

FLORRIE FORDE

Once described as "the epitome of music hall gusto," Florrie Forde gave her debut vaudeville performance in Sydney's in 1892. After initially specialising in popular and comic songs she later established herself as pantomime actor. She travelled to England in 1897 quickly established herself as one of Britain's great music hall and recording stars. She also appeared in several films in the 1930s.

Once described as "the epitome of music hall gusto," Florrie Forde was one of eight children born to Lott Flannagan, an Irish-born stonemason who later ran the United Service Hotel, Fitzroy, and his wife Phoebe (née Simmons). It was at the hotel on 16 August 1876 that Florence Mary, their sixth child was born. One of her brothers, Frank Victor Flanagan later established himself as a Sydney tailor, first in Newtown (22 years) and then Dulwich Hill. Another sibling, Dolly, became the wife of scenic artist George Upward (most associated with J. C. Williamsons Theatre Royal, Melb).

After her husband died in 1878, Phoebe began a relationship with another man theatrical costumier, Thomas Forde. The couple had six children (some prenuptial) before she died in 1892, aged 46 (Brownrigg, 230). That same year Florence, aged 16, and one of her sisters, Nan ran away to Sydney to try their luck on the stage. Calling herself Florrie Forde, the young serio-comic artist made her debut for American dancer/entrepreneur Dan Tracey at the Polytechnic Hall on 1 February. Her turn included the song "See Me Dance the Polka." Although having received no theatrical tuition she was reportedly a hit with the audience and soon afterwards secured engagements at Chowder Bay (Sydney). She returned to Melbourne for Tracey in June to play a season at the Gaiety Theatre.



Florrie Forde.

HANA, PHOTO LONDON

Source: www.jpop.com

G A I E T Y T H E A T R E.
 Lessee and Manager, Dan Tracey.
 Enthusiastic Reception Accorded the
 Charming Serio-comic Artiste,
MISS FLORRIE FORDE,
 Purchasers of Front and Second Tickets are presented
 with a coupon entitling them to a drink or cigar,
 and Gallery Patrons a glass of beer.
 This Applies to Male Adults Only.

Argus 30 June (1892), 8.

In early 1893 Forde performed her male impersonation act "Bubbles" with the Alabama Minstrels followed by engagements with Slade Murray's New Lyric Combination (Opera House, Syd), Delohery Craydon and Holland (Alhambra Music Hall, Syd), and F.M. Clark (Alhambra Palace of Varieties, Melb). Even at this very early stage of her career, Forde was gaining the respect and admiration of both critics and the public. A review of one of her performances at the Sydney Alhambra in late September, for example, saw the *Sydney Morning Herald's* critic write:

Miss Florrie Forde, in her descriptive songs, was particularly good. The one entitled "How Do They Do It," which entered into the intricacies of love-making with the barmaid, the coster's donah, and the actress, was given with ability and considerable emphasis, and met with appreciative recognition from the audience (2 Oct. 1893, 6).

While under the management of Clark at his Bourke Street theatre, Forde reportedly she sang "After the Ball" for sixteen consecutive weeks and, according to Frank Van Straten, was given the honour of riding the winner of the 1893 Melbourne Cup, Tarcoola, onto the stage.¹

Earlier in the year Forde, purportedly with her step-father's written consent, married Walter Emanuel Bew, a 31-year-old water police constable from England and a widower. The marriage too place with Congregational forms at Sydney's Mariner's Church on 2 January 1893 (Brownrigg, 230).

Sydney Morning Herald 20 Jan. (1894), 2.

T I V O L I T H E A T R E.
 Sole Lessee and Manager ... Mr. Harry Rickards.
 CONTINUED PHENOMENAL SUCCESS OF
MR. HARRY RICKARDS
 New Tivoli Minstrels and Specialty Company.
SPECIAL and EXTRAORDINARY ENGAGEMENTS.
TO-NIGHT, SATURDAY, TO-NIGHT,
 of the following Brilliant ARTISTS.
 First Appearance at the Tivoli of
PROFESSOR BEAUMONT,
 the Aquatic King,
 Holder of the World's Under-water Record, 4 minutes 80
 seconds; Saver of 100 Lives from Drowning, assisted by
 Misses LILLIE VANE and ALICE BEAUMONT,
 the Amphibious Queen, the Greatest Wonder in the World
 for High Diving, Swimming, and Tank Performance, in
 their
MARVELLOUS STATUE TANK
 PERFORMANCE.
 The First and Only Statue Tank Show in Existence.
 Acknowledged to be the Greatest Novelty ever seen.
 First Appearance at the Tivoli Theatre of
MR. VAL VOUSDEN,
 The King of Laughter, Mirth, and Mimicry,
 Original, Artistic, and Refined.
 First Appearance at the Tivoli Theatre of
MISS FLORRIE FORDE
 in one of her Great Specialties.
 First Appearance at the Tivoli of
MR. CLARENCE LYNDON,
 the Champion Skipping Rope Dancer of the world.
 The above great Artists will positively appear
TO-NIGHT SATURDAY TO-NIGHT,
 in conjunction with our Great Double Company of real
 talented Specialty Artists.
ENTIRELY NEW PROGRAMME TO-NIGHT,
 including the Australian Team,
DELOHERY, CRAYDON, and HOLLAND.

¹ No reference to this incident has yet been verified through primary sources.

Forde made her debut with Harry Rickards in January 1894. Among her song success that year was "He Nailed the Colours to the Mast." Although largely associated with his Tivoli organisation through until 1897, she also appeared on bills for other firms, including Lawton and Leslie's All Nations Company and Harry Barrington, then ensconced at the Alhambra Music Hall (Syd). Later renowned as a specialist pantomime actor, Forde's first actual principal boy role was in George Rignold's 1894 Christmas pantomime, *The House That Jack Built* (Her Majesty's, Syd). Under Rignold's management she was also cast the following year in the burlesque *Susan With the Two Lovely Black Eyes* (16 Feb. 1895). According to the *Theatre*, Forde was paid £9 a week for her ten weeks engagement with Rignold (Feb. 1922, 3).

In 1896 Forde was spotted by English comedian G.H. Chirgwin who offered her £25 a week for three years to tour Great Britain under his management. She rejected his offer, deciding instead to travel to England on her own to see what opportunities were there. Before she left George Rignold and the local theatrical community put on a benefit for her, with show reportedly raising in excess of £260 (TT: Feb. 1922, 3). One of her final engagements in Australia was a one week appearance at Adelaide's Theatre Royal in March 1897, "during which time the programme was adapted to become a special concert for the members of the Australasian Federal Convention, then meeting. She sang "She Wore a Little Safety Pin, Behind," which the Adelaide *Advertiser's* reviewer thought risqué, but which appealed to the 'boys in the gallery'" (Brownrigg, 230).

Forde arrived in England in 1897, and made her London debut at three theatres on the same night - the August Bank Holiday. She was subsequently offered a three year contract on the Moss Thornton circuit, and initially billed as "Australia's Marie Lloyd." She quickly moved beyond that comparison, however, by establishing herself as one of Britain's great music hall stars in her own right. Such was her stature in Great Britain by the second decade of the 20th century she was invited in 1912 to appear before King George V in the first Royal Command Variety Performance.

She had countless song successes during her career, and released more than 700 individual recordings between 1903 and 1936. Frank Van Straten notes:

Her strong, clear voice transcended the primitive equipment, and she swiftly became a top seller... Though [she] did not write her own material she had an uncanny knack of picking a good song. If a new number failed to have the audience joining in the chorus by the second or third night, she'd discard it. Her first really big hit was "Down at the Old Bull and Bush" in 1904. It was encores 33 times when she introduced it and it put Hampstead Heath and its picturesque pub firmly on the map; today the public bar is fondly dedicated to Florrie's memory." (n. pag.)



Source: www.fredgodfreysongs.ca

Forde is also noted for bringing fellow Australian performer Billy Williams to one of her Edison recording sessions in 1906 and encouraging him to sing his hit "John, Go and Put Your Trousers On." She reportedly remained close friends with Williams until his death in 1915. Among her countless hits were such songs as "Oh! Oh! Antonio," "Goodby-ee," "Hold Your Hand Out, Naughty Boy," "Flanagan," "Goodby Little Sailor Boy" and "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?" She also had great success with her wartime renditions of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" and "Pack Up Your Troubles." According to

her brother, Frank Flanagan, Forde received a retainer of £500 a year from His Master's Voice Co, in addition to being given a payment for every song she recorded (TT: Feb. 1922, 6). Among the best known songs she originated were "Bubbles," "All Through Winking at a Soldier," "There's a Welcome There For You" and "Wyoming."

Forde's considerable career achievements also included feature appearances in several films in the 1930s - one as an actress, *My Old Dutch* (1934), playing the part of Aunt Bertha, and two films in which she appeared as herself, *Say it With Flowers* (1934) and *Royal Cavalcade* (1935). In 1935 she was also honoured with an invitation to perform in a "Veterans of Variety" segment put on as part of a Command Performance celebrating the King's silver anniversary. In 1922 she was also awarded the £100-prize offered by the *London Daily Sketch* for the best waltz song sung during the season - the winning number being "The Silver Star" by Laurie Wright (TT: Feb. 1922, 6).

With most of each spent appearing in and around London, and the few remaining months shared between provincial tours and her annual summer seasons at Douglas on the Isle of Man (where she'd produce a lavish pantomime with herself as the dashing principal boy), Australia never found the time to return to Australia. She is said, however, to have proudly identified herself as Australian. The local press also considered her to be worthy of frequent coverage throughout her long career in the UK, and thus Australians were routinely kept abreast of her exploits.

Florrie Forde is still a headliner at a London music hall and engagements in advance are plentiful (TT: 1 Nov. 1906, 5).

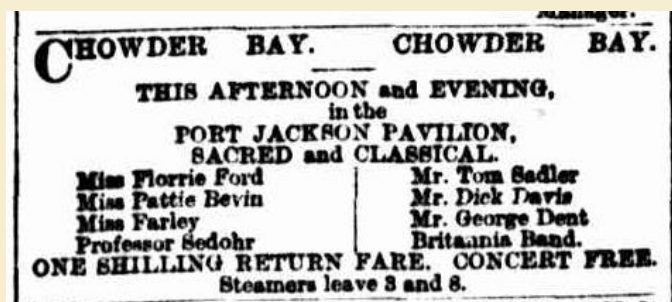
Florrie Forde never actually retired from performing. After the outbreak of war in 1939 she devoted herself to troop entertainment, just as she'd done in the previous World War. On April 18, 1940 she sang for patients in an Aberdeen naval hospital and died suddenly a few hours later, aged 65. It was theatre historian W. MacQueen Pope who saluted her as "the epitome of music hall gusto." Another fan, Dame Nellie Melba also said of Forde: Hers is a "voice of true Australian quality... she might have been trained for opera but, instead, gives pleasure to a far wider audience" (ctd. Van Straten, n. pag.)

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- "The Tivoli." Miss Florrie Forde was quite at home in relating her misfortunes on "The Day I Backed a Winner" (SMH: 10 Aug. 1895, 7).
- There was that so little-remembered darling Florrie Ford from Carlton, Victoria. She never returned to her native land. The Londoners loved her. She was enormous in size with a voice (and a heart) to match. Read what Georgie Wood says of her in his book:

I have yet to find anyone who can speak a word against this great-hearted Australian woman. She was beautiful and her proportions matched her love for everyone. The kindest woman imaginable, and when she went to any large town, one of her first enquires was: "Who is one the danger list at the hospital? Get me a list and I'll send them some flowers.

She died in her car on the way to the Tivoli in Aberdeen, Scotland and after a performance at the naval Hospital, and that would have been the way she would have wished to go. Bud Flanagan tells a true story of Florrie when she was in one of her pantomimes. The show was *Puss in Boots On Ice*. Surrounded by snow and done up to the chin in woollies, Florrie, never one to disappoint her audiences, remarked, "I feel so cold I wish I was in the Sahara" and therewith broke into her successful song "Sahara" for no dramatically sound reason except that it was expected of her. At one time she sang thirty-three encores to a chorus song! Never been known in the UK. She introduced to London "Down at the Old Bull and Bush" and "Oh, Oh, Antonio" (Charles Norman, 274-5).



Sydney Morning Herald 15 Apr. (1892), 8.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

- 1 A number of secondary sources, including Jeff Brownrigg, indicate that Forde was born in 1875.
2. Forde's mother Phoebe had been born in either London or the United States of America, and had two children from a previous marriage to Daniel James Cahill (Brownrigg, 233).
3. As a child... Florrie's only association with the [theatre] was through her step-father. He was the principal of the business at 30 Bourke Street, Melbourne, known as Forde's Theatrical Costumiers. Mr Forde dressed the production *Faust* at the Princess when Frederici as Mephistopheles dropped dead at the end of the performance (TT: Feb. 1922, 6).
4. In his 1995 Forde entry in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Jeff Brownrigg indicates that Forde "began her career with a song and dance routine in Melbourne in 1893 (233). Although he corrects this in his 2005 *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (pointing to the 1892 Polytechnic engagement), there is no mention of the important Dan Tracey, F.M. Clark or Delohery Craydon and Holland appearances during the 1892-1893 period.

Brownrigg's CTTA reference to Ford joining high profile English artist Billee Barlow in Sydney in 1893 indicates that she played dramatic roles in *The Enemy's Camp* and *The Work Girl* (233). The claim is reduced to just *The Working Girl* in 2005. While newspaper advertisements show that Forde appeared in at least two productions of

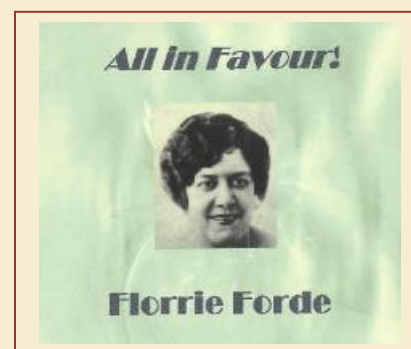
The Work Girl (playing the role of a "larrikiness") these did not occur until 1896. Both productions were produced by C. B. Westmacott at the Theatre Royal, Sydney (beginning 18 Jan.) and the Theatre Royal, Melbourne (18 Apr). Neither season, however, appears to have featured Barlow. Indeed the only production found to date which has Forde appearing in the same production with an artist named Barlow (he is billed as "the only Barlow - of "Blue Tail Fly" fame) occurred in Brisbane in 1895 during the Court Variety and Ballad Company season.

5. Forde married her second husband, English art dealer Laurence Barnett, in 1905. Interestingly, as Brownrigg notes, Forde's marriage certificate records her name and status as Flora Augusta Flanagan, spinster (230).
6. During one of her early seasons at the Isle of Man, Forde engaged a young comedian called Robert Winthrop to play the dame role. She went on to play a key role in advancing his career and even "lent" him the stage name Bud Flanagan - by which he would become famous as part of the Flanagan and Allen duo.

RECORDINGS

- **Florrie Forde: *The World's Greatest Chorus Singer*** (National Film & Sound Archive Australia: CD/NFSA/SW0006.) **CD 1:** 1. Keep on Swinging Me Charlie 2. My Boy 3. Hold Your Hand Out Naughty Boy 4. Hi! Hi! Mr McKie 5. From Poverty Street to Golden Square 6. Is Anybody Looking for a Window 7. Flanagan 8. Keep Away from the Petticoats 9. Molly O'Morgan 10. Pull Yourselves Together Girls 11. On the Silvery Sands 12. Come and Hear Him Play His Oom-ter-ra-a 13. I Can't Keep My Eyes Off the Girls 14. Oh Father 15. A Girl Who was Never Used To It. **CD 2:** Oh! The Lady with the Glad Eye 2. Do you Know Mr Donohue! 3. If You Can't Get a Girl in the Ballroom 4. There's a Girl for Every Soldier 5. Oh! Charlie Charlie 6. That Isn't a Bad Idea 7. Yip-i-addee-i-aye 8. O'Brien 9. On the Same Place Every Time 10. All Aboard for Margate 11. Sullivan Will Be There 12. Let's All Be a Happy Family 13. Fair, Fat and Forty 14. Florrie Forde Old Time Medley (Part 1) 15. Florrie Forde Old Time Medley (Part 2).
- **Florrie Forde - *All in Favour!*** (Chris Gavin)
 1. Having a Good Time, Wish You Were Here 2. I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside 3. I Don't Wanna Go Home 4. On the Ankle Watch Parade 5. Stein! Stein! Everywhere We Go 6. The Old Bull and Bush 7. All in Favour 8. Let's Pretend We're Having a Jolly Good Time 9. Pretty Kitty Kelly 10. The Barmaid Song 11. When We All Went Strolling Round the Town 12. Ta Ta, Be Lucky 13. Sullivan Will be There 14. Are We to Part Like This? 15. He Loved Her - Who Did? He Did - Where? 16. Maggie Jane.

NB: Available via the [Record Mine](http://www.recordmine.com) website.



ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY (Australia only)

- 1892:** DAN TRACEY (Polytechnic Hall, Syd; 1 Feb. - *) ► n/e (Port Jackson Pavilion, Chowder Bay; 13 Mar. /15 Apr.) ► DAN TRACEY (Gaiety Th, Melb; ca. June-July*).
- 1893:** WILLIAM LAMOUR (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 26 Jan. /19 Feb.) ► RICHARD F. KEATING (Op House, Syd; 10 Mar. - * > Slade Murray's New Lyric Combination) ► DAN TRACEY (Gaiety Th, Syd; ca. 25 Mar.) ► DC&H (Alhambra MH, Syd; 23 Sept. - Oct. *) ► F.M. CLARK (Alhambra Palace of Varieties, Melb; 28 Oct. - *)
- 1894:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli, Syd; 20 Jan. - * > Tivoli circuit debut) ► EDMONDSTONE MARKWELL (sub-lessees Alf Lawton/Will Leslie > Th Royal, Bris; 17 Feb. - * > Lawton and Leslie's All Nations Co) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli, Syd; ca. July - Oct. *) ► HARRY BARRINGTON (S of A, Syd; ca. Aug. * > Barrington's Variety & Burlesque Co) ► GEORGE RIGNOLD (Her Majesty's Th, Syd; 22-31 Dec. * > *The House That Jack Built*)
- 1895:** GEORGE RIGNOLD (Her Majesty's Th, Syd; 1 Jan. - 9 Mar > incl. *The House That Jack Built*, *Susan with the Two Lovely Black Eyes* and Forde's benefit on 9 Mar.) ► EDMUND CANNON (Th Royal, Bris; 30 Mar. - * > season incl. Court Variety and Ballad Co from 13 Apr.) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli, Syd; 29 June - ca. Aug. *) ► C. B. WESTMACOTT (Th Royal, Syd; 26-31 Dec. > *Pat; Or, The Bells of Rathbeal*)
- 1896:** C. B. WESTMACOTT (Th Royal, Syd; 26-31 Dec. > *Pat; Or, The Bells of Rathbeal*) ► HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; ca. Dec.*)
- 1897:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; ca. Jan. *) • (Palace Th, Syd; ca. 13 Mar. *) ► WYBERT REEVE (Th Royal, Adel; 20-26 Mar.)



Source: www.oldukphotos.com



Source: www.fredgodfreysongs.ca



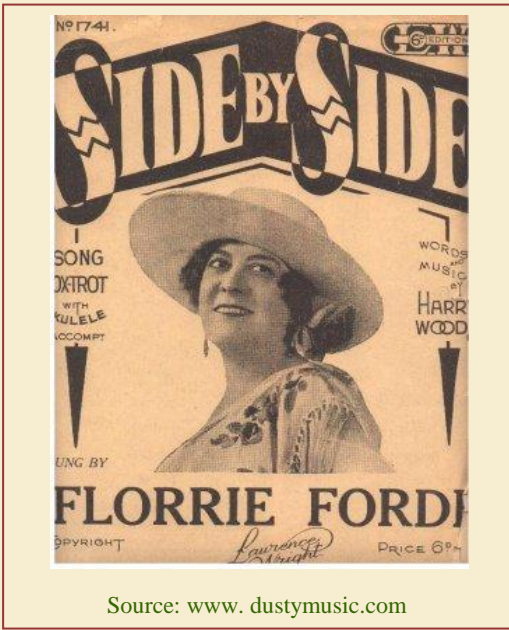
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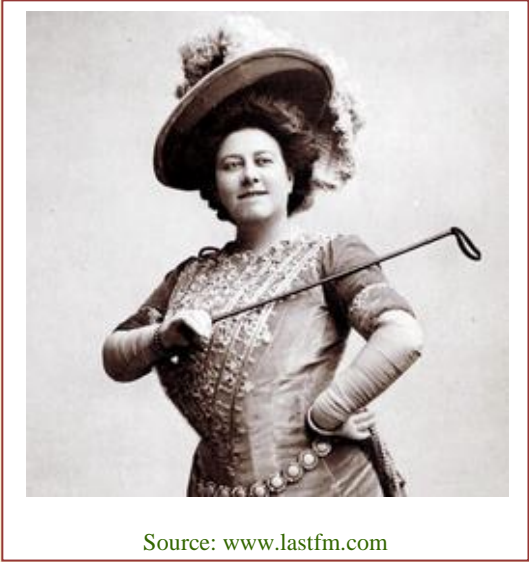
Source: www.stalkingthebelleepoque.blogspot.com.au



Florrie Forde (L) with actress/dancer Susie Belmore (R)
Source: www.therecordmine.com



Source: www.dustymusic.com



Source: www.lastfm.com

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Brownrigg, Jeff. "[Forde, Florrie \(1875–1940\)](#)." ADB: Supplementary Volume (2005) - online (sighted 9/12/2011)
- "'Gaudy Posy for the Popular Soul': Recovering Australia's Early Popular Recording Stars, A." *Journal of Popular Culture* 33.1 (Summer 1999), 105.
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- Busby, R. *British Music Hall* (1976), v. pags.
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- [Queen of Hearts](#) (film extract) 1937 - accessible online (sighted 20/6/2012)
- Rust, Brian. *British Music Hall*. Harrow, Gramophone Publications, 1979.
- Van Straten, Frank. "Fabulous Florrie Forde." *Victorian Arts Theatre Magazine* May (1987), 21. Reprinted in [Stagewhispers](#) - online (sighted 9/12/2011)
- "World's Greatest Chorus Singer, The." TT: Feb. (1922), 3, 6.
- YouTube. A selection of "[Florrie Forde](#)" videos are available via the *YouTube* website.

See also:

- CTTA:** (1995), 233.
- JJ:** 29 Sept. (1927), 28 [photo]
- OCAM:** (1997), 225-6.
- SMH:** 11 Mar. (1895), 3 [re: Forde's benefit]
- SW:** 23 Feb. (1929), 17.
- TT:** 1 Feb. (1906), 15 [re: marriage]

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