

## ELISABETH KUMM

### Theatre in Melbourne, 1914-18: the best, the brightest and the latest

Australian theatre was already undergoing momentous change when war broke out in 1914. Corporations were replacing actor-managers, theatre interests were contracting from multiple groups to just a few, and Australian audiences were increasingly open to American plays and players. The years immediately before the war saw the passing of two of the country's leading entrepreneurs – music hall singer and founder of the Tivoli circuit Harry Rickards, and actor-manager JC Williamson, founder of JC Williamson Ltd – while other 19th-century show-business luminaries – George Coppin, George Rignold and Bland Holt – had died or retired.<sup>1</sup> What did not change was the role of the audience as the arbiter of taste, which saw the public demanding the best, the brightest and the latest.

#### JC Williamson and its competitors

Known as JCW or 'The Firm', JC Williamson Ltd was the dominant force in Australian theatrical promotion, with controlling interests in theatres throughout Australia and New Zealand. The company was founded by American actor James Cassius Williamson, who first visited Australia under the auspices of George Coppin in 1874. He made his preliminary foray into

Front cover of musical score for George R Hyam's 'Imshi', which was first sung in *Stop Your Nonsense* – an original Australian musical burlesque – at the King's Theatre in December 1915. Sydney: J Wynter, c. 1915. National Library of Australia MUS N mba 783.2421599 H992

The Battle-cry of the Australasian Soldiers at the Dardanelles

The Australian war cry on the peninsula is "Imshi Yolla"  
Arabic words meaning "Be off! Move on."  
*Daily Telegraph*

# IMSHI

(MOVE ON)



Words & Music  
By  
George R. Hyam

Sung by  
FRED TWITCHIN in *Beanoof Sm.*  
Leslie Hoskins new musical farce.



"STOP YOUR NONSENSE"

Price

2/-

net

Published by

JOHN WYNTER & CO.  
Temple Court  
Sydney

management in 1879 when he purchased the Australian performance rights for the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. With business partners Arthur Garner and George Musgrove, and later George Tallis and Gustave Ramaciotti, he oversaw the expansion of the company that bore his name. Between 1880 and 1911, The Firm employed leading international stars, as well as negotiating the rights to thousands of plays, musical comedies and operas from London's West End, Europe and New York's Broadway, and touring them throughout their vast network of Australasian theatres.

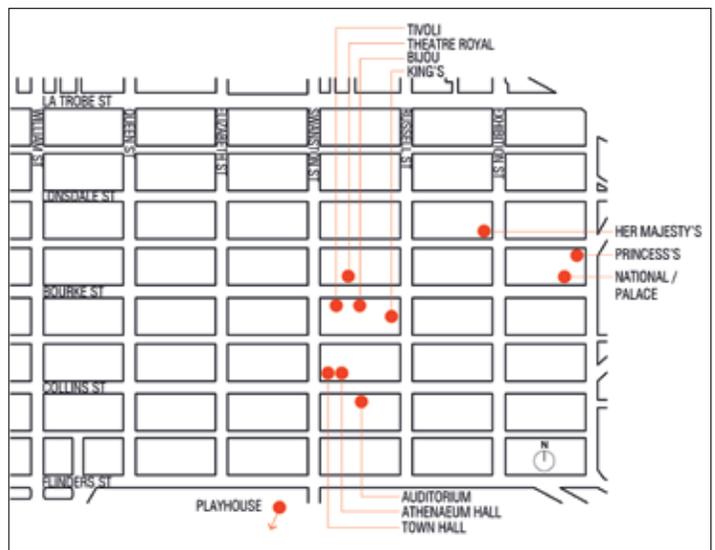
The company's strength lay in its geographic spread and its ability to give the public what it wanted. Employing many of the country's leading performers, designers and technicians, the quality of The Firm's productions was second to none. After Williamson's death in 1913, the directors of the company were George Tallis, Hugh J Ward and Clyde Meynell. Of these, Tallis was the only director without a stage pedigree. An astute businessman, however, with the ability to recognise talent and back the right shows, he was the perfect counterpoint for seasoned showman Ward and theatrical all-rounder Meynell.

Though JCW dominated the industry, there were other groups and individuals vying for theatregoers' attention. These included Hugh D McIntosh, who took over the Tivoli circuit; William Anderson, known for his quality Australian drama productions; Bert Bailey, famous for his adaptations of the stories of Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis); the Tait brothers, John, Nevin and Frank, concert, film and theatre promoters whose company, J & N Tait, became JCW's greatest wartime rivals; George Marlow, noted for his 'Marlowdrama' but also a supporter of Shakespeare and grand opera; and the Fuller brothers, Benjamin and John, who took over the Brennan Vaudeville circuit in 1912.

During the period August 1914 to November 1918, more than 350 different plays were staged in Melbourne, some 200 being performed for the first time. By far the most popular genre was drama, which constituted more than half the plays produced, followed by comedy, musical comedy, pantomime and revue.

### The theatres

In 1914, Melbourne boasted seven principal central city theatres including Her Majesty's and Theatre Royal (JC Williamson Ltd), Princess (George Marlow), King's (William Anderson), Bijou and National (Fullers), and the Tivoli (Hugh D McIntosh). The epicentre was Bourke St, with the largest concentration of theatres sited on the block between Swanston and Russell streets. After 1900,



Left: British performer and vocalist Ada Reeve was an ardent conscriptionist and, while performing at the Tivoli in 1917, set a goal to raise £15,000 for the Anzac Buffet in London. Photograph by May and Mina Moore, c. 1914. Pictures Collection H38782/866  
Right: Central Melbourne, showing the location of theatres during World War I. Map compiled by the author

as the number of cinemas on this strip increased, this part of the city became the number one entertainment destination for Melburnians. In addition to the Town Hall and Athenaeum Hall, Melbourne also had a purpose-built concert hall, the Auditorium in Collins St, built by J & N Tait and opened in May 1913.

Her Majesty's, JCW's flagship venue, was constructed in 1886 as the Alexandra and used predominately for musical comedies and operas, while the Theatre Royal, built in 1872, principally staged plays. The Princess, constructed the same year as Her Majesty's, was originally built by JCW but, since the late 1890s, had been in other hands and, under George Marlow's management, it became 'Melbourne's home of drama'. The Bijou, originally designed as an intimate drama theatre in 1890, now operated as a vaudeville house, as did the Tivoli (opened 1901) and the National (opened 1911, remodelled as a drama theatre and renamed the Palace in 1916). The King's, built by William Anderson and opened in 1908, was Melbourne's newest purpose-built theatre.

### Actors at war

With the declaration of war in August 1914, people stopped going to the theatre and the entrepreneurs started to panic. Hugh D McIntosh and George Marlow were among the first to reduce admission prices to lure patrons back. In an attempt to save jobs, both JCW and McIntosh cut artists' salaries by 25 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Actor Nellie Stewart, in her 1922 autobiography, recalled the

difficulty of those early days, having sunk her savings and those of her partner, George Musgrove, into a lavish production of *Madame du Barry*:

You will recall that in the first anxious days of the war, playgoers were disposed to stay away from the theatre, feeling that it was not a time for amusement. This attitude was to change completely as the titanic struggle progressed, for the public then sought relief and relaxation from the stress of a constant nightmare. But for us in those early weeks, it spelt ruin.<sup>3</sup>

As Stewart suggests, the mood soon changed and people turned to the theatre as a means of escaping the harsh realities of the war.

In the first years of the war, tens of thousands of young men heeded the call to arms, including many members of the theatrical profession, from leading men to stagehands.<sup>4</sup> Of this number, many had performed with JCW, including Paul Plunket<sup>5</sup> and Harcourt Beatty.<sup>6</sup> Frank Crossley<sup>7</sup> from the King's also enlisted, as did a number of men from the Tivoli, such as stagehand Frank Molloy<sup>8</sup> and comedian Jim Gerald.<sup>9</sup>

In May 1917 a special benefit matinee was held at the Theatre Royal for the widow of Tom Dawson, a British vocalist and Tivoli regular, who was killed at Pozières in France after only a month in the trenches.<sup>10</sup> Derek Hudson, a British actor and vocalist who was engaged by JCW in 1914 to create leading roles in musical comedies, joined the Australian Flying Corps as a pilot. Drafted to France as a lieutenant with the Royal Flying Corps, his plane was shot down over France in August 1918 and he was captured by the Germans only to die a few days later from his wounds.<sup>11</sup>

### Actors from America

Prior to 1914, JCW sourced most of its international artists from England but, once war was declared, this situation changed dramatically and suddenly. Top British stars became difficult and expensive to import. As Melbourne's *Punch* noted in 1916:

There is a tremendous dearth of first-class artists. The English market is practically closed to Australian entrepreneurs owing to the colossal salaries which well-known artists now command. All the younger generation of men have gone into the King's uniform. The old hands, who have been public idols for a decade or more, are entrenched behind a scarcity of ability which enables them to demand and obtain huge salaries.<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately for audiences who still craved London names, Australian entrepreneurs like JCW could find quality British actors in America. Key

among them was Marie Tempest and Cyril Maude. Once a star of musical comedy, Tempest was now a doyenne of the dramatic stage, performing in sparkling society comedies, many of which were written for her by her husband Cosmo Gordon-Lennox. She made her first Melbourne appearance at the Royal in April 1917 in *The Marriage of Kitty* and *Penelope*. Initially engaged for six months, she extended her tour by a further six months, and a second Melbourne season followed that included, amongst other plays, Somerset Maugham's *Mrs Dot*. Likewise Maude, an actor-manager who excelled in character roles, had been performing in America prior to commencing his six-month Australian tour. Such was his reputation that his Australian debut at the Royal in June 1917 was attended by Prime Minister Billy Hughes and singer Nellie Melba.

On 21 April 1917, Ada Reeve arrived in Melbourne at the invitation of Hugh D McIntosh for her third Australian tour. Reeve was touring Egypt and India entertaining the troops when she received McIntosh's offer to visit Australia.<sup>13</sup> Her six-week Melbourne season wowed audiences with songs and ditties that ranged from the 'gay to the grave' including 'There's a long, long trail' and 'Soldier boy'. During the course of her 12-month tour, she also appeared in the play *Winnie Brooke, Widow*. JCW was also able to draw on reserves from its South African companies, bringing to Australia numerous British actors such as Madge Fabian, Daisy Atherton and Percy Marmont, and Hilda Guiver. Many British actors who arrived before the outbreak of war chose to remain in Australia, including high calibre performers such as Leslie Holland, Minnie Love, Maude Fane, Connie Ediss, Barry Lupino and Jack Cannot.

Although American plays and players were brought to Australia from the period of the 1850s gold rushes and before, Australians traditionally favoured British plays over American ones. A 1904 interview with JC Williamson in the *Evening News* noted that:

The field Australian managers have to draw upon is largely limited to England, for the public here do not generally take kindly to American plays. There have been exceptions, but these have had to be played by American companies. *Trilby* and *A Trip to Chinatown* were successful as played by American artists; but generally Mr Williamson's efforts to open a market here for American productions have not been encouraged by the public.<sup>14</sup>

In the decade leading up to the First World War, America was becoming a world power, swollen by immigration and industrial advancement. American actors and playwrights were developing a vitality that matched their country's

new-found energy, and were being seen outside of America in greater numbers than ever before. One of the most popular prewar American stars was the aptly named Muriel Starr. Between 1913 and 1918, she made two trips for JCW, performing in high quality American dramas such as *Within the Law* and *The Bird of Paradise*. Other key arrivals for JCW included comedians Hale Hamilton and Myrtle Tannehill (*It Pays to Advertise, Twin Beds*), Kathlene Macdonell and Charles Waldron (*Daddy Long Legs*), Beatrice Nichols and Tom McLarnie (*A Pair of Sixes*), Florence Rockwell (*The House of Glass*), and Margaret Wycherley (*The Thirteenth Chair*).

### Homegrown stars

Despite the large number of international artists who were brought to Australia during the war years, many young Australians were showing that they also had what it took to impress local audiences. These included Dorothy Brunton (*High Jinks, Tonight's the Night*), Gladys Moncrieff (*Katinka, Oh! Oh!! Delphine!!!*), Cyril Ritchard (*Katinka*), Vera Pearce (*Tivoli Follies, Dick Whittington*), Maggie Dickinson (*The Dancing Mistress*), Clyde Cook (*The Cinema Star, The Bing Boys Are Here*), and Robert Greig and Beatrice Holloway (*Baby Mine*).

Older and established stars like Florence Young, Maggie Moore and Carrie Moore performed regularly during the war years. While Young's appearances were confined to JCW musical comedies, Maggie Moore appeared in productions for all the principal managers. For JCW she had character roles in *Daddy Long Legs* and *The Bird of Paradise*, for William Anderson she performed in *Sinbad the Sailor*, and for Fullers she revived the Irish comedy *Judy O'Trot*. Similarly, Carrie Moore was seen in vaudeville and comedy for Fullers, in pantomime for George Marlow, and in musical comedy for JCW.

### The war effort on stage

The entrepreneurs were quick to jump on the war bandwagon, announcing patriotic events in aid of the war effort. One of the first such events was held at Her Majesty's on 28 August 1914 when the 'combined theatrical managements of Melbourne' presented the first of two 'monster matinees'. Companies from the various theatres performed recitations and monologues, sang patriotic and other songs, and presented a number of one-act plays. Theatregoers were encouraged to attend: 'If you help these matinees you will help Australia'.<sup>15</sup>

During the first month of the war, further patriotic concerts were held at the Princess and the Auditorium, with the performance at the Auditorium being in aid of the Red Cross and featuring songs and recitations by performers including Nellie Melba, Ellen Terry and Maggie Stirling.



Program of an early patriotic afternoon 'monster matinee' organised by the 'combined theatrical managements of Melbourne' and held at Her Majesty's on 28 August 1914. Theatre Programs Collection

Throughout wartime, artists and managers gave generously to the war effort, appearing for free at all manner of patriotic events ranging from bazaars to celebrity cricket matches. Nellie Melba received a Dame of the British Empire in recognition of her war work, while Benjamin Fuller and George Tallis both earned knighthoods.

As an 'ardent conscriptionist', Ada Reeve lent her voice to the second conscription referendum, which was held in December 1917.<sup>16</sup> While in Australia she also raised £15,000 for the Anzac Buffet in London,<sup>17</sup> appealing to audiences at the Tivoli to give generously.

### Songs

Patriotic songs were big business and many were interpolated into musicals, pantomimes and revues. Dorothy Brunton popularised the recruiting song 'Your King and country want you' (*The Girl on the Film*) and 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag' (*Canary Cottage*) respectively. One of the biggest hits of the period, 'Australia will be there', was written and composed by WW 'Skipper' Francis, and first performed by him at Fullers' Bijou Theatre in

August 1914. Equally popular with Australian soldiers and those at home, the song's sheet music and recordings sold thousands of copies. It became known as Australia's 'Marseillaise'.<sup>18</sup>

### Revue versus vaudeville

During the first years of the war in Australia, vaudeville was immensely popular but, as it became more and more difficult to bring headline acts from Britain and Europe, entrepreneurs such as Hugh D McIntosh turned to revue.

In the early 1910s, revue was increasingly popular and the genre was being perfected by showmen such as CB Cochran and Andre Charlot in London, and Ziegfeld and Shubert in New York. As a cross between musical comedy, ballet, music hall and pantomime, revue resembled vaudeville but differed from it in its reliance on music and spectacle as a means of linking the disparate elements. Revue also introduced the syncopated rhythms of ragtime, the latest craze from America, which remained popular until the arrival of jazz in Australia in 1917. As audiences craved the latest sensations, Hugh D McIntosh lost no time in introducing localised versions of the London and New York revues, from *Hullo, Ragtime!* and the *Tivoli Follies* in 1914 to *Bubbly* in 1918.

JC Williamson Ltd introduced Australia's 'first' revue in 1913 when it produced a localised adaptation of the London revue *Come Over Here* but, despite its initial success, they didn't stage their next revues, *The Bing Boys Are Here* and *Hello, Everybody!*, until 1918.<sup>19</sup> With a cast headed by Jack Cannot and Minnie Love, *The Bing Boys Are Here* played an eight-week season at Her Majesty's from April 1918, introducing such songs as 'If you were the only girl in the world' and 'Good-by-ee!'.

McIntosh's *Tivoli Follies* was one of the most successful wartime revues. It toured the Tivoli circuit for two and a half years, opening its first season in Sydney in November 1914, during which time the principal artists changed, new artists sang old songs, and new songs and routines were introduced. Initially occupying the second half of the bill, the *Follies* soon took over the whole bill.<sup>20</sup> When it reached Melbourne in February 1915, Vera Pearce, along with Thelma Raye and Jack Cannot, were the stars. Pearce, a young Australian vocalist, became known as the 'Queen of the Follies' and, as well as being a noted pantomime performer, would go on to enjoy further acclaim in successive Tivoli shows.

### Musical comedy

Musical comedy remained popular with audiences and, in Melbourne during the war, JCW staged 20 new productions at Her Majesty's with the last of the



McIntosh's *Tivoli Follies* was one of the most successful revues produced during the war years, making a star of Australian performer Vera Pearce. Image courtesy of Frank Van Straten

London musicals – including *Gipsy Love*, *The Girl in the Taxi* and *The Cinema Star* – being staged during 1914–15. As the war made musicals founded on German originals unacceptable, and with new pieces from Britain in short supply, entrepreneurs turned to America as a source of musical comedy. *High Jinks* and *So Long, Letty* were the first of the new American musicals to arrive in Australia, the latter proving one of the big hits of the war years and playing 15 weeks in Sydney and nine weeks in Melbourne. Songs included 'Here come the married men' (sung by Connie Ediss) and 'The dear old fighting boys' (sung by Marie Eaton), as well as 'Good bye and good luck', composed especially for Dorothy Brunton by Andrew MacCunn and Claude McKay.

*Tonight's the Night* included the topical song 'Little Billy Hughes', also by MacCunn and McKay. First introduced by Arthur Reynolds in the pantomime *Mother Goose* in 1915, it was now sung by Connie Ediss. So, while Prime Minister Hughes was on his way back from Europe having represented Australia at the Paris economy pact in June and visiting Australian troops in France and England, Ediss was singing:

Oh! The man Australia's proud of  
Is little Billy Hughes.  
We love to read his speeches  
And listen to his views;  
And what Billy asks old England

We know she won't refuse,  
 For all Australia's right behind  
 Our Little Billy Hughes.<sup>21</sup>

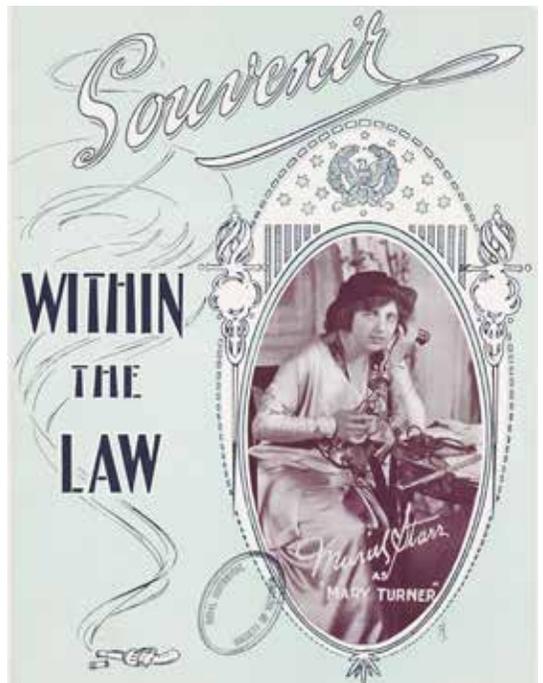
*You're in Love* was memorable for what was known as the 'boom number', in which Maude Fane, wearing pink pyjamas, swung out over the heads of the audience on the boom of a ship singing 'I'm only dreaming'. Patrons were encouraged to snatch one of her slippers and, in return for a donation to a patriotic fund, have it autographed by Fane. The final big musical of wartime was *Katinka*, which opened at Her Majesty's in June 1918. Running for 13 weeks, it established Gladys Moncrieff as the heir to Florence Young. The show's hit number 'Rackety coo' proved so popular that notices appeared in hospital wards asking people to refrain from whistling it.<sup>22</sup>

J & N Tait was JCW's only real rivals during the war years. In 1917 it produced the musicals *Very Good, Eddie* and *The White Chrysanthemum*, the first playing for almost eight weeks at the King's. The company brought Andrew Higginson, a former JCW principal, back to Australia after an absence of five years, to appear alongside Barry Lupino and Fayette Perry. The King's was also the venue for *Stop Your Nonsense*, an original Australian musical burlesque produced by Beaumont Smith and Leslie Hoskins. The show introduced a number of new songs including 'Imshi' (Arabic for 'move on' and used as a battle cry by Australians at Gallipoli), which was composed by George R Hyam, and sung by Fred Twitchin.

Imshi, Mr Turk, now get a move on;  
 Australasia is a-knocking at your door.  
 If you don't make tracks for the Golden Horn,  
 You're sure to take the High road for the Golden Shore.  
 Our Boys can shoot the feathers off an emu,  
 And they will never miss you till you're gone;  
 So – don't be absurd,  
 Take a wise man's word –  
 You'd better do an imshi – Move On.<sup>23</sup>

### Pantomime

During the war years, JC Williamson Ltd continued the pantomime tradition in Melbourne and Sydney by staging new productions at Christmas, and then touring the complete show throughout Australia and New Zealand during the following year. Audiences delighted in the topsy-turvy world of pantomime with its impressive staging and costumes, hoards of supernumeraries and dozens of



Left: The comedy *Twin Beds*, starring husband and wife duo Hale Hamilton and Myrtle Tannehill, was produced at the Melbourne Royal from 25 March 1916. *Table Talk*, 16 March 1916, p. 3

Right: One of the most popular wartime stars to be brought to Australia by JCW's was the aptly named Muriel Starr, a Canadian-born dramatic actor. *Within the Law*, program cover, Melbourne: Syd Day, c. 1913. Theatre Programs Collection

uplifting and amusing songs. After 1900, Christmas pantomimes kept pace with the long-running musicals, playing 10- to 12-week seasons at Her Majesty's. JCW enchanted audiences with *Cinderella* (1914), *Mother Goose* (1915), *The House That Jack Built* (1916), *Dick Whittington* (1917) and *Goody Two Shoes* (1918).

*Cinderella* was notable for introducing one of the most enduring songs of the period, 'Sister Susie's sewing shirts for soldiers', a tongue-twisting patter song, sung by Jack McArdle. Popularised by Jack Norworth in the London revue, *Hullo, Tango!*, and recorded by Al Jolson, it also enjoyed immense popularity among Australian soldiers on the Western Front.<sup>24</sup> In *Mother Goose*, Lilian de Venny scored a hit with 'Soldier boy' and 'There's a long, long trail' (also sung by Ada Reeve), while Arthur Reynolds introduced 'Little Billy Hughes'. *The House That Jack Built* included 'ANZAC', a new song by Tom Armstrong, sung by Constance Cayley, and the topical 'The tanks that broke the ranks', sung by Harry Roxbury. *Goody Two Shoes* included a number of Irving Berlin songs, including 'Oh! How I hate to get up in the morning' (sung by Miss Toby Claude) and 'I'm gonna pin a medal on the girl I left behind' (sung by May de Sousa).

JCW was not the only management to uphold the pantomime tradition. Homegrown pantomimes were also staged at the Princess, Bijou, King's and Tivoli. One of the most successful was *The Bunyip*, written by Nat Phillips and Ella Airlie, with music by Herbert de Pinna. After opening in Sydney at Christmas 1916, it played two successful seasons in Melbourne, at the Princess at Easter 1917 and at the Bijou the following December. Original songs included 'Bill's enlisted' (sung by Queenie Paul) and 'We're proud of our Anzac heroes' (sung by Nellie Kolle).

Throughout wartime, patriotic elements were a common feature of pantomime and revue. At Christmas 1914, William Anderson staged *Sinbad the Sailor*, with Maggie Moore as Mrs Sinbad. Both Anderson and JCW's pantomimes for 1914 featured a 'march of the Allies', depicting Great Britain, her allies and her colonies. In *Cinderella*, Victor Champion composed a freedom march to accompany a parade of nations, the scene culminating with statuesque Celia Ghiloni, dressed as Britannia, singing 'Fighting for the Motherland'. *The House That Jack Built* concluded with a patriotic tableau with Hilda Guiver singing 'Our own dear flag', while *Dick Whittington* saw Vera Pearce supported by a chorus of 'handsome lads in khaki and pretty nurses in grey and scarlet' singing 'When the boys come home again'.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, with the war ended, the final scene in JCW's *Goody Two Shoes* depicted a hall of peace with the Allies and others partaking in a banquet to celebrate the birth of the League of Nations; while J & N Tait's 1918 Christmas pantomime, *Jack and Jill*, saw Dorothy Leigh perform a march song in a khaki setting. Likewise, *Bubbly*, the revue at the Tivoli, featured a hall of peace tableau, with each of the Allied nations represented. Dancer Ethel Bennetto portrayed the Spirit of Peace attended by ballerinas dressed as doves.

## Comedy

Next to musicals and pantomimes, comedy provided excellent escapism and the new batch of American comedies raised the spirits of audiences. During the war years, JCW produced almost 30 new comedies in Melbourne, the only non-American ones being those produced during the seasons of Marie Tempest and the New English Comedy Company.

Between 1912 and 1915, top-line American actors Fred Niblo and Josephine Cohan introduced a number of highly popular comedies including *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford*, *Broadway Jones* and *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, while 1916 saw the arrival of Hale Hamilton and Myrtle Tannehill with *It Pays to Advertise* and *Twin Beds*. Another big success for JCW was the Jewish dialect farce *Potash and Perlmutter*, which opened at the Royal in July 1915. It featured comedians

Paul Burns and Sam Le Bert as the feuding business partners Abe Potash and Mawruss Perlmutter. It was revived in Melbourne in November 1918 with two new comedians, Nick Adams and James R Waters, in the title roles.

During the war years the Bert Bailey and Julius Grant management prospered with a series of Australian comedies at the King's, beginning in 1912 with *On Our Selection*. This play continued to be revived, as did its sequel *Grandad Rudd*, both featuring Bert Bailey in the title role. *On Our Selection* and *Grandad Rudd* gave rise to the first of the 'Hayseed' films produced by Beaumont Smith in 1917. These in turn paved the way for the 'Dad and Dave' films of the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> During 1916, Bailey and Grant also staged another Steel Rudd original, *Duncan McClure and the Poor Parson*, while Beaumont Smith teamed with EJ Carroll to produce an adaptation of Henry Lawson's story 'While the billy boils'.

### Drama

While comedies and musicals provided escapism and the chance for audiences to leave the war behind, the popularity of drama remained unabated throughout the 1910s. JCW produced some 25 new dramas in Melbourne between August 1914 and November 1918, of which 20 were sourced from America. Melodrama, which continued to be played by the companies of William Anderson, George Marlow and the Fullers, was now joined by sentimental comedy-dramas, like *Daddy Long Legs*, or by hard-hitting courtroom and detective dramas such as *The Argyle Case* and *The Thirteenth Chair*.

While Cyril Maude brought with him a suite of new plays to Australia in 1917, *Grumpy*, the play with which he opened at the Royal in June, proved so popular that it ran for the full six weeks allotted for his first Melbourne season. Andrew Bullivant, the octogenarian ex-criminal lawyer who solves a crime from his armchair, proved one of Maude's most enduring characterisations.

*Daddy Long Legs* also proved popular, running for five weeks at the Royal in mid-1917 with Charles Waldron and Kathlene Macdonell. Waldron re-created his New York success as a wealthy playboy who anonymously sponsors the education of a young orphan, whom he later marries.

*The Bird of Paradise*, which opened in Melbourne in December 1917, was the success of Muriel Starr's second Australian tour, playing for over two months at the Royal. It featured Starr as a Hawaiian princess who commits suicide after an American scientist scorns her. Its popularity was further enhanced by an explosive final scene in which an erupting volcano spews dense clouds of steam and fire from its crater; a fine example of the work of JCW scenic artist George Upward.

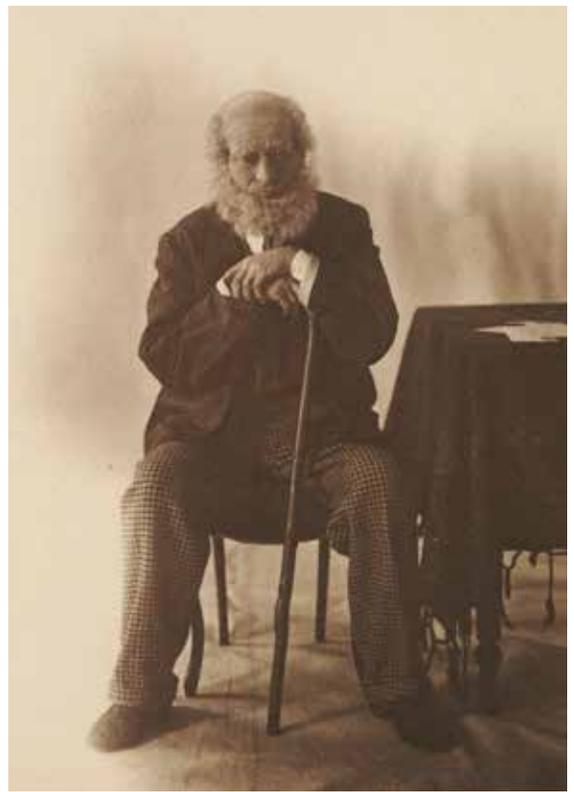
One of the interesting dramatic successes of the period was *Damaged Goods*, which had its Melbourne premiere at the Royal in December 1916. Adapted by John Pollock from Eugene Brieux's *Les Avaries*, this piece was originally banned in England due to its subject matter, which, like Ibsen's *Ghosts*, depicts a family whose lives are ruined by syphilis. George Bernard Shaw championed its production in London in February 1914, attracting the attention of government and medical practitioners who supported the frankness and intelligence with which the play dealt with a difficult topic. At the first performance in Melbourne, the final curtain descended in silence, the audience stunned by the play's brutality and pathos.<sup>27</sup> Newspaper advertisements featured testimonials from Archdeacon Hindley of St Paul's Cathedral and George Black, chief secretary for New South Wales, urging people to attend. Copies of the play, with an introduction by Shaw, were also available for sale in the theatre foyer.<sup>28</sup>

In 1915, J & N Tait took JCW head on when they moved into theatre promotion. Their first vehicle was *Peg O' My Heart* by J Hartley Manners, a play that The Firm had been keen to acquire. It opened at the King's in July 1916 with Sara Allgood, from Dublin's Abbey Theatre, as Peg. The play contained the right amount of sentiment and light comic moments to keep audiences enthralled for over 100 nights. Prior to her departure, Allgood appeared in the 1918 film *Just Peggy*, not a version of Manners' play as might be construed, but nevertheless trading on Allgood's stage success. Her husband, Gerald Henson, played the love interest in the film, which proved popular on its release.<sup>29</sup>

### War-themed drama

*The Man Who Stayed at Home* by JE Harold Terry and Lechmere Worrall was the first major war-themed drama to be produced in Melbourne, opening in June 1915. It played at the Royal for five weeks, including a return season in December. Described as 'a bright, amusing and thrilling play, seasoned with all the sensations of the moment', it dealt with a Scarlet Pimpernel-like English secret service agent, played by Frank Harvey, who allows himself to be branded a coward rather than break his cover. In a key scene in the first act, a young woman hands him a white feather and, much to her chagrin, he uses it to clean his pipe.<sup>30</sup>

At the Princess in October 1915, George Marlow produced the recruiting drama *Our Boys of the Dardanelles*, seven months after the Gallipoli landing. Despite some realistic effects, it was poorly written and was withdrawn after only a week. *Under Fire* by American playwright Roi Cooper Megrue played for a month at the Royal from 1 January 1916. In an unusual move, JCW



Left: Allan Wilkie as Captain Terence Fielding in the submarine drama *Seven Days' Leave*, which ran for two months at the Princess Theatre from 11 August 1917. *Table Talk*, 30 August 1917, p. 18

Right: Bert Bailey played 'Dad Rudd' at the King's Theatre in successful adaptations of Steele Rudd's *On our Selection* and *Grandad Rudd*. Photograph by Mina Moore, c. 1910 – c. 1913. Pictures Collection H38782/48

invited a large number of returned soldiers to witness the dress rehearsal on 31 December, which 'added an appropriate touch of realism to the brilliant scene'.<sup>31</sup> Visitors to the theatre would have also seen an impressive military display in the foyer. The action of the play, which was a dramatisation of incidents surrounding the German invasion of Belgium, incorporated realistic explosions and artillery fire. A full military band, under the leadership of Harry Sims, replaced the usual orchestra.

J Hartley Manners's recruiting drama *Out There* played during Sara Allgood's season at the King's, opening in July 1917. It comprised three loosely connected acts in which Allgood played a young Cockney girl: in her squalid rooms in East London, as a Red Cross nurse in France, and as a touring recruiter in England. Another war-themed play with Cockney characters was *London Pride*, starring Daisy Atherton and Percy Marmont, supported by members of JCW's New English Comedy Company. Staged at the Royal in May 1917, *London Pride* concerned a costermonger who, after enlisting in the army and

leaving his donkey and barrow with his sweetheart, assumes the identity of another man in order to have a few days at home.

By far the most successful of the war plays was the 'submarine drama' *Seven Days' Leave* featuring actor-producer Allan Wilkie, which played a two-month season at the Princess from August 1917. The final scene in the drama depicted a German submarine on the ocean bed and, when its wires are cut, it rises to the surface, only to be attacked by English destroyers.

### Serious drama

With the exception perhaps of *Damaged Goods*, serious dramas remained the domain of the repertory theatre during the war years and beyond. One of the pioneers of the repertory movement in Melbourne was Gegan McMahon, who founded the Melbourne Repertory Company (MRC) in 1911, performing works by writers including George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Harley Granville-Barker, Anton Chekhov, and Arnold Bennett. Between 1911 and 1917 the company performed 65 plays, 13 of which were by Australians.<sup>32</sup> They mainly used the Athenaeum Hall on Collins St but, from mid-1916, they had a residency at the Playhouse on the south bank of the Yarra. The war years proved difficult for the company and, in spite of the quality of their productions, subscription numbers fell and McMahon experienced money problems. Despite initial support from The Firm, it was surmised that the dominance of JCW with its 'lavish spectacle and conspicuous expenditure' was a contributing factor to MRC's demise.<sup>33</sup>

### Shakespeare and opera

Performances of Shakespeare were limited to four seasons in Melbourne during the war years. The first was under the auspices of the George Marlow's Grand Shakespearean Company at the Princess, headed by Allan Wilkie and Frediswynde Hunter-Watts. This initial 12-week season, which opened on 22 January 1916, included *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*. With Marie Ney as his new leading lady, a five-month return season followed in November when six new productions were added: *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Richard III*, the restoration comedies *The School for Scandal*, *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, and Leopold Lewis's *The Bells*. This second season was under the management of the Fullers, who had taken over Marlow's interests. Wilkie also appeared in two seasons of drama for Fullers when four Walter Howard plays were produced: *Seven Days' Leave*, *For the King*, *The Story of the Rosary* and *The Lifeguardsman*.<sup>34</sup>

Buoyed by Wilkie's success, Bailey and Grant engaged actor–producer Ian Maclaren for a season at the King's. Supported by Margaret Sutcliffe, he staged *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Julius Caesar* during August/September 1917, with a follow-up season in November, when *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* were added to the repertoire, along with *David Garrick* and the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice*.

In addition to sponsoring a season of Shakespeare, Marlow also championed the only wartime presentation of grand opera in Australia when he engaged the Gonsalez Opera Company for a three-month season of Italian opera at the Princess, commencing in June 1916. A return season in March 1917 was under the Fullers' banner.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

This brief survey of theatre in Melbourne during the First World War shows that, while thousands of Australian soldiers were fighting for King and Country in the theatre of war, Australian audiences on the home front continued to enjoy a wide range of theatrical entertainment.

With the London theatre scene in decline, entrepreneurs tapped into the burgeoning American market, procuring the best plays and players for an amusement and distraction-hungry audience. The period also saw the consolidation of JC Williamson Ltd as Australia's premier theatrical organisation and the steady decline of any major competitors. By the latter half of the 1920s its hegemony was complete, having consumed the interests of J & N Tait, Hugh D McIntosh, and Bailey and Grant, thereby ensuring JCW's dominance in the period leading up to the next world war and beyond.