

Everything you wanted to know about PLAYBILLS

but were afraid to ask...

*Or, what you can discover about
18-19th century theatre from a bit of old paper.*

Having worked in theatre archives for over twenty years I forget that people in the real world don't know what a prompt book, show report, or costume bible is. And recently, expressing my excitement over playbills in the Shakespeare Collection, has only led to quizzical expressions and the question 'What's that?'

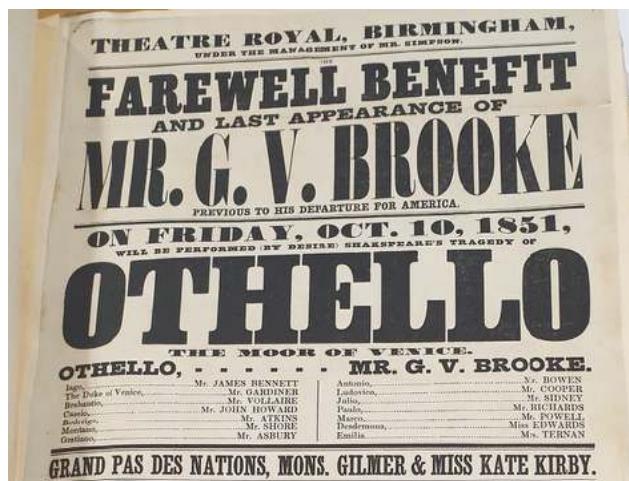
A playbill is a sheet of paper, printed on one side, advertising a public performance or set of performances billed on one night. They were standard, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries before the more modern invention of posters and programmes. They consist of mostly printed text; a mixture of large, bold type for play-titles and stars; occasional glimpses of colour, particularly red to catch they eye.

It's amazing what you can learn about the history of performance from these ephemeral documents. Looking at a variety from a particular theatre gives you an idea of the incredible array of plays performed during particular decades; what Shakespeare plays were popular (or not so popular); what other entertainments were in fashion. They give you all the information you need to imagine what a 'night at the theatre' consisted of.

Playbills are also a bit of a 'who's who' in the theatre world as actors would take their famous performances up and down the country. Actors who worked at the Theatres Royal in London would work in other major UK cities, including Birmingham. It has been fascinating to track down details on some of those actors unfamiliar to me but declared as 'great tragedians' on the playbills. Playbills list many of them as just 'returned from America' and such - the actual reach of these actors is astonishing considering how difficult travel was at that time - they were international celebrities of the stage.

Irish actor Gustavus Vaughan Brooke, normally referred to as G V Brooke for obvious reasons, travelled to America, came back to England for a couple of months and then headed off to Australia on 1 January 1866. He performed as *Othello* at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham in 1851 and for one night only in 1853.

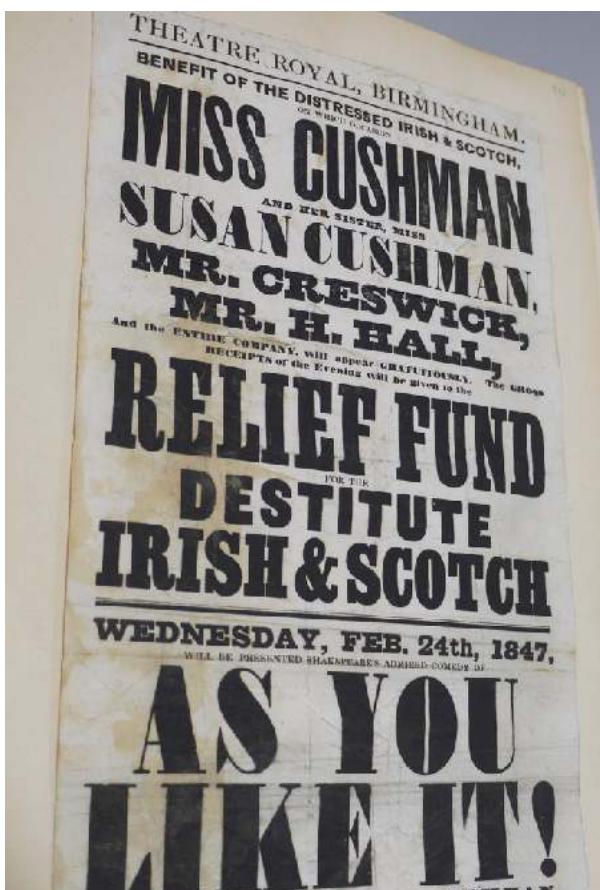
Unfortunately, when Brooke headed off to Australia on the SS London, the ship sank. Witnesses said, he worked bravely manning the pump but went down with the ship declaring 'Give my last farewell to the people of Melbourne.'



Playbills also mention the ‘benefits’ system where actors would receive the whole or half night’s takings to boost their income. They would play roles for which their reputation had grown in order to get the best possible income. These benefits indicate what type of actor they were and the level of their popularity. Bigger stars of the stage had their own benefits, whereas lesser known actors would share with sometimes three actors having their benefit in one night.



Elizabeth Brunton, a very popular actress from the period, first appeared on stage in 1815. This playbill from 1817 is dated less than a month before her first debut at Covent Garden on 12 September.



Performances were also given as fundraisers for local institutions such as hospitals and charities. I particularly liked the production of *As You Like It*, starring Charlotte and Susan Cushman in 1847 for the *Destitute Irish and Scotch*. Concluding that particular bill was the laughable farce of *Pat's Vagaries! Or, More Blunders than One*. The main protagonist is a character called Larry Hooligan and the featured song ‘Tip-ta-la-ra-whack!!’

On the bill there are details of performances of various types, acrobats, dancers, magicians, pantomimes were extremely popular, as were tableaus and dioramas. In the recent television drama *The Terror* they created such a tableau honouring the heroic seamen, before they sail off on their doomed voyage. These tableau were often of events from history, or the recent past. One playbill from 1848 mentions a tableau of the French Revolution which was obviously still a very popular subject with the general public:

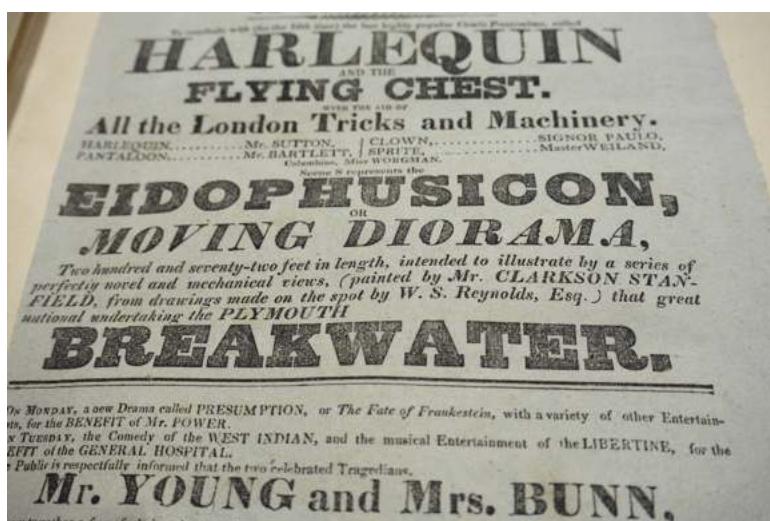
Which has produced a most favourable Impression, and every Evening elicited rapturous Applause from delighted Audiences, who have unanimously proclaimed it the most pleasing and beautiful Representation ever presented to Public Notice, and is withdrawn solely on account of the extensive Preparations requisite for the production, on MONDAY next, of the new Drama, "VIVE LA LIBERTE; OR, THE FRENCH REVOLUTION."

On the playbill below which advertises future performances we can see that Shakespeare and 'pantomime' were big draws.



The exotic and oriental were also always popular. One of my favourite notices tells of Khia Khan Khruse and his amazing ‘protean transformations’ learnt in the caves of Salamanca,

'...exhibiting some of the most surprising evolutions, serpentine postures, &c. &c. ever beheld, with sword, chairs and hoops, &c.'



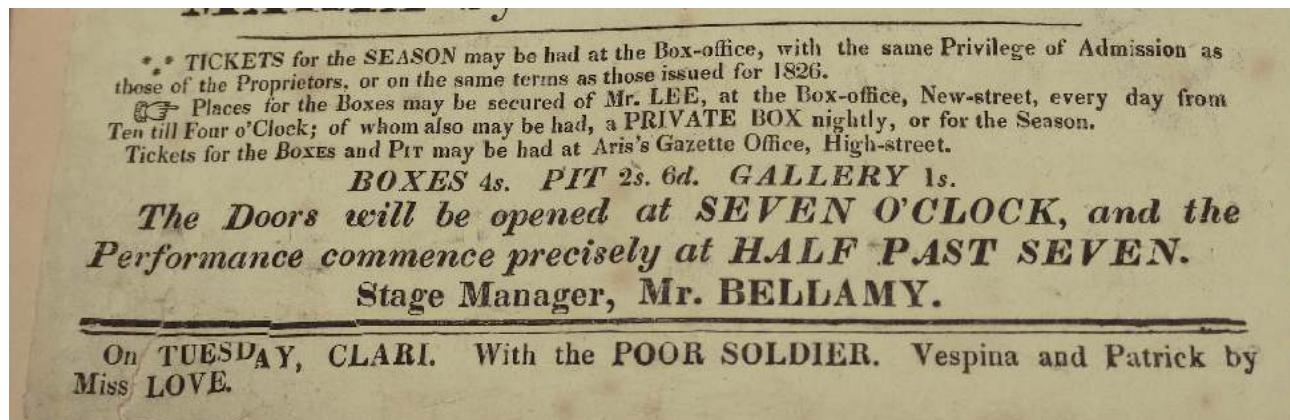
The practicalities of theatre going and even the design of the building can be discovered through the playbill. The inclusion of large, set pieces and 'machinery' indicate the size and the scope of what was possible in the theatre behind-the-scenes. Differently priced tickets indicate that people from all classes attended the theatre. These prices also indicate seating arrangements: boxes, gallery, pit, etc. This gives us a picture of the auditorium. You can even find references to the tradition of providing spaces for audience members to sit on the stage itself.

To see a playbill is to be taken into the past. They are wonderfully evocative documents but also incredibly informative. More than anything they demonstrate that an evening going to see a Shakespeare play was a vastly different experience than it is today. People had the opportunity to

stay for a variety or to come and go from the theatre as they pleased. They could stay for the Shakespeare play and then leave or miss the Shakespeare and go for the entertainments.

In a world where you can select entertainment at the touch of a button on your computer or streaming services it's hard to put yourself back into a time when forms of entertainment were live and limited but definitely colourful. Playbills are an imaginative gateway into that past,

Karin THOMSON
as the
E2E HERITAGE AMBASSADOR
for one month only...



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