

THE LIMERICK STAGE

1736~1800

PART ONE

A STROLLING PRELUDE

Professional stage entertainment had become deeply rooted in the life of Dublin by 1720. Between that year and the Act of Union in 1800 community interest in and support of dramatic performances spread from the capital to all sections of the country. Indeed, it was during the eighteenth century that the theatrical inclinations of the townspeople of Ireland were aroused and shaped into a permanent, nation-wide tradition which was affected by but never dependent upon any of the movements for Irish political autonomy that flared and faded.

A sociable, beneficent attitude in a majority of the upper classes, and a remarkable sense of humour in the lower orders, made the eighteenth-century Irish towns an alluring 'Ultima Thule' for English as well as native performers. The seventeenth-century concept of players as vagabonds or inferior persons disappeared from the minds of both the profession and the public perhaps more quickly in Ireland than in Britain. For instance, in 1743, a Dublin clergyman's son, John Carteret Pilkington, in a fit of adolescent depression over his musical career, had given up 'hopes of being a gentleman'. During the summer, on a visit to Cork, he suddenly decided to join the troupe at the Theatre Royal because he found the members, by dress, manners, and education, assuming the character of 'gentlemen' and being accepted as such in the city. Thus the gratifying status that actors and actresses generally enjoyed long before 1800 throughout the Emerald Isle proved a decisive factor in giving it fame abroad as 'the Hot-Bed for Actors'.

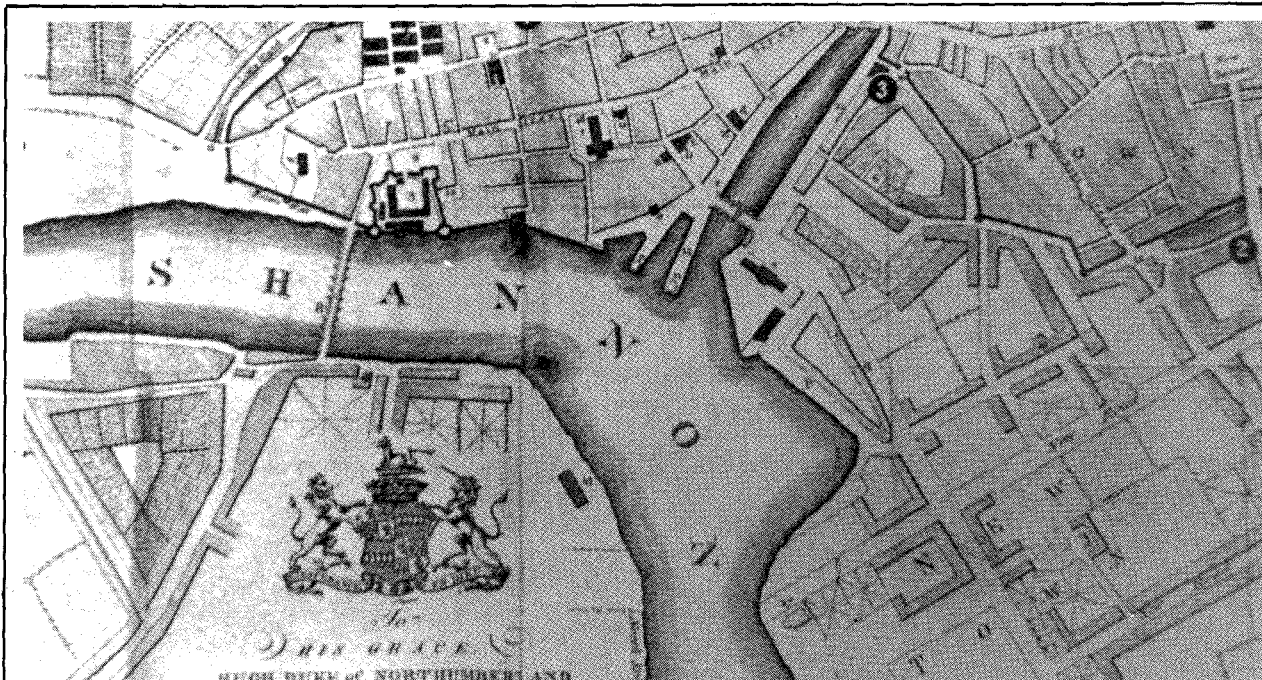
In the course of the eighteenth century the more im-

by William Smith Clark

portant Irish towns came to be divided into three groupings of theatrical foci. Cork, Limerick, and later, Waterford and Newry became satellites of Dublin ... At first such companies originated for the most part in Dublin and embarked in the summers on sporadic tours.

These travelling players fascinated the populace wherever they put up. And, in turn, the spectators at the inns along the road always delighted one of the century's outstanding itinerant comedians, John O'Keeffe. A 'great variety of personages' were sure to assemble at every stopping-place to welcome the troupers and to speed them on their way. Their modes of transport provided the bystanders with a subject for voluble and whimsical repartee: 'the post chaise, the gig, the whiskey, the nobby, the single horse, the double horse, the car', and, above all else, those most humble Irish beasts of burden, 'St. Francis's mules'. As the moment of departure approached, the manager of a strolling band used to round up his fellows like a mother hen overseeing her chicks. On one occasion, O'Keeffe recalled, the manager stood 'at the inn-door, his hands in his fobs, looking anxiously around', and an Irish countryman, pointing at him, loudly addressed another onlooker: "Hush! look! that's the ringleader of them all!"

The manager was the 'ringleader' of a troupe organized in most cases on a 'commonwealth' or shareholding basis. Under such an arrangement each performer shared equally in the profits of each performance after the expenses had been deducted, but the manager customarily enjoyed, in addition to his individual portion,



Map of Limerick by John Ferrar, 1786, showing the sites of the eighteenth century' playhouses.

an allotment of four 'dead' shares, two for costumes and two for scenery.

Every sharer supplemented his income by the profit arising from one or more benefit performances. Each benefit was allocated usually to only one beneficiary or to a married couple, though, sometimes, in the case of a minor or novice actor, to two beneficiaries. Professional seniority normally determined the order of the benefits, the manager and the leading performers taking the earlier ones. Those of about the same rating arrived at precedence by mutual agreement or by lot, or, occasionally, by managerial decision. 'A pretty female might have a Secret Interest with the Manager'. All ranks looked upon the benefit as the ultimate harvest. Failure to reap an appreciable profit wounded not only the player's purse but also 'his feeling in the tenderest point'. Then, as now, 'the Theatre was a Temple of Vanity', in which the acting profession constantly worshipped.

The benefit system, though it added considerably to the gains of the majority of the acting profession, also disturbed the self-respect of many. The system forced both men and women into the dependent position of begging patronage, particularly from the merchants and the gentry. Each performer was expected to go around the town, knocking 'humbly' at doors with or without rappers, as well as 'supinely' calling at shops and stalls, to leave a playbill and request the favour of Mr. and Mrs. —'s company at his benefit. Occasionally a popular actor might be aided by a local friend or official.

Admission was set at 2s., the usual pit price outside Dublin, with the not uncommon provision of half-price for children. The undivided and close seating demanded that, in order to prevent what numerous persons of the period considered unpleasant social contact, no 'servants' be admitted. Ordinarily, at town theatres, the servants of 'persons of quality' were permitted to enter at the opening of the doors and hold seats in the boxes or pits for their employers. Then, on the arrival of the latter, the servants retired to the gallery 'to answer the commands of their respective masters and mistresses'.

The wayward inclinations of the curious and vain theatregoers plagued management everywhere in Ireland up to 1800. As late as May 1799 Mr. Smithson at Kilkenny found prohibition to be necessary and announced with unequivocal brevity: 'No admittance behind the Scenes'. The persistence of the backstage problem may be attributed in some measure to the long-standing tradition of allowing persons on the stage at special performances, such as the nights for the Masons or the Friendly Brothers of St. Patrick. On these occasions rising tiers of boards were erected in the form of an amphitheatre at the rear of the stage to accommodate the guests of honour. The fraternal orders always wore their 'proper Clothing and Jewels', and sat all evening 'in their formalities'. The chief official at the local group was often provided with a seat of distinction at the centre of the amphitheatre.

LIMERICK

Limerick, the historic capital of Munster, had more than recovered from the sieges and confiscations of the Williamite wars by the middle of the eighteenth century. Indeed, by then 'the City of the Violated Treaty' was well on its way to becoming the third city of Ireland. Yet it still retained its mediaeval walls, narrow crooked streets, and segregated districts for English and Irish residents. The ancient fortifications, which surrounded both the 'English Town' on King's Island and also the 'Irish Town' to the south across the Abbey River, unhappily confined a fast-growing population of twenty-five to thirty thousand. Travellers, viewing the city's thriving commerce, were surprised at its shabby precincts, especially the dirty and

crowded quarters of the Irish Town. In truth, Limerick's citizens had been so much absorbed in business enterprises that civic as well as cultural and recreational facilities had by no means kept pace with the increasing stature of the community.

Up to 1760 no tholsel, exchange, custom house, assembly rooms, or promenades existed worthy of a visitor's attention. The theatre of that day was also an undistinguished building with a history that may have extended back to the beginnings of local stage entertainment. From 1736 onwards Dublin troupes, while on their summer tours to the south of Ireland, often stopped to perform at Limerick. Thither in 1754 a veteran stroller, James Love, migrated from Edinburgh to manage a summer company. Though unpleasing in person and voice, he attained a considerable reputation by reason of two quite diverse accomplishments: (1) his writing of the recitational prologue 'Bucks Have at Ye All', a steady favourite throughout Ireland during the latter half of the eighteenth century; (2) his acting of Falstaff, which one informed colleague praised as 'the best of his time'.

In 1760, when Spranger Barry, manager of the Dublin Crow Street Theatre, opened the fine new theatre at Cork, he instituted regular summer seasons at Limerick as a supplementary undertaking. For the next decade the Dublin Theatre Royal company played almost every year at the small inconvenient structure called 'the Theatre in Peter's Cell'. The district known as Peter's Cell, comprising the ruined properties of an Augustinian nunnery dedicated to St. Peter, lay along the walls in the north-eastern section of the English Town. About 1760 a number of professional men and others of some means, such as Anne O'Dell with her fine house and garden, resided there. The lane which led from Bishop Street as the principal entry into the area still survives, bearing the quaint name of 'Peter's Cell'. Today, however, it exhibits no vestiges of the nineteenth century; it is flanked on the north by the modern St. Mary's Convent and School and, on the south, by a large public playground. Some ingenious theatrical entrepreneur transformed the refectory of the one-time nunnery into a playhouse containing boxes, pit, one gallery, stage, and a few dressing rooms. Seats in the 1760's sold at 3s. in the boxes, 2s. in the pit, and 1s. in the gallery. The refreshments served at the Peter's Cell performances constituted the theatre's one distinction: they were not oranges, as in London and Dublin, but peaches. The fruit sellers circulated with baskets of luscious four-inch specimens at a halfpenny each.

In September and October of 1767 the Crow Street actors were performing at Limerick under the leadership of William Dawson, Barry's deputy. During their stay the company's famous tumbler, Sully, married one of the **ingenues**, Miss Shepherd, daughter of an Irish strolling manager, Charles Shepherd. This romance must have caused little stir among the players, however, in the midst of the almost daily excitement surrounding the Peter's Cell performances. The mean and cramped interior of the playhouse made for very informal and prankish behaviour. On one occasion the Badgers Club, composed of the county's first gentlemen, sponsored **Romeo and Juliet**. The club members as privileged spectators sat on the stage and imbibed freely from the contents of a nearby side-board. Towards the close of the play, at the moment of Juliet's death, the Grand Badger, an old man dressed in a high cap of badger's skin, could not contain himself. Crying out, 'Oh, my poor pretty little soul! don't be lying there', he stepped forward, lifted Juliet up in spite of her remonstrance, and took her to the sideboard for refreshments. On the day Shakespeare's tragedy ended in laughter!

At another performance a Limerick buck, familiarly called 'the Grand Bugle', mounted to the stage in order to

show himself off after the prevailing fashion, discovered too many of his kind ahead of him between the scene wings at the sides, and therefore walked behind the scene at the back. Then in the nicely painted and valuable flat he cut with his penknife a hole large enough to show his face. There he stood at his ease, boldly looking out at the audience. The Grand Bugle had a worthy rival for public attention in a personage known as 'the Child' because 'Frolic was his whole affair in this world'. One evening at Peter's Cell 'the Child' was sitting in the gallery with a crowd of fellow roisterers, bottles in hand, leading the crowd in shouting toasts. 'A clap for Mahon the player on the stage' was followed by hearty clapping from the gallery bucks. 'A groan for my aunt in the side-boxes' brought a loud response. The whole house got into an uproar. The sheriff, 'Hero' Jackson, left his box, climbed to the gallery, grasped 'the Child' by the scruff of the neck and shoved him down the gallery stairs into the street. After the sheriff had reached his seat again, he looked across the stage and there he saw 'the Child' sober and quiet beside his aunt in the side-box opposite.

The boisterous interruptions from the Peter's Cell audiences infected the manners of the actors. In a performance of **The Beggar's Opera** West Digges as Captain Macheath had just put on his fetters at Newgate prison. He found himself unpleasantly bound with chains that were not the customary set. Turning in irritation to 'the Grand Bugle' who was seated near by, he complained in a loud voice about the property-man: 'Look here, sir, what a pair of fetters he has brought me — they've cut through my ankles! Instead of giving me proper light tin ones, he has got them out of gaol, and they have been on some murderer!' Such persistent goings-on caused the playhouse in Peter's Cell to be remembered with unusual vividness by John P. O'Keeffe, the far-strolling Dublin comedian.

In 1768 Henry Mossop, the new manager of the combined Dublin theatres, transferred his touring company from Cork to Limerick on the last week-end of September and played at Peter's Cell until 29 October. This, his first experience at the antiquated playhouse prompted him to think of improving Limerick's stage facilities in accord with the spirit of progress now pervading the city. Recent demolition of the old walls had made way for the extension of main thoroughfares and for the construction of new quays along the Abbey River: George's Quay (1763); the South Mall, later known as Charlotte's Quay (1766); Sir Harry's Mall (1767). The introduction of handsome buildings commenced with the erection of the City Court House in 1764 and the Custom House in 1769. A year later the elegant Assembly House, containing shops on the ground floor and vaults underneath, was completed at a cost of £4,000. It stood towards the eastern end of Charlotte's Quay near the old West Water Gate of the Irish Town. All these large edifices rose on the edge of Newtown-Pery, a splendid tract of land owned by the Right Honourable Edmond Sexton Pery, son of a wealthy Limerick merchant and Speaker in the Irish House of Commons in 1768. Pery, showing the vision of a modern city planner, laid out his ground in a design of broad straight streets, cutting across one another to form spacious blocks. Newspaper advertising of 1769 described the Newtown-Pery sites in the picturesque style of eighteenth-century landscape painting that Irish stage settings of the time often copied:

An extensive view up and down the river, commanding a full prospect of many agreeable objects, particularly the romantic grandeur of the county Clare mountains. — A large Cascade and spacious Basin alternately as the tide ebbs and flows. — All the shipping, etc., passing and repassing, and at the several Quays and the Pool. — The Ruins of Carrig



Actress Elizabeth Farren; from a pastel sketch by Ozias Humphre, R.A.

O'Gunnell, etc. ... In short, the most elegant Town Residence in the Kingdom, or perhaps in the World, cannot boast such rural Beauty or so fine a Landscape, and the Variety is daily increasing.

The rapid development of Newtown-Pery into a district of handsome brick residences and shops for well-to-do mercantile families as well as for the gentry from the surrounding country beautified the face of Limerick to an extent which no Irish town other than Dublin enjoyed in the eighteenth century.

The prevailing atmosphere of expansion and opulence soon crystallized Mossop's thinking in regard to the betterment of Limerick's theatrical situation. His future designs he set forth in the **Limerick Chronicle** of 24 October 1768, together with an appeal for funds towards a suitable new playhouse:

With the approbation and patronage of some of the principal Gentlemen of the City of Limerick and of the Counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary, (Mr. Mossop) has undertaken the Establishment of a regular theatre in this City. As Mr. Mossop is under the necessity of immediately setting out for Dublin in order to open the Theatre Royal, he thinks it proper to take this opportunity of assuring the public, that it is his Intention to exhibit Dramatic Entertainments in the most perfect and extensive Manner in the City of Limerick. He proposes to bring down every Summer the best and most approved of those Performers whom he shall have employed in Dublin on each preceding Winter; he also proposes to perform here himself each Summer, and designs to commence the opening of the New Theatre some time before the next Summer Assizes. He further begs leave to assure the Public ... to assert his warmest Endeavours ... in order that the Theatre of Limerick may be allowed to be, in every particular, as well regulated, as elegant, and as complete, as any other Theatre in the Kingdom.

The Proposals at large, with the Plan of the Theatre drawn by a proper Architect, are in the hands of Alderman Sexton Baylee, the Reverend Jaques Ingram, Alexander Franklin

and Nicholas Smith, Esquires, who are so obliging as to undertake the trouble of receiving Subscriptions ... All those who are desirous to patronize their Undertaking will be pleased to send their Names to the above Gentlemen or to Mr. Mossop in the City of Dublin.

On the following day the *Leinster Journal* at Kilkenny interpreted the vague opening sentence of Mossop's announcement as a specific declaration that 'the mayor of Limerick and most of the principal gentlemen of the city of Limerick and of the counties of Limerick, Clare, and Tipperary have become subscribers.' No matter what local subscriptions may have been forthcoming in the autumn and winter of 1768, the grave difficulties which Mossop soon encountered in the management of his Dublin theatres made it impossible for him to carry on with the Limerick project.

Within the next year and a half the Dublin manager sold his theatrical rights in Limerick to a native of that city, Tottenham Heaphy, who had been connected with the Irish stage for over twenty years. In the spring of 1770 Heaphy proceeded to erect a theatre, since he had secured £600 towards the venture from twenty-four subscribers, each of whom paid £25 for a silver transferable admission ticket valid indefinitely. The new building, located at the south-west corner of Cornwallis (now Gerald Griffin Street) and Playhouse Lane (now Little Gerald Griffin Street), presented in its inelegant appearance and arrangements a great contrast to the Assembly House finished a little earlier in the same year. Heaphy's structure lacked a conventional theatre facade with centre doors, because the forward section, abutting on Cornwallis Street, was designed for dwelling and business purposes. Edward Gubbins, noted carriage and coach builder, for years occupied these front premises. Access to the playhouse boxes could be gained only by a long and inconvenient passage that ran from Cornwallis Street through Gubbins' kitchen to the theatre in the rear. Often so many persons crowded together in this narrow corridor that it was very difficult, especially for Ladies, to get out without being hurt. The entry leading to the pit door opened off Playhouse Lane; perhaps it survives in the small old passage on the west side of Little Gerald Griffin Street a short distance north of the corner. The theatre itself measured 80 feet by 40 feet wide, less than two-thirds the size of the Theatre Royal in Aungier Street, Dublin, built forty years before. It had a small stage in comparison with the area of the house and no green-room for the actors; but it did possess, adjoining one gallery, a second tier of side-boxes termed 'lattices' as in Dublin. The prices for seats Heaphy established at the prevailing Dublin scale: 4s. in the boxes and lattices, 2.6d. in the pit, and 1s. in the gallery.

As late as April of 1770 the old playhouse in Peter's Cell was still being used. The *Limerick Chronicle* carried advertisements of a performance to be given there on 14 April by an unnamed group of players, presumably local amateurs. Heaphy opened the new theatre in Cornwallis Street during the summer of 1770 either before or after his company's visit to Cork, 24 August to 6 September. The personnel, drawn mostly from Dublin, included besides Manager Heaphy and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. William Dawson, the youthful light comedian Thomas Lewis, and Mrs. Spranger Barry as the principal figures. Of their bills, none is on record; of their playing, a Limerick resident said 'tolerably decent'.

The following year Heaphy and many of 'His Majesty's Servants' from the Crow Street Theatre, Dublin, played Limerick before Cork. On the opening night, Thursday, 15 August, 'a numerous and polite audience' gave the players 'repeated Plaudits' during the performance of *The Provok'd Husband*. The presence of the famous

Dublin comedian Isaac Sparks and his son Richard, of John O'Keeffe the expert in farce, and of Robert Mahon the character actor considerably improved the company's playing of comedy during this season. Late in August the Heaphy troupe went to Cork for the court assizes and then returned to Limerick to perform until the end of September, as his benefit, expected, in accordance with custom, to solicit in person the sale of tickets. His 'dangerous state of health', however, prevented him from 'waiting on those Ladies and Gentlemen to whom he has the honour of being particularly known'. Instead, tickets could be procured from Mr. Heaphy 'at his house near the Theatre'.

On the following Friday, Lewis the comedian, who throughout the season had been exhibiting a perverse ambition for the important roles of Shakespearian tragedy, chose to do Hamlet for his benefit. This attempt and his earlier efforts in the tragic vein provoked one indignant spectator to protest against 'the disrespect offered by the farcical, ridiculous gesture of Lewis, who certainly had not weight enough for the character of Richard, Hamlet, Lear, etc'. At Mrs. Heaphy's benefit, on 22 October, 1771, Lewis reinstated himself in local esteem by his acting of Belcour, the genteel hero of *The West Indian*, the part which in the previous winter had elevated him to the elect of the Dublin stage and bestowed upon him the sobriquet of 'Gentleman'.

The new theatre did not wholly cure the Limerick audience of the unruly conduct in which it had so freely indulged at Peter's Cell. On Thursday, 10 October, the *Limerick Chronicle* took prominent space to express the public's appreciation 'to the gentlemen who corrected a most clamorous, indecent, troublesome young man in the Gallery of the playhouse last Tuesday night'. By now the local playgoers had invented a more subtle form of misbehaviour; they forged the special printed tickets which were issued in advance for the benefit nights of both individual actors and local charities. In connection with the end-of-season performance on behalf of Limerick's Poor a stern warning had to be published a day ahead that 'Mr. Mayor has marked all the Tickets, and any Person who attempts to pass a Counterfeit one, will be severely punished'. Not only the customers but also the physical plant caused difficulties for Heaphy. The long, dark playhouse required constant attention if they were to be kept decent and safe. To encourage attendance at Mrs. Heaphy's benefit her husband published an emphatic assurance that 'the utmost care will be taken to have the Avenues leading to the Theatre sufficiently Clean'd and Lighted'. As a final means to engender goodwill the manager took pains over a week before departure to urge 'persons who have any demands on the Theatre' to submit their bills at once.

In 1772, Heaphy with most of the chief performers from Crow Street, Dublin, occupied 'the New Theatre Royal, Limerick', at the beginning of July. Soon afterwards an anonymous Limerick troublemaker berated the manager: 'Do you imagine a city so considerable will tacitly suffer such actors to mock so rational an amusement with impunity? ... What greater indignity could you offer than bringing here that animal O'Keeffe, who dared to inscribe some indecent lines under a picture in a publican's at Monasterevan to the Ladies of Limerick! This attack only succeeded in arousing a greater public interest in the local season. Business proved so good that the company did not leave for Cork until mid-August and then returned again for Assize Week, 14—19 September. In fact, the habit of playgoing had grown to such a point among the common people that prices for gallery seats were raised during the season another sixpence to 1s.6d.

Even if irate letter writers did not prove disturbing, other matters did cause Heaphy concern. Numerous male



Actor Isaac Sparks, as the Right Comical Lord Chief Joker; from an etching by Solomon Delane, 1752.

patrons, as in Dublin and other towns, insistently desired to penetrate backstage. Therefore, in the first week of performances, the manager gave out a firm statement of policy: 'Since it is impossible to conduct the Performances with regularity if Gentlemen come behind the Scenes, it is humbly hoped that no Person will be Offended at being denied Admittance'. Nevertheless the gentlemen did not abate their efforts. A month later the manager had to reaffirm his stand in more relevant language: 'Since it is impossible to carry on the Entertainments of the Stage with order or decency if the Performers are crowded or interrupted in their Business, therefore no Money will be taken at the Stage Door; nor will any Person be admitted behind the Scenes but those who belong to the Theatre'. The weather too became troublesome. July turned out so hot that the playhouse threatened to be unbearable. On 13 July and again the next week Heaphy boldly stated that 'proper care will be taken to keep the House cool'. The Limerick building, however, was certainly equipped with no more adequate means of ventilation than its Dublin counterparts, which, according to the newspapers, felt as hot as ovens sometimes in the summer seasons. Complaints about the dilatory commencement of the Cornwallis Street performances followed those in regard to the heat. At last the manager promised that 'for the future the Curtain will rise exactly at seven o'clock. In return, the Limerick ladies and gentlemen were requested to send servants to keep places at five o'clock instead of the former hour of six.

These problems of management amounted to little in the face of a prosperous season. Its prosperity derived in large measure from the presence of Charles Macklin, the master of Irish comedians, and his twenty-year-old pupil, Henriette Amelia Leeson, who had made a brilliant stage debut at Dublin in the preceding winter. For their initial Limerick appearance (and Miss Leeson's first performance outside Dublin) on Friday, 10 July, they played together in **The Merchant of Venice** as Shylock and Portia. Then they carried on their delightful collaboration

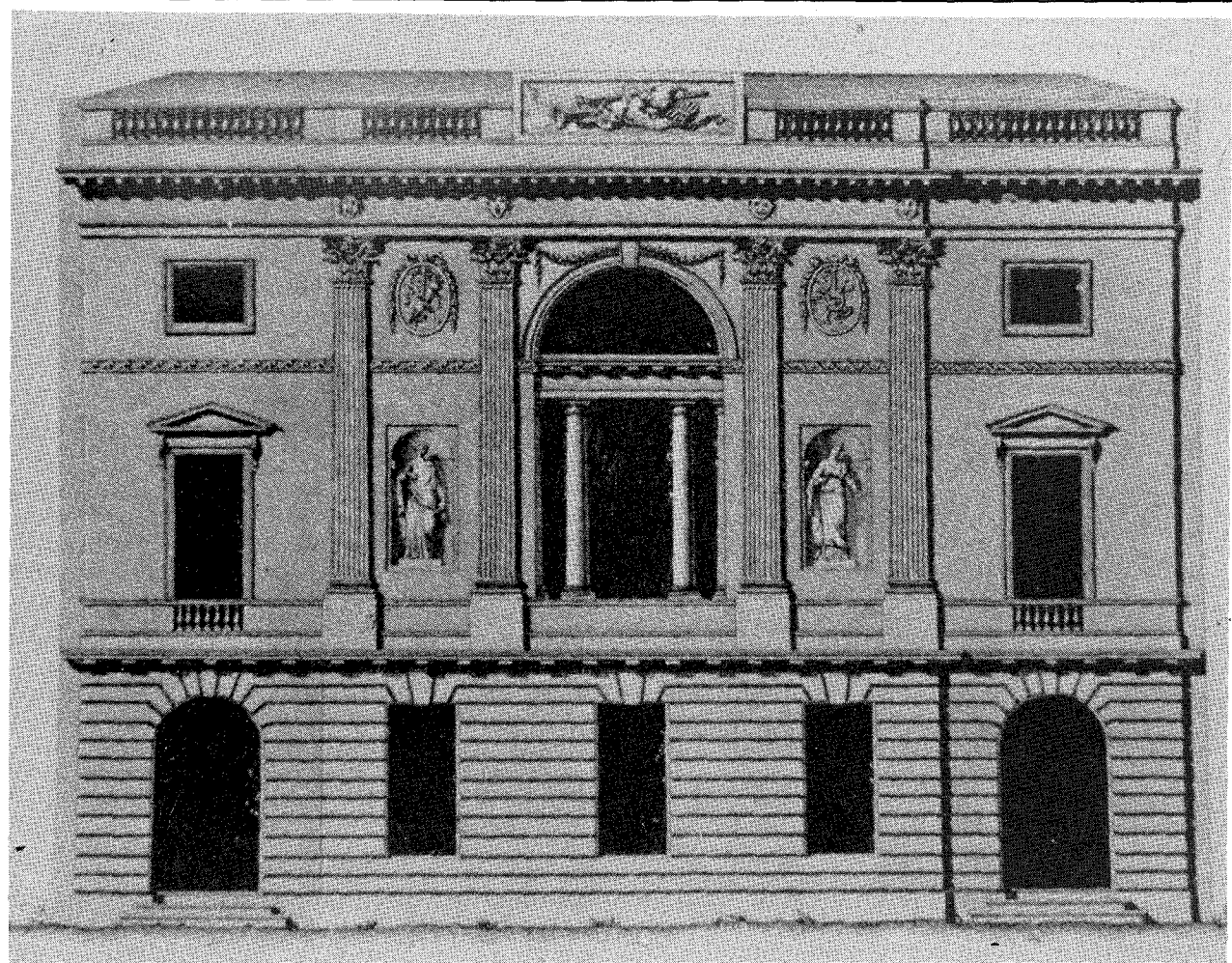
as Sir Gilbert Wrangle and Charlotte in Cibber's comedy, **The Refusal**; as Iago and Desdemona in **Othello**; as Murrough O'Doherty and Mrs. Diggerty in Macklin's **The True-Born Irishman**; and as Sir Pertinax Maccycophant and Lady Rodolpha Lumbercourt in Macklin's **The True-Born Scotsman**, which concluded the main season on Wednesday, 12 August.

Macklin and Miss Leeson did not return with the company to Limerick in September for the Assize Week performances. On Saturday the 19th the Crow Street troupers ended their 1773 tour, as they had commenced it, with the acting of **The Fashionable Lover**. Manager Heaphy had staged this Cumberland comedy on the season's opening night with what he described as 'New Clothes, Scenes, and Decorations'. Thereafter he often called attention to the supposedly fresh costuming and scenery in the summer productions. For his benefit on Friday, 31 July, he got up **The Grecian Daughter** 'with New Dresses and Decorations'. Again, 'New Dresses and Decorations' embellished **The True-Born Scotsman** at Vandermere's benefit on 12 August. Thus the Limerick audiences in 1772 had little reason for raising against their present proprietor the common charge of excessive parsimony in regard to wardrobe and properties.

In the succeeding years the Crow Street company reversed the order of its touring and went to Cork first. Then it paid Limerick a visit of only three weeks, Monday, 2 August, to Friday, 20 August, 1773, but gave at least a dozen performances to well-filled houses. The enthusiastic audiences came principally to watch Heaphy's guest star, Thomas Sheridan of Covent Garden, in his famous tragic roles, such as Hamlet and the Roman Father. On 6 August, when he impersonated Addison's Cato, the critic of the **Limerick Chronicle** described his portrayal as 'incomparably great' and went on to remark in a hyperbolic strain: 'Never were so many Eyes dissolved in tears as on that night'. Yet Sheridan did not provide all the colour of the season. Heaphy and the Masons of the city planned an elaborate show for his benefit on 16 August: 'The Members of the Respective Lodges will walk in their Proper Clothing, and usual order of Procession, to the Stage of the Theatre, which will be form'd into an Amphitheatre and properly decorated for the Reception of the Brethern. Heaphy in the dress of a Master Mason welcomed the Brethern with a prologue before the acting of **She Stoops to Conquer**. Three days later, at the benefit of 'Gentleman' Lewis, the manager found another opportunity for pageantry in presenting **Julius Caesar** with 'a grand procession of Victors, Trophies, Fasces, etc.'

Thomas Wilks, a young light comedian over from England for the summer, acted his speciality, Sir Harry Wildair in Farquhar's **The Constant Couple**, as the closing attraction of this short but profitable Limerick season. The profits amounted to £502, a high average of £42 per night if, as the advertising indicated, a dozen performances made up the season. Wilks for his playing during the three weeks netted £32, a sum equal to a good Irish actor's usual salary for nine or ten weeks outside Dublin.

During the winter of 1773—4 a report began to circulate that a set of players other than Heaphy's would appear at the Limerick theatre in the spring or early summer. On 14 February Heaphy published in Dublin a denial of the report along with the declaration that as patentee of the Limerick playhouse he would not issue to anyone a licence to act there. He had an ambitious intention of his own for enhancing the quality of Limerick theatricals, and he proceeded to reveal it in the **Limerick Chronicle** on 3 March. His notice began by stating that many ladies and gentlemen of Limerick had indicated a wish to remove the Theatre Royal from 'its present, inconvenient situation, to the ground next adjoining the New Assembly House'. The manager had been encouraged in 'the execu-



Design of the Front Elevation for a Proposed Theatre for the City of Limerick.

tion and expense of so great an undertaking' by the subscribers to the existing theatre, by several proprietors of the Assembly House, and by other persons who had desired 'to see those two edifices of entertainment mutually promote and assist each other'. Heaphy concluded his notice by promising to visit Limerick within a few days in order to report to interested ladies and gentlemen 'such measures as he had already conditionally entered into'. This was the first disclosure of a dream that in the ensuing fifteen years directed a recurrent civic movement. Heaphy, however, did not follow up the disclosure by going to Limerick for consultations.

The coming of summer found the Dublin players embarked once more on the Cork-Limerick circuit with yet another variation of schedule: six weeks in Cork, two weeks in Limerick, three weeks in Cork, and then two weeks at Limerick again before going back to Dublin. The opening of the 1774 season in the Munster capital was delayed until 11 August on account of the races held 4—6 August at Rathkeale, eighteen miles south-west. In announcing the postponement on 4 August Heaphy once again promised that 'the much desir'd Scheme of erecting the Theatre adjoining the Assembly-House will be commenced on his Arrival in this City'. Subsequently one of the city's leaders, Thomas Smyth, donated for the theatre site the piece of uncovered ground on Charlotte's Quay next to the Assembly House. In spite of this donation and of the general recognition of the need for a more attractive and better located playhouse, Heaphy, like Smithson at Ennis, never succeeded in bringing about the fulfilment of his dream.

Except for the scheme to erect a new theatre the major interest in the summer's theatricals was furnished by the lively week of benefit performances beginning on Monday, 22 August. Heaphy's, the initial one as usual, consisted of **The Tempest** with Dryden's masque of Neptune and Amphitrite in Act V, Foote's interlude **Piety in Patterns**, and comic opera of **The Deserter** with 'a Grand Garland Dance' in Act I. So rich a dramatic feast required a special curtain time of 6.45 p.m. The rather less elaborate benefits of the leading tragedian, Lawrence Clinch, and the leading comedian, 'Gentleman' Lewis, followed on successive nights. Each of their bills, vying with the manager's selection of **The Tempest**, previously unseen, included at least one work 'never performed here'. Both Clinch and Lewis tried to encourage the advance sale of their benefit tickets among the more wealthy patrons by a monetary arrangement that took advantage of the peculiar currency situation. In separate advertisements the two actors offered to accept in payment for tickets the sub-standard gold guineas which were then in common circulation. These 'light' guineas of 5 dwt. 3 gr. in weight they could use, presumably, in settling their local accounts. Limerick shopkeepers for the time being, were permitted to send up to 5,000 light guineas to the Irish Treasury at Dublin and exchange them for the standard 'heavy' coins. Lewis would 'take gold ... at Mr. Hayes's in Irish-town', where he was lodging; Clinch would 'take Guineas ... at his residence opposite the Theatre', or through Mr. Evory at 'the Box Office'.