

That's Entertainment

with E.C.

The Cinemas

● For well over sixty years I have been a regular cinemagoer, often taking in two performances in one night.

● I got this love of the cinema from my parents who were avid cinemagoers.

● They told me many times that I was taken to the Abbey Kinema in Limerick at the tender age of 21 months. Don't ask me the title of the film which was on view, but from that date I suppose I became hooked on the magic of the cinema.

● Visits to the cinema were at least twice a week from the late 1920s. That was an exciting time as the "silent era" was coming to an end and the local cinemas were being wired up for sound following the success of the first talkie, Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer."

● The major studios were re-shooting many of their current silent productions to include "sound" sequences, the most famous of these being "Hell's Angels" (a World War One aviation epic) which I saw at the Athenaeum in Upper Cecil Street.

● The era of the "all dancing, all singing all talking" movies had arrived and I was part of it from the very beginning.

● Naturally, it was to the westerns that my younger brother, Hugh, and I were given permission to see at first, and the likes of Buck Jones, Tom Keene, Ken Maynard and Tim McCoy (from the Glen area) were our particular favourites.

● I would like to set the scene as it was in the late 1920s.

● There were no less than three cinemas within yards of each other in the vicinity of Barrington's Hospital. Facing the hospital was Paul Bernard's Tivoli (which he opened in 1919). A few yards from that was the Abbey Kinema (on the site where now stands St. Anne's Vocational School). And in Broad Street stood The Garryowen Cinema. Actually, this site was intact up to a few years ago. The front was a furniture store, at the rear, the stage was still intact. I viewed the balcony and sat there looking at the wall on which the screen was draped. On the outside the outlines of the cinema lighting fixtures, and the projection box, had survived the passing of the years. And clearly visible was the date of erection—1919.

● These three cinemas catered for the hundreds of patrons who resided in this populous area. Many of the programmes were supplemented by stage shows, concerts and variety performances.

● Perhaps the Giff (the previous occupant of the Tivoli site) had the most versatile of stage companies. They included the Fergusons with Carrie (mother of Harry Belafonte), and the almost legendary Bert Duvall whose "dying" scenes were so popular that he gave encores and died all over again. He later retired to England. I met him about 36 years ago and he was still recalling those memorable theatre seasons in Limerick.



and offered cinemagoers the cream of Hollywood's technical expertise.

● Going to this cinema was an experience... the seating was more comfortable... the projection razor sharp... and the sound was of a high quality.

● It was in the early '30s that I was refused permission to see "Frankenstein".

● "I'm sorry, Mrs. Connolly," said head usher Jack Mackessy to my mother, "but Mr. Connolly cannot see this film."

● Mother promptly gave me the money for the Athenaeum (where I saw a Marie Dressler—Wallace Beery "Min And Bill" film). Naturally, when we got home, I was fully filled in on the "Frankenstein" film.

● Towards the end of the '30s, "Frankenstein" and "Dracula" played at the Limerick Savoy as a double bill. I went to "Frankenstein," having seen "Dracula" when it was first shown in Limerick in the early '30s at the Grand Central.

● The 1930s were also the era of the "full supporting programme." Each major studio specialised in its own short subjects. If the main feature came from M-G-M, the programme usually included a "Crime Does Not Pay" short, an "Our Gang" or a James A. Fitzpatrick Travelogue, or a Pete Smith Speciality. A regular treat was one of Laurel and Hardy's classic comedy shorts. Incidentally, shorts lasted between nine and eighteen minutes (a one reeler or a two reeler).

● Around this time, I also had my own home projector and screened film programmes in the winter evenings. I exchanged films with my schoolmate Eamon Kenny, so there was a regular supply of changes of programme.

Coliseum

● The Coliseum Cinema in O'Connell Street was also a firm favourite of mine. This house was owned by Mr. Tom Gough and he was an avid fan of gangster movies. So the films of Edward G. Robinson, George Raft, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and Barton McLane were never too far away. They blasted their way out of many a sticky situation. This house (now The Belltable) was very popular.

Grand Central

● The Grand Central Cinema was "Grand" in every sense. This Paul Bernard property specialised in "class" films, with musicals like "Tell Me To-Night" with Jan Kiepura, the Tom Walls comedies, and the films of stars like Jessie Matthews, Jack Hulbert, and Will Hay. Stage shows were a regular feature as were free tickets to the air shows (a raffle on the admission ticket). I felt that even if I was the only person in the house I would not win a ticket. And that situation did in fact take place.

● Sir Allan Cobham was a regular visitor to Limerick with his famous Air Show at Bawnmore Airfield.

● Flights in a mini-airliner were run from the field and tickets sold at a half a crown (12½ pence). I never had the pleasure of enjoying one of those sight-seeing trips over Limerick. A school friend won one and he became the envy of the class. He eventually went on to become a priest. We renewed acquaintance three or four years ago when we were seated together in the Crescent Concert Hall.

● People often ask me about the Gaiety Cinema. This was situated in O'Connell Street, number 45, which is the G. Clancy Electrical Shop. The facade of the Gaiety is still intact—it surrounds the entrance to the shop and the projection box area is now an office.

● In the middle '30s, the Savoy Cinema arrived and this is the subject of a completely separate story in view of its importance as a cinema and theatre of renown.

● "The Voice Of Ireland" arrived at the Central in the early 1930s and had several sequences shot in Limerick and district. The final shot in the film was photographed near The Creek in Ballinacorra. I wrote a composition on this film which was placed on the notice board in the Christian Brothers School in Sexton Street.

● "King Kong"—with Willis O'Brien's technical wizardry (which has never been equalled) was another of my school compositions to receive the approval of my teachers and they advised me to keep it up. However, they need not have worried. I loved every aspect of the cinema then... and I still do.

Thomond

● The Thomond arrived in the '30s and immediately scored with cinemagoers in the Nicholas Street area and even further afield. It was a well proportioned cinema and the pride and joy of Paver Dillon, so named because he was allocated the contract for the major roadworks which were undertaken in the city at that time.

Carlton

● Easter 1940 brought Limerick yet another cinema—the Carlton in Shannon Street—the property of auctioneer E. L. Wickham and Richard Williams (Davy Donnelly's right hand man as he liked to be called).

● Such classics as "Yankee Doodle Dandy," "Citizen Kane," "The Grapes Of Wrath," "Kings Row" and "Hollywood Cavalcade" quickly established the cinema as one of the most popular in the city.

Lyric

● Among the managers here was Douglas Ashleigh who came from the Lyric to take up an appointment at this house. I liked his candid assessment of films and he was a man of impeccable taste. However, during the years 1939 to 1945 (when there was a total ban on war films) made it inevitable that cinemagoers would have to resort to second run films and revivals. In fact, they soon became the order of the day.

The Belltable— Limerick's Broadway

● The Belltable Arts Centre, 69 O'Connell Street, is situated in the heart of Limerick city. Opened by the President of Ireland in 1981, it caters for the mid-west region including Counties Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and Kerry. The theatre, which seats 315, was built in 1840 by a wealthy Limerickman as a concert hall for his musical daughter.

● The centre consists of a theatre, restaurant, wine bar and two gallery spaces, which host an average of 20 exhibitions a year.

● The Belltable presents 48 weeks of theatre a year, featuring national and international companies, and local amateur groups. Among the regular visitors are the Abbey, Druid and Field Day Theatre Companies and also Opera Theatre Company. Music ranges from opera to rock, traditional Irish and classical concerts. Shows performed by local schools and colleges also feature.

● Children are catered for in regular art and drama workshops, pantomime and magic shows. The centre stages two 12-week film seasons every year. Monthly midnight poetry readings are held in Peter's Cell, featuring the best of local, national and international poets.

● Also working in association with the Belltable is the recently formed Island Theatre Company, the city's professional theatre company. Founded in January, 1988, it has already presented nine full productions, two eight week summer seasons of Irish theatre and three tours. While totally independent and autonomous and operating from its own base, Island premiere all their work at the Belltable.

● Indeed, it can be seen why the Belltable deservedly holds the reputation for being the most active, alive and vital regional arts centre in the country.

Athenaeum

● My favourite cinema in the early 1940s was the Athenaeum which had an excellent balcony and first-class projection. Films around that time included "Beau Geste," "100 Men And A Girl," and "Vernon And Irene Castle." At that time the screen was at the laneway end. The screen reverted to its original position (at the Cecil Street end) for the re-opening in the late '40s as The Royal as part of the Breen Group under the management of Mrs. Mamie Collins.

Astor

● Thomondgate had its own cinema with the opening of The Astor—a project which had quite a short life. It was a huge house by present day standards and projection was really excellent.

The Ritz

● In the late 1940s the two O'Sullivan Bros. from Corbally built a luxury cinema in Sexton Street and named it The Ritz.

City Theatre

● However, it was closed a few years later to re-open in 1953 as The City Theatre under the management of the famous theatrical family, The Bourkes of Dublin.

● The first manager was Frank O'Donovan, later Batty Brennan of the TV serial, The Riordans.

● Under the Bourkes the theatre was a great success with the cream of touring companies. The following come to mind instantly—The Mac Linnmoir-Edwards Company with Jack McGowan, the Abbey Theatre, Cyril Cusack, Siobhain McKenna, Margaret Rutherford and her husband, Stringer Davis.

● Then there were revues with a very young Ruby Murray, an ice-show with the stage completely frozen over for the skaters, an all-midget show, and local shows with the Limerick Choral and Operatic Society.

● This was a glorious quarter century in the life of Limerick with James N. Healy and his company presenting John B. Keane's plays almost as soon as the ink had dried on the pages, and screen attractions on a giant screen which brought a new realism to cinemagoing.

● It was the master showman Jack Bourke who presided over all these memorable attractions. Alas, the final curtain fell in the late '70s and the rot which was settling in on the entertainment industry in Ireland finally took the City Theatre off the map.

The Savoy

● Among the many stars who appeared at the Savoy (and whom I had the pleasure of meeting) were Eamon Andrews, with his "Double Or Nothing" quiz show, which ran for several months.

● I supplied many of the questions which he used on the show, which launched him on his meteoric career as one of the best loved television personalities in the world.

● Boxer Jack Doyle and screen actress Movita created a sensation at the Savoy when they played here for one week. Crowds followed them up and down O'Connell Street when they strolled around between performances. They sang solos and duets, and Movita brought the house down with her rendition of "The Kerry Dances." Her accompanist was Charlie Sciascia.

● Other big names were Roy Orbison, Tom Jones, Dick Emery, the Los Paragayos (whom I had seen earlier in Ibiza), Val Doonican, The Vienna Boys Choir, Canon Sydney McEwan, Father Flanagan (of Bystown), and many, many more, too numerous to mention.

Movieland

● The Movieland Twin Cinema complex in Roxboro Road provided suburban cinemagoers on the south side of the city with some memorable films, notably "The Towering Inferno," "Barry Lyndon" and "That's Entertainment".

● The cinemas were served with first-class car parking facilities and it was almost possible to drive right up to the box-office.

● Sadly, for some reason still unexplained, the experiment did not appear to work in this area.

● With a five-screen cinema complex now on its way to Limerick's city centre, perhaps the location in the former Savoy will ensure that cinemagoing is a "going into town" experience.

Movies

● I loved the Robert Flaherty documentary films like "Man Of Aran" and "Nanook Of The North." These films brought an entirely new dimension to filmgoing and the former production is now considered to be a classic.

● Its haunting images of a land, a people and a way of life which continues less than one hundred miles from Limerick had a profound effect on me. Some twenty years ago I flew to the largest of the Aran Islands and visited many of the locations which made the 1930s film such a rewarding experience.

● The films by John Count McCormack were special treats that I remember with affection. "Song Of My Heart," introduced Maureen O'Sullivan to world audiences and "Wings Of The Morning" (in colour with McCormack, Henry Fonda, Annabella and Jockey Steve Donoghue) was another rare experience. I saw the great tenor in O'Connell Street several times as he was a regular visitor to Limerick in the late '30s. His farewell concert at the Savoy in 1938 was an occasion which I helped to plan from the advertising point of view. He came out of retirement to sing during the war years in aid of the Irish Red Cross.

● The Deanna Durbin movies in the late '30s and early '40s were great crowd pullers, and her many fans will be pleased to hear that she lives in retirement near Paris. When she left films she vowed never to sing again.

● Another special memory is "The Phantom Of The Opera," the European Premiere of which I handled for Universal Pictures in the early '40s. A mint condition copy arrived here (originally destined for London), and the instructions regarding its care were most explicit.

Theatre Royal Memories...

● The Theatre Royal in Henry Street, Limerick, had a seating capacity in the region of one and a half thousand seats, and was extremely popular with touring companies and musical societies.

● It was destroyed by fire in the early 1920's, and an era came to an end with the tragic loss of this lovely theatre.

● Films were included in the programmes at this house, but were usually confined to a slot which was dropped should the stage shows over-run.

● Such was the popularity of the stage at that time that cinematograph films were relegated to second place.

● Among the many headliners who appeared on its stage were The March King himself, John Philip Sousa.

● Another famous artiste to perform there was Harry Houdini, then the world's leading escape artiste. He was also a well-known screen star, whose appearances in exciting serials doing his own escapes and stunts made him a figure of world renown.

● The Theatre Royal stood on the site which is now the United Drug Company.

● In the past few years, Limerick has quietly slipped out of the circuit which would ensure that leading cabaret and stage stars would make regular appearances in this city.

● It has now lost its status, and the passing of the Savoy finally convinced the promoters that Limerick was a venue to be avoided.

● We had shown the strength of our apathy in no uncertain manner.

Things I Miss...

● The 1970s and 1980s saw great changes with the loss of the Savoy, the City Theatre, the Lyric, the Royal, the Astor, while the Tivoli and Thomond were long gone.

● At the moment we are down to just two screens and films have improved enormously.

● We head into the 1990s with the Savoy being blitzed from Bedford Row and Henry Street to be replaced by a complex which will house five cinemas.

● However, it is the magic of the early years that I remember with most affection.

● Today, I miss the showmanship which went into a programme, the dimming of the house lights, the footlights of red, green and blue coming on to light up the curtains. Then the parting with the credit titles coming on—and the first sounds of the accompanying soundtracks.

● I miss the supporting programmes, I miss the double bills, I miss the cine-variety, I miss the thrill of the organist rising from the depths of the auditorium, the spotlight picking him out, the round of warm applause greeting his appearance, and the sadness as he waved farewell at the end of his recital.

● All these memories are part and parcel of the magic of an era during which the cinema experimented with 3-D films, wide-screen projection, stereophonic sound, shock effects, science fiction thrillers which have taken on a new dimension, and themes which have become more and more daring in their presentation and content.

● But for me the cinema is still as magical as ever. ● I hope that it remains the same with you.

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