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100-year-old Alhambra back to its roots

How impresario built and developed a theatre that has seen a host of stars

by Emma Clayton
Leisure and Lifestyle Editor

At the beginning of the 20th century, a doctor's son called Francis Laidler moved to Bradford from the North East to take up a post as a wool trader's clerk.

He went on to work for Hammonds Brewery where he was quickly promoted to management. While at Hammonds, he struck up a partnership with Walter J Piper, who was leasing the Prince's Theatre in Bradford. Six months later, Piper died and, aged 35, Francis Laidler left Hammonds to take on the theatre alone.

A sharp businessman, he brought London touring productions to Bradford and had the vision of building a new theatre in the city.

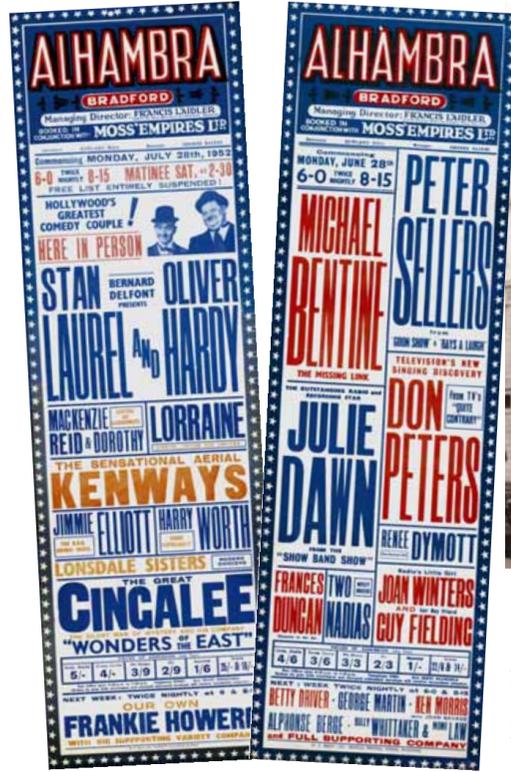
In 1914 his dream was realised, when the Alhambra was built. It officially opened on March 18, 1914 and five days later the curtain rose on a variety show and revue with a cast including Yeadon-born comic Sydney Howard and the Benedetti Brothers acrobats.

The Alhambra opened during the height of variety, offering twice-nightly shows. Shortly after the First World War, renowned variety producers Moss Empires Ltd approached Laidler about working together and they remained the Alhambra's booking agent for more than 40 years, drawing every big-name variety performer to the theatre.

It continued to prosper in the 1920s, attracting stars such as George Formby, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s the likes of Laurel and Hardy, Morecambe and Wise, Peter Sellers and Frankie Howerd trod the Alhambra boards.

This year, to celebrate its centenary, the Alhambra is returning to its variety roots. In September it will host A Night Of Variety - Celebrating 100 Years Of The Alhambra, a one-off show billed as "an homage to the Alhambra Theatre's early days of variety and subsequent long history of entertainment", with star names to be announced.

Before then, the theatre plays host to some of the world's biggest shows, starting with The Lion King, which roars into town next week for a seven-week run.



ON THE BILL: Alhambra line-ups from 1952 (far left) and later in the decade (left)



DREAM: The Alhambra soon after its completion in March 1914 and (right), Francis Laidler, whose ambition it was to build a new theatre in the city

Please do not ask management for complimentary tickets for your friends. If your friends will not pay to see you, why should the public?

- the note placed on dressing room doors by impresario Francis Laidler

In May, the National Theatre production of poignant drama War Horse arrives for the only Yorkshire stop on its first UK tour, followed by hit comedy One Man, Two Guvnors in July and classic musical Singin' In The Rain, direct from the West End, in September. The Royal Shakespeare Company performs Henry IV in October and circus musical Barnum arrives in November, along with Matthew Bourne's new ballet, Lord Of The Flies.

Bradford Theatres general manager Adam Renton said: "Through the golden age of variety when it opened, the 1980s refurbishment and up to the present day, the Alhambra Theatre has had a wonderful and varied history. It remains an iconic venue, attracting the very best in star names and live entertainment to Bradford."

When first built, the Alhambra

offered a touch of luxury to Bradford theatregoers. Tip-up seating in the pit stalls was upholstered as comfortably as seats in the orchestra stalls and dress circle, much to the delight of audiences - the cheaper seats would usually have been wooden benches or uncomfortable chairs. Capacity in the auditorium was originally nearly 1,800, later reduced to 1,650.

Visiting performers welcomed such comforts as hot and cold running water, and gas and electric light in the dressing-rooms. The book Domes Of Delight, by the late Telegraph & Argus entertainment writer Peter Holdsworth, reveals that Laidler is said to have placed a notice on dressing-room doors saying: "Please do not ask management for complimentary tickets for your friends. If your friends will not pay to see you, why should the public?"

Since opening its doors in March 1914, the Alhambra has staged some of the world's biggest and best-loved productions. It is one of the North's premier musical houses, staging shows by leading musical theatre producers including Andrew Lloyd Webber, Cameron Mackintosh and Bill Kenwright.

The theatre underwent a major refurbishment in 1986, and large-scale shows including Jesus Christ Superstar, The Sound Of Music and The Muppet Show graced the newly-refurbished stage. Bradford audiences

were the first to see a new stage version of TV sitcom 'Allo, 'Allo before its West End opening. With thousands fighting for tickets, one staff member commented: "It was as if a war for tickets had been declared".

Prior to the refurbishment, the Alhambra was the setting for 1983 film The Dresser, starring Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay.

Other smash-hit productions at the Alhambra include Les Miserables, which ran for three months in 1998, Phantom Of The Opera, Miss Saigon and The History Boys. The theatre has staged numerous premiers, including Swan Lake by the London Festival Ballet (now the English National Ballet), watched by Princess Margaret at the Alhambra in 1977. In 1930, prima ballerina Anna Pavlova performed The Dying Swan there.

Today, the Alhambra's name is synonymous with pantomime, annually staging the region's biggest panto. Francis Laidler was known as the 'King of Panto', and for half a century delivered panto after panto in his Bradford venues, and his theatres in Leeds, Keighley and London.

The 1958/59 production of Jack And The Beanstalk, starring Ken Dodd, still holds the record for the theatre's longest-running panto. "It went on until March, we were throwing Easter eggs out at the audience," recalled Dobby in a recent interview with the T&A.

The theatre impresario started the charming tradition of junior dance troupe the Sunbeams for Robin Hood in 1917 at the Prince's Theatre in Little Horton Lane. In 1930, the Sunbeams came to the Alhambra, when Laidler switched his pantos to the venue.

The Sunbeams were his "ray of sunshine in the darkness of the war years". The girls, with matching bobbed haircuts, were an instant hit with audiences. All recruited locally, they added high spirits to the Laidler pantos, often joining in with comic capers on stage.

Laidler selected Sunbeams from open auditions. Each girl had to meet strict height criteria and be "in perfect health, with evidence of six months regular school attendance".



Bantam Dynamo in hot form!

The owner of a Bradford restaurant is marking his third year at the helm by creating a new dish inspired by the city it serves. Mirash Ali (pictured), who took over Paprika, on New Line Retail Park, Greengates, in 2011, has created the Bantam Dynamo. He says the chicken dish mirrors the city's rich vibrancy, appeal and cultural heritage, and takes its name from magician Steven "Dynamo" Frayne and the nickname of Bradford City. Mr Ali, an award-winning chef with 23 years experience, said: "Bantam Dynamo draws its inspiration from this great city, and it is already proving to be very popular with customers."

IN BRIEF

Band in concert

An evening of music with the City of Bradford Brass Band, which was crowned first section Champions of Yorkshire earlier this month, will take place in Ilkley tomorrow night. Tickets cost from £10 to £12, and are available from Ilkley Visitor Information Centre (01943) 602319.

Coffee morning

A coffee morning in aid of the Alzheimer's Society takes place at St Peter's Church, Moorhead Lane, Shipley, on Saturday from 10am to 12pm. There will be a tombola, cake stall and raffle.



LIGHTS: The floodlit Alhambra to be seen today following its 1986 refurbishment

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FOUNDATION: The site for the new Alhambra' and (right) a troupe of the theatre's Sunbeams go through their paces in 1952



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