

## **Festival Theatre: History**

The Edinburgh Festival Theatre opened in 1994, on Edinburgh's longest continuous theatre site. The Nicolson Street locale has been a theatre site since 1830 – in sixty years it was Dunedin Hall, the Royal Amphitheatre, Alhambra Music Hall, the Queen's Theatre and Newsome's Circus.

On 7 November 1892, Edward Moss, as managing director of the Edinburgh Empire Palace Ltd, opened the doors of his magnificent Empire Palace Theatre. Thus began the famous Moss Empires' chain of theatres. It was built by the great British theatre architect, Frank Matcham, with lavish decoration: elephants with Nubian riders, nymphs and cherubs abounded the plasterwork. The original Empire Palace Theatre sat 3000 theatregoers on four plush levels of green, cream and tobacco gold.

At the opening performance were the massed bands of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Carabiniers, a thirty strong orchestra, vocal soloists, comedians, mimics, horses, performing dogs and acrobats! Hundreds of top artists played the Empire, Vesta Tilley, Marie Lloyd, Anna Pavlova and Charlie Chaplin to name but a few. There was practically nothing that could not be performed in the early days – in one performance there was even a large model airship, controlled by wireless, which dropped paper pigeons on the audience!

lafayette

On 9 May 1911 there was a disastrous fire on stage during a performance by The Great Lafayette. The theatre was full to its 3000 seat capacity for the performance by the popular illusionist. Disaster struck during the finale of his act, the "Lion's Bride", which involved the use of tapestries, cushions, tents and curtains to create an oriental setting. As The Great Lafayette took his bow a stage lamp fell and ignited a stage-drape. The audience were a bit slow to recognise the danger, being used to Lafayette's illusions, and only evacuated the auditorium after the safety curtain was rapidly lowered, and the band struck up the National Anthem.

All 3000 members of the audience walked to safety. The fire on stage took three hours to get under control however and eleven people died, including The Great Lafayette. To add to the mystery days before Lafayette's death he buried his much loved dog Beauty in Edinburgh. This was only allowed on the condition that he was buried alongside. Unfortunately for Lafayette, the body of his "double", who was used in his stage show to aid with the illusions, was buried in his place for a while before his body was found in the theatre and laid to rest with his dog. It is rumoured that his ghost still haunts the auditorium and the Scottish Power Gallery...

After the fire, the stage was rebuilt in three months, and the stars returned, but by 1927 the Empire decided to brace itself for the threat of the talkies by equipping itself for bigger shows. In less than a year, the brothers W and T R Milburn designed and reconstructed a new Empire Theatre. It opened on 1 October 1928 with the musical *Show Boat*. The architects re-used some of Matcham's structure, just as he had always re-used elements of previous theatres. From 1928 to 1963 the Empire was a variety, musical and opera house, often including ice shows. Big names like Harry Lauder, Charles Laughton, Fats Waller, Joe Loss, and Laurel and Hardy appeared. Jack Buchanan, Max Wall, the singing cowboy Roy Rogers and his horse drew large audiences and Bruce Forsyth, Morecambe and Wise and Harry Worth cut their comic teeth at the Empire. Margot Fonteyn and Moira Shearer danced here; Gracie Fields, Judy Garland and Sophie Tucker sang.

From 1946 to 1963 the Empire was one of the main venues for the Edinburgh International Festival, and was particularly associated with international ballet. At the first Festival in 1947, the Empire saw Margot Fonteyn in *The Sleeping Beauty*. At other times the Old Vic, the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera visited.

From 1963 to 1991 the Empire was a bingo hall, and its wonderful acoustics resounded with the calling of numbers. But, pressed into service as a temporary live theatre for Festivals, the memory and potential of the Empire remained.

The third major incarnation of the Empire Palace Theatre opened in June 1994. An impressive glass fronted structure was created by architect Colin Ross as the new entrance to the renamed Edinburgh Festival Theatre. It provides a perfect foil to the auditorium, which is a wonderful restoration of the Empire Theatre's former 1928 glory, a dramatic mix of art nouveau, beaux arts and neo-classicism, encompassing perfect acoustics within a parlour-like intimacy.