

I

The search

In the spring of 1991 the Old Vic staged the London premiere of *Carmen Jones*, adapted by Oscar Hammerstein from Bizet's opera. It was the first time in its history that the Theatre had housed an 'open-ended run', as opposed to a limited season, short runs by a resident company, or even a number of productions alternating 'in repertoire'. It was also the most expensive undertaking, both actually and relatively, ever to have been mounted on that stage. Although *Faust* and *Carmen* were standbys of the Theatre when it began a hundred years earlier to put on 'opera in English', it is doubtful if Emma Cons, the moving force behind that enterprise, or her niece Lilian Baylis, on whom Miss Cons's mantle descended, would recognise Bizet's work in Hammerstein's adaptation. *Carmen Jones* transplants the scene from Seville to Carolina and Chicago, replaces bullfighting by heavyweight boxing, uses a cast of negro characters and supplies appropriate dialogue and lyrics, so that part of the Habanera becomes

You go for me and I'm taboo;
 But if you're hard to get, I go for you.

The Old Vic Theatre, in fact, as it approached the last quarter of its second century, was continuing that search for a new function, a new public, fresh fields to conquer, which has been its goal and its glory throughout its history.

Tracing that history also involves a search. In its various chapters and under its various names (the Coburg; the Victoria; the Royal Victoria Coffee-Tavern and Temperance Music Hall) the Old Vic has attracted the notice of many famous figures: it appears in the 'journals' of William Charles Macready, 'the Eminent Tragedian', and of Queen Victoria herself; in the fiction of Charles Kingsley and the journalism of Charles Dickens; in the dramatic criticism of William Hazlitt and the music

criticism of George Bernard Shaw. Some of these phases have been well documented, notably the career of the unique Lilian Baylis and the stirring years under Tyrone Guthrie's direction, when Charles Loughton, Edith Evans, Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson in turn led the Company. But other chapters are tantalisingly obscure, for example the ambition of the stage-struck tallow-chandler's son, Joseph Glossop, to make the Theatre a Bankside Drury Lane or even a La Scala, London. We know next to nothing of the entertainment which pioneering Emma Cons offered at her Temperance Music Hall. We can only guess how 'opera in English' was mounted in her day. We do not know what plays Lilian Baylis first staged when she finally obtained a full dramatic licence, as opposed to a music hall permit. We know the titles but next to nothing of the casts of the first Shakespeare plays staged at the Old Vic under her management. The search for answers to these and other questions has inspired the following account.

It has also influenced the proportions of that account. The three histories of the Old Vic published in the last fifty years are Edward Dent's *A Theatre for Everybody*; Harcourt Williams's *Old Vic Saga*; and Peter Roberts's *The Old Vic Story*. Of these writers, both Dent and Harcourt Williams contributed materially to the success of the Old Vic and were eyewitnesses of that marvellous transformation from obscure community centre to leading opera house and classical theatre which took place in the first quarter of the present century. Not surprisingly all three books concentrate on the Theatre's last hundred years. Its earlier history, crammed with variety and vicissitude, remained something of a mystery to their writers, and to their readers. It is therefore to the unravelling of that mystery that this account chiefly addresses itself, and while endeavouring to pay tribute to the achievements of the Theatre over the last half-century, does not examine them in the same detail as earlier historians have done.

There remains the relationship of the Old Vic Theatre and the Old Vic Company. While the worldwide renown of the Old Vic undoubtedly springs from the reputation of its Company, it operated only for fifty years, from 1914 to 1963, while the Theatre will celebrate its 175th birthday in 1993. Proportion alone suggests that a history of the Old Vic Theatre should not give more than a third of its space to the Old Vic Company which already has its historians in Harcourt Williams (*Four Years at the Old Vic*); Audrey Williamson (*Old Vic Drama 1934-1947*); and others. Moreover the years in which the National Theatre Company resided at the Old Vic (1963-76) have been amply documented in John

Elsom's and Nicholas Tomalin's *History of the National Theatre* and elsewhere. It may also be pertinent to record that for ten crucial years (1940–50) the Old Vic Company did not operate at the Old Vic Theatre, and that these years included the seasons at the New Theatre under the leadership of Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson. The brilliant success of those seasons and the prestige they won for the Company may be seen as complicating the function and compromising the future of the Old Vic Theatre by opening to question its suitability as the permanent home of the National Theatre.

The sources for an authoritative record of the Old Vic Company's most successful years and of the Old Vic Theatre's pre-eminence in London stage annals are not difficult to find. The search for the truth about the Theatre's fortunes outside this period is hazardous and exacting, but for that reason greatly rewarding. To seek the unknown is the challenge all searchers look for; to find an answer is the reward only given to some. To find all the answers is not within human capacity, but it is human nature's redeeming grace to persevere.

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Seeking a public

1816–1834

The site

For at least half of its history London's Old Vic Theatre served its own local public, the working-class community of Lambeth and Southwark. Indeed the name 'Old Vic', an affectionate version of the Royal Victoria, suggests a long-standing, intimate acquaintance. In the twenty-five years she ran the Theatre like a family, Lilian Baylis was given to calling her audience 'my people', thereby differentiating them from the wide theatre public. When towards the end of that time the new ideas and soaring standards of Tyrone Guthrie and others began to attract a wider section of support and interest, she viewed the development with suspicion. 'My people', she felt, could not be at ease sitting alongside strangers. So, in retrospect, historians have categorised the nineteenth-century Old Vic, in its various phases and under its various names, with the other Surrey-side theatres, notably Astley's and the Surrey itself, as 'transpontine' – across the bridge – and classified their strengths and weaknesses as shared, if not identical.

Certainly its beginnings point to such a common purpose. When in 1816 James Jones, lessee of the Surrey Theatre, and his creditor, James Dunn, were faced with an impossible rise in rent (from £220 to £4,200) by their ground landlord, Templeton West,¹ it was natural to retaliate by planning a rival theatre nearby, and to implement this challenge by taking much of the furnishings and fittings with them. Thomas Dibdin, their successor, confirms their plunder of the scenery, costumes and more solid fixtures.² But by seeking a third partner with more genteel, even Royal, associates, they opened up greater potential. Thomas Serres was Marine Painter to His Majesty, and it was presumably his standing that obtained the patronage of the Princess Charlotte, only child of the Prince of Wales (soon to succeed as George IV), and of her husband,

Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. This gesture was almost unprecedented: not since the days of the King's (Charles II) and Duke's (James II, then Duke of York) Men had Royalty conferred its name and protection on a theatrical enterprise. Even the select Theatre Royal, Haymarket, began life as an 'anti-establishment' house, repeatedly prosecuted and closed down. It owed its Royal patent not to artistic standing but as an act of redress to the actor-manager, Samuel Foote, crippled in a riding accident after a courtier's practical joke. The favour of the Prince and Princess of Saxe-Coburg therefore transformed Messrs Jones's and Dunn's riposte into an enterprise several classes above that of Astley's and the Surrey, or even of other unpatented house recently opened in Westminster, such as the Olympic and the Adelphi.

This distinction poses a large question as to the intentions of the Theatre's builders. At first glance their site must have looked unpromising for a 'quality' house: the sparsely populated Lambeth marshes, mostly worked as nursery-gardens. But seven years before 1816 when the Surrey magistrates granted these speculators a licence, the far grander speculation of a fourth bridge across the Thames had begun, ultimately named Waterloo Bridge in tribute to the victors over Napoleon. The new Theatre's location was therefore more accessible to central London than either of the existing Surrey-side houses, and in fact the Waterloo Bridge Company duly took a modest financial stake in this theatrical enterprise. Clearly they foresaw the new Coburg drawing much of its support from north of the river, and given that the site though soggy was undeveloped, may have envisaged further developments for pleasure-seekers. The southern approach to the bridge was built on land once known as Cupar's (or more happily Cupid's) Gardens, which offered concerts, fireworks and other summer diversions until closed in 1760. Several popular pleasure-gardens, like Vauxhall and Marylebone, provided entertainment, and one at least, Sadler's Wells, a playhouse.

If this was the vision of the Theatre's planners, it was not shared by the public, particularly by investors. An appeal for £12,000 drew little response; the appointment of an architect, Rudolph Cabanel, who had shared in the design of Drury Lane after its destruction by fire in 1809, was offset by difficulty in laying the foundations, ultimately solved with stone stripped from the site of the Savoy Palace in the Strand.³ At a more exalted level the death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte in November 1817 robbed the project of its patroness. The Prince of Saxe-Coburg remained the justification for its name and prestige, but he was now a

Prince without a Consort, and his prospects blighted. Even before this set-back work on the building had been suspended for lack of funds, and the whole enterprise was only rescued by the intervention of a family far less distinguished than their Royal and Serene Highnesses, but ultimately much more influential in the early years of the theatre: the wealthy tallow-chandler Francis Glossop, and his stage-struck son, Joseph.

Their interest in the theatre world had found practical expression long before the building of the Coburg. Francis Glossop, so his son asserted, came to Sheridan's aid when Drury Lane was burnt down in 1809, and found him £13,600 to pay the company's expenses when they took refuge at the Haymarket.⁴ Joseph Glossop owned a share in the East London Theatre at the time he rescued the Coburg, and transferred some of its staff, notably the young scenic artist Clarkson Stanfield, to his new house. More importantly he made repeated attempts to acquire authority in the patent theatres during the early 1820s, offering to buy a share of the Haymarket and entering into protracted negotiations with Elliston to become joint lessee of Drury Lane.⁵ Clearly his ambitions stretched beyond a transpontine house. At the end of 1822 he left the country under mysterious circumstances and for the next ten years was active in several Continental opera houses, his name being associated with both La Scala, Milan, and the San Carlos, Naples. He was married to the singer, Elizabeth Feron, and he undoubtedly helped to launch Michael Balfe as a theatrical composer at Milan.⁶ Could he have dreamt of the Coburg flowering into an English Versailles or Schönbrunn? He certainly saw it as a step towards a more exalted sphere.

The building

The laying of the foundation stone on 14 September 1816 'by His Serene Highness the Prince of Saxe-Coburg and Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte of Wales' (but in fact by a proxy, Alderman Goodbehere) was to be the ill-fated Princess's only association with the Theatre that bore her husband's name for its first fifteen years. Happily the stone, though moved to the Webber Street side, survived when its patroness did not. The building proceeded less than smoothly, with the workmen striking for their wages and the Glossops obliged to inject further funds on two occasions. When it did open, on Whit Monday, 11 May 1818, it was still only equipped as a 'summer theatre', though this would not necessarily conflict with the notion of the Coburg as the focus of some newly laid-out pleasure-gardens. In the event it was decided that

autumn to install heating and more comfortable seats, providing theatrical entertainment all the year round.⁷

The nineteenth-century reputation of the Old Vic suggests a huge barracks of a house, packed to suffocation with the simplest of spectators, but this was certainly not the architect's original concept. Cabanel had worked on alterations to the Surrey and Drury Lane, but his lasting legacy to the Coburg seems to have been solidity rather than size. Some of his roof trusses survive, and of the three London theatres built between 1810 and 1820 (Drury Lane, the Old Vic and the Haymarket) which still stand, the exterior of the Old Vic is the least changed. Serres, the Royal link in the enterprise, seems to have concentrated on its internal decoration, his *chef d'œuvre* being the Marine Saloon. Most contemporary accounts stress the intimacy and refinement of the theatre and its fittings. A first night reporter claimed:

It is not too large, and yet will hold more company, we should think, than could get into the Little Theatre, Haymarket.⁸

– a significant comparison since the Haymarket in question was the eighteenth-century house, replaced in 1820 by the building which survives today. When the future Queen Victoria paid her only visit to the Theatre then bearing her name, on 27 November 1833, she noted: 'It is a very clean and pretty little theatre, and the box we were in was very comfortable.'⁹ Even unfriendly witnesses testified to its attractions. Henry Crabb Robinson, a diarist of the period who mostly lived up to his second given name, found it 'a very pretty suburban playhouse, not so large, but a fit match for the Paris suburban theatres'.¹⁰

The size and capacity have been the subject of greatly varying estimates. When George Davidge, at that time lessee, gave evidence before the House of Commons Select Committee on Dramatic Literature in 1832 he claimed the Theatre held 'near 4,000',¹¹ a figure that startled the Chairman, Bulwer-Lytton, into asking for particulars. Davidge's answers, though detailed, were devious. He quoted the maximum figures for different parts of the house, but recorded at widely separated dates e.g.

Boxes	1,230	[1 August 1828]
Pit	1,090	[17 December 1824]
Gallery	1,512	[27 December 1830]

Given the opening night prices (Boxes 3/- and 4/-; Pit 2/-; Gallery 1/-) Davidge's figures indicate a full house earning £435. On the other hand

Thomas Allen in his *History of Surrey* (1829) claimed: 'The house holds three hundred and twenty five pounds.'¹² The truth was probably that the capacity was limited only by the public's willingness to be squeezed into the space available. All accounts agree, however, on the size and equipment of the stage. Allen's dimensions: width 32 feet, depth 94 feet, give an area of 3,008 square feet (compared with Drury Lane's present 6,400), and Davidge pointed out to the Committee that the horseshoe design of the theatre brought all parts of the house close to the stage, providing an intimacy not attainable in the amphitheatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The first night reporter already quoted adds: 'The audience are not here contained in an illuminated Wilderness of a Theatre, where Pantomimes, Melodramas and Shrieking Tragedies alone succeed', and pinpoints the management's dilemma by commenting: 'We could not help lamenting that on such a stage the regular drama cannot be displayed.' The Coburg, which could have offered Shakespeare and Sheridan, was to be barred as a 'minor' theatre from doing so.

The patrons

In seeking and obtaining the patronage of Prince Leopold and Princess Charlotte, the promoters of the theatre clearly hoped for Royal and courtly attendance at their performances. In its early years these hopes were regularly fulfilled, although Prince Leopold himself, in his lonely exile at Claremont House, seems to have shown little interest in 'his' Theatre. More than a year after its opening he attended a performance of the topical and spectacular *North Pole* (to which Clarkson Stanfield's designs contributed greatly), and a subsequent bill speaks of 'the Royal Visitor's most flattering appearance'.¹³ He made a second – and apparently final – appearance on 15 May 1820 to see Booth in *The Horatii and the Curatii*, and there may be a touch of irony in the announcement that the performance will be given 'under the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, who will on this Occasion Honour the Theatre with his Rare Presence'. Certainly the proud boast of the opening night: 'Under the immediate patronage of His Royal Highness' had been modified to 'Under the patronage' by the start of the winter season, in November 1818, and presently disappeared altogether.

But if Leopold stayed away, other members of the Royal family proved more attentive. Prominent among these were the Duke and Duchess of Kent, whose daughter Victoria was only six weeks old when they first graced the Coburg on 14 August 1819. Two months later they returned for a performance in aid of 'the Royal Coburg Theatrical

Fund', a bold but short-lived attempt to rival the patent theatres in providing pensions for members of the company. Within three months of that visit the Duke had died, leaving his daughter, still less than a year old, a likely heir to the throne. Nevertheless the Duchess came alone during the week of 18 September 1820, precipitating a change of bill 'from motives of delicacy', *Mary Queen of Scots* (not the most tactful of Royal offerings) being replaced by *The Vampire*, apparently a thoroughly safe choice.

There were also diplomatic embassies: Prince Esterhazy, the Austrian ambassador, and his Princess, graced the Theatre in November 1820 and again in March 1823; the Spanish Ambassador was 'expected' on 3 March 1823 to see *The Spanish Patriots*, and the 'Greek Committee' were positively present on 24 November 1823 (at the height of the struggle for Greek independence) for *Lazarana; or the Archon's Daughter*. Another mark of distinction the Coburg enjoyed in these years was its use for charitable benefits under Royal patronage: George IV was the patron of the Royal General Dispensary and the Dispensary for Children, both of which profited by performances in 1822, and the Duke of Sussex presided over the Philanthropic Institution, which benefited by the proceeds on 4 June 1821, and the Distressed Letter and Press Printers Fund, to which a performance as late as September 1826 was devoted. Members of the aristocracy were regular patrons: an early offering, *Wallace, the Hero of Scotland*, was given on 10 June 1818 'by desire of the Duchess of Wellington', and the last night of the winter 1819–20 season was 'under the Patronage of Lady Caroline Lamb' (wife of the future Lord Melbourne but then more intimately associated with the present Lord Byron) 'and several Other Persons of Distinction'.

The most sensational Royal visit was that of the reckless and ill-fated Queen Caroline on 26 June 1821. George IV's efforts to divorce her by Act of Parliament having failed, she determined to attend his Coronation, fixed for 19 July 1821. Her visit to the Coburg (where she saw *Marguerite; or The Distressed Mother*) was evidently part of her campaign to achieve popular support before presenting herself at Westminster Abbey three weeks later. It happened to follow a bitter dispute between Joseph Glossop, proprietor of the Coburg, and James Winston, the Drury Lane acting manager, which came to a head during a Command Performance there on 9 May. Winston ejected a servant of Glossop's who, he believed, was sent to create a disturbance, and abused Glossop, as 'the lamplighter's boy', referring to his father's trade as a tallow-chandler.¹⁴ The editors of Winston's *Diaries* believe Glossop to have been 'a noted Queen's man', but this seems unlikely in view of his

position as Clerk of the Cheque in the King's Household. Next day Glossop waited for Winston outside Drury Lane and horsewhipped him, resulting in his prosecution and payment to Winston of £150 damages (which he donated to the Drury Lane fund). In fact public life during the summer of 1821 proved more melodramatic than anything the Coburg could offer on stage: the Queen's foray to Westminster Abbey on Coronation Day was repulsed, and within a month she died suddenly (poisoned, so her friends alleged, during a visit to Drury Lane).

Royal visits and aristocratic patronage do not necessarily indicate regular support of the Coburg by the well-to-do, but some evidence does survive of attendance in these early years by a fashionable public. The playbills regularly mention booking agencies at such smart addresses as '182 Piccadilly, opposite Burlington House' and 'Mr Samm's Library, St James's Street, Corner of Pall Mall'. There are also indications that the fashionable used them. When the journalist E. L. Blanchard contributed an article on 'The Victoria Theatre' to *The Era Almanack* for 1873, he was able to cite receipts for the summer 1821 season, which included:

week ending 5 May	£312 19s. od.
12 May	£404 3s. od.
19 May	£354 8s. 6d.
26 May	£402 4s. od.
16 June	£523 4s. 6d.

On the night of Monday 21 May alone the theatre took £152 2s. 6d. Blanchard found these 'very large sums',¹⁵ and the figures certainly indicate consistent support.

One of the most damaging (because widely quoted) accounts of the Coburg audience in this period is contained in Hazlitt's essay 'The Minor Theatres', contributed to *The London Magazine* in March 1820. He evidently visited the theatre in the last week of January and saw J. B. Booth in *Lucius Junius Brutus*, but did not like what he saw, either on the stage or in the audience:

The play was indifferent, but that was nothing. The acting was bad, but that was nothing. The audience was low, but that was nothing. It was the heartless indifference and contempt shown by the performers for their parts and by the audience for the players and the play, that disgusted us with all of them . . .

The genius of St George's Fields prevailed, and you felt yourself in a