



A FORGOTTEN DRAMATIST

by Jim Kemmy

The name of James Kenney is no longer included in modern histories of the theatre. He was born in Co. Limerick in

1780 "of respectable parents". (1) The family moved to London about 1800 (2) and the father became manager of Boodle's Club, St. James Street, of which he was also part owner, and was also well known in the sporting world.

James was placed in the banking-house of Herries, Farquhar & Co., and while there he indulged in private theatricals. His first literary attempt was a small volume first published in 1803, titled **Society, a Poem in two parts, with other Poems**. He next wrote a farce called **Raising the Wind** which in 1803 was produced at a performance of amateurs, with Kenney taking the part of Jeremy Diddler. He offered the play to the managers of Covent Garden, where it became an immediate success on its production on 5th November 1803.

He was a prolific and popular writer and, in a writing career of forty two years, covered everything from tragedy to burletta, over fifty works in all. Reviewing **False Alarms, or my Cousin**, a comic opera in three acts, with music by Braham and Mathew Peter King, produced at Drury Lane in 1807, one critic wrote:

"In this piece the author seems to have trusted entirely to good dramatic music, poetical words for the songs, smart dialogue, humour, incident and situations; in fine, to have discarded machinery, drums, trumpets, noise and spectacle, which were then high in the ascendant, and to have aimed at the restoration of a legitimate opera... and he repaid himself and brought money to the treasury of the theatre, without precariously exhausting a larger sum on scene-painters, machinists, tailors, dressmakers, ovations, processions, elephants, camels, horses, dogs and monkeys". (3)

Another Kenney comedy **The World**, which was produced at Drury Lane on 31st March 1808, did not impress Byron, who wrote in **English Bards and Scotch Reviewers**:

"Kenny's World - ah! where is Kenny's wit? -
Tires the sad gallery, lulls the listless pit".

Kenney married Louisa Sabastian Holcroft, the third wife and widow of a remarkable strolling player and

dramatist Thomas Holcroft, who died in March 1809 in London. Louisa was the daughter of a French writer and politician of the Revolutionary era, Louis Sabastian Mercier, who achieved considerable celebrity in that period. (4)

The Kenneys had four children: one son, Charles Lamb Kenney, became a schoolfriend of Dion Boucicault and introduced him to their wide circle of playwrights and actors; (4) Charles (1821-'81) was a notable journalist and comic-opera librettist.

In 1821 James Kenney was residing at Bellvue, near Paris, and he entertained Charles Lamb and his sister at Versailles in 1822. He still continued his dramatic work for the London stage. One of his most popular works **Sweethearts and Wives** was produced at the Haymarket on 7th July 1823. He was a frequent visitor at Samuel Rogers's breakfasts and dinners and met there most of the notabilities of the day. He also contributed to periodicals, especially annuals, and his poetry appeared in **The Gem** and **Forget-me-Not** for 1829-'31.

In 1832 Kenney appeared before a select committee appointed to inquire into the laws affecting dramatic literature. He gave evidence on the payment of dramatists and on his attitude to "certain immoral and political passages" in plays.(5).

Kenney long suffered from a nervous affliction which gave him such an eccentric appearance that he was often mistaken for an escaped lunatic. One writer quotes a contemporary joke about Kenney's appearance: "It was said of his rickety walk and habit of taking hold of his shirt-collar with a hand to each side, that he was last seen helping himself over a gutter". (6)

Not all of his works were successful, as he himself was the first to acknowledge "A musical drama called 'Hush' ... completely failed ... Finding it so much inferior to what he expected, Kenney himself hissed loudly from the dress circle where he had taken his post, and declared that he did not think he could have done anything so wretchedly bad. It is not often that an author is so disinterested." (7)

He had the reputation of being a wit. Many stories were told about his sayings, and some of these appear in the book **Gossip of the Century**. One day he was dining at Greenwich, when he suddenly began to cough violently. One of his companions observed: "Is that

fish-bone gone the wrong way!" "On my word", he replied, "it was just going the way to kill Kenney".(8)

One of his later works was **The Irish Ambassador**, and his last production **Infatuation**, a serious drama about the French empire. Though he had made a large amount of money from his writings, he was poverty-stricken in old age. Hearing of his plight, many of the leading performers of the day mustered at Drury Lane on 25th July 1849 in a benefit night in aid of the old dramatist who had entertained playgoers for nearly half a century. But the help came too late, for on that very morning he died, after a short illness.

Of Kenney the **Athenaeum** magazine declared: "As a farce-writer he was one of the happiest and most popular artists of his time ..."

Though his name has disappeared from modern historical works on the theatre, James Kenney has achieved one distinction: he gave a word to the English language, the term "diddle" - the slang description of a petty swindle - derives from the character Jeremy Diddler, the hero of Kenney's first farce, **Raising the Wind**, a plausible, ingenious swindler who contrives to "raise the wind" by continually borrowing small amounts of money which he never repays. The success of the play soon led to the use of the word to describe such a practice. The verb "to diddle" was given a secure place in the English language when Edgar Allan Poe (1809-'49) wrote an essay titled "Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences". The word was given further currency when William Makepiece Thackeray (1811-'63) satirised the Dublin engineer and metaphysician Dr. Dionysius Lardner, the natural father of Dion Boucicault, as "Dionysius Diddler."

REFERENCES

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4. *Ibid.* (Page 25).
5. **Stage and Theatre 1**, British Parliamentary Papers, 1831-'32 (Pages 226-232).
6. **Autobiography**, by William Jerdan. Volume 111 (London 1852-'53).
7. **Dublin University Magazine**, January 1856 (Page 24).
8. **Gossip of the Century** by Julia C. Byrne Volume II (London 1892).