

Equity and Managers in furious row over "Closed Shop Lies"

West End business is "the worst ever"

1932: The combination of the depression in the economy, the proliferation of picture houses, and the continuing burden of Entertainment Tax have all taken their toll on theatre business. It was reported that during 1932 London's 46 theatres had, between them, a total of 715 "dark" (empty) weeks. Sixteen theatres were closed for more than six months, with a further nineteen theatres closed for more than three months. Only five London theatres remained open throughout the entire year. This is said to be the worst ever business in the West End in living memory.

Derry & Toms' fairies are not welcome

1934 : The Kensington Department Store, Derry and Toms, had announced that it would be presenting a daily performance of a Christmas play called "When the Fairies Call". Performances would be given on the fifth floor of the store, and admission would be on payment of one shilling. After the performance any customer making a purchase in the store would be entitled to one shilling off the purchase price on production of the ticket stub.

Theatre managers were horrified by this, claiming it was unfair competition to pantomimes, and demanded to know what happened about Entertainment Tax in these circumstances.

Gerald du Maurier

1934 : Sir Gerald du Maurier has died at the age of 61. The younger son of George du Maurier, author of "Trilby", he first gained fame as Captain Hook in "Peter Pan" in 1904. He had much success in "gentleman criminal" roles, beginning with "Raffles" in 1906, and as a light comedian. Joint-manager of Wyndham's Theatre for fifteen years from 1910, he was knighted in 1922 for his services to the theatre. For the past eight years he has been manager of the St James Theatre.

1933: It started harmoniously enough. A Joint Committee of representatives from British Actors' Equity and the Theatrical Management Association sat down to discuss matters of mutual interest and the drafting of a model contract. The meeting was made possible because Equity had withdrawn its insistence on a "closed shop" being a condition of employment.

However, a furious row erupted within a day or so. Equity forced the Duke of Yorks Theatre to close and the audience to be turned away because some of the actors were not members of the Union. A similar threat to close the Queen's Theatre was averted at the last minute when actress, Gillian Lind, finally agreed to join the Union - on the understanding she was joining "under protest". Another threat loomed when Equity threatened to prevent the opening of a new show "Jolly Roger" unless the comedian George Robey agreed to join the Union.

Theatre managers are in uproar. They claim Equity was clearly "telling lies" when it said it would withdraw the closed shop as a condition of employment. Many are refusing to hold further talks with a Union body that cannot be trusted to keep its word. Theatre Managers have been urged to post the following statement on all backstage notice-boards:

"It having come to my notice that there is a movement on foot to force all artists to become members of a Trade Union called British Equity, I desire to put on record that whilst any artist is at liberty to join any Trade Union that he or she may wish, I do not recognise the right of British Equity to coerce any person to join that Association as a condition of employment."

New Opera House at Glyndebourne

1934 : Mr John Christie, a wealthy opera enthusiast, has built a private opera house on his estate at Glyndebourne. Alongside the Tudor mansion which is his home, he has created a 300 seat "bijou" opera theatre incorporating every modern device of stage equipment, and all the latest knowledge of acoustics. He intends to organise annual two-week seasons where enthusiasts like himself can enjoy opera with the least possible outside distractions, along the lines of the seasons presently held at Salzburg and Bayreuth.

His opening season will be devoted to Mozart, and the opening production of the new Glyndebourne Opera Festival will be "The Marriage of Figaro" sung in the original Italian.

Death of the "dashing" Fred Terry

1933 : Brother of Ellen Terry, and forever associated with the dashing role of "The Scarlet Pimpernel" which he first played in 1905, Fred Terry has died at the age of 69. He frequently appeared opposite his wife, Julia Neilson, and they were said to be the most famous couple in the theatre world. He leaves his widow and two grown-up children, Dennis Terry and Phyllis Neilson-Terry, to carry on his family's acting tradition which stretches back to the days of Macready. His nephew, John Gielgud, is also earning a reputation for himself in the Old Vic's Shakespeare productions.



Fred Terry and Julia Neilson in "The Scarlet Pimpernel" (1915)