



BY THE WAY

Occasional Newsletters from The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

Number 36

March 2009

The Brothers Grossmith – George and Lawrence

A further instalment of the series about major stars who appeared in theatre to which Wodehouse contributed, written by **Eddie Grabham**.

Brothers George and Weedon Grossmith were stalwarts of the late Victorian theatre in London. George was a leading light in the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas between 1881 and 1889, while Weedon was a playwright and farceur. The brothers are probably best remembered today for their highly entertaining *Diary of a Nobody* (1892).

However, the brothers Grossmith of this article are George Junior and Lawrence, sons of George Senior. Both followed their illustrious father into the theatre and, in view of their style and panache, it was inevitable that they would enter the theatrical world of P G Wodehouse.

George Junior

Born 11 May 1874, George Junior was only 18 years old when he made his West End debut at the Criterion in 1892 as Cousin Foodle in *Haste to the Wedding*, an operetta by W S Gilbert without Sullivan, which was based on the French farce, *An Italian Straw Hat*. It was the beginning of a long and distinguished career which embraced performing on stage and screen, writing, and management.

Following his debut, George Jr was kept busy and introduced his soon-to-be-familiar about-town dude persona as Lord Percy Pimpleton in *Morocco Bound* (Shaftesbury, 1893). He became involved with George 'The Guv'nor' Edwardes, playing Major Barclay in *A Gaiety Girl* (Daly's, 1894). It was but a short skip to becoming part of the Gaiety Theatre roster itself (which included Seymour Hicks, Ellaline Terriss and, a little later, Gertie Millar), appearing at the famous theatre in the Strand as Bertie Boyd in *The Shop Girl* (1894). He made his New York debut in the same role the following year.

He remained busy when he returned to the West End and, in 1899, played Marc Antony in *Great Caesar*, a play he helped to write. He was also part-author of *The Gay Pretenders* (Globe, 1900) in which he played Prince Harry. When he returned to the Gaiety to play Sir Archibald Hackett, Bart, in *The Toreador* (1901), he introduced the cakewalk to London.

In February 1903 the development of the Aldwych caused the closure of the Gaiety. In the presence of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, the New



George Grossmith Jr with Fifi d'Orsay in
Those Three French Girls

Gaiety opened in the Strand on October 26, with a production of *The Orchid*, featuring George Grossmith Jr and Edmund Payne, arguably the finest 'low' comedian of the period. It was the first in a 10-year run of musical comedies he performed at the New Gaiety; in *Our Miss Gibbs* (1909), he introduced 'Yip-I-Addy-I-Ay', based on a tune he had picked up in the United States, with new lyrics by himself. Initially the song got the bird, but George persevered and it became an enduring hit. It was typical of the man who (suggested West End raconteur Macqueen-Pope) was determined never to be the 'nobody' immortalised by his father and uncle.

He went to New York again in 1913 to appear in the Broadway production of *The Girl on the Film*. On his return to England, he went into management with Edward Laurillard, producing plays in the West End and on Broadway. He continued to perform on stage, notably playing Lord Brocklehurst in a star-studded matinée charity performance of J M Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* at the Coliseum in June 1916.

After the war, George (the 'Junior' was dropped following the death of his father in 1912) and his partner Edward Laurillard bought the rights to the highly successful Bolton-Wodehouse-Kern Princess show *Oh, Boy!*, which they produced with the new title *Oh, Joy!* for a successful run at London's Kingsway and Apollo Theatres in 1919.

Also in that year, the pair bought a war-damaged theatre, rebuilt it as the Winter Garden, and opened it with the first of four successive and successful Wodehouse musicals. *Kissing Time*, the anglicised version of the American *The Girl Behind the Gun*, opened on May 20 with an exceptional cast which included George himself, Stanley Holloway, Yvonne Arnaud, Isobel Jeans, Leslie Henson, Phyllis Dare and Tom Walls. It ran for 430 performances before George's partnership with Laurillard was dissolved.

It was followed by *Sally*, *The Cabaret Girl* and *The Beauty Prize*, all substantial hits with George in the lead. Indeed, he showed his versatility by collaborating with Wodehouse on the book and lyrics of the latter two shows.

This proved to be George's last stage association with Wodehouse, but they were involved again in 1930 when he appeared in MGM's film *Those Three French Girls*, with a screenplay fashioned by Plum. He went on to further successes in the West End, perhaps most notably as Billy Early in the London production of *No, No, Nanette* (Palace, 1925), arguably the quintessential 1920s musical.

George became Managing Director of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane (1931–32) and brought Richard Tauber to the theatre in *Land of Smiles*. He set up the next show, Noël Coward's *Cavalcade*, but retired before it opened. He then became Chairman of London Films, and due to his influence, an important distribution deal was established with United Artists. He died in June 1935.

Lawrence

George's younger brother Lawrence was born on 29 March 1877. It was thought that he would follow a career in engineering, but instead he followed his brother's footsteps into the theatre. He made his

debut playing Robert in *Nitouche* at the Court Theatre. When George left the cast of *Shock-Headed Peter* (Nigel Playfair's adaptation of *Struwwelpeter*) at the Garrick, Lawrence took over the title role in 1901. He was in New York in 1906 before returning to a busy schedule in London.

George Grossmith Senior died in 1912 and, with part of his inheritance, Lawrence entered the management of the Savoy in 1913. He asked Wodehouse to write a long sketch, so Plum adapted a *Strand* short story he had written with Herbert Westbrook into a one-act play. It was a Reggie

Pepper story called *Rallying Round Old George*, and the result was *Brother Alfred*, with Lawrence taking the part of George Lattaker. It was not a great success, achieving only a two-week run. (A British feature-length film version of *Brother Alfred* was released in 1932.)

However, he was destined to work with Plum again. After returning to the USA in 1915, he made two short silent films in 1919 (*Making Good With Mother* and *Cutting Out Venus*) in which he played Reggie Pepper to Charles Coleman's Jeeves.

Following a series of appearances in the USA, Lawrence went to Australia in 1923, returning to England the following autumn. In November 1927 his association with Plum was renewed when he played Lord Tidmouth in *Good Morning, Bill* at the Duke of York's Theatre.

He continued what had become a habit of crossing the Atlantic at regular intervals, appearing as Sir George Chatterley in Jerome Kern's *The Cat and the Fiddle* at New York's Globe Theatre in 1931. He had previously appeared in a Kern revue, *Hitchy-Koo*, in 1920.

More good roles came in London before he reprised his performance as Lord Tidmouth in a revival of *Good Morning, Bill* at Daly's and the Saville in 1934.

Lawrence made more films than George, appearing in some 30 in all, including *Men Are Not Gods* (1936), and outlived him by some years. He died in 1944.



Lawrence Grossmith as Lord Tidmouth in *Good Morning, Bill*