

WALLY EDWARDS

Perhaps best known for his long association with Harry Clay, Wally Edwards started his vaudeville career as a singer in the 1890s. He toured with Clay's Australian Eleven company in 1897. The following year the pair were also members of J. L Travers' Continental Vaudeville Company. They continued their association in 1902 when Edwards began the first of 14 annual tours of the state under Clay's management, initially as a performer and later as a manager. He was also engaged as circuit manager for Clay's South-West NSW line between 1916 and 1919. He continued to perform as an entertainer, either in the role of singer or interlocutor, for most of his career.

Wally Edwards' early life and career remains to date somewhat of a mystery. It is possible that he initially came from north Queensland, where the name W. Edwards is noted in relation to an amateur minstrel company, the Black Diamond Minstrel and Variety Co, which performed around the Charters Towers region (ca.1894-1895). W. Edwards, in the advertising for these shows, was apparently both a singer and music director (NM: 13 Nov. 1895, 1). The first accurately documented appearance of Wally Edwards to date is, however, in 1896, when he was engaged to play the Sydney suburbs with Harry Clay's Australian Eleven Minstrel and Variety Company. After five months, from ca. October 1896 to march 1897, the troupe played a season at the Gaiety Theatre, Sydney. The following year he and Clay both toured through Queensland with J. L. Travers' Continental Vaudeville Company. In addition to his own solo turns Edwards frequently performed duets with Clay.

G A I E T Y T H E A T R E
Castlereagh-street, Sydney.
TO-NIGHT, TO-NIGHT,
and every SATURDAY and MONDAY NIGHTS,
of the
AUSTRALIAN ELEVEN
MINSTREL and VARIETY COMPANY (originally),
but now a Double Team (22 in number), after Five Months
Success in the Suburbs, and now the Rage.
ALL ARTISTS. ALL ARTISTS.

Andy Blanchard	and others.	Kate Henry
Dick Davis		Violet Bishop
Wally Edwards		Rose Fanning
Gus Franks		Annie Gray
Tel Sutton		Maud Fanning
Harry Carlton		Bertha Sutton
Harry Clay		Penelope Cole
James Driscoll		Jillie Florence
George Rocks		Alice Lavigne.
Essie Clay		Ethel Smith.

Efficient Orchestra.
General Admission, Silver Coin.
Orchestra Chairs, 1s.

Sydney Morning Herald 13 Mar. (1897), 2.

Edwards' first engagement with Clay's minstrel and vaudeville company was in 1902 when he was employed as a baritone and endman for the entrepreneur's second tour of Queensland. The troupe at this time was billed as Harry Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company. Edwards specialised in illustrated songs, gaining a reputation in the northern state as one of the company's most popular personalities. Indeed he toured the state annually up until 1907, followed by a tour in 1909, and then each year between 1912 and 1918. During the last five tours he was employed as both tour manager and/or business manager.

Around 1909 Edwards was engaged as the interlocutor and singer at the Amphitheatre (Syd). The *Theatre* magazine refers to one of his performances that year: "Wally Edwards, the portly interlocutor at the Amphitheatre has a singing voice containing the penetrating qualities of a shell fired from a battleship... It may have only been a coincidence; but one night recently, when his vocal chords were working at high pressure, he filled the Amphitheatre with such an amount of sound that a loose brick in the far end of the building flew fairly out and half-way across the street, and narrowly missed killing a red-headed policeman as it fell" (Nov. 1909, 59).

Back on Clay time by 1912, Edwards continued to perform as an entertainer, turning to management duties in 1916 when Harry Clay began his NSW South-western regional circuit. The *Theatre* records at this time that "Mr Edwards has so often toured Queensland with Mr Clay, from year to year, that he's as well known up that way as the principal himself. Evidently Mr Edwards' singing agrees with him, because he keeps so broadening out that, if he continues in the same manner, Mr Clay will have to give him a special stage all to himself. Slide and patriotic songs always were Mr Edwards' speciality" (May 1916, n. pag.).

Edwards took on the management duties for the South-western line (primarily the Blue Mountains and mid-West area) up until 1919 in addition to his Queensland tour duties - having assumed the tour manager role from 1914. From around 1918, however, Edwards had all but retired as a performer, returning to the stage in guest appearances only. In July 1919, he was reported to have been in a bad state of health for some time, being given a benefit at the Princess "by his life-long friend Harry Clay" that month (AV: 18 July 1919, 3). He returned to the stage for Joe Archer's benefit in 1920, however.

Although there are no references regarding Edwards' career between 1920 and 1927, it is more than likely that he remained in a management position for Harry Clay on either one of his suburban or country circuits, or perhaps for

some period of time at the Bridge Theatre. In 1927, two years after Clay's death, he was recalled by the company to take on another Queensland tour, with headline act Nellie Kollé.

Highly respected within the industry for his experience and reliability as a vaudeville manager, Edwards was also considered one of the finest local bass-baritones around. The *Theatre* wrote of him: "Wally is as robust of voice as he is of person - which is saying a deal. When he attacks a high note the atmosphere fairly vibrates and trembles like a hysterical girl who has seen a ghost." (Nov. 1909, 59). Bert Howard also recalled Edwards having given him the advice which led to his instigating the highly successful Sunday film screenings at the old Gaiety Theatre in Castlereagh St.

FURTHER REFERENCE:

Djubal, Clay. "[Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930.](#)" (1998), v. pags.

Last updated: 23/06/2012

First published in: Clay Djubal, "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company." MA Thesis, U of Qld (1998), Appendix E.

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:

Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/practitioners-e/>