

## BERT LE BLANC'S TRAVESTY STARS

Formed in 1915, the Travesty Stars were headed by Bert Le Blanc (in the role of Ike Cohen) and Morris Levy (Jake Mack). The troupe broke a number box office records for the Fullers, opened two of the company's theatres, and went on to rival the Stiffy and Mo company as Australia's most popular wartime revusical ensemble. Among the best known performers to appear with the Travesty Stars were Jim Gerald, Essie Jennings, Lance Vane, Mike Connors, Queenie Paul, Winnie Knight and Carlton Chase. Le Blanc and Mack later led the Who's Who Costume Revue Entertainers. In the late 1920s Le Blanc re-organised the Travesty Stars for a Queensland tour billed as *Frivolities*.



### 1915-1920

Bert Le Blanc formed the Travesty Stars Revue Company (aka The Musical Travesty Company) in 1915 after having completed a national tour with George Willoughby's pantomime *Babes in the Wood*, which had premiered at the Adelphi Theatre, Sydney, in December 1914. Le Blanc was cast as Weary Willie, alongside Australian comedian Ted Stanley as Tired Tim. When the production toured Australia following the Sydney season, Stanley's role was taken over by American Hebrew comedian Jake Mack (born Jacob Snoek). The Le Blanc/Mack partnership in that pantomime was so successful that the pair went on to spend the best part of the next ten years working off each other in revusicals and in vaudeville. From its first season together, the Travesty Stars began breaking box-office records for the Fullers in every city they played. Much of the company's success can be put down to the partnership between Le Blanc and Mack, who together created Ike Cohen and Morris Levi, two Hebrew characters who nevertheless encapsulated the larrikin traits favoured by the contemporary Australian audiences who packed the theatres wherever they played.

The Travesty Stars toured constantly throughout Australia and New Zealand between 1915 and 1920, rivalling Nat Phillips's Stiffy and Mo company as the Fullers' most popular revusical company operating during the war years. Typical of the reviews of the company's shows around this time was a 1915 *Australian Variety* report on *Central 3251* (later known as *In Old Seville*) at the Bijou Theatre, Melbourne. "It scored immense throughout with the customers," wrote the critic. "A bright, breezy combination of singing, dancing and gagging, it put the punch into the bill solid. Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack have still a long vein of genuine humour, and they had the house anyhow with real laughs right through" (28 July 1915, 13). Among his other popular shows staged between 1916 and 1920 were *The Gay Mrs Cohen*, *At the Exposition*, *Keep It Dark*, *Then They Woke Up*, *Fuzzy Wuzzy* and *In Watts* (adapted from the earlier American Burlesque Company hit, *The Grafters*).

The level to which Le Blanc's popularity rose in Australia is demonstrated by the fact he appeared on the front cover of *Australian Variety and Show World* on four occasions during this period, once in 1916 and three times in 1917. He and his company also received considerable coverage both in major industry magazines (*Australian Variety* and the *Theatre*) and in metropolitan and regional newspapers throughout the country. Sir Benjamin and John Fuller also thought highly enough of Le Blanc that they engaged his troupe to open two theatres for them, an honour not even accorded Stiffy and Mo during their career. The first opening occurred on 2 June 1917 when the Fullers began operations at their newly built Majestic Theatre in Newtown (later known as the Elizabethan Theatre). The second occasion was on 8 March 1919, when they opened the newly refurbished National Amphitheatre, which was renamed the National, but became better known simply as the Fullers Theatre. Le Blanc's choice of production for the grand opening was one of his most popular revusicals, *Do it Now* (*Theatre* Apr 1919, 27).

The company's movements throughout 1918 provide an insight into the schedule the company was required to maintain for the Fullers. The troupe - which by then included Lance Vane (brother of Jim Gerald), Lillian Colenzo, and Will Raynor - played a two months season in Brisbane beginning late November 1917 and ending in late January. It immediately transferred to Melbourne, followed by engagements in Adelaide, Northern NSW (including Broken Hill), Kalgoorlie, Perth (under the management of Harry Sadler) and Fremantle. The troupe then returned through Kalgoorlie (including two nights in the suburb of Boulder), Adelaide, and Melbourne, and by early November was back in Brisbane, where it remained until late January 1919.

At the beginning of April 1919, barely three weeks after Le Blanc's company opened the Fullers' New Theatre, legislation was enacted by the New South Wales government to force the closure of public spaces such as theatres due to the impact of the Spanish influenza epidemic. Although the Fullers were able to quickly satisfy the new health requirements for theatre ventilation and thus reopened by mid-May, several members of the Travesty Stars were still in recovery. The Fullers' complex and tight circuit schedule also meant that the troupe was unable to return to the Fullers Theatre. Effectively in limbo for several weeks awaiting the start of the troupe's New Zealand tour, Le Blanc and Mack presented a well-received 'Yiddisher' comedy/singing/patter act at the Fullers Theatre for several weeks.

The Travesty Stars' 10 months New Zealand engagement (June 1919-Apr. 1920) was a more than respectable tour by Fullers' standards to that time (by the mid 1920s, companies such as Stiffy and Mo, Jim Gerald, and George Wallace were able to extend their tours to around eighteen months). However, after completing the circuit, Le Blanc announced that he had disbanded the troupe, and returned to Australia with Jake Mack to work their vaudeville double act. The pair also left the Fullers organisation to work for Harry Clay and later with Birch and Carroll on a north Queensland regional tour. In 1921 they put together a new ensemble, the Who's Who Costume Revue Entertainers.

See **Who's Who Costume Revue Entertainers** entry for details relating to this troupe.

## 1928

In early 1928 Le Blanc travelled to Brisbane to appear at the Cremorne with Victor Roberts' Mirthquakers. The company, which made its debut on 18 February, included high profile performers such as Moon and Morris, George Moon Jnr, and Linda Foy. Towards the end of the season Roberts engaged the Great Levante and Indian "digger" Mahomet Kassim. Following the close of the season Le Blanc put together a reformed Travesty Stars for a tour of North Queensland and New South Wales. At least three members of the Mirthquakers, Levante, Kassim and Gladys Cole, were in the troupe. The tour, which was billed as "The Frivolities" featuring Le Blanc's Travesty Stars is believed to have opened in Rockhampton. Among the revues/revusicals known to have been staged were *Wy Wurrie?*, *Horses for Courses* and *Pot Pourrie*.

Prior to the company's Cairns season the town's newspaper recorded: "the Frivolities holds records that are unbeatable - at Rockhampton and Townsville during carnival week 30,00 people paid for admission to see the [company, and] an entire new show is given each night... Twenty-one artists appear in all" (CP: 21 July 1928, 3).

While only seasons in Townsville, Cairns, Charters Towers and a return Rockhampton season, have been identified to date, the gaps between those towns (played over June and July) and the November engagement in Lismore suggests that the troupe played numerous regional centres during the three months interim. The *Northern Star* indicates that the company may have travelled as far as Wagga and Parkes prior to its season in Lismore (12 Nov. 1928, 10).

**HUGE CANVAS THEATRE.**  
LOCATION . . . . . HOWELL'S PADDOCK.  
**Grand Opening Night, TUESDAY, 13th,**  
**AND ALL SHOW WEEK.**  
Late Alf Coleman's Pantomime.  
The Greatest Aggregation of Talent ever brought to Lismore.  
PAUL WARTON has the honour to present the NOVELTY SHOW OF  
THE YEAR,  
**THE FRIVOLITIES**  
BERT LE BLANC AND HIS TRAVESTY STARS,  
Direct from the Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane,  
IN THE MUSICAL REVUE,  
**WHY WURRY.**

Special starring engagement of **COBONA**, the man who makes the cornet talk, in his Original Fantasy, "THE WANDERING MUSICIAN."

Supported by the Flying Angels, Monty Montague, Whirlwind Dancers, Winnie Knight, Ted Weekes, Haug Joyce, Jack Storey, George Melrose, James Caldwell, Fred Ford (The Musical Genius), Julius Garcia, Betty Rowe, Jess Birrell, Elsie Robbins, Iris Weeks, Biddy Richards, Minnie Ferrington, James Smith, Oscar Peterson, Story and Garcia.

**AND THE SIX CHARMING CHICKENS.**

**PRETTY GIRLS.** **FUNNY COMEDIANS.**

Lismore Municipal Band (under the conductorship of W. H. Lewis) will render Selections every evening from 7.15 till 8 o'clock.

**COMPLETE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME EVERY EVENING.**

POPULAR PRICES: 5/., 4/., 3/., 2/.. Box Plan at PALING'S.

Managing Director, **GEORGE E. MELBOSE.**

**SPECIAL TOY MATINEE . . . . . SATURDAY, 2.30 P.M.**

*Northern Star* (Lismore) 10 Nov. (1928), 4.

The Travesty Stars line-up was significantly re-organised by the time of its Lismore season, with a number of new artists being advertised, while earlier names no longer appear. Of the new faces the best known was James Caldwell.

Bert Le Blanc's engagement with the Hermie Ward Whirl of Mirth Revue Company at the Empire Theatre (Bris) beginning Boxing Night indicates that the Travesty Stars must have disbanded sometime between late November and mid to late-December 1928.

### SEE ALSO

- [Bert Le Blanc](#) • [Ike Cohen and Morris Levy](#) • [Who's Who Costume Revue Entertainers](#)
- [Carlton Chase](#) • [Jim Gerald](#) (and Essie Jennings) • [Bert Ray](#)
- [Connors and Paul](#) • [Connors and Witt](#)

### PERSONNEL

All dates shown below are established years only. In some instances, people may have been associated with the company prior to or after the dates shown, but these years have not yet been identified.

An analysis of reviews published during the course of the Travesty Stars' time together indicates that while Le Blanc and Mack were the stars, the troupe's popularity was also largely in response to the experienced support ensemble. This is a factor that was similarly significant in the success of Stiffy and Mo. Both Le Blanc and Nat Phillips have acknowledged the importance of the performers who supported them, and were keenly aware that they needed experienced and versatile performers capable of handling any type of performance situation, especially improvisation. In a 1916 interview with *Australian Variety* Le Blanc draws attention to this aspect of his success when he says, 'I am very fortunate in securing the services of the people whom I have. To my way of thinking no man should attempt to produce unless he is a capable actor, and [and he should be] not be afraid to do the same things he is telling his actors to do' (5 January 1916, n. pag.).

The Travesty Stars remained largely the same during this period. Of the original troupe's principal cast members only Carlton Chase and Jack Mack were not engaged by George Willoughby for his 1914 pantomime, *The Babes in the Wood* (Adelphi Theatre, Sydney). However, Jake Mack toured with the pantomime during the first half of 1915 (beginning in Brisbane, 22 February).



**Bert Le Blanc and Jake Mack**  
*Australian Variety* 26 Apr. (1916), 1.

Although the membership of the Pony Ballet changed often over the years, these changes were almost always staggered so as to maintain a high level of continuity and consistency.

### **1915-1921**

- 1. Key troupe members:** Incl. Mary Anderson (1921), Carlton Chase (1915-1918), Lillian Colenzo (1918-19), Mike Connors (1917-20), Clym Edgares (1915-17), Mark Erickson (1922-23), Nellie Fallon (1915-19), Syd Garti (1918), Leslie Jephcott (1918), Essie Jennings (1917-19), Glenmore Jones (1915-17), D'Arcy Kellway (1919), Winifred Knight (1916-19), Holly Leslie (1915-17), Harry McDonna (1918), Durham Marcel (1915-18), Maud Miles (1915-16, 1918), Ivy Moore (1917), Queenie Paul (1917-19), Jack Quinlan (1915-17), Bert Ray (1919), Olga Ray (1918), Will Raynor (1918-1919), Neville Royal (1919), Lance Vane (1918-19), Fred Witt (1917-18).
- 2. Short-term performers and/or guest artists:** Incl. Carrie Moore (1915), Arthur Elliott (1920), Jim Gerald (1919), Wee McGregor (1918), Podzey McGuire (1918).
  - Carrie Moore was engaged for the Bijou Theatres season only.
  - Arthur Elliot was husband of minstrel coon singer Maude Fanning, and father of Violet Elliott and Lulla and Mercia Fanning. He is believed to have been engaged only for the 1920 Queensland regional tour (ca. June-July).
  - Jim Gerald was engaged for the Fullers' Theatre (Sydney) season only.
  - Wee McGregor and Podzy McGuire are believed to have been engaged only for one production staged during the 1918 Bijou Theatre season.



**3. Members of the Pony Ballet chorus:** Incl. Dot Bellion (1916-17), Rose Brennan (1918-19), Lily Clark (1916-17), Lucy Cliff (1919), Essie Davis (1919), Violet De Lacy (1916), Rosie Downie (1919), Thelma Gourlay (1919), Annie Henry (1917-19), Alma Hilson (1919), Marie Lannan (1916-17), Alice Lewis (1919), Hilda Lynn (1918-19), Kitty McGuire (1917), Gladys Nyhoym (1916), Letty Patten (1916), Violet and Rita Penson (1918-19), Bertha Rush (1919), Vera Tandy (1918-19), Trixie Wilson (1917),

- Lily Clark's surname is sometimes spelled Clarke.

**4. Musicians and music directors:** Incl. George Powell (music director, 1921)

**5. Additional notes and/or historical clarification:**

- **Fallon and Marcell:** Nellie Fallon and Durham Marcell were brought to Australia from America by George Willoughby in 1914 as specialist Fox Trot dancers.
- **New York Comedy Four:** An in-troupe ensemble, comprised Jack Quinlan, Glenmore Jones, Clym Edgares, and Holly Leslie.
- **Connors and Witt:** Americans Mike Connors and Fred Witt ("the harmony boys") came to Australia for the Fullers in 1916. While with the Travesty Stars Connors met comedienne/pantomime principal boy Queenie Paul. They married in late 1917 while on tour.

## 1928

**1. Troupe members:** Incl. James Caldwell, Gladys Cole, Flying Angelos, Fred Ford, Cora Forrest, Melva Furlington, Julius Garcia, Roy Gennett, Esleie Haid, Mahomet Kassim, Roy Jeanette, Winnie Knight, Venia La Motte, Bert Le Blanc, Levante, Jessie Mackay George Melrose, Enid Parker, Oscar Peterson, Doris Pretty, Bidy Richards, Esme Ray, Elsie Robbins, Betty Rowe, Minna Shelby, George Steadman, Jack Story, Ed Trevor Ted Weekes and Baby Joyce, Iris Weekes.

**2. Production team:** Incl. George Steadman (music director), Doris Pretty (music director)

**3. Special Guests:** Monty and Montague

**4. Ballet/Chorus:** The Sparklers, The Six Charming Chickens.

**5. Additional notes and/or historical clarification:**

- **Gladys Cole:** Piano accordion.
- **Flying Angelos:** Also known as The Four Aerial Angelos. One of the members was Paul Angelo.
- **Baby Joyce:** Acrobat. The 6 year old daughter of Ted and Iris Weekes.
- **Jessie Mackay:** Singer
- **Monty and Montague:** Whirlwind dancers, direct from the Palladium Theatre, London.
- **Enid Parker:** Violin.
- **Iris Weekes:** Dancer
- **Ted Weekes:** Acrobat/comedian.

**SCHOOL OF ARTS**  
**TO-NIGHT—TO-NIGHT.**  
 PAUL WHARTON AND GEORGE MELROSE OFFER THE  
**FRIVOLITIES**  
 From The Cremorne Theatre, Brisbane.  
**BERT LE BLANC**  
 —AND HIS—  
**TRAVESTY STARS**

**Overture—**George Stedman's Orchestra. Hello, Rockhampton—Company.  
**Military Dance—**Iris Weekes and Cora Forrest. **Sketch—Fast and Furious**  
 —Winnie Knight, Enid Parker, Jack Storey, Geo. Melrose, and Bert Le  
**Blanc.** **Baby Joyce—**Equilibristic Marvel. **Winnie Knight—**Charcoal Im-  
 pressions. **Gladys Cole—**Italian Piano Accordeonis. **Storey and Garcia**  
 —"Safety Last." Solo, selected—**Jessie Mackay.** **Sketch—"Oh, What a**  
**Night"—**Misses Weekes, Forrest, La Motte, and Knight. **Bert Le**  
**Blanc—**Your Yiddish Friend.  
**HERE IS CREMORNE'S SENSATION MAKER.**  
**LEVANTE—THE GAY DECEIVER.**  
 (a) Thimbles and How to Get Them. (b) A Bag and an Egg. (c)  
 More Eggs and Two Boys. **Petite Esme Ray.** Pictures from **Scraps**  
**of Rag.** (d) Levante's Magic Kettle. (e) 20th Century Trunk Trick  
 —INTERVAL—  
**Entre Act—**George Stedman's Orchestra. **Dancing Ensemble—**Ballet. The  
 Son of India—Mahomet Kassim, Real Indian Mentalist. The Frivoli-  
 ties, with Bert Le Blanc in—  
 "WY WURRIE."  
 A Revue Produced for Laughing Purposes Only.  
 —Characters—  
 Abe Cohen (Two Society) .. .. . Bert Le Blanc.  
 Luke Mo Luke (Lads) .. .. . Jack Storey.  
 Will Chester (He Will) .. .. . Geo. Melrose.  
 Will Helpew (We Hope So) .. .. . Roy Jeanette.  
 The Mystery Man .. .. . By Himself.  
 Mdlle. Dealy (A Society Belle) .. .. . Winnie Knight.  
 Birdie (Of The Follies) .. .. . Venia La Motte.  
 Flo. Footlights .. .. . Enid Parker.  
 Tillie Lighthouse .. .. . Iris Weekes.  
 Lily Delight .. .. . Cora Forrest.  
 Scene—Anywhere. Time—Make Your Own.  
 —Interruptions and Interludes—  
 Opening Chorus .. .. . Company.  
 Dancer Extraordinary .. .. . Roy Jeanette.  
 Violinist .. .. . Enid Parker.  
 Mahomet Kassim .. .. . The Indian Digger.  
 Solos Selected .. .. . Jessie Mackay.  
 The Four Aerial Angelos .. .. . Acrobatia Marvels.  
 Programme Subject to Alteration.  
**POPULAR PRICES: 4/-, 3/- and 2/- plus tax. Box Plan at Paling's.**

## REVUSICALS AND REVUES

The following shows are entered according to first known year of production by the Travesty Stars.  
See Bert Le Blanc's entry for additional productions.<sup>1</sup>

- 1915:** **The Gay Mrs Cohen** [revusical] • **Fuzzy Wuzzy** [revusical] • **At the Exposition** [revusical] • **In Old Seville** (aka Central 3251) [revusical]  
**1916:** **In Watts** [revusical]  
**1917:** **Keep it Dark** (aka Cohen and Levi in Paris) [revusical] • **Then They Woke Up** [revusical] • **What's the Use** (aka Cohen and Levi as Pawnbrokers) [revusical]  
**1918:** **Do it Now** [revusical] • **Cohen and Levi at Monte Carlo** [revusical] • **Get the Habit** [revusical] • **Dr Dippy's Asylum** [revusical]  
**1928:** **Horses for Courses** [n/e] • **A Pot Pourri** [n/e] • **Easy Money** [n/e] • **Revueland** [revue]

## ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

An asterisk (\*) beside a date indicates that it is either approximate or has not yet been established.  
All dates/venues are Bert Le Blanc's Travesty Stars engagements unless otherwise stated in [square brackets].

- 1915:** FULLERS (Bijou Th, Melb; 26 June - 6 Aug.) • (Melrose Th, Perth; 2 Oct - ca. Nov. \*) • (King's Th, Adel; 11-31 Dec.).  
NB: 21 Aug- 17 Sept. see Le Blanc entry.
- 1916:** FULLERS (King's Th, Adel; 1-15 Jan. \*) • Victoria Th, Newc; 22 Jan - 4 Mar. \*) • (Empire Th, Bris; 11 Mar- 21 Apr) • (National Th, Syd; April-May \*) • (Fullers' Dominion circuit, NZ; June-Nov. \*)
- 1917:** FULLERS (Adel; 7 Apr. - 17 May) • (Majestic Th, Newtown; 2 June - ca. Aug. \*) • (National Th, Syd; ca. Aug. - 28 Sept. \*) • (Victoria Th, Newc; ca. Oct. - 17 Nov. \*) • (Empire Th, Bris; 24 Nov - 31 Dec).
- 1918:** FULLERS (Empire Th, Bris; 1-25 Jan.) • (Bijou Th, Melb; 2 Feb - 15 Mar.) • (Majestic Th, Adel; 23 Mar. - ca. May \*) • (North-Western NSW tour > incl. Broken Hill; May \*) • (Kalgoorlie, WA; 18-24 \* May) • (Mngr/ Lessee: Harry Sadler > Melrose Th, Perth; 27 May - June \*) • (Fremantle, WA; ca. June \*) • Melrose Th, Perth; 6-24 July) • Kalgoorlie, WA; 25-31 July > incl. 2 nights in Boulder) • (Majestic Th, Adel; 3 Aug - Sept. \*) • (Bijou Th, Melb; 21 Sept - 18 Oct.) • (Empire Th, Bris; 2 Nov - 31 Dec.)
- 1919:** FULLERS (Empire Th, Bris; 1-24 Jan.) • (Fullers' Th, Syd; (8 Mar - 2 Apr. \* > season closed early due to flu epidemic) • (New Zealand Dominion circuit, NZ; ca. June - 31 Dec.)  
NB: ca. June (see also Bert Le Blanc entry).
- 1920:** FULLERS (New Zealand Dominion circuit; 1 Jan. - Apr. \*)
- 1928:** WARTON & MELROSE (S of A, Rockhampton; 22 June - \*) ► BC&C (Olympia Th, Townsville; 9 July - \*) • (Olympia Th, Charters Towers; 18 July - \*) ► n/e (Hibernian Hall, Cairns; 24-25 July) ► n/e (Wintergarden, Townsville; 30-31 July) (Rockhampton, S of A; 4 Aug.) ► PAUL WARTON (Howell's Paddock, Lismore; 13 Nov. - \* > under canvas)

NB: As noted above, the Travesty Stars may have travelled as far south as Wagga and Parkes (NSW) between the return Rockhampton and Lismore seasons.

*Truth* (Bris) 2 Apr. (1916), 7.

<sup>1</sup> Wy Wurrrie, for example, was first staged by Le Blanc and the Who's Who Costume Revue Entertainers in 1922. He revived it in 1928 with the re-organised Travesty Stars.

## FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "[Bert Le Blanc's Travesty Stars](#)." *AustLit* (2007).

"[Frivolities, The](#)." CP: 21 July 1928, 3.

"[Frivolities: Coming to Cairns, The](#)." CP: 20 July (1928), 3.

"[Fullers' New Theatre](#)." SMH: 10 Mar. (1919), 5.

"George." "Adelaide Atoms." AV: 29 Mar. (1918), n. pag.

Kitch. "Majestic Theatre, Newtown." AV: 18 July (1917), n. pag.

"Le Blanc's Revue Co." TT: June (1916), 39-40.

"Majestic Theatre, Newtown." AV: 27 June (1917), n. pag.

X-Ray. "Month in Vaudeville, The." TT: Sept. (1917), 33.

### See also:

**A:** 5 July (1915), 13 • 26 July (1915), 14.

**AV:** 7 July (1915), n. pag. • 28 July (1925), 13 • 10 Nov. (1915), n. pag. • 5 Jan. (1916), n. pag. • 23 Feb. (1916), n. pag. • 30 May (1917), n. pag.

**TBRs:** 26 Mar. (1916), 7 • 1 Apr. (1916), 7.

NB: For Travesty Stars production reviews see the individual revue/revusical entries in the "Works" section

**CRYSTAL THEATRE. ENTER THROUGH CRYSTAL ARCADE.**  
Direction of ... .. Ben J. Fuller.  
**BERT LE BLANC'S MUSICAL TRAVESTY STARS.**  
**TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT.**  
The Whirlwind of Fun in One Act and a Dream—  
**ONE NIGHT ONLY—"THEN THEY WOKE UP"—ONE NIGHT ONLY**  
**BERT LE BLANC and JAKE MACK as the Kings of Bong.**  
**FRED BLUETT in even Greater Successes.**  
**MONDAY—"FUZZY WUZZY."**  
**PRICES.—3/, 2/, 1/. Booking nothing extra. Plans at Guppys'.**

*Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill) 27 Apr. (1918), 1.

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Expanded and updated from the 2006 AustLit entry.

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