

MARIE ST DENIS

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In the late 1860s Melbourne theatre-goers had much scandal to talk about when the young actress Marie St Denis committed suicide in Jolimont. Although she was born in Belgium of a Flemish father and an English mother, the public regarded her as French. Indeed, the "Voltairianism" of her "French education" was seen as one of the causes of her atheism and immorality, and eventually her "*felo de se*".

Born Alice Maes in 1848 at Malines, she arrived in Melbourne in 1863 with her widowed mother and elder sister. Mrs Georgina Maes, nee Newbury, styled herself as "schoolmistress" and her daughters as governesses. Soon after their arrival Marie Maes died of typhoid and Mrs Maes had only the 14 year-old Alice to help her in her unsuccessful attempt to open a school for young ladies at Clunes. Eventually, the mother set up as a teacher of French and music in Carlton, while young Alice stayed on as governess to the children of a Clunes doctor.

In 1865 Alice found employment as governess in Geelong and it was there that she attracted the attention of the *Argus* drama critic, who, impressed with her ability to perform extracts from Shakespeare and Byron, in "polite company", urged her to become an actress. The actor-manager William Hoskins gave her some tuition and she made her debut at the Princess's in November 1866, taking the stage name "Marie St Denis". From her first play, *The Love Chase*, she had lead or star billing. Most critics were favourably impressed with her talent mentioning only minor faults, such as a certain impulsiveness, her French accent and her inability to pronounce the letter "r".

Over the next two years she played many major Shakespearian roles, such as Juliet, Desdemona and Portia, opposite the notable visiting tragedians James Anderson and Walter Montgomery. Marie was also thought to be outstanding as the heroine in the melodramas *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. She added notoriety to her success when it became known that she was taking lovers from what the *Leader* called "those capital fellows" around the stage door. In mid 1868 while on tour in Adelaide she started an affair with a married man. Very unhappy over his neglect, and deeply in debt, she attempted suicide. Her career deteriorated from this time, and in October 1868 she took laudanum and died in the arms of her doctor, the theatre critic James Edward Nield. She was just twenty years old.

The newspapers made much of her death in long obituaries which raked up salacious details of her life. Marcus Clarke deplored the "morbid sensationa-