

One Hundred Glorious Years of Variety: A Centenary Celebration of the History of the King's Theatre, Edinburgh.

by Mike Ridings

On the 8th December, 1906, the King's Theatre opened with *Cinderella*, and to celebrate its centenary, the curtain will rise again on the best loved of all pantomimes, the magical story of Cinderella and her Prince Charming.

The building of the King's was commissioned in 1906 as a rival to the successful Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, and also to the prestigious theatres in London's West End. It was designed to be, and a hundred years later, is still recognised as a Number 1 British theatre.

James Davidson and J.D Swanston were not specialist theatre architects such as Matcham and Phipps. But Davidson's rather dour, red sandstone, 'Lanarkshire municipal', building, with its spacious foyer, solid mahogany doors, marble stairs, and fine parquet floors, which echoed the good taste 'of a Victorian gentlemen's club, was nonetheless impressive. Swanston's auditorium, was a cornucopia of Viennese baroque, plush red, and opulent gold, ornate rococo boxes, nine on each side, all graced with voluptuous nudes. The building of the King's was a statement of Victorian ebullience and confidence that here was a theatre of which Edinburgh could always be proud.

Andrew Carnegie, the Dunfermline-born millionaire, laid the foundation stone of the King's, on 18th August, 1906 as 'The House of Variety'. It has remained true to this challenge to this day. It is this comprehensive and all-inclusiveness which has been the bedrock of its strength. First of all are the audiences who for a century have flocked to the theatre which has become an important part of their lives. There are the outstanding theatre managers, such as the Cruikshanks, (whose family were the builders of the theatre) at the beginning, planned and sometimes produced, the season's programmes. They would welcome the patrons, many of whom became their friends, through the mahogany doors of the foyer. The office staff were responsible for the efficient day to day administration of the company, and the barmen and ushers looked after the needs of the audience. Especially important were the unsung heroes, the backstage staff and crew, without whose sheer hard work, ingenuity, and above all, love for the King's and all it represents, and without whom, as all producers, directors, and stage performers are acutely aware, no show could go on. All these things are as true today as they have been since the 8th of December, 1906, when the King's opened for the first time with *Cinderella*.

As the curtain rose, the audience were entranced by an elaborate winter forest scene, which in a trice was transformed by fairy wand into a verdant glade, with a family of live rabbits hopping about happily in the warm springtime sun. A pumpkin and four white mice were magically changed by the Fairy Godmother into a (Shetland pony) horse-drawn carriage, taking the lovely sixteen-year-old Phyllis Dare, as Cinderella, in gorgeous dress and glass slippers to meet her Prince Charming at the ball. At the end, Prince Charming and Cinderella descended the palace stair to marry and live happily ever after, much to the chagrin of the Ugly Sisters, but to the joy of the grown-ups and also

their children, who were to come to the Christmas pantomime again and again, as were their children, and their children's children...For a hundred years the King's been famous for its traditional pantomimes. *Cinderella* especially, has been popular. Not only did it open the theatre in 1906, it was the pantomime chosen for the King's Golden Jubilee in 1956, and it will charm us again, on this, the King's Centenary Celebrations. Even though there may be no live rabbits on the stage, Prince Charming and Cinderella will still be married and live happily ever after.

'The National Theatre of Scotland is Pantomime' declared Sir Lewis Casson, (and for the hundred years until February 2006, with the first productions of the newly formed official National Theatre of Scotland, this was certainly true.) *Dick Whittington, Babes in the Wood Jack and Beanstalk,*

Aladdin, and *Mother Goose* are all favourites. But most loved of all, were the especially composed all-Scottish *Jamie* pantomimes, which took the King's by storm.. 'SCOTTISH PANTO IS A BOMBSHELL' headlined the 'Evening News' in its review of *A Wish for Jamie*, on 15 December, 1962.

Scottish pantomime has thrived, largely because of those other great Scottish traditions, the Variety Stage and the Music Hall. There is nothing a Scottish audience likes more than *A Good Night Out*, to borrow John McGrath's phrase. Scottish audiences want to engage directly with the actors, especially the comedians, in chat and back-chat. Familiarity does not breed contempt. On the contrary, it creates a close friendship and bond between the audience and the entertainers. They came each year to be entertained, to join in the sing-songs, and the 'Oh Yes It Is!' Oh No It Isn't!' banter with the stage. They adored the glamorous chorus girls and marvelled at the magic transformations. Above all, they enjoyed a raucous good laugh at the Dame, with his /her outrageous costumes and slyly winking innuendo.

On the Variety stage, George Robey, Lily Gantry, Frankie Vaughan, Ken Dodd, Jewel and Warris, Bruce Forsyth, and Danny La Rue, is only the sketchiest and inadequate list of the hundreds of top performers, too many to mention individually, who have appeared at the King's.

Especially close to our hearts are the Scottish comedians who have brought gales of laughter and tears of joy to Edinburgh audiences. These are just a few names to conjure with: Harry Lauder, Tommy Lorne, Will Hay, Harry Gordon, Jack Radcliffe, Lex Maclean, Duncan Macrae, Chic Murray and Maisie, Dave Willis, Jimmy Logan, Walter Carr, Alec Finlay, Russell Hunter, Stanley Baxter, Jack Milroy and Rikki.

Fulton. Today, as in the last few years, Allan Stewart and Andy Gray, are the proud inheritors of this very special tradition of Scottish comedy.

No history of the Scottish stage is complete without recognising the contribution to variety and pantomime of the legendary Fay Lenore, Fay started playing Principal Boy at the age of seventeen, who was not only a singer and dancer, but also played in comedy sketches with Rikki Fulton, Jack Milroy, and Stanley Baxter, and others, in variety shows

and pantomime. She starred in the *Jamie* pantomimes, in all their tartan exuberance and wizardry. Fay Lenore is a well-loved and living legend of the Scottish variety stage.

A principal emphasis of the King's has rightly been to open its doors to an audience that comes to enjoy the show, to be able to forget for a short time the rigours of the real world outside. Pantomime in the winter, and *The Five Past Eight Show* for many summer seasons, kept the theatre in business. And it should never be forgotten that the King's doors stayed open during World War1; helped people to forget the Depression, unemployment and rise of Fascism in the 'thirties': and never closed even through the darkest days of the Second World War.

But the King's is not only known for its pantomime and variety shows. The annual performances of Edinburgh's Local Heroes', the extraordinarily talented and dedicated amateur musical theatre groups, such as The Bohemians Lyric Opera Company, Southern Light Opera, Gilbert and Sullivan Society, Edinburgh Music Theatre, and the Scouts and Guides of The Gang Show, fill the theatre to capacity with shows of the highest quality and raise generous donations to local charities.

There can be few theatres in the world that can assemble a more prestigious list of the great national and international performers and Companies who have performed on the stage of the King's Theatre of Edinburgh.

Even before the Edinburgh Festival began in 1947, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Sybil Thorndike, Sarah Bernhardt, Edwige Feuillere, and John Gielgud and Alastair Sim all appeared at the King's. In 1930, Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, and Laurence Olivier acted in the world premier of Coward's *Private Lives*. More recently, Derek Jacobi, Simon Russell Beale, Simon Callow, Nigel Havers, Ian McKellen, Brian Cox, Juliet Stevenson, Faith Shaw and Maggie Smith are just some names that come immediately to mind.

Stewart Grainger, Deborah Kerr, Jean Simmons, John Mills, Claire Bloom and Richard Burton are a representative group of film stars who have performed at this theatre.

World famous companies such as the Royal National Theatre, R.S.C., Berliner Ensemble, Gorki Theatre, Moscow, and the Ninagawa Theatre, have played here, working with celebrated directors like Peter Hall, Peter Zadek, Ingmar Bergman, Ninagawa himself, and Peter Stein. They have brought the best of world drama. Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht and Beckett, have all been seen at the King's.

Pavlova, Ninette de Valois, Moira Shearer, and Margot Fonteyn, have danced on its stage, as have Anton Dolin, Robert Helpmann, and Rudolf Nureyev. Diaghelev's Russian Ballet, Sadler's Wells, and the Royal Ballet have staged both classical and modern ballet.

Carl Rosa Opera. The D'Oyly Carte, Glyndbourne Opera, Covent Garden, La Scala, Milan, directors such as Visconti and Franco Zeffereli, and conductors like Sir Thomas Beecham, John Barbirolli, Georg Solti, Guilini and Addabo, with soloists Maria Callas, Renata Scotto, Joan Sutherland, Kathleen Ferrier, as have Tito Gobbi, Placido Domingo and Pavarotti are further reminders of the glorious history of this world-renowned theatre.

Edinburgh owes a great debt of gratitude to those visionary and practical men of business who in 1906 felt a civic duty to build a theatre for the people of Edinburgh. What they also built was a theatre which has touched the lives of the people of Edinburgh, and at the reached out to the people of the whole world. After a hundred years of continuous use and two major refurbishments, the King's is now in urgent need of repair, so fundamental that the theatre is in imminent danger of having to close. This building work will be very expensive, but The King's is an invaluable part of Edinburgh's heritage, and needs major renovation to be conserved for the future. We must not let it die.

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