

## NELLIE KOLLE

Nellie Kolle first toured Australia in 1912 for the Brennan-Fuller organisation and eventually. Between 1916 and the early 1920s, she worked almost exclusively for Fullers' Theatres Ltd in Australia and New Zealand, establishing herself as not only one of that firm's leading pantomime principal boys, but also as one of the most popular female performers working on the Australian variety stage. From 1922 onwards Kolle secured regular engagements with other leading variety companies, and during the middle of the decade travelled around Australia with her own vaudeville show. Between 1927 and 1928 she worked almost exclusively for Clay's Bridge Theatre Ltd (which included a 1927 tour of regional Queensland). Kolle continued performing in pantomimes and revue during the late 1920s and early 1930s and is thought to have maintained her presence on the variety stage in Australia up until at least the 1940s.

Born Nellie Frances Colley in England ca.1892, Nellie Kolle decided to pursue a career as a singer from an early age after having received a diploma from the London College of Music at age ten. One report notes that even as a youth she been "endowed with a voice of wonderful tone and power [and] was gifted with natural stage equipment" (AV: 2 Feb. 1916, n. pag.). After winning first prize in a competition for juveniles, the prize being a week's engagement at a London suburban hall with a salary of £3, she went on to become well known around the English provinces as the leader of the famous Dixie Dolls. Sometime after turning professional she changed the spelling of her last name, on advice from her agent Will Collins, to avoid similarity with Ada Colley (TT: Jan. 1918, 38).

Kolle came to the attention of Ben Fuller in 1912 and she was subsequently contracted for 16 week Australian and New Zealand tour. Four years later *Australian Variety* wrote that although some of her efforts were rather amateurish during her early antipodean tours, she nevertheless earned unstinting praise and unlimited appreciation from Fullers audiences. "In this latter connection," notes the magazine, "Miss Kolle has found it rather awkward to, at times, keep the stage waiting whilst she responded to the insistent demands for encores" (2 Feb. 1916, n. pag.). Such was her reception during these early tours that Kolle eventually settled in Australia and maintained a presence on the variety stage right through into the 1940s.

Although largely associated with the Fullers up until the mid-to-late 1920s, Kolle began accepting brief engagements with other variety managements, notably Dix-Baker (Hunter Valley) and Frank Graham and Bert Howard (Sydney), from as early as 1914. By this stage, too, it appears that she had begun to develop a more professional act, with reviews indicating that her appeal had begun to find greater critical support. Indeed, with most reviews of her performances tending to make mention of her widespread appeal, Kolle appears to have begun establishing herself as one of the leading principle boys and variety artists working in Australia by around 1915-1916. Reviews, critical comments and fan mail published during that period clearly indicate that she had by then become a major attraction on the Fullers circuit. One obviously bedazzled Kolle fan, writing from Auckland to the *Theatre* in 1915, echoed the sentiment of most critics along the Dominion circuit: "No individual singer has left so deep a remembrance as Miss Kolle. Turns have come and gone - good turns; but a return visit by Miss Kolle would be more welcome in Auckland than any other artist we have seen here before" (June 1915, 43.). Upon her return to Sydney in early January 1916 the *Australian Variety* critic had no doubt who was the Fullers' star attraction:

The applause hit of the bill at the National is, beyond doubt, Nellie Kolle, the clever young English male impersonator. Possessing an exceptionally powerful voice, with fine tone and quality, and rendering her songs with perfect enunciation, she was recalled a half dozen times at her opening on Saturday (26 Jan. 1916, n. pag.).

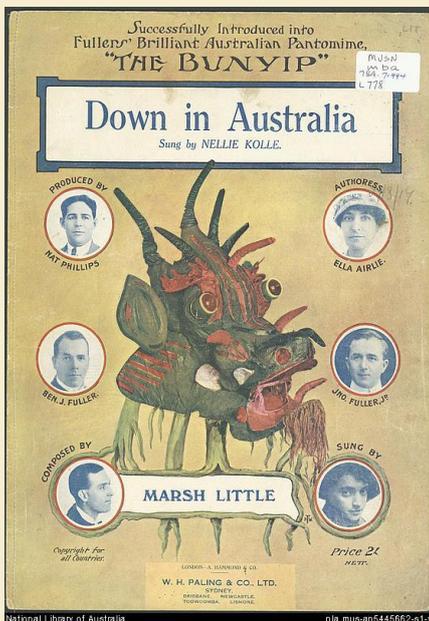
While not as overly enthusiastic, the *Theatre* noted that she had finally "lost the rawness and raucousness" of her previous singing." The critic went on to write: "There is no art in Miss Kolle's work. But she has had experience.... [and she] lives every line she sings.... it would make the average chorus-comedian die with envy to see what Miss Kolle so effortlessly accomplishes. Had it only been this gifted girl's luck to come under the right direction she might long ago have been one of the world's vaudeville stars" (Mar. 1916, 47).



From "Back to Virginia"

by Vince Courtney

Source: National Library of Australia



Source: National Library of Australia

Over the next few years Kolle continued to draw high praise from the critics and attract huge audiences. The highpoint of 1916 was without a doubt her starring role in the Fullers' *The Bunyip* pantomime (Grand Opera House), which saw her score several hit songs – notably Marsh Little's patriotic "Down in Australia" and Ella Airlie's "Back to Kosciusko." The *Theatre* wrote of her a few weeks into the season: "Nellie Kolle is as popular in pantomime as she is in vaudeville. Her numerous admirers in the latter sphere will know what that means. Such is Miss Kolle's magnetic force, to say nothing of her personal, individual charm, that she has at the close of her songs to tear herself away from the demonstratively-applauding spectators" (Jan. 1917, 22). Following the close of the pantomime she travelled to Melbourne to make a guest appearance with Nat Phillips' 'Stiffy and Mo' company during its debut season in the Victorian capital.

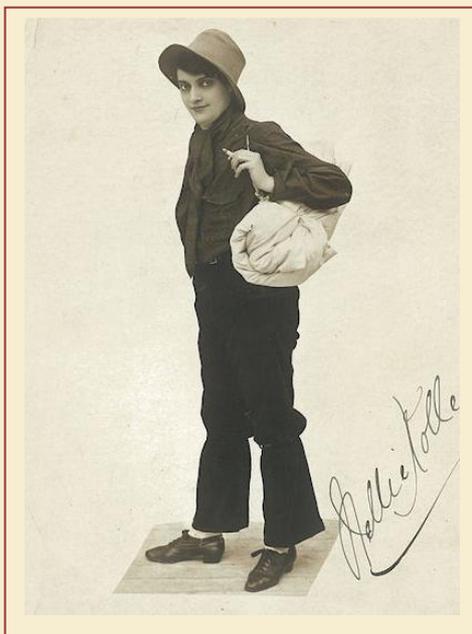
During the holiday period of 1917/18 she was again the principle boy in a Fullers pantomime, this being *Robinson Crusoe*. *Australian Variety* records in November of 1917 that her drawing potential was such that she had only been able to play three cities in an 18 month period, (the third city being Adelaide) "a record any artist would feel proud to claim in any part of the world" (23 Nov. 1917, n. pag.).

While Kolle's career continued to rise, not so her personal life. 1918 saw her face an embarrassing public scandal when she was sued for divorce by her husband, Graham Herbert Penrose Hopkins, on the grounds of desertion. The pair had married in Wellington in October 1912 while she was on tour in New Zealand for the Fullers. A theatrical manager of Phair's Buildings in Melbourne, Hopkins had apparently sold his business and accompanied his fiancée her tour, having been promised that she would retire from the stage upon the conclusion of her contract six months later. Given her popularity by the end of the Kolle not surprisingly changed her mind and accepted another contract. According to Hopkins, his wife continually promised to give up the stage, but each time a contract finished she took up another one. The court was told that there were two children from the union but that "she would not give up the stage to live a domestic life, and would not live with him any longer." Kolle was further recorded as saying she would go to Perth for her next engagement despite her husband not giving her his consent, and that she "was sick and tired of living with him." Hopkins was awarded a decree nisi by the judge (GR: 1 Dec. 1918, n. pag.).



As principle boy in *Bluebeard*  
Fullers, 1921  
*Green Room* Feb. (1922), 6.

Despite her private life having been made so embarrassingly public, Kolle's career continued to climb leading into the early 1920s as she maintained an almost constant presence on the Fullers' Australian and New Zealand circuits. In 1922 she took on what is believed to have been her first engagement with Harry Clay, an association which saw her generally perform as the headline act over his circuit. During the next few years she apparently formed her own troupe, touring throughout Australia, including many country areas. A 1925 par in the *Theatre's* April issue indicates, for example that she was "again" touring the towns of West Australia. The following month Kolle herself wrote to the magazine, informing them that:



I am touring the West with my own vaudeville show, using my own motor car. The combination has a fine reputation around the country towns visited. ... It is my intention to leave for the East next month, and will make the trip by car (May 1925, n. pag.).

As the Swaggy in *The Bunip* (1916)  
Source: [www.gaynewsbits.com](http://www.gaynewsbits.com)

In 1926 Kolle is again known to have been working the Clay circuit, an association which lasted through to the next year. "Nellie Kolle is one of the shining lights at the Gaiety Theatre, Oxford Street, this week," notes *Just It* in September. "Audiences never seem to grow tired of her varied repertory of songs, in the choruses of which many of the audience join. The Australian favourite is well to the fore in up-to-date ditties" (23 Sept. 1926, 29). During this period she continued to performing in pantomimes, with her appearance in Bert "Mugsy" Desmond's production of *Puss in Boots* being a feature attraction. Sometime during the early part of the year she came fifth in a song contest held by the Sydney *Sun* with her own composition, and later headlined Clay's return tour of Queensland under Wally Edwards' stewardship. Press reports indicate that, as usual, Kolle's appearance on stage brought forth thunderous applause, and that she could rarely escape without multiple recalls.

After leaving Clay's, Kolle's movements have become a little less clear - due mostly to the lack of interest in vaudeville by the industry magazines. It is known, however, that she established an association of several years with the O'Donnell and Ray Company, who were noted for their pantomimes on the Fuller circuit around this time. *Everyone's* records in 1928: "She is one of the reasons why the company is playing to phenomenal business throughout Australia. A review of her role as Prince Rupert of Kingswood in *Beauty and the Beast* at the Melbourne Palace in January 1929 further notes: "Nellie Kolle as principal boy proves that she can hold her own with the best of them. The manner in which she works the audience up to join her in the singing of choruses is a tribute to personality" (16 Jan. 1929, 40). Frank Van Straten also records that she appeared on the Tivoli circuit at some stage.

As a variety performer Nellie Kolle's gift for mimicry and her undoubted vocal ability saw her become well-known throughout Australia. The *Toowoomba Chronicle* makes it clear, too, that as a musician she had much talent. "Her mastery of the piano is perhaps her greatest talent," wrote the papers theatre critic. "Her touch is sure and firm and the result of this all too rare gift is clarity in the music which makes it a treat to listen to. She gave a very fine rendering of an impression of the intermezzo, *Cavaleria Rusticana*. Afterwards she played syncopated jazz, and accompaniments for her own monologues, and also gave a song 'Sydney' written and composed by herself" (19 Mar. 1927, 5).

Details of Nellie Kolle's career from the 1930s onwards remain largely unclear at this stage. She is known to have maintained a presence on the variety stage in Australia up until at least the early 1940s, however. In 1932, for example, she appeared in Adelaide with the Tivoli Frivolities (ca. Aug. – 12 Sept.), and was a feature artist in the 1939 Charles A. Wenham directed pantomime, *Sinbad the Sailor*. Kollie co-wrote the song "One for the Road" (with Maurice Guttridge) for the production. She also reportedly headlined the Coles Bohemian Company during its 1939 season in Perth (with the troupe playing in a tent erected on the corner of Hay and Irwin Streets). When Kolle eventually retired she settled in Adelaide, remaining there for the rest of her life.

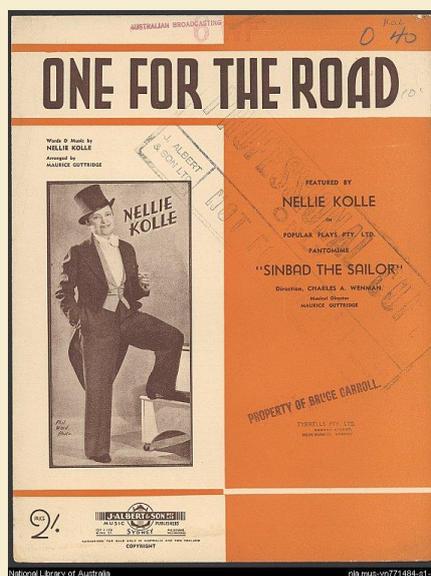
## RECORDINGS

The following recordings are available commercially and/or through various Australian libraries.

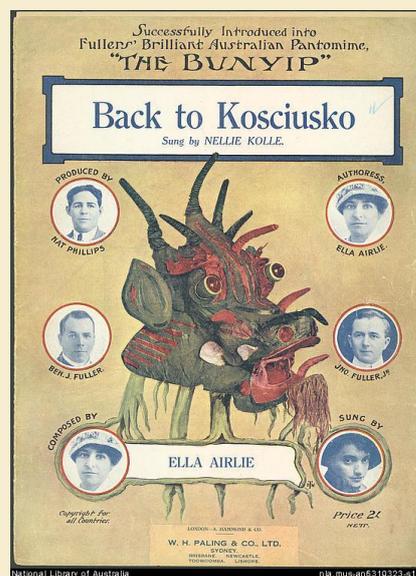
- *Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 1*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 429. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] ("Tell Them That You're a Londoner").



(1920)



(1939)



(1916)

## FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "[Kolle, Nellie](#)." *AustLit* (2007).

--- "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930." (1998).

Kolle, Nellie. "Do Not Get Too Gay with the Emotions : Nellie Kolle on Success - Popular Singer's Recipe." FN: 1 July (1922), 3.

Van Straten, Frank. *Tivoli* (2003), 110.

--- CTTA: (1995), 603.

### See also:

**AV:** 29 Dec. (1915), n. pag. • 26 Jan. (1916), front cover • 2 Feb. (1916), n. pag. • 29 Mar. (1916), n. pag. • 17 Jan. (1917), n. pag. • 23 Nov. (1917), front cover • 9 May (1919), 15 • 24 Dec. (1920), 5.

**E:** 1 Aug. (1928), 45 [on tour via the transcontinental railway for O'Donnell and Ray].

**FN:** 28 Jan. (1922), front cover • 24 June (1922), 13.

**GR:** 1 Feb. (1922), 6 [in *Bluebeard*] • July (1922), 31.



Source: [www.flickrhivemind.net](http://www.flickrhivemind.net)



Source: National Library of Australia

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