

A PEPYS ANTHOLOGY



Passages from the Diary of
SAMUEL PEPYS

Selected and edited by
ROBERT AND LINNET
LATHAM



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The Theatre-goer

¶ THE THEATRES – closed since 1642 under the rule of the Puritans – were reopened after the King's return. By the end of 1660 there were two flourishing companies of actors in London licensed to perform in public, and (for the first time) to employ women in female parts (3 January 1661). They were the King's Company managed by Thomas Killigrew, and the Duke's Company managed by Sir William Davenant. The former, specialising in pre-1642 plays, performed in a theatre constructed from a tennis court in Vere St (usually referred to as 'the Theatre'), but moved in 1663 to a purpose-built theatre in Bridges St, off Drury Lane. The Duke's Company, specialising in new plays, settled in a theatre (again made from a tennis court) in Lincoln's Inn Fields equipped with elaborate scenery and stage machines, and known sometimes, from its 'works', as the 'Opera'. There were occasional productions by both companies in the evenings at Court, in the Great Hall of Whitehall Palace. In the theatres, plays were put on in the afternoons and ran for two or three days only.

Pepys had a passion for the theatre akin to his passion for music. He could rarely resist the temptation of a visit, and never tired of seeing the plays he liked. A little guilty at spending so much time in pleasure, and fearful of being criticised for neglecting his business, he attempted to bind himself against theatre-going by vows enforced by fines paid into his 'poor-box'. But to no great effect – he found ways of avoiding both the vows and the fines (see e.g. 8 May 1663). He rarely saw a play without passing judgement, and his comments are shrewd and comprehensive. He would criticise acting, production, plot and language.

Pepys came to know several actors and actresses, and was captivated in particular by the charm and vivacity of Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Knepp.

To the Theatre, where was acted *Beggars Bush* [by Fletcher and Massinger], it being very well done; and here the first time that ever I saw women come upon the stage. (3 January 1661)

THE THEATRE-GOER

My wife and I to the Opera and there saw *Romeo and Juliet*, the first time it was ever acted. But it is the play of itself the worst that ever I heard in my life, and the worst acted that ever I saw these people do; and I am resolved to go no more to see the first time of acting, for they were all of them out more or less. (1 March 1662)

To the King's Theatre, where we saw *Midsummers Nights Dreame*, which I have never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure. (29 September 1662)

To the Dukes House, where we saw [Dryden's *The Slighted Mayde*] well acted, though the play hath little good in it – being most pleased to see the little girl dance in boy's apparel, she having very fine legs; only, bends in the hams as I perceive all women do. (23 February 1663)

Thence to the new playhouse [the *Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*], the second day of its being opened. The play was *The Humorous Lieutenant* [by Fletcher] – a play that hath little good in it. In the dance, the tall Devil's actions was very pretty. And though my oath against going to plays doth not oblige me against this house, because it was not then in being, yet believing that at that time my meaning was against all public houses, I am resolved to deny myself the liberty of two plays at Court which are in arreare to me for the months of March and Aprill; which will more than countervail this excess. (8 May 1663)

Mr Creed dining with me, I got him to give my wife and me a play this afternoon, lending him money to do it – which is a fallacy that I have found now once to avoid my vowe with, but never to be more practised I swear. (13 August 1664)

After dinner we walked to the King's Playhouse, all in dirt, they being altering of the stage to make it wider – but God knows when they will begin to act again. But my business here was to see the inside of the stage and all the tiring roomes and machines; and ended it was a sight worthy seeing. But to see their clothes and the various sorts, and what a mixture of things there was, here a wooden leg, there a ruff, here a bobby-horse, there a crowne, would make a man split himself to see with laughing – and perticularly Lacys wardrobe, and Shotrell's. But then again, to think how fine they show on the stage by candlelight, and how poor things they are to look now too nearhand, is not pleasant at all. The machines are fine, and the paintings very pretty. (19 March 1666)

[T. Killigrew] tells me how the audience at his house is not above half so much as it used to be before the late fire. That Knipp is like to make the best actor that ever came upon the stage, she understanding so well. That they are going to give her 30*l* a year more. That the stage is now by his pains a thousand times better and more glorious then ever heretofore. Now, wax-candles, and many of them; then [*i.e. under Charles I*], not above 3*lb* of tallow. Now, all things civil, no rudeness any^where; then, as in a bear-garden. Then, two or three fiddlers; now, nine or ten of the best. Then, nothing but rushes upon the ground and everything else mean; and now, all other-

wise. Then, the Queen seldom and the King never would come; now, not the King only for state, but all civil people do think they may come as well as any. (12 February 1667)

After dinner with my wife to the King's House, to see *The Mayden Queene*, a new play of Dryden's mightily commended for the regularity of it and the strain and wit; and the truth is, there is a comical part done by Nell, which is Florimell, that I never can hope ever to see the like done again by man or woman. The King and Duke of York was at the play; but so great performance of a comical part was never, I believe, in the world before as Nell doth this, both as a mad girl and then, most and best of all, when she comes in like a young gallant; and hath the motions and carriage of a spark the most that ever I saw any man have. It makes me, I confess, admire her. (2 March 1667)

At noon home to dinner; and presently my wife and I and Sir W. Penn to the King's playhouse, where the house extraordinary full; and there was the King and Duke of York to see the new play, *Queen Elizabeths Troubles*, and *The History of Eighty-Eight* [by Heywood]. I confess I have sucked in so much of the sad story of Queen Elizabeth from my cradle, that I was ready to weep for her sometimes. But the play is the most ridiculous that sure ever came upon stage, and ended is merely a show; only, shows the true garbe of the Queens in those days, just as we see Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth painted – but the play is merely a puppet-play acted by living puppets. Neither the design nor language better; and one stands by and tells us the meaning of things. Only, I was pleased to see Knipp dance among the milkmaids, and to hear her

sing a song to Queen Elizabeth – and to see her come out in her nightgowne, with no locks on, but her bare face and hair only tied up in a knot behind; which is the comeliest dress that ever I saw her in to her advantage. (17 August 1667)

To the Duke of York's playhouse; but the House so full, it being a new play *The Coffee House* [by *St Cerfe*], that we could not get in, and so to the King's House; and there going in, met with Knipp and she took us up into the tiring-rooms and to the women's shift, where Nell was dressing herself and was all unready; and is very pretty, prettier than I thought; and so walked all up and down the House above, and then below into the Scene-room, and there sat down and she gave us fruit; and here I read the qu's to Knepp while she answered me, through all her part of *Flora's Figarys* [by *Rhodes*], which was acted today. But Lord, to see how they were both painted would make a man mad – and did make me loath them – and what base company of men comes among them, and how lewdly they talk – and how poor the men are in clothes, and yet what a show they make on the stage by candlelight, is very observable. But to see how Nell cursed for having so few people in the pit was pretty, the other House carrying away all the people at the new play, and is said nowadays to have generally most company, as being better players. By and by into the pit and there saw the play; which is pretty good, but my belly was full of what I had seen in the House. (5 October 1667)

Thence I after dinner to the Duke of York's playhouse, and there saw *Sir Martin Marrall* [by *Dryden*], which I have seen so often; and yet am mightily pleased with it

and think it mighty witty, and the fullest of proper matter for mirth that ever was writ. And I do clearly see that they do improve in their acting of it. Here a mighty company of citizens, prentices and others; and it makes me observe that when I begin first to be able to bestow a play on myself, I do not remember that I saw so many by half of the ordinary prentices and mean people in the pit, at 2s.-6d. apiece, as now; I going for several years no higher then the 12d, and then the 18d. places, and though I strained hard to go in then when I did – so much the vanity and prodigality of the age is to be observed in this perticular. (1 January 1668)

I was prettily served this day at the playhouse door; where giving six shillings into the fellow's hand for us three, the fellow by legerdemain did convey one away, and with so much grace face me down that I did give him but five, that though I knew the contrary, yet I was overpowered by his so grave and serious demanding the other shilling that I could not deny him, but was forced by myself to give it him. (24 February 1668)

My wife and I by hackney to the King's playhouse and there, the pit being full, sat in a box above and saw *Catelin's Conspiracy* [by *Ben Jonson*] – yesterday being the first day – a play of much good sense and words to read, but that doth appear the worst upon the stage, I mean the least divertising, that ever I saw any, though most fine in clothes and a fine scene of the Senate and of a fight, that ever I saw in my life – but the play is only to be read. (19 December 1668)

