

HECTOR NAPIER

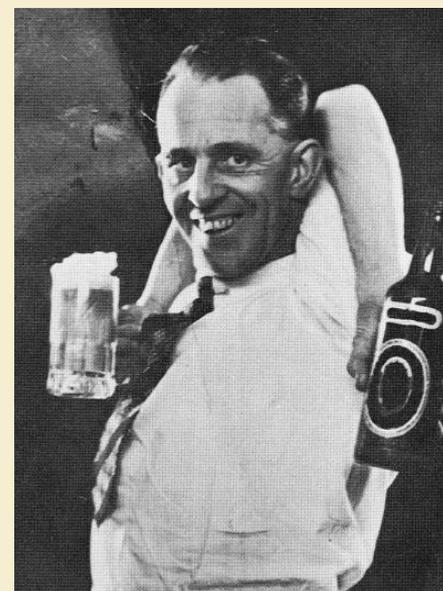
(1891-1965) World-renowned British contortionist Hector "Human Spider" Napier came to Australia in 1912 for Wirth's Circus, and the Tivoli and Fuller-Brennan circuits. He developed his famous act in the USA around 1915, but came back to Australia in 1915 to join the A.I.F. After recovering from wounds in 1916, he teamed up with Yvonne Cartledge, who played the butterfly to his spider. The pair toured Australia between 1916 and 1919, returning in 1922/23 and 1925/26. They retired in the mid-1930s.

Hector Napier's unique ability to dislocate his shoulders, elbows and wrists saw him become one of the greatest contortionists of the early 20th century. Born Arthur Reed in Berwick on the Scottish/English border, he was raised in London and began appearing on the professional stage from age 10. After working under various names, he eventually settled on Hector Napier in order to hide this activity from his disapproving parents. They in turn sent him to Saskatchewan, Canada, while he was in his early to mid-teens hoping that he would learn farming. He did not remain there long, however, preferring instead to make his way to Chicago where he began working the small vaudeville circuits. His special gift quickly bought him to the attention the big time Keith circuit, which eventually led to him touring internationally.

Napier came to Australia with Wirth's Circus in 1912, and later appeared on the Tivoli and Fuller-Brennan circuits. After returning to the USA he developed his world famous "Human Spider" act. The routine saw him skulk around a spider's web backcloth dressed in a skin tight black costume and skull cap while performing all manner of grotesque twists and contortions. His routine is described more fully in *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America, Volume 1*:

Hector had a large rope spider's web made to his specifications, and designed a costume of black tights and skullcap, accented with silver spider stripes. With his legs bent forward over his shoulders and his arms stretched to the rear, he opened the act as a gigantic Human Spider clinging to his rope web hung at the rear of the stage. Slowly he crawled to the floor and downstage toward the audience. Advertising his "sextuple dislocations" of arms, shoulders and wrists, Hector's Human Spider act played the Palace Theatre during its inaugural season; subsequent bookings took him to the West Coast and around the world: Japan. China. Hong Kong, Singapore and India (819).

Napier came back to Australia via a tour of the East soon after war was declared and made the decision to enlist in the Australian Imperial Forces. He was eventually assigned to the Second Light Horse Regiment. Sometime after landing at Gallipoli he was wounded in one eye and in one of his legs, and as a result was shipped home in 1916. When sufficiently recovered from his wounds Napier resumed his former career, billing himself as "Ex-Lieut. 2nd Australian Light Horse, in Unique Feats of Contortion" (ctd Cullen, 819). It was sometime during this period that he met Dorothy Yvonne Cartledge (1888-1966), an Australian-born ballerina whose parents had emigrated from the United Kingdom in the 1880s. She was then under contract (with her sister and aunt) to the Adeline Genee Ballet Company, which had been touring the Antipodes since 1913. When Cartledge completed her engagement she and Napier formed the dance and contortion partnership which eventually propelled them into international stardom. Although best remembered as Napier and Yvonne, the act was actually billed under several names, initially as Napier and Thorne, followed by Napier and Cartledge, and Napier and La Belle Yvonne.



Source: Frank Van Straten. *Tivoli* (2003). 63.

(Hector) (Dorothy),
Napier and Thorne
Contortionist. Dancer.
Hector Napier, the Contortionist With-
out Joints.
Look for the Triple Dislocations.
Communications, This Office.

Interestingly, Napier and Cartledge were reportedly putting together a routine in 1917 that revolved around their cat:

Hector Napier and his wife have a very clever performing cat, and they have framed up a new and novel act introducing this wonderful feline performer. This scribe had the pleasure of witnessing a private performance the other night. The feline did some amazing tricks, one being a double dislocation. On their arrival in Sydney it is Hector's intention of giving a try-out at one of the Fuller houses with a view of playing the new turn on the circuit (AV: 9 May 1917, n. pag.).

In early January 1918, an Australian Variety critic suggested that while Napier was undoubtedly a wonderful contortionist he had still not devised a routine that would make him successful. It would seem that the writer had not yet seen Napier and Cartledge's performance in William Anderson's 1917/18 *Jack and the Beanstalk* pantomime (Wirth's Hippodrome, Syd), for it was that production which saw the pair devise and first present their world famous act. As another reviewer wrote at the time:

[There is a] keen note of originality sounded by "the Butterfly and the Spider," presented by Napier and Yvonne. Napier is apparently as boneless as a piece of string and ties himself into many knots. Yvonne is a toe dancer in the guise of a butterfly and just as light and graceful (ctd. Cullen 819).

Napier also provided some insight into his special gift when talking to a journalist prior to appearing in Adelaide:

Just how Hector Napier the contortionist extraordinary, who in his spider stunt with Butterfly Belle Yvonne, in William Anderson's *Jack and the Beanstalk* pantomime is able to so contort himself is what puzzles most folk who see and marvel at his act. "There's a triple dislocation of my shoulders, my elbows and wrists," he tells, "that's how it is with me." [He] goes on to relate, and has documents to prove it, that New York doctors paid him the equivalent of £30 to permit the trebly dislocated portions of his anatomy to be x-ray photographed in the interests of surgical science" (Adelaide *Advertiser* 31 Jan. (1918), 5.



Worlds News (no details)

Napier and Cartledge remained in Australia until mid-1919, at which time they travelled to the United States to undertake a tour that would ultimately last some years. According to a report published in *Australian Variety* shortly after the couple left the country, Napier had been less than impressed by the state of the Australian industry:

A recent arrival from the States has told us that Hector Napier, the Australian Contortionist, who had just landed in America, was kicking the tripe out of the country and its people. Australia, according to Napier, is rotten and the vaudeville circuits a joke. The Fullers came in for much abuse, a great lot of it levelled against general manager W. J. Douglas. His remarks were overheard by one of the crew of the "Sonoma" (an Australian), who told Napier he was a crimson liar and promptly administered a hiding to the contortionist. Napier here was a huge joke, and, according to himself, had the greatest act in the business, [whereas] as a matter of fact it was as crude and unfinished as one could possibly imagine. When he came into the office on the day he and his wife left for America, Napier took our breath away when he told us that he was [hired] direct from this side by Mrs [?] Weston. In conclusion we would say that Napier found Australian vaudeville conditions so bad by reason of the fact that his set failed to make out on any decent time. Herewith we drop a word in the ear of Mrs Weston direct from Australia - a contortionist who can twist the truth around in a most inconceivable fashion! (1 Aug. 1919, 3).

After completing their engagements in the US the Napiers undertook tours of England and South America, with the later country including engagements in Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro. During this time Cartledge gave birth to two sons, with Napier forced to work a solo act when his wife was no longer able to perform on stage.

Despite his alleged dislike of Australia Napier and his wife came back to Australia via South Africa in 1922, remaining in the country until after the birth of their daughter, Valantyne, in 1923. It would appear, too, that the Fullers held no grudge with Napier, as he appeared on their circuit during the tour, including a season at the Empire Theatre (Bris) in late 1922. Among the other firms to engage the act were the Tivoli circuit and Harry Clay.

During the 1922/23 tour a *Theatre* magazine critic proposed that Napier's act, while both interesting and educational, still suffered somewhat "in presentment," noting that it was "put forward in a rather slow, amateurish way" and therefore lost most of its effect. The critic went on to suggest:

He should work on a miniature black stage; his spider-web should be in red or violet if at all; and a series of black wings should box in his platform. Then he should, clad in white, work under a suitable spotlight - everything focusing to him and his fine series of effortless, boneless dislocations. These are natural and healthful, not abnormal and shuddersome (Jan. 1923, 20).

After some two years touring overseas the Napiers returned for another Antipodian tour, this one being undertaken over the years 1925 and 1926. The mid to late-1920s also saw the act expand to three people. Yvonne's aunt, Lillias Cartledge, who was by then a ballet teacher, was invited to join them for an initial 26 week contract, thus allowing them an opportunity to present something entirely different. Cullen et al provide some insight into the new act in *Vaudeville Old and New*:

As the curtain opened, Hector, Yvonne and Lillias posed as Dresden figures set atop pedestals. They performed a variety of dances involving quick costume changes and remained a trio until Lillias stopped touring (819).

By the early 1930s Napier and Yvonne had reverted back to their popular Spider and Butterfly act, continuing to present it well into the 1930s. Although a number of secondary sources record that Napier retired in 1933, newspaper reports and advertising indicate that he was still performing as late as 1936. Interestingly, although Burnie's *Advocate* records that Napier was making his first appearances in Tasmania that year, he had in fact been in Hobart the previous year as a member of the Frivolities of 1935.

BURNIE Theatre to-night. First appearance in Tasmania of Hector Napier, The Human Spider.

COMMUNITY singing. See Hector Napier, The Human Spider, at the Burnie Theatre to-night.

Advocate (Burnie, Tas) 27 Nov. (1936), 13

ALL HOBART WILL BE AT THE THEATRE ROYAL TO-NIGHT
FAREWELL TO
"THE FRIVOLITIES OF 1935"

Special Attraction—Hector Napier, Contortionist Extraordinary.
PRICES: 2/6, 2/, 1/ (Plus Tax). Box Plan at O.B.M.'s. After 1 p.m. at the theatre.

THIS AFTERNOON—SPECIAL CHILDREN'S MATINEE, conducted by "Hermie" Ward. Novelties and prizes. A heap of fun for the kiddies. Admission 6d. Adults, 1/ all parts.

Mercury (Hobart) 28 Sept. (1935),

SEE ALSO

- [Valantyne Napier](#)

RETURNED SOLDIER ARTIST
TELLS OF HIS EXPERIENCE
WITH

Heenzo

The reliable Home Remedy for

HEADACHES, BACKACHE, INSOMNIA, DYSPEPSIA, NEURALGIA, BRAINFAG, DEPRESSION, PALPITATION AND OTHER NEURASTHENIC CONDITIONS.



Mr. Hector Napier, the Contortionist, now appearing on the Tivoli Circuit, is a returned soldier, having served his country at Gallipoli, where he was wounded by shrapnel. After having had a bout with his nerves he is O.K. again, and tells in the following letter how he got well:—

Mr. G. W. Hean, Chemist,—

Dear Sir:—I desire to convey to you my thanks for the benefit derived from the use of Hean's Tonic Nerve Nuts. For some months after my return from Gallipoli I suffered very much from nervous headaches and insomnia. Thanks, however, to your fine preparation these sources of anxiety are now nothing of the past, and I am feeling as well that I have returned to my work as a professional contortionist.

Yours faithfully,
HECTOR NAPIER.

Australian Variety ca. June (1917), n. pag.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Napier and Cartledge were married in 1917. Their first child, a daughter, was born in June 1917 but died in January the following year after a short illness (AV: 27 June 1917, n. pag / 18 Jan. 1918, n. pag.). The couple went on to have at least three more children, two sons (born between overseas between 1919 and 1922) and another daughter, Valantyne, who was born in Australia in 1923. Victoria Chance notes that "all the children performed the Human Spider act from an early age," with Valantyne performing it for the first time in 1935 (393).

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

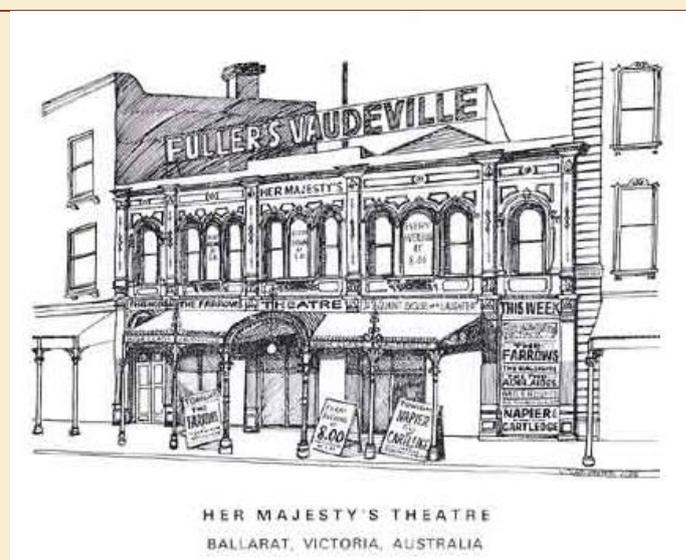
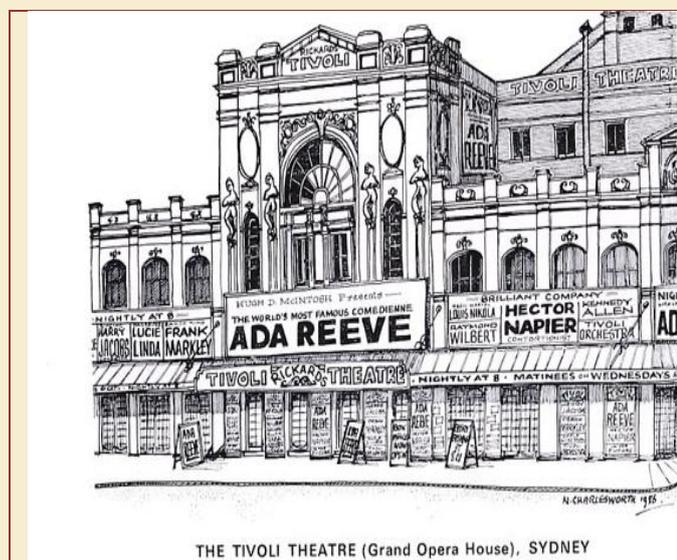
- **Broken Hill:** At the Majestic Gardens tonight, The Napiers (Hector and Yvonne) direct from J. C. Williamson's pantomime, will appear. Their act consists of a large spider web, in the centre of which Hector Napier is garbed as an ugly spider who pursues Yvonne, who is prettily dressed as a butterfly. She dances, and is at last caught and carried away to the centre of the web. Hector also performs a contortion act (BM: 19 Apr. 1918, 3)
- **Adelaide:** Hector Napier, who is also new to the bill will be seen in a wonderful act of contortionism. He is a veritable rubber-framed acrobat, and can twist and turn himself into any shape. His act is free from anything approaching the uncanny (RA: 21 Dec. 1918, 7)

FURTHER REFERENCE

Chance, Victoria. "Valantyne Napier." CTTA: (1995), 392-3.

Cullen, Frank, with Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America, Volume 1*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

"Some Contortionist." AA: 31 Jan. (1918), 5.



Source: vaudeville-postcards.com

SYDNEY. EVENING. NEWS.



LONG ARMS & ELASTIC JOINTS.
—Mr. H. Napier, the contortionist,
folds his arms around his neck.

WORLD'S NEWS. SYDNEY. AUSTRALIA

A HUMAN SPIDER.

NAPIER, the human spider, who has just commenced a tour of the Fuller's Theatre, is one of the most remarkable contortionists ever seen upon the stage. When the curtain goes up on his act, it reveals him clinging to a huge spider web formed of ropes at the rear of the stage. In his clever make-



up, he impersonates the silver striped ghost spider of Southern India, and then, taking off the head piece, follows this with a display of his remarkable power of triple dislocation, wrists, elbows, and shoulders,

DAILY-MAIL SYDNEY. AUSTRALIA

Napier, the human spider, who has just commenced a tour of the Fuller's Theatre, is one of the most remarkable contortionists ever seen upon the stage. He seems to be built differently from anybody else. When the curtain goes up on his act, it reveals him clinging to a huge spider web formed of ropes at the rear of the stage. In his clever make-up, he impersonates the silver-striped ghost spider of Southern India, and then, taking off the head-piece, follows this with a display of his remarkable power of triple dislocation, wrists, elbows and shoulders, which he claims is not done by any other performer.

EVERYONE'S-VARIETY. SYDNEY.

Arrived here from South Africa on Friday:—Hector Napier and his wife and "kiddy"; The Two Albers (said to have played here previously, Fullers), and Jack Trent and partner.

EVERYONE'S VARIETY. SYDNEY.

Hector Napier, the Australian contortionist, who has just returned from America, has improved his act several hundred per cent., since last here, and it is now worthy of a good position on any bill. At the Gaiety Theatre, Sydney, last Saturday, in the closing position, Napier held the audience in till the finish.

MORNING-HERALD. SYDNEY.

PRINCESS THEATRE
RAILWAY-SQUARE.

OUR WILD WESTERN LAUGH,
COWBOYS & GIRLS

Featuring
BLUEY & DOPEY,
AND FULL DOUBLE COMPANY.

NAPIER

The Human Spider.

THE TWO ALBERS

In "Dance O'Mania."

SCOTT & GRAHAM.

EVERYONE'S VARIETY. SYDNEY.

Hector Napier, Australian contortionist, who has just returned from a tour of Africa and America, is now in Sydney, and will open on the Clay circuit, on the 27th.

Courtesy of Valantyne Napier (1998)

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