FRANK REIS

(1871- ) After coming to Australia from South African Frank Reis was associated with Dan Barry (1896), William Anderson (1899-1909), George Marlow (1910-13) and George Willoughby (1913), establishing his reputation as both a dramatic actor and stage manager. After making his first vaudeville appearance in 1913 as a comedian, Reis put together a musical comedy/vaudeville troupe called World's Entertainers in 1914. By 1919 he was running a Sydney suburban vaudeville circuit. Reis continued to work as an actor, teacher, and producer well into the 1930s.

1871-1909

Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1871, Frank Reis made his first public stage appearance at 15 years of age. His name has first been connected with Australian theatre when he was engaged as advance rep for the Olivia Kempf Dramatic Company in 1895. That same year he was embroiled in a sensational court case which involved him suing actress Ada Rochfort (aka Ada Gratton) for slander. The case centred on his allegation that Rochfort had told other members of her company, then playing a season in Brisbane, that Reis had done three months gaol for horse stealing in Wagga. The incident occurred when the supernumeries of the company refused to go on stage. Rochfort, who was under the belief that Reis was one of the organisers of the strike, made the comment in an attempt to discredit him. According to Reis the allegation had spread throughout the local community and resulted in him being unable to secure work at several theatres (BC: 12 Jan. 1895, 2). Reis secured the judgment but was awarded only £15 (plus costs) after having asked for £50 (BC: 26 Jan. 1895, 4).

The following year Reis briefly joined Dan Barry's company at the Alexandra Theatre (Melb), before taking up an engagement at the same theatre with the Alexandra Dramatic Company (1897/98). His fellow actors included Edwin Lester, Harry Daniels and Fred B. Norton, whose drama A Cruel Wrong was first staged by the company in 1897 (9 Oct.). Other productions included: Cinders (Nov.) and Is Life Worth Living (26 Dec.), in which he played the character Adam Tozey.

1899 saw Reis associated with at least three touring dramatic companies, two of these being Ward's Metropolitan Dramatic Company and the Walsh Comedy Company. Both organisations toured Queensland during the year. The Ward troupe, which included Herbert Linden, Minnie Bradon, J.B. North and George Ward, reportedly staged The Danger Signal as one of its feature dramas. Headed by Phil Walsh and Nellie Ogden, the Walsh company presented such works as All for Gold and The Widow O'Brien. The third company Reis was associated with, Charles Holloway and William Anderson's Dramatic Company, saw Reis engaged initially as an actor, playing such characters as Timothy Trimmer in Two Little Drummer Boys (30 June) and Robert Danvers in The World Against Her (21 July). He was eventually appointed to the dual role of actor/stage manager, however (and even took over directorial duties on a number of occasions). He continued in these in these positions with Anderson for around a decade, and for almost all of that time was regarded as a prominent member of two of the entrepreneur's companies - the Famous Dramatic Company and the No 2 Dramatic Company.

In mid-1904 Reis temporarily left Anderson's employ to return to South Africa for some eight months, taking advantage of the peace which had come about following the end of the Boer War (O: 8 Oct. 1904, 6). He returned sometime in February and was immediately sent to New Zealand in charge of one of William Anderson's dramatic companies - possible the second or third time he had undertaken such a task for the entrepreneur. Reis's brother, Roland, was also engaged as the tour's advance rep. The Theatre magazine noted in its July 1905 issue that despite his relatively young age, Reis not only demonstrated a great deal of expertise and professionalism but was able much like by those under his direction:

In recognition of his signal ability, Mr Anderson appointed him stage manager of his company, and as he can claim to have been the youngest stage manager of any important theatrical venture in Australasia, it is proof positive of his merits. As Mr Anderson has produced some exceedingly heavy dramas, his choice of Mr Reis is certainly a wise one, for the man who has the pluck to take up a spectacular play like The Ladder of Life, which takes over 250 people to produce it in actors and auxiliaries, and put it on the stage with only a few days preparation, as was the case when first placed on the boards in Australia, is worthy of the important position...
which he holds. When Mr Anderson determined on sending his combination through Maoriland, on several occasions Mr Reis was chosen as the reliable man for discharging the important obligations incidental to the stage manoeuvres. Off the stage he posses many sterling qualities, which cause him to be very popular. The stage hands say he is the best man they ever had to deal with, and coming from this quarter it is praise indeed (July 1905, 16).

After returning to Australia in mid-1905 set up his own Academy of the Dramatic Art in Sydney. The inaugural student production, Under Two Flags was staged at the Palace Theatre on 25 August in association Stella Chapman's drama studio. Additional entertainment, a ballet entitled "The Carnival," was presented by 40 young ladies from Ina Alston's Academy (TT: 1 Aug. 1905, 15). It is believed that Roland Reis eventually took charge of the Academy. In late 1905 Reis was engaged by Lily Dampier to direct the second production of her company's newly inaugurated season at the Palace. That production, The Postmistress of the Czar, also saw Reis appear in a comedy role (TT: 1 Dec. 1905, 17).

Over the next four years Reis was almost exclusively associated with one or another of William Anderson's companies. In 1906 he is known to have appeared in The Road to Ruin (Dorcas O'Dowd), Transformed for Life (Ong Lee), Streets of New York (as Dan Puffy), The Work Girl and The Ladder of Life. 1907 saw him cast in The Face at the Window, A Sailor's Sweetheart, The Favourite, The Great World of London, East Lynne, The Midnight Mail, The Ladder of Life, Thunderbolt and The Career of the Kelly Gang. Among the actors he performed alongside were cast incl. Bert Bailey, Edmund Duggan, Eugenie Duggan, Max Clifton (see for example The Female Swindler, Criterion Theatre, Sydney; 26 Oct.).

By 1908 Reis had become one of the principals in the company which was known variously as William Anderson's New Australian Dramatic Company (aka William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Company). Robert Inman, Stirling White, Frank Crossley, Herbert Linden and Lillie Bryer were also prominent members of the company at that time. After playing seasons in Adelaide (twice) and Melbourne, as well as touring through Tasmanian, the company left for New Zealand in late October. By then the major productions included The Squatter's Daughter and The Village Blacksmith. After returning to Australia the company undertook another arduous tour of the country, with established engagements being played the capital cities and regional centres of South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. The company's 1909 repertoire included revivals of The Face at the Window and The Squatter's Daughter, along with new productions such as The 10.30 Down Express and Her Luck in London.

1910 - 1918

In 1910 Reis was engaged as stage director for the Charles Stanford Dramatic Company during its season at Harry Clay's Standard Theatre, Sydney. The Sydney Morning Herald's review of the opening production, The Queen of Spies, records Reis also played the comedy role of Phelam McNab with much success (11 July 1910, 5). Another work produced during the season was The Demon's Device (16 July). By the end of September he was in Brisbane, stage managing for George Marlowe's Dramatic Company. The opening production was The Bad Girl of the Family (24 Sept.). Early the following year Marlow's company was ensconced at Melbourne's Princess Theatre. The Argus records that Reis's character in Luck of Roaring Camp (4 Feb.) was chilling: "Mr Frank Reis makes of Gonzales a gaudily-dressed half-breed, with his fingers always straying towards the knife in his belt, and succeeds in sending many a creepy sensation through the house" (6 Feb. 1911, 9). The company followed Melbourne with a 20 weeks season in Sydney at the Adelphi, opening once again with The Bad Girl of the Family (5 Apr.). Another prominent production was Mrs Morton Powell's Driving a Girl to Destruction (17 June). Reis's fellow cast members by then included John Cosgrove, J. P. O'Neill, Harry Diver, Arthur Shirley, Essie Clay, Robert Inman, Ethel Buckley, Cora Warner and Nellie Fergusson. After 20 weeks in Sydney the company returned to Queensland playing Brisbane and a number of regional centres. 1911 also saw Reis appear in a film adaptation of Driving a Girl to Destruction. Produced by Marlowe and his Australian Picturised Drama Company, the cast comprised most of the members of his dramatic company, along with imported British stage stars Louise Hampton and Cecil Mannering in the lead roles.

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1 See "Historical Notes and Corrections" section below for further details relating to Roland Reis's career.
Reis remained with George Marlow through until at least mid-1913, with one of his last engagements being a season at the Adelphi in Sydney. Around July/August that year he was engaged as a comedian in a vaudeville program at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne., with this possibly being his first appearance on the variety stage. Among those on the bill were George Sorlie, Ted Stanley, Con Moreni, Lyla Thompson, the Three Starrs and James Craydon. Later that year Reis accepted an engagement from George Willoughby to appear with his dramatic company during its season at the Adelphi. Other members of the company included Frank Crossley, Arthur Shirley, Charles Taylor and Muriel Dale. Among the productions staged were The Night Side of London (4 Oct.), White as a Lily (18 Oct.) and For the Term of His Natural Life (1 Nov.).

1914 saw Frank Reis begin focusing his attention towards the variety industry, undertaking a tour of New South Wales and Queensland with his own musical comedy and vaudeville company. Invariably billed as "Mr Frank Reis presents The World's Entertainers," and described as comprising leading English and American artists, the original line-up was Ina Alston (Reis's wife), his brother Roland, Gladys Bertram, Sam Chester, Harry Dickson, Gertie Murdoch, Nell Matheson, Vera Murray, Violet Randall and Sam Stanley. The troupe's first established engagement was in Warwick (Qld) in late March, with one of the last for the year being a two nights season in Grafton (NSW) beginning Boxing Night. Among the feature productions staged were The Runaway Wife, The Evil Stranger and The Insurance Agent. The following year Reis introduced several new productions, notably The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg, On the Brain (an English farce) and The Wrong Mrs Wright. One of the artist's known to have been engaged in 1915 was P. Seton Crisp, who reportedly spent some seven months with the company. The World's Entertainers continued touring up until around mid-1915, with the established itinerary once again including New South Wales and Queensland.

Reis is believed to have had disbanded the World's Entertainers sometime between June and September 1915, at which time he returned to legitimate theatre. His first established engagement was in the George Marlow Dramatic Company's production of The Rosary, staged at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne beginning 25 September. The company later played Adelaide, Broken Hill and Sydney. The latter season saw the Marlow initially lease the Palace Theatre from Boxing Night before transferring to the New Adelphi on 12 February the following year. For the debut Adelphi production, Mavoueen, Reis was cast as Billy Button.

1917 saw Reis take up an engagement to tour New Zealand with Brandon Cremer's Dramatic Company. Australian Variety records in its 30 May 1917 issue that he had recently appeared in Margaret of the Red Cross during the company's season at the King's Theatre, in the Auckland suburb of Newtown (n. pag.). In January 1918 Reis appeared in and produced Walter Melville's melodrama The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning at the Victoria Theatre, Newcastle, for Dix-Baker.

1919 - 1920

By 1919 Reis had returned to the variety industry, establishing a suburban circuit in Sydney and later in several South-west New South Wales towns. In July Australian Variety noted: "Frank Reis has three nights vaudeville now at Manly, Balmain and Paddington, and with the show that this fine showman puts over he will soon have the full week, and good luck to him, too" (18 July 1919, n. pag.). The three Sydney shows were then being played at the National Theatre (Balmain), Oxford Theatre (Paddington) and the Britannia Theatre (Manly). The Balmain venue appears to have been used as his base of operations. A little over a month later he opened at Wollongong, and by November the circuit had expanded to include Corramal (near Bulli) and Woonona. The South Coast circuit did not last long, however, with Reis reporting that although his shows had drawn good houses, "they did not pay for the high-class shows" he was presenting. "The city for me," he told Australian Variety (1 Jan. 1920, n. pag.) shortly after closing that circuit down.

True to his word, Reis steadily expanded his Sydney suburban circuit during 1920, opening new shows at Mascot and Chatswood from April; Ryde, Enmore, Hurstville and Haberfield from July; and Katoomba in the Blue Mountains

2 Reis also reportedly staged shows at the Paddington Picture Palace at some stage.
from October. Another development was the establishment of the Frank Reis Revue Company - with Ted Tutty, Muriel Esbank and Ida Jarvis being prominent members around May. The Enmore Theatre venture appears to have been particular successful, with Reis initially booking acts for the newly-built venue's owners, the Szarka Brothers. After opening his own show there in July Australian Variety noted that people were regularly being turned away when Reis's vaudeville show played there on Thursday nights. "Believe me," the writer goes on to say, they are going to continue doing so while they put artists of Joe and Vera White and Devon Brocks' standard on the Bill" (22 July 1920, 21). Packed houses were also being reported at Mascot on Saturday nights. Some credit for this was directed towards Reis's two publicity men - Paddy Detman and Snowie Munroe (AV: 23 Apr. 1920, n. pag.).

In September 1920 one industry writer suggested that Reis was rapidly becoming a "vaudeville king," and that he was expected to be operating at least 20 shows a week along his circuit (AV: 17 Sept. 1920, 7).

Details of Frank Reis's career from 1920s onwards are currently unclear, with few reports having been identified. He was engaged as an actor/stage manager with the Cameos revusical company during its 1925 season in Brisbane. Sometime later that year, or in early 1926 he also became a partner with Brandon Cremer in a venture that involved touring several comedies, including Charlie's Aunt, What Happened to Jones, The Private Secretary, Tons of Money and Tilly of Bloomsbury. The company they engaged included Leslie A. Jones, Max Sorrell, Cyril Gardner, Scott Watson, Bert Frawley, Gertie Cremer, May Granville, Dorothy Moore, Therese Desmond and Kathleen Arnold (BC: 16 Feb. 1926, 11). By the early 1930s Reis appears to have settled in Sydney, taking on the role of producer for his wife's School of Theatrical Dancing.

SEE ALSO

• World's Entertainers

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

• Frank Reis has kept his suburban shows open in the suburbs right through the prince's visit, and although not making a fortune, he kept the ball rolling for his actors (AV: 24 June 1920, 7).

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Roland Reis: While little is known about Roland Reis's personal life or career at this stage, it is likely that he also came to Australia from South Africa with his brother, or followed shortly thereafter. His name has first been connected with the Antipodian theatre industry he acted as the advance rep for the William Anderson Dramatic Company's 1905 tour of New Zealand (led by Frank Reis). In 1912 Reis toured with J. D. Pilcher's Vagabonds through Queensland (GT: 13 July 1912, 2) and the following year he reportedly acted as the advance rep for the Otto Schmidt Company (AV: 10 Dec. 1913, n. pag.). The following year he set up his own school of dramatic art. Australian Variety records in its 24 February 1914 edition that he had recently moved into a larger premises at 51-52 Rawson Chambers, Rawson Place (2nd floor) due to increased business (n. pag.). Intermittent reports published in Australian Variety and the Green Room indicate that 'the well-known' teacher of stage aspirants" continued operating his school well into the 1920s, and that he had some success around the turn
of that decade as the producer of an act known as The Dandy Dancers. A writer for the *Green Room* noted in 1919, too, that as a producer and pedagogue Reis was playing a significant role in the development of young performers:

Probably for the first time in its history St James Hall (Sydney) housed a minstrel show, when Mr Roland Reis and his pupils staged an old-time black-face show at the house on December 2. The programme, comprising no less than forty-four items, reflected much credit on Mr Reis, the producer. The curtain rose revealing the stage, on which sixty performers including six juvenile cornermen were artistically arranged. Space will not permit a review of the individual numbers. Suffice it to say, that managers of theatres will find that they have much to thank Mr Reis for, as his entertainment has shown us how carefully he is modelling stage careers for a host of young Sydneyites. He has accomplished big things, and it is to be hoped that he will continue the good work he is doing with young Australia (Jan. 1919, 9).

2. **Ina Alston**: As the wife of Frank Reis, Ina Alston was also heavily involved in the theatre industry as a dramatic and comedy actress, specialty dancer and teacher. Several reports in Perth's *Sunday Times* indicate that she was a member of the "the famous White family," which "produced several fine dancers, no less than three of the same being star-leg twirlers in the Lonnen-Hood Gaiety Co" ca. 1907. Two other sisters were part of an act known as the Four Rosebuds, also working the variety circuit around the same period (24 Nov. 1907, 17). In addition to Ina, the established identities of two of the other White sisters are Rosie White and Mrs Stanley Grant. Their mother died in February 1909 (STP: 21 Feb. 1909, 14).

Alston opened her own teaching academy at the National Theatre, Balmain, in March 1920, offering private and class tuition in stage and fancy dancing. The academy was still operating in the early 1930s out of premises in the city. Although called the Alston School of Theatrical Dancing, it also offered training in elocution, picture acting, dramatic art and broadcasting.

**FRANK REIS'S ENTERTAINERS**

Including World's Entertainers (1914-1915)

1. **Artists and Acts** included:


   C: Sam Chester (1914-15), Muriel Creber (1919), The Cracknells (1919), Billy Carroll (1920), Marshall Crosby (1920), Crackerjack Orchestra (1920).

   D: Harry Dicconson (1914-15), Percy Davis (1919-20), Will Dyson (1919), Dozey and Dora (1919), Louie Duggan (1919), Daisy Dale (1920), Eugene Damon (1920), Doris Docksey (1920), Hilda Davis (1920), Driscoll Boys (1920).

   E: Eclair Bros (1919), Muriel Esbank (1919-20), Lulla Elliot (1920).


   G: Jim Gaffney (1919), Beatrice Gordon (1919), The Two Greshams (1920), Douglas Graham (1920), Stan Gibb (1920).

   H: Frank Herberte (1919-20), Digger Hughes (1919), Fred Holland (1919), Gladys Holmes (1919), Sisters Hardy (1919), Hyman-Uren Troupe (1919), Homaz Trio (1919).

   J: Josie Johnson (1919), Ida Jarvis (1919-20).

   K: Jack "Porky" Kearns (1920).

   L: Ernest Lauri (1919), Ward Lear (1919), May Lazern (1919), Levarto (1919), Merle Lawrence (1920), Joe Lashwood (1920), Lee Chee Loon Troupe (1920).
**ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY**

1895: OLIVIA KEMP (Gaiety Th, Bris; 9 Mar. - * > as Advance Rep for Olivia Kempf Dramatic Co) ► DAN BARRY
(Alexandra Th, Melb; 26-31 Dec. - > Dan Barry Dramatic Co)

1896: DAN BARRY (Alexandra Th, Melb; 1 Jan. - *)

1897: WILSON FORBES & ERSKINE SCOTT (Alexandra Th, Melb; ca. 9 Oct. - * > Alexandra Dramatic Co)


NB 1: George Ward's Queensland tour included: Rockhampton (Th Royal; ca. early Apr.)

NB 2: Walsh's Dramatic Co Queensland tour included: Rockhampton (Th Royal; 14 Aug. - *)

1900: WILLIAM ANDERSON (Th Royal, Melb; ca. 30 June - 27 July > William Anderson's Famous Dramatic Co)

1900-05: Reis returned to South Africa for eight months, leaving ca. September 1904 and returning ca. April/May 1905.


NB 1: Tasmanian tour included: Hobart (Th Royal; 14 Apr. - *)

NB 2: Victorian tour included: Bendigo (Royal Princess Th; 26-31 Dec.)

1907: WILLIAM ANDERSON (Victorian regional tour; 1 Jan. - 28 May > William Anderson's Dramatic Co) • (His Majesty's Th, Perth; 28 Jan. - * > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co) • (King's Th, Fremantle; 29 May - 1 June > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co) • (Western Australian goldfields tour; ca. 5 June - * > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co) • (King's Th, Fremantle; 24-29 June > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co, return season) • (Criterion Th, Syd; 26 Oct. - ca. Dec* > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co)

NB 1: Victorian tour included: Bendigo (Royal Princess Th; 1 Jan. - *)

NB 2: Western Australian goldfields tour included: Kalgoorlie (Her Majesty's Th; 5 June - *)

1908: WILLIAM ANDERSON (Th Royal, Adel; 1 Feb. - * > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co) • (Tasmanian tour; 3 Mar. - ca. Apr. > William Anderson's No 2 Dramatic Co) • (New Bijou Th, Melb; 18 Apr. - * > William Anderson's Australian Dramatic Co) • (Th Royal, Adel; 27 June - * > William Anderson's Australian Dramatic Co) • (New Zealand
Theatrical Case, The

Theatrical Case, A

Action Against an Actress: A Claim for £50."

Further Reference


See also:

O: 8 Oct. (1904), 6 ["Lorgnette" par by "Prompter"]