

1788-1790

NEW LAW HELPS PROVINCIAL THEATRES

Shylock, aged 88, forgets his words

1788, 10 January : Veteran actor, Charles Macklin, is famous for his incomparable Shylock - a part he first played in 1741, and praised by Pope as "This is the Jew That Shakespeare drew". He appeared in this role at Covent Garden on the 10th January and was excellent in the First Act, but in the Second he became confused. He stopped and addressed the audience, telling them he had been seized with a terror of the mind which had destroyed his mental faculties. He begged their indulgence and promised that this would be the last time he ever appeared before them in so humiliating a situation. Macklin recovered somewhat after large applause from the audience and got through the remainder of the play with much assistance from the prompter.

Macklin fails to finish the show

1789, 7 May : Charles Macklin, who suffered a memory lapse during the middle of his performance as Shylock sixteen months ago, recovered very quickly and has proceeded over the past year to give several more performances of his most acclaimed role. No one was prepared therefore when the same thing happened again. This time it was a complete memory loss, and the "terror of the mind" which he referred to last year seems to have taken him over completely. His performance was abandoned half way through. The audience responded very sympathetically. It was clear they were present at the final performance of a great man of theatre who has been a "star" performer for longer than anyone can remember.

1788: An Act of Parliament allows Justices of the Peace to license theatre performances throughout the country, thus changing the current rules whereby only the London and Provincial "Theatre Royals" have been permitted to stage plays. Many large provincial towns already have their own "Theatre Royals", but some of these towns are not large enough to sustain an all-year-round opening. Accordingly they have developed "circuits" and take their productions (and their "royal patent") on a regular circuit tour to surrounding towns.

The larger provincial theatres regularly employ top London performers when the London theatres are closed. These "star" names join the local company and their presence is beneficial to the box office. Many of today's top performers owe their success to their earlier work in the provincial theatres, which are recognised as a training ground for young talent.

The new Act is likely to lead to a vast increase in the number of theatres and circuits throughout the country, since it will now be possible for the non-Patent theatres to start circuits and to present plays on a regular basis, provided they have the approval of the local Justices.

New Theatres open all over country

1788 : Newcastle has obtained permission to use the title "Theatre Royal" for its existing theatre, while Richmond, Yorkshire, has acquired a completely new Theatre Royal. The theatre has been built on Corporation ground by Samuel Butler, and is to be the centre of his already established circuit which includes Beverley, Northallerton, Whitby, Ulverston and newly built theatres in Harrogate and Kendal. The new Richmond theatre is old-fashioned by today's standards, in that it has retained the large proscenium and square auditorium.

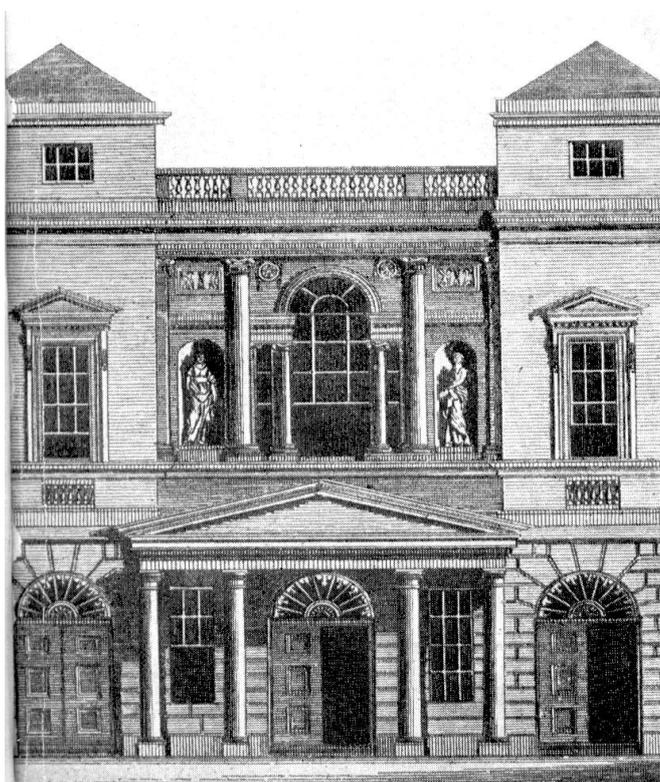
Brighton's North Street Theatre has been replaced by a new theatre in Duke Street - built at a cost of £500 and Aberdeen's old theatre has been replaced with a new Theatre Royal.

Other towns to gain new theatres include Bridlington, Canterbury, Gassington and Londonderry.

King's, Haymarket destroyed by Fire

1789, 17th June : The 84 year old King's Theatre in the Haymarket has been burnt to the ground. The cost of this disaster is said to be £70,000. The theatre, designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, opened in 1705 as the "Queen's Theatre" after the newly crowned Queen Anne. The original managers were Congreve and Vanbrugh with Thomas Betterton and his company who had broken away from Drury Lane. When Betterton returned to Drury Lane, the Queen's was hired to the Irish actor-manager, Owen Swiney. He had a great success with "The Beaux Stratagem" with Anne Oldfield as Mrs Sullen - but soon conflicted with the licensing authorities who banned him from producing straight plays. The theatre then staged operas, but eventually Swiney went bankrupt and fled to Venice in 1710. (When he came back 20 years later he had changed his name to Owen MacSwiney in the hope of fooling his creditors). The theatre, too, changed its name on the death of Queen Anne, and, as the King's Theatre, has presented musicals and operas ever since. Work on creating a replacement building started almost immediately.

In the meantime the 17 year old Pantheon ballroom and music centre in London's Oxford Street has been converted into a theatre to accommodate the opera company from the burnt-down King's Theatre.



The Pantheon Theatre, Oxford Street