

BECOMING KNOWN

The Quest for Black Ada

— Written by Bren Donnellan

The local legend of Black Ada has persisted ever since a first-hand account of her ‘dancing academy’ was published in *Campaign* magazine in 1980. In the article, Brett Warren recalls a large studio up a flight of stairs on Wentworth Avenue during the 1930s being run by a Black proprietor, known as Black Ada, where ‘camp’¹ people would gather to dance in secret:

‘The dancing was real, body to body, pre-war stuff... in fact the favourite dance routine was to dance with your hands down the back of your partner’s trousers – oh the buttocks of it all!’

Whenever the Vice Squad were arriving, Ada would ring a bell which indicated that the dancers needed to sit down and leave only pairs of men and women dancing. The story has captivated people in-the-know ever since, but further information on Black Ada’s identity has remained limited.

It was Fiona Kelly McGregor who first made the historical connection between Black Ada and a man known by many names in her 2017 essay, ‘Surro’² (which re-appeared in an updated form in their essay collection, *Buried Not Dead*³).

Later, McGregor went on to dramatise the character in their Miles Franklin-shortlisted novel, *Iris*.⁴ In the novel, Black Ada’s is created as a nightclub, otherwise known as The Avenue Club on Wentworth Avenue, which is mostly patronised by gay men and presided over by a charismatic, cross-dressing Black host/ess known as Ada.

Subsequently, in an installa-



Samuel Roy Pearce (1898-1976) photographed with his brother, Albert Pearce (1890-1978), c.1930. Courtesy of Simon Jordan.

tion exhibited at the National Art School for Sydney World Pride in 2023, Black Ada was included on a list of LGBTIQ ancestors and luminaries.⁵ All of this helped cement her new status as part of queer Sydney mythology.

The man who McGregor unearthed was known over the course of his life as Samuel Roy Pearce, Roy Pearce, and/or Raymond Sayles. (As living family refer to him as Roy, this is the name we will use in this retelling.)

His array of names should be the first indicator that information around this figure can often be conflicting. However, we can reason why this might be the case as more of his life story and historical context surfaces. For that reason, to fully understand how Roy might be connected to Black Ada, a historical deep-dive was required. Qtopia and the exhibition, **becoming**, offered myself and co-curator, Yiorgos Zafiriou,

the opportunity to do further research. In turn, we have been able to unearth more information, faced more questions, and finally put a face to the name.

For now, it’s best we start at the beginning.

Beginnings

According to his birth certificate, Samuel Roy Pearce was born in Grafton, NSW, in 1898 to Joseph Pearce (1870-1921) and Annie Pearce (nee Smithers) (1870-1958). The first piece of the puzzle when researching was determining Roy’s cultural identity, as such we delved into both parents to gain some clarity.

Joseph Pearce had a good reputation in Grafton as an honourable man and hard-worker at the local pub. Articles surrounding his death make mention of Portuguese heritage, with Annie suggesting he was born in Lisbon.⁶ However, this has yet to be corroborated beyond some

documentation which lists the last name ‘Gooms,’ ‘Gomes’ or ‘Gomas’ – perhaps hinting at something lost in translation. However, there is also the real possibility of this being a useful cover to hide Indigeneity in a time where that led to particular dangers at the hands of authorities. Living descendants speak to this ongoing conversation in their own families.

On the other hand, Annie was the daughter of Henry J Smithers (1810-1879), a man of African descent born in Nova Scotia, Canada. His family may have been enslaved Africans taken to the region in the 18th century or slaves who were offered freedom for fighting on the side of the British during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Also known as ‘Black Loyalists,’ around thirty thousand freed slaves moved to Nova Scotia following the war.⁷ In either case, Henry later immigrated to Australia in the 1850s and, after being criminally charged in Melbourne for retaliating against a racist provocation, would ultimately settle in Grafton.⁸ There he became an entertainer known for his skill on the violin and a town crier, notable enough to be memorialised after his death in local papers as the ‘Black Prince of Halifax.’⁹

These insights tell us that Roy (born one of potentially eleven children) grew up as a person of colour in a small country town in NSW, and was around family who relied on jobs in entertainment or hospitality to make ends meet.

The Entertainer

Following his father’s death (reportedly by suicide in 1921¹⁰), the next records indicate



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Radio Movie Club enamel badge, c.1930.

that Roy was performing on the radio as part of a duo known as 'Sibley and Sayles' also known as the 'Two Sad Sunbeams.' Having won a radio eisteddfod in 1928, he was now going by the name Roy Sayles and travelling the state broadcasting their radio revue on various stations while also performing a vaudeville act along the way.¹¹ It is possible the name Sayles may be in reference to Irving Sayles, a notable African-American radio host that had similarly toured Australia and New Zealand in the early 1900s. Also of note is that Roy was the Vice President of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Radio Movie Club at this time, a popular free social club (initially formed in Sydney) that had sub-branches throughout Australia.

News articles in Grafton and Lismore note that Roy was a prior resident, corroborating the fact that he did grow up in Grafton but must have also spent some time in Lismore by this point.¹² Roy's death certificate (under the name Raymond Sayles) does list his birthplace as Maclean and one of his brothers, Frank 'Ranji' Pearce, was a noteworthy boxer who lived in Tweed for some time prior to his death in 1920.¹³ So it is possible there was a familial connection to the region.

However, by the 1930s, Roy was indeed living in Sydney. According to electoral rolls around this time, he spent time as a labourer and artist with addresses at both 220 William Street and 192 Palmer Street (an address shared by his mother). By this time, a number of his family members had moved from Grafton to Sydney, nota-

bly Annie, his brother Henry, and another brother Albert.

Albert Pearce married Mary Jordan, a West-Indian showgirl who worked at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney, in 1915. A living descendant of this couple, Simon Jordan, recalls an oral history that Mary and Roy were close friends. Family later described Roy as 'an openly gay man in the 1930s' who was unafraid to express flamboyance and often wore stylish neck scarves. Simon Jordan also notes that Albert and Roy were often described as 'half-brothers' (despite some records which listed the same parents) and the house that Annie lived in until her death, 192 Palmer Street, was across from a number of brothels where some women in the family worked. Another descendant, Michelle Vassallo Duggan, corroborates that the house was a home base for the family, having lived there with her grandmother and aunts as a teenager.

During this time, organised crime and sex work was often one of the only available work options for marginalised people

of colour, particularly women and queer people living in Sydney city's Kings Cross/Darlinghurst area. As such, the Pearce family was undoubtedly involved. According to Simon Jordan, Albert and Mary's son was a known member of the Razor gang and Michelle Vassallo Duggan recalls living in a house where Tilly Devine's name was often mentioned. Meanwhile, Henry Pearce was charged with possession of cocaine being sold in local clubs¹⁴ and at least one of Roy's clubs was located in a building run by a local gang.

Roy was the proprietor of at least three clubs, one of which, the Avenue Club, also known as 'Black Ada's Academy School of Dancing,' was on Wentworth Avenue.¹⁵ In his account, Brett Warren refers to Ada by she/her pronouns. This suggests that either there was another person who worked in Roy's establishments known as Ada or that, like the legend has been passed on, Roy could have performed in drag at this venue. This is a theory bolstered by the rumours and accusations of cross-dressers and 'perverts' attending these

clubs.¹⁶ Another of Roy's clubs was known as the Kingsbridge Social Club, later known as the 50-50 Club, and was in what is now the Chards Building at 171-175 William Street. The final club is still to be determined.

Military Man

In 1941, Roy enlisted in the Army under the name Ray Sayles and began serving as a cook. The decision to enlist could have been the result of many contextual reasons, for instance broader public pressure for men to serve or the promise of work outside nightlife. However, there were some familial connections as well. His family were regularly involved with the Black Servicemen's Club, a social club on Albion St which served segregated Black American soldiers who were stationed in Sydney during WWII. Additionally, there was his brother Frank 'Ranji' Pearce who, prior to his death in 1920, had attempted to enlist in WWI but was refused on the grounds of his skin colour.¹⁷

A medical note attached to



Albert Pearce and Mary Pearce (née Jordan), c.1920. Courtesy of Simon Jordan.

Roy's service record details how difficult working conditions in the kitchen left him with a back injury, particularly the incredibly hot environment where his co-workers left the bulk of the work to him. The document lists his next of kin as Phillip Gunn, a 'friend' he lived with at 94 Wommiera Avenue (likely Womerah Avenue). However, this document also details a first-hand account from Roy of his family history.

In it, he claimed to be the son of the King of Uganda in British East Africa. However, after Roy became Christian at fourteen, he was exiled. Moving to London he performed and travelled for many years as an actor, working with Australian actor Oscar Asche. As a result, he migrated to Australia by way of New Zealand and worked as a valet for the upper echelons of society. Then, for a number of years he managed restaurants and 'dancing academies' in Sydney. He said he 'contemplated marriage several times in Australia but fears the colour distinction from his own race [might prevent him from returning home].'

Based on current historical records, much of this story is fabricated (with a useful cover story for why he remained unmarried in his forties). However some details do seem to hold kernels of truth. He certainly did own and run clubs, he was a travelling actor, and even his passing mention to New Zealand is interesting. In an article following his father's death, it is noted that one of Joseph's children was performing and travelling in New Zealand. Living family also recall that Roy did in fact spend time in New Zealand.

While Roy specified that he is solely Ugandan, it is unlikely given what we know. He asserted 'that he is a full-blooded negro but that in cold climate "the pigments in his skin have faded."' It seems clear that, at least during this medical appointment, it was important he was explicitly understood as an African man rather than any-

thing else. (To be clear, it is entirely plausible that he did have Ugandan ancestry even though he was likely not born there.)

The doctor assesses Roy's story as emblematic of 'his feeling of racial inferiority' and 'a strongly narcissistic make up.' It is important to note that this is the writing and conclusion of a doctor that was likely influenced by the same racist social attitudes that led to the marginalisation of Roy and his family in the first place. This was a time when the White Australia Policy was still legally enforced, segregated bars were still commonplace, employment opportunities for people of colour were extremely limited, and assimilation laws were being used to justify the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

The session ended with Roy commenting that he sometimes felt 'I will do away with myself.' So, just a year after enlisting, Roy was discharged from service. Not from his back injury, but by a diagnosis of 'hysteria' given by the doctor. This whole document is interesting as it is hard to parse through what is fact or fiction in Roy's story, especially due to it being a retelling by the doctor. At the very least, it seems clear that Roy had this story ironed out. His love of acting and (reasonable) suspicion of authority figures may have met here as a means of making it through their interaction. Though it is possible that he did in fact have some form of mental illness, it seems more likely that he simply wanted to be discharged, and so did what he could to ensure it would happen.

On Trial

At this stage, the next chapter we have in Roy's life is emblematic of the historical context he lived in and further cements conflicting details in his life story. On the 8th of October 1942, two police officers, Constables Thomas Earle Carney and Neville William Grigg, arrested Roy on a charge of indecency in a public toilet in the Domain.



Const. Carney.



Const. Grigg.

Photographs of Constables Carney and Grigg in Daily Mirror, 1943. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.²⁴

In a recounting of the event, Roy (now going by Ray Sayles) detailed how he had only been released from hospital a few days prior and, while still bandaged from the injuries he sustained while serving as a cook, had taken some time in the bathroom. When he entered the lavatory no one was present but as he left Grigg came in and asked what he had been doing, he replied 'What do you think?' At this stage, Carney entered and told Roy he had been watching for ten minutes and the officers arrested him, hitting him in the stomach in the process. Roy mentioned that during the arrest Carney appeared to be under the influence of liquor.¹⁸ (Notably, a witness who lived on Palmer St also corroborated Roy's account of his arrest.¹⁹) Roy was taken to a police station and a charge of indecency was successfully brought against him as a result.

However, this retelling is significant as it was actually part of a witness testimony Roy offered in a separate court appearance.

Following Roy's arrest, the same constables arrested the editor-in-chief of Consolidated Press, Clarence Sydney McNulty, under similar circumstances. As a result, the officers were stood down by the Police Commissioner.²⁰ McNulty described being 'framed' and through a court case the following year, a number of those arrested were brought in to speak to their experience, including Roy.

According to the Commissioner,

the constables had been arresting an average of four men a week while on duty. This amounted to almost four hundred men in a single year arrested in a handful of bathrooms. Those arrested offered similar testimonies which suggested entrapment, framing, and goading victims into initiating the supposed 'indecent behaviour.' The circumstances of the arrests were made even more suspicious when some of the testimonies included that the constables had suggested a particular solicitor to them if they wanted to prevent the information being reported on and 'outed' in the media.²¹

This speaks to the broader corruption of police when it came to the policing of camp men and people of colour. As such, it is no surprise that Roy's testimony once again included some conflicting accounts of his own history as prosecutors attempted to put his integrity as a witness into question.

While being asked about his birth certificate, Roy stated that while Joseph Pearce was his father, Annie Elizabeth Pearce was not his mother. However, he goes on to mention that his mother – who may go by the name of Mrs Pearce – has lived at 192 Palmer Street and 220 Bourke Street, which are addresses he listed for himself on the electoral roll and that Annie herself lived in. He stated he has always understood his name to be Ray Sayles and that, again,



Roy Sayles photographed at Arcadia St, Coogee, c.1935.
Courtesy of John Farrugia.

he was born in Africa. When the prosecutor turns to questioning his line of work, he poses that the Avenue Club was ‘the resort of perverts’ and was shut down by the Vice Squad. Roy denies both and also denies that Henry Pearce, who he describes as his step-brother, was convicted for cocaine running between his venues. Again, it is hard to know which parts of his account was genuine, lies he told to safeguard himself from the authorities, or a way to prevent his family from becoming guilty by association. Despite the overwhelming witness testimony, the constables were ultimately cleared of their charges of malpractice and were put to work again without further consequences. Constable Grigg would go on to enter a libel suit against the former Police Commissioner, Consolidated Press, and *The Sydney Telegraph* for an article they had published when he had initially been stood down.²² The suit was unsuccessful, incurring £2000 worth of legal costs in the process. Ironically, the Police Association covered the costs of the suit themselves.²³

Beyond

In the years following, Roy’s life becomes somewhat harder to track (though a well-publicised brush with the law might have been a good reason to lay low). In saying that, a family member recalls their uncle Roy visiting their house in a slick black car as a child, always accompanied by a motley crew of entertainers. Having visited Roy’s house, she recalls him having a bust of himself in the entryway – a fitting object for a person who clearly had a flair for the dramatic.

On the 3rd of May, 1976, Roy (now going by Raymond Sayles) passed away at Wyong Nursing Home and was later cremated in Sydney’s North Shore Crematorium. As previously mentioned, his death certificate raises further questions with a differing birthplace as well as a marital status of ‘divorced.’ Both of these notes require further research to confirm or deny, though at this stage evidence of a marriage has yet to be found.

Many mysteries still remain about Roy: What was his paternal cul-

tural identity? Did he have more family in the Northern Rivers or even further afield? And crucially, how might we decisively confirm whether Black Ada was indeed his drag persona or another person involved with his club?

Becoming

The story of Roy and his venue, Black Ada’s, has slowly unfolded alongside the development of this exhibition. Months spent gathering documents and records of this history were punctuated with meeting those still alive. With each person generously entrusting the exhibition with fragments of his story, including photographs, it soon became clear that Roy had to be present in the space as his experience cuts to the core of the exhibition.

As a Black queer man, Roy was policed by the very same laws (i.e. vagrancy, deviancy, and offensive behaviour) which had been targeting marginalised communities since settlement began. In turn, his clubs were dogged by the Vice Squads who alleged his venues were ‘resorts for perverts’ where people cross-dressed; he was dismissed as ‘hysterical’ by military officials; and he was victim to false arrest. Merely being associated with this ‘indecent’ meant his experience of police violence could be further minimised and trivialised.

Despite this, Roy and the broader community managed to survive. The Vice Squad, whose sole purpose was to shut down venues like Black Ada’s, were bamboozled by cheeky, partner-swapping ploys which kept the community laughing. Humour became a language which the queer community used to great effect – with drag representing its most exaggerated form.

The impression that comes from historical documentation that surrounds Roy is that he understood performance as a form of power. He was able to protect himself and his community against oppressive systems through misdirection and a penchant for near-truths. A savvy businessman and entertainer, he used his creative

talents to gain agency as his family had before him – just as show-girls and drag queens did in later years on the Kings Cross strip.

And, significantly, Roy helped forge early spaces where the community could connect and imagine a world that was freer. A world that began to emerge decades later and led to the cultural landscape we see today.

Those with any further insights are encouraged to reach out to Bren Donnellan and the Qtopia team as the quest for Black Ada continues.

Special thanks to those who contributed to this research, especially Simon Jordan, Cheryl Bonello, Michelle Vassallo Duggan and John Farrugia, as well as Qtopia’s Lead Historian, Garry Wotherspoon.

NOTES

- 1 ‘Camp’ was the terminology of the time for what we would today call gay or queer.
- 2 McGregor, Fiona Kelly, ‘Surro’, *Sydney Review of Books*, 10 November 2017.
- 3 McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *Buried Not Dead*, Giramondo, Sydney 2021, pp. 136-145.
- 4 McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *Iris*, Picador, Sydney, 2022.
- 5 The ArtHitects (Gary Carsley and Renjie Teoh), *Thine Shrine, Divine*, National Art School, 2023
- 6 ‘HOTEL PORTER’S DEATH.’ *Daily Examiner* [Grafton, NSW], 14 November 1921, p. 4. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 7 Cooper, Dr. Aflua. ‘Timeline.’ Black Halifax, blackhalifax.com/time-line/. Accessed Feb. 2024.
- 8 Potts, E. Daniel and Annette Potts. *The Negro and the Australian Gold Rushes, 1852-1857*. Pacific Historical Review, vol. 37, no. 4. University of California Press, Nov. 1968, pp. 381-399. JSTOR.
- 9 ‘DEATH OF A WELL-KNOWN CHARACTER’ *Clarence and Richmond Examiner and New England Advertiser* [Grafton, NSW], 1 July 1879, p. 2. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 10 ‘HOTEL PORTER’S DEATH.’ *Daily Examiner* [Grafton, NSW], 14 November 1921, p. 4. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 11 ‘RADIO EISTEDDFOD WINNERS.’ *Daily Examiner* [Grafton, NSW], 27 December 1928, p. 1. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 12 ‘RADIO ARTISTS.’ *Northern Star* [Lismore, NSW], 28 December 1928, p. 4. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 13 ‘RANJI PEARCE DEAD.’ *Daily Examiner* [Grafton, NSW], 8 September 1920, p. 1. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 14 ‘£1050 in Fines for Cocaine Traffickers.’ *Northern Star* [Lismore, NSW], 22 August 1929, p. 7. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 15 ‘Appeal Witness Questioned About Club.’ *The Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* [NSW], 21 June 1943, p. 4. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 16 ‘WITNESS QUESTIONED ON IDENTITY.’ *Daily Mirror* [Sydney, NSW], 21 June 1943, p. 5. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 17 ‘POLICE COURT.’ *Tweed Daily* [Murwillumbah, NSW], 31 August 1916, p. 2. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 18 ‘GRIGG AND CARNEY.’ *Lithgow Mercury* [NSW], 16 June 1943, p. 1. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 19 ‘Carney-Grigg Appeal.’ *Daily Mirror* [Sydney, NSW], 18 June 1943, p. 2. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 20 ‘Police Commissioner gives reasons for suspending two constables.’ *The Daily Telegraph* [Sydney, NSW], 31 January 1943, p. 4. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 21 ‘POLICE APPEAL HEARING.’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* [NSW], 22 June 1943, p. 7. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 22 ‘GRIGG FAILS IN APPEAL.’ *Truth* [Sydney, NSW], 4 March 1945, p. 29. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 23 ‘Legal To Pay Grigg’s Costs.’ *The Sun* [Sydney, NSW], 12 December 1945, p. 2. Trove, National Library of Australia.
- 24 ‘Carney, Grigg Still Not On Police Duty.’ *Daily Mirror* [Sydney, NSW], 29 June 1943, p. 3. Trove, National Library of Australia.