

1900

# OSCAR WILDE DIES AT THE AGE OF 46

## Theatres closed as Bubonic Plague strikes Glasgow

1900: There has been an outbreak of Bubonic Plague in Glasgow. The first case was reported on August 30th and by mid-September the Municipal Authority issued an order closing all public places of entertainment. Prior to the official closure there had been a number of disputes between actors and managers. Some actors were refusing to go to Glasgow because of the plague, whilst managers were insisting that such a refusal would constitute a breach of contract. The proprietor of one Glasgow Theatre had threatened to sue the actors who were refusing to perform at his theatre, claiming that whilst the authorities permitted his theatre to remain open there was no need for alarm. However, the official closure has now clarified the position.

## More Theatres than ever at start of New Century

1900 : As far as can be ascertained, British Theatre starts the 20th Century with a total of 587 major theatres and Variety Houses throughout the country. Of these, 106 are in London and 481 are in the provincial towns and cities. These figures do not include the smaller music halls attached to public houses. London alone has 435 licensed music halls. There are no figures available for the provinces. A hundred years ago, in 1800, London had just 14 theatres, and the provinces around 65. There has been an enormous growth in the theatre industry.

The incredible boom in theatre building continues. In 1900 six new theatres have opened in London—The London Hippodrome, and suburban theatres in Balham, Finchley, Clapham Junction, Euston and Woolwich. The Crystal Palace Theatre and the Grand, Islington, have closed.

Twenty-five theatres have opened in the provinces. There have been eight provincial theatre closures, though in most cases the closed theatres have been replaced with new buildings.

**"Either that wallpaper goes, or I do"**



National Portrait Gallery

1900 : Oscar Wilde has died at the age of 46. He was released from Reading Gaol two years ago following a jail sentence for "committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons" and since that time has lived under an assumed name, wretched and penniless, in Paris.

The greatest wit of the age, it is said that even on his deathbed he managed to raise by a smile by looking around at his shabby quarters and announcing "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do". He also claimed that he was being punished by English Society not simply because of his sexual impropriety, but because he had associated with working-class boys.

His epigram-stuffed society dramas "Lady Windermere's Fan" (1892), "A Woman of No Importance" (1893) and "An Ideal Husband" (1895) were all the rage in the first half of the Nineties. His "The Importance of Being Earnest" (1895) was acclaimed as one of the most technically perfect and verbally witty comedies in the English language. However, as soon as he was convicted, all his plays disappeared from the repertoire and, it was said, no work of his would ever be revived because of his disgrace. Whilst he was in prison he wrote a poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol".

His last completed play was "Salome", a poetic one-act written in French. It has been banned in England, but Sarah Bernhardt has appeared in a Paris production of the work. She declared herself determined to try and assist the disgraced writer to earn some kind of a living from his art. Despite the fact that few English playwrights have displayed such wit, elegance and theatrical dexterity, no prominent English theatre person has been prepared to make any declaration in favour of Oscar Wilde, and his last years have seen him living in very reduced circumstances.