

ALBERT AND MAUD BLETSOE

Albert and Maud Bletsoe worked a comedy costume sketch act around Australia and New Zealand during the 1900s and 1910s. After returning to Australia in late 1914 from an 18 month tour of Canada and America they were signed to the Fullers' circuit and soon afterwards established Bletsoes' Tabloid Musical Comedy Company. Two of its members, Roy Rene (comedian) and Rosie Bowie (dancer/choreographer), went on to become central to the success of Nat Phillips' *Stiffy and Mo Company*, the troupe which evolved out of the Bletsoes' company after it was dissolved by the Fullers in May 1916. The Bletsoes are believed to have retired from the industry at that time.

Although little is currently known of the early life and career of New Zealand brother and sister comedy and sketch artists Albert and Maud Bletsoe, they are described in a 1915 *Theatre Magazine* profile as being "well-known in costume comedy work throughout Australia and New Zealand."¹ While their names have long since disappeared from the annals of Australian theatre history, the variety troupe they founded in 1915 later formed the nucleus of *Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Revue Company*, one of the most popular revusical companies operating in the Australasian region during the 1910s and 1920s. In this respect Bletsoes' Tabloid Musical Comedy Company can be considered one of the pioneers of the Australian revusical genre, along with *Bert Le Blanc's Travesty Stars*, *Arthur Morley's Royal Musical Comedy Company* (aka Harry Clay's No 1 Revue Company), the *Paul Stanhope Revue Company* and the *Jack Kearns' Revue Company*.

The earliest of the Bletsoes' engagements found to date were in 1911 when they joined George Whitehead and his *Merry Mascotte Musical Company* - which also included Courtney Ford, Ivy Davis and George Tubb. The troupe played Sydney, regional Queensland, and Adelaide before being rebranded as the *Punchinellos* by producer J.D. Pilcher in early 1912. The company's debut engagement was at Brisbane's *Theatre Royal* (23 Mar. - 10 May) with a line-up comprising the Bletsoes, Will Raynor, Percy Mackay, Olive Sinclair, Adele Kelly, George Tubb, and Ernest Gollmick. Thereafter it toured the Darling Downs twice (May and August), and played return Brisbane engagements at the *Empire Theatre* (8 June-9 Aug.). The Bletsoes left at the end of the Empire season.



Theatre Magazine (Sydney) Apr. 1915, 35.

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Brisbane Courier 10 Aug. 1912, 2.

Shortly after leaving the *Punchinellos* Albert and Maud put together their own troupe - the *Crimson Ramblers* for a season at Brisbane's *Arcadia Theatre* (situated in New Farm). The entertainment on offer is described in a *Brisbane Courier* preview as "being full of musical gems, song, dance, sketch and story in a bright, unique manner." Their shows also concluded with "the latest photo plays by [the] best producer."²

In February 1914 the Bletsoes disbanded the *Crimson Ramblers* and departed Australia for America where they remained for almost a year. In an interview with the *Theatre Magazine* in April 1915, Albert Bletsoe recalls that he and his sister found that there was little call for their line of costume comedy on the professional US vaudeville circuits at that time, with only the Canada circuits, and primarily Vancouver and Victoria, showing interest in it as an entertainment form. Bletsoe goes on to note, however, that it was deemed acceptable to the Y.M.C.A. circuit except for the dancing. He further indicates that he and Maud could have secured long bookings in that line of work with the Y.M.C.A. had they wished, but eventually turned to ordinary vaudeville so they could focus on sketch-work and dancing. One of their more popular creations on that tour was a dance they titled "The Kangaroo Tango."

¹ "Bletsoe's in America," 48.

² *Brisbane Courier* 10 Aug. 1912, 5. *Advert.*

Following their return to Australia in February 1915 the Bletsoes signed with [Brennan-Fuller](#) and were given the opportunity to form their own variety troupe. As Bletsoes' Tabloid Musical Comedy Company the company made its debut at Newcastle in March 1915 having been leased by Benjamin and John Fuller Jnr to [Dix-Baker](#). The engagement occurred during the very early development period of the Australian style of one act musical comedies that eventually came to be known as revusicals and/or revue. This was noticed by a *Theatre Magazine* journalist which records that their show, which occupied the first part of the programme, was a vast improvement on the management's previous offering – an old minstrel first part.³ The troupe's line-up initially included [Roy Rene](#), James Caldwell, Eileen Barnsley, [Ernest Lauri](#), Charles Melvin, and dancer/choreographer [Rosie Bowie](#)⁴ By early 1916 it also featured husband and wife teams Horace Mann and Caddy Franks, and Courtney Ford and Ivy Davis.

The Bletsoes' repertoire of five revusicals included *In Vacation Time*, *Fun in a Sanatorium*, *Be Beautiful*, and *Palmistry Up-to-Date*. The Newcastle season was followed by engagements in Melbourne ([Bijou Theatre](#)), Adelaide ([King's Theatre](#)), Perth ([Melrose Theatre](#)) and Hobart ([Theatre Royal](#)). The Fullers' sent them to New South Wales, where they remained until early December as feature entertainment at the [National Theatre](#) in Sydney. The troupe then travelled to New Zealand, opening at Dunedin's Princess Theatre on Boxing Night. The Bletsoes 1916 Dominion tour, which continued through until the end of April, also included Wellington (His Majesty's), Auckland (Opera House), and Christchurch (Opera House). On its return to Australia the company opened in Brisbane then travelled north to Rockhampton.

At some stage during the Brisbane engagement, the Bletsoe's decided to retire from the industry and advised the Fullers of their impending departure - their contract being up for renewal in June. With the company having already been booked for an engagement in Sydney at that time, [Benjamin Fuller](#) asked his former producer [Nat Phillips](#) to take over the management of the company. Phillips, who was in Brisbane at the same time performing with his wife [Daisy Merritt](#), subsequently returned to Sydney with several members of the Bletsoe troupe - notably Roy Rene, Rosie Bowie, and members of the ballet. He quickly supplemented the Bletsoe performers with a number of high-profile performers from the Fullers' stable of artists and initiated a series of intensive rehearsals. Renamed Nat Phillips' Tabloid Musical Comedy Company, the troupe undertook a spectacularly successful debut season at the [Princess Theatre](#) beginning 8 July 1916. It later became known as Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Revue Company or simply.... [Stiffy and Mo](#).

In an interview with the *Theatre Magazine* published in August that year Albert indicated that he had sold all of their shows to Nat Phillips. The magazine further records that Albert Bletsoe had by then lined up a good commercial position in Wellington.⁵ The previous month the *NZ Truth* column, "Deadhead's Diary," noted.



Maud Bletsoe
Theatre Magazine May 1915, 37.

Albert Bletsoe, having disposed of his revues, now intends retiring from the stage and is to leave for this Dominion at an early date. Albert is a native of New Zealand, and intends to re-enter commercial life. His sister, Miss Maud Bletsoe, has purchased a farm near Palmerston North. Nat Phillips, the well-known comedian, has purchased the Bletsoe Revues, and is to carry on the good work with them.⁶

SEE ALSO

- [Bletsoes' Tabloid Musical Comedy Co](#)
- [Merry Mascottes](#)
- [The Punchinellos](#)
- [Nat Phillips Stiffy and Mo Revue Co](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The Canadian/American Y.M.C.A. circuit around 1914-1915 was largely run out of Chicago by Englishman Gilbert Shorter.
2. Maud Bletsoe sang in the contralto range.

³ *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) June 1915, n. pag.

⁴ Bowie later choreographed the Stiffy and Mo revusicals.

⁵ "Exit the Bletsoes," 46.

⁶ "The Deadhead's Diary." *NZ Truth* (Wellington, NZ) 15 July 1916, 2. This is the last mention of the Bletsoes in New Zealand newspapers.

3. Albert Bletsoe's claim that he and his sister sold "the whole of their shows to Nat Phillips"⁷ appears to have been the case. While an analysis of the plot developments and situations mentioned in Australian and New Zealand newspapers (as well as through the availability of several complete Nat Phillips scripts⁸) indicates similarities between the Bletsoe and Stiffy and Mo productions, it should be remembered that in Phillips hands the storylines, dialogue, and musical aspects were greatly changed. To a large degree this was in response to Phillips inserting his well-delineated character "Stiffy. Roy Rene was also given much latitude with his Hebrew character "Mo." The many "improvised" sections within the Stiffy and Mo revusicals (identified in the Nat Phillips' Collection manuscripts as "Biz") were also likely to have been developed by Phillips and Rene from their repertoire of sketch and comedy work.

An example of the similarities between the Bletsoes and Phillips shows can be seen in *Be Beautiful* (1915) and the debut Stiffy and Mo revusical *What Oh Tonight*⁹ (1916). Both are set in a beauty parlour and develop their plots around the purchasing of the establishment by men who have no background in that industry. In *Be Beautiful*, the bogus beautifier is played by Roy Rene, with Albert Bletsoe his assistant. In *What Oh Tonight*, Rene's character Mo¹⁰ buys the business and makes his mate, Stiffy (a rabbit-seller), his assistant.

Both the Bletsoes' and Stiffy and Mo companies also produced a revusical with the title *In the Sanatorium*.¹¹



FURTHER REFERENCE

"Bletsoe's in America." *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Apr. 1915, 48.

"Crimson Ramblers." *Brisbane Courier* 10 Aug. 1912, 5.

"Dria." "Chat with Mr and Miss Bletsoe of the King's, A." *Critic* (Adelaide) 5 Nov. 1913, 22.

Djubal, Clay. "Albert Bletsoe." *AustLit* (2008).

"Exit the Bletsoes." *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Aug. 1916, 45-46.

"Month in Vaudeville, The." *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Dec. 1915, 41.

⁷ *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Aug. 1916, 45.

⁸ Nat Phillips Collection, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland. See also "[Texts: Unpublished.](#)"

⁹ Later *The Beauty Parlour and Manicure, Sir?*

¹⁰ In the *What Oh Tonight* manuscript (Nat Phillips Collection), Roy Rene's character is called Sol. This name was changed to Mo shortly before the Princess Theatre debut.

¹¹ See 1919 Works PDF for details relating to Stiffy and Mo's *In the Sanatorium*.

