

# The Georgian Playhouse

An Exhibition at the Hayward Gallery until October 12th 1975 devised by Iain Mackintosh assisted by Geoffrey Ashton

What wonderful things might not be produced by the light when not dispensed in that equal manner, and by degrees, as is now the custom. Were it to be played off with a masterly artifice, distributing it in a strong mass on some parts of the stage, and by depriving others as it were at the same time, it is hardly credible what effects might not be produced thereby; for instance a *chiaroscuro*, for strength and vivacity, not inferior to that so much admired in the prints of Rembrandt.

Count Algarotti's "Essay on the Opera", 1762

There are bits in the catalogue such as this and exhibits on the wall of "The Georgian Playhouse—Actors, Artists, Audiences and Architecture 1730–1830" that betray that this is probably the first fine art exhibition put on by an ex-resident stage manager and present day practising theatre consultant.

Count Algarotti was influential not only in making the revolutionary suggestion that such a craft as stage lighting might exist but also in influencing theatre design in London. In 1792 and 1794 Covent Garden and Drury Lane were rebuilt by Henry Holland to a truly colossal scale. New Drury was three times the volume of Old Drury—the Drury of Garrick from 1747 to 1776. In 1806 Richard Cumberland wrote of the new colossal Drury Lane:

Henceforward theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for . . . The splendour of the scenes, and the ingenuity of the machinist and rich display of dresses aided by the captivating charms of music now in a great degree supersede the labours of the poet . . .

It was, of course, all Count Algarotti's fault who obviously was guilty not only of inventing stage lighting but also the picture frame proscenium arch. Indeed the latter was really the occasion for the invention of the former. In the mid-eighteenth century London theatre (and in the provinces for another 30 or 40 years) the actor rarely went behind the proscenium, preferring the 16-ft. deep acting fore-stage.

Algarotti's influence is clear from this extract from the first English manual on Theatre Planning:

The great advance of some stages in the body of the theatre is too absurd ever again to be practised . . . "Such a contrivance can only please those who are easily satisfied; for who that reflects can not see such a proceeding as subversive to all good order and prudent regulation. The actors instead of being too brought forward ought to be thrown back at a certain distance from the spectator's eye and stand within the scenery of the stage, in order to make a part of that pleasing illusion for which all dramatic exhibitions are calculated." A division is necessary between the theatre and the stage and so characterised as to assist the idea of these being two separate and distinct places. George Saunders' "Treatise on Theatres", London 1790, quoting Count Algarotti's work of 1762



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ROBERT B. SCHNEBBELIE

Royal Coburg Theatre

Pencil pen and sepia ink and watercolour  
17.1 × 22.2 cm.

Inscribed: Orig. Sketch of the Coburg Th. Monday 25th May Robert Blemmim Schnebbelie 1818

Interior view of the theatre, now the Old Vic, on its opening night, taken from the back of the pit. The play is "Trial by Battle" and Alderman Goodbehere is in the stage box.

. . . Having taken an early tea went to the Coburg Theatre. This is a very pretty suburban playhouse not so large, but a fit match for the Paris minor Theatres, the acting is very bad but the show and scenery tolerable enough—I saw

a spectacle exhibiting the wretchedness of a family on the coast of Labrador and left there by pirates—The scenery was imposing and that was all, of course.

Henry Crabb Robinson, Diary, 28 May 1819

The Old Vic has been adjusted constantly over the last one hundred and fifty years though retaining the balance of the original auditorium. The 1818 ceiling is still there and the 1964 alterations to the forestage brought the actor back to where he stood in 1818. The present line of the tiers of circles is slightly forward of the original arc of the horseshoe.

This watercolour, which is in a private collection, has never before been exhibited or photographed. It was the basis of the familiar engraving published by Wilkinson in Jan. 1819.

This notion of putting the actor within the scenery which depended on lighting him, the scenery and not the audience (dimming the auditorium was another revolutionary idea not achieved until the 1820's) taken with the Benthamite\* notion of greatest theatrical good for the greatest possible number (i.e. bigger theatres and bigger profits) changed the nature of theatre in England. And it is no exaggeration to say that Garrick's Drury Lane of 1770 was closer in atmosphere to Burbage's Globe than it was to the vast new theatres of Kemble or of Kean of the 1810's.

The comparison between the naturalism of the Age of Reason, painted by Hogarth and Zoffany and acted out by Garrick in a small scale Drury Lane roughly the size of the present Criterion, and the romantic neo-classical style in which Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble were depicted by Reynolds, Lawrence and Hoppner is a major theme of the exhibition. But when invited to select some pictures for TABS I thought I would not include items to reinforce the central argument from the first half of the exhibition entitled "The Actor and the Artist," but rather chose from "Part Two—Audiences and Architecture" watercolours, engravings and prints that might delight the eye of the latter day technicians in danger of being blinded by the white heat of technology or someone's saturation rig. The notes under the prints are based on the catalogue entries. I.M.

\*The philosopher Bentham (1748–1832), not the Fred Bentham who, I hope, rather than urging the good of the greatest number of people believes in theatres in which you can hear as well as see.



The Overflowing of the Pitt.

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SAMUEL HIERONYMUS GRIMM

The Overflowing of the Pitt 1771

Mezzotint 31.4 × 24.8 cm.

There are only two images extant of the audience of Drury Lane in the years 1747 to 1774 while David Garrick was actor manager and before Adam remodelled the theatre. This one which carries the quotation *Oh had we staid and said our pray'rs at home*, is of a house full to bursting at the Lane during a performance of MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING with David Garrick as Benedick, the part which was the last one he played before and first after his marriage to Eva Maria in 1765. It is good to report that Drury Lane continued to do capacity business and that the marriage was happy, Mr. and Mrs. Garrick never spending a single night apart in 24 years of married life.

218 is from the Theatre Museum.