David Roberts

First Night in Bristol: Reflections on a 250th Anniversary

The 250th anniversary of the opening of the Bristol Old Vic, the country's longest-serving theatre, was celebrated on 30 May 2016. In this article David Roberts considers the repertory choices of the opening night, the way the occasion sought to address anxiety in the city about the presence of a professional theatre in its midst, and the precarious means by which the theatre itself came into being. Where previous historians have emphasized the legal context for objections to the theatre, it is argued here that discourses arising from the Jeremy Collier controversy informed local opposition and were specifically addressed both through programming and through writing for and about the event. David Roberts is Dean of the Arts, Design, and Media at Birmingham City University. His recent publications include *Thomas Betterton* and *Restoration Plays and Players*, both for Cambridge University Press. This article is based on a lecture given to celebrate the anniversary of the Bristol Old Vic.

Key terms: theatre architecture, Bristol Old Vic, *The Conscious Lovers*, Collier controversy.

'HAVE YOU ORDERED that I should not be interrupted while I am dressing?'

Do you hear echoes of P. G. Wodehouse or even Oscar Wilde? The tetchy, nervously superior manner with the servant classes could almost be Bertie Wooster or Algernon Moncrieff. In fact, it is the first line of the first play to be performed at the theatre we now call the Bristol Old Vic, two hundred and fifty years ago last May.

Sir John Bevil, who has a past to be ashamed of, is determined his son will not. A settled situation is what the boy needs, which means a respectable wife, planned to be Lucinda Sealand, a wealthy heiress. Bevil Junior has other ideas. Not only does he love an impoverished orphan girl, Indiana; he knows his best friend, a hot-headed fellow called – wait for it – Myrtle, has a crush on Lucinda. Bevil Junior discusses with Lucinda the drawbacks of his situation in impeccably reasonable terms, but in the process manages to offend Myrtle, who calls him out for a duel. New Model Man that he is, Bevil Junior resists all such macho posturing, and is rewarded for his restraint with the discovery that – bingo! – Indiana is after all a long-lost daughter of Mr Sealand, who duly blesses their union. And as you'd expect, Lucinda gets her Myrtle.

Such is the plot of Sir Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers,* a benign comedy of disguise and redemption that had held the London stage since 1722.[1] It was not to everyone's taste. The playwright and critic John Dennis lambasted its sanctimonious lack of irony, proclaiming it the death of real comedy. This new-fangled sentimentalism may have been good for pacifying the Christian thought police who, early in Steele's career, had tried civil action against playwrights for writing blasphemy and actors for speaking it; but for Dennis *The Conscious Lovers* was a sop to bourgeois taste, a lachrymose soap opera masquerading as drama. It did not matter to him that he had not bothered to read it.[2]

Those very qualities of bourgeois comfort made it the perfect choice for Bristol's most significant opening night ever, on 30 May 1766. Steele's play entered an argument that had been bubbling in the city for years. It offered proof that a professional theatre could be, in the words of Sir John Bevil that propel *The Conscious Lovers* towards its saccharine conclusion, a prompt to 'constancy and merit' rather than:

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a risk of ruining the morals of our youth, impoverishing our tradesmen and artisans, promoting the arts of intrigue and of seducing the innocent, reducing many perhaps to bankruptcy, injuring the credit of others and diffusing an habit of idleness, indolence, and debauchery through this once *industrious and virtuous city*.[3]

Published in a Bristol pamphlet of 1764 in the wake of proposals for a permanent theatre in the city, those anxieties have a long history that is embroiled in legislation. But it is possible to take too legalistic a view. Historians of Bristol theatre routinely cite Elizabethan legislation against vagrants, which required an actor to prove himself a Lord's servant if he wished to avoid the indignity of being whipped back to his home parish.[4] Then there was the licensing system, which meant a company had to obtain permission to act from the Lord Chamberlain or, from 1660, the King himself in the form of Letters Patent.

Charles II showed extreme frugality in few things except dispensing of theatrical patents, and his chosen patentees exploited the commercial advantages of enforcing his policy. Over the next seventy years licences proliferated again and in 1737 the government of Sir Robert Walpole, whose longevity made it a prime target for the satire John Dennis failed to detect in *The Conscious Lovers,* passed a new Licensing Act.[5] Technically, any theatre performance beyond the authority of London's patent theatres was now defined as illegal.

Revisiting the Collier Controversy

Legislation gave every disgruntled burgher of the 'once industrious and virtuous' Bristol a pretext for objecting to the new theatre. What it did not give them was a language to describe their objections that resonated with local values as opposed to national policy, or the feeling that they could take matters into their own hands. Curiously, given the legalistic emphasis of existing histories, no one actually invoked the Licensing Act against the new theatre. Instead, objectors derived their approach from one of the most controversial books ever published about theatre, and the book that John Dennis hated more than any other.

The Reverend Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* first appeared in 1698 and was reprinted several times during the first part of the eighteenth century.[6] It was not antitheatrical in principle, but set out to prove that when measured against its Ancient Greek and early modern begetters, the modern theatre was a mere festering pit of vice. Playwrights today, Collier boomed, were interested only in swearing, sex, idleness and – worst of all for a clergyman who considered himself answerable only to God – making fun of the clergy.

His work inspired a generation of do-gooders to make notes at the theatre and report back to the magistrates, who occasionally obliged by inflicting fines on indignant writers and actors, who in turn took to blaming each other.[7] In other words, a precedent was established for ordinary citizens across the country to believe that the regulation of theatre was not just government business, but their business.

And so when Alexander Edgar, Thomas Symons, Roger Watts, and their colleagues sat down in 1764 to begin drafting proposals for a new theatre in Bristol, they knew there would be opposition.[8] As in any civil war, opponents were sometimes hard to distinguish. Pillars of the community propped up both sides. Symons was a lawyer and Watts a prominent merchant. Edgar would become Mayor and another supporter, Henry Cruger, would join Edmund Burke as a Bristol MP. None of them appears to have been unduly daunted by the prospect of their apprentices bunking off work to chat with prostitutes during the play.

They knew they could do better than the little theatre at Jacobs Wells. Since 1729, John Hippisley had carved out a business more or less in the way Shakespeare and company had, just beyond the boundaries of city jurisdiction and in a pleasure quarter, which in this case served people thirsting for the waters rather than for bears and whores. In 1748 Hippisley bequeathed a moderately successful business to his daughter, Mrs Green, and star actors came from London to support the resident company. William

Powell, who claimed rivalry with David Garrick, was the stand-out performer, so successful that his 1765 benefit could have filled the theatre twice. He posted a letter in the local newspaper by way of apology to those who couldn't get in.[9] Hannah Pritchard, immortalized as Garrick's Lady Macbeth in Zoffany's magnificent painting, was a regular summer visitor.

Since the journey to Jacobs Wells then was no easier than it is now, Alexander Edgar and friends saw the sense in creating a playing space nearer the heart of the city. By the time Thomas Chatterton wrote about Hotwells in 1769, the old theatre was (thanks to Edgar's efforts) on the brink of ruin, much to the poet's fashionably melancholy delight. But his poem, 'Clifton', says a lot more about the elemental excitement audiences yearned for in great acting, which was to make you feel as though you were alive to every murmur and reflex of the natural world:

Here too (alas! though tottering now with age)
Stands our deserted, solitary stage,
Where oft our Powel, Nature's genuine son,
With tragic tones the fixed attention won:
Fierce from his lips his angry accents fly,
Fierce as the blast that tears the northern sky;
Like snows that trickle down hot Ætna's steep,
His passion melts the soul, and makes us weep:
But oh! how soft his tender accents move –
Soft as the cooings of the turtle's love –
Soft as the breath of morn in bloom of spring,
Dropping a lucid tear on zephyr's wing!
O'er Shakespeare's varied scenes he wandered wide,
In Macbeth's form all human power defied;
In shapeless Richard's dark and fierce disguise,
In dreams he saw the murdered train arise;
Then what convulsions shook his trembling breast,
And strewed with pointed thorns his bed of rest![10]

Those 'pointed thorns' suggest that Powell's Richard III excited in Chatterton a religious fervour to rival that of the most puritanical Bristolian.

Raising the Funds

The eighteenth-century version of crowdfunding ensured more people got the chance to experience the same thrill, but only just. Alexander Edgar and team organized a subscription, a system long used to fund the production of expensive buildings and even of expensive books.[11] However, they had two fundamental problems that would set any modern fundraiser chewing the carpet: a sketchy idea of (a) how much money they needed, and (b) how much money the citizenry of Bristol was prepared to give.

Their first proposal published a target of £2,000 through the issue of forty shares of £50 each.[12] In practice, a share meant the silver ticket that signified life membership –

a beautiful idea that would still cause problems two centuries thence as a result of the longstanding trade in silver ticket forgery.[13] Initially, the signs were good. Forty-nine subscribers answered the call to the tune of £50, and a further forty-seven contributed £30 each. But it soon became clear that the £3,860 raised was less than 80 per cent of the actual cost of the building. Rental agreements tided the project over until a further subscription raised £1,040 from people who, whether from financial or moral queasiness, had not joined in first time. Chatterton's first master, the lawyer John Lambert, was one; the author of the 1764 pamphlet appears to have been another.[14] So much for idleness, indolence, and debauchery.

Edgar and his friends took on their project at a time of risks and opportunities. The Seven Years War with France had concluded

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in 1763 after bitter conflict in the American colonies. War had, inevitably, slowed down Bristol's fast-expanding Atlantic trade. The subscription was therefore launched at a time when cash was tight but, conversely, people were ready to take new commercial risks and free themselves from the oppression of wars. It was a fine judgement on the part of the organizing committee, and one they got right only by the skin of their teeth.

An account of the laying of foundations for the theatre suggests that other calculations were scarcely more exact. In late November 1764 a local newspaper reported:

> The Workmen are now employ'd in order to lay the Foundation of the New Theatre, in King-street; which would have been before this Time, had not a Mistake been made in the Calculation, whereby the House would have been built 8 Feet larger in the Clear, than the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane.[15]

If civic pride demanded that Bristol's new theatre should model itself on London's most famous one, cost was a major consideration too. Copying an existing design was much cheaper than commissioning a new one. Among the committee's minutes is a reference to Edgar and Symons' visit to London, where they

> surveyed and [took] Measurements of both the playhouses . . . and have also engaged a draft of Drury-lane h[ouse] and consulting a very ingenious Carpenter Mr Saunders the carpenter of the h[ouse] they have collected such Prints as they flatter themselves will be a means of Saving some hundreds in Building ye Intended h[ouse] in Bristol.[16]

The local press also mentioned a model of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, 'sent for' to get the builders out of the awkward situation created for them. The owners, the report continues,

> seem determined that the Work shall be carried on with great Spirit. The Purchases are made, necessary for the Entrances from King-street and the Rackhay; and another way will be made into Baldwin-street.[17]

When the foundation stone was laid on 30 November 1764, a sceptic could have been forgiven for wondering where the rest of the building might end up in relation to it.

Passers-by would have wondered only where the building was at all. The site was at the end of a long garden that had belonged to a house in Baldwin Street, accessible only by passing through a house in King Street next to the Coopers' Hall. As a concession to those predicting an outbreak of bankruptcy, idleness, indolence, and debauchery (not to mention those who, holding such views, still liked to see a good play), the new theatre was kept discreetly out of sight – even for such a prim tale as *The Conscious Lovers.*

Bristol in the 1760s was not blessed with architects, that rare breed of people steeped in design principles drawn from classical antiquity. Projects were contracted either outside the city or to masons, builders, and carpenters. Chief among those was Thomas Paty, whose work took in the exquisite interior of Redland Chapel as well as the more stolid new Exchange, Clifton Hill House, and Royal Fort House. He began his career as a superlative carver and ended it by designing buildings in partnership with his more able son, William. Gomme, Jenner and Little's history of Bristol's buildings characterizes Paty Senior as the dull boy in the middle of the architecture class: 'rather uninspired and never rose much above the level of competence'.[18]

A 'Charming Mess'

It is easy to see why he should have been drawn to the theatre project, and equally easy to see how it could have been a source of irritation to him. Edgar and friends had commissioned him to design the building before deciding they could cut corners by taking prints of Drury Lane. But he agreed to supervise the construction, squeezing the theatre into the available space 'as nearly as the circumstances of the ground will permit' and in the process overseeing the implementation of the horseshoe design that imitated rather than reproduced Drury Lane, to what appears to be a more intimate effect.[19]

To his enduring credit, Paty devised other practical solutions to endemic problems. His

Paty's Doric columns: 'as slender and as widely spaced as possible to maximize sightlines'.

Doric columns are as slender and as widely spaced as possible to maximize sightlines but without creating the risk of the galleries crashing to the floor. The only sign of *gigantesque* is the Corinthian pilasters lining the stage boxes, where they obstruct no one's view. As the architectural history puts it:

> In strictly architectural terms the auditorium is a mess, but those standards are irrelevant in a theatre: the auditorium is charming and works well.[20]

The charm comes partly from the decorative work. Michael Edkins, a local artist who also sang, played walk-on parts, and made props, painted the auditorium. Marmaduke Cowle, described as 'an upholsterer in St Augustine's Parade', supplied and fitted the wallpaper and curtains, while John French was brought in from Drury Lane to handle the painted scenery.[21] Like most creative projects, it was a compromise of necessity and quality. Where expertise could not be found in the community of trades that was Bristol, it had to be sought from London.

Some of Paty's decisions were reversed by later generations, most notably when a further gallery was added in 1800 by raising the ceiling.[22] Others, having been reversed, have since been restored, in tribute to Paty's theatrical sensitivity. Most notably, his original design saw the stage projecting out beyond the end boxes. Later generations retracted the stage for the sake of greater spectacle and bigger audiences. Recent restoration of the stage to something like Paty's design emphasizes how drama usually works best when actors and audience feel they are sharing a room, not communicating across a chasm.[23] In other words, the supposedly uninspired carver-cum-designer had grasped an essential feature of the best theatrical experiences, irreplaceable by more technically sophisticated means. They create the illusion that the play is being made up here and now, just for you.

A Profitable First Night – for Charity

If Alexander Edgar and friends were unsure how much subscription money they could raise, it was not long before they had to think about how much the wider public were prepared to pay for an evening at the new theatre. A bill published for the opening night trembles with the feigned anxiety of a sales ploy:

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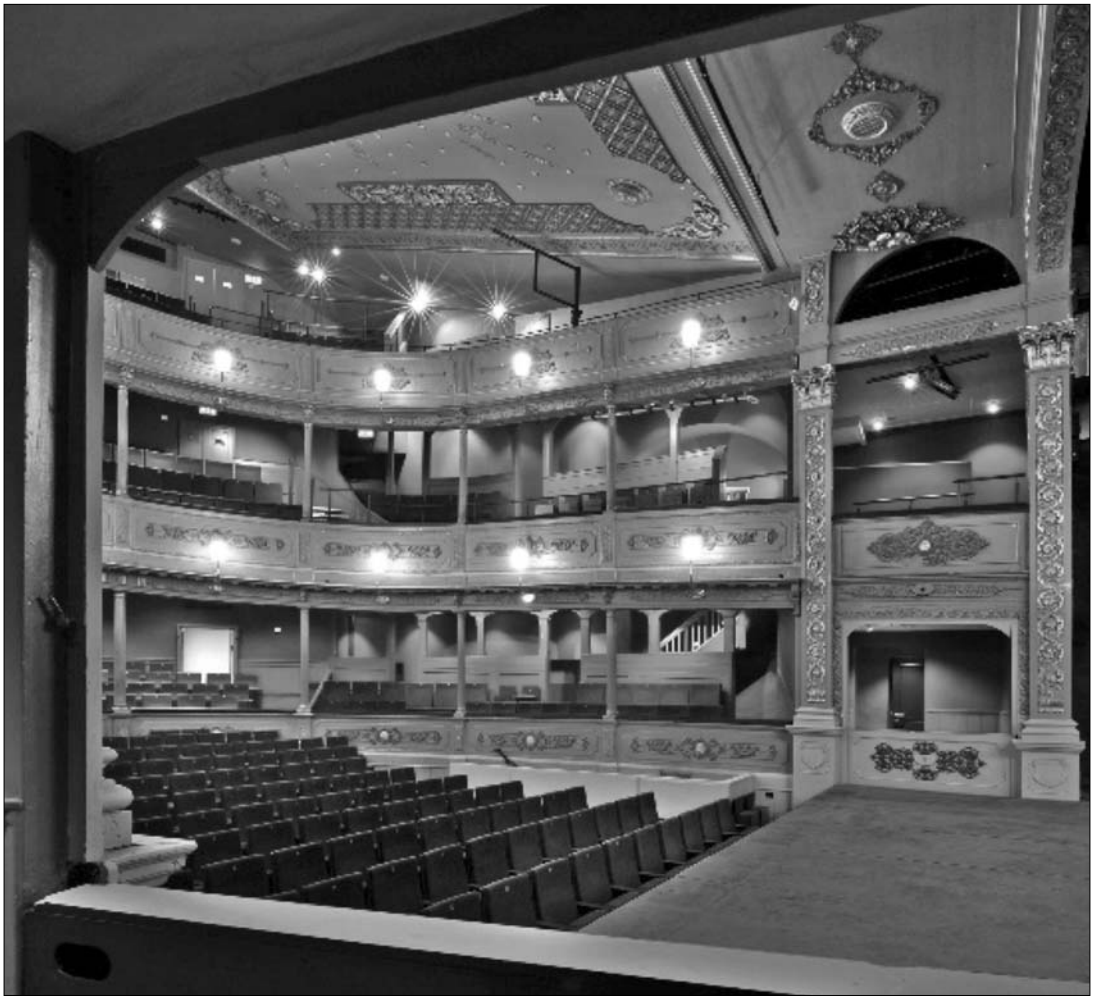
The Managers hope the Ladies and Gentlemen will not think the Prices fix'd for admission exorbitant, when they will please to consider their very great Expenses: particularly the high Charge of Rent; that the House will be illuminated with Wax, that the Clothes, Scenes, and all Decorations are entirely new, and, that they will spare no Pain or Expence to make the Entertainments as Elegant and Pleasing as in the most Established Theatre.[24]

Only the plays and the actors were not new. The old Jacobs Wells company had simply been slotted in to the new theatre. It is safe to assume from the managerial bill that the abandoned structure at Hotwells had always been relatively cheap and less than cheerful. Bristolians proved willing to bear the new expense but not to go further. Prices did not change for seventy years. After all, 4s or 3s 6d for a box, 2s 6d for the pit, and 1s 6d or 1s for the gallery was what Londoners had been paying in 1660. It was not unreasonable for a typically compendious evening that began with music, went on to *The Conscious Lovers*, continued with some dancing, and ended with Arthur Murphy's 1761 farce, *The Citizen*, which replays *The Conscious Lovers* at high speed and with yet more absurd reversals of fortune.[25]

A profit of sixty guineas was made on the first night, but it merely passed through the hands of management. Conscious of abiding moral controversy, they gave the money to charity: specifically, to the Bristol Infirmary Committee, who accepted without demur.[26] Sir Richard Steele would have been delighted. The magnanimous gesture, befitting any



'The Corinthian pilasters lining the stage boxes, where they obstruct no one's view.'

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hero of sentimental comedy, rings strangely in 2016, when theatres are in danger partly because state funding for hospitals is 'ring-fenced'. Still, managerial magnanimity did not stop the flow of pamphlets and sermons decrying the stewpot of depravity down in King Street. Nor did it create a permanent taste for sentimental comedy, to which opposition mounted six years after the opening.[27]

A month before the opening, theatrical royalty had visited the new theatre. David Garrick expressed his approval of the building and took in sufficient of the Bristol air to write a prologue for the opening night that was carefully calculated to appeal to the Bristol mindset and try, at least, to lay to rest local controversy. After clumping, conventional passages on the imagination and the need for actors to please, he moulds Shakespeare in terms of Bristol's mercantile character: a 'golden mine' from which to import riches to the city. That sets the tone for his conclusion about theatre in Bristol. Think of it as business, he says, and you might stop feeling guilty about its morality:

May honour'd commerce, with her sails unfurl'd,
Still bring you treasures from each distant world;
From east to west extend this city's name,
Still to her sons encreasing wealth with fame.
And may this merit be our honest boast,
To give you pleasure, and no virtue lost.[28]

A rather modern sentiment, as appealing to government today as it was to the first night audience in Bristol on 30 May 1766.

Notes and References

1. The play's fortunes in the eighteenth century, following its initial eighteen-day run, can be traced in successive volumes of *The London Stage,* ed. Emmett L. Avery, Part 2; Arthur H. Scouten, Part 3; and George Winchester Stone, Jr, Part 4 (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1968).

2. Dennis, *A Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter* (London, 1722). For discussion, Frank H. Ellis, *Sentimental Comedy: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 43–4. Dennis's later *Remarks on a Play Call'd The Conscious Lovers* (London, 1723) repeats the same arguments.

3. Cited in Kathleen Barker *et al.*, *The Story of the Theatre Royal* (Bristol: Burleigh Press, 1966), p. 3–4; for Sir John's closing words, see Steele, *The Conscious Lovers* (London, 1722), p. 76.

4. See, for example, Kathleen Barker, *The Theatre Royal Bristol: the First Seventy Years* (Bristol: Historical Association, 1969), p. 1.

5. Reproduced in David Thomas, ed., *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660–1788* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 207–10.

6. Reissued in 1728, 1730, and 1738. The counter-arguments of Dennis and many others are in Yuji Kaneko, ed., *The Restoration Stage Controversy* (London: Routledge, 1996).

7. See Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs from September 1678 to April 1714,* 6 vols (Oxford, 1857), IV, p. 378–9 (10, 12 May 1698); V, p. 111 (20 November 1701); also *Post Man,* 17–19 February 1702; *Post Boy,* 24–26 February 1702.

8. For other members see Bryan Little, *The Theatre Royal: the Beginning of a Bicentenary* (Bristol: Bristol and Somerset Society of Architects and Bristol Building Design Centre Journal, 1964), p. 3.

9. Barker, *Story*, p. 1–2.

10. Thomas Chatterton, 'Clifton', in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton,* ed., W. W. Skeat (London: Bell and Daldy, 1871), p. 63–4.

11. Such as Dryden's 1697 Virgil, to which the actor Thomas Betterton subscribed.

12. Barker, *Theatre Royal*, p. 2.

13. The Theatre relaunched the scheme as part of its 250th anniversary celebration, with H.M. Queen Elizabeth II listed as the first new subscriber.

14. Barker, *Theatre Royal*, p. 2–3.

15. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal,* 24 November 1764, p. 1.

16. Cited in Little, p. 5.

17. *Farley*, 24 November 1764, p. 1.

18 Andor Gomme, Michael Jenner, and Bryan Little, *Bristol: an Architectural History* (London: Lund Humphries, 1979), p. 183.

19. Little, p. 8.

20. Gomme *et al.*, p. 183.

21. Little, p. 11.

22. Barker, *Theatre Royal*, p. 11.

23. An innovation favoured by the current artistic director, Tom Morris.

24. First night bill, cited in Barker, *Theatre Royal*, p. 4.

25. Whether Murphy's play was on the bill that night was a matter of dispute until Kathleen Barker settled it in an article devoted to that aspect of 30 May 1766: 'The First Night of the Theatre Royal, Bristol', *Notes and Queries* (November 1967), p. 419–21. The variety of the first night is now echoed in the combination of drama, music, cabaret, and stand-up that keeps the Bristol Old Vic going.

26. Barker, *Theatre Royal*, p. 4.

27. Ibid., p. 5.

28. Garrick, 'Prologue for the Opening of the Bristol Theatre', in *The Poetical Works of David Garrick, Esq.*, 2 vols (London, 1785), I, p. 213. The Prologue was spoken by William Powell.