

## OSCAR ASCHE

One of Australia's most successful theatrical exports, Oscar Asche studied acting in Norway in 1890 before moving to Britain where he established a reputation with Benson's Shakespeare Company and Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree. He later formed his own company with his actress wife Lily Brayton, presenting a largely Shakespearian repertoire. The couple brought the company to Australia in 1909 and again in 1912. Asche's greatest success, however, came through his musicals. The first, *Kismet* (1911), was followed in 1916 by another "Eastern" extravaganza, *Chu Chin Chow*. It ran in London's West End for a record-breaking five years, played on Broadway for six months and came to Australia in 1920. Asche returned home the following year to produce his follow-up hit, *Cairo*. He went back to England in 1924 and over the next ten years appeared in several films, wrote two novels and produced a number of stage shows. His career nevertheless declined significantly and he died in poverty in 1936.

Regarded as among the finest actors of his age, and certainly one of the most imposing, Australian-born actor/ dramatist/ director, Oscar Asche, is described by eminent theatre historian Eric Irvin, as a "theatrical pioneer of no mean order... a big man with big ideas" (11). Indeed, Asche is recognised as having created several visual spectacles which were later taken up by stage and film producers such as Flo Ziegfeld and Cecil B. de Mille, and to whom these innovations are generally attributed. For example, Asche staged several grand staircase scenes many years before Ziegfeld used them in his Follies productions, while de Mille's famous bath scenes were similarly predicated by Asche. The "innovative" European method of staging during the 1920s and 1930s - whereby the wings and borders were done away with and a curved shell was positioned at the back of the stage in order to deepen the spatial perspective - was another Asche innovation staged at least a decade before it came into vogue. Irvin also records that while in Australia in 1922 Asche found it amusing to read in an English newspaper that "a demonstration of a German method of lighting by means of which sunsets, rain, and clouds and so on could be shown on a panorama cloth" He responded: "We had done all this in 1914" (11). His innovations were not just confined to the stage, though. "Asche," writes Irvin "was also an extremely capable and ingenious amateur cook... [who] early in his career invented a portable cooking stove which could be taken in the car of his time and on which he could... cook a three-course meal for anything up to 20 people" (11). As a director, too, he was meticulous in all matters of detail, an aspect which the *Bulletin* reflected upon in its 5 June issue in 1924. When suggesting that the supernumeraries engaged for Seymour Hicks' production of *Man in Dress Clothes* - who, although required to sit around for half an hour pretending to dine in a café, were "doing nothing of the sort" - the *Bulletin* critic then made the observation that they would no doubt have dined under Asche's direction (34).

Born John Stange(r) Heiss Asche at Mack's Hotel, Geelong (Vic) on 24 January 1871, Oscar Asche's Norwegian father, Thomas, was a barrister who never practiced in Australia, but rather took up a number of professions here, including gold-digger, policeman and storekeeper. Having made his fortune through several land deals, Tom Asche promptly lost most of it before eventually establishing himself as a prosperous publican in Geelong. The family moved to Dandenong in 1878, where young Oscar was initially educated (Laurendon 2-11) before undertaking his secondary education at Melbourne Grammar School. After finishing his studies Asche spent a short time as a jackeroo, and according to Irvin, also worked in the employ of a wine and spirit merchant. His decision to become an actor, no doubt influenced through his childhood association with the many actors who visited his father's hotel, was firmed after he mounted a relatively successful production of *Othello* in Sydney. In 1890 he sailed to Norway via Fiji to study under Jorgen Hansen Björnstjern at his dramatic school in Bergen. During his early years as an actor he met with several high profile dramatists, including Henrik Ibsen, who advised the young actor to both continue his studies in England and iron out his Australian accent. Thus Asche soon moved to London, where he was able to live, initially, through an allowance from his father.

Oscar Asche made his British stage debut in March 1893 as Roberts in *Man and Woman* at the Opera Comique Theatre, and afterwards worked extensively with Frank R. Benson's Shakespeare company (1894 - 1902), one of his first roles being that of Antonio in *Twelfth Night*. He left Benson in 1902 after securing an engagement as both actor and director with the more famous Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree company, and with which he remained for some two years. Reviews in several Cork newspapers in late 1893 describe the young actor's portrayal of Cassius in *Julius Caesar* (Cork Opera House) as "a well-finished performance" (*Cork Examiner* qtd. SMH: 17 Feb. 1894, 5) and



Source: National Library of Australia.

"marked by a degree of intelligence and force one would not expect to find in an actor hitherto relegated to very minor parts" (*Cork Constitution* qtd. SMH: 17 Dec. 1894, 5). In a 1922 interview published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Asche estimates that he played over 200 Shakespearian characters during his eight years with Benson (4 Sept. n. pag.). Although reports of Asche's rising career seeped into Australian press reports throughout the late 1890s, it was not until 1901 that he began to make a significant impact on the London stage, with this occurring through his role as Freddy Maldonado in Sir Arthur Pinero's *Iris* (BC: 1 Feb. 1902, 9). He later played the role to much acclaim in New York. Among Asche's more acclaimed performances with Beerbohm-Tree's company were his roles as Benedick, which he played opposite Ellen Terry as Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*; as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and as Bolingbrooke in *Richard II*.

After having left Beerbohm-Tree, Asche spent a period of time in management at the Adelphi Theatre (London), where he directed several well-received productions with his wife, Lily Brayton, whom he had married in 1899. Most notable were the Shakespearian works, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1906) as Bottom, *Macbeth* (1906) and *As You Like It* (1907) with himself as Jacques and Brayton as Rosalind. The later work was met with much-needed success after a previous production, the poetic drama *Attila* (as with Verdi's 1845 opera of the same name), failed to attract much public support. In 1907 Asche and Brayton formed their own company and together they leased His Majesty's Theatre in London, before making the first of three "local boy makes good" tours of Australia (1909-10). The first visit to his homeland as principal of a major dramatic company was a much anticipated event, and had been talked about in Australia from as early as February 1907 (TT: 1 Feb. 1907, 14). Asche's profile in the country had been building long before the tour, however, with frequent mention of his London exploits being having been published in the local theatre press for a number of years previous. Early in 1909 he and Brayton signed a contract with Messrs Meynell and Gunn to undertake a six month tour.



**Lily Brayton**

Source: Emory University

The company, which came with its own scenery, costumes and properties, included Raymond Pechotsch as music conductor. The tour lasted more than a year and saw them present a mostly Shakespearian repertoire, notably *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*, along with *The Virgin Goddess*, John Tobin's *The Honeymoon*, and Asche's own adaptation (with Norris F. Connell) of Stanley Wyman's *Count Hannibal*, which had debuted in London shortly before the company left for Australia. According to Hal Porter, Asche was overjoyed to be famous on his return home, writing: "What a home coming it was. Nothing, nothing can deprive me of that. I had made good, and had come home to show them. Whatever the future years held, or shall hold for me, nothing can eliminate that" (97). Interest in the tour was not confined only to the company's male lead, however. Australian audiences were particularly taken with Lily Brayton, as were the critics. A waltz was even written and dedicated to the actress by Wynne Jones. Titled "Lily Brayton Valse," the music was published by Albert and Son with a portrait of Brayton reproduced in several tints for the cover (A: 28 Aug. 1909, 18). Interestingly, while audiences were excellent for the tour and most newspaper criticism positive, the *Theatre* magazine appears to have taken an almost antagonistic viewpoint. Among the number of snipes and criticisms levelled at Asche are Scene-Shifter's comments: [*Othello* is]

"mutilated... barbarous and blasphemous" and *As You Like It* is "a mess" (25-5). Another critic, writing in the same October 1909 issue suggested, too, that the company's overall acting was "much-puffed" (8).

Returning to London Asche took over the lease of the Garrick Theatre and soon afterwards obtained the rights to Edward Knoblock's play *Hajj's Hour*. At the time Knoblock was in a state of despair, having had an unsuccessful run with *The Fawn*, while his manuscript for *Hajj's Hour* was reported to have been "dog-eared with refusal." Even Beerbohm-Tree had turned it down, while it fared no better in America. Flush with money from his Australian tour, and needing a new show in a hurry, Asche attempted to contact Knoblock, who was away at the time. Asche's agent rang Knoblock's sister who found two versions in a cupboard - one as originally written and the other "embodying all the alterations the various managers who had turned it down had suggested as improvements." The sister unwittingly sent the original version to Asche. "He got it on a Saturday... read it on Sunday, bought it on Monday" (Macqueen-Pope, 202), and, "working like demons," put the play into production almost immediately. First were the changes to text, and a new title, *Kismet*. Then they hired Percy Anderson to do the costumes, Joseph Harker to design the settings, and Christopher Wilson to write the music. Asche's conceptual design also saw him run out an apron stage so as to have something going on stage all the time whilst the many changes of scene were being made. W. Macqueen-Pope recalls:

Nobody had much sleep during that time. The company was too large for the theatre - so big was the crowd; the stage too small for the large effects visualised. But Asche overcame it all. News got out that there was nudity in the show. Excitement reigned. At last, after never-ceasing work, it opened on 19 April 1911. It was a vivid first night. The splendour of the Orient came to Charing Cross Road, the Bazaar scene with its ever-changing

crowds, its noise, its colour, brought the audience to its feet with cheers. The naked lady went into the bath with an accompanying gasp of excitement. Asche was the ideal "Hajj" ... [while] Brayton was the ideal "Marsinah." Its barbaric spectacle and riotous colour, its savagery, its originality - its sweep carried it to vast and overwhelming success. The scenery... alone was a masterpiece (202).

The production ran until late January 1912, sustaining good audiences despite running into trouble with the Lord Chamberlain over the bath scene.<sup>1</sup>

The day after *Kismet* closed Asche and his company left England for a second Australian tour. The tour began in Melbourne in March 1912, and included seasons in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Albany (WA). The company also toured New Zealand and played a second season in Melbourne. The antipodean tour, which ended around August 1913, included *Kismet* and several of his other recent successes, notably new versions of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (accompanied by Mendelssohn's incidental music), and at least one revival from the previous tour. As with the 1907-09 tour, audiences were excellent, as was much of the press criticism. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Taming of the Shrew* moved "along swimmingly," Asche's role as Christopher Sly was "delightfully ludicrous," and his Petruchio "carrying all before him" (2 June 1913, 3). The *Age* records that for *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the actor had "not spared himself time, trouble or expense," presenting a drama that quite outrivalled any Shakespearian production of recent years" (27 Dec. 1912, 6.). Asche's conceptual approach for this production was to provide an Egyptian atmosphere rather than Roman in order to provide greater scope for scenic splendour and picturesque detail (A: 14 Dec. 1912, 28). Of the new productions *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was also seen to exhibit much of Asche's extravagance as a producer, being described in the same paper as having "rare pictorial beauty" (9 June 1913, 3). One of the local actors to be engaged by Asche-Brayton during the tour was J. B. (Jimmy) Atholwood's daughter, Sybil.



As **Petruccio**  
*Taming of the Shrew*  
Source: Emory University

Following his return to England Asche opened a season at the Globe Theatre (London). On 10 March 1914 he revived *Kismet* for London audiences, and the season (which advertised the premiere as the 381<sup>st</sup> production) went on to last until 9 September. Shortly afterwards he debuted his new production, *Mameena*, which was a dramatisation of H. Rider Haggard's *A Child of Storm*. Asche had secured the rights to the novel when he met the author in Brisbane during his previous Australian tour (ca. Mar. 1913). Essentially a play with music, *Mameena* opened in London in late September 1914 and despite the turmoil of the period ran for three and a half months.



As **Count Hannibal**  
Courtesy of Emory University

On 31 August 1916, almost two years after *Mameena* premiered, Asche's greatest theatrical success, the exotic oriental musical extravaganza *Chu Chin Chow* premiered. It ran for five years (2,238 performances) in London alone, and helped make Asche (who wrote and directed it as well as playing the lead role of Abu Hasan/Chu Chin Chow) a millionaire. Eric Irvin records that the production made over £3½ million - "very big money at that time - and that Asche's royalties alone made him more than £200,000" (32). *Chu Chin Chow* created great excitement with audiences in both America (1917-18) and Australia (1920-21, 1923). Indeed, reports and critical observations along the lines of "nothing so remarkable - so costly, beautiful, and subtly atmospheric - in the way of Eastern illustration has been done on [the British] stage" (TT: Nov. 1916, 54), began to filter into Australia shortly after it premiered, creating much interest amongst the local industry.

Asche did not confine himself only to performing in *Chu Chin Chow* during its London run. In 1917, for example, he directed *The New Governor* at Daly's Theatre, with the *West Australian* reporting in its "Musical and Dramatic Notes" column that this project would see Asche embark "upon a new career with other firms in direction which he has long followed with success for himself" (3). Asche also collaborated with Dormford Yates on the libretto for *Eastward, Ho!* (1919) - music by Grace Torrens and John Ansell. Around the same time, too, he began a collaboration with Percy Fletcher to create another

<sup>1</sup> In 1953 Charles Lederer staged a musical comedy production of *Kismet* with the book co-adapted by himself and Luther Davis from Knoblock's play, but retaining Asche's title. It premiered the Ziegfeld Theatre in New York on 3 December with music and lyrics by Robert Wright and George Forrest. The director was Albert Marre.

Arabian Nights-inspired musical comedy. Premiering in New York in 1920 under the title *Mecca*, this new musical was staged the following year in London as *Cairo*. Although it did not equal its predecessor in terms of success, *Cairo* was nonetheless another major hit for Asche. He took the show to Australia (as *Cairo*) in late 1922, and the following year directed the Melbourne production of J. C. Williamson's musical comedy *A Southern Maid* (1923). The Melbourne season was followed by Sydney (ca. May/June), Brisbane (beginning 30 June) and then New Zealand (beginning 20 July) before returning to Sydney in September. Other productions Asche staged during his extended stay in his home country included: *Othello* and *The Skin Game*.

Despite having mounted a successful Australian tour (in terms of patronage), Asche departed the country in 1924 leaving behind him considerable acrimony and controversy. His relationship with the Williamson organisation, having been for the most part an uneasy one, eventually ended when his contract was terminated after a bitter quarrel. Prior to this, Asche had also endured a good deal of ridicule at the hands of critics when he judged the *Daily Telegraph's* 1923 play competition. Having been drawn to the Indian setting of Betty Hiscock's *Desire of Spring*, Asche persuaded one of the other judges to change his vote by promising a London production if it were to win. This raised a storm of protest because many within the local industry believed that the award should have gone to a play set in Australia.

When Asche returned to Britain in 1924 he found himself unable to re-establish the success he had gained with *Chu Chin Chow* and *Cairo*, by then being viewed as somewhat unfashionable, and his career undertook a significant decline. At the same time he found it impossible to change his living style, continuing to over spend on personal interests, notably his passions for coursing and greyhounds. A farm he bought in Gloucestershire also lost him a good deal of money. During the 1920s he produced a couple of shows which failed to attract much success. In 1925, for example, he directed *Frasquita* and *Cleopatra*, and took a lead role (as the Earl of Jawleyford) in his own production, *The Good Old Days*, which he again co-wrote with Percy Fletcher. Produced with the assistance of this then ex-wife, Lily Brayton, *The Good Old Days*, was a financial and critical disaster. In 1928 he began writing his autobiography, *Oscar Asche: His Life by Himself* (1929) and in the same year was cast as Brooke Hoskyn in *Marjolaine*. The following year he directed *The White Camelia* and followed this in 1930 with *El Dorado*, for which he also took the role of Alcide de Barros.



As **Chu Chin Chow**

Source: Wikipedia



**Lily Brayton**  
As Cleopatra  
*Theatre Nov. 1912, 38.*

The early 1930s saw Asche publish two novels, *The Saga of Hans Hansen* (1930) and *The Joss-Sticks of Chung* (1931), in addition to directing in 1932 Lily Brayton's final stage production. He also appeared several films, beginning in 1932 with *My Lucky Star*, and latter, *Don Quixote* (1933), *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* (1934), *Scrooge* (1935), *Private Secretary* (1935) and *Eliza Comes to Stay* (1936). Despite having attained much critical and financial success during his long and distinguished career, Oscar Asche's last years were spent living in poverty. He died on 23 March 1936 at Bisham (England).

At his best Oscar Asche was a dominant stage presence, not only through his considerable acting ability but also through his sheer physical size - which turned from athleticism in his youth to obesity in his later years. Indeed, as a younger man he had been an above average athlete, particularly as a cricketer. He even played for the M.C.C. against minor countries. In his later life he attended most major cricket matches at Lords. He was known as a boisterous, hearty man, who nevertheless took his theatrical work seriously. If there was one frequent criticism of his acting, however, it was that he tended to lack subtlety - it being said that he tended to either strut around the stage too much and that his characterisations rarely conveyed any sense of credible tenderness.

He was also considered one of the finest producers and managers of his day, demonstrating, as Eric Irvin argues, "a remarkable grasp of popular stagecraft, [seeming] to know instinctively what and what was not theatrically possible" (*Dictionary* 33). Asche also remains arguably the most successful Australian-born music theatre writer to date. Nevertheless, while there is little doubt that he established an international reputation through *Chu Chin Chow* (and perhaps to a lesser extent through his innovative Shakespearian interpretations), Asche was equally renowned for having one of the meanest tempers in show business - a factor which may well have played its part in his eventual downfall.

## HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. **Percy Eastman Fletcher:** 1879-1932 [English composer] Born in Derby (Eng) on 12 December 1879, Percy Fletcher carved out a successful career in the United Kingdom as a conductor, composer and orchestrator. He became musical director at several London theatres including the Prince of Wales, Savoy, Drury Lane and from 1915 up until his the early 1930s at His Majesty's. In 1916 he orchestrated Frederick Norton's score for *Chu Chin Chow*, and composed the music for its successor *Cairo* in 1921. He collaborated with Asche on the 1925 production *The Good Old Days* (1925). Although involved in the theatre for most of his career Fletcher nonetheless wrote other music styles, notably several light orchestral works, and many instrumental, solo and choral pieces. He orchestrated and arranged for publication works by Coleridge-Taylor and others, and played a significant role as composer and adjudicator for brass bands. Fletcher died at Windsor (Eng) on 10 September 1932. [Further Reference: see Richard Lamb. NGDM: 6 (1980), 639].
2. **George Frederick Norton:** 1869-1946 [English composer] Frederick Norton was born at Salford, England, on 11 October 1869, and after an initial career in the insurance industry began studying singing. He later joined the Carl Rosa Opera Company - and is reported to have toured as the Monk in Audran's *La Poupée*. Norton began appearing on the variety stage in the early 1900s as a baritone, in addition to delivering musical monologues. During this time he also had numerous songs published, and composed music for a number of stage works, including *The Water Maidens* (1901), *Pinkie and the Fairies* (1908), an adaptation of *Orpheus in the Underground* for Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1912, with Alfred Noyes), *What, Ho! Daphne* (1913) and *The Passing Show* (1915). His most successful musical score, if not his most famous, *Chu Chin Chow* was staged in 1916. Norton himself sang the role of Ali Baba on several occasions during its run. Other musical shows scored by him include *Pamela* (1917), *The Willow Pattern Plate* (n. date) and the unperformed *The Stone of Destiny*. Frederick Norton died at Holford, Somerset, on 15 December 1946. [Further Reference: see Andrew Lamb. NGDM: 13 (1980), 320-1]
3. **Dornford Yates:** 1885-1960 [British writer, solicitor] Born Cecil William Mercer in Walmer, Kent (England). Dornford Yates was the son of a solicitor and attended Harrow School and Oxford University. An active member of the Oxford University Dramatic Society he made friends with a number of people who would later help him in his career, including Oscar Asche with whom he collaborated in 1919 on *Eastwood Ho!*. Yates entered the bar in 1909, but spent much of his spare time writing short stories. A number of these appeared in the *Windsor* magazine. His first book, *The Brother of Daphne*, a collection of his early short stories, was published in 1914. After the First World War, during which he served as a 2nd Lieutenant in Egypt and the Balkans, Yates decided to pursue a literary career. He soon afterwards moved to France, where it was possible to live more cheaply, and remained there until 1941, at which time he moved to Rhodesia. He was re-commissioned in the Royal Rhodesian Regiment, attaining the rank of Major. After the war he returned to writing, continuing in that career until his death in March 1960. [Further Reference: see G.A. Michael Sims' "A Book for all Reasons" [www.abfar.co.uk/bibliog/dy\\_bib.htm](http://www.abfar.co.uk/bibliog/dy_bib.htm) • "Dornford Yates" Wikipedia (sighted 27 Jan. 2011)]



Source: Wikipedia

## MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

(as author)

- 1911: **Kismet** [play with music]
- 1914: **Mameena** [play with music]
- 1916: **Chu Chin Chow** [musical comedy]
- 1919: **Eastward, Ho!** [musical comedy/revue]
- 1921: **Cairo** (aka **Mecca**) [musical comedy]
- 1925: **The Good Old Days** [musical comedy]

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**See also:**

**WA:** 5 July (1910), 4 • 30 July (1910), 4. • 6 Aug. (1910), 3.



L-R: **Hugh D. McIntosh, Oscar Asche and Nellie Stewart.**

Nellie Stewart. *My Life's Story*. (1923), 288.



Source: National Library of Australia

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