

The disappearance of the Savoy Theatre and Cinema after more than fifty years cannot but bring a pang to the hearts of all those 'senior citizens' who remember it in its days of glory.

The Savoy was built on the site of a disused flour and grain store, and was first opened to the citizens of Limerick in 1935 during the mayoralty of Councillor James M. Casey, who presided at its official opening. To the best of my recollection, the film shown was 'Brewster's Millions', starring Jack Buchanan. Alban Chambers, from the Theatre Royal, Dublin, presided at the organ, backed up by Jimmy Campbell and his orchestra. Jimmy Campbell's *pièce de resistance* was a whistling solo which drew rapturous applause from the packed audience.

During the following year, a number of accomplished organists were to be heard, names which included Frank Bridgeman, Jack Courtney, Neville Turner, Philip Dore, Gordon Spicer, Stanley Bowyer and John Enright. I also remember the first singer on the stage, the delightful Limerick soprano, Nan Griffin, known to all as Nan Glynn. She was followed by the local tenor, James Penny.

In addition to being a cinema, the Savoy, with its magnificent stage, provided Limerick with a fine theatre and concert hall. Early in 1936, the Austrian violinist, Fritz Kreisler, generally acclaimed as the world's greatest, performed to a half-empty house. Possibly the public of that period were not yet ready to appreciate the work of the classical master, but another reason put forward was that the death of King George the Fifth, which had occurred at that time, prevented the

# MEMORIES OF THE SAVOY

BY ANTHONY RIORDAN

attendance of a number of 'county folk', who otherwise would have been there. Times have surely changed since then!

When it came to its great singers it was a different story. Of course, no sense of celebrity concerts would then have been complete without a visit from John McCormack, who, the last time he had appeared in Limerick some years earlier, had sung in St. John's Pavilion, followed later in the same venue by the great Australian baritone, Peter Dawson, accompanied by the world famous pianist, Gerald Moore, but as far as John McCormack was concerned, the Savoy gave him much more scope; and the vast auditorium was so full that many people were seated in the stage behind the great man and his accompanist, Percy Kahn.

It was a night to remember, but somehow the next celebrity concert remains indelibly in my memory more than any other. This was the visit of Paul Robeson. This great artist had the most electrifying personality I have ever experienced. A magnificent specimen of manhood as he strode forward in immaculate evening dress, his white shirt-front contrasting with the darkness of his complexion, his very presence was overwhelming. At the

final curtain of a concert which included excerpts both classical and negro-spiritual, he recited William Blake's poem 'The Little Black Boy'.

The year 1938 brought a visit of the well known Carl Rosa Opera Company, and all Limerick appeared to go night after night. 'La Traviata', 'Rigoletto', 'Faust', 'The Barber of Seville', 'Cavalleria Rusticana', 'Paglincei' - we saw them all, and talked about them for days afterwards.

The years of the wartime 'Emergency' brought many changes in the Savoy. On week nights it still serviced as a cinema; for a while it was almost 'taken over' on Sunday nights by Muintir na Tire, then at the height of its influence under its founder, Canon John Hayes, and its general secretary, Frank Lyddy. There were organised discussions, held on the stage, and musical items of great variety. All this had an interesting significance because these events can well be regarded as the 'thin end of the wedge' for the general opening of cinemas, theatres and concert halls for Sunday performances. It is hard now for those of us who were young in the early days to recollect that at one time Limerick was almost alone in



Mayor Jim Casey performing the opening ceremony of the Savoy, 19 December, 1935.



*May Bermingham, long-serving member of the staff of the Savoy Restaurant.*

Ireland in not permitting Sunday opening of any of these places of entertainment.

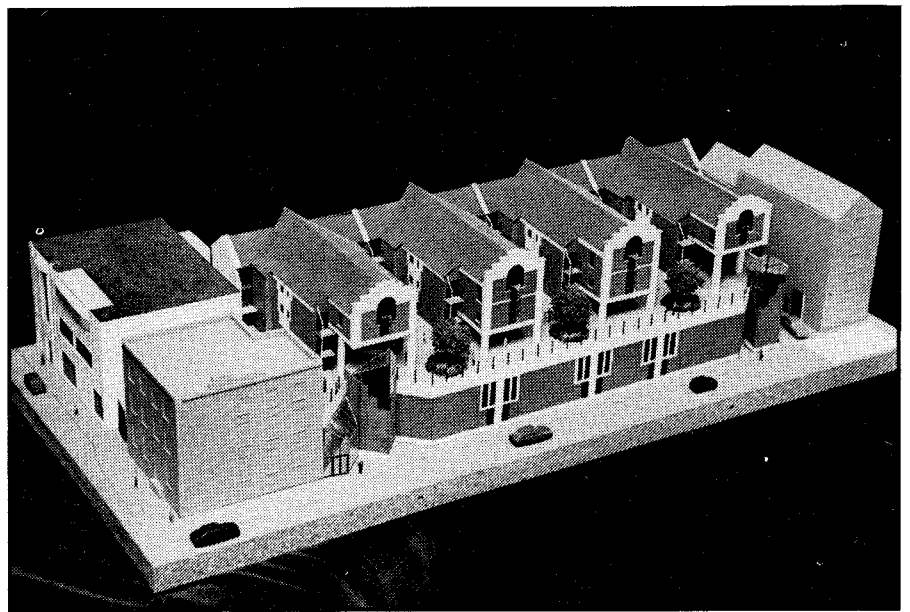
The early 'forties' saw local talent come into its own, with the emergence of two choral societies - one conducted by Frank Brislane and specialising mainly in oratorio, and the other conducted by Stanley Bowyer, specialising in opera, both in concert versions and also with full stage performances. The number of local artists who distinguished themselves with these societies included Patrick Sheehan, Jim Penny, Gerard Allen, Tom Dillon, Maureen O'Hanrahan, Lillian Cahill, Roger Egleston, Arthur Griffith, Hilda Roche, and one who subsequently became a distinguished professional, Josephine Scanlan. Guest vocalists included Michael O'Higgins, Rita Lynch, George Walsh, John Lynskey, Eileen Murnaghan and many others.

I remember a choral performance by the choir of the Dominican Church directed by Fr. J. Collins and Professor Donal Guina, who at a later date also conducted a performance of 'The Messiah' with a specially assembled choir. I also remember the appearance of the Rathkeale-born tenor, Christopher Lynch, with the pianist, Charles Lynch, and Rita Lynch, soprano - mainly a Lynch show!

After that, I have a list of memories; the concerts by professional artists, mostly 'cross channel,' but some with Irish backgrounds. In or about the 'fifties,' two great Welsh tenors in quick succession, Tudor Davies and Parry Jones, once long ago world-famous in opera and on the concert stage, but by then old men past their prime, but still able to give quite a good account of themselves. Memories



*The interior of the Savoy on its opening night.*



*A model of the new Savoy, which is nearing completion in December, 1989.*

crowd in on me of operatic performances by the Dublin Grand Opera Society - 'Faust', 'La Traviata', 'La Boheme', etc., with such distinguished singers as John Torney, James Johnson, John Lynskey, May Devitt, Patricia Black, Robert Irwin and, on one occasion, the great Australian soprano, Joan Hammond.

I remember, too, the symphony concerts with not only the Radio Eireann Symphony Orchestra, but also some of the world's greatest. I suppose the most memorable occasion among these was when the stage was graced by the master violinist, Yehudi Menuhin.

But Limerick itself was not to be outdone, for operas again took over the stage, with performances by the Limerick Choral and Operatic Society, 'Lucia di

Lammermoor', 'Tosca', and the 'Elixir of Love', which had as its principal guest, the Welsh tenor, Stuart Burrows. Indeed, his singing 'stopped the show' when he was encored again and again.

And so we come to the present day, with the last celebrity concert, when we heard the famous Welsh tenor (with a Limerick-born grandfather), Dennis O'Neill, and now we ask ourselves 'Is the glory departed?' Time alone will tell, but when we think that Cork has its Opera House, and Waterford and Wexford, both smaller than Limerick, have theatres where operatic and orchestral performances regularly take place - well what is Limerick, the city of Catherine Hayes and Joseph O'Mara, going to do to ensure that this tradition does not die?