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**John Chapman, Thomas Melrose and Alexander Lee, licensing laws and the patent theatres**

John Kemble Chapman, Thomas Melrose and Alexander Lee took the theatre for the 1829–30 autumn season, which began on 23 November. They selected the name The Theatre, Tottenham Street for the playhouse. On bills circulated in the city, the managers confidently announced their plans to mount performances equal to those of the great houses. John Kemble Chapman (1806–52),<sup>21</sup> serving as the spokesman for the trio as well as acting manager for the company, had earned his theatrical reputation in provincial theatres. Thomas Melrose (1790–1834) was a singer and a promising musician.<sup>22</sup> The financially independent Alexander Lee (d. 1851) brought his skills as a composer and director of music to the management of the theatre. He also appeared in several productions.<sup>23</sup>

The lease was negotiated and the rental agreement signed (a weekly rate of £16, paid in advance), and the company was engaged. The prices were set at 4s, 2s and 1s with half-price beginning at half-past eight, curtain to rise at seven. Chapman, Melrose and Lee formed their company by hiring actors from the Theatres Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane as well as from the English Opera House. The gentlemen included William Vining (1783–1861), from a large family of theatre artists,<sup>24</sup> and Percy Farren (1784–1843), the son of the well-known actor William Farren. Percy Farren, who was to serve as stage manager, suffered from an asthmatic condition and

21 An actor and theatre manager, Chapman was married to Ann Tree, sister of Mrs Charles Kean and Mrs Bradshaw. Erroll Sherson, *London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1925), 39–41. He rarely appeared as an actor in the company at the Theatre, Tottenham Street, but his wife Ann Tree did. After the 1829–30 season at the Theatre, Tottenham Street, he moved to the City Theatre, Cripplegate.

22 'Melrose, Thomas', in Oxberry, *Dramatic Biography*, 79–87. Upon his arrival in London from his native Felton, he studied music with Michael Kelly. In time this apprenticeship led to an engagement at John Brunton's theatre at Brighton. In the following years, he travelled to Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paisley, Aberdeen and Belfast before joining Chapman and Lee at the Theatre, Tottenham Street.

23 'Chapman, John K.', in Sherson, *London's Lost Theatres*, 212; and Blanchard, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, 87. After dissolving his partnership with Chapman and Melrose, Lee became the lessee at Drury Lane and an adversary of his former colleagues. He later married Mrs Harriet Waylett.

24 K.D. Reynolds, 'Vining, James (1795–1870)', *ODNB*, accessed 18 November 2013. William Vining is referred to in this entry.

performed only rarely as an actor. He was previously engaged as stage manager at the Haymarket where he also served as a friend and tutor of Helen Faucit as she prepared for a career on the Victorian stage.<sup>25</sup> Miss Ann Tree (Chapman's wife and the sister of Mrs Charles Kean) and Mrs Harriet Waylett were the two principal women in the company. Mrs Waylett (née Cooke, 1789–1851) was discovered by Charles and Maria-Theresa Kemble and brought to the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in 1812 to play Desdemona. Prior to her appearance at the Theatre, Tottenham Street (Plate 6), Mrs Waylett had performed at several London playhouses.<sup>26</sup>

On Monday 23 November 1829 an enthusiastic audience attended *A Day of Folly, or, The Spanish Wedding* based on the Beaumarchais play *La Folle journée, ou, le mariage de Figaro*, with story elements borrowed from Mozart's opera *Le nozze di Figaro*. The music consisted of popular airs. The audience enjoyed the dramatic productions, the acting and singing (especially that of Ann Tree and Mrs Waylett). The orchestra was also thought to be excellent.<sup>27</sup> In the following week *Royal Travellers*, an operatic play based on the French opera by François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775–1834) entitled *Jean de Paris*, featured William Vining in the role of Phillipe de Valois and Mrs Waylett as the Princess of Navarre. On the same bill, Mrs Tayleure made her debut in the comic piece *Tit for Tat; or A Peep at the Mad-House* (21), adapted from the Eugène Scribe vaudeville *Une Visite à Bedlam*.

In the early days of the new management, the principal piece on the bills was often operatic. This represented an effort to attract audiences from beyond the neighbourhood. By the end of December *Spanish Barber, or the Fruitless Precaution*, adapted from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, 'was given in a style which, in regard to acting, singing, scenery, and costume, would have done credit to either of the winter houses'.<sup>28</sup> The first-price admissions declined after the first month, but the house was crowded at half-price.<sup>29</sup> The managers soon concluded that it would be difficult to survive on half-price receipts and that it would be necessary to increase the melodramatic and comic offerings on the bills.

On 14 January 1830, Percy Farren's new melodrama entitled *The Field of Forty Footsteps* (45) was first presented. It was based on a local legend about a love triangle involving two brothers and their violent deaths. The scene was set in Long Fields, an area behind the east side of Gower Street in the immediate vicinity of Bloomsbury Square. Percy Farren embellished the story by incorporating incidents

25 Carol Jones Carlyle, *Helen Faucit: Fire and Ice on the Victorian Stage* (London, 2000), 22–4.

26 Joseph Knight, 'Waylett, Harriet (1800–1851)', rev. J. Gilliland, *ODNB*, accessed 18 November 2013; and *Green Room Memoirs, Theatrical Library*, c.1820. She appeared in *The Blind Boy* at the age of sixteen in Bath and by 1819 she was in Coventry where she married a fellow actor, Mr Waylett. They performed at the Adelphi in 1820. Mrs Waylett appeared at Drury Lane in 1824 and the following year she was at the Haymarket. She acted and sang in Dublin and Cork in 1828. By 1834, she was the 'sole' manager of the Strand.

27 *London Standard*, 24 November 1829.

28 *Theatrical Observer*, 19 December 1829.

29 *Theatrical Observer*, 19 October 1829.

14 Image not shown

from Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* as well as from *Coming Out; and The Field of the Forty Footsteps*, published two years earlier.<sup>30</sup> The reviewer for the *Athenaeum* offered generous praise for the author and the leading actors, William Vining, Ann Tree and Mrs Waylett.<sup>31</sup> The play was exactly what the neighbourhood audiences desired.

Mrs Waylett next appeared in the title role of a burletta version of Thomas J. Dibdin's script *Don Giovanni* (29). Mrs Waylett's cross-dressing performance was an immediate success. Female cross-dressers became a popular addition to the playbills of this theatre as well as elsewhere in the city.<sup>32</sup> She appeared as Don Giovanni on the bills with *The Field of Forty Footsteps*, and the managers offered a special juvenile evening on 26 January, prior to the conclusion of the Christmas season. Admission was reduced to half-price for children under twelve years old. The entertainments, the managers promised, would conclude by eleven o'clock.<sup>33</sup> *My Wife's Husband* (25) premiered in February and *Midas* (17) opened on 18 March 1830 with Mrs Waylett appearing in the breeches role. According to the press, her Apollo was equal to that of any of her competitors at other theatres.<sup>34</sup> The theatre closed for nine days beginning 3 April for the Easter holiday. During the brief interval, Chapman, Melrose and Lee made several interior improvements.

Mrs Frances Fitzwilliam (1801–54) joined the company (Fig. 14).<sup>35</sup> On 12 April 1830 she made her first appearance at the theatre as Ellen Douglas in *Spectre Boat; or, The Weird Woman of Glenfellin* (15).<sup>36</sup> In late April Mrs Fitzwilliam and William Vining performed in *The Heart of Midlothian* (23). She had performed the Madge Wildfire role previously at the Surrey.<sup>37</sup> By May the critic for the *Morning Post* could not contain his enthusiasm for Mrs Fitzwilliam. He was 'delighted to find this justly favourite actress rather increases than otherwise in talent and energy and has

30 Jane Porter and Anna Maria Porter, *Coming Out; and the Field of Forty Footsteps*, 3 vols (London, 1828). See also John Timbs, *Curiosities of London*, new edn (London, 1868).

31 *Athenaeum*, 23 January 1830.

32 Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, 114.

33 HC: playbill, 26 January 1830.

34 *Theatrical Observer*, 19 April 1830.

35 Joseph Knight, 'Fitzwilliam [née Copeland], Fanny [or Fanny] Elizabeth (1801–1854)', rev. J. Gilliland, *ODNB*, accessed 18 November 2013. She made her debut in Dover at the age of two. Upon hearing ten-year-old Frances Copeland sing, Charles Incedon suggested she abandon the stage to study voice seriously. She pursued a stage career and appeared four years later at the Haymarket under the management of George Coleman the younger. She was engaged at the Surrey by Thomas Dibdin, moved to the Olympic and later appeared at Drury Lane with Robert Elliston. During her career she performed at the Adelphi, Victoria and Sadler's Wells, which she co-managed with W.H. Williams in 1832.

36 The playbills attribute the play to the 'author of *Robert the Devil*' with special music by Alexander Lee. Two melodramas with the title *Robert the Devil* had been performed in London shortly before April 1830: Michael Rophino Lacy's *Robert the Devil, Duke of Normandy* (Covent Garden, 28 November 1829) and an anonymous melodrama *Robert the Devil; or, The Terror or Normandy* (Royal Pavilion, 16 March 1830). A version of the play, published in June 1830, lists Richard John Raymond as the author of *Robert the Devil; Duke of Normandy*. In that volume, *Spectre Boat* is listed as one of his works.

37 Knight, *Major London 'Minor'*, 25. Thomas Dibdin was so pleased with her reception in the role of Madge Wildfire at the Surrey in 1819 that he raised her salary by a pound a week.

lost none of that profusion of animal spirits which has always been the pleasing characteristic of her performances.’<sup>38</sup> Vining, too, had earned strong support from the *Morning Post*, whose writer thought him an actor ‘whose abilities in the more lively characters of the drama are not surpassed by any actor on the stage.’<sup>39</sup> With these appealing entertainments, the managers enjoyed frequent full houses.<sup>40</sup> J.B. Buckstone (1802–79)<sup>41</sup> joined Mrs Fitzwilliam for her benefit on 10 May, and they performed his play *Dead Shot*. She continued at the theatre until mid-June. The managers kept the theatre open during the summer and hosted several leading London actors.

After seven months of management, Chapman, Melrose and Lee had attained a degree of success. They wisely altered their initial plans to perform primarily opera and musical entertainments and added more melodramatic pieces to their bills. With Mrs Fitzwilliam and Mrs Waylett in major roles, theatregoers flocked to the theatre. The full houses soon attracted the attention of the patent theatre holders.

The 1752 act of Parliament had redefined the authority of the patent theatres and enabled local magistrates to license theatres at their discretion. The patent theatres retained the authority to perform the ‘legitimate’ drama as they always had, and the new playhouses, or minor theatres, would present the burletta, a type of performance that would not make incursions into the patent theatres’ prerogatives. The burletta was not defined in specific terms in the act of Parliament, which created considerable confusion. The burletta was a play with music, but uncertainty persisted as to how much music was required to make a distinction between the burletta and a ‘legitimate’ drama. By 1830, five songs in an act were viewed as sufficient to offset any spoken dialogue and thereby qualify the play as a burletta.<sup>42</sup>

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38 *Morning Post*, 14 May 1830.

39 *Ibid.*, 23 March 1830.

40 *Ibid.*, 14 May 1830.

41 Donald Roy, ‘Buckstone, John Baldwin (1802–1879)’, *ODNB*, accessed 18 November 2013. He began his career in the provinces and first appeared in London at the Surrey in 1823. He performed at the Coburg and after appearing at the Adelphi in 1827 he was back at the Surrey. He managed the Haymarket from 1853–77. As an actor ‘he had great breadth and humour, and the mere sound of his voice, a mixture of chuckle and drawl, heard off stage was enough to set the audience laughing’. He was the author of around 200 plays, primarily melodrama and farces.

42 Rowell, *Victorian Theatre*, 10.