



# BY THE WAY

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## *The Ladies of the Grossmith Company*

Notes written by **Eddie Grabham** about five of the most important female actors who appeared in musical comedies from 1919 at the Winter Garden Theatre, London, under George Grossmith Jr's management.

### **Yvonne Arnaud (1895–1958)**

French-born Yvonne Arnaud became a popular actress in England. She shone in light and musical comedy following her success in *The Girl in the Taxi* (Lyric Theatre, 1912).

She played Georgette St Pol in *Kissing Time* (1919), the English version of Wodehouse, Bolton and composer Ivan Caryll's *The Girl Behind the Gun*, which ran for 160 performances on Broadway. Wodehouse and Bolton's book was based on *Madam and her Godson* by Maurice Hennequin and Pierre Weber, and was the only show Plum wrote which reflected the First World War. The London version nearly trebled the length of the Broadway run with 430 performances at the new Winter Garden.



Yvonne Arnaud and Phyllis Dare in *Kissing Time*

Yvonne Arnaud followed this success by appearing in two of Ben Travers' Aldwych farces (*Tons of Money*, transferred from the Shaftesbury where it had opened in 1922, and *A Cuckoo in the Nest*, in 1925). She created the role of Mrs Pepys in *And So To Bed* in both London (1926) and New York (1927). In the 1930s she widened her range of parts to encompass both Shakespeare and Shaw, made many appearances in films and toured with ENSA during WWII. She made her home in Guildford, which named its new theatre the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre in 1965.

### **Phyllis Dare (1890–1975)**

Edwardian beauty Phyllis Dare graced the London stage for half a century following her debut in pantomime with older sister Zena in 1899. Seymour Hicks cast her as Mab in *Bluebell in Fairyland* at the Vaudeville (1901). She played Eileen Cavanagh in Robert Courtneidge's production of *The Arcadians* (1909) for over a year until her role was taken over by Courtneidge's daughter Cicely.

When George Edwardes was looking for a replacement for his great star Gertie Millar at the Gaiety, he gave Phyllis Dare the title role in *Peggy* (1911). She then played Prudence in the Paris production of *The Quaker Girl* before Edwardes provided her with another leading role, in *The Sunshine Girl* (1912).

George Grossmith, who had worked with George Edwardes at the Gaiety, cast her as Lucienne Touquet in *Kissing Time* (1919). She starred with Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert in the Rodgers and Hart musical *Lido Lady* at the Gaiety (1926), and then turned to straight plays with a revival of Freddie Lonsdale's *Aren't We All* at the Fortune (1929).

At the outbreak of war, Ivor Novello invited Phyllis and sister Zena to tour in his play *Full House* (1940). The sisters had not appeared on stage together for forty years. Phyllis toured with ENSA during the war and made her final West End appearance with her sister once again in Novello's *King's Rhapsody* (1949). Although she was engaged briefly to prolific songsmith Paul Rubens during WWI, Phyllis never married and retired in 1951.

### **Dorothy Dickson (1893–1995)**

Before appearing in the Bolton-Wodehouse-Kern musical comedy *Oh, Boy!* at New York's Princess Theatre, Dorothy Dickson had been a ballroom dancer. She stopped the show when she danced with husband Carl Hyson in *The Royal Vagabond* (1919). The couple danced together again in *London, Paris and New York* (London Pavilion,

1921) and later that year she played the title role (created on Broadway by Marilyn Miller) in *Sally* at the Winter Garden Theatre. It was the first of three starring roles under George Grossmith's management at the Winter Garden being followed by *The Cabaret Girl* and *The Beauty Prize*, both Grossmith-Wodehouse-Kern shows.



Dorothy Dickson in  
*The Beauty Prize*

In 1936, the year of her divorce from Carl Hyson, Ivor Novello made Dorothy his leading lady in his second Drury Lane operetta, *Careless Rapture*. She stayed at the Drury Lane for his *Crest of the Wave* (1937), and in Novello's 1938 production of *Henry V*, she played Princess Katherine to Novello's King. Remarkably, she successfully played a twelve-year-old girl in Novello's *Dancing Years* as late in her career as 1939. She was a great friend of the late Queen Mother and, like her, reached her personal Centenary.

#### Vera Lennox (1904–1984)

Having played Effie Dix in *The Cabaret Girl* (1923) and Kitty Wren in *The Beauty Prize* (1924), Vera Lennox stayed at the Winter Garden until 1926. She played another Wodehouse character, Sally Smith MD, in *Good Morning, Bill* (Duke of York's, 1927), and repeated the role when the play was revived in 1934. Her continuing successful career included pantomime and several films before she joined the BBC, becoming a cast member of *ITMA* (*It's That Man Again*) in September 1939.

Vera Lennox in  
*The Beauty Prize*

*ITMA*'s star, Tommy Handley, became a household name throughout the war as the show relentlessly lampooned the Nazis, Vera playing Tommy's fictional secretary Dotty.

#### Heather Thatcher (1897–1987)

Heather Thatcher appeared in films from 1916 and took the role of Renée in *The Girl at*

*Ciro's* at the Garrick in the same year. She developed both careers in parallel before she played Rosalind Rafferty in the London production of *Sally* (1921). Following a part in *Eileen* at the Globe (1922), she



returned to the Winter Garden to appear in *The Cabaret Girl* and *The Beauty Prize*.

In 1929, she played the part of Sally Smith MD in a one-act version of *Dr Sally*, Wodehouse's specially written abridgement of *Good Morning, Bill*, in a music-hall revue at the London Coliseum.

Her best-known film made in Hollywood is *Beau Geste*, with Gary Cooper.

In 1935 she appeared in Novello's *Full House* at London's Haymarket with Isabel Jeans and took the same play to New York. In 1940 she joined Phyllis and Zena Dare in a revival tour, and continued to tour with ENSA during WWII.



Heather Thatcher in  
*Sally*