



In the Company of Chaplin

Barry York reveals the life of Roy Rene, Australia's great folk comic

Roy Rene (1892–1954), better known as 'Mo', was Australia's pre-eminent vaudevillian stage and radio comedian during the first half of the twentieth century. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says he was 'hailed by visiting celebrities such as Dame Sybil Thorndike and Jack Benny as a comic genius in the company of Chaplin!'

Rene was born Harry van der Sluys in Adelaide on 15 February 1892. His father, who sometimes spelt the family name as 'Sluice', migrated from Holland in the 1880s and established a cigar factory in Hindley Street. The family of seven resided on the

premises and, in his 1945 memoir, Rene recalled his father making cigars in the window.

Young Harry became known as 'Little Roy' after securing a role in the pantomime *Sinbad the Sailor* at Adelaide's Theatre Royal—'just down the road from the cigar factory'—at around the age of 10. His father disapproved strongly, but Roy could not be deterred from developing his acting and singing skills.

Around 1905, after the family moved to Melbourne, Roy was on stage again, this time at the Gaiety Theatre. He saved every penny to go to the Opera House (which later became the Tivoli) in Bourke Street to see the English and American vaudeville acts imported by entrepreneur Harry Rickards. From them he learned his sense of 'polish,

Unknown photographer
Hal Lashwood (Lasho) and Mo (Roy Rene) in a Scene From Their Radio Show [between 1946 and 1949]
b&w negative; 10.0 x 12.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3119119



above left:
Ben E. Gold
Loo from Woolloomooloo
Sydney: Nash's Limited, 1918
Music Collection
nla.mus-an8422948



above middle:
Nat Phillips (c.1883–1932)
Rachel Cohen: A Yiddisher Rag
written, composed & sung by
Stiffy and Mo
Melbourne: L.F. Colin, 1920
Music Collection
nla.mus-an13622861



above right:
Tom Ferry
Playbill for *Stiffy and Mo*,
Fullers' Bijou Theatre
Sydney: Edward Lee,
[between 1916 and 1928]
broadside; 101.0 x 39.0 cm
Ephemera Collection
(PA Broadside 16)

finesse, and finish'. He left school, aged 13, determined to become a full-time actor.

His career as 'Little Roy, the boy soprano' dramatically ended when his voice broke at the age of 16. In 1910, he adopted the name Roy Rene when appearing at the National Amphitheatre in Sydney, taking his surname from a famous French clown. The imported vaudevillians whom he had seen on the Tivoli circuit inspired him to branch out into comedy and dance, and he soon developed the versatility that was a hallmark of Australian performers. Rene believed that this quality was a product of the limited market for vaudeville in Australia. Unlike American artists, who could repeat the same act touring hundreds of populous towns, Australians only had half a dozen main cities and so performers had to change their routines each week to keep audiences interested.

Rene was already quite successful when, in 1914 and resident in Sydney, he appeared as Mo with his stage partner 'Stiffy' (Nat Phillips). With World War I making it difficult for travelling troupes to come to Australia, there was increasing reliance on local performers. In 1916, 'Stiffy and Mo' starred at the Grand Opera House in the highly successful Australian pantomime, *The Bunyip, or the Enchantment of Fairy Princess Wattle Blossom*. (This play was the subject of an article in the August 2002 edition of *National Library of Australia News*). For the next 16 years, Stiffy and Mo were household names, breaking all box office records. For most of this time, Mo was with

Sir Benjamin Fuller's theatrical company, but later returned to the Tivoli circuit.

Nat Phillips died in 1932, but 'Stiffy and Mo' had previously split up, first in 1925 and then finally in 1928. Mo continued as a solo act, occasionally teaming with other partners and also working in dramatic roles. Mo's abilities as a straight actor were recognised by one of the Tivoli circuit's managers, Wallace Parnell, who remarked that Mo was 'the one comedian who could play Hamlet, which is the reputed ambition of all comedians'. Like other great comics, such as Chaplin, Mo excelled at creating pathos.

Mo's make-up and dress were a vital part of his charisma. Jacqueline Kent in *Out of the Bakelite Box: The Heyday of Australian Radio* (1990) describes his appearance



as 'a dead white mask of a face ringed by a blackened five o'clock shadow ... He also wore a vaudeville-type costume of appallingly baggy trousers and an undershirt with sleeves to the elbow and a button at the neck'.

Rene is best remembered today for his radio performances. He brilliantly applied his vaudevillian skills to radio from 1946 to 1950, with his segment 'McCackie Mansion' on Colgate-Palmolive's *Calling the Stars*. His central protagonist, Mo McCackie, resided at 13 Coffin Street, a fitting address for the character whose life was constantly made miserable by family and friends alike. His radio success was possible because the shows were recorded before an audience at 2GB's Macquarie theatrette. Rene even wore a version of his Mo make-up and costume for the broadcasts.

In 1934, he starred in a Cinesound film, *Strike Me Lucky*, but it was the rapport a performer develops with a live audience on which he really thrived. He also thrived on the double entendre, the implied bawdiness that relied on the 'dirty minds' of a live audience, and which would never have escaped the diligent censors of films. The film's title, incidentally, was one of Rene's many catchphrases. His contribution to Australian slang is impressive, with the following claimed on his behalf: 'Cop this', 'Mug lair', 'Out of the way, you mugs', 'You beaut', 'I'm a wake-up to you', 'Struth', 'A bunch of rat bags', 'Don't come the raw

prawn with me', 'Fair suck of the sav', 'You filthy beast', and 'I don't know whether to kiss him or kick him'.

By 1950, Rene's health had declined and his radio contract was not renewed, but he made a few other radio appearances, most notably on *The New Atlantic Show*, and had one stage role. He died of heart disease on 22 November 1954, at his home in Kensington, Sydney, and was survived by his wife, actress Sadie Gale, and two children.

Mo's brilliance was summed up by Celestine McDermott in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*:

Mo's greatest asset was his superb timing, which enabled him to 'get away with' the suggestive double entendre—he never did say anything technically obscene. Able to make his audience laugh or cry, he was a master of the physical nuance; his facial expression, gesture, stance and movement were welded within the black and white caricature of a Jewish comedian, with Australian mannerisms, delivering local vernacular with a Semitic twist.



left:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Roy Rene, Comedian
c.1940
gelatin silver photograph;
25.8 x 20.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3106994

below:
'1931 Cartoons' reproduced from
Mo's Memoirs, by Roy Rene
(Melbourne: Reed and Harris, 1945)

Mo's 'Jewishness' has intrigued some critics. In *Mo's Memoirs*, Rene recalls how he only became a 'Hebrew comedian' on the order of his employer, Sir Benjamin Fuller, during a tour of New Zealand in 1914. It was during this tour that he first adopted his face make-up. The website of the Adelaide Jewish Museum describes Mo's traditional make-up as disturbingly similar to 'the ugly stereotype of the Jew', and asks, 'Why did Roy Rene, who remained a Jew all his life, choose to appear in this almost anti-Semitic mask?' The museum then quotes Max Harris, who was the ghost writer of *Mo's Memoirs*:

There he would be, leering, spitting, expostulating, and celebrating every ugly vulgarity to be found in a society rich only in inhibitions, self-delusions and respectable hypocrisies. You can laugh at the grotesque in front of you, he seemed to be saying, laugh at the sub-human stage Jew, but he is you, and I'm going to prove it. And he did. He and his audiences laughed at the worst in themselves.

Fredric Parsons was a one-time writer for Rene and says in his book, *A Man called Mo* (1973), that there was little that was ethnic in Rene's comedy. Parsons maintains rather that it was '99% pure Australian—although "pure" may not be quite the right word'. But what does this really mean? Parsons says the Mo character was 'the down-trodden employee but never the employer', and that

Mo appealed to Australians because of his complete lack of respect for authority. Yet he also acknowledges that Mo was 'very often a cringing sycophant—hilariously funny, but a sycophant'. More to the point, I think, is that the Mo character was urban and working class and, as is argued in John Thompson's book, *Five to Remember*, Mo was 'the embodiment of the working-class urban Australian idea of itself as a comic entity'.

There is hardly a section of the National Library that does not have something about Roy Rene. The Australian Collection holds *Mo's Memoirs*, Parsons' *A Man called Mo*, and Thompson's *Five to Remember*, which contains a wonderful illustration of Mo by Noel Counihan. The Manuscript Collection has the records of the firm J.C. Williamson, which include unique material relating to Rene, and the Oral History Collection has interviews with actors and actresses, such as Rodney Delaney and Leila Cohen, who recall his work. The Music Collection has several scores of pantomimes and plays that featured Rene, including compositions by Nat Phillips, with some of the sheet music bearing portraits of Rene. The Pictures Collection has many images of him, including photos from his radio show. A rare item is a poster advertising a Stiffy and Mo performance at Melbourne's Bijou Theatre.

Roy Rene's name lives on through the Australian Entertainment MO Awards, which are Australia's premier awards for excellence in live performance. It is a fitting tribute to a performer who was Australia's greatest folk comic.

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Unknown photographer
Roy Rene, Kerry Norton and
Arthur Rigby on Allan's Cavalcade
2UE, Sydney, Australia c.1950
b&w negative; 12.5 x 10.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3546217

