Stars of the 18th century stage return to theatreland

Louise Jury
Chief Arts Correspondent

CELEBRATED actresses of the 18th century are to be honoured with a major exhibition. The National Portrait Gallery, in the heart of London's theatre district, brings together more than 50 pictures of stars such as Sarah Siddons, Nell Gwyn and Kitty Clive. The show explores a period when theatrical fame helped make women a subject in their own right for the first time. Portraits by Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds and others will go on display with mass-produced caricatures and prints.

A highlight will be a new acquisition, Three Witches from Macbeth by Daniel Gardner in which three society ladies including Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire – the Whig hostess played by Keira Knightley in the film The Duchess – are depicted as Shakespeare's wild women.

The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons will run from October 20 to January 8, 2012, admission £11.