PAST, PRESENT AND PROPOSED No.10

I ended the last article in this series on the history of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (see Newsletter No.85) with Alfred Bunn bankrupt and leaving the theatre for good. Now one after another came a succession of men to manage the old theatre, and one after another they failed, two lasted a week, another just six days. Frederick Gye the lessee of Covent Garden took over and called the theatre The Grand National Opera House, but his seat prices were too high and the public stayed away.

At the end of 1852 an ex-policeman took over. This was E.T. Smith and he kept the theatre open for seven years. He started with a stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *"Uncle Tom's Cabin"* which proved a success. Shakespeare alternated with opera, a circus, chinese conjurors and from Paris the great French actress Rachael. Italian opera was given at popular prices Stalls 4s. Dress Circle 2s.6d. Upper Circle 1s. and gallery 6d. in todays money 20p to 3p. But like so many others he over-reached himself. As well as Drury Lane he ran two other theatres a circus and a pleasure garden. He also owned a newspaper, was an auctioneer, a wine merchant and the landlord of a public house. It was all too much, eventually he had to give up. Once more Drury Lane needed a manager and for a while it found one in the person of the Irish American actor and playwright Dion Boucicault He presented his own play *"The Colleen Bawn"* with himself and his wife playing the leading roles. (Our members will know the play better as that charming opera *"The Lily of Killarney"* by Julius Benedict. The next lessee had made a small fortune at the Lyceum but he lost it at the Lane.

For the next seventeen years the theatre was run by an astute man by the name of Chatterton. He believed in drama and quality so the public saw plays such as *"King John"*, *"Faust"* and "Manfred" given with lavish panoramic sets. Also during his reign that very peculiar entertainment so much enjoyed by the English and a complete mystery to the rest of the world came to be an annual presentation, I refer of course to the Christmas Pantomime. In Feb 1879 in the middle of the season the doors of the theatre were closed. Chatterton was bankrupt with debts of over £36,000. It was he who said "Shakespeare spells ruin and Byron bankruptcy".

The great theatre was closed and for a time it looked as if it might never open again. But again fortune smiled, this time in the person of Augustus Harris a young man in his twenties whose ambition was to run the theatre. He was no stranger to the world of the theatre. His father (also Augustus) had been associated with Covent Garden for twentyseven years. His grandfather had paid for the completion of the Royal Coburg theatre (now the Old Vic). His grandmother was Elizabeth Feron who had created the roles of Amalia in *"Alfredo il grande"* and Zobeida in *"Alahor in Granata"* both by Donizetti. With less than £4 in his pocket Harris went to see the theatre Committee who told him that he could have the lease on reasonable terms providing he could let them have the sum of £1000 as a guarantee. Not in the least bit daunted he agreed. Within a short space of time he raised £2,750 and in 1879 the theatre opened with Shakespeare's *"Henry V"* followed by a magnificent pantomime *"Bluebeard"*. The variety of entertainment given was nothing short of amazing. In 1881 a season was given by the Ducal Court Company of Saxe-Meiningen, the following year a German season of Beethoven, Wagner and Weber. Then from Italy the renowned actress Madame Ristori

appeared as Lady Macbeth. The Carl Rosa Opera Company followed. 1885 saw Haverley's black-faced Minstrels from America. Later presentations were the Comedie Francaise, Slavinsky's Russian Choir,and the overflow of Italian opera from Covent Garden (he now controlled both theatres) In 1895 Eleanora Duse appeared in *"Magda"* the English title for *"Die Heimet"* by Suderman. Given a knighthood in 1891 he died at the early age of 45 in 1896. Affectionaly known as "Druriolanus" he was honoured with a public drinking fountain summounted by a bust of himself, it is situated on the west frontage just to the left of the portico.

Now the old theatre was in danger. The Duke of Bedford was not going to renew the lease, the theatre would be demolished and the site used to enlarge the Covent Garden fruit and vegetable market. Arthur Collins the stage manager had other ideas, he would buy out the lease which had about ten years to run and continue in the tradition of Harris. The cost of transferring the lease to Collins was £1000 which he raised, but now the Duke's agent intimated that the plan to demolish was in hand. A public outcry arose, articles appeared in the press, questions were asked in Parliament about the threat to the Theatre Royal. The plan was scrapped, Collins got the remainder of the lease with a renewal of eighty years. In 1897 for the first time the theatre became a Limited Liability Company with Arthur Collins as its Managing Director. During his regime the theatre saw some of the greatest plays and players of the period, far too many to mention here. In 1908 fire which had destroyed Drury Lane on two occasions made another appearance, but this time was confined to the backstage area. The drama in 1909 was *"The Whip"* with a scene where a train smashes into a horse box stranded across the rails. the horse is saved in the nick of time and at the end of the play with other horses and jockeys thunders across the stage, past the winning post for the finale. A season of Russian opera and ballet sponsored by Sir Joseph Beecham was given 1913 and 1914. These two seasons saw the London premiers of *"Khovanshchina"*,*"The Maid of Pszov"*,*"The Golden Cockerel"*,*"Prince Igor"* and *"Boris Godunov"* with Chaliapin. Another season of opera given in 1919 this time by Sir Thomas Beecham included *"The Magic Flute"*, *"The Seraglio"* *"The Marriage of Figaro"*, *"Ivan the Terrible"* and *"Louise"*.This was followed by a staging of Rostand's *"Cyrano de Bergerac"* and the return of an old favourite *"La Fille de Madame Angot"* in English which ran for two months. The pantomime that year was *"Cinderella* and was to be the last of the great spectacular productions for many years, ending a tradition which had lasted for nearly seventy years.

Now came a change, in 1921 the old theatre of 1812 was gutted and reconstructed into what some historians insist is the fifth theatre on the site. The outer walls were left untouched as were the foyers, portico,colonnade, rotunda and the Royal staircases. The new theatre opened in 1922, built at a cost of £150,000. The auditorium is about 80ft wide and 85ft deep. There are three circles and twenty-three boxes, with a seating capacity of about 2,280. The stage has a depth of 80ft and under the stage are six lifts, all of these are electrically powered. However the two in the centre were originally hydraulic rams operated by water from the Thames. These had been installed in 1894 after having been seen at the Vienna Theatrical Exhibition of 1893. But with the change to the theatre came a change to the productions. The last big spectacular drama opened in September 1923 and ran for 260 performances. This was *"Good Luck"*, there were scenes of a mutiny and fire in Parkhurst Prison, a ship dashed to pieces on the

rocks during a raging storm and a finale of the Ascot Royal Hunt Cup. Two of the cast went on to become two of Hollywoods well known actors, they were Edmund Gwenn and Claude Rains. It also marked the retirement of Arthur Collins.

The theatre was now run by Sir Alfred Butt and Basil Dean but the partnership only lasted a year. Dean wanted to make the Lane a National Theatre of drama but Sir Alfred wanted to stage what he thought the public wanted. This was musical comedy, and he was right. Dean left, and four musicals made their way unto the stage and pointed the way in which things were going, even to the present day. They were *"Rose Marie"* in 1925, *"The Desert Song"* in 1927, the composer Sigmund Romberg conducting the opening night, *"Show Boat"* in 1928 with the incomparable Paul Robeson and finally in 1929 *"The New Moon"* with the enchanting Evelyn Laye. After an English musical *"The Song of the Drum"* which only ran for four months in 1931 Butt left the Lane. Under new management the Lane now saw *"The Land of Smiles"* with Richard Tauber, Noel Cowards play with music *"Cavalcade"*, which was followed by *"Wild Violets"* with a American actress, Charlotte Greenwood in the cast

Once again the Lane seemed to be losing its luck. A new General Manager was appointed, this was H.M. Tennant who faced with an empty theatre and nothing planned decided io open with a pantomime. During the run of *"Cinderella"* Tennant asked a young man he knew if he could do a show for the Lane to which the reply was yes as he had a idea for a show. Ivor Novello, for he was the young man wrote, composed and took the role of leading man in *"Glamorous Night"* thereby setting up a new record for Drury Lane. Ivor Novello created four great shows for the old theatre which took its history up to the outbreak of World War II. In those four productions the stage machinery was used to its fullest advantage. Scenes included a liner on fire and sinking, a train crash, the interior of a Chinese Temple with a giant statue of a god, an earthquake, a ruined cathedral which took shape in front of the audience and Hampstead Heath Fair with booths,swings and a giant carousel predating the opening scene of an American musical in 1950.

London's theatres were closed to the public for most of the war, Drury Lane was no exception, instead it became the home of the Entertainment National Service Association or ENSA for short. The theatre was hit a number of times mostly by incendiaries, but the fires were always contained. Considerable damage was done to all three circles when a large delayed action bomb crashed through them into the stalls, luckily it burst open but did not explode. After the war the theatre was restored and opened in December 1946 with Noel Cowards *"Pacific 1860"*. Since 1947 the theatre has been home to the blockbuster American musical such as *"Oklahoma"* *"South Pacific"* with Mary Martin,*"The King and I"*, *"Mame"* with Ginger Rogers, *"A Chorus Line"* and *"Miss Saigon"* which opened in September 1989 and closed in October 1999 after 4,263 performances. The Board of Directors has changed many times, at the beginning of 2000 Andrew, Lord Lloyd-Webber gained control of Drury Lane. Now playing there is *a revival of "My Fair Lady"* which was first seen in 1958.

Drury Lane has always been a house for drama with opera only occasionally being heard there and as most books dealing with the theatre concentrate on the drama there is very little written about the opera performances given there. That book would need someone more erudite and knowledgable than myself to write it.

Checking through my copy of Loewenberg's Annals of Opera and other books and periodicals in my library I hope I can give you a glimpse of what was offered at Drury Lane from the time of the second theatre to the present day. Obviously due to lack of space I can only list a short summary of what had been presented.

The first opera (according to Loewenberg) to be given at Drury Lane was *"Ariane, ou Le Mariage de Bacchus"* on 9 April 1674 by Robert Cambert.? The opera was sung in French the score has been lost but the libretto exists in French and English. The first English composer to have his work produced at the Lane was Henry Purcell. In 1703 one act of *"The Fairy Queen"* was given (the full score had been lost in 1700.) *"King Arthur"* also by Purcell first seen elsewhere in 1691 was revived in 1706. In between on 27 January 1705 came *"Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus"* by Thomas Clayton. Whether he composed the music or used Italian airs is still not known, but the history of Italian opera in England starts with this opera. An English version of Rousseau's *"Le Devin du Village"* by Charles Burney was produced in November 1766. Ten years later in December 1776 *Zémire et Azor* by Grétry was given in English with the music arranged by Thomas Linley.

But it's not until the 19th century that opera was heard more frequently at Drury Lane. Most of the operas still to be heard today were given in those hundred years, I will list just a few of them. In 1824 Weber's *"Der Freischultz"* was seen,(that same year seven different theatres put on a version of the opera or as a play). *"La Dame Blanche"* in English as *"The* White Lady"in 1826. Rossini was well represented with a large number of his operas which included *"Guillaume Tell"* as *"Hofer, or The Tell of the Tyrol* in May 1830, *"Maometto II"* in 1836 and in October 1838 *"La gazza ladra"* in English as *"The Maid of Palaiseau".* Mozart was not very popular only four of his operas were given between 1838 and 1842. Bellini seems to have had only three of his operas given at Drury Lane, *"La Sonnambula"* May 1833 in English which was Maria Malibran's debut in England, *"Norma"* again in English in June 1837, and what was to be the penultimate opera to be given there *"Il Pirata*" in a concert performance 22 June 1969 with Montserrat Caballé.

The first opera by Richard Wagner to be produced in London was at Drury Lane in July 1870. This was "Der fliegende Holländer given in Italian as *"L'Olandese dannato.* A season of German opera in May/June 1882 under the direction of Hans Richter gave us the first performances in German of *"Tannhauser"* and *"Lohengrin"* The season also saw the first performances in England of *"Tristan und Isolde" and "Die Meistersinger von Nűrnberg".*

But what of our own maestro, Gaetano Donizetti?. His operas were fashionable mainly at Her Majesty's Theatre, the Lyceum and later at Covent Garden. At least twenty-four of his operas were heard in London from *"Olivo e Pasquale"* and *"L'Esule di Roma"* in 1832 to *"Maria di Rohan"* in 1847 and *"I Martiri"* in 1852. At Drury Lane five operas were given there during the 19th c. They were *"L'Elisir d'Amore"*,June 1839,"La favourite" October 1843 and *"Linda di Chomounix"* January 1848, all were sung in English. July 1845 saw *"Lucia di Lammermoor"* but sung in French. The last of the five was *"Anna Bolena"* in August 1871. "La fille du *Regiment"* seen as a play titled *"Madelaine"* in 1843 with music (but whose?) The last opera at Drury Lane was a concert performance 29 March 1970 of *"Roberto Devereux"* with Bernabé Marti in the title role, Tatiana Troyanos as Sara and Montserrat Caballé as Elizabeth.

Pip Clayton