

Press Release

Restoring the Repertoire™
A Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds production

The London Merchant

By George Lillo

Directed by Colin Blumenau

Designed by Kit Surrey

Press night: Tuesday 05 October 7.30pm

Press matinee: Wednesday 06 October 2pm.

- Production of first 'bourgeois' drama
- Historic theatre to be reconfigured in the round

The Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds is about to stage the first drama of the Georgian age to explore working class themes; *The London Merchant*, a dark tale of seduction, extortion and murder most foul ...



The courtesan Millwood has vowed her revenge on Man. Exquisite, seductive and cruel, she sets her corrupt and decadent eye on innocent apprentice, George Barnwell. Respected by his peers, praised by his London merchant master, and loved by the pretty Maria – the world is at his feet. With a flourishing career ahead of him, he has everything to lose as she, Black Widow-like, draws him into a vortex of illegal and immoral activity which signals his doom and her ultimate revenge.

Written by playwright George Lillo in 1731, the story was based on a popular ballad set in the merchant district of London circa 1588. Telling the story of an apprentice led astray by a courtesan, the tale illustrated the dangers of the city and youthful excess to young men learning their trades. It has been argued that Lillo's works were inspired by a morality borne of the transition to a society based on the success of trade. Yet this 'capitalist' society is shown to have spawned such monsters as Millwood. This production will investigate this conundrum. Titles of his other plays included *The Christian Hero* (1735), *Fatal Curiosity* (1736) and *Elmerick, or Justice Triumphant* (1740).

The London Merchant marked an exceptional departure for Lillo and created a new genre of theatre which concentrated on the struggles of the working classes. Prior to this the theatre of the period had predominantly focussed on stories relating to the upper classes, biblical or classical themes. The new 'bourgeois

drama' became popular across Europe, and gave Lillo a notable place in dramatic history.

For the first time since its restoration in 2007 the Theatre will be presenting a production in the round, re-organising the layout of the historic auditorium to place the stage in the Pit seating area. In addition the costume of the piece will be 16th century marking the period when it is set. Designed by Kit Surrey, part of the design team responsible for the Theatre Royal's historic interior decorative scheme, the staging will help further the theatre's exploration into the dynamic between audience, space and performance in 18th century theatre.

Artistic Director of the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds, Colin Blumenau comments: "This is the first time that we have strayed away from the 'style' comedies of the latter part of the 18th century to a much darker side of early 18th century life. The play is important historically for a number of reasons – the first 'bourgeois' tragedy, the introduction of a merchant class morality to the stage, the startling relevance of the issues being portrayed to contemporary life. What is really important nowadays is the central, and astonishingly frank, portrayal of the revenge of a fallen woman on the society which has perpetrated that fall. The social politics and associated domestic politics are notable not only for their frankness but also for their modern resonance and for the fact that they stemmed from the pen of a man. As ever with *Restoring the Repertoire*[™] I hope that our theatre-going public will rediscover a piece of work which has lain hidden in obscurity for far too long. Lillo is not a dramatist known to many, but this play I hope will re-establish his reputation."

The London Merchant is being sponsored by Suffolk based Solicitors Ashton Graham. This is the 11th Theatre Royal production they have supported, including the past three *Restoring the Repertoire*[™] productions *He's Much to Blame* (2009), *Wives as they Were, and Maids as they Are* (2008) and *Black Eyed Susan* (2007). *Restoring the Repertoire*[™] is also supported by the Leche Trust, the Foyle Foundation, the Idlewild Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund

The London Merchant is running at the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds from the 1st to the 16th of October and then touring to the Exeter Northcott from the 20th – 23rd October. To book tickets at the Theatre Royal call 01284 769505 or go online at www.theatreroyal.org .

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**For more information, images or to arrange interviews please contact:
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