

STEVE ADSON

Steve Adson's career on the local stage spanned some four decades (ca.1880s to 1910s) and included engagements with most leading Australian-based companies and entrepreneurs of the era, including Harry Rickards, George Rignold, the MacMahon Brothers, Frank M. Clark and Dan Tracey. He partnered Jessie Thorne as a comedy/dance duo in later years and toured the East on several occasions. Adson travelled to America in 1918 to take up a number of amusement propositions.

While Steve Adson's origins are yet to be established, several references later in his career imply that if not born in Australia then he was certainly considered a local as much of his career was spent based in the country. An all-round variety performer, Adson's name has been located as early as 1888 appearing with [Charles Hugo's Buffalo Minstrels](#) as an end-man (bones). The company at that stage included Priscilla Verne, another variety performer whose career was largely associated with the Australasian region. Following a second engagement with Hugo in 1890 Adson teamed up with ex-[Billy Emerson](#) company member [Dan Tracey](#) and together they worked for [Harry Rickards](#) before setting up their own troupe, Tracey and Adson's Minstrels. Although the business partnership was short-lived, Adson continued to work with Tracey for some time after. The pair specialised in dance and Irish comedy routines both as vaudeville turns and within burlesques and musical comedies like *McGowan the Millionaire* and *The Irish Inspector* (1890). As a solo artist Adson built a formidable reputation as a specialist dialect comedian. His act, described as a satirical presentation of the oddities and foibles of different nationalities, saw one *Sydney Morning Herald* critic note that it was the "degree of truthfulness [that] convulsed the house."¹

After appearing with a number of organisations in 1891 and 1892, including [Will's Surprise Party](#), Adson teamed up with Tracey again in 1892, around the same time the American was beginning to establish himself as one of Sydney and Melbourne's leading entrepreneurs. Engagements with Harry Rickards (1894-95, 1898), [George Rignold's](#) pantomime company (*The House that Jack Built*, 1894), [Frank York](#) and [George A. Jones](#) (1895), [Frank M. Clark](#) (1897), the [MacMahon Brothers](#) dramatic company (1897-99), and [Thomas Delohery](#) and [Percy St John](#) (1899) firmly established him among the country's leading performers of the late nineteenth century. One of his engagements with the MacMahons also saw him cast in possibly the last [Garnet Walch](#) melodrama to be staged in Australia, *The Prairie King* (Lyceum Theatre, Sydney, 6 Nov. 1897).

Although Steve Adson's career during the first decade of the new century remains somewhat sketchy he is known to have teamed up with [James Craydon](#) and [Ted Holland](#) in 1900 following the departure of Thomas Delohery. It is likely that Adson continue securing engagements with Harry Rickards (ca.1905) between overseas tours with his on-and-off-stage partner, Jessie Thorne. The couple are known, for example, to have been engaged by Frank Clark at Melbourne's [Gaiety Theatre](#) on 6 August 1904, with Adson billed as headline performer. Invariably described as "Australia's leading comedy sketch artists,"² Adson and Thorne toured with American artist/entrepreneur, [Post Mason](#) in 1907 and spent some time touring through Manila and China around 1909 for the [Ramos Brothers](#) - reportedly their third time in East to that date. Another tour of the east (including India) was undertaken around 1917. Adson later made his way to America to take up business opportunities there.



Steve Adson

Theatre Magazine (Sydney) Nov. 1909, 16.

SEE ALSO

- [Dan Tracey](#)

¹ "Empire Theatre." *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 Sept. 1895, 6.

² *Brisbane Courier* 1 June 1907, 2. [Advert.](#)

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

- 1888:** HUGO BROS Geelong, Vic (no details. > Hugos' Buffalo Minstrels)³
- 1889:** MARTYN HAGEN Sydney (Darlinghurst Hall; ca. 12 Oct. > Martyn Hagan Co)
- 1890:** HUGO BROS (Haymarket Palace of Varieties; ca. 15 Mar. > Hugos' Buffalo Minstrels) ► DAN TRACEY & HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (School of Arts; ca. 13 Sept.) ► DAN TRACEY & STEVE ADSON Sydney (School of Arts; ca. 20 Dec. > Adson & Tracey Minstrels)
- 1891:** WILLIAM LARMOUR Sydney (Coogee Palace Aquarium; ca. Jan.) ► Sydney GORDON'S ELITE HARBOUR EXCURSIONS (Sydney Harbour; ca. 28 Mar.)
- 1892:** DAN TRACEY Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; ca. 20 Feb.)
- 1893:** HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (Opera House; ca. 4 Feb.) • (Tivoli Theatre; ca. 25 Feb.)
- 1894:** GEORGE RIGNOLD Sydney (Her Majesty's; ca. 22 Dec.)
- 1895:** HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (Tivoli Theatre; ca. 9 Mar.) ► YORK & JONES Brisbane (Gaiety Theatre; ca. 13 Apr.) • Queensland (regional tour; ca. Jan/Feb.)⁴ • Brisbane (Gaiety Theatre; 11 Apr. - 14 May > Empire Minstrels, return season) • Sydney (Empire Theatre; ca. 7-13 Sept.) ► DELOHERY & SPEED Sydney (Empire Theatre; 14 Sept. -)
- 1897:** F.M. CLARK Brisbane (Theatre Royal; ca. 5 June > F.M. Clark's All-Star Co)
- 1898:** MACMAHON BROS Queensland (regional tour; ca. Feb/Mar. > Dramatic Co) ► HARRY RICKARDS Perth (Cremorne Theatre; ca. 9 July) ► ST GEO'S HALL MINSTREL Co Melbourne (St George's Hall; ca. 8 Oct.)

Note: Macmahon Bros Queensland itinerary incl. Charters Towers (ca. 23 Feb).

- 1899:** MACMAHON BROS Sydney (Lyceum Theatre; ca. 25 Feb. > Dramatic Co) ► DELOHERY & ST JOHN Brisbane (Theatre Royal; ca. 8 July > Delohery and St John's Elite Co)
- 1900:** HARRY RICKARDS Adelaide (Tivoli Theatre; 20 June - > Adson, Craydon & Holland; Opening of the theatre)
- 1904:** F.M. CLARK Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; ca. 6 Aug.)
- 1905:** HARRY RICKARDS Perth (Theatre Royal; ca. 17 Jan.) • Melbourne (Opera House; ca. 22 Apr.) • Sydney (Tivoli Theatre; ca. 17 June) • Melbourne (Opera House; ca. 25 Nov.)
- 1906:** TED HOLLAND Brisbane (Theatre Royal; ca. Mar. > Adson & Thorne)
- 1907:** POST MASON Brisbane (Centennial Hall; 1 June -)
- 1908/09:** RAMOS BROS Manila/China/Hong Kong (no details)⁵
- 1917:** Toured India⁶
- 1918:** Toured USA⁷

FARCES/SKETCHES (Original and Adapted)

All details/dates indicate first known staging in Australia.

- 1907:** **The Insurance Office** [sketch] Post Mason (Centennial Hall, Brisbane; 1 June)

³ See *Melbourne Punch* 28 Dec. 1888, 564.

⁴ See *Brisbane Courier* 22 Jan. 1895, n. pag.

⁵ See *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Apr. 1909, 14 and Nov. 1909, 16.

⁶ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 23 May 1917, n. pag.

⁷ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 25 Jan. 1918, n. pag.

QUOTATIONS

- 1888:** Tracey and Adson, song and dance men, with Hugo's Geelong Co, have come off with flying colours. The local press highly praise their efforts ("*Theatrical Gossip*" *Melbourne Punch* 28 Dec. 1888, 564).
- 1898:** Mr Adson's popularity is nightly evidenced. Of dialect recitations and gags he has a large fund, and he amused the audiences greatly" ("*Cremorne Theatre: Rickards Tivoli Theatre.*" *West Australian* 25 July 1898, 30).
- 1905:** "They Say" :- That Steve Adson at the Tivoli, when singing R.G. Knowles' old song "Faces," should have mentioned his own as being the most wooden on earth (*Theatre Magazine* 15 July 1905, 8).

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Are You Going East?" *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Nov. 1909, 16. [See below]

Are You Going East?

Mr. Steve Adson, of the well-known and popular double, Steve Adson and Jessie Thorn, returned to Australia a few months ago from his third trip East. This time Steve was only in Manila and China.

"There are four places in the East—the Phillipines,



MR. STEVE ADSON.

China, Singapore, and India," said Steve, the other day, to "The Theatre." "Of course, the big place in the Phillipines is Manila. There are a number of military posts of minor importance that can be played.

Levy, of the Orpheum, used to be at Manila; but he appears to have gone bung. The Orpheum was a low-down, disreputable hole. The audiences there consisted of drunken, foul-mouthed soldiers and sailors. No self-respecting woman would ever be seen there. The stage-women Levy got had to be of the same character as the audiences or chuck their billets. The first women that went over from here were a really bad lot. In the end, they had to be deported from Manila. Evidently this had something to do with the impression that came to prevail there—namely, that every woman from Australia must necessarily be a drunken, debauched sort of creature. Levy went from Manila to China, where he struck further trouble in connection with a raid on a gambling den.

"Hongkong is a 40-hours' run from Manila. There are seven big play-places in China, as follows:—Hongkong, Canton, Swatow, Shanghai, Hankow, Tsiensin, and Pekin. Picture shows are very popular there. A picture show has usually four or five artistes with it. The only solid and reputable showmen in China that I would recommend to artistes here are Ramos Brothers. They have four picture shows going the whole year round. I was with Ramos Brothers six months. At the end of this they offered me a further six-months' engagement. All the play-centres are within a comparatively short run of one another.

"It is a two-days' run from Shanghai to Japan.

There are three big show places in Japan—namely, Yokohama, Kobe, and Nagasaki. Calcutta is the big place in India. You can easily put in 12 months in India. Until Cohen recently settled in India I don't think there was any big showman permanently there. I believe Len Davis, formerly of West Australia, is managing in India for Cohen. Beyond this I don't know what are the prospects for artistes in India. I have been doing business in Australia for Ramos Brothers. 'Pros' wishing to get on with Ramos Brothers in China can communicate through me. For some months to come my address will be the A.V.A., Melbourne. Of course, I can't guaranteed all applicants a billet—even if they are capable, first-class applicants. The East is by no means dependent on Australia for its amusements. Big companies—such as Bandmann's Opera Company and Bandmann's Dramatic Company—go there direct from England. China has some beautiful theatres. The building at Shanghai is not surpassed by anything in Australia. Such is the completeness of the theatres over that way that in winter they are artificially heated.

"The cost of a passage from Sydney to China varies from £18 to £22—according to what line you go by."

Theatre Magazine (Sydney) Nov. 1909, 16.

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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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