

Sussex Law Society Theatre Trip 'TRIAL BY LAUGHTER' Review by Cerys Sayer (November, 2018)

Those of you who didn't make it to last week's social event at the Theatre Royal missed out on 'Trial by Laughter', and as the title suggests, a lot of fun too! The most recent production from Ian Hislop & Nick Newman pays tribute to William Hone, a courageous 19th century satirist and defender of free speech, who was tried on escalating charges of libel no less than three times in three days!

A contextual juxtaposition was quickly set on stage between the comical scenes within the libidinous court of Prince George IV and the dissidence sweeping the streets outside it. Corrupt government ministers were nervous that Gallic revolt would germinate and the "Prince of Whales" would not tolerate his waistline being mocked for the entertainment of commoners. Drastic, arguably despotic action had already been taken, namely The Habeus Corpus Suspension Act 1794, and so free speech was next on the hit list. William Hone, the author of pamphlets pointing the parodical finger at politicians was arbitrarily targeted and falsely accused of committing crimes against Religion and Royalty. So it was that the State proceeded to "Make an example out of" him.

When understandably exhausted on the eve of his third trial, and contemplating absconding, Hone's wife delivered one of the play's most resonant lines: "You will demand Justice, not escape it!" So the show went on and Hone proved to be the ultimate litigant in person delivering his defence in stand-up-style. The Judges lacked not only a special jury but also insight into the power of humour in the courtroom having ordered Hone to read his offending (yet hilarious) works aloud. The result being that the jury were repeatedly reduced to laughter and reached a verdict of 'Not guilty,' every time.

Whilst the staging of the play has been dismissed as conservative and clunky, the calibre of the acting and resourceful casting, coupled with clever dialogue was so entertaining that visual stimulation wasn't necessary, (in my humble opinion). In fact, Jeremy Lloyd, who doubled as the Prince Regent and the arresting Sheriff was so mesmeric that it took me until the second part to realise he was one and the same actor!

The consensus of all members was that the production was informative and thought provoking, with its subject and themes just as relevant today as they were two hundred years ago. Recently, when promoting the online court system, Professor Susskind, IT adviser to the Lord Chief Justice declared that there is no basis in jurisprudence or legal philosophy for conducting justice face-to-face. I need to revisit legal theory in order to assess the accuracy of this claim but one thing I am confident of is that Hone would not have been acquitted three times in a row had he not been able to 'hold' court.