

I: THEATRICAL BEGINNINGS, 1878-1905

I sat entranced. A new world had opened to me, a world of poetic illusion and hitherto unimagined beauty. In that week, my decision was made: ... the free, spacious, romantic life of the Shakespearean actor was henceforth my sole ambition, and though I had to wait some years for the fulfilment of that ambition my resolution never wavered. [1]

Allan Wilkie was sixteen when he saw *Hamlet* and *Othello*, his first Shakespeare plays. He had always had a strong interest in Shakespeare, and claimed that by the time he reached his teens he had read all of his works.[2] The performances which inspired him to transform this love of Shakespeare into an acting career were given in Liverpool in 1894. They were the work of a touring company headed by Osmond Tearle, an independent actor-manager whose career flourished in the provinces at that time. Brought up in a Presbyterian household, Wilkie felt that actors were still tainted by the designation "rogues and vagabonds", and this was an image which attracted him to the theatre:

It was [the] romantic side of the stage that appealed to me from the first. It was a revolt against the narrow, ultraconventional surroundings of my boyhood, from which my only escape at that time was in the realms of books and occasional lonely jaunts with a knapsack[3]

Wilkie's family background offered little encouragement to one intent on a career in the theatre. The family was chiefly connected with shipping, its members becoming shipbuilders, engineers, seamen and pilots, while at least one was reputed to have been a smuggler. J.J. McKinley Wilkie, a ship's engineer, came from the Scottish west-coast town of Rothesay. He settled in Liverpool and married Kate Bowyer, an Englishwoman. Allan, one of five or more

children of this couple, was born in Liverpool on 9 February 1878. As a child, his only encounters with the theatre came in the form of occasional visits to the circus or a pantomime. Although his father did not encourage such outings, Wilkie attributed this to "a lingering prejudice resulting from his Presbyterian-Scottish upbringing" rather than to any strong convictions on the subject. As a result of his father's attitude, Wilkie recalled with regret that he missed the opportunity to see several great actors during his schooldays, including Barry Sullivan, who had made his last stage appearance, as Richard III, at Liverpool's Alexandra Theatre in 1887.⁶

A cousin joined one of Ben Greet's touring companies, and was later to provide Allan Wilkie with an introduction to the stage, but apart from this, Wilkie's only family link with the theatre came from his paternal grandfather, who instilled in him a lifelong interest in theatrical tradition and the great actors of the past. He would entertain his grandson with stories of his own boyhood visits to the theatre, notable among which was the occasion on which he saw Edmund Kean, in one of his last appearances, at the old Theatre Royal in Glasgow.

From a seat in the gallery my grandfather saw Kean in one act in each of his five great parts, viz Richard III, Shylock, Macbeth, Othello, and Sir Giles Overreach [in the last act of Massinger's *A Hew Way to Pay Old Debts*].⁷

A sense of tradition and continuity in the theatre was to be important to Wilkie, and such indirect links with the past gave him particular pleasure.

Allan Wilkie was educated at Liverpool High School, and at the age of sixteen he began a five-year apprenticeship in a Liverpool merchant's office, employment which he recollected with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Some time during his first year in the office he saw his first play. It was *A Bunch of violets* by Sydney Grundy, played by a third-rate touring company. While the production was unmemorable, it whetted Wilkie's appetite for theatregoing, and it was at this point that he saw the Tearle Shakespeare productions which inspired his ambition. His father limited his visits to the theatre to one each month, and to supplement this ration, Wilkie resorted to subterfuge. He joined the City Chess Club, which met on Wednesday evenings, and this gave him an excuse to go out regularly. In these "stolen Wednesday evening visits to the theatre, coupled with secret visits to Saturday matinees and the authorised monthly visits", [8] Wilkie saw many memorable performers of the later 1890s, including Herbert Beerbohm Tree in *Julius Caesar*, George Alexander in *As You Like It*, Johnston Forbes-Robertson in *Hamlet*, Wilson Barrett in Henry Jones's classic melodrama *The Silver King* and -most revered by the young playgoer - Henry Irving and Ellen Terry in *The Merchant of Venice*. All these plays were later to be included in Wilkie's own repertoire, and *The Merchant of Venice* came to hold particular significance for him. It was the first play by Shakespeare he produced, and, as he recorded, it proved to be "the most consistent attraction of my repertoire for thirty years, [and] I came to regard [it] as my mascot." Wilkie emphatically stated that Henry Irving was the last truly great actor the English theatre had known, and in later years he was to model many of his own performances

after the style and business of Irving.

Near his twenty-first birthday, when his office apprenticeship ended, Wilkie formally asked his father's permission to become an actor. His father, naturally enough, was surprised by this request, but allowed it.

Although on more mature reflection he endeavoured to dissuade me from my purpose, he never attempted to withdraw the consent he had given, nor did he place any obstacle in the way of my achieving my ambition.[10]

One suspects that the histrionic Wilkie was slightly disappointed that in describing the momentous decision he could not offer the reader a more tempestuous break with his family, or a father who could be cast in the role of an out-and-out tyrant.

So Allan Wilkie as prospective actor left Liverpool for London in 1899. The task before him was considerable.

It would be difficult to imagine anyone more completely ignorant of everything connected with the theatre than I was. ... I had had no experience as an amateur actor, which was then usually the back door to the professional stage. ... I had never crossed the threshold of a stage door, while to greasepaint, crepe hair and other mysteries of the craft I was an absolute stranger. . . .
[11]

On his arrival in London, he sent letters to all theatre managers, asking for work. Needless to say, because of his total inexperience, he was not rushed with offers. Yet he did receive two responses -one within a day or two of his arrival in London, when the delivery of his letter happened to coincide with the need for an extra at a theatre very close to his hotel. Unfortunately, Wilkie was out when the message came, so he missed this opportunity. The other

response was from Mrs Lancaster-Wallis,

a well-known Shakespearean actress in her day, who was making a final tour of the provinces ... but it was a shock when the lady demanded a premium for the privilege of appearing in her company which was quite beyond my means to pay, and my hopes of an engagement were again dashed.[12]

It may still have been common practice at that time for an amateur to gain his stage experience, before the establishment of drama schools, by paying to work with professional companies, though doubtless the system was also often abused. Without an engagement, Wilkie occupied himself by seeing the sights of London, and by indulging in "an orgy of theatregoing".

London theatre at the turn of the century was still the world of the actor-manager. Beerbohm Tree at Her Majesty's, George Alexander at St James's, Seymour Hicks at the Vaudeville, Cyril Maude at the Haymarket and Arthur Bourchier (from 1900) at the Garrick were amongst those who presented an extraordinarily wide range of theatrical fare. Plays first produced in 1899 included Pinero's *The Gay Lord Quex*, Sydney Grundy's *The Degenerates*, Hall Caine's *The Christian*, and Charles Haddon Chambers's *The Tyranny of Tears*. The theatre appeared to be a flourishing concern. By 1901, in the metropolitan area of London alone, there were forty-four theatres under the Lord Chamberlain's stage-play licence, in addition to forty-two music-halls and thirteen theatres under London County Council licence [14]. The suburbs were also well supplied with theatres.

Although the field was very active, opportunities were

limited for an actor (or a manager) who wished to devote himself to Shakespeare, as Wilkie had declared was his own ambition. Public taste did not turn towards Shakespeare very readily at that time, and London managements, with a few exceptions, were not prepared to offer extended seasons of his plays. Henry Irving and Ellen Terry were still presenting Shakespeare at the Lyceum, but it was interspersed with the work of other dramatists. For example in 1899, the year in which Irving lost control of the Lyceum, they gave a revival of *The Merchant of Venice* and the premiere of Sardou's *Robespierre* as translated by Laurence Irving. Beerbohm Tree, who succeeded Irving as the leading figure in London theatre, staged magnificent productions at Her [His] Majesty's Theatre, which he had built with the profits from his production of Paul Potter's *Trilby* (1895). His policy was also to alternate popular, money-making pieces with productions of Shakespeare. In 1898, for example, he offered *The Three Musketeers*, dramatised by Sydney Grundy, and the first London revival for thirty years of *Julius Caesar*. In 1899, he presented Henry Jones's *Carnac Sahib* and Shakespeare's *King John*.

In addition to the hive of theatrical activity in London, there were innumerable companies touring the provinces, which might offer work to hopeful actors. Ben Greet was one of the actor-managers who specialised in this field. He had formed his own company in 1886, and by 1899 had so expanded his activities that he ran up to twenty-five companies, on tour throughout Britain, at any one time. His principal company was the Ben Greet Comedy Company, with which he toured himself, in a repertoire of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century comedy (including Sheridan). This company was the training

ground for many well-known actors, such as H.B. Irving, Mrs Patrick Campbell and Dorothea Baird (who rose to fame as Trilby, in 1895). In 1886 Greet had staged the first of many open-air productions of Shakespeare, and throughout his subsequent career he was to remain devoted to producing the plays of Shakespeare, even when this meant financial loss.

It was with Ben Greet that Allan Wilkie obtained his first theatrical engagement, after some weeks of delay and anxiety. Thanks to a letter of introduction from a cousin, who was a member of one of Greet's companies, Wilkie was taken on as a "walking gentleman" and understudy, at a salary of one guinea a week. The play for which he was engaged was *A Lady of Quality*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett and Stephen Townsend, with a cast headed by Gerald Lawrence, Rawson Buckley and Eleanor Calhoun, a Californian actress. Few demands were made on the trainee actor for this first appearance:

In the livery of a lackey and assisted by another budding actor of the name of Collins, which formed the noteworthy (and as we hoped auspicious) combination of "Wilkie Collins", it was our duty to fling open a pair of folding doors for the entrance of our leading lady.
[18]

In addition to carrying out this vital function, Wilkie was entrusted with a single line, delivered off-stage, in which he had to announce the entry of "His Grace, the Duke of Osmonde". The play was tried out at the New Theatre, Cambridge - which consequently had the honour of seeing the "first appearance on any stage" of Allan Wilkie - and it was then taken to Ipswich, before opening in London at the Comedy Theatre on 8 March 1899. The London run, unfortunately, lasted only some five or six weeks, which Wilkie attributed principally to the

fact that there were no star names in the cast. Clearly this factor influenced theatregoers at the turn of the century as much as it was to do in later years.

Unemployed once more, Wilkie soon discovered that his first walk-on role had made very little impression upon prospective managers, even though it had been in a West End production. He quickly learned to rely on subterfuge of the kind common to the theatrical profession and its publicists:

I camouflaged my lack of experience by describing my "last" engagement as "two small parts at the Comedy Theatre", and by this means inveigled an unfortunate manager into engaging me for a stock season he was running at Llandudno.[19]

The programme at Llandudno was changed twice weekly, which meant that the cast received only three rehearsals for each production. It was almost impossible for a totally inexperienced actor such as Wilkie to meet the heavy demands this imposed of rapid character switching, new scripts to learn and new moves to assimilate. In his first week with the company, he was given roles in two plays, the first being a comedy called *Jedbury Junior*, in which he was required to double two parts. He got through this production with little credit: he dried up on the opening night, and succeeded, so he claimed, in cutting out the entire plot of the play. His second chance was with one of the juvenile roles in Charles Hawtrey's popular and frequently-revived comedy *The Private Secretary*, first performed in 1884:

but by this time, whatever little confidence I had possessed quite oozed away, as did my manager's patience, and my engagement was abruptly and very justly terminated.[20]

Wilkie was fortunate enough to be re-engaged by Ben Greet, and from this point he began his real training in the theatre, learning the basic skills of acting while he worked. He was taken on, at an increased salary of twenty-five shillings per week, as a member of one of Greet's many touring companies. Greet had made it a policy to tour popular London successes to the provinces, and according to Wilkie, he was the first manager to send companies regularly to the small towns. This policy was one which Wilkie himself was to adopt when he became an actor-manager. Wilkie was given the small role of Vitruvius in Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* (1895), an extremely popular melodrama based on the struggles of Christianity in pagan Rome. The leading roles of Marcus Superbus, prefect of Rome, and Mercia, a Christian maiden, were taken by Rawson Buckley and Wanda Beresford. [21] The company was sent out to tour the "fit-up" towns of Scotland. As Wilkie explained in his memoirs,

These were the small towns not possessing a theatre, to which companies would bring a collapsible frame that could be bolted and screwed together in an hour or two and erected in the local town hall, corn exchange or other suitable building, and on which the act drop and scenery could be hung. [22]

This particular tour, by the *Sign of the Cross* number two company, began on 21 August 1899 at Aberystwyth, and visited seventy-two towns in seventeen weeks. This meant playing sometimes in as many as six towns in a week. The tour ended in Ulverston on 16 December [23] and Wilkie, together with his friend, H.F. Maltby, was immediately re-engaged by Greet for a stock season at the old Corn Exchange in

Kilmarnock, to commence in the new year of 1900. During this season four plays were presented, all of which were well-established popular successes. They were *The Lady of Lyons* (1838), by Edward Bulwer-Lytton; *The Two Orphans* (1874), a "stirring melodrama", adapted (from the French original) by Adolphe-Philippe d'Ennery and Eugene Cormon; *Proof, or a Celebrated Case* - based on a sensational trial - adapted by F.C. Burnand, and first produced in London at the Adelphi Theatre in 1878; and finally the unfailingly popular *East Lynne*, in one of many adaptations from the novel by Mrs Henry Wood, first produced in 1874. In all these plays, Wilkie was given only small parts, but Greet evidently considered him to be a useful member of the company, since he offered him a new engagement as soon as the Kilmarnock season ended.

At that time, Greet had just acquired the touring rights of all the spectacular Drury Lane dramas, and following his usual practice, he sent out a number of companies to tour these plays in the provinces. Wilkie's new engagement was with the company presenting *The Great Ruby*, by Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton, a play which had received its first production at Drury Lane in 1898. The sensational climax, obligatory for all Drury Lane melodramas, was in this case a duel to the death which took place in a balloon in mid-air.[24] Wilkie recalls of this piece:

I played five separate speaking parts ... and I account it a minor triumph of make-up and characterisation that when my father and mother made a special journey to York to see me on the stage for the first time, they failed to recognise me excepting in the one part for which I was credited on the programme.[25]

One may perhaps deduce from this comment that Wilkie was at least beginning to learn his craft as an actor by this time, although clearly he was still not considered capable of taking major roles. One of the parts he played was that of the head ostler of "The Coach and Horses" in a spectacular scene which required him to supervise the unharnessing of four horses on stage. This he did with some trepidation, since the glare of the foot lights, the noise of the audience applause, and the unaccustomed surroundings, led the horses to plunge and rear in fright each night, much to Wilkie's discomfiture.

It was in the summer of 1900 that Wilkie took the first step towards his avowed ambition to become a Shakespearean actor. He obtained an engagement with Rawson Buckley, formerly a Greet player, who had decided to form a company of his own. Buckley's intention was to undertake a summer tour, presenting about half a dozen plays by Shakespeare, with himself as the star. Wilkie was engaged for this tour as second low comedian and general utility. In *Hamlet*, he played the Second Gravedigger to the First Gravedigger of Alfred Tate, whom Wilkie recalled as being "the only gravedigger I ever saw who retained the time-honoured business of peeling off half a dozen waistcoats prior to the commencement of his digging operations." [26] Buckley's touring company was not over-large: during the first week alone Wilkie played eleven parts, including Gregory in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the double of Old Gobbo and Tubal in *The Merchant of Venice* - all good experience. [27] Conditions of the engagement - on "summer terms" - were fairly stringent. From

a weekly income of twenty-five shillings, Wilkie had to provide everything but the bare costume required for each character he played, including all wigs, tights, footwear, gloves, jewels and so on. Wilkie's ambition to play Shakespeare may have owed something to the fact that he claimed to feel more at home in doublet and hose than in the clothes of the modern world. In his memoirs he reflected that "I have never experienced the slightest difficulty in adapting myself to the costume, speech and deportment of an earlier period." [28]

For the remainder of 1900 and all of 1901, Wilkie entered into a period of intense theatrical activity, taking work wherever it was to be had. Immediately after the Buckley tour, he found employment in an autumn tour of *The White Heather*. This was another Drury Lane melodrama by Raleigh and Hamilton, first staged in 1897, which featured a duel to the death, in diving suits, at the bottom of the sea. [29] Following this stirring interlude, Wilkie returned once more to Buckley and Shakespeare. For this second season he was given more prominent roles - he now appeared as Horatio, as Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, and in other parts of a similar status. His roles at this time may have included Fabian in *Twelfth Night*. In addition to Shakespeare and eighteenth-century comedies, the company presented *The King of the Huguenots*, a "stirring historical drama" by H.A. Saintsbury. Rapid switching between popular melodrama and classical theatre never seemed to trouble Wilkie, either then or later in his career. This should not appear unusual - even in London, it was then very common for actors to cover the full range

of theatrical offerings, and remain acceptable to their public. Henry Irving scored great successes as Mathias in Leopold Lewis's classic melodrama *The Bells* and as Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Beerbohm Tree created a tremendous effect as Svengali in *Trilby*, but was equally admired as Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*. Versatility in the theatre was expected, and for this, Wilkie was receiving the best possible training.

Strong contrasts could even be found in the methods of presenting Shakespeare, and this can be illustrated by two engagements that Wilkie accepted during 1901. In one of these, he made his only appearance at an East End music hall:

A Mr. George Kirk was exploiting his little girl, aged about twelve, as a vaudeville turn in scenes from *Hamlet*. She impersonated the title-role and I was engaged to support her as Horatio for a week in a Music Hall in the purlieus of Whitechapel. [31]

This brave confession at least illustrates Wilkie's determination to find work on the stage under almost any circumstances. The other engagement shows the maintenance of tradition and appropriate stage action common to the theatre of that era, a factor which has a bearing on Wilkie's later Shakespearean work. He was engaged to play Corin in a production of *As You Like It* in which the role of Jaques was taken by Hermann Vezin (1829-1910). In his heyday, Vezin had played leading roles with Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Weils, and had also appeared with Irving at the Lyceum. Wilkie observed that, as Jaques, Vezin enlarged his role by taking all the speeches of the First Lord that related to Jaques "weeping and commenting / Upon the sobbing deer" (II.i.65-6) by the simple expedient of altering

the text from the third to the first person. This was a common practice at the time. After the production, whenever Wilkie encountered Vezin, the older actor

never failed to greet me by furtively making the sign of the cross accompanied by an admonitory shake of the head. The reason for this cryptic greeting was that when I rehearsed the part of Corin I had introduced a little bit of business of crossing myself when Touchstone informed me I was damned, whereupon Vezin pounced upon me and explained that whereas it might be quite legitimate to cross oneself reverently in a serious scene, ... such a gesture in a comedy scene might possibly give offence to some of the audience. [32]

According to Wilkie's own account, it would appear that he never had to turn to work outside the theatre - such as the office job he had hated - to supplement his income. In order to do this, however, he had to accept any available job in the theatre. This led him, for example, to take an engagement as assistant stage manager to the Irving Amateur Dramatic Society, for a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In 1925, Wilkie was to give Australia its first production of this play for sixty-six years.

During the spring and summer of 1901, he played his first "leading role" - in an old-fashioned melodrama called *Siberia*, which was given a brief and uneventful tour of the London suburban theatres. But he soon worked again for Ben Greet, getting his first experience, so far as I can establish, in Greet's regular open-air productions of Shakespeare. The engagement, which was for performances in the grounds of the Alexandra Palace, Croydon, was something of a baptism of fire. A casting emergency had arisen, and Wilkie was given only one day's notice to learn two quite substantial roles - Page in

The Merry Wives of Windsor and Borachio in *Much Ado About Nothing*: To add to his tribulations, he had to do the performances without any rehearsal. He found the task particularly difficult:

I have never had the happy knack of absorbing lines like a sponge. ... Of the hundreds of thousands of lines I have spoken upon the stage every word has had to be separately hammered into my brain. [33]

Nevertheless, on the following day, Wilkie was word perfect. His hastily-learned performance evidently satisfied Greet, who re-engaged him for a long season at the Botanic Gardens in Regent's Park, with a tour of popular resorts to follow. In July 1902, Wilkie was to undergo a similar experience, when Greet summoned him at short notice to play Oliver to Dorothea Baird's Rosalind in a performance of *As You Like It* at Margate. Once more he had no opportunity to rehearse, and on this occasion he did not even meet the leading actress until he made his entrance in IV.iii, to present her with "this bloody napkin". [34]

Engagements with Greet continued from 1901 to the summer of 1902. For part of this period, Wilkie played with the Ben Greet Comedy Company, touring in the repertoire of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century comedy. In addition, the 1901-02 season included a popular modern comedy, *A Royal Family* (1899), by Robert Marshall. Wilkie recalls the tour with pleasure, as it covered only south-coast towns and the old cathedral cities, but the role he took over in *A Royal Family*, that of the Duke of Berascon, did cause him some degree of discomfiture:

I not only inherited the part originally played by "Mr.

James Erskine", the nom de theatre of Lord Rosslyn, but also his resplendent uniform and military boots. Those boots! I would not venture to estimate the size of his lordship's feet, but I know I stuffed them with several pairs of boot socks and about two pounds of cotton wool, and then flopped and floundered round the stage vainly endeavouring to preserve a smart military gait, and miserably conscious that it resembled that of a ploughman.

Wilkie was next engaged by Greet to play one of the minor roles in *Sherlock Holmes*, with a company which was to tour the smaller towns of the provinces. This play, by the American dramatist William Gillette, was based on episodes from the Conan Doyle stories, and had proved immensely popular in America, and in London, where it had opened at the Lyceum Theatre in September 1901, not long before the provincial tour commenced. Early in 1903, Wilkie was to embark on a second tour of *Sherlock Holmes*, on this occasion being promoted to the role of Professor Moriarty, the "Napoleon of Crime".

The years 1902 and 1903 were filled with a wide assortment of engagements. One of the more interesting of these was a brief season of plays in Inverness and the neighbouring towns, in a company of eight organised by the actor-manager Matheson Lang, who was at that time establishing his own theatrical career. Wilkie's path as an actor-manager was to follow broadly similar lines to that of Lang, though he never achieved the fame Lang was to gain in England. Lang began his career in 1897, and after engagements with Frank Benson, Lily Langtry and Ellen Terry he formed his own company in conjunction with John Holloway. Between 1910 and 1913 he toured South Africa, India and Australia, playing Shakespeare and modern romantic drama with considerable success. The careers of Wilkie

and Lang were to intersect briefly once again in 1911, when they played Shakespeare at rival theatres in Calcutta, but after that point they took different paths - Lang to return to success in England, Wilkie to forge a career in Australia. Apart from the Inverness season, Wilkie's other engagements took him to the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, and in 1903 to Bradford, where he played the "heavy" lead in a thriller called *The Grip of Iron, or The Strangler of Paris*, adapted by Arthur Shirley from a French original. In the role of Lorentz de Ribas, Wilkie was nightly strangled in the last act, for which he received a weekly wage of four pounds. He remained with this company for six months, which was probably his longest engagement for a single play in his entire career.

It was in 1903 that Wilkie made a serious return to Shakespeare, when he obtained an engagement to tour with Frank Benson's North Company in a number of Shakespeare's plays. Benson at that time ran three touring companies which travelled the provinces presenting a Shakespearean repertoire. In addition, since 1889, Benson had given an annual Shakespeare season in London, while from 1886 he had run the Shakespeare festivals at Stratford-upon-Avon. To become a member of Benson's company was generally agreed to be an excellent training for an acting career - in fact, his company has been described as the best school of acting in his time. Many leading Shakespearean actors between 1890 and 1930 learnt their craft from working with Benson, including Matheson Lang, Oscar Asche and Henry Ainley. Benson's own acting talents were limited, particularly in tragic roles. His portrayal of Macbeth, for example, has been

described as "so appallingly bad that no training on earth could have made it passably good." Benson was the first - and only -actor-manager to produce thirty-five of Shakespeare's plays: he omitted *Troilus and Cressida* and *Titus Andronicus*. Wilkie in later years was to try to emulate this record of Shakespearean production in Australia, but would reach only twenty-seven plays before the effects of the depression virtually put an end to his career.

In fact, Wilkie had had a slight connection with the Benson Company before he officially joined it. In April 1902 he had made a special request to Benson for any small part in the Stratford production of *Henry VIII*. The reason for this request was that Ellen Terry was to play Katherine, while Benson himself was Wolsey, and the young Wilkie wanted to be able to say that he had appeared with Ellen Terry. Benson permitted Wilkie to play a monk, standing just behind Ellen Terry, ostensibly taking notes, but in reality holding the prompt-book in case she required help. In the event she needed no prompt, but Benson, known to actors as "Pa", wandered into what Wilkie, following the text, described as nonsense in verse. The other actors would not let Wilkie prompt him, however, as "Pa" would not like it. [39]

Although Wilkie makes no comment on the value of working with Benson's company, it must be assumed that he learned from this experience a great deal, which he would put into practice in later years. It is unfortunate that he did not record in his memoirs a full list of the roles he played in 1903, though we do know that they included the double of Tybalt and the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*. [40]

In 1904, Wilkie joined a company, organised by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, which was to tour permanently the larger cities of Great Britain, with a repertoire of Shakespearean productions from His Majesty's Theatre. These included *Julius Caesar*, which had run for five months in London in 1898, with its magnificent scenery and costumes by Alma-Tadema. Despite the extravagance of the production, Tree still practised economies by merging a number of minor characters, so that, for example, as Metellus Cimber, Wilkie also spoke the lines of Marullus. [41] Tree's scheme was unfortunately short-lived, because it was only when he was able to appear with the touring company that business prospered - without him, the takings dropped to almost nothing. Before the tour ended, Wilkie made his only appearance before royalty, in a command performance before King Edward VII at the Theatre Royal, Dublin. On this occasion, Tree presented famous scenes from his repertoire, including the abdication scene from *Richard II* (IV.i), in which Wilkie played the Earl of Northumberland.

Wilkie next appeared in several brief revivals at His Majesty's Theatre, including *Twelfth Night*, in which he played both the Priest and Antonio. [42] This was followed by a short interval in melodrama, then another tour with Tree's Repertory Company, after which Wilkie took his last engagement "before embarking on the stormy seas of theatrical management.[43] According to his account, this last engagement was in the original production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Barstow's play based on the Baroness Orczy's novel. The stars were Fred Terry (brother of Ellen, and great-uncle of John Gielgud), playing Sir Percy Blakeney, and his wife, Julia Neilson ("very

handsome and orchidaceous") [44] , playing Lady Blakeney. The play had its first London performance at the New Theatre, St Martin's Lane, on 5 January 1905, and proved so popular that Terry revived it frequently over the next twenty years. However, a glance at the cast-list published with the original *Times* review does not mention Wilkie, unless we are to assume - unnecessarily - that he was working under a pseudonym at that time. A closer reading of the wording in the memoirs suggests that Wilkie, tacitly encouraging the reader to make the assumption that he appeared in London, does not say directly that he did. In fact, the play was given a preliminary try-out in the provinces, and it was this "original production" for which Wilkie was engaged.

CHAPTER ONE: FOOTNOTES

1. Allan Wilkie, "All the World my Stage: The Reminiscences of a Shakespearean Actor-Manager in Five Continents" (c.1944, revised c.1959, unpublished), p.9. The MS is referred to hereafter as "Wilkie".
2. "The Shakespearean Chronicle", a souvenir of Wilkie's 1,000th consecutive performance of Shakespeare (Brisbane, 13 June 1924), p.2.
3. Wilkie, p.73.
4. There were at least five children in the family, though Allan Wilkie's memoirs give no information on this point. In a letter to Arthur Colby Sprague (6 February 1965) he reported that "my remaining sister died on 1 January, aged 83 [born c.1882], and my remaining brother died on 11 January aged 91" (born c.1874). Therefore Allan Wilkie, born in 1878, was one of the middle children of the family.
5. Wilkie, p.7.
6. Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951; 3rd edn, 1967), p.925.
7. Letter from Allan Wilkie to the *Rothesay Express*, 3 March 1967. Kindly supplied by A.C. Sprague.
3. Wilkie, p.10.
9. Wilkie, p.77.
10. Wilkie, p.15.
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11. Wilkie, p.16.
12. Wilkie, p.17.
13. Wilkie, p.19.
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14. A.F. Wilson, *Edwardian Theatre* (London: Arthur Barker, 1951), p.22.
15. Austin Brereton, *The Lyceum and Henry Irving* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1903), pp.312-13.
16. Wilkie mentions this cousin, but beyond stating that he was "a few years older than myself" (p.16), he provides no further information.

17. Winifred Isaac, *Ben Greet and the Old Vic* (London: published by the author, n.d.), p.43. Wilkie supplied the information about Eleanor Calhoun.
18. Wilkie, p.22.
19. Wilkie, pp.27-28.
20. Wilkie, p.28.
21. Isaac, p.47.
22. Wilkie, p.20.
23. H.F. Maltby, *Ring Up the Curtain* (London: Hutchinson, 1950), pp.46-48.
24. J.B. Clapp and E.F. Edgett, *Plays of the Present* ("New York: Benjamin Blom, 1902), p.122.
25. Wilkie, p.38.
26. Wilkie, p.43. In 1945, Wilkie reported this business to A.C. Sprague in a letter which began their acquaintance. Sprague later included the information in the Addenda to his *Shakespeare and the Actors* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948), p.441.
27. In a letter to Sprague (25 July 1964), Wilkie recalled having doubled as Old Gobbo and Tubal in "my first Shakespeare engagement", while in another letter (12 October 1964) he mentions having played Gregory to Alfred Tate's Sampson/Peter.
28. Wilkie, p.42.
29. James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, 1973), p.30.
30. A.C. Sprague, "Shakespeare's Unnecessary Characters", *Shakespeare Survey 20* (1967), p. 80: "An old friend, Mr Allan Wilkie, who played the part under Ben Greet, writes me of the assistance Fabian can be to the other characters - 'though always overshadowed by them'."
31. Wilkie, p.46.
32. Wilkie, pp.47-48.
33. Wilkie, p. 52. Douglas Wilkie recalls that, in later years, his father apparently never required a prompt during performance.
34. This anecdote appears in a letter to Sprague, 20 February 1968.

35. Wilkie, p.54.
36. An account of the Lang/Holloway tour of South Africa and the Far East appears in David Holloway, *Playing the Empire* (London: Harrap, 1979), pp.132-55.
37. Hesketh Pearson, *The Last Actor-Managers* (London: Methuen, 1950; repr. White Lion, 1974), p.39.
38. Pearson, p.36.
39. An anecdote recorded by Sprague from conversation with Wilkie, April 1969.
40. Letter to Sprague, 25 July 1964.
41. Letter to Sprague, 25 July 1964.
42. Letter to Sprague, 7 April 1969.
43. Wilkie, p.69.
44. *The Times*, 6 January 1905.
45. This deduction is strengthened by a comment in a letter to Sprague, 25 May 1969: "Your visit to Portsmouth reminds me of my playing there in a Drury Lane drama and also with Fred Terry in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* - or was it Southsea?" Whether in Portsmouth or Southsea, it was clearly a tour of the provinces in which he participated. That such a preliminary tour occurred is confirmed by John Gielgud in *Distinguished Company* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p.24.