

Augustus Harris runs both Garden and Lane

1888 : Augustus Harris, manager of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, has now added the Covent Garden Theatre to his responsibilities. He is following in the footsteps of his father, who worked extensively at Covent Garden for 27 years.

By running the two great London theatres - although the Covent Garden one is in a parlous financial state, Augustus Harris has become the most influential of present day impresarios.

Shaftesbury Ave. gets two theatres

1888 : Shaftesbury Avenue has only been open for eighteen months - the new road removed many of London's old slums - but already it has acquired two theatres, the Lyric and the Shaftesbury. Plans have been submitted for a third theatre on the Avenue.

London has also gained another Lyric Theatre, in Hammersmith, the Empire in Islington, the Grand in Streatham, and a new Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square. Meantime, the Garrick Theatre in Charing Cross Road and the Castle Theatre in Richmond are nearing completion.

The rush of theatre building in the capital has its counterpart in the provinces, where 31 new theatres have opened in the past two years.

"The Great Vance" collapses and dies on Music Hall stage

1889, 26 Dec : "The Great Vance", coster comedian, Alfred Vance, collapsed and died whilst performing at the Sun Music Hall in Knightsbridge. He was 49 years old. He rivalled George Leybourne for the title of "lion comique" of the music hall, and introduced his own song "Cliquot" as competition to Leybourne's "Champagne Charlie".

He started as a "blackface act" with his brother, but from 1864 onwards he specialised in "coster" comedy and was one of the music hall's most popular entertainers.

Major Crackdown on Overcrowding and New Rules on Fire Precautions

1888 : Following last year's disastrous fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter and the subsequent public outcry, there has been a flurry of improvements, mostly prompted by new local legislation. Asbestos safety curtains, stage sprinklers, the use of iron instead of wood wherever possible and fireproofing of scenery are all new requirements being imposed in many towns. There is also a growing insistence on the greater use of electricity in place of gas lighting as a means of reducing the fire risk. Those theatres lit with electricity found no significant drop in attendances after the Exeter fire, whilst those relying on gaslight found attendances fell as the public worried about the risks.

The new London County Council and the County Councils, which were created under the Local Government Act of two years ago, have begun a major campaign to reduce overcrowding in theatres. They are insisting on more fire exits, wider gangways and more space between the rows of seats. As a result the seating capacity of Drury Lane has reduced from 3,000 to 2,500, the Britannia from 3,923 to 3,450, and the Standard from 3,400 to 2,800.

Theatres have generally increased their ticket prices to compensate for the loss of capacity and the cost of the building alterations.

Mrs Ormiston Chant campaigns for decency

1889 : Mrs Ormiston Chant has started a campaign against the selling of liquor inside those large Variety Theatres which are not attached to public houses. She believes they are encouraging people to partake of alcohol. She is also expressing her concern that young women are being exploited by pimps and procuresses and are being forced to solicit their trade inside the bars of these Variety Theatres. Mrs Chant is organising a committee to support her in her attempt to clean up London's Music Halls.

Her campaign has aroused some public derision, and she is being depicted in cartoon-form as a comic figure. However, her campaign is also gaining many supporters.



A cartoon by Phil May in "The Sketch", 1894

Dan Leno triumphs as Dame at Drury Lane

1888 : Dan Leno has made his Drury Lane debut as the Wicked Aunt in the pantomime "Babes in the Wood" and has had enormous success. For the past two years he has played "Dame" at the Surrey Theatre. Although he is only 28 years old he has been an entertainer since his childhood, first appearing as "Little George, the Infant Wonder, Contortionist and Posturer" when he was four years old. In 1880 he won the title Clog Dancing Champion of the World at a competition in Leeds. He has already been booked to appear in next year's Drury Lane pantomime.

W.S.Gilbert's new Garrick Theatre hits underground river problem

1889 : Financed by W.S.Gilbert for actor-manager, John Hare, and named after England's most famous actor, the Garrick Theatre has opened in Charing Cross Road. The opening play was "The Profligate", produced and written by Arthur Wing Pinero. The building hit serious problems when an underground river was discovered during excavations. Gilbert said he didn't know whether to carry on with the building or to let the fishing rights. However, the river has been diverted, and all is well.