Thomas Harris to Col. T. McMahon

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Belleemonte

My dear Sr.

Octob. 20. 1811 —

When I wrote to You the other day I little thought that I should so soon have been compell'd to trespass again upon Your valuable time — the present subject is as painful to my feelings as the former one was gratifying —

I have rec.d information from my Son that You have had from Mr. Colman a petition to present to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, praying for an extension of the Hay-market license to eight months — that is neither more nor less, than to establish a third regular Winter-Theatre — which must effectually compleat the destruction of all regular theatrical property — his own among the rest —

See 18645-6 &c.

The pretences on which Mr. Colman founds his application I understand to be these — viz — the late L.d Chamberlain's License to Mr. Arnold for the english Opera — The innovations practis'd by the numerous public places acting under the Lord Chamberlain's & the Magistrates license in performing regular dramatic pieces — and the protraction of the Seasons

of

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of the Patent Theatres —— it is but too true that the unprecedented licenses granted by the late Lord Chamberlain have been a material injury to us all — The late Lord Dartmouth was the first Lord Chamb.r who ever exercis'd that power on his own authority which heretofore was always understood to be a branch of the Royal prerogative, & under that conviction the two Patents belonging to Drury Lane & Cov. Gard.n have been from time to time purchas'd, & large sums have been advanced upon their validity so consider'd —— The License granted by Lord D. to Mr. Astley (who thereupon erected a small building in Wych street Drury Lane which he has this Year considerably enlarged) has so diminish'd our nightly receipts (our Galleries being almost deserted) that we have been compell'd to have recourse to similar exhibitions, at an enormous expence, without which the regular drama coud not have been supported —— The license granted to Mr. Arnold, obtain'd under the shallow pretense of encouraging native musical talent (as if we had not been always eager to encourage it wherever it was to be found) — & also the license which I understand Mr. Greville has obtain'd must be of serious injury — but while we are suffering in common with Mr. Colman, is it reasonable that he should by an extension of his license

license be enabled to become himself the chief of those innovators of whom he so justly & heavily complains? —

I shall not at present dwell on the irregularities practis'd at the numerous public places acting under Magistrates licenses — for it is to the distress'd state & confusion of the regular Theatres alone that they have so long been suffer'd thus grossly to violate the restricting Act of King Geo 2nd ——

Mr. Colman's last ground of complaint is the aggression of the Patent Theatres — I must here revert to the original grant of the Hay-market Patent to prove that the aggression has been progressively on his part & not on ours —— Sam.l Foote hunting with the late Dk of York met with an accident, the Dk in compassion to his misfortune solicited his Majesty for a Patent authorizing Mr. Foote to open the little Theatre in the Hay-market — during his Life — particular attention was then paid to the interests of the Patent Theatres by restricting the opening of the Hay-market Theatre to the 15th May & the close to the 15th Septem.r — it was also understood that Foote woud perform merely his own pieces or such others as woud not interfere with either the Patent Theatres, their Actors or their performances — the elder Colman having purchas'd Foote's Life interest

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Life interest, at his decease obtaind thro' Lord Hertford an annual License merely, (his petition to have the License during his Life being refused) which was continued to the pres. Mr. G. Colman at the decease of his Father ——— Heretofore the Patent Theatres had frequently performd the whole Year round, but in order to give an interval of rest to theatrical exhibitions, that the public might return to them with more avidity they shut up for three & sometimes 4 months ——
— Until the Hay-market Theatre came into the possession of the present Proprietors the performances seldom interfered with what is call'd the Stock pieces of the Patent Theatres, & consequently the end proposed by closing for a time at the Patent Theatres was answer'd ———

From the intimacy & friendship which has ever subsisted between Mr. Colman & myself, I have been induced for a long series of Years to allow any part of our Company, Stock pieces &c, to be at his service, & have always paid our performers their full Salaries even when acting at the same time, in opposition to Cov.t Gard.n, at the Hay-market Theatre ——— Mr. Colman forgets to state that about two Years since, he prevaild on the late Lord Dartmouth, (without any communication, as I have good reason to believe with his Majesty) to extend the term of his License another month —

that is

to the 15th Octob.r — which extension on a former application direct
to His Majesty thro' L.d Salisbury, His Majesty had been plea'd to
refuse — that month certainly more than compensates for the contingent
protraction of some of our seasons, occasion'd by unavoidable circum-
-stances — I can feel no hostility to M.r Colman for this second
attack on us by his pres.t petition, which indeed I consider more as the
act of his Partners, especially of M.r Morris who for some time has done
all in his power to injure the interests of Cov. Gard.n Theatre merely
because I have from time to time giv'n every theatrical assistance to
his Partner Geo Colman, with whom he is at better variance, & is now, &
has long been contending in the Court of Chancery — Perhaps it may
not be known that M.r Colman some years since sold the half of his
interest in the Hay-market Theatre for six times the sum that his Father
gave for the whole — At which time his License was for 4 months only —
— his other half is now so entangled with Law expenses that it may be said
to be in the hands of his Attorney — & I am credibly inform'd that should the
application for the extended license prove successful, that M.r Colmans
Partners in conjunction with his Attorney, & some speculating discontented
Actors, have agreed to erect on a much larger scale, an entire new Theatre —

this

Thus my dear Sr. have I as briefly as possible (tho I am afraid very tedeously) gone over the grounds of Mr. Colmans pretensions —

A clamour has lately gone forth of a want of theatrical competition — but already the competition for histrionic talent is so general in London, Dublin, Edinbro' & the numerous provincial towns, that at any expence whatever, one good company worthy of a great national Theatre can hardly be collected — three of our performers left us this Year rather than accept a salary of £18.-19. & £20 ⅌ Week each — exclusive of a Benefit by which they generally clear'd from four to five hundred each — & Mr. Colman confesses that it is from our Company that he must create his own —

Drury Lane Theatre will now speedily rise from its ashes supported by all the powerful interest of a charter'd corporation — I know from dear bought experience how difficult it will be to contend with such a rival, for there is no instance on record of Dr. Lane & Cov. Gard. Theatres haveing had in one & the same Year each of them a fair profitable season —

I have now only to add that shou'd our ever gracious & illustrious Founder be induced to withdraw his protection to our patent rights, which he has hitherto so repeatedly & so kindly supported, I entreat that You

will

will in Your friendship give me the earliest notice of such a misfortune — I must then make the best arrangement I can with my numerous Creditors who are now preseing very seriously for their heavy debts, & by ridding myself of my precarious & hazardous concern altogether, I shall extricate my family from a property which must have long since led me among so many others, to the walls of a prison, had I not for so many, many Years experienced the unceasing favour, the protecting power & Justice of the Throne —

With every sentiment of Gratitude & respect —

I remain

My kind & ever esteem'd Sr.

Yours most truly

T. Harris —

T. Harris

Oct. 20. 1811.