

Historical Background:

The establishment of a theatre in York dates from the early 18th century when companies of travelling players relying upon private patronage, which had been common in the 16th and 17th centuries, were being replaced by independent companies using limited, regular circuits of a few towns. One of these companies, owned by Thomas Keregan, performed in Hull, Leeds, Beverley, and York, and in 1734 obtained permission to open a theatre near York Minster. This accommodation proved inadequate and in 1744 Keregan's widow leased the cloisters of St. Leonard's Hospital from the corporation where she built York's first permanent theatre.

The theatre manager was Joseph Baker, a member of the company, and he succeeded Mrs. Keregan as lessee in January 1761. He was given the lease on the condition that he spent at least £500 on improving the building and by 1765 he had created a spacious theatre which was reckoned to be one of the finest outside London. In doing so, however, Baker expended all his energy and capital and was obliged to give up the theatre almost as soon as he had created it.

The new manager and lessee, who took over the Theatre Royal in 1766 and remained until his death in 1803, was Tate Wilkinson. He published voluminous memoirs which give a very detailed history of the theatre during these years. The circuit was enlarged to include York, Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle, Wakefield, Doncaster, and Hull, and this kept the company busy for most of the year. There were many financial crises but Wilkinson managed to remain solvent throughout his years as manager. His greatest achievement was to enhance the prestige of the theatre in York until it began to approach that of the London theatres. The repertoire of the company was extended by him to include most of the works of Shakespeare and those of Sheridan and other 18th-century playwrights soon after their London productions, to say nothing of opera and oratorio. On the other hand the greatest profits were always made from the worst plays or contrived spectacles involving stage machinery. Indeed, the only occasions on which profits were made on Shakespearian productions were those when there were visiting London 'stars' like Mrs. Siddons or John Philip Kemble.

After the death of Tate Wilkinson, his eldest son, John, was manager for a few years; after initial success he was obliged in 1814 to give up the circuit which, by that time, was reduced to York, Hull, Leeds, Doncaster, and Wakefield. During the next half century there was a decline, and manager followed manager in rapid succession. For long periods there was no manager at all and in 1853 the corporation was only prevented with some difficulty from closing. There was a parallel decline in taste. The programme was lengthened because of the growing practice of putting on three or four short pieces with interludes. Most of these pieces were melodramas or adaptations of popular novels. One of the more enterprising managers, Robert Mansel (1821-4), carried out extensive alterations to the building.

Despite all these improvements the old circuit of theatres, centred upon York, had completely collapsed by 1860. It was revived once more in 1865 by John Coleman who built up his 'Great Northern' circuit of York, Leeds, Hull, Doncaster, Liverpool, and Glasgow. This was a highly successful business enterprise based upon spectacular productions, particularly of pantomimes and melodramas, and making no concession to taste. Coleman spent much of his profits on further alterations to the theatre. Coleman became bankrupt in 1876 and the theatre was transferred to W. A. Waddington who made the final break with the old circuit system for he relied entirely upon touring companies. These companies brought many notable plays to York and the system of short pieces and interludes was completely

abandoned. From: 'Places of entertainment', A History of the County of Yorkshire: the City of York (1961), pp. 531-35. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=36389>. Date accessed: 22 August 2005.

Custodial history:

Purchased by Alex Alec-Smith Books at auction in Swindon, 20 July 2005 and offered for sale to Hull University Archives 22nd August 2005. In the auctioneer's catalogue they were included under the heading of 'The Barrie Wilkinson Collection of Theatre, History & Architecture'. This collection was sold in 32 lots and the lot comprising the two volumes was described (not entirely accurately) as 'Theatre Royal Leeds'. An enquiry has been sent to the vendor at auction, via the auctioneers, Dominic Winter, to obtain further details of provenance prior to July 2005. Acquired with aid from the V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

Extent: 2 volumes

Related material:

Letters of Brook & Bulmer, Solicitors (Trustees of the Theatres Royal of the York Circuit) [U DP164]; U DDX/16/6-9, 18-2 and Theatre playbill collection

Access conditions: Access will be granted to any accredited reader

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| U DP208/1 | <p>York Theatre Royal Circuit Accounts Accounts of income and expenditure. Entries for each week (representing a series of performances at one of the theatres in the circuit) across a double page. On the left-hand page, income (Dr), including the following information: Place, event (eg York assizes, Doncaster Races), date, name of play or other feature (usually two or more per programme), total receipts. On the right hand page, expenses (Cr), including entries for: salaries, sums to individuals for their 'share of benefit' [income above £12 or £20 divided] or for their 'ticket night' [half of the ticket receipts]; printing, advertising and bill-posting; cleaning, washing, candles and other lighting, music, costumes, fabrics, properties (props) and other items purchased; fees for actors and actresses, singers or extra members of the band or orchestra (ie those extra to the company); labourers, painters, carpenters, bricklayers and other craftsmen, carriage and portering, supernumeraires; doorkeepers, moneytakers, billers and constables; and other incidental items. weekly and cumulative totals for income and expenditure appear at the end of each page.</p> <p>At the end of the final entry, for 30th June 1829 is a note of the balance carried over to the next volume, commencing 1st July 1829; followed by a list of bills unpaid in Hull and York.</p> <p>1 volume</p> | 21 Jul 1828- 30 Jun 1829 |
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Hull History Centre: York Theatre Royal accounts

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| U DP208/2 | <p>York Theatre Royal Circuit Accounts Accounts of income and expenditure. Entries for each week (representing a series of performances at one of the theatres in the circuit) across a double page. On the left-hand page, income (Dr), including the following information: Place, event (eg York assizes, Doncaster Races), date, name of play or other feature (usually two or more per programme), total receipts. On the right hand page, expenses (Cr), including entries for: salaries, poors-rate for the theatres in Leeds and Hull; sums to individuals for their 'share of benefit' [income above £12 or £20 divided] or for their 'ticket night' [half of the ticket receipts]; printing, advertising and bill-posting; cleaning, washing, candles and other lighting, manuscripts, music and copying; costumes, fabrics, properties (props) and other items purchased; fees for actors and actresses, singers or extra members of the band or orchestra (ie those extra to the company); labourers, tailors, painters, carpenters, bricklayers and other craftsmen, carriage and portering, supernumeraires; doorkeepers, moneytakers, billers and constables; and other incidental items. weekly and cumulative totals for income and expenditure appear at the end of each page.</p> <p>At the end of the final entry, for 1st January 1830 is a note of the balance carried over to Mr Cummins.</p> <p>1 volume</p> | 1 Jul 1829- 1 Jan 1830 |
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