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MILESTONES IN A GREAT PROGRESSION OF ENTERTAINMENT

Some memories of Silent and Sound at the Grand Central

As an entertainment centre in Limerick the Grand Central Cinema ranks next to the old Theatre Royal in the quality of its presentations and in length of service. The Theatre Royal served Limerick citizens loyally and well for some eighty years, and while stage shows predominated for almost all of that time, there were quite a number of films shown there for some years up to its destruction by fire in 1922.

The Grand Central Cinema, too, had its quota of the live theatre, but its policy from its beginnings in early 1923 was to bring to Limerick the finest screen productions in the world. How well it has succeeded two generations of patrons can testify.

Central Hall

But, as a community centre, the Grand Central had outlived the Theatre Royal by many years. Long before the silver screen was heard of, the premises were used for religious service, and away back in the middle of the last century were known as the Wesleyan Chapel. Many famous Methodist preachers held Services there, and it filled this function well into the present century.

Paul Bernard took over the premises in 1923—then known as the Central Hall—and built the modern facade which now serves as a booking office, shop and foyer, on to the old frontage.

Valentino

One of the most remarkable films shown there in 1923, and which created a sensation wherever it had been presented, was "Blood and Sand." The hero was Rudolph Valentino, who had already made such a favourable impression by his acting in "The Sheik." In those days there were two performances at night, 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock, and a matinee on Thursdays and Saturdays at 3.30. Remember the old Central phone number? It was Limerick 361.

While "Blood and Sand" was not the Central's first film, it certainly eclipsed in glory the few that had preceded it.

Mike Nono

We said the Central had its quota of stage productions. The first of these was probably that which starred Mike Nono in the second week of May, 1923. Mike, a native of Ennis, was a highly popular artist in Limerick, and his brilliant dancing earned him the title "The Man with the Twinkling Feet." He was adept in song and dance and holds a cherished place in the memory of all who were privileged to see him perform.

In its first year, cine-variety was a standard form of entertainment at the Grand Central. Mike Nono was followed by

little Mike O'Hare of Dublin; by the local comedian, A. B. Ash; by Hay Joy, whistler and dancer; by Hazel Elliot and her seven candies in an old May-day scene, introducing vocalism, dancing and instrumental items. And then there was a week's special engagement of Chris Sylvester and Company in an Irish comedy sketch, "Patsy."

Harold Lloyd

Harold Lloyd was the rage of the comedy screen in the early 1920's, and he made his first appearance at the Central in June, 1923, in "Grandma's Boy." Later that month we had Andre Knox in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," and another great performer, Lon Chaney, followed with "Bits of Life."

But towering above the lot in those early months of the Grand Central's successes was D. W. Griffith's masterpiece, "Intolerance," which has survived the test of time and is now rated as one of the immortal screen classics. This mighty production had a cast of 25,000 men and women and 7,500 horses took part in the marvellous chariot races along the Euphrates. The cast included some of the great names of the early screen—Constance Talmadge, Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Bessie Love, Olga Grey, Mildred Harris, Marge Wilson, Vera Lewis, Carl Stockport, Tully Marshall, Joseph Haden, A. D. Sears, Frank Bennett and so on. Sir Herbert Beerbaum Tree and Douglas Fairbanks paid tribute to the producers by appearing as extras in the mob scenes.

Carrickfords

This great screen spectacle was followed by a return to the live theatre with a memorable series of plays by the oldest and most popular company then touring Ireland—the Carrickford Reformatory Company.

Some of the well-known actresses were Richard Carrickford, Bredini O'Rourke, Digby Hayes, Billy Raynor, Will Bowman, James Teer, Gus Malone, Humphrey Callaghan, Miss Lillian Carrickford, Miss Moira Bredini, Miss Peggy Dorn, Miss Bridie O'Dea, Miss Bridget Welby, Little Kathleen Bowman and Master Richard.

Remember the plays? "The Touch of a Child," "The Lady Slavey," "A Chinese Romance," "My Old Irish Home" and "His Indian Wife."

"The Show Boat"

So much for the opening months of the Grand Central. The years went by in happy progression, and just forty years ago almost to the day—Monday, September 1, 1923—Harry Pollard's production "The Show Boat" introduced in

great style the great new era of the talking pictures.

The special installations were made by Messrs. Clancy and O'Shaughnessy, electricians, of Limerick, under the supervision of R.C.A. Photophone engineers.

"The Show Boat," or "The Cotton Floating Palace Theatre" on the Mississippi, embraced beautiful views of the moonlit river, of cities, hamlets, of bright entertainments, of music and mirth. And here we were given many "talking songs" in which negro melodies were the leading feature.

We heard Helen Morgan singing "Bill" and "Can't Help Loving That Man"; Jules Bledsoe singing "Old Man River"; Aunt Jemima and the Ziegfeld Plantation Singers rendering "Hey Feller" and "Come On Folks"—music from the seven dollar seventy cent per seat New York stage production, the lyrics of which were written by Oscar Hammerstein II and the music by Jerome Kern.

The story told of the career of Magnolia, the pretty actress-daughter of the Mississippi Show-boat Captain, and vividly reflected all the romance of the closing days of the last century when the floating theatres or show boats were a popular feature in American life. There was a great deal of merriment and wholesome humour and the audiences so thoroughly appreciated it all that "The Show Boat" ran for an extra week.

Laura La Plant had the leading role and played opposite Joseph Schildkraut, a splendid actor who carried conviction in all his work as the gambling husband with his varying successes and misfortunes. Otis Harlan put a real old-time touch with the part of the simple-minded, good-natured captain of the "Show Boat," while in striking contrast to him was Alma Rubens, idealistic as the hard, shrewish, unbending mother of Magnolia, and whose propensity for firing leading actresses of the company at her whims and caprices brought dismay to her good-natured husband, the captain.

New Era

The proprietor of the Grand Central gave further proof of his enterprise by following "The Show Boat" with another celebrated talking picture, "Nothing But the Truth," a comedy dealing with a young man who made a wager of 10,000 dollars that he could tell the truth for 24 hours.

Richard Dix filled the role of the truth teller, and others in the cast were Helen Kane, Louis John Bartels, Ned Sparks and Bertie Churchill.

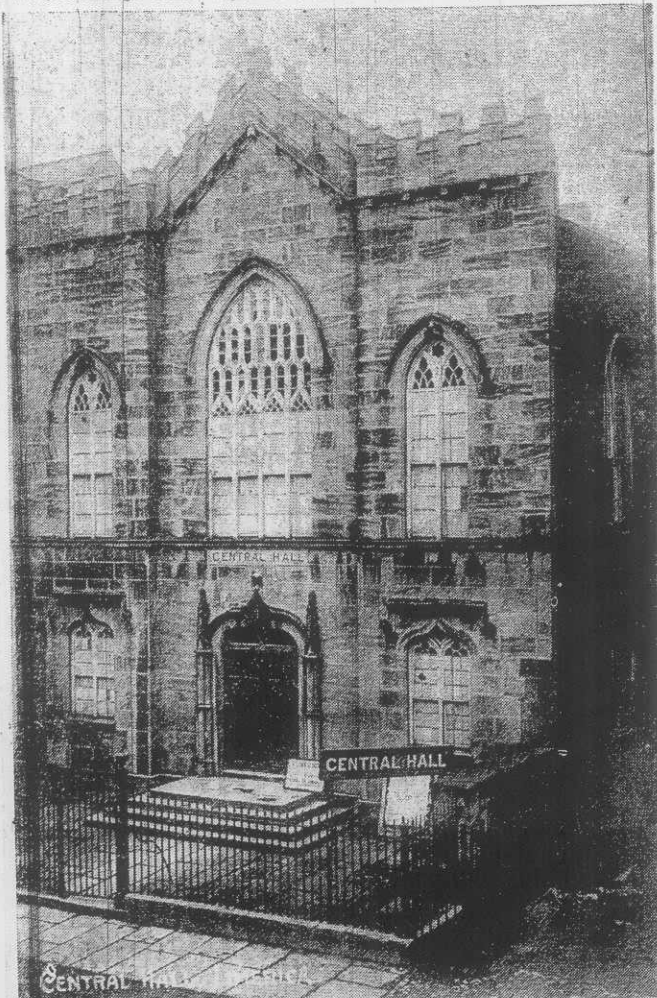
Big houses continued for "Interference," which featured William Powell, Evelyn Brent, Olive Brook, Doris Kenyon and Brandon Hurst.

This was the opening trio that set the talking pictures off to a

great start at the Grand Central. It was the beginning of a great new era of entertainment, an era that will hold nostalgic memories for many of our local cinemagoers.

And next week, on Sunday, as a luxury cinema with "Where September 1, the Grand Central Eagles Dare."

will begin another new era in its long history when it reopens as a luxury cinema with "Where September 1, the Grand Central Eagles Dare."



The Grand Central was opened as a cinema in 1923. Previous to that, the premises were known as the Central Hall, and in the last century were used as a Wesleyan chapel.