

1935

"Closed Shop" Dispute - Victory for Both Sides

1935: West End Managers and Equity Members have finally come to an agreement over their "closed shop" dispute. A new body - the London Theatre Council - will be set up under the independent chairmanship of Lord Esher. The Council will consist of an equal number of managers and actors, and will be the regulating body for the Theatre industry.

Both sides agree to be bound by the decisions of the Council and to accept the Council's contracts of employment. The Managers agree they will only employ those actors "approved" by the Council.

The new Council will both regulate professional standards and "save face" for managers who have resolutely opposed the closed shop. The Council is, at present, only concerned with the West End, but a Provincial Theatre Council, will shortly be set up with the same terms of reference.

Silver Jubilee Shows

1935 : To celebrate the Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary many theatres throughout the country have been providing matinee seats free to parties of poor children, unemployed, and disabled ex-servicemen

"Romeo & Juliet" - Gielgud's production is the stuff that legends are made of



Laurence Olivier, Edith Evans and John Gielgud in "Romeo and Juliet"

1935: John Gielgud's production of "Romeo and Juliet" at the New Theatre opened on October 17th, and was immediately hailed as the "most memorable experience the stage of our lifetime has had to offer", and was said to mark the pinnacle of the great renaissance in Shakespearean acting that has been arousing admiration in recent years.

The critics did not know where to begin with their superlatives. Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet was praised for her flawless performance - no one else has matched her for the appearance of youth with the experience of years demanded by the role. She dominates the action and is breathtakingly moving. Edith Evans' Nurse "glows with humanity". Laurence Olivier's Romeo has a boyish energy and ardour never seen before by contemporary audiences and John Gielgud's Mercutio is acclaimed as the most poetically moving in anyone's experience. The production, by Gielgud, was described as fast-moving, ingenious and beautifully costumed. The critics agreed this was one of the best things they had ever seen on the London stage.

Five weeks later the critics were invited back to review a "new" cast. Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud had exchanged roles. This astonishing demonstration of versatility and bravado brought forward another hail of superlatives. Gielgud's Romeo is "magical in masculine glamour", and is not a mere performance, but Romeo brought to life. Olivier's Mercutio is a bravura performance of gaiety, whimsicality and ferocity all merged into one.

Everyone agrees this is among the most magnificent performances of all time and is certainly one that will become part of the Legend of British Theatre

Vivien Leigh, 19, is a star overnight God tells Lilian not to pay taxes

1935 : In the past two years, since graduating from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Vivien Leigh has acquired a husband, a house in Mayfair, a small staff of servants and an 18 month old daughter, Suzanne. She has also managed to appear in three quota "quickies" in a London film studio, and play the leading role in a play out at Kew. She could not believe her luck when Sydney Carroll offered her a West End role in "The Mask of Virtue" at the Ambassadors. During rehearsals her fellow performers recognised that she was not just a great beauty but a very talented actress as well, and joked that she would be inundated with offers as soon as the show opened.

The show opened on Wednesday night, and Thursday morning's papers were full of critical praise for her West End debut. By Thursday lunchtime her agent had finalised a film contract with Alexander Korda and London Film Productions. Her contract is worth £50,000, and is the highest amount ever paid to a British actress to appear in films. To change overnight from an "unknown" to the highest paid British actress, is the kind of plot that would be too improbable for one of Mr Korda's films - but in this case, fact is stranger than fiction.

1935 : Lilian Baylis, of the Old Vic and Sadlers Wells, headed a delegation of theatre managers to meet the Prime Minister at 10, Downing Street. The managers were seeking exemption from Entertainment Tax for productions of Shakespeare and those classics deemed to be educational. It is said that Miss Baylis stormed into the Cabinet Room, fell on her knees and started to pray. An astonished Stanley Baldwin then saw her rise and say "I've just asked God if I should continue paying this silly Entertainment Tax. Sorry, dear, but God says no".

Shortly afterwards the Prime Minister, Mr Baldwin, announced exactly such an exemption, though it is not known whether his decision was based on the advice of the Chancellor or the Deity! Exemption certificates were awarded to several provincial theatres, to Stratford on Avon, to Robert Atkins' company in Regents Park and to Mr Donald Wolfit's touring Shakespeare company, and, of course, to Lilian Baylis of the Old Vic. Meanwhile the Theatre Managers' Association is calling for total abolition of this tax.