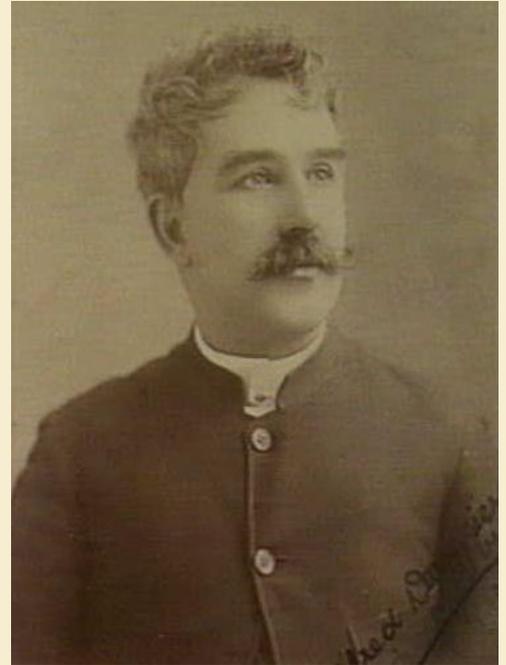


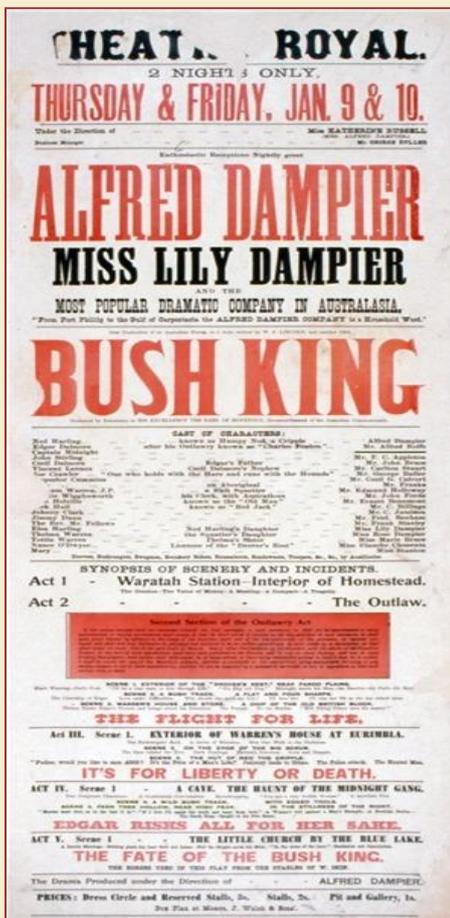
ALFRED DAMPIER

One of the most significant Australian-based actor/managers of the 19th century, Alfred Dampier came to the Antipodes in 1873 under contract to H. R. Harwood and George Coppin. He operated his own company around the region for several years before touring the USA and UK ca. 1878. After returning to Australia he had much success with melodrama. His music theatre works included *Helen's Babies* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The sensation melodrama *Marvellous Melbourne* (1889) also contained much music.

Alfred Dampier was likely born at Horsham (Sussex, Eng) on 28 February 1847. [see "Historical Notes" below] He began his working career in a barrister's office, having completed his education at Charterhouse School, England. After dabbling with local amateur productions he eventually decided against a legal career and turned instead to the professional stage. One of his earliest known engagements was with a Manchester-based theatre company headed by Henry Irving. After Irving left for London in 1866 Dampier became its leading actor. A short while later, however, he also made the move to the English capital and set about developing his craft there. He eventually graduated to lead actor status and was subsequently invited to visit Australia in 1873 by Henry R. Harwood and George Coppin. He made his Australian debut later that year in his own adaptation of *Faust and Marguerite* (Theatre Royal, Melbourne) and soon afterwards formed a company made up of mostly local actors. The decision by Dampier to concentrate his efforts in Australia would, over the next three decades, see his organisation become not only one of the leading theatrical troupes operating in the antipodes, but also make his name a household one.



Source: State Library of Victoria.



Source: State Library of Tasmania.

Dampier's reputation as a Shakespearian actor gave him the opportunity to mount numerous productions of the bard's works throughout the colonies over the next few years (although none fared as well as his later melodramas - the theatrical enterprises that in fact became his trademark). The success he garnered in Australia and New Zealand during the mid-1870s saw him attempt to reproduce similar results in America in 1878, but the tour did not ignite much interest. He returned to Australia for a period, before trying his luck on several tours through the United Kingdom. After failing to establish himself in Britain he eventually returned to Australia, where between 1880 and 1885 he alternated Sydney and Melbourne with occasional regional tours. During this time he also began to develop his own writing craft. His most significant collaborations were with playwrights like F. R. C. Hopkins and journalist John Stanley James (aka Julian Thomas/ "Vagabond"). Another of his successes from this period of his career, too, was *The Flying Dutchman* (aka the *Phantom Ship*) written by his wife Katherine (nee Russell). It was first staged in 1880.

For some three years beginning in 1885, Dampier settled in to an almost continuous season in Sydney, first at the Gaiety Theatre and later at the Royal Standard Theatre in Castlereagh Street. Some of his earlier debut productions included his own drama *Under the Southern Cross* (1885); a collaborative adaptation with John F. Sheridan of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1886); F. R. C. Hopkins' *All for Gold* (1886); and another original work, *Our Emily* (1886). This period in Sydney also saw Dampier strive more and more to promote Australian drama and Australian stories – not just his own works but also those by other local playwrights. His strategy paid off almost immediately when he scored a significant hit with *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1886) which he co-adapted with Thomas Somers from Marcus Clarke's novel. Dampier also organised a play competition as part of country's centennial celebrations, staging the winning entry, John Perry's *The Life and Death of Captain Cook*, on 28 January 1888.

At the end of 1888 Dampier moved his operations to the Alexandra Theatre, Melbourne. It was there, and in collaboration with Garnet Walch, that he wrote a string of original melodramas that effectively placed him among the most important and influential dramatist/actor/managers in Australian theatre history. These works included *Marvellous Melbourne*, which they co-wrote with J. H. Wrangham and Thomas Somers in 1889. The first of the Dampier/Walch melodramas, however, was *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1890). This was followed shortly afterwards by a hugely popular adaptation of Rolfe Boldrewood's *Robbery under Arms* (1890), then *For Love and Life* (q.v., 1890), *The Miner's Right* (1891), *The Scout* (1891), *The Trapper* (1891), *This Great City* (1891), *Wilful Murder* (1892) and *Help One Another* (1892). Dampier also produced Walch's *Jack the Giant Killer* in 1891.

As with many of his theatrical contemporaries the depression had a drastic impact on Dampier's financial resources. He was eventually forced to close his Melbourne season in 1892 and attempted to address the situation by mounting a tour of New Zealand. This proved a disaster, however, and he subsequently entered into a brief period of insolvency. His initial reaction to this situation was to return to England, but he fared no better than the last time. Even his production of *Robbery under Arms* at the Princess Theatre failed to attract much positive attention from the London critics, although his acting was given much praise.

By now resigned to the fact that Australia still held the most promise for him, Dampier returned in 1894 and set about trying to re-establish his somewhat tarnished reputation. The task was by no means easy. Victoria remained a difficult place for him to tour for several years (due primarily to the fact that he had been declared bankrupt in that state), and while the rest of the country was supportive, the theatre industry continued to struggle throughout the remainder of the decade in an economic environment shattered by the depression. Added to these problems was a scandal concerning Lily Dampier's private life, and frequent health problems that he (and his wife) endured throughout their later years. Despite these problems Dampier managed to claw his way back to the position he had commanded at the peak of his career in the late 1880s, a factor that undoubtedly endeared him to both the critics and public alike during the remainder of his professional life. Indeed, Richard Fotheringham notes that during this period Dampier came to be regarded as a courtly gentleman and scholarly actor, who although not challenging the operations of the more prosperous operations of J. C. Williamson, William Anderson and Bland Holt was nevertheless a sentimental favourite of the Australian stage at that time (180).

Alfred Dampier died in Sydney on 23 May 1908 of a brain haemorrhage. He left behind his wife, Katherine, who as an actress had played a significant role in his career, his two daughters and a son, the actor Alfred Dampier Jnr (aka Fred). Lily Dampier and her husband Alfred Rolfe

adapted several of Dampier's scripts for early Australian films. He also left behind a significant legacy of achievement. His role in helping develop both an Australian theatrical tradition and the industry itself certainly cannot be questioned. Later prominent actor/writers like Bert Baily and Edmund Duggan are known to have acknowledged his influence on their early careers. In addition, many leading actors of the era found employment with him for extended periods of time, and in turn passed on their experiences to other actors - whether as peers or as pedagogues. Such actors include Harry Leston, Harry W. Emmet, Lachlan McGowan, Carrie Bilton, Harry Sefton, J. R. Greville, Harry Stoneham and J. B. Atholwood (father of actress Sybil Atholwood).



Alfred and Lily Dampier

Source: National Library of Australia.

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

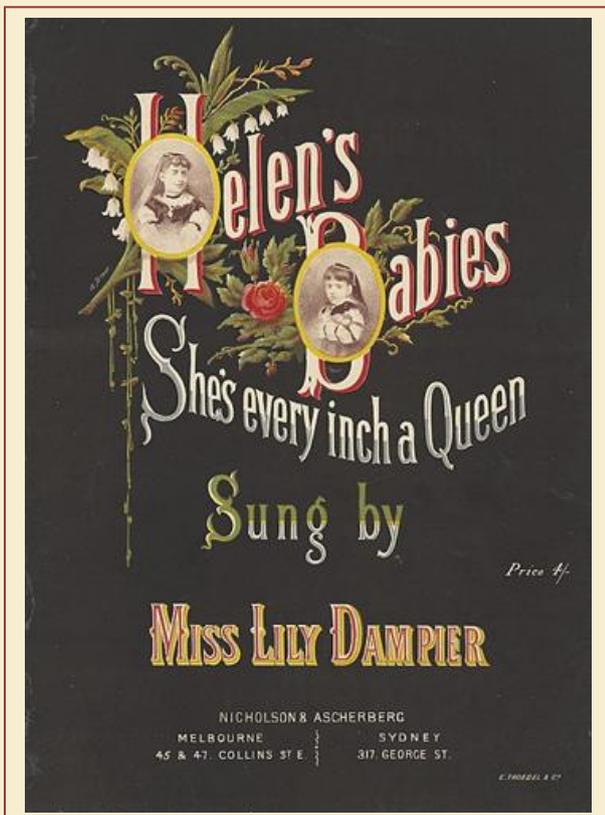
1877: **Helen's Babies** [play with music]

1879: **Uncle Tom's Cabin** [play with music]

1886: **Uncle Tom's Cabin** [play with music]

HISTORICAL NOTES

1. Dampier's birth year differs in various sources. These dates range from 1843 to 1848.
2. His adaptation of *Richard III* was printed in 1879 by Azzopardi, Hildreth and Co (Melb).
3. Dampier adapted at least two works for the stage under the pseudonym Adam Pierre. These were *Briton and Boer* (1899), an adaptation of H. Rider Haggard's *Jess*; and *The Bush King* (1901), which he reworked in collaboration with the original play's author W. J. Lincoln. The latter play was staged regularly by Dampier between 1901 and 1908.
4. Of the music directors and composers who worked with Dampier during his Australian career, the most frequently engaged was Percy H. Kehoe [aka Herbert Percy]. Dampier also worked with David Cope on a number of productions. Both of Dampier's adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1879 and 1886) contained songs and dance, with the latter production having a high musical content according to reviews. A number of other productions presented by Dampier also utilised music as part of the narrative, notably those which were presented in order to highlight the talents of his two daughters, Rose and Lily. One original work, for example, is Garnet Walch's adaptation of *Helen's Babies* (from the novelette by J. Habberton) which Dampier first staged in 1877. A significant amount of music, written by Kehoe, was also presented in *Marvellous Melbourne*.
5. Other works written and/or adapted by Dampier during his career include: *The Wreck of the Dunbar* (1887), *Shamus O'Brien* (adapt. with Percy H. Kehoe, 1887) and *An English Lass* (written with C. H. Krieger, 1887). His version of *Les Miserables*, which he first staged in Sydney in 1877 (Victoria Theatre) was also produced in London four years later. Another successful and often revived production was his co-adaptation (with Julian Thomas) of *Michael Strogoff; Or, Russia As It Is* (1880), based on the Russian drama *The Nihilists; Or Russia As It Is*. Dampier's melodramas were invariably the success highlights of any season. Along with the spectacle he provided, these productions often included some degree of musical accompaniment, although this was more often than not of an incidental nature.
6. Lily Dampier and her husband Alfred Rolfe adapted several of Dampier's scripts for early Australian films, including *The Bush King*, which was renamed *Captain Midnight, the Bush King* (1911)



Above: **Lily Dampier**. *Australian Town and Country Journal* 27 Nov. (1886), 28.

Left: Source: National Library of Australia.



Alfred and Lily Dampier
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See also:

DT: 7 June (1906), n. pag.

Last updated: 27/06/2014

Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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