

THE LIMERICK STAGE 1736-1800

Part Two

by William
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In 1774, shortly after the end of the summer playing, two notable events occurred in the Limerick company. On Saturday, 1 October, John O'Keeffe, the popular low comedian, married in the Irish Town Mary Heaphy, the manager's daughter. Ten days later the wife of a lesser-known comedian, Richard Sparks, 'was delivered ... of Two Sons at Silvermines in the County of Tipperary', while **en route** to Dublin. Mrs. Sparks, like numerous married actresses of the eighteenth century, evidently felt little discomfort or embarrassment in performance during the last month or two of pregnancy. She had been filling prominent roles as recently as 28 September, the day of her benefit. No ill effects seem to have resulted, for on 17 October the **Limerick Chronicle** reported that Mrs. Sparks and the two boys were 'in a fair way of doing well'.

The second summer after the birth of the twins Mrs. Sparks and her husband chose to play at Kilkenny rather than at Cork and Limerick. Heaphy experienced no loss by their secession, however, because the venerable tragedian Thomas Sheridan returned to Ireland for a farewell tour under Heaphy's management. Sheridan had found his south-of-Ireland visit in 1773 too rewarding in acclaim and money (he had 'picked up' £700, so his Dublin friend George Faulkner informed David Garrick) to resist a second summer invitation. Heaphy's company, with Sheridan as the star attraction performed in Limerick during the first three weeks of September 1776. Once more the citizenry turned out in large numbers to admire Sheridan's art, but the ageing actor had lost his zest for the limelight. Towards the close of his Limerick stay he wrote: 'I have been playing to crowded houses; but my time has not passed so agreeably as formerly.'

The enthusiasm over Sheridan's farewell appearances was as nothing compared with the excitement over the Limerick Jubilee in August of the following year. Planned and directed by the enterprising mayor, Thomas Smyth, the Jubilee took the form of a week of varied entertainments. The magnificent celebration was intended to focus the attention of Britain and the

Continent, as well as all Ireland, upon this vigorous city of 40,000 people, and to demonstrate its coming-of-age as an enlightened European metropolis. The Jubilee opened on Tuesday, 12 August, 1777, with the laying of the cornerstone of the impressive Exchange in Rutland Street. At night the Fancy Ball took place at the Assembly House, where the ballroom was 'lighted in the Manner of the Rotunda in Dublin', and the supper room was 'illuminated with Lamps of various Colours, imitative of the Pantheon in London'. Three hundred persons attended, all wearing costumes of Limerick material and manufacture to evidence the beauty of Irish textiles to the world at large. Though no females dressed in native garb, a few patriotic males impersonated either Irish countrymen or hurlers. Most of the participants decked themselves out as fashionably exotic personages: Greek or Roman deities, harlequins, Indian princesses, Italian princes, and Turkish sultans. Because of the pleasant weather the populace crowded the streets near the quays to gape at these bizarrely attired figures of high society riding in carriages or sedan chairs and attended by footmen. Then a developing Irish democratic impulse seized the onlookers. 'The mob-ility, as usual on such occasions', stated the contemporary reporter, 'forced the nobility and gentry out of their chaises and sedans, and made them walk from some distance to the Assembly-House, to the no small diversion of the numerous crowd'. This ball, the most elaborate in Limerick's history before 1800, did not break up until four o'clock on Wednesday morning.

On Wednesday evening the theatrical programme commenced. Heaphy and his company interrupted their Cork summer season to travel to Limerick and perform for the Jubilee. One of the better comedians, Thomas Wilks, was thrown from his carriage

near Mallow on his way from Cork and suffered a concussion. The injury, though severe, did not result in death as the Dublin report asserted. With the exception of the rollicking O'Keeffe, Heaphy's troupe included no actor of repute. Nevertheless it played acceptably a series of old favourites in the four main types of current drama: (1) the comedy of **The Provok'd Husband** by Colley Cibber on the 13th; (2) the musical farce of **Lionel and Clarissa** by Isaac Bickerstaffe on the 14th; (3) the tragedy of **Hane Shore** by Nicholas Rowe on the 15th; (4) the comic opera of **The Duenna** by R.B. Sheridan on the 16th.

The stage productions, however, could scarcely equal in glamour other of the later Jubilee festivities such as 'the Venetian Breakfast in the beautiful and romantic Garden' belonging to Mr. Robert Davis and located along the banks of the Shannon. A river regatta, interspersed with band music on the water, followed this Thursday morning breakfast. The festivities extended over to Monday, 18 August, when the medieval ceremony of 'riding the franchises' of the city was carried out in gorgeous array. The municipal procession led by the 12th Regiment Band, started from King's Island at noon. 'Every one of the corporations took pains to provide fine cattle (i.e. horses), elegant cloaths, furniture, standards, ensigns, etc.' The pageants of the fourteen trade guilds began with the Smith's display of Venus and a child in a phaeton drawn by four beautiful pied horses with a mounted Vulcan alongside. The Tobacconists brought up the rear of the parade with a float showing the Black King of Morocco and Grimalkin the Snuff Grinder. Thus the Limerick Jubilee concluded in a truly grand finale which left one of the Week's participants recalling 'such a diversity of splendid objects, that the fancy, in a kind of controversy with itself, knew not which most to admire'.

Two years after his direction of the very successful Jubilee Thomas Smyth headed the organization of the Limerick Volunteers, a militant defence corps which was forming throughout Ireland to secure her economic as well as her political liberties. As colonel of

the local contingent Smyth ordered a command performance at the Limerick Theatre on Friday, 27 August 1779, the last night of the season as well as Mrs. O'Keeffe's benefit. The evening's bill presented two melodramas appropriate to the insurgent mood of the times. Pilon's humorous **The Liverpool Prize** included a scene picturing a recent martial exploit on the high seas: 'The French Indiaman brought in by the "Charming Sally" privateer'. In the other piece, Home's **Douglas**, Mrs. O'Keefe made her first appearance as Douglas, the young Scotsman, a free nature-loving soul. Spirited Mary Heaphy O'Keeffe was, however, far from the most notable of her father's players at Limerick in 1779. The well-known English actor John Henderson had joined Heaphy's summer tour as a fresh celebrity and, likewise, Richard Daly, a handsome dashing Irish novice.

Daly, who played opposite the charming and genteel Mrs. Lyster (**nee** Barsanti) in genteel comedy, was to become in the next decade the most notorious personage on the Dublin stage. In December 1781, after assuming the managership at Smock Alley, Dublin, Daly brought Heaphy's reign as the proprietor of the Limerick Theatre to an end by leasing it 'for a term of years' with the proviso that Heaphy might take possession for up to six months per year and might use any scenery found on the premises. The new proprietor, in contrast to his predecessor, welcomed any chance for added income from rental of the theatre. Very shortly he leased the building to Alexander Macartney for six weeks in July and August of 1782 while the Daly company from Dublin was performing at Cork. Macartney, a strolling manager already well known to Kilkenny and Lisburn, presented a conventional repertory done by a group of obscure players. In accordance with the prevailing custom the manager exploited his Masonic connexions for his benefit evening on Friday, 26 July. 'He issued a public request that 'every Brother of Town and Neighbourhood be so kind as to attend the Theatre that Night'. The members of Lodge No. 13 were instructed to 'walk in a Procession from their Lodge Room to the Theatre, dressed in the Insigns of their Order'. The rise of the curtain at 7.30 p.m. found them all accommodated upon an 'amphitheatre' erected on the stage. Macartney sought to make an impression not only upon the Masons but also upon the entire community. On 15 August he gave notice through the local newspaper that he and his troupe would be leaving town in a few days, and he asked that all bills against them be submitted at once for prompt payment.

No sooner had Daly's tenants departed in mid-August than he appeared with his company, featuring the Drury

Lane debutante Anna Maria Phillips. For her benefit on Saturday evening, 31 August, she undertook a generous assortment of light musical roles: Laura in the prelude of **The Chaplet**, Polly in **The Beggar's Opera**, and Leonora in **The Padlock**. On this special occasion the manager increased the size of the 'band' as well as engaged a pianoforte accompanist to heighten the 'airs'. The century's fad for musical interpolations was again exhibited in connexion with West Digges's benefit on the following Wednesday, 4 September, when he played *Macbeth*, and Mrs. Melmoth *Lady Macbeth*. The bill for this last day of the Limerick season stressed the rendering of Purcell's **Macbeth** music and the fact that 'in this admired old Tragedy will be introduced the celebrated incantation of the Witches, assembled over their Caldron in the Pit of Acheron, and all their Magical Spells'.

During the summer of 1783 audiences held up so well in Dublin and then in Cork that Daly did not bring his actors to Limerick until the assizes at the beginning of October. During Assize Week the local regiment of Irish Volunteers under Colonels Burke and Smyth gained publicity and worked off patriotic energy by taking the guard of the theatre. On Wednesday, 8 October, the two Masonic lodges observed a benefit night for 'Distressed Masons' with a procession starting for the playhouse at six o'clock. Three days later a veteran cast in **Othello** - Clinch as Othello, Mrs. Sparks as Desdemona, acted on behalf of Mrs. Heaphy. She made an urgent appeal for patronage, announcing 'with the most sincere Sentiments of Gratitude and the most tender Sensations of unalterable Respect and Esteem' that 'this will be the last Season of her performing in this City'. As was often the case in pleas of this sort, the prophecy turned out quite wrong. The lady continued her appearances for five more years.

In the summer of 1784, as soon as it became known that Daly and his Dublin troupe were not going to visit Limerick at all, William Henry Moss, an English actor of considerable experience in London and Dublin, attempted to turn Daly's by-passing of the Munster capital to his own profit. He drew up in Dublin a proposal 'to establish a theatre in Limerick upon a regular, respectable, and permanent footing for three months', commencing about November 1784. A sufficient number of advance subscriptions for transferable tickets to twelve nights of performance (about one month) would enable him 'to procure performers more suitable to the public taste than the customary and casual mode can possibly induce'. The needed amount of £54.12s would be raised by thirty subscriptions for box seats at £1.10s 6d each, and by ten subscriptions for

pit seats at 18s. each. These subscription figures represented a twenty-five per cent. reduction from the ordinary prices for single performances. The subscription money would be received on 12 August to the leading theatrical patron in the county, Sir Vere Hunt, grandfather of the poet Aubrey de Vere, and owner of Curragh Chase, a rich and beautiful estate fifteen miles south-west of Limerick. Sir Vere apparently did not respond with the desired encouragement, and Moss pursued his scheme of a winter theatrical season no further.

The complete dearth of professional stage entertainment during 1784 provoked the formation of the Limerick Theatrical Society. On 17 January 1785 this organization of local gentlemen published its intention to perform for charitable purposes under the joint management of Sir Vere Hunt, Major Alcock of the 47th Regiment, and Captain Trevor Lloyd Ashe, a skilled instrumentalist, who later appeared at the Fishamble Street Theatre, Dublin, and elsewhere on the Irish stage circuit. The Society leased from Daly the Theatre Royal, but sold no tickets at the door. They had to be purchased in advance from Mr. Watson the printer. Seats in the boxes and 'lattices' (the upper row of boxes on each side of the stage) cost 4s.; in the pit, 3s.; and in the gallery, 2s. The first performance on Tuesday, 25 January, consisted of two outstanding stage favourites: **The Poor Soldier** and **Venice Preserved**, to which Mr. Thomas Grady of Limerick wrote a new epilogue delivered by Captain Ashe. On the second bill, a week later, Sir Vere Hunt took the leading part of Octavio in **The Duenna**. For the fourth society production on Tuesday, 1 March, Mrs. Melmoth came down from Dublin to play the heroine in **Venice Preserved** and **Rosina**. Anticipating a crowded house, the sponsors railed off the rear of the pit to be sold as box seats and thus swelled their proceeds. The curtain rose at six o'clock, an hour earlier than usual, in order that 'the Ladies might get in time to the Assembly' after the theatricals. The Society had planned to end its season of charitable plays with **The Revenge** and **The Beggar's Opera** and **The Poor Soldier** on Tuesday, 15 March, for 'the Relief of Fellow Creatures in Distress, many of whom are detained in a loathsome Prison for their Fees'. On this lofty humanitarian note Limerick's exciting innovation of amateur public dramatics closed for the time being.

The successful activities of the Theatrical Society perhaps were responsible for Daly's paying the city greater consideration in the summer of 1785. At the end of the Smock Alley season he sent direct to Limerick the better portion of his company, including two star attractions: the noted

impersonator of native Irish roles, Robert Owenson, and the young Covent Garden tragedian, Joseph Holman, who was visiting Ireland for the first time. He made his county debut on Tuesday, 16 August, as a Romeo in love with a forty-year old Juliet, Mrs. Egerton from Drury Lane. His performance drew somewhat restrained approbation from the **Limerick Chronicle**, which termed his person 'elegant', his voice 'manly', and his action 'that of a finished Gentleman'.

For the next three years Limerick enjoyed more extended and unusual entertainment from Proprietor Daly, no doubt because the city's audiences were keeping pace with its rising population, now close to 50,000. Each summer the Dublin players fitted in two visits to the Munster capital between their sojourns at Cork and Waterford, and also introduced an increasing variety of guest actors. The 1786 performances, which occurred in the first two weeks of August and the last two weeks of September, presented Charles Bannister of Drury Lane and John Henry ("Jack") Johnstone of Covent Garden in their first Limerick appearance, plus Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers, and Richard Wilson, all three of whom were from Covent Garden and on their first Irish tour. These five new faces constituted a superlative cast for **Love in a Village** on the opening night of 31 July. In 1787 the curtain was up at the Theatre Royal, Limerick, 16-28 July and 13-25 August, with the celebrated Michael Kelly, 'from Venice' via Drury Lane, and the charming Mrs. Crouch, also of Drury Lane, as the chief attractions. They chose to do **Lionel and Clarissa** for their **premiere** before an audience overflowing on account of the assizes.

In 1788 Daly opened the theatre very early in order to profit from the crowds attending the Limerick races 7-12 July. For this year Sir Vere Hunt managed the race meeting, much to the displeasure of the Protestant Bishop of Limerick, who deplored the event as 'very injurious to the Lower Class of People, and Gambling (that most destructive Vice) amongst the Higher Class'. Despite the Bishop's opposition, Race Week had already begun to rival Assize Week as a local holiday period, especially for gathering in the county people of all classes. The Garter Inn 'at the back of the square opposite the Theatre' offered 'good stabling' at 8d. per night and served meals every day during the races at special prices: breakfasts 8d., dinners 1s., and suppers, even after the plays, 10d. Limerick's picturesque racecourse, lying in a pretty valley, 'exhibited for the accommodation of spectators a long range of booths, in tent-like style, embellished with painted signs of various figures, as a boot, a pig, a gridiron, etc.,

THIRD NIGHT.

This present *Thursday*, being the 9th of *February*, 1758,
Will be presented, a TRAGEDY, called, The

EARL of ESSEX.

Written by HENRY BROOKE, Esq;

The Part of ESSEX to be performed by

Mr. SHERIDAN,

Burleigh, Mr. HURST,

Southampton by Mr. DEXTER,

Raleigh, Mr. STORER,

Nottingham by Mrs. KENNEDY,

Rutland by Miss KENNEDY,

And, the Part of Queen Elizabeth to be performed by

Mrs. FITZ-HENRY.

(Being her third Appearance in that Character)

The Characters dress'd in the Habits of the Times.

A playbill featuring Thomas Sheridan in the part of Essex.

reminding one of Tenier's celebrated Dutch Fair'. The farmers' wives and daughters so adorned the surrounding slopes that their 'universal costume of blue and scarlet cloaks, and white starched cocked-up caps, in the distance resembled a profusion of sweet comfits regularly disposed on a dessert cake'. To entice these racegoers at night Daly selected as his initial drawing-card seventeen-year-old Maria Hughes, a Tipperary beauty whose stage debut three months previously had thrilled Dublin. She was soon joined by 'Jack' Johnstone and Wright Bowden of Covent Garden, and Mrs. Castelli of Norwich, the latter two on their first Irish tour. Daly's troupe stayed on for most of July, and then came up again from Cork just to act during Assize Week in mid-August.

About this time a 'committee of Nobility and Gentry' revived Tottenham Heaphy's proposal of 1774 that a new playhouse be erected in conjunction with the Assembly House on Charlotte's Quay. The Smyth family, now represented by John Prendergast Smyth, M.P., renewed its offer of ground adjoining the Assembly House, as a site. With this location in view, the promoters commissioned a London architect of some eminence, James Lewis, to draw up in 1788 appropriate building plans. These, the only ones known for an eighteenth-century theatre in Ireland, called for a handsome three-storied structure of Palladian style to be connected with the Assembly House. It was conceived, however, as a structure that, like the existing Theatre Royal in Cornwallis Street, would combine under one roof residential apartments at the front and a theatre at the rear. The living quarters intended for Mr. Smyth's occupancy 'during his stay in the city' would look

north upon the quay and river, and would possess an imposing ornamented facade, in brick and cut stone to match the Assembly House, with two large doors on the ground floor. The theatre area was to have entrances wholly unconnected with the house. Admittance to the boxes would be gained through the vestibule and hallway of the Assembly House, thence up the 'Great Stairs' to a landing, and finally through a broad door into the corridor encircling the first tier of boxes. The pit and the gallery were to be approached separately by doors from the back street at the south end of the building. The stage and dressing-rooms would be situated at this end, but the actors' green-room, reached from backstage by a side passage, would be located in an adjacent card or tea-room of the Assembly House.

The main stage was to be 32 feet at its greatest depth with a forestage or apron one-third as deep, in front of a proscenium 34 feet wide by 27 feet high. The auditorium, 50 feet by 50 feet, and therefore larger by a fifth than that in the Cornwallis Street playhouse, was designed unlike any other eighteenth-century public theatre in Ireland or Britain, namely, with a complete **upper** as well as lower horseshoe-shaped tier of boxes. The upper tier, containing thirteen compartments, would include in the centre a larger box for Mr. Smyth with entry solely from the drawing-room of his house. The lower tier would have two fewer boxes to allow for the door on each side of the forestage under the upper box nearest the proscenium. Another unique feature of Lewis's plans in relation to the box arrangements was the apparent removal of intrusive columns which traditionally supported the front tiers.

This projected Limerick theatre, though not equal in size or in impressiveness of entrance to the contemporary Theatre Royal at Cork, would have surpassed the latter in the elegance and novelty of its interior. Indeed, it would have been an edifice truly befitting the stature of Ireland's third city. A major obstacle to its construction, however, arose. The peculiar and limited 'form of the ground' donated by the Smyth family compelled the architect to design the backstage area in the shape of a right-angled triangle with the rear seat as hypotenuse. The consequent space available for the requirements of production did not prove sufficient to meet professional acceptance. This adverse judgement made clear the unfeasibility of the site, and with that revelation the community interest in a new playhouse apparently evaporated. Once again the Munster capital, despite its prosperity, showed a lack of strong desire to establish a worthy home for its dramatic entertainment.

As a dismal aftermath to the failure of the theatre venture Daly sent 'the Dregs' of this Dublin company to Limerick in the summer of 1789. Under the assistant manager, William Dawson, they seem to have given bad performances during the August assizes. The audiences felt insulted and reacted with severity toward what one indignant observer called 'the remnant of a motley group of ragged strollers'. This same critic wrote to Dublin a satiric description of the first evening when 'a discordant scraper and a blind fiddler attempted to grind opera tunes; and a gentleman of the bar, Mr. Lysaght, called out Deputy Dawson, alias Chief of the Monarch's eunuchs, on the stage, and he was obliged to make the **amende honorable**'. Saturday night, 22 August, saw the tension on both sides of the footlights at its height. Mrs. O'Reilly, one of the leading ladies, started to play Lucy in **The Beggar's Opera**, then 'changed her mind and quitted the house'. The irate audience shouted for her husband, and at O'Reilly's appearance on the stage, 'treated him so roughly that he set out for Cork that moment'.

This unhappy summer produced strong repercussions among the playgoing enthusiasts of the city and vicinity. A group of young gentlemen, following in the steps of the former Limerick Theatrical Society, undertook a series of performances for charitable purposes during the autumn and early winter of 1789-90. They leased the Theatre Royal; set up a price scale of 3s. for the boxes, 2s. for the pit, 1s. for the gallery; and sold admission tickets as well as box places in advance. The overwhelming response to their first effort led them to raise prices by one shilling for the box area, and by six-

pence for the other parts of the house. The 'crowded and brilliant' audience at the opening on Friday, 9 October, brought in such a profit that 'it effected the liberty' of two men from the city jail where they had been confined a long time for debt in spite of their numerous dependants. The second bill on Tuesday, 17 November, provided an ample evening of entertainment: **Venice Preserved, The Poor Soldier**, a recitation and a duet. The curtain rose at seven o'clock but did not go down until midnight by reason of the encores. Though 'the actresses were a little bashful, it being their first appearance', they received hearty applause from a full house that netted over twenty guineas for the Limerick poor.

Even greater profit was secured by railing in the rear of the pit with the boxes for the acting of **Cato** and **The Brave Irishman** on Monday, 21 December, when the proceeds went to 'the Relief of Confined Debtors, who now Labour under the greatest Disress for want of the common Necessaries of Life at this inclement Season'. Two weeks later the Fever Hospital benefited from a repetition of the December programme, the final one of the charitable series.

While these young gentlemen players were stirring up Limerick's interest in stage entertainment, Sir Vere Hunt felt the urge again, after five years, to engage in the theatrical business but now as a bona-fide professional enterprise. Realizing the appeal of a fresh and more elegant milieu, he turned to the brick and cut-stone Assembly House and transformed its ballroom into a 'beautiful' theatre. The magnificent ballroom - 60 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 35 feet high - was coved and decorated in Ionic style, and equipped with handsome glass lustres. Some of the adjoining small rooms the baronet doubtless fitted up as backstage quarters.

Sir Vere procured as his manager the veteran Dublin tragedian, Lawrence Clinch, a strong-minded actor who at the moment was enjoying one of his frequent disagreements with Richard Daly and therefore was not employed at Crow Street for the current winter. Clinch assembled a troupe of experienced strolling actors to open the 'New Theatre' with **As You Like It**, on Saturday, 30 January 1790. Immediate success induced the aristocratic entrepreneur to expand his activities by taking over from Daly the proprietorship of the Waterford Theatre Royal. Thither he sent his players under Manager Clinch sometime in early summer for a stay that lasted till late July.

When Sir Vere's company returned from Waterford to begin a summer season of five weeks at the Limerick Assembly House on Saturday, 31 July, it had to compete against the Crow Street troupe under Daly till their departure on 13 August. The Dublin players chose to appear just at this time so that they might share in the lucrative business provided by Assize Week, 2-7 August. At their Cornwallis Street theatre they performed for the most part comic operas with a strong quartet of vocalists in Bowden, J. Kelly, Mrs. Mountain, and Miss George. Thus, during this brief midsummer period, the Limerick playgoers could enjoy two competent companies with quite differing repertoires - a situation unparalleled in the city's stage history before 1800.

Many interesting details of Sir Vere Hunt's theatrical enterprise during the summer and the following winter season at Limerick can be gleaned from the surviving accounts of his treasurer, John Booker. Receipts ran large from the opening Saturday night, 31 July, through the ensuing Assize Week when daily performances were given. Income for these seven evenings totalled £130.7s., with a maximum of £37.19s. on Monday, 2 August, and a minimum of £4.6s. for the next Saturday. During this period the doorkeepers unwittingly accepted 13s.6d. of 'bad silver', for which, according to custom, they had to be reimbursed by the proprietor.

In addition to the manager, a dozen men and a half-dozen women composed the regular acting personnel. Manager Clinch, of course, got the biggest compensation, £3,13s.6d. a week. The leading men - Richard Hurst, Ezra Wells, and J. Brown who had just come from Crow Street - received £2.2s. for a normal week of three nights, but additional and variable amounts for extra performances; the ordinary actors - Adamson, Clare, Kelly, McCulloch, McCrea, Power - £1.1s. to £1.11s.6d. per week; and the novices - Beaumont, Dempsey, Gotley - 10s.6d. weekly. The women's salaries were appreciably lower. The top figure of £1.11s.6d. was paid to Mrs. Achmet, a well-known Dublin actress recently back from Covent Garden. Young Harriet Westropp Atkins of Cork, **ingenue** and comedienne, played for £1.1s. per week; the undistinguished Mrs. McCulloch and Mrs. Power, 10s.6d. The irregular services of Mesdames Brown, Hurst, Kelly and Wells appear to have been remunerated by extra payments to their respective husbands. The benefit nights 'added a good deal to the stated salaries, but the returns on these occasions always proved unpredictable. For instance, Miss Atkins at her August benefit took in £9.4s., while Wells with a comparable position in the company

drew only £5.11s. Miss Atkin's next benefit, in January 1791, yielded £19.8s., over twice the amount of her previous intake.

Sir Vere Hunt's backstage and house staff numbered between twenty and twenty-five. The scene designer, Samuel (?) Whitmore, an artist of repute, rated with the chief actors in salary at £2.2s. per week. Byrne the assistant scene painter, Hoole the head carpenter, and the two regular musicians had a nightly wage of 3s. per night. Bill posters, charwomen, doorkeepers, playhouse guards, stage boys, and other helpers got 1s. for each performance. The total wages of the New Theatre, Limerick, for the last week of its summer season, a typical week, amounted to approximately £36.

Sir Vere Hunt kept production expenses at a minimum. Copy-books of individual parts in plays (for example, **King Lear** and **She Stoops to Conquer**) were procured at a charge of only 6d. Purchases of such petty materials as chains, cord, glass, ink, nails, painter's size, paper, pens, tar, and wine occurred often. A few unusual items were bought: green baize for the pit seats, 4s.3d.; 'two Chamber Pots for the Dress Rooms', 2s.; an inkstand, 6d.; a pitcher and basin, 2s.; a prompter's whistle, 6d.; a dozen tin candlesticks, 2s.3d. Hurst, wardrobe and property keeper as well as actor, made occasional outlays: 'stage properties', £2.10s. on one date and £1.1s. on another; 'dresses', £1.1s. once, and, later, £1.11s. A costume for *Touchstone*, done by Moore the tailor, cost 7s. The stage carpenter received 3s. for 'turning work' on Juliet's bier. Certainly these were very modest sums for outfitting.

Similar economy characterized the illumination of the theatre and the stage. During the summer season it must have been done entirely by oil lamps, because the sole lighting charge was for oil at 9s. a performance. The expense of oil lighting in the winter increased by 2s. Since the accounts mention 'toe for the lamps', that is, cord-like cloth or fibre for lamp wicks, it is apparent that Sir Vere Hunt had not installed the London 'patent' lamps, an improved type with cylindrical wick, which Daly had introduced to Ireland at the Crow Street Theatre in 1788. Wax tapers lighted the playhouse interior on rare occasions in the winter season. According to one entry, it cost 38s.4d. to buy 'Candles for 4 nights'.

Pantomimes like **The Death of Captain Cook**, given several times in January 1791, required, according to one of the playbills, 'a beautiful display of Scenes: the Wigwam of the Chiefs of O-Why-ee, a Kaiva or Festival, Grand Savage Dances, a Marriage Altar backed by a Dark Wood, a Nuptial Procession, the Arrival of Captain

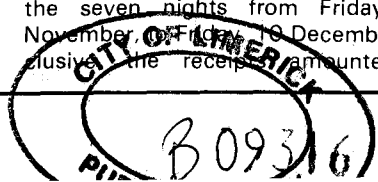


The flag of the Limerick Volunteers.

Cook, Nautical Manoeuvres, the Assassination of Captain Cook, a Grand Tomb Scene, a Procession of Naval and Military Honours.' The hire of soldiers from the local barracks to act in the landing and processional scenes amounted to somewhat more than £1 per night. Four extra 'Black Men', impersonating South Sea islanders, had to be paid 3s. for each performance; 2s. an evening were spent on 'faggots and toys' used by the 'natives'. Yet even these additional expenditures for a pantomime indicate simple and thrifty staging.

Sir Vere Hunt brought his summer season to an end on 4 September. Then, still of a mind to extend his

theatrical reputation, he led his company to neighbouring Ennis for four weeks. Thereafter the troupe may have gone further afield or they may have taken a vacation; at any rate they did not start acting again in Limerick until Monday, 8 November. The personnel remained much the same except for the absence of Clinch, who at the time of the Ennis tour had left for Dublin to join Daly's Crow Street organization once more. Performances until mid-December maintained the normal schedule of Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and business continued good. For the seven nights from Friday, 26 November, or Friday, 10 December, inclusive, the receipts amounted to



£107.14s., compared with £130.14s. for the first seven nights of the summer season. With the onset of more inclement weather, playing became more intermittent at the same time that attendance declined. From 10 December to the end of January the company acted only eleven nights and took in at the door £87.7s. On Monday, 7 February 1791, with the benefits completed, the thirteen weeks of winter performances at the Assembly House came to a close.

Sir Vere Hunt then prepared for another short season that would include the Spring Assize Week, and to that end installed as manager, at a salary of £4.4s. per week, the veteran William Moss of Dublin. Back in 1784, Moss had vainly aspired to be a Limerick manager but had never appeared on the local stage until his arrival in December 1790, after a long sojourn in Edinburgh. The new manager persuaded Mrs. Castelli and Mr. Brennan, well-known singing strollers, to join the company, and thus he strengthened its musical repertoire. The new season at the Assembly House theatre commenced on 23 February 1791 and continued until 18 March. During these four weeks Moss raised the curtain on nine nights for total receipts of about £72, the same average per night as in midwinter.

After a month of inactivity following the cessation of the Limerick performances Sir Vere sent the company under Moss to play at Cork. In June a disagreement with Moss caused the Limerick baronet to withdraw from any further theatrical responsibilities. **Faulkner's Dublin Journal** on 9 August reported that Sir Vere's playhouses at Limerick and Waterford were untenanted and his 'troops' were ranging the country. 'Having renounced the office of Field Marshall Manager, he has retired within the purlieu of the (Newtown-Pery) club house'.

With Sir Vere's retirement Richard Daly once again exercised sole control of Limerick's professional stage entertainment. His Dublin players, however, no longer liked the venerable Theatre Royal on Cornwallis Street, and called it 'too small' when in September 1791 they arrived with two guest stars from London, Charles Incedon and Mrs. James Billington, who were making their first Limerick appearance. The disgusted Mrs. Billington, who had been hailed 'divine, all-captivating, angelic', now 'mistook the respect due to an audience'. Incensed by her disdain, the public returned the compliment by 'mistaking the night of her benefit'; they carefully refrained from buying any box seats for that day. The celebrated actress in the face of this debacle hurried from town without any reward.

The harsh reception accorded Mrs. Billington failed to deter one of her rivals, Madame Mara of Drury Lane,

from performing at the Limerick Theatre Royal during the next summer. She appeared along with Daly's Crow Street troupe for Assize Week, 20-25 August 1792. This year the playhouse rather than the players aroused public condemnation: 'So large and so improving a City as this should be disgraced by such a Theatre. The Manager ought to pay some attention to the proper accommodation of the Inhabitants. The House is not only considerably out of repair, but many of the Seats in the Boxes are dirty beyond description'. The same critic blamed the manager also for the 'disorderly and insolent behaviour in the gallery' where the spectators 'resemble Savages'. If the manager had shown the proper initiative and called on the 'magistrates', they would surely have assisted in preserving decent manners throughout the house.

Daly may not have heeded the urging of this angry patron to sweep out and repair his building, but at least he appeased the complaints of others by putting the theatre's subscription list in order for 1793. Since the list had been 'mislaid' at the start of the previous season, 'some confusion' had attended the admission of season-ticket holders. No longer, however, would ladies and gentlemen be inconvenienced at the door, for the doorkeepers had in hand a new and correct list, so the proprietor announced before the first night. The Crow Street company came direct from Dublin in mid-July to present Limerick's playgoers with their first sight of two gifted actresses, Mrs. Frances Abington and Miss W. Brett. They paired off admirably as Lady Teazle and Maria in **The School for Scandal** for Mrs. Abington's benefit on Thursday, 25 July, when the curtain did not rise until 7.30 p.m., a half-hour later than usual because of the high society attending. Miss Brett in connexion with her benefit on Monday the 29th adopted the unusual procedure of being present at the theatre on that Monday from ten until three o'clock to sell in person tickets as well as box places. Her novelty on the evening's programme consisted in assuming for the first time the male role of Young Hob in the ever-popular ballad opera of **Hob in the Well**.

Another glamorous actress new to Limerick, Miss Elizabeth Farren from Drury Lane, furnished the main excitement of the 1794 season, which opened with Assize Week, 8-13 September. Miss Farren 'was most rapturously received by a very elegant audience; for, besides numerous people of fashion residing near Limerick, the assizes brought together an immense number of people'. Packed houses greeted her on all five nights of her week's engagement. To Proprietor Daly she proved a lucrative investment despite his publicity about the 'very

great expense' connected with her visit. Over the years the Theatre Royal had grown notorious because it contained no decent place of reception backstage. The prospect of Miss Farren's vexation at the absence of so important a facility moved Daly at last to remedy the situation. He built for her a fine dressing-room that in the future was to be used for the green-room. In addition, he paid her the highest fee ever given to an actress in eighteenth-century Limerick, namely, £50 per night. These outlays in conjunction with 'the smallness of the theatre' provided Daly with his excuse for raising the cost of seats to the current Dublin figures: 5s. for the boxes, 3s. for the pit, and 2s. for the gallery. At these new prices a full house totalled about £130. Therefore, with the theatre filled throughout Assize Week, the proprietor earned a large profit.

Miss Farren elected to entertain Limerick with the comic parts in which she excelled: Beatrice in **Much Ado About Nothing**, Estifania in **Rule A Wife**, Lady Bell in Arthur Murphy's **Know Your Own Mind**, and Violante in Mrs. Centlivre's **The Wonder: A Woman Keeps A Secret**. To play Lissardo opposite Miss Farren's Violante, Daly chose at short notice the youthful comedian Charles Mathews, who had made a promising debut at Crow Street in June. This assignment led to a situation that developed as much comic melodrama as any scene in the troupe's repertory.

Mathews, desirous of perfecting his role of Lissardo, decided to rehearse during the afternoon in the open air. He crossed the bridge over the Shannon and was strolling along the river bank when he met a fellow actor, Seymour, also rehearsing. After reading lines to each other for a while, they parted. Soon Mathews, on account of the sultry weather, proceeded to strip for bathing, but 'never had a notion of swimming'. Suddenly he got in over his head and started to sink in panic. Like a man in a dream, he fell for a brief moment into conjecturing who could act Lissardo with Miss Farren that night if he were drowned. Then he rose, saw Seymour reading a little way off in the meadow, cried out feebly, and sank twice. Seymour providentially heard him, rushed up, and jumped into the river without undressing. Mathews, dragged to shore after a struggle, was hurriedly carried in the nude by Seymour and two by-standing soldiers to a public house, put on a table, and rubbed 'in all directions' with whisky. Curious onlookers gathered for joking comment on the reviving corpse:

'Sure, he went a swimming, and had never learnt?

'He had one lesson only, I heard, and that was to teach him how to sink'.

'By my soul, then he was an apt

scholar. What name's upon him?"

'Sure, I heard the Englisher red-coat say he was one of Daly's **divarters**'.

The whisky massage restored the nearly drowned Mathews with such surprising speed that by evening he went on stage and carried off his part to the complete satisfaction of both Miss Farren and the audience.

Another memorable episode enlivened Limerick's summer two years later. The Crow Street company came to the city direct from Dublin in order to take advantage of Assize Week. They opened on Monday, 18 July 1796, in the comic operas of **Robin Hood** and **The Farmer**, with the two principals, Joseph Munden and Miss Poole, making their first Limerick appearance. Since Daly's players were staying for only ten days, he rashly promised that he would send at least a portion of his troupe up from Cork to perform during the Limerick races, 18-20 August. When the time came, however, he dispatched five of his instrumentalists and singers to give evening concerts in the Cornwallis Street theatre with but pit and box seats available. The substitution of chamber music for plays irritated fashionable society at the same time that the closing off of the gallery vexed the general populace. In retaliation citizens and visitors alike boycotted the concert series. Four persons attended the **premiere**: one unidentified man in the pit, and Lord Barrymore with two guests, all three of whom entered a box late in the programme. This fiasco concluded both the concerts and Daly's reign as proprietor of the

Limerick Theatre Royal.

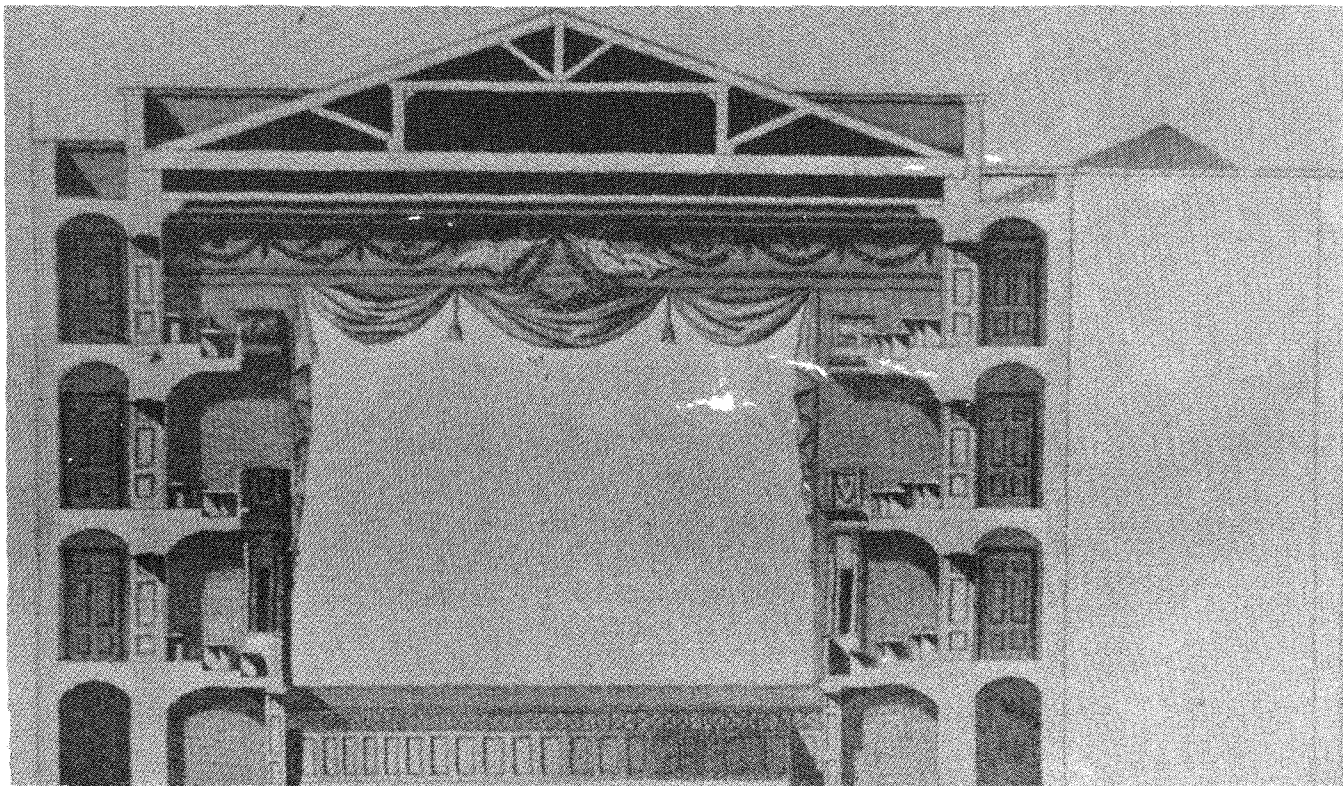
The Rebellion of 1798 caused the Crow Street organization to delay its annual visit to Munster's capital until the first of October, when the violence and tension had almost subsided in the south-west of Ireland. Then the Crow Street deputy manager, Thomas Bellamy, took on tour one of the strongest troupes that had ever set forth from Dublin. Its leading figure was not, as in recent summer tours, an actress, a comedian, or a singer, but a tragedian of repute, George Frederick Cooke from Covent Garden. He made his Limerick debut in the role of Shylock on the season's opening night, Monday, 1 October. A week later Manager Bellamy staged his own benefit with a calculated outburst of loyalty to the English Ascendancy. For the evening's climax 'a Grand Emblematic Transparency', representing the Viceroy Marquess Cornwallis supported by Justice and Mercy, was gradually disclosed amid the singing of 'See the Conquering Hero', 'Rule Britannia!', and 'God Save The King'. This display of allegiance typified the political bias that had dominated the entrepreneurs of the Irish theatre throughout the preceding two critical decades.

The final summer of the century found the Crow Street troupe at Limerick in time for the assizes, 22-26 July, with an even finer aggregation of talent, including Thomas Huddart of Covent Garden on his first Irish tour, young Miss Gough in her local debut, Cooke, Fulham, and the popular come-

dian James B. Stewart. For the troupe's last performance Huddart and Stewart employed the arrangement, rare among 'name' players, of 'blending their Nights', that is, combining their benefits. Huddart proceeded to shine as Othello, and Stewart as a singer of comic lyrics, notably one entitled 'In Poaching All Mankind Delight'.

The truly superior groups of actors that now were yearly visiting Ireland's third city deserved there an attractive and commodious playhouse. Frederick Edward Jones, who in 1797 had taken over the Limerick as well as the Dublin and Cork Theatre Royal patents from Richard Daly, pronounced the thirty-year-old structure in Cornwallis Street to be in 'such a decayed and ruinous condition that it would be much more advantageous to build a new Theatre than repair the old'. Therefore, to stir up agitation for an appropriate modern building, he advertised at intervals during the winter 1799-1800 for 'Ground in a central situation ... 50 feet in Front, by at least 130 feet in Depth', whereon to erect a new theatre.

These advertisements, however, elicited neither offer of land nor any other material support. For the third time in the last quarter-century the undertaking to provide Limerick with a more suitable playhouse had been called to public attention; for the third time no effective response was forthcoming. Without any good excuse Limerick went forward into the era of the Union dependent upon a notoriously outdated theatre.



Design of the cross-section of the stage for the proposed Limerick theatre.