

DAISY MERRITT

Adept at comedy work, dancing, singing and acting, Daisy Merritt started out as a dancer, and then dance teacher before teaming up with Nat Phillips. The pair then spent almost eight years touring the international variety circuits before returning to Australia 1912. Over the next four years they presented a sketch act which saw gradually develop his famous "Stiffy" character. Merritt subsequently became a principle member of his Stiffy and Mo Revue Company, and later the Whirligigs.

Born sometime around 1871, May Ann (Daisy) Merritt's name has first been located in 1897 on the bills of the Coogee Palace and Bondi Aquarium (Sydney). By 1901 she was assisting Tom Donnelly at his Hunter Street dance studio (SMH: 12 Apr. 1901, 2), and two years later was operating her own academy situated opposite the Criterion Theatre. She apparently specialised in step and fancy dancing. Merritt's connection with Nat Phillips dates back sometime prior to that year, however. It is believed that the couple was engaged in an affair before Phillips and his first partner Tommy Armstrong left Australia in 1903 to tour the USA vaudeville circuits. Quite a few years older than Phillips, Merritt was married and the mother of three small children – Harry, Will and Lorrie.¹ When Phillips and Tommy Armstrong ended their ten-year partnership in 1905, Phillips asked Merritt to join him in the USA. In an interview with *Theatre* magazine, Phillips indicates that they opened the night after he and Armstrong gave their final performance (Dec. 1914, 39).

MISS DAISY MERRITT teaches every kind Step and Fancy Dance quickly. Equitable-cham., op. Criterion.
MISS DAISY MERRITT, Expert Teacher every kind Step Fancy Dancing. Equitable-ch., opp. Criterion.

Sydney Morning Herald 13 Feb. (1903), 2.

Nat Phillips Collection (UQFL9)
Courtesy of the Fryer Library, The University of Queensland



Phillips and Merritt spent around four years working the American variety circuits (ca. 1905 to 1908) before heading to Britain and Europe where they worked for a further 6 years. Their reputation by this stage was such that they were able to secure a contract with eminent British variety circuit Moss and Stoll. Phillips claims that the original contract was for thirty-two weeks each year up until 1916. Over the next six or so years, the pair played virtually every syndicate hall in the UK and appeared on regular occasions at the Coliseum Theatre (London). Their act around this time had developed into a comedy sketch turn that utilised Phillips's piano playing and acrobatic capabilities, and their combined expertise in eccentric dancing and vocal work. When not engaged on the Moss and Stoll circuit, Phillips and Merritt toured a number of European circuits, playing such countries as Holland, Germany, and Russia. For these largely non-English-speaking audiences, they simply cut out their sketch work and relied instead on physical comedy and singing.

In 1912, Phillips and Merritt returned to Australia on what was supposed to be a holiday to visit family. While in Sydney, they were offered a two-week season by Ben and John Fuller. The reception they received the night Ben Fuller saw their act convinced him to sign them immediately to a twelve-month contract. The conditions and prospects offered were such that they decided against taking up the four-year option they still had with Moss and Stoll, and remained in Australia on a more or less permanent basis thereafter. The pair toured the Fullers' Australian and New Zealand circuits extensively throughout the next two years. From around late 1914 and up until mid-way through 1916, Merritt partnered Phillips in many sketches he developed around his famous 'Stiffy the Rabbitoh' character. She also toured the subcontinent with him for around seven months during the same period.

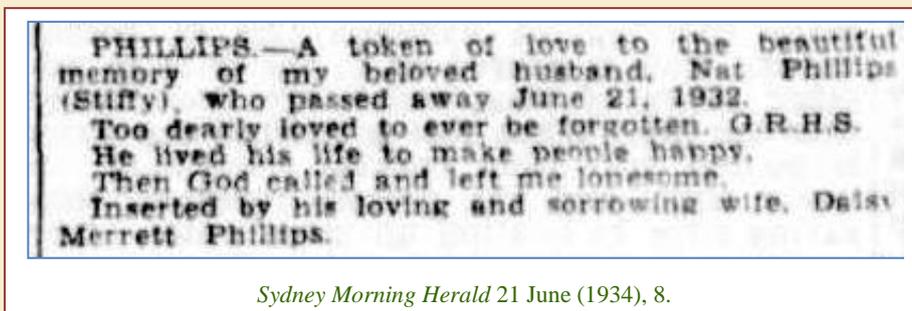
Merritt's career was largely overshadowed by her husband's massive success as one half of the iconic and hugely popular Stiffy and Mo comedy duo, even though she was a principal member of the ensemble cast and appeared in most of her husband's pantomimes. Merritt continued performing with her husband up until his death in 1932. She

¹ Merritt's married name may have been Jeffrey. Her death notice in the *Sydney Morning Herald* indicates that she was the beloved mother of Harry, Will and Lorrie Jeffrey (27 Nov. 1934, 10).

died two years later on 26 November aged 71. According to information passed on from Kim Phillips and her family, Merritt's death was in part due to health problems brought on by heavy drinking which became progressively worse after Nat's death. She was survived by her three children.

SEE ALSO

- [Nat Phillips](#)
- [Nat Phillips Stiffy and Mo Revue Co](#)
- [Nat Phillips Whirligigs Co](#)



ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS AND PUBLISHED MATERIAL

- Hysterical is the Phillips-Merritt girl. As a singer she will shortly have no voice at all. This is not due to faulty production because production is a word that can't in any way be applied to her singing. Through forcing, her voice has become apparently louder but really weaker. It is losing every day the little tone it originally possessed (TT: Nov. 1914, 37).
- *All Aboard* [Princess Theatre, Sydney] Nat Phillips and Roy Rene as Stiffy and Mo are the life and soul of the show in a comedy sense, except for Daisy Merritt, who is emphatically a hit as the slavey – Norah Snobs. Mr Phillips tries his luck as a palmist. He is consulted by Miss Merritt. "You are very beautiful," he says looking at her palm. "Can you," she asks in surprise, "tell I'm good-looking by looking at my hand." "Well," remarks Mr Phillips, "I couldn't tell it by looking at your face" (TT: Oct. 1916, 49).
- A striking feature of the performance of Daisy Merritt, as one of the ugly sisters in the *Cinderella* pantomime, at Newtown Majestic, is the popularity of the role with both sexes of the audience. As a rule, parts like this in pantomime do not make any appeal to men, whose fancy runs in quite another direction, but in the case of Miss Merritt Daffodil is exceedingly popular. The reason would seem to be in the attractive personality of the comedienne. Miss Merritt makes herself personally liked by the audience. She is kindly, humorous, yet a little character appeal to the audience, and the representation has the quiet touches of detail that go to make it well acted. She has a resonant voice that and persuasive manner that at once makes an impression and throughout her performance Miss Merritt achieves her effects without recourse to vulgarity (FN: 21 Jan. (1922), 4).



**Lola Hunt and Daisy Merritt
as the Ugly Sisters in
Cinderella (1921)**

Fuller News Dec/Jan. 1921/22, 14.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. In the 1914 *Theatre* magazine interview, Phillips mentions that he and Merritt married prior to his departure for America (Dec. 1914, 39). This claim is contradicted, however, by information gathered in later years by Jack Phillips' family. Their research indicates that the couple married in New York in 1904. Phillips' final will, made in 1931, clouds this issue somewhat when he claims that he and his wife had been married for twenty-four years, suggesting that it could have been as late as 1907.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY (ca. 1897-1905)

For further details regarding Merritt's career see Nat Phillips, Nat Phillips Stiffy and Mo Co and Nat Phillips Whirligigs.

1897: (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 26 Jan.) • (Bondi Aquarium, Syd; 5 May) • (Coogee Palace Aquarium, Syd; 2 Oct.).

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Dainty Merritt Scores." FN: 21 Jan. (1922), 4.

Djubal, Clay. "[Merritt, Daisy](#)." *AustLit* (2006).

[untitled]. AV: 24 Nov. (1915), 9. [Letter to *Australian Variety* editor Martin C. Brennan from Merritt and Phillips]



Nat and Daisy

Source: Charles Norman, *When Vaudeville was King* (1983), 141.

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