

PHILLIPS SISTERS

Sisters Eileen and Bessie Phillips started their careers as professional entertainers in Brisbane sometime around 1911. Following a tour of New Zealand a few years later they began their association with Harry Clay, touring Queensland in 1914 and eventually spending some seven years with his company. They also secured regular engagements with other leading variety firms during this period, too. The sisters toured with James Caldwell (Bessie's husband) in the early 1920s on the Fullers and Clays circuits through until the mid-to-late 1920s.

Not to be confused with Gertie and Hilda Phillips (who were also known as the Phillips Sisters, and who are believed to have been the act that toured with Harry Clay in 1904), Eileen and Bessie Phillips were the daughters of Mrs Norah Phillips of Kelvin Grove, Brisbane. Their stage act lasted more than twenty years, beginning with professional engagements in Queensland as early as 1911. It is known, for example, that they appeared on a bill with Julian Rose (the internationally known Hebrew comic) at Martoo's Olympia Theatre, Ipswich in March that year, billed as "Eileen Phillips and her Charming Little Sister" (QT: 16 Mar. 1911, 1). They toured New Zealand with an as yet unidentified company around late 1913 and early 1914, and upon their return to Australia were offered a contract from Harry Clay to tour Queensland. Returning to Sydney after their first northern tour the sisters became regulars at Clay's Bridge Theatre headquarters, establishing themselves as big favourites with the Newtown audiences over the next seven years.

As *Australian Variety* records: "The Phillips Sisters, with attractive costumes, again performed exceedingly well together, and went very big; these two girls should make a hit on any bill, as their turn is well put over" (13 Oct. 1915, 12). The reception the sisters were receiving in Sydney, combined with the audience reactions to their earlier Queensland tour saw them offered a further two northern engagements, the first in 1916, followed by another in 1917. On their off-time with Clays they pair also secured regular engagements with a number of other leading managements, including the Fullers.

In 1917 *Australian Variety* said of the pair, they are "one of Australia's most versatile double acts. Their repertoire is an extensive one, and their work of a very high calibre. During the past two years they have been prominent on Harry Clay's circuit - a fact which speaks volumes for their ability" (17 Jan. 1917, n. pag.). This was echoed by the *Theatre* the following month: "The Phillips Sisters are great favourites with the Harry Clay-ites at the Newtown Bridge Theatre. What a captivating manner has the darker one of the two" (Feb. 1917, 32). Some further critiques over the next few years include:

The Philips Sisters are still very popular. Eileen's smile and Bessie's pose will never fail. Always something new to offer, with artistic dressings, these two clever girls never fail to score" (AV: 1 Mar. 1918).

The Phillips sister who plays the girl could be much more expressive in face and gesture. Largely because of what she lacks in this direction may the success of the turn be said to rest wholly with the boy-attired sister. They had to give three numbers nightly at the Princess (Syd) during [last month]. Even then the audience would have had more of them if it could have got it (TT: Nov. 1918, 24).

The Philips Sisters must be about the most popular pair of girls in Australian vaudeville.... the audience are aglow with appreciation all the time the duo are on the stage (TT: Oct. 1919 28).

Bessie and Eileen Phillips had to respond to no less than three encores last Monday evening; they dress luxuriously in their quaint, old-fashioned minuets (AV: 13 Apr. 1921, 15).

Eileen Phillips often played the boy role in their turns, and was said to have a voice remindful of Nellie Kollie in the volume of her delivery, and in appearance and manner that of Effie Fellows (TT: May 1916, 51). She was also acknowledged for her "easy confident manner, and the way she captivates the audience" (TT: Jan. 1918, 37). In many respects Eileen was the one who received the most critical acclaim throughout their career. Despite the somewhat uneven nature of their reported talents, the two were undeniably popular with audiences around the country.

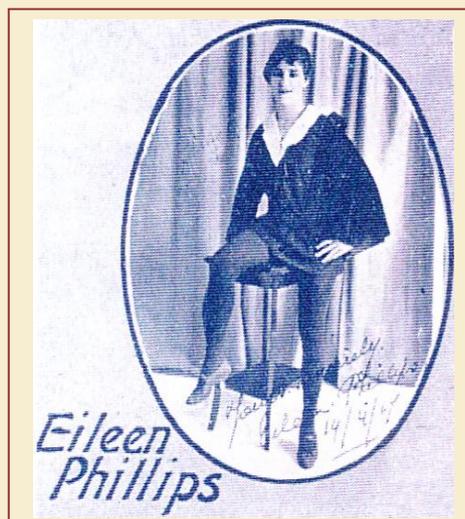
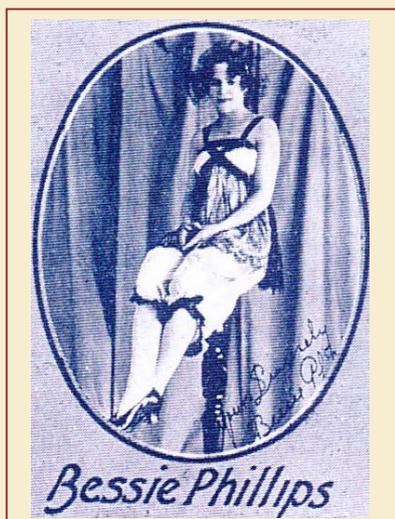
In 1921 the Phillips temporarily ended their seven year association with Harry Clay to take up an extended season at the Shaftsbury Theatre in Perth, leaving with James Caldwell (who had been married to Bessie since September 1919) along with Ivy Davis and Courtney Ford, and the Paulastros. By 1924, however, the pair were back on Clay time, continuing regular engagements up until at least 1927.



L-R: Bessie and Eileen
Australian Variety 17 Jan. (1917), n. pag.

SEE ALSO

- [Harry Clay's No 1 Musical Comedy Co](#)



Australian Variety 23 May (1917), cover.

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- One of Australia's most versatile double acts, [the Phillips Sisters] repertoire is an extensive one, and their work of a very high calibre. During the past two years they have been prominent on Harry Clay's circuit – a fact which speaks volumes for their ability. They are real sisters and two very estimable young ladies, both on and off the stage (AV: 17 Jan. (1917), n. pag.)
- "Bright, Versatile Girls":- The Phillips girls (Eileen and Bessie) were with Harry Clay at the Newtown Bridge Theatre during April. Eileen (that is the one I take to be Eileen, or the "boy" of the two) is in voice remindful of Nellie Kalle, and in appearance and manner of Effie Fellows. They are certainly a self-confident, experienced pair; and the applause they got the night I heard the, was most convincing evidence as to the brightness of the different turns they did (TT: May 1916, 51).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "[Harry and Clay's Vaudeville Company](#)." MA thesis (1998).

See also:

- AV:** 1 Mar. (1918), n. pag. • 18 July (1917), 7 • 15 Mar. (1918), n. pag. • 25 Jan. (1919), n. pag. • 26 Sept. (1919), 3.
- BC:** 17 Dec. (1910), 2.
- E:** 26 Oct. (1921), 20 • 30 Nov. (1921), 20 • 11 Jan. (1922), 19 • 19 Jan. (1922), 20 • 22 Feb. (1922), 20.
- NM:** 6 Aug. (1910), 1.
- TC:** 16 Mar. (1911), 1.
- TT:** Apr. (1918), 38 • June (1918), 27, 29 • July (1918), 27 • Nov. (1918), 24 • Oct. (1919), 28 • Oct. (1920), 20 •

MISS EILY PHILLIPS,
Of the Phillips Sisters

Is Certainly "Some Boy"

In her latest Tailor Made
By VEREY, The Actors' Tailor,
133 KING ST, SYDNEY.

Australian Variety 19 Apr. (1916), n. pag.

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