

8th March 2020 – Equestrian Drama in Liverpool. Talk by John Pinfold.

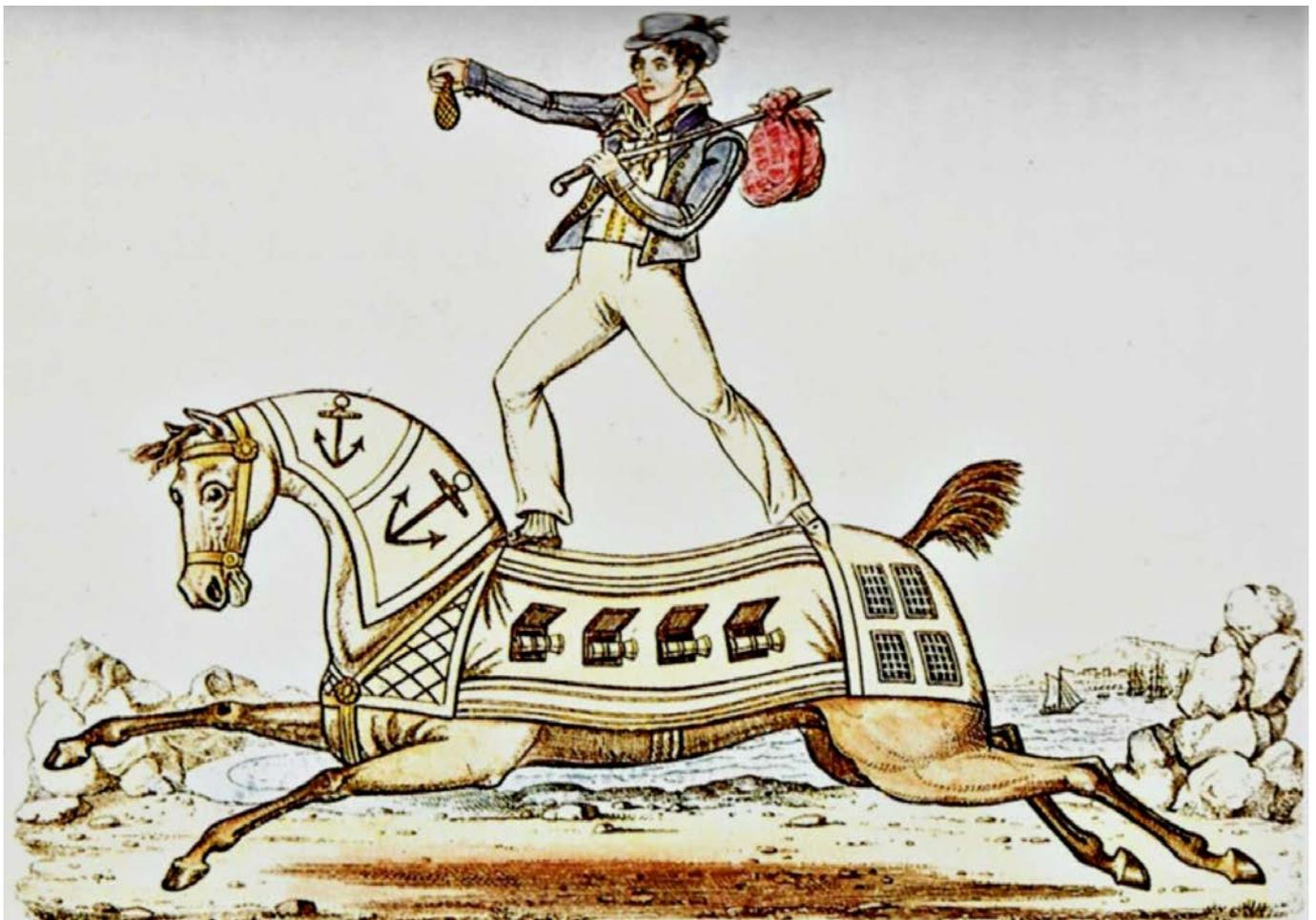
The talk covered the following aspects:

A definition of equestrian theatre, or 'hippodrama' as the Victorians called it, not a circus performance nor an outdoor recreation of for example the Wild West, but rather a stage performance in a purpose built theatre in which horses played a (or often the) leading part. They were above all Spectacles and Extravanzas.

First known example a Harlequinade probably in Italy, as depicted in a 16th century woodblock

First appeared in England in the late 18th century in Astley's Circus, which visited Liverpool from the 1770s through to the 1790s .

Liverpool, like Glasgow and Manchester became a major provincial centre for this new form of entertainment. Andrew Ducrow (whose wife was an equestrienne from Liverpool) the leading exponent of this form of drama.



Principal equestrian theatres in Liverpool were first the Olympic in Christian Street, and then the Royal Amphitheatre (later Royal Court) in Great Charlotte St.

Types of production: variety; melodramas (eg Timur the Tartar, The Blood Red Knight, The Secret Mine, Mazeppa); historical or contemporary re-enactments (eg Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow, The Battle of Waterloo, Our Victories in the Crimea, The Fall of Sebastopol); bowdlerised versions of Shakespeare (eg Richard III, Macbeth); pantomimes (eg Vicissitudes of a Tar, The Chinese Enchanter)

From the mid-19th century a new taste for racing drama took hold. One of the first such plays was 'Going to the National' ('a laughable farce') in 1854. Many such plays were stock melodramas, based on skulduggery on the Turf, for eg 'The Flying Scud' which included a representation of the Derby on stage (by puppets) following which a real horse was brought on stage as the winner.

'The Prodigal Daughter' (1892) represented the zenith of racing dramas, its centrepiece being the staging of the Grand National (complete with water jump) on stage by twelve thoroughbreds, one of whom, Voluptuary, was in reality a Grand National winner. The show appeared in Liverpool for the first time in 1893 and returned regularly until Voluptuary's death (still playing the role) in 1905. When staged at smaller theatres such as the Lyric on Everton Valley only six rather than twelve horses were used.

In 1898 the Grand National was filmed for the first time and the film shown to huge crowds at the Empire. This was the beginning of the end for equestrian drama as 'animated pictures' gradually became more popular. Some shows lasted through until the early 1920s however, such as 'The Whip' which included a horse being rescued from a spectacular train crash..

One last hurrah: the production of Ben Hur in the Edwardian period including the chariot race - description of how this was staged.

A recent revival of equestrian theatre, but in a different form - 'War Horse'

Is traditional equestrian theatre with real horses still possible in today's environment? [To learn the answer to this question you needed to come to the talk!]

John Pinfold