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Entertainment, Propaganda, Education

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History of Theatre in Yorkshire

In Britain theatre ‘is regarded as a commercial affair, part of the entertainment business, and playgoing, like smoking and drinking wine and spirits, is severely taxed.’

J.B. Priestley¹

*Successful theatre means not only good art
but also good business.*

Edith J.R. Isaacs²

Modern history of regional theatre in Britain can roughly be divided into three different periods. During the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries stock companies ran (sometimes substantial) touring circuits in the provinces. The following period not only saw a general rise in the number of theatres, an increased social acceptance and a greater variety of entertainments, but also witnessed a qualitative change with the demise of many of the regional stock companies. Instead the scene became increasingly dominated by influential, mostly London-based, managers who sent their West End companies on provincial tours and often also owned a string of regional theatres. During the first half of the twentieth century the rising repertory movement reclaimed some of the territory lost to these chains. Many repertory companies deliberately stressed a particular local identity, established close links to communities and challenged the big receiving playhouses.

Yorkshire’s theatres mirror these developments. Tate Wilkinson’s Yorkshire circuit in the late eighteenth century was one of the most important in the country, but the stock companies declined in the course of the nineteenth century, at the end of which many playhouses became part of large business empires. Countless new theatres and

music halls had opened by the outbreak of the First World War and, together with the phenomenal rise of cinema after the war, testified to a vibrant entertainment industry in Yorkshire. During the 1920s and 1930s many ‘reps’ sprang up proving a revived interest in theatre presented by resident companies. More than any other playhouse in the region, the Theatre Royal in the county’s old capital York exemplified these different periods.

In view of the comparative approach of this study it is interesting to note that the differences in the respective theatre histories seem to become particularly obvious during theatre’s heyday in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Most towns and cities experienced a surge in theatrical entertainment and a growing variety with music halls, circuses and ‘proper’ playhouses springing up. This means that, in contrast to Germany, most places featured more than one theatre. For the sake of comparability, however, I will not deal with every venue offering theatrical entertainment in each place, but instead concentrate on what commentators have identified as the leading theatre in each locality. I will also restrict myself to the theatres in Yorkshire’s biggest cities, and have, therefore, chosen York (Theatre Royal), Hull (Little/New Theatre), Leeds (Grand Theatre and Opera House), Bradford (Prince’s Theatre and Alhambra) and Sheffield (Sheffield Repertory Company).

EARLY HISTORY

The first permanent theatres in Yorkshire were built in the course of the eighteenth century. In 1734 Thomas Keregan opened York’s first playhouse, the Theatre in Sheffield was launched in 1762, Hull opened in 1768 and Leeds in 1771. Many of these early theatres thrived and quickly established themselves both within their communities and further afield. In the 1740s Joseph Baker established a successful circuit, which included York, Newcastle, Beverley and Hull.³ An indication of these early successes is the official recognition some of them received in the form of royal patents. Tate Wilkinson became the first truly countywide theatre ‘phenomenon’ in the second half of the eighteenth century. He was impresario in York and Hull, and enlarged Baker’s circuit to perform in York, Leeds, Pontefract, Wakefield, Doncaster and Hull. Wilkinson presided over a company that was praised as the best outside of London, and it was his management of

which ‘every actor was talking’.⁴ As far as the repertoire was concerned Wilkinson staged most Shakespearean plays, although profits were more likely to be made with spectacles involving extensive use of stage machinery. As a matter of fact, Wilkinson only managed to make Shakespeare pay when he was able to secure the services of well-known London stars such as Sarah Siddons or John Philip Kemble.⁵

In the first half of the nineteenth century many theatres experienced increasing uncertainty with managers following each other in rapid succession, financial problems and declining audiences.⁶ This was in part due to increasing competition, which was made possible by the 1843 Theatres Act. Additionally, places like York deteriorated as fashionable social centres with events like the Race and Assize Weeks declining in prestige.⁷ Attempts to revive Wilkinson’s Yorkshire circuit of theatres failed and it gradually disintegrated. The repertoire, too, seemed to become an increasingly one-sided affair with extravaganzas, sensational novelties and travesties being produced to meet the demand for the spectacular.⁸ Criticism grew within communities, in particular within religious circles. Sheffield’s Reverend Thomas Best claimed that theatre audiences were by their very nature ‘already inclined to evil’, and in 1853 York’s City Corporation could only with some difficulty be prevented from closing ‘Satan’s synagogue’.⁹ At the same time, however, Yorkshire’s theatres became integral parts of urban social life.¹⁰ York’s Theatre Royal, for example, was very much part of a development which saw the foundation of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, the Yorkshire Museum, the Subscription Library, the grand De Grey Rooms, and numerous music societies and festivals.¹¹ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theatre – sandwiched between the museum, the library and the Minster – was constantly renovated, updated and redecorated during the nineteenth century to keep up with changing tastes and expectations. Robert Mansel, for example, entirely remodelled its interior and fitted it with gas lighting. To fund the renovation Mansel organised a public subscription, and he also managed to persuade the City Corporation to offer financial assistance.¹² At the end of the nineteenth century most theatres had not only been updated internally but also externally with grand neo-Gothic façades (Leeds, York), domes and turrets (Bradford’s Alhambra and Sheffield’s Lyceum) and elaborate glass and steel canopies.¹³