

BY MARY HEENAN

PEOPLE:

RUNNING at the Belltable Arts Centre, this week, is Neil Donnelly's highly acclaimed play, 'The Silver Dollar Boys.'

And for Limerick audiences, this should have special appeal, for it stars Nigel Mercier, a well-known Limerick actor, in one of the leading roles.

Though born in London, Nigel moved to Limerick with his parents, Nuala and David, when he was only six months old. And up until four years ago, he lived at Shannonville, on the Ennis Road.

Educated at St. Munchin's College, Nigel's first introduction to drama came when he joined the Miriam Darcy School of Speech and Drama. Through the school, he was both a regular competitor and winner at Feile Luimni and other festivals throughout the country.

Electrician

After completing his Inter Cert, Nigel trained as an electrician for four years. He joined the Quarry Players and took part in several productions with the group. These include 'Confusions', 'The Master', 'Harvey' and 'The Last Victim.'

For his role in 'The Last Victim' which was directed by Jim Keyes, he received the best actor award at the South Galway Drama Festival in 1982.

A founder member of the Limerick Youth Theatre with Seamus O'Brien, Nigel regrets that there is still not a professional theatre here in the city.

"There is an abundance of talent here in Limerick, and there is certainly room for a professional theatre company here.

"If Galway could do it and become one of the biggest

and most respected theatre companies in the country, then there is no reason why it can't be done here in Limerick."

Talent

He cites the Granary Players as just one example of the talent that there is in the city: "They are continually producing top quality plays."

But according to Nigel, the biggest boost that drama received in the city was the opening of the Belltable Arts Centre: "Prior to its opening, amateur groups were only able to see the same grade of drama among each other. And only if they visited some of the larger professional theatres had they an opportunity to see productions by top-quality Irish groups."

In 1983, Nigel moved to Dublin to study at the Oscar Theatre School of Acting.

"And yes, it was difficult to break into the professional acting scene, and it still is," he admits.

"When I was getting involved as a full-time career, I was told by everyone to get involved in as many different aspects as possible."

Nigel spent 18 months at the Oscar Theatre School of Acting, studying under tutors, Alan Stanford (voice production and character analysis); Chloe Gibson (speech); Kevin McHugh (acting), and Vincent O'Neill (mime and movement).

Acting

Nigel also studied approaches to acting with Tom Hickey at the Centre for the Performing Arts, improvisation with Ray Yeats at the Centre for the Performing Arts, direction with Joe Dowling, at the Belltable Arts Centre, and a production course with Tim



Nigel Mercier.

O'Neill and Tom Hardiman at the Centre for the Performing Arts.

From July '84 to July '85, Nigel was employed as an actor with the Project Acting Company, and as an assistant stage manager.

Nigel said that, for the first year-and-a-half, he spent most of his time doing auditions: "And with the recession and the high numbers of people unemployed, many young people feel that they have nothing to lose by going into the business."

Nigel recalls walking in for auditions, on many occasions to a packed waiting room. "There were often over 500 people waiting for the audition, and out of that number about 100 would be serious about a career in

acting."

But acting is an uncertain business, and work is scarce. "This is the first year that I know what I will be doing up until the end of the year. Usually this is not the case. And this is true also for many of the well-known actors.

Work

Many actors are forced to leave the country to look for work abroad, but Nigel admits that he would like to make a name for himself here before he leaves.

During the past four years, Nigel has taken part in a large number of varied productions and these included: 'The Cherry Orchard,' in the Abbey Theatre; 'The Bear,' at the

peacock Theatre; 'King Lear' and 'Our Town,' with the Oscar Theatre Company; 'No Regrets — The Edith Piaf Story,' with the Olympia Theatre, and the Irish Tour, 1984; 'Antigone,' 'The Durango Kid Rides Again' and the 'The Oval Machine,' with the Projects Arts Centre company; 'Giselle,' with the Dublin City Ballet, and the 'Borstal Boy,' with the Gaiety Theatre.

Nigel has also played the lead role of Sonny in Summerwing Productions' preview of Soldiers of Destiny, and has appeared in a number of television productions, including R.T.E.'s prison series, 'Inside', 'Letters to Theo' — the life of Vincent Van Gough, for R.T.E., in November '86, and 'Mega-mix,' support act for Pierce Turner, R.T.E., December '86.

Speaking of the many changes which are now taking place in the acting profession, Nigel said that emphasis on full-time courses with degree status were now becoming essential.

This year it is now possible to study for a degree in drama at Trinity College, and the Abbey Theatre are also re-opening their drama school.

Courses

However, Nigel points out that the cost of such courses may be prohibitive for many people. "Some of the larger drama colleges in London cost in the region of £5,000 per year, and unless you obtain some form of sponsorship, it's impossible to survive."

Looking forward to performing in his home city, in his biggest role to date, Nigel describes 'The Silver Dollar Boys' as a comment on society in the sixties.

The play, which is presented by Playwrights and Actors Company, is set mostly in the sixties, and centres

around a group of young people about to do their Leaving Cert.

Originally written by Neil Donnelly in 1980,, it was first produced by the Abbey in 1982.

This play, which was a Harvey's award winner, is set in a Christian Brothers School in the Midlands. And while it is a reflection of society in Ireland, during the sixties, we are also given glimpses of the lives of the young people as they grow up throughout the seventies and the eighties.

Role

Nigel plays the role of Lorenzo Morelli, his biggest role to date in the play which runs at the Belltable until August 22. After its visit to Limerick, it moves to Gorey, and then on to Waterford and Galway.

Another Limerick connection with the play is that it is being directed by another city man, Kevin McHugh.

It's then back to Dublin for Nigel for rehearsals for the Gaiety production of the Borstal Boy, which re-opens again this autumn.

"This has been one of the most successful plays running this summer. It has been popular with local people and tourists, but it has been playing mainly to an Irish audience."

According to Nigel, theatres in Dublin are enjoying a huge revival.

"But theatre-goers are no longer interested in going out to see poor quality productions — they only want to see something worthwhile, and this has now had the effect of raising the overall standard," he said.

"This summer we have had a record number of excellent productions catering for the tastes of all theatre-goers."

The play, which opened on Monday night last, continues until Saturday night, August 22.