

Leader2



New grads jump for joy
Years of hard work pay off for conferred students >P7-8



FEATURES	1-3
ENTERTAINMENT	4-6
PICTURE SPECIALS	7, 8, 16 & 17
COMMUNITY LEADER	9-15
CLASSIFIEDS	18-19
MOTORS TODAY	21
BUSINESS	22
JOBS TODAY	23
FASHION	24

Fabulous fashion Young Juliane wins top €10,000 prize at International Fashion Student Awards >P24



Limerick play tells a forgotten tale
The Unlucky Cabin Boy shares the dramatic true story of local tragedy next week at the Lime Tree >P4

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A fascination with cinema

A new book delves into the history of the old cinemas and theatres located in Limerick.

Alan Owens buys a ticket for the show

THERE was a "very distinctive smell" associated with the old cinemas, Joe Coleman explains, one that he will never forget.

A fabric smell, mixed with a lingering and stale wisp of tobacco smoke, old plaster, ice cream, crisps and popcorn.

Joe, who has authored a new book called *House Full*, an affectionate look back at the old cinemas and theatre of Limerick, says that he remembers "the whole atmosphere" of the Savoy, a 1,500 seater theatre that he had a 17 year association with, working there for several years, first in the bar and later in the operating box.

That experience began an "incredible fascination" with the cinema, theatre and the film industry, which was at its height in the early to 1900s in Limerick.

"The carbon arcs that we used for the projectors - there were no bulbs in those days that could project over 135 feet," answers Joe, when asked what he remembers from the Savoy.

"Changing of the reels, watching the projectors to



A flier for the Tivoli Picture Palace, which ran from 1916 to 1959 and was located on Charlotte Quay

make sure the reel didn't run out on us; dropping safety curtains; the eeriness of the stage; the boiler under the stage; the dark shadows, dim lighting - the smell in the cinemas, that fabric smell that they had, that type of thing," replies the Bus Eireann inspector, originally from Thomondgate but living in Meelick for almost

30 years. "I was only 15 at the time and it was a magical world. I was doing a job that I probably shouldn't have been doing, and I was still at school, which was even better. I was able to prepare for exams and all while I was doing this," he adds.

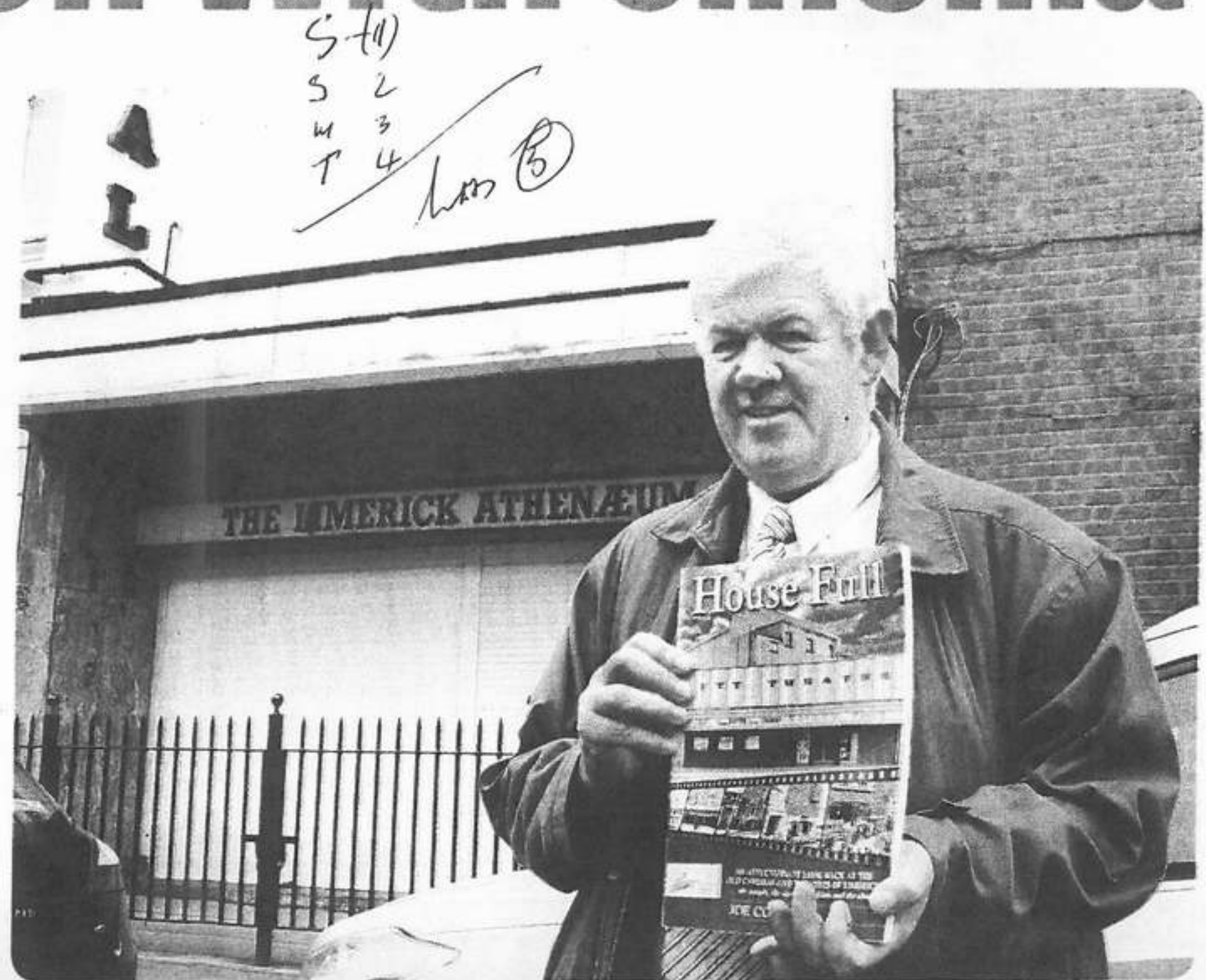
Joe's own story is the entry point to a fascinating sociocultural sweep through some 200 years of cinema and theatrical history of Limerick, while he uses other specific examples of former employees, managers and even the story of Earl Connolly - titan of the entertainment world and Limerick Leader advertising manager - to illustrate the book.

He concentrates largely on what he calls the 'golden era' of film, when there was some six city centre cinemas operating in Limerick.

"It was the second quarter of the 20th century, that is when it peaked. Between 1925 and 1950," he argues.

"The decline set in after that, because television had come to America in the 30s, so it was a

CONTINUES ON PAGE 2



A lifelong fascination: author Joe Coleman with *House Full*, which is available in all good bookshops around Limerick. The book will be officially launched this Friday night at the library in The Granary on Michael Street, starting at 6.30pm

Picture: Adrian Butler

House Full offers a window into Limerick cinema

➔ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

downward spiral after the war. The film industry introduced double features in the 1950s as a kind of a two for the price of one. They had all but disappeared by the mid-70s. In Ireland the decline set in after the introduction of television. The Savoy was a serious casualty because it had 1,500 seats, which was massive for a cinema."

Before the decline, Joe eloquently describes a Limerick that was cinema crazy, with queues winding around streets for features, ticket scalping and

"I was only 15 at the time and it was a magical world"

Joe Coleman
Author, House Full

queue jumping being something of a sport and a feeling of ownership or possession over these great movie houses a feature of the time.

The great cinemas, as well as the Savoy - many of which

doubled as music venues - included the Grand Central, the Carlton, The Royal, The Lyric, the City Theatre, Thomond Cinema.

"It was a great era. There was still a little bit of it in my time, it still had that magic, but with declining numbers that were dropping rapidly," he says.

"Not all of the cinemas in Limerick worked at the same time, some were early casualties, some only lasted through the silent era. When sound came along then it changed the whole style of cinema and that was to continue right into the 50s. Before that you really had just



The great Limerick Leader entertainment writer Earl Connolly with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy in the Olympia Theatre in Dublin in 1953. Earl reported in the entertainment pages of this paper for more than 50 years, and was also advertising and circulation manager during his lengthy career at 54 O'Connell Street

the dance halls and the picture houses.

"The Savoy - the sheer scale of the Savoy, it was the place to go, it had a certain prestige about it, you had to book for Sunday

nights, patrons considered their seats to be their own property and that kind of thing."

The legendary Earl Connolly, as mentioned, is celebrated in a particularly entertaining

chapter. As entertainment columnist for the Leader, he had access to the stars of the time, and had an array of contacts in the film industry.

"I told Callie [Earl's wife],

when this book was coming, that I was going to bring Earl to life. I think I have achieved that," says Joe.

"He had an incredible career, it wouldn't happen now. Over 52 years. He was a lovely man and an unusual critic in that he was always positive in his approach - it was always the good things. He had incredible contacts in the film industry. I only met him once, but I was impressed with him."

Coleman also examines the unfolding story using a thematic approach, looking at the effect of wars and the Troubles on the industry, plus the considerable impact of the Catholic Church. It is not a "history book", he explains.

"I wanted to look a little bit behind the scenes - this is not a specific history book, this is a book about events and their influences on the cinema, linking these events together," he says.

"I would consider it my lifetime achievement, I don't think I could top it. The reason I say that is it hasn't been done before and my approach to it is different. It doesn't follow a linear style."

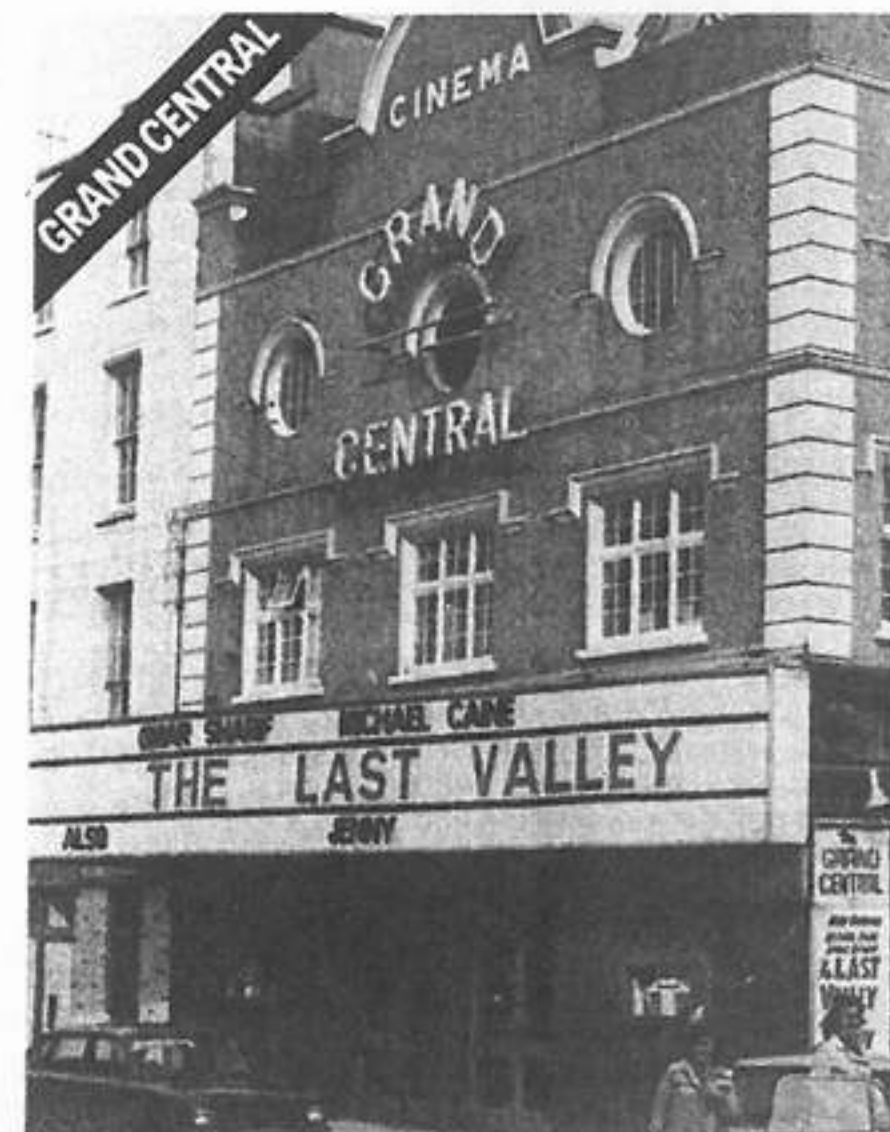
House Full will be launched in the Granary Library this Friday at 6.30pm. It is available in bookshops and from the author, email joemeelick@hotmail.com



The Savoy, which was located on Bedford Row and ran from 1935 to 1988. It was the jewel in the crown of the entertainment world in Limerick, playing host to films, music and theatre



The Lyric Theatre, located on the corner of Glentworth Street and Baker Place, and was in operation from 1924 to 1976. It had a seating capacity of about 600. It was previously known as the Limerick Hypodrome and was demolished in the spring of 1982



The Grand Central, which ran from 1922 to 1990 - latterly known as the Savoy 2. It was located on Bedford Row and had a seating capacity of 800 at its height