

GEORGE SORLIE

Regarded as one of Australia's most versatile performers, George Sorlie came to Australia as a child and grew up in Melbourne and Kalgoorlie. He moved to Sydney ca. 1903 looking to find work as a professional variety performer and initially found regular employment with Harry Clay. Over the next decade he was associated with Harry Rickards, James Brennan, J. C. Bain and Bert Howard, and in 1913 was elected to the position of President of the Australian Vaudeville Artists Federation. Sorlie found much success in a partnership with Billy C. Brown (ex-Hugo's Buffalo Minstrels) on the Fullers circuit between 1914 and 1916. Following Brown's return to America in 1917 Sorlie worked a solo act, and during the years 1918 and 1919 was mostly engaged on Harry Clay's Sydney circuit. In 1920 he reached an agreement with Philip Lytton to purchase some of his moving theatre equipment and from then onwards concentrated on touring his own companies (mostly) under canvas. Over the next two decades established himself as Australia's "Tent Show King," staging musical comedies, pantomimes, vaudeville and drama productions around the country year in and year out. During his career Sorlie contributed regularly to a number of theatre magazines, as correspondent, anecdotist and industry observer. He also recorded a number of songs for the Parlophone label in the later 1920s.

In an industry which required of its work force the ability to multitask, George Sorlie was with little doubt one of the most versatile. In addition to his principal comedy routine he could perform with expertise almost anything that was required. Dancing, acting, singing and juggling were just part of his overall repertoire of skills. He was also a noted trick cyclist and held three gold medals for "manipulating the baton," an act he did to great applause in the Anzac Day march of 1918 (27 Apr. 1918, n. pag). Sorlie's historical status today is largely that of Australia's leading tent showman. As with others of his era, those like Nat Phillips, Jim Gerald, Stanley McKay and George Wallace, George Sorlie's considerable reputation and achievements during his lifetime have found very little recognition from historians. Even that which currently passes as an historical account requires further investigation as much of it erroneous.

Source: [Internet Archive](#)



1885-1909

The son of Frederick Sorlie and Sarah Jane (nee Rodick) George Brown Sorlie was born on 7 February 1885 in Liverpool, England. Of West Indian ancestry, his family migrated to Australia, settling first in Melbourne. Following the death of his father, however, Sorlie and his mother moved to Western Australia. From an early age he attempted to help support them both by busking and appearing in local vaudeville programs. By 1896 Sorlie was supporting his mother by singing in bars, halls and on the streets of Kalgoorlie during that district's goldrush period.¹ Although precise details on Sorlie's early professional career are scarce it appears that he moved to Sydney sometime around 1903, picking up work with Harry Clay during his off-Queensland season (ca. Oct-February). It is believed that he maintained an association with Clay for at least two years, and may well have continued to play brief engagements on an irregular basis over the decade. Interestingly, during that period he did not tour Clay's NSW/Queensland circuit. This indicates that he was finding on-going work on other circuits in Sydney and elsewhere at that time. In early 1905, for example, he made his first appearance at the Cremorne Theatre in Perth for Leonard Davis in a company that included Sam Gale and his wife Myra James, Sam Rowley and Albert Lucas. Described as "the Great American Coon Impersonator," Sorlie's act was well received - particularly his plate-spinning (WA: 11 Feb. 1905, 1). By July he was with Will Wallace's Waxworks Company on their tour of Queensland, again with the Gales (and their daughter Sadie). Advertising in the *Northern Miner* indicates that the company had come direct from Melbourne (1 July 1905, 1). Following that tour Sorlie secured an engagement with Frank M. Clark at the Gaiety Theatre (Melb), making his first appearance with the company on 11 November.

The claims by Peter Spearritt, Bruce Carroll and Charles Norman that Sorlie joined Harry Rickards circuit in 1905 (18), working in his Tivoli and National Theatres as a cornerman, might well have some basis, but as yet no record has been uncovered during the survey undertaken for this project. Furthermore, his other commitments throughout that year indicate that any Rickards engagement would have been relatively brief. The only specific details pertaining to Sorlie's career between 1906 and 1910 located to date are for an unidentified season in Hobart sometime around 22 September 1906; an engagement at the Adelaide Tivoli Theatre (for Rickards) beginning 22 December (an continuing

¹ Another youngster to develop his performance skills in Kalgoorlie during the 1890s was Jack "Dinks" Paterson, who later found fame with George Wallace as Dinks and Oncus.

on until 19 Jan.); and his "reappearance after a lengthy absence" for Ted Holland's management at the Theatre Royal (Bris) beginning 21 September 1907 (BC: 23 Sept. 1907, 2). Spearritt's entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* also indicates that he was with James Brennan sometime in 1907. His act was at this stage being promoted as a dancing and plate spinning turn.

TIVOLI THEATRE.
 Lessee Mr. Harry Rickards.

SLIDING ROOF. COOLEST THEATRE IN ADELAIDE. ELECTRIC FANS.

TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT.
 NOVELTY ALL-STAR COMPANY.
 Australia's Premier Popular Comedian.

FRED BLUETT,

Supported by the following Star Vaudeville Artists:—
 Acrobatic Comedian, London Sketch Artists,
ARTHUR ELLIOTT. **THE SWIFTS,**
 Australia's Greatest Coon Impersonator.

MAUD FANNING.

The Dashing Serio, Lightning Baton Spinner,
GRAY SISTERS, **GEORGE SORLIE,**
DOROTHY SWIFT, BOSTON BROTHERS, LILLAS BIRT, CHAS. RIDGEWAY, VIOLET
AND MERCLA, LITTLE ETTIE.

Dress Circle and Orchestra Stalls, 2/-; Stalls, 1/-; Gallery, Sixpence. Early Doors Saturdays
 and Holidays Only. Box-plan at Marshalls'. Day Sales at Isbitt & Biven's. General Manager—A. BRANDON CREMER.

Adelaide Advertiser 12 Dec. (1906), 2.

1910-1915

The feature positioning of Sorlie's name on the bill of the Tivoli (Syd) for 5 February 1910 indicates that Rickards considered him one of his major attractions. Sorlie remained with the Sydney company until late March and then transferred to Melbourne for Rickards' show at the Opera House (2 Apr.). Among his fellow performers around this period were Les Warton, Johnny Gilmore, Con Moreni and the Huxhams. By August Sorlie was off the Rickards circuit and back performing with Harry Clay on his suburban circuit, which included the Royal Standard (Castlereagh St). He made his debut with the company that month on the corner as an endman (27 Aug.). The following year he was contracted to James Brennan, with his engagement including a season at Brisbane's Theatre Royal with Brennan's Vaudeville Players (20 Nov.).

STANDARD THEATRE
 TO-NIGHT, SATURDAY, AND
 EVERY SATURDAY NIGHT.

**HARRY CLAY'S HARRY
 VAUDEVILLE CO.**

NEW ARTISTS.
 ALL THE OLD FAVOURITES
 IN NEW BUSINESS.

ADMISSION: 6d, 1/-, and 1/8.

SUBURBAN ROUTE:
 MASONIC HALL, NORTH SYDNEY, MONDAY; PETER-
 SHAM, TUESDAY; NEWTOWN, WEDNESDAY;
 ASHFIELD, THURSDAY; PARRAMATTA, FRI-
 DAY.

STANDARD THEATRE.
HARRY CLAY'S VAUDEVILLE COX.

The new Corner To-night will be Mr. Geo. Sorlie,
 Comedian and Specialty Artist. There will be an en-
 tirely new Programme. The Company Play North Syd-
 ney Monday, Petersham Tuesday, Newtown Wednesday,
 Ashfield Thursday, Parramatta Friday.

Sorlie's association with J. C. Bain is believed to have begun early in 1912, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that he was already touring Bain's Sydney circuit by 11 May. Although no further details have been located concerning his precise movements that year, Eric Reade claims that Sorlie won third place in a "funny man competition" run by film exhibitor, Cousens Spencer. "The featurettes," writes Reade, "ranged from 'The Crazy Barber' to 'The Hobo on Wheels'" (68). He continued with Bain's Vaudeville Entertainers on a regular basis throughout 1913 and 1914, while occasionally taking up brief engagements with other companies. He is recorded performing on Bain's circuit in March, May, July, August and September that year, which led the *Theatre* to suggest in its August issue that both he and Con Moreni had become institutions at the Princess Theatre. The same review provides some further details of his stage work:

Mr Sorlie receives a "staggering" blow from Olive Robinson. As he rises dizzily from the floor Mr Sorlie addresses the audience thus: - "I done my best, gentlemen; but weight will tell." As the fleshy Olive must scale something like twelve stone, the audience are not slow in seeing the joke; and a hearty laugh invariably follows (29).

Sydney Morning Herald 27 Aug. (1910), 2.

Sorlie is believed to have taken a break from Bain's management around late October/early November 1912, with newspaper advertisements showing that he appeared on the programmes of Sydney's Star and Oxford theatres during that time. By early November he was at the Fullers Bijou Theatre in Melbourne, performing in company that included

his future partner Billy C. Brown. Although few details of Sorlie's movements have yet been located for 1913, by January 1914 he was once again at the Princess Theatre under Jimmy Bain's management. *Australian Variety* reports, too, that the manager lent Sorlie out to a benefit for vaudeville performer George Dean at the Little Theatre (28 Jan. 1914, 5).

1914 was a significant year for George Sorlie. He continued to build his reputation with James Bain's audiences, while briefly going on to other management bills. Notable among these other firms was Dix-Baker who contracted Sorlie for their Newcastle/Hunter shows around June/July. Prior to this engagement, however, Sorlie had been elected to the position of president of the Australian Vaudeville Artists' Federation (A.V.A.F.). *Australian Variety* notes of his appearance in Newcastle at the first ladies Sunday social afternoon at the club-rooms, that he was the hardest worker in what was a most successful function (29 July 1914, n. pag.). A few weeks previous the same magazine reported news concerning Sorlie's future plans. "The Era Comedy Four will be minus Billy Brown at the expiration of their present contract with the Fuller-Brennan management. The comedian will double up with George Sorlie, and if indications are anything, these boys are going to clean up with several routines of new and original business" (AV: 8 July 1914, 7). Sorlie and Brown made their debut in New Zealand on 7 September 1914 while on tour for the Fullers. By the time they returned to Australia the duo had fine-tuned their act to such a degree that audience receptions nightly included multiple recalls. By early 1915 their popularity led to them gracing the *Australian Variety's* 10 February issue. The magazine proclaimed later that same year:

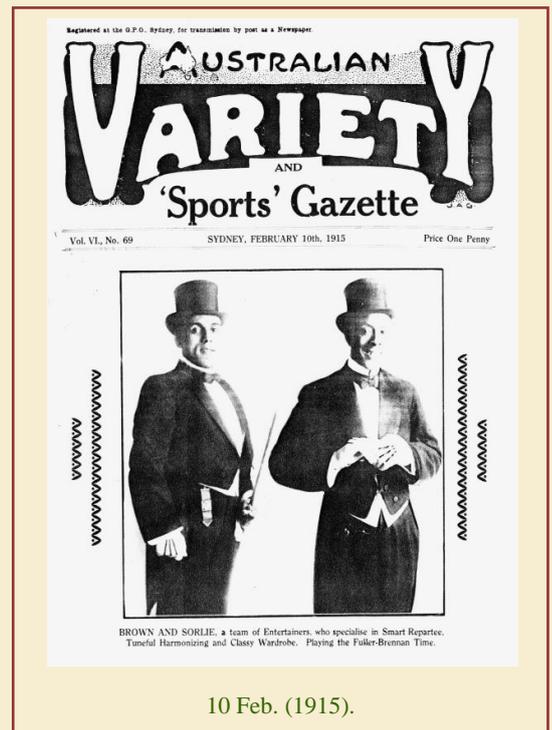
Brown and Sorlie the coloured deliverers of the best essence of laughology are a scream this week, and during the whole time these two dandy performers are on view, the house is completely broken up from start to finish. As a double, you must hand it to these two boys as one of the best ever that has played Melbourne (24 Nov. 1915, 12).

Throughout 1915 Sorlie and Brown contributed a number of articles and letters to the two leading industry magazines – *The Theatre* and *Australian Variety*. Sorlie contributed his views on current issues (see "George Sorlie Writes," 31, for example), while both men wrote about their experiences of show business and regional touring for *Australian Variety's* first annual - Sorlie with "Learning his Lesson"(n. pag.) and Brown with a two-page article that proclaimed that "Showbusiness was No Bed of Roses" (n. pags.). 1915 also saw Sorlie marry Grace Stewart. The pair remained together as husband and wife and business partners until Sorlie's death some 33 years later.

While much of Sorlie and Brown's time together over the period 1915 to late-1916 was spent with the Fullers' company, they were on occasion leased out to other companies. In 1915, for example, the pair undertook engagements in Brisbane with Holland and St John (ca. Feb.), toured Birch and Carroll's Queensland circuit (ca. Mar/Apr.), and appeared with Dix-Baker at Newcastle (ca. Dec.). That same year they worked on a Fullers bill while playing Fremantle and Perth (ca. Aug) and Melbourne (ca. May).

1916-1919

1916 began for Sorlie and Brown where the previous year had left off. *Australian Variety* described them as the "finest pair of coloured performers since the days of Pope and Sayles," reporting that the immaculate Sorlie and his direct antithesis in dress, "Rastus" Brown, had got their offering down to a fine art (5 Jan. 1916, n. pag.). The *Theatre* went even further, proposing that "greater favourites than they have become have seldom been seen on the Australia stage" (Feb. 1916, 47). They toured New Zealand beginning February, returning to Australia in late June. The following month, having played a brief season in Sydney, the pair left for Adelaide's Majestic Theatre (Adelaide), followed by a three month season at the Empire Theatre in Brisbane. Although the partnership had proved popular the two comedians called it quits in December 1916 when Brown's future became uncertain, having been targeted by the Australian government to return to the USA under the Alien Restriction Act (AV: 13 Dec. 1916, n. pag.). The repatriation issue was raised around the same time that *Australian Variety* accorded the two comedians a full-page photographic spread (29 Dec.). Interestingly, while forewarning the public that the Brown and Sorlie partnership was soon to end, both *Australian Variety* and the *Theatre* also reported that Sorlie had recently become "a partner in the fine and up-to-date

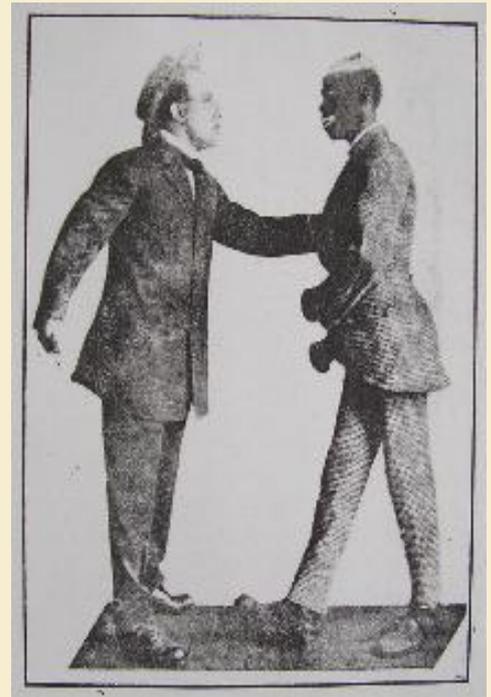


fruit shop at the corner of Elizabeth and King Streets." *Variety* went on to note, too, that he was likely to confine himself to [that] industry now that Bill Brown is going back to America" (13 Dec. 1916, n. pag.).²

Brown appears to have remained in Australia working as a solo comedian up until March 1917, with his last established engagements being in Adelaide in late February. His movements around this period are somewhat difficult to determine, however, as another American comedian named Billy Brown (aka "the Fellow with the Fiddle") was also touring the country at the same time. The second Brown reportedly did an Irish comedy act, and was largely associated with fellow American comedienne, Kitty Clinton. Advertising from a number of New Zealand newspapers indicates that by April Billie C. Brown ("the Koloured Komedie King") was in that country touring for the Fullers. Although slated to appear in their Christmas pantomime, *Robinson Crusoe* (OBS: 25 Aug. 1917, 6), October Brown was on his way back to the USA by October.³

In 1917 Sorlie took up engagements with Beck and Howard circuit around the middle of the year, followed by a contract with Bert Howard shortly after he and Beck parted ways. This engagement lasted almost eight months. During that time, however, he is known to have played engagements with Harry Sadler (Princess Theatre) and Harry Clay, as evidenced by the following review of his turn at Bridge Theatre in October 1917:

George Sorlie is "some swell" in his evening dress, and his rendering of "Gungapin" [sic] was an eye-opener to many, who never thought George could do it to such big success. His number, "How I Beat Jack Johnson"⁴ was a winner (AV: 26 Oct. 1917, n. pag.).

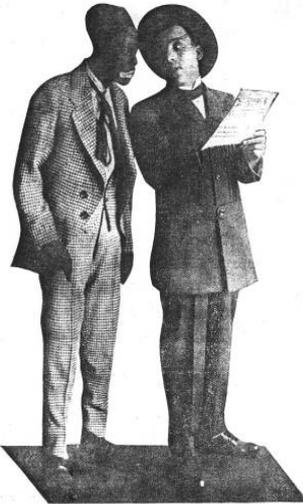


Brown and Sorlie
Australian Variety 27 Jan. (1915), n. pag

BROWN and SORLIE

A
Happy
New
Year





From
George
and
Billy.



Two Brownskins in Kullud Komedie. "Nuff Sed".
One of Mr. Ben J. Fuller's Star Stock Acts.

Australian Variety 29 Dec. (1916), n. pag.

After finishing up with Howard sometime in late January 1918 Sorlie returned to Clay's, remaining with the company throughout most of the year, albeit with brief engagements for other managements, notably including Bert Howard. Reviews from 1918 mostly extolled Sorlie's act, as the following reports demonstrate:

George Sorlie created quite a sensation on Anzac Day. He was leading the musician's band. Dressed in full uniform, he cut a dashing figure, and his work with the baton was of great interest to all who witnessed his performance (AV: 3 May 1918, 4).

George Sorlie is easily the first part hit at the Princess (Railway Square). He had to sing five songs on April 20. A tuneful voice and an invigorating style are the means - or mostly so - through which Mr Sorlie succeeds in doing the trick (TT: May 1918, 33).

Harry Clay and George Sorlie made quite a hit at the Princess Theatre last Saturday, when they did a double dance (AV: 10 May 1918, 3).

Not all critics were enamoured with his performance, however:

George Sorlie ("The Chocolate Soldier") is over-confident. He thinks he has the audience captivated before he opens his lips, or without doing anything to first win their approval. Mr Sorlie is a good performer. But he is by no means so great that he can affect the cocksure attitude he took the night I heard him (TT: Mar. 1918, 33).

The reputation and experience Sorlie had by then gained was obviously appreciated by Harry Clay who kept him on at his two major venues, the Princess and Bridge theatres on a permanent basis, as the June 1918 issue of the *Theatre* reports (29). Indeed, the same magazine reports in its December issue that he had played the Princess and Bridge

² See also TT: Jan. 1917, 49.

³ A letter from Brown while en route to America was published in the 26 October 1917 issue of *Australian Variety*.

⁴ "How I Beat Jack Johnson" - written by drummer Ralph Weekes (also Harry Clay's music arranger at the Bridge Theatre, Newtown)

theatres for fifty weeks straight (32). Several times during his association with Clay reference was made to his de facto producer role, assisting less experienced performers and involving himself in many facets of the operation. The *Theatre* records, for instance that "at times his help towards the show is of a general nature, and he frequently assists a weak offering in a quiet but effective manner" (June 1919, 25). *Australian Variety* noted, too, that "besides being a very bit hit on the programme [Sorlie] is a great help to the artists in their numbers. Often when a turn is falling flat, George comes along with a little comedy during the song, which turns the number from failure, to one of the successes of the bill" (16 Aug. 1918, 11). The *Theatre* provides further insight into Sorlie's relationship with his audience:

If you can stand it I'll sing it!" It was the retort of George Sorlie to a crowded house that clamoured for "Four and Nine" after he had already responded to no less than three recalls. "We're used to it," interposed someone in the audience. Said Mr Sorlie, "You ought to be." After a pause he added. "If there's anybody here who hasn't heard me sing it will he please stand up?" For a joke someone did, because for so long has Mr Sorlie been giving "Four and Nine" that it's inconceivable there is among Harry Clay's thousands of Sydney patrons one who hasn't heard of George's rendering of it - again and again. To the person standing up Mr Sorlie remarked amidst laughter, "There's a medal for you in the office." The song has assuredly never had in Australia the equal of Mr S. as a singer of it. Hence his sensational success in the clever, tuneful, humorous lines (Feb. 1919, 27).

Considered one of the industry's leading personalities, not all of Sorlie's press coverage over the years was related to his on stage performances.

For some time, George Sorlie has bet various sums that he could stand in his shop and tell the destination of various trams long before they got within his direct line of vision. At times he almost cleared the rent, as well as cleaning out his friends. But the secret is out. George sees the reflection of the destination-board in the shop opposite his, so now a fine source of revenue is no more (AV: 1 Aug. 1919, 2).

1920-1948

Sometime early in 1920 Sorlie struck a deal with theatrical entrepreneur Philip Lytton which saw the high profile vaudeville artist buy part of Lytton's travelling theatre operations. By August that year his Pantomime and Musical Comedy Company was being billed as "presented by Mr Phillips Lytton" (MB: 18 Aug. 1920, 8). The long-held view that Lytton sold his entire tent show operations to Sorlie and effectively retired from touring under canvas can no longer be supported, given that he is identified as continuing his entrepreneurial career well into the early 1930s [see Lytton's entry in the *Entrepreneurs* section [G-L for more details] By the end of 1920 Sorlie was operating the company under his own direction and without the use of Lytton's name. Indeed *Australian Variety* reports as early as September that "George Sorlie" had returned to Sydney after a "highly successful tour up North with his pantomime company" (10 Sept. 1920, n. pag.). Interestingly, even though he was by then running his own touring company, Sorlie nevertheless undertook at least two variety engagements with other firms, these being with Bert Howard (see the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt ca. Sept/Oct.) and the K-Nuts (ca. Jan. 1921).⁵

As he criss-crossed the nation, following the annual show circuit Sorlie's new venture quickly proved to be a popular addition to the yearly entertainment schedule in many regional centres. His experiences over the previous two decades gave him the ability to innately assess his audiences expectations and needs, and as such he continued to present new offerings when and where required. He also expanded his itineraries to include new and/or expanding townships, or even those which had previously missed out on the type of entertainment he was providing. In a letter to the *Theatre* in November 1922, for example, Sorlie reports on his arrival in the thriving mining town of Broken Hill (by then a regular stop over by any company touring regional NSW) recording that he was opening a stock drama season there for ten weeks (beginning 14 Oct.). He further adds: "We are the first moving [dramatic] theatre outfit to ever visit Broken Hill" (n. pag.).

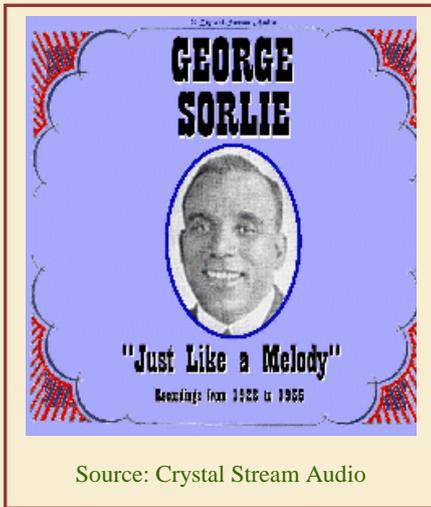
Although Sorlie's reputation from 1921 onwards was largely associated with more theatrically "legitimate productions – but not melodrama as a 1977 *Daily Mirror* feature article claims, as melodrama had become passé several decades previous (30) - he did not divorce himself altogether from variety or the industry. His tents shows over the years included musical comedies on a regular basis, and he often employed artists with backgrounds in vaudeville. In the early 1930s he even made a return to variety entertainment by forming the George Sorlie Vaudeville and Revue Co.

SCHOOL OF ARTS.
WEDNESDAY, 25th AUGUST, to
SATURDAY, 28th AUGUST.
PHILIP LYTTON
PHILIP LYTTON
Presents—
The **GEORGE SORLIE** Greater Pantomime
and Musical Comedy Company in
THE SLEEPING BEAUTY.
THE SLEEPING BEAUTY.
Complete change of Programme Nightly.
Can you tell the Age of "THE SLEEP-
ING BEAUTY." Record your guess and
win a guinea.
GEORGE SORLIE, America's Champion
Drum Major, will lead the band parade
from the Post Office to School of Arts
each night during the season.
Prices: 4/-, 3/-, and 2/-, plus tax.
Box Plan at **W. H. PALING'S.**

Rockhampton
Morning Bulletin 21 Aug. (1920), 2.

⁵ The K-Nuts engagement included Bathurst in early January 1921.

One of the earliest engagements undertaken by the troupe was a season at His Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane (7 Nov. 1931 - 2 Jan. 1932). Featuring the talents of seasoned performers like Arthur Morley, Bert Desmond, Sam Stern, Yvonne Banvard and Percy Mackay, the troupe presented a first part vaudeville programme followed by a second part revusical. Among the productions staged were two of Arthur Morley's revusicals from 1915 (*On the Sands* and *Not a Word to the Wife*) and his new pantomime, *Mother Grundy*. The troupe, this time billed as George Sorlie's Musical Revue Co, played a season at Sydney's Grand Opera House beginning 26 March 1932, with several of Bert Desmond's revusicals being staged.



Source: Crystal Stream Audio

Although Sorlie's movements over the course of his career are far too extensive and also fall outside the scope of the AVTA, suffice it to say, he continued to maintain a considerable presence in the country through until his death in 1948. Even then his legacy of taking theatre to the wider Australian community continued under the management of his protégé Bobby Le Brun and widow Grace until the early 1960s. Certainly the strength of his ensemble during the early years (c1920-mid-1930s) and his perseverance in overcoming the countless obstacles put in his way, helped establish his reputation as an iconic travelling showman. It should be remembered, however, that Sorlie did not confine himself only to regional centres. *Everyone's* notes in 1924, for example, that after eight months absence the company made a very welcome return to Balmain, playing under canvas on a vacant block in Darling Street. "On his previous season in that suburb Mr Sorlie had achieved a most enviable distinction, both in his personal and professional capacities... an indication of the popularity of the George Sorlie Musical and Dramatic Company is evidenced in the capacity audience that greeted [them]" (22 Oct. 1924, 36).

During the mid-to-late 1920s Sorlie regularly contributed articles to the industry magazines, often putting forward his opinions about various show business related issues (see below). Some articles were inspired by his overseas travels, one such time being in early 1928. Not all of his comments were viewed positively, however, with several of his articles being taken to task in later issues by individuals who saw things from a different perspective. He is also known to have released a number of songs during the late 1920s on the Parlophone record label. In October 1928, for example, he recorded "Everything is Rosy Down in Georgia" (Russ Johnston) and "Just like a Melody out of the Sky" (Walter Donaldson). The following month he recorded four more songs, "Beautiful," "Angela," "Get out and Get Under the Moon" and "Ten Little Miles from Town." All were apparently accompanied by piano only.

On a humorous note, a rumour began circulating around North Queensland in 1929 that Sorlie had died. Several newspapers, including the *Northern Miner*, were called upon to refute the rumour prior to Sorlie's imminent mid-year tour of the north by letting people know that his lengthy absence from the region was due to an extended overseas trip (11 July 1929, 3).



George Sorlie Revue Company, 1938

Source: State Library of Queensland

Not long after the outbreak of World War II Sorlie closed down his theatre operations in response to fuel shortages. After putting his equipment into storage he settled into retirement in Sydney, spending his time playing golf and bowls while also undertaking activities with his local Masonic Lodge. Finding it difficult to slow down Sorlie utilised his management skills to establish the Sorlie Construction Company, a business which began building cheap homes for

returned to or ex-servicemen in a model village at Frenchs Forest. In his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry of Sorlie, Peter Spearritt records that "although deposits had been paid to his partners, Twentieth Century Home Service Pty Ltd, a shortage of materials ended the project after less than a dozen homes had been built." The litigation which ensued is believed to have affected Sorlie's health and he died of a cerebral thrombosis in Sydney on 19 June 1948. After his death Grace Sorlie used the money from her husband's estate (£12,911) to revive his moving theatre operations in partnership with one of the company's former comedians, Bobby Le Brun.⁶ A little over a decade later competition from the booming club industry effectively forced them to close down. Grace died on 21 December 1962, leaving her estate valued at £212,281 to the Royal Blind Society of New South Wales and the New South Wales Society for Crippled Children. Le Brun died in 1985, leaving behind his widow, Grace Le Brun (1912-1911).

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. A 1977 *Daily Mirror* article on Sorlie (see "Great Showman") makes the grossly inaccurate claim that he was the first entrepreneur to tour vaudeville in the bush (30). This is a not all that uncommon example of how easily the media (and even some historians) can distort the historical record and effectively reinvent Australia history through either inadequate research or poor choice of expression.
2. Several secondary accounts of Sorlie's movements in the early 1900s further demonstrate how easily erroneous recall and non-specific or poor choice of language can undermine historical accuracy and lead to myth. Charles Norman's sometimes unintentional borrowing of erroneous details from works published in the 1970s and early 1980s and then converting them into his own memory (of up to seven or eight decades previous) can serve to demonstrate this point. In recording that Sorlie joined Clay's when he first got to Sydney, Norman incorrectly refers to the Newtown Bridge Theatre as the place where his old friend the "white Rajah" opened. This could not have happened at the Bridge Theatre because Clay did not begin building it until early 1913. Up until that year his Newtown operations were based out of St George's Hall. Norman has possibly collapsed the two theatres into one because he was unaware of Clay's earlier association with St George's Hall and more familiar with the Bridge Theatre (the venue he himself played at often during the mid-1920s).

Confusion over the identity of the theatre first played by Sorlie under Clay's management is also aided by Bruce Carroll in the *Australian Stage Album* (1976) because in referring to Clay's Newtown Theatre (with the capital "T") he specifically implies the Bridge Theatre - rather than another Newtown-based theatre. As Carroll writes:

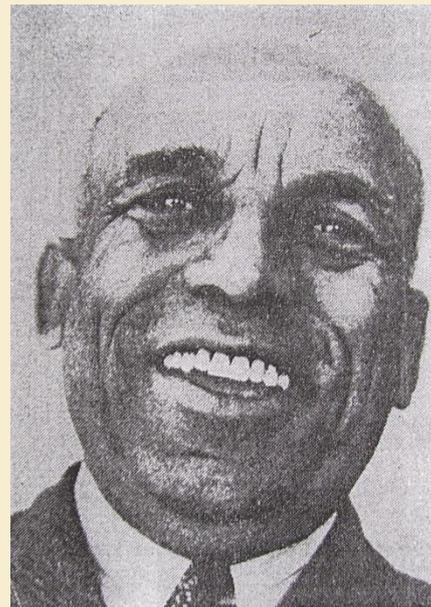
In 1903, 18 year old George Sorlie faced the acid test of a one-night stand before the audience of Harry Clay's Newtown Theatre, where those who paid sixpence to sit in the gods had an unerring aim as they dispatched soft tomatoes and overripe eggs towards performers who failed to please them. When he had finished and no missiles came, veteran trouper Ted Tutty told him; "Boy you have been accepted by the most critical audience in Australia" (88).



Everyone's 12 Dec. (1928), 125.



1938
Source: Powerhouse Museum



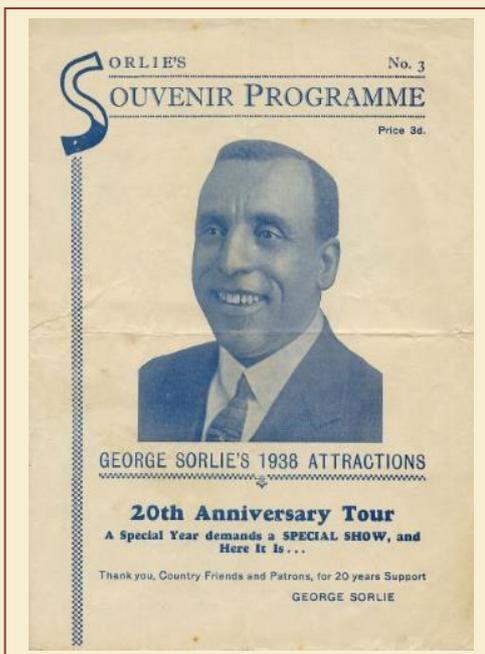
Daily Mirror 12 Dec. (1977), 30.

⁶ Le Brun married Grace Boyd (aka Grace Wilhelmina) in 1941. She also toured with the Sorlie show directing the choreography, appearing in sketches and make costumes for showgirls.

3. The historical record pertaining to when George Sorlie first began operating his famous travelling tent show has also been wrong in a number of instances, and very likely as a result of postulation and acceptance of myth. Brian Carroll, in the *Australian Stage Album* claims, for example that Sorlie and his wife "scrapped together every penny they had [in 1917] and brought out Philip Lytton's travelling tent show" (88). As the above biography demonstrates, however, Sorlie not only didn't buy out Lytton (only some of his equipment) but also didn't begin this venture until 1920. The 1977 "Historical Feature" on Sorlie, published in the *Daily Mirror* recycles much of Carroll's account while adding further disinformation to the story.

Writing eight years after Carroll, Charles Norman's memory also appears to support most of Carroll's account, except that he claims that Sorlie's tent show career began as early as 1914. Peter Spearritt's 1990 entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* accepts most of these accounts, and in particular the details surrounding Sorlie's supposed purchase of Lytton's business in 1917 (and his opening shows at Wagga). Spearritt even repeats word for word Carroll's claims regarding Sorlie's opening season of productions - which are said to have included his original play *My Pal Ginger*. Although Norman doesn't specifically identify that work as having been one of Sorlie's early productions, both Carroll and Spearritt do. The problem for Carroll and Spearritt is that their claims concerning that play are eleven years too early. Evidence contradicting these accounts can be seen in the 12 September 1928 issue of *Everyone's*, which records: "George Sorlie's company will commence a season with a new Australian play, *My Pal Ginger*, at the Grand Opera House, Sydney on September 22. Sorlie, in his enthusiasm, predicts that this production will prove as big a winner as *On Our Selection*" (45).

Given a closer examination, too, Norman's version is clouded by suggestions of inadvertent (and unfortunately erroneous) plagiarism in that he too repeats Carroll word for word, despite having first given the reader the impression that the account is entirely his own recall.⁷ Although Norman's memoirs were published some eight years after Carroll's, there is the possibility that he provided the initial information to Carroll (which would negate any plagiarism charges). This cannot be verified, however, as Carroll doesn't cite his sources. The similarities between these accounts, in addition to the number of errors on the part of both authors (as well as Spearritt), do propose however that none are suitable sources of historically accurate information.⁸



The issue of most concern here is that the errors in these accounts have continued to be recycled as fact even in prestigious publications like the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*.⁹ An example of this can be seen in Carroll's claim that Sorlie "soon teamed up with Billy Brown, a brilliant ad lib comedian, and one of Rickards' stars" (88) after having transferred to Rickards from Clay's circuit in 1905. The problem here is that not only did Sorlie and Brown not team up until some nine years later, but there is no evidence supporting the claim that Brown ever worked for Rickards or Tivoli Theatres Ltd. In no articles on Brown in *Australian Variety* or the *Theatre* (or even in interviews with him) is an association between Brown and Rickards mentioned. Indeed, in the article titled "Goodbye Billy," the *Theatre* writes, "[Brown] originally came here with Hugo's Minstrels. With the disbandment of that combination - a matter of only a few months after being in Australia - Mr Brown got a show with Ben J. Fuller and has been on the Fuller circuit ever since. First he appeared under the Fuller management with the Era Comedy Four" (49).

1938
Source: Powerhouse Museum

What is now clear, however, is that most of Carroll's version of Sorlie's life requires re-examination because it's clear that relied mostly on second hand accounts rather than basing his research on primary sources. He is not alone in having done this, though. Even George Sorlie has got his own career facts wrong. As the accompanying image (left) shows, for example, he advertised his 1938 shows as being his 20th anniversary tour.

⁷ Norman states in his book "I had the pleasure of working with him but once, in Adelaide in 1945... In our dressing room chats he often talked about his beginnings" (62-4). Norman's account from this point on closely mirrors Carroll's, in many places word for word. Interestingly, although Spearritt also replicates Carroll's claims virtually word for word, he does not indicate that publication as a source. Furthermore, of the primary sources he does cite, none are from the period 1917 to 1928.

⁸ It is possible that Norman's memory may have inadvertently collapsed Sorlie's early moving theatre career with another prominent tent showman of the time, Stanley McKay, who was touring pantomime and Shakespeare around Australia under canvas as early as 1910 (see McKay entry for further details).

⁹ See Victoria Chance's entry on Sorlie in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, which similarly repeats almost word for word Carroll's original errors.

SEE ALSO

- [George Sorlie Vaudeville & Revue Co](#)
- [Phillip Lytton](#)
- [K-Nuts](#)
- [Australian Vaudeville Artists' Federation](#)
- [Billy C. Brown](#)

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"Sorlie's Comments on Australians' Chances in London Draw Strong Criticism." E: 6 June (1928), 38.
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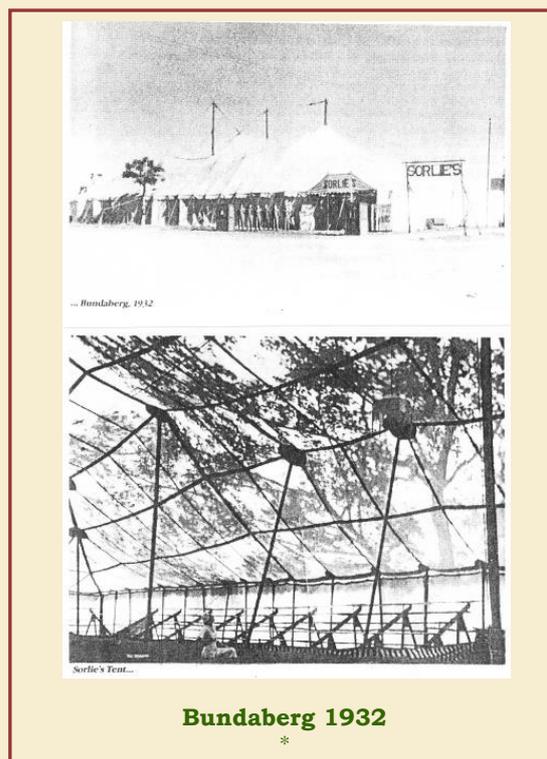
See also:

- A:** 11 Nov. (1905), 16 • 2 Apr. (1910), 18 • 7 May (1910), 16 • 21 May (1910), 16.
ARG: 1 May 1915.
AV: 28 Jan. (1914), 5 • 8 July (1914), 7 • 29 July (1914), n. pag. • 12 Aug. (1914), n. pag. • 16 Sept. (1914), n. pag. • 3 Feb. (1915), 13 • 10 Feb. (1915), n. pag. • 7 Apr. (1915), n. pag. • 24 Nov. (1915), 12 • 8 Dec. (1915), 11 • 5 Jan. (1916), n. pag. • 12 Jan. (1916), n. pag. • 2 Feb. (1916), n. pag. • 28 June (1916), n. pag. • 27 Sept. (1916), n. pag. • 13 Dec. (1916), 49 • 26 Oct. (1917), n. pag. • 18 Jan. (1918), 4 • 15 Feb. (1918), n. pag. (1918), • 22 Feb. (1918), n. pag. [letter from Billy C. Brown] • 3 May (1918), 4 • 10 May (1918), 3 • 28 June (1918), n. pag. • 1 Aug. (1919), 2 • 26 Sept. (1919), n. pag. • 16 Apr. (1920), n. pag. • 10 Sept. (1920), n. pag.
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DM: 3 July (1929), 10 • 12 Dec (1977), n. pag.
E: 7 Dec. (1921), 20 • 12 Nov. (1924), 44 • 19 Nov. (1924), 37 • 26 Nov. (1924), 36 • 3 Dec. (1924), 36 • 24 Dec. (1924), 32 • 31 Dec. (1924), 32 • 21 Jan. (1925), 33 • 4 Mar. (1925), 32 • 8 Apr. (1925), 32 • 6 May (1925), 36 • 2 Feb. (1927), 81 • 9 May (1928), 51 • 12 Sept. (1928), 45 • 3 Oct. (1928), 48 • 14 Nov. (1928), 40 • 12 Dec. (1928), n. pag. • 22 May (1929), 42 • 31 July (1929), n. pag. • 11 Sept. (1929), n. pag. • 9 Oct. (1929), 37, 50 • 27 Nov. (1929), 41 • 4 Dec. (1929), 48.
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TT: Dec. (1912), 35 • Aug. (1913), 29 • June (1914), 28 • July (1914), 26, 27 • Oct. (1914), 35 • Feb (1916), 20, 47 • Oct. (1916), 48 • Nov. (1916), 49 • Jan. (1917), 49 • Aug. (1917), n. pag. • Mar. (1918), 33 • Apr. (1918), 33, 38 • May (1918), 33 • June (1918), 29 • Nov. (1918), 23 • Dec. (1918), 32 • 10 Feb. (1919), 27, 28 • June (1919), 25.
WA: 11 Feb. (1905), 1, 9 • 13 Feb. (1905), 6. • 3 Apr. (1905), 9 •



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Bundaberg 1932

* Source details are currently missing

Last updated: 2/01/2015

First published in: Clay Djubal, "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company." MA Thesis, U of Qld (1998), Appendix F.
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