

1883

Alhambra Rebuilt



Mander & Mitchelson Collection

Underground Theatre is forced to surface

1883: Fears about public safety have caused the Metropolitan Board of Works to insist on the Criterion Theatre being re-constructed, properly ventilated and made safer for public access. The theatre will be closed for approximately one year from March 1883 to enable the rebuilding to take place. The Criterion stands on the site of the Mitre Tavern, the venue where Farquhar first discovered Anne Oldfield. When the Mitre was replaced with Spiers and Pond's restaurant, an entertainment venue was attached, and eventually this was enlarged to form the Criterion.

Phipps and Matcham are leading theatre architects

1883: Three new theatres built this year—The Lyceum, Edinburgh, The Hippodrome, Eastbourne, and the Olympic—have all been designed by the 48 year old architect, Charles John Phipps. This prolific and much praised designer now has 33 theatres to his credit

His major rival is the 29 year old Frank Matcham, who has already designed nine theatres and is noted for his flamboyant and exciting style.

1883 - 3rd December : The Alhambra has been rebuilt, following last year's fire. The old Alhambra Music Hall was famous for presenting varied attractions like Leotard, the daring young man on the flying trapeze, and ballet companies. The Middlesex Sessions once refused it a licence on the grounds of indecency - the can-can had been danced there. It then presented a series of Promenade Concerts, but these too, were deemed to infringe the licence. For the past few years the Alhambra had been the home of opera-bouffe.

The rebuilt theatre is magnificently splendid, with a lavish promenade walkway at the back of the auditorium. It has re-opened with a comic opera, but there are plans for it to revert to presenting variety entertainments in the near future. The Alhambra originally opened as the Panopticon in 1854, and was rebuilt as an operetta house in 1871. The eleven year old theatre burnt down last year, and has now reopened as one of the most resplendent venues in London.

New invention to revolutionise box office?

1883 : In the earliest theatre days you simply arrived at the Globe or the Rose, paid your penny to stand, or paid your tuppence for a covered space. By the days of Garrick, to be sure of getting a ticket you had to queue outside the theatre for many hours. If you were rich, you sent your servant to queue on your behalf.

Over the years a thriving trade has developed amongst street urchins, who, for an extra penny, will stand in an all-day queue for those busy people without servants.

Over the past fifty years most theatres have developed an "advance booking" system - selling a guaranteed place for a particular evening, with a small extra charge to cover the service. But, for the most popular shows, someone still has to queue.

All this may soon change. A new invention could revolutionise ticket selling. Four years ago London's first "telephone exchange" opened with eight subscribers. Within two years 914 people had subscribed to the telephone service. London now has fifteen telephone exchanges. Several theatres have installed the telephone, primarily as a means of one theatre manager delivering information to another theatre without the need of sending a messenger. However, the enterprising Richard D'Oyly Carte has proposed installing a telephone in the box office of the Savoy Theatre. Customers can telephone and reserve their seats, which they then collect and pay for at the time of the performance. A rival manager has pointed out that if this service becomes popular, then the queues to pay for the reserved tickets could be as long as they were before.