

**Everything you wanted to know about PLAYBILLS but were
afraid to ask...**
**Or, what you can discover about 18-19th century theatre from
a bit of old paper**

Having worked in theatre archives for over twenty years I forget that people in the real world don't know what a prompt book, show report, or costume bible is. And recently, expressing my excitement over playbills in the Shakespeare Collection, has only led to quizzical expressions and the question 'What's that?'

A playbill is a sheet of paper, printed on one side, advertising a public performance or set of performances billed on one night. They were standard, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries before the more modern invention of posters and programmes. They consist of mostly printed text; a mixture of large, bold type for play-titles and stars; occasional glimpses of colour, particularly red to catch their eye.

It's amazing what you can learn about the history of performance from these ephemeral documents. Looking at a variety from a particular theatre gives you an idea of the incredible array of plays performed during particular decades; what Shakespeare plays were popular (or not so popular); what other entertainments were in fashion. They give you all the information you need to imagine what a 'night at the theatre' consisted of.

Playbills are also a bit of a 'who's who' in the theatre world as actors would take their famous performances up and down the country. Actors who worked at the Theatres Royal in London would work in other major UK cities, including Birmingham. It has been fascinating to track down details on some of those actors unfamiliar to me but declared as 'great tragedians' on the playbills. Playbills list many of them as just 'returned from America' and such - the actual reach of these actors is astonishing considering how difficult travel was at that time - they were international celebrities of the stage.

Irish actor Gustavus Vaughan Brooke, normally referred to as G V Brooke for obvious reasons, travelled to America, came back to England for a couple of months and then headed off to Australia on 1 January 1866. He performed as *Othello* at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham in 1851 and for one night only in 1853. Unfortunately, when Brooke headed off to Australia on the SS London, the ship sank. Witnesses said, he worked bravely manning the pump but went down with the ship declaring 'Give my last farewell to the people of Melbourne.'

Playbills also mention the 'benefits' system where actors would receive the whole or half night's takings to boost their income. They would play roles for which their reputation had grown in order to get the best possible income. These benefits indicate what type of actor they were and the level of their popularity. Bigger stars of the stage had their own benefits, whereas lesser known actors would share with sometimes three actors having their benefit in one night.

THE ROYAL BIRMINGHAM
Second Night of the Performance of the celebrated

Mrs. DAVISON,
and Last Night and Two of the Engagement of
Mr. BLANCHARD.

Mr. ST. ALBIN
AND
Mademoiselle Garbois
Have the pleasure of informing their Friends and the Public, that their

BENEFIT
AND LAST APPEARANCE HERE THIS SEASON
is appointed to take place on **WEDNESDAY, July 28, 1824.**
Which will be performed Shakespeare's Tragedy of

OTHELLO.

The Duke of Young, Mr. RUMMALL, Desdemona, M. CRISTEL,
Iago, Mr. WARD.
IAGO by a GENTLEMAN AMATEUR (from London,
Cassio, Mr. BULLOCK, Gratiano, Mr. BROWN, Lodovico, Mr. WHITEHEAD,
Montano, Mr. KING, Rodrigo, Mr. BUCHANAN, Antonio, M. FORSTER,
Thronger, M. BRADY.
Desdemona, Miss JARMAN.
In the course of the Evening, Mrs. WATLEY will sing

HOME, SWEET HOME.
Minuet de la Cour & Gavotte,
by Mr. ST. ALBIN and Mademoiselle GARBOIS.
KELVIN GROVE,
Will be sung by Mr. THORPE.

Between the Play and Ballet will be performed the Farce of the

CITIZEN.

Old Philpot, Mr. BLANCHARD,
Young Pollet, Mr. BULLOCK, Sir Jasper Widdow, Mr. BUNTER,
Young Wilton, Mr. KING, Belmont, Mr. ANTHONY,
Quilmore, Mr. WHITEHEAD, Will, Mr. BRADY,
Maria, Mrs. DAVISON,
in which CHARACTER SHE WILL SING
Roy's Wife of Alvalloch.

To conclude with a NEW GRAND BALLET, called the

CARNIVAL
OF VENICE.

The principal Characters by Mr. ST. ALBIN, Miss WORGAN, Monsieur and Mademoiselle
GAMBRE, Miss WELAND, Mr. and Miss TURBOUR, &c. &c.

In the course of the Ballet will be introduced the following DANCES:—
A PAS SEUL by Mademoiselle Garbois,
A Grand Pas De Trois
by Mr. ST. ALBIN, Miss WORGAN, and Mademoiselle GARBOIS
A GRAND PAS DE DEUX
by Mr. ST. ALBIN and Miss WORGAN.
The Masquerade Turkish Dwarf Dance
by Mr. TURBOUR.—An Actor WELAND will introduce the
TRIPARTITE,
Or **THREE-HEADED ODDITY.**
The Ballet to conclude with a NEW GRAND

Masquerade,
UPON A PECULIAR PLAN,
And on which occasion the
MAGNIFICENT STAGE
WILL BE THROWN OPEN.
Quadrilles, Waltzing, &c.
BY THE CHARACTERS.—To conclude with a
GRAND FINALE.

Persons wishing to assume a Cha-

THEATRE ROYAL, BIRMINGHAM,
UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF MR. SIMPSON.

FAREWELL BENEFIT
AND LAST APPEARANCE OF
MR. G. V. BROOKE
PREVIOUS TO HIS DEPARTURE FOR AMERICA.
ON FRIDAY, OCT. 10, 1851,
WILL BE PERFORMED BY DESIRÉ SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY OF

OTHELLO
THE MOOR OF VENICE.

OTHELLO, MR. G. V. BROOKE.

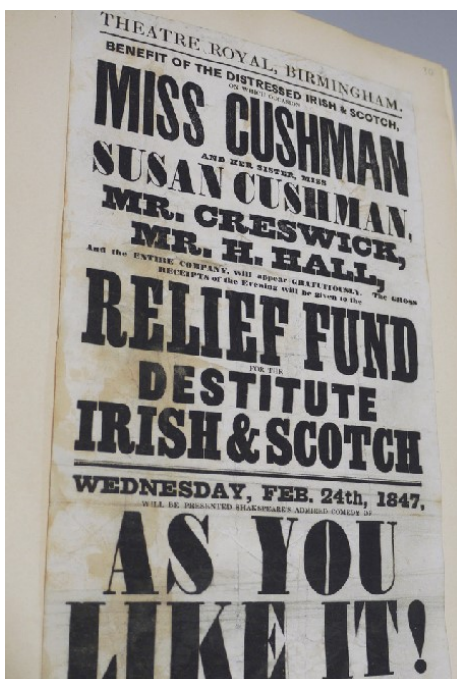
Iago, Mr. JAMES BENNETT	Antonio, Mr. BOWEN	Mr. COOPER
The Duke of Venice, Mr. GARDNER	Lodovico, Mr. SIDNEY	Mr. RICHARDS
Brabantio, Mr. VOLLAIRE	Julia, Mr. POWELL	Miss EDWARDS
Cassio, Mr. JOHN HOWARD	Desdemona, Miss EDWARDS	Mr. TERNAN
Roderigo, Mr. ATKINS	Emilia, Miss EDWARDS	
Montano, Mr. SHORE		
Guiliani, Mr. ASBURY		

GRAND PAS DES NATIONS, MONS. GILMER & MISS KATE KIRBY.



Elizabeth Brunton, a very popular actress from the period, first appeared on stage in 1815. This playbill from 1817 is dated less than a month before her first debut at Covent Garden on 12 September.

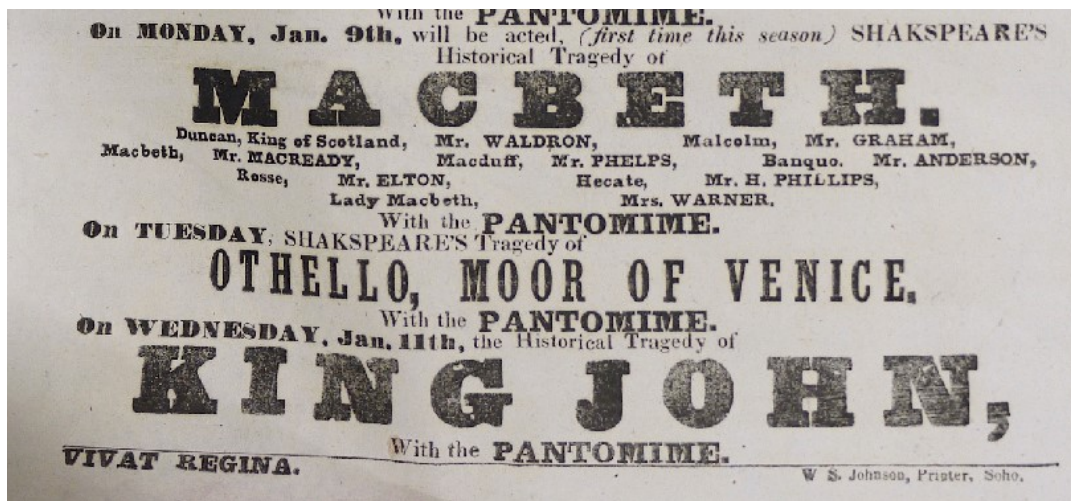
Performances were also given as fundraisers for local institutions such as hospitals and charities. I particularly liked the production of *As You Like It*, starring Charlotte and Susan Cushman in 1847 for the *Destitute Irish and Scotch*. Concluding that particular bill was the laughable farce of *Pat's Vagaries! Or, More Blunders than One*. The main protagonist is a character called Larry Hooligan and the featured song 'Tip-ta-la-ra-whack!!'



On the bill there are details of performances of various types, acrobats, dancers, magicians, pantomimes were extremely popular, as were tableaux and dioramas. In the recent television drama *The Terror* they created such a tableau honouring the heroic seamen, before they sail off on their doomed voyage. These tableaux were often of events from history, or the recent past. One playbill from 1848 mentions a tableau of the French Revolution which was obviously still a very popular subject with the general public:

“Which has produced a most favourable Impression, and every Evening elicited rapturous Applause from delighted Audiences, who have unanimously proclaimed it the most pleasing and beautiful Representation ever presented to Public Notice, and is withdrawn solely on account of the extensive Preparations requisite for the production, on MONDAY next, of the new Drama, “VIVE LA LIBERTE; OR, THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.”

On the playbill below which advertises future performances we can see that Shakespeare and ‘pantomime’ were big draws.



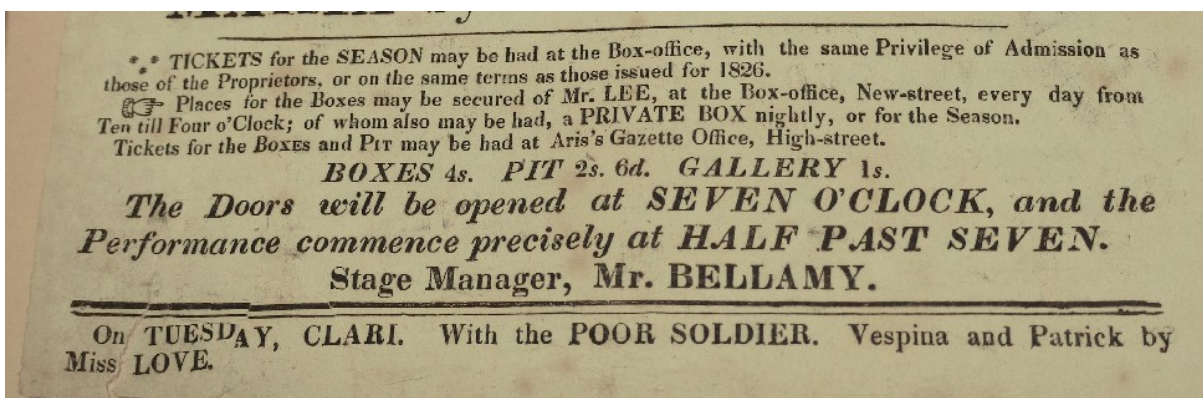
The exotic and oriental were also always popular. One of my favourite notices tells of Khia Khan Khruse and his amazing ‘protean transformations’ learnt in the caves of Salamanca, ‘...exhibiting some of the most surprising evolutions, serpentine postures, &c. &c. ever beheld, with sword, chairs and hoops, &c.’

The practicalities of theatre going and even the design of the building can be discovered through the playbill. The inclusion of large, set pieces and ‘machinery’ indicate the size and the scope of what was possible in the theatre behind-the-scenes. Differently priced tickets indicate that people from all classes attended the theatre. These prices also indicate seating arrangements: boxes, gallery, pit, etc. This gives us a picture of the auditorium. You can even find references to the tradition of providing spaces for audience members to sit on the stage itself.



To see a playbill is to be taken into the past. They are wonderfully evocative documents but also incredibly informative. More than anything they demonstrate that an evening going to see a Shakespeare play was a vastly different experience than it is today. People had the opportunity to stay for a variety or to come and go from the theatre as they pleased. They could stay for the Shakespeare play and then leave or miss the Shakespeare and go for the entertainments.

In a world where you can select entertainment at the touch of a button on your computer or streaming services it's hard to put yourself back into a time when forms of entertainment were live and limited but definitely colourful. Playbills are an imaginative gateway into that past.



Karin Thomson
'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

