PAST, PRESENT AND PROPOSED No.9

At the end of the last part of this potted history of one of London's great theatres (see Newsletter No.84) I concluded with the fire that destroyed the third theatre and the rebuilding of the fourth, and so to continue.....

THE FOURTH THEATRE

The theatre opened 10 October 1812 with an address by Lord Byron followed by a performance of *"Hamlet"*, the Prince being played by Robert Elliston. The first manager was Samuel Arnold who had at one time been in control of another of London's theatres, the Lyceum. But here at Drury Lane, he was under the control of a committee which included among others the Earls of Dudley and Essex, Lord Byron, Lord Holland and Samuel Whitbread, the brewer. All were amateurs. By all accounts these "amateurs" seemed always to be at odds with one another. Byron wrote:- *"my new function consists of listening to the despair of Bradshaw, the hopes of Kinnaird, the wishes of Lord Essex and the complaints of Whitbread all totally at variance. Bradshaw wants to light the theatre with gas, which may perhaps (if it is to be believed) poison half the audience and all the dramatis personae"*. But, despite misgivings gas lighting was introduced in 1817, albeit after the successful installation at the rival theatre, Covent Garden in 1815/16.

But what of the theatre itself ?. Yet again it was and is not situated in Drury Lane (see site plan), its frontage still on Brydges Street. The external walls were, and are quite plain. The auditorium consisted of a pit area of nineteen rows of benches with standing room at the back, three tiers of twenty-four boxes, and a fourth tier of seven boxes either side of ten rows of benches. From the front entrances you entered a large lobby 24ft wide and 97ft long, from there you passed to a Rotunda 35ft in diameter with two grand staircases which led to the tiers of boxes. The portico at the West front was added in 1820, and the colonnade on the North side in 1831, the pillars of which were taken from Nash's Quadrant in Regent Street. In 1822 the auditorium was altered at a cost of £22,000. This work which involved the ceiling being lowered and the front of the boxes brought forward was an attempt to improve the accoustics.

Now is the time to tell of one of the many curiosties about Drury Lane. Shortly after the theatre opened two playgoers met in the Rotunda. The older gentleman took hold of the younger, smacked his face and roundly boxed his ears. They were father and son, one King George III, the other the Prince of Wales later George IV. The management decided that such an embarrassing situation must not happen again and so over the door to the left was inscribed "King's Side", while over the door to the right was inscribed "Prince's Side". The Rotunda was made no man's land and so each with his own box and retiring room the chance of meeting each other was now minimal. Visiting Drury Lane you can still see those signs over the doors.

Essentially Drury Lane was a playhouse and the names of the men and women who stood upon that stage read like a history of the theatre. Edmund Kean, perhaps the greatest actor of the age, appeared here on 21 January 1814 as Shylock. This was not his first step on this famous stage. At the opening of the third theatre in 1794 the play was *"Macbeth"*. Kean then aged six was an evil sprite attending on the three witches, he tripped and fell against the boy next to him, who in turn knocked over the next boy, and so on, until like a line of dominoes all were in a heap. Young Kean played for one night only.

In June 1819 the amateur committee resigned; they had debts of over £80,000. Samuel Whitbread, brewer and the saviour of Drury Lane became ill due to stress, his reason gave way and he took his own life.

Drury Lane was now acquired by Robert Elliston, once an actor at the theatre but now managing the Olympic Theatre not very far away in Wych Street. In that first season Kean played King Lear and Richard III before he went to America. At a chance meeting Elliston met Madame Vestris an actress and singer. She had sung with success in Paris, and in London was the first Pippo in *"La gazza ladra"*, Malcolm in *"La donna del lago"*and Emma in *"Zelmira"*. She also created the role of Fatima in Weber's "Oberon at Covent Garden in 1826. Elliston offered her a contract which she accepted. Her first appearance at Drury Lane was in *"The Siege of Belgrade"* by Storace, the score included arias by Paisiello and Salieri. She next appeared in *"Artaxexes"* by Thomas Arne. Then in 1820 she created a scandal, by appearing in male attire as the Don in Mozart's *"Don Giovanni"*. London's audiences were split, some shocked, but mostly enthusiastic.

But in 1826, Elliston was struck with paralysis and with debts of £5,500 he was finished. Kean heard of this while in America and tried to obtain the lease, but an American , Stephen Price, secured it at a rent of £10,000 per annum. Kean returned from America and Price engaged him to appear as Shylock, but it was noticed how old and ill he looked. He was to appear next in a new play *"Ben Nazir"* which was a complete failure. He undertook the role of *"Henry V"* a part he had never played, but before curtain up he was found in his dressing room incoherent, unable to go on. Another attempt was made and although able to go on stage could not continue through to the end of the play. It was the beginning of the end, this once great actor was now unreliable, the brandy bottle his constant companion. At the end he broke his contract with Drury Lane and went to Covent Garden to appear as Othello with his son Charles as Iago. The first night was 25 March 1833 the first two acts went well, but it soon was seen that he was exhausted. In the third act at the lines "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!" he collapsed and cried "Oh God, I'm dying". He was carried from the stage to a nearby tavern then a week later to his home in Richmond where he died in May 1833.

By now Price was in trouble, he was in arrears with his rent and eventually the shareholders paid him to get out of the theatre. A publisher, Alexander Lee now took over the theatre, but to all events and purposes it was his stage manager who was in command of the theatre. He was Alfred Bunn. But before I tell you more about him, here is another of those little curiosities.

One evening the leader of the orchestra asked Mr Bunn for an evening off, with him was a young Irish boy aged fifteen who, he said would deputise for him. Bunn although concerned agreed and asked the boy his name "Michael Balfe" was the reply. This was the first meeting of two people who in a few years time would bring to Drury Lane a number of English operas.

In 1833 Lee gave up his lease, and Mr Bunn saw his chance. Covent Garden was also without a lessee and Bunn surprised the theatrical world by taking on the leases of both theatres. He said that he would make both theatres "Temples of Drama". But his real policy was light entertainment which he believed was what the public wanted, and he was right. He scored an early success at Covent Garden with *"Gustavus the Third"* by Auber which ran for 135 consecutive performances and a further 100 before the end of the season. At Drury Lane he had another success with *"Masaniello" ("La Muette de Portici") also by Auber.*

He engaged Maria Malibran to sing at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden where she was seen in *"Masaniello"*, *"Fidelio"* and *"La sonnambula"*. She also sang two performances of a ballad opera *"The Devils Bridge"* by C.E. Horn and John Braham which she called "baby's music". Her fee for singing in *"La sonnambula "* and *"Fidelio"* was £125 per performance. Eventually running the two theatres became too expensive and Bunn gave up Covent Garden.

Next he engaged William Macready, a fine actor at £30 a week to perform in Shakespeare. but *"Hamlet"*, *"Macbeth"* and *King Lear"* were no match for the opera. Such operas as *"The Corsair"*, *("Zampa",)* and *"Der Freischutz"* paid for the losses incurred by the drama. Under unusual circumstances he was offered a new opera for production, *"The Siege of Rochelle"*, which opened 29 October 1835 to great success. This was the first of Michael Balfe's English operas. Sometimes Shakespeare was played first with the opera to follow, sometimes the other way around. In any case it was a very long evening at the theatre.

Eventually matters came to a head. On the night of 29 April 1836 the programme was, the first three acts of Richard III, then an opera *"The Jewess"* by Robert Planche followed by the first act of *"Chevy Chase"* described as a Grand Chivalric Entertainment. Now a furious Macready stormed into Bunn's office and gave him a black eye, Bunn sued and by default won damages of £150. Macready left Drury Lane. Bunn of course was delighted, he had a new opera to put on. This was Balfe's *"The Maid of Artois"* which he had written for Malibran. Bunn had written the libretto which quite honestly is poor. It opened 27 May 1837 and thanks to Malibran and Balfe's score, was a success.

Bunn was by all accounts a difficult man, when running both Covent Garden and Drury Lane he made his actors and singers appear at both theatres on the same night, but he did not double their salary, making a rule that nobody should receive more than £20 a week. It was not unusual to see people in costume and full make-up running between the two theatres in the evening. He cut down the press allocation and argued with the established ticket agencies. He even begged to differ with King William IV who knew a great deal about Drury Lane through his mistress, the actress Mrs Jordan. What is surprising, that for a man of the theatre he disliked actors, calling them "mere performers". By 1840 like others Bunn found that the cost of running a theatre as large as Drury Lane was becoming too much for him and he went bankrupt. However after recouping his losses he returned in 1843 with his greatest success. This was *"The Bohemian Girl"* to his own libretto and with music by Balfe, which opened on 27 November and ran for 100 performances.

Also in 1843 an Act of Parliament was passed breaking the monopoly of the two "Patent" theatres Covent Garden and Drury Lane which now gave all theatres the right to perform any sort of stage attraction they wished.

Bunn held on and toward the end of 1848 he presented a French company to perform *in "The Count of Monte Cristo"*. The play was long and was given as a serial over two nights, Bunn expected the public to pay for each night separately and caused a riot. The public in turn responded by staying away. Again Bunn went into bankruptcy, this time he left Drury Lane for ever. But during his time there he made Drury Lane a home of opera, producing among others, works by Auber, Balfe, Bellini, Mozart, Rossini, Wallace, Weber and of course Donizetti.

To be continued

Pip Clayton.