

THE GATE 1925 - 2003

The original Gate theatre opened in 1925 in the top floor of a warehouse and wine loft at 11 Floral Street, Covent Garden. Named 'The Gate Theatre Salon', the venue held just under one hundred people and was the brainchild of director-producer Peter Godfrey and his wife Molly Venness. Coined later by Godfrey as 'the Gate to better things', the theatre operated on a minimal budget; canvas and coloured material provided a makeshift back-cloth, and often no scenery was used. The idea of an active avant-garde club theatre had never been realised until this time.

A venue that could operate regularly outside the bureaucracy of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship was a ticket to experimentation and innovation. The freedom that the Gate found beyond censorship was, ironically enough, granted through a court ruling itself. Upon application for a public license, the theatre's cramped conditions and the single rickety worn-out staircase operating as the only entrance were both deemed unsafe by the London City Council; the application was therefore turned down.

The bold and entirely new artistic policy grew out of this new-found liberty, and Godfrey would be commended later for his decisions, referred to as 'the foremost producer of New Theatre in this country, and it is purely as a result of his technical knowledge and abilities that the Gate Theatre has now an international reputation and remains the only advanced theatre in London.'

Barely three months after the Gate's first production of Susan Glaspell's *Bernice* on the 30th October 1925, the theatre was brought to the public's attention in the national press. The production of Georg Kaiser's early Expressionist piece *From Morning to Midnight* was reviewed by James Agate in the Observer on January 19th, 1926.

'The important thing is that here is a theatre which exists for the purpose of competently giving, and does competently give, the very best plays and only the very best...Pirandello, Kaiser, Hauptmann, Strindberg, Benevente, Masefield, Molière, Andreev, Monkhouse, O'Neill, Toller, Tchekov, Wedekind, Capek, Copeau, Ibsen, Molner, and Dostoievsky...Breathes there a serious playgoer with soul so dead that he will neglect to support a theatre of such aim and achievement...? I refuse to think so.'

These words inspired a flood of applications for membership and conjured up a new lease of life in terms of public awareness of the theatre's earnest and original artistic output. The applications for membership stated that the theatre existed only 'as a Club for those who are genuinely and sincerely interested in the development of the Drama'. The Gate Theatre Salon soon moved to 16a Villiers Street in the Strand, opening its new premises in November 1927 as the Gate Theatre Studio. Producer Norman Marshall arrived in 1934 and remained at the theatre until 1939, when the venue was destroyed by incendiary bombs during the first year of the Second World War.

It was not until the late seventies that Lou Stein, artistic director of the Latchmere - a theatre wishing to reflect a similar international avant-garde flavour - decided to re-launch the Gate in Notting Hill at its current venue above the Prince Albert Pub on Pembridge Road. Its intimate space and ceaselessly adventurous programming echoes the quirky originality of the Gate in the 1920s, with its 'crazy staircase, the barn-like apartment [forming] both stage and auditorium'. But the audience of the Gate nearly eighty years on would be hard-pressed to disagree with Agate's summation of their character and determination:

'If the adventurer's courage does not fail him before the curtain goes up, he will assuredly stay till it falls.'

And stay they will, no doubt, for another eighty years.

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