

## NELLIE STEWART –

### GRAHAM SHIRLEY'S SPEECH FOR WOOLLAHRA PLAQUE SCHEME

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Firstly, I want to thank Woollahra Council for inviting me to speak today. As somebody who knew the outline of Nellie's Stewart's life and the fact that she appeared in an Australian feature film in 1911, it wasn't until two years ago - when I was invited to write an article for the State Library about that film and Nellie's subsequent sound recordings - that I learned a lot more about her story. Having written about Nellie, I realise the great significance of the plaque being unveiled today. It's a plaque which will see her recognised among others in the arts and literature fields previously recognised by the Woollahra Council Plaque Scheme.

Nellie Stewart was a child of theatre parents. Her mother was Theodosia Yates, a great-granddaughter of Richard Yates and Mary Ann Yates, celebrated 18<sup>th</sup> century performers at Drury Lane, London. Theodosia herself taught choruses at Drury Lane and she arrived in Australia in 1840 with an operatic company. Her first husband was the actor, James Guerin. After his death, her second marriage was to the former gold-miner Richard Stewart Towzey, who adopted the stage name 'Stewart' and became a stage actor as well as manager.

Nellie was born Eleanor Towzey Stewart in Woolloomooloo on 20 November 1858. When the family moved to Melbourne, Nellie was educated at the National Model and Training School, and at the Grandtown House boarding school. At the age of two, she made her first stage appearance in a play called *The Stranger*. In 1878, she appeared in what she considered was her first notable professional role - singing and dancing with other members of her family in a revue show called *Rainbow Revels*. After appearing profitably in *Rainbow Revels* and a similar production in Australia and New Zealand, the family travelled to present both shows in Calcutta and Bombay.

The Stewart family then took the production to America, from where in late 1880 they returned to Melbourne so that Nellie could appear for 14 weeks in the title role of *Sinbad the Sailor*. Having admired her work in that pantomime, producer George Musgrove cast her

in 1882 as Stella in Offenbach's musical extravaganza, *La Fille du Tambour-Major*, which was to be Nellie's comic opera debut.

*La Fille du Tambour-Major* also brought the start of Nellie's personal and professional relationship with George Musgrove. This was a relationship that paused only temporarily when, in January 1884, Nellie married and then soon separated from Richard Goldsborough Row, a marriage that was annulled in 1901. George Musgrove was already married to a woman who refused to divorce him. Although Nellie couldn't marry Musgrove, from 1885 until her death, she wore a distinctive gold bangle as a private symbol of her and Musgrove's devotion to each other. She even wore the bangle on stage, and it was so noticeable that it inspired a fashion trend. In the words of historian Anita Boyd, for decade after decade in Australia and New Zealand, "these bangles were exchanged as material symbols of romantic love in courtship rituals and handed down through generations as sentimental love objects". For many years, members of the public wearing a Nellie Stewart Bangle had no idea of the great significance of the original bangle to Nellie herself and George Musgrove.

In late 1883 Nellie became J. C. Williamson's prima donna, and for the next four years she sang continuously in comic opera, playing 21 roles as she toured with the managers George Musgrove, J.C. Williamson, and Arthur Garner. Hal Porter was later to write: "Nellie Stewart's earlier fame came largely through her dynamic stage presence and her singing voice which, though not of La Scala quality, was nevertheless a true one of much sweetness. ... Her physical radiance and exuberant health were bywords. Despite almost continual appearances, overseas as well as in her native country, this exuberance remained undiminished."

George Musgrove continued to steer and promote Nellie's career, and in London he produced her in *Blue Eye Susan* at the Prince of Wales Theatre and in *Forty Thieves* at Drury Lane. For the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Jean Gittins was to write of Musgrove that in the 1880s he "was a new sort of producer", and "he carefully studied the taste of audiences before introducing new ideas. Sometimes brusque, he was kind-hearted and always just and considerate to his players. His aim was good production; money was a secondary matter, and he is said to have made and lost half a dozen fortunes." In her autobiography, Nellie wrote that Musgrove was "a great and good man".

In 1888 Nellie permanently damaged her voice when - as Marguerite - she sang for 24 consecutive nights in the grand opera *Faust*. After starring for George Musgrove in an 1889 production of *Paul Jones*, Nellie travelled with Musgrove to England. It was in England that in June 1893 Nellie gave birth to her and Musgrove's daughter Nancye, who – as Nancye Stewart – was later to have a career on stage, radio, and in television. After Nancye's birth, Nellie returned to Australia where, in September 1893, she began performing a repertoire of nine operas. By 1895, she had again overstrained her voice. She travelled back to England and rested for four years. She was able, nevertheless, to sing the memorial ode *Australia* at the first opening of Australia's federal parliament in 1901.

On 15 February 1902, Nellie, at the age of 44, first appeared in *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*. The play by Paul Kester was set in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and featured Stewart as Nell Gwynne who in real-life had been an orange seller who became an actress and mistress of King Charles II. Although the play's fortunes seemed uncertain in its first fortnight, Stuart as Nell Gwynne enraptured the public, and *Sweet Nell of Old Drury* soon became an enormous success. Nellie Stewart returned repeatedly to the role for the next thirty years, and in the eyes of the public, her personality and appearance accurately reflected those of the real-life Nell Gwynne. In October 1911, Nellie told *The Theatre* magazine that *Sweet Nell* was "the play in which I was to make my first appearance in drama of a romantic, picturesque character, and a class of work for which I had always been longing".

Back in 1906, Nellie and Musgrove began touring the play in America. They had been warned that the play could not possibly run for more than a week in San Francisco, and yet from January 1906 it played there for a month and subsequently returned for another two weeks. George Musgrove was still in San Francisco at the time of that city's catastrophic 18 April 1906 earthquake but survived unhurt. Nellie had left San Francisco four days before the quake with the aim of touring *Sweet Nell* to other American cities. New York was their main destination, but the quake soon sent the American theatre scene into chaos. All other touring companies based in New York were ordered back to that city. Nellie remembered: "It was for this reason that we could not get into New York. Every hall was taken." According to Hal Porter, the financial loss that Nellie and George Musgrove sustained because of the quake "was a calamity from which they were never fully to recover".

But there were initially hopeful signs. While in America, Nellie was able to sign up with the American theatre entertainment syndicate Klaw and Erlanger as a leading lady. But before she could perform for them, she developed a neck and shoulder problem and went to England for surgery. Since this meant not being able to work for Klaw and Erlanger, she returned in Australia to resume dramatic work.

In 1909 Nellie had another notable success in *Sweet Kitty Belairs*. A long season alternated that play with her appearances in a play called *Zaza*, along with Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and revivals of *Sweet Nell*. In March 1910, Nellie had further success as Maggie Wylie in *What Every Woman Knows*, followed by the role of Princess Mary in *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, and the title role of *Trilby*. In 1910 and early 1911, Nellie and Musgrove toured plays with a full company through 32 towns of New Zealand, followed by a similar tour of eastern Australia.

After 1910, Nellie devoted herself to fundraising for disadvantaged children and impoverished hospital patients. Unlike some Australian stage performers who moved to America and found new stardom in American silent films, she continued to live in Australia and publicly identify as Australian until the end of her life.

In September 1911, Nellie became one of the first of the international stage stars to appear in a feature film when she appeared in Spencer's Pictures' film adaptation of *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*. When George Musgrove began directing the film, he intended that it should be a carbon-copy of his stage production. According to Australian filmmaker Raymond Longford, Musgrove expended 15,000 feet of film before he accepted his approach was not working. After a revision of Musgrove's contract, Raymond Longford, who was an experienced filmmaker, took over the direction of *Sweet Nell*, and started again from scratch. The film's interiors were shot at a temporary studio at Wonderland City in Tamarama. Exteriors included scenes shot in the gardens of mansions in and around Elizabeth Bay and Potts Point. For appearing in the film, Nellie Stewart was reportedly paid one thousand pounds – half of the film's budget – along with a share of the film's profits.

The *Sweet Nell* film was an enormous success when it premiered at Sydney's Lyceum Theatre in December 1911. Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* reported that when Nellie first appeared onscreen, "there was great applause; and as she advanced into the foreground

and coyly held out an orange, as if offering it to the audience, she had a fine reception". *The Theatre* magazine wrote: "The film is of historic value, for future generations will see it when there is but the name of Sweet Nell left." In 1914, the film was released in America as *Nell Gwynne*, with *Variety* judging that Stewart "does very good work and gets all that she can out of the part".

In Australia, the filmed *Sweet Nell of Old Drury* screened for at least six years, and *Everyones* magazine in 1931 claimed that it held the record "for the number of city revivals". During the film's early screenings, reviewers stressed the importance of preserving it for posterity. In her 1923 autobiography Nellie wrote of her belief that "a set of reels of this film is held, to be produced after I am no more". But by 1931, it was considered a lost film. In the 1960s, Nellie's biographer Marjorie Skill and film producer and historian Tony Buckley believed that the film had been deposited either with the State Library of New South Wales or the State Library of Victoria. But the historians' inquiries yielded no trace of the film.

After touring again with the theatre version of *Sweet Nell* in 1911 and 1912, Nellie made only sporadic appearances on stage. Her life partner and producer George Musgrove died in January 1916, leading her to later say that she felt "like one who had been torn apart from some other world".

Nellie now embarked on a lean period, and the impact of World War 1 on live theatre meant that she lost nearly all her savings. But Hugh D. McIntosh of Tivoli Theatres Ltd. persuaded her to appear between May and July 1917 in a serial form of *Sweet Nell* at Sydney's and Melbourne's Tivoli venues, with one act produced each week. On 21 May 1917, the Melbourne *Argus* described Nellie's first appearance at that city's Tivoli as "one of the greatest demonstrations that have ever been given an artist on the Australian stage. There was much enthusiasm when the performance commenced, and at the close, thunders of applause rang through the house for more than 10 minutes."

When, in subsequent years, Nellie did periodically appear onstage, it was usually in revivals of *Sweet Nell*. In July 1930, her last fully professional stage appearance was at the age of 72 at the Comedy Theatre Melbourne where she played the lead role of Margherita Cavallini, an opera singer, in a play called *Romance*. It was the same role that Greta Garbo played that year in a Hollywood film adaptation. Also in 1930, W.B. McInnes painted a portrait of Nellie,

featuring her as Nell Gwyne in Act 2 of *Sweet Nell*. Her final stage appearance of any kind was a charity performance at the Mosman Town Hall for the benefit of distressed women and children. At that event, she played Nell in the first act of *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, before playing Romeo to the Juliet of Nancye Stewart, in the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Toward the end of her life, Nellie Stewart continued to believe in the value of leaving a lasting legacy of her work, and of being remembered. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1931 she appeared in two sound recordings produced by the Columbia Graphophone company at their studio in Homebush. One of the records featured Nellie and other actors – including her daughter Nancye and son-in-law Mayne Lynton - in two extracts from *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*. The other record was the monologue, *Nellie Stewart Addresses Her Public*.

The final words of Nellie’s autobiography and the first words of the recording, *Nellie Stewart Addresses Her Public* are a quote from the final words of *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*: “Memory will be my happiness / For you are enshrined there”. The last words of the recording hint at Nellie’s possible reunion with her public in the afterlife when she says: “And when I am no longer with you, I want you to think of me as just withdrawn into the dimness ... And so, to where I wait, come gently on. Always the same, Nellie Stewart”.

In 1938, something of the perfectionist that was part of Nellie Stewart’s personality was revealed by Nancye Stewart, who told *Wireless Weekly* that although Columbia had been thoroughly happy with the first takes of the two recordings, Nellie “insisted that they were dreadful, and must be repeated again and again”. In writing about Nellie in May 1931, journalist Nora Cooper quoted Nellie recalling that her mother, Theodosia, when working onstage “did not believe in any slackness or pampering or weakness”. Cooper wondered if amongst all the gifts nature had endowed Nellie, “this little stubborn streak which Nellie Stewart inherited from Theodosia - the unrelenting ceaseless desire always to ‘do better’ which has been such a characteristic of her own work - was not the best gift of all”.

Nellie died in Sydney on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1931, and her death made headlines around the world. At her funeral on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June at Sydney’s St. James’ Church, the surrounding streets were packed with thousands of admirers. *The Sydney Morning Herald* wrote of the funeral: “There were actors and actresses of a generation grown old, and there were actors and actresses now in their heyday of their fame. There were people on whom Miss Stewart

had conferred some kindness long ago, and people who had never known her, but had admired and loved her. As the funeral procession moved slowly down the aisle, sobbing women touched the casket with their fingers.”

Nellie’s ashes were buried in her family grave plot at the Boroondara cemetery in Kew, Melbourne. To this day, seated in front of the cross that sits atop the grave is a stone angel bearing Nellie’s facial likeness.