

## **Obituary: David Kelsey (1932 – 1996)**

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"Oh, no, Kels. I don't think so - a bit over the top." David Kelsey, actor, director, playwright and adaptor, had such a relish for the stage as a dramatic medium - such a feeling for the theatre theatrical - that it was almost instinctive for him to attempt a boldness of gesture, a roundness of delivery and a robustness of manner which by today's standards struck an altogether too actorly note.

Kelsey had the build, the voice, the presence and the personality: but in a theatrical era coming swiftly under the influence of television, the opportunities to strut and fret were diminishing nightly, and they came mainly in musicals.

It was in that old warhorse, *Robert and Elizabeth* (Lyric, 1964), written by Ron Grainer (tunes) and Ronald Millar (words), that Kelsey probably had his finest hour, or at least his most widely remembered, since he was to spend most of his career running various reps in the heyday of the subsidised post-war revival of the repertory movement.

He played Mr Macready, Kean's great rival, and some of us suspected that in the timing of the famous Macready pause Kelsey out-paused Macready himself. And why not? If one could not go over the top as Mr Macready in a West End musical as "emotional" as the Millar-Grainer hit about the secret passion of two great poets, Elizabeth Moulton-Barrett and Robert Browning, what was the theatre for?

In Wendy Toye's production Kelsey sensed that the atmosphere was ripe for ripeness. So he let rip. One night, however, the interpreter of the master of the stagy pause was himself given pause - indeed everybody was - when a spectator in the royal box at the Lyric interposed his own critical comment.

It came while Kelsey's Macready was questioning the quality of a play Browning had written. When Keith Michell's Browning insisted that it was "a

good play" and Macready contradicted him, an American voice barked from the outer darkness: "It is a good play!"

Such unexpected support for the poet's dramaturgy created a distraction for several minutes since the spectator repeatedly contradicted Macready's criticism until a member of the stage staff went up to the playgoer, who promptly left.

Had Kelsey himself inadvertently incited the incident during the run of his previous West End show, a short-lived, intimate revue which satirised American values and attitudes? *Seven-Bob-A-Buck*, which had transferred from Hampstead to the Comedy, may have got the bird from the critics for the crudeness of its satire, but Kelsey had stolen a notice or two.

"Paying customers, if any, will find what pleasure they can in . . . the well-bred, languid embarrassments of David Kelsey," said one; and "David Kelsey strikes a succession of stage-English attitudes which are often very funny," wrote another.

Widely respected in the profession as a versatile and sympathetic character actor - ranging from Malvolio, Archie Rice and Sherlock Holmes to Trigorin in *The Seagull*, Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* and Crocker-Harris in *The Browning Version*, Kelsey also held posts as resident director at the Northcott, Exeter, the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, the Royal, Northampton, and the Marlowe, Canterbury, and helped to found a touring troupe, Baroque Theatre Company, which gave work to newly qualified actors and technicians.

No one understood better the value of the largely under-rated reps, and Kelsey seems to have worked as actor or director at most of them, from Pitlochry to Plymouth, Bromley to Basingstoke, Manchester to Newbury. In a recent tour of *The Boy Friend* he played the redoubtable Percy and staged a tour of his own musical about Elsie and Doris Waters called *Gert 'n' Daisy*.

Other writings ranged from a stagy vehicle for the late - and some said great - Sonia Dresdel as a snarling elocutionist, *Game for Two or More Players* (Farnham, 1973) to an improbable funeral-parlour farce, *Now Here's a Funny Thing!* (Exeter, 1976); but if his pieces rarely struck gold they were never less than actable, especially for players unafraid to go "over the top".

Among more recent touring productions were revivals of the American musical Barnum, Priestley's I Have Been Here Before, and the pantomime Cinderella (King's, Edinburgh).

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David Kelsey, actor, director and playwright: born 16 June 1932; died 4 April 1996.