



2006: In 1903 Sir Charles Wyndham built his "New Theatre" in St Martin's Lane, on a site immediately behind the theatre he had previously built four years earlier and named after himself. For the next seventy years the New hosted a series of notable shows. Highlights of the early years included Shaw's "St Joan" with Sybil Thorndike, Gielgud's legendary "Hamlet" and "Richard of Bordeaux", and the Gielgud/Olivier doubling as Romeo/Mercutio with Peggy Ashcroft and Edith Evans. Following the wartime damage to the Old Vic, the Vic-Wells company was in residence from the Blitz to the 1950s.

Lionel Bart's musical "Oliver" was one of the most successful shows to play the New, opening on 30 June 1960 and running for 2,618 performances. In 1973 the New was renamed the Albery Theatre in tribute to the late Sir Bronson Albery, who had been the manager for many years. Over the next years the Albery had big success with "Children of a Lesser God" (1981) with Trevor Eve and Elizabeth Quinn and a much praised 1994 revival of "A Month in the Country" with Helen Mirren and John Hurt. In September last year, the Albery was taken over by Delfont-Mackintosh Ltd and underwent major refurbishment. On June 1st this year it has re-opened with the London premiere of "Avenue Q"

The theatre has now been given a new name - the Noel Coward Theatre, named after the highly successful playwright/actor/songwriter who died in 1973. The choice of name has caused some surprise, since Noel Coward himself had very little connection with either the New or the Albery. However, he did appear at the New in 1920 in his own play "I'll Leave it To You", the first West End production of one of his plays, and presumably that was justification enough for Cameron Mackintosh's decision.

There is also a delicious irony in the fact that Noel Coward's early plays were deemed shocking because of their sexual humour and openness. The show chosen to open the Noel Coward Theatre is an American musical "Avenue Q", which

features a cast of three human characters and eleven puppet characters who use many four-letter words in dialogue and songs, with scenes of "full puppet nudity" and puppet sex. The songs have titles like "The Internet is for Porn", "I'm Not Wearing Underwear Today" and "You Can Be as Loud as the Hell You Want When You're Makin' Love", and the show's themes deal with things like pornography, racism and homosexuality. It is thought that Coward, "The Master", would have thoroughly approved.

How do you solve a problem like Maria?

2006: A BBC TV show caused much protest from performers claiming the programme was an insult to trained and established actors. Andrew Lloyd Webber and David Ian held live TV auditions for the role of Maria in their revival of "The Sound of Music". Viewers of the peak-time Saturday evening show were required to phone in their votes, eliminate contenders and make the final choice. Between July and September huge publicity ensued. The final public choice fell on 23 year old Connie Fisher, who duly opened as Maria at the London Palladium in November.

Moira & the Red Shoes

2006 : Moira Shearer, who has died at the age of 80, made her debut with Sadlers Wells Ballet in 1942, and became a household name following the success of the ballet-themed film "The Red Shoes" in 1948. Her performance made such an impact that she was in great demand for other films and stage work, including Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" as Titania, and even hosting the 1972 Eurovision Song Contest held in Edinburgh. As Lady Kennedy (married to Sir Ludovic Kennedy) she did an enormous amount of charity work and world-wide promotion of ballet.

West End "awash with Musicals"

2006 : Of the West End's 35 "mainstream" theatres an astonishing 24 are currently housing musicals. Ten of them are new productions or revivals which opened this year, and include "Avenue Q", "Cabaret", "Daddy Cool", "Dancing in the Streets", "Dirty Dancing", "Evita", "Spamalot", "Porgy and Bess", "The Sound of Music", and "Wicked".

The remainder include Billy Elliot (2005), Blood Brothers (1988), Chicago (1997), Guys & Dolls (2005), Les Miserables (1985), Lion King (1999), Mamma Mia (1999), Mary Poppins (2004), Phantom of the Opera (1986), The Producers (2004), Stomp (2002), We Will Rock You (2002) with two variety/revue type shows making up the rest.

Among the new shows, the Rufus Norris revival of "Cabaret" starring Anna Maxwell Martin, James Dreyfus and Sheila Hancock with its horrifying echoes of the Nazi death camps has been highly praised. The revival of "Evita" (directed by Michael Grandage with stunning choreography by Rob Ashford) witnessed an amazing performance by the real-life Argentine actress, Elena Roger.

The other big musical event of the year was Stephen Schwartz's "Wicked", a kind of prequel to "The Wizard of Oz", starring Idina Menzel and Helen Dallimore. In spite of its much-praised Broadway production, "Wicked" received some very mixed reviews from the London critics, but, once again, it looks like it's a show that will run and run in spite of some negative reviews.



Idina Menzel in "Wicked"



Tim Curry in "Spamalot"



Elena Roger in "Evita"