



2009: Danny La Rue, entertainer and female impersonator, has died at the age of 81. His career extended over some 60 years, in the course of which Noel Coward called him "The most professional, most utterly charming man in the business" and Bob Hope called him "The most glamorous woman in the world."

He preferred to call himself "a comic in a frock" rather than a female impersonator. His career in cabaret, revues, musicals and pantomime peaked in the early 1970s, when he became the highest paid entertainer in the country. In 1964 he opened his own nightclub in Hanover Square, and in the early 70s invested more than £1million in Walton Hall, a country house hotel. Due to his performance commitments, he decided to sell the business in 1983 and two Canadians offered him a deal by which, if the hotel retained La Rue's name, he would become the major shareholder. He signed the hotel over to them, but six months later discovered his name was linked to a fraud investigation involving these two men. Danny La Rue was eventually cleared of

any suspicion but, at the age of 56, he discovered he had lost his entire life's savings.

Over the years Danny La Rue triumphed in seven major West End shows including "Come Spy With Me" at the Whitehall Theatre, The Danny La Rue Show at the Prince of Wales Theatre, and "Aladdin" at the London Palladium. In 1982 he appeared with great success as Dolly Levi in the musical "Hello, Dolly". After losing all his money, he bounced back, touring with his own show, breaking box office records everywhere. He was a particular hit in Australia, where he would spend half his working year entertaining in television as well as theatre and cabaret seasons. Every year he would appear in pantomime, as the most glamorous Dame in the business, and undertook a total of 53 pantomimes in the course of his career.

He appeared in three Royal Variety shows, and won many awards including Showbiz Personality of the Year, Entertainer of the Decade, etc. In 2002 he was awarded an OBE in recognition of his work for charity and theatre. In 2006 he suffered a mild stroke and his planned performances were cancelled. However, he recovered enough to make a guest appearance in "Hello Danny" - a biographical show in Benidorm, Spain, in November 2007. The part of Danny himself was played by Jerry Lane, while Danny himself appeared in the second half to answer questions from the audience.

Big Names bring Big Play Business

2009: The straight play made something of a come-back in London this season, with producers luring "big names" into the West End and accordingly attracting big audiences. On the Lyttleton stage Dame Helen Mirren and Margaret Tyzack appeared to much acclaim in the Ted Hughes version of Racine's "Phèdre".

At the Donmar Warehouse, the other end of the seating capacity scale, the film and TV icon, Gillian Anderson (famous for TV's X-Files) starred in a rewritten version of Ibsen's "A Doll's House". The adaptation didn't go down too well with the critics, but Gillian Anderson earned great praise for her excellent performance. Also at the Donmar, Rachel Weisz gave an outstanding portrayal of Blanche duBois in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire".

Another Tennessee Williams' play, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" at the Novello Theatre, was given an all-black cast with American star James Earl Jones as Big Daddy, joined by British Adrian Lester as Brick. This was a transfer from Broadway, where the production was an equal success with its London season.

The inclusion of well-known TV and film names has certainly paid off at the box office and helped redress the balance of plays against musicals. Most of the current musicals have either been running for decades or are "compilation" shows - so serious theatregoers are delighted with this new position.

Rock'n'Roll out Brecht's Waggon

2009: Deborah Warner's production of Brecht's "Mother Courage" at the National's Olivier Theatre turned out to be one of the most controversial productions of recent times. The first public preview was abruptly stopped half way through, because of technical problems, cast changes, and the inability of leading actress Fiona Shaw to cope with her lines (due to numerous last-minute re-writes in this new translation.). The opening night was delayed by nine days, but even then the show was deemed incomplete by some critics.

It was roundly condemned for its "rock concert" approach, its gimmicks, and for Fiona Shaw's "folksy Oirish" performance. And, at the same time, it was lavishly praised for its brilliant re-interpretation of Brecht's anti-war classic and for Fiona Shaw's outstandingly moving performance. Rarely has a production so divided the critics: whose verdicts ranged from "A scruffy, wretched embarrassment" to "an exciting, moving and formidable theatrical experience".

Waiting and Queuing for Godot

Nearly 55 years after its hugely controversial premiere at the Arts Theatre, "Waiting for Godot" is back, this time at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in a production by Sean Mathias. The production offers the starriest assembly of names seen in the West End for many a long time: Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Simon Callow and Ronald Pickup. Last time it was said the audience stayed away in droves; this time it is the hottest ticket in the West End.

It is being critically acclaimed as the best thing on the London stage for many a long year, and no one can imagine a better performed version of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece.

