

STANLEY McKAY

Considered one of the most enterprising actor/managers during the first three decades of the twentieth century by his Australian contemporaries, Stanley McKay was one of the first showmen in the 20th century to tour pantomime around Australia and New Zealand using tents as his theatre space (this being some five years prior to Philip Lytton). The *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton) notes in an article on McKay in 1971, that his "memoirs are studded with the names of the great ones in Australian stage life over more than half a century" (n. pag.). Those he was closely associated with include: Sir Ben Fuller, Walter Bentley, Edward Carroll and George Birch, Kate Howarde, Harry Clay, George Wallace, Jim Gerald, John Cosgrove, Nellie Ferguson and her mother Helen Furgus, Frank Neil and Nellie Stewart. Among the numerous tributes accorded McKay during his extraordinarily long career as a showman are two particularly frequent comments - that he had a seemingly inexhaustible energy level and that his good nature was such that he never lost a friend. McKay's popularity as a manager can also be seen by the length of time that the various members of his companies stayed with him - even under the harshest of travelling conditions.



Corporal Stanley McKay
Theatre Magazine Sept. (1916), 42.

1879-1908

Stanley McKay was born Henry Stanley McKay in the southern NSW highlands township of Tumut (NSW) on 9 October, 1879. Educated at the local public school, he developed an early love of drama, particularly Shakespeare. A few weeks after completing his schooling he moved to Sydney to take up a position with the Bank of New South Wales. He was employed in this position for some nine or ten years, an experience that no doubt played a significant role helping him successfully manage the financial aspects of his later entrepreneurial career. These early years in Sydney saw McKay involve himself in local amateur theatre activities, first as an actor and eventually as actor/manager. Although many of the details surrounding his movements around this stage of his career remain unclear, it has been established that he founded the Sydney Muffs amateur theatre company in 1903, some six years prior to quitting his position with the bank.¹ The Sydney Muffs first ever performance was at the Criterion Theatre in July 1903 (TT: June 1906, 13) with the staging of Henry Hamilton's domestic drama, *Harvest*. At least one critic later said of the production that it was possibly the finest amateur performance ever staged in Sydney to that date. Over the next few years the company's repertoire included drama, comedy, farce and even vaudeville. The first review of a McKay/Sydney Muffs production located as part of this survey is a 1904 *Player* magazine report on a production staged at the Queen's Hall (Syd):

The Queen's Hall was the scene of operations by the Sydney Muffs on the 23rd of August, when a very creditable amateur rendering of T. W. Robertson's great comedy, *Caste* was given under the direction of Col. D'Orsay Ogden.... H. Stanley McKay must be congratulated on his capital character sketch of Sam Gerridge (15 Sept. 1904, 22).

The following month, the same magazine recorded, "H. Stanley McKay and his band are resting after their production of *Caste*, but a new piece will be put in rehearsal almost immediately. A *Tragedy* will probably be staged, with the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* as a forerunner" (P: 15 Oct. 1904, 22). Under McKay's leadership the Sydney Muffs established a considerable reputation in amateur circles from quite early on, leading to frequent reviews being published in the *Player* and *Theatre* magazines. In this respect, one of *Theatre's* critics noted in November 1905:

The Sydney Muffs have not evinced their usual activity of late, their efforts being restricted to suburban performances. Rumour however speaks of their reappearance at the Criterion Theatre on Dec. 21st, but the name of the piece selected has not been made known. Stanley McKay is still the moving spirit in all the club's undertakings, which have lately assumed a Shakespearian bent with much success (7).

Of the Muffs' early productions, much praise was accorded *The Private Secretary* (see P: 15 May 1905, 26; and TT: June 1906, 9). The troupe's many Shakespearian scenes, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, were also often accorded positive criticism. The *Theatre* wrote of McKay's role as Shylock, for example, that in undertaking "this big step up from Gerridge" he showed much promise and versatility" (TT: Sept. 1905, 13). A June 1906 *Theatre* overview of the company to that date indicated, too, that a performance of Tobin's masterpiece, *The Honeymoon* (Theatre Royal) was one of their best all-round productions.

¹ A letter by Charles Cabot (dated 1974) held in the National Library's McKay Collection contains a brief biography on McKay. Several dates referred to conflict with information provided both by McKay (earlier in his career) and with official records, however. Cabot claims, for example, that McKay quit his job with the bank when he was 22 years old, while McKay states in 1910 that he had been with the Bank of NSW for nine years (TT: Nov. 1910, 10). He reconfirmed this in the *Theatre* magazine interview published in September 1916 ("What About the Rabbits"), stating that he resigned from the bank seven years ago "after ten very pleasant years" (if Cabot's claim were correct McKay would have implausibly begun his banking career at 11 years). It is more probable that he left the bank at 32 - the age he was in 1909. Cabot also claims that McKay's was born in 1877, which is two years earlier than that certified on his birth certificate. Of additional concern is the fact that the letter leaves out many of McKay's significant achievements - notably the 1909 Walter Bentley engagement and his founding of the Sydney Muffs troupe. As a source of information its accuracy must therefore be treated with caution.



as David Garrick
Theatre Aug. (1909), 22.

The Sydney Muffs toured regularly around Sydney during this early period, often raising money for city and suburban charities. Some £400 is said to have been raised by mid-1906, a not inconsiderable amount for an amateur theatrical society (TT: June 1906, 13). An advertisement placed in an October edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* provides additional insight into the movements of the Muffs, with their suburban tour prior to the Christmas vacation travelling from Mosman Town Hall, to the Liverpool School of Arts, Medlow Baths Hydro and finally the Criterion Theatre. An *al fresco* performance of *As You Like It* was also to be given at the A.N.A. Exhibition (28 Oct. 1905, 2). One particular highlight of the year was the troupe's December 14 production of *Caste* at the Palace Theatre which was said to have been packed - due in no small part to Nellie Stewart's guest appearance at the top of the bill, performing "'Op O' My Thumb'" (see TT: Jan 1906, 23; June 1906, 13).

While largely associated with the Sydney Muffs, McKay also appeared with the Thespian Bankers (aka the Bank of New South Wales Musical and Dramatic Society) on a number of occasions. One such production was in August 1906 when the troupe presented *The Pickpocket* (TT: Sept. 1906, 19). It was through his involvement with the Muffs, however, that McKay was given the opportunity to present his best work. The *Theatre* also notes that "much of the success of the [company] is due to the energy displayed by their genial manager, Mr Stanley McKay" (June 1906, 13). The extent to which the company members expanded their abilities under McKay was also reported in the same article, when attention was drawn to the success of one of the troupe's original members, Lillian Bethell, who within a year of leaving the troupe had gone on to secure constant work in the English provinces and Scotland (13). The company was also invited to produce *The Amateur Burglar* (Criterion Theatre, 1-2 August) by the emerging dramatist, W. J. Curtis. McKay notes in later years that he owed a great deal to the manager of his bank, Mr J. J. Phillips, who allowed him much leeway when schedules were tight:

My theatrical experiences even in those days frequently called me away from the city, chiefly weekend trips to the Blue Mountains; and I well remember waiting for hours so that I could approach [him] for the half day's leave necessary on the occasions my train on the Monday not arriving in Sydney much before midday... He never refused! I put it down, however, to catching [him] at the opportune time (McKay 41).

1907 and 1908 saw McKay and the Muffs continue to raise the bar in so far as their performances were concerned. A highlight of 1907 was their short season at the Palace Theatre, beginning 18 December, which saw them produce Pocock's operatic drama *Rob Roy* in collaboration with the Highland Society of NSW. The production spared no expense, including a full orchestra and 40 voice choir (TT: Dec. 1907, 18). The following year, on 11 July, the Muffs gave Arthur H. Adam's play, *The Tame Cat* its world premiere at charity matinee at the Criterion Theatre. McKay later said of this venture that the play was a "clever comedy of manners" and that the one show resulted in a profit of £285 ("What About the Rabbits" 41). In the same *Theatre* article, McKay also makes mention of the fact that the Muffs staged in the Australia the first ever "Australian Shakespeare Festival" (although no specific date is given). Presented at the Palace Theatre in Sydney, the company produced four of the Bard's plays. "On the last day of the season," he recalls, "we played *As You Like It* in the afternoon and *Romeo and Juliet* at night, both with the same cast. In these productions Elsie Prince made a hit as Rosalind and Juliet" (41).

In late 1908 the Muffs revived *The Merchant of Venice* "on a very complete scale at the Royal Standard" (11-13 Nov.). The theatre was then being leased and managed by Harry Clay (with whom McKay would later form several successful, though invariably brief, alliances). It is reported that "the resources of our foremost amateur dramatic company club are so powerful that the management were able to present a new Portia every night" (TT: Dec. 1908, 19).² Of McKay's role as Shylock, the same critic wrote, it is "well and favourably known to play-goers. He realised more than ever the implacability, fierce-hatred, and subtle cunning of the old Jew, and his acting in the trial scene was very fine" (19).

1909-1911

McKay's final year with the Sydney Muffs began where the previous year had left off. "The Sydney Muffs production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Palace during [last] month," wrote a *Theatre* critic, "has brought them any amount of kudos... Mr Stanley McKay may well congratulate himself on the result of his labour" (Mar. 1909, n. pag.). A little over a month later the magazine further praised the "Stanley McKay-Sydney Muffs Easter week performance" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at Clay's Standard Theatre, especially praising the acting of Fred Stephenson, the 19 year-old son of long-time member, Clara Stephenson. Another member of the company was Stella Chapman (a leading Sydney-based elocutionist and pedagogue since 1905).³ Plays toured by the company around this time also included, *The Shaughraun*, *East Lynne* and *David Garrick*. The latter play was given its debut by the company before a crowded Criterion house on 4 June. In proposing that McKay undertook possibly his most difficult role, that of Garrick, the *Theatre's* critic wrote: "He played with fire and refinement (an unusual mixture), and the great role was happily sustained" (July 1909, 19). The company's reputation by this stage was such that McKay was able to call on professional actors

² Elsie Prince (11 Nov.), Ella Crone (12 Nov.) and Lillian Booth (13 Nov.)

³ See TT: 1 Sept. 1905, 10. Chapman later married actor Douglas Ancelon, who had been associated on and off with Walter Bentley from 1899 when their two companies joined forces in New Zealand. In 1910 Chapman and Ancelon became principals of the Walter Bentley Dramatic and Elocutionary College (Syd). The following year the pair established their own successful teaching college in association with Palings.

from time to time to strengthen the line-up. With *David Garrick*, for example, he obtained the services of Ruby Coxhead, late of the Pollard Company, and whom the critic noticed brought much experience in acting and make-up (19). Also among the cast was Ada Fitzgerald, daughter of barrister John D. Fitzgerald (and cousin of Jim Gerald). The possibility that the Muffs could no longer maintain the level of performance that McKay desired, is hinted at in the same review, however, when the critic implies that the company had not quite achieved what they hoped set out. "The Superiah Critic [sic] would doubtless remark that the Muffs aimed too high," he notes, "but they didn't - they couldn't. Instead of being jibed by boy critics of the evening press who can only act one thing - the fool, The Muffs should be encouraged in every possible way" (19).

It is believed that McKay severed his relationship with both the Sydney Muffs and the Bank of New South Wales sometime around late August 1909. One of his last productions with the Muffs was the one act playlet, *A Martyr to Principle* (ca. 25 Aug.) which he co-wrote with Sumner Locke. The *Theatre* records of this production:

By courtesy of Mr Bland Holt, who generously lent the Theatre Royal ... the Sydney Muffs, who are ever ready to lend a hand for charity's sake, staged *Niobe* and *A Martyr to Principle* in aid of St. Martha's Industrial Home, Leichhardt. The theatre was crowded. *Niobe*, which followed the original playlet *A Martyr to Principle*, was thoroughly appreciated by the audience, but the interest really centred in the curtain-raiser, which was written by Sumner-Locke and Stanley McKay, the well-known director of the Sydney Muffs (Sept. 1909, 19).

The most significant factor to influence McKay's decision to turn professional was very likely the success he achieved in presenting Walter Bentley at the Criterion Theatre for ten nights beginning 13 July. The previous month Bentley had been passing through Sydney on his way to Adelaide for a brief season under J. C. Williamson (which included *The Silver King*). Aware that the Criterion was to be vacant for two weeks beginning a few days after the expiration of Bentley's contract with Williamson, McKay approached the eminent Scottish actor with a view to staging *Hamlet* on his return. As luck would have it Bentley was planning to return to Sydney in order to prepare for his forthcoming tour of Queensland under Harry Clay's management, and agreed to McKay's proposition. The young entrepreneur was seriously handicapped in terms of preparation, however, as he had only two and a half weeks to prepare the production, and without the lead actor present until three or four days prior to opening night. According to the *Theatre*, however, "it proved to be the most successful Shakespearian season Mr Bentley ever played" in Australia (Nov. 1910, n. pag.). As the magazine's critic wrote in the August edition: "It is good for a big city to get a shock now and then; and, by Jehosophat it got one in the Walter Bentley season" (18). The company McKay put together provides further insight into his standing within the Australian theatrical community - including as it did such high profile performers of the day as John Cosgrove (Claudius), Johnson Weir (Ghost), Helen Fergus (Gertrude), her daughter, Nellie Fergusson (Ophelia) and George Titheradge (Horatio).

Some six weeks after the Bentley season Stanley McKay's newly formed Shakespearian and Comedy Company left for Wollongong where they staged a season of drama that included *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Soldier's Bride* (Town Hall, beginning 3 Sept.), returning to Sydney for a brief season at St George's Hall (Newtown) two weeks later. The following month a three week tour of the Northern Rivers was undertaken. Commencing at Ballina (11 Oct.) the circuit then included the townships of Coraki, Lismore, Grafton, Maclean, Casino and Murwillumbah (TT: Oct. 1909, 23). That same month McKay was invited to join a distinguished group of local dramatists to form the Australian Dramatic Authors Association. Convened by T. Hilhouse Taylor, the meeting is believed to have been attended by E. Lewis Scott, Agnes Haddon Chambers and Sumner Locke (TT: Nov. 1909, 17). During December, McKay returned to the Criterion where he staged the smash hit English comedy, *Dr Bill* (beginning 11 Dec.) and a revival of *Niobe - All Smiles*. Directed by and starring McKay, the season further enhanced his reputation as one of Sydney's leading thespians. "[He] played Dr Bill in a way that showed he had devoted considerable study to the part," wrote one of the *Theatre's* critics. "At times he tickled the house immensely by the ridiculous situations in which he found himself, especially in the bathroom scene" (Jan. 1910, 7). Among the cast, too, were several ex-Sydney Muffs actors, including Fred Stephenson and Ruby Guest, and playwright Sumner Locke. The season also saw him accorded a testimonial by his peers in recognition of the work and effort he had put in to not only Sydney amateur theatre over the past six or more years, but equally his strong commitment to local charities (SMH: 18 Dec. 1909, 17).

A report in the 13 August 1910 edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* indicates that McKay was to open at the Victoria Theatre, Manly, on the 16th, with *Romeo and Juliet*. The company had just completed an eight month tour of NSW, including towns as far west as Coonamble. One of the longest seasons was apparently eight nights at Grafton, with a different play staged every night (16). By the 22nd they were opening in Parkes for the Race and Show week. The company at this time is said to have comprised among its actors, Fred and Clara Stephenson, Harry Saville and Elsie Prince, all of whom had been long associated with McKay. A few months later McKay put together the first of his touring pantomime companies, which led the *Theatre* to comment on his seemingly never-ending entrepreneurial expansion:

IN THE PRESENCE OF THEIR EXCELLENCIES THE ADMIRAL AND LADY POORE.

CRITERION THEATRE.

Lessee..... Frank Musgrove.

BRIEF SEASON, commencing

TUESDAY EVENING, 13th INST.

STANLEY McKay, presents the World-famed Tragedian,

WALTER BENTLEY

(Fresh from his triumphs in England and America), in Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy,

"HAMLET."

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

HAMLET (Prince of Denmark) WALTER BENTLEY
 Claudius (King of Denmark) John Cosgrove
 Polonius (Lord Chamberlain) Harry Waltham
 Horatio (Friend to Hamlet) W. S. Titheradge
 Laertes (Son to Polonius) Arthur E. Greenaway
 (By Permission of Mr. J. C. Williamson.)
 Rozencrantz } (Courtiers) } N. McLeod
 Guildenstern } } Reginald Hall
 Osric (Page to Hamlet) Olive Burke
 Priest Oscar Wakefield
 Ghost Johnson Weir
 Marcellus (an Officer) John Haynes
 Bernardo (an Officer) Mervyn Barrington
 First Actor Maurice Nodin
 Second Actor R. H. Henry
 Gertrude (Queen of Denmark) Helen Fergus
 Ophelia (Daughter to Polonius) Nellie Fergusson
 Player Queen Sara Collins
 Lords and Ladies of the Court, Soldiers, and Grave-diggers.

Magnificent Scenery from the brush of HARRY WHAITE. Elaborate Costumes by Zenda.

ABSOLUTELY NO FREE LIST.
 Plan at Ely's. Prices, 3s, 2s, and 1s. (Booking, 1s extra). Day Sale, White Rose, Pitt-street.

Sydney Morning Herald 10 July (1909), 2

Mr McKay's manifold other theatrical ventures include the organisation of the Shakespearian and Comedy Co., with which he just recently returned to Sydney after making the third of a most successful series of tours of the Northern Rivers..... So costly and exhilarating an entertainment is that now promised by Mr McKay [the *Bo-Peep* tour] that he should meet with crowded houses, particularly in the country, where pantomime on the scale on which he is presenting it is really being seen for the very first time (Nov. 1910, 10).

On Christmas Eve the company presented for the first time in Sydney their pantomime, *Bo-Peep* (Exhibition Building, Alfred Park). Written by Harry Taylor - author of *Dick Whittington* (1902), among others - the company by now included Bruce Drysdale and Phyllis Faye, Ruby Davies, Dot Ireland, and Vicky Miller - all of whom were to later become established high profile vaudeville performers in Australia. It is not clear whether the Sydney production was the pantomime's premiere or whether it had early been staged in regional NSW. McKay recalls this time of his career in a 1916 *Theatre* interview, but provides no time line:

I next procured a portable tent with a seating capacity of 1500 and a stage correspondingly large. At this time I was struck by the scarcity of touring musical shows and decided that my first venture would be one of a musical character. I chose pantomime for preference, as no touring company other than the late John Sheridan's (who played only a few towns), had exploited 'panto' through Inland [sic] Australia.... In four weeks time the libretto and music were written, the wardrobe's made by Zenda, scenery (including a transformation scene) painted by Harry Whaite, the moving theatre and the one hundred and one etceteras that go with it specially built, the company organised and rehearsed, and the panto produced at Mudgee, a town about 200 miles from Sydney... I might mention that after these preliminary necessities and the first class fares for thirty-two people had been paid I boarded the train solvent - and only solvent. My capital, which I carried in my vest pocket, consisted of 1/6... However, my credit must have been good, for the [Mudgee] shopkeepers were pleased to send along anything that was required (McKay 42).

The following year McKay's company went through Queensland under the auspices of Harry Clay. Advertised as the largest production ever toured in the Commonwealth, by all accounts much of the public's initial interest lay in the size of the mammoth mining tent the company used, (it is said to have by then seated some 2,000 people and taken several days to erect). The critical responses to the shows themselves were also overwhelmingly enthusiastic.⁴ While the *Bo-Peep* tour utilised rail and steamer for its transportation, McKay's other tours around this period involved a variety of methods, including stage coach, bullock wagons, cars, trucks and even sulkies. In some instances the distances travelled, and in the harshest of conditions, indicate how hardy these show people were. In his "What About the Rabbits" interview, for example, McKay recalls having to "jump" from Mackay in North Queensland to the Riverina in South-western NSW in order to make a certain show date - a distance of 1600 miles" (42). After a year on the road the company once again returned to Sydney, opening at Manly in December with *Bo-Peep*. The *Theatre* suggested even then, that McKay's "unflagging energy must certainly bring him to the front some day as one of Sydney's biggest theatrical managers" (Jan. 1912, 6).

Bo-Peep

POST AS A NEWSPAPER.

1911. PRICE: ONE PENNY.

PANTOMIME -- PANTOMIME.

To-night || COMMENCING (MONDAY, JUNE 19th.) || To-night

Direction of HARRY CLAY.
THE MAMMOTH MOVING THEATRE.

THE GORGEOUS PANTOMIME--

BO-PEEP!
BO-PEEP!
BO-PEEP!
PRODUCED IN ITS ENTIRETY AND GLORIOUS SPLENDOUR
BY STANLEY MCKAY.

BO-PEEP.

BO-PEEP!
BO-PEEP!
BO-PEEP!

38 Star Artists. 38

The Most Colossal and Most Costly Theatrical Enterprise yet
Presented to Theatre-goers.
RICHLY SUPERB DRESSING!
BEAUTIFUL BALLET GIRLS!
EXQUISITE SCENERY!

"UNDER THE WAVES Including the wonder- "UNDER THE WAVES!"
ful Transformation "UNDER THE WAVES!"

General Notices. **Dividend.**

SALVATION ARMY HALL. NORTH QUEENSLAND MOTORS,
TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT! LIMITED,
IN LIQUIDATION.

Charters Towers, Qld
Northern Miner 19 June (1911), 1.

⁴ For further details see Clay Djupal. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company, 1965-1930 (1998), Appendix C - 1911.

1912-1918

From 1912 and up until around 1916 McKay operated two touring companies at one time - one offering pantomime and the other serious drama, more often than not presenting Shakespeare. The companies toured all the Australian states, with the dramatic company also being known to have operated under a tent for its productions. A New Zealand tour was also undertaken by McKay's "Royal Pantomime Company" in 1913 (see Christchurch, 28 Nov.). That same year the *Theatre* published a series of photographs showing McKay's company on tour through inland Australia, providing further insight into the conditions experienced by troupes such as his even as late as 1912.

Sometime around 1914-15 McKay dropped the dramatic company tours in favour of two pantomime companies, no doubt forced into this by the greater financial returns offered through presenting popular theatre. One of the principal attractions during 1914 was the company's locally written *Mother Goose* pantomime, which starred Jim Gerald (the dame) and Essie Jennings (principal boy). The pair had only recently been leased to McKay by the Fullers, initially on a semi-permanent basis, but the conditions they were offered saw them stay with McKay until 1916. McKay's two companies even toured for a while on the Fullers circuit, the itineraries including Melbourne (Lyric Theatre, St Kilda), Adelaide, Perth, Fremantle, Sydney (Princess Theatre) and the NSW and Queensland regions. Ross B. Simpson, McKay's Sydney-based business partner, estimated that the No 1 Company (comprising 25 performers) had by itself travelled some 27,000 miles during the 12 month period to July 31, 1915 (TT: Aug. 1915, 33). *Australian Variety* proposed in its 18 November issue of 1914 that McKay deserved every success for getting such a good vaudeville talent together:

Stanley McKay's Pantomime, *Mother Goose*, is showing at the Lyric Theatre, on the Esplanade, St Kilda [Melb], and a tidy little combination it is, too, and also Australian vaudeville artists are here getting a decent chance to show what they can really do, and are miles ahead of some of the imported article, which is constantly being pushed into Australia for a Christmas pantomime, heralded by a lot of newspaper junket and interviews, and if the truth is really known they come out of a small time pantomime in the 'smalls' of England. Essie Jennings, as principal boy is great, her beautiful figure making the society crowd look some, and her singing and acting being a real knock-out to this scribe...Jimmy Gerald (alias Fitzgerald) is a fair dame, and scores solid throughout, although some of his songs want nailing down his box. On the whole, McKay deserves every success for getting such good vaudeville talent together (18 Nov. 1914, n. pag.).



Stanley McKay's Companies taking Shakespeare to inland towns

Theatre Mar. (1913), 9.

In early April, around the same time that the No 1 Company returned to Australia (and according to George Stephenson with a "handsome balance on the right side"), McKay expressed his intention to enlist with Australia's armed forces. Stephenson suggested that it would be easy work for him considering the Herculean labours he had undertaken during the past five or six years (TT: May 1916, 10). The following month McKay volunteered for active duty and closed down his theatrical operations prior to undertaking military training. Most of the male members of the company also enlisted with McKay, including Jim Gerald, Bruce Drysdale and Leslie Smith. McKay left Australia in late August as a Corporal in the Fifth Brigade (Artillery), Ninth reinforcements, having trained as a field gunner. It was with the 14th Light French Mortar Battery, however, that he served out the war in France and Belgium. Although spending a good deal of time at the front, the showman nevertheless still found opportunities to keep his hand in at the theatre game. The National Library letter (5244) indicates that he organised shows while in camp in Australia, while on board the troopship steaming to England, in camp in Salisbury, and even in France when his unit had a rest period (1). During his tour of duty McKay occasionally found time to write to the *Theatre*, informing readers mostly of his attempts to stage theatricals and his observations of wartime activity. Even though thousands of miles from home McKay still couldn't escape the old theatrical network - at one stage having his scenery painted by an old mate - who also happened to be the brother of Nellie Ferguson. Always one to put things in perspective McKay finished one letter from Belgium - in which he details recent productions of *The Waybacks*, *Fun on the Bristol* and *The Merchant of Venice* - by making passing comment that one of the greatest battles in history was raging as he wrote (Dec. 1917, 13).⁵ After the war ended in November 1918, McKay is said to have obtained permission to remain in England so as to spend time studying theatrical production in London and Stratford-on-Avon. On his return to Australia he organised with the Victorian and NSW Education departments to tour Shakespearian plays set for current school study to high schools in both states.⁶

1919-1929

While much research into Stanley McKay's career between the end of the war and 1924 is still required, it is known that he continued touring his pantomime and dramatic companies throughout Australia and New Zealand, much as he had done previously - although possibly not under canvas. One season known to have been staged in Sydney in 1922 was at the old Strand Theatre, Leichhardt, with the company then starring Bert Desmond and Mattie Jansen (see also Desmond file in this appendix). In 1923 McKay joined forces with Alf Coleman to again tour pantomime with a moveable theatre - the combined company is said to have been the largest operation based out of Sydney at that time. Operating under the title, "The Aldwych Theatre" - after the popular structure of the same name which became the vogue in London during the war - the new company's debut was at Inverell during the town's show week - with following destinations including Guyra, Tenterfield, Glen Innes, Quirindi and Tamworth, followed by a Northern NSW Rivers tour. The pantomimes staged included *Bluebeard*, *Mother Hubbard*, *Little Bo-Peep* and a new revue - *Around the World* (E: 24 Jan. 1923, 33).

It is not clear how long the Coleman/McKay association lasted. No mention of Coleman has been found in any reports published in 1924. An undated reference from *Everyone's* (ca. Oct.) indicates, however, that the company had reverted to playing theatres. McKay's engagements around October that year were mostly located in the Riverina and south-western regions of NSW (including Wagga ca. 25 Oct.; Gundagai 26 Oct. - 2 Nov.). The company at that time included Billy and Ivy Cass, Will Raynor and Rosie Brennan. Following a tour of the western NSW (including Bathurst, Orange, Nyngan and Narromine) in early 1925, McKay returned to Sydney briefly in May to organise both a North Coast tour and a return visit to Victoria. By 1926 his organisation was touring both pantomime and opera. *Everyone's* 15 December 1926 issue notes, for example, that McKay's operations that year had been largely confined to New Zealand and New South Wales. Further insights into the hazards of commercial theatre touring are also provided in this article:

**Stanley McKay's
Enterprises**

STANLEY MCKAY'S MUSICAL
COMEDY CO.

Presenting Frank Neil's Grand Opera House Successes:—

"UP IN MABEL'S ROOM"
and
"GETTING GERTIE'S GARTER"

The year's operations of this Company were confined to New South Wales and Tasmania. So great was their success, New Zealand will be visited with those comedies in the New Year, when

**STANLEY MCKAY'S NEW
PANTOMIME CO.**

Will Also Tour New South Wales and Queensland.

ROBERT POLLOCK, General Manager.

During the first six months of the year, the repertoire was devoted solely to pantomime, and since July - on the company's return to Australia - Mr McKay arranged with Mr Walter George to present his operatic revues, which were so very successful for some years at the Fullers' city theatres... During the tour of the Dominion successful seasons were given in Auckland and the itinerary included all the most important centres in the North Island and also on the West Coast of the South Island... When en route from Tauanga [however]... the company had the unpleasant experience of being shipwrecked on "Slipper Reef" (125).

Everyone's records in an earlier issue that McKay's musical company had done excellent business at Narrandera (NSW) during show week, while also proposing that the company was "far above the average" (27 Oct. 1926, 5). Of special note, too, 1926 saw McKay accorded the honour of being the first theatrical manager to stage a pantomime in the nation's capital - with the ever-popular *Bo-Peep* being produced at the Causeway Hall, Canberra on 25 October. Other productions to be part of the company's 1926 repertoire included: *The Geisha Girl*, *The King of Dunderberg*, *Laughing Time*, *The Orange Girl*, *The Forty Thieves* and *The New Aladdin* (E: 13 Oct. 1926, 38). The following year, around March, McKay took his company back across the Tasman to once again tour the Dominion circuit. *Everyone's* records that despite the poor economic conditions then affecting New Zealand McKay's tour was proving quite prosperous. Among the newer members of the company by this time were Walter George and Georgie Martin.

Everyone's 12 Dec. (1928), 132.

⁵ See also McKay's letter in the *Theatre* Apr. 1918, 9.

⁶ See McKay Collection letter and "In the World of Music and Drama" SYM: 2 Feb. (1921), 14.

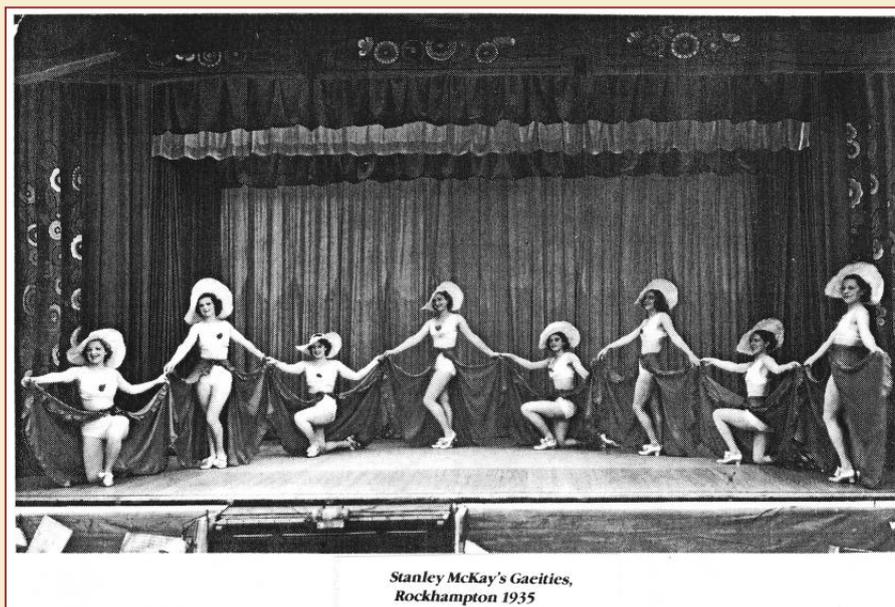
The final years of the decade also saw Stanley McKay's Enterprises present a number of Frank Neil's Grand Opera successes - notably *Up in Mabel's Room* and *Getting Gertie's Garter*. These productions were produced under the banner - Stanley McKay's Musical Comedy Co (E: 12 Dec. 1928, 132). Among the company were Joe Rox, Les Shipp and Grace Quine.

In 1929, McKay expanded his operations to two full-time troupes, one mounting a tour of New Zealand with musical comedy (the Frank Neil productions) while the second company returned to New South Wales and Queensland with pantomime.

1930-1971

Despite the harsh economic conditions of the 1930s and the difficulties he experienced during the Second World War, McKay continued touring his theatrical operations around the Antipodes. He maintained his reputation for quality variety entertainment, producing pantomimes, revues, and musical theatre works until the mid-1960s. Indeed, it was from the 1930s onwards that Stanley McKay's Gaieties became a theatrical institution throughout much of Australia. In an undated press clipping from 1964 (Stanley McKay Collection), the writer draws attention to both McKay's position as the oldest working showman in Australia and his generous spirit in supporting regional centres, especially in Queensland, where he had much success over many decades:

Few people know that the beautiful fountain which has proved a great tourist attraction in Townsville, and enjoyed by thousands of local residents was built at the suggestion of Mr McKay, and he supported his idea with the first donation of £500. At the same time he made a similar suggestion to the Mayor of Rockhampton, again supporting his idea with £500 (n. pag.).



Stanley McKay's Gaieties,
Rockhampton 1935

New Theatre Australia Jan/Feb. (1987), 10.

The article also goes on to note that McKay had returned to the state under his own auspices for the first time in eight years, 'although every year he has toured as partner in productions arranged by other managements, such as the Reddy-Benton Follies, Tibor Rudas Productions' Oriental Cavalcade and the Ziegfeld Follies' (n. pag.). A 1971 article published in the *Morning Bulletin* also reflects on McKay's extraordinary career:

He was always a strong believer in simple rules of living and the virtues of physical exercise and the outdoor life. When on tour if the distance between towns was no more than 20 miles and the weather favourable he would walk the journey while the rest of the company travelled by train or coach (10 June 1971, 15).

McKay's unflagging energy is an aspect of his personality that was often commented on by his contemporaries, and appears to have been evident in him all the way back to his youth. One *Theatre* magazine critic writing in 1916 records, for example, '[Stanley McKay is] a man of untiring energy. To his many friends it was ever a matter of wonder how he contrived to keep going at the pace he worked. Yet never in the course of his association with the stage has he been incapacitated for a day' (September 1916, p.41). His seemingly constant entrepreneurial activities were frequently acknowledged within the leading trade journals during the 1910s and 1920s even though much of his audience base lay outside the major Australian cities. Indeed, no other Australian touring company appears to have garnered the level of attention that he did throughout those two decades. During his early years with the Sydney Muffs, McKay was also often praised for the contributions he made as both actor and director and for the skill he deployed managing the Sydney Muffs. His benevolent disposition, professionalism, and enthusiasm appear also to have earned him the respect and admiration of his fellow thespians, helping to maintain a theatrical enterprise that lasted some sixty years.

Stanley McKay spent the last years of his life at his home in the Sydney suburb of Willoughby, remaining relatively fit and alert until the last. It is not yet known if he was survived by any family members. A few years before his death, at 95 years of age, Rockhampton's *Morning Bulletin* paid tribute to him, recording:

He was always a strong believer in simple rules of living and the virtues of physical exercise and the outdoor life. When on tour if the distance between towns was no more than twenty miles and the weather favourable he would walk the journey while the rest of the company travelled by train or coach (MB: 10 June 1971, 15).

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

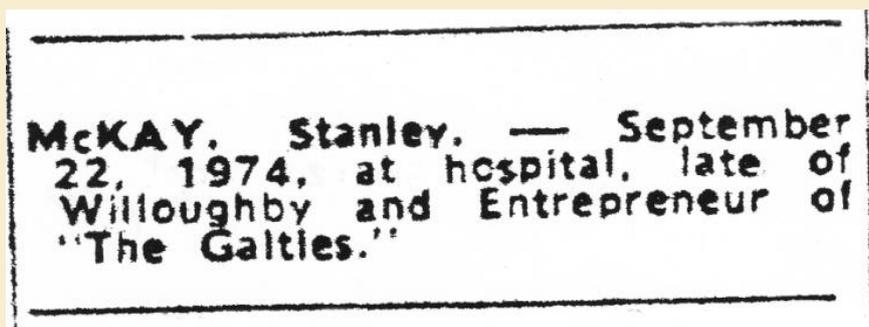
1. A letter by Charles Cabot (dated 1974) held in the National Library's McKay Collection contains a brief biography on McKay. Several dates in that letter, however, conflict with information provided both by McKay (earlier in his career) and with official records. Cabot claims, for example, that McKay quit his job with the bank when he was twenty-two years old, while McKay states in 1910 that he had been with the Bank of NSW for nine years (TT: Nov. 1910, 10). He reconfirmed this statement in the September 1916 *Theatre Magazine* interview ("What About the Rabbits?"), recalling that he had resigned from the bank seven years ago "after ten very pleasant years." If Cabot's claim were correct, McKay would have implausibly begun his banking career at eleven years of age. It is more likely that he left the bank at thirty-two, the age he would have been in 1909.

Cabot also claims that McKay was born in 1877, which is two years earlier than the date certified on his birth certificate. Of additional concern is the fact that the letter leaves out many of McKay's significant achievements, notably the 1909 Walter Bentley engagement and his founding of the Sydney Muffs troupe. As a source of information, its accuracy must therefore be treated with caution.

2. Insights into McKay's touring schedules, distances travelled, and difficulties faced include:

A run through the books made by Mr Simpson discloses the interesting fact that during the twelve months beginning July [1914] and ending July 31 this year [1915], the No 1 company travelled no less than 27,000 miles [43,452 km]' (TT: Aug. 1915, 33).

[In 1910 I] toured the company through Queensland, playing the larger towns as far north as Townsville, Charters Towers and Cairns; and on the return journey, in order to catch a certain show date, made a jump from Mackay (Qld) to the Riverina (NSW), a distance of 1600 miles [2575 km]. This with thirty-two people, theatre and effects was no light matter. I then had a wish for another pioneering trip, and started a second company, placing the affairs of the "panto" co in the hands of a manager, and supervising the second (dramatic) company myself. In this way we toured from Maitland to Murwillumbah and back again, the company per stage coach and the theatre per bullock wagon - taking nineteen weeks and travelling by this primitive method 1957 miles [3150 km]. Talk of vicissitudes! We had 'em this trip. Yet in the end it turned out trumps. In order to have the theatre erected in time for our opening it is always necessary to play a hall one night while the theatre is "moving." In this way [for example] we played the last night of our season in Bowraville (a flourishing town on the Nambucca) in the local hall while the theatre was plodding its weary way per Bullock team to Bellingen. The send off to the theatre was something of a sensation, the local residents being loathe to believe that the theatre, which held a crowded audience at 11pm could possibly so tighten its girth as to pack on to an eight-ton bullock wagon... Since my first tour of New Zealand my company has [also] visited Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, playing the city theatres as well as on tour; and in the past two years we have over 37,000 miles of travelling to our credit [59,546 km]. My weekly expenses for touring shows were considerable, the New Zealand show costing per week about £350 and the Australian show over £200. ("What About the Rabbits?," 42).



Sydney Morning Herald 24 Sept. (1974), 30.

PERSONNEL ENGAGED BY STANLEY MCKAY FOR HIS VARIOUS COMPANIES

The years following each individual entry are those identified to date only. It is likely that many individuals would have had longer associations that are represented in this list.

1. **Stanley McKay Shakespearian/Dramatic Companies (1909-1914):** Mervyn Barrington (1909), Walter Bentley (1909), Olive Burke (1909-10), Clara Burton (1909-10), Sarah Collins (1909), John Cosgrove (1909), Queenie Cross (1909-1910), Helen Furgus (1909), Nellie Fergusson (1909), Arthur Greenaway (1909), Ruby Guest (1909-10), Reginald Hall (1909), John Haynes (1909), R. H. Henry (1909), Helena Sumner Locke (1909-10), N. McLeod (1909), Miss Mandaville (1909-10), Maurice Nodin (1909), Elsie Prince (1909-1910), Miss Renno (1909-10), Harry Saville (1909-10), Arthur Sherry (1909-10), Clara Stephenson (1909-10), Fred Stephenson (1909-10), George S. Titheridge (1909), Oscar Wakefield (1909), Harry Waltham (1909), Johnson Weir (1909).

2. Stanley McKay Pantomime Companies (1910-1916): Lillia Adams (1910), Marie Andrews (1910), Miss Ray Barnard (1916), Mdlle Beebe [continental danseuse] (1916), Anita Cohen (1916), Coleman Sisters [Rosie and Carmen] (1914-1915), Anna Collins (1916), Rosie Davidson (1910), Ruby Davies (1910), Millie Dawson (1910), Bruce Drysdale (1910-1916), Richard Dunbur (1915-1916), Phyllis Faye (1910-1916), The Fontenoy's [singers] (1916), Marjorie Ford (1916), Fred Francis (1910), Jessica French (1916), Jim Gaffney (1916), Jim Gerald (1914-1916), Edith Gershon (1910), Norma Godfrey (1910), Maisie Green (1916), Maurice Green (1915), Rupert Green (1915), The Greshams (1916), Nellie Hall (1916), Lily Harvey (1911), Gus Hilton (1915), Janet Hopkins (1916), Florrie Horan (1915), Dot Ireland (1910), Essie Jennings (1914-1916), James Kay (1910-1911), Edith Kays-Price (1911), Kreutz Brothers (1910), Daphne Leigh (1916), Phil Levarto [magician] (1916), Harry Little (1916), Willie McDonald (1916), Harry McDonna (1915), Esme McLennan (1910-1916), Ivy Marsden (1915), Ethel Melbourne (1910), Michelet [clay model sculptor] (1916), Ella Miller (1910-1911), Vicky Miller (1910-1916), Eva Morris (1916), Willie Morrow (1915), Musical Fredos (1915), Daisy Nash (1911), Nelson and Reid (1915), R. Orton (1911), Olga Partridge (1910), Ruby Raymond (1915), Will Raynor (1914-1915, 1924), Ailsa Sherbrooke (1910), Maud Shipp (1916), Billy Speed (q.v. 1915), Dora Tate (1916), Bessie Utting (1916), Constance Wallis (1916), Jack West (1916), Aileen Wills (1916), Ethel Wilson (1916).

3. Stanley McKay Pantomime, Revue and Musical Comedy Companies (ca. 1919-1929): Dorothy Arnold (1928), James Arthur (1928), Kitty Balfour (1928), Ernest Barraclough (1926), Arthur Brehham (1922), Rubee Brehham (1922), Rosie Brennan (1924), May Brooke (1927), Ruth Bucknall (1926), Audrey Carlisle (1922), Billy Cass (1924-25), Ivy Cass [aka Beaumont] (1924-25), Zara Clinton (1928), Frank Daniel (1928), Bert Desmond (1922-23), Richard Dunbar (1928), The Eleven Wonders (1926), Lulla Fanning (1922), Four Little Kelly's (1928), Isobel Gawler (1928), Walter George (1926-27), Nellie Hall (1928), George Harper (1922), Arthur Harrison (1927), Mattie Jansen (1922-23), Madoline Knight (1927), Laurie McLeod (1926-28), George Martin (1927), Marie Maxwell (1928), Jack Mayer (1928), S. Meredith (1926), Arthur Meredith (1924-27), Ethel Osbourne (1922), Frank Perryn (1926-27), Fred Peters (1928), Walter Pym (1928), Grace Quine (1928), Ivy Ray (1928), Jack Raymond (1927), Will Raynor (1924-27), Rene Rich [violinist] (1928), Joe Rox (1928), Neville Rutledge (1928), Les Shipp (1928), Maudie Stewart (1924-27).

4. Associated Practitioners and Managers: Ross B. Simpson, manager, Sydney (ca. 1911-1916) and No 1 Pantomime company (1914-1915); Leslie Smith, manager, No 1 Pantomime Company (ca. 1915-1916).

5. Additional Notes and/or Historical Clarification:

- Helen Furgus and Nellie Ferguson were mother and daughter.
- Clara and Fred Stephenson were mother and son.
- Johnson Weir: Well-known in Australia during the early 1900s as a legitimate actor and for his recitations with slides, Weir was also a one-time president of the Australian Actors Association.

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Criterion Theatre – Stanley McKay Co. TT: Jan. (1910), 7. [rnib]
 Djubal, Clay. "[McKay, Stanley](#)." *AustLit* (2006).
 McKay Collection, Australian National Library (5244). Incl. undated newspaper article: "Stanley McKay's Gaieties of 1964."
 McKay, Stanley. "What about the Rabbits." TT: Sept. (1916), 41-2.
 "Mr Stanley McKay and *Little Bo-Peep*." TT: Nov. (1910), 10.
 "Pantomime in Canberra." E: 13 Oct. (1926), 38.
 "Something about the Sydney Muffs." TT: June (1906), 13.
 "Stanley McKay's Companies." E: 12 Dec. (1928), 111. [rnib]
 "Stanley McKay's Pantomime Company in New Zealand: A Prosperous Tour." E: 23 Mar. (1927), 54.
 "Touring Companies - Stanley McKay's Pantomime and Opera Company." E: 15 Dec. (1926), 125.
 "Years of Gay Entertainment." MB: 10 June (1971), 14-15.

SEE ALSO:

P: 15 Oct. (1904), 22. Photograph. [rnib]
TT: Nov. (1910), 9. Photograph. [rnib]

P: **Sydney Muffs reviews:** 15 Sept. (1904), 22 • 15 Oct. 1904, 22 • 15 May (1905), 26. • TT: July 1905, 15 • Sept. (1905), 13 • Nov. (1905), 7 • Jan. (1906), 9, 23 • Mar. (1906), 9 • 13 • Nov. (1907), 11 • Dec. (1907), 7, 18 • Dec. (1908), 19 • Feb. (1909), 8 • Mar. (1909), n. pag. • May (1909), 18 • June (1909), 1 • July (1909), 18-19 • Sept. (1909), 19 • Oct. (1909), 23. [all rnib]



Theatre June (1906), 14.