

1977

DEATH OF MARIA CALLAS

Portrait by Ulisse Sarrini—Museo Teatrale alla Scala



"La Divina" - Legendary Opera Star and "The Voice of the Century"

1977 : Born in New York of Greek parents, Maria Callas became the best known opera singer in the world. Her tumultuous personal life, including a long relationship with Greek tycoon Aristotle Onassis, a spectacular transformation from frumpy overweight to exceptional style and beauty, and legendary rows with opera house managers - all combined to keep her in the newspaper headlines.

But the power of her performances in the most exacting soprano roles, her breathtaking control of intricate bel-canto, and the dramatic integrity she brought to roles such as Tosca, La Traviata and Norma ensured her a place amongst the top opera singers of all times.

Her vocal control began to fail early and she retired from the opera stage in 1964. A concert-tour "comeback" in 1973 led to sold out houses and fevered adulation in cities all over the world, but it was clear the former vocal brilliance was long gone. She became something of a recluse after that tour, and has died at her Paris apartment of a heart attack. She was 53 years old.

Queen's Silver Jubilee - business booms! Aunt Edna & the Well Made Play

1977 : The Silver Jubilee Celebrations, marking 25 years since the accession of Queen Elizabeth II, consisted of special events all over the country. A chain of bonfires was lit across the nation, street parties were held everywhere, and the country enjoyed itself enormously.

Theatres marked the Silver Jubilee with a whole series of special productions, and there was a huge tourist boom. Gradually the country is emerging from a disastrous few years of industrial disputes and economic recession. As the state of the national finances has improved, a new spirit of optimism has emerged, and the Silver Jubilee celebrations have been an excuse for everyone to have a party. West End theatre business saw its best ever summer attendance figures, and the level of theatre business rose everywhere. By the end of the year theatre business was said to be the best that anyone could remember.

Gielgud is the last of the Terry dynasty

1977 : Phyllis Neilson-Terry, daughter of Fred Terry and Julia Neilson, has died at the age of 84. She made her debut at the Opera House, Blackpool in 1909, and is chiefly remembered for her Shakespeare roles and for creating the title role in the original production of "Trilby". Her grandfather, Benjamin, founded a dynasty of Terrys. Five of his eleven children went on the stage—Ellen, Fred, Florence, Kate and Marion—and two went into theatre management. Ellen's son, Gordon Craig, was a famous designer. Fred's children, Dennis and Phyllis, were both performers. Kate's eldest daughter, also named Kate, became the mother of John Gielgud, and her youngest daughter, Mabel, was an outstanding actress. With the death of Phyllis, only Gielgud remains to carry on the Terry Tradition.

1977 : Terence Rattigan was the master of the "well made play". From his first success in 1936, "French Without Tears", he went on to write a string of commercial success, including "Flare Path" (1942), "While the Sun Shines" (1943), "The Winslow Boy" (1946), "The Browning Version" (1948), "The Deep Blue Sea" (1952), "Separate Tables" (1955) and "Ross" (1960).

He once attributed his success to a fictional theatregoer, Aunt Edna. She was a middle-aged maiden lady, middle-class, and the backbone of the midweek matinee audience. If he kept her in mind while he was writing, then he would have a success. If he ignored her, his play would be doomed. It was this attitude towards writing, combined with Rattigan's flamboyant extravagance - a Rolls Royce with personalised number-plates - which made him a natural target for the "Angry Young Men" of the new theatre style from 1957 onwards. Rattigan, they said, represented everything they hated about theatre. In his turn, he equally hated the sordid realism of their "kitchen sink" drama.

He was subject to many virulent attacks, and rapidly saw his style of play-writing go out of fashion. Along with Noel Coward, he came to represent the past. In spite of earning vast sums of money from his Hollywood screenplays, Rattigan never came to terms with his sudden transition from the most highly praised of British playwrights to the most denigrated. He has died, an unhappy but a very wealthy man, at the age of 66. His works will eventually be placed in their proper context, and be seen as a major contribution to the development of British Theatre.