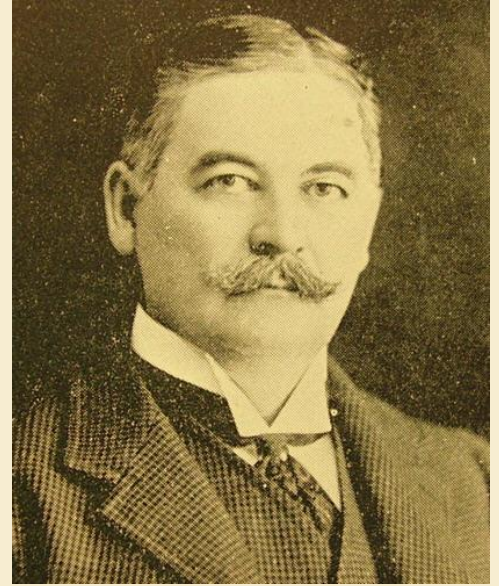


J. C. WILLIAMSON

J. C. Williamson started out his career as an actor in the USA and first toured Australia in 1874 with his wife, Maggie Moore. He returned in 1879 and the following year joined George Musgrove and Arthur Garner in partnership that a decade. He and Musgrove later formed a new firm before Williamson and George Tallis founded J.C. Williamson's Ltd in the late 1890s. The "The Firm" went on to become one of Australia's greatest theatrical organisations.

James Cassius Williamson was the third child of James Hezlep Williamson, physician, and his wife, Salina (nee Campbell). They were a family of Scots-Irish Presbyterian descent. The family moved from Pennsylvania to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, around 1856, where Williamson was educated and made a clandestine theatrical debut in 1857. Attendance at a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in that year led to a lifelong infatuation with the theatre. After working for various theatrical companies, he moved to New York, where he became known as a dialect comedian. His most famous roles (John Stofel in *Struck Oil*, Myles na Coppallen in *The Colleen Bawn*, and Kerry in *Kerry*) were all roles heavily dependent on dialect. Williamson made his name in character and low comedy roles at Wallack's Theatre in New York, where he also learnt the skills of play production and stage management.

In 1871, Williamson joined the California Theatre in San Francisco, replacing the enormously popular comedian John T. Raymond. He soon won over the critics and on 2 February 1873 married Margaret Virginia Sullivan (1851-1926), a talented young actress who joined him at the California Theatre. Sullivan is best remembered by her professional name, Maggie Moore. Around this time Williamson bought a one-act play, *The German Recruit*, from amateur playwright Sam Smith, and then paid Clay Greene to expand it into a three-act play. Williamson retitled it *Struck Oil* and on 23 February 1874 they starred in the melodramatic play in Salt Lake City, before leaving for Australia. It had been arranged with the actor-manager George Coppin that they would perform it in Sydney and Melbourne. So popular was *Struck Oil* in Melbourne that it ran for forty-three nights, the longest to that date in colonial theatre. During five months in Melbourne, the Williamsons made almost £7000. They were to receive an even greater response from Sydney, where they performed until July 1875. The Williamsons then embarked on a tour of England, Europe, and the United States that lasted until 1879.



From the *Australis; or, The City of Zero* program (1901)

Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Qld



Maggie Moore in *Struck Oil*

Source: Nellie Stewart
My Life's Story (1923), 34.

In July 1879, the Williamsons left for Australia again, purchasing the Australasian rights to *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Williamson took legal action to protect his rights to the operetta and later referred to his fight to establish British copyright in Australia as influential in his decision to settle in Australia (Dicker, p.93). *H.M.S. Pinafore* was a resounding success in Sydney and Melbourne, prompting Williamson to secure the rights to *The Pirates of Penzance*, which opened in Sydney in March 1881. Williamson provided a higher standard of theatrical production than Australia had ever seen before. Audiences overlooked his limited vocal capacity as he was so popular.

Williamson's long career as Australia's most prominent theatrical manager began with his lease of the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, on 8 September 1881. He had already formed his own Comic Opera Company in 1880. He soon afterwards went into partnership Arthur Garner, and George Musgrove to jointly lease the Theatre Royal – the others had previously been his two main competitors. Their alliance, often referred to as "the triumvirate," lasted nine years and brought to Australia a brilliant series of international artists. There was often criticism that they had crushed the old repertory system and made it hard for local actors to flourish.

Professional rivalry over Nellie Stewart saw Musgrove secede from the partnership in 1890. The following year, however, Williamson, and Garner had a spectacular success with the visit of Sarah Bernhardt to Australia. Ian Dicker comments on this tour, noting that "for Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide the Bernhardt visit was the theatrical and social event of the decade. Her coming did much to dispel, at least for a time, the prevalent colonial attitude of cultural defeatism" (123). At the end of that year, Williamson bought Garner out and George Musgrove rejoined him in 1892.

After Maggie Moore left him for the actor Harry Roberts, Williamson remarried in 1899, this time to Mary Alice Weir, a dancer. The break-up between Moore and Williamson created a difficulty in so far as the couple's greatest hit, though, with a legal dispute being contested when Moore decided to revive *Struck Oil* with her own theatre company. She appealed his injunction and this was upheld in March 1894. Williamson never played his favourite role of John Stofel again.

In 1895 with his financial situation having become precarious in the aftermath of the economic depression which had begun to take hold of the country from the late 1880s, Williamson and Musgrove risked everything on the Christmas pantomime *Djin Djin*, which he wrote with Bert Royle. It was a spectacular success, playing to packed houses for months in Australia and New Zealand, and as a result his entrepreneurial career, which would eventually result in J. C. Williamson's Ltd (aka "the Firm"), was saved.



"The Triumvirate"

L-R: J.C. Williamson, Arthur Garner and George Musgrove (ca. 1881/1882)

Source: National Library of Australia

A few years after the *Djin Djin* success Williamson and Musgrove fell out when the latter undertook some risky ventures in London without consulting his partner. The relationship was officially dissolved in December 1899, with Williamson continuing as sole lessee of the Princess's Theatre (Melb) until 1900 when he renovated the Alexandra Theatre and moved there, having renamed it Her Majesty's. A stream of imported stars drew big audiences for Williamson. One of his biggest shows from this period was the lavishly-produced *Ben Hur*, which he staged in Sydney at his newly renovated Her Majesty's Theatre. The show, which premiered on 8 February 1902 reportedly cost £14,000 to produce. Williamson suffered huge losses, however, when the theatre burnt down on 23 March. He nevertheless managed to have it rebuilt by August 1903.

In 1904, Williamson and George Tallis, his Melbourne manager, became partners, and set about specialising in visually sensational shows. From 1907 onwards, Williamson withdrew from some aspects of theatre management, spending more time with his two young daughters. This did not stop him organising H. B. Irving and Nellie Melba to visit Australia in 1911, the jubilee of his first stage appearance. The previous year he and Tallis established the Firm as a proprietary company - J. C. Williamson's Ltd - with Gustav Ramaciotti as managing director. In 1911 the company absorbed Clarke and Meynell Pty Ltd, with Williamson becoming governing director. His final years were not without some controversy, however, with 1913 seeing him publicly oppose an effort by local actors to form a union. 1913 also saw him give his last performance on the Australian stage, the occasion being a Sydney benefit in February for the widows of Captain Robert Scott's Antarctic expedition. He died in Paris later that year.

In his biography of J. C. Williamson's impact on Australian theatre Ian Dicker writes: "This young American was so much better attuned to the callow colonial culture than was the usual British mentor. ... The very plays in which he scored his greatest triumphs were, in fact, the melodramas and farces which appealed so strongly to the colonial taste. To this understanding Williamson added a high degree of artistic and technical proficiency gleaned from the leading playhouses of America and England" (196). George Titheradge, an actor, also wrote, "You meet very good business men and you meet very good imaginative men, but the capacity of Mr Williamson to be both architect and builder of his huge theatrical structure seemed to me quite unique" (cited in Bevan).

SEE ALSO

- [Williamson, Garner and Musgrove](#)
- [J. C. Williamson's Ltd](#)
- [Theatre Royal \(Melb\)](#)

FURTHER REFERENCE

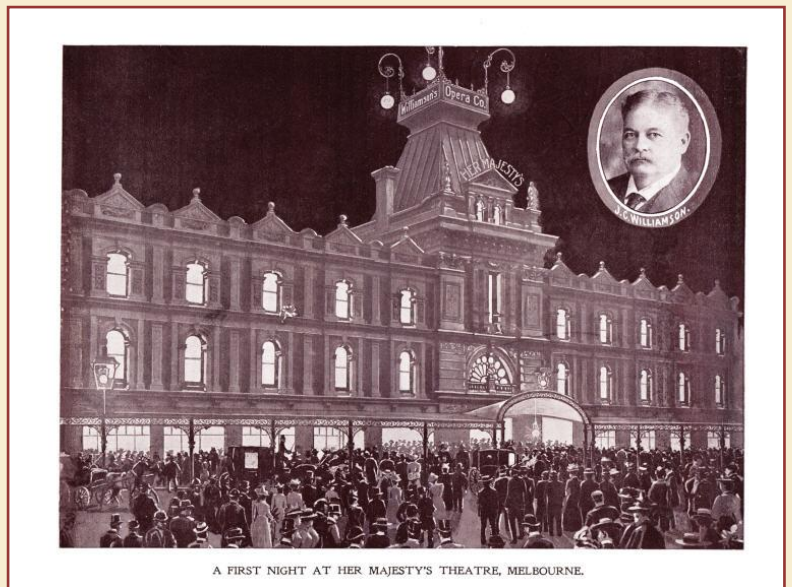
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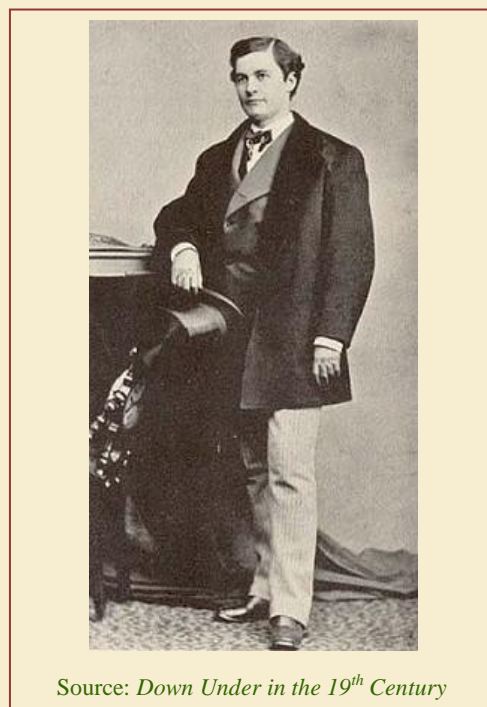
Source: State Library of Tasmania



A FIRST NIGHT AT HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE, MELBOURNE.



Source: State Library of NSW



Source: *Down Under in the 19th Century*

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