



LOV200

Celebrating the 200th anniversary of London Old Vic.

LOV200: celebrating 200 years of London Old Vic

11 May 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the first public performance at the London Old Vic. This exhibition celebrates this occasion with a selection of items from the London Old Vic Archive and other items from the Theatre Collection's holdings. We highlight some key aspects of the Old Vic's history, including the Old Vic's particular association with Shakespeare, the foundation of the Vic-Wells ballet, and two of the key personalities associated with the Old Vic: Emma Cons and Lilian Baylis.

The Royal Coburg, The Royal Victoria and The Old Vic

In 1818, the Royal Coburg Theatre was opened, built to take advantage of the new Waterloo Bridge. One of the partners, John Serres, was marine painter to the King, and he was able to gain the patronage of His Serene Highness Leopold, Prince of Saxe-Coburg, and his wife Princess Charlotte, the only child of the Prince Regent and heir presumptive to the British throne. The first night's programme ran for four hours, featuring a melodrama, *Trial by Battle*, a fairy pantomime, and *Midnight Revelry*, a harlequinade.

One early attraction was the famous looking-glass curtain. This was made of 63 mirrors assembled in a gold frame but was almost immediately covered in finger-marks and next to impossible to clean. It weighed five tons and was suspended from the roof, and soon had to be removed for fear it would cause the building to collapse. The first night it was lowered to great applause, but after three or four minutes a voice from the gallery called out: 'That's all very well. Now show us summut else.'

Wall above Case 1:

1. Playbill for programme at the Royal Coburg Theatre, including the melodramatic spectacle of *Trial by Battle; or, Heaven Defend the Right*, a 'Grand Asiatic Ballet', and *Manfredi, The Mysterious Hermit!*, a melodrama. (OVSB/7)
2. Engraving of the auditorium of the Royal Coburg, illustrating the audience reflected in the looking-glass curtain. (TCP/T/101)

Case 1

3. Engraving of the Royal Cobourg Theatre, Surrey on its opening night. The style of the auditorium followed the Georgian theatre building tradition of simple pit benches and rows of boxes. Note the slight change in the spelling of the theatre name. (TCP/T/8)
4. Coloured engraving of the exterior of the theatre in 1826. (TCP/T/114)
5. Tinsel print of Mr Blanchard in *Trial by Battle*, arguably the theatre's first leading man! See playbill above the case. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/1)
6. Fragment of the original looking-glass curtain. (OV/M/236)
7. Playbill dated 20 December 1821. (OVP/71/30)

The theatre did not have a royal license (unlike the Theatres Royal at Covent Garden and Drury Lane) and was therefore one of the 'illegitimate' theatres of the early nineteenth century. This meant that until 1843, the management were not licensed to stage dramas.

There were many ways to circumvent the restrictions and 'burlettas' were plays interspersed with spectacle, music and dance to avoid being classed as 'drama'. Not only was the glass curtain promoted here but also the stage machinery capable of creating spectacular effects such as the 'torrents of fire' and dioramic scenery that could show different light effects (such as the 'progress of evening and change to Moonlight').

In 1833, the lease of the Coburg was sold to Daniel Egerton and William Abbott. By this time, the Coburg name had ceased to have much meaning and the new proprietors, having secured the patronage of the Duchess of Kent, the mother of the future Queen Victoria, renamed the theatre 'The Royal Victoria'. The theatre name underwent various changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the adoption of 'Old Vic' in the late 1870s.

8. Handbill for the Victoria Palace, 1872 (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12).

In 1871, the old stage and auditorium had been stripped out and sold at auction, and a new theatre erected between the original side walls and under the original roof. The new auditorium of the renamed Royal Victoria Palace was judged a success, described by the Daily News as the most magnificent in the world.

Case 2: Emma Cons and Lilian Baylis

In the nineteenth century, concerns about the moral health of and available entertainments for the working classes led to an increase in temperance societies. In 1879, the Coffee Tavern Music Hall Company bought the lease of the Old Vic. They, and in particular, their honorary secretary, Emma Cons, were interested in the building not as a theatre but as a venue where non-alcoholic beverages and wholesome food could be provided alongside 'improving' entertainment.

Emma Cons was deeply religious and an active social reformer, having previously worked with Octavia Hill to build houses for the poor. In 1880 she took up her role as manager of the new Royal Victoria Hall and Coffee Tavern and the building reopened on Boxing Day that year as a temperance music hall where penny readings, lectures and carefully selected variety entertainments were programmed, in the hope of drawing the local working class population away from the pubs and the songs and innuendo of the standard music halls.

Top shelf: Emma Cons

9. Pencil sketch and watercolour and ink design for stained glass by Emma Cons. (OVEC/279)
10. Programme for the Victoria Coffee Music Hall, 1881. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12)
11. Miniature of Emma Cons. (OVLB/436)
12. Photograph of Emma Cons. (OVEC/258)
13. Bible given to Lilian Baylis by Emma Cons. (OVLB/420)
14. Handbill for ballad concerts, 1881. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12)

15. Press cutting from Illustrated London News with illustrations of the Victoria Coffee Music Hall. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/1)

Middle shelf: Lilian Baylis

Lilian Baylis was Emma Cons's niece, and was at the Old Vic on Emma Cons' first night. Her mother and father were musicians, and Lilian toured with them, performing ballads and scenes from operettas at their concerts and playing the violin and banjo. In 1889 the family formed a group called the Gipsy Revellers and two years later, when Lilian was 17, set out for a tour of South Africa.

16. Programme for Konss-Baylis Family featuring the Gipsy Revellers (OVEC/17)

17 Programme for the Gipsy Revellers featuring photograph. Lilian Baylis is second from right on the back row. (OVEC/11/9)

In 1897 Lilian had to have a kidney operation. The Konss-Baylis family were still in South Africa and Emma Cons offered to pay Lilian's fare to London so she could recuperate in England. Within a year she was being employed to assist her aunt to run the Old Vic. Although she was able to introduce certain innovations, such as moving pictures from 1901, she was unable to convince her aunt to apply for the theatre licence that was required to put on plays and operas in their entirety. Two months after Emma Cons's death in 1912, Lilian was able to achieve her long term ambition and secure a theatre licence for the Old Vic.

18. Reverse of programme for Carmen advertising lectures and talks at Morley College and animated pictures. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12)

19. Reverse of programme for Henry V advertising upcoming

Shakespeare and Classical plays and popular illustrated lectures.
(MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/13)

Lilian Baylis was very fond of her dogs, Scamp and Sue, who would often accompany her at the theatre, Laurence Olivier joked that they were trained to go for the ankles of anyone asking for a payrise!

20. Photograph of Lilian Baylis with her dogs. (OVLB/380)

21. Lilian Baylis's favourite Liberty silk scarf. (OVLB/370)

22. Lilian Baylis's diary for the year 1932. (MM/2/PE/PR/LB)

23. Lilian Baylis's horn-rimmed spectacles. (OVLB/422)

In 1924, Lilian Baylis was awarded an honorary MA at Oxford, the first woman to be so honoured other than the Queen. After this she wore her Master's cap, gown and hood at first nights, last nights and gala performances, and always signed MA (Oxon.) after her name.

24. Letter to Lilian Baylis from Sybil Thorndike, congratulating her on the award of her MA. (OV/LB/307)

The letter reads:

Lilian darling,

We are delighted at your honour—the 1st the stage has received from one of the great universities—& that It should be you is still more thrilling[?] to us all.

Bless you darling. I'm thinking such a lot about you - working on St Joan - she's so like you...

25 Photograph of Lilian Baylis in her Master's cap, gown and hood, by Angus McBean. (OVLB/379)

Bottom shelf: Shakespeare at London Old Vic

The Old Vic received its theatrical licence in 1912. Bayliss was passionate about spreading the enjoyment of opera to the local Lambeth community, and made it accessible by singing in English and keeping ticket prices affordable, staging two or three full operas a week. Plays did not begin to appear until March 1913, and initially drama was provided intermittently by visiting companies. Although the Old Vic became known as the home of Shakespeare in London, it was the initially more popular opera that subsidised the early Shakespeare performances.

The idea of bringing Shakespeare to the people was first considered in 1912, but first came to fruition in 1914 when Rosina Filippi directed the first Shakespeare season at the Old Vic. Baylis and Filippi's relationship was stormy and the season was not a success, losing money, so was not repeated. A second season was similarly unsuccessful, but the breakthrough came with Matheson Lang and Hutin Britton's successful season in 1914. When Lang and Britton left to go on tour, Ben Greet took over, staying for four years and playing a huge role in the creation of the Old Vic's Shakespearean tradition.

The Old Vic was the first theatre, apart from the original Globe, to perform the complete works of Shakespeare. The first Shakespeare production, *The Taming of the Shrew*, was staged in 1914, and the final First Folio performance of *Troilus and Cressida* was in November 1923.

26. Notes on early Shakespeare productions, annotated by Lilian Baylis. (OV uncatalogued)

27. First page of speech given by Lilian Baylis entitled 'Shakespeare and the People'. (OV uncatalogued)

- 28 Photograph of Beatrice Wilson as Queen Katharine in *Henry VIII*, 1916. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12)
29. Programme for *Henry VIII*, 1916. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/12)
30. Letter from Lilian Baylis to Mrs Gielgud, mother of John, thanking her for a cushion she had made, commenting on John's successful season at London Old Vic, and speculating on his likely future success. (MM/2/PE/PR/LB)
31. Photograph of Lilian Baylis, John Gielgud and Dorothy Green. (MM/2/PE/PR/LB)
32. Programme for *Troilus and Cressida*, the final play of the First Folio performances, 1923. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/20)
33. Reverse of programme for *Troilus and Cressida* with photographs of Lilian Baylis and all the producers of Shakespeare at London Old Vic. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/20)

Wall above table

34. Pencil sketch of the exterior of the Old Vic, 1923 (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/1)

Case 3: The Vic-Wells Ballet

In 1926, Ninette de Valois – dancer, teacher and choreographer – began a strong working relationship with Lilian Baylis at the Old Vic. De Valois wanted to create professional performance opportunities for the dancers at her Academy of Choreographic Art. Five years later, in 1931, the Baylis-de Valois partnership created the Vic-Wells Ballet Company. At that stage the company comprised just six dancers including a young Margot Fonteyn and gave them a permanent base at the Old Vic for eight months each year; the Old Vic was therefore able to sustain an innovative programme of ballet, Shakespeare and opera. In 1939 the Vic-Wells ballet moved permanently to the Sadler’s Wells theatre and the company became the Sadler’s Wells Ballet.

35. Production photograph of *Les rendezvous*, 1933, by Merlyn Severn. (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

36. List of performances at London Old Vic and Sadler’s Wells, January to February 1931. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/28)

37. Season programme for 1930/31. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/28)

38. Rehearsal photograph for *Regatta*, 22 September 1931 featuring Ninette de Valois (middle back row) and Frederick Ashton (right). (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

Images on screen above case

Vic-Wells ballet rehearsal for *Regatta*, 22 September 1931 for 1931-32 season. Photograph: London News Agency (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/288)

Vic Wells season programme for 1933-34. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/30)

Coppélia, the village dance. Vic-Wells Ballet 1933. Photographer: J W Debenham (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

The Gods go a-Begging, Sadler's Wells 1936 Robert Helpmann and Ursula Horeton. Photographer: J W Debenham (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

The Gods go a-Begging, choreography by Ninette de Valois, Sadler's Wells 1936. Music by Handel, arranged by Sir Thomas Beecham. Pamela May, Harold Turner and Joy Newton. Photographer: J W Debenham (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

The Sleeping Princess, Vic Wells Ballet 1936, Robert Helpmann and Margot Fonteyn. Photographer unknown (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

Scene from *Horoscope*, including Margot Fonteyn, Vic Wells Ballet 1938. Photographer: J W Debenham (MM/2/DA/CO/52)

Programme for the 14th Annual Vic—Wells Dance 14 February. Cover and list of contributors. (MM/2/TH/LO/OLV/30)

On stairwell

39. Costume design for Margot Fonteyn in *Les Patineurs*, Vic-Wells Ballet by William Chappell, 1937. (TCD/C/37)

Cover image: Sketch of exterior of London Old Vic
by Arthur Moreland, c.1928.

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