successful revues have been staged at the [Bridge Theatre](#) than have ever been witnessed before. Maurice seems to have just what the audience's like. In the new year he has some real winners up his sleeve (*Australian Variety* 14 Dec. 1917, n. pag.).
- 1918:** Maurice Chenoweth and [Ted Tutty](#) are the hit of the bill. The screams of laughter they get set aside any doubt on that point (*Theatre Magazine* Feb. 1918, 41).
- 1918:** Chenoweth and Tutty held the stage for quite a while with their bright and bidding fair to outdo Caldwell and Crawford routine of patter, and their duets - eh; Caldwell (*Australian Variety* 1 Mar 1918, n. pag.).
- 1918:** Maurice Chenoweth has now been producing for Harry Clay for 104 weeks, this in itself is a splendid advertisement for Maurie's ability; he is still Johnny Walker (*Australian Variety* 14 June 1918, n. pag.).
- 1918:** Maurice Chenoweth, whose versatility is remarkable, has certainly acquired a wonderful knowledge of the vaudeville game since his association with Harry Clay (*Australian Variety* 11 Oct. 1918, 15).
- 1919:** [Maurice Chenoweth] delights the house, first with "The Rivers of Love," and then "My Dear Irish Mother." Temperament and personality are largely contributing elements in Mr Chenoweth's pronounced success as a singer. He has to be accorded the further credit of being an ideal spruiker-in-general (*Theatre Magazine* Nov. 1919, 28).
- 1921:** A tenner offered by the [Clay's] management to anybody breaking the record held by Maurice Chenoweth's bunch at this house [[Gaiety](#)] (*Everyone's* 13 Apr. 1921, 15).
- 1921:** Maurice Chenoweth's company has been drawing capacity since last Saturday (*Everyone's* 1 June 1921, 15).
- 1929:** A Happy Man. Maurice Chenoweth can be fittingly described as a "Happy Man." "Happy" should be Maurice's middle name. He is one of the happiest natured men in Sydney. His secret? It isn't a secret at all; he has merely learned the knack of looking pleasant, even though the heavens might be about to fall. These days he is theatre manager for Fullers' [National](#) - a job that fits him like a pair of gloves, for of all people in this city he certainly knows his vaudevillianic onions ("Personalialia," 3).

FURTHER REFERENCE

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