

THEATRES CLOSE AS QUEEN DIES

The Poets' War Ends in Truce

1601: The ongoing public battle between Ben Jonson and his fellow-playwrights John Marston and Thomas Dekker seems to have reached its climax with Jonson's "The Poetaster", in which he portrays his two rivals as terrible hacks at the very bottom of the poetry scale.

In this play - his bitterest attack so far - Jonson also declares that he is tired of all this bickering and announces that, as far as he is concerned, this is the end of the "War".

New Company takes over lease on Rose

1602: "My Lord of Worcester's Players" have taken over the Rose Theatre, and celebrated their opening night on August 21st with a party at the Mermaid Tavern. Philip Henslowe paid the costs of the party, which came to 9 shillings. The star attraction for Worcester's Men is the comedian, Will Kempe. He parted company with the Chamberlain's Men two years ago, but is now back with a permanent troupe. The new company hopes to gain success with lavish, spectacular effects and to maximise the current popularity for plays of horror and painful death. Playwrights Thomas Middleton and John Webster are already part of this venture.

William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third

1602: John Manningham, a law student in the Middle Temple, has noted a joke currently doing the rounds. From his diary entry on March 13th: "Upon a time when Burbage played Richard III there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him that before she went from the play she appointed him to come to her that night by the name of Richard III. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained and at his game ere Burbage came. The message being brought that Richard III was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard III."

New King, James Ist, changes theatre rules

1603: All theatres were closed on March 19 when it became known that Queen Elizabeth was close to death. She died five days later. The Rose was already closed, since Will Kempe was leading that company on a provincial tour.

By Royal Edict of the newly crowned King James, all theatre companies are to be under the patronage and control of the Crown. Whether this is a sign of royal approval for theatre or an attempt to increase official control remains to be seen. As a result of the order, a whole series of new names will come into being, and a lot of familiar company titles from years past will be replaced.

Richard Burbage's Company, formerly the Chamberlain's Men, will now be known as The King's Men. His major rival, Philip Henslowe, who has long worked under the name of Nottingham's Men, will now be known as Prince Henry's Men. Worcester's Men are to be known as Queen Anne's Men.

Re-Opening delayed by devastating Plague

1603: Plans for London's theatres to re-open in May, following the official mourning period for the death of the Queen, failed to materialise. A particularly devastating outbreak of plague started in May and raged till the end of the year. The commercial, political and theatrical life of London was completely disrupted as over 30,000 citizens were reported dead.

Theatre business is especially vulnerable to outbreaks of plague. In 1592 all playhouses were closed from June to September. The following year all performances were banned from February to September, and after just one month, the ban was re-imposed for October and November. 1594 saw a short closure from February onwards, after which outbreaks of plague seemed to diminish. However, the seven years since then have seen the playhouses closed on a number of occasions due to censorship and political pressures.

1603 will turn out to be a disastrous year for theatre business. The playhouses will have been closed for nearly nine months. The provincial tours which have helped actors survive during these long closures are not possible this year, since most towns outside London are refusing to allow entry to anyone from the capital in an attempt to stop the plague spreading.

Will Kemp - the Nine Days' Wonder - Dies

1603: Will Kemp, the most famous comic actor of the age, has died. Originator of the common phrase "Nine Days' Wonder" because of his epic dance from London to Norwich in 1600, Will Kemp inherited Tarlton's mantle as the leading English Clown. Famous for his Dogberry in "Much Ado About Nothing" and his Justice Shallow in "Henry IV", he was a brilliant self-publicist and the leading comedian of Henslowe's Company. He toured Holland with the Earl of Leicester's Company in 1585, and played at Elsinore at 1586. He was with the Chamberlain's Men from their formation in 1594 and has been a great favourite with audiences for over a decade.

