

II: THE ACTOR-MANAGER, 1905-1914

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice To
reign is worth ambition though in hell: Better to
reign in hell, than serve in heav'n. Milton,
Paradise Lost (Bk.I, 261-63)

By the middle of 1905, Allan Wilkie, who was now twenty-seven, had been in the theatre profession for six years. During that time he had progressed from an untrained beginner, grateful for walk-on parts, to an actor with a quite respectable career touring the provinces. He had appeared in shows ranging from high melodrama to his favourite Shakespeare, and had been given opportunities to work for two of the leading exponents of Shakespeare at that time - Beerbohm Tree and Frank Benson. His own report of his career would suggest that he found no difficulty in obtaining an uninterrupted stream of engagements, but there is nothing to indicate whether he felt the strain of constantly seeking new work, for indefinite periods, from a variety of managements. Wilkie's personality was of the kind that could not long submit to being a follower rather than a leader. As he chose to express it, he had "a temperament that preferred to reign in Hell rather than serve in Heaven." [1] Therefore it is not altogether surprising that at this stage in his career he made the decision to become an actor-manager. Although such a venture was filled with risks, the decision could not have been too difficult to make. Wilkie must have had a shrewd notion of the opportunities that were likely to be open to him if he continued in his present path - further offers of second leads outside London, or perhaps major roles, if he were lucky, with small and relatively obscure touring companies. As a life prospect

this had little to recommend it to an actor with ambition.

Wilkie devotes several pages of his memoirs to a discussion of his reasons for becoming an actor-manager, and these reasons are worth examining, as they indicate aspects of both his personality and his professional drives. At the top of his list, he placed the need to be in control of his own career: to be at the head of his own company had even greater appeal than to succeed as an actor in the West End. It is possible that this comment is a piece of bravura, since there is nothing to indicate that Wilkie was likely ever to succeed in the West End, without the assistance of extraordinary good luck. Indeed, another of his reasons for becoming an actor-manager underlines this point:

I would be able to satisfy a burning and impatient ambition to play scores of famous parts for which in the ordinary course of events the opportunity might not present itself for years.[2]

In the years to come, Wilkie was able to satisfy this urge to play a wide range of parts, both modern and classical. By no means all of these parts were suited to his particular talents, but this consideration was never to act as a barrier to his undertaking them. A third reason put forward by Wilkie was that he had discovered in himself an insatiable lust for travel, and as an actor-manager he would be able to satisfy this particular lust,

visiting with my company all kinds of strange, out of the way places, even though doing so frequently involved me in monetary loss. It always gave me great satisfaction to take Shakespeare to towns and countries where no one else had dared to penetrate with the Bard.[3]

The desire to present Shakespeare's plays was the fourth major reason that Wilkie offered for his decision to become an actor-manager. He was able to reflect with satisfaction on his efforts to take Shakespeare to the people, because, like many others of his time, he was firmly convinced that exposure to Shakespeare could only uplift and enlighten the masses. He was to give a typical expression of this opinion in an address on the subject "Shakespeare and the Empire", delivered to the Commonwealth Club of Hobart, Tasmania, in 1922. Amongst the patriotic sentiments suited to the occasion, the speech indicated his belief

that in a small way he had done something towards preserving the integrity of the British Empire. ... He believed however inadequately [the plays] might be performed, the mere representation of the language of Shakespeare improved the people who listened, and made them better citizens of the Empire. ^[4]

This vision of an almost evangelical mission has been put in perspective by Hal Porter, who described Wilkie, amongst others, as a "cultural do-gooder". All this, however, still lay in the future.

Despite his resolution, Wilkie seems to have been ill-prepared to become an actor-manager:

I had never produced a play and had not even a first-hand knowledge of stage-management, while of the business side of my profession I knew less than nothing. Moreover I was very immature for my years and had no experience whatever of that most essential faculty of an actor-manager, the ability to select, handle and control men and women tactfully and yet firmly. ^[6]

the other hand, his ambition had already brought him an acting

career of sorts, even though he had entered the profession without credentials, training or connections. He was a man of optimism, determined to succeed - or at least to survive with credit - in his chosen field. In accordance with this determination, the first Allan Wilkie touring theatre company came into being towards the end of 1905. The company was on a very modest scale, since Wilkie was working with limited capital. To save money, he was not only the leading actor, but also the business manager, stage manager and producer. His first leading lady was an actress named Laura Hansen, while Henry Maltby, Wilkie's long-term friend from the Ben Greet *Sign of the Cross* company, spent some months touring with the company as an actor and part-manager. [7]

Wilkie's intention was that the company should present a repertoire of Shakespeare's plays, in fulfilment of his long-standing ambition. He had visions of emulating the success of Osmond Tearle, the actor-manager whose performances of Shakespeare had been his earliest inspiration to enter the theatre. In later years, Wilkie expressed a high admiration for Tearle, who had rejected offers of leading roles in London from Beerbohm Tree, Mrs Langtry and other stars of that era, preferring

his independence and his life as an actor-manager in the provinces, where, particularly in the north of England, he had an immense and devoted following.[8]

However, for a young, untried company like Wilkie's, success was only a remote possibility. Wilkie swiftly discovered that his aspiration to be a Shakespearean actor-manager could have no hope of immediate fulfilment. At that time, there were more than a

dozen companies touring the provinces with a repertoire either wholly or substantially composed of plays by Shakespeare, so there was little demand for an additional group with a similar repertoire. On attempting to make a series of theatre bookings for the inaugural tour, Wilkie soon found this to be a problem.

As I found that theatre proprietors were naturally chary of booking an unknown youngster to compete with established favourites I was compelled to begin with a less ambitious programme. Once accepted as a manager I calculated it would be possible to convert the composition of my repertoire by the gradual introduction of Shakespearean drama.[9]

For this reason, the first plays presented by the Wilkie company were all popular melodramas, which were likely to guarantee an income. The four plays selected for initial presentation were *Belphegor the Mountebank, or The Pride of Birth*, an adaptation of a French melodrama written in 1850, by Dennery and Marc Fourmier; Dion Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers* (1852), again adapted from a French original; *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863) by Tom Taylor, and *East Lynne*. With these plays, the company had a mixed reception. *East Lynne, or Lady Isabel's Secret*, was a safe choice, with an excellent record of popularity. Wilkie does not indicate which adaptation of the novel by Mrs Henry Wood was used by the company, though it may well have been either the version by John Oxenford (1866), or that of T.A. Palmer (1874). *The Corsican Brothers* had also proved its popularity, its best-known productions being those of Charles Kean at the Princess Theatre in 1852 and Henry Irving at the Lyceum in 1880. Like these two actor-managers, Wilkie gave

himself the dual role of twin brothers, Fabien and Louis Dei Franchi. Wilkie recorded the fact that *The Corsican Brothers* remained in his repertoire for some years, so it must have continued to be a draw for him. [10] Since the Kean and Irving productions had been principally noted for their spectacular scenery and effects -the so-called "Corsican Trap" was invented to accommodate the effect of a ghost rising and drifting across the stage at the climaxes of Acts I and III - one wonders what attraction the play had for Wilkie's audiences, when played by a small company with the minimum of scenery and properties. Its popularity in these circumstances speaks well for the text of the play. *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, regarded as being one of the best melodramas, had also proved its popularity. The leading part, that of Bob Brierly, a "Lancashire lad" who is unjustly imprisoned, was another role that had been played by Wilkie's theatrical idol, Henry Irving. *Belphegor*, the remaining play, was the only one of the four which did not prove to be a drawcard for the company. This Wilkie attributed to the fact that the play was hopelessly dated, whilst also allowing that "in my raw experience the part was beyond my capacity." [11]

With these four plays, then, the Wilkie company set out on its first tour, opening at the old Court Theatre in Warrington around the middle of 1905. Wilkie soon discovered that, despite the fact that the repertoire had been designed to suit all tastes, the public was little inclined to support an unknown, untried company, and business was slow to improve. After touring the provinces for

two or three months, without particular success, Wilkie decided to introduce his first Shakespeare play into the repertoire. *The Merchant of Venice* opened in Shrewsbury, with Wilkie in the role of Shylock. In his memoirs, Wilkie estimates that he was to play this part about fifteen hundred times during the course of his career. The introduction of Shakespeare, however, had little effect on box office receipts, which remained low. Yet at least one benefit came from the production of *The Merchant of Venice* at that time. Since the company was very small - for reasons of economy - Wilkie was obliged to supplement it for this play, and he engaged John Paley, an actor of "the old school". Paley was to work with the company, on and off, over the next six years, and despite the fact that he drank too much alcohol he was to prove a valuable addition. Wilkie comments that

besides being a very sound and versatile actor who could be relied upon to play any part at a moment's notice, his familiarity with the business of the plays I was constantly adding to my repertoire made him exceptionally useful to me.[12]

This is a revealing remark, since it clearly establishes Wilkie's interest in preserving traditional stage business - a habit he was to maintain while others were seeking changes. For example, he deplored the fashion of presenting Shakespeare in modern dress, and referred in his memoirs to Sir Barry Jackson's "freak production" of *Hamlet* in 1925.[13] Wilkie's Shylock was modelled at least in part on that of Henry Irving, in costume and in certain business. He had seen Irving in this role at least once, and he may well have attempted to reproduce the details of his performance. He clearly

recalled at least one piece of Irving's business, which required Shylock to touch Antonio on the breast at the line "But note me, signior" (I.iii.92), at which Antonio recoils. As Wilkie recorded in a letter to A.C. Sprague,

Antonio turning to Bassanio on the next line ["Mark you this, Bassanio"] provides an opportunity for Shylock to shew [sic] his resentment of Antonio's recoil immediately after a fawning bow of apology for his familiarity. [14]

Wilkie introduced this business into his own performance based on his recollection of Irving. The point is made again by Wilkie's interpretation of the role of Mathias in *The Bells*. This was probably Irving's most famous role, and it was one which Wilkie performed, in his own estimation, more frequently than anyone but Irving himself. That he took great pains to model his performance on that of Irving can be seen from comments that Wilkie made on the performance of Marius Goring as Mathias, in an unsuccessful 1968 revival of the play in London:

Surely Goring, if he wished, could have found someone who could have advised him of Irving's business and methods. I, for one, could have shown him every twist and turn of Irving's production and personal performance.[15]

Similarly, amongst the most important things Wilkie had learnt from his engagements with Tree and Benson were the details of business in their productions of Shakespeare's plays, many of which he was to recreate in his own productions.

As the tour progressed, there was little sign of any improvement at the box office. The Christmas period of 1905 proved to be a particularly bad time for the company. This was - and is - the

traditional pantomime season, and consequently most of the better theatres were booked for that purpose. Since the Wilkie company had, as yet, failed to establish a reputation, theatre managers were understandably reluctant to give the company a booking at the most popular time of the year. The consequence was that Wilkie was compelled to take "a sequence of theatres, every one of which had the unenviable reputation of being known as 'the actor's grave'."

[16] To make matters worse, he also had to compete with a drawn-out general election, and as a result, the box office take decreased dramatically. In one particularly bad week, at a small town in Yorkshire, the average income was about thirty shillings each night, while for six consecutive weeks of the tour, the gross receipts were never more than thirty pounds. In this way, Wilkie came perilously close to exhausting his capital.

Despite difficulties, the tour struggled on into 1906. Plays added to the repertoire included *Othello*, in which Wilkie took the title role, *The Bells*, and *The Fool's Revenge* (1859), a blank-verse drama by Tom Taylor, based on Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*. [17] By this time, Laura Hansen had left the company, to be replaced as leading lady by Haidee Gunn. This actress was the daughter of the late Michael Gunn, the proprietor of the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. Haidee Gunn had started her career there in 1902, and had found success with the Edward Compton Comedy Company, in parts like Lady Teazle in "*The School for Scandal*". During her time with Wilkie's company, she played such roles as Ophelia, Portia, Juliet and Rosalind. [18] Wilkie's company gave several performances at the Gaiety Theatre, including one of *The Merchant of Venice*, for which Wilkie received his first

press notice from "a really reputable paper", the *Freeman's Journal*. This paper's reviewer stated, with some caution, that "no appreciative critic who saw Mr Allan Wilkie play Shylock, could doubt that he has the making of one of the finest actors on the stage." [19] However, despite this enthusiasm, Wilkie's finances were exhausted, and after three weeks in Ireland the tour finished, and the company was disbanded in Wexford.

Despite the fact that this tour had left Wilkie virtually penniless, he retained sufficient enthusiasm to make a new effort, and as soon as he managed to borrow a small amount of capital, he set about re-forming his company to begin a second tour on August Bank Holiday of 1906. This was a normal starting date for provincial companies, who would then generally play a season of between forty-four and forty-eight weeks. This was to become Wilkie's practice, with his tours ending in June each year at the Theatre Royal, York. On this second tour, finances were so precarious that Wilkie had to watch every penny:

It was even with some hesitation and only after the house on the opening night seemed to warrant the expenditure that I dared to spend the small sum necessary to purchase a sword and dagger for Hamlet, which part I was playing for the first time that week. [20]

For this tour, Wilkie succeeded in engaging actors of a slightly higher calibre, many of whom were at the start of their own careers. Company members now included Aubrey Mather, who was to become a featured Hollywood player, Ian Fleming, Frank Royde, Alexander Marsh and Frank Fay. Fleming and Royde, according to

Wilkie, went on to attain prominent positions on the London stage. Alexander Marsh, who remained with Wilkie for four years before going into management himself, had done some of his theatre training by playing small parts with the Osmond Tearle company. He now took such roles as Iago, although on one unfortunate occasion Wilkie/Othello accidentally stabbed him during a performance. He survived the encounter to rejoin Wilkie in Australia in 1928. Frank Fay was an Irish actor from the Abbey Theatre, and he was to return there in 1907, to play Shawn Keogh in the first production of John Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, in which his brother William took the part of Christy Mahon. [21] During a later season, Wilkie was to acquire the services of Philip Gordon, who had been low comedian and stage manager for Osmond Tearle for fifteen years. Tearle had died in 1901, and Wilkie must have been pleased to make this link with the past of the actor who had brought him to Shakespeare in performance.

It was also at the beginning of the 1906 tour that Frediswyde Hunter-Watts joined the company. Born in Sussex in 1887, she was at this time nineteen years of age. Her father, J. Hunter-Watts, was a foundation member of the Fabian Society, and by virtue of this, was acquainted with George Bernard Shaw - a somewhat tenuous link with fame, but one that was to be resurrected for publicity purposes in later years.[22] Like Allan Wilkie she had been fascinated by her first Shakespeare play (Beerbohm Tree's production of *Richard II*), seer, at the age of fifteen, and consequently had made every effort to become a Shakespearean actress.[23] According to Wilkie's memoirs,

she had been a student at Beerbohm Tree's Academy of Dramatic Art (founded in 1904), but as far as I can discover, this was not the case.[24] Instead, she spent a year at the Westminster School of Arts, developing a latent talent which in later years led her to design many of the stage costumes she wore. On her days off from art school she took the usual lessons in dancing, fencing and elocution as preparation for her intended career. Her first stage appearance was in the chorus in Euripides' *The Trojan Women* at Her Majesty's Theatre, and she then trained in Shakespeare, "playing five or six parts in one evening, as page, acolyte, waiting woman, joined Wilkie's company, it²⁵ swordbearer and the like." When she was to play minor roles, probably including such parts as the Player Queen and later Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Lucius, Pindarus and Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, and Stephano, Balthazar, Jessica and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*. Indeed, when she first joined the company, it was to play a page in the latter play. It was still common practice at that time for girls and young women to take the roles of boys and minor male characters in productions of Shakespeare's plays. In 1856, Ellen Terry, aged nine, had made her stage debut at the Princess Theatre as Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*." The practice would continue to be adopted by Wilkie well into the 1920s.

In 1908, about two years after she joined the company, Frediswyde Hunter-Watts and Allan Wilkie were married. This was a second marriage for Wilkie. As he wrote, "together we were to share both our lives and our theatrical careers, in a partnership

which brought us great happiness for almost half a century."²⁹
Douglas Wilkie, their only child, was born in Derbyshire in 1908. Because it was impractical for the child to travel with them on extensive and disruptive tours, he was cared for by his Hunter-Watts grandparents. This began a pattern in which he rarely saw his parents until, at the age of eighteen, he left the last of a line of boarding schools, and went to Australia to tour with them, briefly, before commencing a career in journalism. In the opinion of Douglas Wilkie, his mother was a much better actress than his father was an actor, and in order to remain with him she sacrificed a career which could otherwise have taken her to the West End stage. Instead, when Carrie Baillie, who was Wilkie's current leading lady around 1910, left the company, Miss Hunter-Watts took her place, proving her mettle by preparing and playing eighteen roles in three weeks.

Between the years 1906 and 1911, the Allan Wilkie company continued to tour the provinces. During this six-year period, Wilkie estimated, he produced over thirty plays. These included about a dozen of the more popular plays of Shakespeare, comedies by Sheridan and Goldsmith, and a number of melodramas. The principal melodramas added to his repertoire included two by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, both of which had proved very popular vehicles in the past for Henry Irving. The plays were *The Lady of Lyons* (1838), in which Wilkie, like Irving, took the role of Claude Melnotte, and *Richelieu., or the Conspiracy* (1839). In addition, Wilkie played the lead in *Virginins* (1820) by Sheridan Knowles, as well as

in a number of other pieces.

The programmes were exceptionally heavy work for a star actor apart from managerial duties. In the north of England where I spent most of my time, Lancashire alone absorbing nearly half the year, the popular taste ran to tragedy or drama for five nights a week with a comedy on the Friday which was regarded as the "fashionable" night. As a special attraction I would frequently give a double bill composed of say *The Bells* and *The Corsican Brothers*, or a collection of five acts from the most popular plays of my repertoire.³¹

It is clear from this account of audience-demand that Wilkie had little opportunity to convert his company to a programme composed entirely of Shakespeare's plays, which for him was a "consummation devoutly to be wished".

Wilkie glosses over these years in his memoirs with very little comment. They were businesslike but unremarkable, and the company was evidently not hailed as exceptional. After all, as Wilkie admitted, his was only one of a number of companies travelling the same circuit and presenting similar fare. Such companies met a need which was later to be filled by the silent movies - which in due course eroded the popularity of this kind of theatrical venture. Wilkie attempted to gain prestige for his company by obtaining bookings, where possible, in the "number one" theatres, even though performances in smaller theatres, with more generous terms, would often bring a better profit. By 1911, theatrical business was at a very low ebb, which Wilkie attributed primarily to the excessively hot weather, lasting from Easter to October. There seemed little chance of any real advance for the company. Faced with this situation, Wilkie was open to the possibility of a complete change,

and when an opportunity was offered to him, he seized it. He happened to meet the representative of a theatre proprietor in Calcutta, who was in England looking for a company that would be prepared to play a season of Shakespeare in India. This season was to coincide with the planned visit of King George V and Queen Mary for the Royal Durbar. Wilkie was casually asked if he would care to take his own company to India:

I jumped at the offer. Not that the adverse conditions in England were the sole inducement. I welcomed the opportunity to explore fresh fields, particularly when the fresh fields were those of the romantic East as a contrast to the grimy industrial towns of the north of England.[32]

In India, the company would have less competition, which might increase profits. In addition, Wilkie would have his first real opportunity to present a repertoire of Shakespeare's plays.

The Wilkies sailed for Calcutta by the *S.S. Nubia* on 11 September 1911, at the head of a company of twenty. The agreement Wilkie had reached with the Cohen firm, in whose theatres he was to play, was that he would tour India for them for about six months. This period was to include a season in Calcutta from Christmas 1911, designed to coincide with the royal visit. In fact, the company opened in Calcutta at the Grand Opera House in October, with a performance of Wilkie's "lucky mascot", *The Merchant of Venice*. After six weeks in Calcutta, they travelled to Bombay, where performances were given over two weeks. At the same time, additions to the repertoire were prepared, and these were presented during a return season in Calcutta timed to coincide with the visit of King George. Although Calcutta had seen no Shakespeare for the

previous twenty-five years, the city was now faced with a surfeit, since Matheson Lang's company had also chosen to play there at that time, offering *Othello*, *Hamlet* and other plays. However, the crowds of visitors to Calcutta ensured that both companies played to good houses. After the second season in Calcutta, the Wilkie company embarked on a tour to Rangoon, Madras, Tuticorin and Colombo, playing in each city for about a fortnight.

It soon became clear to Wilkie that he had made a wise decision to leave England. In India, the prestige of his company increased enormously. They were welcome in every city, and their performances were well attended, presumably by an Anglo-Indian population starved for culture and entertainment from the homeland. One of the more interesting aspects of Wilkie's tour is that he catered for all sections of the community. He played primarily for the British community, although this stretched the repertoire to its limits, since the relatively small numbers meant a high turnover of plays to keep up attendance levels. However, the company also performed in theatres in the "native quarter" from time to time, encountering there a public fascinated by Shakespeare and the classics. Wilkie writes of the native audiences with a mixture of amusement and superiority which is normal for his age and upbringing:

On several Sunday evenings we played at the Koh-i-Nor Theatre in the native quarter, to an audience comprised entirely of Bengalis who demonstrated their appreciation of our efforts in a naive and almost child-like manner. During the more pathetic and moving scenes of *Othello* they would weep openly and unashamed ... and the realistic combat between Macbeth and Macduff aroused them to such a frenzy of excitement and panic that many of them dived under their seats and others made a mad rush for the doors. 34

These must surely have been the most responsive audiences to which he ever played.

It was about April 1912 when Wilkie's arrangement with the Cohen firm expired. The tour had evidently been prosperous, and this encouraged Wilkie to make the decision to remain in India with his company for an indefinite period, presenting plays on his own behalf. The newly-independent Wilkie company began its tour with a second visit to Bombay, and then travelled round India. Beginning in the north, in what is now Pakistan, they played in Karachi, in Quetta (to audiences drawn entirely from the British regiments), and in Lahore. Here they gave what may have been the first open-air performance organised by Wilkie. They played *As You Like It* in the Lawrence Gardens, "known to all readers of Kipling's *Kim*".[35] Many open-air performances were given after this, the *hot* climate often making it too uncomfortable for the company to perform in a theatre. The tour continued to Meerut, to Nain-i-Tal in the Himalayas, to Allahabad, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Mussoorie and then back to Calcutta at the end of July 1912, to play a third season there before moving on again.

Throughout the tour, the company had to become accustomed to new routines and hazards. Greasepaint would vanish in a stream of sweat on stage, particularly during the heat of matinees, and make-up had to be blotted with blotting paper. At the Grand Opera House in Calcutta, actors had to compete with the noise made by donkeys in the roof of the theatre. When the mood took them, these donkeys would fling missiles - such as pieces of wood, or even

spanners - down at the stage from above. Company members had to contend with bouts of fever, while one unfortunate actress contracted typhoid. Sickness often left the company unexpectedly short-handed, so that an advertised performance might have to be changed at the last moment. On one occasion, Wilkie was obliged to treble the roles of Friar Lawrence, Mercutio and Prince Escalus in a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, a feat which he believed to be unprecedented. On another occasion, a performance of the same play had to be cancelled because only four members of the cast were sufficiently healthy. Under these circumstances, Wilkie would hastily substitute another play with a smaller cast.

In order to meet such emergencies, it was necessary to have an extensive repertoire. Wilkie gradually added about a dozen modern plays, bringing the total up to about thirty. The modern plays included Tom Robertson's *David Garrick* (1864), an adaptation of Walter Scott's *Bob Roy*, and inevitably *East Lynne*. A more unusual choice was Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, with Miss Hunter-Watts in the title role. *Salome*, written in French in 1893, had had its first performance in Paris in 1896, and in London, in an English translation by Lord Alfred Douglas, in 1905. The latter was a private performance, since the play was refused a licence for public performance in England. It would have been interesting to learn Wilkie's reasons for selecting such a comparatively daring play, but unfortunately his memoirs make no comment on this point. These modern plays were added to a Shakespearean repertoire which included *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Wilkie was faced with a

considerable financial burden because of the expense involved in transporting a company of twenty, together with scenery, costumes and properties for all the plays, over long distances. There was a time when these difficulties nearly forced him to abandon the tour and return to England, but circumstances improved, and the tour continued. In addition to the money Wilkie was making, he must have been gratified by the intense enthusiasm and love for Shakespeare which he encountered in India. No longer was the Wilkie company one of a dozen or more touring the same circuit. Now he could offer a real service to people starved for Shakespeare, who were prepared to go to great lengths to see his productions. In his memoirs, Wilkie drew a striking example of this enthusiasm:

Some half dozen Indian students living in a little up-country village, who had formed a Shakespeare society for the mutual study of the poet's works, learning that an English company was playing *Hamlet* in Bangalore, determined not to miss this, the only opportunity they might ever have of seeing the tragedy enacted upon the stage. Their visit to Bangalore for this purpose necessitated with the return journey over a week's travelling, as they had to walk through the jungle sixty miles to the nearest railway station, with a three hundred mile train journey to follow.[36]

The company paid a return visit to Ceylon, playing in Colombo for three weeks and in Kandy for two nights. The theatre at Kandy was the most primitive they had encountered, with trees and plants growing wild through the dressing-rooms and under the stage. The company brought no scenery for their brief visit, relying on a native artist to paint the required setting, which included a drawing room opening on to a typically English garden. On making his

entrance in the play, Wilkie discovered, to his horror, that the artist had filled this garden with exotic vegetation:

Moreover, in the foreground, two huge Bengal tigers crouched amongst the flower beds and to render them truly realistic, he had affixed large pieces of tinfoil to the canvas to represent the eyeballs of these typically British "wild-fowl".³⁷

Colombo provided Wilkie with another very striking scenic arrangement. He decided to stage *Salome* there, for which he had "a simple but quite effective setting which was backed by a plain sky cloth." One wonders how adequately these limited resources filled the exotic requirements of the text:

A great terrace in the palace of Herod, set above the banqueting-hall. ... To the right, there is a gigantic staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze. Moonlight.³⁹

However, on this occasion, Wilkie discovered that to leave open the back of the theatre gave the play an ideal setting, with a vista of palm trees, a minaret, and other characteristic features of the east. The audience was so delighted by this enchanting spectacle -hat it gave "such a prolonged and hearty round of applause as our histrionic efforts and the strange beauties of Wilde's exotic play never evoked." ■

40

Since the company's fortunes had improved, and the tour of India had proved so successful, Wilkie was sufficiently encouraged to plan an extended tour of the Far East, which would take him to China, the Malay States, the Philippines and northwards as far as Japan. The company sailed from Colombo for Singapore in September 1912, and after performances there, began a tour which took them

first to Kuala Lumpur, then to Hong Kong, and then to mainland China, where they made forays along the east coast, playing at Shanghai's Gaiety Theatre, then inland to Tientsin and to Peking. In Shanghai, they performed Sydney Grundy's *A Bunch of Violets* (1894), the first play Wilkie had seen, which he now produced for "sentimental reasons".⁴¹

There followed a six-week tour of Japan, including visits to Nagasaki, Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe and Yokohama. In the latter city they remained longest, because it had the greatest concentration of foreigners, and they were mainly reliant on the foreign population for support. The Imperial Theatre in Tokyo Wilkie regarded as the best in which he had ever played, and he wrote with admiration of its revolving stage, its proscenium opening seventy feet wide, its orchestra of sixty and its seating capacity of over three thousand. The season in Osaka stretched his determination, since he contracted a bad case of influenza but forced himself to continue with performances, playing Shylock, Hamlet and Othello on three successive nights, with a temperature hovering between 103 and 104 . In fact, only once in his career was he forced by illness not to appear -in a season in Perth, Western Australia, in 1918.

Wilkie had hoped to complete a circuit of the globe by travelling from Japan to South America and the West Indies, and *then* on to England, but he found it impossible to organise South American theatre bookings by correspondence, and so abandoned this plan. Instead, the company retraced its steps through Asia, adding venues which had previously been omitted. Christmas 1912 was spent

in Shanghai, with subsequent visits to Hong Kong and Canton, and -
he company then sailed to the Philippines. In Manila, the
repertoire included not only Wilde's *Salome* but also George Bernard
Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Shaw's play, written in 1893, had
been given its first private performance by the English Stage
Society in 1902. However, it was not to be granted a licence for
public performance in England until 1924, as it was considered to be

42

an immoral play. The Attorney-General, having heard of Wilkie's
intention, announced that the two plays by Shaw and Wilde could not
be performed in Manila since neither was licensed for the English
stage. Wilkie arranged for a representative of the Attorney-General
to attend a rehearsal and decide whether the plays really needed to
be banned. By chance, the official attended a rehearsal of James
Shirley's *The Cardinal* instead, and not knowing "he plays, was none
the wiser. Naturally, he passed the plays as fit for public
performance - and the final result was excellent
business for the Wilkie company, since news of the ban ensured
packed houses for the performances of both plays.⁴³

After the season in the Philippines, the company played again
in Hong Kong, Singapore and the Malay States, and the tour concluded
with return seasons in Ceylon, at Colombo and Kandy. From Kandy,
they sailed back to England, where the company presumably
disbanded, in or around May 1913. The original tour had been
extended from about eighteen weeks to twenty months, and in that time
much of East Asia had been travelled:

I had transported my company some 30,000 miles or more by land and sea and produced over thirty plays, staging Shakespeare in many places for the first time and frequently to alien races whose enthusiastic appreciation testified once more that not only is Shakespeare for all time but for all peoples.⁴⁴"

Wilkie and his wife, temporarily reunited with their son, settled in England for the remainder of 1913, accepting engagements wherever they could obtain them. Wilkie appeared in a production of *Ivanhoe* at the Lyceum which opened on 22 May and ran until 5 July. This adaptation of Scott's novel, which may have been the 1820 version by Tom Dibdin, starred Miss Tittell Brune as Rebecca and Lauderdale Maitland as Ivanhoe. Wilkie's name certainly appears on the advertising for this production, but no indication is given of the role he played. The production closely followed the "house style" of Lyceum melodrama, which was run at that time by the Melville brothers, though Wilkie considered it to have been "ambitious but not very successful". His next engagement of note was to play the role of Sir John Falstaff in a two-week season of *Henry IV Part I* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. The production, which opened on 11 October, was produced by the Reverend Arnold Pinchard, a co-founder, with Barry Jackson, of the company. At that time, Frank D. Clewlow was the company's resident stage manager, his previous engagement being to tour the Far East with Wilkie. It would seem likely that he was instrumental in getting Wilkie the role of Falstaff, for which no suitable actor could be found in the Repertory company at that time. ⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Frediswyde Hunter-Watts had played Candida in

Bernard Shaw's play, apparently in a production for which no rights had been obtained from Shaw. He wrote to her, in mildly chiding tone:

I was right when I said you would one day be playing *Candida*. You have played it - without my leave. However, I bear no malice. A youth spent in piracy may be a spirited beginning of a career of legitimate enterprise. Let me know if you happen to be playing anywhere within my reach, so as to give me a chance of seeing what you can do. I have nothing uncast at present.[47]

It is most unlikely that she played *Candida* during these months in London, or Shaw would have had the opportunity to see her. There remain two possibilities - first, that she played the role somewhere in the provinces; and secondly, that it was one of the productions staged by the Wilkie company in the Far East.⁴³ Shaw's note, then, sounds like the response to a request for a part in one of *his* plays.

Wilkie could raise little enthusiasm for a return to his former existence, touring the industrial regions of the north. He was anxious to obtain professional theatre work which would take him to other countries once more, where his talents would be better appreciated. Accordingly, he was more than happy to accept an offer, received at the end of 1913, to join a company that was to tour South Africa. This tour was organised by Leonard Rayne, an actor-manager who controlled a chain of theatres in that
type of⁴⁹ country. Wilkie's memoirs give no indication of the plays performed, but the tour, which opened at Cape Town in January 1914, was evidently successful. The company performed in

all major centres, including Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Durban and Pretoria. A re-organisation of the company-left a vacancy for an actress, and this enabled Miss Hunter-Watts to leave England and join her husband. The tour continued until November 1914, with an expanded circuit which included many of the smaller towns, and a final long stock season in Cape Town. Wilkie recalls that the company heard war declared on 4 August 1914, while they were playing in Pretoria.

Once the South African engagement had ended, the Wilkies found that they had no great desire to return to England, as there did not seem to be any good professional prospects on the horizon. They believed, too, "as I think most people did at that time", that the war would end within a few months. After much discussion, the Wilkies decided to go to Australia.

Although it was a terra incognita to us both theatrically and otherwise, my wife had some relatives who had recently settled there, in the neighbourhood of Sydney. There it seemed we might find a temporary home; and a visit to Australia would appease our thirst for further travel.⁵¹

Having reached this decision, Allan Wilkie and his wife sailed -"or Australia in the *Demosthenes*, towards the end of November 1914.

CHAPTER TWO: FOOTNOTES

1. Wilkie, p.72.
 2. Wilkie, p.74.
 3. Wilkie, p.73.
 4. The Hobart *Mercury*, 11 January 1922.
 5. Hal Porter, *Stars of Australian Stage and Screen* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965), p.114.
 6. Wilkie, p.71.
 7. H.F. Maltby, *Ring Up the Curtain* ('London: Hutchinson, 1950), p.110. There is some discrepancy here, since Wilkie's account does not indicate that anyone helped him with the company's management.
 8. Letter to the *daily Telegraph*, 1953, from Allan Wilkie. Supplied by A.C. Sprague.
 9. Wilkie, pp.74-75.
 10. Letter to Sprague, 12 October 1964.
 11. Wilkie, p.75.
 12. Wilkie, p.78. Wilkie and Maltby (pp.110-11) both record anecdotes about Paley.
 13. Wilkie, p.123. He was frequently to record his dislike of modern-dress or unnecessarily-innovative productions. For example, on seeing a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (which featured John Gielgud, Diana Wynyard and Paul Scofield), Wilkie took exception to the scenic arrangements, commenting that "anything for novelty is the watchword for Shakespearean production today. I am by no means a hidebound traditionalist but I do not think one is justified in discarding the accumulated experience and inspiration of all the great actors of the past unless one has something as good, or better, to offer in place of what they have evolved by trial and error." (Letter to A.C. Sprague, 1 December 1952.)
 - 4. Letter to Sprague, c.1945 (no precise date).
 - 5. Letter to Marie Ney, 13 March 1968. -6.
- Wilkie, p.83.

17. Wilkie's memoirs give no clear indication of the Shakespeare plays included in his repertoire in the years 1906-1911. However, a publicity pamphlet (n.d.) which shows Wilkie in a number of roles may provide an answer. The photographs it contains were all taken at studios in York and Manchester, which suggests that plays performed by Wilkie during this period included: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *As You Like It*.
18. Information from *Who Was Who in the Theatre: 1912-1976*.
19. Wilkie, p.85.
20. Wilkie, p.92.
21. Hartnoll (ed), *Oxford Companion*, p.311.
22. For example, in the *Tasmanian Mail*, 30 December 1920, it was reported that Miss Hunter-Watts was a personal friend of Shaw, and that she was from "a famous English family".
23. From an article by Miss Hunter-Watts in "The Shakespearean Chronicle", a four-page souvenir of Wilkie's 1,000th consecutive performance of Shakespeare, Brisbane, 13 June 1924, p.3.
24. Wilkie's memoirs describe her as a "very enthusiastic graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art" (p.92). However, in "The Shakespearean Chronicle" and again in an interview with the Hobart *Mercury* (5 January 1928), Miss Hunter-Watts makes it clear that, although she would have liked to attend the Academy, she was not able to do so.
25. Interview with Miss Hunter-Watts in the Hobart *Mercury*, 5 January 1928.
26. "The Shakespearean Chronicle" souvenir, p.2, lists all the Shakespearean parts played by Miss Hunter-Watts to June 1924.
27. Ellen Terry, *The Story of my Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1908), p.12.
28. Wilkie's memoirs make no mention of a first marriage, but his obituary in *The Times* (8 January 1970) clearly states that Miss Hunter-Watts was his second wife. This point was confirmed for me by Douglas Wilkie, who was unable to supply any further information except that his father's first wife, who later worked for the BBC, was named Cameron.
29. Wilkie, p.92.
30. Douglas Wilkie interviewed by me in Melbourne, 16 May 1980.

31. Wilkie, p.100.
32. Wilkie, p.112.
33. Holloway, p.145.
34. Wilkie, p.121.
35. Wilkie, p.139.
36. Wilkie, p.155.
37. "The Shakespearean Chronicle" souvenir, p.3; Wilkie, p.159.
38. Wilkie, p.158.
39. Oscar Wilde, trans. Lord Alfred Douglas, *Salome* (1894; Harmondsworth: Penguin edn, 1968), p.319.
40. Wilkie, p.158.
41. "The Shakespearean Chronicle", p.2.
42. Hesketh Pearson, *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality* (London: Collins, 1945), pp.188, 190.
43. In 1905, the New York production of *Mrs Warren's Profession* had also done excellent business as a result of the ban initially placed upon it. Pearson, p.189.
44. Wilkie, p.197.
45. Wilkie, p.197. The play was reviewed in *The Times*, 23 May 1913.
46. Clewlow was stage manager for Birmingham Repertory from August 1913 to June 1918. See Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924), pp.51, 176, 210.
47. Note dated 23 August 1913, supplied to me by Douglas Wilkie.
48. Wilkie's entry in *Who Was Who in the Theatre, 1912-1976* indicates that the following plays might have been included in the repertoire for the tour of the Far East: Pinerro, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893); Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892); Henry Arthur Jones, *Mrs Dane's Defence* (1900); Shaw, *Candida* (1900).
49. Leonard Rayne (1869-1925) was the lessee of the Gaiety in Johannesburg, and the sub-lessee of a number of theatres, including the Opera House, Cape Town. Information supplied in *Who Was Who in the Theatre*.

50. Wilkie, p.205.

51. Wilkie, p.205.