

# The Irvingite

Irving Society Newsletter No 55 — April 2011



## FIFTEENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Concert Hall, Concert Artistes' Association

20 Bedford Street, London WC2E 9HP

Sunday, 13 February 2011, at 3.00pm

Report Michael Kilgarriff Photographs Sylvia Starshine



Through a chilly drizzle our chair, Frances Hughes, welcomed us briskly before handing the Birthday Wreath to Michael Read. The photo left shows the enladdered Dr Read with his finger apparently on HI's left big toe; at ground level we see Mike Ostler with last year's wreath, faded but still intact, and Frances with the fresh wreath; the enigmatic figure at the rear peering from under his cap is your reporter.

Back in the panelled warmth of the CAA the AGM proceeded with the usual opening formalities: reading of the minutes and apologies for absence.

**Chairman's Report** Frances reminded us of the tragic loss of our founder chair, Michael Sharvell-Martin, last October. It was in PJ's restaurant in Covent Garden in 1996 that the Society was launched; present on that occasion with Michael were Brien Chitty, Dr Jack Reading, Daphne Cunes, Alex Bisset and Frances herself. From that working lunch emerged the Society as we know it today, and Michael will always be greatly missed. His widow, Linda, has

been granted Honorary Membership in his memory.

The year's events were listed: in May there was Catherine Leonard's talk at Westminster Reference Library on the RSC's costume collection (now in the V&A), and in June a visit in conjunction with the STR to Kensal Green Cemetery – Henry Vivian-Neal of the Friends of the Cemetery was especially lauded for his enthusiastic co-operation. The Annual Dinner, held in October again at the New Cavendish Club, was greatly enlivened by Prof Jeffrey Richards' talk on the Lyceum's lesser lights.

Finally, on 6 February, there was the unveiling by Richard Briers of a plaque on Irving House, Keinton Mandeville, HI's birthplace (to be fully reported in the next *First Knight*).

It was suggested from the floor that Honorary Membership be offered to the current owners in appreciation of their co-operation and in generously allowing access to the very room in which HI was born.

Thanks were offered to the Hon Secretary for his work throughout the year, and to Sylvia Starshine, Hon Treasurer, for her safe-keeping of the Society's funds. Glen Hayes was also thanked for opening up the CAA; this was the second year he had given up a Sunday for us, despite not being a member. It was felt fitting therefore to make him an Honorary Member.

**Hon Secretary's Report** Membership at 113 is 2 up on the previous year. A new Group member is TACT (The Actors' Charitable Trust), whose general secretary, Robert Ashby, was welcomed. TACT was originally founded as the Actors' Orphanage Fund in 1896 with HI its first Patron. The Trust is now responsible for the running of Denville Hall.

Brian Manvell kindly donated a framed pastel of HI for the raffle, and Elizabeth Sutter sent in a number of items of Irvingiana. As always thanks were extended to Hilary Phillips for generously providing the essential Birthday Wreath.

Thought has been given by the Committee during the past year to attracting younger members. Approaches have been made to the Actors' Centre in Covent Garden and the Drama Studio in Ealing, though it was recognised that young actors are not generally much interested in their profession's rich heritage.

Finally, I announced that I wished to relinquish the office of Hon Secretary. I will stay until the next AGM, by which time I will have been in post for ten years. A new Hon Sec will bring fresh ideas and a fresh approach, and as I do not have the energy I once had I would rather stand down before the office becomes a burden rather than a labour of love. I would, however, be prepared to continue as Editor of *The Irvingite* and *First Knight*.

**Hon Treasurer's Report** Due to computer difficulties Sylvia Starshine was only able to give us outline accounts, showing the Society to be in good shape financially. Thanks were offered as usual to Richard Wadhams of Hogsbans Dunphy for casting an eye over the figures.



*Michael Read*

After a short break your reporter sang at the piano HI's musical party piece *'Tis But a Little Faded Flower*. Demands (ironic?) for an encore were firmly ignored. After the raffle Michael Read gave this year's Heritage Talk: *The First Irvingite*, in which he examined the careers and personalities of these two most unlikely friends, the tall dignified Henry Irving and the short 'rascally' J. L. Toole. Dr Read ended by performing an abridged version of Hood's *The Dream of Eugene Aram*, a positive tour de force which was received with delight. A real 'bit of the old'.

A splendid and brave conclusion to our meeting; with even the cake tasting fruitier than usual.

## **THE KNIGHT FROM NOWHERE**

Illustrated talk by Frances Hughes on the life and career of Henry Irving.

Tristan Bates Theatre, The Actors' Centre, 1a Tower St., London WC2H 9NP

Thursday, 21 April, at 1.30pm.

Admission £5 (£2 for Irving Soc members)

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## **THE LONDON SATYR**

**Robert Edric**

**Doubleday £16.99**

*The following is from David Grylls' review in The Sunday Times, 13 March, 2011:*

'Set in London in the sultry summer of 1891, the latest novel from the much-touted historical author Robert Edric offers many opportunities for colourful sensationalism. Its narrator, Webster, is a photographer working for Sir Henry Irving and his manager, Bram Stoker, at the Lyceum theatre. As a lucrative sideline, he supplies props and costumes to a sinister manipulative pornographer, Marlow (the "London Satyr" of the book's title).'

*Note the error - in 1891 HI was still Mr. Ed.*

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## **PERFORMING ARTS BOOK FAIR**

The first of this year's two fairs will be held in the Level 5 Function Room of the Royal Festival Hall on Sunday, 29 May, from 10.00am – 5.00pm.

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## **LONDON STAGE IN THE NINETEENTH THEATRE**

**Robert Tanitch**

**Carnegie Publishing with Westminster City Archives £24.99 HB 345pp**

**Numerous ills 078-1-85936-208-2**

**Reviewed by Michael Kilgarriff**

This is in essence another of the author's scissors and paste jobs. Each year of the century is represented by four or five pages of illustrations, press reports of performers and productions, and brief, often entertainingly contradictory, extracts from diaries and memoirs.

What is lacking is the historian's vision. There is much delving in Westminster City archives but no scholarship to pull it all together, just a random selection of factoids, enlivened by a plethora of errors.

HI's year of birth is given as 1837, and then, a page or two on, correctly as 1838. In the 1847 section we are informed that the 'thirteen-year-old Ellen Terry' appeared in *The Tempest* with Samuel Phelps. 1847 was of course the year of her birth, as we are told *on the very next page*. Captain Eyre Massey Shaw was Superintendent of the London Fire Brigade, not



*Captain Shaw*

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Force; in 1896 HI is confused with HBI, etc., etc. It may be almost impossible to compile a book of this nature without the odd error creeping in,

but Mr Tanitch abuses the privilege.

Ballet and opera are not neglected. Nor, from the 1880s, is Music Hall, though it is in this field that the author makes some of his most egregious mistakes – his versions of popular song titles in particular are quite hilariously muddled.

The reader starts off musing 'Fancy that!', but it wasn't long before this reader was thinking 'So what?' and, not infrequently, 'Oh, no!' Nevertheless the book is handsomely produced with hundreds of excellent illustrations. Alas, the index is restricted to titles of plays.

Why no index of performers? Tanitch has one in his companion book *London Stage in the Twentieth Century* so why not here? Without this essential reference tool the book's worth, already compromised by so many misspellings and so much misinformation, is even further devalued.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

**Kevin Spacey in Richard III at the Old Vic. Director: Sam Mendes. 18 seats at £30 available for Sunday, 28 August, at 5.00pm. They are in the Lilian Baylis balcony so be prepared for quite a few stairs. If you wish to join the party contact me a.s.a.p.**

*A coach trip is proposed from the Old Vic to Tower Cottage, Winchelsea, Ellen Terry's country home from 1896 to 1906.*

*Although the actual house is not open to visitors there is access to a small museum, and the trip could include a digression to nearby Rye. The cost will probably be around £30, depending on numbers. Whether this event goes ahead depends upon members' response, so if the outing, tentatively dated Saturday, 3 September, appeals please let me know.*

**This year's Annual Dinner will again be held at the New Cavendish Club on Friday, 28 October. Details t.b.a.**

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### **IRVING BY GASLIGHT**

A 75 minute 'monodrama' on HI at the Hanover Centre, 33 Southover Street, Brighton BN2 9UD.

Dates: 29 April, 30 April and 1 May. Starts 8.00pm. Admission £6 (£4 concessions).

For full details google Hanover Community Association.

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### **ELLEN TERRY FELLOWSHIP AGM**

#### **Report by Brian Manvell**

The 2011 AGM took place on Monday, 28 February, in the Ellen Terry building of Coventry University. In the absence of the indisposed chairman, Eric Stringer, our own Frances Hughes, chair of the Irving Society, officiated.

Joyce Stringer, Hon Sec, opened the meeting with a short talk including two poems. Apologies for absence were

received from David Brind, Margaret Weare, and President Tina Gray who was appearing in *To Kill A Mocking Bird* at the Mayflower, Southampton..

Frances' keynote speech was based on an observation that Ellen Terry was, metaphorically, 'androgynous'. She did of course play male roles, especially in her younger days, and later played strong female characters such as Lady Macbeth and Portia in which there are marked elements of masculine determination.

After a break for refreshments we were given the garden scene from *Twelfth Night* performed by second year students from the Performing Arts Dept, directed by Geoff Wilcott, with Malvolio played by a young woman student. The scene was played with the energy and dash necessary for the humour to be conveyed.

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## **HON SECRETARY OF THE IRVING SOCIETY REQUIRED**

To start 6 February, 2012

Lots of interest and job satisfaction.

Reasonable expenses.

Applicants should be computer literate. I will of course offer every assistance with the handover. If you're thinking about it but aren't sure whether to commit contact me for a chat See box below.

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