LESTER BROWN

Lester Brown was involved in a number of different facets of the Australian variety industry between 1913 and 1925. During that time he produced pantomimes, revues, revusicals and musical comedies for George Willoughby, Hugh D. McIntosh (Tivoli Theatres), the Fullers, George Marlow and Harry Clay, while also working at various times as an actor, comedian and stage director/manager. Brown came back to Australia in 1922, having returned home in 1920, and secured work as a comedian/actor on both stage and radio. After leaving Australia he worked in the US as a publicist for Fox Films.

A prominent member of the New York-based Green Room Club during the early-twentieth century, Lester Brown had started his theatrical career at the Casino Theatre at age 19, spending the next six years there as an actor. One of the most popular productions to have been staged at the theatre was The Belle of New York. Brown's forte during his early career was portraying stylish villains, and he claims that the hit of his career was playing such a part in The Dangerous Maid (1899). Brown also claims that he became a director by accident, with this occurring when the individual overseeing one production became sick and he was asked to step in to the position. The show went on without a hitch and he found himself being hailed a "born again stage manager." In an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald held shortly after his arrival in Australia, Brown indicated that it had never been his plan to pursue the directorial side of the theatre:

It is an occupation which taxes both mind and temper and acting is baby's work to it. I've had ten years of it, The Runaway Girl in Baltimore, The Geisha, San Toy and other pieces elsewhere including The Mocking Bird and a score of other musical comedies. Just before the Adelphi management cabled for me I was in New York rehearsing The Moon Maiden, the scene of which was laid in Korea. We tried it out in several small places, and I had just got it running in good order when I was called away, so that I have not heard how it turned out in the metropolis.¹

¹ "Music and Drama," 4.

Brown came to Australia with his wife, Grace Ross, in late-1913 under contract by George Marlow, owner of the Adelphi Theatre, Sydney. By the time he arrived in the country, however, Marlow had temporarily moved to Melbourne after purchasing Melbourne's Princess's Theatre. Brown's contract was subsequently transferred to George Willoughby who had been given charge of the Adelphi by Marlow. The American director's first major production was the 1913-14 Christmas pantomime Aladdin. He later produced shows such as The Tenderfoot and The Mayor of Tokyo for Willoughby's American Musical Comedy Co and oversaw the production of two further Adelphi pantomimes The Babes in the Wood (1914-15) and Dick Whittington (1915-16) before eventually getting to work for George Marlow.
Over the next few years Brown spent much of the time on the road working for a number of firms, primarily as a director and/or producer. He also occasionally turned his hand to performing as a sketch comedian - notably for **Fullers’ Theatres**. One of his earliest stage appearances was opposite Horace Mann and Caddie Franks in early-1915.² Among the trio’s more popular sketches was ”A Business Marriage,” staged during the first part of a vaudeville bill at Melbourne’s **Bijou Theatre** (ca. June/July 1915).³ Brown, Mann and Franks are also known to have presented another sketch together - ”The Escape.”⁴

In December 1916 Brown was engaged by **J.C. Williamson’s Ltd** to stage manage its Melbourne pantomime **The House That Jack Built**. The overall direction was undertaken by Charles A. Wenman. Williamson’s re-engaged Brown as stage manager for the pantomime’s Sydney revival in December the following year. His commitments in 1917 also included touring with George Willoughby’s dramatic company as an actor, and securing a short-term contract with Sydney-based entrepreneur **Harry Clay**. This latter engagement saw him produce a season of revusicals at the **Bridge Theatre**, Newtown (beginning late September). The productions included: **Mack’s Troubles**, **Oh You Girls**, **Winning Tatts** and **Flying High**. At least three of the revusicals produced for Harry Clay were purchased by Brown from the USA. He then adapted them for the local audiences.

The years 1918 and 1919 saw Brown employed for the most part by **Hugh D. McIntosh**. His services were as a director of the firm’s vaudeville shows and musical comedies (the company operated as **Harry Rickards’ Tivoli Theatres Ltd**). Brown’s productions were primarily seen by Sydney and Melbourne audiences. Arguably his biggest hit was the London musical revue, **Honi Soit,** which was given its Australian premiere in Melbourne on 31 October 1918. After an enormously successful Sydney season the show was given a ”2nd Edition” revival in Melbourne. At the same time Brown got preparations underway for the follow-up revue, the London comedy hit - **Bubbly**. It premiered in Melbourne on 21 December 1918 and then travelled to Sydney where it was still playing to audiences in March the following year. Lester Browne’s reputation by 1918 was such that Clements Tonic used his celebrity status for a series of endorsements published around Australia beginning January 1919.

**Green Room** (Sydney) Jan. 1919, 9.

Brown’s services over the next two years included a season in Perth at the **Melrose Theatre** beginning 3 April 1920. His first show for producer/lessee **Durham Marcel** was the musical comedy **Are You There?** It was followed on a weekly basis by a combination of revues and musical comedies. Produced as a second half entertainment (the first part being a vaudeville programme), the works presented were **Hello A3581, Thumbs Up, Oh, I Say, Patches, Pel Mel, Houp-La, Odds and Ends, Miss New York, College Days, The Perfect Lover, The Tivoli Girl, Caught in Court, Mary’s Lamb, Borrowed Wives, Bubbles, Tit-Bits, The Telephone Girl, Some Week-End, Who’s Your Husband, When Women are Men, and Brown’s final production A Million in Sight.** Only two shows were repeated - **Oh, I Say and Fun in College.** The director and his wife departed for Sydney in early October.

Sometime after producing the ”smart musical comedy” **Oh Kitty** at Sydney's Playhouse Theatre in December 1920, Brown returned to the USA. He came back to Australia around late 1921 or early 1922 and initially found employment as a comedian with Fullers’ Theatres. He later worked for other firms and touring concerns - including the Spangles Company (1923). Brown also appeared on radio on a number of occasions during February and March 1925. In these instances he featured as an actor in short comedy sketches produced live in the

² The pair soon afterwards became original members of Nat Phillips’ **Stiffy and Mo Revue Company**.
³ The second part of the Bijou programme was presented by Bert Le Blanc’s **Travesty Stars**.
⁴ See for example: **Empire Theatre**, Brisbane; 2-8 Oct. 1915.
⁵ See for example the reviews: ”Music and Drama: Tivoli - **Honi Soit.**” **Argus** (Melbourne) 2 Sept. 1918, 6; ”**Honi Soit.**” **Sydney Morning Herald** 21 Oct. 1918, 8.
studios of 2BL, Sydney. The pieces produced were "Uncle Rastus on the Kissing Bill" and A Sausage Episode" (7 Feb.), "The General Manager's Office of the Consolidated Stove Works, Chicago, USA" (23 Feb.) and "Juli-e-et and Rom-e-eo" (16 Mar.).

Lester Brown's last known appearances in Australia were with Claude Dampier's company during its season at the Majestic Theatre, Perth in August 1925. This association led to him appearing in Beaumont Smith's 1925 film, The Adventures of Algy, starring Dampier and featuring other members of the company. The following year Brown reportedly began working back in the USA as a publicist for Fox Films.

During his time in Australia Brown found additional employment writing articles for several industry journals, including the Theatre Magazine and Australian Variety. These ranged from reflections on his own career to critiques of various aspects of the industry. For Variety he even wrote a regular column, called "Lester Brown's Page" (ca. 1916-17).

**HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS**

1. In 1921 Perth's Mirror columnist, "Allan," recalled that the "cigar 'bull' producer," then in the USA, had been "a most unpopular producer in whatever theatre that harboured him, and [that] the Melrose [Theatre had been] no exception." Following Brown's return to Australia in January 1922, "Allan" expressed his surprise at comments recently published in the Midnight Sun (Melbourne) that suggested an altogether different perspective of "the well-known former producer for Marcel Durham" in Perth:


6 Especially written for Brown by George Ade.

Mr Lester Brown, genial manager of The Scarlet Gaieties, besides having a big experience in the show business, has also been engaged at various times in following the "Inky Way" both in this country and the States, so with his knowledge of the two professions, he has no difficulty in deciding what the public wants and gets in the entertainment line." - Which reads very nice too. Still - quite a crowd of local folk in the know, will smile broadly ("Allan." "Films, Footlights, Plays and Players." Mirror 21 Jan. 1922, 4).

**ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS**

- People who say the public don't want curtain raisers at the regular theatres should note the zest and enthusiasm with which the audience appreciate the humours of the twenty minutes playlet "Whose Baby." From start to finish Lester Brown as the husband, May Geary as the wife, and Norman Barrington as the Butler, make the play one series of well-earned laughs (Theatre Magazine Nov. 1923, 24).

**FURTHER REFERENCE**

"Folk Who Put the Bubbles in Bubbly at the Tivoli." Graphic of Australia (Melbourne) 31 Dec. 1918, 19.
"Lester Brown - Producer: Bubbly to leave Palace on Wednesday." Sunday Times (Sydney) 30 Mar. 1919, 11.
"Producer Exploits, The." Everyone's (Sydney) 24 Nov. 1926, 3.
"Rules for Australian Play Goers." Australian Variety 17 Jan. 1917, n. pag. ["Lester Brown's Page"]

**See also:**