

SLAVIN AND THOMPSON

Art Slavin and Lily Thompson

Art Slavin came to Australia in the 1880s as a child and initially pursued a career as a chemist before turning to the variety stage. After finding success on Harry Rickards' circuit during the early 1900s, he and soubrette Lily Thompson formed a life-long partnership, touring for Rickards and other leading variety organisations from 1910 up until the 1930s. Between 1915 and the early 1920s, however, they were largely associated with Harry Clay, who engaged Slavin as a revusical producer and company manager for much of that time.

Born in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, around 1880, Art Slavin's parents immigrated to Australia when he was six years old. It is believed that they settled in the Blue Mountains township of Wellington, New South Wales, where a number of relatives were already living. Although it has not yet been ascertained he may also have been a relative of a P. or F. Slavin, a trombonist who was associated with the Alhambra Music Hall around the mid-1880s (see Alhambra Stage photograph in AV: 15 July 1914, n. pag.). According to the *Theatre* magazine's "Lantern," Slavin was a Sydney native who initially pursued a career as a chemist (Feb. 1919, 28), which suggests that he may have moved to the New South Wales capital in his youth. Official records show that he married his first wife, Alberta Dutton, in Wellington in 1903, and the pair had three children - two girls (one died in infancy) and a boy, Eric. Little else is known of Slavin's early life, other than the couple were divorced in 1914.

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Theatre 2 Dec. (1907), 19.

Art Slavin's first recorded engagement with Harry Rickards was at the Tivoli Theatre (Syd) on 16 February 1907. This indicates that he had been performing for a number of years because Rickards did not employ amateurs or even emerging professionals. In addition to his Tivoli engagements Slavin also occasionally appeared with other firms, notably Ted Holland (Theatre Royal, Bris) ca. June 1907; and James Brennan (Sydney and Melbourne) in 1910-11. His contract with Brennan, which lasted well into 1911, and possibly 1912, included at least one tour with the entrepreneur's Vaudeville Players (see Theatre Royal, Bris; ca. Nov.). By that stage Slavin was appearing in a partnership with soubrette, Lily Thompson. A native of Melbourne (and reportedly a sister of Maisie Pollard), Frances Lilia Thompson had begun her stage career with the Pollard family, beginning as one of the Lilliputians and ending as a member of their Juvenile Opera Company. She

toured the East and through America with Mrs C.A. Chester, a daughter of Tom Sullivan (aka Tom Pollard), and later toured South Africa with the Harry Hall Lilliputian Opera Co (TT: Feb. 1919, 28). Although it has not yet been determined when Thompson and Slavin first teamed up, it is believed to have occurred while they were contracted to the Tivoli circuit, and possibly as early as 1910.

In 1913 Slavin and Thompson worked with Dix-Baker in Newcastle, J. C. Bain (Syd) and the Fullers. The following year they again secured work with Bain, in addition to seasons with Harry Clay, Cook and Fowles (Bris), Post Mason's Carnival Company and Jacky Landow's Entertainers. It was with Harry Clay, however, that they had the longest and most fruitful association. Two years after making their first appearance at his Bridge Theatre the couple were ideally positioned to take advantage of Clay's considerably expanded circuit. This comprised, in addition to the annual Queensland tour and revived Sydney suburban circuit, a fortnight-long South-West NSW tour (up to 13 towns situated along the railway line which ran west through Katoomba and then south to Wagga Wagga and Albury).

Although mostly associated with Clay between 1915 and 1919, Slavin and Thompson occasionally appeared with other organisations, including Holland and St John (1916), Harry Sadler (1917) and Will Robey (1917). It was during this period, too, that the revusical genre began to emerge as a popular variety attraction, and in Art Slavin it found an enthusiastic writer/director. Indeed, over the 1916-18 period only Arthur Morley could

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16 — STAR ARTISTS — 16.
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Toowoomba Chronicle 30 June (1917), 6.

be said to have perhaps written and produced more revues for Harry Clay. In 1917 Slavin and Thompson made the first of two back to back tours of Queensland for Clay. According to reviews in most centres a highlight of each season was Arthur Morley's revusical *Dockum Street, Woolloomooloo*. As the *Toowoomba Chronicle* records:

As comedy waiters, Messrs Art Slavin and Bert Desmond caused endless amusement by their many interludes and quaint sayings, as an Irishman and as a Jew, and their topical song "1999," was most humorous. Mr Slavin's "cards" were responsible for a deal of laughter and interest... Slavin and Thompson (old Toowoomba favourites) had the audience with them the whole time they were on the stage, and blended patter, gags and paradoxical fragments harmoniously" (2 July 1917, 7).

Between tours Slavin and Thompson worked Clay's Sydney and NSW circuits. *Australian Variety* notes in January that "Slavin and Thompson [are] good people at all times; [they do] excellent work in the revue, and later on the programme is strengthened by their turn; good cross patter, and original vocal numbers, with added praise for the parodies from Art Slavin" (18 Jan. 1918, n. pag.). The following month a *Theatre* critic wrote: "The features of the first part revue, *Three Thousand Miles a Minute*, are Art Slavin's staggersome make-up as a spiritualist, with big goggle eyes and a profusion of red, curly hair.... Mr Slavin is the life and soul of the revue" (Feb. 1918, 41).

1918 also saw Slavin manage the last of Clay's Queensland tours for almost a decade, with the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918/19 forcing the company to cancel its 1919 tour - the first time since 1901, the year Clay began sending troupes through the state.¹ The epidemic was so bad at one stage that Slavin wrote a little light relief which *Australian Variety* duly published in its 11 October 1918 issue:

"Slavin's Spasm"

Everybody's got the "Flu"
At-choo! At-choo! At-choo!
I'm trying to write this verse for -
At-choo! At-choo! At-choo!
Don't miss Clay's laughter show this week
If you're feeling sad or blue
It's no darned good, I can't write more,
At-choo! At-choo! At-choo! (17)

For the 1918 tour Slavin was handed the duties of producer and tour manager and as such he staged several of his own revues, including the highly popular *Casey's Ashes*. The 1918 tour was also run with the assistance of Wally Edwards, who acted as business manager. The extent to which Slavin was regarded in the industry can be seen in a *Northern Miner* review of the company's Charters Towers season: "The first portion of the evening's entertainment was devoted to an extremely funny revue [by Art Slavin] which provided a constant simmer of merriment.... Slavin and Thompson's comedy patter work was another feature of the performance" (26 June 1918, 3). Two months later, having just returned to Clay's Sydney circuit, *Australian Variety* reflected:

An Energetic Producer: - Art Slavin is a paragon of excellence in stage management, and the manner in which he conducts rehearsals. There is no time lost in idling around, but he gets to work right away. Furthermore, he uses no aggressive methods, but gets more done by his genteel methods (30 Aug. 1918, 7).



The magazine later wrote a similarly glowing review: "Slavin and Thompson are a riot nightly; the former's parodies are without doubt, excellent; and the latter is a dainty and polished artist, who always renders assistance towards making the turn a success" (18 Oct. 1918, 11). The *Theatre* was equally impressed with the Slavin line of work on Clay time, reporting in its February 1919 issue: "Besides writing a lot of the Slavin-Thompson songs and patter, Mr Slavin was, at the time these lines were written, supplying Mr Clay with a second-half revue that made in all seventeen for that manager, from his clever, resourceful pen" (Feb. 1919, n. pag).

Lily Thompson

Courtesy of Brian Slavin and Kelly Hindman

¹ With his NSW expansion taking up his time and competition from film more fierce Clay permanently ended his association with Queensland. Only two more tours of the state were mounted after this. The first was in 1927, two years after Clay's death, and the last in 1929 (with Roy Rene).

Sometime around 1919/1920 Slavin and Thompson left Harry Clay's circuit, and while there remains a significant gap in their careers as far as the research for this thesis is concerned they are believed to have continued playing throughout Australia and New Zealand during the first half of the 1920s, much of it apparently on the Fullers circuit. In this respect the *Theatre* reports in 1923 that "Slavin and Thompson, a very pleasing lady and smart comedian put over a fine offering. The lady sings ballads, which the comedian himself wrote" (TT: Oct. 1923, 18).

In 1924 Slavin and Thompson returned to Clay's on a more permanent basis, with Slavin being known to have produced a number of revues for the company that year, including *The Winning Ticket* (ca. Sept/Oct), and his ever-popular *Casey's Ashes* (ca. Nov.). Of that production the *Theatre* records: "The revue is entrusted to Art Slavin's direction, and he and his many lady and gentlemen confederates supply plenty of amusement in song, dance and jokelet. A word of praise is due to the careful manner in which these revues are mounted" (Dec. 1924, 17). Slavin continued to present shows for Clay's during the following year. In a review of one of his Princess Theatre productions a *Theatre* critic wrote: "Art Slavin's revue company is going strong with plenty of variety in *The Wags*" (Mar. 1925, 17).

Slavin and Thompson's last professional engagement located to date was a tour of regional Queensland in mid-1927 with Alf Coleman's pantomime Company. For the Little Bo-peep production Thompson was cast in the principal boy role of Jack Horner, while Art Slavin teamed up with veteran Wal Rockley to take charge of the comedy side of things. The tour also included the musical comedy *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*. Although no further details of their career have yet been forthcoming the couple would have more than likely continued to appear on the Australian variety stage for a number of years after this. Their family has provided a few insights into these years, however. One of their last stage appearances, for example, may well have been at the Sydney Town Hall on 15 January 1942 when they took part in a production called *Old Time Minstrel Show Singing and Pageant*. For this they presented a piece called "A Night at Rickards' Tivoli." Presented in aid of the Wool Trades War Fund, the bill also included Bob Driscoll and Ward Lear. Slavin and Thompson, who never married, had one son, Francis (Frank) Arthur Slavin who was born in 1911. Much of their latter years are believed to have been spent at Newport on Sydney's Northern beaches. Art Slavin died in 1961, with Lily passing away two years later, aged 76.



Art Slavin and Lily Thompson (aka Mr and Mrs Slavin)

Courtesy of Brian Slavin and Kelly Hindman

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1916:** **Fun on the Ranch** [revusical]
1917: **Casey's Ashes** [revusical]
1918: **Brisket Boxed** [revusical] • **Doolan's Bight** [revusical] • **Half Past Twenty Eight** [revusical] • **Sock the Kaiser** [revusical] • **Thirty Thousand Miles a Minute** [revusical]
1919: **Artilleryman Wins** [revusical] • **After the Show** [revusical] • **Boarders and Ballets** [revusical] • **Hotel De Bong** (aka Hotel Bon Bons) [revusical] • **Kute Kids** [revusical]
1924: **The Winning Ticket** [revusical]
1925: **The Wags** [revusical]

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Lily Thompson, was born Frances Lilia Thompson on 2 March 1887 in Fitzroy (Victoria). She died at Newport, Sydney, on 16 October 1963.

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS AND PATTTER

- Lily Thompson to Art Slavin:-
 - "There are plenty of things in England you haven't here in Australia."
 - "What are they?"
 - "Well for instance, there are lords – men who don't work, and live in places surrounded by parks."
 - "Why, we have any amount of them here; but we call them loafers" (TT: Oct. 1916, n. pag.)
- (*Dockum Street, Woolloomooloo*): - As comedy waiters, Messrs Art Slavin and Bert Desmond caused endless amusement by their many interludes and quaint sayings, as an Irishman and as a Jew, and their topical song "1999," was most humorous. Mr Slavin's "cards" were responsible for a deal of laughter and interest... Slavin and Thompson (old Toowoomba favourites) had the audience with them the whole time they were on the stage, and blended patter, gags and paradoxical fragments harmoniously (TC: 2 July 1917, 7).
- Slavin and Thompson, good people at all times; excellent work in the revue, and later on the programme is strengthened by their turn; good cross patter, and original vocal numbers, with added praise for the parodies from Art Slavin (AV: 18 Jan. 1918, n. pag.).
- *Half Past Twenty Eight*, a new revue of the 1999 order, written by Art Slavin, proved a big success. The company supporting it was good and should not be changed as they will no doubt be working so well together that they will take some beating (AV: 15 Feb. 1918, n. pag.).
- The first portion of the evening's entertainment was devoted to an extremely funny revue [by Art Slavin] which provided a constant simmer of merriment.... Slavin and Thompson's comedy patter work was another feature of the performance (NM: 26 June 1918, 3).
- Mr Slavin has written a parody of the one-time popular Lancashire songs "Clogs and Shawl." A few of the lines to this sure laugh-getter:-

She wore clogs and a shawl
Only clogs and a shawl;
If that's all she wore
She looked fine I'm sure
If she took off her shawl
She'd have clogs on – that's all
T'would make me feel dizzy
If I looked at Lizzie
In only her clogs and shawl.
(TT: Feb. 1919, n. pag.)

- Art Slavin patter:

Life is like a game of cards. We all take a hand in the game. The barber cuts, the shopkeeper deals, and the old maid goes alone. She tries to get a partner; but nobody will prop; and she's euchred every time. The butcher plays a plucky game. He plays for a good stake, and never loses his block. A baker never plays for fun, he always needs the dough. The navy plays spades, and the sport plays clubs. The lover plays hearts; but he often has to use diamonds to take a trick. A little baby always reminds me of cards. The baby's the little joker, and his mother's the queen of trumps. If the little joker plays a crook game his mother takes him up, puts him across her lap, raises the right bower, and trumps the ace (TT: Feb. 1919, n. pag.).
- More Slavin and Thompson patter:-
 - "The only wine I ever get is the whining of the kid: (Lily Thompson at the Princes (Sydney))
 - "Every night my wife smooths the cares out of my forehead – with a flat iron" (Art Slavin at the Princes (Sydney)).

ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS – ART SLAVIN (Published)

191-: "**Like a Bird with a Broken Wing**" (words: George D'Albert and Art Slavin / music: Joe Slater). Published in *Paling's Xmas Annual. No. 26*

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

All engagements are for Slavin and Thompson unless otherwise noted

- 1907:** HARRY RICKARDS (Art Slavin > Tivoli Th, Syd; 16 Feb.) ▶ TED HOLLAND (Art Slavin > Th Royal, Bris; 15 June) ▶ HARRY RICKARDS (Art Slavin > Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. Nov.* > See TT: 2 Dec. 1907)
- NB:** From ca. 1910 onwards Slavin and Thompson appear regularly together on the same bills.
- 1910:** JAMES BRENNAN (Gaiety Th, Melb; 29 Jan.-*) • (National Amph, Syd; 19 Mar.-*) ▶ BENEVOLENT FUND BENEFIT (Tivoli Th, Syd; 21 Mar.) ▶ HARRY RICKARDS (Lily Thompson - Op House, Melb; 17 Sept. -*)
- 1911:** JAMES BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; ca. 2 Sept.-*) • (Th Royal, Bris; 30 Oct.-*)
- 1913:** FULLER-BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 18 Jan.-* > See also 30 Aug.; 13 Sept.) ▶ DIX-BAKER (Kings Hall, Newc; ca. Nov.) ▶ J. C. BAIN (Princess Th, Syd; 27-31 Dec.)
- 1914:** J. C. BAIN (Princess Th, Syd; 1 Jan.-*) ▶ HARRY CLAY (Bridge Th, Syd; ca. Feb/Mar.* > See AV: 11 Mar. 1914, 3) ▶ COOK & FOWLE'S MUSICAL COMEDY VAUDEVILLE STARS (Palace Th, Bris; ca. Apr.*) ▶ POST MASON'S CARNIVAL Co (Qld regional tour, ca. May-June. > Incl. Rockhampton 11 June) ▶ JACKY LANDOW'S ENTERTAINERS (Sydney circuit; ca. June*)
- 1915:** HARRY CLAY (Sydney circuit; ca. Apr.* > See AV: 7 Apr. 1915, n. pag.) ▶ FULLER-BRENNAN (Melrose Th, Perth; 11 Sept. - 1 Oct. > first appearance in Perth) • (Princess Th, Fremantle; 2-8 Oct.) • (King's Th, Adel; 16-22 Oct.)
- 1916:** HOLLAND & ST JOHN (Empire Th, Bris; ca. Feb/Mar.*) ▶ HARRY CLAY (Sydney circuit; ca. Sept-Dec.* > see AV: 13 Sept. n. pag. / 4 Oct. n. pag. / and 29 Dec. 1917, n. pags.)
- 1917:** HARRY CLAY (Sydney circuit; ca. Jan.* > see AV: 3 Jan. 1917, n. pag. See also AV: ca. July and TT: Aug. 1917, n. pag.) ▶ HARRY SADLER (Princess Th, Syd; ca. Sept.*) ▶ WILL ROBEY Co (Clare's Picture Th, Drummoyne, Syd; ca. Dec.*)
- 1918:** HARRY CLAY (Sydney/South-West NSW circuits; ca. Jan/Feb.* > see AV: 15 Feb. 1918, n. pag.) ▶ DIX-BAKER (King's Th, Newc; ca. July*) ▶ HARRY CLAY (Princess Th, Syd; ca. Aug. - Oct. > See TT: Sept. 1918, 29 and AV: 18 Oct. 11)
- 1923:** FULLERS THEATRES (no details; ca. Sept.* > see TT: Oct. 1923, 18)
- 1924:** HARRY CLAY (Princess Th, Syd; ca. Oct.*)
- 1925:** FULLERS THEATRES (Bijou Th, Melb; ca. 12 Sept.-*)
- 1927:** ALF COLEMAN (Queensland regional tour; ca. June-Aug. > Incl. School of Arts, Rockhampton; ca. 18 June-* • Hibernian Hall, Cairns; 9 July-*).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "[Slavin, Art](#)." *AustLit* (2006).

See also:

- AV:** 15 Feb. (1918), n. pag. • 30 Aug. (1918), 7 • 15 Nov. (1918), 8 • 3 Oct. (1919), 7 • 7 Sept. (1925), 14.
- BC:** 22 June (1907), 2 • 15 June (1907), 6.
- DT:** 12 Jan. (1942), n. pag. [photo of Slavin and Thompson]
- TT:** Feb. (1919), 28 • Oct. (1916), n. pag. • Aug. (1917), n. pag. • Feb. (1918), 41 • Sept. (1918), 29 • Feb. (1919), 28, n. pag. • Oct. (1923), 18 •

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