

## HARRY RICKARDS' TIVOLI THEATRES LTD (1912-1929)

Hugh D. McIntosh headed a syndicate which bought the Tivoli circuit in 1912. Between 1914 and 1921 the company focused on lavish musical comedies and Follies-style revues. The financial strain came to a climax in 1921 when a transport strike crippled attendances at the Melbourne season of *Chu Chin Chow* and McIntosh was forced to hand over control to Harry G. Musgrove. Four years later J. C. Williamsons took over (trading as Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville). The company's last remaining theatre (the Sydney Tivoli) was sold in 1929.

[This entry is an overview only. For more extensive coverage of the Tivoli operations between 1912 and 1929 see the "Further Reference" section below]

Following the death of Harry Rickards in 1911, Hugh D. McIntosh formed a syndicate that bought the Tivoli circuit from the entrepreneur's heirs. The Sydney Tivoli could only be leased, however, as Rickards's will demanded that it remain in his family until the last of his children had died. Re-branded Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatres, the new organisation began operating in 1912, with McIntosh as its general manager. Despite having no previous experience in variety theatre entertainment, McIntosh had nevertheless developed his own entrepreneurial skills as a sports promoter. One of his first changes was to rename Melbourne's Grand Opera House the Tivoli. In Adelaide, the old Tivoli was turned into a cinema and renamed the Star Theatre, with the company leasing in 1913 a new venue, Rickards' Tivoli Theatre, in its place.

Although McIntosh and his board of directors initially maintained Rickards' philosophy of importing the world's leading stars, they soon made changes to the typical Tivoli vaudeville programme, producing many lavish musical comedies and Follies-style revues. While the Tivoli organisation was not the first to stage a revue in Australia (see *Come Over Here*), it quickly established itself as the leading purveyor of such entertainment (see note below). In this respect, the company was forced to make the switch to revue during the First World War, when it became increasingly difficult to bring overseas acts to the country.

A little over a year after taking over the Tivoli operations, McIntosh raised the ire of Australia's two leading variety industry journals, *The Theatre Magazine* and *Australian Variety*, when he took up the position of managing director of the *Sunday Times* and began using that newspaper to highlight the Tivoli's shows at the expense of other local variety operations.<sup>1</sup> Matters came to a head in early 1916, when McIntosh instigated legal action against *Australian Variety* owner Martin C. Brennan over an article published in the *American Billboard* magazine, which he believed Brennan had written. This piece supposedly gave an inaccurate account of McIntosh's financial stability. Although the issue was resolved in early 1916, both *Australian Variety* and the *Theatre* continued their attacks on McIntosh and the quality of the Tivoli programmes up until at least the end of 1917 (Djugal, 'What Oh Tonight,' 94-96).



Source: National Library of Australia



**Tivoli Theatre, Brisbane**

Source: Pictures Queensland, State Library of Queensland

McIntosh was also unpopular with many artists within the variety industry, and found himself in court of several occasions defending himself against writs taken out for various breaches of contract or for failing to honour promises of employment. In the end he was forced to accept the unionisation of the industry, notably through the Australian Vaudeville Artists' Association, the Musicians' Union and the Actors' Federation, although he was not opposed to making his opposition clearly evident. Interestingly McIntosh was in 1917 one of the founders of the Theatrical Proprietors' and Managers' Association (the forerunner of today's Live Performance Australia), serving as one of its first vice presidents.

<sup>1</sup> This may explain why Tivoli advertisements, and hence reviews, disappeared from the *Sydney Morning Herald* for almost two and a half years, beginning January 1913.

Following the outbreak of war, McIntosh found it increasingly difficult to import acts for the Tivoli and was eventually forced to begin producing revues, with largely local performers. Although his Tivoli Follies was enormously successful, touring Australia and New Zealand for two and a half years, the costs involved became a drain on his resources. In this respect he was unable to compete with organisations such as the Fullers and Harry Clay which began finding much success with low-cost revusical. An example of this can be seen in his attempt to expand into the Brisbane variety market in 1918 on a permanent basis. This venture, which involved building the city's first Tivoli Theatre<sup>2</sup> was an attempt to wrestle audiences away from the Empire Theatre, by then managed by the Fullers. The new theatre, which also included a roof-top garden for more intimate entertainments, continued to present a "higher" class of variety – including big budget musical comedies and revues. McIntosh's new venture did not find things easy, however, as the Empire had become very popular with Brisbanites under the management of Ted Holland and Percy St John. The Fullers' mix of vaudeville and revusicals at a lower admission price also meant that the Tivoli struggled to compete for a number of years, and indeed on several occasions was closed for varying lengths of time.

The policy of staging musical comedies and revues continued after the war, with the Tivoli producing a number of significant works, including *The Lilac Domino*, C. J. De Garis and Reginald Stoneham's musical *F. F. F.*, and the first Australian production of Oscar Asche's *Chu Chin Chow*. Frank Van Straten records in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, however, that *Chu Chin Chow* was a financial disaster for the Tivoli. "With characteristic extravagance," writes Van Straten, "McIntosh brought camels from central Australia to Melbourne... [The production] opened on Boxing Day in 1920, when Melbourne was crippled by a transport strike. McIntosh unsuccessfully tried to deliver patrons to the theatre privately by bus" but was eventually forced to sell the production to J. C. Williamson's due to the financial losses incurred (348).

In 1921, McIntosh handed over control of the company to Harry G. Musgrove, but retained a seat on the board along with a significant parcel of shares. Although the company continued to trade as Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres Ltd, its advertised billing generally indicated that the direction was by (or in association with) Harry G. Musgrove Theatres. Musgrove initially attempted to exhibit pictures in the Sydney and Melbourne Tivoli theatres, but this venture was less than successful, due largely to their unsuitability as cinemas. He then returned to staging vaudeville with the assistance of his cousin Jack Musgrove. Some four years later, J. C. Williamson's took control of the circuit, operating it as Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville. Interestingly, Musgrove had been using the "celebrity vaudeville" descriptive to advertise his own shows as early as December 1921 (see advertisement below right). While the organisation trading as Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatres Ltd continued to retain ownership of most of its original theatres up until the late 1920s, it was no longer involved in the production of entertainment. The company sold the Sydney Tivoli to a London syndicate in 1929.

### **SEE ALSO**

- [Harry Rickards](#)
- [Tivoli Frolics](#)
- [Con-Paul Theatres](#) (1931-34)
- [Hugh D. McIntosh](#)
- [Harry G. Musgrove](#)
- [Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville](#) (1924-31)
- [Tivoli Circuit Australia](#) (1934-44)
- [Tivoli Theatres](#) (1944-66)

### **HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS**

1. Interestingly McIntosh and the Tivoli organisation played no part in developing the Australian one-act musical comedy (aka revusical) that established itself as the country's most popular variety genre for more than a decade, beginning ca. 1915-1916. Although several leading revusical troupes, for example, the George Wallace Revue Company and Jim Gerald Revue Company, are known to have toured their shows on the Tivoli circuit, they did so only in the late 1920s, when the company was controlled by J. C. Williamson's. A number of leading Australian performers engaged by McIntosh, including George Edwards, also played a part in the revusical's early success, but only after they had the Tivoli organisation.

### **FURTHER REFERENCE**

"Behind the Scenes in Vaudeville: Actors Claims Damages." AA: 25 Mar. (1915), 8

"Congratulated by Tivoli Directors." TT: Dec. (1914), 43.

Cunneen, Chris. "[McIntosh, Hugh Donald \(1876 - 1942\)](#)." ADB:

Djubal, Clay. "[Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatres](#)." *AustLit* (2008).

--- "What Oh Tonight: The Methodology Factor and Pre-1930s Variety Theatre (2005), Ch. 6.

"Hugh D. McIntosh - A Volcanic Personality." TT: Oct. (1912), 28.

<sup>2</sup> The Brisbane Tivoli was situated in Albert St, between Ann and Adelaide streets - adjacent to where King George Square is now situated.

- "Lawsuit to Untangle Tivoli Tangle." E: 4 July (1928), 45.
- "Nothing But Vaudeville!: The Harry G. Musgrove Policy." TT: Dec. (1921), 26.
- Ryan, Delyse. "Brisbane Theatre During World War I" (2000).
- "[Tivoli Theatres: Ephemera Collection Finding Aid](#)." Performing Arts Programs and Ephemera (PROMPT). National Library of Australia. [sighted 17/02/2015]
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- Van Straten, Frank. *Huge Deal – The Fortunes and Follies of Hugh D. McIntosh* (2004).
- *Tivoli* (2003).
- "[Hugh D. McIntosh 1876-1942](#)." *Live Performance Australia: Hall of Fame* (2007) [sighted 6/02/2011]
- "Vaudeville Innovation - The Tivoli Follies, A" TT: Jan. (1915), 48.
- "Vaudeville Venture: Hugh D. McIntosh the Principal, A." STP: 2 Mar. (1913), 1.

**Theatre Royal**

Lessee -- J. C. Williamson, Ltd.  
 Sub Lessee -- Musgrove's Theatre, Ltd.  
 S.A. Control -- A. M. Miller.

Under the Patronage and in the presence  
 of HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR,  
 LADY WEGGALL, and MITY, and the  
 SON THE LORD MAYOR, LADY  
 MAYORER, and Party.

COMMENCING  
**TO-MORROW at 2.30.**  
**HARRY G. MUSGROVE**  
 announces the presentation of

**Celebrity  
 Vaudeville**

The Managerial Policy will be to present  
 Vaudeville of an international star  
 standard in settings of superior beauty,  
 and in the accompaniment of music of  
 sparkling quality.

**TO-MORROW**  
 Com. at the Matinee,  
 Harry G. Musgrove will have pleasure in  
 presenting on his opening bill your old  
 friend Mr.

**CLAUDE  
 DAMPIER**

"THE PROFESSIONAL IDIOT,"  
 Supported by his charming assumption,  
**EILDA ATTENBORO.**

Since leaving Australia Mr. Dampier has  
 won an international reputation. He is  
 unusual, genial, with a dash of that is  
 ever so drill.

*Register (Adelaide) 9 Dec. (1921), 2.*

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