

## CHAPTER 10

# BRITISH THEATRE EXHIBITION

During four wonderful weeks in 1949 Bingley Hall was the venue for the British Theatre Exhibition. On Monday, 23 May, before a distinguished audience, veteran actress Dame Sybil Thorndike took the stage in the hall, but not in one of her many acclaimed rôles. Sir Lewis Casson, who had often played opposite her in the theatre in the past, supported her. Her task on this occasion, and his too, was to officiate at the opening of one of the most extraordinary theatrical exhibitions ever to be mounted in Bingley Hall, or, for that matter, in any other venue in this country. (1) Sir Barry Jackson's foreword in the prospectus shows that it was conceived as a British national variation on a pre-war international enterprise staged in Germany.

*The growth of interest in the living theatre . . . has one of the most encouraging indicators of the vitality of British arts. Yet no attempt has so far been made to display its many-sided activities in a comprehensive national exhibition . . . Before the war . . . Germany organised a Theatre Exhibition of great proportions which was open to the exhibits of all countries. The exhibition now projected for Birmingham will concentrate upon the theatre of our own country. (2)*

Sponsored by Lord Iliffe's *Birmingham Post*, and organised by them in association with Sir Barry Jackson and the Arts Council of Great Britain, most things connected with stage entertainment were on display. There was only one major element missing, but that, regrettably, was a glaring omission, as lamented by Raymond Roden, then of the *Birmingham News*.

*Only one aspect of the great tradition of the stage appears to be missing, and this was a pity, for in it lies the colourful personalities whose names today fall with an almost loving remembrance from the lips of older people. I speak of music halls and musical comedy, not the modern equivalent of those much jaded glories, but the old characters and types who meant as much to drama in popular concept as any of those who played out the stately themes of noble tragedy. (3)*

Perhaps music hall entertainment was too lowbrow for the organisers' taste, although, weighing slightly against that suggestion, the stand of Emile Littler's Birmingham Theatre Factory was mainly devoted to pantomime. Elsewhere even Punch and Judy were present, albeit in an antique booth that was on display, rather than in action.

National and provincial theatres such as Birmingham's Alexandra Theatre participated. Famous establishments like the Old Vic, the Royal Opera House, Sadler's Wells and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre rubbed shoulders with local repertory theatres and little amateur theatres such

as Birmingham's Crescent Theatre, then celebrating their silver jubilee. (4)

All the posters, leaflets, catalogues and other printed material connected with the exhibition carried a strange but attractive motif, a small male figure dancing to his own music. As the *Mail* explained, this character was not just a figment of an artist's fancy but portrayed Dick Tarlton, a seventeenth-century entertainer. According to Michael Wood, in his TV series *In search of Shakespeare*, he performed before Queen Elizabeth herself,

*The woodcut representation of a queer little man beating a tabor and playing on a pipe has become increasingly familiar to Birmingham people of recent days. The drawing is of one Richard Tarlton, an actor and jester who flourished in the middle years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it has been adopted as the distinctive sign – the hallmark as it were – of the British Theatre Exhibition. (5)*

The exhibition presented a range of stage exhibits such as had never before been assembled at any one venue. On display were historic costumes that had been worn by legendary performers, amongst them those of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and Beerbohm Tree. There was property animals, stage sets, puppets, toy theatres, a model of a projected mobile theatre for over two hundred patrons, a First Folio Shakespeare facsimile, a large collection of china figures of

great performers of the past, even the actual Broadwood grand piano played by Chopin during his visit to London in 1848, the year before his death. The list of extraordinary things to see seemed endless. The most novel item in the catalogue was as a Baird portable television receiver, the first of its kind in the world. The price tag was £47 15s 6d, plus £15 17s 4d purchase tax, a price approaching £1,000 in today's money. Civic Radio Services Ltd, a local firm, had other sets and aerials for this new form of domestic entertainment. The new transmitter then being built at Sutton Coldfield was also featured in their display. (6)

Birmingham's Parks Department displayed a model of their popular summertime marquee theatres, this one in Aston Park set against the background of the famous Jacobean mansion, Aston Hall. The city's public libraries' resources had been combed for the most interesting items in their collections, a difficult task in view of the vast number of books and documents from which to choose, as their entry in the exhibition catalogue elaborates.

*Many of the exhibits are naturally taken from the Shakespeare Memorial Library of 33,000 items of Shakespeare's works and Shakespeariana in sixty-one languages. This is the most comprehensive Shakespeare Collection in the world . . . Playbills are a valuable source of theatre history and by assiduous collecting the Library has amassed many thousands . . . One exhibit relates to Drury Lane Theatre .*

*. . . while another relating to Birmingham Theatre Royal belongs to a continuous set of playbills from 1790 to date . . . Of particular interest to Birmingham visitors are . . . books of words for pantomimes produced at Birmingham theatres over the period 1856-1926. (7)*

A host of models of animals, birds and reptiles used in earlier productions were to be seen in the Footlight Zoo. For example, there were a number of creatures from “Alice in Wonderland”, including the White Rabbit, the March Hare and the Mock Turtle. From “Peter Pan” came the crocodile, together with the lion from Shaw’s “Androcles and the Lion”, and the thieving magpie. from Rossini’s opera “La Gazza Ladra”.

Performances of scenes from Shakespeare’s plays were presented thrice daily, but in the manner of his time and on a rush-strewn stage especially designed in the style of the sixteenth century. The distinguished theatre critic T C Kemp of the *Post* declared in *The Listener* “if you want to know how Londoners in the days of Elizabeth enjoyed themselves, you will get a good idea from these performances”. (8)

A battered copy of Hall’s *Chronicles*, a Tudor history book from which Shakespeare is known to have derived some of the material for his historical plays, was the most precious single item in the whole exhibition. It was insured for £50,000, say £1 million today, and was displayed in a strong plate glass case. Total panic prevailed one morning when the glass was found to have been shattered

overnight. A note had been left on top of the book complaining that “*the attempt to ascribe these plays to a half-literate man is bogus . . . read “The Mystery of Francis Bacon . . . which explodes the whole theory of Shakespeare’s authorship “.*

Amazingly the antique volume was undamaged by the broken glass that had showered down upon it during the attack. Interestingly, some of the pages are annotated in Elizabethan writing style, giving rise to the speculation that the Bard himself may once have owned the very book. (9)

In parallel with the Bingley Hall show, Birmingham’s Art Gallery presented its own exhibition, “*Painters and the Theatre*”. In addition to the material from the city’s own collection, many additional items were borrowed from galleries in London and elsewhere, from private owners, including the King, and, importantly, from the Garrick Club. Unusually, there was an admission charge of one shilling, half price for children, but, happily, this was waived on Saturdays and Sundays. All profits were allocated to theatrical charities, as were those made at Bingley Hall. (10) Portraits by famous artists of renowned actors and actresses were featured: David Garrick by Reynolds, Mrs Patrick Campbell by Shannon, Henry Irving by Millais and several others. Also displayed were stage designs by Piper and Sutherland and many other costumes and designs. Particularly outstanding items on show were the actual costumes that Captain Hook and the Pirates wore in the first ever presentation of *Peter Pan*. There were ballet scenes painted by Dame Laura Knight and much else. A veritable feast of art

connected with the theatre had been assembled in the Gallery. (11)

Bingley Hall's sensational exhibition attracted hordes of students, many parties of school children and the general public in large numbers, but, above all, practitioners of every kind in the theatrical world, designers, producers and, of course, performers. Autograph hunters had a splendid time spotting famous personalities. Amongst them were many actors and actresses, including stars such as Hermione Gingold, Michael Redgrave, Gwen Ffroncon-Davies, Anthony Quayle, Marius Goring, Margaret Leighton (an Edgbaston girl), the distinguished ballet director Ninette de Valois and Wee Georgie Wood from the world of vaudeville and pantomime. Many other well-known performers visited the exhibition during the four weeks. Autograph collectors must also have been sorely tempted to make off with the theatre bar counter on display. It bore the signatures of over a hundred stage stars, a unique treasure. (12)

There were distinguished visitors from Danish and Finnish theatres and from France. From the art world came VIPs like James Harvey, a senior figure at the Victoria & Albert Museum. The exhibition was also honoured by that distinguished royal patron of the arts, the Duchess Kent who viewed the displays at both the Art Gallery and in Bingley Hall. (13) During the proceedings she was presented with a simple posy from the garden at Shakespeare's New Hall Place. Suitably, it was proffered by a young actor in Elizabethan doublet and hose who was currently playing a small part as

a pageboy in a production of Richard III at the old Birmingham Repertory Theatre in Station Street. (14) The play had been specially selected to run in parallel with the exhibition. Other local theatres were also staging appropriate plays.

The Duchess later departed Stratford bound, for yet more theatre – as it happened, a performance of “*Much Ado About Nothing*”, a completely unintended but perhaps somewhat inappropriate choice! Much more apt was the comment in *Punch*, that “*Birmingham has got in first, and more power to it, but what about London?*” (15)

Students staffing the stand of the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art found “*Brummie*” speech “*interesting*”, but were politely critical. We do not open our mouths properly, it seems! Nevertheless they were honest enough to admit that they could think of no convincing reason why the accent of the Home Counties upper-middle-class was regarded as the only one suitable for the stage and the BBC. (16) How attitudes have changed since 1949! With the flowering of television it seems that convincing provincial accents have become a positive virtue, almost a requirement, for those in front of the camera.

Years later, in June 1974, Lucas Industries took over part of the hall to stage a Festival of Arts. This ran in parallel with amateur stage performances at the Repertory Theatre and other venues. The preface to the catalogue for the Bingley Hall display defines the objectives and scope of the event.

*The Lucas Festival of Arts is a presentation of the artistic abilities of Lucas people. All the works on display . . . have been produced by Lucas people, including their families and pensioners . . . It is estimated that the Lucas community consists of about 300,000 people . . . The idea . . . was to provide a challenge and an opportunity for people to show what they can do to produce something of beauty, and to draw out abilities which people possess but do not normally display. (17)*

The extent to which these aims were met is revealed in the details of the staggering 2683 entries listed in the catalogue. The items came from all over the globe, from many European countries, from the USA and Canada, South America, Australasia, Japan, the Indian continent, South Africa and, of course, the home base in Great King Street and other British plants.

The range of items on display was equally staggering. To mention but a few of the categories into which they fell, there were paintings – an enormous number – etchings, drawings, graphics, photographic images, models, sculptures, pottery, bead-work, embroidery, tapestry and even carpets. The literary side of art was present too in the form of plays, poetry, stories and even a thesis. It was a crying shame that this splendid initiative by Lucas Industries was not “*copied by other companies and organisations*” as hoped for by the organisers. (18)

Some years later, in November 1981, there was an exhibition in the hall of a somewhat similar

nature, although not sponsored by a firm. Organised as the Northern Arts & Crafts Show, there were displays and demonstrations of bronze casting, wood carving, clog making and other skills. Don Estelle, star of television's popular series at the time, "*It Ain't Half Hot Mum*", was the special guest at the exhibition. (19)