

1804-1805

"BETTYMANIA" HITS LONDON

Theatres battle to present "The Boy Wonder"



National Portrait Gallery

1804: He is just 12 years old and already a huge success in Ireland and Scotland. His English debut at Birmingham brought rival bids from Drury Lane and Covent Garden to be the first to present him in London. Drury Lane offered £100 for seven performances plus half a benefit. Covent Garden offered twelve performances at 50 guineas per performance plus a clear benefit - the largest sum ever offered to a performer.

Betty storms the Garden Drury Lane loves Betty

1804, 1st December : Master Betty, the boy wonder and highest paid artist ever, made his London debut at Covent Garden. Billed as "The Infant Roscius", he appeared as Achmet in "Barbarossa". The crowds in Bow Street and Covent Garden were so great that soldiers were called to keep order. The audiences acclaimed him as "Garrick returned to the stage", and Charles James Fox described him as "greater even than Garrick".

1804 : As soon as his Covent Garden contract was fulfilled, Master Betty straightway moved to Drury Lane to play Young Norval. His death scene brought down the house. When he died with the whispered word "Mother" on his lips, there was not a dry eye in the theatre.

Betty is ill - crowds gather at his door

1805 : Master Betty has been taken ill, and for seven days and nights a large crowd has maintained a vigil outside his lodgings. A daily bulletin was issued from the steps of the lodgings, and the details then rushed to the newspapers.

MPs adjourn for Betty

1805 : The Prime Minister, William Pitt, adjourned the sitting of the House of Commons to enable members to get to the theatre in time to see Master William Betty appearing as Hamlet.

Dibdin's nautical spectacles draw crowds to Sadler's Wells

1804: Under the management of Charles Dibdin, a series of nautical dramas are being presented at Sadler's Wells, featuring real water in a tank fed by the New River. These are proving so popular with the public that Dibdin has ceased to perform his one-man shows and is concentrating on the aquatic displays. His Sans Souci Theatre in Leicester Place is being rented out for amateur performances.

Tailors riot at the Haymarket Charles Bannister dies, 66

1805 : Hundreds of tailors, enraged by Samuel Foote's satire "The Tailors" , flocked to the Haymarket .They claimed the play was an insult to their profession. The protest turned into a riot, and troops were called to disperse them.

1804: Charles Bannister was London's favourite comic actor. His career was spent mainly at the Haymarket and Drury Lane. In recent years his son, Charles, took over his father's famous roles including Sir Anthony Absolute and Tony Lumpkin. He has died at the age of 66.

"Bettymania" ends with Richard III

1804 : Master Betty has fallen from favour as the world of fashion withdraws somewhat shamefacedly from its infatuation. His appearance as Richard III has not appealed to the public, and his attempt at a second London season has met with similar indifference. For the 1804/5 season he was, without doubt, the greatest attraction ever on the London stage. His accumulated earnings in just one season are said to vastly outweigh those of an entire career of most other star performers.

"Bettymania" - who can explain it?

London's theatres have never before experienced anything like the wave of "Bettymania". He was an overnight sensation, and then just as suddenly a performer to be ignored. The story of Master Betty is likely to remain one of theatre's great mysteries.