

## A CHANGE OF STYLE AT THE THEATRE ROYAL, 1805–1820

Mac Hopkins-Clarke

Under John Palmer the old Theatre Royal in Orchard Street (and the associated theatre in Bristol) had been managed on repertory lines. This meant that plays and other entertainments were staged out of the resources of the resident stock company, the permanent troupe of actors and actresses who typically presented a different play and afterpiece each night featuring one of their company as a leading player. This was invariably the tragedian who would play Hamlet, Macbeth (or Lady Macbeth) and similar roles as well as serious comedy. Subordinate parts would be allocated to other members of the company who might have had to prove their worth from the humblest of beginnings. Often players undertook a special 'line of business' and were paid according to the importance of the part and their status in the company. The stock company system was common to all theatres throughout the country and players moved from one theatre to another if opportunity for advancement arose.

In 1785 John Palmer relinquished the proprietorship having established the Theatre Royal as a leading provincial playhouse. Messrs Keasberry and Dimond, two very experienced members of the company, took over the management and initiated a period of unrivalled success which eventually led to the building of the new theatre in Beaufort Square. It was during their management that the links with the London theatres developed. Henceforth many actors and actresses who started in Bath moved on to work with companies at Covent Garden and Drury Lane and perhaps later returned to Bath for short periods to perform. For a time Bath became a veritable nursery for the London stage. Sarah Siddons and John Henderson, both popular tragedians, and Incedon the vocalist first proved themselves in Bath and then moved on to the metropolitan theatres. They were all invited back to make much acclaimed appearances at Orchard Street. The visit of Sarah Siddons in 1799 created so much interest the *Bath Herald* wrote that although 'it was not till Saturday night that Mrs Siddons was announced to appear a few nights at our theatre, at an early hour on Monday there was not a seat unlet for any of her performances'.<sup>1</sup> A similar situation arose when John

Philip Kemble came in 1802 on a return visit to the theatre he had known so well. He also was well received on this occasion and remained a favourite with the local audiences and could be assured of a full house whenever he appeared. Robert Elliston too, whose versatility constantly surprised his audience, left Bath in 1804 but returned on many occasions. These visits, and others like them, attracted large audiences and were influential in convincing the management that eventually a larger theatre would have to be provided to keep pace with public demand.

With the increase in average attendance at the Orchard Street theatre from 1790–1803 its size had become a handicap to the management. In response to the demands of an audience less keen to journey from the northern side of the city through the narrow streets and the poor approaches to the theatre, a new site in Sawclose was purchased from the private landlords and the Trustees of St John's Hospital. Financed by a group of shareholders the New Theatre Royal opened on 12 October 1805. The stock company from Orchard Street moved into a theatre equipped with new scenery, backstage saloons and retiring rooms, wardrobe spaces and refinements considered 'modern' and generous.

The movement begun towards the end of the eighteenth century for visiting players to take leading roles in Bath was carried on in the new theatre and gradually increased, the effect being to emphasise still further the dominance of London and in particular the Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres. At the turn of the century the country was still facing the Napoleonic challenge and economic uncertainties but new patterns of social life were developing. Entertaining in the home, later times for supper, and the counter-attraction of the seaside towns all had an effect on the pattern of social life in Bath. The theatre management met the situation by introducing more 'star' performers and different kinds of plays to hold their audiences.

Increasingly therefore during these years, star engagements began to dominate the calendar. The periods just before and just after the London theatre season offered most scope for them to visit the provincial theatres. It soon became the accepted thing that London actors took engagements in the provinces whenever not needed for a period in London. The dislocation caused by the burning down of Covent Garden in 1808 and Drury Lane in 1809 provided them with an extended opportunity for such visits. New forms of drama were already emerging. Melodramas, pantomimes and patriotic spectacles dominated programmes which often contained musical and dance interludes as well as the usual after-

# MASTER BETTY.

THE

# YOUNG ROSCIUS.

The Public are respectfully informed, that; by Permission of the Proprietors of the Theatres-Royal, Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden, MASTER BETTY is engaged to perform a few Nights only at this Theatre, in some of his principal Characters.

This present FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 1806,  
Will be presented a TRAGEDY, called

# HAMLET.

Hamlet .....	MASTER BETTY.	Ostrick ....	Mr. WRENCH.
King .....	Mr. EGAN.	Rofencrantz	Mr. ABBOTT.
Horatio ....	Mr. EGERTON.	Guiltenstern	Mr. DOWLAND.
Polonius ....	Mr. CHARLTON.	The Ghost ..	Mr. CAULFIELD.
Laertes .....	Mr. CUNNINGHAM.	Queen .....	Miss MARRIOTT.
Player-Queen	Miss SUMMERS.	Ophelia .....	Miss JAMESON.

To which will be added a FARCE, called

# Raising the Wind.

Diddler .....	Mr. WRENCH.	Waiter .....	Mr. KELLY.
Plainway .....	Mr. CHARLTON.	John .....	Mr. LODGE.
Fainwou'd .....	Mr. DOWLAND.	Sam .....	Mr. EVANS.
Richard .....	Mr. SIMS.	Peggy .....	Mrs. SIMS.
Miss Laurelia Durable	Mrs. EGAN.		

Tickets and Places to be had of Mr. BARTLEY, at the Theatre, from Ten till Four o'Clock.

Doors to be opened at Half-past Five o'Clock, and to begin at Half-past Six.

Boxes 5s. Pit 3s. Gallery 1s. 6d. Latter Account, Boxes 3s. Pit 2s. Gallery 1s.

N. B. No Orders or Free Admissions during Master Betty's Performances. None but the *Subscribers'* and Office Tickets can be admitted.

No Places can be infured without taking Tickets for them at the same time.

On Saturday, *LOVERS' VOWS*; Frederick, by MASTER BETTY; with *YOUTH, LOVE, and FOLLY*.  
On Tuesday next, *The DISTRESS'D MOTHER*—the Part of Orestes by MASTER BETTY; with Entertainments:

Ann Keene, Printer, 7, Kingsmead-street, Bath;

pieces. Provincial audiences, long accustomed to English ballad opera, were now introduced to serious opera in diluted form.

Public taste gradually turned away from tragedy as the strong emotional impact of melodrama gained in popularity. The term was first applied to an adaptation of a play by a French writer in the 1790s but there were strong influences from German Gothic sources, particularly in plays like *The Castle Spectre* which was presented two weeks after the opening of the New Theatre Royal. Another play, *The Knight and the Wood Daemon* by the same author 'Monk' Lewis, and *The Miller and his Men* by Isaac Pocock became firm favourites with the Bath audiences and were often repeated. Pantomime was included in programmes as an after-piece and Harlequin became the 'leading' player. In 1814 Grimaldi, the famous clown, came to Bath appearing in the after-pieces *The Wild Man*, *Harlequin and Padmanaba* and then in his most famous role in *Mother Goose*. Though pantomime did not develop into a main feature of the programme until later in the century these early versions were sure to attract an audience. 'On Saturday the theatre exhibited as elegant a display of fashion and beauty as we are accustomed to see at the height of the season...The new pantomime seems to increase in popularity on every repetition. Grimaldi himself is a magnet of irresistible attraction'.<sup>2</sup> Despite the splendour of *Mother Goose* however, some people regretted what they saw as a lowering of public taste. 'To see our best Tragedies and Comedies deserted, while all the world is running after a Goose, is lamentable'.<sup>3</sup>

The early nineteenth century was dominated by melodrama, pantomime and plays requiring special effects and striking scenery. London designers became involved in provincial productions to the detriment of locally employed talent. John Henderson Grieve from Covent Garden was responsible for many fine pieces at Bath, and Marchbanks 'from London' and William Capon each contributed scenery. The latter's work was duly acclaimed in the *Bath Chronicle* of 5 January 1808: 'the scenery is picturesque and beautiful; the gothic church is a magnificent scene, surpassing anything of the kind we have yet beheld, and does the highest credit to the chaste and classic period of the ingenious artist Mr Capon, by whom it was designed and painted'.<sup>4</sup> It was these three painters, plus Mr French the resident artist of the Bath theatre, who had been responsible for the scenery of the opening production of *Richard III* in 1805. 'The scenery cannot be sufficiently admired; it astonished by its fine effect, and deluded for the moment the imagination, making that appear real which was only colours and canvas'.<sup>5</sup>



2 The actress Mrs (Dorothy) Jordan.

When the theatre had first opened the seat prices had been fixed at Boxes 5s., Pit 3s., Gallery 1s.6d., and these long remained the basic prices. For special guest appearances though, special rates were charged and Boxes could cost as much as 10s.6d., Pit 7s. and Gallery 4s. The wages paid to regular stock company players could be as low as 30 shillings a week whereas leading actors in London might be paid £14 or more a week. During her 1811 engagement Mrs Jordan grossed £800 from Bath and Bristol, and Grimaldi realised £287 from his engagement in 1814.

Visits by stars to take the leading roles in tragedies, melodramas or pantomime reduced the opportunities for the stock company players. Fewer secondary roles were available and the supporting cast was sometimes weakened. 'The conventional figures of pantomime, Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon and more recently Clown, had always been represented by members of the regular company, and now these specialities became ever more skilled and more important and so more highly paid'.<sup>6</sup> The rapport that players in a stock company developed between each other had been a strong element in the effectiveness of their performances. With the input of actors with whom they were largely unfamiliar the supporting cast was not as strong as it might have been.

3 The actor Richard William Elliston.



In April 1806 young Master Betty came from Drury Lane to make his first appearance in the city. His impact on London theatregoers had been the talk of Bath well beforehand and on the announcement of his pending arrival 'the Boxkeeper has been so closely besieged at every point...that it has been difficult for him and his assistants to answer the numerous and incessant application for places'.<sup>7</sup> He was received with rapturous applause playing Achmet in *Barbarossa*, Young Norval in *Douglas* and Orestes in *The Distressed Mother*. When he came back to Bath in January 1807 to play in *The Clandestine Marriage* and *Richard III*, the *Bath Journal* enthused, 'we cannot refrain from observing that in every new character he has displayed some fresh excellence and that our delight and admiration has been uniformly increased each time that we have witnessed his acting'.<sup>8</sup> Betty also played Hamlet in 1806 and returned to the city on several other occasions.

Mrs Siddons revisited her beloved Bath in 1807 to play Elvira in the tragic play of *Pizarro*, *Lady Macbeth*, and other favourite roles, her performance being described as 'the most perfect and highly finished specimens of the histrionic art'.<sup>9</sup> In January 1808 this great actress again enthralled her audiences in the city and 'it has been justly observed that

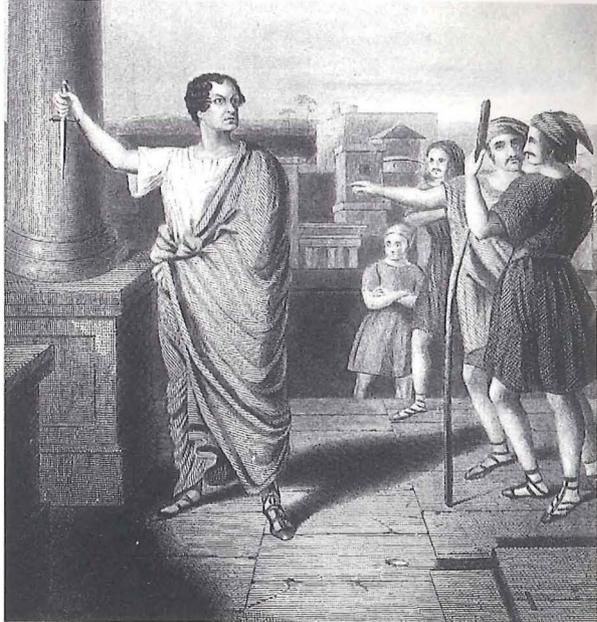
the scale and structure of the Bath theatre is better adapted for the purpose of acting than those of larger dimensions'.<sup>10</sup> This observation is interesting because the size of Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres later became a significant factor in determining styles of acting and types of productions, but theatres like Bath's still offered a more intimate contact between actor and audience. G.F. Cooke came to Bath in 1806 and filled the theatre every night he performed. The *Bath Journal* was supportive: 'His Richard III, Shylock and Sir Arthur have successively been represented with that masterly discrimination of character, that wonderfully varied expression of countenance and voice and gesture which so eminently characterizes the acting of this truly great performer'.<sup>11</sup>

The visits of such nationally famous stars introduced plays and theatrical pieces to provincial audiences which they would not have otherwise experienced. Madame Catalani in 1809 gave Bath playgoers excerpts from Grand Opera. 'We never heard this surprising singer to so much advantage or experienced a more delightful treat'.<sup>12</sup> She later performed the part of Semiramide in the opera of that name and so audiences were able to judge her acting talents. The 'incomparable' actress Mrs Jordan came in 1809 and John Braham, the celebrated tenor vocalist whose 'inimitable powers were never heard to greater advantage',<sup>13</sup> was at the theatre in 1812 again by popular demand. John Philip Kemble's classical acting style had long been a great attraction in both London and Bath: 'the impressive dignity of his action and his total absorption in the character he represents'<sup>14</sup> established him among the pre-eminent actors of the period.

It had long been the custom to afford long-serving and leading members of a stock company a benefit night from which they would gain financially. The management would offer an actor, actress, musical conductor or boxkeeper an opportunity to select their own programme and performers. After deducting management expenses the recipient of the benefit would profit by as much as £150 to £200 on a good night. Since stars were also accorded this privilege at the end of a visit, stock company productions on benefit nights ceased to draw such advantages. Small wonder that stock companies were not always happy about star performers from outside or 'auxiliaries' as they called them.

In 1814-15 two very prominent but very different tragedian actors played at Bath: William Macready from provincial theatres and Edmund Kean from Drury Lane where he had made such a startling impact. Macready appeared in December 1814 having built up a reputation in

4 William Charles Macready as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. (Courtesy University of Bristol Theatre Collection)



the North of England as a 'rising actor of the very first order'.<sup>15</sup> He received a flattering reception from the Bath audience who enjoyed his 'natural requisites of voice, person and deportment'.<sup>16</sup> In his later *Reminiscences* he described at length his first appearance in Bath as cold at first but very soon 'my reception, if I had wanted heart, was hearty enough to give it...'.<sup>17</sup> Macready performed many times in Bath, playing Hamlet, Richard II, Richard III, Romeo, and leading roles in contemporary dramas until 1835.

Kean came four times up to 1822 playing thirty nights in all. Billed as a Drury Lane star he acted Shylock, Othello, Richard III and Macbeth. Local opinion was that 'Mr Kean's figure is small certainly, unfortunately small for the class of characters which he represents and it is only the magic of his genius which could make us forget it'.<sup>18</sup> His first performance in the part of Shylock was dynamic and excited audiences with his piercing eyes and wild look. The venom and power of his characterisation was totally new and compelling and contrasted greatly with that of Kemble which was more traditional and subdued. One newspaper commented that 'The admirers of the drama have been gratified during the past week with an intellectual treat of the highest

## Theatre Royal, Bath.

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FIFTH NIGHT OF

# MR. KEAN.

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This present FRIDAY, December 31st, 1819,

Will be presented, Shakespeare's Tragedy of

# OTHELLO.

Othello .....	Mr. KEAN		
Iago .....	Mr. ROWBOTHAM	Montano .....	Mr. HORREBOW
Roderigo .....	Mr. FARREN	Gratiano .....	Mr. COBURN
Cassio .....	Mr. BAKER	Ladovico .....	Mr. EGAN
Brabantio .....	Mr. CHARLTON	Duke .....	Mr. CUNNINGHAM
Desdemona .....	Miss BLANCHARD		
Emilia .....	Mrs. POPE		

To which will be added the Opera of

# ROSINA.

Mr. Belville .....	Mr. JOLLEY,		
	(Being his Third Appearance)		
Captain Belville .....	Mr. BEDFORD	Harry .....	Mr. HEALY
William .....	Mr. POWER	Irishman .....	Mr. EGAN
	Rosina .....	(first time) .....	Miss GREENE
Phæbe .....	Mrs. G. LODER	Dorcas .....	Mrs. EGAN.

SATURDAY, the Rev. Mr. Maturin's Tragedy of BERTRAM; the part of *Bertram* by Mr. KEAN. After which Milton's Masque of COMUS; or, *The Incharned Wood: Comus* by Mr. CONWAY; the *Dances* by the Three Misses GIROUX, (their first appearance this Season.)

MONDAY, Shakespeare's Tragedy of MACBETH; the part of *Macbeth* by Mr. KEAN; *Macduff* by Mr. WARDE. With (by particular desire of several juvenile parties) the Grand Romance of the FORTY THIEVES; *Morgiana* by Mrs. HUMBY.

TUESDAY, Mr. KEAN will act *Reuben Glenroy*.

WEDNESDAY, Phillips' Tragedy of the DISTRESSED MOTHER, in which Mr. KEAN will sustain (for the first time in Bath) his celebrated character of *Orestes*. After which will be revived the Grand Melo-Drame of the LADY of the LAKE; *Fitz James* by Mr. CONWAY—*Roderic Dhu* by Mr. WARDE.

## 6 Edmund Kean as Richard III.



order.'<sup>19</sup> In July 1816, when Kean returned, Fanny Burney wrote from Bath: 'We are all running mad here after Kean except my Gen[era]l [her husband]...Certainly he has very great talents but the familiar whisper that follows the loud heroic rants requires time, I imagine, for appreciation...But don't think us too cold to admire Mr. Kean...'.<sup>20</sup> Genest observed of Kean's performance as Shylock that 'in some parts of the 3rd and 4th acts he was exquisite',<sup>21</sup> but he considered Kean's best part Richard III. Mrs Piozzi sounded somewhat more dubious in December 1816: 'Mrs Dimond offers me a place in her box tonight, whence will be seen Massinger's horrible Sir Giles Overreach, played by Mr Kean. If he can stretch that hideous character as he does others, quite beyond all the author meant or wished, it will shock us too much for endurance'.<sup>22</sup> After seeing the performance, however, she admitted that 'he did it very finely indeed'.<sup>23</sup> Coleridge once said of Kean that 'he revealed Shakespeare by flashes of lightning'.<sup>24</sup>

Actors of the calibre of Kean and Macready, singers like Madame Catalani, Braham and Incedon, and many others of similar or lesser ability came to Bath as metropolitan stars and, as noted already, intro-

duced playgoers to a wider selection of plays and entertainments than might otherwise have been possible. Shakespeare's plays were staged almost entirely by visiting stars, though an occasional performance by a member of the company to impress at a benefit added to the variety. It was London talent rather than the plays which drew audiences, and since visiting celebrities had their favourite and well-acclaimed parts several plays might be repeated during the season but performed by different stars. Thus in 1809 first Mrs Jordan and then Mrs Charles Kemble played Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In 1814–15 first Betty then Kean played *Othello*, and the following year Macready and Kean played the part yet again. During the season 1816–17 the Bath audience was offered Richard III three times and similar repetitions were made in other plays by other actors. Only eight of Shakespeare's plays were performed with any frequency, with *Hamlet* the most popular, followed by *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Fidelity to an original text was unusual at this time and most versions remained those of Colin Cibber from Drury Lane.

The impact of Gothic novels and plays and the spectacular features of melodrama largely overshadowed lyricism and poetical drama. Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* were largely ignored, and though the poetry of Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge was read they had little effect on playwriting. Nor was this an age with a discriminating attitude to comedy, as we understand it. There was plenty of farce, especially in the after-pieces, but no comedy which endured. Many pieces were based on Walter Scott's novels which were seized on for the stage. *Guy Mannering* reached Bath in 1817, *Rob Roy* in 1818, and *Kenilworth* was presented without thought of expense in December 1821. 'It was the grandest spectacle ever exhibited at a provincial theatre'.<sup>25</sup> Audiences responded to such productions with enthusiasm. There was no longer much call for thought-provoking dramas.

Wyatt Dimond died in 1812 and was succeeded by his son William as manager. In 1817 the Bath company declined to renew its lease on the Bristol theatre and so each went its separate way. William Dimond offered a different style of management from his father. His tastes as a successful writer of melodramas 'rose little above his own production'.<sup>26</sup> He retired in 1823 when Charlton, the former stage-manager, took over. His period of office was neither uplifting nor successful and he was replaced in 1827. A period of declining fortunes faced both the city and the theatre from the mid-1820s and with the challenge of puritanical ideas from various pulpits hostile to the theatre, more difficult days lay

ahead. Acting styles, presentation, companies and types of plays nevertheless continued to evolve until the second half of the century brought another phase of English theatre.

## Notes

- 1 *Bath Herald* 2 Feb 1799.
- 2 *Bath Journal* 21 Nov 1814.
- 3 *Bristol Mirror* 31 Oct 1807.
- 4 *Bath Chronicle* 5 Jan 1808.
- 5 Belville S. Penley, *The Bath Stage* (London, 1892), p. 98.
- 6 Kathleen Barker, *The Theatre Royal, Bristol, 1766-1966* (London, 1974), p. 72.
- 7 *Bath Journal* 28 April 1806.
- 8 *Ibid.* 8 Jan 1807.
- 9 *Ibid.* 6 Apr 1807.
- 10 *Ibid.* 25 Jan 1808.
- 11 *Ibid.* 14 Apr 1806.
- 12 *Ibid.* 13 Feb 1809.
- 13 *Ibid.* 26 Oct 1812.
- 14 *Ibid.* 30 Nov 1812.
- 15 *Ibid.* 9 Jan 1815.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 B.S. Penley, op. cit., p. 111.
- 18 G. Greatwood, 'Bath's New Theatre Royal' (unpublished study).
- 19 *Bath Journal* 17 July 1815.
- 20 Fanny Burney, *The Letters and Journals*, J. Hemlow et al. (eds.), 12 vols. (Oxford, 1972-84), Vol. 9 (ed. W. Derry), pp. 167-8.
- 21 John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage, 1660-1830*, 10 vols. (Bath, 1832), Vol. 9, p. 494.
- 22 Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale), *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains*, A. Hayward (ed.), 2 vols. (London, 1861), Vol. 2 p. 183, HLP to Sir James Fellows, Bath 27 Dec 1816.
- 23 *Ibid.* p. 186, HLP to same, 4 Jan 1817.
- 24 Giles Playfair, *Kean* (London, 1939), p. 92.
- 25 J. Genest, op.cit., p. 171.
- 26 K. Barker, op.cit., p. 73.