

SECOND WORLD WAR BEGINS

ENSA - Every Night Something Awful!

1939 : The Entertainments National Service Association - ENSA - has been revived to provide recreation for members of the armed forces. A number of NAAFI "canteens" have been set up around the country in places where troops are stationed, and in at least one case, an existing theatre has been requisitioned for the use of troop entertainment.

The first round of entertainments provided for these canteens has been very hastily put together and it is generally agreed they have not been very well organised. The troops have already coined the nickname "Every Night Something Awful" for the ENSA shows.

Strict Rationing

1939 : The Government has imposed strict rationing on items such as petrol, coal, electricity and gas - all of which could make life even more difficult for theatres and cinemas. There is to be rationing of foodstuffs, particularly confectionery and chocolate, and plans are being made for paper rationing. This will restrict the amount of advertising and limit the size of theatre programmes. Clothing is to be rationed, leading to the gradual disappearance of "costume drama" from theatre shows - assuming, of course, that theatres are able to remain open in the future.

Outbreak of war finds theatres in difficulties

1939 : Over the past ten years the number of theatres in the UK has shown a net loss of seventy venues. Most of these have been converted into cinemas.

London has gained 8 new venues, but 16 have closed. In the provinces, 26 new venues have opened, but 88 have closed.

London's new theatres include the Windmill, the Saville, the Westminster, the Prince of Wales, and the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park as well as the Lewisham Theatre. London's closed venues include the Gaiety, Lyceum, Alhambra, Daly's, the London Pavilion and the Royalty, Soho.

1939: Following the Declaration of War between England and Germany on September 3rd, the world of theatre was thrown into chaos. The Government ordered the immediate closure of all theatres, cinemas, dance halls and places of public entertainment, and imposed very stringent "blackout" requirements.

During the first weeks of the war thousands of theatre people were thrown out of work, many were evacuated, many actors and technicians joined the Forces and Civil Defence Services and a nightmare of complex managerial problems presented themselves.

By September 11th - when the expected air raids had failed to materialise - the Government agreed to re-open places of entertainment, but the rules for re-opening differed from town to town. In some towns only the stalls could be opened - the circles and galleries were considered too dangerous. In other towns the various cinemas and theatres had to agree to "stagger" their starting times so there was no risk of all performances ending at the same time.

By mid-October, six West End theatres had re-opened - the first being the Windmill, with a "non stop revue" - but many of the shows which had been playing the West End had now moved to the provinces. The Old Vic Company uprooted itself for a provincial tour.

In the West End itself no production was allowed to commence later than 6pm, and almost by unspoken mutual agreement amongst audiences, it suddenly became improper to attend the theatre in evening dress, formerly "de rigueur" for sitting in the stalls or circle.

The Government required a number of Air Raid Precautions to be undertaken by theatres, and offered 11/40ths of the cost as a grant. Insurance policies were hastily rewritten. Contracts with actors and other employees were hastily re-interpreted in the light of changed circumstances. In some towns the Chief Constable ruled that no one could be admitted to a theatre unless he or she was carrying a gas mask.

Sir Frank Benson, cricket-loving actor

1939 : Frank Benson, the great Shakespearean actor, has died at the age of 81. He first appeared in Irving's "Romeo and Juliet" at the Lyceum in 1882, and was knighted in the royal box at Drury Lane in 1916 for his services to theatre.

He is said only to have employed cricket-loving actors in his touring company.

Gaiety and Lyceum to be demolished

1939 : Two major London theatres have closed their doors and will be demolished as part of "progress". The Lyceum closed with six farewell performances of "Hamlet" by John Gielgud - a fitting farewell to the site forever associated with Henry Irving - and will be demolished to provide a wider roadway. The Gaiety is suffering a similar fate. The original Gaiety was torn down in 1903 for road-widening in the Strand, but was rebuilt on its present site in the Aldwych. Now it is to be demolished again, this time to make way for a block of offices. The shades of George Edwards and his immortal Gaiety Girls must surely be lamenting the passing of the "dear old Gaiety", with its memories of broughams and hansoms, titled young men and real life romances.

Rules say: Gas Masks to be carried at all times

1939 : Because of the very real risk of a gas attack by German airplanes, the entire population has been issued with individual gas masks. Mothers of small babies have been supplied with special containers with hand-pumps, and young children have been supplied with Mickey Mouse masks. According to official instructions, these gas masks must be "carried on the person at all times" This clearly poses something of a problem for actors and entertainers.

