

1950

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW DIES, 94

Soap & Petrol Rationing Ends

1950: The end of soap rationing is a great relief for the theatre profession. Soap has been very scarce throughout this period, making the removal of make-up a difficult task. Wardrobe mistresses are delighted, having suffered for the past ten years, as they attempted to wash costumes with no soap powder. At the same time, petrol rationing has ended, but at three shillings a gallon it is beyond the means of many people.

Rocco Gatti dies

1950 : Rocco Gatti, who has died at the age of 76, was a member of a remarkable family. In the 1850s the brothers Carlo and Giovanni Gatti ran a coffee and ice-cream business and used the profits to open Gatti's Music Hall (recently re-opened as the Players' Theatre in Charing Cross). They then opened a restaurant and even bought an electrical generating plant in Maiden Lane. When the adjacent Vaudeville Theatre complained about the noise from the plant, the Gatti Family solved the problem by purchasing the Vaudeville itself.

Al Jolson - the greatest entertainer in the world

1950 : Star of the first talking picture, the highest paid performer in history, "the greatest entertainer in the world" - Al Jolson has died,

Death of Ballet Legend, Nijinsky

1950: The most famous of all dancers, Vaslav Nijinsky, had a dazzling career which lasted just ten years, during which his dancing and choreography left an indelible mark on the ballet world. The impresario Diaghilev refused to employ him again as a jealous reaction to Nijinsky's marriage to Hungarian dancer, Romala de Pulszky, in 1913. During the early part of World War 1 he was interned in Budapest, and in 1917 was released to undertake a world tour, once more with Diaghilev, who had relented somewhat. However, he rapidly began to show signs of insanity, and was diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic later that year. He spent the rest of his life in and out of various clinics. In his lucid periods he worked on a system of dance notation. Sadly, these were few and far between. In 1921 Western newspapers recorded his supposed death in a mental hospital in Budapest, but this was a mistake, and he lived on to the age of 62. He remains a legend for his sensational Paris and London performances between 1909-1913, especially for his dancing in "Petrushka" and "L'Apres Midi d'un Faune" and "The Rite of Spring".

1950: George Bernard Shaw, one of the greatest names of British Theatre this century, has died at the age of 94. He was an Irishman who dominated the early years of this century with his plays - notably "Pygmalion" and "Saint Joan" - and has long been recognised as a great playwright. One of his major ambitions was to see a National Theatre built during his lifetime, and he was one of the principal organisers of the 1908 campaign. The Great War intervened and the plan was abandoned. Throughout the 1930s he seemed to be getting somewhere until the Second World War ended all such thoughts. It is a great irony that he has died just as the Government is prepared to announce the laying of a foundation stone for just such a building. He began his literary career as a critic and became a passionate advocate of the plays of Henrik Ibsen. In the 1890s he began to write plays of his own, concerned with social problems like prostitution and slum landlordism, and the political and moral problems posed by society. He also revealed a gift for sparkling comedy with plays like "Arms and the Man" and from 1904 to 1914 he gradually won public acceptance as a worthy playwright rather than a mere spokesman for political movements like the Fabian Society.

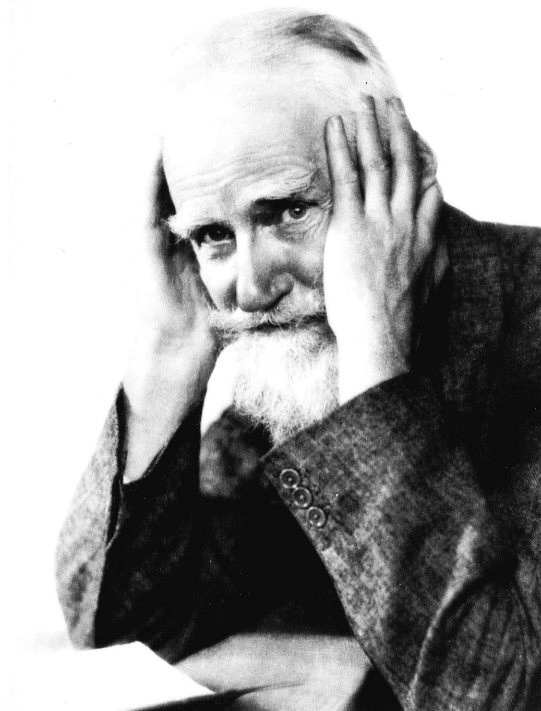
In 1914 he published "Common Sense about the War", a pacifist essay which caused outrage at the time and led to calls for him to be jailed as a public enemy. By the early 1920s the public had forgiven him - possibly because the reality of the Great War led many to agree with his earlier views - and with "Back to Methuselah" (1921) and "Saint Joan" (1924) he was once more established as Britain's leading playwright. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Throughout the 1930s he made long lecture tours, including one to Soviet Russia, preaching his stern yet invigorating Shavian morality of individual responsibility, self-discipline, heroic effort without thought of reward, and utmost integrity. He was a deliberately outspoken figure who enjoyed stirring up controversy and, in his advanced old age, enjoyed his position as a Legend of British Theatre.

When his death was announced the Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, paid a special tribute in the House of Commons; the Indian High Commissioner said "India has lost one of the greatest non-Indian champions of India's freedom"; in Washington President Truman said "the world has lost a pre-eminent figure who left the indelible print of his genius on a prodigious literary output". All the theatres on New York's Broadway and in London's West End turned off their lights as a tribute to a brilliant playwright.

Old Vic is back at Waterloo home

1950 : Nine years ago a German bomb smashed through the roof of the Old Vic, sending the Old Vic company into years of exile - at the New Theatre, on tours of the United Kingdom, the Continent and the Commonwealth.

But at last, on November 14th, the Old Vic company was back home. Before the start of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" a lone figure walked on the stage to speak a Re-Opening Prologue. The audience immediately recognised Dame Edith Evans, who had flown in especially for the occasion from America. The evening therefore began with the loudest cheers heard for many years in any theatre. From there on it was laughter and loud hurrahs all the way for the cast which included Peggy Ashcroft as Viola, Roger Livesey as Sir Toby and Paul Rogers as Malvolio. There were even louder cheers when Hugh Hunt, the producer of the play, came on to make a curtain speech, re-dedicating the Old Vic to its former policy of Shakespeare for the people.



National Portrait Gallery