BOVIS BROTHERS

Charles and William (Billy) Bovis

The Bovis brothers started performing in the early to mid-1880s and toured not only the Antipodes but also internationally. During their time together, the brothers worked for most of the leading variety organisations and entrepreneurs operating in Australia, including Cottiers' Peoples Concerts (Sydney), Alfred Dampier, Frank Smith (Sydney), John F. Sheridan, Tommy Hudson (Hudson's Surprise Party), Martyn Hagan, Charles Fanning, Harry Rickards, J. C. Williamson, F.M. Clark, and George Stephenson. They also occasionally undertook managerial operations in partnership with other performers, notably Thomas Delohery and Sydney Deane, and by themselves. Charles died in 1928, while Billy's last known appearance was in 1941.

Charles Bovis and his younger brother Billy are thought to have begun their careers on the Australian variety stage at least as early as 1885. Their names have first been identified to date with Cottiers' People Concerts in Sydney (1886-87). The brothers first big break is believed their appearance in Alfred Dampier and Julius Grant's 1886 Christmas pantomime, Dick Whittington and His Cat, A Pantomime with Purr-Puss. Staged at Sydney's Royal Standard, the production was written by Lance Lenton (libretto) and Percy Kehoe (original music). Over the remainder of the 1880s, and as their reputations increased markedly, the brothers found themselves working for Charlie Fanning, Perry Ryan and Martyn Hagan (XLCR Co), Pemberton Willard and John F. Sheridan, and Frank Smith (Alhambra Theatre, Sydney).

Harry Rickards first engaged the Bovis brothers in 1893. The Sydney Morning Herald indicates in this respect that their 7 October billing was the first time they had appeared at the Tivoli. They continued to work for Rickards frequently throughout the 1890s, while also procuring engagements with such firms as John F. Sheridan (1890-93); J. Billin (1892/93 - with the US Minstrels); Frank Smith (1892-93); Harry Barrington (1894); Frank York and George A. Jones (Empire Minstrels, 1895); F.M. Clark (1898); Harry Cogill (1898) and Delohery, Craydon and Holland (1898). The brothers' association with John F. Sheridan saw them appear in such productions as the 1890 revival of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1886), the 1891 revival of Black Eyed Susan (1890) and The Zouaves (Military and Spectacular) and Sappho Ballet. Staged in 1891, the latter entertainment included their popular "Living Photographs" turn, along with an "American Sand Dance." In addition to performing their comedy act, the brothers wrote much of their own material - including jokes, sketches and songs. They were also responsible for writing, or adapting the occasional afterpiece (or farce). A feature of their act around 1892, for example was "The Two Sarahs." Described as an "original knockabout" sketch it introduced a specialty "comic boxing act." The sketch was possibly first staged during their engagement with the US Minstrels at the Victoria Hall, Melbourne on 18 June 1892. Another recorded "turn" from the mid-1890s was "The Salvations Sisters" which was possibly staged for the first time during their engagement with York and Jones' Gaiety Company in 1895.

As the older brother, Charles became involved in managerial aspects of the industry at various times during the mid to late-1890s. The most significant partnership was with Thomas Delohery and Sydney Deane (as Delohery, Bovis and Deane). This venture was carried out in Brisbane at the Gaiety Theatre in 1897 through the Elite Burlesque, Comedy and Specialty Company. The season's success was due in no small part to the quality of the artistes involved, with the original line-up comprising well-known performers like Delohery Craydon and Holland, the Bovis Brothers, Sydney Deane, Little Florrie Ranger, the Lingard Sisters, and J.D. (Johnny) Foley. Later guest artists

1 Billy Bovis claims in an interview with the Adelaide Mail in 1940 that he and his brother were engaged by Tommy Hudson "49 years ago" and played "Garner's Rooms" in that city ("Stallite. "Have You Heard This." 7 Dec. 1940, 3). No details have yet been located for this engagement.
3 The 1891 Black-Eyed Susan production was not the first time that the Bovis brothers had been associated with that famous play. One or both had previously appeared a burlesque version, Two Lovely Black Eyes; Or, The Sailor Bold and the Smuggler Sold, which was presented by Pemberton Willard and John F. Sheridan in 1889.
included J.C. Bain (Feb.), D'Arcy Stanfield and Eva Clements (Apr.) and Will Stevens (June). The Elite company's musical theatre repertoire comprised a range of genres – with the most popular being arguably burlesques like *Trill-B!* (1896) and *The Trip To Manly and the Soapboilers' Picnic* (the latter written by W. Horace Bent, and first staged in 1884) and comediettas like *The Giddy Curate and the Gaiety Girl* (1897) and *Ballooancy* (1895). After the Elite season ended in late 1897 the brothers took over the lease of the Gaiety with their own company. The principle artists engaged for that venture were Horace Bent, Flo Darley, Maud Fanning and Violet Bishop. The inclusion of Bent saw the company stage several of his popular burlesques and farces, notably *The Yellow Novel Heroes* (1888) and *Pneumatic Eradicator*.

On 2 February 1899 the brothers were accorded a benefit at the Opera House, Sydney, prior to their departure overseas. The *Sydney Morning Herald* records that the pair were scheduled to sail the next day for the Cape Colony, South Africa, for an eight weeks engagement with Hyman and Alexander, beginning with a season at the Empire Theatre, Johannesburg. They then intended travelling to London for the first time.5 The Bovis's returned to Australia in 1902, having undertaken a successful tour of Great Britain and the USA. While few details regarding their overseas experiences have yet been located it was reported that one of their major engagements was as members of the original London cast for *The Belle of New York*.

The brothers first major engagement after returning home was as feature guests in Williamson and Musgrove's *Dick Whittington* pantomime (Her Majesty's, Melbourne, 1902). Over the remainder of the decade they worked together and separately for numerous firms - notably *George Stephenson* (ca. 1904-06). Under his management they toured extensively throughout Australia and New Zealand and appeared such musical theatre productions as *The Dandy Doctor* (1904), *Rose of the Riviera* (1905), *Bill Adams* (1905), Alfred Hill's comic opera *A Moorish Maid* (1906). Among the other companies which employed their services during the first decade of the 20th century were James Brennan, Harry Rickards and Harry Clay. The James Brennan association in 1907 clearly shows the esteem that the pair were held in, with the entrepreneur giving them headline billing at his *National Amphitheatre* (Sydney) during the all-star Congress of Nations extravaganza - presented to mark the venue's re-opening (23 Feb.). With their extensive experience as both performers and managers, Brennan also employed the pair as the "Nash's" general managers (1907). In 1909 the brothers returned to running their own venture for a while - this being a circuit that operated around the Hunter Valley/Singleton district of New South Wales.

Although their names largely disappear from Australian newspaper reportage after 1910, it is believed that the brothers may have either spent some considerable time overseas, and/or possibly apart. Perth's *Sunday Times*, records in July 1910, for example that Billy and his wife Flo Darley were currently in San Francisco, and that either she and/or he had undertaken a tour of the States for Harry Rickards in 1909. It appears in this respect that Bovis and Darley had also formed an on-stage partnership, which they may have first presented before audiences as early as 1907 or 1908. Charles Bovis, on the other hand, is recorded as having been engaged by Harry Clay in 1910 (no mention of his brother has yet been located for these engagements). The Bovis brothers' last known appearances together were during a tour of Northern New South Wales in 1915 by Branson's Comedy Entertainers. Older brother Charles Bovis had died in Maryborough, Queensland, in 1928.6

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6 “Obituary.” *Brisbane Courier* 20 June 1928, 17.
While it has not yet been established exactly when the brothers ended their partnership, Billy Bovis is known to have still be performing in the 1930s. Between 1925 and 1929 he was a member of F. Gayle Wyer's Bandbox Revue Co, which played exclusively on the Fullers' circuit. In 1929 he also undertook a tour of North Queensland with Roy Rene (Mo and His Merrymakers). George Wallace engaged Bovis for his 1931 Brisbane season and he is known to have been on the bill of at least one Sunday Harbour Cruise in Sydney in 1936.

Bovis also appeared on radio several times during the 1930s and early 1940s. His first known broadcast was in 1934 as part of a "Veterans of the Minstrel and Variety World" special (21 Sept.). He is also known to have been involved in community singing broadcasts in 1936, and featured in a comedy sketch for 2FC in 1938 (3 June). His final radio appearance was possibly another "veterans" show broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in October 1940. Bovis' last appearances on the stage are believed to have occurred around the same period, when he took part in a series of "old time reunions" staged in 1940 and 1941. He was reportedly in the vicinity of 70 years of age.

SEE ALSO
Delohery Bovis & Deane  •  Old Time Nigger Minstrels [2] (Billy Bovis)  •  
F. Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co (Billy Bovis)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Will Bovis married Rose Darley in Wellington, New Zealand in August 1906 (Theatre Magazine Sept. 1906, 4). Darley was the daughter of a well-known contractor based in Annandale, Sydney.

2. Charles Bovis' roles with the George Stephenson English Comedy Company included: Colonel Pendred (The Dandy Doctor), Telegraph (The Rose of the Riviera), Lightning (Bill Adams), Chippee Chop, Lord Chancellor (A Chinese Honeymoon).

3. Billy Bovis' roles with the George Stephenson English Comedy Co included: Monsieur Erol (The Rose of the Riviera), the Rajah of Poonah Bay (Bill Adams), and Hi Lung, Lord High Admiral (A Chinese Honeymoon).

4. The 1940/41 series of "old time vaudeville" shows were staged under the variant title "Stars of 1900" / "Vogues of variety" / "Veterans of Variety" etc, and originally organised by Priscilla Verne. The first show was likely the one held at the Melbourne Tivoli on 2 September 1940. In addition to Verne and Billy Bovis and the cast of "veterans" for that show included Maud Fanning, Ted Tutty, Ethel Smith, Wal Rockley, Lyla Thompson, Doris Tindall, Alf Verne and Ward Lear. Other contemporary "guest" stars to appear alongside them were Roy Rene and Billy Kershaw. In 1941 the veterans also appeared in the Melbourne Tivoli revue Bally Hoo.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

The following list of engagements should be considered very incomplete. It serves as a snapshot of the brothers' careers only.

1888: FRANK SMITH Sydney (Alhambra Music Hall; ca. 2 Apr. -)  •  RYAN, FANNING & HAGEN Co Sydney (Protestant Hall; 14 July > XLCR Co).
1890: JOHN F. SHERIDAN Brisbane (Lse/Prod. MacMahon Bros > Opera House; 5 Apr. -).
1891: JOHN F. SHERIDAN Sydney (Garrick Theatre; 25 Apr. -)  •  Sydney (Darlinghurst Hall; 26-31 Dec.).
1892:  JOHN F. SHERIDAN Sydney (Lse. Hiscocks & Wilson > Darlinghurst Hall; 1 Jan. -)  ► US MINSTRELS - Melbourne (Lse/Prod. J. Billin > Victoria Hall; 18 June -)  ► FRANK SMITH Sydney (Alhambra Music Hall; 1 Aug. -).

1893:  FRANK SMITH Sydney (Alhambra Music Hall; 1 Jan. -)  ► HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (Tivoli Theatre; ca. 7 Oct.-).

1894:  HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (Tivoli Theatre; 19 May -)  ► HARRY BARRINGTON Sydney (School of Arts; 29 Sept. -).

1895:  YORK & JONES Brisbane (Gaiety Theatre; 13 Apr. -)  • Queensland (Regional tour; ca. Jan. > See "Popular Entertainers." Brisbane Courier 22 Jan. 1895, 4.)  • Brisbane (Gaiety Theatre; 23 Mar. > return season)  • Sydney (Empire Theatre; 29 June -).

1897:  ELITE BURLESQUE Co Brisbane (Lse/Prod. Delohery. C. Bovis & S. Deane > Gaiety Theatre; 13 Mar. -)  ► BOVIS BROS NEW ELITE Co Brisbane (Gaiety Theatre; 6 Nov. -).

1898:  DELOHERY CRAYDON & HOLLAND Perth (Ye Olde English Fayre; 12 Feb.-)  ► F.M. CLARK Co Perth (Theatre Royal; 18 Apr.)  ► HARRY COGILL Melbourne (Gaiety Theatre; 23 July - > Cogill's New Federation Minstrels)  ► HARRY RICKARDS Sydney (Tivoli Theatre; 12 Nov.-).


1903:  J.C. WILLIAMSON'S Melbourne (Her Majesty's Theatre; 1 Jan. - > Dick Whittington).


- 1906 George Stephenson New Zealand tour itinerary incl. Auckland (His Majesty's Theatre; 26 Feb. -).
- 1906 Fullers' engagement incl. Christchurch (Opera House; ca. July)  • (Wellingston; ca. Aug.).

1907:  JAMES BRENNAN Sydney (National Amphitheatre; 5 Jan. - > incl. Bovis Bros' Australian Vaudeville Co from 23 Feb.).

1909:  BOVIS BROS New South Wales (Hunter valley circuit; > see Singleton Argus 21 Feb. 1909, 2).


1915:  GERALD BRANSON New South Wales (Northern New South Wales tour; ca. Mar. > Branson's Comedy Entertainers)

- Northern NSW tour itinerary incl. Grafton (Fitzroy Theatre; 11 Mar)  • (Maclean; 12 Mar.)  • (Ulmarra; 13 Mar.).
- All engagements below are for Billy Bovis only.

1923:  FULLERS' THEATRES Sydney (Fuller's Theatre; 26 May -)  • Adelaide (Majestic Theatre; 20 Oct. -)  • Melbourne (Bijou Theatre; 1-31 Dec.).

1924:  FULLERS' THEATRES Brisbane (Empire Theatre; 5 Jan. -).


1928: FULLERS' THEATRES Sydney (Fullers Theatre; ca. 11 Aug. - > Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co) • Adelaide (Majestic Theatre; 3 Nov. - > Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co) • Perth (Luxor Theatre, 22-31 Dec. > Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co).

1929: FULLERS' THEATRES Perth (Luxor Theatre, Perth; 1 Jan. - ca. 16 Feb. > Gayle Wyer's Band Box Revue Co) • Albany, WA (Empire Theatre, Albany; 18-20 Feb.) • CLAY'S BRIDGE THEATRE Co Rockhampton, Qld (Coliseum, Rockhampton; 21 Sept. - 12 Oct. > Mo's Merrymakers) • Mt Morgan, Qld (School of Arts; 14 ca. Oct. - > Mo's Merrymakers) • Townsville, Qld (Theatre Royal; 18-24 Oct. - > Mo's Merrymakers) • Cairns, Qld (Hibernian Hall; 26 Oct. - > Mo's Merrymakers).

1931: H.R. KITCHING Brisbane (Theatre Royal; 4 Apr. - > George Wallace Musical Revue Co) • TIVOLI CELEBRITY VAUDEVILLE Sydney (Theatre Royal; 31 July - > appears with Maud Fanning).

1935: IKE BECK West Maitland, NSW (Town Hall; 14 Dec. - > All Star Vaudeville)


1940: TIVOLI CIRCUIT AUSTRALIA Melbourne (Tivoli Theatre; 2 Sept. - > "Stars of 1900") • Adelaide (Majestic Theatre; 5 Dec. - > Vogues of Variety).

1941: TIVOLI CIRCUIT AUSTRALIA Melbourne (Tivoli Theatre; 5 July - > Bally Hoo revue).

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Bovis Bros' Comedy Company."Albury Banner and Wodonga Express (NSW) 18 Dec. 1908, 21.


"Mr Billy Bovis: Old Time Vaudeville Memories." Advertiser (Adelaide) 7 May 1927, 16.