

# Press Release

*Restoring the Repertoire*  
A Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds production

## The Poor Soldier

*Written by John O’Keeffe, Composed by William Shield*  
*Directed by Colin Blumenau*

**Press night: Tuesday 29 June 2010**

- Regency theatre restores hit Musical Comedy
- George Washington’s favourite drama
- Cambridge University Press sponsors Georgian drama

**The Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds is set to revive an important piece of the musical theatre repertoire from 1783: *The Poor Soldier* by Irish playwright John O’Keeffe and British composer William Shield.**

Written in the same year as the end of the American War of Independence, the Musical Comedy follows the story of a young soldier returning to his Irish hometown full of exciting plans to wed his childhood sweetheart. But Spring is in the air and rival young lovers abound, from foolish peasant boys to a swaggering English Officer and the bizarrest of French manservants.

With songs inspired by popular Irish country ballads, *The Poor Soldier* proved one of the most popular musical dramas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both in Britain and in the United States. The piece was a hit in London in 1783, New York in 1785 and Dublin in 1786. It was reputedly President George Washington’s favourite drama, with scenes even performed at the presidential inauguration ceremony at his request.

Artistic Director Colin Blumenau comments: “It is easy to see why the piece was so popular. The wit of O’Keeffe’s writing, Shields’ melodious compositions and the veiled political and social critique combine to make it a joyous piece of work. Following the American War of Independence the piece achieved extraordinary popularity and remained in the English and American repertoires until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The original score that remains is also exceptionally beautiful and its tendency to propel the action forward makes it more in tune with modern musicals than previous examples of the musical comedy and operas of the day – you will not be surprised we are inviting audiences to rediscover the “original Broadway musical” since it predates *The Black Crook* on Broadway by 80 years.”

*The Poor Soldier* is made possible with sponsorship from Cambridge University Press with support funding from the Leche Trust, the Foyle Foundation, and the Idlewild Trust. The Restoring the Repertoire programme is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Theatre Royal welcomes this major new sponsor for the production. Cambridge University Press will be the principal sponsor following on from their support as major donors in 2009 helping the ongoing annual funding needs of the Theatre Royal.

Stephen Bourne, CEO of Cambridge University Press commented on their support of the production: "Cambridge University Press is delighted to be working with the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds to help bring back to life this Georgian stage hit. The Press's commitment to Georgian theatre has encompassed text editions and literary criticism for so long that it is a great delight to see such works brought to the stage - and what a stage! - where they belong."

*The Poor Soldier* premieres at the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds from 29 June - 03 July 2010 with the ambition that the production will go on tour in Spring 2011. For tickets and further details please call the Box Office on 01284 769505 or visit [www.theatreroyal.org](http://www.theatreroyal.org) .

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**For more information, images or to arrange interviews please contact: Lucy Close, Communications Officer, 01284 829947, [lucy@theatreroyal.org](mailto:lucy@theatreroyal.org)**

**1. Impact of the *Poor Soldier* on American drama:** Along with R.B Sheridan's *A School for Scandal*, *The Poor Soldier* was one of the inspirations for the first professional play written by an American, *The Contrast* by Royall Tyler. The characters in *The Contrast* are heard discussing a performance of both pieces.

**2. John O'Keeffe (1747 – 1833)** was an Irish writer and one of the most produced playwrights in London in the last quarter of the 18th century. He is best known for his play *Wild Oats*, which has had a number of successful revivals across the UK in the last 30 years.

**3. William Shield (1748 – 1829)** was a composer and close contemporary of Joseph Haydn. For a time he was the composer in residence at the Covent Garden Theatre and later he was appointed Master of the King's Music. As a theatrical composer Shield is known for incorporating traditional country music into his scores.

**4. The Theatre Royal Bury St. Edmunds** is the last remaining working Regency Theatre in Britain and the only Theatre in the National Trust's portfolio of properties. This beautiful and intimate playhouse re-opened in 2007 following £5.3 million restoration project to restore its unique 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative

scheme and layout. The staging of *The Poor Soldier* forms part of the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds' *Restoring the Repertoire* project to re-discover works from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, performing the best of these in the setting of its restored 1819 auditorium.