

# Eddie Hegan

26<sup>th</sup> November 1906 - 24<sup>th</sup> July 1990

**Eddie Hegan** was born in Belfast, Ireland, where his parents Hannah (b. Burton) and William Hegan had a bakery delivery business. Eddie had two siblings, Bill and Patricia.

He started attending vaudeville shows in 1917 after being given free tickets by his boss at *Charlie Skelton's Butchers Shop*. At his first show at the *Empire theatre*, the 11 year old met Pat Rooney, an American tap dancer, who showed him the rudiments. From that moment Eddie was stage-struck and practiced day and night.



In 1919 the Hegan family emigrated to NZ and bought a small farm in Rangiora, North Canterbury. Eddie found work at the *Post Office* then the local chemist but 2 years later moved to Christchurch and began working in the footwear department of *W. Strange and co. Arthur*, his landlord, had worked in England as a step-dancer so they created a double act and began accepting engagements at local cinemas and dance-halls. In 1923 he joined a local group called the *Kiwi Sunshine Players* which produced weekend Variety shows around the Canterbury region.

Hegan joined Arthur in his decorating business and made extra cash by competing in dance competitions and later gave Charleston exhibitions at balls and parties. He won the 1925 *South Island Foxtrot Championship*.

In 1926 Eddie was mistakenly diagnosed with tuberculosis and admitted to a Cashmere health clinic for six months. He then approached *Fullers* and was offered a 12 week national tour starting in Wellington. Back in Christchurch he teamed up with Charlie Lawrence to form *Musical Follies*, a company producing stage shows at cinemas, styled to suite particular movies.

The introduction of sound changed the whole cinema industry throwing thousands of musicians out of work but the new medium of radio allowed Eddie to perform as *The Radio Rascal* doing everything from singing, playing ukulele, telling gags, impersonations and even tap-dancing. He got together a small group of artistes called *The Radio Minstrels* and wrote and produced musical comedies and minstrel shows for *3YA* then later toured the larger country towns to packed houses.

An Australian couple, Letty Craydon and Ron Shand, formed their own variety company and asked Eddie to join them. *The Gloom Chasers Revue* started their tour on Boxing Day 1929 to reasonable houses but as the economy turned sour they reduced the company to five until Letty, Ron and Eddie were offered a job in Sydney. Good news turned to bad when on arrival they were told that the show had been cancelled but undaunted they used the now empty *Bridge Theater* to produce a show but even that had to be cancelled after a week. The depression in Australia hit the entertainment industry very hard with admission prices slashed, artistes and musicians unemployed and desperate acts gladly accepting one night stands for mediocre salaries.

Hegan quickly returned to Auckland and soon picked up work performing at cinemas for 2 weeks which got him back to Christchurch where he made a frugal living as *The Radio Rascal* and working the country charity show circuit. A chance encounter found Eddie with a flat/studio in central Christchurch and he set up the *Hegan School of Tap Dancing* which quickly outgrew the premises.

He was approached by *Australasian Enterprises*, a small touring group, to help them out, so he suspended his school for a month and together they toured small communities. This was a commonwealth troupe, meaning that everything was shared equally. When magician friend Doc Hamilton became ill Eddie toured his tent show through the showgrounds until Doc improved.

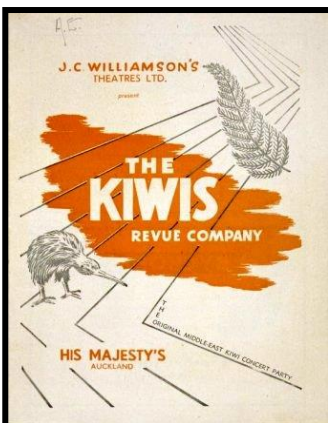


He produced a series of successful dance revue shows using his pupils and continued to grow the business. One of his more successful pupils was female impersonator Noel McKay. Maurice Dixon and Dennis Young, who later became *All Blacks*, were also students.

A number of city cinemas started holding talent quests and Eddie was asked to judge them and offer advice on how they could improve their acts. Jack Maybury, *3ZB* quiz show host, asked Hegan to team up with him to do comedy then Eddie was invited to front his own half-hour variety program *The Little Show* which was broadcast live on Saturday nights. When he and Jack started the *Happy Feet Club*, Eddie's school had to move into larger premises and to extend its teaching to include ballroom dancing. In order to teach dance for his radio *Dancing Time* show he invented a chart that showed feet positions and body movements.

Eddie married one of his pupils and they had a daughter but the relationship did not last.

As New Zealand entered WW2 he and a group of entertainers staged a large weekly charity show at the *Civic Theatre*, with all proceeds going to the war effort. Eddie joined the army in 1941 and soon found himself a sergeant instructing at *Maadi Camp*, the NZ army base in Egypt. A friend, a mathematical wizard, worked out a successful system for winning at two-up so they were never without funds. For several months he organised shows and a regular quiz night with cash prizes put up by the *YMCA*. In June 1942 he joined the *26<sup>th</sup> Battalion* in the desert but was invalided out with sinus problems and when the division moved to Italy he was returned to New Zealand and discharged. In 1944 he was invited to direct the *Bond-Wagon* tour, putting on 3 shows a day throughout the South Island, appealing to civilians to invest in War-bonds.



Tommy Kirk-Burnand, the founder of the *Kiwi Concert Party*, asked Hegan to assist in setting up a touring show based on the *KCP*. Eddie became the producer and the show started out at the *Wellington Opera House* in November 1944 as *The Kiwis*. It starred a host of returned *KCP* performers plus a young female impersonator from Auckland, John 'Primrose' Hunter. That first show *Cairo Carnival* was followed by *Desert Days* then *Alamain Antics*. In the winter of 1945 the company closed down and a new commonwealth style troupe formed consisting of Taffy Owen, Wally Proctor, Stan Wineera, Lionel Bailey with Art Rosoman as Musical Director. A new show called *Mardi Gras* was readied and they headed north again.

When the war ended and members of the middle-east *KCP* returned, the *Kiwis* and the *KCP* merged and Terry Vaughan took over as producer and musical director. Sir Frank Tait of *J.C. Williamson Company* became their manager. The *KCP* Played 3 weeks in Auckland then crossed to Australia where, after a few hiccups in Queensland, they played to capacity houses in every city that they appeared.

Eddie married Elaine in 1945 and they returned to New Zealand to manage and produce a new show, this time with Australian ex-servicemen and women, called *The Kangaroosters*. Elaine took on the role of secretary/treasurer. In 1948 the Hegan's settled in Auckland and eventually produced 4 sons, Campbell, Kim, Chris and Shane.



During the 1950's Eddie wrote and acted on radio, produced and directed Christmas shows and ran Talent quests. In 1959 while working at *The Auckland Public Relations Office* he convinced them to create a Maori Variety show. Eddie produced it with a cast of twenty-five performers under the appropriate title of *Maori* and they toured Australia on Contract to J.C Williamson. Notable performers were Nuki Waka and Mahora Peters (who both went on to form the *Maori Volcanics*) and Trevor Rupe (a very young and male Carmen Rupe).

In 1960 Eddie and Elaine started the *Hegan Entertainment Agency* and soon they had a large stable of New Zealand artistes including many of the founding members of the *VAC*, Jon Zealando, Les Andrews, George Tumahai, Chic Littlewood, Peter Newberry, Peter Evans, Rusty Greaves, Howard Morrison and a very young Kiri Te Kanawa. These were backed up with internationals such as Max Bygreaves and Dame Vera Lynn. They also went on to manage the careers of many local stars including Dave Dobbyn, Ray Woolf and the Late Billy T James. For years *Hegan's* booked all entertainment for the *Auckland Easter Shows*.

As an actor Eddie appeared in films such as the *Buck House TV Series (1974-5)* for which he wrote some episodes, *Colour Scheme (1977)*, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt (1984)*, *An Angel At My Table (1990)* and *User Friendly (1990)*.

In 1980 Hegan was awarded the *VAC Benny Trophy* but refused it. Two years earlier he had informed the *VAC* that he would not accept any awards as a result of their decision to refuse accepting agents as members. Elaine and Eddie were granted *VAC Life Membership* in 1980 and that same year Eddie released his autobiography, *No Choice*. *Hegan Entertainment* was contracted to produce the 1990 *Auckland Sesqui Centennial Celebrations*, featuring three stages and twelve hundred performers.

Eddie Hegan died after a short illness on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1990.

**Elaine Hegan** (15 April 1923 – 24 May 1998) was the only child of a wealthy industrialist who owned *Campbell Explosives*; importing mining equipment from the UK in his beautiful schooner, the *Huia*. She was invited to be the first woman lifesaver at Piha Beach but her father would not allow it. Later she became New Zealand's first female bank teller and the first woman to legally carry a firearm. She met her future husband while selling tickets to the *Kiwi's Revue Show* at *His Majesty's Theatre* on Queen Street. Elaine passed away after a 15 month battle with cancer.