

History Report for January 2023

After our annual December 'bring an object or memory' session, which as always produced a most varied and interesting selection, January saw Marilyn Anderson talk to us on 'The History of the Theatre'.

Marilyn began in the ancient world and introduced us to her topic with a modern photograph of the celebrated Roman theatre at St Albans (Verulamium). She went on to describe this structure aided by a most helpful reconstruction drawing. This set the tone for all that followed: clear concise detail enhanced by a series of well-selected slides. After briefly backtracking to consider the Greek influence on the Roman theatre she then spoke about the wearing of masks to represent character in the classical theatre; again the point was well emphasised by showing us a particularly appropriate trio of surviving masks.

We then moved quickly through the dark ages, when it is believed that itinerant minstrels performed what little drama survived, before the evolving church entered the story, adding a very brief dramatic exchange (possibly lasting only a few seconds) known as 'Quem Quaeritis' ('whom do you seek?') to its Easter Mass in the 10th century. From this small beginning genuine religious drama grew. Marilyn showed us a cross-section of Southwell Minster where raised platforms representing 'Galilee' (and of course 'Heaven' and 'Hell') were introduced to provide entertainment (at first in Latin) for the congregation. Interest grew and by 1210 lack of space had driven such performances outside, while the clergy began to lose some of their control, so that the 'mystery plays' which came into fashion mixed religious themes with episodes from daily life. Comedy too crept in and we were introduced to 'the Squib' (a sort of early banger introduced with great peril, one imagines, into parts of the actors' bodies), as well as fire-breathing masks. As plots became more sophisticated, the mystery plays went out of fashion, initially being replaced by morality plays featuring fast plots with full storylines showing the triumph of good over evil, which guaranteed the approval of the church. This phase was abruptly terminated by the accession of Elizabeth I in the 16th century.

Yet the years of Elizabeth's reign saw the golden age of theatre and drama with the erection of the first permanent theatres since Roman days: these were confined to London. 1576 saw the opening of 'The Theatre' at Shoreditch where a troupe called 'The Chamberlain's Men' performed the plays of Marlowe and a young newcomer, William Shakespeare. By 1597 the first indoor theatre had followed at Blackfriars, lit by candles and with costumes supplied by the aristocracy. Actors were versatile, being required to sing, dance and play instruments as well as follow their scripts. The accession of James I saw the doubling of the numbers of performances at court (with plays such as 'Macbeth' pandering to the new king's love of mysterious themes) but the arrival of the Puritans in 1642 again brought such frivolity to a halt. From 1660 however, the Restoration under Charles II led to bigger theatres and revolutionary changes like the first use of female actors – Nell Gwyn with her royal connections becoming the most famous. By 1705 provincial theatres were appearing with plays that often acted as royalist propaganda, although these gave way in time to largely non-political comedies of manners.

As will be becoming apparent Marilyn drew an inextricable link between the development of the theatre and the politics of each era. In 1737 Walpole established government censorship; then came the use of prologues to curry favour with the audience, the emergence of star actors like David Garrick and Sarah Siddons and, by about 1800, the establishment of professional companies. Here we stopped allowing 20 minutes of animated discussion among the large audience who had been royally entertained by a first-rate presentation. Many thanks again Marilyn (and assistant Wallace for the fine accompanying slides!).

Tim Meacham. January 2022.