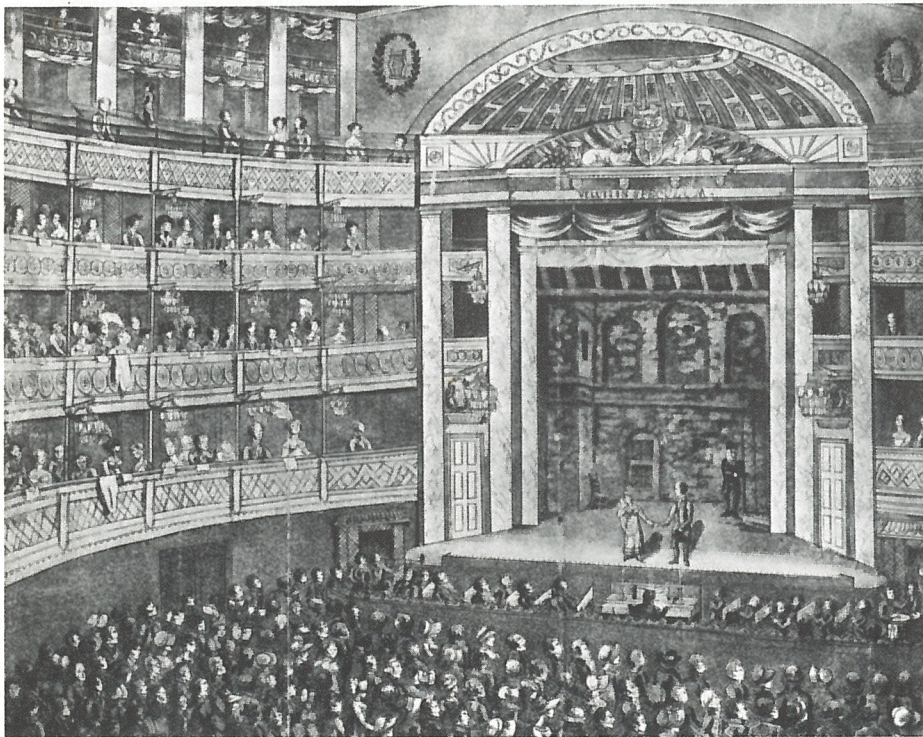


William Dawes. 'The Downfall of Shakespeare on a modern stage'.



J. Gleadah. 'Covent Garden c. 1813-1819'.

possibly, though not necessarily, more interesting or exciting items. If I know my Iain Mackintosh (co-producer of the feast with Geoffrey Ashton) some very cogent reason will be conveyed to me in due course. Perhaps involving a proper interpretation of the word *retrospective* or perhaps stressing a need to emphasise that this was not the sort of historical survey that one might expect to find in a theatre museum.

For, as befits the Royal Academy, this was an exhibition of fine art that had been inspired by the Covent Garden theatres, their performances and their performers.

The exhibition centred around paintings of the performers of earlier centuries. Paint has, temporarily one feels and hopes, been

overtaken by photography although there is a splendid Hockney of Sir David Webster, the pragmatist who U-turned from national opera and so ensured that London now has both national opera (at the Coliseum) and international (in Covent Garden) whereas there was a moment in the post war cultural revolution when it looked as if we might have a Covent Garden that would miss both targets.

The joys of an event such as this is to meet up with some of the more inaccessible paintings that are known only from book illustrations – in my case, a first meeting after a long acquaintance with Philip Mercier's Handel. Or to meet some that one does not know at all: the gentlemen of the Garrick Club are said to

rejoice in a menu of genuine nursery fare but I do hope that they occasionally find time to look up from the rice pudding to savour their splendid collection of the work of Gainsborough Dupont. Hogarth and Zoffany, Gainsborough and Reynolds were all on view: all good publicity pics, perhaps telling us more about the actors' personalities than their performances – but each and everyone alone worth the visit.

I stood for a long time in front of William Dawes *The Downfall of Shakespeare on the Modern Stage*, showing the sort of 'improvements' that are long discredited but for which I now occasionally hanker after years of authenticity. Perhaps we should sometimes play Shakespeare in the styles of various eras. I love my 'original version' Messiah on authentic instruments, but Mozart's expanded orchestration is a worthy work in its own right, much enjoyed on occasional revival. If you hear what I mean.

A word of praise for the lighting of the paintings: one had, not surprisingly, to stand absolutely square on to avoid reflections, but it was then quite excellent.

Although this was primarily a portrait painter's occasion, there were many architectural delights on show. But (scream, scream, protest, protest) they were hung badly and atrociously lit. However the craning of the neck, the bending of the knees and the screwing of the eyes was well worthwhile. With the aid of pain killers, I was able to control the thumps in my head induced by my determination to savour every detail of the Rowlandsons, Pugins and Schnebbelies. It was delightful to meet again the 1815 engraving by J. Gleadah much swooned over at the 1975 Hayward Georgian explosion.

But it is the delicate lines of Schnebbelie that induce the most sensual responses. And here we go again: it is the juxtapositions that breathe life. It is by experiencing together the architecture of Schnebbelie and the heightened social behaviour in the Rowlandsons that I can sense Georgian ambience. Only the sound was missing. (I really must get myself one of these pocket gramophone machines with earphones for walking round in exhibitions in a proper aural ambience).

The Retrospective begat an excellent catalogue wisely using the same design, graphic and print team as the great Hayward event. Mackintosh and Ashton are really rather good at this sort of thing. I look forward to their next.

I leave to the end the one magnificent artefact: the Americans had let us borrow the original Patent granted by Charles II to Sir Willian Davenant. This is the charter that has given these Covent Garden theatres the right to present entertainment across the centuries. In the presence of such a historical document one can only fall silent and receive a montage of images.

Yes, this was a splendid event: a fitting adjunct to the real business of the Covent Garden celebrations, the staging of *Semele*. Both were filled with what Handel and Congreve happily term *celestial odour and ambrosial dew*.