John Rich was an actor-manager and performer, who brought pantomime to Britain in the 18th century. He had earned so much money from his performances at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, that he decided to build a brand new venue, the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden which opened in 1732.

The theatre became famous for its pantomimes, which were combined with other entertainments on one bill. In this performance, the playbill advertises the tragedy of The Earl of Essex. This was based on the history of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, who was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I until his misjudged military campaign against Irish rebels led to his downfall and execution. This serious performance is combined with Rich’s pantomime of The Rape of Proserpine with The Birth and Adventures of Harlequin. As with all Rich’s pantomimes, this first act usually had a serious theme; in this case, it was based on the Roman myth of the changing seasons, supposedly instigated by the kidnapping of Proserpina by Pluto. The second act was The Harlequinade.

The Harlequinade was brought to popularity by John Rich, who performed the part of Harlequin himself for many years. It was in mime with music and slapstick. The story of the Harlequinade had the same basic format; a chase scene where the two lovers, Harlequin and Columbine, are kept apart by the girl's father, Pantaloon, whose servants play tricks on him. In the chase the two lovers are pursued by her father and his servant, Clown. It was performed in mime with music and spectacle. These characters were all derived from the 16th century form of Italian improvisational theatre, Commedia dell'arte. This was an unscripted, practical-joke filled, often satirical form of drama using archetypal characters identified by masks which Rich adapted for the British stage.

John Rich's Harlequin used a slapstick (a wooden bat which made a large amount of noise with little exertion of force, used in Commedia dell'arte) to hit the scenery and make the scenes change by knocking down a series of hinged flaps. The chase scene would take the characters to many different locations all controlled by Harlequin's magic bat. The slapstick genre of comedy derives from this pantomime act.

Descriptive line
Playbill advertising the play, The Earl of Essex, and the pantomime, The Rape of Proserpine with The Birth and Adventures of Harlequin, Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 1759. Typographical

Physical description
Typographic playbill printed in red and black ink, advertising a performance of The Earl of Essex and The Rape of Proserpine at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden

Dimensions
Height: 53.6 cm, Width: 40 cm

Museum number
S.2292-1994

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158310/playbill-unknown/