

The Theatre in Limerick

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The history of the many theatres in Limerick from 1770 to the present day is briefly outlined, and also of some of the more famous singers and actors who performed in them.

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Now that there is a resurgence of interest in the theatre it might be of interest to look back on its early days in Limerick, and on its palmy days before it lost out to "moving pictures". Although there was much talk of establishing a theatre in Limerick before the mid seventeen hundreds it was not until 1770 that the goal was achieved, and the first regular theatre was erected in Cornwallis Street [Gerald Griffin Street] in that year.

The building and fitting out of the theatre cost £600, a sum subscribed by "twenty four gentlemen, who had free tickets".

Lenihan leaves us a good description of the theatre: "This was a celebrated theatre in its time. The box entrance was in the street now called Cornwallis Street [Gerald Griffin Street], and the pit passage was at the corner of Play House Lane [Little Gerald Griffin Street]. Mr. Edward Gubbins, a coach builder, occupied the front of the theatre as a workshop and showroom for carriages. For a long time, the holders of box tickets were obliged to go through Mr. Gubbins' kitchen, for their places in the boxes. Celebrated actors, viz., Garrick, Mossop, Barry, Ryder, &c., all acted in the old theatre. More recently George Frederick Cooke, Kemble, Macklin, Mrs. Siddons, Miss Farren (afterwards the Countess of Derby) acted here also; and in comic operas, Mrs. Billington, Miss Brett and Mrs. Creswell frequently appeared in 'Love in a Village'—Miss Stevens, the vocalist, at a later period, also sung here to crowded houses. Ned Williams, Richard Jones, Johnson and others who are satirized by Wilson Croker in his 'Familiar Epistles to Edward Jones, Esq.', were also actors in this theatre, the successive managers of which, were Mr. Heapy, Mr. Richard Daly, an excellent light comedy actor, and Mr. Edward Frederick Jones. The amateurs also played in this theatre, and drew crowded houses—among them were Sir Mathew (then Mr. Mathew) Barrington, Mr. John McAuliff, Mr. Pierce Brett, Mr. George Hogan, Mr. Thomas Gromwell, Mr. Hewitt, Mr. Andrew Tracey, Mr. John Gubbins, Mr. William Glover &c. The three last mentioned are alive in 1864. The amateurs played in support of public charities, particularly the House of Industry, and the receipts were considerable. Near the theatre was the principal hotel in the city [now Griffin's Funeral Undertakers], which was a well conducted establishment, and in this hotel Mrs. Siddons is said to have lodged during her visit to Limerick. The other leading actors generally lodged in the house of Mr. Williams in the same Street. It was from this theatre that George Frederick Cooke, the celebrated comedian, went out one night, his head full of the fumes of a little keg of whiskey to which he had been paying attention, and arrayed in the broad brimmed hat and whimsical dress of Petrucio, which character he had been playing, stumbled into the house of some poor people, from which the wail of woe was dolefully issuing, chanting as the inmates were in full chorus over a dead body. Plunging sword in hand into the midst of the group, Cooke advanced to the bed, on which the corpse of an old woman lay, and suiting the action to the word—exclaimed, 'How now, ye secret, black, and midnight hags, what isn't ye do?' The result may be imagined, it cannot be described."¹

The theatre, which was known as the 'Theatre Royal', was destroyed by fire in 1818. To-day a public house occupies the site of the house where some of the world's greatest players performed.

*"San Michele", Pennywell Road, Limerick.

¹M. Lenihan, *Limerick, its History and Antiquities*, Limerick 1866, p. 364.

THE GEORGE'S ST. THEATRE

As the new town expanded the movement away from the old parts of the city seemed to race ahead of the expansion. While the old Theatre Royal was still going strong, a splendid new theatre was erected in George's Street [O'Connell Street]. This was three times bigger than the old one, being 100 feet long and 58 feet wide; it had a 40 feet depth of stage.

This theatre had a disappointing opening in July 29th, 1814, with the staging of "Inconstant", the intended performance of "Othello" had to be cancelled at the last minute owing to the defection of some of the tragedians.

After only eight years this fine theatre failed. In 1822 it was sold to the Augustinian Order who converted it into a beautiful church. This was demolished in 1942 to make way for the present church.

'THE GAFF'

The year 1821 saw the beginning of a long and highly successful association of Charlotte Quay with the theatre. In that year the old Assembly Rooms building was fitted up by a Mr. Courtney as a theatre. It opened on September 13th with "King Richard III", the great actor, Kane, playing Richard. Unlike the opening of the George's St. theatre seven years before, which was almost a disaster over the failure of the principal players to turn up, the Charlotte Quay opening all but failed for want of patrons! After five days Kane refused to play to empty houses for another seven days (he had been engaged by the manager, Mr. Clarke, to play for twelve days).

This house, formerly known as Courtney's Theatre, but better known as the 'Gaff', prospered as the years rolled by, and in due course a Mr. Ferguson rebuilt the place. Next to the Theatre Royal, 'The Gaff' was the most talked about and popular institution in the city. Some of the finest companies played to packed houses here for many years. It was a fairly well conducted place, provided the entertainment was acceptable to the hypercritical audience, who could be ruthless in their attitude to entertainers whom they considered sub-standard. The proprietors may have gone a little too far in erecting barbed wire between the sixpenny and tuppenny seats—and they may not!

A local apple-stand proprietor, Moll O'Brien, had the privilege of bringing her whole stock-in-trade into the theatre during the intervals, much like the chocolate and ice cream girls who were a feature of our big cinemas in later years. She was a buxom lady with a fiery temper and, I believe, looked a formidable adversary to anyone who thought of haggling over the price of her apples, which she sold (gave away?) at four for a ha'penny. Being a confirmed "rise" she was often the victim of a knife carrying practical joker who deftly slit the bulging apron which held her stock, causing the apples to roll down the sloping floor towards the stage, none of which got that far, as they were all accounted for in the free-for-all that followed the rumbling noise of the rolling apples and the unprintable impecations of Moll.

From time to time every well known play was staged here. Among the great favourites of its later days were "East Lynne", "The Face at the Window" and "Sweeney Todd".

In 1916 Paul Bernard bought the 'Gaff' and transformed it into the 'Tivoli' cinema, which provided entertainment for the population of the older parts of the city for half a century.

THE ATHENAEUM

This splendid hall was the property of the citizens and served as a theatre for many years before finally being fitted out as a first class cinema. It boasted upholstered seating, a luxury unheard of in such places. The gallery—or 'gods'—had the usual wooden seating which was

more acceptable and suitable for the 'boys' who often found, in pounding the wooden seating, a vent for their satisfaction at a good performance, or for their disapproval when things were not so good.

The theatre was mainly used for small shows, sketches, magicians, jugglers, etc., but plays, concerts and lectures were held there from time to time. It was also well known as a lecture hall. One of the first lectures there was entitled 'Edison's Phonograph'. This was a time when the world was looking at the gramophone as a miracle. It was in one of the variety shows that Count John McCormack first made his appearance on the Limerick stage.

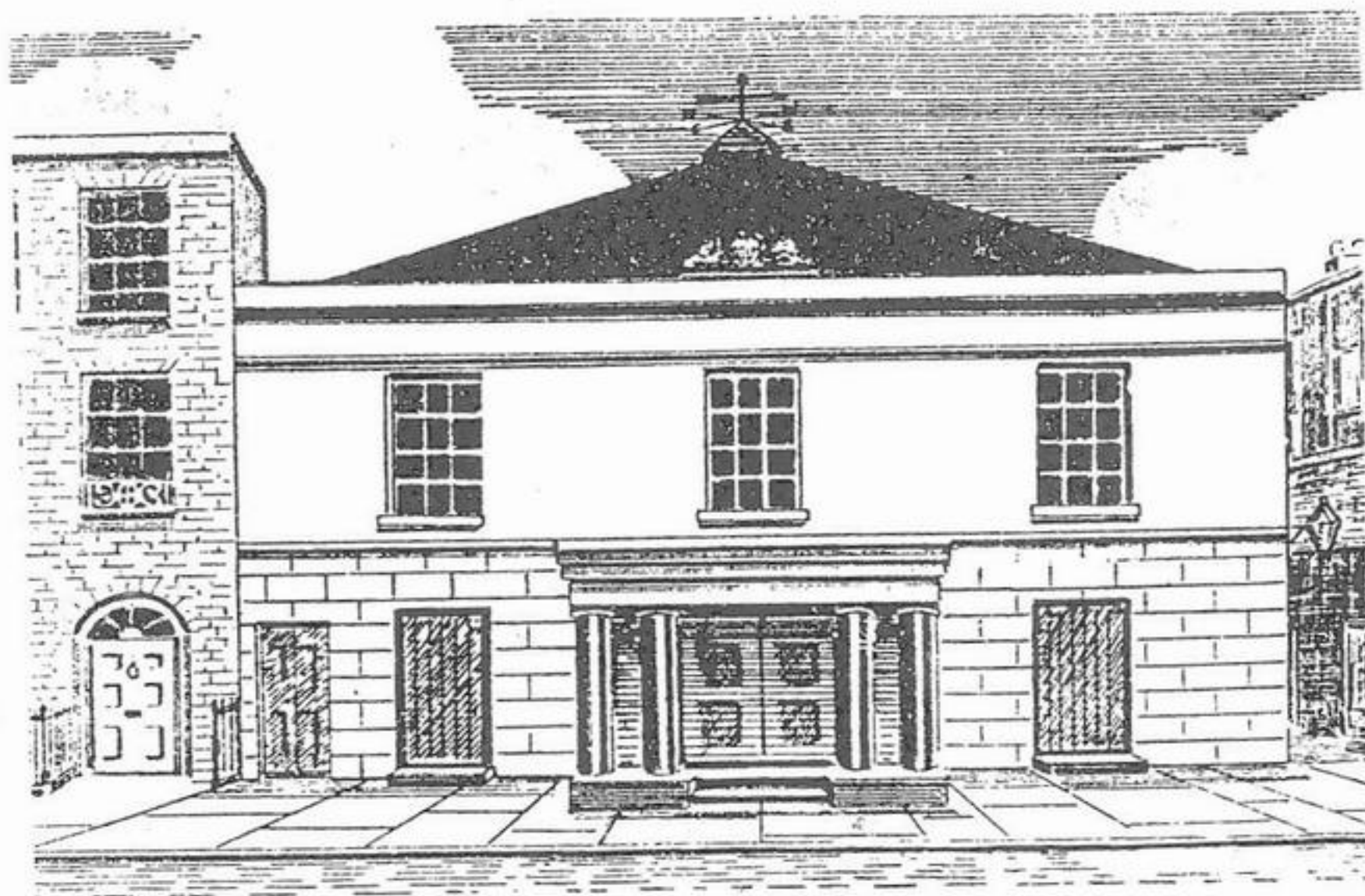
The hall passed mysteriously out of the hands of the citizens and eventually became a cinema. The name was changed to the 'Royal' in the fifties. It changed ownership many times and has now been reconstructed as a theatre after a disastrous fire.

Smaller theatres, the 'Garryowen' in Broad Street and the 'Gaiety' in O'Connell Street, put on small shows and concerts for a short time. The former bearded the lion in his den by opening only a hundred yards from the Tivoli and suffered for its folly, closing after a year or two.

THE THEATRE ROYAL

(Illus. 1)

This theatre was built in Henry Street in 1841 by Joseph Fogarty and continued to delight enraptured audiences for sixty years. It was a noble building and was second only to Dublin's Theatre Royal for grandeur and size. Pictures of famous performers who played in the theatre festooned the walls, including the great Catherine Hayes (Illus. 2), who, despite her dazzling international success and the great demands on her talents, found time to return on no less than three occasions to her native city to enthrall her fellow citizens in the Theatre



Illus. 1. The Old Theatre Royal, Limerick. (From drawing by J. F. Walsh)



Illus. 2. Catherine Hayes, probably Limerick's greatest soprano.

Royal. What a great pity that one of Limerick's other international celebrities—one of the greatest Shakespearian actresses of them all—Ada Rehan, never set foot again in the city of her birth after leaving it in 1860. What a welcome she would have got in the Royal!

The late Mr. J. F. Walsh, historian and theatre-goer, left us a fine description of the old place:

“Obtaining entrance to the theatre during the run of a popular show was, in those pre-queue days, a feat in itself. Might was right. One joined the elbowing jostling crowd where possible, and took part in the pushing and shoving until at last, breathless but happy, one was forced through the entrance. All the while an attendant at a side door enticed the more wary with his call of “Early doors, Sixpence extra”.

The usual prices of admission were, circle, 3s. 0d.; stalls 2s. 6d.; pit, 1s.; gallery 6d. Up to the advent of electricity, the house was lighted by gasaliers suspended from the gallery balcony, over the circle. The stage was spacious and the theatre was so constructed that no matter what part of the house one was in, the stage never appeared far away. The drop-screen—a work of art in itself—had been painted by Henry O'Shea, a well known artist in those days. In the centre Shakespeare stood, under a pillared cupola, scroll in hand and leaning on a low column. Seated on steps, one at either side, were two female figures, one representing music and comedy, with a lyre and a mask, and the other, Tragedy, with a poison-cup and dagger. Underneath ran the caption, “All the World's a Stage”. There was another curtain of heavy dark material that fell to indicate the end of a performance, and time and again great actors and actresses had to come on in front of this to make their final bows.²

Limerick audiences always seemed to prefer musical performances, and the shows of D'Oyly Carte, Joseph O'Mara, Moody Manners, Elester-Grime and Carl Rosa always packed the theatre for every performance. Musical comedies were enjoyed with the same zest. There was an evergreen welcome for the George Edwards Girl shows: “The Girl in the Train”, “My Girl”, “The Quaker Girl” and “The Country Girl”. Then there were the other great musicals: “San Toy”, “The Geisha”, “Floridora”, “The Belle of New York”, “The Merry Widow”, “Maid of the Mountains”, “The Chocolate Soldier” and many others.

Among the many dramas enjoyed here were “Pink Dominoes”, “The Last of Mrs. Cheyney”, “Trilby”, “The Sign of the Cross”, “A Royal Divorce”, “Under the Robe” and a host of others, including all the Shakespearian dramas.

One of the greatest attractions of the Royal in its later years was “Mouser” Fitzgerald, a brilliant local baritone who, during the intervals, stole the thunder of the best performers in the operas with his splendid rendering of pieces from the operas. He usually sang from the “Gods” of which he was a well known and well loved patron. The whole audience of the packed theatre were usually held spellbound by his wonderful voice, and it was nothing unusual for his many encores to delay the next act. He refused many invitations to join companies who were mystified that such an outstanding artiste should allow his talent to stagnate in a bacon factory where he worked as a pork butcher.

FRANK LAND

Of the professionals who performed at the Royal, the great baritone, Frank Land, a native of Clonmel, was surely one of the greatest. When Frank was on the bill every seat was sure to be occupied. He was the principal baritone in the Moody-Manners Opera

²J. *Old Limerick Soc.* (1946).



Illus. 3. Joseph O'Mara, Limerick's world-famous operatic tenor.

Company, at the same time our own Joseph O'Mara was its principal tenor. With all his great talent he had a serious weakness for the bottle. His company usually put up at the Imperial Hotel in Catherine Street. On one occasion before opening night his company took his clothes at the hotel and hid them in an effort to keep him out of the pubs so that he would be in his best voice for the first night. Frank, however, wrapped himself in a blanket and stole over to O'Dwyer's public house at the corner of Roche's Street and Catherine Street. The worth of his performance that night is not recorded.

He later joined a smaller group, the Elster-Grime Opera Company and continued to attract huge audiences. His rendering of "The Torreador's Song", "The Heart Bowed Down" and "Even Bravest Hearts" was spoken of with nostalgic remembrance during the lifetime of those who had the privilege of hearing him. He died in the city and was buried in St. Munchin's.

JOSEPH O'MARA³

One of Limerick's greatest artistes, Joseph O'Mara (Illus. 3),⁴ had a long association with the Royal. His voice of exceptional sweetness, power and quality was complimented by his great gift as an actor. It was asserted by many critics at the time that his success on the dramatic stage was assured even if he never sang. The great tenor was born in Limerick on July 16th, 1866, and was son of James O'Mara, J.P. He was educated in the Jesuit College. At the age of twenty-three he gave up business and went to Milan where he studied singing under Moratti and Perini. He returned to England after three years where he was at once engaged for the Royal English Opera House. On February 4th, 1891, he appeared there as "Ivanhoe" in Sullivan's opera. In between engagements he studied further under Edwin Holland. He sung leading roles in Covent Garden and at Drury Lane, and was ranked as one of the world's great opera singers. In 1896 he created the part of Mike Murphy in Stanford's "Shamus O'Brien". He made his first appearance in Boston at the Hollis Street Theatre on October 25th, 1897, in De Koven's "Highwayman".

Joseph O'Mara engaged in a seven month concert tour of the United States where he played to crowded houses. In the forefront of his repertoire were the ballads and songs of Ireland. In due course O'Mara formed his own Opera Company which had success at both sides of the Atlantic. In this he recruited a group of brilliant artistes, many of whom had achieved world fame. Being an English opera combination it was composed mainly of British artistes, recruited at home and from the Colonies. A brilliant young baritone came from South Africa, and a contralto, a pupil of the great Melba, came from New Zealand.

His artistic genius earned Joseph O'Mara the Freedom of Limerick, the first and only time a singer achieved this great honour. He died on August 5th, 1927.

END OF THE ROYAL

As if the threat of the cinema in the early years of the present century was not enough worry for Limerick theatre goes the final curtain fell when their beloved Theatre Royal was burned to the ground on the 23rd of January 1922. Two years before it had a grand reopening after a general renovation, carpeting and painting.

³See also this *Journal*, pp. 83-95.

⁴I am grateful to Mrs. Phil O'Halloran, Limerick, for providing me, through the good offices of Michael Rynne, with this picture, a post-card, for reproduction here.

THE CITY THEATRE

Live theatre in Limerick remained in the doldrums until 1952 when an enterprising Dublinman, Jack Bourke, purchased the Ritz cinema in Sexton Street and promoted cinema cum theatre for many years. Mr. Bourke was a member of a well known Dublin theatrical family and used his expertise in a manner that regaled the citizens for many years with excellent shows, including the performances of the local Operatic Company. This was too good to last. Mounting overheads crowded in and forced closure. It is sad to contemplate the loss of this—the City Theatre— where not one act of assistance, one word of encouragement or one smile of favour was given to assist the management to continue Limerick's only theatre.

Jack Bourke has since, as a City Councillor, and twice Mayor of the City, contributed much to the social and cultural life of Limerick.

TO-DAY'S THEATRE

To-day there is much evidence of a quickening of enthusiasm for live theatre and a number of excellent amateur groups are catering, not alone for genuine playgoers, but for those who are seeking ways of offsetting their bane of familiarity with the ubiquitous television set in the corner.

It is rather a pity that the old name "Colliseum" cannot be revived at the Belltable. The latter name is ugly and meaningless. Was it not in the Colliseum that Miss Lena Gough revived the great musical "The Belle of New York"? The former name commemorates a Dutch soldier named Henry Belltable who, in 1844, organised meetings of working men for prayer and instruction. His example resulted in the founding of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family in Limerick in 1868. His name is out of place in our little theatre. Give us back the Colliseum!