

EFFIE FELLOWS

aka Master Freddie Manners / Bobby Folson

Influenced by the popularity of male impersonator Nellie Kelle, Effie Fellows developed her own act and was eventually offered a contract by the Fullers. Initially billed as Master Freddie Manners, "Australia's Perfect Boy" she toured their circuit before heading to Great Britain in the early 1920s. Renamed Bobby Folson she scored a good deal of success in London and on the provincial circuits, and subsequently travelled to the USA where she was greeted with similar popularity. Fellows returned to Australia a number of times during the 1920s, and invariably included her hometown as part of her itinerary. Her career slowed in the 1930s as the combined effects of the depression and the "talkies" brought about the gradual demise of vaudeville.

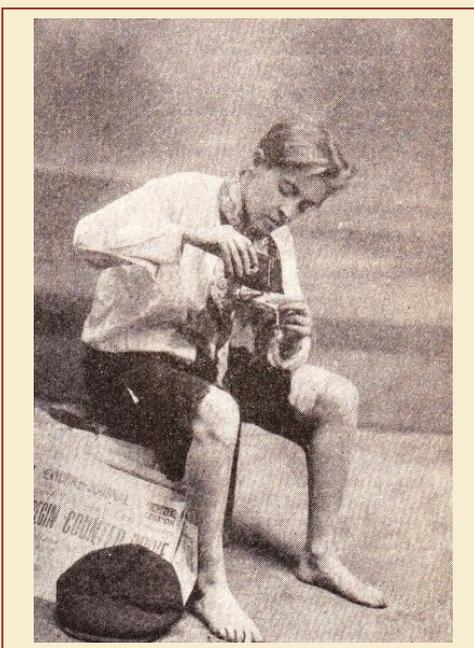
Effie Marion Fellows was born in Subiaco in 1893 and showed an early flair for male attire and performance, winning a fancy dress contest at the age of 17 dressed as a "half boy/half girl"- a popular vaudeville act in which the performer appears as either a man or a woman depending on which side of their body they turn to the audience. According to a 1922 Fuller news item, Fellows had by age 16 decided that not only were skirts a nuisance but that she had to have "either freedom of speech or action." Having little regard for convention or "politicians," she decided to become a boy and subsequently adopted men's attire. Tom Stannage records that while still in her teens Fellows managed to gain entrance to a boxing match (women were not allowed in), but her identity was revealed when she accidentally slipped over. She was subsequently reprimanded by the Perth Court. As she was already employed as a bellhop at the Palace Hotel in St George's Terrace, the court appearance and the job's proximity to home became meant that she was taking an enormous risk if she continued the deception.

In speaking to the South African theatrical journal *Stage and Cinema* in 1916 (9 Sept. issue)¹ while touring for the African Theatres Trust Ltd, Fellows' recalls that she soon afterwards decided to use the little money she'd saved for a half-fare steamboat passage to Melbourne. Calling herself Freddie Manners, she was accordingly put into a shared male cabin, fortuitously with two travelling variety performers – Harry Lindon and Alec Hurley – who were in the habit of staying up late playing cards. This allowed her the opportunity of retiring early and leaving the cabin before they woke. According to Fellows she met Hurley a few years later when they were playing the Fuller circuit and reminded him of the trip – he was reportedly astounded at the hoax.



Is She a Boy? Is He a Girl?

Fuller News 25 Feb. (1922), cover.



While on the boat Fellows also apparently attracted the unwelcome attention of a "lady" who invited this young man to come to her home. Fellows was forced to run away when the lady's questions became too difficult. She soon afterwards managed to get a job driving a horse and cart for a Toorak newsagent. Six months later, however, she grew homesick and returned to Perth, travelling as a girl this time. Within three months she's had enough of settling down and returned to Melbourne, again as a boy, where she became a photographer's assistant. It was around this time that she first saw male impersonators on the stage, but was largely unimpressed. "They used to give me a pain," she recalls. "They were not a bit like it. I used to sit and watch 'em and chuckle to myself at the thought of what my boy pals would say if they knew I was really a girl. Lordy, they'd have dropped down dead."

Fuller News 25 Feb. (1922), 15.

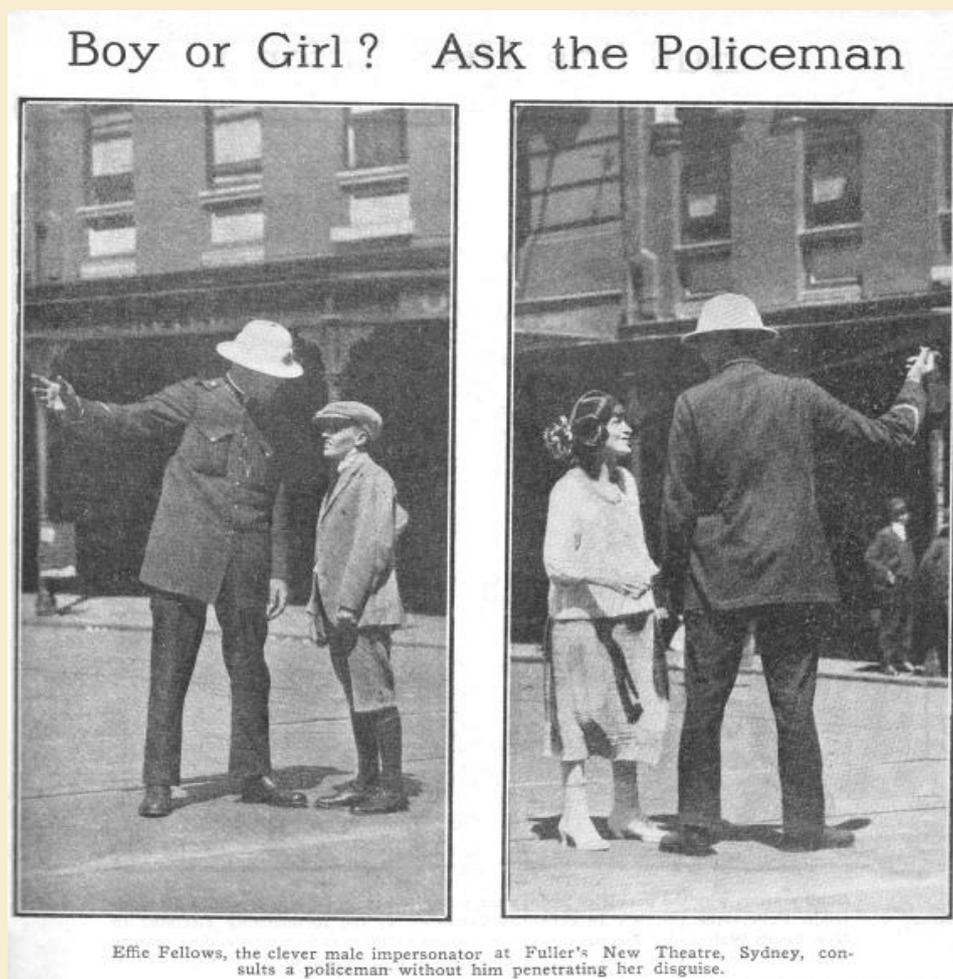
¹ Cited in the *Theatre* Nov. (1916), 52. In this article, titled "Ambitious Effie," the *Theatre* takes the stance that Fellows was pulling the legs of the South African journalists, and suggests that this was simply contrived publicity. Whether this was the case or not is unclear. Such "accounts" do, however, provide insights into the way artists like Fellows or Daisy Jerome, for example, were imagined by the public.

After another visit back home Fellowes once again ran off – this time to Sydney where she learned to drive a car on the scenic railway in the White City recreation park. The personal nature of the young driver of Car 4 made it a popular choice with regular patrons and in this way she made the acquaintance of Ben Fuller and the actor Fred Niblo. At the conclusion of the holiday season she managed to convince her boss to give her a letter of introduction to see the head of Fullers Theatres. At initial meeting, at which time Fuller remembered the young man, he asked what he could do. Fellowes "impudently" replied that he was an impersonator and was given the opportunity of an audition the following day. When he turned up in feminine attire and Fuller tumbled to the earlier deception Fellowes was offer a contract on the spot.

Billed her as Freddie Manners, "Australia's Perfect Boy" Fellowes' career was launched by the Fullers in Sydney in 1915. She then toured the firm's Australian and New Zealand circuits and in the process developed into an extraordinarily gifted and popular entertainer. At the conclusion of the Fullers contract she was booked to tour India for the Randman circuit, followed by a contract with the African Theatres Trust Ltd in South Africa in 1916. The *Theatre* also notes that Fellowes was travelling at this time with her partner, Piquo, the Acrobatic Clown – who also appeared on the same bills.²

A review of Fellowes' appearance at the Wellington Town Hall, New Zealand in 1915 provides some insight into her act at that early stage of her career: "Her appearance was heralded by some kinematograph pictures where she is seen on the day of the recent Belgian collection. She makes a capital boy – her make-up was admirable – and as such she contributed a couple of songs. She received warm applause" (EP: 25 May 1915, 3).

By 1922 Fellowes had toured the world as variety performer – appearing in America, Great Britain, the East, Europe and Africa. While in England, she had assumed the stage name Bobby Folson and was a great success in 1922 when she donned a top hat and tails to perform at the London Palladium. She was also a big hit on American stages, performing alongside some of the era's most famous stars, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker and Stan Laurel. A review from a New York newspaper of the time states: "Effie Fellowes is the greatest boy impersonator in her line, and we say that bearing in mind that there have been other great ones. High praise indeed considering Vesta Tilly, possibly the most well known male impersonator of the early twentieth century, had also performed in New York not long before."



Fuller News 25 Feb. (1922), 11.

² Fellowes and Piquo were also on the same Empire Theatre bill in 1928.

Despite having left Perth several times as a teenager Fellows regularly returned home to perform during her career. These visits invariably saw her headline at such theatres as the Majestic, Regent and the Luxor. These later engagements also saw her routinely sing her signature tune "I've Never Seen a Straight Banana." When vaudeville started to wane in popularity in the 1930s Fellows returned to Perth and settled back into life in Subiaco. She continued to perform in nursing homes and community centres, always in male costume until her death in 1977 at the age of 84.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

1915: FULLERS (New Zealand tour; ca. May-June *) ► HARRY SADLER (Th Royal, Hobart; 14 Aug. -* > on lease from Fullers' Theatres)

NB: New Zealand itinerary incl. His Majesty's Th, Wellington; ca. 24 May- 5 June)

1922: FULLERS (Fullers' New Th, Syd; ca. Feb. *)

1928: TIVOLI THEATRES (Tivoli Th, Bris; ca. Apr/May *) ► EMPIRE THEATRE Co (Empire Th, Syd; ca. Oct. *)

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Ambitious Effie." TT: Nov. (1916), 52.

"Boy or Girl? Ask the Policeman." FN: 25 Feb. (1922), 11-12.

Effie Fellows Papers. Batty Library, State Library of Western Australia [MN 2386, ACC 6320A]

"Girl or Boy: A Hard Question." FN: 25 Feb. (1922), 4.

"Girls Made Love to Her: Adventurous Career of Miss Effie Fellows - Australia's Perfect Boy's Escapades, The" FN: 25 Feb. (1922), 15-16.

"Side Stepping with Effie Fellows: Adventures of Australia's perfect Boy." FN: 18 Mar. (1922), 15-16.

See also:

EP: 25 May (1915), 3.

