

1817-1818

Kean and Booth in fight for supremacy

1817, 20 February : In an atmosphere not unlike a prize fight, Edmund Kean as Othello and Junius Brutus Booth as Iago were contestants in a battle of the actors. The opening night was packed - and the result was a knockout victory for Kean. Booth has withdrawn from future performances of the role. Edmund Kean is, without doubt, the undisputed King of the British Stage.

Macabre funeral at sea for the "Master of Horror"

1818 : "Monk" Lewis (his real name was Matthew, but he gained his nickname after the success of his 1796 Gothick horror novel, "The Monk") spent many of his 43 years shocking and frightening audiences with murders, ghosts and graveyards in a series of spectacular plays like "The Castle Spectre" and "Timour the Tartar". But not even he could have dreamed up a funeral as macabre as his own. Whilst on a voyage from Jamaica he died of yellow fever and was buried at sea. The coffin was lowered into the water but slipped its weights. Instead of sinking, it simply floated off into the great unknown.

THEATRES COMPETE IN RACE TO INSTALL GAS ILLUMINATION

1817 : London's top theatres had all been studying plans and details of the new installation of gas lighting which was successfully introduced into the Chestnut Theatre in Philadelphia USA last year. Gas lighting is not a new concept. A Mr F.A. Winsor gave a demonstration at the Lyceum Theatre as far back as 1803, and caused much interest when for several nights in 1807 he used coal-gas lighting to illuminate one side of Pall Mall. Westminster Bridge has been lit by gas since 1814.

The Theatre Royal, Covent Garden introduced gas lighting into the foyer areas for the season which opened on 11 September 1815, and a few weeks later, on 30 October 1815, the Olympic Theatre announced that "The Exterior, the Saloon and part of the Interior will be lighted with Gas".

However, the use of gas lighting to light the stage itself is something new for London. The major advantage of gas-lighting lies in the fact that the lights can be dimmed by reducing the amount of gas, or brightened by increasing the pressure - something impossible with candle-light, and something achieved only to a limited extent with oil lamps.

The Lyceum, Covent Garden and Drury Lane all announced they would be installing gas lighting for the new season, and each was determined to be the first to do so. The Lyceum claimed to be the first, since its opening night on 6 August announced that "The Gas Lighting will this evening be introduced over the whole stage". By 8 September the Lyceum was able to announce that its "trial of several weeks" had been a great success, and it was enlarging the gas installation to illuminate the audience part of the theatre as well.

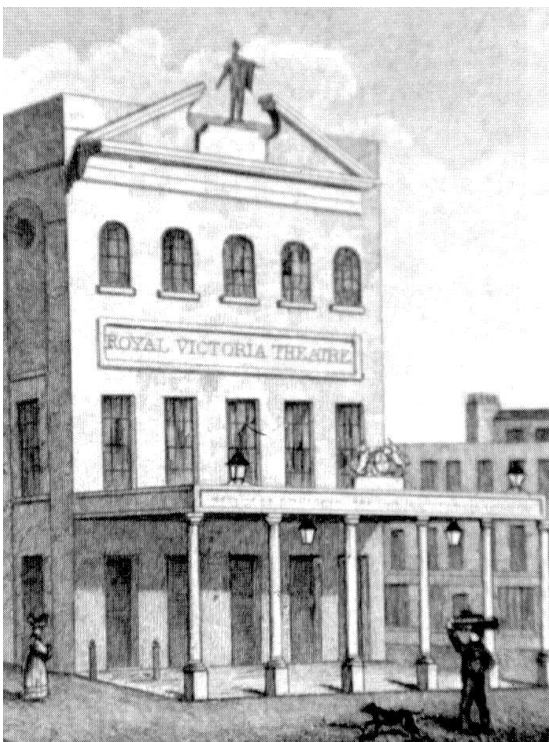
Drury Lane introduced gas lighting onstage on 6th September. Although this was a month after the Lyceum, Drury Lane was already using gas in the audience parts of the building, so it was able to claim it was the first theatre to be entirely lit by gas, thus claiming a two day victory in the race with the Lyceum.

Not to be outdone, Covent Garden gave a preliminary demonstration of gas lighting onstage on the very same night as Drury Lane - so it, too, could lay claim to being up there with the firsts. By the time the competition was done with, it was generally felt that Drury Lane was the very first English theatre to be lit entirely by gas, with the Lyceum following just two days later. However, Covent Garden could genuinely claim to be the first English theatre to use gas lighting on its premises, and the Lyceum could genuinely claim to be the first English theatre to light its stage with gas.

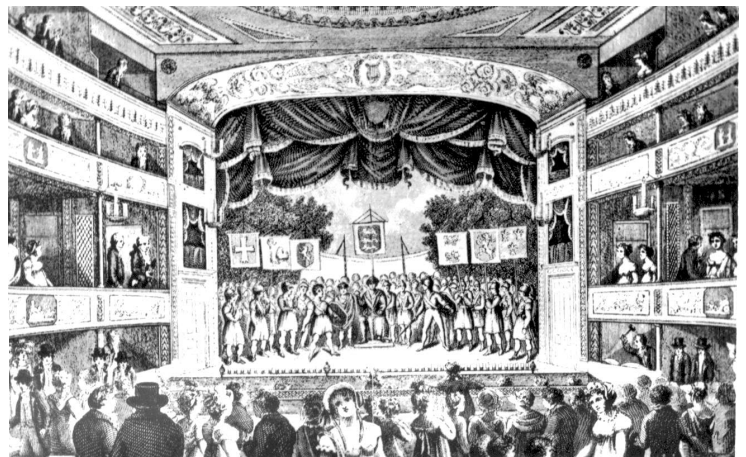
At the end of all this competitiveness, the major question was: is gas lighting an improvement on the old systems? Drury Lane's eighty lamps across the front and twelve each side of the stage were said by The Examiner to produce an effect "as mild as it is splendid, white regular and pervading". The Times was initially enthusiastic, but a few days later reported "having sat through a whole evening in the theatre, playgoers felt a burning and prickling sensation in their eyes, a soreness in the throat and a headache which lasted for several days afterwards".

Royal Coburg Theatre opens on Lambeth Marshes

1818 : The newly opened Waterloo Bridge has encouraged the building of a new theatre on Lambeth Marshes, on the Surrey side of the river. With the patronage of the Princess of Wales and His Serene Highness the Prince of Saxe-Coburg, the £12,000 theatre is to be called the Royal Coburg Theatre. Despite the current fashion for gas lighting, the new theatre has opted for oil-lamps. It opened on May 11th with a production of "Trial by Battle"



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