

V: SHAKESPEARE AND THE DEPRESSION, 1927-1931

Farewell, a long farewell, to all my greatness!
Henry VIII (III.ii.352)

Wilkie's expedition to gather props and costumes kept him away from Australia for nearly five months. In his absence the production of Shakespeare languished, while commercial managements offered an exclusive diet of musical comedy and American farce, leavened with popular revivals such as *The Sentimental Bloke*, or J.M. Barrie's *Quality Street*, or Paul M. Potter's adaptation of *Trilby*. This trend was to continue for the remainder of the decade. It was punctuated only by the gathering signs of economic depression, in which theatres were increasingly left dark, converted into cinemas, sold as business premises, or pulled down.

During the second half of 1926, Sydney and Melbourne were each offered one amateur production of Shakespeare. Both presentations occurred, coincidentally, during the month of October. In Sydney, yet another *Hamlet* was staged at the Conservatorium, to excellent houses which no doubt consisted largely of schoolchildren. The production was the work of Alfred Gordon, who also played the title role as a "young, sympathy-winning Hamlet" (*Bulletin*, 14 October). Most of the cast were amateurs, drilled in their tasks by Gordon. He had developed in them a strong sense of teamwork that extended even to the walk-on players, each of whom became a "character". Arthur Greenaway, continuing his association with Shakespeare, was the stage manager,

and he also stepped in at short notice to play the part of settings ² Claudius. Particular notice was taken of the for this production, which were created solely by means of curtains, lighting and a few properties, and enhanced by the careful groupings of the players. This suggests that Wilkie's productions had offered a lesson which other directors were content to follow. At about the same time, the Melbourne Repertory Society elected to stage *Twelfth Night*, to help the fund for rebuilding the burnt-down Shakespeare theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. The producer was Irene Webb, formerly an actress with the Wilkie Company, and the sparse extant description of the setting for the play suggests that she too was adapting Wilkie's ideas to her own needs. Again, simplicity was the keynote. A backcloth indicated a sky, walls, a terrace and a few pillars, while the wings were draped with green curtains. This set was arranged by Glen Liston, who was to become stage manager for Wilkie in ⁴ 1927. John Cameron, the Orsino in Miss Webb's production, was also to join Wilkie in that year, beginning with minor roles like Rosencrantz or Count Paris, and soon rising to play Demetrius and Orsino. His progress demonstrates once again that Wilkie's company was a useful professional training ground for aspiring young actors.

Wilkie's return from England, in December 1926, was noted by the Australian press, to whom he expressed his opinions of the English theatrical scene. During ten weeks in London, he had managed to see ten Shakespeare performances, which he found interesting but not outstanding. In addition, he had attended

other offerings of the London stage, and had been disillusioned by the changes he perceived in the theatre in the twelve years since he had left the country. He found the standard of plays to be "deplorable", or even "degenerate", dealing as they now often did with the "eternal sex question", as he expressed it in an interview for the *Argus* (21 December 1926). His adverse reaction may have been at least partly dictated by his discovery that in England the actor-manager had largely become a thing of the past, and to this must be added his regret that there was no actor he considered of sufficient personality and ability to replace the great stars of his own youth. That England would never again see actors of the calibre of Henry Irving was something of which he remained convinced to the end of his life.

Wilkie gave it as his opinion that it was the disappearance of the actor-manager which had caused a deterioration in the standards of London theatre. There was no-one who possessed the "ideals of duty" held by such leading actor-managers as Irving, Forbes-Robertson, Tree and George Alexander, and consequently the majority of the public was no longer drawn to "quality" theatre, but exhibited a marked preference for revue and other "low" entertainments. He reported that theatre business was flourishing throughout England, but he found this singularly frustrating, as popular entertainments of a low standard were the staple diet. It appeared, indeed, that only a few repertory societies were prepared to continue producing

the classics, to cater for the "small cult which demands that class of entertainment".

A quantity of wardrobe, wigs and stage armour accompanied Wilkie back to Australia, as well as production ideas based on his observation of stage and lighting techniques. He claimed that some of his original wardrobe was irreplaceable, and that this loss might curtail future productions. He had, however, managed to buy the wardrobe for Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's production of *Henry VIII*, and the advertised splendour of these garments was to be a major publicity item for the re-opening of his company's activities. Another of Wilkie's purchases was a specially-commissioned ass's head, cleverly made to permit Wilkie - as Bottom - to derive great comic effect from the wiggling of its ears, the rolling of its eyeballs, and so on. Douglas Wilkie recalls that his father, very taken with this contraption, would spend hours practising with it, to achieve the maximum effect. In addition to all the clothes and properties, Wilkie brought to Australia three new company members whom he had engaged in England, together with his son, at that time about eighteen years of age. Douglas Wilkie was to travel with the company for about two years - the first occasion on which he had been with his parents for any length of time. He acted as general assistant to the company, helping with such matters as publicity, organisation of venue and box office, and so on, and in addition played a number of minor roles and walk-ons, usually under the pseudonym of Douglas

Montgomerie. After making the decision to leave the company, Douglas Wilkie took up a career in journalism, which he still pursues (1981).

The three new company members were Frank D. Clewlow, Dennis Barry and Miss Minna Suckling. Clewlow, who was appointed as stage director, had in fact worked for Wilkie earlier in his career, touring with him to the Far East in 1911. His professional experience was extensive, and included two years as stage manager for Annie Horniman's Repertory Company at the Manchester Gaiety Theatre, and five years (1913-18) as actor and producer with the Birmingham Repertory Company, a position to which he had been appointed by Sir Barry Jackson. In addition to this, he had been a founder of the Leicester branch of the British Drama Society, which he directed for three years, and producer for two years with the Scottish National Theatre Society in Glasgow. Immediately before accepting his new engagement with Wilkie, Clewlow had been stage manager for the Carl Rosa Opera Company. With this background, he was a strong supporter of the repertory movement, and in time was to leave the Wilkie company to take over Gregan McMahon's position as director of the Melbourne Repertory Society. During his two years with the company, however, he proved invaluable in matters of lighting and staging techniques, assisting Wilkie with many of his revised productions.

Of the other additions to the company, Minna Suckling,

who was engaged to play ingenue roles, was Frank Clewlow's wife. Her allotted parts ranged from Anne Bullen to Octavia. Dennis Barry was officially referred to as "an English romantic juvenile", and was indeed to play such roles for Wilkie as Romeo, Bassanio, Orlando, Oberon and Bertram. More unusually, he was to take the role of Puck on occasion, notable in view of the fact that this role was normally given to a girl in productions of that day. Barry was to remain with the company for several years, and his style, grace and agility as an actor were to prove an asset.

Wilkie and his son were reunited with Frediswyde Hunter-Watts, who had remained in Australia to supervise details of wardrobe, sets and properties. Most of the former members were happy to rejoin Wilkie, and once reassembled, the company moved to Hobart, on 5 January 1927. Here, preparations were made for the opening productions in the city that Wilkie had often referred to as the one which, in his experience, had shown the highest and most consistent appreciation of Shakespeare. As was to be expected, the Wilkie company was feted on its return to Hobart. With people determined to show their support for the struggle of Allan Wilkie to survive, bookings were extremely heavy and record attendances were confidently predicted. Two of the productions to be staged on this occasion had never before been seen in Tasmania, and indeed had never previously been offered by Allan Wilkie in Australia. These were *Henry VIII* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The past production history of these

two plays in Australia was very limited. *Henry VIII* had not been seen in Sydney since the 1860s, when the role of Wolsey, favoured by leading actors, had been taken by William Creswick.⁸ *Antony and Cleopatra* had been performed more recently by the Oscar Asche Company during its tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1912-13, with the leading roles played by Asche and Lily Brayton.

The play *Henry VIII* had special significance, as reviewers were quick to point out. After all, it was the first production for this company which had risen phoenix-like from the ashes of the Geelong fire. This suggested a satisfying completion of a circle which began in 1613, when the Globe theatre had been burned down during a performance of the same play: cannon, fired to herald the King's arrival at Wolsey's feast, had set fire to the straw thatching. But within a year the Globe had been rebuilt - with a tiled roof. Correspondingly, Wilkie's first appearance on stage in *Henry VIII* in Hobart was to be greeted by a prolonged ovation from the audience, in appreciation of his plucky effort - a gesture that was to be repeated in each centre visited by the company as it picked up the threads of its old touring circuit.

For this new beginning to his company's efforts, Wilkie made the decision to offer a new staging policy. He felt that audience acceptance of a bare stage was decreasing, and that to entice people back to the theatre a certain amount of

spectacle would have to be provided. If nothing else, this would create a new point of interest for the plays he had staged so many times before. Since Wilkie now chose to align himself with the production policy of Beerbohm Tree as far as he conveniently could, it was all the more appropriate that *Henry VIII*, the inaugural production, should be dressed in the lavish costumes from Tree's presentation of the play in 1910. Wilkie's advertising campaign placed *Henry VIII* as a pageant-filled play, above all else. Emphasis was, of necessity, placed on the costumes, since transport expenses and difficulties would continue to make the use of elaborate sets all but impossible. Painted backcloths remained the main indicators of scene changes, with the parliament hall at Blackfriars being considered the best picture. The principal feature of this backcloth was a "lofty window of emblematic design" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1928), supplemented by the minimum of furniture (the King's throne), and a small flight of steps, which gave Catherine an imposing entry for the trial scene (II.iv). Other royal scenes were suggested by a "gorgeous panel of tapestry" (*Mercury*, 21 January 1927), again in the form of a backcloth. So, to replace Tree's magnificent throne room, or the splendours of Queen Katherine's vision (IV.ii), Wilkie had only his wardrobe, songs, dances and processions (limited by the number of supers he could afford to employ) with which to convey the sense of majesty he felt the play required. Pageantry was emphasised by the various

processions which pass across the stage to mark the phases of the play. For example, Wolsey's first entrance involves a procession, in the play's opening scene, while another climactic procession is seen in IV.i. This is the coronation procession of Anne Bullen, "who, robed in cloth of gold, and under a Royal canopy, came from the Cathedral amid a wondrous procession, chanting the 'Te Deum'" (*Argus*, 28 February).

For Allan Wilkie, *Henry VIII* found its principal theme in the tragic collapse from power of Cardinal Wolsey. The prominence which Wolsey must therefore have been given suggests a slight imbalance in reading the text, since it is rather the successive falls of Buckingham, Wolsey and Katherine that give the play its shape and strength. However, Wilkie was, as usual, following firmly in the footsteps of Irving and Tree, the role. Wolsey proved to be one⁹ each of whom had essayed of the parts to which Wilkie's particular talent could well adapt itself. Little action was required - his Wolsey became an orator, whom the reviewers could praise for his "resonant voice and eloquent facial expression" (*Mercury*) or for his "austere dignity and suggestion of formidable will-power" (*S.M.H.*). The change from powerful figure to fallen man was well depicted: as the *Mercury* said, he became another man, "seeming to shrink in bodily stature". The *Sydney Morning Herald* later described Wolsey's final appearances. Its reviewer found Wilkie particularly effective in the scene of his great

speech, III.ii, following the departure of the lords (Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey) who had come to taunt him.

With their derision ringing in his ears, the Cardinal, accompanying them to their exit, began with arms outstretched the celebrated speech beginning "Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness". Then, advancing to the front of the scene, he continued the lines, and made a fine effect at the passage, "vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye" [21 May 1928].

A later reviewer added the information that the scene ended "with Wolsey's broken sobs upon the shoulder of the faithful Cromwell."

The fact that the scene of Katherine's vision was never alluded to in reviews suggests that it was far from being the remarkable moment of theatre which it had been in - say - Charles Kean's production of the play in 1855, which Lewis Carroll found to be "exquisite". Miss Hunter-Watts had obvious difficulties with her voice, which appeared to be undergoing some strain. Not all reviewers were to be critical of this defect, however. In Dunedin, the *Otago Daily Times* reviewer was to make the following comment on her performance:

She is inclined to take a risk of unreality in creating effect by an amazingly varied range of diction, but where it does not interfere with clear elocution, her hoarse intensity of voice is decidedly effective [1 August 1927].

Of the new additions to the company, Frank Clewlow, in the role of Henry, was singled out for comment. The *Mercury* reviewer found him to be "an excellent embodiment of the bluff and

brawny, hot-headed king" - although the *Bulletin* was later to dismiss this same performance as a complete failure, because of Clewlow's "comedian's face and gait" (3 March 1927). Certainly, Clewlow was accustomed to comedy roles in Shakespeare. During an engagement with the Ian Maclaren company in England, he had featured in such roles as Touchstone and Sir Andrew Aguecheek.

Music was a prominent feature of the production, and its contribution was emphasised in publicity material. Wilkie had brought back from England incidental music composed by John Foulds (1880-1939), a composer and conductor whose work had included compositions for plays as diverse as *The Whispering Well*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Trojan Women*". To supplement this, Bradshaw Major had composed special themes for Katherine and Wolsey, and a march for King Henry VIII. Dulcie Cherry as Patience sang Sir Arthur Sullivan's setting of "Orpheus with his lute", sung to disperse the troubles of the Queen (III.i), while Edward German's "Morris Dance" was played for the dance at Wolsey's palace (I.iv). An interpolation into the same scene was a song given to Dennis Barry, as the Earl of Suffolk. The song, called "Youth will needs have dalliance", had been written by Henry VIII himself. Wilkie's expressed object in using this music was to "endeavour to bring into prominence the spirit of the period of the play" (*Mercury*, 21 January 1927), and for the Hobart reviewer, at least, he succeeded admirably in this design.

The Tasmanian season of the resurrected company lasted for one month (22 January to 21 February), and during that time nine plays were staged. Two of these - *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest* - were staged in Launceston only, probably because greater variety was needed to encourage the smaller population to attend successive performances. The plays seen in both cities were *Henry VIII*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Although publicity suggested that the productions had been completely revitalised, in fact it was only in the matters of costuming and casting that any real signs of change were evident at that time. Consistent efforts to modernise and improve production techniques - lighting, setting, staging effects and so on - lay in the future. While special efforts were made with the two plays that were new to the repertoire, the other productions- remained much as they had always been. In *Macbeth*, Wilkie retained the male-female mixture he preferred for the witches, in this instance played by Arthur Keane (who had replaced Augustus Neville in comedy roles), Dennis Barry and Miss Noel Seaton, a young actress who undertook minor roles for the company. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the comedy interludes had become broader, if that were possible, with Wilkie's newly-acquired ass's head voted a great success. In each case, costumes were the only new feature of the production to be remarked upon.

A direct comparison of the Allan Wilkie Company in 1920

with its reformed version in 1926 makes it very clear that Wilkie had succeeded over the years in building a company of talented artists who were becoming increasingly confident with the style needed for Shakespearean production. The arrival of Frank Clewlow and Dennis Barry meant that Wilkie was able to recast *Romeo and Juliet* in a more satisfactory manner than on its previous presentations. As resident romantic juvenile, Barry was automatically given the role of Romeo, in which part he was warmly approved by the *Mercury* critic for his displays of appropriate emotions - "passionate abandonment", "depths of manly despair", "splendid fury", and so on (29 January 1927). For the first time, Wilkie was able to relinquish the part of Mercutio, which, as he himself admitted, had sat most uneasily on his shoulders. It went to Frank Clewlow, whose performance was praised for its dash and swashbuckling spirit. Showing evidence of good sense, Wilkie cast himself in the part of Friar Lawrence, in which he was "calm, wise and dignified", making no attempt to force his character into undue prominence. The only performance which remained unaltered was that of Frediswyde Hunter-Watts, who continued to play Juliet to the end of her career. Perhaps in recognition of the fact that an attempt to portray a thirteen-year-old girl might stretch the credulity of her audiences, Miss Hunter-Watts increased Juliet's age to eighteen. Even then, it was mainly the gentle grace of her performance which allowed critics to be kind to her - though the schoolchildren who witnessed the performances were not

always equally so.

Towards the end of the Hobart season, the company presented *Antony and Cleopatra* for three nights. For these initial performances only, Lorna Forbes was given the opportunity to play Cleopatra, Miss Hunter-Watts pleading the strain of rehearsals and constant study as her reason for not appearing. Since the *Mercury* review (4 February 1927) offered little criticism, preferring to describe each actor's performance as "effective", or "powerful" or "sympathetic", little can be ascertained of the production as it appeared in Hobart. Only in two instances is any informative comment offered. The first, and more telling, is the observation that the cast were far from perfect in their recollection of lines and business. This difficulty was dismissed as inevitable for early performances, with the assurance that further rehearsal would correct all faults. That such shortcomings from a professional company should be accepted seems rather surprising. It points to the unsatisfactory rehearsal arrangements, with rehearsals presumably carried out during the two-week interval after the preparation of the new *Henry VIII* production. The second worth-while comment on the production of *Antony* concerns the scene of drunken revelry on board Pompey's barge (II.vii), the highlight of which was Dulcie Cherry's song "Come thou monarch of the vine", to which the Romans responded in "roysterer chorus". That this scene was singled out as a "marked success" suggests that

the remainder of the Wilkie production may have been lacking in dramatic interest - as is further suggested by the fact that even the relationship and deaths of the two lovers received scant attention in the review.¹⁴

More detail of the production of *Antony and Cleopatra* is available from the Australian mainland reviews once the production had been taken to Melbourne, where the company's first return season opened on 26 February at the Princess's Theatre. Here, the new production ran for nine nights, to very mixed reviews. The *Argus* suggested very tactfully that Wilkie and Miss Hunter-Watts were not ideally suited to the roles of the great lovers, but softened this with the comment that Melbourne audiences should be grateful for the opportunity to witness any attempt to bring Shakespeare's characters to life on the stage (10 March 1927). Wilkie, as Antony, was found to be a capable exponent of those scenes which required him to depict the general rather than the lover, and he was said to have done his best work in the scenes' of defeated despair towards the end of Act IV (*Argus* 10 March and *S.M.H.* 24 May 1928) The *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer was to remark bluntly that Wilkie's speaking voice was too heavy and too staccato (the old failing), though again acknowledging that as the soldier he was a commanding figure.

The Cleopatra of Miss Hunter-Watts received much stronger criticism. In the estimation of the *Bulletin* (17 March 1927) the

subtleties and rapid changes of the role were beyond her capacity as an actress. She could achieve a certain measure of the tragic, but was incapable of creating the figure of whom Enobarbus says

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.

(II.ii.239-40)

Though couched in more circumspect terms, the *Argus* review shared this estimate, noting that it was in the "deeper shades" of the play that the actress gave her best work. For the 1928 performances in Sydney, the *Sydney Morning Herald* was more outspoken in its comments:

Miss Hunter-Watts emphasised the womanly phase of Cleopatra at the expense of the other quality of imperious domination of the Egyptian Queen and therefore did not manifest the full weight and authority required for the role [24 May].

Miss Hunter-Watts had, in fact, given much thought to her interpretation of Cleopatra, which she considered to be the most interesting part she had played for years. In an interview given to the *Mercury* during a visit to Hobart (5 January 1928), she stated that her interpretation of the role had been guided by a study called *The Life and Times of Cleopatra* (1923), by Arthur Weigall (1880-1934), a prominent Egyptologist. This study concluded that the Egyptian queen did not necessarily have any oriental blood, and that she may well have been small and graceful in appearance. The principal aim of the actress was to convey the traits attributed to her by Plutarch -

personal charm, magnetism, intelligence and vivacity. It is unfortunate, then, that in the eyes of the critics her execution of the role could not match her intention.

Inevitably, large cuts were made to the text for performance. In the first instance, it was bowdlerised to such an extent that the *Bulletin* commented that it was necessary to read the text "in the original version by William Shakespeare" to get the full flavour of the play. One known cut instituted by Wilkie came in the play's final scene - the encounter between Cleopatra, Seleucus and Octavius Caesar, in which she is shown to have tried to cheat Caesar of half her wealth. The *Bulletin* suggested that this was removed because Miss Hunter-Watts was incapable of acting it. An equally feasible explanation may be that Wilkie simply excised passages which he felt would prolong the climax of the play, after the death of Antony. In any case, the thematic value of the Seleucus episode is far from clear in Shakespeare's text as it has come down to us.

It was in the matter of costume and scenery that a slight controversy was raised over the production. As usual, Wilkie had lavished great care on the costumes, Cleopatra in particular being dressed in a range of garments which were both exotic and pseudo-oriental in style. For example, one scene found the queen enthroned in her palace, and wearing

a clinging garment of dull wrought gold, with a magnificent gold mantle woven with hidden colours. On her head was the sacred gold bird headdress

with the peacock blue feathers spreading out behind [*Argus* 10 March 1927].¹⁵

Considerably more attention was given in the review to Miss Hunter-Watts' clothing than to her performance, which may have been kindness on the part of the *Argus*. Extras as slaves and attendants to the Egyptian court were placed, in stiff garments, in poses reminiscent of ancient Egyptian paintings, while in contrast, the Roman soldiers appeared in traditional armour, tunics, and togas in austere colours. Effort was clearly made with scenery for the Egyptian court, to help to establish some sense of the division between the two worlds. Wilkie solved the problem of frequent scene changes in the simplest fashion, by using a black curtain which was drawn across the stage to denote change of location. The greatest attention was given to the scenes on Pompey's galley and in Cleopatra's palace. With Cleopatra's throne as the central focus, a series of pillars directed the eye towards the backcloth, on which was depicted the "grey mauve of the desert with the Sphinx (II.vii), gleaming under a sky of Egyptian blue". For the "orgy" sequence dancing girls appeared, dressed in "transparent robes of rose and silver", and were cheered by Romans crowned with roses and indulging in suitably wild carousal. It appears that this scene was artistically lit from a single source - a great lantern which swung overhead, and created the dim atmosphere of abandoned revelry which it was intended the scene should convey. Some controversy arose over the discrepancy between the reviews of the *Argus* and the *Age* in their description of scenery and

costume. While the *Argus* considered the production to be "magnificently staged", the *Age* flatly stated that:

Mr Wilkie has not attempted to present the bright pictures for which the fast changing scenes in the Queen's palaces and on the battlefields give opportunity. The presentation is somewhat drab. [10 March 1927].

This seems a surprising point of criticism, but it cannot be denied that, in comparison to the splendours of the Asche-Brayton production of 1912, the Wilkie version presented a sorry spectacle. Wilkie's production also lacked the verve and sparkle which would have compensated for these visual deficiencies.

Wilkie and his company were formally welcomed back to Australia by a civic reception at the Melbourne Town Hall on 24 February 1927. On this occasion, Wilkie was hailed as "the high priest of Shakespeare in Australia", [16] and was presented with a cheque for £1,930 9s. 6c. - the final proceeds of the *Argus* appeal for funds. He readily acknowledged that it was this display of public generosity which had enabled his company to be re-formed in such a brief space of time. He also seized the opportunity to campaign for the establishment of a municipal theatre in Melbourne, pointing out that many of these existed in New Zealand, to support the arts of drama. In support of his plea, Wilkie gave it as his opinion that the theatre had a much higher purpose than that of mere entertainment, and that it was "one of the most potent instruments our modern civilisation possesses" (*Argus*, 25 February 1927).

During this Melbourne season, Wilkie gave the first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* with the reformed company, in which once again there was little but the necessary cast changes to distinguish it from the many earlier presentations of the piece by the company. Melbourne also became the first mainland city to witness Wilkie's production of *Measure for Measure*. Sufficient interest was aroused by this and the other productions to maintain the season for six weeks, after which the company began its itinerant programme once more. This took it in the first instance to Queensland, and then on a tour of the country centres of New South Wales. A country tour of Victoria, however, was declared by Wilkie to be out of the question, because of the State government's attitude in still refusing to grant the company railway concessions. It was Victoria alone which continued to resist Wilkie's pleas for financial consideration for his company, all the other States having by now followed the lead of Queensland in the matter.

Still fighting for financial support, the Wilkie company made its first visit to New Zealand since the disastrous depression tour of 1923. Theatre conditions seemed to have improved significantly by 1927, and in the five months which were spent touring the country the company was given a notably better reception than on the last occasion. A repertoire of fourteen Shakespeare plays was prepared for this tour, including the latest offerings, *Henry VIII* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. During these months Wilkie was also preparing for the new

emphasis in his productions. From this point onwards, advertising was to stress the magnificence not only of the costumes, but, for the first time, of the scenery.

The first effects of this marked change in artistic policy were to be displayed, as so often, in Tasmania. Wilkie opened his eighth Tasmanian season at Hobart's Theatre Royal on 26 December 1927, with a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, the play in which he had made his first appearance at this theatre. He offered two reasons for this choice. In the first place, it was the play he had come to regard as a mascot. In the second place, he claimed it was to be a "test" piece, by which the people of Hobart would be able to gauge the extent of the change in presentation. The latter aspect was to become increasingly important because, inevitably, prospective audiences had been tiring of the same plays offered year after year. It took strong campaigning to convince many of them that a second, or even a third, visit to *Hamlet* or *As You Like It* would be worth while. Circumstances therefore obliged Wilkie to adapt his policy, to give at least the illusion that the productions he presented were different from his previous offerings.

Advance publicity claimed accordingly that the production changes were to be revolutionary, affecting both scenery and lighting. They were to come about as a result of Wilkie's own observations of the latest in English production techniques,

with the assistance of Frank Clewlow's knowledge and the work of an expert scene painter. This was William N. Rowell, a well-known Melbourne portrait and landscape painter, whom Wilkie engaged to design and paint the scenery for his new season. Rowell was by no means a stranger to the art of scenic design - in 1917 he had been commissioned to paint the backcloths for the Ian Maclaren Shakespeare season, for which he had received much praise. Since that time, he had spent six years as scene designer for the Taits at the King's Theatre, Melbourne, so that by 1927 he had firm ideas on the subject. Interviewed for the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail* (21 December 1927), Rowell spoke of the awakening aesthetic consciousness of the Australian theatre-going public, which was dictating closer attention to lighting, movement, colour, design and costume than had ever been though necessary in the past. His own association with the theatre had begun because of a dissatisfaction with "the old-fashioned methods of clashing colours and bad designs". In their place, he advocated simplicity of design, and colour schemes to harmonise with the costumes and the period of each play. Illustrations of his scene designs for Wilkie show a strong debt to Gordon Craig, whose work had become prominent in Europe from about 1911 (the year of publication of *The Art of the Theatre*). Rowell admitted the similarity, but pointed out that Craig's work was "more elaborate" than his own.

The effect that Wilkie and Rowell aimed to achieve with

the new designs was symbolic rather than naturalistic. To attempt the latter convincingly would be impossible, Wilkie declared, since "a street or a wood, no matter how well finished, can never be anything other than a painted scene" (*Mercury*, 22 December 1927). In addition to the new stylised backcloths, which were to be much more brightly coloured than their predecessors, other changes were to take place on the stage. The most notable of these was the abolition of the green side curtains, so long a feature of Wilkie's set designs. These were replaced by painted wings, to "heighten the artistic unity of the scenes". Furniture was to remain at a minimum, for ease of transportation as well as for artistic reasons.

The other area of innovation for Wilkie was that of lighting. He had acquired a "special lighting plant",¹⁸ which would make possible lighting effects never before seen in Australia. Without further detail, it is impossible to gauge how well justified this claim may have been, but it seems more than likely that, for Tasmania at least, Wilkie was providing an advanced form of theatre lighting. This may well have included enhanced colour effects. Hobart's Theatre Royal (which had been converted to electricity during the renovations of 1911) still relied on old methods of creating coloured lighting. This entailed dipping individual lamps into coloured dyes or lacquers. Only a few colours were used - perhaps the primaries (blue, green, red) and yellow - and these were arranged in four alternated circuits along the

footlights or in battens - a system which clearly did not allow for great flexibility. According to Keith Jarvis of Hobart,¹⁹ Allan Wilkie was the first person to bring gelatines (colour filters) to Hobart theatre. Whatever innovations Wilkie may have introduced, the result was that controlled sources of electric light ensured that new effects could be achieved when the light played over scenery and costumes.

It is no surprise to find that the review of *The Merchant of Venice* which appeared in the *Mercury* on 27 December 1927 devoted half its space to commenting on the effect of the new sets and lighting, which were found to be a great enhancement to the production. The reviewer exclaimed over

the modifications of the suffused lighting [which] not only recall sunlight and moonlight in turn, but also completely alter the effect of the backgrounds.

One may deduce from this that the previous system of lighting must have been somewhat primitive. Reviews for the remainder of the season continued to rhapsodise over the lighting effects. In *Hamlet*, for example, "there was an apotheosis when Hamlet appeared alone behind Ophelia's grave, the eerie twilight seeming to linger on the distant hills" (29 December). Such artistic effects added a new symbolic element to the productions.

During the Hobart season, Wilkie added two further plays to his repertoire, thus bringing the number of Shakespeare plays produced up to twenty-six. The new additions were

All's Well That Ends Well and *Coriolanus*, neither of which had previously been staged in Hobart. Wilkie announced that his was the first production of the former play in the southern hemisphere - a claim that was disputed by an *Argus* correspondent, who recalled a production at the Theatre Royal, Ballarat, in May 1864. What Wilkie could legitimately claim was that he was bringing the play for the first time to the current generation of Australians. *All's Well That Ends Well*, like *Measure for Measure* was indeed something of a "problem" play for Australia in the 1920s, in the sense that in dealing with sexual matters it was inevitably considered to be indelicate. This was one of the reasons put forward for its long absence from the Australian stage. In addition, it was regarded as one of the lesser plays of Shakespeare - with some justification; and furthermore it lacked a sufficiently prominent role for a leading actor. Wilkie's bowdlerising of the piece met with the full approval of the *Mercury* reviewer, who considered the "new" version to be one which brought out the beauty and the effective situations of the play "without once overstepping the bounds of good taste" (2 January 1928). The difficulty, of course, is that many of the presumably offending passages - such as the interchange between Helena and Parolles on the subject of virginity (I.i.100-74) - add much to one's appreciation of character and theme in the play, and their removal leaves it impoverished. This, however, would not have been a weighty consideration for Wilkie's generation.

According to the *Mercury* and the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*, honours were equally divided between the actors and the sets, the latter publication devoting much space to a lyrical description of the garden setting of Bertram's castle, in which "tall sombre trees were an ever-present, though not too insistent, reminder of the sorrowful constancy of Helena" (4 January). Of the actors, John Cairns, as the King of France, was singled out for particular praise being "perhaps the only one of the company to have a part in which he could do himself full justice" as the reviewer for the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail* put it. His performance was considered to be outstanding:

The change from decrepitude to vigour in the early scenes was very well done, and in the scene where Helena chooses her husband, and is rejected [II.iii], the King's wrath with Bertram [Dennis Barry] was excellently worked up to an effective climax.

Although Tasmanian reviewers were well satisfied with the sincere, graceful performance of Miss Hunter-Watts as Helena, the *Bulletin* was later to accuse her of misreading the part, maintaining that the "real" Helena was a "designing hussy", while the actress reduced her to nothing more than "a tournament of elocution without any discoverable human idiosyncrasies" (5 December 1928). Allan Wilkie contented himself with another of the comic parts he was so adept at creating, and made the role of the cowardly Parolles a major success, especially at the high point in IV.i when he is blindfolded and tricked.

The production of *Coriolanus* received the minimum of

critical attention, perhaps because of the tragedy's relative unfamiliarity. Wilkie here took the principal part, naturally, while his wife played Virgilia, in which part she looked "winsome". Little enlightening comment about production detail appeared, other than approval of the costumes and the bright, formal pictures they created on stage. The production was summed up as "intensely thrilling", while Wilkie's performance as Caius Marcius Coriolanus was "forceful and dignified". Perhaps more telling was the comment that the majority of the audience failed to appreciate the ironic humour of the crowd scenes - and this may in part explain the production's lack of popularity.²⁰

During this 1927-28 season of four weeks in Hobart, twelve plays were presented. Unfortunately, audience attendance fell to a low ebb, presaging the difficulties to come in the next two years. In a speech delivered to the Hobart Repertory Theatre Society,[21] Wilkie acknowledged that the season now ending was the worst he had so far experienced, and as a direct consequence, his company could not return to Hobart for two years, as the financial risk would be too great. In a sense, this admitted defeat was the beginning of the end for the Allan Wilkie Company - never again could it rely upon good houses in any of its erstwhile established areas of support. Decreased audiences could be attributed to any of several causes, including the gradual onset of the depression, the arrival of the "talkies", and - not to be underestimated - the sense of

over-familiarity many people now felt with the plays and the production methods of the Wilkie company.

In 1928, as the signs of economic depression again began to make themselves felt in the theatre, Wilkie once more pressed for a government subsidy for his company, claiming - with some justification - that its work was of educational benefit. This call for a subsidy was supported by a report which was to consider the importance of Australia's possessing a permanent Shakespeare company. This report was drawn up by one Basil of the legal profession, who pointed out²² Murphy, a member that Shakespeare was the only dramatist whose plays were studied at schools and universities throughout the Commonwealth, and insisted that these plays could be fully appreciated only in performance. Yet if one accepted the claim that the plays were worth supporting, why should a subsidy be granted to the Wilkie company in particular? Murphy's answer to this was that Wilkie had proved, by his own unaided efforts, that he was a worthy recipient. He had achieved a record of Shakespeare production in Australia which had never before been approached, and the public and press had demonstrated their willingness to admire and to support his venture. The Allan Wilkie Company therefore was the obvious recipient of a subsidy in the first instance. Furthermore, once the company was receiving public financial support, this would automatically ensure that high standards of performance would be maintained, since the company would be directly subject to public scrutiny and criticism.

Essentially, Murphy argued, a subsidy would not be for the purpose of enabling Wilkie to fulfil an ambition of producing all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays, but for that of

preserving for our own benefit and officially taking over in a sense an institution which is liable to disappear if allowed to go unaided.

Despite the thrust of Murphy's argument, which urged that Shakespeare, through whom the Empire was celebrated, deserved to be honoured in this way, the Commonwealth government, under Prime Minister S.M. Bruce, remained unmoved, and the subsidy was not granted.

Although Wilkie's extensive tours continued, one venue remained a challenge in 1928. Wilkie had been unable to obtain a suitable theatre in Sydney since November 1924, largely because of the attitude of the controlling commercial managements, and this situation seemed likely to continue indefinitely. While touring to other centres - Bendigo and Ballarat were included, and Adelaide was visited for the first time since 1926 - Wilkie continued to look for an opening in Sydney. When it became clear that no city theatre would be available, he made the decision to book the Majestic Theatre in Newtown - a theatre, owned by the Fullers, which was best known as a home of melodrama and vaudeville. The move was greeted with prophecies of disaster. Audiences, it was declared, would not dream of going to unfashionable, working-class Newtown to see Shakespeare, and in any case, the house had a bad attendance record, even for

vaudeville programmes.

Wilkie apparently felt that, since this was the only Sydney theatre available to him, the risks were worth taking. Accordingly, the Allan Wilkie Company opened at the Majestic on 21 April 1928, with a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. As in the past, Wilkie was able to induce the Governor and his wife to attend the first night, thereby casting an air of social respectability on the proceedings, while the presence of the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University and of the current Minister for Education underlined the intellectual benefits to be gained. Lady de Chair, the Governor's wife, took it upon herself to champion Wilkie at the Majestic, and her frequent attendances there throughout the season did a great deal to convince Sydney's fashionable theatregoers that the suburban theatre was well worth a visit, a debt which Wilkie later acknowledged. In some quarters, her support mattered more than the ability of the company or even the entertainment value of the plays, and this proved yet again the wisdom of Wilkie's continued use of social status to gain audiences and "respectability".

For the first four weeks of his projected ten-week season, Wilkie presented seven plays, all of which were familiar to Sydney audiences. These gained a sympathetic press, and were received with a reasonable degree of enthusiasm by the theatregoing public. It was with the presentation of *Henry VIII*,

which opened on 19 May, that support and enthusiasm began to develop to a remarkable extent. This can be explained partly by the fact that Sydney had been left for so long without a Shakespeare company, and partly by Wilkie's judicious use of publicity. Sydney was seeing for the first time the "new" Wilkie company, with refashioned sets and costumes, and its collection of talented actors. It was also the first opportunity for these audiences to demonstrate their support for Wilkie's decision to resurrect the company from the ashes of the Geelong fire. All these factors helped to give Wilkie the first profitable season he had experienced in Sydney.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* was pleased to note the changes evident in Wilkie's productions. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which opened on 28 April, had a new emphasis placed on the lovers and the fairies, rather than on the "rude mechanicals". As the newspaper pointed out, this could only be an improvement, since Bottom and his confederates were "rather too unsophisticated for this age, especially to playgoers accustomed to Maugham and Lonsdale" (30 April). For the first time, Wilkie ran the play with a fuller text, restoring many passages for the lovers - played by Alexander Marsh (Lysander), John Cameron (Demetrius), Marjorie Carr (Helena) and Lorna Forbes (Hermia) - which rendered their parts more interesting. The appearance of Dennis Barry in the role of Puck was considered to be an innovation, and his approach to the part was startling. He chose to play Puck in a flamboyant

costume consisting of a close-fitting garment, with his hands and face tinted green, his hair dyed red, and reddened teeth, which, according to the reviewer, glowed in the subdued stage light. This costume and make-up, offset by his light-footed movements, was impressive, since it made him appear to be almost "a part of the mighty forest so strongly and so decoratively suggested by the scenery" (5 July 1928). Approbation was also given to the set, "an architectural stage somewhat after the style of Max Reinhardt", which greatly increased visual interest without detracting from the play itself.

During these weeks, the company seemed to go from strength to strength. On 30 June, the *Sydney Morning Herald* devoted a leader to praise of Wilkie's enterprise, in which his triumph at the Newtown Majestic was compared to the work of Lilian Bayliss at the unfashionably-situated Old Vic in London. Far from spelling ruin, it appeared that Shakespeare at last spelled to extend²³ success, and Wilkie was sufficiently encouraged his season for a further four weeks - the longest run he had ever achieved in a single city for an unalleviated diet of Shakespeare. The last weeks consisted of rapid changes of programme, including Wilkie's first - and last - presentation in Sydney of *Measure for Measure*. In all, nineteen plays were presented during the fourteen-week run, a noteworthy achievement when one considers the difficulties that Wilkie had overcome. On the triumphant last night of the Majestic season, played to

an "enormous and demonstrative audience" (*S.M.H.* 28 July}, Allan Wilkie was presented with an illuminated address from the Shakespeare Society of New South Wales. He announced that, since enthusiasm was so great, he had decided to make it a deliberate policy to play at the Majestic in future, and had already obtained a lease to ensure that he could do so the following year.

So pleased was Wilkie by his reception in Newtown that he immediately began a two-month tour of Sydney's other suburban theatres, playing anything from one night to a week in such suburbs as Bondi Junction, Mosman, Bankstown, Parramatta and Rockdale. The repertoire for this surprisingly successful venture was limited to *Henry VIII* and three of the more popular comedies - *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Such a tour was virtually unheard of for a self-supporting professional company at that time. The Newtown Majestic meanwhile was finding new popularity, now that Wilkie had shown the way. The Shakespeare season was almost immediately followed by the Bert Bailey Company in a revival of the ever-popular *On Our Selection*, and this in turn was closely followed by a season of Schiller's *The Robbers*, produced by Alfred Gordon Kalmikoff with a largely amateur cast. That such diverse productions could now be staged at the old vaudeville theatre was entirely due to the efforts of Allan Wilkie.²⁴

Fresh from their triumph in Sydney, the company returned

to Melbourne, where it opened at the Princess's Theatre on 6 October 1928, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Unfortunately, Melbourne audiences were not to be as receptive as those in Sydney, and after a promising opening to the season, attendances began to decline. Nothing, it seemed, would entice audiences - neither the promise of new productions, such as *Coriolanus*, nor the familiarity of popular plays. Over a period of eight weeks, Wilkie steadily lost money - he claimed a personal loss of over £2,000 - until he was forced to close the season at the beginning of December, ironically enough concluding with a performance of *All's Well That Ends Well*.

This sudden reversal of the company's good fortune may be attributed to a variety of causes. Although the gathering depression most certainly played its part, a more immediate cause may well have lain with the Wilkies themselves. Over the years they had repeated their performances so often, and with so little variation, that they now lacked any sense of vitality or spontaneity. Audiences may well have begun to suffer the malaise of over-familiarity with the Wilkies. This was certainly the view held by a *Bulletin* correspondent, who suggested that the failure of the Melbourne season

by no means indicates that the intelligent playgoer is tired of Shakespeare; it only means that he has had a little too much of [the Wilkies]. Wilkie is a capable producer, but as an actor he has his limitations. In some of his parts he is excellent; in others, merely boring. Miss Hunter-Watts has one or two good parts - she can no more interpret others than a lark can sing grand opera. Yet lack

of funds compels the two to take the leading roles in most of the 26 pieces in their repertoire. No wonder that the Princess towards the end of their season was one long yawn of emptiness and desolation [12 December 1928].

Although these are harsh words, they still show a certain amount of sympathy for the plight of the Wilkies, trapped, as always, by lack of funds.

In an attempt to recover some of his losses, and perhaps also to solve the problem of over-familiarity, Wilkie embarked with his company on his seventh tour of New Zealand, which was to keep him out of Australia for nine months. His lengthy stay in New Zealand was facilitated by the fact that the government had agreed to grant him free transport by rail for his company and effects throughout the country. The burden of this not inconsiderable expense was to be met by the education department, since the country recognised Wilkie's work as an educational benefit." The immediate effect of this concession was to enable Wilkie to considerably extend his tour of New Zealand, which he did by visiting every town with a population of 2,000 or more. In many instances, this was the first occasion on which Shakespeare had been acted in some of these towns. In fact, Wilkie toured New Zealand twice during these nine months, first playing his Shakespearean repertoire, and secondly presenting revivals of the eighteenth-century comedies which had been a feature of his tours before the Geelong fire. Interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on his return to Australia (16 October 1929), Wilkie proudly recounted the fact

that the company had travelled 6,000 miles during the New Zealand tour, and had played to over 100,000 schoolchildren. However, a less optimistic picture is painted in his memoirs, in which he records that business on that tour was generally poor, with the unaccountable exception of two excellent seasons in the town of Nelson. Although (in Wilkie's estimate) the population of Nelson was only 12,000, the company played its Shakespeare repertoire there for a week, to more than satisfactory takings of £1,600. Unfortunately, such good business was to become progressively rarer.

During the period of Wilkie's absence from Australia, theatrical conditions began to show a decline that was impossible to reverse under the prevailing economic conditions. Theatre was rapidly being eclipsed by the "talkies", which posed a threat that could not be ignored. Commercial theatre managements retreated into the comparative safety of musicals, light comedies and melodrama, and it was left to the repertory companies and "little theatre" groups to supply more intellectual fare - such as Shaw or Galsworthy - or to provide a showcase for aspiring Australian playwrights like Betty M. Davies [Roland]. Her play *The Touch of Silk* was presented by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre in a production directed by Frank Clewlow which opened on 3 November 1928.

Performances of Shakespeare's plays by companies other than Wilkie's also seem to have decreased towards the end of

the decade. More often than not, those that were produced were the work of former members of Wilkie's company, including Neville and ²⁷Heath Burdock, Beresford Fowler, Gus McCarthy, the last having served as Wilkie's business manager in 1924. It is not unreasonable to suppose that at least some elements of Wilkie's production methods and stage business were incorporated by these men in their own presentations of Shakespeare. Indeed, Fowler makes it clear in his book *Shakespearian Talks* that he owed a considerable debt to Wilkie, adopting, for example, Wilkie's cuts for his own production of *Richard III*. On at least one occasion, however, he produced a Shakespeare play in a style quite opposite to Wilkie's. In May 1928, Fowler's Little Art Theatre group staged a modern-dress version of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Playhouse in Melbourne. This was, he reported, "much to Wilkie's indignation. When he heard about it he told one of his company he'd murder me." [29] Wilkie, of course, disapproved strongly of Shakespeare in modern dress, and could not have condoned the taming of Katherina as staged by Fowler, who took the part of Petruchio himself:

In the street scene I brought her on in a sidecar, and during the wooing toyed with a cigarette while tying her hands with my necktie as she sat rebelliously on my knees. Kate and Bianca first entered with tennis racquets and one paper said Grumio looked like a Collingwood tough.³⁰

Although modern-dress Shakespeare was still considered a novelty in Australia during the 1920s, this was not the first occasion on which it had been done. In July 1927, the Sydney University

Dramatic Society had given two performances of *As You Like It*, in which the actors wore plus fours, carried revolvers in place of rapiers, smoked cigarettes and even listened to the radio in the Forest of Arden.

February 1928 saw two independent productions of *Twelfth Night*, staged in successive weeks at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, each catering largely for school audiences. The first was produced by Heath Burdock, and the second by Arthur Greenaway, who was returning to Shakespeare with the backing of the N.S.W. Education Department. Both producers elected to play the part of Malvolio - Greenaway in black Elizabethan costume, with a red wig and goatee - and both were chastised by the *Bulletin* reviewer for weakening the end of the play by permitting the return of Malvolio. Strangely enough, no reference was made to Wilkie's exit for Malvolio, from which the business of Greenaway and Burdock clearly derives. Instead, the reviewer chose to reach into the past, recalling the Malvolio of W.H. Denny in 1903 and noting that he had given the character a strong exit on his final line (7 March 1928). Of the two, it would appear that Greenaway's was the better production, which is not surprising, considering his long experience in Shakespeare. Undaunted, however, Burdock staged *As You Like It* in the following month at the same venue, taking the role of Jaques, though while he was with the Wilkie company he had had to be content with the comparatively small role of Corin.

Later in 1928, while Wilkie was touring the suburbs of Sydney, an amateur production of *Hamlet* was staged at the Melbourne Playhouse. It was considered to show the worst excesses of traditionally amateur performance in all but the rendition of the central role, which was played by a drama teacher named Izobel Duncan, whose soliloquies were "verbal music" according to the *Bulletin* (29 August). Although a female Hamlet was unusual, it was by no means unprecedented on the Australian stage according to, a *Bulletin* correspondent (5 September 1928), who cited earlier performances by American actresses Rose Evans (1872) and Louise Pomeroy (1882), both at Melbourne's Theatre Royal. Europe's most famous female Hamlet was of course Sarah Bernhardt, who appeared in the role in Paris in 1899. The Duncan version was the second production of *Hamlet* to be seen in Melbourne within a year. In September 1927, an English actor named Peter Gawthorne had undertaken the role at Melbourne's Theatre Royal, and his performance had been acclaimed by the *Bulletin's* reviewer as superior to Wilkie's for reasons which point yet again to Wilkie's chief failing as an actor.

[Gawthorne] was restrained and impressive; his diction was perfect - every word was understood, instead of one in three, which is about Wilkie's highest average. His utterance was beautifully rhythmic, yet cunningly naturalistic [8 September 1927].

In the supporting cast were several former members of the Wilkie company, including Edward Landor as Polonius, and Ellis Irving, who displayed "a neat leg and much sound Wilksperience",

as Laertes. This comment shows some acknowledgement of Wilkie's training of actors.

In 1929, apart from a second Wilkie season at the Newtown Majestic, no Shakespeare was staged at major theatres in Melbourne or Sydney. On a much smaller scale, Gus Neville farmed a small company - comprising himself, two actresses and one other actor - with which he toured schools in the Sydney suburbs, performing excerpts from Shakespeare. Neville had been a member of Wilkie's company in the years 1920-25, and had appeared, it was said, in over one thousand performances. In his new venture, he was joined by Roland McCarthy, who managed his business affairs.

Allan Wilkie opened his second season at the Newtown Majestic on 19 October 1929, with a production of *The School for Scandal*. Sheridan and Goldsmith were to alternate with Shakespeare throughout the season, in a bid to revitalise flagging audience interest. Unfortunately, poor business, occasionally interspersed with unexpectedly good houses, was to be the general pattern from now on, and the season was financially unsuccessful. As survival became more of a struggle, new financial relief - but still no subsidy - was granted by the government. At the end of the Sydney season, Wilkie was able to announce that in future, no Federal entertainment tax going to be levied on his Shakespeare productions. ³² This belated gesture was hailed by Wilkie as "an indication of a

liberal spirit such as exists in other parts of the world, where the drama is recognised as a cultural factor in our modern life" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1929). There is an understandable hint of bitterness in these words.

Although Wilkie was now to be exempt from Federal entertainment tax other theatrical managements were less fortunate, for it was at the end of 1929 that the governments of New South Wales and Victoria decided to introduce a double entertainment tax. The imposition of State as well as Federal tax - a situation which had long existed in South Australia - was considered to be iniquitous. Sir George Tallis, who was at that time the chairman of the board of J.C. Williamson's, considered that the taxes were crushing the life out of the Australian entertainment industry, and he announced immediate cuts in the expenditure of "the Firm". Production of Grand Opera and other entertainments likely to run at a substantial loss would cease. Theatres began to close down. The Firm ran five theatres in Sydney and five in Melbourne at that time, and planned to cease operations in at least half of them. On 25 October, a fire had partially destroyed His Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne, and planned reconstruction was delayed until 1934. Negotiations were commenced to sell the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, to Manton's drapery company. Of the Firm's remaining theatres, several were converted into cinemas. Despite these measures, the Firm was to lose heavily, with losses running up to £50,000 in 1930-31.

Although Wilkie was comparatively well off - commercial managements were to receive no concessions before 1946 - he sympathised fully with Tallis's view that the entertainment tax was crushing the life out of the Australian entertainment industry. In Hobart, where he had returned for his ninth (and final) Tasmanian season, he wrote a heartfelt letter to the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*, in which he expressed his own concern at the disintegration of the theatre.

Although the taxation may appear to be a small thing in itself, yet, with the continually mounting cost of theatrical production and the managers' inability to maintain a correspondingly increased price of admission owing to the opposition of other forms of entertainment and economic pressure, it is the last straw [15 January 1930].³⁴

In addition to this, however, Wilkie proposed another factor which he considered was contributing to the decline of the theatre. He considered that too many Australians had purchased motor cars which they could ill afford, and that they were consequently obliged to curtail other expenses - such as the cost of going to the theatre - in order to maintain them. Wilkie was alone in putting forward this interesting, if unorthodox, point of view.

In the midst of this deepening crisis in the theatre, Wilkie, in Hobart, produced his twenty-seventh - and last - Shakespeare play which opened at the Theatre Royal on 11 January 1930. This was *Henry IV Part I*, a comparative rarity, and Wilkie's may have been the first production of this play in

Australia. It is difficult to see why the play should have been largely ignored - it is eminently stageable - but this was the case at that time, even in England and mainland Europe. Unfortunately, economic conditions became so bad that Wilkie seems not to have been able to stage the play at any other Australian venue. In these circumstances, it is all the more regrettable that the review of the play which appeared in the *Mercury* on 13 January offers very little information on the production.

Wilkie took the role of "plump Jack" Falstaff, and the reviewer noted only that Falstaff must rank among Wilkie's best creations. Later in the season, a revival of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* gave Hobart audiences a unique opportunity to compare Shakespeare's portrayals of the fat knight in the two plays. Wilkie himself recorded only one piece of business that he used in the production, this being the interpolation of a line "dignified by tradition", but not by Shakespeare. The line, "D'ye think I didn't know ye?", was added as a preface to Falstaff's blustering "By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye", addressed to Prince Hal when he reveals that he was one of the rogues in buckram at Gad's Hill (II.iv.257). This interpolation was by no means an invention of Wilkie's. It was an effective addition, commonly used during the nineteenth century, and certainly employed by America's most famous Falstaff, James Hackett. It is yet another instance of Wilkie maintaining traditional business in his productions. His stage antics, on

this occasion, were rewarded with what the *Mercury* reviewer described as "Homeric laughter".

Other roles taken by the "capable cast" were briefly dismissed. Alexander Marsh played Hotspur "with the requisite abandon and with full emotional value", while Miss Hunter-Watts "brought distinction" to the small role of Lady Percy. Almost perversely, the reviewer singled out Miss Mimi Miles, in the tiny part of Lady Mortimer, for particular praise. He greatly admired her use of Welsh in her one scene (III.i):

Under Mr. Wilkie's capable direction real lines were spoken, and Miss Miles showed a quite unusual grasp of difficult Welsh sounds. Her pleasing and well-modulated voice carried with ease to the farthest seats in the house, and the words were spoken with deep emotional effect and perfectly naturally. Charming also was her sweet soprano in the beautiful Welsh song . . . The eerie effect was heightened by the tastefully written accompaniment played with plucked strings.

Indeed, the reviewer seems to have been particularly impressed by the incidental music which Bradshaw Major had composed for the play, and he noted that

when Falstaff is in rich good humour . . . the music too is laughing as heartily as you please, but when the mood is changed and Shakespeare has a whip for Falstaffs back, the clarinet snarls and mocks until one suddenly seems sorry for the fat knight."

It was Wilkie, rather than Falstaff, for whom audiences should have been feeling sorry. Despite the inclusion of popular eighteenth-century comedies, the Hobart season did very

little to ease the financial burden that Wilkie was now carrying. In an attempt to arouse new interest, he offered Hobart his first presentation of *The Jealous Wife* (1765), a comedy by George Colman the younger, which opened at the Theatre Royal on 25 January 1930. It was considered to be one of the highlights of the season, with Miss Hunter-Watts giving an excellent performance as Mrs Oakly, the jealous wife of the title. As the play was rarely performed, Wilkie had no stock of traditional business upon which he could draw for his production. Nevertheless, to give the illusion of preserving the past, he announced (when he came to repeat the play in his final Sydney season) that he had found, in a Sydney public library, an old copy of the play which contained the cuts made to the script by David Garrick.

After Hobart, the company returned to Melbourne, to open at the King's Theatre on 22 February. Wilkie was by now so short of funds that he could not raise enough to pay the shipping freight on his scenery and wardrobe, and it was only by taking money from the advance bookings for the forthcoming season that he was able to reclaim his property for the performances. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the Melbourne season proved to be a resounding success, which Wilkie considered to be the finest he had ever had in Australasia. At this time of theatrical depression, this unexpected phenomenon was beyond even Wilkie's comprehension, but he gratefully accented the crowded houses for five weeks. Had he foreseen

the great success he was to enjoy, particularly with the eighteenth-century comedies, from which hundreds were nightly turned away, Wilkie would certainly have extended his season. Owing to previous arrangements, however, this proved to be impossible, and so the Wilkie company, at the end of March, turned its back on what was to prove its last enjoyment of success in Australia.

After a tour which included Adelaide, Perth and a number of country centres, the Wilkie company returned to Sydney, opening at the Grand Opera House on 5 July. Wilkie now accepted that Shakespeare was not likely to be a paying proposition during the depression. He therefore made the decision to try a new experiment, by commissioning an Australian playwright to write a play for him. The Allan Wilkie Company thus became the only professional theatre company in Australia to support local drama at that time, and this unique and bold experiment deserves
38
praise.

The play, by Sydney writer Doris Egerton Jones, was called *Governor Bligh*, and it was based on "an intensely dramatic early history of N.S.W." This historical³⁹ episode in the subject, which the *Sydney Morning Herald* described as "the determination of Governor Bligh to suppress the traffic in rum which was enriching members of the New South Wales Corps at the expense of hardworking farmers and merchants" (4 August), was deliberately selected by Wilkie. He hoped that it would

create local interest sufficient to bring audiences back to the theatre. In at least one sense, he proved to be right. The production, which opened on 2 August, sparked a brief controversy in the *Herald*. Correspondence flew on the subject of whether the play was accurate historically, and this created all the interest that Wilkie could have reasonably desired. Although the production was staged for business motives, it is nevertheless true that Wilkie made a gesture for local theatre which no one else was prepared to match. One correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald* went so far as to offer Wilkie congratulations for his enterprise and courage "in presenting for the first time on any stage a play written by an Australian author and dealing solely with Australian history" (6 August).

Wilkie played Governor Biigh, scoring an emphatic success "peppery old martinet" depicted by Doris Jones. The ⁴⁰ as the first reviews devoted themselves as much to her work as to the production, though considerable space was given to consideration of the scenery and costumes. On these, Wilkie had lavished great attention. He had attempted to dress the play with historical accuracy, and to reproduce scenes of old Sydney taken from prints of the period. In these matters alone, the production must rank as one of Wilkie's most elaborate achievements. Unfortunately, it could only temporarily stave off collapse.

As the season progressed, attendances declined, repeating a now familiar pattern. Wilkie moved his company back to

Melbourne, to open at the New Princess Theatre on 13 September. Here, the production of *Governor Bligh*, for which Wilkie had high hopes, was greeted with indifference. Revivals of Sheridan, Goldsmith and Shakespeare fared little better, in striking contrast to the Melbourne season of February-March. This time, business in Melbourne was so poor that Wilkie was finally obliged to admit defeat. On Saturday 11 October 1930, a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* was concluded by Wilkie's official announcement that he was obliged to disband the Allan Wilkie Company, thus bringing to an end a venture which had survived against all expectations for fourteen years.

The company faded away with surprisingly little comment from the press or the public. It was duly noted that Wilkie had every hope of reforming the company when economic conditions showed some sign of improving. It was the economic factor alone which he held to be responsible, rather than any "failing of public interest in Shakespeare" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October). In the interim, Allan Wilkie and Frediswyde Hunter-Watts announced their plans for a personal tour of the country centres of Australia, presenting recitations of scenes from Shakespeare. This tour began immediately, with a recital in Geelong on 22 October, while the remaining members of the disbanded company were left to find theatrical employment when and where they could.

Wilkie soon discovered that he missed the excitement of touring at the head of his own company, though in his memoirs he claimed that there were compensations to be found

in the satisfaction of holding and entertaining an audience for a couple of hours without the adventitious aids of a supporting company, scenery, costumes and other stage accessories.
[42]

Nevertheless, the urge to direct full-scale productions in major theatres remained strong with Wilkie, and he soon began to look for ways back into the theatrical mainstream in Australia. He was to find a way early in 1931, when for the first time since 1920, he turned to modern comedy as a means of attracting an audience. The piece chosen was Noel Coward's *Fever*, advertised as an "antidote to depression", and⁴³ *Hay* Wilkie's was the first professional production of this play in Australia. He and his wife took the roles of Judith and David Bliss, and were very well received by the critics. The play opened at the Tivoli Theatre in Melbourne on 21 February 1931. It did slow business to begin with, as the theatre was strongly associated with vaudeville, but it turned out that Wilkie was able to run it for a month. He now had hopes of reviving his career with further modern comedies, for which expenses were much smaller than for Shakespeare. The Coward play was transferred to Brisbane, where it enjoyed another successful run, and it was succeeded by a production of John Drinkwater's comedy *Bird in Hand*. A tour of Queensland country centres followed, but Wilkie then came to the realisation

that Australian conditions would not support this new venture indefinitely.

Disbanding the cast of *Bird in Hand*, the Wilkies left Australia for New Zealand around May 1931, and spent four months touring that country with their programme of Shakespeare recitations, but in the end they were forced by economic pressures to abandon this tour also. In September they sailed from Auckland for Canada, and began a recital tour through that country. They were never to tour Australia or New Zealand in their professional capacity again. The ensuing years were filled with tours through Canada, the U.S.A. and Britain, which occupied the Wilkies throughout the 1940s. In August 1951, Frediswyde Hunter-Watts, who had been in bad health for some time, died, and this finally marked the close of Wilkie's theatrical career.

For the remainder of his life, Allan Wilkie travelled in Europe, and paid two return visits to Australia, in 1955 and 1959. Here, he renewed acquaintance with former members of his company, and with many who remembered with gratitude the Shakespearean performances which had brought the plays vividly to life for an entire generation of young Australians. Wilkie married for a third time in 1966, and spent his last years in Rothesay, where he died on 6 January 1970, one month short of his ninety-second birthday.

Allan Wilkie's lasting achievement as a Shakespearean producer and actor can be viewed from two quite different angles. His own desire was to bring Shakespeare to the people of Australia, at a time when the Commonwealth countries still felt very strongly the bonds which tied them to "the mother country". Sir Archibald Strong's assessment of Wilkie, written in 1930, stands as a record to that contemporary feeling:

It is too often forgotten in Australia that there are some vastly important ways of furthering the country's national life besides the ways of politics of the civil service or the professions. In older countries, artists in every kind receive far more honour than they do amongst ourselves, and are recognised as being invaluable to the national welfare. It is difficult to see how a man could render finer social service than by making the greatest genius of their race a living and familiar being to Australians of every age and class. That is what Mr. Wilkie is doing today.⁴⁴

The other angle of view, taking advantage of a further half-century's hindsight, is that of the theatrical profession. It can fairly be claimed that the Allan Wilkie Shakespearean Company, with its long perseverance through the 1920s, was decisive in establishing a tradition of classical acting in Australia. The work of John Alden, as a director and a trainer of actors, was to benefit from it, and he in turn was to have influence on such actors and directors as Ron Haddrick, Ruth

Cracknell, Robin Lovejoy, John Bell and Richard Wherrett.

Theatre may indeed be "written on the wind", as Peter Brook's saturnine phrase has it, but the art of theatre lives in men and women who have skills and training. Allan Wilkie contributed to those skills and to that training in Australia.

CHAPTER FIVE: FOOTNOTES

1. For example, the *Bulletin*, 2 December 1926, lists the following at Sydney theatres for that week: *Rose Marie* (Her Majesty's); *Trilby*, starring Maurice Moscovitch (Criterion); *Is Zat So?* (Palace); *Abie's Irish Rose* (Royal); *Betty Lee* (St. James). *Quality Street* (?directed by Dion Boucicault) opened at Sydney's Theatre Royal in July, having previously played in Melbourne. It starred English actors Brian Aherne and Angela Baddeley. *The Sentimental Bloke* was playing at the Sydney Grand Opera House in October.
2. It was reported in the *Bulletin* (14 October) that the actor given the role of Claudius had injured himself in an over-enthusiastic death scene on the first night.
3. For example, the *Bulletin* 14 October 1926.
4. In the usual tradition of Wilkie's company, Liston also found himself playing minor parts throughout 1927, including Sir Henry Guildford in *Henry VIII*, Dennis in *As You Like It* and Seyton in *Macbeth*.
5. Under this name, Douglas Wilkie played a variety of servants, soldiers and gentlemen - for example, second gentleman in *Othello* and sixth soldier in *All's Well*. He also doubled the Duke of Gloucester and the French Soldier in *Henry 7* at the Newtown Majestic in 1928; and on one occasion, at very short notice, he read the part of the Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra* (7 January 1923, in Hobart) "very badly", as he recalls. The *Mercury*, however, made a point of offering him a word of praise for this effort.
6. Information on Clewlow is compiled from two sources: (a) an interview published in the Hobart *Mercury*, 29 December 1927; (b) Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, pp. 77, 176, and Appendix D.
7. He was so described in the *Mercury*, 12 January 1927, which went on to say that Wilkie had first seen him in England playing Saint Francis of Assisi in *The Lizzie Plays of Saint Francis* by Laurence Housman.
8. The *Bulletin's* "At Poverty Point" column (31 March 1927) claimed that *Henry VIII* had been produced in Melbourne in about 1884, with Genevieve Ward as Katherine and W.H. Vernon as Wolsey.

9. It is a minor point of interest that Wilkie as Wolsey used the scarlet robes that had been made for Henry Irving, those for the Tree production having proved either unavailable or in some way unsuitable.
10. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 1929.
11. On 22 June 1855, Carroll wrote of the Kean production in his Diary:

never shall I forget that wonderful evening, that exquisite vision - sunbeams broke in through the roof and gradually revealed two angel forms, floating in front of the carved work on the ceiling: the column of sunbeams shone down upon the sleeping queen, and gradually down it floated a troop of angelic forms, transparent, and carrying palm branches in their hands. ...

From Gamini Salgado, *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare: First Hand Accounts of Performances 1590-1890* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), pp.352-53.
12. *Mercury* interview, 29 December 1927.
13. Oscar Thompson and Bruce Bohle (eds), *The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 10th edn, 1975) .
14. The only comment, made in reference to the Cleopatra of Lorna Forbes, was that "she wove her endless snares to hold Antony, and rose to lofty heights in the death scene."
15. Cleopatra's other costumes for this production were equally lavish, and were noted in great detail for the *Argus* review. For her first appearance, Miss Hunter-Watts was dressed as follows:

Her marvellous robe of shimmering silk patterned with green, gold, and black, dotted all over with gold until it glittered like fish scales, fell in sweeping folds from a damascened gold girdle. At one side the robe opened to reveal an underdress of green and gold dotted silk, which enhanced the sinuous mermaid effect. The body above the waist was bare except for the breast corselet of green and gold, while a narrow jewelled headdress had the traditional side pieces falling over the ears.

16. *Argus*, 25 February 1927, p. 13. This praise was offered by Mr Watt M.H.R., who went on to comment that, although he was no authority on the theatre, "he had not seen anything better in Australia or in any other part of the world."
17. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "the impressive Cathedral scene, admirably put on by scenic artist Rowell, may be said to set the hallmark of efficiency on all concerned in it" (*Bulletin*, 23 August 1917).
18. *Mercury* interview with Allan Wilkie, 22 December 1927.
19. Mr Jarvis interviewed by me, 5 September 1980, in Hobart.
20. Certainly *Coriolanus* was one of the plays which Wilkie did not expect to draw good houses. In a letter to Robert Pringle of Hobart (16 January 1928), he noted that "King John", "Richard III", "The Comedy of Errors", "King Lear" and "The Tempest" have never drawn a payable house, except on the first night of performance, which hardly encourages me to repeat them"; while "the house tonight for "Coriolanus" does not indicate a desire for new plays."
21. Reported in the *Mercury*, 29 January 1928.
22. A rough copy of the report, undated, is held in the LaTrobe collection at the Victorian State Library. I have been unable to discover any details about Basil Murphy, other than that he was one of the "leading barristers, politicians and others" who had appeared in the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice* at the charity performance to raise money for the Wilkie company, 14 July 1926.
23. The phrase "Shakespeare spells ruin" had virtually achieved the status of a theatrical adage. Wilkie was aware of this saying of F.B. Chatterton, the manager of Drury Lane Theatre in the 1870s, from the very start of his own career (as he indicates on p.74 of his memoirs), and the phrase seemed to haunt his efforts over the years. Chatterton, from bitter experience, had laid it down that "Shakespeare spells ruin and Byron bankruptcy." See *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, p.257.
24. In 1955, the Majestic was taken over by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and re-named the Elizabethan Theatre. On 19 January 1980, the theatre was burned down, but sadly, in the flood of tributes which ensued about the theatre in its heyday, the work of Allan Wilkie was entirely overlooked. Douglas Wilkie tried to rectify this in a letter which appeared in the *Australian*, 26 January 1980.

25. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 1929, noted that, in New Zealand, a grant of £750 towards the travelling expenses of the Allan Wilkie Shakespearean Company was charged against the education vote.
25. Wilkie, p.294.
27. According to Miss Irene Webb, "Heath Burdock" was a pseudonym suggested by Miss Hunter-Watts. I have been unable to discover the actor's real name.
28. J. Beresford Fowler, *Shakespearian Talks*, p.41.
29. Fowler, p.23.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Reported in the *Bulletin*, 14 July 1927.
32. An interview with Wilkie in the *Mercury*, 4 January 1930, also records the fact that the Australian government had by now followed the lead of New Zealand in granting him free railway transport.
33. Viola Tait, *A Family of Brothers: The Taites and J.C. Williamson; A Theatre History* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1971, pp.124-25. Newspaper reports, including one in the *Mercury*, 5 January 1930, also record Tallis's comments.
34. In 1929, J.C. Williamson's had collected more than £80,000 from patrons in entertainment tax - no "small thing". See Tait, p. 125.
35. Hackett's business was recorded by A.C. Sprague in "Falstaff Hackett", *Theatre Notebook*, IX (1954-55), p.62. Wilkie wrote to Sprague of his own use of the line in a letter dated 8 September 1955.
36. *Henry IV Part I* was one of sixteen Shakespeare plays staged by Wilkie for which Bradshaw Major had composed the incidental music. [*Mercury*, 8 January 1930).
37. From an interview with Allan Wilkie recorded in Rothesay, Scotland, 8 February 1969, for radio. The interviewer was John East.
33. Leslie Rees notes that "It was left to Wilkie to provide ... one of the few Australian plays on the professional level". *A History of Australian Drama* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973; 2nd edn, 2 vols, 1978), Vol.I, p.142.

39. Wilkie, p.296.
40. Rees's assessment of the play offers a different perspective: "By mixing social palaver and trivial romance with scenes of the Governor's deposition, the author loses continuity of significant narrative and dramatic drive. All the same, there are some good scenes; and the dialogue, while having few undertones of subtlety or realism, is efficient. But Bligh himself remains only a second-rate character without much force" (vol.1, p.142).
41. The most successful of them were Alexander Marsh and Lorna Forbes, who formed their own company of "Metropolitan Artists", as they were described in programme notes, and went on tour. Most of them had formerly been with Wilkie - actors Arthur Keane, Miles Hastings, John Cairns, Alan Harkness, Marsh and Forbes; business manager Eric V. Conway; chief mechanist Thomas Keen. A typical season of mixed drama and comedy was presented at Hobart's Theatre Royal (December 1930 - January 1931): *Dracula*, *Passers By*, *A Wife or Two*, *Mixed Doubles*, *Nothing But the Truth*.
42. Wilkie, p.299.
43. Brisbane *Courier* advertising, 1 April 1931. The same issue (p.14) featured an interview with Wilkie, in which he expressed his confidence in the future of the theatre. He and his wife claimed to be "thoroughly enjoying the relief from the responsibility of playing Shakespearean roles." It was important for an artist not to be caught in a groove, Wilkie claimed, but "when things improved theatrically and they returned to [Shakespeare] they would be physically and mentally in better shape than ever for the task." Brave words!

Archibald Strong, "Allan Wilkie and Shakespeare", *The Australian Quarterly*, II (1930), p