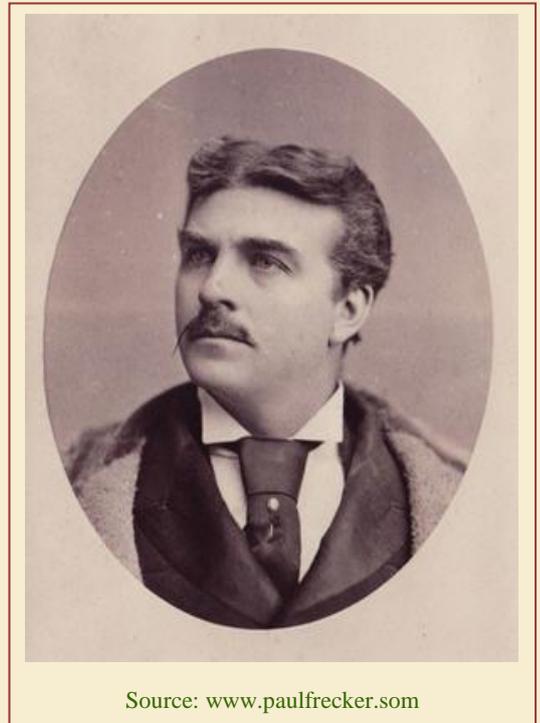


GEORGE RIGNOLD

After a decade working the English provinces, George Rignold progressed to playing lead roles in London in the early 1870s. He came to Australia in 1876 via the USA and Canada and built a formidable reputation touring Shakespeare (and later melodrama) around Australasia and occasionally overseas. As lessee/manager of a number of Australian theatres he produced many works (including pantomimes), and after settling in Sydney in 1884 he also collaborated on several works himself - notably the pantomime *The House that Jack Built* (1894, with Bert Royle) and the historical drama *Dreyfus* (1899, with Walter Bentley).

The second son of William Rignall, a provincial theatre manager, and his actress wife Patience (née Blaxland), George Richard Rignell was born in Birmingham, Warwickshire. Like his parents and older brother, William (1836–1904), he used Rignold as a professional surname. The brothers began their careers as violinists in theatre orchestras, but after taking up a minor role at short notice in an 1857 production of *Macbeth*, George decided to pursue acting rather than music (William also turned to acting and went on to establish a considerable reputation in Britain and Australia). After spending much of the 1860s working in the provinces, notably Bristol and Bath, George eventually moved to London, where in 1870 he began appearing in lead roles in London.

In 1875 Rignold accepted an offer from American managers A. M. Palmer and Jarrett to play *Henry V* at the Booth Theatre, New York. He later toured the US and Canada before sailing to Australia. His debut season playing *Henry V* (beginning 28 Aug.) was an enormous success as was his subsequent tour of the country. Rignold returned to America and Great Britain, and at one stage became sub-lessee of London's Drury Lane Theatre. In November 1879, however, he staged an opulent version of *Henry V*. Although it reportedly excited audiences the production was panned by the critics, and the season became a financial failure.



Between 1880 and 1887 Rignold alternated tours of the Australasian region with ones to America. By 1884, however, he and his wife, actress Marie Henderson,¹ had effectively settled in Sydney. In 1887 he went in to partnership with James Allison at the Sydney's newly built Her Majesty's Theatre (Pitt Str). After opening there on 10 September with *Henry V* he remained at the helm of the theatre until 1895.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.
Sole Lessee and Manager ... Mr. Geo. Rignold
Stage Manager ... Mr. J. W. Haslitt
Treasurer ... Mr. C. B. Bailey.

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.
THE PANTOMIME PAR EXCELLENCE OF THE EPOCH.

TO-DAY, BOXING DAY,
AT 2 O'CLOCK,
with all the effects as at night,
THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.

Doors open at 1.30, commence at 2. Children under 10 half-price (gallery excepted).
MATINEE PERFORMANCES
will also be given To-morrow (Thursday) and on Saturday next.

TO-NIGHT, AT 7.45,
THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.

Replete with startling novelties and beautiful effects.

THE FIRE BALLET.
First time in any theatre in the world.
THE MOST MARVELLOUS EFFECT OF THE AGE.

The 1880s and early 1890s saw Rignold become heavily involved in various facets of the theatre industry. "He wrote a flattering retrospective diary, brought out his own acting editions of Shakespeare and made lengthy speeches to his audiences; and while living at Paddington he bought a property at Middle Harbour, called Braybrook, and flew Henry V's standard whenever there (Van Der Poorten, n. pag.). He also continued to act, starring in and producing such plays as *Julius Caesar* (as Mark Antony) and *A Midsummer's Dream* (Bottom) in 1889. 1890 saw him play the role of Macbeth and Ford (to the Falstaff of his brother William) in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Commercial pressure also forced Rignold into producing melodramas such as *Lights o' London*, *Youth* (Merritt and Harris) and *In the Ranks* (Sims and Pettit), and played Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* and the villain in *Called Back*. He toured melodrama through Victoria, Queensland and South Australia from 1895, while also returning to Shakespeare as often as possible, and had much success producing Christmas pantomimes like *The House That Jack Built* (1894). In 1899 he also collaborated with Walter Bentley on the historical drama *Dreyfus*.

Sydney Morning Herald 26 Dec. (1894), 2.

¹ See "Historical Notes and Corrections" below for details on Henderson.

Following the death of his wife in 1902, Rignold withdrew to partial seclusion at Middle Harbour. He performed only occasionally, and made his last stage appearance in Melbourne in August 1907 for his old friend Bland Holt. In 1907 he married Georgina Harriet Don, daughter of George Coppin. As with his first marriage this one was also childless. Rignold died of empyema and cardiac angina on 16 December 1912 at Darlinghurst's Charlemont Private Hospital. He is buried in the Anglican section of Waverley cemetery. He left the residue of his estate, valued for probate at over £11,000, to the Royal General Theatrical Fund.

As an actor, Rignold's key assets were his physical dominance, his heroic looks and his formidable stage presence. In her *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry Helen Van De Poorten writes: "Despite mismanagement and unhappy years wasted in cheap melodramas, Rignold succeeded largely in persuading his public that he was the great Shakespearian actor he had wished to be. The lavishness of his spectacles brought the pictorial approach to theatre in Australia as far as it could go."

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Rignold married comic actress and dancer Marie Braybrooke Henderson, at Brighton, England, on 28 September 1865. Her failing health prevented them from returning to England early in 1900 and she died in Sydney on 25 February 1902. A report on her death published in the *Auckland Star* records: "[She was] a fine actress in many parts, but coming to Australia in the latter half of her career, she was chiefly famous in the Antipodes in the line of characters undertaken by the 'first' old woman of a dramatic company. In her youthful days Miss Marie Brayborroke Henderson was an accomplished dancer, a beautiful and vivacious ingénue, and afterwards a talented leading lady" (4 Mar. 1902, 4).

FURTHER READING

McPherson, Ailsa. "[Rignold, George](#)." *Dictionary of Sydney*. 2010.
[sighted 4/3/2014]

Mercer, Leah. "A Worthy Scaffold - George Rignold's rewriting and staging of *Henry V*." ADS: Oct. (1993).

Van Der Poorten, Helen. "[Rignall, George Richard \(1839–1912\)](#)." ADB: 6 (1976). [sighted 4/3/2014]

