

## 17th Century Women of Theatre

The 17th Century saw the first actresses on the English stage. Throughout this century, the theatre had its ups and downs. At the turn of the 17th century, theatre was a thriving aspect of society both in England and on the continent. In the 1640s, though, this would all change in England.

The Puritans had risen to power in Parliament and did not approve of the life style and approach to the ruling of Charles I, their king. He was too extravagant in his spending and his desire for absolute control as monarch, emulating that of Louis in France. This tension would lead to civil war in 1642 and again in 1648, ultimately landing Charles in prison. Charles was beheaded for treason in January of 1649.

With the Puritan run Parliament, many changes to English lifestyle occurred. One was the closing of all the theaters. They were later torn down. All theatrical activity in the 17th Century became illegal. This would last until 1660, when Charles II, who had been sent to France, came back and restored the throne of England. For most of the 17th Century, he had been raised in France where the arts thrived including theatre. Upon his return to England, he also restored theatre.

Women of theatre had already been accepted in France, a tradition that Charles brought with him to England. Interestingly, Nell Gwyn was one of the first successful actresses in England and also Charles's mistress. Throughout Europe, the women of theatre began making their mark on the history of theatre.