

## GEORGE MUSGROVE

George Musgrove worked briefly for W.S. Lyster before finding success as a producer in 1880 with Offenbach's *Tambour Major* (Melbourne Opera House). With J.C. Williamson and Arthur Garner he ran the most successful theatrical firm in the Antipodes during the 1880s, and between 1892 and 1899 was a partner in Williamson and Musgrove (running the UK end of the business). He continued to produce shows in England and Australia until 1914. Musgrove was also closely associated with Australian actress/singer, Nellie Stewart.

George Musgrove was born at Surbiton on Thames, England, on 21 January 1854. His mother, Fanny Hodson, was an actress related to the Kemble family, and was a sister of Georgina Hodson (who married W.S. Lyster) and Henrietta Hodson (a well known London actress). Musgrove came to Australia at age 12 with his parents and was educated at the Flinders School, Geelong, Victoria. After completing his schooling he took up a position as Lyster's treasurer before returning briefly to England in 1879. Back in Australia the following year Musgrove staged a remarkable production of Offenbach's *La Fille du Tambour Major* at the Melbourne Opera House. The record run of 101 performances effectively established his reputation as an entrepreneur eventually led to him becoming part of the Australian theatrical "triumvirate," Williamson, Garner and Musgrove.



Source: Nellie Stewart *My Life's Story* (1923), 242.

J. C. Williamson, Arthur Garner and George Musgrove joined forces in July 1882 to lease the Theatres Royal in Melbourne and Sydney. By the mid to late-1880s, the partnership had established itself as the leading Australian-based theatrical organisation 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.



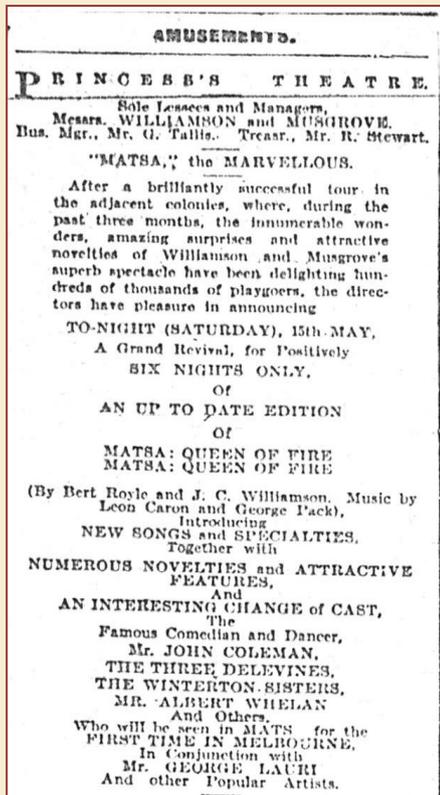
### **"The New Theatrical Management"**

L-R: J. C. Williamson, Arthur Garner and George Musgrove  
Part of Lady Viola Tait collection, National Library of Australia

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. Williamson and Garner's relationship also soured soon afterwards leaving Williamson to briefly run his operations single-handed. Musgrove in the meantime produced a series of productions on his own, including a successful season of *Paul Jones* with Marion Burton and Nellie Stewart in the leading parts.



Age 15 May (1897), 12.

In 1892, Musgrove and Williamson reunited, with the new partnership Williamson and Musgrove operating for some eight years. Among their many successes during that 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).

By 1898 Musgrove had moved to England where he looked after the company's interests from his base in London. Among his successes there was *The Belle of New York*, staged at the Shaftesbury Theatre by a completely American company. It was around this time, however, that his relationship with Williamson ended amidst a great deal of animosity. The reasons for the split were due to a number of risky business ventures that Musgrove undertook in London on their behalf but without Williamson's knowledge or consent.

The year after the termination of the Williamson and Musgrove partnership, George Musgrove took a grand opera company to Australia. Comprising mostly members of the Carl Rosa Opera Company it presented a number of well-known works including *Tannhauser* and *The Flying Dutchman*. In 1903 Musgrove put together company that was responsible for possibly the finest all-round productions of Shakespeare ever seen in Australia to that time –

with the principal works being *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Some four years later (1907) he brought a German grand opera company to Australia, introducing audiences to *The Valkyries*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Another opera season in 1909 was less successful.

While George Musgrove was a very astute and gifted producer, with some people suggesting that he succeeded because he had the "soul of an artist," he was nevertheless susceptible to taking risks and hence in his last years had suffered from financial worries. It has been said, for example, that while he reportedly made more than £60,000 from *The Belle of New York*, he very likely lost more than that through several of his opera ventures. To Musgrove money was largely secondary to his desire to make his productions the best he possibly could. Musgrove's final years also saw him suffer from indifferent health and he died suddenly at Sydney on 21 January 1916, his 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

Although Musgrove could be brusque he was well-known for his generosity and consideration, especially towards the members of various companies he engaged. He married and had two daughters, Rose (who was a successful actress in her own right for many years) and Emily. He also had a third daughter, Nancye Doris Stewart, with his long-time lover, Australian actress/singer Nellie Stewart.

## **SEE ALSO**

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

## HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The image captioned "The New Theatrical management" (above) is dated by the Australian National Library as being ca. 1890. As this biography and the J. C. Williamson's Ltd entry note, however, Williamson, Garner and Musgrove was far from "new" in 1890, and in fact Musgrove left the partnership that very year. The ages of the three men as depicted, combined with the description "new theatrical management" suggests that the image should be dated as early as 1882, or at least the early to mid-1880s.

## FURTHER REFERENCE

"[Of Things Theatrical: A Talk with Mr Musgrove in London.](#)" SAR 20 Oct. (1897), 7.

Stewart, Nellie. *My Life's Story* (1923).

Tait, Viola. *Dames, Principal Boys... And All That: A History of Pantomime* (2002).

### See also:

**A:** 22 Jan. (1916), n. pag.

**ARG:** 22 Jan. (1916), n. pag.

**SMH:** 22 Jan. (1916), n. pag.



Source: Viola Tait. *Dames, Principal Boys... And All That* (2001), 108.



Source: National Library of Australia