HARRY RICKARDS

After starting out in London music halls during the late 1860s, Harry Rickards toured the Antipodes three times before establishing a permanent base in the country in the late 1880s. Although often referred to as the “Napoleon” or “king” of Australian vaudeville, Rickards did not monopolise the industry. He instead concentrated on the upper end of the market, providing a high-class entertainment package, frequently travelling to England and America in search of the best international acts. While many of these performers have dominated accounts of Rickards’s theatrical operations, he nevertheless employed many local performers. His success saw him build a substantial fortune during his lifetime, but was also renowned for supporting charities and performers and/or their families who had fallen on hard times. After his death in 1911 the Tivoli circuit was taken over by Hugh D. McIntosh. The new company was subsequently named Harry Rickards’ Tivoli Theatres Ltd, in recognition of its founder.

[This biography is an overview only. For further insight and details regarding Harry Rickards' life and career, see the Further Reference below]

1843-1889

The son of a printer, Harry Rickards was born Benjamin Harry Leete in the slum area of East London and, as a youth, was apprenticed to an engineer. He supplemented his meagre income by singing in local pubs, and eventually turned to the theatre as a career. After he made his professional debut in a production of *Rob Roy* at the Runcorn Theatre Royal, he began appearing on the stages of numerous London music halls, eventually changing his name to Rickards. His first big break came about in 1863, through his rendition of the song ‘Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines.’ This success led to him finding engagements in the more upmarket London music halls as a *lion comique*, a comedian who affected a toff persona, complete with moustache, cane, and champagne. After a failed attempt at management, a venture that bankrupted him, he decided to tour outside the United Kingdom, initially choosing the Commonwealth countries.

Rickards first toured the colonies in partnership with Enderby Jackson (1871-72). After going their separate ways at the conclusion of a New Zealand tour, Rickards formed his own company - the London Star Comique Combination in December 1872. He toured the troupe around the country for 18 months and then he left for the USA, making his debut appearance at Maguire’s New Theatre, San Francisco in October 1874. Around this period his first marriage ended and Rickards soon afterwards formed a relationship with Kate Roscoe (or Rowsow), a performer whose stage name was Mdle Katrine, “The Empress of the Air.” Following several years in America (1874-1875) and almost a decade back in the United Kingdom (as well as a tour of South Africa) Rickards returned to the Antipodes in 1885.

Although the 1885 tour was not a great success Rickards nevertheless made a second attempt in 1887 and again the following year. The third tour (1888-91) was undertaken in collaboration with his brother, John (Jack) Leete, who acted as general manager. Although the pair undertook a further tour of the USA, Britain and the UK, by this stage Rickards had decided to concentrate his energies in one location, and having experienced the major international variety industries believed that Australian held both the most potential and least competition for the type venture he was going to attempt to build.

---

1 Rickards and his first wife, Carrie Rickards, nee Tudor, were eventually divorced in 1878.

Harry Rickards’ first stage appearance in Australia
*Argus* 2 Dec. (1871), 8.

As the “Mad Butcher”
The early 1890s was not an ideal time to be involved in high risk ventures such as theatrical management. As the Depression gradually increased its toll on the economy a number of high-profile CBD-based entrepreneurs were forced to close. In order to reduce the potential for losses while increasing entertainment value Rickards temporarily joined forces with other companies on occasions, notably with the Cogill Brothers (with whom he staged double-company programmes), and American entrepreneur Dan Tracey. Although always branded with the Rickards's name, his troupes were variously billed: The Rickards-Leete Combination, Harry Rickards' New Comedy Company, Harry Rickards' New English and Irish Company, and Harry Rickards' New Musical Comedy Company.

One of Rickards major strategic moves was to rename his company the Tivoli Minstrels. Frank Van Staten notes that "the choice of the word 'Tivoli' was inspired" in that "it implied that his artistes had come from the prestigious Tivoli music hall in London; [while] in reality most of them were locally recruited. Rickards debuted the company at the Opera House, Sydney on 10 December 1892 as the New Tivoli Minstrel and Grand Specialty Company of Forty Great Artistes. The success of this venture was such that the following year he switched venues to the newer and more attractive Garrick Theatre (Castlereagh Street) and renamed it the Tivoli – thus setting in motion a theatrical institution that continued to operate for upwards of seventy years (albeit under different managements). Opening on 18 February 1893 the Tivoli Theatre was an enormous success despite the prevailing economic conditions and the fact that he made a deliberate decision to pitch his shows to the city’s increasingly affluent middle classes. While his Tivoli operations, both in other capital cities and in regional centres, did not exclude the poorer sections of the community "who populated the ‘gods’ (the cheapest section of the house), the more expensive admission prices and the requirement that patrons conduct themselves and attire themselves according to the Tivoli dress code, suggests that his entertainments were attended by many within the popular culture demographic as special occasions rather than the regular weekly (or more) attractions offered cheaply in the suburbs [see Historical Notes and Corrections below for more on this issue].

Rickards' entertainment formula remained pretty much the same during the 1890s, "a basic company of versatile, popular regulars, often augmented by visiting acts, but containing no real stars" (Van Straten, "Harry Rickards" 2). Fortunately there was an exceedingly large pool of experienced and popular local artists to draw on. Among the most prominent names were Priscilla Verne (ex-Hugos' Minstrels), Fred and Will Leslie, Florrie Forde, Billy Williams, McKisson and Kearns (Albert McKisson and Jack Kearns), Ida Tauchert (aka Ida Rosslyn/Ida Kearns), Charlie Fanning, George Devoe, Maud Fanning, Arthur Elliott, Martyn Hagan, Will Whitburn, and (briefly) Harry Clay. Arguably the most popular of the locally-based artists to regularly appear on the Tivoli stage during the mid to late-1890s, however, were African-American comedians Charlie Pope and Irving Sayles.

Buoyed by the success of his Sydney venture, Rickards established a permanent presence in Melbourne at the Prince of Wales Opera House, beginning in 1895. It from this time onwards, too, that he began to actively move away from the minstrel show format - although that is not to say that some performers (Will Whitburn and Maud Fanning, for example) didn’t still appear in blackface and continue presenting their minstrel comedy routines and "coon" songs.
In 1895 Rickards also undertook the first of a number of overseas trips to the United Kingdom to book new acts and shows. One of the biggest changes in his business strategy during the mid-1890s, however, was to gradually remove the old minstrel semi-circle format, a move that effectively distanced him from the other lower-level Australian theatrical entrepreneurs operating at that time. Things did not always go well for Rickards during this period of expansion, though. A disaster occurred in 1899 when fire destroyed the Sydney Tivoli. Undeterred he rebuilt a new theatre in its place within six months, and soon afterwards began expanding his base of operations to other capital cities.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Harry Rickards owned, managed, or leased five theatres in Australia. He cemented his presence in Melbourne in 1901 by building a new theatre to replace the tired old Grand Opera House. In naming it the Tivoli he effectively began the process of establishing the Tivoli both as a brand and an Australian institution. In addition to his major operations in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane, and Kalgoorlie, Rickards also sent troupes on tour through regional Australia and New Zealand.

Rickards's great achievement was to bring many of the world's greatest variety stars of the day to Australia, among them Little Tich (comic), Marie Lloyd (comic), Julian Rose (Hebrew comedian), Harry Houdini (escapologist), Eugene Sandow (strongman), W. C. Fields (comic juggler), and George Fuller Golden (singer). While his reputation as a theatrical importer tends to be the focus of most historical insights into his career, it should not be forgotten that he made a significant contribution to the employment of many high-profile Australian performers. In addition to those noted earlier, the early 1900s saw the rise of local stars such as Vaude and Verne, Art Slavin and Lily Thompson, Fred Bluett, George Sorlie, Bert Desmond, Ida Berridge, Sam Rowley, and Essie Jennings. Many of his local artists are known to have continued working the Tivoli circuit on a regular basis for many years.

Harry Rickards died in England in 1911 while on talent-buying trip, leaving behind his wife Kate, two daughters, and a fortune estimated at £135,000. An astute businessman, who effectively reigned as Australia's "king of vaudeville" for sixteen years, Rickards was also a benevolent man, regularly contributing to both industry and community welfare needs. One of his charitable institutions, for example, was a free Christmas lunch for disadvantaged people. He also regularly provided his artists and venues free of charge for benefit events. In 1912, following negotiations with Rickards' widow, the company was taken over by Hugh D. McIntosh. The new general manager subsequently renamed the organisation "Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres," in honour of its founder.
1. While Harry Rickards was undoubtedly the most successful and most high-profile Australian variety entrepreneur of his era, it should be noted that his influence and impact on the overall Australian variety industry and popular culture audience has been overly inflated by historians. Recent research into Australian variety industry (ca. 1870-1930) demonstrates that the current literature has neglected the extensive suburban and regional variety markets that offered alternative entertainment opportunities to the massive audience base that Rickards was unable and unwilling to cater for (Djubal 2005). Thus, with no sustained research conducted into the overall Australian theatre history of that era, the variety industry appears to have been oligopolistic, and Rickards' role has subsequently exaggerated by association with that concept. What is now clear is that he succeeded only in dominating the specific upper-level market. Although his audiences still comprised patrons from both the lower socio-economic demographic and from regional Australia (through his touring companies), the numbers were only a small percentage of the overall variety market.

To put things in context one only has to do the math. The Theatre records in April 1909, for example, that Rickards operated five permanent theatres the previous year, employing 115 foreign artists and 117 local performers (232 total). This was also a time when his operations were at their peak. Considering the population of Australia at that time (a little over 4.3 million), it is abundantly obvious that Rickards neither dominated nor controlled the vast Australian variety market. He was simply the most successful in his particular market (ctd. Djubal "What Oh Tonight," 26). Taking Sydney as a particular example, it is possible to ascertain that during the 1890s, the combined nightly attendance for theatres and music halls situated within the central business and inner suburban districts would have exceeded 10,000. This does not take into account the many other non-theatrical entertainment opportunities or outer suburban shows on offer. Given that the Tivoli Theatre seated only 1,200 patrons, it is evident that his operations were but a minor part of the overall Sydney entertainment industry. While his interstate touring troupes provided additional patronage for his company, these tours still only accounted for a small percentage of the entertainment on offer at any particular time around the country (ctd. Djubal "What Oh Tonight," 43, using data supplied by Eric Irvin in the Dictionary of Australian Theatre).

SEE ALSO

• Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres Ltd
• Opera House [1] (Melb)
• Tivoli Theatre (Melb)
• Tivoli Theatre [1] (Syd)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENTS AND TIVOLI COMPANY CHRONOLOGY

This chronology of engagements mostly comprises Rickards' career in Australia, including his Tivoli company's tour movements from the mid-1890s onwards. For further details concerning his professional movements outside Australia, see "Harry Rickards: The Napoleon of Vaudeville" by Monica Crouch.

An asterisk (*) beside a date indicates that it is either approximate or has not yet been established.

1871:  **ENDERBY JACKSON** (Princess Th, Melb; 2 Dec. - * > Enderby Jackson's London Star Co) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; ca. Dec. - * > Enderby Jackson's London Star Co)


1874:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (Sydney suburban tour; ca. Feb. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (A of M, Adel; 6 June - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 16 May - ca. 6 June - * > London Star Comique) • (Op House, Melb; 8-13 June > London Star Comique) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 15 June - * > London Star Comique)


1885:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (A of M, Adel; 6 June - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (A of M, Bris; 19 Aug. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 5 Sept. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (A of M, Syd; 24 Oct. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 26-31 Dec. > Rickards-Leete Combination)

1886:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 1 Jan. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (Th Royal, Hobart; 8-19 June > Rickards-Raynor Combination) • (Victoria Th, Maitland; 19-21 July > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (A of M, Bris; 26 July - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (S of A, Rockhampton; 24 Aug. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination) • (A of M, Syd; 4 Oct. - * > Rickards-Leete Combination)

NB: Rickards spent most of 1887 in the United Kingdom.

1888:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (Th Royal, Adel; 28 Apr. - * > New English Comedy & Specialty Co , first season back in Australia) • (New Op House, Syd; 19 May - 3 July) • (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 24 May > Queen's Birthday only) ▶ **HARRY RICKARDS/COGILL BROS** (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 7 July - 14 Sept. > Cogill Bros Minstrel & Burlesque Co/Rickards' New English Comedy & Specialty Co) ▶ **HARRY RICKARDS** (Gaiety Th, Bris; 27 Oct. - * ) • (Haymarket Music Hall, Syd; 19 Nov. - 31 Dec.) • (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 26 Dec. > afternoon concert)


1890:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (S of A, Syd; 1 Jan. - 17 Feb.) ▶ **COGEE AQUARIUM** (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 3, 4, 11, and 15 Jan. > New English & Irish Comedy Co) ▶ **HARRY RICKARDS** (Gaiety Th, Bris; 21 Feb. - * > New English & Irish Comedy Co) ▶ **COGEE AQUARIUM** (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 22 Mar. > New English & Irish Comedy Co - afternoon concert) • (Gaiety Th, Melb; 5 Apr. - 2 May > New English & Irish Comedy Co) ▶ **COGILL BROS** (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 3-27 May; > New English & Irish Comedy Co - with Cogill Brothers Minstrels) ▶ **HARRY RICKARDS** (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 28 May - 13 June > New English & Irish Comedy Co) • (Bijou Hall, Launceston; 17 June - * > Comedy Comic Opera and Specialty Co) • (S of A, Syd; 2 Aug. - 17 Nov. > New Musical Comedy Co) • (New Th Royal, Bris; 22 Nov. - *) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 26-31 Dec.)

NB: The Cogill Bros season at St George's Hall was already underway when the Rickards company was engaged.

1891:  **HARRY RICKARDS** (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 1 Jan. - * > New Musical Comedy Co) • (Gordon's Elite Concerts and Harbour Excursions, Syd; 29 Mar. only).

NB: Rickards returned to England ca. Apr.
A benefit for Rickards was held at the Melbourne Opera House on 8 October.

A Sydney Tivoli Theatre almost continuously between 1894 and 1911. He also ran variety entertainment at the Opera House, Melbourne on a yearly basis between February 1895 and February 1899. The details below therefore mostly indicate his company's Australian and New Zealand regional tours, the start dates for new theatre acquisitions, and any temporary theatre-leasing arrangements.

Advertisements placed in the Sydney Morning Herald during October indicate that Rickards was also at that time the lessee of the Victoria Theatre, Newcastle.

The Tivoli Theatre, Sydney, was destroyed by fire on 12 September.

All seasons from 1903 are Harry Rickards Tivoli Co unless otherwise noted.

1905: HARRY RICKARDS (Th Royal, Perth; 17 Jan. - 28 Apr.) • (Th Royal, Perth; 1-25 Aug.) • HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 27-31 Dec. 20 Jan.- * > Urbanora Bioscope Co)

1906: HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 1 Jan. - * > Urbanora Bioscope Co) • (Queen's Hall, Syd; 20 Jan.- * > Urbanora Bioscope Co) • (New Zealand Dominion tour; ca. Oct. - Nov.) • (East Asia tour) • (Palace Gardens, Perth; 8-31 Dec.)

NB: New Zealand tour incl. (Wellington, 20-31 Oct.) • (Christchurch, carnival week) • (Dunedin, 12-17 Nov.)

1907: HARRY RICKARDS (Palace Gardens, Perth; 1 Jan.- *) • (New Zealand Dominion tour; ca. June - Aug.) • incl. Theatre Royal, Christchurch. ca. June; His Majesty's, Auckland, ca. Aug.)

1909: HARRY RICKARDS (Palace Gardens, Perth; 23-31 Dec.)

1910: HARRY RICKARDS (Palace Gardens, Perth; 1 Jan.- 26 Feb.) • (Palace Gardens, Perth; 12 Apr. - *) • (Palace Gardens, Perth; 17-31 Dec.)

1911: HARRY RICKARDS (Palace Gardens, Perth; 1 Jan.- *)

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Mr Harry Rickards' New Mansion at Darling Point." TT: 1 Apr. (1905), 11.
Norman, Charles. When Vaudeville Was King (1983).
White, F. Farmer. "Late Harry Rickards; King of Vaudeville." SYM: 18 Oct. (1911), n. pag.