

SIR BARRY JACKSON, 1879-1961

The birthplace of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, that world-famous little theatre in Station Street, might well be said to have been The Grange, 53 Wake Green Road, Moseley, for it was there that young Barry Jackson and his friends developed the theatrical skills which led to his founding of the theatre and to his great patronage of the drama in Britain and overseas. Throughout his life he gave unstintingly of his time and money in the service of the theatre.

Barry Vincent Jackson was born in 1879, the second son of George Jackson and Jane Spreadborough, then living at Avonmore in Bristol Road, Birmingham. Mr Jackson was a provision merchant of the Maypole Dairy Company. He was interested in literature, painting and the theatre, and was a staunch supporter of the drama and the opera.

Young Barry's introduction to the theatre, like that of many a youngster in those days, was at a pantomime - *The Queen of Hearts* - at the old Theatre Royal in New Street, alas long gone. His first experience of Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, was also at the Theatre Royal. By the time that he was in his 'teens, his theatrical experiences were many and very widely varied.

He studied for a time at Greenhill Preparatory School in Moseley, and then had a private tutor who coached him in the liberal arts as well as the conventional curriculum. He went to Switzerland to study French and there developed a love of painting. However, his father discouraged him from becoming a professional painter, feeling that this was too precarious an occupation. Instead, in 1897, he was articled to a Birmingham architect, Frank Osborn. Although he abandoned his training after five years it must, with his painting, have been invaluable experience for one who was to go on to design theatre sets..

By now the family were living at The Grange, where the young Barry, while devoting much time to his father who was stricken with arthritis, was busy painting and reading and writing plays. There was already a well-established family tradition of amateur theatricals, and now Barry became producer, manager, and often playwright. Friends of the family, many later to become well-known or even famous, were the players.

The dining room at The Grange provided the venue for the plays, while the billiard room was used as dressing room. In the History of the early years of the Rep, as it became known to its Birmingham audiences, its first manager Bache Matthews wrote: "I don't believe anyone ever played billiards there: when it was not a workshop it was a studio, and on the settees were piled drawing boards, portfolios, and studies in various stages of completion."

Among the visitors to The Grange, attracted there by these amateur theatricals, was the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who later became Patron-in-Chief of the Malvern Festival which Barry Jackson founded in 1935. In 1902 came a tall, thin, pale young man, John Drinkwater, who later became a well-known poet and playwright. This meeting was to prove significant for both young men.



Sir Barry Jackson

Among the audience for a production of *The Interlude of Youth*, an early English morality play, was the Vicar of St Jude's Mission in Birmingham, Arnold Pincher. He was impressed and felt that the players should be introduced to a wider audience. Arrangements were made for the play to be put on in St Jude's Mission Hall in Inge Street. The players were prepared to donate the proceeds to any charity which the Vicar cared to name, but he insisted that the play should stand on its own merits. Thus it was that, on October 2nd 1907, Barry Jackson and his friends made their first public appearance and the Pilgrim Players were born.

The Mission Hall was their first headquarters. The following year they moved to the Assembly Rooms in Edgbaston where the plays could be given more elaborate productions than had been possible in the dining room at The Grange or in the Mission Hall. Nevertheless, simplicity in scenery was aimed at, not from any lack of means but as a conscious effort to free the drama from an excess of theatricality. Barry Jackson believed that the scenery should fit the play.

Pictorial realism was the norm on the stage at that time, and at first the Pilgrims' audiences found this austerity somewhat puzzling. But they soon came to appreciate its worth, and audiences for Shakespeare, Wilde, and Beaumont and Fletcher grew in size.

Producers were Barry Jackson, Arnold Pincher and John Drinkwater, with Barry Jackson designing all the sets and costumes. By 1909 he told John Drinkwater that he was preparing to develop the Pilgrim Players into a professional company and to build his own theatre. He proposed that John should devote himself to the necessary preparatory work in Birmingham.

Drinkwater was an up-and-coming surveyor for the London and Lancashire Fire Office, but his heart was in poetry and plays. The Pilgrim Players meant more to him than insurance policies. He accepted Barry's challenge and became secretary to the company, a post which

he held until the opening of the repertory theatre in 1913. Meanwhile the Players forged ahead with tours of Midland villages, a short season at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre, and steady improvements to productions at the Assembly Rooms. Leading, directing, designing, playwriting and paying the bills was Barry Jackson.

In April 1912 local architect S. N. Cooke was commissioned by him to design and build a theatre for him in Station Street, Birmingham. Did the young man from Moseley, nurtured on home theatricals, realise how famous his tiny theatre was to become, and how many future stars of stage and screen were there to tread the boards for the first time?

No new theatre had been built in England for many years and the architect had to go to Germany for inspiration. Whatever ideas he brought back, coupled with Barry Jackson's insistence on every member of the audience having an uninterrupted view of the stage, an apron stage, the most up-to-date lighting, dressing-rooms fit for human habitation and a tasteful decor, had to be accommodated in a site which was long and narrow, as anyone will realise who has been to the Old Rep, as it is now known. However, according to T. C. Kemp in his *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, Mr Cooke found Mr Jackson an ideal client: he knew what he wanted and insisted on having it, but was sympathetic and helpful in criticism.

On Saturday night, February 15th 1913, the young Barry Jackson's dream became reality when he stood before the curtain of his own theatre to read John Drinkwater's specially written lines which end:

We have the challenge of the mighty line:
God give us grace to give the counter-sign.

The curtain rose on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* with a cast no longer amateur but fully professional.

Six years later the company made its first foray on to a London stage. John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* transferred lock stock and barrel from Station Street to the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith. In 1922 *The Immortal Hour* at London's Regent Theatre marked the beginning of the company's ten years of productions in the metropolis, using more than a dozen different theatres. *The Farmer's Wife* ran for 1329 performances at The Court. By 1925 the company's reputation in the capital was such that Barry Jackson said he would work in both cities, and he leased the Kingsway Theatre.

Recognition of his contribution to the theatre in Birmingham was made in 1922 by the Birmingham Civic Society who presented him with their gold medal. Later in the same year, Birmingham University made him an honorary M.A.

For eleven momentous years the theatre offered drama of quality to the people of Birmingham, but the city had persistently neglected to appreciate this contribution to its cultural life. The theatre was not self-supporting, partly owing to its small size - its auditorium could seat only about 400 people. It survived only by the generosity of its founder. In January 1924 he announced that the theatre would close on February 9th.

This brought the Birmingham Civic Society into action, and a committee was formed from the principal literary and arts societies of the city. When the curtain fell on February 9th, the Lord Mayor spoke from the stage giving details of a scheme to save the theatre. If four thousand people would take tickets to attend once a fortnight for three months, Barry Jackson promised to re-open the theatre. With a city population of more than a million, plus many more from surrounding areas, this seemed a modest request. However, it was July before there was a sufficient response to persuade Barry Jackson to re-open the theatre. The first production was a Celtic folk opera called *"The Seal Woman"* with Adrian Boult as its musical director. The previous year he had come to Birmingham to succeed Sir Henry Wood as

conductor of the Birmingham Festival Choral Society. He was appointed conductor of the City Orchestra in 1924.

National recognition of his work came to Barry Jackson in 1925 when he was offered a knighthood. He hesitated to accept, but Bernard Shaw persuaded him to do so for the sake of the theatre. Not long after, St Andrews University made him an honorary Doctor of Laws.

In 1929 he sold The Grange to Birmingham's electricity supply department, and went to live at Malvern. There he rented the reconstructed theatre and started the Malvern Festival with George Bernard Shaw its patron in chief. The festival ran for two weeks for each of the first two years, but such was its popularity that by 1934 there was a four-week season, and many other cultural activities were added to complement the drama. Unfortunately the festival was brought to an end with the outbreak of war in 1939.

Back in Birmingham the Rep continued its good work, but by 1935 Sir Barry felt that it was time to ask others to share the burden of maintaining the theatre. The Sir Barry Jackson Trust was set up which he hoped would ensure the survival of the theatre after its pioneers were no longer there to sustain it. He had by this time spent more than £100,000 on the venture.

By now the fame of the little theatre in Station Street had spread world-wide. In addition to his work in Birmingham, London and Malvern, Sir Barry gave many lectures both at home and abroad. Following a lecture tour of Canada where he urged people to found their own little theatres, a special company was recruited to tour that country in the winter of 1931-2. They took six plays and visited sixteen cities. Not long afterwards, no doubt helped by these new experiences for Canadians, the Canadian Little Theatre Festival was set up at Ottawa.

During the war of 1939-45 Sir Barry directed the Plays in the Parks, set up to aid the Lord Mayor of Birmingham's War Relief Fund. These plays, given in large marquees, toured five of the city's parks, including Cannon Hill.

In 1946 he was invited to become Director of the Shakespeare Festival at Stratford-upon-Avon, which in those days ran for six months of each year. The Festival Director was responsible only for the festival, and not for the Memorial Theatre as a whole. At the end of his first season Sir Barry insisted that the director of the festival should also be director of the theatre. The governors readily agreed. He had already done considerable work of reorganisation which began to bear fruit in his second season. Now he laid down a long-term policy to set the theatre on a sound artistic footing. Although he was director for a mere three years, this policy was to be developed into what we now know as the Royal Shakespeare Company.

It was not until 1955 that his native city accorded him the recognition which he so richly deserved by making him an honorary freeman of the City of Birmingham.

In 1954 the Rep received its first Arts Council grant of £500. Six years later Sir Barry et the City Council and the Arts Council and persuaded them to guarantee the finances of a new repertory theatre. Alas, he was not to live to see the new theatre rise on Broad Street. He was taken ill in January 1961. On March 15th that year he was able to see his company in action for the last time in a matinee performance of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. He died in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital on April 3rd, 1961.

In addition to his theatre work in Birmingham, London, Malvern and Stratford, he was a governor of the Old Vic Theatre, original home of the National Theatre, a governor of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and an honorary vice-president of the Royal Birmingham

Society of Artists. He served on innumerable councils and committees connected with the theatre. Yet through all this he continued to write, adapt and translate plays for production in Station Street. He was even asked by his friend Sir Edward Elgar to write a libretto for *The Spanish Lady*, a grand opera on which Sir Edward was working when he died.

It can truly be said of Sir Barry Jackson that he filled Kipling's "unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run".

Joan Hazlewood

----oOo----