

A Rich and Defiant History of the World's Oldest Theatre

Sleaze at the top!

“Snufffer, snuffer!” – words delivered eagerly from the common members of the audience occupying the benches of the theatre’s pit. It was all part of the fun of a performance to summon the backstage functionary whose job it was to extinguish the dying, smouldering candle and to replace and relight it, regardless of the action of the play on stage which such candles illuminated. Although some afternoon daylight from the translucent dome above the audience provided some natural light onto the stage, and although much of the action of the play took place on the apron reaching out into touching distance of the audience, the use of candles with reflectors was the only means of artificial theatre lighting in this, Old Drury, London, May 1665.

Following the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658 that had brought Charles II back to England from exile in France and the Netherlands, ending the period of Cromwell’s oppression which had included the banning of theatres and places of entertainment, the audiences were again able to enjoy the spectacle of theatrical performances.

Built in 1663 in Drury Lane by Thomas Killigrew on land leased from the Earl of Bedford and situated adjacent to London’s Covent Garden, King Charles II had granted the theatre its legal status as ‘The King’s Playhouse’ by way of a charter, and the ‘Merry Monarch’ was a frequent visitor. It was to become The Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

On that May afternoon, from the Royal Box that almost reached down onto the apron itself, the King welcomed the extra light to enhance his vision of the pretty, captivating young woman onstage, Mistress Eleanor Gwynne who had been the focus of his attention all afternoon, appearing opposite Drury Lane’s stalwart actor Charles Hart in a play entitled ‘*All Mistaken*’ or ‘*The Mad Couple*’.

The background of Mistress Eleanor (Nell) Gwynne was shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. Even her date of birth was uncertain, being either 1642 or 1650, meaning that at the date of the King’s visit she was either 23 or 15 years. There was no certainty either of the identity of her birthplace or the identity of her father though she later claimed she remembered part of her childhood in Hereford. Her mother ‘Old Ma Gwyn’ was born in the area of Soho and Covent Garden and was known to be an alcoholic and ran a brothel. Perhaps in a state of alcoholic stupor, she had fallen into the Thames and drowned.

Nell was probably a child prostitute herself but had found a more respectable job employed by Mary Meggs, a friend of her mother and herself a former prostitute. She had been nicknamed ‘Orange Moll’ and had been granted a licence to sell oranges, lemons and other fruit to the Drury Lane theatregoers, though not to those occupying the seats at the higher levels for fear that they might be used as missiles during the performance. Gwyn therefore became one of the orange sellers at the theatre, the image that is frequently used in her description – indeed she is more commonly remembered as an orange seller than as the popular actress she was to become.

Though illiterate, but with a lively wit, good looks and a strong voice, Nell had caught the eye of theatre owner Thomas Killigrew, and more particularly of actor Charles Hart who had taken her under his wing, and into his bed! She appeared prominently in a number of plays in the 1644/5 season, being described by Samuel Pepys in his diary as ‘pretty, witty, Nell.’ However, in mid 1665 London was hit by the great Plague

which at its height was claiming 7,000 dead a week, forcing the closure of the theatre for eighteen months and halting Nell's career. (*Sound familiar?*)

By 1668 she had become a mistress to King Charles II though still appearing onstage until 1671 by which time she had given birth to a son of the King. She was only one of seven mistresses that the King had during his reign, and when he died in February 1685 aged 54 he left a childless wife and eleven illegitimate children. None of these were therefore qualified to succeed him as king, his brother James taking the throne. His long-suffering wife, Catherine Breganza who he had married in 1662 had suffered several miscarriages.

He suffered a long and painful death requesting his brother to 'be well to Portsmouth and let not poor Nelly starve'. (The Duchess of Portsmouth had been one of his other mistresses).

The succeeding King James indeed awarded Nell a pension and the funding for a family house that remained in her family's possession until 1940. Her two sons by the King were given titles and Nell was to die two years after the King in 1687 at the probably age of 45 (assuming the earlier date of 1642 as her birth). She had suffered a stroke earlier in the year, but her death was probably the result of syphilis. She left a considerable fortune, most of which went to her sons, though she also left money to the poor and to the relief of debtors in prison at Christmas. She is buried in the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London where the then future Archbishop of Canterbury delivered a sermon based on the book of St Luke, 'I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance'.



Charles II and Nell Gwynne

A statue to her memory stands outside a block of flats in Chelsea bearing her name, believed to be the only statue of a royal mistress in London. It is claimed that it was she that persuaded Charles II to decree the wearing of the famous red uniforms by the Chelsea Pensioners of Chelsea Hospital, in memory of the uniformed pensioners she said she remembered as a child in Hereford.

The account of Nelly Gwynne and King Charles II is just one of many stories of historical interest with royal connections that is The Theatre Royal Drury Lane, and it is claimed that every monarch since Charles II has attended the theatre during their reigns.

The present theatre is in fact the fourth building or rebuilding on the site, the others having been either destroyed by fires (1672 and 1809) or otherwise requiring a rebuild due to falling into a state of disrepair (1791). The third rebuild in 1791 increased its capacity to a staggering 3,611 though this was reduced to around 2,200 in the fourth build in 1812 for safety and comfort, and this rebuild is largely the theatre as we know it today.



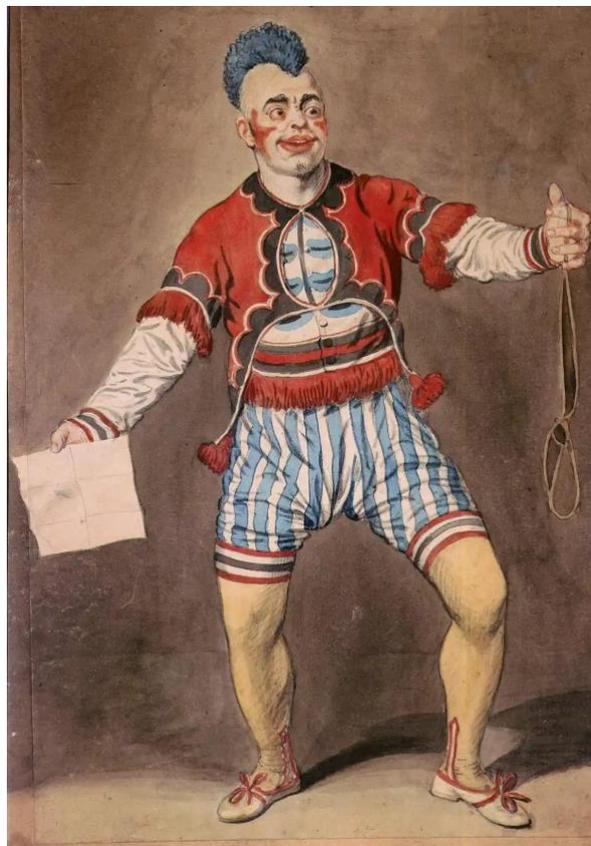
The fire of 1791

On 18th May 1800 King George III was standing in the Royal Box during the playing of the National Anthem when James Hadfield, a disturbed military veteran of war, fired two shots at the King from the pit in an assassination attempt. The shots narrowly missed and Hadfield was overcome and later stood trial. He was found not guilty on account of his insanity but kept in a mental institute thereafter. It was one of the first cases in English law that recognised a person guiltless due to insanity. After Hadfield was detained by theatregoers the King ordered that the play must go on as normal, earning the respect of all present.

Uniquely the theatre has two royal boxes, one with the Royal Coat of Arms situated in what is still known as The King's Side, and one with the Coat of Arms of the Prince of Wales one what is known as The Prince's Side. This dates back when King George III boxed the ears of the Prince Regent (Later George IV) at the theatre in an argument, after which they were separated and thereafter accommodated in separate parts of the theatre.



The theatre is also home to what is London's most famous theatre ghost, the Haunted Man in Grey. His appearances are often witnessed in the circle from the stage during final rehearsals for a new production and his appearance is said to be a sign of his approval and a positive signal to the future success of the production. Some believe he represents the famous comic actor and clown Grimaldi who had become so famous in the theatre during the 18th century, and whose image of the clown is still used today. Others believe its presence goes back to a skeleton found in the cavity of a wall in the circle balcony during a refurbishment in 1848 with a knife through its ribs into what would have been his heart.



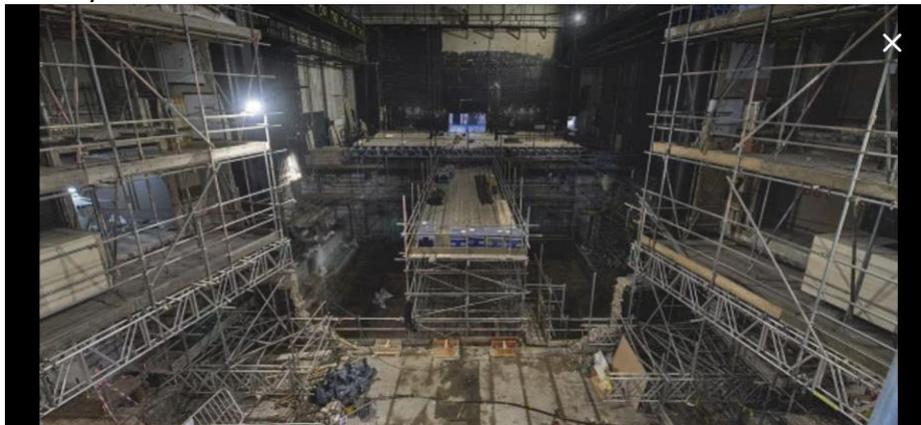
Drury Lane Theatre boasts a number of 'firsts' including the first singing of the National Anthem in 1745, the first use of a safety curtain in 1794 to prevent the 'chimney effect' of fire and the first theatre to be lit entirely by gaslight in 1817.

The theatre was a victim of German bombing in October 1940 when an incendiary bomb crashed through the roof, through the upper circle and grand circle before penetrating the pit floor. Though the impact caused considerable damage, it failed to explode. More was to follow when within a few minutes a second incendiary device came through the same hole, setting fire to the carpets. Fortunately, the evening performance had ended, the audience had left and the theatre's own Air Raid Precautions (ARP) team sleeping in the bar were unhurt. The second bomb was soon put out by the wardens and the old theatre proudly survived. The first bomb was defused and the casing remains as an exhibit at the theatre.



The productions at Drury Lane and those who have appeared in them over 400 years reads like an entire account of all that is best in theatre history. Since world war 2 it has brought us the major hits of the musical theatre, including *Cavalcade*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*, *Mame*, *A Chorus Line*, *42nd Street*, *Miss Saigon*, *Oliver*, and currently *Frozen*. The original scenery and set of *Oklahoma!* is still stored at the theatre.

In 2019 present owner Andrew Lloyd Webber undertook a two-year, £60 million refurbishment assuring that the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, as the oldest in the world to have been in continuous use, remains the most lavish and most historic theatre of the 38 West End theatres, most theatregoers generally unaware of its long and colourful history.





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Recollecting the account of the personal but public life of Charles II, and indeed many of those who came after him, we should not perhaps be so surprised and shocked as I sometimes am about the similar antics of royalty and other national leaders in present times.

Brought up in an era when to respect one's 'elders and betters' was very much part of our childhood learning, and in which a leader's moral personal life was part of what qualified him for leadership, it is indeed sobering now to come to terms that 'leading by example' is indeed dead at all levels. I express this at a moment when the current news is dominated not by the continuing threat of Covid, climate change, the environment and political world tensions threatening our peace and security, but by the antics of our leaders. I refer of course to the domination of our news by the accusations of sleaze and sexual misconduct tearing at the heart of the British Royal Family and at the top of government. If ever there had been a time to respect one's 'elders and betters' merely as a matter of their status, it is long past gone.

Jim Stebbings
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