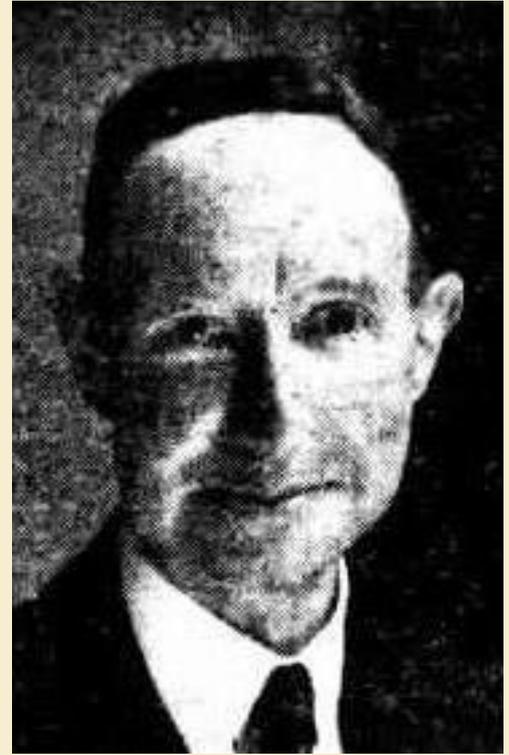


Arthur Phillips Hemsley - the London dude...



Arthur Hemsley was born 18 August 1881 at 2 Alma Place, Margate, Kent. He was the fifth son to actor and scenery artist, Durham-born William Hemsley and his Welsh wife Fanny. By 1885 the Hemsley family had relocated to Battersea, London, where they had two daughters, Ivy M. Hemsley (1885) and Grace F. Hemsley (1888). Here they settled at 1 Comyn Road, Battersea. By 1885 the family had moved to 1 Comyn Road, Battersea. Arthur was baptized on 1st January 1885 at 3 years along with sister Ivy who had just been born, at Finsbury Park, Islington. On 25th March 1889 he started Belleville Road School, aged 7, still living at Comyn Road.

Both parents were involved in theatre. Early in his life, when his parents were moving, young Arthur was put in a basket which just escaped being taken into the theatre. There were nine children in the family. When he was eighteen months old he crawled on to stage one night - in the days of gas-jets - and blew out half the footlights.

Little is known about Arthur's teenage years. At age 20 in 1901 he was living in Ecclesall Bierlow in Yorkshire, listed as an 'artist and sculptor.' By 1906 Arthur was already known on the British variety circuit in an act with Elsa Brüll. They appeared at the summer public concert at Jephson Gardens, Leamington in June that year. In March 1907 Arthur, aged 25, married Elsa in Greater London. The pair set up home with Elsa's father, Anton Brüll, living at St-John-At-Hackney, London by the 1911 census, both Arthur and Elsa listed as artists, but Elsa's father died in October that year forcing a move.

Arthur's wife and variety partner, Elsa Brüll, was born in 1879 in Wood Green, Middlesex. Her father was Anton Brüll (1837-1911) and her mother was Maria A. Brüll who was born in Woolwich, Kent. Anton Brüll was born in Vienna and became a naturalized British citizen in 1890, having been living in Tottenham since at least 1881. By 1911 he was living at St-John-At-Hackney, where he died in October that year. Elsa had two siblings, an older brother Joseph Brüll, born in 1873, and an older sister, Katie Brüll, born in 1874.

While still quite young Hemsley became stage manager for legendary actress/manager Sarah Thorne at Theatre Royal, Margate. From there he went onto a stock company at the Grand Theatre, Islington while simultaneously appearing in a number of Dickens' plays. Hemsley's depth of talent was noticed early as he was in demand in character parts by several Drury Lane companies.

Hemsley had some lessons in sculpting during his teenage years, but relied mainly on innate talent. His artistic sculpting talent is rumoured to have been promising, yet theatre won out as a medium for his artistic expression. His older brother Harry Hemsley, in whose shadow Arthur lived, was already the more famous of the two, having played a part in Sir Arthur Sullivan's opera *Ivanhoe*, which premiered at the Royal English Opera House on 31st January 1891 for a consecutive run of 155 performances. Harry Hemsley is possibly best remembered for his stellar radio career with the BBC's *The Ovaltineys*.

Chances are Arthur Hemsley might have remained in serious theatre, but for a natural comedic talent, a talent which over time would see him star abroad away from his famous older brother. It was in musical comedy that Arthur Hemsley found his calling. He took the public by storm at the Pavilion and Oxford theatres in London where he teamed up with George 'Scratcher' Ross, for several years, often writing his own material.

Almost immediately after their marriage they became billed as 'Brull & Hemsley.' Although advertisements exist of a season from June 1906 at Jephson Gardens, Leamington summer concerts where the two 'met a receptive audience,' prior to their marriage.

They had a successful sketch routine called 'Fun in a Music Shop' doing the rounds from 1910 until at least 1914 in Britain and later a sketch called 'The Knut, the Girl and the Egg' (also known as 'The Knut and the Girl') from late 1914. This routine is in two parts, firstly a meeting at the seaside between the two, and later in a shop, where the holiday flirtation has a happy ending.

Australia was still over the horizon when Hemsley began performing overseas. Britain's empire was at its peak and thirsty for the fares of London. Hemsley, combining travel, adventure and acting joined the Hyman's Company and set off for Africa. He made no less than nine tours with Hyman's before being snapped up by the South African Theatre Trust where he was in high demand and received favourable reviews. Together with Phil Smith and Victor Couriet Hemsley played for several years under famous George Edwardes.



Zanzibar off the east-African coast later became the venue to enjoy Hemsley's theatrical brilliance. Zanzibar was an outpost of the British Empire at the time. Hemsley later recalled: "I was throughout my life mindful of critics and reacted with a modicum of angst against unfavourable reviews." [There were scarcely any]. However, while performing in Zanzibar Hemsley noticed a piece in Arabic writing featuring his name. Convinced that it was an unflattering review he wrestled with the clipping until one day he decided to have it translated. Hemsley was near the end of his tour and relieved to find that the clipping was in fact an advertisement for a laundry, claiming to handle the laundry needs for stage star Arthur Hemsley.

Rather than returning to England, Hemsley continued his career under Maurice Bandmann's management in India. He crisscrossed the subcontinent for several years playing to sell-out audiences in Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Cochin. Hemsley spoke, in *Australian Variety* June 17, 1917, of the stifling heat and humidity during India's monsoon season causing him to lose a stone in weight. The same article mentions Hemsley's 'military rejection papers' and how these permits unhindered travel during the war. Hemsley was thirty-six years old at war's end.

He also toured the antipodes twice. Brull and Hemsley joined the Australian variety circuit in 1913 and again in 1918. Their acceptance with the Australian audience was instant on both occasions.

It is fair to state that Australia knew nothing of Arthur Hemsley prior to his first arrival. However, it was not long after he first went on stage Down Under before his fame spread. The double act Brull & Hemsley quickly became a household name. They received rave reviews in trade journals such as *Everyone's*; *Theatre Magazine* and *Australian Variety*, the latter even featuring them on page one, 13 June 1917.

"Like good wine, Brull and Hemsley improve with age. This most entertaining costume comedy couple have on the Fuller's circuit for some three or four years now, and have given us a big variety of changes. Every act is full of merit and both performers are outstanding in their work. It is very gratifying to speak of performers in such terms of these young English people, for they are two of the best it has ever been our lot to meet - a sentiment that will be re-echoed by many friends." *Australian Variety*, 29 January, 1920.

(Hemsley's name was often misspelt throughout his career, with the addition of an extra "L".)

Indeed, they were also in much demand in New Zealand...

"Mr Arthur Hemsley, who will make an additional feature on the programme at His Majesty's Theatre next Monday night, is probably the finest exponent off the London "dude"

character studies that has ever been booked by the enterprising Fuller firm for the delegations of their Antipodean patrons. Mr. Hemsley, who, with his talented and dainty partner, Miss Elsa Brull has been delighting Mr. Ben T. Fuller's Australasian audiences for the best part of two years, has been secured for this short season at His Majesty's only after a very special arrangements with the Fuller vaudeville firm. The season be limited to three nights only. Seats may be reserved at Upton's without extra, charge. The prices for circle and stalls have been fixed at 1/7 and 1/-." - *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 October 1918.



It was Elsa that would have suggested Australia as a place to live, having already lived in Victoria aged 21 in 1900. After marrying Arthur she arrived again in Sydney, Australia aged 34, having departed London on the ship *Makarini* and arriving in Sydney on 19th June 1913.

They settled permanently in Australia in 1924, Their ship record lists their intended address as 1 Queens Avenue, Rushcutter Bay, Sydney. They had made other tours of Australia. Indeed, looking at travel arrangement documents, the Hemsley's lived for most of the time after 1918 in Australia, only occasionally returning to England. For example, Arthur and Elsa's daughter, June Veronica Hemsley, was born in New South Wales in 1922. She married American one Clive Whitcombe in 1941 and died in Mississippi, USA, in 1993, aged 71.

While it is stated that the Hemsley's emigrated by departing Liverpool and arriving in Albany, Western Australia on 19th May 1924 on the ship *Suevic*, the decision would have been made earlier. Arthur and Elsa did not abruptly return to England after their '1918 tour' but remained first in Brisbane and later Sydney on and off until permanency set in. Arthur was then in his early forties.

THE BRISBANE CONNECTION



Hemsley landed a part with *The Courtiers* by 1917. Proprietor/producer John N. McCallum travelled to Sydney and Melbourne in search of a new resident company. When he arrived back in Brisbane in July, he announced that he had secured the *Courtiers Costume Comedy Company*. The famous company debuted at the Cremorne Theatre on 4 August 1917. The stellar cast including well known stage luminaries was further augmented throughout the year-long season by Arthur and Elsa Hemsley.

HEMSLEY BECOMES A FREEMASON

Towards the end of his tenure with *The Courtiers* at the Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane Hemsley had been introduced to several of Brisbane's Freemasons. Some were part of *The Courtiers*, others stage crew and fans from the audience. Told by actors Hugh Huxham and Les Warton that it was possible to attend a Masonic Lodge during the day Hemsley made an application to join the Fraternity. With the aforementioned friends from theatre as proposer and seconder Hemsley was initiated into Thespian Lodge No. 73, Grand Lodge of Queensland on 4 June, 1920.

The event took place in the Alice Street Masonic Temple with "a goodly portion of Freemasons from the theatrical fraternity in attendance", according to the minute books. Hemsley's progression in Freemasonry was fast. By 11 August the same year Hemsley was a Master Mason which entitled him to visit Masonic lodges all over Australia and beyond. The Hemsley's, at the time, lived on the top storey of Netherway Boarding House, 193 North Quay, corner of Herschel Street, a mere stone throw away from famous actor and fellow Freemason, Claude Holland.



As was often the lot of actors in the 1920s a transient lifestyle was not only expected but accepted. To this end Arthur Hemsley travelled extensively throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

By 1924 a Sydney article chart Hemsley's travels..."Brull & Hemsley, after a most successful engagement at the Arcadia Theatre, Chatswood, Sydney, leave for Adelaide where they will perform under the direction of Williamson's vaudeville. A month later the Hemsley's are performing at St. Kilda in Melbourne." Their hectic schedule also saw them perform in Hobart, Bernie and Launceston as well as various venues in Western Australia. In 1923 the *Perth Mirror* newspaper feature Hemsley as a female impersonator in a classic stock role as The Dame, which purportedly had audiences "crying with laughter."

The classic role was repeatedly brought to life at the Tivoli in Sydney, Unity Theatre in Perth, in Port Pirie, Kalgoorlie as well as at the Shaftesbury Theatre in Perth. Outside his paid engagements Hemsley was a generous man towards charities and performed either on his own or with his wife for several fund raising events. Atypical of these was a well-attended Blue Triangle event for the Perth Y.W.C.A. in October, 1923 raising "a princely sum to secure its charitable work continues in these hard times," according to the *West Australian*.

RADIO ARRIVES IN AUSTRALIA

The first radio broadcast in Australia occurred in January 1924. Towards the end of the decade it was more widespread. Indeed, by the early 1930s it had grown to be a strong competitor with live theatre. The fact was not lost of many of the practitioners who sought employment and future careers in this new medium. Once restricted to theatre audiences serious stage actors, comedians and singers found new fame. Hemsley quickly adjusted to the changing



lit, but a recognisable prop, not unlike George Burns and his cigars.

By 1936, the *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* in Parramatta featured a lengthy article announcing Hemsley's first National Radio tour for the ABC, a sojourn which took him to all capital cities and many regional areas. The tour began January 15, 1936 and took several months to complete. Indeed, no sooner was Hemsley back in Sydney before the national broadcaster in New Zealand asked him to reprise his Australian tour.

Hemsley also worked in many classic Australian radio serials, hosted popular tunes programs and occasional interviews with former colleagues from theatre. Some of his radio work has survived to this day e.g. *ADVENTURES*



OF BOBBY FILBERT Series: 143354. Summary: A comedy of the misdoings of a lovable youngster. Contributors: Arthur Hemsley (Script writer). Cast: Arthur Hemsley (Smudge, Bertie, Mrs. Wiggs), Grace Mackie (Auntie), Arthur Carr jnr (Bobby Filbert). Episode duration: 8 mins Broadcast details: c1933- ; Monday to Friday on 2UE at 7.22pm and later at 7.00pm. **NFSA Holdings:** Eps 1-4. Hemsley's versatility as a script writer saw him equally at ease with raucous comedy on the one hand and hard-nosed crime shows on the other.

Cinema was yet to be conquered by versatile Hemsley by the late 1940s. Elsa Brull had by now retired from show business altogether and is listed as "Home Duties" in the electoral rolls from 1943 onwards.

FORGETTABLE FORAY INTO MOVIES

By the early 1950s Hemsley, the consummate actor, was offered a small part in an Australian movie, playing an old man, or, as the credit reads, 'a bar fly.' Sadly, the movie, *The Glenrowan Affair*, directed by Australia's answer to Ed Wood, Rupert Kathner, convinced Hemsley to stick with theatre and radio, the latter medium he had mastered and perfected since the early 1930s.

Kathner and his former barmaid partner Alma Brooks were known as the Bonnie and Clyde team of Australian movie making. The critic for *Sun Herald* wrote of *The Glenrowan Affair*... "This near-unendurable stretch of laboured, amateurish film-making is something that the developing Australian film industry will wish to forget, swiftly and finally. A film made on a shoestring (as this obviously was) could still achieve a little crude vitality. This one isn't even robust enough for the unconscious humour (and there is plenty of that) to be really enjoyable. The script is dreary, the photography more often out of-focus than in, the editing is unimaginative and the acting petrified. It would be misplaced kindness, in fact, to try and ferret out a single redeeming feature."

Many years on the road had caught up with the Hemsley's. They both longed for permanency in the city in which they had, after all, spent most of their time in Australia - Sydney. To this end they rented a house at 43 Muston Street, Mosman in 1936. The following year they purchased their final home at 1 Cross Street, in the same leafy suburb and remained there until Arthur's death, aged 73 in 1954. Elsa Brull outlived her husband by some years, passing away in 1961, aged 82. Both are buried at Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.

EPILOGUE

Brull and Hemsley would arguably have succeeded wherever they went. Evidence suggests they conquered many countries on several continents during the peak of their fame. Their professional background, having done most of the hard yards back in England prior to touring, held them in good stead and secured not only steady employment in the antipodes, but enduring popularity by theatre goes across the width and breadth of Australasia. Many, due to the tyranny of distance, only discovered Arthur Hemsley through his radio broadcasts, others enjoyed him in person. His contribution to Australian theatre in general and vaudeville in particular is long remembered.

Stig R. Hokanson