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Nat Phillips (Stiffy) and Roy Rene (Mo).

Phillip Nathan Phillips was born in Brewarrina, N.S.W. about the year 1880 and first appeared on stage when he was approximately ten years of age before going to the U.S.A. with his partner of that time, Tommy Armstrong. Later they were joined by Nat's wife, Daisy Merritt, who also appeared on stage with him. After four years in the U.S.A. and six years in Great Britain and Europe, Nat returned to Australia and joined Fuller's Vaudeville circuit. He took over the revue company originally run by Alfred Bletsoe.

"Australian Variety" magazine of 1916 stated, "He reorganised the books and business of the various productions, dressed the pony ballet and principals right up to the mark and introduced a most lifelike Australian in the character of Stiffy." Nat Phillips is also credited with bringing the expression "Stiff Luck" into the Australian vernacular. Performing in the same company at the time was Roy Rene specialising in Hebrew comedy.

Roy Rene was born Harry Van der Sluys or Sluice on 15th February 1891 in Adelaide one of seven children of a Jewish cigar manufacturer and an Anglican mother. He is said to have made his debut in 1899 as a bare back horse rider in a school circus and it is claimed that he shared a horse with Peter Dawson in exchange for singing lessons.

At ten years of age Harry won a singing competition at an Adelaide market, the prize being ten shillings or a duck. Harry took the duck and sold it for twelve shillings. He next appeared in 1904 as "Little Roy" dressed in an Eton Collar and singing from the dress circle box in the Adelaide Theatre Royal. He then played in a pantomime, "Sinbad The Sailor", in 1905 at the "old" Tivoli Theatre in Adelaide, becoming known as "Boy Roy the Child Soprano". The next appearances were in charity concerts and blackface singing and dancing acts.

In 1905 when Harry was thirteen years of age the family moved to Melbourne where he was an apprentice jockey for a brief period which however was enough to give him a lifetime interest in racing. The pull of the theatre was too strong and he returned in 1908 to Brennan's Melbourne Vaudeville at The Gaiety Theatre as "Little Roy the Australian Little Tich". While here he spent his spare time at Rickard's Opera House studying stage stars and learning their techniques.

In 1910 he worked at The Princess Theatre at Railway Square in Sydney with Bain's vaudeville circuit as a blackface cornerman in minstrel shows and as his voice had broken he began doing dancing and comedy routines. Roy toured New South Wales with this company before being noticed by Ben Fuller who sent him off to New Zealand for further experience. While there he experimented with black face makeup which would become his future trademark and it was also during this time in New Zealand that he took the name of Roy Rene from a well known French clown.

Returning from New Zealand in 1915 he joined the Bletsoe vaudeville company in a revue called "In Vacation Time" at Fuller's National Theatre in Sydney which was under the management of James Bain. On the same bill was an act called Phillips and Merritt. Nat suggested that he and Roy team up and perform in weekly change revues. Roy agreed and a name was discussed, Phillips and Rene not being acceptable. As so often is the case the real story is unclear but credit is generally given to Bill Sadler who was with the circuit. He asked Roy if he had a stage name suitable to go with Stiffy and the name Ikey was suggested to which Bill Sadler replied, "Blimey he's puttin' on his mo" and so Stiffy and Mo came together for what is undoubtedly the most successful double comedy act in Australian theatrical history.

They first performed together at the Princess Theatre in Sydney at the southern end of Railway Square on 8th July 1916 in a series of revues which ran until November that year. Australian Variety Magazine commented "That the excellent fooling of Stiffy and Mo has accomplished what nothing else hitherto has succeeded in doing—packing The Princess for ten continuous weeks." By Christmas that year Stiffy and Mo opened at The Grand Opera House in Sydney in a pantomime called "The Bunyip." This theatre was previously The Adelphi which had been built around 1911 by Thomas Rofe and interestingly at the time the cost was estimated at 12,500 Pounds and the final cost was 30,000 Pounds. The theatre was on a site bounded by Campbell, Castlereagh and Hay Streets and the City Council of the time imposed the condition that the theatre would revert to City ownership after 50 years, the Lord Mayor at the time being Alan Taylor. The Bunyip played until March and then transferred to Melbourne as an Easter pantomime at the Princess Theatre and was revived in 1917-18 and finally had a total run of 280 performances. In 1918-19 Stiffy wrote another pantomime called "The Babes In The Woods" and more followed.

On 29th March 1917 Mo married an actress, Dorothy (Dot) Claire Davis at St. Stephen's Church, Sydney. This marriage remained childless and they were divorced in May 1929.

In between pantomimes Roy and Nat played in various theatres and many stories have been told of their crude or "blue" nature however most of these appear to be anecdotal and concoctions of people's imagination

although there appears to be no doubt that at times there was a streak of vulgarity about some of their performances. It is also accepted that Mo was the funnier performer and Stiffy the better manager. Stiffy and Mo continued to work together with great success in theatres on the Fuller circuit playing their own particular brand of comedy and pantomime. During

this time the pair played to full houses and set box office records. The pair often wrote their own revues and Stiffy complained that many times people in the audience were writing down the lines for their own use and once said, "There are only forty thieves in this business and Roy and I want the other thirty-eight exterminated." During this seven year period they played every capital city except Perth and Hobart and it included an eighteen month tour of New Zealand. It was also during this very productive period that Mo perfected the earlier mentioned unshaven make up appearance. This was done by allowing his beard to grow for a few days then trimming it with nail clippers and applying black crepe paper. It was estimated that during their run together Mo used a ton and a half of crepe paper and clipped more than even thousand acres of whiskers. Also appearing in the company was a Miss Sadie Gale who was later to become Mo's wife.

The partnership continued until 1925 when they split up for the first time. This occurred in Adelaide and is reported to have been caused by a dispute over money, Mo allegedly discovering that Fullers were paying Stiffy a higher salary.

After the break Mo went to the Luxor in Perth and continued to work in revue with Mike Connors as his straight man. In 1925-26 Mo played a straight role in "Give And Take", this being one of the very rare occasions that he appeared on stage without his famous make up. He then returned to the Tivoli Circuit now being run by J.C. Williamson's vaudeville division to play with Fred Bluett and Lou Vernon, of radio's "Dr. Mac" in a play called "The Admiral And The Sailor."

During this period apart Stiffy worked with Jack Kellaway, the brother of Cecil Kellaway, the film actor.

Stiffy and Mo were reunited in 1927 in Brisbane and opened in Sydney on 19th March that year and then played all capital cities with great success followed by a tour of New Zealand. While on the New Zealand tour Stiffy told Fuller's management he felt that he and Mo should separate again. They were succesful theatrically but not personally and in 1929 they broke up for the last time. Also on tour with them was the previously mentioned Sadie Gale and Mo insisted that he would continue to work with Sadie Gale after the separation from Stiffy. Roy and Sadie returned to Sydney and opened in "Mo's Merry Monarchs" at Fuller's theatre in Castlereagh Street. The great depression was coming and the show did not do very well, however Mo was in love with Sadie Gale and although she did not really take to him at first he eventually won her over and they were married on 3rd July 1929 in two ceremonies, one Jewish and the other Presbyterian, the marriage being a great success and producing one son and one daughter. Many attempts were made to reconcile Stiffy and Mo but none succeeded and Nat Phillips death in 1932 ended all hope of that occurring.

After the second and final break with Nat Phillips Roy Rene went on a tour to North Queensland where he found himself unfavourably compared with another star of the time, George Wallace. After the Queensland tour Mo signed with Frank Neill for "Clowns In Clover" which opened at the King's Theatre in Melbourne. During this show Mo collapsed with peritonitis and was very ill for about three months, at one stage almost dying, taking eighteen months to recuperate and having to wear a corset for the rest of his life to cover the scars.

Hugh D. McIntosh then signed Mo in 1930 for "Pot Luck" with Sadie, but the show did not go well because of the depression. During this time their son Sam was born. Mo went off to New Zealand again for a short tour but times were hard and Fullers were disbanding their vaudeville circuit. After this brief tour Mo returned to Australia in 1931 and opened at Melbourne's Bijou theatre for Mike Connors and Queenie Paul in "Brighter Days" which was in the worst days of the depression. During the period 1931-32 Connors and Paul took over the Melbourne Tivoli and also converted the old Sydney Grand Opera House to the new Tivoli and ran weekly change variety shows at these two theatres. It was during one of these shows when Mo was starring with Fred Bluett that he heard of the death of Nat Phillips.

During the 1930's Mo continued to play in a great variety of theatres and for different managements including a show at The Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney in which show Robert Helpmann was in the ballet. By this time talkies had all but wiped out live shows and vaudeville was again having a difficult time. A daughter, Myra, who always called herself Mylo was born. At this time Mo bought a house at Kensington which was to be the family home until his death in 1954. Mo in 1934 made his one and only movie, "Strike Me Lucky", for Ken G. Hall which was not a great success, Mo being a visual comedian and needing rapport with his audience. 1936 saw him open for Connors and Paul in Melbourne and it was here that he met Fred Parsons who showed him some scripts which Mo accepted. Mo was then working with Buster Fiddess and the whole troupe came to Sydney where Parsons wrote 5-6 sketches a week for shows at the Newtown Majestic Theatre. After a few months Connors and Paul returned to New Zealand and Mo joined Wallace Parnell at the Tivoli circuit in Sydney and Melbourne, the shows typically running for five week periods with Fred Parsons writing the scripts. Frank Neill who was managing the circuit at the time resented Mo and would not renew his contract but when Neill was accidentally killed on New Year's Eve 1939, Wallace Parnell immediately renewed Mo's contract.

During the war Wallace Parnell organised troop entertainment units and Mo appeared in them, one being a concert at The Melbourne Cricket Ground for Australian and American troops. Throughout the war period Mo continued to work the Tivoli circuit with other established stage stars, and in 1941 Wallace Parnell put Mo and Bob Dyer together for the first time. During this time Harry Wren was organising shows at The Brisbane Cremorne Theatre and he used many radio stars for these shows as he realised the hold that radio had on audiences at that time.

In 1944 Ron Beck started the radio programme, "Calling The Stars", with Dick Bentley, Willie Fennell and many others and at the end of 1945 David N. Martin, who had replaced Wallace Parnell at the Tivoli theatre did not renew Mo's contract. Martin did not like Australian comedians such as Roy Rene and George Wallace and instead preferred to import acts. At this time Mo, realising that radio was replacing stage vaudeville as entertainment began to worry about his future and decided to sign with Ron Beck in Calling The Stars. Fred Parsons also went with him as script writer and Mo was concerned that he might not succeed on radio because of being a visual comedian and relying on facial expressions. However, Parsons and Alexander MacDonld rewrote old sketches such as "The Barmaid and the Butcher" which were an instant success and Mo at that stage outshone the great Jack



Davey. In July 1947 the first episode on radio of a new series called "McCackie's Mansions" went to air with hopefully a run of six weeks but this series went on to run for three years and introduced Roy Rene to a whole generation of new fans. In 1949 at the age of 58 years, although Mo claimed he was only 56, he was performing the same style of comedy on radio as he had been performing on stage thirty years before and was working just two nights a week.

Harry Wren, in 1949, brought, from America Olsen and Johnson, to appear in "Hellzapoppin" which came to the Empire Theatre in Sydney in April 1950. This and "McCackie Mo'Ments" in Melbourne were to be Mo's last appearances live on stage. He was still on radio and because of this commitment he was only able to appear on stage for four nights a week. Roy's birthday was 15th February, and on that date in 1950 he was on stage in Melbourne and after he had been presented with a cake, the cast and audience joined together in singing "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow." At this time he was performing such old favourites as "The Green Eye Of The Little Yellow God" with Hal Lashwood constantly interrupting from a theatre box. The first edition of "People" magazine in March 1950 featured Mo.

In 1950 Ron Beck resigned from the Colgate Palmolive radio shows and quiz shows began to replace variety shows. At the end of 1950 Mo's contract had expired and he was suffering from ill health. Late in 1951 a pilot series for a show called "McCackie Manor" with Hal Lashwood was made for the A.B.C. but this did not get to air, Mo falling ill again. 1952 saw Mo back on 2GB in "The New Atlantic Show" which again was a success with an Australia wide audience. Mo and Sadie went for a country tour in 1953 and while at Lismore Mo fell very ill and they returned home to Kensington where another radio show was tried but Mo was too ill and he announced his retirement on 15th May 1953. Fred Parsons and Ron Beck proposed a new show in 1954 but on 22nd November that year Harry Van der Sluys, Roy Rene or Mo died.

In 1966 The Sydney Tivoli Theatre finally closed its doors, having been on borrowed time since 1960 when the original 50 year lease granted to George Marlow in 1910 had expired. The stage manager at the time refused to pull down the curtain on the last night saying, "The Tiv. may be dead, but I'm not nailing down the coffin." The curtain was still up when the Mulders moved in. On the last night in Sydney Mo's widow, Sadie, was in the audience whilst on the last night in Melbourne Jim Gerald was in the audience.

Mo was arguably Australia's greatest stage comedian in a time of greats such as George Wallace, Nat Phillips, Jim Gerald and others. His stage language and expressions would probably not pass muster today. The audience was always called The Mob, there were Mugs, Sheilas, Pal, Lairs and other similar expressions.

Phillip Nathan Phillips was Initiated in Lodge Dramatic in Glasgow on 23rd May 1908, Passed to the Second Degree on 28th August 1908 and Raised to the Third Degree on 30th October that year. He Affiliated with Lodge Thespian No. 256 U.G.L. of N.S.W. on 23rd July 1912 and Called Off on 22nd July 1918. The 1913 Balance Sheet of Lodge Thespian show "Sale of Masonic Emblems donated by Nat. Phillips: Three Pounds."

Harry van der Sluys or Sluice was Initiated in Lodge Thespian No. 256 U.G.L. of N.S.W on 27th March 1917 and was struck off for non payment of dues on 24th April 1928.

Roy Rene "Mo" appeared on an Australian stamp of 39 cents value issued on 12th July 1989. This was one of a series issued to commemorate Australian stars of stage and screen. Mo is featured on the same stamp as Gladys Moncreiff, "Our Glad.", who is depicted as turning away from Mo as it is claimed that she did not approve of his humour.

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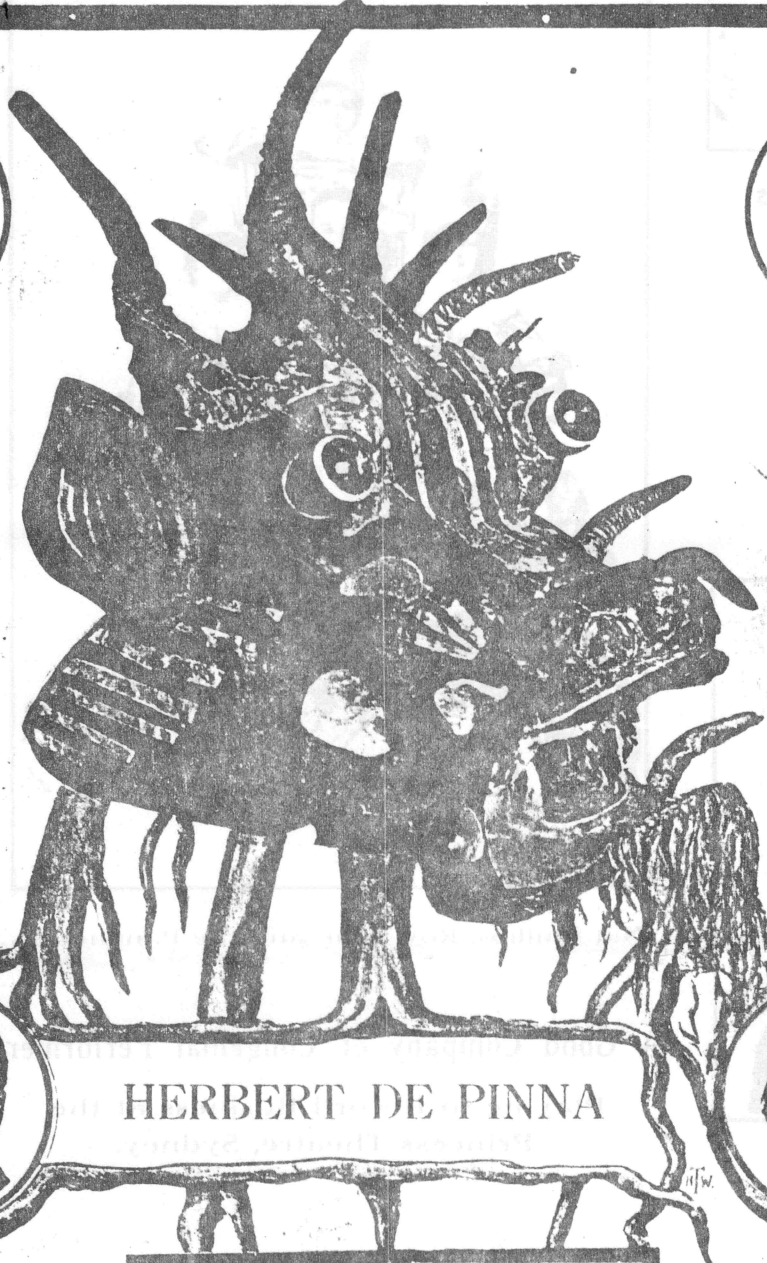


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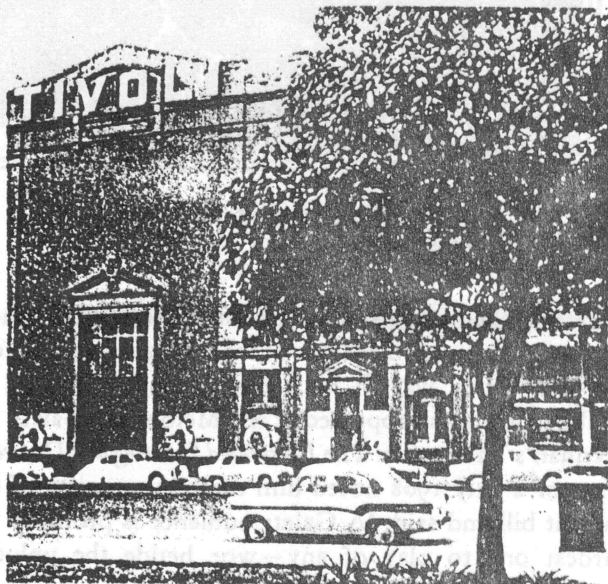


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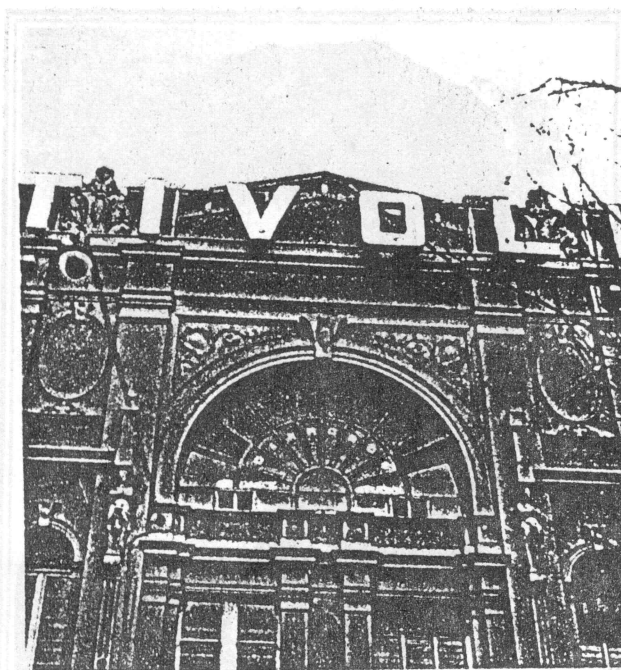




The good old Tiv Four shots of the Sydney Tivoli as it appeared in the late 1950s.

### GARNET H. CARROLL

At the Princess Melbourne, entrepreneur Garnet H. Carroll faced the inevitable problems of non-existent outlets in other big cities, especially Sydney. Two Carroll houses, the Capitol in Perth and another in Stockton outside Newcastle, did not exactly constitute a circuit. Carroll attractions in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and



elsewhere could only be shown by means of a grace and favour arrangement with other managements. The result was that a lot of Carroll product barely travelled at all. For some of his attractions, this hardly seemed to matter, minor Hollywood stars such as Richard Arlen and Melvyn Douglas played in forgettable comedies. But it was more serious in the case of a charming Broadway musical like *Bells Are Ringing*, concerning the love affair of a nice American guy and the girl on his telephone answering service. Perky British star Shani Wallis played the girl and was, by all accounts, delightful. It was a shame that few people outside Melbourne were given the chance to see themselves.



Roy Rene and Nat Phillips, the popular comedians, appearing at Fullers' Theatre, Sydney, as 'Stiffy and Mo.'

*Stiffy and Mo* Roy Rene and Nat Phillips appearing at the Fuller's Theatre, Sydney. The picture appeared in a magazine dated 29 November, 1923.

*Nat Phillips* His revue company during its season at the Princess, Sydney.

according to *Australian Variety* in 1916, he 'reorganised the book and business of the various productions, dressed the pony ballet and principals right up to the mark and introduced a most lifelike Australian in the character of Stiffy'. Another performer in the Bletsoe revue company was Roy Rene, doing Hebrew comedy.

Roy was born Harry Van der Sluys or Sluice in Adelaide in 1892. His father was a cigar manufacturer in Hindley Street. As 'Little Roy', young Harry made his debut in an Eton collar, singing from the dress circle box of the Theatre Royal. A year or so later he made it on stage in the 1905 pantomime *Sinbad the Sailor* (which played in February—smaller capital cities could not always be sure

of getting their pantos in the Christmas season). His next professional engagement was at the 'old' Adelaide Tivoli.

When Harry was in his teens the family moved to Melbourne and he appeared at the Melbourne Gaiety for Brennan's Vaudeville. The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* of 2 July 1908 noted him there in a review of the current bill and said, 'A Gaiety audience is probably the hardest one to play of any—woe betide the unlucky performer who doesn't suit. He is promptly recommended to "go and get work" or some other little speech such as "off", "out", "give us something new" etc... the newcomers on Saturday were the Juvenile Darts who scored an emphatic success and Little Roy, "the Australian Little Tich" who also hit the taste of the audience.'

The young performer spent as much time as he could in the gallery of the nearby Rickard's Opera House, watching and learning from the stars he saw. He moved into suburban vaudeville, learning the tricks as 'Boy Roy the Would-Be Comic'. Then he went to Sydney to join J. C. Bain's vaudeville circuit in the suburbs and he also

