

Gaiety Theatre. In 1901 "Floradora" ushered in the long series of musical comedies that were to remain a staple of J. C. Williamson's theatrical diet.

In 1902 Williamson embarked on one of his greatest ventures, the staging of "Ben Hur," with massed choirs and battles and resounding horses' hooves at full gallop — an amazing event terminated after a few weeks when Her Majesty's was gutted by fire.

The new theatre opened a year later and was soon providing a steady stream of first rate attractions.

The crowning touch to Williamson's career was combining with the great Dame Nellie Melba to stage grand opera. On opening night at Her Majesty's in Melbourne, Melba took 10 curtain calls and altogether she and Williamson each made 46,000 pounds profit from the tour.

Williamson died in 1913, in the midst of a European tour to sign up more artists, and in 1920 the five Tait brothers, already well-known as entrepreneurs, bought into Williamson's to continue the great success of The Firm.

Sir Frank, the last brother, died in 1965.

Big night out

The pattern remained the same — classy shows, musicals, comedies, dramas — always lavish, always star-studded, providing the traditional big night out for generation after generation of Australians.

The '20s in particular were great years for Williamson's. Doubtless the greatest attraction was Melba, returning again and again to her adoring fans. The Sydney season of the Melba-Williamson grand opera, directed by Nevin Tait, was a stupendous success in 1924.

In 1928 there was a triumphant return season — and it was during this season that Melba, whose health was failing, sang for the last time on the stage of Her Majesty's. She died in 1931.

During 1926 the great Anna Pavlova danced at Her Majesty's.

Later there was "Our Glad," Gladys Moncrieff, in the role in which her dotting public loved her best, as Teresa in "Maid of the Mountains," among many other musicals.

The Firm's greatest success was undoubtedly "My Fair Lady," closely followed by "Fiddler On The Roof."

Last of the line was "Irene," for which Williamson's, in a flash of that old theatre magic, created a star in Julie Anthony.

Rated universally as the best musical for a generation, in fresh and original production devised and designed in Sydney, it showed once again that JCW at its best was well and truly up to its rivals anywhere in the world.

Sad footnote to the brilliant success was that even such a hit as this, in these days of escalating costs for theatrical ventures, was not capable of providing the necessary boost for The Firm's failing fortunes.



Lady Tait now, and (inset) in "Lilac Time," 1942

When "Our Glad" sang propped up

LADY TAIT, widow of Sir Frank, looks back over 35 years with The Firm.

A director of the new company, Lady Tait has a rich storehouse of anecdotes and an infallible memory for performers and backstage hands alike.

In common with most of the older generation of Australian theatregoers, one of her favourite performers was the unforgettable Gladys Moncrieff.

Lady Tait was party to a well-kept secret when "Our Glad" made a moving comeback as Teresa in "The Maid of the Mountains," following a serious car accident in 1942.

The show's opening number featured Teresa standing atop a mountain, but with one ankle still severely affected by the accident, Gladys was frightened of losing her footing.

"The stage hands designed a special frame for her to stand in," said Lady Tait. "It couldn't be seen from the audience and only a handful of us ever knew."

As Viola Wilson, Lady Tait arrived in Australia in 1940 in a company from the D'Oyley Carte Opera, for a season of Gilbert and Sullivan. She met and married

Sir Frank (then plain Mr Tait) soon afterwards. During the war years she appeared in many of JCW's lavish musical productions.

Lady Tait feels The Firm is still in good hands.

"With a highly-successful entrepreneur like Kenn Brodziak and a clever young man like Michael Edgely among the directors, I don't think the name of JCW will fade away," she said.

The new J. C. Williamson company's first production will be a rollicking sequel to the enormously successful "Canterbury Tales." Called simply, "More Canterbury Tales," it will have its world premiere in Melbourne on October 23.

One of The Firm's longest-serving employees was advertising and publicity man, Charles Dearden, who retired in 1966. Mr Dearden's opinion of JCW's stars ("Some of them were nicer than others") had a great bearing on the standard of their accommodation in Melbourne.

He admits he booked the "extra nice ones" into the magnificent Windsor Hotel or Cliveden Mansions, while others went to an "inferior" hotel.

WENDY CROSS