

THORNDIKE THEATRE

ROYAL OPENING FOR LEATHERHEAD REP. 17 SEPTEMBER 1969

IN THE PRESENCE OF PRINCESS MARGARET

Sybil Thorndike to play an old blighter who sleeps in the park every night

"I WAS DOUBLY THRILLED," admits Sybil Thorndike, "when asked if the new theatre at Leatherhead could be named after me. Only rarely is an actress so honoured, but what gave me almost more pleasure is the fact that Leatherhead is a repertory theatre, because repertory has played a remarkable part in my career."

Rather more than sixty years ago Dame Sybil was at the Gaiety, Manchester, a member of Miss Horniman's famous company, which made history by being the first professional rep. in this country. From 1908 until 1917 Miss Horniman maintained an excellent company and put on some 200 plays, of which more than half were new. Her first producer was Iden Payne; he was succeeded by Lewis Casson, who married Sybil Thorndike at that time. Even in those early years the promising Miss Thorndike became Shaw's ideal Candida.

"I'd rather work than be a lady," insists Dame Sybil, which is one reason for her pioneering in the theatre at the present time in her mid-eighties instead of leading a life of leisure in her Chelsea home. Her most recent achievement is the lecture-recital on Ellen Terry, which she gave at the National Portrait Gallery, standing before Sargent's dramatic full-length portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth. Last month she scored a memorable personal success at the Edinburgh Festival with this same one-woman performance.

She would like to treat Mrs. Pankhurst in the same manner, as this dynamic figure who organised militant methods to secure votes

for women is a woman after Dame Sybil's own heart.

"Lewis was interested in the Women's Movement when we first met in Manchester and I was ashamed to admit I knew little or nothing about it," confessed Dame Sybil. "He was amazed, and as a result of listening to him I was taking the chair at meetings less than a fortnight later!" Dame Sybil has vivid personal recollections of the period and her ringing voice would be so admirably suited to a lecture-recital on Mrs. Pankhurst and the Suffragettes.

Historical

I wondered if there remained any great historical figures Dame Sybil would still like to play on the stage, either in existing plays or in a new one specially commissioned for her. Apparently there are none. "I would like to have played Elizabeth I, but I missed out on Clemence Dane's 'Will Shakespeare', in which Haidie Wright appeared as Elizabeth to the Shakespeare of Philip Merivale. I think Edith Evans would have made a compelling Elizabeth, but the Faerie Queen seems to have eluded both of us in a full-length play."

"I was lucky enough," continued Dame Sybil, "to play many of the figures in history who stirred my imagination—Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Katharine of Aragon, Peg Woffington, Mrs. Siddons and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson."

In the new Thorndike Theatre at Leatherhead Dame Sybil hopes they will stage classics from time to time, and especially Shakespeare. Why? "Because Shakespeare makes actors speak out. I like good words and good speaking which cannot be taken for granted in the theatre today, where they consider production more important than words. Pinter is an exception. He has a feeling for words and his plays conform to a design, which gives me great satisfaction."

Dame Sybil admits she does not mind desperately if she does not see films. "But I mind very much if I don't see plays regularly. Yet I am bored with the wild, abstract scenery which is all the fashion these days. Again, there is always the exception; and I was tremendously impressed by Ralph Koltan's décor for the recent National Theatre revival of Shaw's 'Back to Methuselah' at the Old Vic. The imaginative sets made the onlooker aware of the universe as opposed to the world and on that account mankind seemed so very small."

Next month, on October 14, Dame Sybil is to play on the boards of the Thorndike Theatre for the first time, in John Graham's "There Was an Old Woman" in which, to quote her, she appears as "a poor old blighter who sleeps in the park every night." Her only friend seems to be a young policeman who reminds her of her beloved young husband of many years ago. In fact, everyone round her reminds her of people in her earlier life.

ERIC JOHNS



Sybil Thorndike in the stalls of the theatre named after her, expressing her approval of the new playhouse, when seeing it for the first time, while the workmen were still on the site.

THORNDIKE THEATRE WHO'S WHO

Managing Director	Hazel Vincent Wallace
Company Secretary	Michael Marriott
Business Manager	Arthur Aldrich
Public Relations Officer	Peter Harlock
Assistant Administrator	Harriet Cruickshank
House Manager	John Morrison
Youth Administrator	Joan Macalpine
Mailing Secretary	Joy Haskins
Social Secretary	Diana Williams
Production Manager	William Sharkey
Stage Manager	Ian McDougall
Deputy Stage Manager	Pauline Dake
Assistant Stage Manager	David Brooke
Assistant Stage Manager	David Goodhart
Head of Design	Sidney Jarvis
Assistant Designer	Michael Hunter
Scenic Artist	Betty Davison
Costume Designer	Julia Foyle
Wardrobe Assistant	Amy Roberts
Chief Electrician	Peter Raby
Master Carpenter	Fred Smith
Stage Carpenter	Peter Walker
Green Room Club Secretary	Kenneth Cuthbert
Restaurant Manager	Joseph Shellard
Appeal Organiser	C. A. Neal
Assistant Appeal Organiser	Nonnie Blackford

Why not pay a visit to the newest theatre in this country?

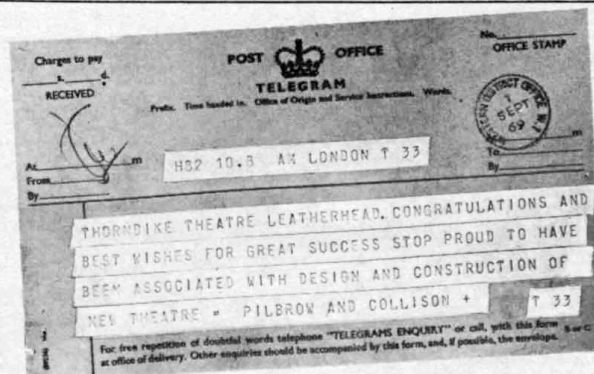
THORNDIKE THEATRE

Leatherhead, Surrey

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