

1597

BEN JONSON ARRESTED AS PRIVY COUNCIL CLOSES ALL THEATRES

"Isle of Dogs" Row leads to Arrest of Actors and Writers



An order of the Privy Council (Dated 28 July 1597) has banned all further public performances and ordered all theatres within three miles of the City of London to be demolished. Playwright Ben Jonson and actors Gabriel Spencer and Robert Shea were immediately arrested. A warrant was also issued for the arrest of writer Thomas Nashe, who has fled to Yarmouth to avoid imprisonment. The reason behind this sudden drama is assumed to be "The Isle of Dogs", a play by Nashe and Jonson which was being performed at the Swan Theatre in the repertoire of Pembroke's Men. Even though the play had been officially licensed by the Master of the Revels' Committee, it is claimed that the version being performed has been re-written and ad-libbed to the point where it contains "very seditious and slanderous matter" and "lewd and mutinous behaviour".

The Privy Council has appointed Richard Topcliffe to investigate the situation. Topcliffe is known as the "cruellest tyrant" for his methods of torture - just six years ago his methods of investigation led Thomas Kyd to incriminate Christopher Marlowe.

Crisis Over as Jonson is Freed

Ten weeks after their arrest, Jonson, Spencer and Shea were released from prison with no charges being made against them, and it was announced that all London's theatres are free to re-open.

However, the loss of income during the peak summer months has been disastrous for the theatre world, and the financial losses are likely to sink the Swan, which is facing a very bleak future indeed.

Ben Jonson, the controversial playwright

New Lord Chamberlain Dies, and Actors gets new name - again!

After just eight months in office the present Lord Chamberlain has died, and Lord Hunsdon has succeeded to the post. Accordingly, the Chamberlain's Men who have been known as Lord Hunsdon's Men since July last year, are once more to be known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Favourite actor, Edward Alleyn, to Retire

At the age of 31 and at the very top of his profession, England's most famous actor has announced that he is to retire. He has been acclaimed for his portrayals of Orlando Furioso, Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus and the Jew of Malta - and it appears that he has amassed a large fortune from his acting and managerial activities.

It seems he wishes to give up the stage and devote himself to charitable work

DEATH OF PIONEER, JAMES BURBAGE

The "Founding Father" of English Theatre dies, age 67

When the history of English Theatre comes to be written, James Burbage will certainly feature as a father-figure. His death, at the age of 67, marks the end of the beginning. The Red Lion, the Theatre, and the new Blackfriars Theatre all owe their existence to the joiner-actor-property-developer who has just died.

Shortly before his death, Burbage spent £600 converting the former frater of Blackfriars Priory into a "private" and covered theatre. An earlier theatre on the Blackfriars site proved a popular attraction amongst the nobility, although it only survived eight years and closed in 1584 because of religious opposition.

But Burbage's Theatre now will not even open. Permission has been refused - in spite of the completion of the work - following a large and well-organised protest campaign by local residents. The decision is said to have thrown Burbage into a terrible rage, and this may have contributed to his death.

He was a man of violent temper, stubborn and unscrupulous, and was always in financial difficulties, but he was also a man of the theatre. He leaves two sons, Cuthbert and Richard, both active in the theatre, and both intending to carry on the pioneer work of their late father. James Burbage, therefore, has founded the English Theatre's first theatrical dynasty.