

# GARNET WALCH

The most popular, and arguably the most successful, writer for the Australian stage during the 1870s and 1880s, Garnet Walch's career emerged in the wake of the country's previous leading dramatist, W. M. Akhurst. While many of his works were localised and updated adaptations (notably his pantomimes), it was his ability to tap into the public's mood and desires by expressing sentiments and making satirical allusions that made his works so popular. Walch wrote a wide array of genres and forms, including "serious" dramatic works, comedies, pantomimes, melodrama, and vaudeville sketches. His career appears to have undergone two significant peaks, the first during the mid to late-1870s and the second, through his collaboration with Alfred Dampier during the early 1890s. Walch's career is also tied in with many other leading theatre practitioners of the period, including Harry Rickards, George Darrell, Richard Stewart, W. S. Lyster and R. P. Whitworth. A number of his works were adapted by other writers and producers in later years, notably Archibald Murray and Samuel Lazar. Among the works Walch is most remembered for today are *Australia Felix* (1873), *Marvellous Melbourne* (1889), *Robbery Under Arms* (1890).

## 1843-1871

Garnet Walch was born in Hobart the year after his father arrived in the colony of Tasmania in 1842 as a major in the 54th Regiment. Some three years later, his father opened the Hobart branch of publishers Samuel Tegg. Under the stewardship of his eldest boys James and Charles, the business later became the successful publishing house J. Walch and Sons. In 1852, following the death of his father, Garnet returned to Europe, where he completed his education first at London's Denmark Hill Grammar and later at a private college in the German township of Hamelin. He moved back to Australia in his late teens and, after spending a brief period in Hobart making a poor attempt at a career as a clerk, he moved to Sydney. It was there that his writing ability came to the attention of George Ross Morton, editor of the *Sydney Punch* and himself an occasional dramatist. Over the next few years, Walch contributed regularly to several Sydney papers, and in 1867 took over the editorship of the *Cumberland Mercury*. Within the same year, he started his own paper, the *Cumberland Times* and published his first short novel, *The Fireflash*.



Source: State Library of Victoria

A marked increase in theatrical productions in Sydney during the late 1860s, largely a result of the flow-on from the huge number of gold-seekers arriving in the colony, began providing opportunities for anyone with a theatrically-inclined imagination and a talent for writing. As with a number of his journalist peers, Walch began accepting commissions to adapt, localise, and update material for local theatrical managements. The availability of sources, notably English burlesques, pantomimes, and novels, provided these authors with creative frames into which they could inject topicality and local references for the popular culture audiences that attended them. The first production that can be attributed to Walch is the burlesque *Love's Silver Dream*, first staged in 1869. After it was well received by both critics and public, he was inspired to adapt several more works in quick succession, including *Conrad the Corsair* and *Prometheus* (both 1870) and *Trookulentos the Tempter* (1871) for George Darrell. Walch's immediate success at this new craft is not surprising, given that, as theatre historian Veronica Kelly points out in her preface to *Australia Felix*, he was "ideally suited to write for the popular stage... [taking] his task lightly enough to contribute [a] genial irony and sense of the fantastic, and seriously enough never to patronise popular taste or feel the work beneath him" (27).

## 1872-1879

In 1872, Walch moved to Melbourne where he soon established himself as the successor to W. M. Akhurst in terms of being both Melbourne's and Australia's leading dramatist and music theatre writer. Indeed, by the end of that same year, he had the distinction of having two productions of *True-Blue Beard* (his own version and an adaptation by Archibald Murray) running simultaneously in Sydney and Melbourne. The following year, he was engaged as the secretary of the Melbourne Athenaeum on a stipend of £300. This position, which he held until 1879, provided Walch with an income that allowed ample opportunity to write for the theatre while enjoying financial security. He subsequently wrote or adapted more than twenty music theatre works between 1872 and 1879. These include the pantomimes *Australia Felix* (1873), *Beauty and the Beast* (1875), *Jack the Giant Killer and His Doughty Deeds* (1878), and *Babes in the Woods* (1879); the sketch *Mother Says I Mustn't*, written especially for Harry Rickards

(1972); the operetta *Genevieve de Brabant* (1873), which he adapted for W. S. Lyster; and the burlesques *Pygmalion and His Gal (A Dear)* (1873), written for Harry Rickards, and *The White Fawn* (1874).

**AMUSEMENTS.**  
**THEATRE ROYAL.**  
 Lessee and Manager ..... Mr. Samuel Lazar.  
 Treasurer ..... Mr. James Booty.  
 FOXING NIGHT, MONDAY, December 27.  
 GRAND PRODUCTION  
 of an original, magical, mirthful, mystical, sophistical,  
 cabalistical, phantastical, cryptical, onomatopoeical, metrical,  
 and musical extravaganza, by Garnet Walch, author of  
 Trocubantos, Adamanta, Australia Felix, Pygmalion and  
 His Gal (dear), &c., forming the opening to the Royal  
 Pantomime,  
**BEAUTY AND THE BEAST,**  
 OR,  
**HARLEQUIN KING GLORIO THE MILLIONTH,**  
**THE ISLAND OF APES,**  
 and  
**THE FAIRIES OF THE MAGIC ROSES.**  
 Sydney Morning Herald 27 Dec. (1875), 8.

In addition, there were plays with significant musical performances, notably *The Great Hibernicon* (1874) and 'musical entertainments' such as *Rainbow Revels* (1877) and *If* (1878), both written especially for Richard Stewart's family. Referring to the first of these works in her autobiography, Nellie Stewart recalls:

Mr Walch suggested [to my father] that he should write an entertainment for us on lines broadly similar to that in which the Vokes Family in England had won such success, and that we should tour Australia with it ... I was enabled for once to sing and dance my fill, playing seven parts - school girl, Dutch girl, Irish girl, pantomime boy and so forth ... From its inception *Rainbow Revels* was so successful that Mr Walch wrote another medley called *If* (39-40).

During the same period, Walch was also responsible for a variety of sketches and comediettas, including, for example, the sketch *Shy, Shy, Dreadfully Shy* (1872), the dramas *A Terribly Strange Bed* (1876) and *Where Am I?* (1876); and the comedies *The*

*Haunted Chamber* and *The Great Wager of £500* (both staged in 1876 by the magician Alfred Sylvester), *Humble Pie* (1877), and *Perfidious Albion* (1878). The mid-1870s also saw Walch begin his long-time association with actor/manager Alfred Dampier. Although their most recognisable collaborations, a series of highly popular melodramas, would not eventuate until the early 1890s, Walch initially provided some material for Dampier, beginning with *Faust and Marguerite* (1876). The following year, he wrote the popular stage production *Helen's Babies* (adapted from J. Habberton's best-selling novelette) for Dampier and his daughters Lily and Rose.

## 1880-1888

Despite the economic security of his Athenaeum position, and the frequent, though much lower, income from his theatre writing, Walch's financial situation steadily worsened over the late 1870s. Veronica Kelly indicates that Walch's 'characteristic generosity and optimism' was in evidence right up to the point where his losses could no longer be sustained. In 1880, for example, he sponsored a clandestine performance of Marcus Clarke's banned play *A Happy Land* (1880), chartering at his own expense a steamboat to carry the company to its destination, the beachside township of Frankston. The excursion was a financial disaster for Walch and he soon afterwards filed for bankruptcy (33). 1881 saw Walch continue writing for the theatre, but at the same time he began collaborating with artist Charles Turner in an ambitious project he hoped would cash in on the Melbourne International Exhibition. The result, *Victoria in 1880*, which is described by Kelly as a "triumph of colonial publishing," failed to realise a financial return. The following year, he wrote the comedy-drama *Her Evil Star* for Mrs G. B. W. Lewis, along with several sketches for the Sylvester family and two pantomimes, as well as founding the short-lived weekly magazine *Town Talk* with writer R. P. Whitworth and cricketer John Conway. However, the stress of work and his poor financial situation finally saw Walch suffer a collapse early in 1882. A prestigious benefit was held in his honour, and although he contributed a new comedy, Walch soon afterwards took an extended break by sailing to Madagascar. The venture was paid for in part through the reports he sent back to the *Argus*.

Almost immediately after returning refreshed to Australia in late 1885, Walch supplied Harry Rickards with arguably two of the actor/manager's greatest-ever Australian-written musical entertainments, *Bric-a-Brac* and *Spoons* (Rickards staged both works frequently until 1890), along with a burlesque version of his earlier pantomime, *Babes in the Woods*. He continued to produce new theatre works during the remainder of the 1880s, while also writing various pamphlets, numerous newspaper articles, and (in 1887) a centennial celebration publication, *The Australian Birthday Book*. He even produced several biographies, notably *A Life of General Gordon* and a monograph on J. C. Williamson. 1887 also saw him become editor of the Centennial Printing and Publishing Company. Some three years later, he again teamed up with Alfred Dampier to produce the first of a series of melodramas, the success of which effectively returned his career to the heights of the previous decade.

**NEW OPERA HOUSE.**  
 TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY) TO-NIGHT  
 TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY) TO-NIGHT.  
 ENTIRE CHANGE. ENTIRE CHANGE.  
 ENTIRE CHANGE. ENTIRE CHANGE.  
 FOR SIX NIGHTS ONLY.  
 THE ORIGINAL, MUSICAL, AND BURLESQUE ENTERTAINMENT WRITTEN BY GARNET  
 WALCH EXPRESSLY FOR MR. HARRY RICKARDS TO INTRODUCE  
 THE SPECIALITIES OF HIMSELF AND HIS TALENTED COMPANY;  
 ENTITLED  
 BRIC-A-BRAC BRIC-A-BRAC  
 BRIC-A-BRAC BRIC-A-BRAC.  
 WHEN YOU COME TO THINK OF IT,  
 MR. HARRY RICKARDS  
 IN ALL HIS GLORY.  
 'ARRY, OH 'ARRY  
 'ARRY, OH 'ARRY  
 THE ONLY ONE! THE ONLY ONE!  
 THE ONLY ONE! THE ONLY ONE!  
 HIS LORDSHIP WINKED AT THE COUNSEL.  
 HIS LORDSHIP WINKED AT THE COUNSEL.  
 IT'S ALL OVER NOW WITH THE LADIES.  
 IT'S ALL OVER NOW WITH THE LADIES.  
 THAT'S MY PA, THAT'S MY DAUGHTER.  
 THAT'S MY PA, THAT'S MY DAUGHTER.  
 NONSENSE! YAAS, BAI JOVE.  
 NONSENSE! YAAS, BAI JOVE.  
 REMEMBER! REMEMBER!  
 THE HARRY RICKARDS  
 NEW COMEDY and SPECIALTY COMPANY  
 is acknowledged by the press and public to be the greatest com-  
 pany of Comedians, Singers, Dancers, and Specialists  
 that ever appeared in Australia.  
 POSITIVELY CLOSING TUESDAY, JULY 5, 1888.

Sydney Morning Herald 23 June (1888), 2.

## 1889-1897

Walch and Dampier began their creative association in 1889, after the actor/manager moved his operations from Sydney's Royal Standard Theatre to Melbourne's Alexandra Theatre. One of their first collaborations was on *Marvellous Melbourne*, which they co-wrote with J. H. Wrangham and Thomas Somers in 1889. The first Dampier/Walch melodrama, however, was *The Count of Monte Cristo*, staged in 1890. The pair then presented arguably their biggest success, an adaptation of Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1890), followed by such works as *For Love and Life* (1890), *The Miner's Rights* (1891), *The Scout* (1891), *The Trapper* (1891), *This Great City* (1891), *Wilful Murder* (1892), and *Help One Another* (1892). During the same period, Walch also wrote *The Land Lubber* (1890) for Katie Rickards, *Jack the Giant Killer* (1891) for Dampier, and the comedy-drama *Silver Chimes*, staged in Adelaide in late 1892.

By 1892, however, the combination of long-term drought and economic depression took hold of the Australian economy, forcing Dampier to eventually abandon his once unassailable theatrical fortress at the Alexandra. That year also effectively marked the beginning of the end for Garnet Walch's theatrical career. While it is known that he wrote another version of *Sinbad the Sailor* for J. C. Williamson (1893) and that he intended to try to promote several of his more recent productions in England and America, the success of this latter venture is unclear. A collaboration with John Grocott resulted in the publication of an opera-bouffe titled *Kismet; Or, The Cadi's Daughter* in 1894. No production details have yet been located, however. One of Walch's last known works to be produced in Australia was *The Prairie King*. A revival was staged in Sydney by the MacMahon brothers in 1897. Advertising indicates that it contained "with startling vividness and romantic flavour, the life and customs of WILD AMERICA, with its Red Indians, Scouts, Cowboys, Mexicans, Chiefs, Half-breeds, Guides [and] Frontiersmen" (SMH: 6 Nov. 1897, 2). From 1897 onwards, little else about Garnet Walch is known other than he retired from the theatre.

[NB: The above biography acknowledges the research undertaken by Eric Irvin for his *Australian Melodrama: Eighty Years of Popular Theatre* (1981) and Veronica Kelly's "Introduction" to the University of Queensland Press edition of *Australia Felix* (1988)]

## MUSIC THEATRE WORK

- 1869:** **Love's Silver Dream** [pantomime]  
**1870:** **Conrad the Corsair** [burlesque] • **Prometheus** [burlesque]  
**1871:** **Trookulentos the Tempter** [pantomime]  
**1872:** **Mother Says I Mustn't** [musical sketch] • **Orpheus** [burlesque] • **Trookulentos in a Nutshell** [pantomime] • **True Blue Beard** [pantomime]  
**1873:** **Australia Felix** [pantomime] • **Genevieve De Brabant** [operetta] • **Pygmalion and His Gal (A Dear)** [burlesque]  
**1874:** **Admanta the Proud Princess of Profusia and Her Six Unlucky Suitors** [pantomime] • **The Great Hibernicon** [play with music] • **A Second Edition of Pygmalion and His Gal** [burlesque] • **The White Fawn** [extravaganza]  
**1875:** **Beauty and the Beast** [pantomime] • **A Froggee Would a Wooing Go** [pantomime]  
**1876:** **Hey Diddle Diddle The Cat and the Fiddle, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon** [pantomime] • **Pluto; Or, The Magic Lyre** [burlesque]  
**1877:** **Helen's Babies** [play with music] • **Rainbow Revels** [entertainment]  
**1878:** **If; Or, An Old Gem Rest** [musical entertainment] • **Jack the Giant Killer and His Doughy Deeds** [pantomime] • **Lohengrin in a Nutshell** [burlesque]  
**1879:** **Babes in the Wood** [pantomime]  
**1880:** **Sinbad the Sailor; Or, The Pet of the Peri** [pantomime]  
**1881:** **Dyk Whyttyngtonne and Hys Wonderfull Cattle** [pantomime] • **Gulliver; Or, Harlequin King Lilliput** [pantomime]  
**1885:** **Bric-a-Brac** [entertainment] • **Spoons** [entertainment] • **Sleeping Beauty; Or, Harlequin Mother Goose** [pantomime]  
**1888:** **Ma-in-Law** [entertainment] • **Our Letter Carriers** [entertainment]  
**1889:** **Landlubber** [entertainment]  
**1893:** **Sinbad the Sailor** [pantomime]

# THE LYCEUM.

Under the Management of the Messrs. MACMAHON.

The Messrs. MACMAHON are gratified to acknowledge the continued success of the policy by which they claim to have brought within the means of all classes of the community the opportunity of witnessing and enjoying magnificent representations of some of the most notable Plays of the time at **WONDERFULLY CHEAP PRICES**. They have now to announce the **FOURTH GREAT PRODUCTION** for

**THIS (SATURDAY) EVENING NOVEMBER 6,  
THE PRAIRIE KING**

(Written by Garnet Walsh, author of "Robbery Under Arms," &c.)

which, they venture to think, will far eclipse all their previous efforts in this direction. This production will introduce with startling vividness and romantic flavour the Life and Customs of **WILD AMERICA**, with its Red Indians, Scouts, Cowboys, Mexicans, Chiefs, Half-breeds, Guides, Frontiersmen, &c. **20 HIGHLY-TRAINED HORSES** (23) are to be employed in the representation, the perfection of which will also be heightened by **BEAUTIFUL and APPROPRIATE SCENERY and EXTRAORDINARY MECHANICAL EFFECTS**, including the most thrilling of all sensations ever attempted upon any stage, **THE GREAT CANYON SCENE and HORSE DIVE**, with its intrepid rider, into the **RIVER**. This sensational effect is produced with the aid of absolutely the **LARGEST BODY OF REAL WATER** ever shown on the stage, forming a **RESERVOIR 80 FEET WIDE**, and containing upwards of **100 TONS OF WATER**. Imagination cannot picture this thrilling episode, which must be seen to be realised.

**THE STRONGEST DRAMATIC ORGANISATION IN AUSTRALIA** will interpret the cast as under:—

Harold Hume ("The Prairie King")	Mr. King Hedley	Menser Motzakleis	Mr. Steve Adson
Rattlesnake Joe	Mr. Harry Overton	Vance Renard	Mr. A. W. Boothman
Colonel Ebenezer Doolittle	Mr. L. Chateaux	Dusty Rhodes	Mr. Charles Woods
Seth Strawbones	Mr. E. D. Marsland	The Gopher	Mr. Charles Blake
James Hamber	Mr. Neville Mayman	Priamose Snowball	Mr. E. Gratton Coughlan
Hector O'Hooligan	Mr. Harry Shine	Yellow Feather	Mr. W. J. Merton
Konrad Kroppengeisser (Rival Suitors)	Mr. J. Driscoll Foley	Lucy Hamber	Miss Maud Williamson
		La Belle Mexicana	Miss Ethel Grey
		Hanna Statia Briggs	Mr. D'Arcy Head
		White Cloud	Miss Lullie Roberts

**TRAMPS**—Tired Tommy, Dusy Eyes, Early Morn, Mournful Michael, Weary Willie, Sleepy Sammy.  
**INDIANS**—Sleeping Crow, Man-who-rides-on-the-wind, Man-who-shoots-with-a-stick, Sharp Knife, Surefoot, Many Scalps, Big Spear, Red Giant, Red Blanket.

**COWBOYS**--Lasso Sam, Broncho Bill, Rifle Jack, Deerfoot Dick, Mountain Mick, Kills Enemy.

**INDIAN WARRIORS, U.S. TROOPS, BY A HOST OF AUXILIARIES.**

The Drama is produced under the Sole Direction of Mr. Alfred Woods. Preceded at 7.45 by the Marvellous Cinematographic Pictures of the Queen's Jubilee, and other astounding Triumphs of Electric Photography. The **STARTLING PRICES** remain: 2s, 1s, and 6d. Plan at Nicholson's. **TUESDAY NEXT, PRINCE OF WALES' BIRTHDAY, GRAND MATINEE PERFORMANCE, of THE PRAIRIE KING.**

*Sydney Morning Herald* 6 Nov. (1897), 2.

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

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