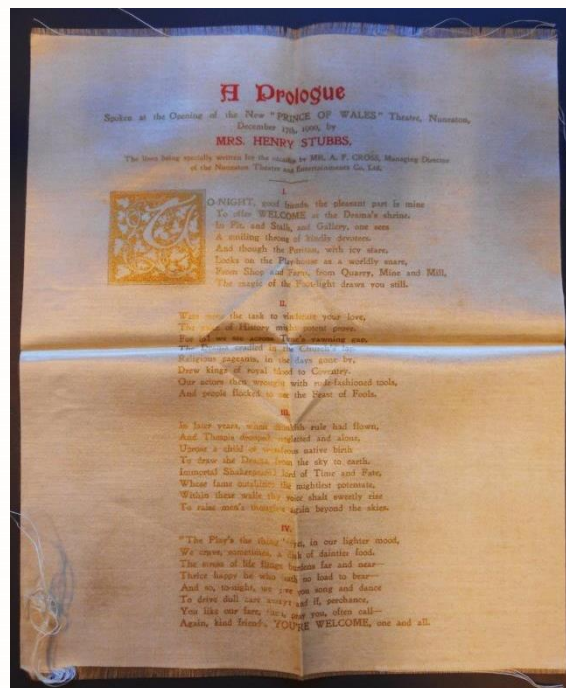


A Potted History of Theatre

CR2884

It has been a very theatre-friendly year, what with the 400 year old anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and we couldn't let the year go by without an aptly theatrical Document of the Month¹. The document in question is a small silk sheet, a souvenir commemorating the opening of the *Prince of Wales* theatre in Nuneaton, on 17th December 1900.

Printed on the silk is a poem, written by the managing director of the theatre and recited by Mrs Henry Stubbs on that opening night over a hundred years ago. It celebrates a rising popularity for theatre at the time, and charts the rise and fall of drama since its inception.



The silk sheet commemorating the opening night of the *Prince of Wales* theatre in Nuneaton, 1900. Warwickshire County Record Office, CR2884.

¹ Warwickshire County Record Office, document reference CR2884

The History of the Theatre

The *Prince of Wales* operated as a 'variety theatre, with films screened as part of the programme'. ² It was a new breed of theatre, endeavouring to embrace the rising popularity of the cinema, as well as cater for traditional shows. It quickly kept evolving - by 1909 it had been re-named the *Hippodrome Theatre*, and entertained audiences alongside the Empire Hall and Skating Rink which had been built at the rear of the theatre - but by 1914 the owners had gone bankrupt. After operating as a variety theatre for many years, and undergoing technical upgrades in order to keep up with the continual rise of the 'talkies' and cinema, the *Hippodrome* was bought by Associated British Cinema in the 1930s. However, in 1937 ABC opened a new cinema in Nuneaton, the *Union Ritz*, and after this the *Hippodrome's* popularity waned. It eventually closed in 1956 and stood empty, until a fire rendered it unsafe in 1968 and it was demolished. ³

This document then, is rather bittersweet, because for all the glory and wonder it describes, the theatre itself would cease to be in less than 70 years.



The envelope containing the poem. 'With the Compliments of the Directors'. Warwickshire County Record Office, CR2884.

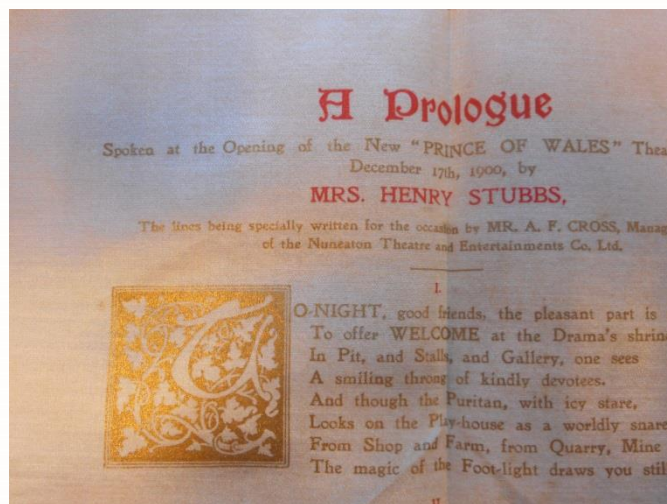
² Ken Roe, <<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/34261>> [accessed 26th July 2016]

³ Ibid.

As for the poem that is printed here, written by the managing director Mr Cross, it tells a fascinating, and perhaps one-sided history of theatre. There is an emphasis on the legacy, appeal, and unifying quality that theatre has.

A Great Unifier

The poem tells us that theatre audiences can be drawn from far and wide, from 'Shop and Farm, Quarry, Mine and Mill.' People from varying backgrounds and occupations can come and enjoy themselves together; theatre is a unifier. Such equality can only go so far, however, because of money. The seats in theatres are divided by price, thus offering more enjoyable and comfortable experiences for more money. Theatre may bring people together, but only for those who can afford it - and those with more money may have a better time. All of the locations mentioned by the poet here are places associated with mostly working-class occupations, which suggests the audience was predominantly working-class too.⁴ In which case, although unifying for some, there are clearly people who remain undrawn to the 'magic of the Foot-light'.



A close-up of the poem. Warwickshire County Record Office CR2884.

⁴ As he mentions shop, quarry, mine and mill, we would naturally think of agricultural labourers, miners, quarry-men and mill-workers. Arguably shop-workers may have been considered lower middle class at the turn of the century.

A Celebrated History

Mr Cross uses most of the poem to remind his audience of the great legacy that theatre has left to them. He describes how theatre was first inspired and influenced by the Church, mentioning the medieval mystery plays ‘that drew royal blood to Coventry’ and the Feast of Fools, a French festival where religious hierarchy was mocked and circumvented.⁵ Theatre then declines with the Reformation before booming again with Shakespeare, whose ‘fame outshines the mightiest potentate’. After Shakespeare has seemingly rescued English theatre from decline, Cross’s history ceases. There may have been logistical reasons for this – after all, Cross could not have mentioned everything, nor could he risk boring his first audience with an over-long poem. However it is still interesting that Shakespeare seems to indisputably be theatre’s saving grace; the proudest moment in English theatrical history.

Profound Experience or Light Relief?

The poem ends with an interesting argument - that as well as drama to illuminate us or allow us to question ourselves, we need drama simply to ‘drive dull care away’. This question is introduced to us by a quote from Hamlet, when Hamlet organises a play in order to provoke a guilty reaction from his uncle, Claudius, who he suspects of murdering his brother, Hamlet’s father. Such a profound motivation for producing theatre is all very well, but Cross emphasises here theatre as escapism, as light relief and entertainment.

⁵ Herbert Thurston, ‘A Feast of Fools’, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06132a.htm> [accessed 26th July 2016]