

BERT HOWARD

Born in The Rocks area of Sydney in 1879, Bert "The Droll" Howard went on to become one of Sydney's leading B circuit vaudeville managers and entrepreneurs - a group headed by Harry Clay and consisting of others such as Jacky Landow, Frank Reis and Harry Sadler. After starting out as a newsboy at Circular Quay he later became interested in the fight game, trying his hand as a lightweight boxer, before eventually turning to management. One of his earliest managerial successes was in helping Tommy Dillon win at a tournament at Waterloo. As a young man Howard was taken under the wing of Harry Rickards. He initially sold song books at the Tivoli Theatre, and was later employed as Rickards' office-assistant and valet. He left Rickards after twelve years and attempted a career in vaudeville, finding regular employment with Harry Clay's newly formed company for some five years (ca. 1901-1906). He is also believed to have toured through Queensland with Clay on at least one occasion. Howard later undertook similar employment with J. C. Bain for a further five years or so. Between around 1910 and 1916 Howard worked the suburbs of Sydney as a film exhibitor with Humbert Pugliese,¹ while also continuing to be involved in boxing management and promotion. In later years Howard claimed that he and Pugliese were the first to introduce moving pictures to many of Sydney's suburbs. During that time he is also known to have been employed for some two years as a stage manager for the Fullers and as a manager for both Dr Richard Rowe (magician/spiritualist) and Norwood (an American hypnotist). Taking the advice of Clay's manager Wally Edwards, Howard originated the Sunday night concerts at the old Gaiety Theatre, and began presenting vaudeville and pictures around a small circuit in Sydney on his own. Sometime around late 1913 he joined forces with Frank Graham. The pair jointly presented pictures shows and vaudeville around Sydney for two years or more.



Australian Variety 16 May (1917), n. pag.

It is not clear why Bert Howard became known as "The Droll" (and sometimes as "The King Droll"), although one might speculate that it had to do with his personality or demeanour. Certainly by 1913 the moniker was regularly associated with him in the industry magazines. *Australian Variety* records, for example: "Bert Howard, 'The Droll,' wishes it to be distinctly understood that he is still in the business, despite the many knockers who would keep him out if they could. At present Bert is running his own show, and also works in conjunction with Frank Graham (29 Oct. 1913, 6). A few months later the same magazine reported that "Long Bert Howard is also helping local acts get three regular meals and the usual bed nowanights. The King Droll is a battler who strikes adversity now and again, but he is some fighter, believe me" (14 Jan. 1914, n. pag.). Although renowned for conducting his business from a doorway at Sydney's Poverty Point, often leaving messages in chalk on the footpath, it appears that Howard's official place of business was not the doorway but an upstairs office, as indicated by a par published in *Australian Variety* in 1917. "The King of Drolls appeared to be very disconsolate one day last week. On Wong Toy Sun asking the reason, the big fellow said: - "Here I am with a fine office, everything I want, and to think that I cannot 'bridge' it to Dr Richard Rowe right away. When he comes back the newness will be worn off" (16 May 1917, n. pag.).

BERT HOWARD'S
VAUDEVILLE CIRCUIT.
of Suburban Houses.
Something Big Every Week.

Australian Variety 17 Dec. (1913), 9.

In June 1917, having by then split with Frank Graham, Howard teamed up with the relatively inexperienced vaudeville artist/manager, Ike Beck, who was known in Sydney circles as the "fashion plate" (see Ike Beck entry in this appendix). Together they presented vaudeville and pictures in Redfern, Mascot, Leichhardt, Burwood and Rozelle. The operations were known as Beck and Howard's Vaudeville Enterprises, with their business headquarters established at 9 Commercial Chambers, 80 Bathurst Street, Sydney. The partnership did not last long, however, due, one might suggest to their quite different natures and experiences - with Beck being the style conscious man-about-town, and Howard a street fighter from the Rocks.

After parting ways with Beck, Howard opened up his own booking agency and in 1918 expanded his operations, servicing suburbs such as Crows Nest, Leichhardt, Auburn, Granville and Hornsby in addition to several country touring circuits. In 1919, after patching up their differences, Howard engaged Ike Beck for his circuit as a vaudeville performer during Beck's hiatus from his own managerial activities. Howard's circuit had also by this time expanded into the Blue Mountains area. In 1920 his Sydney circuit was Leichhardt, Arncliffe, Lidcombe, Parramatta, and Granville.

¹ Pugliese was also associated with the Alhambra Theatre around this period.

Howard continued as a vaudeville and picture show entrepreneur right up until at least the early 1930s, his circuit over the 1928 and 1929 period included, for instance; Campsie, Manly, Burwood, Bankstown, Parramatta, Earlwood, Granville. Around this time, too, he toured pantomimes like *Beauty and the Beast* through a number of regional centres including the Hunter circuit (ca. Jan. 1928). His troupe included well-known performers like Arthur Morley, Wal Rockley, Dan Thomas and Percy King. This venture was apparently going well until Howard was struck down with a seriously debilitating illness which required four operations and knocked both him and the tour out of action. While laid up his company was run by James H. White, Harry Clay's ex-Theatrical Agency manager, and a small-time entrepreneur in his own right.

Upon recovering his health, Howard returned to his suburban circuit, continuing his career of thirty or so years in Sydney theatrical management. In 1929 he claimed to have been the first manager to introduce revusicals to the suburbs, suggesting that if anyone wanted to argue "let's see if they can remember a company earlier than Arthur Morley's, *On the Sands* with Amy Rochelle, Jim Caldwell, the Phillip Sisters, the Dudleys, Morley and Bates, Will Rollow and Ted Stanley" (Howard 104).² He has also claimed to have given Nellie Kolle her first success, prior to the English male impersonator's metropolitan successes. Some doubt exists regarding both claims, however, as the earliest record of that production located to date is with Harry Clay (late 1915), and Kolle's first six years in Australasia were almost exclusively with the Fullers.



Bert Howard

"Lord Mayor of Poverty Point"
Everyone's 12 Dec. (1928), 136.

As a fight manager, Howard gained some recognition for his involvement in the careers of Bob Whitelaw, Arthur Cripps, and Tommy Hanley. He also toured such fighters as Billy McColl, George Johns and heavyweight title contender Bill Squires. His involvement with vaudeville saw him employ a great number of Australian artists over the years, although in no way comparable to that of his fellow B circuit manager, Harry Clay. However, many of the leading artists Howard engaged were also associated at one time or another with Clay's, Rickards and the Fullers.

Bert Howard was well-known for his generous charity work during his career. As he himself noted, "while it makes an old showman like me mighty happy to hear the money clinking in the box-office, maybe I get more happiness out of hearing the chuckles when we give the Lidcombe Hospital a show, or the yells of the youngsters when we play the Boys' Farm at Mittagong..." (Howard 104). It appears, though, that like his contemporary, Harry Sadler, Bert Howard's had its fair share of ups and downs. He also attracted a good deal of criticism from within some quarters of the industry over the years - although the reasons for this are unclear. A June 1917 par published in *Australian Variety* gives some additional insight into Howard and his career to that early stage:

Success kills some people, but not so with Bert Howard, who despite the fact that he is now doing better than at any other period during the past ten years, has plenty of time for his less fortunate professional brethren. At the same time there are a few who still "knock" and the big fellow now and again has a little of this commodity directed against him. It would be better if some of these loafers took a leaf out of The Droll's book, and got a hustle on! Whilst they are asleep he is working for himself and the new firm. When not with them he is doing business for somebody else. Beck and Howard are now doing fine business, and the latter says that with Ike behind him he is not afraid of anybody in the show business (13 June 1917, n. pag.).

Two articles published in *Everyone's* towards the end of the 1920s also indicate that Howard's career in the suburbs during the early film years was one of a pioneer, and in this respect he routinely presented film and vaudeville to audiences who only visited the larger city-based entertainment venues on an infrequent basis:

It is not generally known that Bert Howard was at one time a picture showman, and many Sydney suburbs now possessing an elaborate theatre saw its first films screened by the Howardscope. The Droll specialised in Sunday evening screenings and he numbered among his audiences of the time many who are now prominent exhibitors. In addition to the pictorial offering, artists helped the show along, and the favourites included Clyde Cook, Nat Phillips, George Sorlie, Tom Armstrong, Bronco Wallace and George Clements, who was the real big noise with a line-up of illustrated songs. With such films as *The Life and Death of Ned Kelly* and *The Life of Buffalo Bill*, the show was always good for an extension of the season to three or four nights in all centres (9 Jan. 1929, 49).

I used to be a magnate in the days when the only two syllable word anyone in the picture business knew was 'Fillum.' We had the 'Howardscope,' Harry Harrison, Joe Dunn, Daddy Franklin, and me, with Humbert Pugliese as operator. It was one of the first movie outfits to go on tour, with the Clement Bros, Charles Rodgers, Olive (Baby) Carr, Doris Tindall, Jack West, Baby Josie Johnson and Scott and Wallace as added attractions. Just as well we had those added attractions, because half the time we had no picture show. Plop -flop- plop! And the machine was a bust (11 Dec. 1929, 104).

² Interestingly, this company sounds suspiciously like Harry Clay's No 1 Revue Company. At this point there is no explanation for such a similarity. Clay began presenting revues in 1916, at a time when each of those artists was known to have been in his regular employment.

FURTHER REFERENCE

The following list comprises articles, paragraphs, and reports relating to Bert Howard that are not given individual entries in this database. An asterisk (*) indicates that the source is an advertisement.

- Djubal, Clay. "[Howard, Bert](#)." *AustLit* (2007).
Howard, Bert. "Confessions of The Droll." E: 11 Dec. (1929), 104.
"Tribute for Bert Howard, A." E: 18 Dec. (1929), 37.
"With the Droll in the Early Days." E: 9 Jan. (1929), 49.

SEE ALSO

- AV:** 29 Oct. (1913), 6 • 26 Nov. (1913), 9* • 14 Jan. (1914), n. pag. • 20 May (1914), 6 • 1 July (1914), 6 • 7 Oct. (1914), 15 • 18 Nov. (1914), 6 • 3 Feb. (1915), 6 • 10 Feb. (1915), v. pag. • 2 June (1915), 11 • 2 Aug. (1916), n. pag. • 7 Feb. (1917), n. pag. • 21 Feb. (1917), n. pag. • 4 Apr. (1917), n. pag. • 18 Apr. (1917), n. pag. • 25 Apr. (1917), n. pag. • 2 May (1917), n. pag. • 9 May (1917), n. pag. • 16 May (1917), n. pag. • 23 May (1917), n. pag. • 6 June (1917), n. pag. • 13 June (1917), n. pag. • 4 July (1917), n. pag. • 27 June (1917), n. pag.* • 1 Aug. (1917), n. pag. • 19 Sept. (1917), 3 • 18 Jan. (1918), n. pag. • 25 Jan. (1918), n. pag. • 22 Mar. (1918), n. pag. • 7 June (1918), n. pag. • 6 Sept. (1918), n. pag. • 15 Aug (1919), n. pag. • 5 Sept. (1919), n. pag. • 3 Oct. (1919), n. pag. • 23 Oct. (1919), n. pag. • 7 Nov. (1919), n. pag. • 1 Jan. (1920), n. pag. • 18 Mar. (1920), n. pag. • 6 May (1920), n. pag. • 27 May (1920), n. pag. • 15 Oct. (1920), n. pag. • 31 Dec. (1920), n. pag.
- E:** 11 Mar. (1925), 36 • 4 Mar. (1925), 32 • 1 Apr. (1925), 36 • 8 Feb. (1928), 41 • 8 Aug. (1928), 49 • 17 Oct. (1928), n. pag. • 17 Apr. (1929), n. pag. • 27 Nov. (1929), n. pag. • 18 Dec. (1929), 37.