

APPENDIX J

HARRY CLAY: ANECDOTES

ANECDOTES ABOUT HARRY CLAY AND HIS COMPANY

Miscellaneous Anecdotes Without Specific Reference to Years

- Just before the First World War, Clay's was showing at Bathurst. Harry called a rehearsal for 10 am. When he walked into the hall at 10.30, the only person he could see was comedian Will Wynand. Clay went into a frenzy: "Where the devil are all those so an so performers?" he shouted, splattering the question with a flow of invective that lasted two minutes. Wynand came to his feet. "Please Mr Clay," he protested, "my wife [Lulu Eugene] is behind that curtain dressing." Clay walked to the curtain. "Are you there Lulu?" he asked. "Yes Mr Clay." "Well," he added apologetically, "I'm sorry you heard me, but if you had to work with a mob of Australian @#%!" then followed another stream of adjectives – "you'd swear too."

At this time Harry Clay had a dapper little English manager, Jim Boyle. When a circuit went north on a Queensland tour, it was Boyle's job to write ahead and book local school of arts. The company arrived at one small town to find no booking had been made. That afternoon Harry Clay received Boyle's letter back from the dead letter office. It was addressed to "The Caretaker, School of Arts, Queensland." At that minute Boyle walked in swinging his cane. Clay abused him roundly till he ran out of breath. Boyle was crestfallen: "You know Mr Clay," he said. "I ought to be kicked." A happy smile lit Harry Clay's face. He jumped to his feet and delivered a mighty blow with his boot that Boyle was still rubbing days after ("Sometimes" ARG: 3 July 1959, n. pag.)

- Once an English comedian new to Australia came to [Harry Clay]. "Mr Clay," he said. "I'm Clark Time. I'm a comedian." Clay looked at his credentials and decided on the spot to give him an act at the Bridge [Theatre] the following night. The comedian was a little wary of Australian audiences. He warmed himself up with plenty of Dutch courage from a bottle before he went on stage. Result was he got his lines mixed while his voice came out in great croaks. Clay called him from the wings: "Mark Time. Are you ready? Quick March!" As the little Englishman was leaving the theatre, Harry Clay slipped a five pound note into his pocket ("Audiences" NP: 23 Sept. 1951, n. pag.).

- Harry Clay, King of Vaudeville stood on the footpath in Castlereagh St., opposite the old Tivoli Theatre. Outside the theatre he saw his top comedian, Ted Tutty. Clay rammed a couple of fingers into his mouth and whistled. Tutty went down on all fours and as the traffic clattered to a halt crawled slowly across the road. He came up to his employer and licked his hand. Clay patted him on the head. "You're a good pooch, Teddy." He said. "Be on time tonight, or I'll down you." Then he went his way. Even the policeman on duty at the corner of King and Castlereagh streets showed no surprise at these antics. Everyone in Sydney knew Harry Clay ("Audiences" NP: 23 Sept. 1951, n. pag.).

- One of the big tasks was to offer a forthcoming attraction that would ensure a full house at the next show. [Jimmy] Boyle had the job one night. He had heard Miss Annie Jones sing privately and decided to build her up..... "Thank you for your attendance," Boyle told the audience. "I want to say that next Friday night you will be given the honour of hearing the greatest soprano voice ever produced in the country." For ten minutes he kept the audience sitting while he built up Annie Jones' reputation. After the show some of the audience came back stage: "Is this fair dinkum?" they asked. "My oath, it is." Next Friday the theatre was packed. They all came to hear the new Australian nightingale. Miss Jones was the last act. She waddled on to the stage. There was deep silence. She opened her mouth. From it came a voice so thin the orchestra leader in the pit could hardly hear it. The audience stayed still for a minute. Then all hell broke loose. The mob raged and roared. Missiles of every description were thrown at the unhappy soprano. Boyle ducked out the stage door. He could still hear the shouting as he disappeared up King Street ("Sometimes" ARG: 3 July 1957, n. pag).

- Harry Clay was a shrewd showman. When travelling through the country with his shows you would see this significant figure at the front of the theatre or hall with a bookmaker's bag slung over his shoulder, taking the money and giving the necessary tickets. Harry trusted no man (Norman, 245).

- So much of this kind of variety went "bush" and was started by Harry Rickards. But there were travelling bush drama companies on the road. Harry Clay, himself a comic singer, had travelling companies before he started in Sydney. These travelling shows seldom played city dates, preferring to stay with the one horse towns where they were sure to be appreciated, and where they also had built up strong friendships with the folk who travelled miles though dusty roads to enjoy them (Norman, 130).

Anecdotes Arranged According to the Years Published

1910

- In the interval Mr Clay explained that his company had advertised to show the moving picture of The Funeral of the Late King Edward. He regretted that they would be unable to do so, because the film that had been sent to them was not quite up to his expectation. They had shown it at Longreach and he was not satisfied with it. An excellent film of the funeral of King Edward was now being shown in Rockhampton by Mr G. H. Birch. He [Mr Clay] had seen it, and it was a very fine picture. He had now been before the public for many years and had no desire to show anything that was not of the best description. Mr Clay's manly speech was loudly applauded (DB: 1 July 1910, 4).
- One of the attractive features of the performance was the fine rendition of the song "Ireland's Rights" by Mr. Harry Clay, who was in splendid voice. In the illustrated song "The Black Sheep Loves You Better Than Them All" Mr Clay was heard again to much advantage (DB: 6 July 1910, 4).

1911

- Early in 1911 on the tender putting out from Mackay to catch the boat for Brisbane were the members of the Fasola Vaudeville Co. and the Harry Clay Co. An old cripple approached Fasola for the few shillings he happened to need to enable him to get to his wife and children a little way out of Brisbane. Fasola had done exceptionally good business in Mackay, largely as a result of his management having secured the hall which Mr Clay for years had been in the habit of playing in. Hearing of his plight, Mr Clay immediately hunted up the ancient derelict, and promptly have him five times the amount that he wanted. A white man always is the generous, big-hearted Harry! (TT: May 1912, 29).

1912

- Mr Harry Sadler has often worked with Mr Harry Clay. One of the songs he used to sing was "Studying the Doctor's orders." In this get-up he had a swag on his back. Mr Clay says that sometimes when Mr Sadler was singing this he used to shout to him from behind the scenes:- "If I had my way, I'd strap that swag to your back, and make you carry it to Melbourne" (TT: Dec. 1912, 33).

1914

- After the Randwick races Harry Clay said to Jimmy Bain, "I won 250 pounds straight out on Portrush, and nipped them for 310 pounds on Simon Frisco in the Final Handicap. Those were the only two bets I had." Bain replied, "On Epsom Day they hit me to leg for 280 pounds. But on Monday, Gilgandra's win in the first race – the Shorts – was worth 600 pounds to me. As this left me a trifle over 300 pounds to the good, I just hopped into my car and told the driver to run me up the mountains for the rest of the day." And then the two of them – Mr Clay and Mr Bain – simultaneously woke up! (TT: Nov. 1914, 28).
- Harry Clay, one of the most popular of Australian managers, was the only newcomer during the day [to a Chasers day out on Sydney Harbour]. His subsequent initiation was carried out in great style. Mel Brewer, the baritone, who is now fulfilling an engagement under Mr Clay's management, was very solicitous as to his chief's welfare, and attended on him faithfully during the day... During [the] fishing operation, Clay showed us that he was no novice by the manner in which he handled and securely landed a very large fish. As a throwing expert, he was very prominent at times, and put in some clever work with banana and other peel (AV: 3 June 1914, n. pag.).

1915

- Harry Clay is the whole life now of the Watson's Bay ferry, and he has a good audience of "sports" listening to his after dinner stories (AV: 5 May 1915, 4).
- When tapped for a loan it was Harry Clay's custom, before responding, to lecture the applicant as to the evils of smoking and drinking. "Why," asked Mr Clay, "don't you give it up? It's no use telling me you can't. Look at me! I neither smoke nor drink. When I say a thing I do it. I've got no time for a man who hasn't got the backbone to stick to what he says." Once Mr Clay struck a performer, who instead of standing dejectedly before him until he'd got what he asked for, showed some inclination to argue the point. "But Mr Clay," he declared, "I've often heard you say that you were going to give up horseracing." he got no further. "Oh," reported Mr Clay impatiently; "betting's another thing altogether." Since then Mr Clay has been a lot more chary about giving "biters" the chance of touching what is in his case a very tender spot (TT: June 1915, 7).
- The other Saturday afternoon a hard-up looking old fellow sidled up to Harry Clay. "Can you tell me," he asked, "if a train leaves Sydney to-night for Albury?" I live there and want to get back. Mr Clay told him to get somebody to ring up the inquiry office at the railway Station. The deadbeat said he didn't know how he could manage this. So Mr Clay undertook to do the

ringing-up for him. As the two of them walked to where there was a telephone, a hundred yards away, the old fellow explained that in his early days he had been on the stage. "So you must have reformed," said Mr Clay, "and taken to honest toil instead. I rather like that. It shows there's SOME good in you. The pity is that more on the stage don't do the same." Mr Clay left him in the street, went into a shop where there was a telephone, and returned a few minutes later with the information that no train left until 7.30 the following night. His newly-made friend was horror-stricken. "Whatever shall I do," he wailed, "to see me over till then?" I don't know a soul here and I haven't got a penny. By this time Mr Clay had taken a tumble. "It's all right, old fellow!" he said. "You've beaten me. If you haven't been an actor – as you say you have – you certainly should be one. You played the part well. Here's half a crown, if that's any good to you. You deserve it. Only" – by this time Mr Clay had got a good whiff of his breath – "before you nibble at anybody else take a clove or two to get rid of the smell of it. You'll have a much better chance of pulling it off, if you do." The old man pocketed the half crown, smiled in acknowledgment of the tip with which it was accompanied, and the two of them separated – Mr Clay to meet, a few minutes later, some friends to whom he laughingly related the incident. "It was," he declared, "the most artfully-worked thing I've struck for many a day" (TT: July 1915, 7).

- Arthur Morley sang "The Singer was Irish" at Harry Clay's last week. This so moved an old "Tad" in the front row of the stalls that he sent around "a small gift for the singer." It was bright sovereign. On being told that the song could not be sung again in the second half, the old fellow signified his intention of being present [the next week]. But here's where Harry Clay gets his dirty work. He is busy rehearsing all the Irish songs he can think of. "I'll be the first on the programme, too," declares Harry, "and see if I can hit the old fellow for a tenner" (AV: 11 Aug. 1915, 17).

- Those young fellows – Harry Clay and Arthur Morley – are always having a "go" at one another. The latter, coming off stage after his turn at the Bridge Theatre the other evening, said: "Say, Harry, the audience are so used to giving me money for my wonderful efforts that somebody just threw up sixpence on the stage." "That's right old man," was the rejoinder. "They'll throw more than that before the finish." "I can bear that," was Morley's reply. "I'm the best looking singer for my age in Australia." "Well spare me days," said the white-haired one. "You don't like yourself! Look at me – my beauty is not artificial. I need no grease paint to make me look pretty." The last squib was too much for Arthur, so he discreetly withdrew from the controversy (AV: 18 Aug. 1915, 12).

- Harry Clay was waiting on the side of the stage, looking rather anxious the other evening, during the farce. When asked what the matter was he replied that owing to him mislaying the stage money they were using his good notes: at the time there was a fair amount being used. It was no wonder that Harry was keeping an eye on them (AV: 8 Dec. 1915, n. pag.)

1916

- When Harry Clay walked in on the disappointed orator (who was airing his version of why he wouldn't go up north, and how much he was worth to Clay), there was something doing. And the bombastic one got what he deserved – his walking ticket (AV: 12 Jan. 1916, n. pag.).

- Harry Clay was recently presented with a framed photograph of the picnic group. Conductor, Percy Davis, on behalf of the committee, handed the gift over to the silvery-haired one, who responded in a cordial and appreciative speech. The good feeling existing between the genial Clay and his employees is most marked (AV: 12 Apr. 1916, 5).

- "You've had some good wins," was the remark of a friend to Harry Clay, respecting the latter's racecourse experiences. "Yes," Mr Clay replied, 'with becoming emphasis; "but they've had some better wins from me" (TT: Nov. 1916, 54).

1917

- Going back a few years, it is brought to mind that in those days Gio Angelo, then working for J. C. Bain, was receiving six pounds a week to work in [the] first and second part. When asked to double with Harry Clay's Newtown show at half salary, he readily agreed, but the Australian Variety Artists Association, then much more powerful than it is now, refused to let [him] work under full salary, and Mr Clay had to fall in with their views (AV: 23 May 1917, n. pag.).

- Jake Mack and Bert Le Blanc were both seen doubled up in Newtown last week, when an old lady came up and asked them what was the matter, and obtaining no answer was just about to call a cab and send them to hospital when Jake Mack said he was alright, but was only laughing. He had been listening to one of Harry Clay's funny stories (AV: 27 June 1917, 3).

- With Clay's ruling the roost at Newtown, the Fuller circuit decided to enter the competition. Fullers took over the majestic [later to become the Elizabethan] and the battle for audiences began. The night the Fullers opened found Clay's almost empty. Harry told Maurice [Chenoweth] to do something about it. On the Monday a full-page ad appeared in the Newtown Daily. All it said was: "From Clay you came, and to Clay you will return." The next day Fullers took over the Newtown Daily. Its ad read: "No matter how full you are, we're always Fuller" ("Audiences," NP: 23 Sept. 1951, n. pag.).

- Ben Fuller owned the favourite running in the Fourteen-two Handicap at Kensington on July 18. He failed to get a place. "The horse's bad showing was, indeed, the disappointment of the day. Among Ben's heaviest backers was – Harry Clay! But Harry got it all back – and a trifle more – by Agathon's nose-victory over Balanto in the next race (TT: Aug. 1917, n. pag.).

1918

- Said Harry Clay, approaching the hulking six-footer who outside the vestibule of the princess (Sydney) was cursing and threatening everybody within hearing, "You're a terrible fellow! You must have a graveyard of your own somewhere." The conflict that followed was quick and decisive. It wasn't until Mr Clay had picked him up and sat him on the footpath with his to a support that he partly recovered consciousness. His first words were: "Where's Jack?" Jack was a companion to who he had handed some fish he was eating as a preliminary to the easy job he thought he had before him. But Jack had vanished. Nor was it long before he was followed, sadly and sorely, by the man who a few minutes previously was going to eat the whole theatre (TT: Nov. 1918, 24).

1920

- Harry Clay, the proprietor of the Princess and the Newtown Bridge Theatres, says he is not frothing for it, but if Jack Munro put on an old Buffers' competition at the stadium, he will be a competitor, and believe me whoever beats Harry will know there has been a cyclone around somewhere. He can hit like a mule kicking (AV: 1 Apr. 1920, 3).
- Among his acquaintances Mr Clay still keeps up his reputation as a humorist. A performer whose weakness he knew was the other night humming in his hearing "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." "Yes," interrupted Mr Clay; "blowing them from the top of a pewter" (TT: Sept. 1920, 3).

1921

- Early in 1920, with business booming, Harry Clay took a stroke. He was put to bed in his Petersham home. It was hard, with his tremendous vitality to stay in bed. He gave his coloured vocabulary full play. In desperation, he got up and went to the theatre. To one of the cast he said "You know I think it's time I got off this earth." The man was startled. "Why Mr Clay?" "Because" and Harry Clay emitted a stream of well-chosen adjectives – "when I walked past the news boy outside, I heard him say, 'there goes that old so-and-so Harry Clay.' Now I don't mind being called a so-and-so, but I'm damned if I like that 'old' business ("Audiences" NP: 23 Sept. 1951, n. pag.)

1923

- Mr Clay looked a very ill man as the writer, the other evening, passed him on his way into the princess. In progress at that moment was a burlesque of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Poor old Tom was expiring under the flagellations of the brutal, murderous Simon Legree. But Tom still had a grasp in him. "My body may belong to you, Massa;" he gurgled; "but my soul belongs to - Harry Clay!" Certainly there are thousands – and more than thousands – who must feel that, whatever their after-life may be, this indeed would have been an unhappy one except for - Harry Clay (TT: July 1923, 17).