

## EMMA ABBOTT - a postcript

I ended my article on the American singer Emma Abbott (see Newsletter No 78) with three questions. Perhaps if I had been a little more diligent those questions need not have been asked. I can only say that in my haste to meet a printing deadline I had to curtail my research. Now thanks to one of our members, Michael P. Walters I have some answers. He tells me that *Erminie* was not as I suggested a misprint for Rossini's *Ermione* but a work in its own right and produced in London in 1885 at the Comedy Theatre. Also he felt quite certain that *The Chimes of Normandy* is indeed *Les Cloches de Corneville*. Armed with this information I have done some more research and can confirm his findings.

*Erminie* is a comic opera in two acts with libretto by Claxson Bellamy and Harry Paulton, music by Edward Jakobowski; the plot was based on a French play *L'Auberge des Adrets*. It was given a two week try-out in Birmingham and Brighton before opening at the Comedy Theatre 9 November 1885 where it ran for over three months, and then later it was revived at the same theatre in June 1886. Following its London run the show went on tour to the many provincial theatres there were in the United Kingdom at that time. In fact the demand was so great that a second company was sent out to meet the demand from theatre managements for return visits.

One of the librettists Harry Paulton took the role of Cadeau, a thief disguised as a Baron who nearly gives the show away due to his lack of social graces, and played it throughout the run and tour. Quoting from the review in *The Stage* the Birmingham correspondent said "Birmingham playgoers witnessed the production of one of the best of modern comic operas".

*Erminie* reached New York's Casino Theater 10 May 1886 where it played for over 1,250 performances and proved to be at that time the most successful musical that Broadway had ever seen. The New York papers were ecstatic;

"It is a shout of laughter beginning to end" (Morning Journal)

"*Erminie* is the comic hit of the season" (Daily News)

"Is destined to run long and successful" (Evening Telegraph)

Only the New York Times was unfavourable, commenting: "a comical sketch of a petty thief masquerading in polite society and bringing his slang and jail manners into the salons of the aristocracy". Of the score the paper was even more damning: "the composer, if possessed of any originality, has carefully hidden it, and his music, although bright and rhythmical, cannot be compared with the second-rate efforts of Strauss and Millocker". Despite the bad review (unlike today) the run was exceptional and was so popular it was revived at other theaters in 1889, 1893, 1897, 1899, 1903, 1915, and 1921. It is interesting to note that in New York the role of Cadeau(x) was taken at every revival by Francis Wilson, a famous American actor-manager.

"*Erminie* became a favourite among the many companies that toured the small towns and cities of North America.

A production in a version by F. Zell and Victor Leon was given at the Carltheatre in Vienna 7 November 1890.

The hit number from the show, a lullaby was recorded by Helen Jenyns as early as 1895, while vocal gems were recorded by the Victor Light Opera Co. on the Victor label in 1915 and re-issued in the U.K. by HMV in 1921. A vocal score was also published.

The composer Edward Jakobowski had been born in London of Polish Austrian parents. He had been educated in Vienna and lived in Paris before returning to the city of his birth. *Erminie* appears to have been his one and only big success.

#### Les Cloches de Corneville

*Les Cloches de Corneville*, an opera-comique in three acts by Clairville and Charles Gabet, music by Robert Planquette. It was premiered at the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques Paris 19 April 1877. That same year it opened in New York in an English translation as *The Chimes of Normandy* at the Fifth Avenue Theater. In the cast was an American tenor William Castle who was eventually to join Emma Abbott's company. The following year it opened at the Folly Theatre in London 28 February where it ran for 705 performances.

Finally I have obtained a reprint of *The American Opera Singer* (from 1825 to 1997) in which I read that Emma's husband was Eugene Wetherell and not Charles H. Pratt.

For those like myself, interested in old theatres, a few facts.

The Comedy Theatre opened in October 1881. It was originally named the Royal Comedy. Although no warrant had been issued for the prefix 'Royal', this addition was removed in 1884. The first productions were *La Mascotte* by Edmond Audran followed by Suppé's *Boccaccio* and *Rip van Winkle* by Robert Planquette in 1882. *Falka* by Chassaing followed in 1883. All of these were given in an English translation. But by 1885 opéra comique or operetta had given way to drama apart from a production of *Monsieur Beaucaire* by Frederick Lonsdale in 1902 which ran for over 400 performances. The theatre still stands and is in use today.

The Casino Theater stood on a corner of Broadway and Thirty-ninth street. It opened its doors in October 1882 and for most of its existence was home to operetta, musical comedy and revue. It was the Casino in 1900 which saw the "Floradora girl", the first of a long line of chorus girls from Ziegfield down to the present Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall and the Tiller girls in London. The Casino was demolished in 1930.

The Carltheatre was built on the site of the old Leopoldstädter Theatre in 1847. Presentations were usually plays with music and operetta. It was here that Offenbach's one act operettas led to the development of the Austrian counterpart including Oscar Straus's *Ein Walzertraum* in 1907. Unfortunately (like so many others) the theatre was bombed during World War ii and the ruins finally cleared in 1951.

The Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques was in existence between the years 1863-1899 and was used by various companies giving operetta and vaudeville. Among other operettas premiered there, were, *Chilpéric* 1868 and *Le petit Faust* 1869 both by Florimond Ronger, known by his pseudonym Hervé. Also seen for the first time were Offenbach's *Madame Favart* 1878 and *La Fille du Tambour-Major* in 1879. (Regrettably my knowledge of the history of the theatre in France is virtually nil. I would appreciate it if any of our members could suggest books-in-English that would help to fill the gap.)

Fifth Avenue Theater was not, as its name suggests, situated on 5th Avenue but was built on 24th street west of 5th Avenue. A small edifice built in 1862 by the owner of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, it was originally used as an illegal stock exchange. When this was discovered the building was closed and stayed vacant until 1865 when it re-opened as the Fifth Avenue Opera House. In 1869 the theatre became the property of Augustin Daly until 1873 when it was gutted by fire. Because of the financial panic of that year and the depression that followed, the site remained a ruin until 1877 when it was rebuilt. Two years later the theatre changed hands yet again, the interior was redesigned and it was re-christened the Madison Square Theater. In 1891 it became the Hoyt Theater and remained so until its demolition in 1908.

The Folly Theatre stood on the corner of Agar Street and King William Street (now William iv Street), a triangular site bordered on the third side by Chandos Street. Before it became the Folly Theatre, however it had a long and chequered history. Most of the site was taken up by the Charing Cross Hospital, built in 1831. What was left was occupied by private houses and shops. From time to time various houses were purchased and became Lowthers Hotel. This in turn became the Polygraphic Hall, used for lectures and lantern slide shows. This was eventually sold and by the purchase of adjoining houses the whole was re-constructed as the Charing Cross Theatre which opened in 1869.

Three years later in 1872 the theatre became the property of an American, John S. Clarke. (*He was married to the daughter of Junius Brutus Booth and so was brother-in-law to the assassin of Abraham Lincoln.*)

In 1876 the theatre was leased by an actress, Miss Lydia Thompson and her husband and it was they who yet again re-constructed the theatre and renamed it the Folly, and so it stayed until 1881. In 1882 now leased to an actor named John Toole, more alterations were made to the old buildings. It re-opened as Toole's Theatre, the first theatre in London to follow the American example of being named after its owner. But by 1895 the theatre, now a maze of corridors and small rooms backstage, was considered unsafe and the licence for performances was withdrawn. Some time earlier the Governors of Charing Cross Hospital had acquired the leasehold and the site was cleared in 1896 and used for the Out-Patients Department of the hospital. Most of the building was gutted in 1973 for re-development, where once the Folly Theatre stood there is now a police station.

Pip Clayton.