

Geoffrey Brawn

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Long-serving musical director of the Players' Theatre who tickled the ivories on *The Good Old Days*

GEOFFREY BRAWN, who has died aged 83, was a gifted composer and musician and the musical director of the Players' Theatre, London, for 40 years, accompanying at the piano some of the most celebrated stars in show business, including Peter Ustinov, Beryl Reid, Dora Bryan, Hattie Jacques, Ian Carmichael and Pat Kirkwood.

Geoffrey Christopher Brawn was born at Kendal on January 31 1935. As a boy he sang in the choir at Holy Trinity parish church in Kendal where the organist, Frederick Dalrymple, discerned his musical gifts. With Dalrymple's encouragement and under his tutelage, Brawn won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London.

After National Service in the RAF, he first came to public attention in the television series *Before the Fringe* in 1967, in which he appeared with Beatrice Lillie and Alan Melville among others. His association with the Players' Theatre, the home of Victorian music hall, began in the early 1960s and was consolidated in 1968 when he first appeared in the BBC television series *The Good Old Days*, regally ensconced at the piano to accompany members of the Players' cast led by Sheila Mathews, with Leonard Sachs wielding the gavel as chairman.

That same year Brawn was the musical director of the film *A Little of What You Fancy*, a colourful history of the British music hall, filmed at the

Brawn: adapted Victorian pantomimes and wrote an all-male Shakespearean musical



Players' with a cast led by Barry Cryer and the pop singer Helen Shapiro, and co-directed by an uncredited Michael Winner. The following year he was responsible for the musical arrangements for the television series *It's Ragtime!*, featuring Clive Dunn.

In June 1974, Brawn was musical director for *Jack the Ripper*, which began life at the Players' and transferred to the West End for runs of 228 performances at the Ambassadors' and Cambridge theatres under the management of the flamboyant Larry Parnes.

Brawn's own musical, *At the Sign of the Angel*, had its world premiere at the Players' three months later. It was based on the premise that a band of male Elizabethan players, driven from London by the plague and

stranded without scripts, staged performances of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2, from extremely defective memory. Brawn's music ranged from light operatic to modern, but West End managements were not attracted by an all-male musical and it failed to transfer.

From 1981 to 1983 Brawn returned to *The Good Old Days* as musical associate, commanding the keyboard for episodes starring Roy Hudd and Danny La Rue. The following year his production of the pantomime *Pics in Boots* contained clever keyboard reworkings of Beethoven, Donizetti, Handel, Mozart and Rossini.

In 1992, Brawn was musical director of Charles Reading's nostalgic compilation, *Glamorous Nights At Drury Lane*, which starred the 92-year-old Evelyn Laye, accompanied by her own musical director, John Dalby, and Reading's wife Sheila Mathews, who, rousing support by Brawn at his piano upstage, stopped the show with Noël Coward's *Why Do the Wrong People Travel?*

When Evelyn Laye fell and broke her hip before the production was due to open at Wimbledon Theatre in 1993, its new star, Pat Kirkwood, for whom the piece was retitled *Glamorous Nights of Music*, rejected Dalby and insisted on Brawn as her accompanist, for ever afterwards maintaining that he was the best she had had in her whole career.

In April 1994 Brawn became musical director for the Players' revival of Sandy Wilson's musical *The Boy Friend*, directed by Maria Charles, who had starred in the original 1954

London production. Brawn kept his cool when two of the leading players, bemused by Miss Charles's directorial style, walked out of the show ahead of the opening.

An erudite, intelligent man, Brawn adapted and directed new versions of Victorian pantomimes for the Players': *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (1995), *Robin Hood or The Forester's Fate* (1996) and *King Charming or The Bluebird of Paradise* (2000). He was by then also director of the Players', but business was never his forte and he looked on helplessly as his co-director, "Count" Dominic Le Foe (real name Abraham Alan Cooper-Smith) - who was described in the High Court in June 2001 as a man "with a long record of falsehood and deceit" - drove the once-affluent Players' into the hands of the bailiffs.

In recent years Brawn joined Sheila Mathews and Edward Woodward in a series of radio broadcasts on famous West End theatres. He also accompanied Sheila Mathews in her one-woman show, *An Evening with Sheila*.

Brawn's active career came to an end in 2013 when he was knocked down by a cyclist in Brighton. His health never recovered, and he never played the piano again. A self-effacing and private man, in his final years he divided his time between his apartment in Hove and his home in Ibiza.

Geoffrey Brawn never married. He is survived by his elder sister, Jean Blackburn.

Geoffrey Brawn, born January 31 1935, died May 13 2018

