

THE FRIENDS OF KENSAL GREEN CEMETERY — THE MAGAZINE —

ISSUE 43

AUTUMN 2006

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THE PODCAST



DESPERATELY SEEKING LYDIA

The revival of burlesque not only as an entertainment, but as a feminist issue and avant-garde art form, has stimulated interest in the origins of the genre and, in particular, the curvaceous British pantomime artiste who brought the Burly Q to America.

The new status of the ancient art was manifest this summer when 'Shake It, Baby', a documentary for BBC Radio 4, brought journalist Libby Purves and burlesque star Kitty Klaw to the fringes of Kensal Green Cemetery in search of the grave of Lydia Thompson, the original blonde bombshell.

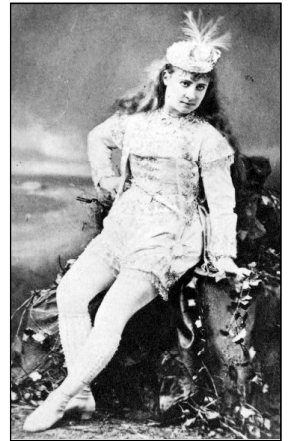
Describing her researches in *The Times' Times2* (22 June 2006), Purves wrote of her visit to Kensal Green, with producer Sarah Mitchell and performance artist Marisa Carnesky:

Her grave was our last location. Sarah found a toppled headstone in a corner of Kensal Green Cemetery, and Marisa Carnesky and I stood there, reflecting on how neither moral outrage nor cheap stripclubs killed the Thompson spirit. It lives on, throwing out creative sparks in different directions: comic, artistic, erotic.

"Poor Lydia. We ought," said Marisa sadly, "to get all the burlesque artistes of London to come and deck her grave in old corsets and silk roses ..."

Do you know, perhaps we will.

It is often with mixed feelings that cemetery Friends receive such impulsive offers, although a transient bit of decking would certainly be easier to arrange than a full-scale restoration. The Friends of Kensal Green are currently engaged in the refurbishment of the toppled tomb of another pioneering Victorian stage artist, the celebrated Irish soprano Catherine Hayes [Bushnell], a project that will cost thousands of



Lydia Thompson in the title role of *Ixion! or, The Man at the Wheel*, a riotous comedy loosely based on a gruesome Greek myth, and one of her first hits in the American tour of 1868

ELIZA HODGES ('LYDIA') THOMPSON

19 February 1838 to 17 November 1904

pounds over many months even though the monument is substantially intact. Research by the Friends suggests that little more than fragments remain at Lydia Thompson's tomb.

Finding a grave is rarely so straightforward as neophytes might imagine. Of all the dear departed, those who still have legible monuments are much in the minority, even where graves are as well recorded as those in Kensal Green Cemetery.

FOKGC Guide Joe Hughes has undertaken documentary and field research in the wake of the BBC documentary. Lydia's grave is clearly identified in the General Cemetery Company's records as plot 18467, lying in square 158 of Kensal Green's grid plan, two rows from the nearest path (that is, in the north-west corner of the cemetery, near the wall). It was owned by Lydia's daughter, the actress Zeffie Tilbury [Mrs. L.E. Woodthorpe], although a tantalizing note records "Garden arch added 4/4/1913 by Mr. Eastlake".

Yet such is the state of many monuments in this corner that the GCC has secured the area with some clearance and a scatter of gravel. Such is the density of deposits that Joe had to locate a number of adjacent burials to define the site. Only then, with the help of digital photography to record the inscriptions on fallen monuments, and analyse eroded stones, has he determined that Lydia Thompson's grave is indeed a patch of bare earth, adjacent to the fallen granite

cross, now marked only by a badly eroded footstone which may just bear traces of the number 18467.

This is the level of research that informs the Friends' publications and guided tours. We are indeed grateful to the GCC both for maintaining such records, and allowing certain Friends access to them. Now – who was Mr. Eastlake?

SIGNE HOFFOS & JOE HUGHES

Eliza Hodges Thompson was born in the parish of St Paul's, Covent Garden ('The Actors' Church') on 19 February 1838, the daughter of a sometime pub landlord named Philip Thompson, who died when she was four; her twice-widowed mother promptly married another publican, one Edward Hodges. As 'Lydia', the fourteen-year-old joined the dancing chorus at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1852, and by the next year had a starring role in the Haymarket's Christmas pantomime. In 1855, she embarked on a three-year tour of Europe that took her as far as St. Petersburg and Constantinople, winning acclaim for the dexterity of her dancing – which included the Highland Fling and Hornpipe – as well as the charms of her person and the vivacity of her character. (A contemporary comparison might be Britney Spears in her teenaged heyday.)

Back in London, she undertook principal roles in a variety of pantomimes, farces and burlesques, many with parodies of popular ballets and operas in the mix. She married John Christian Tilbury, a riding-master, in 1863, and gave birth to a daughter, Agnes Lydia, in November but had already returned to the stage when, in April 1864, her husband was killed in steeplechase. She met the man who would be her next partner, the provincial theatre

manager Alexander Henderson, that same year, but if she ever actually married him, it was probably not until 1868, when the two of them embarked for America with a cast of British light entertainers – actresses, dancers and comedians drawn from the pantomime and burlesque circuit – who became the celebrated British Blondes.

The eccentricities of pantomime and burlesque – with their curious combination of comedy, parody, satire, improvisation, song and dance, variety acts, cross-dressing, extravagant stage effects, risqué jokes and saucy costumes – while familiar enough to British audiences, took New York by storm. As so often with adjective-and-noun combinations, not all of the company were either British or blonde, by birth or artifice, but an element of speculation only added to their allure. A thoroughly modern promotional campaign, pursued on the principle that there's no such thing as bad publicity, kept the Lydia and her troupe in the public eye, and the six-month tour eventually ran to nearly six years. The first New York season alone grossed over \$370,000, at a time when a female factory worker would have been well-paid at five dollars a week.

Lydia re-established her career in London in 1874, but returned to America many times over the next two

All that remains of Lydia Thompson's grave – the patch of earth and eroded footstone on the left. (Photo: Joe Hughes)





Whatever her reputation in America, a sewing machine company confidently used Lydia's image on a trade card – certainly, her costumes were a testament to solid stitching.

decades, venturing into straight roles there as forty years on the boards took their toll on her singing

and dancing. She tried her hand at producing, but as the money ran out, was reduced to receiving a benefit at the Lyceum by 1899. Still she soldiered on, making her last stage appearance in 1904, and dying in London on 17 November 1908, at the age of 70.

Whatever the legal status of her relationship with Henderson, they separated amicably, although he didn't carry exactly carry a torch for her: before leaving her the residue of his estate, he conscientiously named a roster of erstwhile mistresses and natural offspring in his will. Lydia's own rap sheet included a breach-of-promise suit when she was only 16, and a well publicized encounter with a lesbian stalker during her first American tour (all, again, curiously like the sort of titillation that now keeps zedlebrities in the pages of gossip mags and tabloids).

Continuing the family's colourful history, as Zeffie Tilbury, Lydia's daughter became a noted character actress in America, moving from stage to screen to appear in over 70 films

between 1917 and 1941 – most famously, as Grandma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* – despite being virtually blind by the 1930s.

The private life of Lydia's niece and natal namesake, Violet Lydia Thompson (1862-1919), as the operetta singer Violet Cameron, was too racy for the American press, which scuppered her Broadway debut with lively reports of her private life. Thompson cousins also included the actress Violet Lloyd and her sister, sometime male impersonator Florence Lloyd.

Lydia Thompson's biographer¹, Kurt Gänzl (series editor of 'Forgotten Stars of the Musical Theater'), concludes that: "A phenomenon in the American theatre, where she has been credited with giving general popularity to a superior brand of girlie show with comedy which has remained popular ever since, at home she was just one of a number of fine burlesque actresses of the period. However, her skillful management, her adept casting of her troupe, her knack for publicity, her own charms and talents, and the fact that she spent the most blooming of her blooming years on the American stage, built a special place for her in American theatre history."

SIGNE HOFFOS

1. Kurt Gänzl, *Lydia Thompson: A Biography*, Routledge 2002

APPRECIATING LYDIA

Lydia Thompson was a celebrity even before she set foot in America. In England she had gained great popularity as a dancer and comic actress. In Europe, if her publicity is to be believed, she was already little short of a legend:

At Helingfors her pathway was strewn with flowers and the streets illuminated with torches carried by her ardent admirers. At Cologne, the students insisted in sending the horses about their business and drawing the carriage that contained the object of their devotion themselves At Lember, a Captain Ludoc Baumbarten of the Russian dragoons took some flowers and a glove belonging to Miss Thompson, placed them on his breast, then shot himself through the heart, leaving on his table a note stating that his love for her brought on the fatal act.

That P.T. Barnum was responsible for bringing her to America might lead one to suspect the absolute veracity of this bulletin, nevertheless it cannot be said that the great showman couldn't pick a winner. Sure enough, Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes caused a sensation when they opened at Wood's in New York on 28 September 1868.

America had never seen anything quite like it. Burlesque was not

unknown to them, but this was a new form. No longer an afterpiece to the feature drama, this was an extravaganza in itself, a spectacle of stunning scenery and costumes, with a large cast and ladies in tights.

Breeches' roles had a long and honourable tradition in British theatre, going back to the days when Madame Vestris showed her legs to London audiences and won such fame that plaster casts of the admired limbs were bought in their thousands by her adoring fans. But such gender-bending roles were usually associated with the 'legitimate' stage. This new form of entertainment was pure razzle-dazzle.

The British Blondes (later to become the Mammoth Burlesque Company) were a troupe of dancing actresses, all (allegedly) natural blondes, voluptuous – and built on somewhat more than ample lines, '250-lb Beauties' being by no means a derogatory description of their charms – displaying an assertive femininity which was quite unknown to American theatregoers. Taken aback as they were, New Yorkers chose to be delighted by what they saw, and Lydia's company performed the burlesques *Ixion*, *The Forty Thieves* and *Sinbad* for an unprecedented continuous run of forty weeks.

There were of course critics. Olive Logan, a famous American actress and

STILL RAISING EYEBROWS: LYDIA THOMPSON AS ROBINSON CRUSOE AND WILLIE EDOUIN AS MAN FRIDAY THRILLING NEW YORK IN 1868, WHEN AUDIENCES FOUND HER COSTUME SHOCKING AND HIS MAKE-UP AMUSING ...



ARCHIVAL IMAGES: PRIVATE COLLECTION

feminist, in a speech before the American Equal Rights Association Convention in 1869, said: "I cannot advise any woman to go upon the stage with the demoralizing influence which seems here to prevail more every day, when its greatest rewards are won by brazen-faced, stained, yellow-haired, padded-limbed creatures, while actresses of the old school – well-trained, decent – cannot earn a living."

Miss Logan's moral indignation seems to have blinded her to the fact that, far from being an impediment to the advancement of women's rights, Lydia and her troupe, by the very manner of their performance, could not have been a more forceful argument for those rights. But such criticism did little to quench the British Blondes' popularity, and American women were as fascinated by them as their salivating menfolk: blonde hair and bleaching became ail the rage, an emulation that previously would have branded a woman as a shameless hussy. The American press couldn't get enough of them, even reporting on the Blondes' huge appetites, which they compared admiringly to those of big men.

After the phenomenal success of the New York performances, Lydia's troupe embarked upon an American tour that was to last for the next six years. Everywhere they went, they met with the same enthusiastic reception, tempered here and there with a voice of dissent. One of these was Wilbur Story, editor of the *Chicago Times*. He waged war against the company in the pages

of his newspaper, calling the Blondes 'bawds' and 'ladies of the evening'. Lydia was formidable when angry, and the account has it that she went to Story's home, accompanied by her husband and manager, Alex Henderson, publicist Archie Gordon, and fellow Blonde Pauline Markham, and – while the three of them held Story – horse-whipped him. They were later charged with assault, to which they pleaded guilty and were fined 100 dollars each. But Lydia had had her satisfaction and avenged her good name.

America was to welcome her back several times during the next twenty years, but it was this first visit which fixed her in the imagination of the American public. She is regarded there as the founder of that style of burlesque which was so inexorably to become inseparable from the semi-naked female form. More significantly, however, her visit changed American attitudes to the status of women on the stage, and in society at large. Her breeches' roles, her eating habits and her devil-may-care assertiveness offered a new, more independent model of femininity to American women.

One would be hard put to think of a model for Lydia Thompson, but there can be no denying that she set a precedent for generations to come. In this respect, more than one commentator has traced her influence to the early stars of Hollywood, citing Mae West as perhaps not the least of her imitators.

BOB MOULDER