

# GEORGE FAWCETT

aka **George Curtis Rowe / George Fawcett Rowe / George F. Rowe**

Although his association with Australia was only brief, George Fawcett he nevertheless played a significant part in the early development of professional theatre at that time. He arrived in Australia in 1853 and spent several years touring regional Victoria before moving to Melbourne. Mostly associated with the Prince of Wales Theatre, Fawcett wrote and staged more than 15 works, ranging from pantomime and burlesque to comediettas and musical entertainments. He left the country in 1864, spending several years in New Zealand before establishing himself in both the USA and UK. While in America in the late 1870s he was commissioned by John F. Sheridan to write *Fun on the Bristol* (1879), the work which became arguably his greatest success.

The eldest son of artist/lithographer, George Rowe, and his wife Elizabeth, George Curtis Rowe was born in Exeter, Devon, on 24 July 1832 and initially followed his father's footsteps by becoming a scenic artist. When George Rowe Snr suffered a significant financial loss in the early 1850s (through the default of a partner) he travelled to Australia leaving in the hope of finding fortune on the Victorian goldfields. He arrived at the Bendigo diggings in early 1853 and was joined in November by his son George, who by that time had decided to undertake a career in acting. Taking the name George Fawcett he initially established his reputation in Victoria as a character actor and impersonator, playing regional centres like Ballarat and Geelong and even in the goldfields themselves. Within a few years he moved to Melbourne where he began writing for the stage as well as acting on it.

Between 1859 and 1863 he was almost exclusively associated with the Princess Theatre, his involvement being as an actor, sometimes manager and lessee, director and playwright. During these five years he produced at least 15 of his own works, ranging from pantomime and burlesque to comediettas and musical entertainments. His 1862 production of *David Copperfield*, saw him develop his own unique interpretation of the character Wilkins Micawber, and so popular was this representation that, according to Mimi Colligan and Veronica Kelly, "he played it everywhere throughout his career" (222). Other Fawcett dramas from this period included *The Captain of the Vulture* (based on the novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon), a comedietta which was presented after the main entertainment, *Tom Jerry; Or, Life in London* in August 1863. The *Argus* records that the play introduced a number of ghostly effects similarly used for a recent production at the Haymarket Theatre (17 Aug. 1863, 5). Another concluding comedietta was *The Chamber of Horrors*, in which Fawcett took on several characters then prominent in Professor Sohiers' waxworks exhibition.



1873

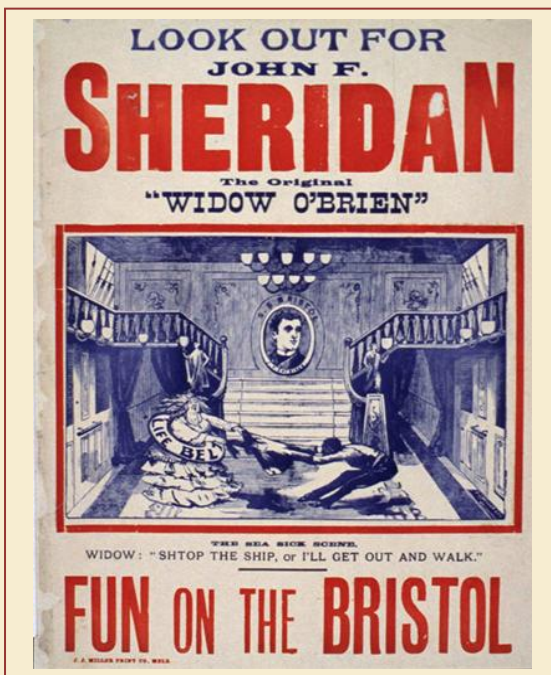
Source: University of Washington Library.



University of Virginia.

Fawcett left Australia in 1864 for New Zealand, where in 1862 he entered into a partnership to build Princess Theatre in Dunedin. A few years later he travelled to the USA where he made his debut (as George F. Rowe) in New York. As an actor his most successful roles in America were as the comic upstart Digby Grant in *Two Roses* (1872), as Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield* (1874), and as Hawkeye in his own dramatisation of Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1874). Rowe's writing output after leaving Australia, believed to have numbered more than 40 works, ranged from the burlesque *Mephisto and the Four Sensations* (1873, written for Lydia Thompson) to his adaptation of Feuillet's melodrama *The Sphinx* (1874, written for Clara Morris). He also adapted *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for Jarrett and Palmer's 1878 production [left].

Arguably Fawcett's greatest success was *Fun on the Bristol: Or, A Night on the Sound* (1879). Based on an outline developed by John F. Sheridan, the musical comedy starred Sheridan (in his greatest ever role as the Widow O'Brien) and served as a vehicle for variety sketches, comic and minstrel songs, dances and even opera selections. In an article based on an interview with Sheridan in 1890 *Table Talk* provides some insight in to the origins of the work:



In 1878 it was the fashion among the smaller theatres of New York to conclude the entertainment with a farce, and in one of these Mr. Sheridan happened to be representing the character of an elderly Irish widow, whose two daughters had gone crazy over [H.M.S.] *Pinafore*, and who were in consequence ordered off to a lunatic asylum. The action passed on board the "Bristol", a magnificently appointed steamboat that plied at that time between New York and Boston. Mr. Sheridan's performance created so much amusement that it occurred to him it would be a good idea to work out a three-act comedy on the same lines. Conferring with Mr. George Fawcett Rowe, an actor and dramatists in America, but who had previously won fame in Australia, Mr. Sheridan gave a sketch of the piece, and placed the construction in Mr. Rowe's hands, reserving the Widow O'Brien for his own invention, with the result that the play now known all over the world as *Fun on the Bristol*, was evolved. The first performance was given at the Newport Theatre, Rhode Island, in 1879, and the success it then achieved has followed it ever since.<sup>1</sup>

LINC Tasmania

Rowe did not remain only in the USA during the 1870s and 1880s. Throughout these years he travelled y to England on numerous occasions to appear in various productions. Interestingly, his English career was managed by Clarence Holt, father of Australian-based dramatist Bland Holt. Fawcett's connection with Australia subsequently continued even though he never returned to the country, as Bland Holt produced one of his plays, a sensation melodrama, *The New Babylon*, in Australia in 1878. It was a significant moment in the country's theatre history, for as Colligan and Kelly note, the play became "the forerunner here of dramas dealing with sport and society" (222).

Despite his considerable output of original works and his ability to carve out an industrious career, Fawcett does not appear to have been able to capitalise financially from his efforts and in fact died impoverished in New York City on 29 August 1889. After a service held at the Little Church around the Corner, reportedly attended by a large number of person and professional friends, Fawcett's remains were interred in the Actors Plot at the Evergreen Cemetery.

While little is known about Fawcett's personal life, he is recorded as having been married and divorced to American actress Kate Girard, and possibly married to Adelaide Arthur at the time of his death. Colligan and Kelly have described Fawcett as "irascible but good company" and a "tireless raconteur." His inability to profit from his prodigious dramatic output, and the great success of at least two of his comedies, they surmise was likely due to his lack of fiscal acumen (222). Even though his career was mostly undertaken in Melbourne, Fawcett's influence and significance to Australian theatre during the pivotal industry-growth years of the late 1850s and early 1860s cannot be understated. In this respect he ranks alongside W.M. Akhurst one of this country's most important early dramatists from this period.

[Some details have been sourced from Mimi Colligan and Veronia Kelly's entry in the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*.]

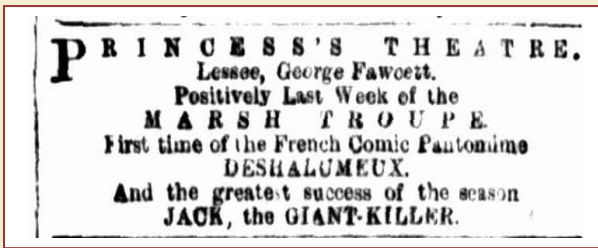
## ORIGINAL MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1858: **Beauty and the Beast** [pantomime]
- 1859: **Harlequin Prince Humpty Dumpty** [pantomime] • **Ye Stories of Il Trovatorie** [burlesque] • **The Enchanted Isle** [burlesque]
- 1860: **Mydea – A Lesson to Husbands** [burlesque]
- 1861: **Harlequin Mother Hubbard and Puss in Boots** [pantomime] • **Masaniello** [burlesque] • **Cupid and Zephyr** [burlesque] • **Endymion, the Naughty Boy Who Cried for the Moon** [musical entertainment]
- 1862: **Puss in Boots** [burlesque]
- 1863: **Thesus and Ariadne; Or, The Marriage of Bacchus** [burlesque]
- 1879: **Fun on the Bristol; Or A Night on the Sound** [musical comedy]



<sup>1</sup> "[Mr J. F. Sheridan: The Widow O'Brien](#)." TBT: 29 Aug. (1890), 5-6.

## POSSIBLY WRITTEN BY FAWCETT



**1857:** **Fortunio; Or, The Seven Gifted Servants** [pantomime]  
**1860:** **Pluto and Prosperinel; Or, The Triumphs of Ceres**  
[burlesque]

*Argus* 31 Dec. (1860), 8.

## FURTHER REFERENCE

Colligan, Mimi, and Veronica Kelly. "George Fawcett." CTTA (1995), 222.

Djubal, Clay. "[Fawcett, George](#)." AustLit (2006).

"[Funeral of George Fawcett Rowe](#)." NYT: 2 Sept. (1889), n. pag. [sighted 4/11/2011]

"[George F. Rowe's Script](#)." *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, The University of Virginia [sighted 4/11/2011]

### **See also:**

**ARG:** 5 July (1857), n. pag. • 30 Apr. (1858), n. pag. • 12 July (1858), n. pag.

**BA:** 15 May (1857), n. pag.

**ME:** 13 Sept. (1862), n. pag.

**AUSN:** 30 Jan. (1869), n. pag. • 7 Sept (1889), n. pag.

**NYT:** 1 Sept. (1889), n. pag.