

## The London Coliseum

Designed by Frank Matcham for Sir Oswald Stoll, the London Coliseum opened on Christmas Eve 1904. Stoll's inspiration for the Coliseum came from watching waves of people arriving at Charing Cross station from the suburbs. He believed they needed something midway between serious theatre and the racy music halls, so he built a 'Theatre of Variety' that could hold nearly 3,500 people, with restaurants, writing room, smoking room and lounges for people to meet in, whether or not they were catching a show. He was catering for an audience that wanted refined but not highbrow entertainment. His vision was encapsulated in the theatre's original slogan, 'PRO BONO PUBLICO' ('For the Public Good') which was emblazoned in gold on the programme covers.

Stoll's artistic policy of 'High-Class Variety' mixed popular vaudeville acts with spectacles such as tennis tournaments, cricket matches, dog-racing, and even a full-scale chariot race on the massive, three-ringed, revolving stage. Approximately 20,000 variety 'turns' appeared at the Coliseum, from Dhiagilev's Ballets Russes to Lockhart's Performing Elephants, including artists as varied as Julie Andrews (who made her stage debut here), Sir Noel Coward, Sir Edward Elgar, Gracie Fields, Jellicoe the Performing Sealion and The Marx Brothers. Synchronised swimmers disported themselves in glass tanks; prototype airships and televisions were demonstrated to the novelty-hungry audience; full-scale military battles were re-enacted before their very eyes. On 31st August 1914, the Coliseum premiered a little number entitled *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* during a rapidly-thrown-together patriotic programme, which would become the song that defined an epoch.

Variety remained the staple of the London Coliseum during the 1920s, but as the decade drew to a close radio and cinema poached both the stars and their audiences. In the spirit of 'adapt-and-survive', the theatre re-invented itself. In 1931 it was renamed the Coliseum Theatre, and re-opened with Ralph Benatzky's 'White Horse Inn' which ran for a phenomenal 651 performances. Icecapades, pantomimes, movies - all were booked in at the Coliseum. During the Second World War, the theatre was bombed twice and served as a canteen for Air Raid Patrol workers, and Sir Winston Churchill himself delivered an address from the stage in 1942. Popular revivals, revues, dance bands, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra kept up Londoners' wartime morale in the Charing Cross Road.

When Stoll died in 1941 the management of the theatre passed to the enterprising Prince Littler, who took a gamble and imported an unknown Broadway musical to the London Coliseum in 1947. The show was Irving Berlin's smash-hit *Annie Get Your Gun*, which ran for 1,304 performances. The London Coliseum remained a major producing house for American musicals for the next decade, including *Kiss Me Kate*, *Call Me Madam*, *Guys and Dolls* and *The Pajama Game*. In 1961 it began a brief career as a 'Cinerama' cinema, before, after restorations and alterations by Martin Carr, it re-opened in 1968 as The London Coliseum, home to the Sadlers Wells Opera Company, soon to be renamed English National Opera, thus neatly linking the aims of Oswald Stoll and the redoubtable Lilian Baylis (foundress of ENO) of making classy entertainment available to the public at affordable prices.

Tamsin Collison

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ENO Baylis

London Coliseum, St Martin's Lane, London WC2N 4ES  
Telephone +44 (0)20 7632 8484 Fax +44 (0)20 7845 9443  
email [baylis@eno.org](mailto:baylis@eno.org) [www.eno.org/baylis](http://www.eno.org/baylis)