

OSCAR ASCHE

- A. THOMAS ASCHE , son of Thomas von ASCHE, 1780-1826, born 1826 Graduate Christiana University, 1847, possibly migrated to Victoria 1848 [51 or 52]. Miner and storekeeper on Ballarat and Bendigo goldfields. Married with one son, John

1865-67 Land agent at Camperdown

186 John attended Geelong College.

1866 Thomas Asche wed Harriet Trear in September at Christ Church, Geelong.

B OSCAR ASCHE

- 1871 26 Jan. Thomas Stanger Heiss Oscar Asche born at Geelong.
Mar. Thomas Asche acquired licence of Mack's Hotel.
" " , a Town Councillor, stood for Parliament unsuccessfully.
- 1876 Family moved to Melbourne. Union Club Hotel.
- 1878 Oscar attended Miss Shaw's school at Dandenong. [{Laurel Lodge}]
- 1879 His brother Harold died.
- ? Oscar attended St James Grammar School.
- 1884 " " Melbourne Grammar.
- 1886 Thomas moved to Royal Hotel, George St., Sydney.
- 1887 Oscar moved to Sydney.
- 1891 or 92 Oscar Asche went to Norway to study for the stage.
- 1892 He met Henrik Ibsen. Went to London for further study.
- 1893 25 Mar. First stage role, at Opera Comique in Man and Woman.
Bank crashes in Sydney. Thomas Asche ruined,
Oscar Asche found employment in F.R.Benson's Shakespearean Coy.
- 1894 O.A. acting in Ireland.
- 1899 Jun. O.A. married actress Lily Brayton at Hindley.
- 1901 Appeared in Iris at Garrick Theatre, London.
" To New York.
- 1902 Feb Joined Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's Coy. in London.
- 1907 With Lily Brayton and Otho Stuart established own company.
" Published Shakespeare's Comedy, As You Like It, Arranged for the Stage.
- 1909 Brought his company on tour of Australia. Revisited Geelong.
- 1910 Sailed for London. Adapted and produced Kismet.
- ? Returned to Australia. Tour of New Zealand. Death of his mother.
- 1914 Oct. Staged his musical Mameena in London.
- 1916 Aug. Chu Chin Chow: Asche wrote, produced, designed decor, and acted in this production.
- 1917 31 Jan Lieut.Fritz Asche, A.I.F. killed in France.
- 1921 ? Oscar Asche produced Maid of the Mountains in London.
- 1921 22 Jul Chu Chin Chow closed after 2235 performances.
Asche wrote and produced Cairo in London.
- 1922 22 Jul Sailed for Sydney. Final Australian tour.
23 Dec Staged Cairo in Melbourne.
- 1923 Produced A Southern Maid with Gladys Moncrieff & Claude Flemming.
" Staged Julius Caesar.
- 7 Mar. " Chu Chin Chow at Her Majesty's.
- 1924 8 Mar. " Iris at King's Theatre
25 Mar. " Othello at Geelong. Civic Reception by Cr R. Purnell.

appeared in *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and Asche's own adaptations of Stanley Wyman's book *Count Hannibal* and Besier's *The Virgin Goddess*.

Asche's *Othello* garnered more than its share of audience involvement. One night, when Asche was disposing of his Desdemona, a woman shouted, 'You big black ...' The crowded house waited for the next word, and sighed with relief when it turned out to be 'beast'. And during another performance an excited youth called out to Iago: 'You're a bloody liar!'

The Asche tour finished with two weeks in Perth. Though the city was paralysed by a transport strike, Asche filled His Majesty's. 'People walked miles to the theatre and back again,' he recalled. 'They drove in and rode in from country districts and put up at the hotels and every place where a bed could be found. They made up parties and drove in on lorries and farm carts. And the strikers took advantage of their holiday by coming too! We played to record business, and every night foot and mounted police had to control the crowds.'

Asche toured Australia again in 1912-13 with a repertoire including his elaborate production of Edward Knoblock's play *Kismet*, which had run for two years in London, plus more Shakespeare.

Asche again mined Oriental mystique when he wrote *Chu Chin Chow*, a fabulous Arabian Nights extravaganza, with music by Frederic Norton. He also directed and starred in it with his wife. *Chu* opened at His Majesty's in London on 31 August 1916. Colourful, spicy and spectacular, it was just what wartime Britain needed. It ran for five years – 2,235 performances – in spite of complaints about the ladies' scanty costumes, which Herbert Beerbohm Tree described as 'more navel than millinery'.

MMM

In 1920 the Australian entrepreneur Hugh D. McIntosh spent so much producing *Chu Chin Chow* at the Melbourne Tivoli that he was forced to retire from theatrical management.

Asche himself played in *Chu* during his third Australian tour in 1922. Also in his repertoire were *Cairo*, *The Spanish Main*, *Julius Caesar*, Galsworthy's *The Skin Game* and Pinero's *Iris*. This time Lily Brayton did not accompany him.

Contractual squabbles with Williamson's led to an extraordinary finale in Melbourne. According to Asche: 'Before the final curtain had touched the stage, the orchestra started the National Anthem – but the auditorium was kept in pitch blackness. I was to be prevented making a speech. I went in front of the curtain, which the stage manager had orders not to take up. Two enemy stage-hands tried to prevent me but I did a bit of rough-house. I stamped heavily with my heel on one man's instep and jogged my elbow into the other's mouth, leaving him with the prospect of a heavy dentist's bill. But I could not speak because the orchestra was playing tiddly bits for the audience to walk out to. On comes Doris Champion, who jumps over the footlights on to the top of the piano and thence to the floor, garrottes the conductor with one arm and with her free hand snatches the baton out of his hand. Then the band stops, the audience cheer, and I speak.'

Back in London, Asche's fortunes faltered. His marriage failed, though Lily Brayton, who was always more astute with money, did help produce his final play, *The Good Old Days of England*, in 1928. It flopped.

Asche wrote two Oriental-themed novels and an autobiography, published in 1929. He directed Brayton's last stage appearance in 1932, but his glory days were gone. Bankrupt, hopelessly obese, petulant, violent and unreliable, he picked up a few small parts in now forgotten films, but had no involvement in the spectacular 1934 film version of *Chu Chin Chow*.

Oscar Asche died in poverty on 23 March 1936. He had no children, but his nephew, the Honourable Keith John Austin Asche AC, has played a prominent role in Australian public life, notably as Chief Justice of the Northern Territory and its Administrator from 1993 to 1997. Oscar, on the other hand, is barely remembered, though for many years his name survived as rhyming slang for – ironically – 'cash'.

Frank Van Straten, 2007