

PLAYBILL

{ A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEATRE IN DONCASTER }

On the occasion of the 250th Anniversary of the opening of The Theatre Royal }

With the American Revolution in full swing on the other side of the Atlantic, and James Watt kick-starting the Industrial Revolution in England with the successful commercialisation of his efficient steam engine, 1776 was a year of great changes. In Doncaster this change came in the form of a brand new theatre.

In 1774 a row of tenements at the entrance to Scot Lane were demolishezd to make way for the erection of Doncaster's first purpose-built public theatre. Designed by local architect William Lindley, the first stone was laid on April 28th, 1775. On Monday September 23rd, 1776 — the same year that the St Leger Stakes was founded — the doors officially opened on a majestic structure which stood opposite the Woolpack Hotel and the Red Lion Inn. The ground floor housed a row of shops, with the upper floor housing a theatre with a rectangular auditorium typical of the time.

A long-time friend of Anthony St Leger, the York theatre producer Tate Wilkinson, opened the theatre with two popular comedies, *The Rivals* and *The Citizen*, thus establishing the new Doncaster theatre as part of Wilkinson's 'York circuit', which included theatres at York, Hull, Leeds and Wakefield. Being on the 'circuit' meant that you could attract performers who would not usually appear at provincial theatres, such as the famous tragic actress Sarah Siddons of the Siddons acting dynasty who appeared at the Doncaster theatre during Race Week in 1779 in a production of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*.

The theatre continued to be a major attraction into the 19th Century. In 1827 the Duke and Duchess of St Albans attended a performance of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. In 1835 the theatre, which had simply been known as 'Theatre, Doncaster', was renamed The Theatre Royal when Princess Victoria and her mother stayed at Wentworth House for part of Race Week. W.J. Hammond, the theatre manager, suggested that the renaming was due to their patronage of a performance on September 18th, but there is no evidence to show whether they actually attended the show.

Despite the new name, this was an era of decline for the theatre. People's tastes were changing,

opera and virtuoso performances were more popular. In 1833 Hammond had lost a lot of his audience to the Concert Room on East Laith Gate when the world-famous violinist Niccolo Paganini played as part of their *Grand Concert*.



The Theatre Royal, from an illustration by Colin Walton, adapted from his 1980 book, *The Changing Face of Doncaster*.

The theatrics of the audience were as notable as Paganini's performance as Darwin Cooke of Averly Hall arrived at the Concert Room with a large entourage of young ladies only to find that the front row of seats were already full. He dragged a bench from the back of the room to the front. Unfortunately he placed it in front of the richest man in Doncaster, Edmund Beckett-Denison, who would go on to design the clock mechanism for Big Ben and bring the railways to our town. Edmund proceeded to tell the younger man exactly what he thought of his behaviour. After being publicly humiliated by Becket-Denison, Darwin Cooke sent a letter demanding satisfaction. Thankfully, for Donny rail enthusiasts and lovers of Big Ben, Lord Warncliffe mediated a settlement before things could escalate into a duel.

By the mid 19th Century theatres would offer random combinations of Shakespeare and performing dogs just to get bums on seats. By the time things began to change in the 1870s The Theatre Royal itself was 100 years old and would lose out to venues like the Guild Hall and the Corn Exchange. In 1885 an innovative new venue opened on Station Road. The Circus, as the name suggests, was a permanent circus with a circle, pit, theatre and gallery which could host both theatrical plays and actual circuses, and even

horseback dramas such as *Dick Turpin's Ride to York* which were a combination of both. In retaliation the Theatre Royal got a Japanese-style face-lift and was re-Christened the New Theatre Royal. But even when the Circus began to be used for services by Salvation Army, the fortunes (and quality of performances) of the New Theatre Royal did not improve. In 1894 it became the Royal Opera House only to see the Circus transformed in 1895 with a new stage and seats, and renamed the People's Empire Palace.

In 1896 John William Chapman, the lessee of the Royal Opera House also leased the Empire Palace with the option to purchase it. The Empire Palace became the first place to show a moving picture in Doncaster, while the Royal Opera House was seen as an unprofitable eyesore. Chapman formed a company called the Grand Theatre and Opera House and in July 1898 he demolished the Empire Palace. Whilst he built a new theatre in its place he ran shows at the Royal Opera House. On 25th March 1899 the Royal held its final show, *Behind a Mask* and two days later the Grand Theatre and Opera House (now tucked away in the corner of the Frenchgate centre next to Sainsbury's) opened with *La Poupee*, one of the most popular musicals of the day.

The Grand was state of the art. Like its predecessors, it was designed to host touring productions. As well as plays and musicals, the theatre would also offer seasonal pantomime and variety acts. In 1909, after a meeting at the Glynn Hotel, next door to the Grand, The Doncaster Amateur Operatic Society (DAOS) was founded and in 1910 they hired the Grand for their first performance, a six-night run of Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*. As Doncaster's longest running society, DAOS would give birth to The Phoenix Theatre Company Doncaster and would itself eventually be rebranded Doncaster Stage Productions in 2016.

With the demolition of the Royal in 1900, the Grand was the only theatre venue in town until the Palace Theatre of Varieties opened on Silver Street on August 28th, 1911. Within a year of the Palace's opening, Palace Theatre (Doncaster) Ltd also took tenure of the Grand, which was

Cast would like to acknowledge the incredible talent of performing artists in Doncaster. Thank you to our many wonderful dance schools, drama academies, music schools and clubs, live music nights, gig venues, theatres, cinemas, comedy clubs, festivals, pop-ups and creative happenings. Big love to all of our actors, musicians, street performers, dancers, singers, set-designers, writers, dramaturgs, drag artists, producers, directors, sound and lighting technicians, buskers and hard-working box office and hospitality crews. You're awesome.

relaunched in April 1912 as the Grand Picture House, although its conversion to a cinema was short-lived and it soon reverted to putting on live shows. The Palace itself was converted into a cinema in 1920, opening with the French silent drama *J'Accuse*, a powerful testament against the folly of war.

While the story of theatre in Doncaster town is central to this history, theatrical life has always extended far beyond the town centre. Across the wider borough, audiences have gathered in theatres, cinemas, ballrooms and community venues to experience live performance, music, variety and film. From the Phoenix Theatre in Bawtry and the Empress Ballroom in Mexborough (who famously turned down a £25 booking to host The Beatles in 1962), to the Empire Palace in Denaby, Fieldside Cinema in Thorne, the Globe in Conisbrough, the Coliseum in Bentley, and picture houses in Askern and Woodlands, as well as the Savoy in Stainforth, these venues formed an important part of the cultural life of their communities. Together, they remind us that Doncaster's theatrical history is not confined to a handful of buildings in the town centre, but is a story of performance, entertainment and shared experiences woven throughout the communities that make up the borough.

Forty years prior to the snubbing of The Beatles, in June 1922, a sports hall in the Waterdale area of the town was relaunched as the Arcadia. With splendid 'Kremlin' style domes at the entrance to a building whose lower walls could be removed to provide an 'open-air' feel, it entertained people with concert parties, Pierrot shows, films and dramas akin to those at the Grand, but of a finer character. The Grand itself had another revamp in 1931, with the removal of the cinema equipment and the development of a new booking hall, re-opening to *London Revels*, an Archie Pitt revue. In 1934 the Gaumont Cinema opened on Hall Gate. This 2000 seater Art

Deco venue would also be used for live shows and music, playing host to acts like Buddy Holly, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. The building included a beautiful frieze designed by the sculptor Newbury Abbot Trent, which is now on display outside Cast on Sir Nigel Gresley Square.

Illustrations Amedee Forestier, 1887 © Public Domain

In 1947, the same year a young Harry Secombe played at the Grand, both the Grand and the Palace were acquired by the Essoldo company. This was the era of the national Civic Theatre movement, with its emphasis on making the arts accessible and community driven, as opposed to a solely profit motivated exercise, and in 1948 the Doncaster Education Committee announced their intention to purchase the Arcadia to these ends. In March 1949 the Arcadia became The Arts Centre, which as well as hosting professional shows, put on eighteen amateur productions in its first year and hosted the *Youth Drama Festival*.

The Grand closed as a live theatre in 1958 and was re-launched, once again, as a cinema by the Essolodo company. In 1959 it became an innovative 'news theatre' which provided a ninety minute programme of news and cartoons, only to close its doors again in 1960. Despite the Doncaster Operatic Society urging the Doncaster corporation to purchase the Grand for the benefit of the town as it had done with the Arcadia, the Grand would become, as many live theatres became during that era, a bingo hall in 1961. In 1978 the stage was refurbished to once again host live shows, but the Grand was nearly lost in 1994 when the bingo hall closed and the new owners applied to demolish the building. The Grand Theatre Restoration group fought to protect the building and the Friends of the Grand have ensured that it has remained an important issue in the minds of Doncaster residents. At the time of writing the Grand is undergoing a feasibility plan ahead of renovation work.

Unfortunately The Friends of Doncaster Odeon (the Gaumont had become an Odeon in 1987) and The Theatres Trust were not successful in their bid to get the lovely Art Deco building listed, and so the Odeon was demolished by Lazurus Properties to make way for a car park in 2009.

As part of the Civic Theatres movement, The Arts Centre was closely associated with the theatre department of Doncaster College, who had been running drama courses since 1936 after seventeen local drama enthusiasts had requested them. The students of the college would form The College Repertory Players (The Rep), who would study at the college through the day and then perform their stagecraft in Doncaster's theatres.

WAITING IN THE WINGS

Follow the QR Code to the **Waiting In The Wings** exhibition page where you can enjoy Madaan Media's interviews with a host of Doncaster theatre companies.



At the height of The Rep's relationship with The Arts Centre they could run six-week long matinee performances with two alternating casts. Sometime in the 1970s, the Arts Centre was renamed Doncaster Civic Theatre and 'the Civic' would be the main fully dedicated theatre space in Doncaster until it was joined in March 1995 when the Doncaster Little Theatre (DLT) opened with a production of Terence Rattigan's three-act psychological drama, *The Deep Blue Sea*.

The DLT was born from the Doncaster Literary Society (LIT), which, like the Rep, had also begun in the 1930s. The LIT had operated out of church halls until they purchased an old tile factory on King Street, off East Laith Gate, and converted it into a theatre space. By the time the Little Theatre officially opened in March 1995, the LIT had transformed into the DLT. Offering 12 of its own theatrical performances a year from a building which many Doncastrians have yet to visit, it is very much a 'hidden gem'. The theatre's Young LIT group has been a point of entry for many young people in Doncaster who want to learn the many aspects of stagecraft, from acting, to lighting, to set design. The smaller, more intimate stage and affordable access is perfect for both smaller production companies who lack resources, and for larger companies to freely develop works without a large financial risk.

After giving pantomime goers the time of their lives with performances from famed actors such as Ken Dodd, Duncan Norvelle and Louis Emerick, The Civic Theatre came to the end of its life in 2013, but its theatrical heritage now lives on in the shape of Cast in Waterdale. Cast, a £22million ultra-modern theatre designed by Suzie Bridges with 620 seat and 200 seat performance spaces, was officially opened on September 6th, 2013 with performances of *A Cast of Thousands* (created especially for the opening and performed outside Cast) and Richard Cameron's *The Glee Club*. As with their predecessors, Cast is supporting amateur companies, students, and rising artists to help keep the vibrant world of Doncaster theatre alive. They present a diverse bill of professional touring performances — theatre, dance, cabaret, comedy, music, etc. — which echoes and honours the wide variety of work which has been enjoyed in Doncaster's venues over the last 250 years.

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