



da Rehan, perhaps the greatest and most famous actress and stage personality ever to come out of this country, was born at No. 1, Shan-

nnon Street, Limerick, on April 22nd, 1860. Her father was Thomas Crehan, one of the hundreds who worked in and around the harbour. As a skilled shipwright, he might be regarded as belonging to the middle class, especially since he is sometimes described as a 'ship-owner', though the same badge of respectability might be pinned on every "badoir" that brought turf from Lābasheeda to Arthur's Quay. His address, however, was some distance from the working class districts at the time, and gives some authenticity to the claims of his social standing.

In those days, the harbour was a busy place, and it was not uncommon to see a forest of masts along the river between the dock gate and the Custom House. New vessels, usually schooners, yawls and such smaller craft, were built at the Lansdowne Yard (still to be seen, in dereliction, near St. Michael's Boat Club), and at the Long Dock (near the Co. Courthouse), which was known, around the turn of the century, as Farrell's Yard. No doubt, Tom Crehan had a hand in the building of some of the fine vessels that left these stocks. With the transition from sail to steam, work in the Limerick yards began to decline and the skills of the shipwright were becoming less and less in demand. Evidently this change, however gradual, was beginning to be felt by the mid-1860s, for we find Tom Crehan packing up and emigrating to the United States with his wife and family — two boys and three girls. There may have been other reasons for this move, for the *Baltimore Sun* described him as "...a shipwright and ship-owner who met with reverses and emigrated to this country about the close of the Civil War".

Tom Crehan, the craftsman, was also a good provider, for he soon set up his family in a comfortable home. Apparently, they got along well with their new neighbours; after a short time the older girl, Mary Kate struck up a friendship with Oliver Byron, a well connected playwright and actor who was enjoying some success in his profession. They married after a short courtship, and soon Katie was on the stage playing beside her husband. No doubt she was assisted in her new career by a fine soprano voice which, during her Limerick days, had thrilled congregations in the Franciscan Church. After a few months, her younger sister, Hattie, followed her on to the stage, as did her brothers, William, and Arthur. The former became an agent for his brother-in-law, Oliver Byron, while Arthur was associated

# Ada Rehan

by Kevin Hannan



Ada Rehan and John Drew in "The Railroad of Love", Daly's Theatre, New York, 1888.

with Augustin Daly, the ebullient impresario who was to guide their youngest sister, Ada (Charlotte), to the dizzy heights of stardom.

Despite her family's connection with the stage, Ada's introduction to it was purely accidental. On a night in 1874, she was taken by her elder sister to the Newark Theatre, New Jersey, where Oliver Byron was playing. One of the actresses was taken ill, and Byron, at his wits' end to find a replacement, asked his young sister-in-law to read the lines. Ada's performance was so successful that she continued to fill the role for several nights, until the actress whose part she played had recovered. She was then known by her own name,

Ada Crehan, and it was not until she had become the leading lady with Mrs. John Drew, at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia, that she got her new name. The change was caused by a printer's error in billing her in the cast as 'Ada C. Rehan'. For the rest of her life she remained Ada Rehan — without the "C". Her brother, Arthur, was the only other member of her family to assume this name.

Within a few months of her accidental debut, Ada secured a position in Mrs. Drew's Company, where her great talents made for dazzling performances in such parts as Ophelia to Edwin Booth's *Hamlet*, and Lady Anne to John McCullough's *Richard III*. In the

period 1875-'78, she played nearly 200 different roles, mainly Shakespearean heroines, in Philadelphia, Louisville, Albany and Baltimore. In 1879, she took a decisive step on the road to fame when she met Augustin Daly, the man who was to dominate her life until his death, 20 years later. It was during this period that Ada reached stardom in a world theatre graced by such actresses as Ellen Terry and Lily Langtry. She seems to have been captivated by Daly, who was a married man and a "strict Catholic".

This was, ostensibly, a purely business association, but the petty jealousies, foibles and squabbles of these two decades marked out the partnership as an extra-marital liaison of the deepest emotional attachment, though it was opined by more than one contemporary that Daly would not have married Ada Rehan, even if he had been free to do so. Yet their behaviour was that of a couple in love, and Daly's habit of hiring glamorous actresses and ditching them unceremoniously so as to make it easier for his own leading lady to retain her supremacy at the top of the bill gave further credence to that conclusion.

Notwithstanding the charges made against him by a number of influential critics, Augustin Daly was a remarkable man by any standards. Born in 1838, he began his theatrical career by writing dramatic criticism for the *New York Courier*. He soon emerged as an ingenious playwright, and adapted more than 90 plays, usually from French or German drama or from English and American novels. Most of these plays were theatrically successful but had little literary value. However, they served to further his managerial ambitions and also launched several popular actresses who appeared under his direction. He became a theatre owner when he opened his new Fifth Avenue Theatre on December 14th, 1875.

From the moment Daly first saw Ada Rehan in Mrs. John Drew's Company in Philadelphia, he was quick to discern the genius that lay hidden behind the captivating personality. He set about the task of establishing her in his theatre. This he did, and soon she fell under the spell of his forceful personality. He showed her every trick of the trade and she quickly blossomed forth, as W. Graham Robertson has noted: "... bewitching, elusive, irritating, amazing Ada Rehan ... her career was a mystery which to me admits of but one explanation; Daly must have been a great actor who couldn't act. He was rough and uncouth, with harsh utterance and uncultured accent; a singer without a voice, a musician without an instrument. But in Ada Rehan he found his means of self expression; Ada Rehan with her quaint charm and gentle nature which he could mould to his will."

Daly came under the lash of many other eminent critics of the time, including the dreaded George Bernard Shaw, whose biting invective leaves nothing to the imagination: "...Her (Ellen Terry's) only rival as a Shakespearean actress was the great Ada Rehan (who by a printer's error became famous as Ada C. Rehan): and her genius too was being wasted by Augustin Daly, another master mutilator of the unfortunate playwright whom he professed to adore. But, as Daly did not

reputation. Her Viola was irresistible; her Rosalind took all-time high rank; her Peggy in *The Country Girl*, was perhaps as fine as Mrs. Jordan's; but it was her Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, for which she will always be remembered. In that part she had few if any peers; certainly none in her own time. Daly must be given credit for this for it was he who restored the play to its full Shakespearean significance, re-inserting the portions which Garrick had deleted. He took his company to England, first in 1884 and again in 1886, when a Berlin season was undertaken and also in 1888 when his version of the *Shrew* won high praise. Paris was only mildly enthusiastic but English critics recognised the value of his restorations and the company was well received. So warm was the response that he built a theatre in London ... (torn down in 1939), which became one of the most popular theatres in "the British capital".

When Augustin Daly brought Ada Rehan to London in 1884 the theatre-goers expected the usual American style stage presentation, but what a surprise they got! The patrons of O'Toole's Theatre went wild with delight. One eminent critic had this to say after her first performance:

"Hitherto Daly had put before us little else but German-American farce, beautifully played, but a little thin and not very satisfactory. Suddenly he announced his intention of producing a Shakespearean comedy. He would submit to us *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Miss Rehan as Katherine. We all remember the result. What a revelation, to begin with, was the setting of the play, how much charm there was in the scenery! But the main benefaction was the presentation to us, in the person of Miss Rehan, of a new Shakespearean actress of the finest gifts, and most delightful powers — the only real adequate Katherine that had been seen on the English stage in the memory of middle-aged enthusiasts. Coming over again in 1890, Mr. Daly installed himself at the Lyceum and announced a revival of *As You Like It*, and expectation was raised in the minds of devout theatre-goers to fever heat. In Katherine, Miss Rehan had few and not many formidable rivals. In Rosalind she would have to contend against memories of the tenderest and most agreeable sort — memories of Adelaide Neilson, Marie Litton, Mary Anderson and the like. Moreover, *As You Like It* as a play is one concerning which every English amateur has made up his mind. There is no theatre-goer worth his salt who has not his ideal Rosalind. This then was a grave undertaking, not only for Daly, but for Miss Rehan, who came to play Rosalind in the

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A poster for Augustin Daly's play "Under the Gas Light".

himself act, his hackings and hewings were very largely addressed to the object of taking all the good lines out of the other parts and adding them to Ada Rehan's: and she spoke them so harmoniously that when listening to her it was impossible to care much about anything but the music of her voice and Shakespeare's."

If Augustin Daly was such a bounder, how then did Miss Rehan attain such pre-eminence in her profession? The whole theatrical world raved about her and the seasoned critics were hard pushed to find appropriate adjectives to describe her brilliance. Surely the man deserves some credit for this success.

Daly's — and Ada Rehan's — contribution to the theatre was more calmly assessed in *A History of the Theatre* by George Freedley and John A. Reeves, published in New York in 1941:

"In 1879 Ada Rehan, the young woman who was to become one of America's leading portrayals of comedy, came to Daly's where she has been seen in a variety of parts. Of these, her two outstanding roles were Mrs. Osprey in Daly's *The Railroad of Love* (1887) and the Baroness Vera in his *A Test Case* (1892). However, it was in Daly's notable Shakespearean revivals that she made her

very centre of Shakespearian culture and tradition, and to play it, as it turned out, quite in her own fashion, and without reference to the conventions of the past. Well, here again, we all remember the result — triumph, triumph, all along the line”.

During her London seasons, Ada Rehan was much in demand for guest

with such fervour and adulation that Daly was stirred to build a theatre especially for her. (He had experienced some difficulty in procuring a suitable theatre in the city). Ada Rehan laid the corner-stone of the new building in Leicester Square on October 30, 1891. This theatre later became a fashionable home of musical comedy.

Daly's has there been such cause for hurrying, such kid-glove-bursting applause, such bouquet tossing across the bedazzled footlights, welcoming our newest, our dearest star, Miss Ethel Barrymore.”

Though Miss Rehan made many triumphal visits to England until her last appearance there in 1895, there is no evidence that she ever visited the city of her birth. Theatre-going in Limerick was at its height during her lifetime, and faithful, old Theatre Royal stalwarts would surely have made the rafters ring had she appeared on its boards. But such was not to be.

Ada Rehan retired from the stage in 1905, when she was only 45 years old. Public taste had changed and, as more naturalistic plays and acting techniques came into vogue, her style became dated.

The best known picture of the great actress, at the age of 31, hardly does her full justice, arrayed as she is in dowdy Victorian garb, complete with ridiculous hat. A more prepossessing picture may be conjured up from a contemporary description which appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*: “... Miss Rehan's features were powerful and intelligent rather than beautiful, but her figure so nearly approached perfection that she was invited to be the model for the Montana statue, which, cast in silver, and representing the ideal of female loveliness, was one of the sights at the great Chicago Exhibition.”

Ada Rehan never married. When she died in New York on January 8th 1916, aged 56 years, her body was cremated. Writing her obituary, the *Times* dramatic critic paid her this tribute:

“In the closing years of the last century, when Ada Rehan was in her prime, she was without a rival in her province on the comic stage. Whatever stage she entered she dominated. In Shakespearian comedy — the full-blooded, not the dreamy, fantastic, regimen of it — she was a marvel. The bubbling effervescing fun of her Rosalind was an unforgettable delight. There have been more tender Rosalinds, and more refined — but probably none so humorous and none so full of essential womanhood. But her Rosalind was surpassed by her Katherine in the *Taming of the Shrew*. You thought Shakespeare foresaw her when he wrote that part. You feel that something of Shakespeare's secret died with Ada Rehan.”

The great actress is now forgotten in her native city where not even a simple plaque marks the place of her birth. While many of our modern streets and statues are memorials to small-time political nonentities, there is none to honour Ada Rehan. A further insult was offered in more recent times when our only surviving theatre, the Coliseum, was renamed after a Continental nonentity named Beltable.



Ada Rehan in her famous classical pose.

and charity performances. On July 23rd 1890, she read a poem by Thomas Hardy at a performance on behalf of Lady Jeune's Holiday Fund for City Children, at the Lyceum Theatre. She was then at the height of her success. And, as one biographical note, put it, she continued “creating a *furor* with her impersonations of Katherine (*Taming of the Shrew*); Rosalind (*As You Like It*); Villa (*Twelfth Night*); Lady Teazle (*School for Scandal*) etc.”

The London theatre community — said to be the most critical in the world at the time — embraced Miss Rehan

Because she was particularly successful in portraying mannered comic roles, Daly restricted her playing roles of that kind and, after his death in 1899, her popularity declined. However, her reputation remained intact, and the performances of young, up-and-coming actresses were often measured against hers. For instance, when Ethel Barrymore, a sibling of the famous American theatrical family, made her New York debut, at the Garrick Theatre on February 4th 1901, one newspaper reported: “Not since John Drew led Ada Rehan before the curtain at Mr.