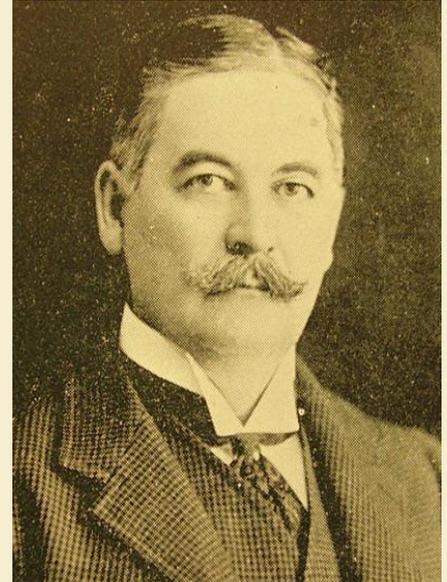


J. C. WILLIAMSON'S LTD

Australia's longest-running theatrical organisation began in 1882 when James Cassius Williamson, George Musgrove, and Arthur Garner joined forces. The J. C. Williamson's Ltd trading name did not come into operation until Williamson merged his interests with those of Rupert Clarke and Clyde Meynell in 1911, however. In 1920 the "Firm" underwent another merger, this time with J. and N. Tait. Apart from a few years during the late 1930s, when the company was briefly controlled by New Zealand-based businessman John McKenzie, one or more of the brothers was associated with running the company until Frank Tait's death in 1965. The company was briefly run by actor John McCallum but when he departed its fortunes slid severely. After several takeovers it ceased operations entirely.

Australia's longest-running theatrical organisation began in 1882 as a merger between James Cassius Williamson, George Musgrove, and Arthur Garner. The J. C. Williamson's Ltd trading name came into operation in 1911, when Williamson merged his interests with those of Rupert Clarke and Clyde Meynell. By 1913, the year that Williamson died, he and his partners had built "the Firm" into Australia's premiere theatrical production company. Over next seven or so decades J. C. Williamson's brought to Australia some of the greatest names in international theatre for almost a hundred years. Although often criticised for not giving enough support to the Australian entertainment industry, the company employed many hundreds of local performers (dancers, actors, singers, etc) and associated practitioners (including writers, composers, musicians, and production crew) over the years. Among the other people responsible for running the company following Williamson's death were George Tallis, Hugh J. Ward, J. and N. Tait, John McKenzie and John McCallum.



J.C. Williamson

From the *Australis; Or, The City of Zero* program
Courtesy of the Fryer Library

1882-1891

The theatrical organisation which eventually came to be known as J. C. Williamson's Ltd was founded in July 1882 when Williamson, Musgrove, and Garner joined forces to lease the Theatres Royal in Melbourne and Sydney. By the mid to late-1880s, the trio (often referred to as the 'Triumvirate') had established themselves as the leading Australian-based theatrical entrepreneurs of the era. This led, however, to the firm being heavily criticised for monopolising the local industry and ignoring local actors in favour of those from overseas. It has also been said that their dominance was such that they stifled the growth of repertory societies in the two major capital cities during that decade. On the other hand, Australian audiences were treated to many quality companies and performers, most notably the actor/managers George Rignold and Dion Boucicault Snr. Local actors with talent, and perhaps the necessary connections, were nevertheless given opportunities and training, as Nellie Stewart's early career demonstrates.



George Musgrove

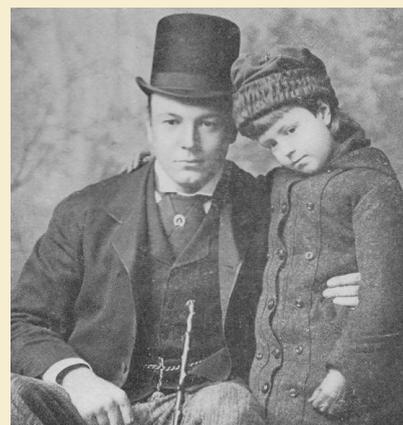
From *Nellie Stewart's My Life's Story*
(1923)

Among the locally written Williamson, Garner, and Musgrove productions during the 1880s were the annual Christmas pantomime extravaganzas, beginning with *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1882). Later pantomimes included *Harlequin Aladdin* and *Robinson Crusoe and His Man Friday* (1883), *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella* (1884), *Sleeping Beauty* (1885), *Sleeping Beauty and Robinson Crusoe* (1886), *Robinson Crusoe and Jack the Giant Killer* (1887), and *Sinbad the Sailor* (1888). The triumvirate also staged the first Australian production of *Estrella* (by Luscombe Searelle and Walter J. Parke) in 1884.

By 1886, the company was required to expand its operations in Melbourne through the acquisition of the Princess Theatre, which they opened with Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado*. Although the company's business operations and productions continued to grow exponentially, the relationships between the three entrepreneurs were often strained. Rivalry over Nellie Stewart eventually caused a rift between Williamson and Musgrove, with the result that Musgrove resigned in 1890. The new partnership found initial success in 1891 when they brought Sarah Bernhardt to Australia, but personality differences between the two men saw Garner leave within a year to pursue other business options. It is likely, too, that as George Coppin once pointed out, both men were far too ill-tempered to work together (ctd. van der Poorten, n. pag.).

1892-1910

In 1892, Williamson reunited with George Musgrove to form Williamson and Musgrove, and the two men remained in partnership until 1899. Among their many successes during that eight-year period were the locally written pantomimes *Little Red Riding Hood and Harlequin Boy Blue* (1892), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1892), *Cinderella* (1894), *Djin Djin the Japanese Bogie Man* (1895), *Sinbad the Sailor* (1896), *Matza - Queen of Fire* (1896), *The Babes in the Wood* (1897), and a re-working of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1898). Other significant musical works written by Australian (or Australian-based) practitioners included Fritz Hart and Sir William Robinson's *Predatoras* (1894) and Alfred Moulton's opera *Lelamine* (1897).



Arthur Garner and daughter
From Nellie Stewart's *My Life's Story* (1923), 58

The Williamson and Musgrove partnership eventually ended with much animosity when Musgrove undertook some risky business ventures in London on their behalf, forcing Williamson to run his Australian operations on his own for several years. He continued as sole lessee of the Princess's Theatre (Melbourne) until May 1900, while also adding the city's old Alexandra Theatre to his stable of venues. After it was renovated, he renamed it Her Majesty's. In Sydney, his theatrical enterprise was similarly based out of Her Majesty's Theatre, although when the building burned down on 23 March 1902, he was temporarily forced to relocate to the Theatre Royal.

THE AUSTRALASIAN STAGE ANNUAL. 31

Mr. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S THEATRES.

HER MAJESTY'S, MELBOURNE.
THEATRE ROYAL, SYDNEY.
HER MAJESTY'S, SYDNEY.

Australasian Stage Annual 3 (1902), 31

Despite suffering a huge financial loss as a result of the fire, Williamson soon afterwards organised a Shakespearian company at the Royal and began rebuilding his flagship theatre. It reopened in August 1903. The following year, he again entered into a business partnership, this time with George Tallis and Gustave Ramaciotti. Tallis had previously been engaged as Williamson's Melbourne-based manager while Ramaciotti had been his legal adviser for a number of years.

THE AUSTRALASIAN STAGE ANNUAL. 30

J. C. WILLIAMSON'S

THEATRES and ENTERPRISES FOR 1902.

Proprietor ... Mr. J. C. WILLIAMSON.
Associate Manager ... Mr. H. H. VINCENT. Sydney, Mr. GEO. L. GOODMAN
General Business Managers ... Melbourne, Mr. GEO. TALLIS.

<p>Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne. Proprietor ... Mr. J. C. WILLIAMSON. EVERY EVENING AT 8. WEDNESDAY & SATURDAY AFTERNOON AT 2. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S ROYAL COMIC OPERA COMPANY SAN TOY. Prices as usual. Box Plan at ALLAN & CO.</p>	<p>Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney. Proprietor ... Mr. J. C. WILLIAMSON. EVERY EVENING AT 8. WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON AT 2. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S ITALIAN OPERA CO. GRAND OPERA REPERTOIRE. Prices as usual. Box Plan at NICHOLSON & CO.</p>
<p>Theatre, Royal, Sydney. Proprietor ... Mr. W. BATES. EVERY EVENING AT 8. WEDNESDAY & SATURDAY AFTERNOONS AT 2. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S Musical Comedy Co. ALICE in WONDERLAND Presented from touring by the Charming Play in two acts. THE MAN WHO STOLE THE CASTLE. Prices as usual. Box Plan at GILBY & CO.</p>	<p>WILSON BARRETT'S NEW ZEALAND TOUR. Proprietor ... Mr. BRUCE BARRETT. In the WILSON BARRETT REPERTOIRE OF FAMOUS PLAYS. The Sign of the Cross. The Silver King. Man and his Maker. Virginia. The Manxman. Hamlet. Othello. Quo Vadis. For Particulars refer to Standard Papers.</p>

COMING ATTRACTIONS.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE, SYDNEY.
COMING.—"Ben Hur," the greatest and most expensive Dramatic Attraction ever presented in Australia (by arrangement with Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger). Interpreted by a most powerful and complete Dramatic Company specially organised for this production.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE, MELBOURNE.
COMING.—"The Runaway Girl."

THEATRE ROYAL, SYDNEY.
COMING.—Brady and Griermer's Company of American Artists in the famous plays, "Way down East" and "Love's Lane."

NEW ZEALAND.
Mr. Wilson Barrett and Complete London Company in the Wilson Barrett Repertoire.

NEW COMEDIES, OPERAS, and PLAYS in the Repertoires.

The Runaway Girl	The Treador	L'Alphonse	Why Women Kiss
The Messenger Boy	Are You a Mason?	Madame Butterfly	On the Turf
The Circus Girl	The J.P.	Isa	The Rebels

Mr. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S DEPARTMENTAL STAFFS.

Touring Managers—Messrs. Harold Jeffries, William Douglas, E. Bennett, John Stevens, Geo. McEwen.
Conductors—Messrs. Richard Mason, Leon Carter, Edwin Archer, Geo. Hill, F. O'Connell.
Stage Managers—Messrs. Henry Bony, Agnes Bony, Edmund Quinn, Geo. Bony.
Watchmen—Messrs. W. Selwyn, Jas. Tamm, E. Briggs, H. Tyler, G. Fennell, G. Wilson.
Balliet Mistress—Misses Maudie Egan, Jessie Egan.
Lockers—Mr. E. H. Egan. **Receptionists of Boxes**—Mr. J. W. Butler. **Assistant**—Mr. F. J. Gann. **Private Secretary**—Mr. W. Mulholland. **Assistant Clerk**—Mr. F. Kelly. **Gen. Thompson, J. Lewis.** **Box Collectors**—Messrs. L. Ross, Geo. Edgeway, W. Reynolds, G. Thompson.

Intelligence Representatives—Messrs. Donald, W. Bell, Brock, Spence, W. W. W. Harkley, Frank Jewell, Stuart, Lyons and Leitch, Douglas, W. C. Fisher.
Scenic Artists—Messrs. John Gordon, George Dixon, William Little, Leslie Smith.
Property Masters—Messrs. Ruth Phillips, W. Edwards, G. Henry, F. O'Connell.
Superintendent of Wardrobes—Miss Emily Dallas.
Wardrobe Mistress—Misses J. Hagan, L. Forbes, W. Kelly.
Wardrobe Masters—Messrs. W. Ford, W. Maxwell, A. Robinson, G. Thompson.

Australasian Stage Annual 3 (1902), 30.

1911-1929

The first decade of the new century saw the partnership's operations expand considerably as the economic woes of the 1890s' depression receded. By this period, the company was employing some 650 people on a permanent basis, and had begun specialising almost exclusively in extravagant and spectacular theatrical productions. When Gustave Ramaciotti retired in 1911, Williamson invited Hugh J. Ward to take his place as partner. On 1 September 1911, the company also merged with theatrical entrepreneurs Rupert Clarke and Clyde Meynell, with Williamson remaining as governing director and consultant while Meynell, Tallis and Ward ran the business. At this point, the company's name officially became J. C. Williamson's Ltd (and unofficially 'the Firm').

Following Williamson's death in 1913, the company underwent some difficult years, especially when the importation of foreign artists slowed down and eventually stopped altogether during the war years. The firm was also by then in direct competition with several other theatrical organisations, notably J. and N. Tait. In 1920, George Tallis, having realised the implications of the two companies going head to head in the same limited market, invited the Tait's to merge their theatrical operations with J. C. Williamson's Ltd. The Tait's continued to stage their concert productions independently of the Williamson partnership, however.

The 1920s saw the firm elevate itself again to the country's premiere theatrical organisation, staging successful tours by such stars as Gladys Moncrieff, Oscar Asche, Josie Melville, and the Vanbrugh-Boucicault Company. Anna Pavlova and her company also toured twice with much success (1926 and 1929). The firm also moved into the area of vaudeville in 1924, after taking over the Tivoli Circuit. These operations were run under the banner Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville.

While J. C. Williamson's Ltd continued to expand its operations throughout the 1920s, continual rifts between the governing directors created a good deal of tension.

Hugh J. Ward, who had always opposed the merger with the Tait's, had had enough by 1922 and departed, leaving his shares to a Tallis ally, Arthur W. Allen. Clyde Meynell retired in 1924. Under the Tait's and Tallis, J. C. Williamson's Ltd began purchasing the freehold on their theatres during the late 1920s and also ventured out of Australia by mounting productions in London, the English provinces, and America. When the depression hit Australia, the firm was forced to abandon its vaudeville operations (1931) and contract its overall business. This included cancelling the reconstruction of His Majesty's in Melbourne (which had burned down in October 1929) and selling the Melbourne Theatre Royal. The company was also forced to abandon live theatre at His Majesty's in Sydney and turn to film exhibition for a period of time.



George Tallis

Source: National Library of Australia

1930-1949

In the early 1930s, the company attempted to stem the heavy losses by reviving a number of popular musical shows, including three starring Gladys Moncrieff. They also had much success with a series of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and, in 1934, brought to Australia the Dandre-Levitoff Russian Ballet, led by Olga Spessivtseva and Anatole Vilzak. In subsequent years, Williamson's continued to bring large theatrical dance companies to Australia, including ballet companies such as the Bolshoi Ballet and a variety of folk dance companies, including many from the USSR. Despite their efforts, the board was still forced to close down parts of its operations as the depression created economic havoc around the country. Her Majesty's (Sydney) was closed in June 1933, with the Melbourne Theatre Royal lasting until November that same year.



Ernest C. Rolls

Source: National Library of Australia

Following George Tallis's retirement in 1931, the company was run largely by John and Nevin Tait, although Tallis still retained a seat on the board for some years. The 1930s were made more difficult for the Tait's, too, because they were unable to gain control of the company, having only 40 percent of its shares (Tallis and Arthur W. Allen controlled 46 percent, with the remaining 14 percent owned by individuals not on the board). In 1937, control of the J. C. Williamson's Ltd board went to an outsider, Victorian businessman John McKenzie, after he purchased the Tallis and Allen shares, possibly with support from producer/director Ernest C. Rolls. Under McKenzie, the firm was split into two operations: a property and investment arm (J. C. Williamson's Ltd) and a theatrical production company (Australian and New Zealand Theatres Ltd). Rolls was subsequently elevated to the position of managing director of the latter arm and also its principal producer. This manoeuvre saw the Tait's restricted from running the company's theatrical operations despite being board directors. By 1939, however, Rolls had run

up significant losses for the company and was forced to resign. Although financial control of the company remained with the New Zealand-based headquarters, the Tait effectively regained creative control of the company. They also renamed it J. C. Williamson's Theatres Ltd.

In the early 1940s, J. C. Williamson's backed Australia's first professional ballet company, the Kirsova Ballet, and by 1943 was presenting seasons of the Borovansky Ballet. It was to be the firm's musicals, however, that proved a regular source of employment for Australian dancers through-out the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, thereby helping provide significant industry stability and training for that area of the arts. Among the biggest success were imported musicals such as *Annie Get Your Gun* (1947), *Oklahoma!* (1949), *Brigadoon* (1951), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1952), *South Pacific* (1952), *The Pyjama Game* (1958), and *My Fair Lady* (1959). The Williamson organisation was also involved, along with the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, in the establishment and early seasons of the Australian Ballet.

1950-1984

Although the company managed to overcome the financial difficulties that resulted from the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, it underwent significant changes during the late 1940s and early 1950s. These changes were forced on it as a result of competition from new entertainment media, particularly television and cinema, and the deaths of two of the Tait brothers, E. J. in 1947 and John in 1955. Two years after the latter brother's death, expatriate Australian actor John McCallum returned to the country to take up an offer from Frank Tait to act as the company's assistant managing director. McCallum found much success in 1959 with an Australian production of *My Fair Lady*. Such was its popularity that he was forced to tour two simultaneous productions just to meet demand. When Frank Tait died in 1965, McCallum took over as sole managing director despite not being on the governing board. Although he had played a significant part in helping the company return a profit margin, McCallum's stay was short, due to a decision by the board to appoint a Melbourne businessman (with limited theatrical experience) as executive director. McCallum resigned in protest shortly afterwards and went on to found his own film and television company, Fauna Productions.

The remainder of the 1960s and early 1970s saw the company struggle to survive mergers and restructuring, and when its theatres and other assets were sold off in 1976 to repay skyrocketing debts, J. C. Williamson's Ltd was effectively a brand name only. A consortium headed by Michael Edgley and Ken Brodziak secured the rights to use the name (as J. C. Williamson Productions), and as such staved off its demise for almost eight years. In 1984, however, that company was acquired by the Danbury Group, marking the end of the country's longest-running theatrical organisation.

SEE ALSO

- [J. C. Williamson](#)
- [Arthur Garner](#)
- [George Musgrove](#)
- [Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville](#)
- [World's Entertainers \[1\]](#)
- [Bio-Tableau Entertainers](#)

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "Australian-made Pictures: The J. C. Williamson Operations." TT:Dec. 1915, 29-33.
- Deacon, Desley. "Cosmopolitans at Home: Judith Anderson and the American Aspirations of J.C. Williamson Stock Company Members, 1897-1918" In *Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s - 1960s*. Ed. Robert Dixon, Veronica Kelly. (2008), 202-222.
- Dicker, Ian. *J.C.W.: A Short Biography of James Cassius Williamson* (1974).
- "J.C. Williamson" / "Williamson and Musgrove" / "Williamson, Garner and Co" / "Williamson, Garner and Musgrove." CTTA: (1995), 643-645.
- Djubal, Clay. "[J. C. Williamson's Ltd.](#)" *AustLit* (2007).
- Kemp, Kevin. "JCW and All That – The Ultimate Nostalgia Trip." NAT: 8-13 July (1974), 26.
- Love, Harold, ed. *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (1984), 133-35.
- "Musical Score: How J.C.W. Succeeds in Show Business Without Really Trying." N: 4 May (1963), 10-13.
- "Nine New J.C.W. Shows Next Year." SMH: 13 Nov. (1965), 12.
- "Stage Enterprise : Williamson Expansion - E. J. Tait Talks." SW: 14 Feb. (1925), 11.
- Tait, Viola. *Family of Brothers: The Tait's and J. C. Williamson; A Theatrical History, The* (1971).
- Tallis, Michael and Joan. *The Silent Showman: Sir George Tallis, the Man Behind the World's Largest Entertainment Organisation of the 1920s* (1999).
- West, John. "J. C. Williamson's." CTTA: (1995), 299-304.

Last updated: 27/08/2015

Expanded and Updated from the 2007 AustLit entry

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:
Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/organisations-a-l/>