

1682-83

Charles Hart dies soon after retiring

1683: As the leading actor of the day, many expressed surprise when Charles Hart accepted a pension and retired from the stage just as the two Patent Companies merged last year. Some said it was because he was unwilling to enter into competition with Thomas Betterton.

Charles Hart, who was Shakespeare's great-nephew, was famous for his portrayals of Othello and Hotspur - and equally famous for being the discoverer and first lover of Nell Gwynn. He began his career as a boy actor as far back as 1641, but his early success was cut short by the outbreak of war. He became a soldier and returned to the stage at the Restoration. As an actor it was said he became so absorbed in his role during a performance that it was impossible to distract his attention.

Otway's success

1682: 30 year old playwright, Thomas Otway, has had much success in the past seven years — notably with "Alcibiades", "Don Carlos" and "The Orphan". His current play, "Venice Preserved" is proving an even more popular hit with London's audiences.

KING'S & DUKE'S MEN TO MERGE

London's two theatre companies will become one

1682 Rivalry between the two companies over the past twenty years since the Restoration has come to an end with a merger brought about on the King's advice. Audiences have declined in recent years. The leading actors are getting older, and no new favourites seem to have emerged. Thomas Killigrew is ill and unlikely to survive, and Charles Hart has announced his wish to retire.

The King has advised that a merger between the two companies will strengthen resources and ease the strain on the royal purse. Davenant's Dorset Gardens Theatre has had the edge over the past few years, but even his "Duke's House" has been feeling the pinch. The Drury Lane Theatre has lurched from crisis to crisis and has been riven with quarrels and walk-outs. The merger of the two companies means there is now only one Royal Patent Theatre in London, and therefore only one venue permitted to stage legitimate plays. The merged company will use the Drury Lane Theatre as its headquarters. The Dorset Gardens Theatre will be prevented from staging plays, but will be able to stage musical productions and operas as long as it can find an entrepreneur wealthy enough to support such a venture.

Enterprising Sadler Cashes in on Wells

1683 : Workmen digging in the grounds of Thomas Sadler at Clerkenwell have rediscovered a well from the Middle Ages - a well associated with miraculous healing powers. Mr Sadler has converted his gardens to an entertainment centre where people are flocking to drink the waters and be entertained at Sadler's Musick House

New "Merged" Company Triumphs

1682: The merged company at Drury Lane have announced a new season including Shakespeare's "Othello" and "Julius Caesar". The 47 year old actor, Thomas Betterton, has scored a spectacular success with his Brutus. For many years he was the leading player at the Dorset Gardens Theatre, but he has at last achieved a popular acclaim which makes him a number one box office attraction. Other productions in the opening season include Ben Jonson's "Bartholomew Fair". Contemporary works are represented by Wycherley's "The Plain Dealer" and Dryden's "Evening Love". All performances are given at 3.30 in the afternoon.

Death of leading actor, Thomas Killigrew, 72

1683 He began his career hanging around the stage door of the Red Bull Playhouse, always volunteering to play a walk-on whenever the chance arose. ("Who will and be a devil, and he shall see the play for nothing?") And he ended his career at the very top of his profession - the man who established Drury Lane Theatre, the man who performed the first licensed performance of the Restoration, and the man who developed Britain's first drama school - the Nursery.

Thomas Killigrew, who has died at the age of 72, spent all his life associated with the Court. He was a pageboy to Charles I, then groom of the bedchamber and Master of the Revels to Charles II. His brother, Sir William, was a playwright, and his two sons, Thomas and Charles, were both associated with him in the management of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Charles Killigrew will become the new Master of the Revels.

