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BRO. JAMES FITZGERALD - ('JIM GERALD')

James Fitzgerald was born on 2nd January 1891 at Darlington in Sydney, the youngest of four sons of Australian born parents, Stephen Australia Fitzgerald, an actor, and Mary. His father was bitten by the acting bug and came to Sydney where he was a noted performer in old style melodramas. All four boys went on to the stage under the various names of "Max Clifton", "Lance Vane", "Cliff Stevens" and "Jim Gerald". Jim became a professional performer at the age of seven, having very little schooling and really receiving most of his education in the sandhills at the back of Centennial Park. He went there, while wagging school in the company of his brothers, to watch teams of professional acrobats and jugglers practice their craft. Not content with watching Jim pestered the performers to teach him the art of tumbling so that the age of seven he became a proficient tumbler and acrobat.

About this time Fitzgerald's Circus, owned by two of his uncles, came to town and Jim showed such talent and exuberance that a strongman in the circus, Oscar Pagel, persuaded Jim to join him in his act. Pagel was billed as the world's strongest man, claiming to be able to carry a horse up a ladder, support the weight of an elephant on his arched back and even wrestle a lion.

Jim, in 1898, at the age of seven went to Africa, Asia and North America with Oscar Pagel's Circus, touring for ten years, before returning to Australia in 1908. He was then a tumbler as well as a trick motor cyclist. It was claimed that Jim could do sixty somersaults in sixty seconds on a trampoline. He worked with several circuses under the name of Diabolo and was billed as the first person in the world to loop the loop in a globe on a motor cycle. An extra dimension was added to this by having gates snapping open on the globe just after the motor cycle had passed. In later years Jim Gerald often said that, not surprisingly, he had broken just about every bone in his body during these trick motor cycle performances. In 1912, while touring in Queensland with Frank Barton's circus, Jim was driving one of the big wagons with circus equipment on board. He was so interested in circus talk that he did not notice trucks in front swerving to avoid overhanging trees with the result that the truck crashed, the performers were thrown out and the truck was smashed beyond repair. As he was unable to pay for the repairs Jim then quit Barton's circus. He returned to acrobatics and added wire walking to his repertoire performing on the booming vaudeville circuit. In 1913 while performing in Adelaide he was supposed to somersault off a table on to a chair, go over again and land lightly on his feet in the orchestra pit. One night he slipped, crashed and was knocked unconscious. When he recovered he

refused to go to hospital and a young and pretty singer dancer named Essie Jennings, whom Jim had been asking to go out with him for a while, volunteered to look after him. A fortnight later Jim, at the age of twenty-one, married Essie. While on their honeymoon they worked up a comedy sketch called "The Actress And The Paperhanger." This was pure slapstick but audiences thoroughly enjoyed it and so Jim Gerald's career as a comedian was well and truly launched. The rather scantily clad Essie really just stood around looking decorative while Jim fell off tables, trestles and leapt off a concealed trampoline to pull a light fitting down from the ceiling. They were performing this in Bro. Ben Fuller's Bijou Theatre in Melbourne in 1914 at the time that Jim Gerald enlisted as a Private in the Australian Imperial Forces. He served in Gallipoli, Egypt and Mesopotamia before being discharged in 1918.

Returning to the Fuller Circuit he was asked to write and produce his own comedy sketches. He and Essie then worked up a routine called "The New Recruit." which remained popular for years, even being played to vaudeville audiences twenty years later. Jim Gerald was to continue working for the Fuller circuit for the next fifteen years as a comedian. There was a break in 1925 and 1928 when he went to England and America to try his luck. He played one revue in England which was panned by the critics. This was called "Home James" and some critics added the advice "and don't spare the horses."

Jim Gerald was more of an international type performer than were Mo and George Wallace who were both totally and unashamedly Australian in all their performances. After the sojourn in England Jim Gerald travelled to America in 1928 and appeared in some thirty two-reel silent comedies with Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle and others. His speaking voice was apparently considered too cockney-like when talkies began and he again returned to Australia.

During 1932-33 with the advent of talking pictures vaudeville fell on hard times and Sir Ben Fuller began to break up his empire. At that stage Jim Gerald had some time of a ten year contract to run with Ben Fuller and was called in to negotiate the breaking of that contract. Jim Gerald tore up the contract saying "You don't owe me anything Sir Ben, but I owe you plenty."

From then until the outbreak of World War 2 Jim Gerald and Mo continued to head vaudeville companies under different managements, often alternating in six monthly seasons between Sydney and Melbourne.

During 1935-36 Jim Gerald again tried his luck in England playing again in London in "Don't Spare The Horses", this time with more success.

He returned to Australia in 1936 and featured in a show called "Shout For Joy." During this period he had a dresser named Max Reddy who was later to marry Stella Lamond and be the father of Helen Reddy, the international singing star. Jim Gerald was one of the very few

performers who had a dresser but his drawing power was so strong that management would provide him with almost anything he required. He did not always write his own comedy routines but he had a good eye for what would work. Jim Gerald was also absolutely meticulous in his stage appearance, demanding the best technicians and fellow performers available, always insisting in making up properly for his roles. This was important because during the 1930s he always played the dame in Christmas pantomines staged by the Tivoli and other circuits. Jim Gerald was arguably Australia's most successful the pantomine dame.

In 1939 Jim Gerald signed a contract with The Australian Broadcasting Commission and starred in "Jim and Jitters" with Bro. Jim Davidson's A.B.C. Dance Band. and conducted the Saturday "After Dinner Show".

When General Blamey in 1941 decided to form an entertainment unit for Australian troops overseas Jim Gerald was recruited and made a Lieutenant Colonel in charge of organising the unit. Gerald recruited Jim Davidson and a troop of 70 jugglers, magicians, acrobats, musicians, ventriloquists, stage hands and other performers for the unit. He recruited a female chorus line and the first performance was at Gaza in Palestine on 16th December 1941 the show being called "All In Fun." and reportedly "received with rapturous applause."

There was always some sort of theatrical rivalry between Mo and Jim Gerald and Mo did not conceal his jealousy when he heard of Jim Gerald's appointment as a Lieutenant Colonel until told of the pay which was greatly inferior to that on the stage. "Strike me lucky" exulted Mo "they had to put Gerald in the flamin' army to find out how much he was worth." It is claimed that Mo thought that Jim Gerald was the only other funny comedian on the stage and this resulted in rivalry.

Returning home in 1942 he starred in a revue called "Stripped For Action" on the Tivoli circuit.

When World War 2 ended vaudeville type comedy was going out of fashion and it seemed that Jim Gerald and Mo would fade from the scene. As we know Mo successfully transferred to Radio in McCackie Mansions.

Jim Gerald began a new career as the lead in a farce called "Ladies Night In A Turkish Bath." He followed this in a revue called "Thanks For The Memory" in which he shared top billing with George Wallace with his famous, "Sophie The Sort On The Bus". This opened at The Princess Theatre in Melbourne and toured for three years. Other performers in this were stars such as George Nicholls, Enzo Toppiano and Jandy, the famous clown, who I believe was a Mason.

The show "Thanks For The Memory" produced spin offs such as "The Good Old Days" in 1957 in Sydney and finally in "Many Happy Returns" in 1959. This last show brought the

curtain down on Jim Gerald and Gladys Moncrieff.

Jim Gerald's other passion was motor cars of which he owned a succession, driving across America, Europe, The Middle East, Great Britain and all over Australia.

His wife, Essie, died in 1961 and Jim moved to a home in Rosebud, Victoria, where he died on 2nd March 1971.

The Melbourne Tivoli closed one week later than the Sydney Tivoli on 2nd March 1966 and Jim Gerald was in the audience.

Towards the end of his life he became a heavy drinker and was often seen leaving the theatre supported by two showgirls. He was also a bit of a womaniser and his wife gave him hell when she found an affair on but being a great actor he would weep and plead and ask for forgiveness and then go out and find another girl.

Jim Gerald will be remembered for his versatility "as a big-eared oaf in baggy pants and shapeless hat, as a seemingly rubber-boned and pathetically droll clown and as Australia's greatest pantomime dame."

James Fitzgerald was initiated in Lodge Thespian No. 256 on 27th January 1920 aged 28. I can find no record of a Second or Third Degree and he called off on 26th November 1930.

Ref:

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Australian Womens Weekly, 26th November 1949.

People, Sydney, 1st August 1951.

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The magnificently expressive face of Jim Gerald, one of Australia's Big Three of comedy.



Publicity shots from *Ladies' Night in a Turkish Bath* Showing Jim Gerald, Edmund Glover and the Ladies.

