

Richmond Theatre- a review by Evan Rule

Richmond Theatre Celebrates 110 Years

**“To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To raise the genius and to mend the heart,
To make mankind in conscious virtue bold.”**

This prologue to Cato written by Alexander Pope is a fitting mission statement for Richmond Theatre that celebrated 110 years of tender strokes of art in September 09 with a gala performance of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera ‘The Pirates of Penzance’ featuring Jo Brand.

Richmond Theatre is more than just a playhouse, it was built and meant to be and has been a monument to the dramatic arts. It is a place to delight and to stir up a cockpit of emotions and opinions, to edify and to educate beyond your common experience and, at the same time, to entertain you with the finest acting and drama of your age.

Almost certainly Shakespeare and his “Chamberlain’s Men” performed for Queen Elizabeth at Richmond Palace and there were three other theatres at various times in Richmond before the owner, F.C.Mouflett, of the third ‘The Castle Hotel Assembly Rooms’ decided on a theatre of far grander scale. No expense was to be spared and so the great Frank Matcham was engaged to build a theatre in the gardens of Onslow House, then a military academy. No expense spared, so Frank Matcham, designed of over 120 Victorian theatres, including the London Palladium and the London Coliseum to name but two, let his imagination run riot and incorporated ornate plaster and marble work over the whole edifice with huge cantilever balconies and seating for all, even though there were only benches for the poorest playgoers. Mouflett did not want a run of the mill space, he wanted a monument to the arts and sciences a place of great drama and opera. So Matcham obliged, ceilings with reliefs of great Shakespearian scenes, statues dedicated to drama, comedy, art and to science, monuments to Edmund Keen and the line from the prologue over the proscenium arch, to remind all of the purpose of the theatre. All the latest innovations in science were incorporated, electrification from the very start, an extensive fly tower.

One year after the purchase of the land, in September 1889, the theatre opened with a performance of Shakespeare’s “As You Like It”. It cost the princely sum of £30 000 and seated 1 500 patrons. These glory years of drama and opera were to last three years and in 1902 George Dance purchased the then named ‘Theatre Royal & Opera House’ for £23 000. Under various names, ‘The Prince of Wales Theatre’ and ‘Richmond Hippodrome & Theatre’, he started a tradition of musical comedies and music hall acts. All the greats played Richmond, Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, Lilly Langtry, Ellen Terry, Anna Pavlova, Marie Lloyd to name but a few, great comics, actors and actresses singers and dancers.

In 1917 the theatre was sold to Joseph Mears, a one time mayor of Richmond, who had an entertainment empire of cinemas, pleasure boats and was chairman of Chelsea FC and in turn sold it in 1944 to the present owners of the building, F.J.Butterworth.

In 1946 Butterworths granted a lease to Alan Miles, Andrew Melville and Freric Piffard and Freric Piffard became the manager of the Richmond Repertory Company, 50 plays a year, a new production every week, where trainee actors could learn the craft of acting, trainees like Paul Scofield (A Man for All Seasons), Dandy Nichols (Till Death us do Part) and Vivien Merchant (Alfie and also happened to be Pinter's first wife). The Lease passed through a few hands till now it is owned by the Ambassador Theatre Group, Rep Theatre has long and some say, sadly passed away, but Richmond continues with a diet of a different play nearly every week and Just in the days of Arthur Wing Pinero and 'Trelawney of the Wells' most important is the Pantomime!

The Pantomime has always been central to the life of Richmond Theatre. In 1899 it was 'Puss in Boots' and this year its 134th production is 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. 134, but the theatre is only 110 years old! They were so popular that, up until the 1930's, they often had 2 a year. The 1910/11 season had 5!! The great Arthur Askey was a regular favourite at Richmond, as have been, Benny Hill, Terry Scott, Spike Milligan, Jimmy Edwards, Roy Hudd, Barbara Windsor and Rolf Harris. If you want to book for the Panto, do so early, for one certainty in the life of the theatre is that the 'House Full' will be use again this year as thousands of young children drag their parents into the theatre.

The Panto is not the only thing on offer for young children. Richmond have regular workshops of children of all ages. This year they are on the theme of loving Annie, Bear Hunts as well as Panto and they back them up with a week of the play. 'Annie' has Su Pollard and they also have 'We're going on a Bear Hunt' as well as 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. If your child is bitten by the bug of theatre, they also do regular acting workshops as well as technical theatre workshops. For the older children ie us adults, they have regular scriptwriting and drama groups, as well as an introduction to the theatre group. Many of their classic pieces of theatre will include post show discussions often with the directors and actors. Of course many people just enjoy going to the theatre to watch a play! 'Friends of Richmond' can enjoy many benefits in cheaper seats, ease of booking and also 1st night parties to meet the actors.

The most important benefit is the variety of the shows on offer. This autumn season has 'Prick Up Your Ears' with Matt Lucas, a new play based on the diaries of that innovative playwright, Joe Orton a friend of Kenneth Williams, who was brutally murdered by his boyfriend. 'Round the Horne' based on the radio scripts of Barry Took and Marty Feldman, two incredibly funny writers and a radio series that still has a freshness and novel humour when repeated on radio four. The classic 'The Hypochondriac' by Molière adapted by Roger McGouth. Molière knew he was ill, he kept telling people he wasn't well, He died a week after the play opened! 'Entertaining Angels' stars a firm Richmond favourite, Penelope Keith. 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' is bound to bring a huge audience of young people to see this classic Brecht play of war and fascism. 'The Grass is Greener' is due to star the talents of Liza Goddard and Christopher Cazenove, while 'Rain Man', based on the film, brings us Neil Morissey and Oliver Chris and plenty to think about as we ponder about Morissey's portrayal of autism. The Frederick Knott classic 'Dial M for Murder' is next up, perhaps better known from the Hitchcock film, the first British directed film in 3D. Originally it was a BBC play, which transferred to the stage and, with Knott's other play 'Wait Until Dark' scared audiences in the West End and on

Broadway for years. While we are on the Hitchcock theme, Richard Baron, the director of 'The 39 Steps', still hugely popular, brings us his next offering 'Our Man in Havana' based on the book by the one time British spy, but all time great writer, Graham Greene. Felicity Kendal stars in 'Mrs Warren's Profession' by George Bernard Shaw and then there is 'Pride and Prejudice' and that takes us up to Christmas and the Panto.

Many of these shows will transfer to the West End so here is your chance to see them before others start to rave about them, but all will do their part in waking our souls by tender strokes of art.

Of course there is that gala performance of 'The Pirates of Penzance', a comic opera classic from Gilbert and Sullivan. Do not be fooled, most of us have seen amateur productions of G&S, but this is not , this is a full professional opera company production and Jo Brand has already had massive critical acclaim for this role. This is a production worth seeing and to boot a whole host celebrity guests will be walking up the steps of this terracotta fronted building, in through the posh entrance, to see Jo Brand as many in the past have turned up to see Ralph Richardson, Alec Guinness, Celia Johnson, Rita Tushingham, Omar Sharif, Raymond Burr, Glenda Jackson, Sir Ian McKellen as well as all the others that I have mentioned so far. Many of them will marvel at this building by Frank Matcham

It is a building worth marvelling at. The terracotta front is an imposing statement on Richmond Green, but looking closely you will see it is not one entrance, but several, an historic monument to the Victorian class society, with separate entrances for the stall and dress circle away from the cheaper seats in the pits. The first thing to notice is the old ceiling in the theatre foyer, I say old it was painted in 1989 by Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen then unknown and working for the respected scenic designer Carl Toms who had been engaged to oversee the refurbishment. It cost £4 million and added new administrative offices and a stalls bar, as well as trying to sort out the maze of stairs that the Victorians needed to keep the classes of audiences apart. Once inside the auditorium you can see the true grandeur of Matchams edifice. A massive 30 lamp chandelier hangs from the ceiling, surrounded by the Shakespearian scenes and then down the walls imposing plaster work and marble statues and there in front of you is the proscenium stage, 25 feet high and 25 feet above it to enable the scenic cloths to be hidden till flown in and there in the middle the Richmond coat of arms, the letters RT and the words of Alexander Pope. Students of architecture, theatre archaeology, social history, history of theatre or just a general love of the theatre are also able to have a tour round the theatre, to look into the knocks and crannies that there are, to discover the hidden marvels of this theatre, normally on a Saturday morning it is best to phone and make arrangements. Tickets for the shows are easy to get, either by calling into the box office, phoning the box office or by using the Ambassador Group website, please remember that the plays do change weekly which gives you plenty of variety, but don't dither when wanting to see a show.

Me, I shall be in my seat at the Gala Performance in the Dress Circle, sitting hopefully next to a celebrity, possibly I shall be watching out for the ghost of the producer Gardner Davies, who died having thrown himself from the balustrade of the Dress Circle or perhaps looking out for the ghostly imprints of all those other fine talents that have graced the stage of Richmond Theatre, but certainly waiting to see yet another fine performance.