Lydia Thompson

Queen of Burlesque

Kurt Gänzl

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FORGOTTON STARS OF THE MUSICAL THEATRE

Kurt Gänzl, Series Editor

Lydia Thompson BY KURT GÄNZL

Leslie Stuart BY ANDREW LAMB

William B. Gill BY KURT GÄNZL

David Braham BY JOHN FRANCESCHINA

Alice May BY ADRIENNE SIMPSON

Harry B. Smith BY JOHN FRANCESCHINA

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FORGOTTEN STARS OF THE MUSICAL THEATRE

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For Ian
With Love

Lydia Thompson, Queen of Burlesque. Courtesy Peter Joslin collection.

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"Sic transit gloria spectaculi": Some Famous but Forgotten Figures of the Musical Theater

Over the past few years, I have spent most of my time researching, writing, and otherwise putting together the vast quantity of text involved in the second edition of my now three-volumed *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*. And, as the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe* exhaustedly sings, "thank goodness they're both of them over!" Part of this extremely extended extending exercise involved my compiling bibliographies of biographical works for the hundreds (or was it thousands?) of people whose careers in the musical theatre warranted an entry in the *Encyclopedia*. As I duly compiled, however, I became surprisedly aware of just how many outstanding figures of the historical stage have never, ever been made the subject of even a monograph-sized "life and works." Time and time again, I found that the articles that I have researched (from scratch, not only by choice but quite simply because no one has ever, it seems, done it before) and written for the *Encyclopedia* are the largest pieces of biographical copy up till now put together on this or that person or personality. And I do not mean nobodies: I mean some of the most important and most fascinating theatrical figures of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatres.

This series of short biographies is intended to take the first small step toward rectifying that situation: to bring back to notice and, perhaps, even to their rightful place in the history of the international theatre, a few of the people whose names have—for all but the scholar and the specialist—drifted into the darkness of the past, leaving too little trace.

This is a very personal project and one very dear to my heart. And because it is so personal, even though the majority of the volumes in the series are written by my closest colleagues in the theatre-books world, rather than by myself, you will find that they do rather have me stamped on them in some ways. And I take full responsibility for that.

These books are not intended to be university theses. You will not find them dotted with a dozen footnotes per page and hung with vast appendices of sources. I am sure that that is a perfectly legitimate way of writing biography, but it's a way that has never appealed to me and, because I am being allowed to "do it my way" in this series, the paraphernalia of the thesis, of the learned pamphlet, has here been kept to a minimum. My care, in these biographies, is not to be "learned"; it is to tell the story of Lydia, or Willie or Alice, of Tom or Harry or of Dave, of her or his career in the theatre and (as much as is possible at a century's distance) on the other side of the footlights as well: to relate what they did and what they achieved, what they wrote or what they sang, where they went and with whom, what happened to them and what became of them. Because these people had fascinating lives—well, they fascinate me, and I hope they will fascinate you too—and just to tell their stories, free of any decoration, any theorizing, any generalities, any "significance" (oh! that word)—seems to me to be thoroughly justified.

The decoration, the theorizing, the generalities, and an exaggerated search for (shudder) significance will all be missing. Perhaps because I've spent so much of my life as a writer of reference works and encyclopedias, I am a thorough devotee of fact, and these books are intended to be made up wholly of fact. Not for me even the "educated guess." Not unless one admits it's just a guess, anyhow.

So, what you will get from us are quite a lot of dates and places, facts and figures, quite a lot of theatre bills reproduced word for word from the originals, quite a lot of songwords from the songwriters and singers, of text from the playwrights and actors, and, where we have been able to dig it up, as much autograph material from the hands of our subjects as is humanly possible.

What you won't get any more than can be helped is the "he must have

felt that . . ." (must he, who says?), or the "perhaps she. . . ." There will be no invented conversations. No "Marie Antoinette turned to Toulouse-Lautrec and said 'you haven't telephoned Richard the Lionheart this week. . . .'" Direct speech in a biography of a prerecording-age subject seems to me to be an absolute denial of the first principle of biography: the writing down of the content and actions of someone's life. Indeed, there will be nothing invented at all. My theory of biography, as I say, is that it is facts. And if the facts of someone's life are not colorful and interesting enough in themselves to make up a worthwhile book, then—well, I've chosen the wrong people to biographize.

Choosing those people to whom these first six volumes would be devoted was actually not as difficult as I'd thought it might be. When Richard, my editor, asked me for a first list of "possibles" I wrote it down—a dozen names—in about five minutes. It started, of course, with all my own particular "pets": the special little group of a half-dozen old-time theatre folk who, through my twenty years and more working in this field, have particularly grabbed my interest and provoked me to want to learn more and more and indeed everything about them. The only trouble was—I was supposed to be editing this series, not writing the whole jolly thing. And there was no way that I was handing over any of my special pets to someone else—not even Andrew, Adrienne, or John—so I had to choose. Just two.

Lydia Thompson, to me, was the most obvious candidate of all. How on earth theatre literature has got to its present state without someone (even for all the wrong reasons) turning out a book on Lydia, when there are three or four books on Miss Blurbleurble and two or three on Miss Nyngnyng, I cannot imagine. Lydia chose herself.

Having picked myself this "plum," I then decided that I really ought to be a bit tougher on myself with my second pick. Certainly, I could take it easy and perhaps pot the incomplete but already over-one-million-word biography of the other great international star of Lydia's era, Emily Soldene, which is hidden bulgingly under my desk, into a convenient package. But then, why not have a crack at a really tough nut?

When I said I was going to "do" Willie Gill, almost everyone—even the most knowledgeable of my friends and colleagues—said "who?" Which seems to me to be a very good reason for putting down on paper the tale of the life and works of the man who wrote Broadway's biggest hit musical of his era. Tough it has been and tough it is, tracking him and his down, but what satisfaction to drag from the marshes of the past

something that seemed so wholly forgotten. A full-scale biography of a man about whom *nothing* was known!

Having realized that these two choices were pinned to the fact that it was I who was going to be writing about them, I then also realized that I ought to be considering my other choices not from my own "pet" list, but to suit the other authors who were going to take part in the series. First catch your author.

Well, I caught three. The fourth, pretexting age, overuse, and retirement, got away. But I got the other three—my three (since the fourth is retired) favorite and most respected writer colleagues in the theatre-books business. Enter Andrew, Adrienne, and John: one from England, one from New Zealand, and one from the United States. A very judicious geographical spread. And the subjects for the four final volumes were, of course, chosen in function of what enthused them.

For Andrew, the choice was the not-so-very-forgotten English songwriter Leslie Stuart, whose *Florodora* songs stunned Broadway, and the rest of the world, in the earliest years of this century. For Adrienne, I went for the mysterious Alice May, whose career ranged from Australia and New Zealand to the West End and Broadway and who has gone down in history—when anyone reads that bit of history—as Gilbert and Sullivan's first (full-length) prima donna. For John, I earmarked two very different American writers: the musician Dave Braham, who, although his wordsmith Ned Harrigan has attracted repeated attention down through the years, has been himself left puzzlingly in the shade, and the prolific, ebullient Harry B. Smith, the writer who flooded Broadway with over two hundred musicals in an amazing and amazingly successful career.

I feel bad about the ones who have got left on the cutting-room floor—but, maybe later? If we all survive what I've discovered with some apprehension is the intensive work needed to extract from the past the life and works of someone long gone, and largely forgotten.

But it has been worth it. Worth all the work. I've enjoyed it enormously. I know my colleagues have enjoyed it, and are still enjoying it. And I hope those of you who read the stories of Lydia, Willie, and Alice, of Dave, Harry, and Tom, will enjoy them too. And I hope, too, that you will remember these people. Because I really do reckon that they deserve better than to be forgotten.

Kurt Gänzl

Lydia Thompson: Queen of Burlesque

Lydia Thompson is one of the legends of the musical theatre. And, like so many other legends, in all walks of life, her history—professional and personal—has been so long and so liberally embroidered by raconteurs and writers with the fiorature of fame and fancy, that now—150 years after her first appearance on any stage, and nearly a century after her death—it has become more than a little problematic to sieve the veritable facts of her life and career from out of the mass of favorite fictions.

Whenever Lydia's name finds its way into print in this day and age, it is almost inevitably to tell a tale about her "British Blondes," the company of touring burlesque actresses and comedians of which she was the star and the overwhelming central attraction. This little troupe, purpose built for the occasion, stunned and stirred up the theatre-goers of New York in the fall of 1868, and its ladies—and most especially their leader—went on to become household names throughout America as the epitome of splendidly saucy and slightly shocking glamour. Lydia's more newspaperworthy and retailable exploits—"Lydia horsewhips Chicago

editor"; "Lydia's Lesbian Attacker"—illustrated by pictures of bulging damsels in tights and trunks, or such exaggerated-to-wholly-fictional tales as a supposed fling with a Russian Grand Duke, have left us with an image of this unique star of the Victorian musical and comic stage as a kind of storming, sexy, mid-nineteenth-century Miss Whiplash. Nothing could be further from the truth. There was much, much more to Lydia Thompson than a pair of temptingly tights-clad thighs and some slightly souped-up scandals.

The real Lydia Thompson was a sweet, gentle, and all too-loving creature who sparkled and shone rather than glittered from the stage. She was beautiful too, stunningly beautiful by the standards of her times, although today, when the spindly, pneumatic, overtoasted damsels of the Californian beaches have been foisted on us as the ideal of feminine beauty, she probably wouldn't turn a head. Except of course by the force of her personality. For that personality was at the heart of her attraction. Lydia Thompson simply radiated star quality. A star in the theatre from her earliest teens, she never relinquished that title not even when, half a century on, she ended her career playing small, supporting character roles. And her greatest attraction was not ever in her since much written about sex appeal, but in her capacity for communicating merriment, pleasure, happiness, joy. Time and again, the better journalists of her day took time off to comment on what they recognized as her vital stage talent: she sizzled with the feeling of laughter. She was having such a wonderful time up there on the boards, with her graceful dances, her lively and foolishly funny songs, her cheeky comedy, and the vivacious interplay she enjoyed with each and every one of her fellow actors, that you couldn't help but get swept up in the gaiety of her goings-on. Lydia Thompson simply made you feel really, really good. And you loved her for it.

She was also, not incidentally, one of the most technically skilled and effective dancers of her generation, a dazzling comedienne who played during her career opposite some of the great comic actors—classic and low—of her day, and was never, ever outshone, and the possessor of both a pretty, if unambitious, soprano, and of a deliciously winning way with a popular song of the comic, piquant, or merry kind (she was never, ever into the droopy ingénues). All that, added to the star quality and the physical charms, and just a little of the right help from the right man—oh! that devilish man!—at the right moment in her life and career—it is no wonder Lydia Thompson became not only a half-century star but also

a legend for all theatrical time. It is no wonder that a decade after her death, an old play-goer writing to the press would sigh: "Like Nellie Farren and Emily Soldene, there has never been but one Lydia Thompson. . . ." And he was right. Other stars had flown and flourished, in the heydays of the Victorian stage, but Nellie and Emily and Lydia—they were more than just stars of a moment, stars of a decade, stars of even a generation: they were indeed the stuff of legends.

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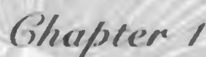

The Family Album

I don't think there was ever too much secret about Lydia Thompson's birth and family circumstances during her lifetime. However, her parents didn't impinge on her working life and journalists of and after her heyday were more interested in writing about the blondes, the whips, and the lesbians than in asking her about her background, so the actual facts of her parentage were never, to my knowledge, reported. By the time of that heyday, anyway, both her real parents were long dead and, so it appears, her financially foolish stepfather, too. Only one amongst all of her brothers and sisters, her youngest half-sister Clara, chose the stage as a career, and, after working with Lydia in her earliest days, Clara moved on to leading roles in comic opera and eventually to a long career in the drama, and their professional paths crossed but little.

In spite of this apparent contemporary information whiteout, in his book entitled *Burleycue,* published in 1931, Bernard Sobel surprisingly turned up with what purported to be Lydia's genealogy:

> She was born in London, February 19, 1841. Her grandfather Philip Thornton eloped with and married a Miss Mellon at Gretna Green. Her parents were Philip Wilburn Thompson and his Quaker wife, "a lady who was always fond of the stage". . . .

In 1931 Lydia's daughter was still very much alive. Did she give Sobel this information? If not, from where did he get it? It has gone down as history, copied from one book to another by the credulous and the lazy—but it is not correct.[1]

Lydia's parents were Philip Thompson (the "Milbourn" [sic], which appears on her wedding certificate, seems to have been a bit of posthumous upmarketing) and his wife, Eliza. Eliza may or may not have been a Quaker but she was scarcely a "lady" of the kind Sobel suggests. Our heroine's mother was née Eliza Cooper, the daughter of one Michael Cooper, described on her subsequent wedding certificate as "gentleman" and in the census as "of this county," and when she married Philip Thompson on 11 June 1834 at the church of St. Paul's in Covent Garden, she had buried one husband already. She was the widow Griggs.

Daughter of a gentleman? Not likely. That familiar wedding certificate euphemism was just that. Michael Cooper was almost certainly in the beer business. And it seems that Mr. Griggs was, too. Eliza was a pure product of the public-house system.

Philip, apparently, hailed originally from Cumberland. The vital records of the British nation show a Philip Thompson born to Roland Thompson and Ruth née Dobson and christened 16 May 1802 at Wetheral, near Carlisle. And yes, Wetheral is the stuff of which myths are made: it is indeed just down the A74 from Gretna Green. Philip and Eliza christened their firstborn daughter by the not very common name of Ruth, so this seems a likely identification.

Philip was thirty-two and a bachelor when he wed the widowed Eliza, and his daily bread came, again, from pub-keeping. He was the licensee of the Sheridan Knowles public house at number 12 Brydges Street in Covent Garden. Later on, however, he gave up the pub—or it gave him up. The 1841 census of London shows him living at 15 Queen's Row, Amwell, Clerkenwell, and described as an account agent by occupation. A year after this census, however, he was dead, having passed away at that same 15 Queen's Row, on 2 July 1842, "aged 40, of consumption." One Elizabeth Hoskins "of 59 Cow Cross" put her mark to his death certificate as being "present at the death." Not Eliza. Was she

out working, or had she walked out on him since April 1841? Given what happened after his death, the latter hypothesis isn't wholly improbable. But in any case, she evidently wasn't around the house when she was widowed for the second time in seven years.

The widow Thompson was left with three children: Ruth Maria Thompson, born in the parish of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, 24 January 1835 and known as Maria rather than Ruth; Eliza Hodges Thompson, born at the Sheridan Knowles pub on 19 February 1838; and Alfred Hodges Thompson, born at the self-same licensed premises on 28 September 1839. A fourth and last child of the union, Ellen Hodges Thompson, born in January 1841, had died before her first birthday. And, yes, "Eliza Hodges Thompson" was the child who would become world famous as "Lydia." She was born, as the census confirms, in 1838, not in 1841, and not in 1836, a date insisted on by many of her obituarists including that of the usually impeccable *The Era*. This fortunate circumstance means that she scrapes into the first volumes of Britain's General Registry Office registrations and, as a result, I hold in my hand her birth certificate.

The second-time widow didn't remain a widow for longer than it takes to hop out of—or into—bed. Philip died in July and on 29 September Eliza went to the altar at the Parish Church of St. Mark, Clerkenwell, and re-retied the knot with another publican, the rather older Edward Hodges "of Half Moon Crescent, Islington." This Edward Hodges—fifty-one years old at the time of his marriage—was the son of another Edward Hodges, a papermaker from Farningham in Kent, and his wife, Ann, and he was the landlord of Islington's Canonbury Tavern. Perhaps I'm being too suspicious, but I think the wooing and winning in this case might not have been as hasty as it looks. In fact, if I were being really suspicious, I'd wonder perhaps just who exactly was the biological father of the curiously named Eliza Hodges Thompson, Ellen Hodges Thompson, and Alfred Hodges Thompson. But perhaps I am being too suspicious. Perhaps Edward had hitherto been naught but a kindly godfather to the Thompson children. In the years following his marriage to Eliza, however, he was a decidedly fertile stepfather. He supplied the three little Thompsons with three half-brothers and one half-sister. In 1845, Eliza gave birth to triplets: three sons, Isaac William, Abraham Edward, and Jacob George Hodges (only the first two survived), and then, on 1 January 1848, to her last child, Clara Rose Hodges. And that was Lydia's family.

That and no more. Later, when she became a star, a number of other Thompsons surfaced in the theatre papers claiming and at best not disclaiming themselves as one relative or another of the shining Lydia,[2] and her funeral reports quoted flowers sent "from her brother, Herbert."[3] But this was, I assure you, it.

Airy Fairy Lydia

"As a child, Lydia amused the people of the neighbourhood by dancing on the streets to the music of itinerant organ-grinders," continues Sobel. "At the age of twelve, in the year 1853, she was dancing through necessity on the professional stage, her father dead and her mother penniless."

Doubtless little Eliza did dance to the street music of the organ-grinders. She probably danced in the pub, too, while stepfather Edward still had one. And she certainly did go on the stage in the early 1850s, although quite when is a moot point. But "of necessity"? In place of her "father dead" she had a stepfather who looks as if he might have been, if anything, a little wiser and steadier in his trade than Philip, and one who continued in the licensed victualling business until a considerable age before retiring, presumably because he was able to. So Eliza of the three husbands was surely not penniless. "Of necessity"? No, I think not.

It was almost certainly a choice. The pretty little pubkeeper's daughter who loved to dance: Why shouldn't she go on the stage and make some money there? And maybe hook herself a good, and even a rich,

husband in the process? She had a better chance of finding one there than hanging around Clerkenwell Green and its public houses. The theatre was indeed a fine option for a pubkeeper's daughter, even if it would not have been such a fine one for "the daughter of a Quaker lady who was always fond of the stage."

In Victorian times, the stage—especially the extravaganza and burlesque stage—was not considered very "nice" as a way of life for a young woman. That is to say, it wasn't the sort of thing a well-bred girl did by choice. She did it only because she was forced to, because Daddy had been killed in the Franco-Prussian War or run off with the governess and someone had to support Mummy and all the little brothers and sisters. And alas, if one were a young lady, one had not learned actually to do anything except sing, dance, sketch, speak French, and indulge in other such ladylike pursuits. When a money-making occupation was needed, only governessing or the dreadful stage were possibilities. And definitely only when it was "necessary." Of course, anything was preferable to governessing. Many a nineteenth-century performer told some variant on this tale to reconcile a stage career with a professed degree of birth. Mostly it was untrue. I don't know whether it was usually believed, even at the time, but it saved appearances.

Quite when the mutation of "Eliza" into "Lydia" Thompson happened and quite when she made her "first appearance on any stage" are other bones of contention. It was certainly prior to 1853 (when our heroine was, in any case, fifteen, not twelve), but whatever engagements the young girl fulfilled in her early teens, they were engagements in which she worked only as a dancer—maybe even simply a chorus dancer.

Several reports—including that of the great journalist George R. Sims, whom I have yet to catch in a provable error—agree that she first appeared "[as principal dancer] in a fairy ballet at Her Majesty's Theatre . . . in 1852." Well, manager Benjamin Lumley abandoned Her Majesty's Theatre after the summer of 1852, and it was closed thereafter right up until the moment that Lydia made her first famous appearance in a featured role, at Christmas 1853, billed as being "from Her Majesty's Theatre." So clearly her appearance there must have happened no later than during the course of Lumley's 1852 summer opera season. But Lydia did not appear in Lumley's opera ballet as a principal. The principals are all clearly billed in the advertisements, and they are all Mademoiselles and Signoras. Which doesn't mean they weren't English, of course.

The fairy ballet? Well, most of the ballets done at Her Majesty's that year, alongside the Italian operas that were the backbone of the season, were rustic fêtes or Frenchified flower-girl stories, so the choice is limited. It looks to me as if the work in question must be the second-to-last new ballet of the season, a piece called *Zélie, ou l'amour et le magie,* written by J. H. Vernoy de St Georges and composed by Gustave Nadaud. Prima ballerina Carolina Rosati, in the title role, shared the spotlight with representatives of air, fire, and water taken from amongst the theatre's less than assolutas: Mdlle Louise Fleury, Mdlle Esper, Mdlle Rosa, Mdlle Allegrini, and Mdlle Lamoureux. Was Lydia hidden under one of these probably pseudonyms? Or was she just a little puff of air or a little spark of flame in the second row of the corps de ballet? We'll never know for sure. But one or the other seems at least possible and even highly probable.

Having got into the theatre, at the age of fourteen, with sufficient skills to be hired as a member of the opera ballet (which, unlike many other theatre "ballets," usually required its coryphées to be able to hold more than three positions and dance more than three steps, rather than just look leggy and buxom), did Lydia just hang around being "of Her Majesty's Theatre" until lightning and Mr. John Baldwin Buckstone struck and she was suddenly hoisted from nowhere into a lead role at the Haymarket Theatre? That's what history, Mr. Sobel, and her obituaries would have us believe.

But, of course, she didn't. She herself mentioned at some stage having "danced for three months in a German Opera Company at Drury Lane" (a season I have failed utterly to find in that theatre's history), but, for some reason, she never, as far as I know, mentioned "The Living Marionettes."

In the season of 1852, a rather surprising success was won in the West End theatre by Mr. Albany Brown's Royal Marionettes: a puppet theatre; genuine woodenheads. But these puppets didn't play in a booth or a stall, they appeared on the stage of a regular little theatre in Adelaide Street, Strand, and later in full-sized theatres, "performing" a repertoire of comedies, operettas, and burlesques such as one might have found on the program of a normal people-populated theatre. They were decidedly convincing woodenheads—they even had changeable heads to allow them to perform "nigger minstrel shows" in the requisite "make-up"—and decidedly well-liked ones, too.

In this atmosphere, John Thomas Ennis, the prompter from the

Haymarket Theatre, set himself up as a small-time producer and launched another novelty show, one that he called "The Living Marionettes." "Living" because, instead of woodenheads, his cast was made up of children. Ennis produced his program at Mr. Henry Lee's so-called Théâtre des Variétés in the Linwood Gallery, Leicester Square, in May 1852. In spite of this seemingly unpromising location, he and his productions found the kind of popular success that often attends kiddie shows. The young people's performances of pieces such as Dibdin's *The Waterman,* Adam's *The Swiss Cottage,* the old William Dimond burletta *Brother and Sister,* an extravaganza called *Oberon,* and a ballet divertissement, *Une nuit de bal,* provoked fine notices ("one of the great novelties of the day"), a three months' town run, a tour to such summery spots as Bath and Sheffield, a return London season, a visit (with the company now expanded from twenty to fifty children) to the East End's Standard Theatre, and a fresh run—with a cast of forty—in the Strand the following year.

The children who took part "some barely above the nursery years, some we should say 'in the teens'" were, initially, not named. Master George, Miss Sarah, Miss Hannah, Miss Charlotte, Miss Sophia was the only identification supplied for the little actors at what soon became known as the Living Marionette Theatre. Only two amongst them were given the grace of a full name on the bills, two who would actually go on to varying adult careers as performers. Master George Beckett, son of the entertainment's director-choreographer and the star of most of the Marionettes' pieces was one; the other was a future opéra-bouffe star of the first degree, "Miss Julia Mathews, aged 8 [actually ten-and-a-half], with a grand fantasia on the pianoforte."

So how do we know Lydia was in the show? We know, because some thirty years down the line, John Ennis, by this time seventy-nine years old and living with only his dog for company as a twenty-year-long pensioner of the Royal Dramatic College "in a little wooden hut a stone's throw of the College's gates," penned a brief reminiscence of his theatrical career for the *Era* newspaper. Writing of his attempt as a producer, he recounted proudly how—in spite of the fact that, when all was tallied up, the venture had itself been "very unprofitable" to him personally —some of "his" children had turned out remarkably well. He mentioned by name Beckett, Julia Mathews, Willie Edouin, and Lydia. The presence of the first two is of course verifiable, so I see no reason to mistrust his memory on the other two, especially since little Master Edouin (aged seven),