THE OLD VIC REOPENED

By CONSTANCE TOMKINSON

IN mid-November of last year the Old Vic Theatre, London's best known and best loved theatre reopened with Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" after almost ten years' inactivity. On a night in 1941 the theatre was shaken to its foundations by a landmine dropped by the Germans in a vain effort to put Waterloo Station out of action. All around it are bombed-out sites and it is a miracle that the theatre was spared. It might seem an odd place for the most important theatrical event of the year to take place for the Old Vic is not in London's smart West End, not in the hub of theatre land, which is near Piccadilly Circus, but on the South Bank of the Thames, in a shabby market street in the shadow of Waterloo Station.

It would have been a logical place in Shakespeare's day as the Globe Theatre was also on the South Bank not too far away. But in modern times it is indeed an odd place to be a hive of culture situated as it is surrounded by fish and chip shops with a market right on its front doorstep complete with pushcarts and little stalls busily selling everything from cabbages to winkles and live eels. There are no taxis cruising by but the trams of the Waterloo Road. This theatre, which is the pride and joy of London, is not at first glance an impressive looking building from the outside but it stands for so much that it is hard to see it now with a cold and calculating eye. For here shines the bright light of culture in the shabby slum of Southwark. Its contribution to many sides of the theatre has been enormous—in the past the home of the English Ballet and Opera and now the home of Shakespeare and the classics in London. This is a theatre with a healthy present and a past which is worth knowing something about.

The foundation stone of the Royal Coburg Theatre (as it was then called) now to be seen in the Waterloo Road wall of the Old Vic Theatre was laid on September 14th, 1816, and the theatre opened to the public in 1818. The opening of this theatre came about because two impresarios thought the rents then demanded for theatres so exorbitant that they decided to build a theatre for themselves. Taking advantage of the newly constructed Waterloo Bridge, they erected the Royal Coburg a few hundred yards from its south end. It was opened by William Barrymore, ancestor of the famous Broadway family, presenting a "new melodramatic spectacle" (written by himself) called TRIAL BY BATTLE; or, "Heaven Defend the Right".

The dangers of theatre-going in the locality at that time may be judged from the announcement on the Theatre Bills that "Extra Patroles are engaged for the bridge and roads leading to the Theatre, and particular attention will be paid to lighting the same."

During the following twenty-five years most of the famous actors of the time, including Junius Brutus Booth (whose son assassinated President Lincoln), Macready and Sheridan Knowles played at the Coburg, and the famous clown Grimaldi appeared there several times in pantomime. In 1833 the name was changed to "The Royal Victoria Theatre" in honour of the heiress to the throne. From 1834, during which year Paganini gave his farewell concert at the Vic, to 1878 the theatre had a chequered career and by the middle of the century it had become the lowest type of music hall, being classed by Kinglsey in "Alton Locke" amongst "These licensed pits of darkness, traps of temptation, profligacy and ruin, truimphantly yawning night after night."

The modern story of the Vic starts in 1879, when there appears on the scene Miss Emma Cons, a social worker filled with hatred of strong drink, the effects of which were only too apparent on the poor among whom she worked. Hers was no negative approach to the problem. She realised that she could only help those who sought escape from slum conditions in drink and low entertainment by providing a counter attraction. She, therefore, took the Royal Coburg, which was standing empty at the time, and reopened it on the day after Christmas, 1880, as the Royal Victoria Coffee Music Hall, presenting wholesome variety programmes with non-alcoholic refreshment. On one night a week a ballad concert was given, and later another night was devoted to lectures. There was such an enthusiastic response to these lectures that classes were started in the dressing rooms and paint shop, which proved so popular that in time half the building was appropriated for this purpose, eventually growing into Morley College.

The new venture had a difficult time because the old music hall public preferred spicy entertainment with alcohol, and the respectable citizens were reluctant to patronise a building with such a disreputable past. It was only kept going by the faith of Miss Cons and a few generous guarantors. The tide finally turned when Samuel Morley, a wealthy industrialist, came to the rescue. He was only associated with the Vic from 1884 to 1886, but he provided and induced such support for it

that after his death the freehold of the theatre and the college named in his honour was bought by public subscription and vested in a Trust under the Charity Commissioners. Not until 1923 was the college separated from the theatre, and it is to this day carrying on its worthwhile work.

In 1898 Miss Con's niece, Lilian Baylis, was appointed manager and began a period of thirty-nine years' work, the effect of which on the Theatre, Opera and Ballet of the United Kingdom is still incalculable. The theatrical activities at the Old Vic, as it was now affectionately known, lay chiefly in the direction of Opera and Symphony concerts until the death of Miss Cons in 1912. The fact that the theatre was operating under a music hall license meant that entire performances could not be given except by the employment of such exasperating subterfuges as interpolating songs in straight plays and dropping the curtain at least six times during each play or opera, thus in principle converting the performances into a concert. Then Lilian Baylis, becoming lessee and general manager, obtained a dramatic licence; and, after a preliminary experiment by Rosina Filippi, the first season of Shakespearean and classical plays opened with Matheson Lang's production of "The Merchant of Venice" in 1914.

Lilian Baylis knew nothing about the stage; she turned to Shakespeare because other forms of entertainment had failed; but she had an uncanny flair for picking the right people and a tremendous gift for making up by enthusiasm and drive what she lacked in financial response. She decided against all expert advice to put on Shakespearean plays and to launch Opera and Ballet in Waterloo Road. She behaved like one called to a mission in life and she carried it out with fanatical zeal. She never spared herself or any of her artists in her struggle to produce quality on a shoestring. When you talk to people who knew her a vivid picture emerges. She was an amazing personality, energetic and uncompromising—a formidable character indeed, referred to by those in the theatre as "The Lady." In her pictures she looks like a severe school mistress. She ruled the theatre with a rod of iron and yet she could be very kind. One of the leading actors of the present company tells a story to illustrate this. When he came to the Vic he was very young and it was his first job. He had nothing more important to do than to carry a spear and mill around in crowds. She came up to him one day in rehearsal and said:

"Are you sure you're eating properly, dear?"

He was far from certain himself but he assured her he was doing quite well. The next day she arrived with a thermos flask of stewed rabbit which she insisted on his eating to the last drop. There are so many stories about her. They claim that during matinee performances a slight sizzle could be heard coming from her box on the prompt side. It was "The Lady" brewing herself some tea. She wouldn't miss the matinee and had no intention of missing her cup of tea. Probably the most famous story is the one about the actor coming unexpectedly into her office and finding her on her knees praying to be sent "a good actor cheap."

Her prayers were certainly answered as today it is unusual to meet a leading actor (or actress) who has not been at some time or other a member of the Old Vic Company . . . and earning only a tiny fraction of what he can demand in the commercial theatre. Actors such as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Charles Laughton, Maurice Evans, Dame Sybil Thorndike, Dame Edith Evans and countless other top ranking artists have obviously put the opportunity of working with first class producers in worthwhile plays higher than material gain. One would have been ashamed to haggle over money when everyone knew that she was working for practically nothing herself because of her devotion to the theatre and was begging, scrounging and borrowing the wherewithal to keep the theatre going. The organisation was always on the verge of bankruptcy. At times she must have held the enterprise together by sheer force of will, but with her inspiration and ability combined with a series of talented directors she succeeded in building up a tradition for presenting dramatic productions of a very high standard at popular prices.

She had vision as well as faith. It was Lilian Baylis who gave the Sadlers Wells Ballet their first chance. She recognised Dame Ninette de Valois for the genius that she is and gave her the opportunity to present occasional performances with the then small, newly formed company which was later to become internationally famous. Now the Company is recognised as one of the finest ballet companies in the world but in those days everyone laughed at the mere idea that anyone would ever pay money to see any dancer who did not have a Russian name. But Lilian Baylis didn't laugh. She gave this small English company all the support and encouragement she could at a time when it was vitally necessary. Ballet and Opera had run concurrently with plays at the Vic in the early days, but in 1931

the Sadlers Wells Theatre was opened under the same management and it soon became the home of Opera and Ballet leaving the Vic clear for plays.

By 1923 the Old Vic had completed the production of the entire Shakespeare cycle, thus creating a record for any single management. Gradually people everywhere came to know what a wonderful job of work was being done in the Waterloo Road, and in 1929 Lilian Baylis and her work were honoured by the King when she was admitted to the Order of the Companions of Honour. When she died in 1937 she had laid the foundations for a National Theatre, to say nothing of the Opera and Ballet, at the sister theatre, the Sadlers Wells, which was also her child.

After her death the work was carried on in various forms by that brilliant producer Tyrone Guthrie and later by a triumvirate of John Burrell, Laurence Oliver, and Ralph Richardson. When the threatre was put out of action during the war the Company were sent on tour playing all over the country in large cities like Liverpool and small mining village halls. Eventually they settled temporarily at the New Theatre in London where they gained fresh laurels, but the Company was never completely at home outside its own theatre—still less was its public—and there was great jubilation when the news was announced that the Vic was being rebuilt and would be open in 1950.

The opening of the theatre with Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" was a very moving occasion. Dame Edith Evans had flown back from New York just in time to speak the prologue written specially by the poet Christopher Hassall for the event. She spoke it with such feeling that only the insensitive could have failed to be gripped by the emotion in the theatre. It was no trick of lighting that her eyes shone so and her voice broke with emotion on the lines:

"This first night 'Twelfth Night' happiest night of all".

The Old Vic means a great deal to her as it does to so many artists of her calibre. For while they made the Old Vic what she is, the Old Vic in turn made them.

Many of the smartly dressed people in the audience that night must have been haunted with memories of themselves when they were young, crammed in the Gallery under the rafters, having paid the sum of six pence for their seat. They must have been thinking of unforgettable performances and experiences in this same theatre. I had my own particular set of thoughts—

the state of the theatre when I arrived two years before—large piles of rubble in the auditorium, dry rot in the Gallery, no proper roof, signs everywhere saying "Danger", "Out of Bounds," etc. It seemed incredible that it could be now as Christopher Hassall put it:

> "From wartime wreck, refreshed with paint and brick
> Rises no Phoenix, but the fabled Vic.
> The new Vic yet the same Vic as the old,
> Resplendent in her plush and native gold."

Resplendent she is and with that indefinable something called atmosphere. When one says that a theatre has atmosphere it's not imagination—it's fact. Ask any actor and he can tell you in a minute whether or not a theatre has atmosphere. Perhaps it's the result of its gilt and red plush; perhaps a matter of proportions—that its shape is cosy and right. I like to think it the result of the things that have happened there but it is there whatever the cause. It has a sort of magic about it—glamour in its real and solid sense.

Since its rebuilding it is a blending of the traditional with its red plush and gold, and the experimental, with its modern forestage, which has been built out beyond the proscenium arch. This is fitted with an electric lift so that its height can be changed during a performance. The forestage jutting out nto the auditorium makes for a closer, more intimate contact between the actor and his audience. It gives speed to a production which is not possible with a picture frame stage, and with the new electronic switchboard it is technically one of the finest equipped theatres in Europe.

It is difficult to explain to a stranger the affection in which this theatre is held by the general public. It is not a precious institution belonging to a select few—it is truly a People's Theatre. It is not labouring under the shadow of being "arty-crafty", but healthy and robust. Its followers stretch from Cabinet Ministers to the stallholders of "the Cut", the market just outside the doors. In the hosts of telegrams of congratulation on the opening night from all parts of the world was one from "The Traders of the Cut." In this season's repertoire is Ben Jonson's play "Bartholomew Fair" set in the Smithfield Market of 1614. It is a little eerie to sit in the theatre and watch the ancestors of these Traders shouting their wares in much the same way as the barrow boys of today. Their interest and pride in the theatre is very touching. You cannot walk

down the street without getting anxious enquiries as to "How's business?" The fishmonger tells me, as he expertly fillets a plaice, how much he and his wife enjoyed "Henry V". The portly man in the draper's stall explains earnestly to me his problem over rolls of material: his small son must see "Twelfth Night" as he'd heard so much about it from his father who had once played Sir Toby Belch in an amateur production. The man at the vegetable stall who had not been able to get seats for "Bartholomew Fair"—could I do anything? He told me he has been such a staunch supporter that he'd even followed the Company "up West" to the New Theatre. I suggested he try for "Electra". He shook his head.

"I don't fancy the Greeks," he said.

The devotion of the bus conductors is quite overwhelming. I sometimes get a picture of the theatre in the past entirely full of bus conductors. Once they know you are with the Vic they launch off into stories of shows they have seen there, experiences they will never forget. When you try to pay your fare, they merely wink and refuse it. I suppose it is their way of repaying their debt to the Vic. The last sight you get of them they are wistfully waving as you disappear through the stage door. Even my charlady is a follower. I suspect she only stays with me because of my connection with the Vic. She is more than a little vague as to who and what she has actually seen in the theatre, but is quite clear she enjoyed every moment of it.

During the rebuilding of the theatre the morale of the workmen was very high. They worked night and day to get it finished in time. To show our gratitude we asked the foreman whether any of them might like to come to the dress rehearsal—not expecting much response. They arrived en masse, filling the theatre with their wives and families—all looking almost unrecognisable and rather uncomfortable in their Sunday best. They were a most enthusiastic audience. After the show they changed back into their usual garb and worked through the night to finish the theatre for the following night. They were driving nails up to the time the first customers came in. As we came out of the theatre on the night of the dress rehearsal there were queues of people sitting on camp stools reinforced with blankets and thermos flasks prepared for an all night wait to buy Gallery seats (only on sale the day of the performance) the following morning.

I envy the crocodiles of children streaming into the theatre. I wish so much that I had had the opportunity to see Shakespeare

played when I was their age, but unfortunately in Nova Scotia we rarely, if ever, had an opportunity of seeing the classics. To me as a youngster they were all a great bore—an ordeal to be got through. It was not until I had seen a really good production in London that Shakespeare came alive for me. But for these children the classics are not just dry, dull words pressed between the covers of a book but something that lives for them. It is most interesting to sit in the theatre at matinees and watch the children's faces, lit up with excitement; some of them with the text of the play clutched in their hands. You might think to see them seated on the edge of their seats that they were watching a cowboy film. They react to everything in the most uinhibited fashion. They laugh unroariously at the clowns and cry through the sad scenes. You can almost see the impressions being imprinted on the blotting paper of their minds. Although they are a wonderful audience to play to it can be a strain on an actor who is not word perfect. A member of the Company told me that once when he delivered a line he distinctly heard some child in the front row say,

"It shouldn't be that. He's got it all wrong."

He was only too aware that he had fluffed the line. In the well known passages such as Henry's "Into the breach dear friends—" or "God for Harry, England and St. George", you can sometimes hear a sort of muffled chorus of the children carrying on with the artist."

At the Old Vic not only are people of all ages enabled to see the classics but to see them for very little money. There are four hundred seats in the Gallery sold at 1/6 which should be well within the reach of anyone's pocket. This is only made possible by the fact that the Old Vic is state subsidised. This is done through a body known as The Arts Council of Great Britain, a Government organisation formed to subsidise the arts. They give to the Governors of the Old Vic (an unpaid body) an annual grant of something like £30,000. This makes the Old Vic for all practical purposes the National Theatre. In subsidising the Old Vic the Arts Council is getting good value for money spent, since apart from the Old Vic Company itself, the organization runs two other companies and a dramatic school.

The Old Vic Theatre School trains the artists of the future. Gone is the day when people thought all you had to do was just get on the stage and act. It is a craft like anything else that must be learned.

The Bristol Old Vic Company plays in the Theatre Royal, Bristol, a beautiful eighteenth century playhouse where Mrs. Siddons and Garrick once played. This Company has probably the highest standard of any repertory company outside of London. It provides for Britsol and the West Country a different production every three weeks.

The junior company, the Young Vic, tours throughout England, Wales and Scotland with two productions a year, usually playing a week in each place. This Company caters chiefly to the youth of the country and the Ministry of Education cooperates closely with the Young Vic in its effort to bring culture to the young. In this way they are building up a future theatre audience. So the organisation is not just serving London but the whole country—being truly National.

The Old Vic Company is more than National. It is International. Its reputation is such that it attracts people from all over the Commonwealth and the world. In the audience you see Indian women in beautiful saris, Malays in sarongs, young colored students from the Gold Coast or Nigeria; you hear many languages spoken. It is a mecca of all nationalities visiting the country interested in the arts.

This year audiences of the Bristol Old Vic will be seeing such plays as Shaw's "Saint Joan", Sheridan's "The School for Scandal" and Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" and many others in their pattern of three-weekly repertory. Audiences of the Young Vic will be seeing "The Merchant of Venice" and Beaumont and Fletcher's rarely done piece "The Knight of the Burning Pestle". While in London the Old Vic Company will be playing in repertory "Twelfth Night", "Henry V", "The Merry Wives of Windsor", Ben Jonson's "Bartholomew Fair," Sophocles' "Electra" and Shaw's "Captain Brassbound's Conversion."

The theatre in England is not just a luxury but part of their national life. The English may be rationed in food and many of the good things of life, but they will not be rationed in their theatre, and in this field the best is not, as in everything else, "For Export Only"; it is to be seen in the Royal Victoria Hall—so affectionately called the Old Vic.