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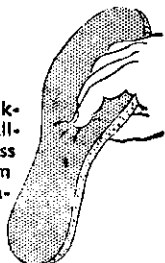
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SMOOTH TAKE-OFF

FLORENCE ELIZABETH DAWSON was a little girl who used to look out over the crowded streets of Islington from the room above her father's bootmaker's shop. She was born in 1905 and life then was simple, middling poor, but infinitely respectable in the Dawson family. At the age of ten the ambitious child got a job as a dancer in a touring version of the pantomime *Babes in the Wood*, and earned five shillings a week. It was during that tour that Florrie Dawson decided to become Florence Desmond.

From that time onward Florence Desmond's career followed a familiar pattern of variety singing turns and comic numbers in companies touring the Provinces. Abruptly she decided to give up touring and make a bid for the West End, starting in the chorus. C. B. Cochran saw her and not long afterwards she became one of the original band of "Mr. Cochran's Young Ladies." That led to musical shows like Noel Coward's *On With the Dance* and *This Year of Grace*, to cabaret work in England and the United States and to film work.

Just as a speculative venture Florence Desmond started doing her imitations—of Alice Delysia, Jessie Matthews and Tallulah Bankhead. She was surprised to find that these bits went over better than her songs so, remembering Noel Coward's advice ("Specialise, Dessie. Don't try to do too much of everything"), she extended her repertoire. One she worked up was her celebrated "Hollywood Party," in which she imitated Janet Gaynor (the hostess), ZaSu Pitts, Marlène Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Tallulah Bankhead, Jimmy Durante, Gracie Fields and Marie Dressler. Her recording of the "Hollywood Party" topped the year's best-seller list.

Though Florence Desmond's successful career contained enough excitement for one person, her private life was by no means a calm one. There was her marriage to Tom Campbell Black, the famous airman, who, with C. W. A. Scott, won the London to Melbourne Air Race in record time in 1935. After only eighteen months of marriage he was killed in an aircraft accident.

Florence Desmond herself contracted a near-fatal case of lead-poisoning from her stage make-up. In later years she married again, and during the war spent a long and exhausting period leading a band of ENSA entertainers who gave concerts in the Mediterranean area.

Florence Desmond's greatest asset in her work is conviction. Ability to lose oneself entirely in the character one is playing is to some extent, she says, a natural gift which can be developed and improved by intense study and practice. She never practises in front of a mirror because then she would see only herself. She starts by imitating the shape of the face because only then can she produce from it the right type of voice. Three visits are all she needs before she can imitate a person. On the first visit she often feels discouraged; on the second little mannerisms begin to stand out and then suddenly the right voice comes.

When Florence Desmond visited Australia for the ABC recently she recorded three programmes. *Florence Desmond Entertains* will be heard from all YA and YZ stations, beginning on Saturday, February 5, at 7.30 p.m.



FLORENCE DESMOND
Three variations

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 4, 1955.