Book Review: The Birth Of Modern Theatre

REVIEW

Intro: *200 years ago, theatre audiences were so rowdy and menacing that bouncers were needed to keep the peace. Actors lived in fear of being pelted with fruit, and much more. That would have been real stage fright*

A NIGHT out at the theatre in the 18th century was extraordinarily immersive –

that’s to say, audience participation was taken to terrifying lengths.

It was a common scene for riots to break out in the stalls, with the destruction of lighting fixtures, benches and canvas scenery. Gents were forever swarming on stage, with swords drawn, to join in the action. If patrons didn’t like a performance, they were known to stand up and bellow: “This will not do!”

Once, when a magician’s act was particularly poor, the audience were so enraged they dragged the theatre’s furnishings into the street, hoisted the velvet curtains on a pole “as a kind of flag” and started a bonfire.

Such behaviour was normal. In 1755, after war had broken out between France and England, the audience decided that the dancers at Drury Lane theatre were “disguised

French soldiers”. Not only that, “all foreigners are Frenchmen”, including the Swiss and Italians.

It was then remembered that David Garrick’s ancestors were Huguenots, which made the famous actor-manager French, though he was born in Hereford and raised in Lichfield.

The audience raced to his house in Southampton Street and smashed his windows. In

retaliation, Garrick cancelled all concessionary tickets. They returned and smashed his windows again.

EVEN if they remained seated, patrons pelted each other with oranges and apple cores. When a barrel fell of the edge of the balcony and hit a lady in the stalls, “her huge fashionable headdress saved her from injury”.

Dr Johnson, accompanied to the theatre by friend and biographer James Boswell, was so cross when he was hit by flying fruit that he picked up his assailant and threw him into the orchestra pit.

Given such mayhem, it’s a wonder anybody attended to the plays, but theatres employed “hush men” to calm people down and encourage them to enjoy the acting – which generally they did.

During Garrick's career, Romeo and Juliet was performed 141 times and The Beggar's Opera 128 times.

As Norman S. Poser says in the fascinating The Birth Of Modern Theatre, out of a metropolitan population of around 700,000, more than 12,000 people a week regularly attended Drury Lane and Covent Garden, where seat prices started at a shilling.

The theatre was also a significant employer, as in addition to actors and dancers there were ticket collectors, stage managers, prop men, bill stickers, scene painters and janitors.

It was only at the theatre that the social classes mixed at all, from the Royal Family, who attended 11 times in 1760, down to servants and labourers. Daily newspapers, which began flourishing in this

Georgian period, carried reviews and gossip. Actors became celebrities whose careers were discussed in London coffee houses.

Garrick, very much the hero in Poser's narrative, was the Laurence Olivier or Kenneth Branagh of his era. Acting and living had become the same thing to him.

Described as being "open without frankness, polite without refinement, and

sociable without friends”, Garrick was a great enigma, and dominated his profession for three decades.

In 1737, he’d walked from the Midlands to London with Dr Johnson, who later had to stop himself from paying visits backstage. “I’ll come no more behind your scenes,” he told Garrick. “The silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities.”

Though in make-up and on-stage, Garrick was “alert and alive in every muscle” – and watching him as Richard III was generally said to be “like lightning passing through one’s frame” – off-stage, out of costume, the star was a bit plump and nondescript, short and squat.

Peg Woffington, Garrick’s Cordelia and Ophelia, rebuffed him adroitly after a brief affair by saying, “I desire you always

to be my lover upon the stage, and my friend off of it.”

In 1749, undaunted, Garrick married the illegitimate but beloved daughter of the Earl of Burlington, who provided a useful dowry of £6,000 (or £1.3 million in modern currency). Thus, Garrick could purchase the Drury Lane lease and form his company. He was also the first actor in history to freely mix with the aristocracy, and he advised

the Duke of Devonshire on the purchase of Old Masters.

He performed privately for George III at Windsor, as the King was fond of theatricals. Indeed, his father George II had hired an actor, James Quin, to teach his children how to speak English correctly. Elocution lessons are a thing of the past, aren't they?

Garrick attempted many innovations. He tried to ban

audience members from sitting on the stage. He studied and rehearsed roles diligently; and, expected his company to learn their lines. He wanted actresses to be more than adornments or models whose sole purpose was their “ability to dazzle the audience” with an array of elaborate costumes.

WHAT Garrick didn’t do was play Shakespeare as written:

he preferred the edited versions, where King Lear had a happy ending and Hamlet lost the grave digger scene and the business about Yorick.

As Poser says, Garrick aspired to a style of acting noted for “ease, simplicity and genuine humour”, rather than anything bombastic and artificial. He got rid of the old-fashioned declamatory manner, where there was a lot of gesticulation, arm-waving

and face-pulling to signify grief, anger, joy and despair.

Though there's nothing realistic about the mechanical wig he wore as Hamlet, where the hair stood on end when he saw the Ghost.

After giving his Richard III he'd be in his dressing room, "panting, perspiring and lying prostrate" – acting the part of a man looking exhausted and spent. (There's a dreadful editorial mistake here. Poser

says Garrick was lying “prostate” – though what killed him in 1779 were kidney stones.)

One thing that was definitely invented in the 18th century was The Pinter Pause. Charles Macklin, who was 98 when he died in 1797, played Shylock hundreds of times, and inserted many dramatic pauses, the most impressive being known as the Grand Pause.

One night the silence grew and grew. Finally, the prompter whispered the next line. Macklin rushed into the wings, knocked the prompter down, and returned to inform the audience, “The fellow interrupted me in my Grand Pause.”

. The Birth Of Modern Theatre by Norman S. Poser is published by Routledge for £24.99, 200pp

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