

1827-1828

Grimaldi's Farewell Benefit

1828 : Five years have passed since "Joey" Grimaldi last delighted audiences with his harlequinades, his verbal comedy, his baggy breeches and his bald wig with tufts of wild red hair. His incredible physical energy took its toll on his health. By the end of the 1823 Covent Garden pantomime he had men waiting in the wings to massage his legs as soon as he came off, and he would be shaking with sobs of exhaustion. He was too ill to be able to perform in any farewell benefit performances at that time, and he has been living in straitened circumstances ever since. Although physically unable to recreate his masterpieces of pantomime, he has recovered enough to be able to sing and recite whilst sitting at the footlights, and he was encouraged to appear in a farewell benefit at Sadlers Wells on 17 March. The public flocked to see their old favourite, and Drury Lane offered to stage another benefit for him on June 27 to help swell the sum available for his old age. Curiously Covent Garden refused to offer him the same honour, some say because of their feud with Grimaldi's son, Joseph Junior, who took over his father's roles at Covent Garden but who destroyed his reputation with his debauchery and constant drunkenness. "Joey" Grimaldi's farewells were very emotional occasions, as the audiences cheered to the rafters in honour of the much loved clown they consider to be the funniest man alive.

Kean welcomed back from USA with great applause

1827 : Edmund Kean, who was made an honorary Red Indian Chief during his recent American tour, returned to Drury Lane on January 8th in his old role as Shylock. He was received with joy and acclamation by a public out to show how much they had missed the greatest actor of the age. Backstage his fellow artists were shocked by how old, ill and worn he looks.

Enter a new Kean - the Son rises

1827 : Edmund Kean's son, Charles, has been educated at Eton, with no expense spared to prepare him for a proper career and to keep him out of the theatre. The decision of 18 year old Charles to become an actor has enraged his father. When Charles was engaged by Stephen Price to play Young Norval at Drury Lane, Edmund promptly walked out and has moved to the rival Covent Garden - a great loss to Drury Lane. Charles Kean's debut was received sympathetically, and as the season ended, Kean Junior decided to go to the theatre in Dublin and other provincial venues so that he can gain more experience.

New Pavilion aims at Jewish audience

1828 : Over the past few years a large Jewish population has appeared in the Whitechapel and Shoreditch area of London. Messrs Wyatt and Farrell have built a new theatre in this area - the Pavilion - and are aiming their programme directly at the local population by introducing Jewish comedians and actors as curtain-raisers or after-pieces to the burlettas and burlesques which have been the traditional fare of the non-Patent theatres.



FIFTEEN PEOPLE KILLED AS NEW THEATRE COLLAPSES

1828, 28 February : The Royal Brunswick Theatre in Wellclose Square opened just three days ago. It was a replacement for the old Royalty Theatre which stood on the same site but was destroyed by fire in 1826. The company was on stage rehearsing Scott's "Guy Mannering" when the roof of the stage suddenly collapsed, sending a great quantity of iron and brick on to the heads of the cast. As the roof caved in, so also did one of the side walls, burying many of the actors. Frantic efforts were made to dig out the injured - but fifteen people were killed, either as a result of injuries received or from suffocation. A further twenty were badly hurt. An immediate enquiry was undertaken into the cause of the disaster, which is generally felt to be due entirely to shoddy workmanship and cheap design, which caused the load bearing walls to be inadequate to support the weight of the roof.

Gas Explosion - Covent Garden goes back to wax and oil lighting

1828, 18 November : An explosion of a gasometer inside Covent Garden Theatre has led to all apparatus for making gas being removed from the building. The gas illumination which remains on the stage is to be supplied directly from the mains of the Chartered Gas Company, and the auditorium, corridors and front of the house will revert to oil lighting. The King's Theatre, the Adelphi and the English Opera House have announced they will all do the same as a safety measure.