

# FEATURES



Among Limerick's film favourites of yesterday (from left): Hepburn, Bogart, Bergman and Russell . . . and of today: Ford, Gere and Cruise.

## Movies make a dramatic come-back in Limerick

Special report by  
**JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY**

IT IS once again becoming fashionable in Limerick to go to the pictures, just as it was in the hey-day of the cinema from the 1950's to the mid-70's when admissions reached their peak.

Those were the days when buffs ignored the elements and queued for hours to see the latest epics from Hollywood, with such stars as Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, Kirk Douglas, James Dean, Frank Sinatra, John Mills, Charles Laughton, David Niven, Humphrey Bogart, Joan Fontaine, Jane Russell, Audrey Hepburn and a host of others, releasing them for a few hours from the trials and tribulations of normal life.

The advent of multi-channel TV, followed by home video and other technological advances, brought dramatic changes in lifestyles, and a thriving industry went into decline, which many thought might be irreversible.

Now, it would seem, the wheel has turned full circle again.

In the 12 months to the end of April, this year, 8.1 million visits were made to cinemas nationwide—in other words, over two tickets for every man, woman and child—a staggering 3m more than the previous year.

Those within are in no doubt that double figures will be reached very shortly, maybe even in the current year, what with such blockbusters as *The Commitments*, *Batman Returns*, *Basic Instinct*, *The Lovers*, *Cape Fear*, *Lethal*

*Weapon*, *Alien 3* and *JFK* having enticed the most lukewarm film enthusiasts from their firesides.

Predictions in the mid-eighties that the cinema would never recover were off the mark.

True, there was a lull as people grappled with new technology, and this resulted in some casualties along the way. More seasoned filmgoers will argue that the turn-off point was prompted more by the drop in standards from Hollywood, where the emphasis switched towards sex and violence, rather than from other sources. The entertainment content of many films was questioned by Irish audiences.

The film moguls were worried, and many of the big studios either closed or changed ownership.

They met the competition with bigger production budgets and a huge publicity machine, and that, allied to a new wave of thinking by equally concerned cinema proprietors, together with a more liberal approach by the public, no longer offended by what they saw on screen, helped swing the pendulum back in

their favour.

Then when other centres reported an upsurge in interest, Limerick continued to turn its back on the big screen, principally because of the run-down state of the then cinemas, where audience comforts were not the best and projection was of poor quality—a situation exacerbated by unacceptable delays in getting first-run product.

Now all has changed, thanks mainly to the advent of the Savoy cineplex in Bedford Row.

It might be said that a whole new audience has been created.

When the cineplex opened its doors almost two years ago, the main difficulty for the management was to target their market—in other words, persuade people that the cinema was a worthwhile choice in their search for escapism.

Those who were regular filmgoers in the past had forsaken their favourite pastime, and the younger generation just did not want to know, simply because they hadn't been encouraged to pursue an interest.

Nowadays there is a mixture of both, with the bal-

Jason Bradshaw, Sarsfield Avenue, Garryowen and Gillian Gavin, Doyle's Cottages, Garryowen enjoy an evening at the cinema.  
**DERMOT LYNCH**

ance tipped in favour of the latter. The battle has been won.

It wasn't until *The Field* arrived that the committed



Eastwood (centre) straddles the generations between McLaglen and Beethoven.

fan of yesteryear sought pastures old. They identified with local boy made good, Dickie Harris, star of *Camelot*, *A Man Called*



*Horse*, etc., films which packed them in in the good old days.

"I haven't been to the cinema in over a decade"



was a much heard comment in the foyer at the Savoy during the extended run of *The Field*.

Now, I am told, many of them have been regulars since, and, in quite a few instances have brought along their grandchildren.

This new audience is important to the long term success of the industry in Limerick, and, conscious of their obligations, the Savoy has nurtured them along with such delightful movie: as *Home Alone*, *Beethoven*, *Curly Sue*, *My Girl*, *Peter Pan*, all proven winners.

(Next week: More treats in store for Limerick filmgoers)

## Those were the not so good old days . . .

**THE LYRIC**, Royal, City Theatre, Carlton and Grand Central served their purpose in the past, when those in search of a night out had few options, and were prepared to accept basic comforts.

But as audiences became more sophisticated and demanding, they fell by the wayside. The buildings were dated and a modernisation programme would have proven too expensive for the owners.

The former Savoy was one of the most luxurious in the land but because of its very size (1,500 seats), had outlived its usefulness.

In stepped Jack Bourke, who pioneered the Movieland Twins in the mid-70s, but for some reason, perhaps due to the fact they were in the suburbs, they never really caught on.

Closure followed closure and for

a period Limerick was left with just two screens, the Carlton and Central. The former was allowed to become run-down and the latter, with just 200 seats, had, due to limited capacity, too many retentions to keep the regular filmgoer happy.

It often happened that films by-passed Limerick.

The audience dwindled all the

time. Then when nobody else seemed to care, local businessman Tony O'Mara, entered the scene with a package to transform the Savoy, which he had earlier purchased, into a multi-screen cinema.

He put the pieces together and brought under his wing the Ward Anderson Group, the biggest players in the Irish market.

The result—the new look Savoy.

When is  
Angus