

JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE
1757-1823

John Philip Kemble, born at Prescot 1 February 1757,⁽¹⁾ is remembered as the leading exponent of the Grand Manner in English acting. Twice he made a fortune out of it, but has suffered in reputation for it ever since. The legend of his pompous dignity was well set in his own day—"King John", he was called—and neither an imprisonment for debt at 19, nor a gentleman's taste for liquor that led to some drunken escapades in London, nor the easy hospitality for any casual visitor in his retirement at Lausanne, altered the impression. Hence, for example, the well known story, doubtless coloured, of his marriage to Priscilla Hopkins in 1787: the happy pair were invited home to dinner by the Bannisters, their colleagues at Drury Lane, for no arrangements had been made for a wedding breakfast. After dinner, the bride went off to the theatre to play her part while the bridegroom put up his feet on Mrs. Bannister's mantelpiece till eleven o'clock, when he called a coach, went round to the theatre, and took his wife to her new home. "It is impossible to conceive a finer figure for Roman characters than he was," wrote the Rev. John Genest in 1832.

Perhaps this trait, shared by his sister Mrs. Siddons, came from their mother, who was said by Lee Lewes to have "an adamantine heart". The parents were proprietors of a respectable touring company who in February 1757 may have been travelling between Warrington (where an undated bill now in the Public Library records their having played) and Liverpool, where the old Drury Lane theatre would then be available. Where they stayed in Prescot is not known: perhaps at the "Legs of Man", which was favoured by theatricals a generation later. Although he was playing grown-up parts with this company at the age of ten, young Kemble was destined for the Roman priesthood, and was turned off by his disappointed parents when he ran away from Douay at the age of 18. For two years he starved. Then Sarah, who was beginning to make a name, got him an engagement with her at Liverpool. Here for a year he did well, but was outraged by a violent demonstration against the manager's attempt to set up a resident local company without visiting stars. History suggests that the manager, with a company that included Mrs. Siddons, Kemble, and Elizabeth Farren (later the countess of Derby), was not

⁽¹⁾ Prescot Historic Society marked the bicentenary with a paper on Kemble by Dora Bailey, B.A.

far wrong; but the Liverpool public thought otherwise. A letter from Kemble describes the "Volleys of potatoes and broken bottles", the smashing of all the lamps in the theatre, and the way in which "every wall in the town was covered with verse and prose expressive of the contempt they hold us in". Kemble went to Manchester and then to York, and in his stiff-necked way, refused to play in Liverpool again until he was himself a London star, as he soon was.

The other side of Kemble's seriousness of temper, however, is his dedication to the theatre. Even Leigh Hunt, who lost no opportunity of attacking him, admitted that "if Mr. Kemble has not succeeded Garrick in all tragic excellence, as some of his admirers pretend, he has worthily succeeded him in one important respect, that of loving Shakespeare and keeping him before the public". A few months later, of course, Hunt was lambasting him for bringing horses on the stage: "That actors should make beasts of themselves is no new thing; but . . . Mr. Kemble must turn beasts into actors". In fact Kemble's importance to the English theatre lies much more in his work as a manager than in his acting.

In 1788 Kemble took over the management of Drury Lane in London, and from this time until his retirement he prepared his plays with an attention to visual effect that was quite new. He sought advice about historical costume from antiquaries like Francis Douce (and took it when it suited him: as Hotspur he continued to wear the Garter, despite a historian's proof to him that it was wrong). He drilled his supers, an unusual thing at the time, and made his battles and processions magnificent and realistic. In one scene of his *Coriolanus* 240 soldiers marched and countermarched; the horses that disgusted Hunt were for a cavalry battle in the melodrama of *Blue Beard*; there was also, alas, a dance of elves in *Macbeth*.

These innovations foreshadow the Victorian stage, but even more so does Kemble's rebuilding of his theatres. Wren's old Drury Lane, pulled down in 1791, held fewer than two thousand people; Kemble's new one, opened in 1794, was almost twice the size in every way, in height, length, stage area, and seating capacity—a house designed for mass entertainment. In 1803 he moved to Covent Garden, which was still much as it had been in 1732, and immediately added sixteen private boxes, which were let at £300 per season and which cut off much of the view from the top gallery. There was some public outcry at this, but it died down and all went well. For a while his chief rival, G. F. Cooke, was acting with him, and of course Mrs. Siddons was a steady draw. Kemble himself began to be troubled with gout

and his style became more statuesque than ever. But he was wealthy and moved freely in the most fashionable society. Scott was his lifelong friend, and he was on intimate terms with such men as the marquis of Abercorn and the Prince of Wales. When Lady Clarendon met Napoleon, she recorded in her diary that "his outline of face has a great resemblance to Kemble the actor in miniature", which she presumably thought a sufficient description.

The disaster and humiliation that followed were therefore the more painful. On 20 September 1808, Covent Garden theatre was burnt down and Kemble and his sister lost almost all they possessed. With the aid of loans from his noble friends, including £10,000 from the duke of Northumberland, he set about building a new playhouse, twice the size of the old one. The façade was modelled on the Temple of Minerva on the Acropolis, and the interior was vast and splendid, but the acoustics and sight-lines were poor and many of the audience could neither see nor hear. Criticism of the house was heard before it opened, but Kemble was confident of success, for he had engaged four separate companies, for tragedy, comedy, opera and ballet, and had the leading performers in each line. ("Whenever there is Danger of a Riot, always act an Opera; for Musick drowns the noise of opposition", he had written in his journal in 1791). To meet the expense of all this Kemble raised the prices from 3s. 6d. to 4s. in the pit and from 6s. to 7s. in the boxes.

There followed the notorious Old Price riots. For over sixty nights there was violent uproar from all parts of the house, and the efforts of the management to subdue this by bringing in professional boxers and "fighting Jews" were quite unsuccessful. Legal action against one of the leaders, a lawyer named Clifford, failed, and Clifford was awarded damages. Kemble had to accept the humiliating conditions presented to him: to apologise; to restore the old prices; to dismiss Mme. Catalani, the Italian soprano whose salary of £75 per night was blamed for the rise in prices; and above all, to do away with the private boxes, each with its ante-room and private entrance, that Kemble had let for £12,000 a year. The ostensible objection to these was that they would foster immorality, and Harriet Wilson's memoirs, for example, lend colour to it. But that was nothing fresh in the playhouses, and the real source of the objection, and perhaps of the whole riot, was no doubt political, for the clamour for Reform was rising in 1809. This is implied in a contemporary parody, of which the fourth verse runs: "This is the Cat (*i.e.*, Mme. Catalani), engaged to squall,

to the poor in the pigeon-holes over the boxes, let to the great, that visit the house that Jack built". Jack Kemble, reserved, aristocratic in manner, the companion of peers and princes, but a common player, was an obvious target.

Once the row was over, however, Kemble and his theatre prospered. He put on spectacular shows, with performing animals and highly paid singers, but he also stuck to his Shakespeare, and his farewell season of 1816-17 was marked by scenes of great enthusiasm and reiterated requests that he should continue to act occasionally. But he was old and ill, and in 1818 he retired to Lausanne, where he died in 1823.

Kemble is a paradoxical figure in the history of the English stage. In building his two vast theatres in London he was the first English manager to break away from the coterie theatre of the eighteenth century and so to make possible the genuinely popular theatre of the nineteenth. Where Garrick had played to "the Town", a largely homogeneous audience like the regulars at a modern repertory house, Kemble, with his thousands of seats and his spectacular bills suited to a variety of tastes, seems to have sensed a great new audience among the lower middle classes. But it was just this group that he offended with his private boxes, high prices, and aristocratic bearing. It was just this group that relished the "romantic", melodramatic style of acting that supplanted Kemble's Grand Manner. In short, Kemble created the conditions in which his successor, Edmund Kean, could triumph over his memory.

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THE BICENTENARY OF WARRINGTON ACADEMY

The bicentenary of the Warrington Academy was celebrated in Warrington from 20-26 October 1957. The highlight of the celebrations was a dinner in the Masonic Hall on Thursday 24 October at which Dr. J. Bronowski was the principal guest speaker. Dr. Bronowski said that in his view the Academy "was an institution of pioneer importance both in the factual and spiritual education of England. During its whole history there were fewer than four hundred students, but they and their teachers brought about a remarkable change in two separate ways. They were the men, they and their students, and their students in turn, who made the Industrial Revolution, and they did not make it by mechanical skill but because they