

1872-1875

Irving's Hamlet runs 200 nights



1874 : It seems that no "great" actor has earned his spurs until he has played "Hamlet". Richard Burbage created the role in 1602, and Thomas Betterton played it in 1661. From then on, the list is a long one. According to the history books, the outstanding interpreters of the role were : Robert Wilks (1708), Lacy Ryan (1722), David Garrick (1742), Spranger Barry (1747), John Philip Kemble (1783), Master Betty (1805), Charles Young (1807), Edmund Kean (1814), William Macready (1821), and Charles Kean (1833).

In living memory there seems to be little enthusiasm for the interpreters of the past 40 years. Until now. Henry Irving has performed the role. Irving - with his peculiar delivery of lines. Irving - with his awkward way of moving. He might be all right for melodramatic roles like Mathias in "The Bells" - but surely not as Hamlet.

Perhaps it was the curiosity value that packed the first few performances at the Lyceum. However, it was clearly more than curiosity which kept the production running for two hundred performances. Irving has broken every record for the number of times he has played the role in a continuous production.

His Hamlet is an astonishing interpretation. His is a gentle, tender, subtle and moving performance. Audiences come away moved with sadness at the dilemma of the Prince of Denmark.

His triumph in "The Bells" a few years ago marked him as a powerful, gripping and highly dramatic actor of great flair. His "Hamlet" reveals a depth of sensitivity rarely seen on the British stage. He is now generally accepted as one the leading actors of the age.

Gaiety Introduces "Matinees"

1872 : History has gone full circle, with the Gaiety Theatre announcing "matinee" performances, starting at 2pm on certain days of the week. The only difference between these and the afternoon performances of days long gone by is that these matinees are in addition to the evening performances.

Surrey Gardens Re-Open

1872 : Eleven years after the fire, and renamed the Surrey Gardens Theatre, this enormous venue is now back in business, though with a much reduced capacity.

Oxford Burns & Builds Again

On 1st Nov, 1872, just three years after being rebuilt because of fire damage, the Oxford Theatre was once more been destroyed by fire. In 1873 it re-opened following reconstruction.

Royal Amphitheatre Opens

1873 : Built five years ago for circus and equestrian entertainments, the Royal Amphitheatre in High Holborn has been converted into a theatre. The opening performance on October 11th was a new version of Offenbach's "Eurydice" under the management of Frederick Strange.

The "Infant Roscius" dies at the age of 83

1874 : Having passed most of his life in complete obscurity, William Betty has died at the age of 83. For one season, seventy years ago, he was the most famous actor in the country. At the age of thirteen he played Hamlet and other major roles at Covent Garden and Drury Lane and even the House of Commons adjourned early to allow Members of Parliament to go and see the Boy Wonder, the "Infant Roscius" known as Master William Betty.

Underground Theatre is a great novelty

1873 : The large restaurant development in Regent Circus Piccadilly incorporates a "novelty" - the world's first underground theatre, known as the Criterion. Even the Upper Circle is reached by descending stairs. It is necessary to pump air into the theatre to prevent the audience from being asphyxiated. The manager is Henry J. Byron, who also wrote the opening attraction, "An American Lady".

London's Newest "Oldest" Theatre

1782: The Elephant and Castle Theatre has been built at the northern end of the New Kent Road. It is to be used for melodrama and pantomime. The owners claim that the new building stands on the very same site as the Newington Butts Theatre which opened in 1575, though there seems to be no real evidence for this statement.

Three hundred years ago Newington Butts was a long way out of town - almost a "provincial" theatre. It seems never to have been successful except for those occasions when the London theatres were closed due to plague, and players and audiences would use the out of town venue as an alternative. It is accepted that the Elizabethan building was in that general area, but to claim the exact site for the new building is felt to be an exaggeration intended to draw publicity for the opening event.

Nowadays the Elephant and Castle area is one of the busiest junctions of roads in South London.