

1833

EDMUND KEAN IS DEAD

Collapses onstage in arms of son



Victoria & Albert Museum

1833 : Laporte, the Covent Garden manager, had pulled off the coup of the season. On March 25th he was to offer Edmund Kean as Othello with his son, Charles, playing Iago. It was to be a reconciliation of father and son as well as a thrill for the audience. The worry started when Charles met his father in the dressing room before the performance. Charles had not seen his father for some considerable time. He was shocked at the shrunken body, and the gaunt and wasted face. Edmund said he was afraid he could not play. Laporte was insistent. Charles was worried.

The audience went wild as soon as Edmund appeared - and a miraculous transformation occurred. The tired old actor revived. By the first interval he commented "Charles is getting on well tonight - I suppose it's because he's acting with me". During the second act Edmund began to falter. It became painful to watch. He rallied again in the third act, and his "Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content" speech was spoken so profoundly that the audience were roused to stormy applause. When he moved to strangle Iago, he suddenly collapsed against his son, and whispered "'O, God, I am dying - speak to them for me". Charles caught his father in his arms. The audience cheered at this unexpected and dramatic piece of business. But the cheers turned to an eerie silence as they realised something was wrong. The curtain was lowered,

the performance abandoned, and Covent Garden Theatre emptied in silence. Everyone knew this was the last time they would ever see the great Edmund Kean.

Edmund lay unconscious in his dressing room for hours. He was then carried to the nearby Wrekin Tavern, still in costume and blackface makeup. Later the following day he was considered well enough to be taken to his home in Richmond. He seemed to be recovering as each day passed. He even managed to write to his estranged wife, Mary, asking her forgiveness and asking her to return to him. But his recovery was only temporary, and by the end of April he was unable to recognise the people around him. He held imaginary conversations with the characters he had played throughout his career. As news of his fast approaching death spread, one of his creditors called for his arrest over a debt of £100 - a sum that would never be recovered if Kean were to die. At midnight on May 14th Edmund Kean suddenly awoke, leapt from his bed, shouted "A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!" and fell to the floor in a coma. At nine the following morning he breathed his last. He was just forty-six years old.

Kean's friends tried to arrange a burial in Westminster Abbey by the side of David Garrick. The authorities demanded too high a fee. He was buried in Richmond, near the west gate of the old parish church, alongside the bones of Richard Burbage. On the day of the funeral all the shops in Richmond closed. The streets were lined with mourners - the poor of Richmond, who had good cause to remember their generous friend, the ordinary townspeople, and much of the acting profession. The choir sang Handel's "His body is buried in peace, but his name shall live for evermore".

Julia plays Falstaff Former Stage Manager now heads both Garden & Lane Performers protest over "double engagements"

1833, 21 November : Julia Glover, already famous for her performances as Hamlet, caused a sensation when she played Falstaff at the Haymarket.

Dramatic Copyright Act

1833 : Until now there has been no copyright in a performance. If a play has been printed, anyone can perform it with no further payment. The new Dramatic Copyright law has created the author's right to be paid for performances of both published and unpublished works.

1833 : Alfred Bunn, the 35 year old former stage manager at Drury Lane has become at one and the same time the manager of both Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. He is a theatrical jack-of-all-trades and has seen to it that he is the most talked about man of the day. He is actor, stage manager, manager, librettist, impresario, journalist and poet (of sorts). He has taken over both theatres at an extremely low point in their respective fortunes. With his flair for showmanship and his determination to triumph over all difficulties, it is felt he might be the one person who can turn the situation around.

1833 : Alfred Bunn requires his performers to appear at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres on the same evening, thus forcing actors to run through the streets in full costume and makeup to avoid missing an entrance. The inevitable delays occasionally caused are blamed on the actors and not the management, and the actors are distinctly unhappy. He is, of course, only paying one wage for the evening.