

DELAVALE AND GILBERT

Ern Delavale and Will Gilbert

(1908-1916) Regarded as one of the more popular Australian comedy duos touring Australia and New Zealand during the pre-war years, Ern Delavale and Will Gilbert worked an act that comprised patter, sketch material and songs. The themes explored by the pair included marriage, outback life, and the navy. During their time together the two comedians worked for most of the leading variety managements, including James Brennan, Ted Holland, Harry Clay and Fullers' Theatres. They toured Queensland twice for Clay (1912 and 1916) and played for several months in India in early 1914. The partnership was interrupted for around six months that same year while Gilbert recovered from a severe illness and eventually dissolved in late-1916. Both men later worked long-term acts with their wives.

Will Gilbert, renowned for his ultra thin and very lanky appearance, and thus often billed the "Loose Legged Comedian," and "the Human Hairpin," joined forces with Ern Delavale,¹ the "robust one," in either late-1907 or early 1908. Their first recorded appearance as Delavale and Gilbert appears to have been at [James Brennan's Gaiety Theatre](#) (Melbourne) in January 1908. One of the earliest reviews of their act, published in the *Newsletter* in early February, suggests that the combination still required some fine-tuning: "The patter of Ern Delavale and Will Gilbert is an infliction too grievous to be borne in silence, but their singing might stand as a slight mitigation of the offence."² By the end of their debut season with Brennan the pair was accorded more favourable critical responses, with a *Table Talk* critic writing, for example, "Delavale and Gilbert are to the fore with fresh and breezy sketches."³ They followed the Brennan engagement with work with [Harry Sadler](#) (Newcastle) and [Harry Rickards](#) (Western Australia).

Within a few years the pair established themselves as rising stars in Australian variety. Ern Delavale's singing was a particular feature of the act, while Will Gilbert's popularity with audiences was largely due to his ability to contort his lanky body. As the *Theatre Magazine* noted in 1909: "His twistings are simply marvellous... he appeared more like a streak of India-rubber than a human being."⁴ Very often the headline act with the companies they appeared with, the pair seldom performed without numerous recalls, and along with [Ted Tutty](#) were possibly the most popular of all [Harry Clay's](#) Queensland touring artists. The *Toowoomba Chronicle* writes of one performance:

Will Gilbert, who almost has to stoop to evade the top roof, was responsible for an uproar on his entrance, and was installed as the favourite of the evening. After his humorous rendition of 'Come Out of It,' he gave one of the greatest exhibitions of leg-screwing that has ever been witnessed in Toowoomba, and swept the stage with the whole length of his long legs. Until he did this one would have thought that the stage was free from dust.⁵

NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE.
Sole Proprietor Mr. JAMES BRENNAN.
EVERY EVENING AT 8
MATINEES EVERY SATURDAY and WEDNESDAY
AN ESTABLISHED POPULARITY.
THE NATIONAL VAUDEVILLE
ENTERTAINERS.
ADVANCE AUSTRALIA.
ADVANCE VAUDEVILLE.
TO-NIGHT.
MORE NEW ARTISTS AND NEW MOVING
PICTURES.
OUR MAMMOTH COMPANY
DELAVALE and GILBERT (Sketch Team), COLLEMAN (Concertina King), DAINY OLIVE CARR, Three Musical Millers, Ward Lear, Two Leontons, Joe Charles, Ivy Nicholls, Dodds Sisters, Laura Rollo, Vere Kearns, Octavia and Warne, Rowell Sisters, McKinnon and Kearns, Vere Ferrace, Alice Fane, Dolly Keldie, Alice Johnson, Dick Stead, and others.
OUR SHOW IS BEYOND CRITICISM.

A year and a half after their formation a *Theatre Magazine* critic wrote of their appearance at Sydney's [National Amphitheatre](#), "Delavale and Gilbert are both patriotic and original [in] their naval scene, "Sydney Harbour, a view from a Battleship." [It] is beautifully arranged; and the whole turn is bright and topical.⁶ The same sketch, which is believed to have been given the title "H.M.A.S. Australia," continued to be performed by the pair for several more years at least.⁷ Interestingly, for New Zealand audiences the sketch was known as "H.M.A.S. New Zealand."

Earliest recorded advertisement for Delavale and Gilbert
Evening News (Sydney) 18 Jan. (1908), 2.

¹ Please note: Ern Delavale was not a blood-relation to comedian Ike Delavale. The latter performer was born Ernest Charles Vockler. They were, however, brothers-in-law, with Ern Delavale having married Ern Vockler's eldest sister Lily in 1908. See the [Ike Delavale](#) or [Delavale Brothers](#) entries for further details on their familial and career links.

² "The Strutter's Page." *Newsletter* (Sydney) 1 Feb. (1908), 3.

³ "The Gaiety." *Table Talk* (Melbourne) 19 Mar. (1908), 19.

⁴ *Theatre Magazine* 16 Mar. (1909), 3.

⁵ *Toowoomba Chronicle* (Qld) 20 July 1909, 3.

⁶ *Theatre Magazine* Nov. (1909), 22.

⁷ See for example "Dix and Baker's Entertainers." *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) 13 Mar. (1911),

From 1909 through to 1914 Delavale and Gilbert were largely associated with James Brennan (and later [Brennan-Fuller](#)), as well as with Harry Clay and the [Fullers](#) (New Zealand). In addition to working Clay's Sydney circuit they also toured Queensland twice (1909 and 1912). Between these engagements the "novelty sketch team" appeared on the bill of such managers as [Ted Holland](#) (Brisbane), [J.C. Bain](#) (Sydney), [Dix-Baker](#) (Newcastle), Lennon, Hyman, Lennon (Adelaide), [E. J. Carroll](#) (Ipswich) and [Birch and Carroll](#) (Rockhampton). The Ipswich season at Martoo's Olympia saw them support Sam Langford, the "Boston Tar Baby." New Zealand tours were undertaken in 1911 and 1913. Among their more popular sketches from this period were "Theory of Marriage" and "Fun on Our Selection." The battleship sketch also remained an audience favourite, as the *Townsville Star* noted in 1913:

Messrs. Delavale and Gilbert's vaudeville sketch was one continued laugh, being a travesty of man-o'-war life and a merry exposition of the sublime and the ridiculous in partnership, Mr Gilbert's make-up as a weather-beaten tar being a very funny conception. The stage setting as a battleship called forth a round of applause, while the 'gagging' was brisk and bright, interspersed with melodies, and the consequent mirth hilarious.⁸

Perhaps the highlight of their first seven years together occurred in early 1914 when the duo, by then billed as "Australia's Leading Comedy Merchants and Laughter Experts," travelled to India on a contract arranged through the Fullers.⁹

Upon their return to Australia in late-May, Delavale and Gilbert played a short season at the [Bijou Theatre](#), Melbourne, before taking up an offer from Graham and Howard to work their Sydney circuit. Within a matter of weeks, however, Gilbert suffered a serious bout of acute sciatica and rheumatism which required a lengthy period of recuperation. Forced to work without his partner, Delavale quickly formed a stage act with [Arthur Tauchert](#) which they toured around the Clay and [Jack Landow](#) circuits for several months. *Australian Variety* said of the partnership in mid-July: "The new team of Delavale and Tauchert is proving very successful around the suburbs. With Jacky Landow's show the other evening it was the hit of the programme."¹⁰ Although the two comedians announced that they would continue as a regular team, this never eventuated because in late-August Delavale resigned his position as Vice President of the [Australian Variety Artists' Federation](#) (A.V.A.F.) in order to open his own suburban circuit in Sydney.

Known as the Refined Vaudeville Entertainers, Delavale's company was for a time a serious competitor to Harry Clay's circuit.¹¹ He started off by taking a lease on the National Theatre at Balmain, where he proceeded to capture good audiences through his established reputation and extensive connections within the industry. His circuit later took in Redfern, Coogee, Randwick and Ashfield. Some of the artists he was able to engage were among the best available at the time, with names such as [Denis Carney](#), [Lulu Eugene](#), [Bert Desmond](#), [Olga Pennington](#), [Ward Lear](#), [Mark Erickson](#) and the Two Rexos being just a sample.

As a staunch vaudeville activist, it is not surprising that Delavale put his fellow members of the A.V.A.F. first when it came to engagements. *Australian Variety* records in this respect: "Ern Delavale, the successful suburban manager, placed before the audience a grand double bill, the equal of which has never been seen around the suburbs. Twenty-two performers took part in the entertainment.... Speaking to the proprietor, he assures me that all the members of the orchestra, staff and performers are unionists. Without a doubt, it is a city show with suburban prices."¹² Unfortunately, 1914 also saw Delavale and his wife lose a child in birth, with Lily almost dying from the complications.

THE
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FULLERS' VAUDEVILLE COMPANY.
A Hugely Popular Programme.

THE TYBELLS	Aerial Artists and
THE TYBELLS	Dental Trapeze
THE TYBELLS	Performers.

A Really Wonderful Act.

Premiere	MAY DAHLBERG	Danseuse
Popular	RUPERT CUTHBERT	Baritone.

Last Night of
KEARNS AND ROSLYN.

Last Night	VERA KEARNS.
Last Night	ESSIE JENNINGS.
LITTLE WILLIB.	GEO. SPARKES.
TIM HOWARD.	LEWIS TRIO.

TO-MORROW NIGHT,
First Appearance of
DELAVALÉ and GILBERT
And **LILY VOCKLER.**

THE BRITISH BIOGRAPH.

PRICES: D.C. and O.S., 2s; Stalls, 1s.
Plan at Jacobs's. No Booking Fee.

Evening Star (Dunedin, NZ) 13 July
(1911), 5.

To-night & To-morrow night
Thursday & Friday,
FORESTERS' HALL.

GRAND
Vaudeville Entertainments
Ern Delavale & Will Gilbert's
15 STAR ARTISTS.

The following well-known Star Artists will positively appear:—

JACK WEST,	LILY VOCKLER,
JOE LASHWOOD & KITTY RENBY,	BREZZETTO,
DORIS TINDALL,	DRAMATIC SKETCH.
WILL GILBERT,	ERN. DELAVALÉ AND WILL GILBERT,
LILLY EUGENE,	WILL HUNTER,
THE 2 CLIFFS,	MARJORIE DAW,
GEO. SPILKER,	

Camden News (NSW) 4 Mar. (1915), 5.

⁸ *Townsville Star* ctd. in "[Amusements: Theatre Royal.](#)" *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton) 5 May (1913), 3.

⁹ *Australian Variety* 11 Mar. (1914), 6. The duo and Lily Vockler departed from Fremantle (Western Australia) on 28 February via the S.S. Marmora. The trio had appeared earlier that evening at Fremantle's Princess Theatre.

¹⁰ *Australian Variety* 15 July (1914), 7.

¹¹ Jack Rhodesbury (of the Two Rhodesbury's) was elected to the position of Vice President after Delavale's resignation. Ted Tutty was also elected to a seat on the Executive Committee. Will Gilbert remained on the executive committee.

¹² *Australian Variety* 21 Oct. (1914), 7.

By February 1915 Delavale and Gilbert were once again performing together. Using Ern Delavale's recently acquired managerial skills the pair toured their own 15-member star company around the south-west region of Sydney (including Camden). Over the next five months they worked in Newcastle for Dix-Baker and in Sydney for Leonard's Entertainers, Reg "Snowy" Baker (Rushcutters Bay Stadium),¹³ and the Szarka Brothers (Enmore Theatre). In August the pair took out an advertisement in *Australian Variety* letting their fans know that they had decided to quit vaudeville for a while to take up an offer to tour New Zealand with [George Stephenson's English Comedy Company](#).¹⁴ The engagement saw the two comics work their own specialty act into the company's repertoire, which included *Fun on the Bristol*, *Muldoon's Picnic*¹⁵ and *Skipped by the Light of the Moon*.¹⁶

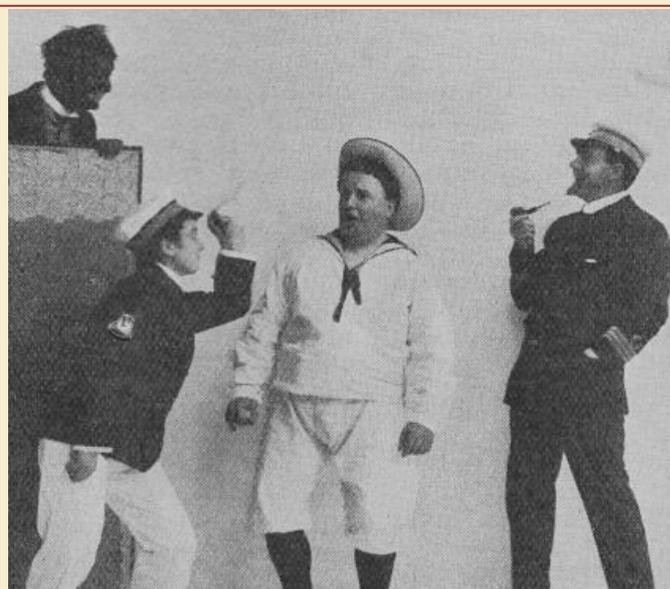
Delevale and Gilbert

Australia's Leading Comedy Merchants
and Laughter Experts.

Wish to state that owing to the extensive War Salaries being offered in vaudeville at the present time, they have decided to quit vaudeville for the time being, and will open in New Zealand with George Stephenson's English Comedy Company in 'Fun on the Bristol.' These performers have been specially engaged to work their own specialty act throughout the tour.

All Comms.: This Office.

Australian Variety 11 Aug. (1915), 13.



L-R: **Will Gilbert, Ivy Davis, Ern Delavale, and Courtney Ford** in *The Widow O'Brien*
George Stephenson's Comedy Company
Theatre Sept. (1915), 25.

Following the end of their engagement with Stephenson, Delavale and Gilbert returned to Australia, taking up an offer from Harry Clay to appear on his Sydney circuit early in 1916. In February they joined other Clay's artists on that year's northern New South Wales and Queensland tour.¹⁷ The two comedians are known to have still been working for Clay as late as September. At that time they had briefly joined his [No 1 Musical Comedy Company](#) touring the South-western-New South Wales line.

Sometime during the latter months of 1916 Delavale and Gilbert decided to call it quits, with each putting together a new act with their wife. As the Gilberts, Will and Dora, quickly established a popular reputation, and went on to maintain a presence in Australian variety theatre well into the 1930s. Although Ern Delavale and Lily Vockler were also well-known for their many years as stage partners, the initial Delavale and Vockler act lasted only a month or so before being postponed. This came about when Lily's husband and brother, Ern, formed the Delavale Brothers act in February 1917. Their partnership lasted some four years.

SEE ALSO

- [Ern Delavale](#)
- [Will Gilbert \(The Gilberts\)](#)

¹³ The Snowy Baker/ Sydney Stadium engagement on 7 July was a boxing/vaudeville event. Delavale and Gilbert appeared in a program that also included Doris Tindall (male impersonator), Gladys Gordon (contralto), The Rexos (jugglers), Gazza Trio (musicians) and Bert Gold (banjoist). The Szarka Brothers engagement at the Enmore Theatre in July was a between-films appearance.

¹⁴ *Australian Variety* 11 Aug. (1915), 13.

¹⁵ Muldoon's Picnic is believed to have been first staged in New York in 1880. [Frank Clark](#) introduced it to Australians in 1882, claiming the work as his own. For details relating to the history of the work in Australasia see the [1882 Works](#) entry

¹⁶ Ctd. *Theatre Magazine* Sept. (1915), 36.

¹⁷ For information relating to Harry Clay's annual New South Wales and Queensland tours see the [Harry Clay](#) entry.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Interestingly Brisbane's *Truth* newspaper reported in December 1912 that Delavale and Gilbert, the "don't-say-so" patter team had dissolved their partnership, and that Gilbert had joined forces with someone named Stratton. "They introduce a lot of new stuff that makes their act go," notes the journalist.¹⁸ An act billed as Stratton and Gilbert is known to have worked at the Princess Theatre, Sydney, under J.C. Bain's management for several weeks in late-December 1912 and early-January 1913. No other record of this partnership has yet been found, so it is presently unclear if this was Will Gilbert temporarily working with someone else or another comedian with the same name. If Delavale and Gilbert had broken up it was clearly brief, as the partnership was in full swing in Brisbane by March 1913.
2. The *Theatre Magazine* in early 1916 records the following Delavale and Gilbert patter from their final year together:

Venus in a Bath." At Harry Clay's Newtown [Bridge Theatre](#) (Sydney): -

- Mr Delavale (*handing Mr Gilbert a postcard*): That is "Venus in the Bath."
- Mr Gilbert (*taking the card and looking at it*): Yes?
- Mr Delavale: Of course you can see very little of her. The water is up to her neck. (*Mr Gilbert continues looking at the picture, evidently with no thought of handing the card back to Mr Delavale*)
- Mr Delavale: (*reaching for it*): Give it to me.
- Mr Gilbert: No, I'm waiting.
- Mr Delavale: Waiting for what?
- Mr Gilbert: Waiting for the water to run out.¹⁹

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

The following list of engagements should be considered very incomplete. Its aim is to provide a snapshot of Delavale and Gilbert's career together. The chronology will continue to be updated over time. See the last page of this PDF for the publication date of the most recent version. All engagements include Lily Vockler unless otherwise noted)

- 1908:** JAMES BRENNAN Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; ca. Jan. - Mar.) ► HARRY SADLER Newcastle (ca. Apr.) ► HARRY CLAY Sydney (suburban circuit; May-Aug.) ► TED HOLLAND Brisbane (Theatre Royal; 29 Aug. - > Royal Revellers Co) ► HARRY RICKARDS Kalgoorlie, WA (Cremorne Theatre; 3 Nov. -) • Perth (Palace Gardens; 21 Nov. -)
- 1909:** HARRY CLAY Queensland (regional tour; ca. Feb. - Aug. > Clay's Waxworks & Co) ► JAMES BRENNAN Sydney (National Theatre; ca. Nov. - 31 Dec.)
- 1910:** JAMES BRENNAN Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; ca. Jan-Feb.) ► LENNON, HYMAN, LENNON Adelaide (Empire Theatre; ca. Mar-Apr.) ► JAMES BRENNAN Newcastle (Victoria Theatre; ca. Feb-Mar.) • Sydney (National Amphitheatre; ca. June-July) • Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; July-23 Dec.) • Sydney (National Amphitheatre; 24-31 Dec.)
- 1911:** JAMES BRENNAN Sydney (National Amphitheatre; 1 Jan. - ca. Feb.) ► DIX-BAKER Newcastle (King's Hall; ca. Mar.-Apr. > Dix-Baker's Entertainers) ► HOLLAND & ST JOHN Brisbane (Empire Theatre; 11 May - ca. July > Holland's Vaudeville Entertainers) ► FULLERS' THEATRES New Zealand (Dominion tour; 13 July - 2 Dec.)
- NB:** New Zealand engagements incl. Dunedin (King's Theatre; 13 July-12 Aug) • Christchurch (Opera House; 14 Aug. -) • Wellington (Theatre Royal; 11 Sept. -) • Auckland (Opera House; 9 Oct. - 2 Dec.)
- 1912:** J.C. BAIN Sydney (Princess Theatre; 6 Jan. - Feb. > Bain's Vaudeville Entertainers) ► HARRY CLAY New South Wales/Queensland (regional tour; Feb. - Aug. > Harry Clay Co) ► J.C. BAIN Sydney (Princess Theatre; 7 Sept. - > Bain's Vaudeville Entertainers) ► DIX-BAKER Newcastle (King's Hall; 26 Oct. - 22 Nov. > Dix-Baker's Entertainers)
- 1913:** BRENNAN-FULLER Brisbane (Theatre Royal; 15-28 Mar.) ► E.J. CARROLL Ipswich, Qld (Martoo's Olympia; 29 Mar. - ca. Apr. > Carroll's Continentals) ► BIRCH & CARROLL Queensland (ca. Apr./May) ► HOLLAND & ST JOHN Brisbane (Empire Theatre; 17 May - ca. June) ► BRENNAN-FULLER Broken Hill, NSW (Crystal Theatre; 7 July - ca. Aug.) • Adelaide (King's Hall; 17 Aug. -) ► FULLERS' THEATRES New Zealand (Dominion tour; Sept. - ca. Sept-Dec.)

NB 1: The Birch and Carroll Queensland tour included Townsville and Rockhampton (Theatre Royal).

NB 2: Delavale, Gilbert and Vockler left Sydney for New Zealand on 3 September. The Dominion itinerary incl. Auckland (Opera House; Sept/Oct.); Wellington (His Majesty's Theatre; 6-25 Oct.) • Christchurch (Opera House; 10 Nov.) • Dunedin (King's Theatre; 25 Nov. - ca. 31 Dec.)

¹⁸ "Shows and Shams." *Truth* (Brisbane) 15 Dec. (1912), 12.

¹⁹ *Theatre Magazine* Mar. (1916), 46.

1914: WEST'S Ltd (in assoc. with Brennan-Fuller) **Perth/Fremantle** (Melrose Theatre, Perth/Princess Theatre, Fremantle; 17 Jan. - 28 Feb. > Brennan-Fullers' Vaudeville Co) ► n/e **India** (ca. Mar-May) ► BRENNAN-FULLER Melbourne (Bijou Theatre; ca. 22 May -) ► GRAHAM & HOWARD Sydney (suburban circuit; ca. June)

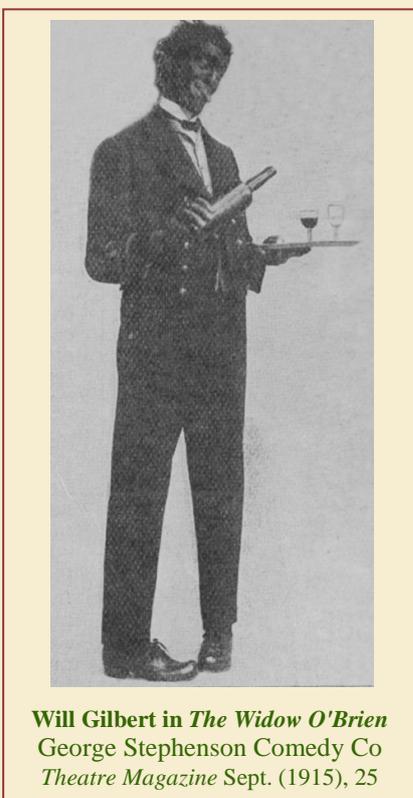
NB : Will Gilbert was forced to temporarily retire from the stage due to ill health in June. His is not believed to have returned to work until early 1915. See the Delavale and Vockler entry for details relating to Ern Delavale's movements between June and December 1914.

1915: ERN DELAVALÉ New South Wales (South-west tour; ca. Feb/Mar. > Delavale and Gilbert's Entertainers) ► DIX-BAKER Newcastle (Victoria Theatre; ca. Apr.) ► LEONARD'S ENTERTAINERS Sydney (no details - cited *Prahran Telegraph* 19 June 1915, 4) ► REG L. BAKER Sydney (Stadium; 7 June > boxing and vaudeville) ► SZARKA BROS Sydney (Enmore Theatre; ca. 26-28 July) ► GEORGE STEPHENSON New Zealand (Dominion tour; ca. Aug. - > George Stephenson's Comedy Co)

1916: HARRY CLAY Sydney (suburban circuit; ca. Feb.) • **Queensland** (regional tour; ca. Mar. - July > Harry Clay's Co) ►

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company 1865-1930." (1998), v. pags.



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