

The Illustrated London News and the Theatre by Professor Christopher Kent

Introduction

The ILN, which prided itself on its sense of history, commissioned its drama critic Clement Scott to write “Fifty Years at the Play” for its fiftieth anniversary number in 1892, and in 1911 commissioned Sir Henry Irving, the Victorian age’s greatest actor, to take a retrospective look at the Victorian Stage [HN3100482287]. Both are well worth reading.

The Victorian period is not viewed by scholars as a great era in theatre history. It produced very few classic plays, but the Victorian theatre tells us a great deal about the age, and the ILN tells us a great deal about the theatre. Its founding coincided with a watershed event in theatre history, the abolition in 1843 of the monopoly that restricted the right to present “legitimate” drama in London to three theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket. This led to considerable growth in the London’s prestigious West End theatres which dominated the British theatre. Also important was the enthusiastic patronage of the theatre by the young Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert that did much to remove the stigma of immorality that had kept many of the middle class out of the theatre. Victoria also had the actor-producer Charles Kean arrange private productions of plays at Windsor Castle complete with specially constructed sets such for his 1849 performance of the Merchant of Venice see 6 January 1849 [HN3100020918]. The ILN loyally recorded and illustrated these as it did royal occasions of every kind.

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Theatre Reviews

An obvious way of accessing the ILN’s theatre-related content is through its reviews. From its first issue in May 1842 the paper published an article almost every week providing reviews of the latest London productions as well as other theatre news. These can be searched by their various running titles which were mainly “The Theatres” from 1842 to the mid-1870s, “The Playhouses” in the early 1880s, “Art, Music and Drama” 1907-1914, and “The World of the Theatre” 1920-64. The ILN’s theatre critics included the minor poet-playwright John A. Heraud who wrote anonymously from 1849 to 1873, the chatty journalist George Augustus Sala who wrote under his well-known initials in the 1880s, the influential and opinionated Clement Scott who signed his articles in the 1890s, and the literary critic Frederick George Bettany who wrote anonymously in the early 1900s. From 1920 to 1934 Jacob Thomas Grein, an important figure in the independent theatre movement, was the theatre critic, followed by the theatre scholar Ivor Brown until 1940, and then from 1947 to 1964 J.C. Trewin, who was also the London Observer’s drama critic for over sixty years.

The articles of these last three men, all of whom wrote under their own names and can be thus searched, offer an extremely valuable source of information on the British theatre from 1914 to 1964. Grein, Brown and Trewin were tremendously knowledgeable on all aspects of the theatre. They didn’t just review plays but commented extensively with insider’s knowledge, though very readably, on all aspects of the theatre including its history, different acting styles, the construction of plays and directing. They also ranged beyond London, paying attention to the increasingly significant provincial theatre, and ranged beyond Britain as well, Grein, who was Dutch by birth, was very knowledgeable about the continental theatre and its influence. Brown was particularly passionate about Shakespeare. Trewin had decidedly conventional, somewhat nostalgic tastes, which reflected those of the ILN’s post-second World War readership. He was most appreciative of the work of middlebrow playwrights like J.B. Priestley and Terrence Rattigan. His hostile reaction to the “angry young men” of the new British drama of the 1950s exemplified by John Osborne’s ground-breaking play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the English Stage Company’s productions at the Royal Court Theatre, and the

determined proletarianism of “kitchen sink” realism, gives one a certain sense of what the “angry young men” were angry about. By this time motion pictures the chief form of theatre for most people. “The World of Kinema”(The ILN’s standard spelling until changed in 1939 to “cinema.”) became a regular review feature from 1926 and was written by J.T. Grein’s wife, the actress Alice Greeven under the pseudonym “Michael Orme”until 1939. Subsequently Alan Dent and from 1968 Michael Billington wrote this column.

Victorian Theatre Sets and Scenery

The ILN is uniquely valuable as a source of information about the Victorian theatre that is in some cases impossible to find elsewhere. The Victorian theatre was very scenery-driven. The introduction of gas lighting in the early nineteenth century, and of electric light in the 1880s meant that the stage could be much more brightly lit than ever before and that elaborate scenery and painted backdrops could actually be seen. This led to increasing visual realism on the Victorian stage and increasingly elaborate sets. Actors complained that they were being upstaged by the scenery, and some playwrights complained that the scene painters, who were often called by the audience to “take a bow” for a particularly fine piece of scenery, were becoming more important than they were. Because virtually no examples of Victorian scenic art survive, and photography was incapable of recording it until the 1880s, the ILN’s woodcut illustrations are an essential source that tells us what the early- and mid-Victorian stage really looked like. Charles Kean was particularly noted for his carefully researched and elaborately constructed and painted sets for his productions of Shakespeare, a playwright whom no period held in greater reverence than the Victorian. The ILN provides several images of Kean’s productions. The innovative plays of Thomas Robertson in the 1860s such as *Caste*, *Society*, *Ours*, and *M.P.* that were hailed for the “cup and saucer” realism of their depiction of contemporary English middle class life, and for their rejection of many of the stale conventions of melodrama, received favourable reviews and valuable illustrations in the ILN. Towards the end of the century ever more spectacular scenic effects were achieved by elaborate lighting, machinery as horse races, train wrecks, and undersea combats were staged, such as in *White Heather*, [HN3100157075] where gauze curtains and eerie greenish lighting were used to create the illusion that two divers were struggling underwater to cut each other’s air hoses. Actors and actresses were not however neglected by the ILN which is an excellent source of images of leading players both in and out of character, woodcut and increasingly from the 1880s photographic process images.

Victorian Pantomimes and Innovative Productions

A distinctly Victorian theatre production documented extensively by the ILN was the Christmas pantomime, a highly profitable “family entertainment” that became increasingly lavish and spectacular, employing large numbers of young women and children, many of them slum children whose families welcomed their earnings. An 1867 illustration shows the children thronging the portico of the Drury Lane [HN 3100074612] theatre in hopes of being engaged. Pantomime costumes and scenery evoked a world of fantasy, and the ILN provided detailed verbal descriptions as well as pictures of each theatre’s production. It also covered a wide variety of entertainments that weren’t staged in traditional theatres but were theatrical in the broadest sense, such as the numerous panoramas and dioramas that gave viewers the illusion of travel to far places, pyrotechnic spectacles at Vauxhall and Surrey Gardens that reproduced the eruption of Vesuvius and destruction of Pompeii, re-enactments featuring large numbers of horses of British battlefield victories at Astley’s Amphitheatre in Lambeth, or the sedate and ultra-respectable drawing room “entertainments” of Mr. and Mrs. German Reid at the London’s Egyptian Hall. At the popular end of this spectrum was the circus, which Astley’s did much to popularize. At the high end was the opera, traditionally patronized by the aristocracy but drawing wider audiences thanks to the sensational success of singers like Jenny Lind and Adelina Patti. Ballet, frequently noticed by the ILN in its earlier years, largely disappears from its pages from the 1870s as it was seen as it lost respectability from its associations with the music halls, which the paper tended to ignore. It reappears from the early twentieth century when it regained status as a “high” art form.

Destruction and Construction

In keeping with its muted taste for catastrophe, the ILN took note of the fires that frequently destroyed theatres. In most of the London fires the loss of life was slight, but elsewhere tragic death tolls were recorded, as in the Brooklyn Theatre fire of 1876 in which 300 died, or the 1927 cinema fire panic in Montreal where 77 children died of suffocation. Reporting an incident in 1878 at a Liverpool music hall where someone shouted “fire” although there was none, and 33 people died in the resulting panic, the ILN noted that the theatre was “thronged with a company of a low class . . . listening to a vulgar sort of musical performance.” As well as their destruction, the ILN reported the construction of theatres, often providing valuable information about their dimensions, layout and decor, with often excellent illustrations of both interior and exterior. A spectacular example of an illustration combining both is the highly detailed section of the Drury Lane theatre published in 1910, which among other things provides an excellent depiction of its scene-painting facilities.

Highlights

The Stage of the Victorian Era HN3100482287

Theatrical Performance at Windsor Castle HN3100020918

The White Heather at Drury Lane Theatre: The Submarine Duel HN3100157075

Young Supernumeraries at Drury Lane HN3100074612

Search terms

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Easter entertainments
Extravaganza
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