

## Robert Osborne - A Smile, a Song, and an Educated Dog

© Kent Blackmore 2020, with editorial contributions from Mark St Leon

The history of Robert James ‘Bob’ Osborne is a varied one – he was an actor, singer, magician and dog trainer amongst other skills. Given Osborne’s extensive travels, convict heritage and connection to early Sydney theatre and circus, a partial overview of his life<sup>1</sup> makes for an interesting insight into the highs and lows of an itinerant actor and comedian in the mid-1800s.

### Convict Beginnings

Robert James Osborne was baptised in in the parish of St Dunstan, Stepney on 17 April 1829, the son of James Osborne, a cabinet maker, and his wife Mary Ann.<sup>2</sup> The first, crucial brush of Robert with the law came on 23 October 1843, when, listed as aged 17 [sic], he appeared at the Central Criminal Court in London:

2828. ROBERT JAMES OSBORNE was indicted for stealing, on the 30th of Sept., at St. George in the East, 18 spoons, value 5l.; 1 pair of sugar tongs, 5s.; 1 cruet-frame, 10s.; 2 cruet stops, 2s.; 1 toast-rack, 5s.; 6 knives, 2s.; and 6 forks, 2s.; also, on the 29th of Sept., 1 sheet, 2s.; and 1 table-cloth; the goods of William Skeggs Francis, his master, in his dwelling-house; and that he had been before convicted of felony ; to which he pleaded Guilty. Aged 17 – Transported for Ten years.

What was his previous conviction of felony? The most likely was the charge on 28 November 1842 of a James Osborne, ‘aged 15’, with another young man, with simple larceny, the theft of a piece of bacon. Osborne was found guilty, confined for eight days, and whipped twice.

Robert James Osborne arrived as a convict in Hobart Town, Van Diemen’s Land [Tasmania], on 17 June 1845, on the *Mount Stewart Elphinstone*, which had departed London on 7 March. His official conduct record shows that Osborne was a Protestant, a clerk and labourer by trade, in good health and able to read and write.<sup>3</sup> He was nearly six feet tall with brown hair and eyes. His ‘native place’ was Limehouse, a docklands area in London’s East End. He must have been well-behaved as there were only two entries made in his conduct record, both occurring after he had received his Ticket-of-Leave on 28 June 1845. On 1 April 1846, he had represented himself as a free man, and on 11 August 1846, he was found

---

<sup>1</sup> For more extensive Convict and career links, see: <http://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/register-O.php>

under ‘Osborne, Robert James’ and ‘Osborne, Mrs. R.J.’ - Dr Graeme Skinner, ‘A biographical register of Australian colonial musical personnel’ at Australharmony, an online resource toward the history of music and musicians in colonial and early Federation Australia. See also, tags against ‘R. J. Osborne, convict actor’ at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/result?l-publictag=R+J+Osborne+convict+actor>.

<sup>2</sup> Ancestry.com, London, England, Church of England, Births and Baptisms, 1813-1924: St Dunstan and All Saints, Stepney, Robert James Osborne, 17 April 1829.

<sup>3</sup> Conduct Record: [https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON33-1-66\\$init=CON33-1-66p175](https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON33-1-66$init=CON33-1-66p175). Indent record: <http://search.archives.tas.gov.au/default.aspx?detail=1&type=I&id=CON14/1/21> images 233, 234.

performing at 'the theatre' after hours. At the end of November 1847, only four years after being sentenced, he was granted a pardon on condition that he not return or be found again within the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

### Early Years, 1846 – 1853

As his conduct record shows, Osborne, about 20, entered the theatrical profession during the period of his ticket-of-leave but his activities suggest that he possessed some previously acquired theatrical experience. In Launceston in April 1846, he advertised under the heading of the Theatre Royal Olympic, that

Monsieurs Osborne (from the London Theatres) and Mr McDonald have made arrangements with Mr Story for the above premises which will be opened in a few days.

The Royal Olympic Theatre was conducted in the assembly room of the London Family Hotel, otherwise known as the London Tavern. **[FIGURE 1]** The following month, Osborne was directing the Boleno Family in their 'Living Tableau' at Launceston's Royal Olympic Theatre. **[FIGURE 2]** Later the same month, he appears to have made his acting debut at the Royal Olympic in a play called *The Deserter*. The principal role of Adelbert:

... was ably sustained by Osborne, who is likely to become a favourite ... Osborne's comic singing told with the audience, however we prefer his acting, and a little more experience will, as we said, make him a useful performer.<sup>5</sup>

This appearance is notable for the fact that John Powell Courtier, an ex-convict turned 'Fire King and Necromancer' was also acting in the show due to the shortage of male actors. On the same bill was 'Monsieur Risley' (r.n. Riley), who may have introduced to Australia the acrobatic skill in which a performer juggles objects or other people with their feet, while lying down. His close association with both magic and circus provides the clue as to where he may have learned some of his skills and made contacts which would last through his career.

By June the *Cornwall Chronicle* was singing Osborne's praises:

Osborne is a clever young man and by care and study, he cannot fail to become exceedingly popular. He possesses powers of conception as well as of action, which enable him to understand his parts, and make the most of them. His imitations of celebrated London and Colonial actors are good. Real talent is sure to develop itself, and as sure to be eventually appreciated.<sup>6</sup>

Osborne expanded his career in many directions in the years to follow. Sponge-like, he seems to have absorbed every facet of entertaining and made a name for himself as a multi-talented performer and theatrical manager during his twenties. While awaiting his

---

<sup>4</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart, 7 December 1847.

<sup>5</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 20 May 1846.

<sup>6</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 10 June 1846.

official Pardon, Osborne remained within the bounds of Tasmania, and it would not be until 1849 that he ventured briefly over the water to Melbourne.

At the Olympic Theatre in May 1846, Osborne's troupe included the 'Sable Minstrels', a very early example of the coming minstrel troupes which would become a feature of the Australian entertainment scene.<sup>7</sup> By 1848, he was mentioned as the Manager of the Albert Theatre, Hobart, where:

... seems determined to cater to the best of his ability for the public amusement, and with this view he has determined to produce a Pantomime on Easter Monday, comprising several novel comicalities. Amongst other, we may mention the driving of four cats harnessed round the stage – the cats having been well-trained to this novel feat by Mr Osborne, who has succeeded in bringing them to a state of great docility quite foreign to the natural dispositions of these animals.<sup>8</sup>

The four cats took Osborne to Melbourne in February 1849, where he appeared in the Queen's Theatre of John Thomas Smith.<sup>9</sup>

In October 1849, back in Launceston at the Royal Olympic Theatre, Osborne was identified as both the lessee and manager, where he produced 'a new local comic pantomime, with entirely new scenery, machinery, dresses, tricks and transformation, entitled *Harlequin in California! or, Emigration from Tasmania*, and *The Fiend of the Gold Mine*.'<sup>10</sup> **[FIGURE 3]** By December he was performing straight drama, as the lead performer in Shakespeare's *Othello*. This season also featured Mrs Osborne.<sup>11</sup> The former Anne Richardson (1833-1878) married Robert James Osborne at Bethesda Chapel, Hobart Town, on 24 July 1848.<sup>12</sup>

**[FIGURE 4]**

Osborne continued building his reputation in Van Diemen's Land and developed as a singer of popular comic or 'Boffo' songs, which became the mainstay of his career. A cursory overview of his work up to 1853 includes the following appearances:

January 1851 – As Signor Ferdinand in *Don Caesar De Bazan* at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Hobart Town.<sup>13</sup>

February 1851 – As Icilius in James Sheridan Knowles' play *Virginius* at the Royal Victoria. The title role was played by another significant figure, Mr. Faucit Saville.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 13 May 1846.

<sup>8</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart Town, 21 April 1848.

<sup>9</sup> *Melbourne Daily News*, 10 February 1849.

<sup>10</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 27 October 1849.

<sup>11</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 29 December 1849.

<sup>12</sup> Marriage, Robert James Osborne and Anne Richardson: [https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-7\\$init=RGD37-1-7](https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-7$init=RGD37-1-7), p.122.

<sup>13</sup> *Hobart Guardian*, 15 January 1851. The Royal Victoria Theatre, opened in 1836, was commonly known as the Theatre Royal and is still in operation today,

<sup>14</sup> *Courier*, Hobart, 8 February 1851.

September 1851 - Recipient of a benefit night at the Albert Theatre, Hobart Town.<sup>15</sup>

July 1852 to March 1853 – As singer and ‘Acting Stage Manager’ at the Royal Victoria.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1853, Mrs Osborne appeared in the lead role of *Black Eyed Susan*.<sup>17</sup> The following month, Mr and Mrs Osborne played opposite each other in the drama of *Jack Sheppard*.<sup>18</sup> In mid-February 1853, change was in the air, as Mr and Mrs Osborne took a ‘farewell’ benefit at the Royal Victoria. It seems, however, that a local hotelier was eager to have Osborne gone. Mr John Davies of the Waterloo Hotel and a Mr J. B. Watson had obtained the new lease of the theatre and, on 19 February, they advertised that:

The undersigned having become lessees for five years of the above theatre, respectfully notify to the public that it will close after this evening for the season. During the recess the theatre will be remodelled and embellished...<sup>19</sup> Mr R. Osborne takes the present opportunity of returning his sincere and grateful thanks to his numerous Friends, and the Public in general, for the liberal patronage he has on all occasions received, but more especially on Monday Evening last, when they simultaneously exhibited their disgust at the conduct pursued by Mr Davies, landlord of the Waterloo Hotel, in this city, in his having used all his energy in endeavouring to remove me from the Theatre, without even a week’s notice, together with his having circulated through the medium of the press – that last Thursday Evening the 17th [sic] instant, would be the last night that the Theatre would be open under my management this season ... The Theatre will be opened on Monday Evening, Feb. 28 ... with the celebrated Drama, by desire, entitled *The Avenger; or, The Dark Gondolier of Madrid!* ... The Avenger ... Mr Osborne.<sup>20</sup>

Osborne was still at the Theatre on 7 March when he appeared in the ‘celebrated’ drama entitled *The Demon Dwarf; or, The Magic Statue* which was announced to be the last night of the season.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sydney 1854 – The Royal Olympic Arena**

The years 1853-54 were both the most ambitious and the most devastating for Robert Osborne. Almost as soon as he and his wife left Tasmania, they vanish but, from the scant evidence, it appears likely that they may have travelled to England in search of theatrical performers to bring back to Australia under their management. This in itself is an astonishing

---

<sup>15</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 13 September 1851.

<sup>16</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 26 June 1852.

<sup>17</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 15 January 1853.

<sup>18</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 16 February 1853.

<sup>19</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart, 19 February 1853.

<sup>20</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 26 February 1853.

<sup>21</sup> *Hobarton Guardian*, 2 March 1853.

venture, if true, because Osborne's pardon was conditional on him not returning to the 'motherland' and would surely have placed him at great risk.

Supporting the possibility that Osborne travelled to England is the 1913 reminiscence of Harry Percival Lyons, an old-time circus agent and contemporary of Osborne.<sup>22</sup> In his letter to the *Sydney Sportsman*, Osborne covered a great many topics to some of which we will return later in this article:

...re my connection with the late Bob Osborne, and the dear old dog Jonathan. 'The Wonderful dog Jonathan' which was starred, was a large white French poodle, capped to look like a lion; he did a very fast, clever performance, good for those times, the early fifties. Osborne brought him to the colonies from England, together with those clever performers, the Wieland Brothers, Tom and John. Tom and myself became partners in Wieland and Lyon's Circus, after the death of poor John, who committed suicide, in Castlemaine, Victoria, some years before. Bob Osborne was one of the old-time actors .... Bob Osborne went to England in the early fifties, and brought out a small company, Wieland Bros, and the wonderful dog Jonathan. The great agent, John Hall Wilton<sup>23</sup> ... induced the boys to leave Osborne, and join Burton, the circus proprietor, of those days.<sup>24</sup> Poor Bob, in 1859, when I joined him to do his advance work, was reduced to a company of four people, and the ever-faithful old dog. Osborne, his wife, Mrs Mitson, a concertina player, and myself. We toured Victoria and South Australia in our own conveyance. Osborne was a good melodramatic actor and comedian, and a first-class comic singer ...<sup>25</sup>

In April 1854, announced in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that he had imported, from London, supplies of spangles, foil paper, studs, bugles, Dutch metal lace, a troupe of marionette figures with complete wardrobe, and 200 miscellaneous dresses to be sold for masquerades, casinos, dress balls or theatricals. He directed intending purchasers to his address, the Olympic Arena, Castlereagh Street, Sydney.<sup>26</sup>

This 'Olympic' was one of several equestrian arenas in existence in Sydney at this time, precursors of the touring circuses that travelled Australia with their rope balancing, trick horse riding, and gymnastic displays. So, which 'Olympic' arena was this one occupied by

---

<sup>22</sup> In the course of his lengthy colonial career, Harry Percival Lyons (1845-1913) acted as agent for many touring companies, troupes and individual performers including the great ropewalker Charles Blondin, St Leon's Circus and the illusionist, Charles Carter. He was a co-proprietor of Wieland & Lyons' Circus and represented some of America's leading circus companies for their Australasian tours, such as W.W. Cole's Concorporated Shows and Sells Brothers'. For several years, Lyons conducted the Stirling Arms Hotel in Perth. See: <https://thestirlingarms.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SA-History-Book.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> John Hall Wilton (1820-62) acted as an agent for P.T. Barnum, G.V. Brooke and Barry Sullivan. See: <http://outoftheinkbottle.blogspot.com/2017/11/john-hall-wilton-manager-and-military.html>

<sup>24</sup> Henry Burton, 1823-1900, touring circus proprietor and rival to John Malcom. See: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/burton-henry-3123>

<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Sportsman*, 1 January 1913. The 'Wieland Brothers' were not truly 'brothers' but two performers, probably unrelated, named Stevens and Buckley. John Wieland suicided in March 1871, following an argument in Burton's Circus with another performer and Wieland's subsequent dismissal by Burton. See: *Border Watch*, Mt Gambier, 1 April 1871.

<sup>26</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1854.

Osborne in 1854? It was not the 'Australian Olympic Theatre' which, although not far from Osborne's Olympic, was an earlier, unrelated performance space. Located in Hunter Street, on the southern side just down the incline from George Street, the Australian Olympic Theatre was large tent-like pavilion fitted up with a stage, dress circle and pit as well as an arena for displays of horsemanship. Built by the head of the first gymnastic troupe to visit Australia, Signor Luigi Dalle Case, the Australian Olympic Theatre was the site in January 1842 of the first circus performances given on Australian soil.<sup>27</sup> However, Dalle Case's Australian Olympic Theatre was short-lived and did not lead to the rise of an Australian circus industry as Radford's Royal Circus, in Launceston, would several years later.<sup>28</sup>

A more important equestrian arena in Sydney at this time was Malcom's Amphitheatre, previously known as Malcom's Royal Australian Amphitheatre and, even earlier, as the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus. This arena was housed in a pavilion at the rear of John Malcom's Adelphi Hotel in York Street. The Royal Australian Equestrian Circus had been opened in October 1850 under the direction of Edward 'La Rosiere' Hughes and John Jones (later known as 'St Leon').<sup>29</sup> Impressed by the success of the enterprise conducted in the backyard of his hotel, John Malcom reclaimed the venue and renamed it Malcom's. Malcom carried out several upgrades and modifications and it remained Sydney's primary circus venue until 1856. It was briefly occupied by Jones' Olympic Circus in 1857 but, ultimately, the site became a conventional theatre under different names such as 'The Lyceum', 'Queen's Theatre' and 'Theatre Royal' before it was closed for the last time in 1882.<sup>30</sup>

In the history of Sydney theatre, Osborne's 'Royal Olympic Arena' in Castlereagh Street has been overlooked as it existed under that name for only a very short time. However, the site itself is of major historical importance to Sydney theatre. It was a wooden pavilion that stood at the rear of The Painter's Arms. Here, in 1851, an American circus man, John Sullivan Noble, opened his 'Olympic Circus'. A succession of performance venues subsequently occupied the location:

Royal Marionette Theatre, 1853

Royal Olympic Arena, 1854

Royal Albert Theatre & Dancing Salon, 1854

Scandinavian Hall, 1866

Victoria Hall, 1881

---

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Australia's circus history, see, for example, the following works by Dr Mark St Leon: *Circus: The Australian Story*, Melbourne Books, 2011; *Circus in Australia: Index of Show Movements, 1833-1969*, self-published 2005; 'Theatre, Amphitheatre and Circus in Sydney, 1833-60', in *Journal of the Royal Historical Society*. See:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/159864730?q=%22Olympic+Circus%22+castlereagh&sortby=dateAsc&c=article&sort=holdings+desc&=1578376519116&versionId=233470548>. An extensive list of books and essays by Mark St Leon will be found <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=h5YTEh4AAAAJ&hl=en>

<sup>28</sup> *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston. 29 December 1847.

<sup>29</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1850.

<sup>30</sup> For a longer history of the Royal Lyceum Theatre, see: <https://sydneymagic.net/lyceum.html>

Academy of Music, 1882

Garrick Theatre 1890

Rickards' Tivoli 1893

Embassy Cinema, 1934, demolished in 1960s<sup>31</sup>

The address once occupied by Osborne's 'Royal Olympic Arena', 272 Castlereagh Street, is now embraced by the rear end of the Westfield and Sydney Tower shopping complex and a Gucci store and is re-numbered 79-83 Castlereagh Street.

Osborne's new performing troupe arrived from London aboard the Dutch ship *Doctrina et Amicitia* on 18 March 1854.<sup>32</sup> They were a strong lineup of acrobats, vocalists, lecturers, actors and musicians, 'Herr Leopold the modern Hercules', tableaux posers, giant dioramas and moving panoramas. The trapeze performer Thomas Wieland (r.n. Stevens) deserves credit for introducing trapeze skills to Australia. Master Hernandez (r.n. Buckley) was a young boy named John Buckley. Oddly enough, the most enduring feature of the troupe was the large white trained poodle, *Jonathan*, Osborne's featured attraction into the 1860s. Wieland and the above-mentioned Harry Percival Lyons later (872) formed Wieland and Lyons's Mammoth Circus Company, one of the first circus companies to visit Western Australia.<sup>33</sup>

Even while conducting the Royal Olympic Arena, Mr and Mrs Osborne performed at John Malcom's Amphitheatre during April 1854 where they appeared in *The Hunter of the Alps* and *Oliver Twist*.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Malcom advertised his amphitheatre, hotel and horses for lease owing to his ill-health.<sup>35</sup> However, the venue continued to open intermittently until late 1856.

The Royal Olympic Arena season opened on 8 May with a line-up of talented performers that was almost vaudevillian in character and which embraced drama and farce as well as circus. The *Illustrated Sydney News* expressed its surprise and pleasure at the show.

**[FIGURE 5]**

Mr R. J. Osborne, the lessee of this little theatre, has much cleverness, and possesses a most decided talent for comedy... some very clever and difficult feats of skill and strength were executed by Professor Wieland, and by Professor Siegrist and his son ... the Dog Jonathan has reach a pitch of docile intelligence which some who are not quadrupeds, if they had sense enough, might envy. Mdlle. Elise Clauss ... possesses a real genius for music and would be an acquisition to the most fashionable concert ... alone worth the price of

<sup>31</sup> See <https://ozvta.com/theatres-nsw>

<sup>32</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March 1854.

<sup>33</sup> *Herald*, Fremantle, 28 September 1872.

<sup>34</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12, 14 April 1854

<sup>35</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 April 1854.

admission ... as this new theatre becomes more generally known, we predict for it an increasing success.<sup>36</sup>

The *People's Advocate* likewise commented favourably on the new entertainment.

The Moving Panorama, depicting the most interesting American scenery on the banks of the famous Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, is a most attractive spectacle, eliciting general applause ... and loud plaudits at the conclusion.... but the overdone rant and raving of the principal character [in the drama 'The Lone Hut'] Mr. C. Forrest ... was in a great measure destructive of the effect of the performance. Mrs. Osborne's performances met with marked approval. Herr Leopold's entertainment, and the very daring and agile feats of Professor Siegrist and Son are well worth going to see. But we must not close our criticism of the Olympic without a brief notice of the truly wonderful performance of the 'Dog Jonathan'. Among numerous proofs of extreme sagacity and docility, this poor dog, which is a handsome species of the French poodle, leaps backwards and forwards repeatedly, through a hoop all on blaze of fire.<sup>37</sup>

Despite these favourable observations, the *People's Advocate* expressed its concern that Osborne, the 'enterprising lessee', did not have a larger and more handsomely decorated Theatre for the display of his Company.<sup>38</sup>

In mid-May 1854, a petty dispute broke out between John Malcom and the rival theatre. Malcom, attempting to retrieve two chairs which he had lent to the Olympic Arena, kicked in a door of the theatre. The incident led to a court case on 25 May, when the Bench, 'conceiving that the affair was in a great measure owing to the jealousy engendered by the rival nature of the litigant's establishments, fixed the damages at ten shillings, which the defendant having paid, was discharged.'<sup>39</sup> **[FIGURE 6]**

Far more serious was the tragedy which occurred on 22 May, another sad tale in the history of theatrical fires. The Belgian pianist, 'Mdle Elise Clauss', 24, seems to have been crossing the stage area to her piano, dressed in light muslin, when her dress caught on a naked flame and caught alight. Although Osborne's agent, Charles White, threw her to the floor and extinguished the flames, it was too late to prevent serious burns.<sup>40</sup> Mdle. Clauss succumbed to her injuries on 1 June. An inquest returned a finding of accidental burning.<sup>41</sup> From the date of the fire, all performances seem to have been cancelled and, as a result, Osborne was unable to

---

<sup>36</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 13 May 1854

<sup>37</sup> *People's Advocate*, Sydney, 20 May 1854.

<sup>38</sup> *People's Advocate*, Sydney, 27 May 1854.

<sup>39</sup> *Empire*, 26 May 1854.

<sup>40</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1854.

<sup>41</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1854. In a subsequent report of the court action that Osborne took against the Wielands, it was mentioned that another witness, a 'Jane Elizabeth Bradley', was deceased, having been burnt to death in Sydney. Was this the true name of 'Elise Clauss'? If so, her name and 'Belgian' origin must have been assumed as promotional devices. See: *Hobart Times*, 29 December 1854. Nevertheless, there is record of the death and burial of an 'Elise Clauss' in Sydney in 1854 but none of a 'Jane Elizabeth Bradley'.

find the rent for his theatre. On 6 June, a concerned group of citizens published the following announcement:

... Considering the heavy expenses you have been put to in bringing a company from England, at an enormous outlay, and the late catastrophe by the loss of a lady .... and the indifferent success you have met with, owing to your theatre (the Olympic) not having sufficient accommodation, we hereby request that you name a night ...to show our sympathy and good-feeling ... trusting you will be greeted with a bumper.<sup>42</sup>

The offer was to no avail and, on 23 June, under 'distrain' for arrears of rent, the various stage wings, furniture and piano, were sold off.<sup>43</sup> By 27 June, the Olympic Arena was advertised for let:

... fitted up with stage, orchestra, scenery and gas-fittings. Would suit for dramatic performances, or would make a store for hay and corn, dry goods .... also, a Cottage in the courtyard, containing three rooms.

By mid-July, it was reported that Henry Burton, of circus fame, had taken the theatre, renamed it the 'Prince Albert Theatre' and supplied his own *corps dramatique* from the Royal Victoria Theatre in Pitt Street for further entertainments.

So ended the brief history of the 'Royal Olympic Arena'.

Robert Osborne removed to Tasmania, taking his troupe with him. At the town of Kingston, the acrobats performed outdoors:

amongst other things, the lad ascended a long heavy pole ... and when at the summit, held on by one hand and extended his body in a horizontal position, to the terror and surprise of the crowd, concluding the terrific exploit by descending to *terra firma* head foremost.<sup>44</sup>

In November and December 1854, Osborne, Wieland (Stevens) and Hernandez (Buckley) were all embroiled in multiple legal disputes. In Hobart, Osborne was briefly gaoled over unpaid debts. Wieland alleged that, by being forced to perform outdoors, their indentured apprenticeship had been abused. Osborne claimed that both Wieland and Hernandez had abandoned their employment and that they had committed larceny. Ultimately all this came to nothing, as the apprenticeship papers could not be proven to have been properly sealed. It seems that the acrobats were attempting to break away from Osborne as had the rest of his troupe who found themselves in a strange country and out of work after only a few months.<sup>45</sup>

## **Magic and the Travelling Years**

---

<sup>42</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1854.

<sup>43</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 1854.

<sup>44</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart Town, 6 October 1854.

<sup>45</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart Town, 21 November 1854.

From this point, Robert Osborne's career evolved through a multiplicity of troupes, plays, concerts and appearances, too much to document in this brief article. Throughout 1855, Osborne stayed in Hobart Town within the bounds of the Albert and Royal Victoria Theatres, leasing either theatre and acting in various romances and melodramas. In June 1855, he was declared insolvent with debts of £243.<sup>46</sup> Not until May 1857 could Osborne return to the Royal Albert to produce a new series of drama and farces.<sup>47</sup>

By June 1857, Osborne was back in Sydney, with apparently the only remaining member of the Royal Olympic Arena troupe, the dog *Jonathan*. They appeared at the Shakespeare Saloon in Pitt Street, opposite the Royal Victoria Theatre.<sup>48</sup> Organizing a new troupe called the National Circus, including equestrian, tightrope and *la perche* performers, he travelled as far north as Moreton Bay (now Brisbane).<sup>49</sup> Returning to Sydney, Osborne was featured in John Jones' Olympic Circus in November, presenting 'jests, Shakespearean burlesque and exhibitions of canine sagacity'. He performed alongside Mr Jones the 'star rider and performer of gymnastics' and 'Mr Evans Elliott the British horseman'.<sup>50</sup>

In April 1858, Osborne and Jonathan appeared with Foley's American Circus at West Maitland. A 'Miss A. Frampton', the 'premier danseuse', was listed on Foley's bill.<sup>51</sup> By the time 'Mr R.J. Osborne's Troupe' appeared in Goulburn in October 1858, Miss Frampton was described as 'Mrs R.J. Osborne, Late Miss A. Frampton'. There is no indication of what had happened to the first Mrs Osborne, nor any evidence that Osborne and Miss Frampton had legally married. The troupe included the dog Jonathan, a vocalist and an 'Ethiopian Delineator' or minstrel singer.<sup>52</sup>

By August 1858, when he appeared at the Queen's Theatre, Maitland, Osborne had added conjuring to his repertoire in 'his New Entertainment entitled Magic and Mystery'.<sup>53</sup>

The following October, when 'Mr R.J. Osborne's Troupe' visited Goulburn, Osborne was presenting 'Soirees Fantastique, being a series of experiments in the Cabalistic Art, by the Wizard of the South.'<sup>54</sup> **[FIGURE 7]** Despite his apparent success in Goulburn, a notice appeared in the *Goulburn Herald* in December 1858 alleging that he had left town without settling his debts for printing and advertising.<sup>55</sup>

By May 1859, the Osbornes had reached Beechworth, in north-eastern Victoria, where they performed at the Telegraph Hotel and Assembly Rooms, with ballet, comedy, farce, petite drums, duets, songs, 'national impersonations', operatic dances, magic, mystery, tableau vivants, spirit rapping and *soirees fantastiques*.<sup>56</sup> **[FIGURE 8]**

The Osbornes continued touring through provincial Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and New South Wales, with different combinations of performers cobbled together

---

<sup>46</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart Town, 5 June 1855.

<sup>47</sup> *Colonial Times*, Hobart Town, 18 May 1857.

<sup>48</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1857.

<sup>49</sup> *Moreton Bay Free Press*, 14 October 1857.

<sup>50</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 1857.

<sup>51</sup> *Northern Times*, 24 April 1858.

<sup>52</sup> *Goulburn Herald*, 27 October 1858.

<sup>53</sup> *Northern Times*, 14 August 1858.

<sup>54</sup> *Goulburn Herald*, 27 October 1858.

<sup>55</sup> *Goulburn Herald*, 18 December 1858, 8 January 1859.

<sup>56</sup> *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 1 May 1859.

into a performing troupe. Despite the demands of constant travelling, the Osbornes managed to deliver entertainments of quality as suggested by this review of their performance at the Lyceum Theatre, Bendigo in late November 1859:

The engagement of Mr. and Mrs. Osborne at the Lyceum Theatre, where they made their first appearance on Saturday night, may be considered an acquisition to the already excellent company there. As a performer, the lady appears to possess some considerable versatility of talent, being a very fair actress, having some pretensions to be a singer, and in ballet dancing she is far beyond mediocrity. For the latter accomplishment she possesses a very good figure and a pleasing and graceful style. Mr. Osborne sang a comic song with some degree of humour and was loudly encored. The principal feature of his performances, however, appeared to be in the exhibition of a wonderfully trained dog, yclept 'Jonathan,' who, apparently, could do everything but speak, and sufficiently clever not to do that for fear - like the monkeys - of being compelled to work. The introduction, by Madame Cushla and her troupe, of several new 'living pictures' was loudly applauded. The theatre was tolerably crammed by an audience who applauded all and everything that was produced on the stage, and very fairly the entertainments deserved it.<sup>57</sup>

The 'magic' portion of Osborne's entertainments were more regularly advertised. In May 1860, touting himself as 'The Wizard of the West', Osborne appeared each evening, in his extraordinary Drawing Room Entertainment, entitled 'soirees fantastique'.<sup>58</sup> **[FIGURE 9]** In June 1861, 'Mr R.J. Osborne's Theatre of Varieties' performed in Sale with a display of 'electro-biology versus mesmerism'. In addition, 'The Dog Jonathan' executed 'his astounding feats on chairs, ladders, bars and circles of fire.'<sup>59</sup>

The Wizard was evidently not sure of what direction he was coming as, in January 1862, he promoted himself as 'The Great Wizard of the East in some of his most incredible feats'; and, in August, as 'The Wizard, in his astonishing Cabalistic feats'. Visiting Queanbeyan, the *Golden Age* declared that:

Mr R. J. Osborne performed tricks of an astounding nature, in a portion of the entertainments called 'Fantastic Seances.' This artiste's speciality is in the performance of his tricks without the aid of apparatus. Many sought to detect the means by which they were produced, but the sharpest scrutiny failed ... altogether this troupe is quite a novelty and deserving of success.<sup>60</sup> **[FIGURE 10]**

The last mention of the second Mrs Osborne occurs in Sale in February 1863, where she and her husband appeared at the Club Hotel:

---

<sup>57</sup> *Bendigo Advertiser*, 21 November 1859.

<sup>58</sup> *Kyneton Observer*, 24 May 1860.

<sup>59</sup> *Gippsland Guardian*, 21 June 1861.

<sup>60</sup> *Golden Age*, 28 August 1862.

Mr Osborne's talents, both in the sleight of hand scenes and personation of different characters are too well known to need any commendation from us, whilst Mrs Osborne as a ballad singer and versatile performer far surpasses any actress who has ever paid Sale a visit.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Final Years**

From this point, 'Mr and Mrs Osborne' appear to have parted company. Robert James Osborne continued on his own and with mixed fortunes. In June 1865, he:

was indicted for, that at Muswellbrook, on the 24th of February 1865, he feloniously did forge a certain warrant or order, with intent thereby to defraud; a second count charged him with uttering the same ... The prisoner was found guilty on the second count and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in Maitland Gaol, with hard labour.<sup>62</sup>

Released after two years in gaol, Osborne re-invented himself as 'Professor Abder-El-Kaib, the Oriental Wizard' when he appeared at the Royal Victoria Hall in Brisbane in February 1868.<sup>63</sup> **FIGURE 11** Possibly Osborne was out of practice after two years' imprisonment but one review of his entertainments, from August 1868, was particularly savage:

Last evening, a person calling himself Bob Osborne gave what he called an entertainment, and of all the miserable affairs that has taken place up here [Roma, Queensland] it was certainly the worst. Fancy paying 3s. to listen to a German concertina out of tune, and miserably played, and a performer yelling out what he called comic songs and trying to delude the audience with a few common conjuring tricks, assisted by one or two confederates.<sup>64</sup>

What happened to 'The Dog Jonathan' during Osborne's imprisonment? It is unlikely that the 'The World Renowned Dog Jonathon [sic]' that an unnamed 'Professor' presented at Mt Alexander in April 1870, to accompany the Professor's displays of legerdemain and ventriloquism, was the genuine 'Jonathan'.<sup>65</sup> By 1872, he was simply 'Mr Bob Osborne' when he presented his 'Magic Temple' at Cremorne Gardens, Rockhampton.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, Osborne's qualities as a showman remained undiminished:

His entertainment is certainly the best we have witnessed out of the metropolis. Mr Osborne's performance possesses great versatility and is far above mediocrity; his repertoire seems inexhaustible, legerdemain, anecdotes, songs, mechanical figures &c. keep you fairly

---

<sup>61</sup> *Gippsland Times*, 6 February 1863.

<sup>62</sup> *Maitland Mercury*, 29 June 1865. For court report, see: *Maitland Mercury*, 18 March 18, 1865.

<sup>63</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 19 February 1868.

<sup>64</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 27 August 1868.

<sup>65</sup> *Mount Alexander*, 23 April 1870.

<sup>66</sup> *Northern Argus*, 30 March 1872.

amused for three hours. Altogether, Mr Bob Osborne's entertainment is well worthy of extensive patronage.<sup>67</sup>

From 1872, Osborne appears to have concentrated his professional activities in Queensland, promoting himself as 'Osborne's Varieties' or 'Osborne's Museum'.<sup>68</sup>

In July 1876, an advertisement in the *Western Star* announced that 'Leon's [sic] Circus' would appear on the ground facing the Sydney Hotel, Roma. A subsequent advertisement in the same newspaper identified 'R. J. Osborne' as the circus agent.<sup>69</sup> **[FIGURE 12]** According to circus historian, Mark St Leon, this was a 'counterfeit show', not the genuine 'St Leon's Circus' which well-known throughout the eastern colonies at that time. Osborne was charged with procuring money and goods, including a circus ring, sand and sawdust, and advertising in the *Western Star* on the pretence that he was the agent for 'Leon's Circus'.<sup>70</sup> The following notice, dated 15 September 1876, was placed in the *Queensland Police Gazette*:

Robert Osborne is charged, on warrant issued by the Roma Bench, with obtaining money and goods, not specified, from Henry C. Milton, by means of false pretences, on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1876. He is described as a travelling juggler, about 42 years of age, 5 feet 9.5 inches high, stout build, sandy complexion, inclined to be fair, clean shaved except moustache, round full face. Supposed to have gone towards Taroom.<sup>71</sup>

Osborne was arrested at Springsure and remanded to Roma.<sup>72</sup> The *Western Star* quipped that Osborne was 'well known in this town as a professor of legerdemain and the conjuror's art generally.'<sup>73</sup> He was brought before the Roma Police Court on 25 November 1876 and committed to stand trial at the next sitting of the District Court.<sup>74</sup> However, Osborne did not appear at the 'next sitting' of the Police Court held on 1 December 1876.<sup>75</sup> Subsequent sittings of the Police Court, as reported in the *Western Star*, provide no mention of Osborne standing trial. What had happened? Had he died while on remand?

The name of Robert Osborne no longer appears in the annals of Australian show business. Neither online newspapers nor online genealogical records provide any clue as to the fate of a man answering the description of this Robert Osborne. We are thus left to conclude that Osborne must have died while on remand and before he could make his appearance again before the Roma Police Court. At this point, Osborne was about 48 years of age, but the date, place and circumstances of his death are a mystery. After his extensive and turbulent career as a colonial entertainer, the true Robert James Osborne - actor, comic, magician and singer - was deserving of a peaceful, dignified end.

---

<sup>67</sup> *Dalby Herald*, 6 December 1873.

<sup>68</sup> *Darling Downs Gazette*, 19 February 1870; *Peak Downs Telegram*, 29 July 1871.

<sup>69</sup> *Western Star*, 22 July 1876, 5 August 1876.

<sup>70</sup> *Western Star*, 29 July 1876.

<sup>71</sup> *Queensland Police Gazette*, 4 October 1876, p. 120.

<sup>72</sup> *Queensland Police Gazette*, 6 December 1876, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup> *Western Star*, 21 October 1876.

<sup>74</sup> *Western Star*, 25 November 1876.

<sup>75</sup> *Western Star*, 9 December 1876.

## **Image captions**

Figure 1 – The London Family Hotel ('London Tavern', Launceston

Figure 2 – Advertisement for Theatre Royal, Olympic, *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 13 May 1846

Figure 3 – Advertisement for Royal Olympic Theatre, *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, 27 October 1849

Figure 4 – Marriage of Robert James Osborne and Anne Richardson, Bethseda Chapel, Hobart Town, 24 July 1848

Figure 5 – 'A scene in Osborne's Olympic Arena', *Illustrated Sydney News*, 20 May 1854

Figure 6 – Advertisements for Malcom's Royal Australian Amphitheatre and the Royal Olympic Theatre, *Empire*, Sydney, 6 May 1854.

Figure 7 – Advertisement for 'Mr R. J. Osborne's Troupe', *Goulburn Herald*, 20 October 1858

Figure 8 – Advertisement for 'Mr & Mrs Osborne', *Ovens & Murray Advertiser*, Beechworth, 5 May 1859

Figure 9 – Advertisement for 'Mr and Mrs Osborne', *Kyneton Observer*, 24 May 1860

Figure 10 – Advertisement for 'Mr and R. J. Mrs Osborne', *Ovens & Murray Advertiser*, Beechworth, 11 January 1862

Figure 11 – Advertisement for 'Professor Abder-El-Kaib' at Royal Victoria Hall, *Brisbane Courier*, 19 February 1868

Figure 12 – Advertisement for Leon's Circus, R. J. Osborne, agent, *Western Star*, Roma, 29 July 1876.