



Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

A sketch of the young Sarah Siddons by George Romney

1782 : Six years ago her performances at Drury Lane went unnoticed - except for one review which called her "lamentable". Now she has returned in triumph after six years developing her craft in the provinces, where she became known as the Queen of the Theatre Royal, Bath. Her fame in the West Country persuaded Sheridan to implore her to try London again, and on October 10th she returned to Drury Lane as Isabella in "The Fatal Marriage". She made such a deep impression that the audience was "nearly drowned in tears". In a play of undiluted grief and innocence betrayed, she played on the audience's emotions as a great pianist does on a keyboard. The frenzied applause and the unprecedented ovation means Mrs Siddons is back to stay !

Mrs Siddons' Royal Honour

1783 : George III and Queen Caroline have become regular playgoers at Drury Lane - but only on the nights when Mrs Siddons is appearing. After one performance the King sent for her and told her that although he had tried, he had failed to catch her out on a single wrong emphasis. He contrasted her great repose with the acting of Garrick, who, according to the King, "was a great fidget, he could never stand still". Mrs Siddons has been given a Royal Appointment as Preceptress in English Reading to the Princess.

Another five theatres built throughout land

New theatres continue to be built all over the country. During the years 1781-84 theatres have opened in Dunlop Street, Glasgow, in Lancaster, Newry and in Brecon.

In London the Surrey Theatre has been rebuilt. It originally opened in 1771 as a riding-school and exhibition in opposition to Astley's, but has now been rebuilt near the Obelisk in Blackfriars Road and calls itself the Surrey Royal Circus.

Astley's equestrian empire expands thanks to King and goes international

1784: The authorities tried to close down Philip Astley's Amphitheatre in Westminster Bridge Road, but the equestrian showman has a great piece of luck. King George III needed professional help with a restive horse and, naturally, asked Astley - the best known horseman in the land. In return for this favour, the King granted Astley a licence for his theatre. The venue has now been fully roofed, and a gallery, pit and boxes have been added, whilst the interior has been decorated to look like a grove of trees. He has renamed it "The Royal Grove at Astley's Amphitheatre". In the meantime Astley has opened another Amphitheatre in Paris, and has thus become the first known English theatre manager to control a venue in Continental Europe. He has also opened similar places of entertainment all over England and Ireland. When all his buildings are complete, he will control 19 different venues. The public's appetite for equestrian events seems to be insatiable. Astley has plans to introduce music and dance into his horse shows.

And her brother comes too - with an outstanding "Hamlet"

1783 : John Philip Kemble - the brother of Sarah Siddons - has joined the Drury Lane company. He originally began his career as a child performer with his father's strolling company, but as soon as he reached maturity his father, Roger Kemble, sent John Philip to Douai to train for the priesthood. He abandoned this to return to the stage, and following a season at the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin, has been engaged to play "Hamlet" at Drury Lane. Eclipsed by the present fame of his sister, his Hamlet initially puzzled the audience. He gave an unusual performance - gentle, philosophical, sensible and lonely - and, at the beginning, the audience seemed a little cool towards him. His successive performances in the role have captivated the Drury Lane audience, who have acclaimed the "the sweet, the graceful, the gentlemanly Hamlet" and have taken him to their hearts.