

1871

IRVING TRIUMPHS IN "THE BELLS"



Prince's Manchester rivals London's best

1871 : Charles Calvert at the Prince's Theatre Manchester has built a reputation over the past seven years which rivals the best London has to offer. His spectacular productions of Shakespeare are noted for their accuracy as well as their splendour. This year he visited Venice to prepare his "Merchant of Venice" and brought back a complete gondola to use onstage at the Manchester theatre.

Pier Pressure increases seaside theatre building

1871 : The Pier Pavilion Theatre which has opened at Hunstanton joins a growing list of seasonal entertainment venues appearing in seaside towns around the country. Several seaside towns are constructing or planning promenade piers—walkways which extend some distance into the sea—an engineering feat made possible by new methods of using iron supports. These are proving very popular and seem to be replacing the Pleasure Gardens of earlier times. Eight years ago Blackpool's North Pier Pavilion was a pioneer in this new kind of venue. Many more seem set to follow.

Comedie Francaise on tour

1871 : The performances at the Opera Comique, Aldwych, are the first ever given outside France by the Comedie Francaise, the national theatre of France.

London acclaims a "great new actor"

1871 : "The Bells" opened on Saturday 25th November at the Royal Lyceum under the management of H.L. Bateman. The main role was performed by the company's 34 year old leading man, Henry Irving. Irving's London debut at the Princess's twelve years ago was something of a disaster, and he spent most of the next decade touring in provincial obscurity. When he returned to London three years ago he did get himself noticed, but for somewhat negative reasons. He was considered to be a most peculiar actor, prone to peculiar gestures and with a peculiar voice. No one held out much of a future for this very provincial performer.

In 1870 he played in "The Two Roses" at the Vaudeville and, at last, he gained some success. The play ran 291 performances, and Irving had his own benefit night. Apart from "The Two Roses" he performed the monologue "The Dream of Eugene Avram" to great acclaim. In the audience was H.L. Bateman. He had just taken over a long lease on the Lyceum - a venue which was part derelict and generally regarded as an "unlucky" theatre. Bateman was looking for a leading man and instinct told him he had found his leading man in Henry Irving. Irving discussed terms and the roles he would like to play, and Bateman promised to consider a new version of "The Polish Jew" which had taken Irving's fancy.

The Lyceum season opened in September. The first two plays were box office failures and by the end of October Bateman was facing financial ruin. Irving urged him to stage the "Polish Jew" in a desperate attempt to turn round their fortunes. Another version of that play was already running at the Alfred Theatre, Marylebone, and was failing to attract any audiences. Bateman was dubious, but Irving persisted and provided a version written by a young solicitor called Leopold Lewis. And so, "The Bells" opened at the Lyceum.

The opening night audience was sparse. At the end of the performance the audience sat in stunned silence. A lady fainted in the stalls. Then suddenly it erupted. A tumult of cheers and applause. A huge ovation. The critics had an extra day to write their reviews, and therefore had time to stay and witness the audience's ovation. When Monday's newspapers appeared they all hailed the birth of a great star of British Theatre. Irving is being compared to the "greats" of bygone years. The Lyceum is besieged by people wanting to buy tickets. Henry Irving and Leopold Lewis are the talk of the town.