



Theatre.

Vesta Tilley and female drag

Date

c.1880 - 1912

Description

Matilda Powles (1864-1952) widely known by her stage name Vesta Tilley, was one of the most famous male impersonators of her era. A star in Britain and the United States, she performed to audiences to great acclaim for over thirty years performing and singing comedic songs in drag as a man. The songs would often elaborate on embarrassing or pompous aspects of masculinity or the profession of love for or desire by ladies in numbers such as 'I'm The Idol of the Girls' or 'When the Right Girl Comes Along'. Her sexuality was never questioned and she was married to a British politician and yet today we would consider that her performance of gender role was perhaps more complex than appreciated at the time. Our collections include a poster advertising Vesta Tilley's performance at the South London Palace in 1882, as well as depictions of the theatre itself. Other outlets for female drag in the late 19th century included pantomime where women often played the parts of men (which continues today) and some can be seen here in a promotional piece for a run of 'Dick Whittington' at Elephant and Castle