

Shakespeare Without Class

Birmingham's Eighteenth Century Theatres



Image of the New Street Theatre, with the Shakespeare Tavern clearly marked on the right-hand side of the building. Library of Birmingham archives.

The story of Birmingham's relationship with Shakespeare in performance goes back a long way and has always had the precedent of making theatre accessible across class divisions. Going to see a Shakespeare play was not the expensive event that it is now. Shakespeare productions in the Victorian period were truly public entertainment outside any divisive cultural, educational or class ownership. With theatre one of the main sources of entertainment, theatre managers had to keep their prices low, and create bills of entertainment that would draw in crowds; Shakespeare was definitely one of those draws.

The first theatre in Birmingham was the Moor Street Theatre, which became a playhouse in 1740. Its manager, John Ward, found a home in the city for his travelling players, the Warwickshire Company of Comedians, which was a touring company travelling around the West Midlands and the Welsh borders. A performance of *Othello* in 1746 by John Ward's company in Stratford-upon-Avon, is the first recorded performance of the play, or any Shakespeare play in his hometown.



Portrait of John Ward, believed to be by Thomas Beach, 1833 (from the Garrick Club Art Collection)

It is by a strange twist of fate that the same street, Moor Street, which saw the first theatre in Birmingham also became the first home for George Dawson's Civic Gospel, out of which grew the scheme for a Shakespeare library belonging to the people of the city.

A battle of the theatres began when in 1751 actor/manager Richard Yates, seeing a commercial opportunity, moved into the King Street Theatre. A fierce rivalry between the two venues began. Yates' theatre usurped Moor Street, which eventually closed in 1764 and was converted into a Methodist Chapel soon after. The King Street Theatre was dominant in the city until the New Street Theatre opened in 1774.

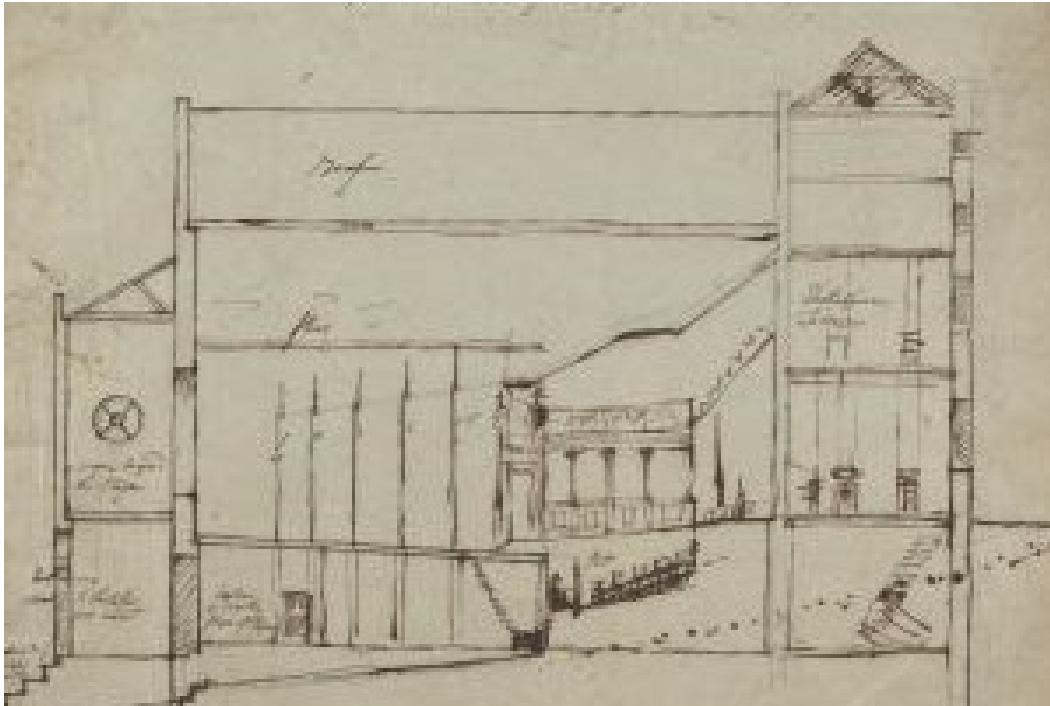
When the building of the New Theatre was proposed, some of Birmingham's factory owners expressed concern, opposing the build in a letter in the *Arts's Birmingham Gazette* (31 May 1773). The following 'caution' was printed:

... many respectable Manufacturers in the very populous and Important Town' [consider] 'the Exhibition of Plays... as extremely prejudicial to the Manufacturing carried on here; having a Tendency to promote Negligence, create Expense, and corrupt the morals of the Industrious.'

A clear indication that it was the men and women of the lower classes, the factory workers, who predominantly frequented the theatre.

The New Street Theatre was titled the Theatre Royal in 1807 by dint of the fact it obtained a royal patent meaning it had the right to perform all drama, including Shakespeare; other theatres were only permitted to perform comedy, pantomime or melodrama. Before receiving their patent, New Street would advertise an evening of music, interspersed with singing, sketches, tableau and/or dancing, to prevent the whole bill from appearing too serious or dramatic. Any serious dramas would be given free of charge by the actors; as indicated in this advert for the New Street Theatre's first performance of *As You Like It* - note the word 'gratis':

At the Theatre in New Street, Birmingham, this present Monday, June 20th, 1744, will be presented a concert of Music... Between the several parts of the Concert will be presented, (gratis), by a Company of Their Majesties Comedians from the Theatre Royal in London, a Comedy called "As You Like It" - to be spoken by Mr Yates. To which will be added "Miss in her 'Teens."



Plans for the New Street Theatre

With great business cunning, the owners also planned for the theatre design to include a pub, called the Shakespeare Tavern. This theatre bar had its frontage on to New Street and was positioned in front of the theatre auditorium itself. Come for a drink, take in some Shakespeare, along with a farce, some music, dance or acrobatics; a great way to lure in the punters but also, more significantly, an indication that theatre, and particularly Shakespeare, was not elitist entertainment but was accessible to everyone.

As one would expect, having a slightly inebriated audience had its occasional drawbacks. Birmingham audiences gained a certain notoriety, especially for rowdiness in the gallery. This rather patronising and colourful description comes from *The Theatrical Looker On at the Birmingham Theatres*:

'In the Dress Boxes we had a happy mixture of fish, flesh and fowl - the fish woman, butcher and poulterer - the thief with one hand on the crimson cushion of the Box, and the other in the hand of his neighbour's pocket - gin, water or the mixture, running down from the upper to the lower Boxes, plentifully supplying all empty hats - more oaths than Babel ever knew, and no places but Birmingham could utter...'

Richard Yates was poached from the King Street Theatre in order to run the Theatre Royal, along with the theatre's top designer, Mr Columba, much to the annoyance of the owners of King Street. Yates had a national reputation as a performer of low comic characters rather

than great tragic parts. At Drury Lane, in London, he became the definitive player of characters like Touchstone in *As You Like It* and the Fool in *King Lear*, in which he starred alongside David Garrick.

Yates accessibility and reputation as a comic actor made him popular with the public; along with his skill as a theatre manager, the audiences which had attended King Street switched their allegiances to the New Street Theatre (once they reduced their ticket prices!). In 1780, the King Street Theatre closed its doors for the last time, and, like Moor Street, became a Methodist chapel.

In his *History of Birmingham* (1809), Hutton wrote: 'Methodism still trod upon the heels of the players, for in 1780, the spirit of the stage drooping, the itinerant preacher took possession of the theatre in King Street.'

The idea of performance, permeates both the theatre and the church, and occasionally, both spaces have informed and inspired each other; Birmingham is a prime example of this. One thinks of George Dawson and the extraordinary impact of his sermons on the people and his power as an orator. Drawn by his reputation, the actor, George Rignold attended Dawson's sermons to learn from his style and impact as an orator, and George Dawson himself, of course, as well as being a preacher was a disciple of Shakespeare.

Birmingham theatre critic and dramatist, T. Edgar Pemberton wrote of Rignold's improvement as a performer and one wonders how much of this was down to what he learned from Dawson:

His voice is singularly rich in tone, his face is curiously mobile, his action is graceful and effective... He positively stilled his audience into a death-like silence as he developed the character he played. He looked, and spoke, and walked like life itself... He has got rid of the somewhat dragging style in which he used to speak... Mr Rignold has made such marked advance in his art since he first appeared among us, that he is fairly entitled to be ranked not merely among the promising but even the foremost players of our time.

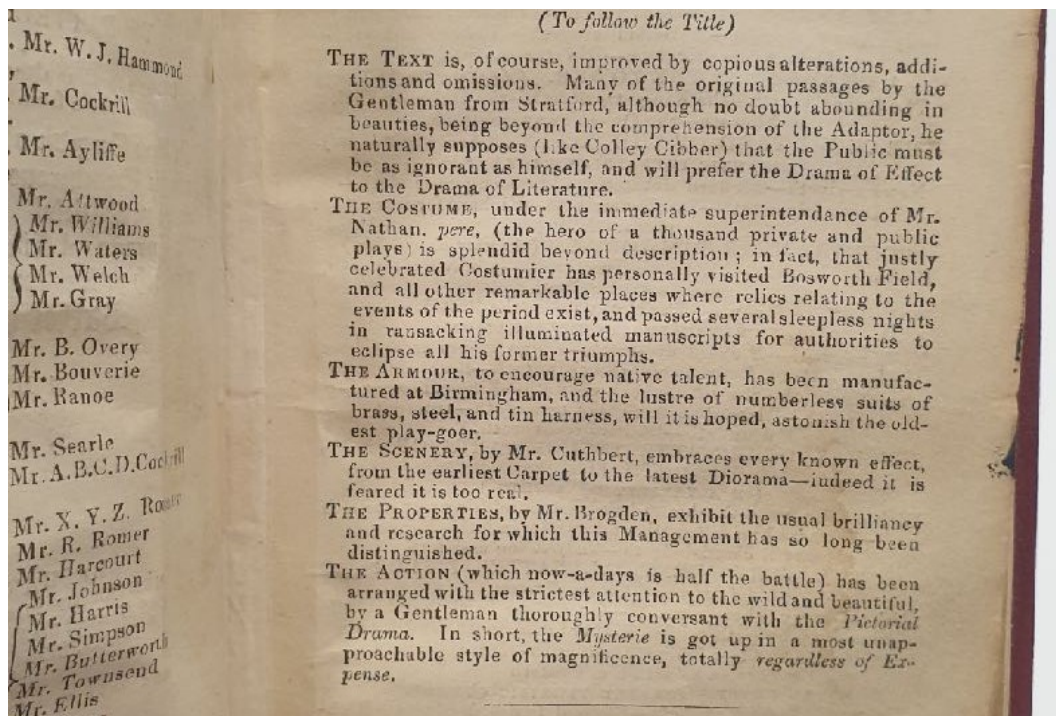


George Rignold as *Henry V*, 1877

In the Shakespeare Collection there is a wonderful collection of prompt books, the documents used by Stage Managers to record and manage exactly what happens on stage in each act and scene. Many of these prompt books were published specifically for performances by the chain of theatres designated as Theatre Royal.

Birmingham's reputation as the workshop of the world gets a well-earned but cheeky nod in the prompt book for the Shakespeare travestie, *Kinge Richard III Ye Third: or, Ye Battel of Bosworth Field - a merry mystery* in one act, (1844). The notes, comic in tone, point to the theatre's prevailing Victorian trend for historic realism in costume and scenery; 'indeed it is feared too real.' Part of that realism is attributed to the reputation of Birmingham as the workshop of the world:

THE ARMOUR, to encourage native talent, has been manufactured at Birmingham, and the lustre of numberless suits of brass, steel, and tin harness, will it is hoped, astonish the oldest play-goer.



Description of humorous playbill notes to accompany performances of the play *Kinge Richard Ye Third* (originally performed in 1834)

In Andrew Murphy's book *Shakespeare for the People*, he looks at the working class relationship with Shakespeare. One of the examples he uses is that of Tom Mann, a lathe operator in a Birmingham factory, who was introduced to Shakespeare by the man on the machine next to him, a Scot named Jeffries. In his diary, Mann described how Jeffries' 'only recreation was to read Shakespeare, and books that dealt with Shakespeare, plus seeing every Shakespearian piece performed.' Mann's own interest in the Bard soon blossomed: ... my fellow workman impelled me to carefully read, mark and learn... I was never lonely so long as a volume of Shakespeare was available. Mann eventually moved to London and formed a Shakespeare Mutual Improvement Society, of which he was president. That 'native talent' referred to in the prompt book were also, occasionally, students of Shakespeare.

The Theatre Royal thrived during the Victorian period, bringing Shakespeare to the people, and after two fires, and one demolition, the final fourth theatre building was erected in 1904. The only pieces left of the Theatre Royal built in 1820 and demolished in 1902 resides in the collections; stone reliefs of Shakespeare and Garrick.

In 1956 it closed its door for the last time. Into the new century, the Birmingham Rep would come into ascendance with Shakespearean innovators Barry Jackson and John Drinkwater, initially at the helm, heralding a new era for Birmingham made Shakespeare.



Stone reliefs of Garrick and Shakespeare, the only surviving pieces of the New Street Theatre Royal. Held in the Shakespeare Collection.

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

