

1905

DEATH OF SIR HENRY IRVING



Shaw's "Man and Superman" praised

1905: The critic and novelist, George Bernard Shaw, previously attacked for his plays like "Mrs Warren's Profession" (1893) and "You Never Can Tell" (1896), has been universally praised for his new comedy "Man and Superman". The Daily Mail critic said "At last...he has written a play which is not a practical joke or a political pamphlet or a bundle of whimsicalities". With Granville Barker in the leading role (modelled on Shaw himself) the play has been a triumph at the Court Theatre. Shaw himself is now being hailed as one of the most important playwrights of the English stage

Wilde's Private Show

1905: Despite the fact that Oscar Wilde's "Salome" has long since been acclaimed as a theatrical masterpiece throughout Europe, the Lord Chamberlain has refused to allow any public performances of the sensuous poetic tragedy in this country. The work was given its British premiere by the New Stage Club at the Bijou Theatre, Victoria Hall - a "private" performance for Club Members only.

Station roof collapses on Theatre

1905: In the early hours of December 5th the roof of London's Charing Cross Railway Station collapsed, killing six people who were in the station at that time. The collapsing masonry fell on the Avenue Theatre, which is part of the Station building. The theatre's ceiling collapsed, and the auditorium was destroyed.

1905: The whole of the English stage and much of the English nation, mourned the death of Sir Henry Irving at the age of 67. He died in Bradford whilst touring there with his famous "Lyceum" company. He finished his performance of "Beckett" at the Bradford Theatre Royal and left at 11.30pm for the Midland Hotel. He was obviously in great pain, and a doctor was immediately called. Sir Henry never rallied, and a few minutes later he died. The last words he spoke onstage - in the role of the dying Thomas Beckett - were "Into Thy hand, O Lord, into Thy Hands!"

For more than 35 years he has been the undisputed king of the English stage. His reign at the Lyceum Theatre began in 1871 and his partnership there with Ellen Terry made them the most famous theatrical pair in the world. As well as this country, they conquered America with their frequent tours. Henry Irving (originally Henry Brodribb) was born near Glastonbury on 6 February 1838 and as a young actor struggled in provincial obscurity for many years. In 1871 he had a phenomenal success at the Lyceum as Mathias in "The Bells" - a role which remained in his repertoire ever since. In 1878 he took over management of the Lyceum, called on the services of Ellen Terry, and began a period which has been called the greatest glory of the English stage. With brilliant ideas, untiring patience, meticulous attention to detail and unflinching courtesy, he staged a series of triumphs which had all London flocking to see him.

He undertook annual provincial tours which made him famous throughout the country. In 1883 he made the first of many visits to America, and became just as well known in the United States as he was in Britain. He was held in honour everywhere, and received Honorary Degrees from the Universities of Cambridge, Glasgow and Dublin. In 1895 he became the first actor to receive a Knighthood. In 1901 he left the Lyceum to the deep regret of all. He travelled the provinces and America and returned to London for a few weeks each season. In the course of these brief reappearances he seemed to have lost some of his old magic. His "Coriolanus" was felt to be an unhappy choice, and his chosen plays "Robespierre" and "Dante" were felt to be mediocre. However, he continued to perform old favourites (especially "The Bells") and as far as the box office was concerned, he was still the greatest attraction.

Max Beerbohm, in an obituary, talked of his "incomparable power of stirring up a sense of mystery and horror". Other critics sometimes felt he was predictable and mannered, but as far as the theatre-going public is concerned, Irving was the greatest actor of the age.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey - a singular honour for an actor. The Abbey was full to overflowing for his funeral, and enormous respectful crowds lined the streets outside.