



ISSN: 1839-5511

No 2.

25 April 2012

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**Australian Variety Theatre Archive**

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**Have Gravity Will Threaten**

Woolloowin, Queensland, 4030



## "Harry Leston: A Versatile Showman"

Harry Leston was never a leading actor, indeed today few people would know his name. His career flourished during the boom years of Australian theatre in the 1870s and 80s. In later years he tutored others who were to become stars. Though frequently billed as "The People's Favourite" Harry is one of the forgotten personalities of Australian theatre. Nevertheless his performances, which spanned almost forty years on the professional stage, did not go unnoticed by the critics of the day.

Though born John Daly on 17 January 1851 in Wellington, New Zealand, Harry was married as John Joseph Xavier Daly, so it can be assumed he was baptised with these names. His father, John Joseph Daly, had joined the 65th Regiment in 1839, probably in his native Ireland. While stationed at Sheerness, Kent, England he married Mary Sophia McDonald in September 1845. Mary hailed from County Monaghan and John from County Clare. Although they both gave their ages as "full" on the marriage certificate, it seems likely that Mary was only sixteen at the time. Nine months after their marriage John Senior, probably accompanied by Mary, sailed with his regiment which formed the guard for the convicts being transported to Tasmania on the ship *John Calvin*.

The regiment travelled via Norfolk Island and Hobart, where the convicts disembarked, to Sydney, then on to New Zealand. John was stationed at Bay of Islands and Wanganui before he paid his way out of the army at the end of 1848. Sometime in this period two daughters, Mary Jane Agnes and Catherine Mary, were born. Following John Junior's birth the family returned to Wanganui, where a second son, Robert Michael Felix, was born in May 1852. Two months later they embarked for Sydney on the *William*, arriving on 11 August 1852. The reason for their coming to Sydney is unknown. This was the time of the gold rushes which attracted many people with their lure of prosperity for all. It was also thought in the family that there may have been Daly relatives in Sydney.

Following his discharge from the army John Senior had worked as a labourer and servant in New Zealand and was a labourer, messenger, employee of the Oriental Bank and storeman at the government stores in NSW. The Dalys were living at Exeter Place, Sydney, when their third son, Charles Benedict, was born in 1854. By 1861, when Austin was born, they were established in Lower Campbell Street, Surry Hills, where they were to remain until John Senior's death in 1875. Two more daughters were born there: Theresa Angela in 1863 and Frances Clare two years later.

The Daly family were members of the Catholic faith and could not have been well-off with eight children to support, but it seems apparent that they all received a good education. Austin died in childhood and Charles, a commercial traveller, died in 1888 of a cerebral tumour. Mary Jane married Daniel Holland, a Windsor merchant, in 1875 and they became respected members of the Windsor community, Daniel serving on the local council for many years. Catherine is believed to have been running a school in Sydney at the time of her father's death. Theresa married a solicitor in 1892 and Frances remained unmarried. Robert was one of the founders of the printing firm H.T. Dunn & Co. and was involved in amateur singing and acting, performing often at charity concerts. His firm also printed programs for J.C. Williamson. After John's death in 1875 Mary ran a boarding house in Darlinghurst Road, Sydney, until her own death in 1888. Although she left some money and property to her children, she had never learned to read and write.

By the 1850s theatre was the main form of public night entertainment and both Melbourne and Sydney had flourishing theatres, whose productions were acknowledged as equivalent to the best of the British provincial theatre. How John Junior first became involved with the theatre and when he began calling himself Harry Leston is not clear. His father had been a member of the Loyal Wandering Minstrel Lodge in Sydney so an interest in music must have existed in the family.

Nellie Stewart mentions that her mother, Theodosia Yates, who also sang there, remembered Harry as a choir boy at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.<sup>1</sup> It is thought, however, that his first professional stage appearance was as a mesmerist, Professor Leston, in Melbourne around 1867 or 68. Unfortunately no confirmation of this has been found. Perhaps, like the Commedia Dell' Arte actors, he became so identified with his part that he abandoned his own name for that of the character he played. Other members of the family also took the name Leston: Robert being known as Fred Leston and Frances as Fanny Leston.

When the Theatre Royal Melbourne reopened in August 1868 under Henry Harwood, Richard Stewart, John Hennings and George Coppin the members of their Royal Star Company, purported to be "the strongest that could possibly be collected together in the Australian colonies", included Mr George Darrell, later to be well-known as a playwright, who was making his stage debut.<sup>2</sup> Stewart, Hennings and Coppin opened the new Haymarket, later Duke of Edinburgh, Theatre in 1869 and it seems that Harry Leston began his acting career there under J.R. Greville, at the age of nineteen. Evidently his big break came when Miss Maggie Chester, who played Blueskin in the pantomime *Jack Sheppard*, became ill and Harry successfully took over her part.<sup>3</sup> At a benefit night for J.R. Greville at the Theatre Royal on 25 January 1870 he appeared as Dandy in *The House That Jack Built*. Advertisements for this event indicate that it was his first performance, but whether it was his first in the part of Dandy or first ever is not clear.<sup>4</sup>

Harry evidently made a name for himself playing an Irish policeman. Actors in the nineteenth century stock companies tended to be type-cast in specialist roles according to their physical attributes and stage mannerisms and so became identified with these roles in much the same way as today's soap opera actors become identified with their parts. Harry Leston's Irish policeman became his trademark as George Coppin's Billy Barlow became his. Coppin, dubbed "the father of Australian theatre", tends to be remembered more as an entrepreneur than an actor, but would, nevertheless, have provided a suitable role-model for the aspiring comedian and Harry later took many of the parts in which Coppin had appeared. In July 1871 Harry played a policeman in Boucicault's *Elfie, or The Cherry Tree Inn* and a gamekeeper in *Old Gooseberry* at the Theatre Royal. Following the disastrous fire at the Theatre Royal in 1872 a Benefit Cricket Match was held with actors in costume playing for Bassanio's Team and The Apothecary's Team. The *Age* notes that a Mr Lester, dressed as Policeman X, played for The Apothecary's Team.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that this was Harry.

Harry was cast as Prince Gogmagog in *Riquet With the Tuft* or *Harlequin Old Mother Shipton*, the first pantomime to be presented at the newly built Theatre Royal. He remained with this company appearing in many roles at the Theatre Royal, which by 1875 was managed by Alfred Dampier. These included the part of Sullivan, a peasant, in Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun*, Dick in *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and the Lord Chamberlain in *Humpty Dumpty*. Richard, Docy, Nellie, still in her teens, and Maggie Stewart were also members of the company at this time.

By the 1870s Melbourne was already the financial centre of Australia and characterised by bustling commercial activity and social gaiety. As well as the two large theatres there were two or three small halls used for theatrical and musical entertainment. The Royal, which seated 3500, was flanked on one side by the Royal Hotel and on the other by the popular Cafe de Paris. The Haymarket, seating 2500, boasted a fountain in the vestibule, with bars, cellars and a music saloon known as the Apollo Music Hall.

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<sup>1</sup> Nellie Stewart, *My Life's Story*. Sydney: John Sands (1923), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> *Age* 3 Aug. (1868), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Town and Country Journal* 13 July (1889), 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Age* 25 Jan. (1870), 3 and *Argus* 25 Jan. (1870), 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Age* 25 Mar. (1872), 3.

Around August 1875 Harry left the Royal Star Company and probably returned to Sydney, as his father, who died in September, was by then seriously ill. He joined Samuel Lazar's company at the new Theatre Royal in Sydney in December the same year. Built on the site of the old Prince of Wales Theatre in Castlereagh Street, the Royal was described as a "new and magnificent edifice" with flying and sliding scenery.<sup>6</sup> In the opening production, *Daisy Farm*, Harry played Mr Dobson.

In May and June 1878 Harry appeared with Mrs Scott-Siddons in her Shakespearean season at the Royal, playing, amongst other parts, Starveling the tailor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Prices for this production were 5/-, 3/-, 2/-, 1/- and, curiously, one guinea for children in arms!<sup>7</sup> By 1880 he was appearing at the Queen's Theatre with Alfred Dampier and Dampier's daughters Rose and Lily. In August that year the *Bulletin* noted that the theatre was to be thoroughly renovated and cleaned and exclaimed "What a fearful slaughter of rats and fleas!"<sup>8</sup> This was preparatory to the appearance of a new company under J.R. Greville with Harry Leston engaged as comedian.

Harry played in Shakespeare, pantomime and modern melodramas by Boucicault, Darrell and others. His portrayal of an aboriginal in *Never Too Late To Mend* was lauded by the *Bulletin's* theatrical reviewer.<sup>9</sup> He evidently excelled at low comedy and dialect parts such as the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*. The *Bulletin* of 22 January 1881 notes that he bore a remarkable physical resemblance to Greville and that "as a character and dialect actor he has few equals on the colonial stage".<sup>10</sup> This type of praise for a colonial-born actor must have been both gratifying and encouraging for him. In March that year a benefit was held in his honour for the close of Greville's season at the Queen's and Harry appeared in the Irish play *Robert Emmett* with his brother Fred giving a comique impersonation.

On 10 October 1881 Alfred Dampier and his company, which included Harry Leston, opened their season at the newly renovated Gaiety Theatre in Castlereagh Street with the burlesque *The Corsican Brothers*. The new auditorium had a sloping floor to ensure all patrons had a good view of the stage. The theatre was deemed to be "one of the prettiest and most comfortable places of amusement in the colonies".<sup>11</sup> By 1882 Harry was back at the Royal and in 1883 at the Opera House. In 1883 the Royal became the first theatre in Sydney to have its stage lit by electricity instead of gas. Around this time also the practice of dimming the house lights during performances began and consequently it was less common to find the full texts of pantomimes printed in programs. It had previously been the custom for the audience to follow the text line-by-line as it was spoken.

Harry's life must have been fairly hectic during the 80s. On 10 March 1883 he was playing with Mr Polk in a four-act farce *The Strategist* at Sydney Opera House and two weeks later he was appearing in Melbourne as the footman Plantagenet Smiffer, described as "an aesthetic gent", in the first production of George Darrell's play *The Sunny South*. Darrell played the leading part of Matt Morley. W.J. Holloway, who later made his name in London, played Ben Brewer and Essie Jenyns appeared as Bubs Berkeley. The play was a great success and ran for thirty-six performances. With all the ingredients of a good melodrama, as well as English aristocracy, bushrangers and gold-diggers, it was such a crowd pleaser it was revived many times. Its initial six-week run was followed by *The Naked Truth*, also by Darrell, in which Harry played Routh Rutherford.

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<sup>6</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 Dec. (1875), 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 4 June (1878), 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Bulletin* 17 July (1880), 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 1 May (1880), 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 22 Jan. (1881), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 Oct. (1881), 6.

In 1884 Harry appeared at the Theatre Royal, under the triumvirate: Williamson, Garner and Musgrove, in, amongst other plays, the very successful comedy *The Silver King*, starring Maggie Moore, H. Titheradge and Herbert Flemming and as the third witch in *Macbeth* with Howard Vernon and Genevieve Ward. Later that year he toured the country with Howard Vernon. In February 1886 Harry was playing Phineas Fletcher in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during Dampier's season at the Sydney Gaiety and took some time off to travel to Newcastle to marry Florence Rouse, daughter of a well-known businessman in the area. Appropriately a musical entertainment was given at the residence of the bride's uncle following the wedding.

In May that year Dampier's company moved to the smaller Royal Standard Theatre, which was the remodelled Forresters' Hall in Castlereagh Street. Harry appeared as Roderigo in *Othello*, the opening production. Alfred Dampier played Iago, Edmund Holloway Othello and Miss Dampier Desdemona. The new theatre was evidently the height of luxury and cleanliness, something for which theatres were not renowned at the time. One critic, however, complained that the circle was so cold a blizzard could be felt there.<sup>12</sup> *Othello* was followed by *Our Em'ly*, based on Dickens's *David Copperfield*, then *Term of His Natural Life*. Harry's portrayal of the clergyman in *Term of His Natural Life*, based on Marcus Clarke's novel, was evidently so realistic the audience felt that he must really be a man of the cloth and was remembered by aficionados for years afterwards.<sup>13</sup>

Dampier generally produced a Shakespearean play every Friday night and modern drama on other nights, the audience selecting by vote those they wished to see performed. Some of these had the most incredible plots and plots within plots. The *Bulletin's* reviewer thought *The Great Pink Pearl* had "as many plots as an Orange lodge".<sup>14</sup>

Harry seems to have had that enviable ability to immerse himself completely in the character he was playing at the moment, whether it was Karl, a servant of the lion-tamer, in *All for Gold*, Jonas Grimwood, a deformed boatman, in *Royal Pardon* or the Irishman Patrucio Gormani in *The Great Pink Pearl*, all of which he portrayed in 1886. In July 1887 he took the part of Chrysos, an art patron, in W.S. Gilbert's comedy *Pygmalion and Galatea* at the Royal Standard Theatre. This play, written in 1871, was the inspiration for G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, first produced in 1912 and, much later, set to music as *My Fair Lady*.

In October 1887 Dampier's Company moved to the renovated and redecorated Gaiety Theatre, opening with the first Australian production of his five-act drama *Shamus O'Brien* about the 1798 Irish rebellion. Harry played Murtoogh M'Carthy, one of the boys concerned in the uprising. The theatre had a new stage and the old gallery had been converted into a circle with the addition of folding chairs. Prices were 3/- for the circle, 2/- for the stalls and 1/- for the pit.

In April the following year Harry appeared with Dampier's Company at the Gaiety in *The Woman of the People*, but by June he was performing at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne under the triumvirate. He appeared in a number of plays in Melbourne, including the very successful *Hands Across the Sea*, which starred Charles Warner and Herbert Flemming and ran for fifty-five nights, and *The Tomboy*, in which he performed a new and original song and dance with Miss Carrie Swain. He also played the part of The Duenna "one who would duenna thing not inconsistent with a gushing maiden's modesty" in the 1888 Christmas pantomime *Sinbad the Sailor*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Bulletin* 15 May, 9 and 12 June (1886), 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 12 June (1886), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 10 Apr. (1886), 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Argus* 25 Dec. (1888), 8.

In March 1889 Harry played Tom Chuckle, a soldier, in *The Union Jack* at a testimonial performance for John Hennings at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne. In September, after taking a break at Lake Macquarie, he was engaged as business manager for Larry Foley at the Gaiety Theatre, Sydney, but by December that year he was back on the boards appearing with George Rignold at Her Majesty's as Flute in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Theatre had flourished in the eighties with variety performances, comprising circus-style acts and sketches, and vaudeville becoming popular so that by 1887 Sydney had six theatres in regular production. By the end of the decade, however, the land boom had slowed and the theatres suffered as a consequence of this and the bank crashes which followed. Three of the five Melbourne theatres were closed by September 1892 and Alfred Dampier was declared bankrupt two years later. The triumvirate of J.C. Williamson, Arthur Garner and George Musgrove, who controlled a number of theatres, split up. Legitimate theatre suffered a decline in popularity in favour of variety shows, such as Harry Rickards's Tivoli and entertainments like those at the Bondi and Coogee Aquariums and Darlinghurst Rink.

It was not surprising that in this climate Harry Leston began teaching dramatic art, deportment, elocution and voice building by "splendid method"<sup>16</sup>, in order to provide himself with a regular income. He shared a studio with Walter Howe and, later, with Charles Hall, in Hunter Street, Sydney and at the Theatre Royal where they coached clergymen and barristers, as well as actors.

During the nineties Harry appeared at Her Majesty's in *Robbery Under Arms*, as Mrs Crusoe in the pantomime *Robinson Crusoe*, in *To The West*, set in Western Australia, and as Gaspard Caderousse, a "crawling villain", in *Monte Cristo*, a part he had first played in 1886. He played Touchstone in *As You Like It* with Hilda Spong and Greenaway and a "flunkey" in *An Unequal Match* at the Criterion. His portrayal of a Boer in *A Transvaal Heroine* was one of the highlights of that drama. He also appeared in Sunday concerts at the Bondi Aquarium and Darlinghurst Rink, singing and giving humorous recitations, and played Ben Brewer in a revival of *The Sunny South*.

Nineteenth century actors had to be versatile, performing farce one night, melodrama the next and Shakespeare the next, with comic recitations at concerts on Sundays, so they soon became familiar with all aspects of theatre. Harry's performance as Mrs Crusoe in the 1895 Christmas pantomime *Robinson Crusoe* was remarkable for the fact that he portrayed a "vast seasick person in woman's clothing" which a reviewer thought was a degradation of his talent.<sup>17</sup> One performance was marred by a patron falling out of the gallery on to two others, injuring them and breaking the backs of two chairs in the stalls. Fortunately such dramatic occurrences off-stage were not too frequent.

During his career Harry had performed in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, but, so far as I can establish, never further afield. Evidently, like Mrs Crusoe, he suffered greatly from sea-sickness and had to refuse offers which may have furthered his career on account of this unfortunate malady. The time Harry put into his performances and teaching must have been considerable and perhaps not appreciated by his wife as they divorced in 1901. There were no children of the union. His last professional engagement was at Easter 1906 at the Victoria Theatre, Newcastle, NSW, where he appeared with George Darrell in the detective play *From Scotland Yard* and as the digger Ben Brewer in *The Sunny South*. His performance, as usual, was lauded for "his versatile power of character depiction".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 17 Dec. (1892) and 11 Aug. (1893), 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Bulletin* 4 Jan. (1896), 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald* 17 Apr. (1906), n. pag.

Harry's deteriorating health, perhaps the beginning of the kidney disease he later suffered, caused him to give up acting and concentrate on teaching elocution and dramatic art. A benefit performance was held in his honour at the Theatre Royal in September that year. The theatre was lent by Bland Holt; George Rignold and Beatrice Holloway were amongst the performers. A full house turned out to the benefit, which raised £200 for him, though, sadly, he was not well enough to perform himself. The poet Roderic Quinn wrote a poem in his honour, which appeared in the program and was reprinted in the *Freeman's Journal*, which also noted there was "no line of business connected with the theatrical profession that he has not interpreted during his career".<sup>19</sup>

Harry continued to appear at charity concerts and benefits for other actors and continued teaching elocution and voice culture to members of the theatrical profession and public speakers until a few weeks before his death. After almost forty years in professional theatre he lived long enough to see some of his protégés appear on the silver screen. Lottie Lyell, who made her name in the early Raymond Longford films, is known to have been one of his students. His coaching must have borne fruit as her enunciation attracted praise from the critics.

In December 1912 Harry was one of the mourners at the funeral at Waverley Cemetery of George Rignold. The curtain closed on his own life on 13 July 1923 and his funeral was attended by fellow actors, including Raymond Longford, representatives of J.C. Williamson, the Education Department and the Professional Musicians' Association.<sup>20</sup> He was buried at Waverley Cemetery, in company with many of his theatrical colleagues, where "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well" (*Macbeth* Act 3 Scene 2).

**Originally published in *Victorian Historical Journal* 68. 1 (Apr 1997), 98-104.**

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<sup>19</sup> *Freeman's Journal* 15 Sept. (1906), 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 July (1923), 12.