

'Measurements That Almost Surpass Belief!'

IAN WARDEN OGLES THE SOMETIMES GLITTER-ENHANCED PICTURES OF CELEBRITIES IN THE DAVID ELLIOTT THEATRICAL POSTCARD COLLECTION HELD AT THE LIBRARY

THE AVERAGE DAMSEL DISTRESSED BY a giant, black, hairy tarantula should surely go deathly pale (and be left what tabloid newspapers call 'ashen faced') but somehow this terror has brought a pretty pink blush to the cheeks of Gertie Millar.

Yorkshire-born Gertie Millar (1879–1952) was a tall, slender and much-beloved star of musical comedy and the encounter just described takes place on a theatrical picture postcard. A postcard manufacturer's artist, using some artistic licence, has enhanced the black-and-white photograph with some crimson on Miss Millar's bonnet and fabulous dress and with a little damsel-pink tinting of her celebrity cheeks.

This postcard (Gertie's ordeal is depicted on one side of it and, on the other, a chap called Reggie has written and posted a message to a girl called Rose) is one of 1083 cards in the seven albums of the rather bedazzling David Elliott Theatrical Postcard Collection acquired by the National Library of Australia in 2000.

The postcards in this collection were all made between about 1890 and about 1920. This time was not only the sustained heyday of the production of, and the craze for, collecting picture postcards but was also a spell of flourishing theatricality. Grand opera, operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan, vaudeville, pantomime, drama and melodrama, brass bands, midget circuses (Zeynard's Marvellous

Midget Circus toured Australia in 1911 with the production *Tiny Town—The Big Show*) and all sorts of entertainments that could be put upon a stage all blossomed in this largely pre-film and, of course, utterly pre-television time. Working people, often doing dreary and wearying work and for six days a week, adored the once-a-week escapism of the sparkle, spectacle, make-believe and glamour of a visit to the theatre. '[So] is it a wonder', David Cook reflects in his *Picture Postcards in Australia*, 'that our grandparents seemed to idolise the theatrical stars of the day and filled their postcard albums with their images?'

Anyone who haunts places where trash and treasure of yesteryear is sold will testify to the amazing abundance of old picture postcards. In Australia, the United States and some countries of western Europe the postcards may be almost the most plentiful and ubiquitous of all collectible objects.

Nineteenth-century postal reforms and inventions of new mass-production printing techniques and then the spread of literacy thanks to proliferations of government schools all enabled the postcard to flourish.

Finding these postcards everywhere today, we can tell there was once in our past a terrific pop-culture blizzard of postcard producing, sending and collecting of which the millions of surviving postcards are that blizzard's enduring flakes piled up in enduring drifts. In his *Collector's Guide to Theatrical Postcards*, Richard Bonyne says



ABOVE
Raphael Tuck & Sons
Miss Gertie Millar c.1907
coloured postcard
13.9 x 8.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22931795

LEFT
Rotary Photo E.C./Foulsham
& Banfield
Miss Gertie Millar c.1907
b&w postcard; 8.9 x 13.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22931795





ABOVE
S.Hildesheimer & Co./
Fradelle & Young
Sir Henry Irving c.1906
b&w postcard; 13.8 x 9.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22892392

LEFT
Aristophot Co. Ltd
Lily Brayton between 1890
and 1920
coloured postcard
9.1 x 13.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22946222

that in 1908 alone 860 million cards were sent through the post and that by 1897 and in Germany alone there were more than a thousand manufacturers of picture postcards and more than 60 manufacturers of albums for postcard collectors to display their treasures in. Bonyngne insists that there is just such an overwhelming superabundance of cards on such an array of subjects (for example, there are military cards, royalty cards, special event cards like the mini-blizzard churned out when the USA's Great White Fleet of battleships visited Australia in 1908 and, most familiar of all, the postcards of picturesque places) that the collector really must specialise

if his or her collection is not to be too mind-bogglingly miscellaneous to have any meaning. Bonyngne has chosen, as the late David Elliott did, to collect theatrical postcards.

Whenever the surviving theatrical picture postcards are ones that were written on and posted (and about half of the David Elliott cards are like this) this humanises them enormously. They were cheap to buy and cheap to post and reading them now they emerge in some instances as a kind of precursor of email. Some cities had several postal deliveries a day and so messages written on postcards could be almost a form of conversation. 'Dear G', someone (signature illegible) of East Finchley wrote to fellow Londoner Miss G. Rutter of Wimbledon on 2 July 1907, 'Shall be at your house about 2.30 or 2.45 which I hope will not be too late'. The picture on the other side of the card is of the very beautiful Gertie Millar cheek to cheek with a very ugly dog.

Then, too, it's obvious from what's often written on them that many postcards were sent

only because they were collectable. The cards themselves were the reason for their posting. 'Dear Rose, Hope you have not already got this in your collection. Expect to see you soon', Reggie wrote to Miss R. Herwin of Fulham in London on 3 May 1907 on the back of the aforementioned card in which the arachnophobic Millar blushes with terror.

Reading postcards would seem like a shameful form of stickybeaking into others' mail but for the fact that few of the writers of the postcards in the David Elliott Collection used this instant, cheap and necessarily public form of communication to express anything of importance. There are, though, some hints at big, boiling feelings. Someone, his name illegible, wrote to Miss Ida Kelly of Russell Street, Melbourne on 11 July 1906 to warn, tersely, on the back of a black-and-white picture of the great Shakespearean thespian Sir Henry Irving (wearing a suitably forbidding expression on his craggy features), 'Have a bone to pick with you Friday night. Daresay [*sic*] you can guess what it is'. Did the writer deliberately pick a sober card featuring a grave actor (rather than a frivolous card featuring a glittery fibbertigibbet) to help amplify his message? What had Ida done? On Friday night was she contrite or was she feistily unapologetic?

To spend lots of time with the David Elliott Collection (this writer went back to the hypnotising albums far more often than duty required) is to get an inkling of why the collectors collected the cards. As well as being colourful and exquisite objects (their colourfulness often enhanced with absurd and kitschy pieces of tinsel still glittering wildly after all these years), the portrayed subjects of the cards become somehow like a vast theatrical cast, singing, dancing, declaiming, emoting and posing, all at the album-ogler's fingertips. Great, much-depicted celebrities like Australia's incomparable singer and actress Nellie Stewart (1858–1931), the bewitchingly sweet Tittell Brune (1875–1974) and the dimple-chinned and gasp-makingly gorgeous Shakespearean actress, Lily Brayton (1876–1953), (each of these three is represented in the David Elliott Collection by dozens of different cards), bombard the onlooker with their loveliness.

Lily Brayton, in particular, blessed with startlingly enormous eyes and usually staring straight out from her cards at whoever is looking at her, gives one the unnerving



sense of being the target of whichever powerful thespian emotion (often rage, horror, withering scorn and reproach) is contorting her lovely features.

But some celebrities' poses and expressions may today seem to us too melodramatic and daft. Nellie Stewart, for example, though by all accounts a fabulous performer (Australia's favourite, she was chosen to warble the memorial ode-hymn, *Australia*, at the grand concert following the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament in May 1901) wears far too often in her postcards the same unconvincing expression of tortured sincerity.

For those of us looking at them in sensitised and enlightened 2009, some cards are wince-makingly sexist. One of the very few film postcards in the David Elliott Collection promotes 'Annette Kellermann, "The Perfect Woman" and a company of 1000 players in *Neptune's Daughter*, The Film Masterpiece of the World', made in 1914.

The postcard catalogues 'Measurements That Almost Surpass Belief' that compare Miss Kellermann—the Perfect Woman—with the Venus de Milo and the goddess Diana and show that whether it be height, head, neck, chest, waist, hips, thigh, calf, ankle, underarm, forearm or wrist, Miss Kellermann was as perfect as those two legendary templates of female loveliness. So, for example, Miss Kellermann's 7.7-inch ankles compare with Venus' 7.4-inch and Diana's 8-inch ones



(indeed in everything but her implausibly slender and swan-like neck, Diana turns out to be marginally the most chunky of the three sirens).

Almost as openly entrepreneurial is one of the Dame Nellie Melba (1861–1931) postcards. On a black-and-white card of Melba looking dignified and statuesque there is printed a copy of her handwritten and personally signed fulsome endorsement of the last thing on earth she (the world's greatest soprano) needed—the four shilling booklet *Morell's New Singing Method—High and Low Voice*.

Almost all of the picture postcards in the David Elliott Collection are beautifully preserved and so have an eerie charm. The celebrities, usually portrayed in their radiant heydays, have been given, if not eternal life, a kind of extended stardom by these sturdy little pieces of ephemera. The Gertie Millar and the tarantula postcard discussed above is almost unchanged from the day 101 years ago when Reggie wrote it and Rose (how one wants to believe she didn't have the card in her collection yet and was thrilled to bits to get it!) first picked it up and marvelled at the lifelike pinkness of Gertie's celebrity cheeks.

ABOVE LEFT
C.B. & Co. Talma
Miss Nellie Stewart
between 1890 and 1920
coloured postcard, glitter,
sequins; 13.4 x 8.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22964257

ABOVE RIGHT
Frederic Shipman
Enterprises Ltd
Annette Kellermann,
'The Perfect Woman' ... c.1914
b&w postcard; 12.7 x 8.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22948275

LEFT
Breitkopf & Hartel
Madame Melba between 1890
and 1920
coloured postcard
13.5 x 8.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22931738



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