

Magical Savoy memories

On December 19 the 80th birthday of the Savoy theatre will be celebrated at a special ball in the hotel that carries the name on. **Aine Fitzgerald** met Savoy managers past and present, Tom English and Ronan Branigan, for a trip down memory lane

TOM English was a 13-year-old "green, country young fella" when he first stepped inside Limerick's Savoy Theatre.

He came into the city from his home village of Hospital to see a legend of his childhood years, entertainer Jimmy O'Dea. The sight of the theatre's Compton organ rising up from the pit transported him to another world. He was enthralled, entertained, intrigued.

A mere nine years later, Tom would wake up to the sound of that very same organ.

In June 1954, at barely 22 years of age, he was appointed manager of the Savoy following the passing of Clifford Marston, making him the first Limerick man appointed to the position, and the youngest manager on the national circuit. As part of his contract, he lived overhead the stage, in a small but functional apartment.

"It does my heart good to be here today," says Mr English on this November afternoon, arms

outstretched in the plush lobby of the Savoy hotel which now stands on the site of the former old cinema theatre.

Almost eighty years ago, on December 19, 1935 the first ever performance took place in the

**"Everything
had to be done
five-star and, as I
look around here
today at the hotel,
it's the same**

Tom English

Former manager of the Savoy Theatre

newly opened Savoy Theatre on Bedford Row/Henry Street.

To mark the anniversary, the Savoy Hotel will host a grand masquerade ball on December 19 with a throwback to the heady days of the theatre's golden era in Limerick.

"I have a table reserved upstairs," says Ronan Branigan, managing director of the five-

star hotel. He sits himself down alongside Tom at a round table beside a wall of windows overlooking Henry Street and they order coffee. Over the next hour and a half, on this blustery Friday lunchtime, 83-year-old Tom stirs up lots of laughter and more than a little nostalgia on a colourful trip down memory lane.

"I will tell ye a little ditty now," Tom starts, in his warm, fireside voice.

"I remember being at a function here with Jim Kemmy and he said, 'You know Tom, I wouldn't be here in this world today only for the Savoy'. I said: 'How come?' and he said, 'Well, my father and mother were friendly, they were going out but my father had no job so he was about to emigrate to England in 1935'.

"He was a stonemason," says Tom of Kemmy's father. "The next thing a job came up in the Savoy and Jim's father got married on the strength of it and he worked throughout the building of the

CONTINUES ON PAGE 2



Tom English, former manager of Limerick's Savoy Theatre, meets Ronan Branigan, manager of the five-star hotel which carries on the proud Savoy name today, on the same iconic site. The two Limerick Savoy managers thoroughly enjoyed a trip down memory lane

Picture: Michael Cowhey

Savoy managers' trip down memory lane

➔ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Savoy." The first thing the new management of the hotel did when they took over in 2009 – it had previously been part of the Marriott brand – was to rename it The Savoy.

"It has brought back all that history and all that emotion," says Ronan. "It numbers in the tens and twenties a day in terms of people I meet people here in the hotel who say, 'I met my husband, I met my wife or I met my girlfriend here'."

When it opened its doors in 1935 the Savoy primarily served as a cinema but over the next half century went on to become Limerick's main theatrical venue – playing host to national and international acts including Roy Orbison, Tom Jones, Joe Dolan and his band The Drifters, the Hallé Orchestra, Rory Gallagher and The Dubliners.

For the audiences who attended over the decades, it was a thrill to be there. Planting your shoe soles in the deep carpets, admiring the flow of the heavy, long, red, drapes, sinking your *derrière* into the soft seating or tipping your cigarette into the individual, brass ashtrays all gave rise to that wonderful feeling of stepping out of the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Here was Limerick's answer to New York's Broadway or London's West End.

Every manager knows that your staff can make or break you. During Tom's eight years at manager of the Savoy there were more than 50 people employed there.

"And you could put your ace of hearts on them," says Tom, whose son Alan is the editor of the Limerick Leader.

"In the eight years I was there we never had to call a guard.

"The restaurant actually kept the cinema going," he recalls. "There were two floors of restaurants. We had dozens of restaurant staff. We had four chefs, and then we had a snack bar downstairs."

Both floors were regularly packed to capacity with a queue snaking down the stairs at lunchtime: "A lot of Todds and Cannocks staff had lunch here."

"And still do – I must say," says Ronan. "Todds, or Brown Thomas nowadays, and Debenhams – which was Roches Stores – those bastions are still



Ronan Branigan, Savoy manager today, with Tom English at the hotel located on the same site where Tom once lived in an apartment when manager of the Savoy Theatre. He was just 22 when first appointed to the prestigious position



Youthful manager of the Savoy Tom English, left, pictured 59 years ago on the occasion of the theatre's 21st birthday by the Leader's Donal MacMonagle, looks on as Edmund A. Grace, representing the Savoy's owners, Irish Cinemas, presents a cheque to Mayor of Limerick, John Carew. Also pictured is Minister Michael Keyes



Happy birthday to a Limerick institution: a special cake made to a likeness of the old Savoy building on Bedford Row was made to mark its 21st birthday in 1956. In this charming picture, Mayoress Hilda Carew cuts the cake, watched by - from left - Mayor John Carew; Johnny McMahon; Donogh O'Malley, TD; PJ Meighan, county manager; Oona McWhirter, Irish Cinemas; Minister Michael J Keyes; Colman Conroy, Irish Cinemas; Nellie Hughes, restaurant manageress; Des Maher, head chef; May Bermingham, head waitress; Tom English, Savoy manager; Rita Moran, previous Savoy manageress; Edmund A. Grace, Irish Cinemas



The heartbeat of Limerick: A picture of the front facade of the Savoy taken in 1956 when Tom English was manager. A Rock Hudson movie was the big attraction

and his band the Drifters, the Hallé Orchestra, Rory Gallagher and The Dubliners.

For the audiences who attended over the decades, it was a thrill to be there. Planting your shoe soles in the deep carpets, admiring the flow of the heavy, long, red, drapes, sinking your *derrière* into the soft seating or tipping your cigarette into the individual, brass ashtrays all gave rise to that wonderful feeling of stepping out of the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Here was Limerick's answer to New York's Broadway or London's West End.

Every manager knows that your staff can make or break you. During Tom's eight years at manager of the Savoy there were more than 50 people employed there.

"And you could put your ace of hearts on them," says Tom, whose son Alan is the editor of the Limerick Leader.

"In the eight years I was there we never had to call a guard.

"The restaurant actually kept the cinema going," he recalls. "There were two floors of restaurants. We had dozens of restaurant staff. We had four chefs, and then we had a snack bar downstairs."

Both floors were regularly packed to capacity with a queue snaking down the stairs at lunchtime: "A lot of Todds and Cannocks staff had lunch here."

"And still do - I must say," says Ronan. "Todds, or Brown Thomas nowadays, and Debenhams - which was Roches Stores - those bastions are still here."

A famous waitress called May Bermingham springs to mind for Tom. Such was her legendary status in Limerick people would wait specifically for 'May's table'.

Then there was Madge Hinchy. "She was the one who would look after me as if I was her son - she would give me a nice bit of fillet steak or a nice bit of sole."

Also among the staff at the time were the two Ryans - Jim and Michael - who worked at front of house and Alec O'Farrell, who was the maintenance man, stage manager and head cleaner. There were eight cleaners in total - six women and two men. Jimmy Carter was in the operating box, and Benny Franklin, the electrician, looked after the heating. There were also two junior ushers, a couple of pageboys, and eight usherettes.

The Savoy had built up a reputation for being an establishment of quality and in order to maintain that reputation, everything had to appear perfect - the brass ashtrays had to sparkle, the air had to "smell of roses".

Every detail mattered. "Everything had to be done



Ronan Branigan, Savoy manager today, with Tom English at the hotel located on the same site where Tom once lived in an apartment when manager of the Savoy Theatre. He was just 22 when first appointed to the prestigious position



Happy birthday to a Limerick institution: a special cake made to a likeness of the old Savoy building on Bedford Row was made to mark its 21st birthday in 1956. In this charming picture, Mayoress Hilda Carew cuts the cake, watched by - from left - Mayor John Carew; Johnny McMahon; Donogh O'Malley, TD; PJ Meighan, county manager; Oona McWhirter, Irish Cinemas; Minister Michael J. Keyes; Colman Conroy, Irish Cinemas; Nellie Hughes, restaurant manageress; Des Maher, head chef; May Bermingham, head waitress; Tom English, Savoy manager; Rita Moran, previous Savoy manageress; Edmund A. Grace, Irish Cinemas

five-star and, as I look around the hotel here today, it's the same," says Tom, casting his eyes around the luxurious Liszt Lounge on the first floor as Johann Sebastian Bach's instrumental Christmas CD plays softly over the modern sound system.

Back in those early days, there were two different staff uniforms - a summer one and a winter one. In winter, it was deep purple with gold braiding and gold cufflinks.

For the summertime, it was light grey with red trimmings.

To have secured a job in the Savoy was a badge of honour. "There was a staff parade every day - all the staff had to line up in their uniforms and you would be told who is on a day off and so on," Tom recalls.

The Savoy was open seven days, with three screenings from at 3pm, 5pm and 8pm. The capacity at the time was 1,483.

The final screening had to be done before 10.40pm because the last buses would be leaving from Todds for Corbally and Ballynanty and other such places at 10.45pm.

People would cycle in from all

over the county and they would park their bikes at the Bedford Row hospital railing. They could leave them there all night, no trouble.

Was there any graffiti or vandalism? "Zilch!" comes the immediate reply from Tom. "Everyone knew how to behave themselves." Different times.

Well after darkness had fallen over Henry Street, the heart of theatrical life in the city kept beating. A night watchman, Pat O'Shea, would sing while hoovering the lobby and a man would come every two months to tune the organ. "I would be asleep upstairs and the next thing I would hear the organ," laughs Tom. "I didn't know if I had reached heaven or was after having a bad night the night before!"

On a typical Savoy morning, Alec, the stage manager, would bring Mr English's breakfast, complete with fresh orange juice, up to the apartment, "and then I would make an appearance at half eleven but then I would be there until eleven o'clock every night."

Such was the influence of the Catholic Church at the time,

there were no pictures screened in Limerick during Lent. For seven weeks the Savoy remained closed and there was also no Sunday night pictures because it would interfere with the Novena.

"The stage door would have been around here on Henry Street," continues Tom. "There was a box office. There were cheaper seats when you entered from Henry Street."

The main entrance, of course, was on Bedford Row. While there was no official 'date night' back in the 50s and 60s, going to 'see a picture' was a popular pastime for young couples in the throes of puppy love.

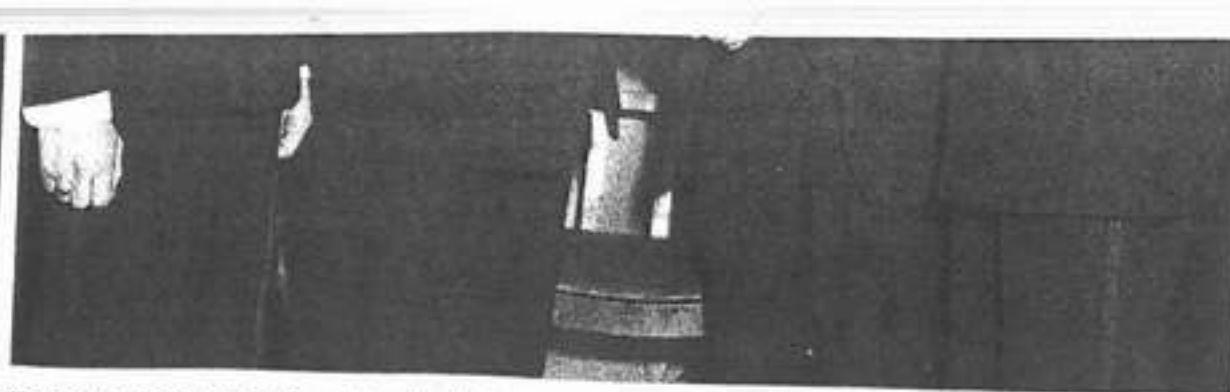
Many a young woman made her mind up fast on her future romantic prospects, on the

grounds of whether her date had forked out for a balcony seat or done it on the cheap with the Henry Street entrance.

"If you were doing a serious line you would bring a girl upstairs afterwards for coffee and buns. That was a treat," smiles O'Connell Avenue resident Tom, who is married to Anne, a former Limerick County Council employee. "There were so many couples I saw coming in as boyfriend and girlfriend - or doing a line, as was the expression then - who are married now."

Another attraction of the theatre was the assortment of nibbles on offer and the ability to smoke to your heart's content. "You had four girls with trays going around up and down the aisles with chocolate, ice-cream, popcorn and cigarettes." Brands included Cadbury, Rowntree's, Mackintosh's, Cleaves toffees, HB ice-cream, Player's, Wills, Gold Flake, and Woodbines.

The snack bar downstairs did a steady trade - the speciality was tripe and mash. "A lot of the cattle dealers would come in and they would love their tripe and mash, and the fellas involved in



Youthful manager of the Savoy Tom English, left, pictured 59 years ago on the occasion of the theatre's 21st birthday by the Leader's Donal MacMonagle, looks on as Edmund A. Grace, representing the Savoy's owners Irish Cinemas, presents a cheque to Mayor of Limerick, John Carew. Also pictured is Minister Michael Keyes



The heartbeat of Limerick: A picture of the front facade of the Savoy taken in 1959, when Tom English was manager. A Rock Hudson movie was the big attraction

greyhounds - they'd bring the greyhounds in with them."

The best friend the Savoy had in Limerick, according to Tom, was Earl Connolly who was in charge of the exceptionally popular entertainment pages in the Limerick Leader. Earl's column was highly influential and he was always keen to sell tickets for the Savoy. Whether the show was good, bad or indifferent, "he would give it the works", Tom recalls with a fond smile.

He was manager for eight years and left in 1962. He says January 1, 1962 was "a day I'll never forget. The reason I say that is it was the day television came to Ireland - and that was the death knell of the big cinemas, all over Ireland." They just weren't going to the pictures in anything like the same numbers - they had the television at home.

Every time Tom passes The Savoy Hotel - which could be four times a week - he will always look up at the sign. "And I look up at where I used to stay, which was over the stage."

For Ronan, who hails from Castleblaney in County Monaghan, Tom's magical recollections have given him a

new insight and even greater appreciation of the modern Savoy ship he now steers. "Coming to the hotel school in Shannon in 1987 when I arrived, the Savoy was then a cinema and we used to come in to it on our nights out in Limerick. It was a very different place to what Tom was describing - what I would call the golden era."

On December 19 at 8pm - which was the time the first show began in 1935 - more of those special memories will be relived and 120 guests will enjoy at six-course dinner featuring menu items from the good old days. Liam O'Brien and The Million Dollar Swing Band will headline. Limited tickets are available from Anne Murray at the Savoy, for €85 per person.

"We are just holding the baton for a period of time as well - we are hoping that it will develop and go on into the future," says Ronan, before giving the final word to Tom. With a double handed tap of the table while rising to his feet, he remarks: "There you have my Savoy memories. And as a friend of mine used to say, memories are better than dreams."

"We are just holding the baton for a period of time as well, hoping that it will develop and go on."

Ronan Branigan
Savoy Hotel manager