

1813-1814

EDMUND KEAN TRIUMPHS AS SHYLOCK

Philip Astley - "Horse Manager" -dies, 72

1814 : Philip Astley, famous for his presentation of equestrian pantomimes, has died at the age of 72. One time proprietor of theatres in London, Paris, Dublin, and a dozen other provincial venues, he would tour his company (both four-legged and two-legged) to each of his theatres in turn. He is survived by his wife, who is famous for always appearing in the biggest wigs on any stage, and his son, whose grace and agility on horseback has made him a star of the entertainment world.

Sam Whitbread's Suicide

1814 : After months of illness and increasing pain Samuel Whitbread, the brewer and theatre enthusiast, has taken his own life. The Inquest revealed that he had been suffering from a brain tumour. He is mourned by everyone in the theatre world and it is said that his lasting monument will be the new Drury Lane Theatre - a building which would never have happened were it not for his drive and determination.

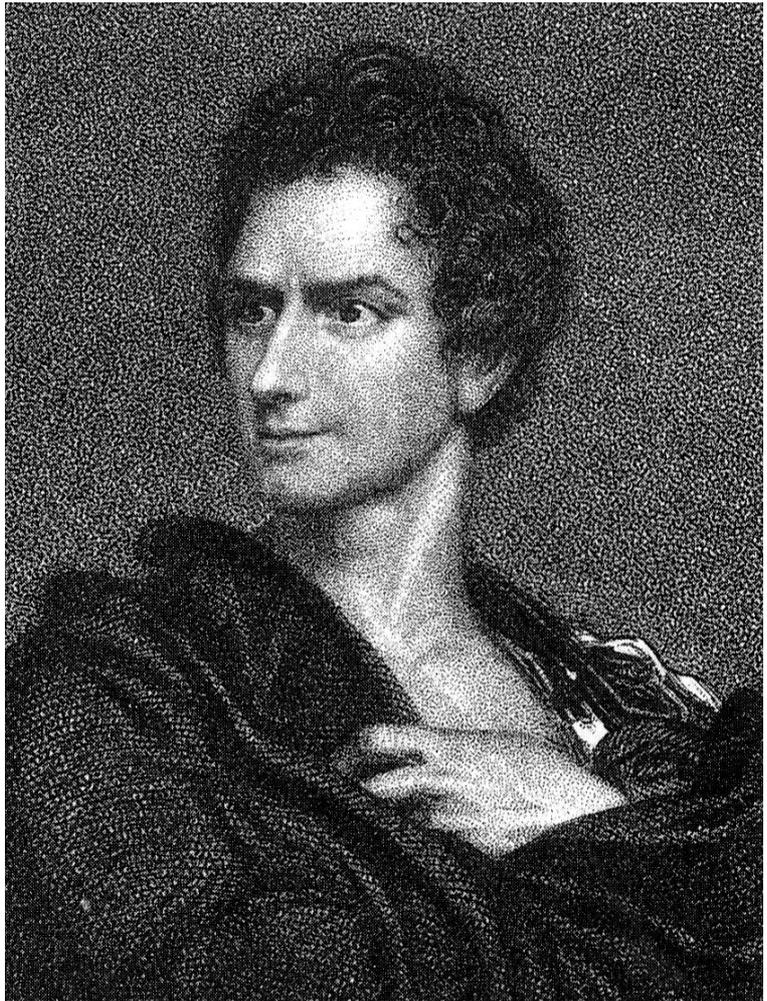
Pantheon closes after opera losses

1814 : The Pantheon Theatre in Oxford Street has closed following disastrous financial losses. Two years ago it was re-opened as an opera house in a joint venture between Colonel Greville and a wine merchant called Cundy. That led to a loss of £50,000 in just one month. Since then Mr Cundy has taken over sole control and attempted all manner of attractions to save his theatre. His pantomime seasons offered cheaper tickets than the rival Drury Lane but even that failed to attract the public. With considerable rent arrears, the Pantheon has been put up for sale - though the building has been stripped by the creditors. It is not thought that the venue will ever re-open as a theatre.

1814 , 26 January : With very little publicity and in dreadful weather, the unknown actor, Edmund Kean, made his Drury Lane debut as Shylock. The house was sparsely attended, and the audience shocked by Kean's first entrance, wearing a black wig and beard. Not even the great Macklin's radical re-think of Shylock had dared to do away with the traditional red wig for this part. It was clear from the beginning that this was to be an extraordinary performance. In the first interval some of the audience rushed to nearby coffee houses and even to Covent Garden to tell their friends to drop everything and come at once to Drury Lane. By the

end of the performance, the house was much fuller, and resounded to thunderous applause and excited shouts. The following day, the town could talk of nothing else. Hazlitt, writing for the next day's Press, was full of magnificent praise. Everyone was eager to find out the background of this astonishing new actor.

He is 27 years old, and is said to be the illegitimate child of a strolling player. Since his earliest days he has been a child performer in fairs and barns all round the country and is even said to have appeared at Covent Garden as a baby Cupid. He has taken his name from Moses Kean, the touring mimic and ventriloquist who had at one time acted as his guardian, and he received training in all the theatre arts whilst facing the bitter trials of a strolling player. For many years, together with his wife and two small sons, he has been touring the provinces with very little success and in great penury. The elder of his two sons is said to have died from the privations of the touring life. All this has changed in one night. His Drury Lane debut has been sensational. He is a short, swarthy man whose performances project a sense of danger and dark passion - very much part of the new "Romantic" movement associated with Lord Byron.



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Twenty One New Theatres

1814: The growth in provincial theatre building which marked the end of the last century seems to be continuing. Since 1800, around 21 new theatres have been built outside London. Towns which have acquired new theatres include Horsham, Tunbridge Wells, Bath, Glasgow, Henley on Thames, Arundel, Brighton, Swansea, Cambridge, Gravesend, Dundee, Macclesfield, Colchester, Wells, Carlisle, Leamington Spa, Plymouth, Beccles, Kings Lynn, Newport and Woodbridge.

Kean as Richard III, Hamlet Othello & Iago

1814 : In rapid succession Edmund Kean has made his indelible mark on all the major roles - Richard III (12 February), Hamlet, Othello (5 May), Iago, and the Duke in "Riches". In his first season he has given 15 Shylocks, 20 Richards, 10 Othellos, 10 Hamlets, 8 Iagos and 4 Dukes. The profits for Drury Lane have amounted to £20,000 and Kean's own benefit night raised £1,150. Perhaps the greatest accolade for his opening season came from the very elderly Mrs David Garrick who has praised him highly and presented him with some of Garrick's stage costumes and properties.