

THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN ON "THE FIRM"

By Maurice Walsh

Ninety-seven years after a young American actor came to Melbourne for the second time to produce and act here, and joined two local theatrical managers in a famous triumvirate, the curtain ~~has~~ come down on his great theatre company, which became known throughout Australia as "The Firm".

In 1874, a young American actor-producer, James Cassius Williamson, and his actress-wife, Maggie Moore, arrived in Melbourne with their very successful American play, "Struck Oil", and they liked us so much that they returned four years afterwards after playing through India and England on their way back to California.

Williamson was not born into the theatre. He walked into it at the ambitious age of fifteen and served an arduous apprenticeship in a company which rushed around America's middle west, seeking what could be devoured physically and mentally, until he came under the notice of a New York theatre owner, named John Wallack.

Comedy, ancient and modern, Shakespeare and all the best of what was being produced in England at the time were re-produced by Wallack in the best possible style. Wallack aimed at perfection in the many English shows which he produced, and acting and plenty of it was required when the youthful Williamson joined him.

Seven hard years followed in New York where he gained a reputation as a dialect comedian, and was cast for French, Dutch, German and Yorkshire characters at short notice. Williamson went right through the mill at Wallack's but, as he confessed to the writer's father many years later, it was worth it, for he had a well-earned reputation when he decided to return to California where, after another three years on the stage, he decided to enter the producer ranks.

It was a risky step in those days, but the level-headed young actor had studied Wallack closely. He had saved his money and he got hold of a play called "Struck Oil", which looked promising. He bought it, made some alterations in the drama, married Maggie Moore, California's stage sweetheart, and went on tour with these two valuable possessions.

They made their first appearance among the Mormons in Salt Lake City, and the blessing of Brigham Young descended upon them. They were made. They made a long tour of the United States before coming to Australia in 1874. Here they played to business, never seen before, for fifteen months before, on their trip home, looting India and the Cockneys at the Adelphi in London for six months, after which James and Maggie returned to California for a long well-earned rest.

In 1879 they returned to Australia to a wonderful welcome and enjoyed another boom with the old play, Maggie becoming, as in California, the theatre's sweetheart. Williamson determined to live by his art and to avoid the worries of management. But circumstances conquered his resolution.

Having met d'Oyley Carte in London, Williamson became interested in the Gilbert

and Sullivan operas, <sup>and</sup> he had brought out "Pinafore" and "The Pirates of Penzance" with him, in which he proposed to play the parts of Sir Joseph Porter and the Sergeant of Police, parts very suitable for the humour of the Californian. He was arranging to form his own company to be known as the Royal Comic Oper<sup>re</sup> Company when he was approached by two Melbourne theatrical managers, who had recently joined forces, to join them in production and, as a result, the triumvirate firm of Williamson, Garnet<sup>re</sup> and Musgrove was formed, which later became J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd.

What the new company was to mean to the Australian theatre is simply told — under Williamson's direction it produced grand opera, Gilbert and Sullivan, comic opera, musical comedies, pantomimes and the leading overseas <sup>plays</sup>, featuring all the world's great stars, personally selected by the erstwhile American actor-manager.

But despite the volume of work as senior partner and director which faced him, Williamson was reluctant to leave the boards, and an extraordinary clause in the partnership agreement allowed him to resume acting for six months in each year, the only stipulation being that the Firm could have first call on his services! But he didn't take advantage of the clause, for the amount of work, due to the immediate success of the company, required his full attention.

Before the turn of the century, apart from Gilbert and Sullivan, the Firm had extraordinary success with "The Silver King", "Ma Mie Rosette", "Djin Djin" and, of course, the record-breaker, "Trilby". Maggie Moore played the innocent Trilby who was the victim of the machinations of the villainous Svengali.

Williamson never lost an opportunity to encourage local talent and, when he produced Lehar's "Merry Widow", in 1908, he gave the part to a young Geelong girl, Carrie Moore, who danced like an angel to become the greatest Sonia of all time. A Carlton girl, Nellie Stewart, selected by Williamson, wore the enormous hats of "Sweet Nell of Old Drury", Charles II's light O's love. And who of our grandfathers <sup>didn't</sup> throng the theatre when lovely Florence Young appeared in "Floradora"? Its ditties were whistled in every street in every Australian city and township.

And what of Nellie Melba? She made her debut in Brussels, in 1896, and on her many returns to Australia, Williamson was there to produce her in grand opera and on the concert platform. The great manager's comment about the great diva perhaps best sums up the famous singer — "Melba was the best, she demanded the best, and I gave her the best."

J.C.W. attributed his success to women. "I've been associated with hundreds of women in the theatre, and not one of them has ever let me down. But everything began with Maggie. She was a better actress than I could ever have been an actor, and her love and encouragement has raised me up on the many occasions when my head has been low. But perhaps he was too modest. A close friend said of him — "Mr Williamson is not an emotional man. He talks about his histrionic career with difficulty and diffidence."

James Cassius Williamson died in Paris in 1913, scarcely a decade before a girl from Bundaberg, Gladys Moncrieff, starred in what proved to be the most popular production ever featured by the historic Firm — "Maid of the Mountains."