

1796-1799

CHARLES MACKLIN DIES, AGED 99

Forty new Theatres built in past decade

1799 : In the decade since provincial theatres gained new freedom under the Act of 1788, there has been some rapid development in theatres outside London. "Circuits" have been created all over the country and provincial managers are appearing everywhere: amongst them are Butler in Yorkshire, Fisher in East Anglia, Tate Wilkinson in York, Watson in Cheltenham, Whitely in Chester and Mrs Baker in Canterbury. A circuit can consist of anything between three and eleven theatres, though many of these "theatres" would not qualify for that name as far as London playgoers are concerned. It is estimated that around forty new theatres have opened in the past ten years.

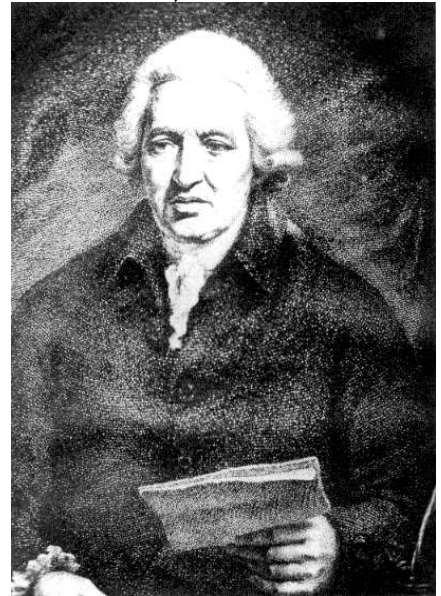
Circus hero, Ricketts, and his company are drowned

1799 : John Bill Ricketts and his entire circus company, including the famous Signor Spinacuta and the Polander Dwarf, have perished in a shipwreck whilst returning from a tour of America. Ricketts, "The Equestrian Hero", was legendary for his acrobatics on horseback and, in spite of Anglo-American hostilities over the War of Independence, he became a great favourite in the newly created United States of America. He even went riding with George Washington. The company was returning to England because their New York Amphitheatre had been destroyed by fire. Ricketts was 39 years old.

Fanny Abington retires

1799 : For much of her career Fanny Abington, overshadowed by Kitty Clive, worked exclusively in Dublin. When Kitty Clive retired, Fanny returned to London and during 26 years at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, established herself as one of London's favourite performers. She has now retired, at the age of sixty.

1799: At the age of 99 - though some claimed he was actually older and was 107 - Charles Macklin has died. He was the greatest Shylock of the age, though the pre-eminence of David Garrick and Spranger Barry tended to eclipse his fame. His life was marked with scandals - guilty of manslaughter in 1733, involved in a sex scandal in 1740, he became an overnight "star" in 1741 with his unsurpassed portrayal of a sympathetic Shylock, and then created a further stir by portraying Macbeth in the dress of a Highland chieftain for the first time in 1773. He is said to have been a tyrant in the theatre and a disgustingly rude and obnoxious person, and at the same time, a man of great charm, energy and integrity who would immediately apologise for his rudeness and disarm all those he had offended. He was twice married and is survived by his second wife. All his children predeceased him.



Newly discovered "Shakespeare" play is laughed off the stage

1796: 19 year old William Ireland, a young would-be poet, brought his amazing discovery to Drury Lane. He had come across the script of "Vortigern and Rowena", a previously unknown play by Shakespeare. Sheridan and Kemble were assured of its authenticity by Shakespeare scholars Malone and Parson, and by Boswell, who upon sight of the manuscript, knelt down and kissed it.

William Ireland drove a hard bargain - finally agreeing on a downpayment of £300 and half the profits for the first sixty performances.

As soon as rehearsals began, Kemble began to have serious doubts about it. However, interest and advance sales were so great that he was obliged to go ahead with it. The play opened on April 2nd. The audience grew increasingly restless throughout. In the Fifth Act Kemble had a line "And when this mockery is over. . .". This was the cue for an outburst of rage, disdain and anger from the audience. The play immediately died its rightful death.

Dibdin moves his Sans-Souci to new building

1796 : The lease was up on the old Sans-Souci theatre in the Strand, but that did not deter the popular singer and performer, Charles Dibdin. He simply reconstructed the old building, moving it to Leicester Place. The theatre's interior has been so carefully re-assembled that once inside, the audience would not know it had moved. Dibdin remains one of the Town's most popular attractions.

