

‘The only place of amusement where a happy evening may be spent’: The Lydia Howarde Troupe [slide 1]

I aim today to bring you face to face with a name, a person, you might never have heard of – Lydia Howarde. Through Lydia Howarde and her theatrical Troupe I hope to challenge some of the perceptions you may have of the nineteenth century theatrical experience in colonial New Zealand and of the role leading females played in this experience.

First, I will bring you face to face with the Troupe and its many audiences. I will leave, tantalisingly, the question ‘*who* is Lydia Howarde?’ to the end. I may add that it took me some time, through my archival explorations, to answer this question. I needed to do so as Lydia Howarde features strongly in the book I am writing about Gilbert and Sullivan in Australia and New Zealand.

My first encounter with Lydia Howarde came early in my Gilbert and Sullivan research. She and her troupe were the first company to perform Gilbert and Sullivan in New Zealand. **[slide 2]** The one-act *Trial by Jury*, a comic opera about a breach of promise case, premiered in London in March 1875 and was an immediate success. Just over a year later the first performance in the Southern Hemisphere took place at the Prince of Wales Opera House in Melbourne. Such was the success of *Trial by Jury* in Melbourne that the enterprising Lydia

Howarde, an Australian on tour in New Zealand, quickly incorporated the work into the repertoire of her company and it had its New Zealand debut on the 31 August 1876.¹ An enthusiastic audience crammed into the Canterbury Music Hall, with ‘every nook and cranny filled to overflowing’, and laughed and applauded ‘the most exquisite little bit of fooling in the way of burlesque ever written’.² The audience rose to their feet at the end, cheering and demanding several encores, particularly for Lydia Howarde’s ‘spirit[ed] and dash[ing]’ plaintiff and Mr R. Cary’s ‘irresistibly funny’ judge.³

The troupe arrived in New Zealand from Australia on 18 February 1876 and immediately captivated audiences. They were a relatively small troupe, [slide 3] the nucleus formed by Lydia Howarde, the soprano, Mademoiselle Solange Navaro (the stage name of Maude Vickery) the mezzo with the cachet of having performed at the Theatre Comique in Paris, and Harry Power the comedian, the son of a Melbourne Presbyterian minister. In keeping with nineteenth century theatre practice, this core company relied on local talent to swell their numbers. Some, such as Aucklander Jennie Nye and Wellingtonian R. Cary, became fixtures of the troupe, and others provided support as costume designers, musicians, stagehands, and chorus members for the duration of the company’s stay in their town.

Lydia Howarde originally billed her troupe as an Opera Bouffe company and their first performance featured a work in the French comic opera tradition.

Chilpéric [slide 4] by Florimond Hervé opened in Paris in 1868. Lydia Howarde staged the English version of the opera (which was a favourite of the Prince of Wales) and opening night on 25 February 1876 was a resounding success. Although the troupe arrived in Auckland only a week prior to opening, in this time Lydia Howarde auditioned, hired, and rehearsed a cast of 30 to sing the big choruses.⁴ The final chorus of Act 1 brought the house down with its special sound effects of rain and its dancing druids spinning umbrellas in a multitude of colours. The umbrellas and bright gas lights unsettled the star of this finale so much that he bolted from the stage – he was a ‘very teachable donkey’ (the budget couldn’t stretch to the seven horses of the original) who had behaved perfectly in rehearsals but suffered from stage fright on the night. The audience also particularly enjoyed the local allusions in an exchange in broken Spanish between Mr Searle playing Dr Senna and Mr Ramsden playing Don Nervosa which managed to rhyme ‘Rangitoto’ with ‘North Shoro’.⁵

Burlesque was the format that the Lydia Howarde company, now billed as a Burlesque Troupe, increasingly employed. One of the Troupe’s biggest hits was *Robinson Crusoe*, [slide 5]. The show loosely followed the narrative of Daniel Defoe’s novel and included many of the most popular songs of the day. Lydia Howarde played Robinson and the most encored number was her rendition of

‘Nancy Lee’. This ballad in praise of a faithful sailor’s wife waiting for her beloved to return from the sea, was composed by the prolific duo Stephen Adams and Frederick E. Weatherly (perhaps most famous for the ‘Holy City’ and ‘The Star of Bethlehem’) in 1876 and sold 70,000 copies in a year. [slide 6] Another hit of 1876 also made its way into *Robinson Crusoe*, with Mr Fischer singing American composer Henry Clay Work’s ‘Grandfather’s Clock’ to a self-accompaniment ‘on an instrument resembling a stethoscope’.⁶ Just where this fits into the narrative of a shipwrecked island is rather unclear!

The works of Sir Walter Scott [slide 7] were particular favourites of the Lydia Howarde Troupe. *Kenilworth*, with its onstage spectacle of Elizabeth I and her court arriving by boat in sumptuous costumes, and *Ivanhoe*, with its sword fight and love triangle, were particularly popular. At times reviewers seemed baffled by the topsy turvey irreverence of these burlesque shows, but there was no doubt that audiences revelled in them. When *Ivanhoe* was performed in Gisborne in 1881 one reporter exclaimed: ‘shades of Sir Walter Scott! Could the great bard rise from his grave and see the finest of his historic creations made the subject of a burlesque...how tremendous would be his objurgations ... To behold his *Ivanhoe* — the gallant — the chivalrous — the devoted — represented by a woman who sings the songs of the day ... and, still worse than all, to witness an audience aching with laughter; to be compelled to see them clapping hands and encoring songs and giving forth acclamations of approval.’⁷

The secret of this success [slide 8] lay perhaps in the quality of the troupe as a whole, and especially of Lydia Howarde who from the outset was hailed as ‘one of the greatest burlesque actresses in the Australian colonies’.⁸ One Christchurch reviewer in 1876 went as far as declaring that to see the Lydia Howarde troupe perform at the Music Hall was ‘the only place of amusement where a happy evening may be spent.’⁹ The lavish costumes, specially painted sets, and beautiful grand piano that toured with the company throughout the North and South Islands are all testament to the high production standards.

The early stages of the 1880-81 tour equalled the successes of the previous tour. An audience favourite [slide 9] was the witches’ scene from *Macbeth* which provides an excellent insight into the kind of punning dialogue common in burlesque. This is not the scene as Shakespeare purists might expect. Banquo and Macbeth enter the stage carrying umbrellas to encounter the three weird sisters who immediately exclaim: ‘Hail! Hail! Hail!’ The stage effects of a storm accompanied this opening and when Macbeth asked Banquo ‘What means these salutations, noble thane’ the witches replied: ‘These shouts of ‘Hail’ anticipate your Rain.’ Off stage the stage manager swirled around a cascade of stones in a trough of water to give the appropriate effect and the audience went wild.

While the repertoire of the Lydia Howarde Troupe was predominantly European and in the burlesque tradition, they also knew the value of profiling the local [slide 10]. On Christmas Day 1876 the company gave the first public performance of ‘God Defend New Zealand’, words by Dunedin MP Thomas Bracken and words by John Joseph Woods. Two days earlier the troupe paid homage to the work of the Dunedin Fire Brigade. Lydia sang Bracken’s ‘The Tramp of the Fire Brigade’ while a large number of the brigade marched behind her in uniform.¹⁰

Theatre-going was a primarily European activity in this period, but Māori interest in European music making was evident when a party of 150 local Maori gate-crashed a rehearsal [slide 11] in 1881 in Cambridge. The Lydia Howarde company were gathered around the piano in the Town Hall to rehearse Julius Eichberg’s *The Doctor of Alcantara*. The *Waikato Times* reported that the ‘music-loving’ Māori ‘swarmed round the devoted actors and actresses, enjoying to the full the cheap treat thus provided.’ As a thank you for the entertainment the Māori visitors performed a haka. This was a moment of genuine musical exchange, with the music enticing the Māori party into the hall and eliciting pleasure and a desire to reciprocate.¹¹

What do these face to face encounters with nineteenth century New Zealand performers and audiences reveal about the nature of theatre at that time? What

did audiences want and enjoy? What did the Lydia Howarde company provide? Firstly, while there were some theatrical exchanges between Māori and Pākehā, the theatre was predominantly a European space, with European actors performing European works to a predominantly European audience.

The repertoire [slide 12] performed by the Lydia Howarde troupe is the perfect microcosm of what was popular as entertainment in the 1870s. The appetite of the day was primarily for comedy and for song. People wanted to go to the theatre to laugh, to escape the humdrum realities of everyday life, to enter a topsy-turvy realm in which princesses could become cats, magic lamps could transform street urchins into sultans, able seamen could become captains, and true love could conquer all. But audiences also wanted wit – to laugh and applaud because shows were not just absurd but also clever. Both of these elements are central to the burlesque shows that the Lydia Howarde troupe staged. The story of the Lydia Howarde troupe also reveals that colonial audiences had an appetite for the new. The troupe found their greatest success with Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* and *HMS Pinafore* because they were original, topical, and came with the cachet of recent international success.

In order to succeed on the nineteenth century colonial stage performers needed to be both versatile and intrepid. [slide 13] Travelling troupes such as the Lydia Howarde troupe, the Pollards Liliputian Opera Company, and Riccardi's

Pinafore Company could make a living if they were prepared to brave the perils of the sea and rough inland tracks to take their shows to wherever theatres were to be found. And there were many such theatres. For instance, in Kumara on the West Coast, population 4,000, by 1876 there were not one but two theatres (the Adelphi and the Theatre Royal) that were filled to capacity every night by miners and business owners, men and women, old and young.¹²

The story of Lydia Howarde's troupe is also representative of the prominent place women occupied in nineteenth century, not just as performers but as directors and entrepreneurs, and my research thus intersects with and endorses Catherine Bishop's recent scholarship on colonial businesswomen.¹³ **[slide 14]** On stage Lydia Howarde always played the lead, be that part male or female, reflecting nineteenth century comfort with theatrical cross dressing and gender reversal. Lydia was Chilperic, King of the Gauls. She was the street urchin Aladdin who became the sultan. She was the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe. She was the Earl of Leicester charming Elizabeth I (who was played in drag by comedian Harry Powers). Reviews walked a fine line between highlighting the rather titillating pleasure of women's legs and 'splendid figure' being on display in a 'closely fitted costume' and emphasising that Lydia played her roles with sincerity, dignity, and refinement.¹⁴

So, who is Lydia Howarde¹⁵ and, as we come face to face with this remarkable woman, what conclusions can we draw as we place her within the context of her time? **[slide 15]** Born Ann Day in London in 1837 she immigrated to Australia with her parents. She was studying at the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute when she met Giovanni Vitelli (the stage name of Englishman John Wittle), marrying him when she was only 18. He became an impresario known for staging affordable concerts at Hockings' Grand Concert Hall and the Criterion Hall with his wife as the star. Two years later Annie Vitelli was performing in Bendigo while her husband remained in Melbourne. Here she met Charles Thatcher, **[slide 16]** the goldfields Balladeer, who she married in 1861 after Vitelli's death. Touring both New Zealand and Australia with Thatcher throughout the 1860s, she was acclaimed for her voluptuous beauty and her rendition of sentimental ballads such as 'Listen to the Mockingbird' and 'Jeremiah, Don't Go to Sea'.

Thatcher has attracted the attention of biographers Hugh Anderson and Robert Hoskins, but Annie plays a very minor role in these discussions, relegated to on-stage supporting act and valuable colonial helpmeet capable of smoothing over offence caused by Thatcher's satiric ballads. In both the biographies Annie's story ends when Thatcher leaves Australasia for England in 1870, with Hoskins commenting that she was 'willing to settle into household duties after a long and distinguished career'. This is entirely false. Annie did not accompany her

husband but stayed in Australia and completely reinvented herself. [slide 17]
No longer was she the sidekick but the primadonna and star. No longer was she 'Madame' or 'Mrs', the helpful appendage to a male impresario, but the director of her own company. Annie Vitelli, otherwise known as Mrs Charles Thatcher, was reborn as Lydia Howarde. It was under this name that she established her successful theatre troupe and it was under this name that she toured New Zealand in the 1870s and early 1880s. Her capacity for reinvention is as remarkable as the way in which she defies so many stereotypes.

In the popular imagination the nineteenth century is all too often regarded as a time of blanket gender oppression, male control, and female silencing and marginalisation. Thatcher's twentieth-century biographers may have marginalised and silenced Lydia, but the latter part of her life was lived on her own terms as she demonstrated that freedom of movement, a successful career, and financial independence were possible for nineteenth century women. Even in 2019 narratives of women declaring that opportunities for actresses all too frequently dry up as women hit 35 remain all too common (although there are wonderful counter narratives of stars like Judi Dench and Maggie Smith who prove that age and gender are no deterrents to success). Before them Lydia Howarde proved that life really could begin at 40 – her 40s and 50s being the time of her greatest on-stage success. When she returned to Australia in the

1880s she continued her life-long association with the theatre as a teacher and director. Just six months before her death at the age of 80 she produced the comedy *The Accidental Honeymoon* at Melbourne's King's Theatre¹⁶

The history of Lydia Howarde and her troupe is also the history of the theatre of the day in microcosm. These travelling players were ahead of their time in many ways, or perhaps they reveal that it is our attitude towards this period that needs to be reassessed. Women were significant players, not only starring in productions but managing troupes. Actors and audiences had no problem with cross-gender casting, female performers taking the stage in breeches and male stars playing female parts as both parodies and flattering imitations. These performers saw themselves as innovators and creators, indebted to the traditions of opera bouffe and unabashed appropriators of the new Gilbert and Sullivan craze, but unburdened by undue respect. They changed, and adapted, and made new because they saw the stage as place of malleability and fluidity, where their only duty was to enchant and entertain.

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- ¹ 'News of the Day,' *The Press*, 29 August 1876, p. 2.
- ² 'News of the Day,' *The Press*, 1 September 1876, p. 2.
- ³ 'Amusements: The Lydia Howarde Troupe,' *The Globe*, 1 September 1876, p. 2.
- ⁴ 'Prince of Wales Theatre, Opera Di Camera,' *New Zealand Herald*, 26 February 1876, p. 3.
- ⁵ 'Meetings and Amusements,' *Auckland Star*, 26 February 1876, p. 3.
- ⁶ 'Lydia Howarde Company,' *Taranaki Herald*, 5 September 1881, p. 2.
- ⁷ 'Ivanhoe,' *Poverty Bay Herald*, 2 February 1881, p. 2.
- ⁸ 'Meetings and Amusements,' *Auckland Star*, 25 February 1876, p. 3.
- ⁹ 'Amusements,' *Globe*, 17 June 1876, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Otago Daily Times*, 23 December 1876, p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Waikato Times* 1 March 1881, p. 2.
- ¹² T.E.Y. Seddon, *The Seddons: An Autobiography* (Auckland and London: Collins, 1968), p. 34.
- ¹³ Catherine Bishop, *Women Mean Business: Colonial Businesswoman in New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2019).
- ¹⁴ 'Meetings and Amusements,' *Auckland Star*, 26 February 1876, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Robert H. B. Hoskins. 'Vitelli, Annie', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, first published in 1990, updated April, 2014. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1v3/vitelli-annie> (accessed 24 August 2018); Karl Gänzl, *Emily Soldene: In Search of a Singer* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2007), volume 1, pp. 715-6; Karl Gänzl, *Victorian Vocalists* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 729-730; Mark Pinner, 'Charles Robert Thatcher's Songsters: Politics on the Goldfields of Victoria, Australia,' in *Cheap Print and Popular Song in the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural History of the Songster*, ed. Paul Watt, Derek B. Scott, Patrick Spedding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 138-159, p. 155 (Hugh Anderson, *The Colonial Minstrel*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, 1960, p. 8).
- ¹⁶ 'The Playgoer,' *Punch*, 11 January 1917, p. 36.