

More than 100 Theatres have closed

Olivier & Vivien Leigh Divorce

1960: Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh have divorced, thus ending one of the most famous show business partnerships. Sir Laurence is currently attracting heavy criticism for his decision to appear in a new play by the French "theatre of the absurd" author, Eugene Ionesco. In the course of this play Sir Laurence is supposed to turn into a rhinoceros.

Sir Barry Jackson dies

1961: Sir Barry Jackson, founder of the Birmingham Rep and the Malvern Festival, has died at the age of 81.

"Royal" Shakespeare opens second home

1961: By order of the Queen, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre will now be known as the Royal Shakespeare Company. Director, Peter Hall, has announced that the Stratford company is to open a London base at the Aldwych Theatre, and will run two seasons simultaneously.

Russian Ballet Star defects to West

1961: 23 year old Rudolf Nureyev, of the Kirov Ballet, made a dramatic escape from his Soviet "minders" at Le Bourget Airport in France. He dashed through the airport barrier and shouted in English "I want to be free". He is seeking political asylum, claiming that the Russians were forcing him to return to the Soviet Union against his will.

Olivier Marries Again

1961: Just ten days after divorcing Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier has re-married. His new wife is actress Joan Plowright. At 28, she is twenty-five years younger than her new husband. The couple were married in a small New England township in the USA. Both of them are currently appearing in separate shows on Broadway

1961: In the past ten years 109 theatres have closed and only 28 new theatres have been built to replace them. London has lost a number of suburban venues, including the Empires at Chiswick, Finsbury Park, Hounslow, Hackney, and Woolwich, Croydon Grand, Chelsea Palace, Walthamstow Palace and the Royal Artillery in Woolwich. The Bedford Theatre and the Granville Varieties have closed. Other Central London losses have been the Winter Garden Theatre in Drury Lane, the St James's Theatre and the Stoll. To replace these, only the Mermaid and the rebuilt Queen's in Shaftesbury Avenue have been built.

Outside London, the touring-variety circuit has been extremely hard hit following the decision of Moss-Empires to close many of its theatres. Lost "Empires" include those in Bradford, Bristol, Barnsley, Belfast, Cardiff, Chatham, Chelmsford, Dewsbury, Grantham, Leeds, Mansfield, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Swansea and Wolverhampton. It is said that "Variety is Dead", and twice-nightly shows throughout the country have now come to an end.

It is not only the Moss Empires theatres which have closed. Other Circuit-owned or privately owned theatres have closed in Accrington, Aldershot (2), Ashton under Lyne, Bath, Belfast, Bideford, Birmingham (2), Birtley, Blackburn, Blackpool, Bolton, Bradford, Brighton, Bury, Cambridge, Cardiff, Chelmsford, Cheltenham, Chorley, Coatbridge, Colchester, Cowes, Darwen, Edinburgh (2), Fleetwood, Gateshead, Gillingham, Glasgow (3), Great Yarmouth, Halifax (2), Hanley, Hereford, Huddersfield (2), Keighley, Leeds, Leicester (2), Luton, Margate, Morecambe, Newcastle, Northampton, Norwich, Oldham (2), Paisley, Peterborough, Reading, Rochdale, Ryde, Sheffield, Southampton, Southend, Stockport, Sunderland, Swansea, Tipton, Warrington, Whitehaven, Woodbridge, and Worcester.

Commercial repertory has been struggling over the past few years and many of the theatres which had turned to repertory are now closing down as well. A considerable number of theatres are now being used for the newly popular game of chance called "Bingo" - described as a version of the parlour game known as "Housey Housey". It is felt that the impact of television is the main cause of this loss of theatres, an impact which is also being felt in falling cinema attendances.

George Formby dies in arms of bride-to-be

1961: George Formby, the enormously popular film star and comedian, has died at the age of 56. Just ten weeks ago, on Christmas Day, his wife of 36 years, Beryl, died. Three weeks later George Formby suffered a heart attack and was forced to withdraw from his pantomime at Bristol. On Valentines Day he revealed that the last 15 years of his marriage had not been as happy as he had let the public believe, and announced his engagement to Patricia Howson. She was the daughter of a family friend, and was twenty years younger than him.

He was in a nursing home, recovering from his heart attack, when his bride-to-be paid a visit. As they were making plans for a May wedding, he suddenly suffered a second heart attack and died immediately. After his funeral, a week later, his family was informed that he had very recently changed his will, and that Patricia Howson would inherit all his £100,000 estate except for a small legacy to his handyman and a sum set aside to look after his ageing mother.



There's nothing like a Dame- all 3 of them!

1960: Flora Robson, 58, acclaimed as Mrs Alving in Ibsen's "Ghosts", and whose 1931 film "Fire Over England" brought her world-wide fame, has been made a Dame. The same honour has gone to actress, Judith Anderson, and opera singer, Eva Turner.