# ENTERTAINMENT IN THE NINETIES

by KATHLEEN BARKER

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*Entertainment in the Nineties* is the thirty-third pamphlet published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. Its author, Miss Kathleen Barker, has already contributed two pamphlets to the series. The first of these is in its third edition and the second is at present out-of-print. Miss Barker's definitive history of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, will be published on 1 March 1974. Advance subscriptions are invited before that date at a special pre-publication price of £3.75 post free. After publication, the price will be £5.00. Orders should be sent to the Society for Theatre Research, 77 Kinnerton Street, London, S.W.1. The edition will be limited to 1,000 copies and there is likely to be a heavy demand.

The Branch wishes to express its gratitude to Miss Barker and to the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol which made a grant towards the cost of publication of this pamphlet.

The Branch hopes to publish in the course of the next twelve months pamphlets on the Bristol Riots, the establishment of the Police Force in Bristol and a study of John Wesley in Bristol. It also hopes to include in the series the F. C. Jones Memorial Lecture which is to be delivered later this year by Professor Peter Marshall on the subject of Bristol and the Abolition of Slavery.

Eight of the pamphlets in this series have now appeared in book form under the title of *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Patrick McGrath, and published by David and Charles at £3.75.

A full list of publications is given on the inside back cover. The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers, from the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building and in the Senate House, or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9. Readers are asked to help the work by placing a standing order for future productions.

# Entertainment in the Nineties

by KATHLEEN BARKER

Introducing his final volume of *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, dealing with the period 1887—1900, John Latimer wrote: "The years whose story is here narrated have been more full of incidents interesting in themselves, and more big with promise as regards the future of Bristol and its citizens, than any previous period of similar length."[1]

This assessment might equally well be applied to Bristol entertainments over the same period. In 1890 the pattern was essentially still that of twenty years earlier; though in the theatres the Stock Companies had been replaced by the touring system, the theatres themselves were still locally owned; music hall entertainment was confined to the taverns; Hengler's Circus in Park Row was host to annual visits, and almost every Christmas the Poole brothers brought one of their Myrioramas — elaborate painted canvases hundreds of feet long, picturing foreign lands and adventures, and lineal descendants of the "panoramic views" displayed at eighteenth century fairs.

By 1900 much of this pattern of entertainment had already broken up or was on the verge of doing so. The opening of two large "family" music halls had its effect not only in virtually extinguishing the old tavern tradition but on the fare provided by the theatres; for the first time, too, theatres were built and run as part of national circuits, without local connections. Analogous managerial "empire-building" affected the Theatre Royal; even the Prince's was in its last period of local ownership, which ended in 1912. And gradually, insidiously, every theatre, every music hall, every popular entertainment was penetrated by the latest novelty: the Bioscope, Eragraph, Theatrograph, Cinematographe — under

a myriad names the "moving pictures" began to make their way. The new pattern of the city's entertainments, which would last for the first forty years of the twentieth century, is already detectable at its opening.

## DRAMA AND OPERA

The recognised home of the "legitimate drama" in the nineties was, as it had been for twenty years, the Prince's Theatre in Park Row. Designed by that most prolific of theatre architects, C. J. Phipps, and opened in 1867 by James Henry Chute, also then lessee of the Royal, it was now owned and managed by his fifth son, James Macready Chute, who in 1890 was only 34 but was already recognised as a worthy successor to his much-loved father. One visiting manager after another, in his curtain speech in Bristol, made graceful allusion to the way "my young friend Chute" was maintaining the high standards of stage and house management set by the previous generation.

Built primarily to provide the moneyed residents of Redland and Clifton with a theatre in their own locality, the Prince's had the pick of the principal touring companies, and the nineties saw every actor-manager of note bring his company to Bristol. The city's response was not always commensurate with the quality of the fare provided, but local loyalties were still strong where Henry Irving was concerned; rows of extra stalls hemmed in the pit area for almost every performance he gave, and he had the knack, in his curtain speeches, of making his audience feel involved in his career as a whole. There was a similar proprietory feeling towards Ellen Terry, and when her son Gordon Craig made his first appearance in Bristol in *Nance Oldfield*, "he was received with a cheer for his mother's sake, but the storm of applause that prevailed at the close was due in no small degree to his sympathetic and thoroughly artistic acting as the young poet. With a face telling of a singularly intellectual and emotional nature, and with a good voice and presence, Mr. Gordon Craig has much to help him in the profession to which he has naturally turned."[1]

The highlight of the visits of the Lyceum Company, from Bristol's point of view, however, was the choice of the Prince's for the first production, on 21 September 1894, of *A Story of Waterloo*, adapted by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle from one of his own short stories. Irving was in his element as the aged Corporal Gregory Brewster, almost in his dotage, the last survivor of

1 *Western Daily Press*, 22.9.1891.



his regiment's contingent at the Battle of Waterloo. "The great actor presents to us the shrunken, tottering limbs, the quivering frame, the sunken, gummy eyes, the unmanageable tongue, all the symptoms of advanced years."[1] Irving admitted in a curtain speech at the second performance that "although the old gentleman, I believe, came from Essex, I did my best to give him a Gloucestershire or Somerset accent" — on the grounds that "if I could not take a liberty with my own county, there was no other county with which I could take a liberty."[2]

Almost equal warmth of support was given to Wilson Barrett, more particularly after the first production in Bristol of his spectacular drama of the early Christians under Nero, *The Sign of the Cross*. This undoubtedly was the theatrical sensation of the decade as far as Bristol was concerned, and became a *locus classicus* in the lively debates on the morality of the stage. One cleric denounced it as a diabolically specious lure for the unwary; whereupon Caleb Porter, who was playing Nero in the current production, wrote to affirm: "Theatrical plays can and do cast out devils, devils of doubt, devils of uncleanness, devils of despair. I have ocular and documentary proof of these things as a result of 'The Sign of the Cross'."[3] When Wilson Barrett made his appearance that night at the Prince's he was met with "a perfect tempest of applause."

"Problem plays" were another matter. Despite the difference in social setting, they held a position in the 1890s similar to what was labelled "kitchen sink drama" in the 1960s, and the arguments about both types of play are almost interchangeable. Some critics refused to be reconciled: "We have never liked problem plays, and we never shall," averred the *Times & Mirror*, reviewing *The Case of Rebellious Susan*, "simply because they invariably exhibit the worst side of human nature, and what is the use of it?"

Most prominent of the class was, of course, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, in which at various times Bristol saw C. Aubrey Smith, George Alexander and Forbes Robertson as Aubrey Tanqueray, and Evelyn Millard and Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Paula. But even Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* was generally received with the utmost seriousness as a contribution to the same genre, the *Times & Mirror* going so far as to endow it with a moral: "A man, thoroughly debased, is utterly devoid of honour — a woman, although she may have fallen, is not

1 *Bristol Mercury*, 22.9.1894.
2 *ibid.*, 24.9.1894. One suspects the resulting accent was actually "Mummerzet".
3 *Bristol Mercury*, 7.10.1898.

always so." *The Devil's Disciple*, the only Shaw play to be seen in Bristol during this decade (Forbes Robertson brought it on tour in November 1900) was treated with equally unexpected solemnity, being described as "a strange [play], weird in some of its details, and intense and thrilling throughout."[1]

Bristol was well served with productions of the classics, too, in the nineties, though the number and calibre of the companies dropped away very sharply during the last years. The Compton Comedy Company kept Sheridan and Goldsmith alive, and a number of other managers such as Miss Fortescue and Edmund Tearle sometimes included *The School for Scandal* or *She Stoops to Conquer*. That good old warhorse, Sheridan Knowles' *Virginius*, which had helped to make Macready's name in 1820, was still regularly in Edmund Tearle's repertory, as Bulwer Lytton's *Richelieu* was in that of Hermann Vezin at the Royal.

Opportunities of seeing Shakespeare were, especially in the first five years, frequent and rich. Bristolians could compare the Hamlets of the Tearle cousins, Edmund and Osmund; of Tree ("a scholarly actor", as he is surprisingly often described), Wilson Barrett, Benson and Forbes Robertson: almost too self-possessed a Hamlet, the *Western Daily Press* thought, but "we do not remember hearing some of the famous speeches better rendered, not only by charm of tone but by a nice appreciation of the circumstances of their delivery," and the critic summed up the characterisation as "scholarly, intelligent, restrained, guilty of no meretricious tricks to win applause."[2] *Othello* ran *Hamlet* close for the range of its interpreters: *Macbeth*, still decked out with Locke's music, was given only by the Tearles and Vezin, and *Lear* only once in the decade, by Osmond Tearle, who had revived the play at Stratford in 1890.

Osmond Tearle must be given credit, too, for staging several rarities, *King John* (in 1890), *King Henry V* (1891) and *Coriolanus* (1893). The first-named was highly praised for the all-round standard of acting (including the somewhat ambiguous compliment that "as the Citizen of Angiers Mr. Philip Gordon showed that he could speak the English language").[3] The performance of *Coriolanus* was the first in Bristol for over twenty years, and unfortunately, like most of the productions in that particular engagement, it failed to draw; so in future visits Tearle kept to the safe routine of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and gave up altogether after 1896. (His cousin Edmund most surprisingly deserted the Prince's in favour of the Royal after

1 *Western Daily Press*, 15.11.1900.
2 *ibid.*, 13.11.1900
3 *Bristol Mercury*, 12.9.1890.



1892; less surprisingly, two engagements sufficed him there.)

Frank Benson, though his name is not usually associated with massive spectacular effects, was certainly the greatest promoter of this type of Shakespeare production in the provinces at the time. *The Dream* was a feature of several visits; he promised a trained choir and enlarged orchestra with specially-selected soloists to do justice to Mendelssohn's music in 1892, and in 1897, his last visit that decade, "the scenery and the properties weighed 9 tons, and over 100 auxiliaries have been under training for the past week." Similar elaboration was bestowed on the production of *Julius Caesar* in November 1894, but with Benson as Mark Antony, Louis Calvert as Brutus, and Lyall Swete and the young Oscar Asche in minor parts, at least the acting would not have been overshadowed by the scenery.

It was Benson, too, who brought to Bristol Shakespeare's *Richard III* (the Tearles were still using Cibber's stagy perversion), and he was also prepared to be adventurous in his lighter choices, playing all the major comedies as well as *The Merry Wives* and *The Shrew*, whereas most other touring companies confined themselves to *The Merchant of Venice*, frequently ending the play with the fourth act. *The Merchant* was the only Shakespeare play in which Irving and Ellen Terry acted in Bristol in the nineties.

Bristol even had open-air Shakespeare at the Zoological Gardens where during the summers of 1890, 1894 and 1896 Ben Greet's Pastoral Players staged suitable excerpts from Shakespearian comedies, including *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado* and *The Tempest*, which were scarcely ever seen in the repertoire of regular touring companies. It was the 1890 engagement which brought about the unlikely sight of Mrs. Patrick Campbell playing Rosalind in *As You Like It* among the lions, tigers and bears. Her Rosalind was said to be "at once merry, witty and graceful, and laughter and applause were repeatedly aroused by her merry sallies."[1] Certainly few actresses were less likely to be daunted by their surroundings.

Such a catalogue of actors and plays tends to obscure the fact that by far the greater portion of each season was given up to musical comedy and to melodrama, and in these categories, particularly the latter, the repertoire of the Prince's overlapped considerably with that of the Theatre Royal. Indeed, on one occasion, both were playing *East Lynne* the same week, though in different versions.

The 1890s were difficult years for the Royal, but during them

1 *Western Daily Press*, 24.6.1890.

its role for the next forty years was determined. Andrew Melville, who had taken over the lease in 1882 and initially done wonders in reviving the theatre's fortunes by his puckish ebullience and showmanship, had by now extended his theatrical empire into the Midlands and the North and gave less and less personal attention to his Bristol theatre. Quick as always to sense such a falling-off in concern, Bristolians responded predictably, and even the once uproariously successful pantomimes had to be discontinued in 1890 in favour of drama and comic opera. " 'Quite as successful as any Pantomime' (everybody's opinion, Melville's included)" the irrepressible manager advertised his compensating production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

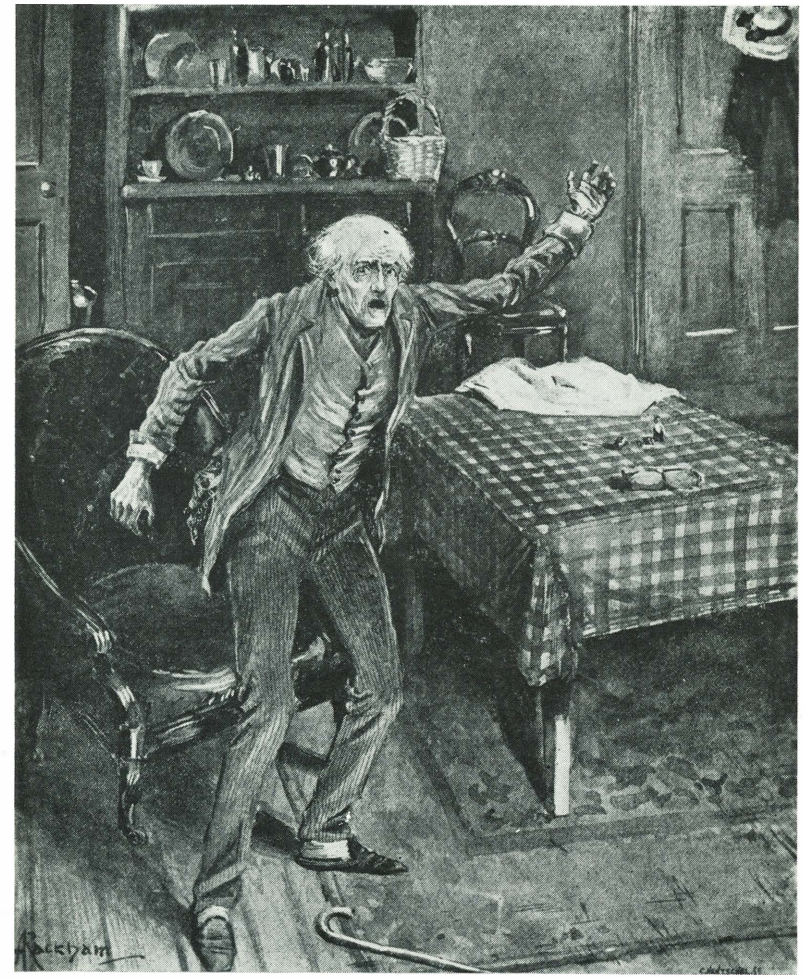
In 1893, largely because of ill health, Melville transferred his lease to John Barker. Barker had his successes — most notably *A Royal Divorce,* which became a provincial standby — but came badly adrift with his Christmas "annual", a pantomime version of *Androcles and the Lion* which Shaw might well have appreciated but which disconcerted Bristolians by the ambivalence of its mood. Despite the popularity of Lottie Lonsdale as Androcles, and the Sisters Tilley as "two rum 'uns from Rome" singing "The Dinky Arno Boys", it failed to catch on, and Barker hastily put the production on tour.

In June 1894 he gave up his lease to Ernest Carpenter, who restored some continuity to the management. On his first night he told his audience that "what he wanted to do was to try and bring back the old days when the Bristol Royal was as famed as the London Lyceum was at present . . . His great aim would be to produce the pieces in as complete a manner as possible. He hoped to stage them with all the possible scenic accessories, and he would have special scenes painted, when necessary, to enhance the production of various plays."[1]

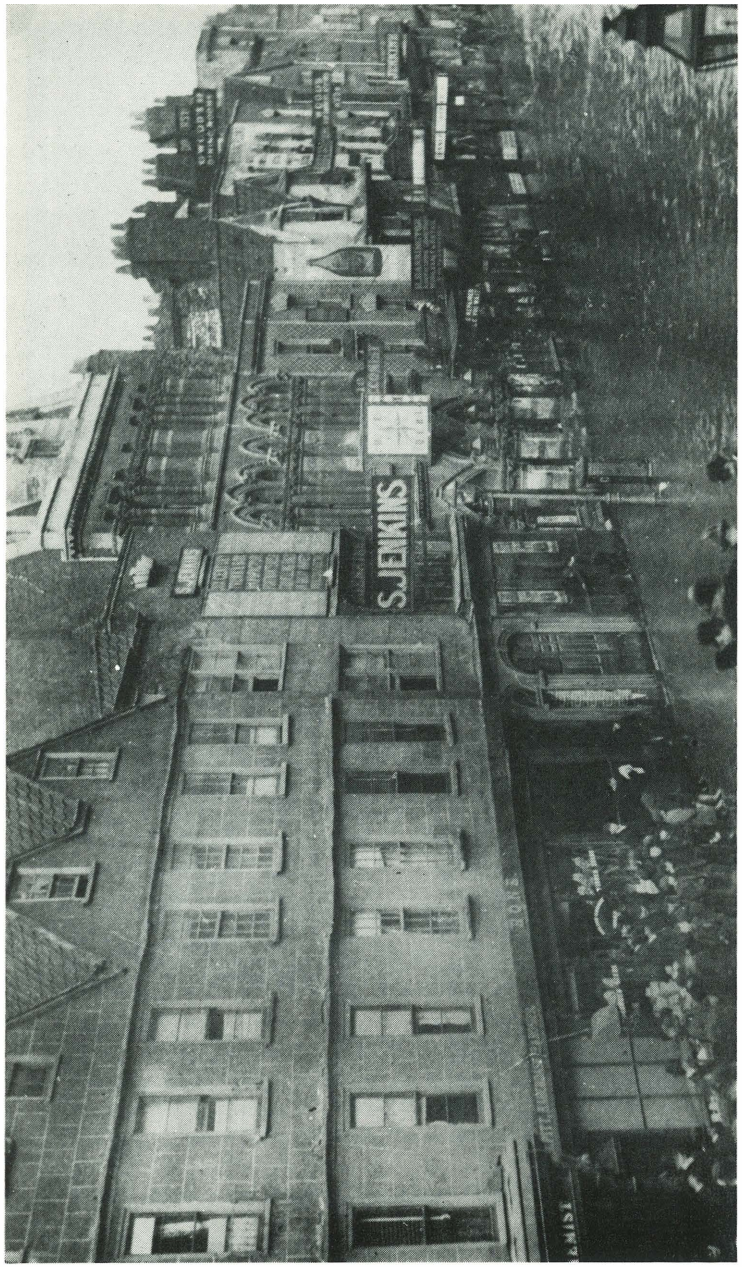
What this meant in practice was a gradual narrowing of the touring attractions to modern melodrama, at first varied with farce or musical comedy, but after 1897 almost unrelieved except by the annual pantomime. More interestingly, Carpenter also reintroduced a kind of stock system — the theatre as a whole was just beginning to realise what it had lost artistically by the breaking up of the provincial stock companies — by engaging a resident company for six to eight weeks almost every summer. This overt harking back to the past was accentuated by the repertoire, which consisted almost entirely of the old standbys of the 60s and 70s: *The Ticket-of-Leave Man, Driven from Home, The Shaughraun, The Colleen Bawn* and the like. Certainly, however, Carpenter

1 *Western Daily Press,* 26.6.1894.





Henry Irving as Corporal Gregory Brewster in *A Story of Waterloo,* first played at the Prince's Theatre on 21 September 1894. Drawing by Arthur Rackham reproduced by permission of the Victoria & Albert Museum.




An early photograph of Broadmead (taken during the floods of March 1889) showing the exterior of the Star Music Hall, just beyond the sign "S. Jenkins". *Photograph: Reece Winstone*

fulfilled his promise about "scenic accessories", and since any policy consistently carried out is likely to be more successful than no policy at all, he did do a good deal to re-establish the Theatre Royal as a going concern.

But he also, inevitably, lost something. Much play was made — is still sometimes made — with the healthy, black-and-white morality of melodrama. But if "problem plays" were suspect because of their dwelling on the unpleasant, melodrama was in reality even more open to question. There was a strong element of downright sadism which it is now fashionable to ignore, and some of the "sensations" were very near the bone: flogging and hanging on the stage, for example.

Some critics, at least, realised this, even if they oversimplified the factors involved. *The Football King* was praised for its choice of theme because "it is surely better that an audience which has a taste for exciting drama should be entertained with a play that lays its scenes in the football field, and can hardly, therefore, be unwholesome, than that it should sit shuddering through five acts at a nightmare of horrors called a stirring melodrama."[1]

Nevertheless, despite the fact that their much-vaunted realism seldom extended to psychological probability, it is in the melodramas rather than in the more fashionable straight plays that we can glimpse some reflection of life of the day; it is the ephemeral which can best afford to exploit topicality. The *Western Daily Press* pointed out that the conception of William Bourne's *Work and Wages* "was undoubtedly due to the recent agitation among the various trades for shorter hours and increased pay." The multitude of military dramas, both at the Theatre Royal and the Prince's, represent almost the sole nod made by the theatre in the direction of the Matabele, Sudan and Boer Wars. Programme notes promised the introduction of the "Famous MAXIM GUNS IN FULL ACTION. These Guns are identical with those used in the late Matabele War and the Chitral Campaign" — but, lest realism prove too uncomfortable, the audiences were reassured that "Despite the enormous amount of ammunition used . . . the atmosphere remains perfectly clear, only smokeless powder being used."[2]

If there was one form of entertainment which rivalled melodrama in the breadth of its appeal, it was (and still is) musical comedy. The continued popularity of the earlier Savoy operas ensured D'Oyly Carte's No. 1 Company successful weeks when

1 *Bristol Times & Mirror*, 24.11.1896.
2 Programme note, *A Life of Pleasure*, Prince's, 12.10.1896.

ever they visited — which was normally two or three times in a year — but the overwhelming successes of the 1890s were the series of Edwardes' "Girl" musicals: *The Circus Girl, The Shop Girl, The Gaiety Girl* . . . It was also the decade of such Oriental fantasies as *The Geisha* and *San Toy*, and, foreshadowing a new race of vigorous American imports, *The Belle of New York*, "a form of entertainment strange to our audiences . . . I doubt whether our audiences will understand it," according to the *Bristol Mercury* on its first production in September 1898. Between musical comedy and burlesque — and there was not always very much between them — a good third of every year's programme at the Prince's was taken up; more during the last years, probably as the result of the usual demand in times of war for lighter entertainment. It is noteworthy that when certain principal provincial managers, among whom James Macready Chute was a leading spirit, formed a touring syndicate, the productions they sponsored were invariably of this type.

The relative rarity of musicals at the Theatre Royal was probably more a matter of restricted stage and orchestral facilities than of the limited taste of the audience, since they seem to have been popular enough when they were put on. The virtual monopoly of grand opera by the Prince's, however, was to a great extent a "class" matter. A poor gallery for the first production of *La Bohème* in Bristol was explained by "the usual lack of interest felt in such performances by those whose musical minds are less cultured,"[1] a piece of snobbery not less significant for being partly true.

The Carl Rosa Opera Company was the most important of the provincial touring companies, and its repertoire was impressive. A fortnight's visit in 1890 included the first performance in Bristol of Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* and the specially-commissioned *Thorgrim* by Frederick Cowen. Three years later Bristol had its first experience of *I Pagliacci*, Verdi's *Otello*, and, most important, Wagner's *Tannhauser*, whose success encouraged the company to add more Wagner operas to their programme on subsequent visits.

So popular were the opera weeks in the autumn that Chute decided to supplement them by an engagement of the Arthur Rousbey Company at the end of April 1894. At once the Carl Rosa manager pointed out that their contract stipulated no other English grand opera company should be engaged at the theatres they visited, and refused to renew the booking for the autumn. Instead he announced the Company were negotiating to

1 *Bristol Evening News*, 9.10.1897.



give four "grand operatic recitals" elsewhere in Bristol. These never materialised, but it is interesting to find a rumour going round in January 1895 "that a Bijou Theatre is likely to be erected in Clifton, chiefly with a view to operatic performances."

The publicity given to the dispute between Chute and the Carl Rosa ensured the success of Rousbey's first visit, but his repertoire was comparatively old-fashioned and conventional, relying on such popular standbys as *The Bohemian Girl* and Gounod's *Faust*, though almost alone among touring opera managements of the time he did include some Mozart. Even Sir Augustus Harris's Drury Lane Opera Company, with *Lohengrin* and Verdi's *Falstaff*, did not really compensate for the absence of the Carl Rosa, who finally returned in December 1896. So great was the pressure on seats that for the first time in the Prince's history Chute put into practice a strict queueing system for Pit and Gallery Early Doors. Ironically, the Company disbanded for a time soon afterwards, and Chute had to have recourse to the hardworking but limited J. W. Turner Opera Company as a stop-gap. But the fact that there were at least five[1] fully-equipped grand opera companies available in the provinces during one decade suggests a rather different estimate of the popularity of opera in England from that usually made.

## PANTOMIME

There was one common denominator of taste among the audiences at every place of entertainment, however, and that was pantomime. Next to melodrama, it provided the most immediate reflection of current events, not only national but local. There was often a special credit on the programme for the man who wrote in the "locals", and it was at least partly a lack of attention to this essential ingredient which caused the failure of Melville's pantomimes at the end of the 1880s.

In schoolroom quiz, fairy debate, or airballoon tour, the year's events were more or less amiably dissected, and in the most exotic of settings reminders of Bristol might be found. In *The Forty Thieves* (Empire, Christmas 1899) Abdallah pondered how to get rid of his enemy Hassarac: "If I could persuade him to bathe in the river Avon, that would do it: yet, no, that would be too horrible."

Both the Prince's pantomimes under Chute and the Royal's

1 Besides the four above mentioned, Mrs. Gordon Hicks' English Opera Company visited the Theatre Royal in January 1894.

under Carpenter continued the established form of an elaborated and spectacular version of a fairy-tale culminating in a transformation scene, and topped up, when time permitted, by the sad remnants of a Harlequinade entirely unconnected with the pantomime proper. The standard of stage spectacles attained by the Prince's pantomimes was of the highest, so much so that on one occasion it was seriously suggested to Chute that he should organise an invitation matinée so that the ladies might view at their leisure the dresses and properties used in the China Palace scene, in which groups of girls paraded in costumes representing Crown Derby, Wedgwood and other famous makes of china.

In latter years the pictorial effects were improved by the spreading application of electricity. The Prince's adopted electric lighting in 1895, and Chute's *Cinderella* that Christmas became known as "The Electric Pantomime," though as Rennie Powell points out, the devices would seem ludicrously clumsy to-day. Each fairy in the *corps de ballet*

> was weighed to earth by an electric cable attached to her waist, and as (*sic*), holding above her head a half-hoop of silvery foliage, she dragged after her this extraordinary tail possessing almost the diameter of a half-penny. Dance, there was none; with the formidable appendage it was a case of *non possumus*! but at the psychological moment the current was transmitted, and the floral bowers illuminated with a multitude of little lamps for blossoms.[1]

Even at the Royal where gas lighting continued until 1905, battery-lit triumphal arches and stage coaches became popular pantomime features.

The Royal had not the facilities to compete with the Prince's in pictorial effect, and instead concentrated on bright colours and fun. The rage for punning had by no means died out, as this extract from Carpenter's 1896 pantomime, *The Babes in the Wood*, will show:

ROBIN HOOD Come, won't you name the day, my pretty Marion?
MARION I'm in no hurry, Robin dear, for marryin'.
ROBIN My winsome lassie, don't my wish deny.
MARION You'll win some lassie, richer far than I.
Being but a country girl without a cent,
How to your wishes can I give assent?
I haven't got a crown, much more a note!

1 G. Rennie Powell: *The Bristol Stage* (Bristol, 1919), p 160.



ROBIN Well, that's no hardship, I'm in the same boat.
Without a note you're dearer far to me
Than if your notes could range from sea to sea.

The external trappings, the means to the end, might superficially seem in the strongest contrast, but basically the formula for the success of pantomime and melodrama was the same; the audience sought and found in both escapism laced with topicality, which is as good a recipe as any for commercial success in entertainment.

## MUSIC HALL

If the nineties proved something of a high watermark for the Prince's, something of a time of trial for the Royal, for music hall entrepreneurs they represented a time of opportunity.

In a sense, of course, music hall had long since arrived, for it had permeated almost every type of entertainment. It had become almost *de rigueur* for melodrama writers to introduce variety acts with or without excuse, and the music hall had long been the principal source of recruitment to musical comedy, burlesque and even farce. Pantomimes too were cast very largely from music hall artists, and as major halls became established in Bristol there was a new and useful reinforcement of popularity for both types of house: the favourite of a pantomime would bring in followers at his or her next appearance on the halls, and the popularity of a music hall turn would encourage that audience to see the performer in pantomime (Cora Duncan once played both the Theatre Royal pantomime and the Empire music hall each night for a week, but this was in a professional emergency). Even the myrioramas of the Poole Brothers were by 1890 incomplete without a substantial variety programme to accompany them, while the various minstrel shows were really little else but drawing-room versions of the older type of music hall programme.

Nevertheless the "family" music hall took some time to reach Bristol. In 1890 the only music hall open was the last remaining tavern hall, the New Star in Broadmead, as Charles Rodney had rechristened the 1870 Alhambra in 1889. It was not only limited in capacity, but its drinking licence, while attractive to many, to others made its claims of "Mirth and Morality" somewhat suspect.

Despite various rumours, it was October 1891 before there was

any definite move in Bristol. That month the Livermore Brothers, who ran a well-known touring troupe of Court Minstrels, announced a new People's Palace in Baldwin Street, a copy of that already built for them in Dundee, and part of a nation-wide circuit. The shell of this building still exists as the Gaumont Cinema.

Livermore's People's Palace, which held 3,000 people, was the first place of entertainment to be lit by electricity when it opened on Boxing Day 1892. Within six months of its opening the *Bristol Times & Mirror* paid this tribute:

> The Messrs. Livermore deserve the greatest possible credit for having made a variety entertainment, altogether free from vulgarity, popular in this city. Such a success would have been impossible twenty years ago; but it is an accomplished fact now, and they deserve full credit for carrying out their schemes without the aid of liquor or laxity of the recognised rules of decorum.

As managers of a national chain, the Livermores were able to engage virtually every well-known name in the music hall world, including Vesta Victoria ("Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow"), Marie Lloyd, Eugene Stratton, Dan Leno, Harry Champion and George Robey, but perhaps the most unexpected artist to appear at the Palace was the great English tenor Sims Reeves, who, in an unsuccessful attempt to stave off bankruptcy, accepted a series of music hall engagements from 1893 onwards. He came to Bristol in March 1896, at the age of 78, and sang popular ballads to packed houses on three nights of the week. "Mr Reeves' rendering [of 'Come into the Garden, Maud'] was that of a true artiste," pronounced the *Western Daily Press,* "and if the voice of the singer lacked some of the power it once possessed, the charm of style and delicate phrasing and clear articulation remained."

Singers and comedians were however only two examples of the tremendously wide range of entertainers, some of whose descriptive titles now have a delightful period ring. Top boot and clog dancers, legmania artists, musical grotesques, champion kickers and globe manipulators, performing animals (including a Boxing Kangaroo which escaped from the ring and proceeded to clout the attendant) and acrobats of every kind appeared on the bill. Among the most popular acts were a troupe of Dahomey Amazon Women Warriors, the Colibris Troup of Midgets (who were paid a then record fee of £160 a week), and Jenny Mills with her *danses illumineuses,* in which the new electric light was used to throw ever-changing colours upon her dress with



fascinating effect. (Chute snapped up this act for his 1899 pantomime and it caused a furore.)

Not least because of the ability of their local manager, Charles Gascoigne, the Livermore Brothers' enterprise was rewarded financially as well as artistically. Twice within the first eight years the house was lavishly redecorated and improved, and by keeping up with every novelty (including the developing moving pictures, to which Gascoigne himself contributed films of local events), at the end of the century the People's Palace was well established.

The same could not be said of the second comer in the field, the Empire in Old Market Street, built to serve the growing suburbs of East Bristol and opened on 6 November 1893 with Frank Allen of Moss & Thornton's as General Manager, though Allen had to miss the preliminary press conference, having been knocked down by a bull! This might have been taken as an omen by the superstitious, for more misfortune overtook the opening night. "The theatrical managers of the city had intimated their intention to take proceedings if Miss Cora Stuart appeared in the 'Fair Equestrienne', as had been announced."[1] The objection was to a sketch involving the spoken word and so technically infringing the dramatic monopoly of theatres such as the Prince's, where Miss Stuart had presented that very sketch in April 1891. Instead, therefore, she substituted a musical scena, *Presented at Court,* a subterfuge reminiscent of the unlicensed theatres of the eighteenth century.

Like the Palace, the Empire was officially "dry", but as its entrance was through the White Hart Hotel, with the Woolpack adjacent, this was little drawback to those who liked stronger refreshment than the tea-bars provided, and the management had some difficulty with galleryites who made too good use of the interval. Since the whole complex was negotiated as a single site, it also involved the promoters in a crippling mortgage, and the theatre was forced to close in May 1894, a winding up petition being presented in June.

At a shareholders' meeting in August efforts were made to float a new company to take over the old share capital and issue fresh stock, the hope being that the liquor licence of the now bankrupt Star might be transferred. But the magistrates refused the transfer, and the Chairman had difficulty in raising even £200 to reopen the hall. As a result the reopening lasted only six weeks, and the "guarantee" gave rise to a farcical lawsuit, in which the Chairman tried to reclaim money from the guarantors, only to

1 *Western Daily Press*, 7.11.1893.

find that "in the meantime Jacques [the promoters' solicitor] had absconded, the liquidator to the company had absconded, and the third parties, whom the Official Receiver had ordered to be brought in, were, he was informed, also in difficulties."[1]

So the Empire staggered on; in December E. Leon,[2] manager of the Star (now rechristened the Tivoli), leased the Empire also, and purchased the freehold in May 1897, but a year later he too was bankrupt, having taken on not only two competing music halls and a public house (the Woolpack), but also nine "dentistry businesses" in Bristol, Bath, Gloucester, Cardiff, Pontypridd and Swansea, "all . . . now closed for various reasons, but chiefly through the different landlords having distrained upon and sold the effects for rent."[3]

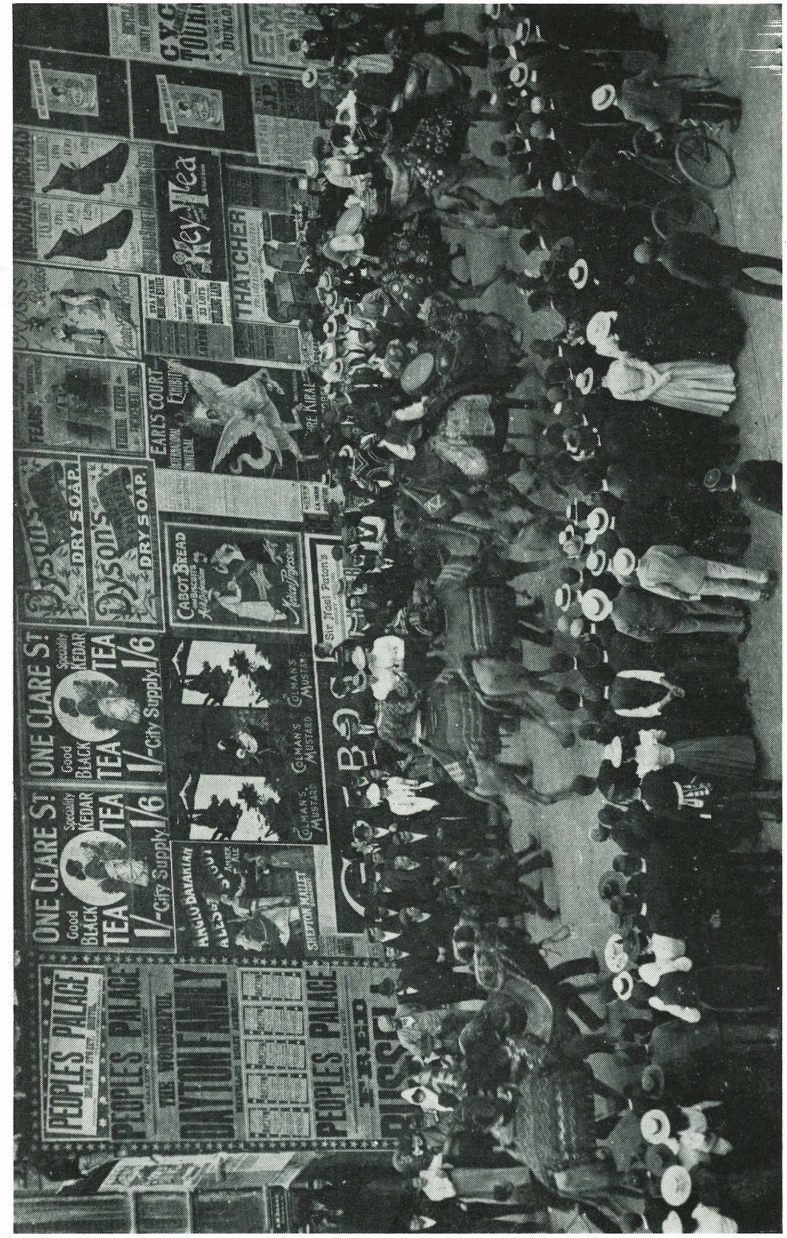
At this point Ernest Carpenter, lessee of the Theatre Royal, stepped in and complicated matters still further by purchasing the hall from the second mortgagee, reopening at the beginning of August and doing a great deal to improve the calibre of the artists engaged, but not without difficulties. The Empire audience had always included a rather rough element, but Carpenter's gallery seems to have been particularly boisterous. Occasionally it must be admitted the artists invited trouble: Billie Barlow, illustrating her first number by throwing a miniature pair of bloomers into the audience, understandably found it difficult to restrain the witticisms of the gallery boys. But more often it was the same sort of "audience participation" which marked the behaviour of melodrama audiences. A sketch called *The Jaws of Death* "appealed very strongly to the occupants of the gallery, and the villainy of the 'heavy man' was so cruel that some of the 'gods' became quite excited, and several times tried to warn the hero and heroine of the plot against them."[4]

Carpenter's expansionist programme (he had also opened a theatre in Swindon, where he was elected to the Town Council) eventually brought him to grief. Following his 1899 pantomime, *The Forty Thieves*, he attempted to introduce twice-nightly performances of music hall, but Bristol would have none of it, and after two disastrous weeks Carpenter was forced to revert to once-nightly performances. After a programme appropriately including a sketch called *Wishing the Boys Farewell*, the Empire closed on 28 April.

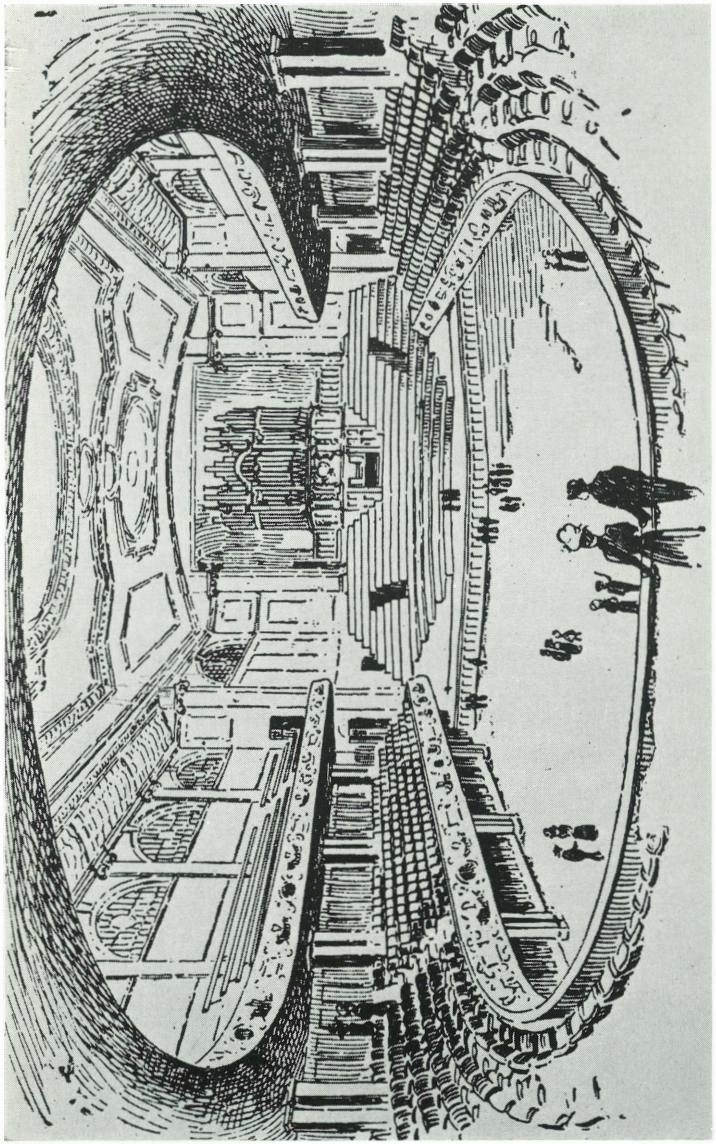
George Abel of the Opera House, Cheltenham, took over the lease in the summer of 1900, reopening the house in August, and

1 *Bristol Mercury*, 25.11.1896.
2 Stage name of Edward Aubrey Goodman.
3 *Bristol Mercury*, 7.7.1898.
4 *Bristol Evening News*, 18.4.1899.






"The Greatest Show on Earth" parades down Baldwin Street on 15 August 1898. Besides the show animals, there were innumerable floats portraying national scenes, nursery tales, &c.
*Photograph: Reece Winstone*



The second Colston Hall, rebuilt after a disastrous fire in 1893, and reopened on 27 November 1900. It could hold over 4,000 people. The organ was the gift of Sir William Henry Wills.
*Western Daily Press*, 15.11.1900

bringing some great attractions: Witty Wattie Walton, Vesta Victoria, Eugene Stratton, and Bessie Wentworth, a now-forgotten "coon singer" who was the idol of Bristol's factory girls following her appearance as principal boy in Chute's pantomime of 1896—7. With a visit from Marie Lloyd just prior to her Australian tour at the end of November, Abel established an early success which gave the Empire a much-needed measure of stability.[1]

If the finely equipped Empire had such difficulties in keeping afloat, it can well be imagined what rough waters soon overtook C. M. Rodney[2] at the little Star in Broadmead. He was naturally unable to afford many top-liners, though it was he who gave a start to Cissie Loftus' career. At his public examination in bankruptcy Rodney told the Registrar: "The Star Music Hall paid its way until the end of 1892, when a larger hall [the People's Palace] was opened in Bristol. It held more people at the same prices as his own hall and gave a better entertainment, with a disastrous result to his own hall."

In November 1894 the Star was put up for sale, and in July the following year was opened again, after considerable alterations and improvements, as the New Tivoli under E. Leon, with Wilkie Bard, the popular coster comedian, at the head of the bill. Leon's attractions included Lottie Lonsdale, and what seems to have been the first showing in Bristol of "Animated Living Pictures" in June 1896, but by August of that year he was forced to the expedient of twice-nightly performances. The result of Leon's subsequent attempt to recoup his fortunes by adding the Empire to his responsibilities has already been described.

Eventually in November 1898 the Tivoli was reopened under R. Judd-Green. In the second week he succeeded in engaging Charles Chaplin senior, who at one time or another played all the Bristol halls during the nineties, but soon managers were coming and going with alarming rapidity, despite attempts to promote the Tivoli lounge as a sort of theatrical meeting place.[3]

In January 1900, Lady Ada Mansell, herself a music hall artist, took the lease, but by June the hall was closed again, to be reopened in November as "Barnard's Tivoli Palace" with twice-nightly performances. It continued only two more years before finally succumbing, the last and most tenacious of Bris-

1 With the exception of brief periods, the Empire retained its identity as a live entertainment house to the end of World War II.
2 Again a stage name; his real name was J. Walsh.
3 Some lively reminiscences were printed in the *Bristol Evening Post* 12.10.1942.

tol's tavern music halls, defeated by the new respectability as much as by the superior facilities of its competitors.

## POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT

Outside the acknowledged theatres and music halls, there was still a variety of entertainment in the nineties. Circuses had been regular visitors to Bristol since at least 1790, the traditional sites being the Back Fields behind the Full Moon in Stokes Croft and The Grove to the south of Queen Square (where bears had been baited in Elizabethan times), and even in the 1890s these areas were still occasionally used.

The most popular venue for circuses, however, was the Rifle Drill Hall, which Hengler's Circus, regular visitors since the 1860s, used for autumn visits four years running at the opening of the nineties. While equestrian acts still constituted the main appeal, there was an increasing exploitation of water spectacles and pantomimes, ranging from *Cinderella* to *The War in Zululand.* The ballet-pantomime of *The Brigands,* staged in October 1891, proved a remarkable piece of "theatre in the round," with an advanced use of back-lighting: "the circular scenery is made of painted gauze, through which the spectator can see the bright and animated tableaux inside, and which yet makes an artistic background that cuts off from view the people on the other side of the ring."[1] July 1893, however, was the Henglers' last visit, and thereafter with one exception Bristol was visited only by tenting circuses, which continued throughout the decade.

Of these the most outstanding were Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and "the Greatest Show on Earth" — that of Barnum and Bailey. On their first visit in August 1898 the latter rented a site in North Street, Bedminster (an area just beginning to be a centre for popular entertainment); their grand procession, taking twenty minutes to pass any given point, and blocking traffic at Bristol Bridge for the best part of an hour, included a display of flags of all nations, "except that of Spain, which it was explained had been eaten by one of the elephants, and thus a new insult heaped upon the unfortunate Spaniards."[2]

"The Greatest Show on Earth", despite torrential rain, drew such large audiences that even the Prince's was severely affected. With a menagerie and a display of human and animal freaks as well as three rings and two raised stages in the circus proper,

1 *Western Daily Press,* 20.10.1891.
2 *Bristol Mercury,* 16.8.1898.



the site could and did accommodate something like 11,000 people at a time. The rain so affected the ground, however, as to interfere considerably with taking up, and the following year Barnum and Bailey moved to a site off Bishop Road, Horfield, where similar August weather was combated by loads of straw.

Among Bristol's most regular providers of entertainment were the Poole Brothers, whose various Myrioramas were Christmas visitors to the Greater Colston Hall throughout the nineties till it was destroyed by fire in 1898; after two rather uneasy seasons at the Drill Hall, they thankfully returned to the rebuilt Colston Hall in 1900.

These extensive panoramas, accompanied by an explanatory commentary, held the same appeal in their day as did the news reels and travelogues of the later cinema. A typical example, Joseph Poole's Myriorama of 1891, presented views of London, Portsmouth and Ireland, followed by "a series of magnificent dioramic mechanical tableaux, invented and painted by Mr. Arthur C. Rogers, representing a wreck on the Kentish coast — the fog, snowstorm, breaking up of the ship, and gallant rescue of the crew at sunrise by the lifeboat." After more pictures of Liverpool, New York and Niagara Falls, there were illustrations of "the great battle of Abu Klea, and the charge of the British troops at the battle of Gubat" in the Sudan, followed by the story of Stanley's recent African explorations, "concluding with a thrilling representation of the slave trade and the burning of a village."[1] In the intervals between the parts of the Myriorama a variety entertainment was given, and this became gradually more and more important till in December 1900 the *Western Daily Press* could assert that it "would put many a music-hall to shame, and is a complete entertainment in itself."

Both the Greater and Lesser Colston Halls were used quite frequently also for Minstrel shows, particularly the Bohee and Livermore Troupes and Moore & Burgess's Minstrels, who included a series of Musical Tableaux Vivants, one of which was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with music by Ivan Caryll and libretto by George R. Sims. A more unusual visitor was Tussaud & Co's waxwork exhibition, which was further enlivened by musical numbers rendered by the Bohemian Band of Ladies and Professor Conrad's cinematograph. The Lesser Colston Hall was fitted up as the Chamber of Horrors!

A fire which broke out on the night of September 1898 in an adjacent clothier's warehouse completely destroyed the Greater

1 *Western Daily Press,* 26.12.1891.

Colston Hall (though as happened again in 1945 the Lesser Colston Hall escaped). It was soon determined to rebuild, on an extended site, and the new Hall was opened on 27 November 1900. A series of concerts tested its acoustics, and gave rise to a delightful story of George Riseley conducting Villiers Stanford's *Last Post*. "Towards the close of the piece there is a representation of the 'post' with muffled drum roll in the distance, and while this is being given the orchestra maintains a dead silence. A lady was heard to remark:— 'Now that was very good of Mr. George Riseley to stop while a German band was playing in Colston Street.' "[1]

Although the Victoria Rooms was surprisingly little used for stage entertainments at this period, there were a number of recital engagements, the artists ranging from Albert Chevalier (who came three times in the nineties) to Sir Squire Bancroft reciting *A Christmas Carol* in aid of the Infirmary. The Drill Hall housed, besides circuses, numerous popular exhibitions, visits of Professor Crocker and his educated horses, and even the occasional minstrel show, before being sold as the site of the civic Museum and Art Gallery in 1899.

The emergence of Bedminster as a centre of entertainment has already been mentioned; though it had no licensed hall till Stoll built the Bedminster Hippodrome in 1912, the Town Hall and the Alliance Club were pressed into service for Minstrel shows, and, on one occasion, a display by Dr. Barnardo's Boys.

Outdoor entertainments were not neglected. There were pleasure grounds at Avonmouth and at the Bell, Stapleton, and on public holidays the Zoological Gardens mounted fetes with dancing, fireworks, and variety acts.

All this was in addition to the multitude of amateur and semi-professional concert parties giving Happy Evenings for the People at Temperance Halls, or drawing room entertainments at the hotels, particularly the Grand Spa. Live entertainment was spread all over the city, even if in places it was spread rather thin.

## THE BEGINNING OF FILM

It is doubtful whether any theatrical manager in Bristol realised the impact which the nascent film industry would eventually make on live entertainment in the early part of the twentieth century. From their point of view it was a novelty, and as

1 *Bristol Evening News*, 4.12.1900.



such might draw in the curious; towards the end of the nineties, however, it was also increasingly playing the role of a living newspaper of sport, politics and war.

Even the Prince's and the Theatre Royal included moving pictures occasionally in their programmes, but it was the music halls which embraced the innovation most readily. The Tivoli, as has been mentioned, seems to have been the first in the field in June 1896, but four months later the People's Palace introduced the Theatrograph, invented by Robert William Paul, one of the leading pioneers of the British film industry. So popular was this that Gascoigne rebooked it four times within the next eight months, and followed it up with the American Biograph, the invention of Hermann Casler. In an interview published in the *Bristol Evening News* on 28 August 1897 the operator, Eugene Lauste, gave a vivid description of the current techniques of photographing, processing and projecting the films. Asked whether he thought Mr. Edison would succeed with his current experiments to introduce sound, he said he thought not, on his present lines — a pronouncement which may in retrospect have caused him to blush a little.

The most popular sequence in the Biograph's offering was one which showed Jumbo the Horseless Fire Engine, and invariably this aroused shouted demands for its repetition. As it was impossible to rewind the film, Lauste obtained a second copy and spliced it into the sequence; next week, therefore, the audience had its encore whether it would or no!

Thanks to the tribulations of its managements, it was not till May 1898 that moving pictures came to the Empire, when Edison's Life-Size Pictures were shown on the first of many occasions there. They were praised by the press as an item "which is bound to receive the approval of those who hold the strictest views with regard to the amusements of the people."[1] In view of the accusations of demoralising influence later to be hurled at the cinema it is amusing to see how strongly the moralists initially approved of its educational value, especially in the case of a film on the notorious "Affaire Dreyfus," which was shown at the Empire in October 1899.

Numerous other halls, from the Victoria Rooms to the YMCA, were used for film displays by enterprising showmen. Probably the most interesting of these shows was one given by T. J. West of the Modern Marvel Company at the Victoria Rooms in September 1898. Besides "animated pictures" there was a demonstration of the analyticon, an early stereoscopic device, and

1 *Bristol Mercury*, 10.5.1898.

of the Ives process of colour photography. David Devant's company brought "animated photographs and original illusions" to the Victoria Rooms at Christmas that year, one of the film sequences showing the scene before and after the disaster at the launching of the SS Albion, but not the disaster itself; "for meanwhile the operators and crew of the cinematograph boat were engaged in rescue work, and saved no less than 25 lives."[1] The Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight was shown on film at the Colston Hall, with a commentary between reels.

At that stage of development there was of course no possibility of an entertainment devoted uninterruptedly to films — neither the technical excellence of projection nor the length of sequence available permitted this — but those who looked closely must have perceived that by the end of the century film entertainment possessed the potential to provide many of the attractions of live entertainment: pictorial interest, topicality, amusement, *verismo*. With hindsight we can see how much of the success of the cinema in the first half of the twentieth century was foreshadowed by the end of the nineties.

* * *

Looking back, too, we can see how many other developments of the new century's amusements had their roots in the previous decade: the gradual absorption of locally-owned or managed theatres into national circuits, the increasing selectivity of repertoire in entertainment houses and the assumed segregation of "class" audiences. What seemed a prosperous and developing decade in entertainment as in commerce had within it seeds of decay.

Let us not, nevertheless, belittle the last years of the Victorian era. When we look at the calibre of artists and their material, the range of entertainment and its diffusion of locality over Bristol, we see even the newest theatre complex in a rather different perspective. The greatest loss, which perhaps may yet be regained, is of the wide-spread enthusiasm for live entertainment of all kinds; the greatest gain, though there is some danger of its dissipation, the restoration of the idea of a Bristol theatre which is felt to be truly part of Bristol and Bristolians.

1 *Bristol Mercury*, 27.12.1898.





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